“Vous Ecoutez La Voix du Peuple”: The Kreyol Language Pirate Radio Stations of Flatbush, Brooklyn

Sounding Out! Authors

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Abstract

Learning from other scholars’ work on Haitian radio was, and still is, one of the greatest pleasures in the process of writing Isles of Noise: Sonic Media in the Caribbean (UNC 2016). People living in or from Haiti widely acknowledged and almost took for granted radio’s outsized role in public and political life.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Black Studies, Caribbean Studies, Cultural Studies, Diasporic Sound



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Haitian Radio // Radyo Ayisyen

Learning from other scholars' work on Haitian radio was, and still is, one of the greatest pleasures in the process of writing *Isles of Noise: Sonic Media in the Caribbean* (UNC 2016). People living in or from Haiti widely acknowledged and almost took for granted radio's outsized role in public and political life. Edwidge Danticat and Jonathan Demme also understood this and paid tribute in *Claire of the Sea Light* and *The Agronomist* respectively, but historians remained largely fixated,

understandably, on pivotal moments in Haiti's rich history. Radio is different. Not pivotal, but witnessing the pivotal. Less dramatic and more long lasting and adhering to the same format for days, years, decades. It speaks to people who wouldn't read newspapers or books. It floods private and public space with the sounds of music, talking, ruling, dissenting, explaining, satirizing, creating, crying, testifying, lying. But it leaves few archival traces. This is why the work of the five scholars in this series is so important. They allow us to hear a little and honor the listeners who make the medium what it is.

To start the series, Ian Coss gave a finely tuned account of a "day in the life" of a radio station in Cap Haïtien that follows the programming rhythm of days and nights. Then, Jennifer Garcon recounted one of the pivotal points in the relationship—its near breakdown and ultimate survival—also a turning point for a 19-year-old Jean Claude Duvalier, newly proclaimed President for life. Last week, Laura Wagner, who listened to each recording Radio Haïti-Inter and its archive (now at Duke University) and wrote its archival descriptors, writes of the work itself, the emotional, financial and intellectual challenges involved, and the reason this archive is essential to anyone interested in Haiti, or radio, or racial justice.

We continue the series in Brooklyn this week, where amidst gentrification and millennials seeking upscale vegan quesadillas, the 'culture of the transistor' is alive and well. Pirate radio stations broadcasting music and news in Haitian Creole have loyal followings, mostly of an older generation for whom radio was the primary medium during their youth. Listening brings back memories of a prosperous 1940s and 50s Haiti that recent narratives centered on catastrophe tend to bury. **David Goren**, who has not just written about but also mapped Brooklyn's pirate stations, reminds us that these aural communities connect past and present, and perhaps future as well.

Guest Editor– Alejandra Bronfman

Click here for the full series!

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Station Logo Grid, Courtesy of Author

'A lot of these stations, especially the Haitian stations, they have such an extensive music library that a song will come on the radio and all of a sudden my mom is like, 'Oh my God! Your grandma used to have this record and she played it every Saturday!' says Joan Martinez, a young Haitian-American born in the US and a former program host on some of the unlicensed Kreyol language stations. "Now she's transported back to being on the island, with the big radio that's a piece of furniture in the living room. People are chatting, little drinks are flowing about, my grandmother milling about in a gorgeous dress. It's kind of like that whole nostalgia era that unfortunately was probably lost because of the political turmoil in Haiti. So it's harkening back to a good time, to a simpler time, a better time, a more carefree era."

Every day, the skies of New York City fill up with unseen clouds of radio signals spreading over immigrant neighborhoods. These culturally charged clouds of radio energy burst with a flow of content that continually shifts and transforms, following the lifecycle and rhythm of the streets.

From clandestine studios tucked behind store fronts, DJs transform time and physical space with Konpa, Reggae and Soca music, mixing the sounds of ancestral homes with the thump and challenge of adapting to a new life in the United States. Jolted by electrified fingers of Signal, the old radio poetry of hiss and hum leaps from a scattered forest of antennas connected to transmitters hidden away inside rooftop sheds. In Brooklyn, the signals alight on Flatbush Avenue, blasting from radios in dollar vans, bakeries, churches and on street corners and kitchen tables. By accessing an analog technology that (outside of the radio itself) is essentially free for the listener, economically marginalized communities avoid the subscription and data fees built in to the conveniences of the digital life. Listeners, often the elders of the community, extend metal

antennas and position the radios just so, trying to catch the elusive vibrations of crucial music, news and information that are seldom felt in New York City's legal and mostly corporate owned media soundscape.

