

# Vintage Radio

local radio station run  
\* by people over 50,  
\* to cater for an audience of older  
listeners.

## *What did Vintage Radio mean to you?*

"Realising that ordinary people have an interesting story to tell and we should listen."

"A lot of fun ... " "Kept a lot of superannuated hippies off the streets." "

"To present a programme on my favourite music including playing lots of loud stuff, was my way of, to paraphrase Dylan Thomas, "raging against the dying of the light"<sup>1</sup>"

"I gained a host of new friends and the realization that, with a little hard work and effort, it's amazing what a group of mostly inexperienced people can produce."

"It was inspiring for everyone to achieve something that 'came out of the blue', had never occurred to most of us that we would do, and succeed."

"The value may not be in Vintage Radio, but in what V. R. can show others as to what can be achieved."

*these, and all the quotations in this review, come from interview comments and questionnaire responses made by those taking part in the project*

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## **Summary of Conclusions and Recommendation**

The evaluation concludes that Vintage Radio succeeded in mobilising an active group of older participants to create effective broadcasting which met a variety of individual and community needs. The project also contributes a wide range of benefits for all concerned, and demonstrates a need for, and an interest in, radio made by people over 50 with their communities in mind. The project also demonstrates very effective continuing learning, very effective participation in the running of the project and excellent capacity to plan extensions to the project with well-considered further improvements.

This evaluation recommends further support for the work of the group, in continuing and extending the project, broadcasting both on air and through internet, and in working on the improvements identified by the debriefings, working groups and the evaluation process. This evaluation recognises Vintage Radio's contribution to community broadcasting, and endorses the nomination of VR for an award in that category.

## **Background**

The Merseyside Regional Development Officer<sup>2</sup> for Help the Aged,<sup>3</sup> set up a conference called "Sounds Good to Me," held in May 2008. It brought together people involved in community radio and looked at the possibility of establishing a local station run by people over 50 to cater for an audience of older listeners. There was sufficient interest amongst the 80 delegates to proceed and a small working group was formed.

In August 2008, a group of older people on Wirral responded to an advert by the Help the Aged RDO, offering training and facilities for them to create a community radio station, reflecting the interests of people over 50. Nearly 200 older people made contact with the Help the Aged office. They adopted the name "Vintage Radio" for the station.

In October, Help the Aged provided funding of £19,500, sourced from Northwest legacies. 2 initial meetings were held in the Town Hall, followed by 6 monthly planning group meetings, first at the Birkenhead Sixth Form College, and later at the Birkenhead YMCA. In addition a number of subgroups were formed that met regularly. A total of five groups looked at resources, training, publicity, technical issues and programming. The groups tended to meet every fortnight.

Training started in September. Three training courses were attended by 40 volunteers. *Seven Waves Radio* was commissioned to provide 2 courses of 10 weekly sessions and there was another course run on Saturdays in December and January. The course aimed to prepare people with the skills they needed to present their own programme, and to run the desk themselves.

The station purchased a limited license to run for 9 days from February 21<sup>st</sup> to March 1<sup>st</sup> 2009. It also purchased the domain name [www.vintageradio.org.uk](http://www.vintageradio.org.uk) and two students at Plessington School volunteered to produce the website. The responsibility for the site was later taken over by the Technical Sub-Group. As well as telling people about the project, it was the intention of the group – full realised – to broadcast live over the web. During the broadcasts Vintage Radio had listeners in the United States, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland, the Channel Isles, and Georgia, as well as all over the United Kingdom.

In all over 60 people took part in developing the station and presenting programmes: There were 42 programme makers /presenters, 9 technical support staff who put the equipment together and acted as programme producers during the broadcasts. 14 studio managers did a variety of tasks from providing all the contacts between callers, visitors and the studio. 2 HTA staff members were involved and 5 reception and other staff from the YMCA.

### **Findings from visits, interviews and questionnaires:**

"All things considered, fantastic, both in effort and content."

The project succeeded on several levels. The view of participants, and of the listeners who had contacted them, was that it made good radio. How do you define "quality" of radio? There were several interesting ideas. There was the notion that good radio felt like a conversation or a friend taking you on an interesting journey through their stories and their favourite music. "(Excellent) beyond all my expectations. Yes, there were hiccups and gaffs but, *hey*, we're not the BBC (thank God)!" Vintage Radio also provided a good deal of local interest for listeners, and topics and a style of radio presentation that suited an over-50 age group. The range of topics was impressive and wasn't just a stereotype of what might be thought relevant to the age group, including much that would be challenging and unfamiliar. Many interviewed had discovered such items in the station's output, and were surprised to find how fascinating many new topics were. The enthusiasm of the presenters was a significant factor in this. "Friends and colleagues enjoyed listening and were surprised at what we broadcast. - as it was not a professional radio station, it was exciting to listen to." There were a "lot of unexpected twists and turns and made listening different and not boring." "The station's wide range of interests and tastes in music was a delight, and the soap-opera must have been as much fun to make as it was for me to listen to."

On another level, the project was described by a participant as a "bit of empowerment of the over 50s," and that it succeeded to "raise the profile of older people and show they have something to offer and that they can gain and exploit new skills." One noted that it "kept a lot of superannuated hippies off the streets." YMCA, who provided a location for the project, welcomed the involvement of so many older people in the building, and the contribution they made to the wider community which the YMCA serves, and would welcome a continuing relationship with the group, seeing value in older people's involvement, as an example, in their music studio project.

It was clear that most participants and stakeholders did not want to limit the listenership purely to an over 50s group. It was equally clear that many issues and interests that affect and involve older people needed the sort of attention which local radio gives best. This includes giving relevant information, mobilising opinion and community involvement, tackling isolation and doing something about making sure older people feel included and have a more positive image.

All respondents were very satisfied, on a personal level, with their experience and typically found it demanding ("I put other stuff in my life on hold whilst doing this") but rewarding. "As for myself, it gave me a new focus and re-awakened my love of music and radio." They found many aspects stretching, and, as an example, hadn't anticipated the amount of research they'd had to do in preparation for the programmes. There was a great deal of enjoyment: "learning about local history & getting up to speed on current affairs;" "being legitimately nosy about everyone who took part;" "being at the hub of things." Many felt that the experience was very significant in improving their confidence, skills and self-esteem. "I can overcome anything life throws at me. Having been on air it has given me new confidence." One broadcaster's taking part was described as being the first step on her own road after personal loss. Another commented that a chance to broadcast his favourite genre of music "including playing lots of loud stuff, was my way of, to paraphrase Dylan Thomas "raging against the dying of the light". It's appropriate to single out this very striking quote, reflecting that many of the issues for older people are not comfortable ones, and not always ones which get a good airing. For that reason it is prominent on the cover and the endnote.

The positive experience of learning was very notable, both the amount people learned, and the level of satisfaction expressed. Nearly 75% intending taking on new learning as a result, and 25% starting new learning or activities within a month of the project.

Five stations have offered a presenter's role to members of the team: 7 Waves, Flame FM, Arrowse Sound, Radio Clatterbridge, City Talk Radio. The achievements overall were very impressive, and the station merits nomination in the community category in the next Sony Radio Academy Awards.

The learning and preparation which underpinned the achievements was substantial. 93% had not had any experience of managing or making broadcasts. However many had transferrable skills, enjoyed using skills they already had, and all learned some new applications and techniques.

All shared a positive view of the learning, both in the skill sessions, the meetings & working groups and the experience of being at the station. They had learned a lot, both technical, about their own areas of interest, and about the fascinating topics brought by others. Many said they wished they'd prepared themselves more. One summed it up as being "about 90% prepared, the rest I played by ear." The majority enjoyed the challenges and were confident that they'd learned enough so as not to be overwhelmed by the technicalities. There was very positive appreciation for the meetings, the informative newsletters and good recording of progress in minutes. There was a strong comment that even those who missed meetings were kept well informed with good follow up by the co-ordinator.