"These underground, unlicensed or pirate stations have been around for as long as there has been radio," Martinez says. The legality of radio stations stems from The Communications Act of 1934, legislation that created the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the agency tasked with penalizing unlicensed stations and shutting them down. "The focus really was on the listeners." says Rosemary Harold, chief of FCC Enforcement 'because what had happened before licensing became what we know as today, was that listeners weren't able to consistently hear radio broadcasts. And now we're kind of in a modern iteration of that."

Others, like pirate radio historian John Anderson**,** see the Act as unfairly slanted towards commercial interests, awarding "the highest powers and clearest channels" to stations that sold advertising, tilting the medium away from serving specific communities. "By privileging commercial speech over non-commercial speech and by basically saying if you are a special interest, we will not award you a license." Anderson says. "You create the conditions for there to be dissension over the media policy, which will lead people into radical actions, like putting stations on the air without permission." In Flatbush, stations broadcast primarily to Haitians, Jamaicans, Trinidadians, Grenadians and Orthodox Jews. The Haitian stations are particularly active in East Flatbush with just under a dozen broadcasting daily in Kreyol to the large Haitian community.

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Jacques Dessaline Boulevard sign, courtesy of author

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Joan Martinez, courtesy of author

"I came across it at a very young age. There was this really popular station back in the late 80s, Radio Guinee, and it was based in Brooklyn." Joan Martinez says. "Nobody knows where it was, there are suspicions. But all I know is from Friday night all the way to Sunday night, you would just hear a series of these stations every weekend and it would be the place where you could listen to the latest in Haitian pop music, rap music. It was also the news, my parents and their friends would all sit around the radio and they would just be politicking in the living room getting really loud, you know, dancing, singing along that sort of thing. It was just like a meeting ground and the radio was guiding it."

This phase of New York City pirate radio rose from the ashes of a previous scene dating to the late sixties: a dozen or so stations sporadically run mostly by white teenagers: a mix of hippies, radicals and electronically inclined misfits. By 1987, this loose collective of friends and rivals devolved into infighting after a short-lived attempt to broadcast from international waters off Jones Beach**.** This created room for new pirate radio voices from diverse communities that were increasingly being pushed off the legal airwaves by high costs, format consolidation**,** and "the low power desert", an FCC-led phaseout of small community broadcasters**.** The local pirates joined a growing national wave of progressive pirate radio activity taking advantage of a new generation of cheap FM transmitters imported from China or homebrewed in makeshift workshops by free radio activists.



Radio La Voix Du Peuple Flyer,
Image by Author

By the early 90's, immigrant community-focused broadcasters In New York City flipped the unspoken rules of the earlier pirates who broadcast mainly late at night on a few pre-determined "safe" frequencies, instead filling the FM dial from bottom to top, day and night. In 2000, under pressure from a nationwide increase in pirate radio activity, the FCC introduced a new license class: Low Power FM (LPFM) but opposition from National Public Radio and the National Association of Broadcasters shut down the issuing of new licenses. That severely limited LPFM's availability in major urban markets due to rules requiring LPFM's to be "three click aways" from

existing stations. Local pirates felt they had no alternative but to continue broadcasting and some stations in Flatbush have been on the air for decades. Despite the passage of the Local Community Radio Act in 2011, opening a new licensing window with relaxed spacing requirements, few new frequencies were available in NYC due to an already crowded dial. The continued pirate presence is enabled by a sort of safety in numbers, an FCC enforcement team hampered by a low budget and a bureaucratic process of enforcement.

Though the stations exist to serve their communities with news and culture and maybe make a little money for their owners and dj's, they can and do cause interference for listeners of licensed stations, particularly low-powered non-commercial broadcasters like WFMU, a beloved freeform music station. Interference near their frequency has inspired the Brooklyn Pirate Watch Twitter group to keep a wary eye on pirate operations.