The set-up of the studio and green room while the programme was being broadcast was very effective, although sometimes crowded. Full consideration had been given to potential health and safety issues (no incidents/accidents occurred), information flow, and the security of participants and the belongings. The layout of rooms, facilities and support were all excellent, with effective team working and appropriate back-up. The equipment provided was very appropriate for their use, with both the right degree of stimulus offered, without overwhelming the participants with too much gadgetry beyond what they needed or could actually use. Very confident and appropriate use of ICT was noted, although participants were very modest about their skills. The control desks were the older analogue variety, whereas they had trained at Seven Waves radio on digital desks, so the layout was unfamiliar to users, although the scope and capacity were similar. Some hiccups occurred with cd players, and the use of Myriad to store tunes on hard disk. This was commented on by participants, but they concluded that with the excellent technical teamwork, they coped well.

Support for participants throughout was excellent. The technical team enjoyed collaborating with others, and felt valued. Participants mentioned a great deal of mutual support, the very friendly staff at YMCA, and "the willingness of contributors and interviewees to take part." All very appreciative of the effort put in by the Help the Aged co-ordinators (special mention was made of long hours, patience and commitment). When asked if they had needed more support, one telling comment, which demonstrates the resilience of the experience-rich: "No - most people can adapt to the circumstances. After all, we have had years of practice"

There was also very full appreciation of the organisation of the project, with 87% finding this very good. One respondent mentioned that it was a first time, that there were lots of people involved, and that "John and Matt worked their socks off, and made it possible for a bunch of inexperienced total amateurs to excel." Other aspects rated as good were the clear planning of programmes, clear and effective areas of responsibility, communications and that the project was overall "well thought out." Most of the difficulties with the technologies were not easy to have foreseen before the event, but there has been reflection, discussion and forward planning to deal with them next time Vintage Radio is broadcasting.

The evaluation noted that there was no overall editorship function. The "house-style" was to give every encouragement to all who took part, rather than give detailed feedback to participants on the quality of their content or presentation. As a first step, this was appropriate and effective, but participants were themselves, if anything, a little too self-critical, and keenly aware of their own areas of potential improvement. Participants valued any feedback they got from colleagues and coordinators, and when Vintage Radio is on air again, it would be helpful to give participants a fuller and more immediate debriefing. It would also be helpful to include workshops to share the best ways participants can give sensitive, supportive and constructive feedback to each other. This would both reassure participants who tend to worry unduly about how their work came over on air, or how their technical or studio support went, but also continue the improvement of the quality of programmes.

It is very appropriate that there is consideration of future planning, as Vintage Radio is a highly suitable model to repeat. It is cost effective, given the substantial volunteer base, it meets an identifiable need and has created both a great deal of active learning, a commitment to sharing the skills and opportunities more widely, and stimulated lots of ideas that they're keen to discuss further. When asked if there was anything he wanted to learn next, one responded that he'd tackle anything that could help his contribution to VR, and added "You see, I can't divorce myself from VR - we are one and the same." At all levels, Vintage Radio has helped people over 50 to find their voice, and it is to be hoped that the group can, as one said "Do it again, it can only get better."

### **Process of evaluation**

An external evaluation was agreed with an independent evaluator who had relevant experience of inspecting adult learning, community participation and in broadcasting<sup>4</sup>. The process was lengthy, and took: 1 preliminary meeting with the co-ordinator; 4 visits to the temporary radio station during the license period; 1 visit to end-of-station celebration; Unstructured interviews/conversations with 4 studio managers, 7 presenters, 3 drama participants, 2 guests, 4 technical staff; 2 YMCA staff, 1 YMCA board member, discussions with 5 participants at an outside venue & 3 follow-up discussions with participants; Feedback from a de-briefing meeting on March 9<sup>th</sup> 2009, a week after broadcasts were finished; 25% of the participants completed a long questionnaire, distributed in the newsletter and on line. This preliminary review is being sent to all participants, to check that it reflected their experience and to invite any further thoughts or comments.

Most of the questionnaire questions are included in this evaluation, with summarised responses and examples of the many valuable comments made by participants. The questions are interleaved with a summary of the collated responses, with quotes wherever possible to illustrate the response range. It wasn't possible to put in every single comment, which is a great shame, as responses were very well-considered. The evaluator undertook to keep responses anonymous, so has removed any individually identifying references in the summary.

25% of the original participants chose to feedback their views this way, and the summary is also being circulated more widely, so that any other participants can check if they concur or not with views expressed, or have points to add.

## Questionnaire & summary of responses

### **What did you do in the project? (presenter, technician, studio manager, etc.?):**

13 replied that they were presenters, 3 technical contributors, 3 station managers, 1 writer and 4 also mentioned a planning or support role.

### **initial meetings: were these effective in giving you an accurate idea of what was going to be needed, and in identifying what you wanted from the project?:**

All replied that the meetings were at least adequate and overwhelmingly (93%) thought it was good. Although some commented on a degree of vagueness, there was a strong comment that even those who missed meetings were kept well informed with good follow up by the co-ordinator.

**what did you think of the Newsletters? The** commonest response was "informative." Responses all said that communication was good to excellent. One comment added that newsletters could be more creative in future, but a contrasting view described the newsletters as "Informative in a light hearted sort of way."

### **what did you think of the venues used? (incl. the rooms, travel & parking, safety, etc.?)**

All replies rated the venues as at least good, 40% as excellent. Some commented that parking could have been a problem for others, but no-one said that they themselves had a parking problem, and 2 identified future solutions.

### **what did you think of the resources and facilities (studio equipment, computer links, refreshments, etc.?)**

Responses were that these were generally good. The provision of refreshments was particularly appreciated. "The main problem we experienced was in not being sure exactly what music etc. was on the system but this could be greatly reduced next time by getting play lists from people earlier." One comment was that "switching to different equipment from training to broadcast was not helpful."

### **what did you think of the organization of the project?**

87% commented that this was very good. "well thought-out" "everything ran smoothly, thanks to Matt and John."

### **Had you done anything like this before or had you a lot to learn first? Tell us more!**

93% had not had any experience of managing or contributing to broadcasts. However many had transferrable technical skills from telecommunications, public speaking, DJ work etc. Most were confident in general computer use. There was a lot of learning involved: "This is the first time I have ever embarked on anything like this and it was really exciting to learn so much in such a short time."

### **Were you adequately prepared through your previous experience (or what you'd learned) for the project?**

"The learning was interesting and the experience very good. Personally I had some minor hiccups on the day but on reflection would have liked more time on air." Responses reflected that the best learning was by doing it for real. All shared a positive view of the learning, most wished they'd prepared themselves more. Good summary quote: "(I was) about 90% prepared, the rest I played by ear."

### **Did you have sufficient say in what went on in the project?**

Mixed views, ranging from "Decision making seemed pretty democratic" (80%) to one "none at all." There were comments, perhaps explaining that last point, that not everybody was able to make all the meetings, and "If you spoke up, your concerns were taken into account," which perhaps hints a need to ensure all contribute to the discussions there and then, while they were going on.

### **Any comments about how you all worked as a group?**

This brought expressions of overwhelming appreciation for the commitment, mutual support and success of team working.

### **What did you gain from taking part?**

Replies to this and other conversations mentioned the sense of achievement, new skills, new friends, improved status and confidence.

"I can overcome anything life throws at me. Having been on air it has given me new confidence."