Storefont available, photo courtesy of author

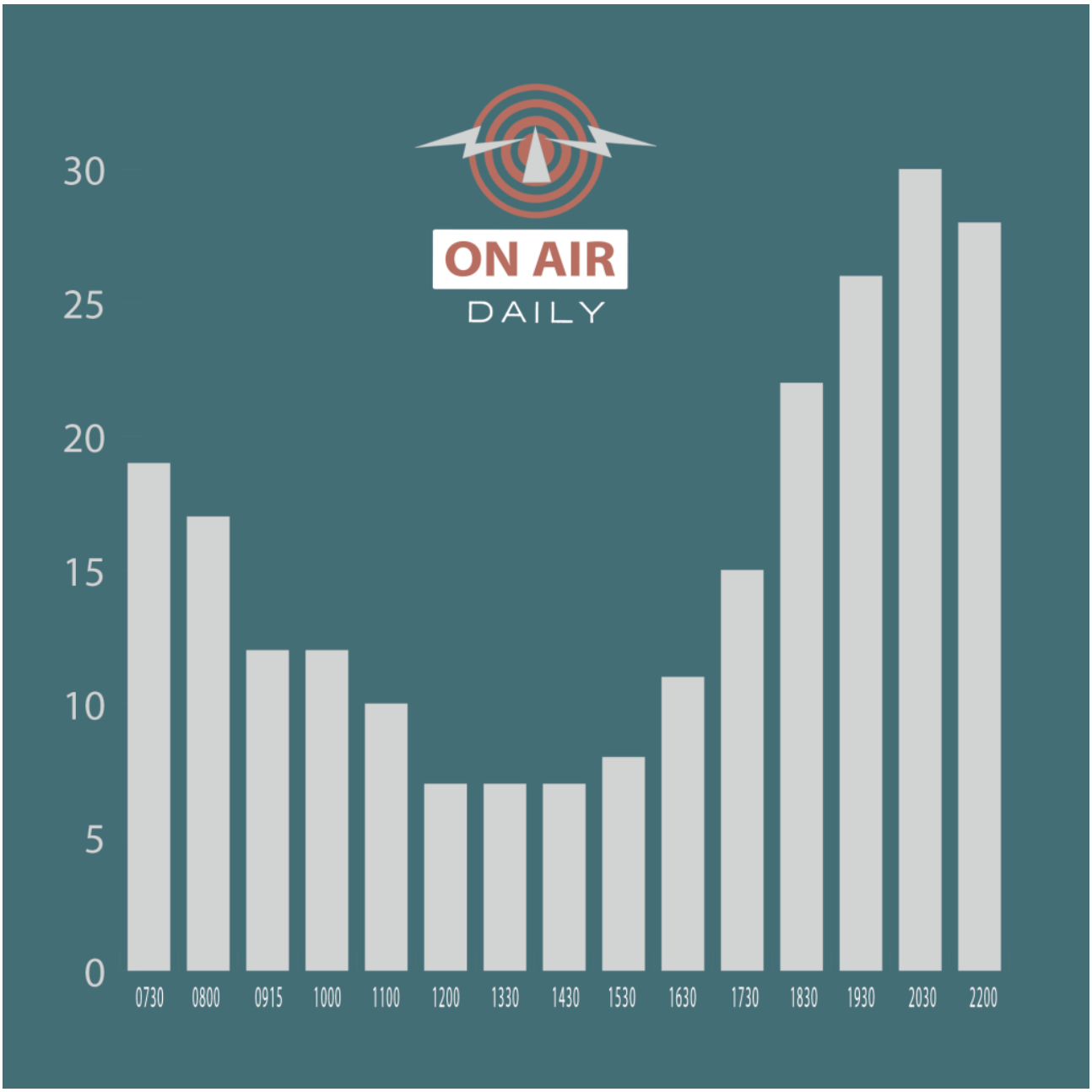
Interference aside, FCC commissioners and staff publicly fume at the pirates for a range of potential public safety violations, some more theoretical than others and claim they are somehow harming their own communities, and wonder finally, why don't they just stream on the internet. By viewing radio piracy purely from a legal perspective, critics miss the cultural and historic forces driving the Haitian pirates. During the Duvalier dictatorship (1957-1986) Haitians had access to only two stations broadcasting in Kreyol, rather than French, the language of the elite. One was Radio Lumiere, a religious station and the other Radio Haiti-Inter, a fiercely independent voice whose director Jean Dominque was assassinated in 1999.