**Any surprises?** "That ordinary people have an interesting story to tell and we should listen."

### **What did you find difficult or challenging? Any regrets?**

Majority enjoyed the challenges and had no regrets, but some were very self-critical, and wished that they had been personally more prepared. "I found the system hard in parts but I managed to muddle through, I wish I could have been more prepared." "(could have done with) finding the time to put the music on the Myriad system due to work commitments. "

**Has the experience given you ideas of new things to tackle?**

73% have new goals, and 27% have started already. One comment that they were "Doing too much already!"

**If you have had any feedback from listeners to the station, what did they say?**

"Friends and colleagues enjoyed listening and were surprised at what we broadcast."

"World-wide listenership through the webcast, "

"The feedback I received was that, as it was not a professional radio station, it was exciting to listen to."

"It had a lot of unexpected twists and turns and made listening different and not boring!"

**What items have you enjoyed hearing from your colleagues while you've been involved in the station?**

All the comments about other people's work was positive, and showed that as listeners they'd enjoyed both the familiar and being introduced to new topics by colleagues.

"I really enjoyed John and Matt's show as they had a lot of information and the music others played was great. "

"The variety of programmes meant that there was always something interesting and different to listen to."

"Blues" "Lots of encouragement from all and positive feed-back from John C."

**Can you suggest any other benefits that you or listeners have gained from Vintage Radio?**

"The listeners said it was a breath of fresh air to tune into content that they could associate with."

"As for myself, it gave me a new focus and re-awakened my love of music and radio."

Many commented that the positive benefit was either that it used local materials or relevant information for the age group served.

**What do you think was the value of the project?**

"Immeasurable value." Many responses referred back to previous answers about the value to themselves, in their own learning and growth. Several mentioned that radio is the ideal medium for providing information for older people, and that issues of coping with change and isolation are issues for many. Some added some broader benefits to society:

"To raise the profile of older people and show they have something to offer and can gain and exploit new skills."

"If others want to use VR as a model or even roll the concept out to a wider audience that is where the true value will be."

One reflected that it "Kept a lot of superannuated hippies off the streets."

**What do you think are the next steps for Vintage Radio?**

All are convinced that it's worth continuing: "doing it again and better at it." There were several helpful comments about maintaining an interim web presence and "marketing the product"

**What's your own taste in radio programmes (or mixes of programmes)?**

Replies were very varied, not all age specific, but most liked a mixture of music and factual. One comment was that their tastes were for "lots of types of programme, but think that programmes covering so-called 'minority' musical tastes - blues, jazz and world music - are disgracefully under- provided for on the BBC and commercial stations."

**Are there other skills which you might want to learn (digital editing, music making, more interviewing skills, creative writing or whatever..?)**

All showed a taste for learning more, ranging from computer use for community activists, to scripting and interviewing skills. Some have already found courses. Most were looking for some learning further linked to their radio experience. One expressed it forcefully, that he was looking for "Any skill that would be beneficial to myself as a presenter and to VR as a whole."

**Is there anything which might make it easier for you to take part? (anything from adapted equipment to changing locations or timing?)**

Most had no additional requirements, some had specific comments about access to an additional Myriad facility. One telling comment, which demonstrates the resilience of the experience-rich:

"No - most people can adapt to the circumstances. After all, we have had years of practice"

**Anything else you might like to do in future Vintage Radio projects?**

The clear response is that they wanted "More of the same." Some offered to help and support other new project participants in making Radio.

**It seems that you've had a busy 9 days, and a long lead-up. Was it such a mammoth effort?**

Mostly the response was that the effort required was "Just Right!"

**In future projects, how much work would you want to take on?**

Most were happy to do the same as they did this time, and wanted a longer run

All except one had used computers for listening to programmes, all accepted the need to continue using the internet for broadcasts, but several mentioned that on-air radio broadcasting “is good for the group we're aiming at.” “You can't listen to the internet in a car”

### **Any other ideas, recommendations or comments?**

The steering group and participants are giving a lot of thought to improvements already, so the replies were additional to a great deal that had already been communicated. Nonetheless, suggestions given in response to the questionnaire were still good, mostly very practical and thoughtful, and marketing and promotion figured prominently.