"The peasant in Haiti, while he's working on his farm you know he had a transistor." Says Dr. Jean Eddy St. Paul, Director of the Haitian Studies Institute at the City University of New York. 'And many peasants, they don't have money to buy tobacco to smoke, but they will have money to buy the battery to put in the transistor. The first generation of migration, in the US, was during the 1960s and for many of those people the culture of transistor was part of their everyday life, so they're still maintaining the culture of transistor. For them, having a radio station is very important.'

In July 2019, on a side street in East Flatbush, I met a man calling himself "Joseph" aka "Haitian" ("because I'm a pure Haitian!"), part of a group that keeps Radio Comedy FM on the air. "There's no owners and committee. It's a bunch of young guys". Joseph says, "We have to do something positive for our community. Right now the Marines are in Haiti and we don't know what's next! CNN don't show you this! BBC don't show you this! So what we do, we have people in Haiti that call us and tell us what's going on and will send us pictures. This is how we get our information. And bring it to the people.... I have family over there, my mother's still there. So I have to know what's going on.

At this point in the digital age, it's an open question how long these analog pirate stations will remain relevant, as their audiences age, neighborhoods gentrify and younger listeners gravitate to social media platforms. The answer seems to lie with their elderly and impoverished listeners. **"**They don't have enough money to buy the newspapers understand?." Joseph says." For him that makes it worth it to keep Radio Comedy on the air despite a crackdown from the FCC backed by the PIRATE Act signed into law in 2020 that increases fines to $100,000 a day up to $2 million. But the legislation lacks funding to enforce the new regulations. With a federal statute still in place reducing fines down to the ability to pay, it's unclear whether the PIRATE Act will be anything more than another in an escalating series of scare tactics**.**

"If they don't want us to do it just make it easy for us. Let's make a meeting with those guys [the FCC]," Joseph says. 'We're going to provide the air for you. A frequency. You're going to pay for example, $500 a month even $1,000 a month.' We will be more than happy to do it. "



Pirate Radio Activity Chart, Courtesy of Author

Though the FCC has recently suggested the possibility of a new round of LPFM licenses in the future, the already crowded nature of NYC's FM band makes it unlikely that new frequencies will be made available to the current pirate stations. In addition the FCC doesn't want to be seen as rewarding illegal activity by granting a license to former pirate broadcasters, which was a prohibition in LPFM's earlier licensing periods. And for the moment, Joseph, who's been running unlicensed stations since 1991 ('it's an addiction') is equally unlikely to cede the airwaves. He sees Radio Comedy as not just a radio station, but a community lifeline.

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"You know many children we save? There was a bunch of guys…Jamaican, Trinidadian, Haitian trying to form a gang. We talked to them, bring them to the station. Most of them have a diploma now. Without the radio, most of them probably get locked up or dead."

Even with the PIRATE act on the books, the number of stations on the air in Brooklyn has remained steady with an average of about 25 per day and the advent of the Coronavirus pandemic has only sharpened their mission. In March 2020 as the spread of Covid-19 lead to NYC's lockdown, the unlicensed Haitian broadcasters and the other West Indian stations in Brooklyn took a step closer to their listeners, increasing their air time and enhancing their formats to deliver information about the virus both in New York and in their countries of origin amid the heavy toll it took on the community.

Click here to hear Station IDs for Radio Lumiere, Radio Independans, and La Voix du Peuple!

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Featured Image: Antenna in Flatbush, courtesy of David Goren

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An award-winning radio producer, David Goren has created programming for the BBC, Jazz at Lincoln Center Radio, the Wall Street Journal Magazine, and NPR's "Lost and Found Sound" series, as well as audio-based installations for Proteus Gowanus Radio Cona and the Ethnographic Terminalia Collective. In 2016, he was an artist-in residence at Wave Farm, a center for the transmission arts.

Since 2014, David has been recording New York City's prodigious pirate radio activity and researching the evolution of this grassroots community radio movement resulting in the release of "Outlaws of the Airwaves: The Rise of Pirate Radio Station WBAD" (2018) for KCRW's "Lost Notes" podcast, New York City's Pirates of the Air for the BBC World Service (2019) and the "Brooklyn Pirate Radio Sound Map 2.0" (2020) which was featured in The New Yorker. He presented "Tracing Neighborhoods in the Sky," as part of the Fall 2019 Franke Lectures at Yale University. In January 2021, the Brooklyn Pirate Radio Sound Map became a partner of the Library of Congress' Radio Preservation Task Force.

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