Responses are listed in full below:

- Wider use of a newsletter linked to broadcasts and in general communications
- Maybe some Outside Broadcasts, vox pops etc.
- Thanks to everyone involved with the project. It has been an unbelievable journey and I don't want to get off just yet!!!!
- We need to review the marketing of Vintage Radio so that listeners know how to find it, what's on and importantly when it's on and also on what media.
- We also need to look at targeted marketing for specific groups of over 50's.
- We also need a way that interested people can make donations to the VR fund. whether it's by a PayPal donate button on the web site or whatever.
- I would sort out the GREEN ROOM better with facilities for presenters' work to be stored.
- VR has been an amazing experience and I pleased to give its future my full support in any way I can.
- longer live broadcast time, a lot of untapped talent
- Need to consider how we help meet government targets etc. as a means of supporting grant applications.
- Need a larger body of people involved if we are to do this more regularly and need also to keep present members involved but avoid the risk of becoming a bit of a 'club' where new members are not always encouraged.
- If people don't know it's on, they won't tune in & we are broadcasting to nothing.
- Really old people watch TV (I think it's easier for their brains to register sight and sound together)

### **Is it important to have a distinct programme for over-50's?**

A simple “Yes.”

#### **Why is that?**

Replies showed that older people have needs for information, which radio is very suited to provide, that some older people have problems of isolation, and that the many older people have tastes which are wrongly labelled as “minority” and not well served.

One especially forceful comment was on the value of reminiscence: “We need it! It fills a need, we are living in a world ever changing and sometimes looking back and listening to past experiences and topics and music of interest, bring back memories both good and bad it's good for us! We need it!”

“The over 50s are the largest body of the population and growing in size, therefore the most important in the future.” “Yes but try to attract a younger audience to have a listen.”

### **To sum up, what's your view of how well Vintage Radio performed?**

“Beyond all my expectations, yes, there were hiccups and gaffs but *hey* we're not the BBC (thank God!)”

“All things considered fantastic, both in effort and content.”

“Do it again, it can only get better.”

Endnote:

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<sup>1</sup> One respondent reminded us that his very appropriate paraphrase was from Dylan Thomas' villanelle, "Do not go gentle into that good night" (*The Poems of Dylan Thomas*, published by New Directions)

In this, Thomas writes that, even as life is coming to an end, there's much that still needs to be shouted about.

It's a good quote for Vintage Radio, too, as a demand for the old to be listened to and not to be expected to sit quietly in a corner:

"Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light..."

<sup>2</sup> Details of the conference and work with older people in the region are available from John Cotcher, Regional Development Officer Merseyside, Help the Aged, tel. 0151 647 4720. [John.Cotcher@helptheaged.org.uk](mailto:John.Cotcher@helptheaged.org.uk). John also kindly provided the background information to assist this evaluation.

<sup>3</sup> Help the Aged (charity number 272786) is an international charity fighting to free older people from poverty, isolation and neglect. Since the project ended, Help the Aged has merged with Age Concern England (charity number 261794) to form Age UK, a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England: registered office address 207 to 221 Pentonville Road, London, N1 9UZ, company number 6825798, registered charity number 1128267. Age Concern and Help the Aged are brands of Age UK. The three national Age Concerns in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales have also merged with Help the Aged in these nations to form three registered charities: Age Scotland, Age NI, Age Cymru.

<sup>4</sup> Dave Ellwand works freelance in the areas of adult and family learning, heritage, music, broadcasting, diversity and equality. He produces and directs projects or provides evaluation and consultancy services. More details on [www.DaveEllwand.co.uk](http://www.DaveEllwand.co.uk)

