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The Right Stuff? The Original Double Jay as Site for Youth Counterculture

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Abstract

On 19 January 1975, Australia's first youth station 2JJ (Double Jay) launched itself onto the nation's airwaves with a NASA-style countdown and *You Only Like Me 'Cause I'm Good in Bed* by Australian band *Skyhooks*. Refused airtime by the commercial stations because of its explicit sexual content, this song was a clear signifier of the new station's intent—to occupy a more radical territory on Australian radio. Indeed, Double Jay's musical entrée into the highly restrictive local broadcasting environment of the time has gone on to symbolise both the station's role in its early days as an *enfant terrible* of radio (Inglis 376), and its near 40 years as a voice for youth culture in Australia (Milesago, *Double Jay*).

The proposition that Double Jay functioned as an outlet for youth counterculture in Australia, and that it achieved this even with (and arguably because of) its credentials as a state-generated entity. This proposition is considered via brief analysis of the political and musical context leading to the establishment of Double Jay. We intend to demonstrate that although the station was deeply embedded in "the system" in material and cultural terms, it simultaneously existed in an "uneasy symbiosis" (Martin and Siehl 54) with this system because it consciously railed against the mainstream cultures from which it drew, providing a public and active vehicle for youth counterculture in Australia.

The origins of Double Jay thus provide one example of the complicated relationship between culture and counterculture, and the multiple ways in which the two are inextricably linked. As a publicly-funded broadcasting station Double Jay was liberated from the industrial imperatives of Australia's commercial stations which arguably drove their predisposition for formula. The absence of profit motive gave Double Jay's organisers greater room to experiment with format and content, and thus the potential to create a genuine alternative in Australia broadcasting.

As a youth station Double Jay was created to provide a minority with its own outlet. The Labor government committed to wrenching airspace from the very restrictive Australian broadcasting "system" (Wiltshire and Stokes 2) to provide minority voices with room to speak and to be heard. Youth was identified by the government as one such minority. The Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) contributed to this process by enabling young staffers to establish the semi-independent Contemporary Radio Unit (CRU) (Webb) and within this a youth station. Not only did this provide a focal point around which a youth collective could coalesce, but the distinct place and identity of Double Jay within the ABC offered its organisers the opportunity to ignore or indeed subvert some of the perceived strictures of the "motherhood" that was the ABC, whether in organisational, content and/or stylistic terms.

For these and other reasons Double Jay was arguably well positioned to counter the broadcasting cultures that existed alongside this station. It did so stylistically, and also in more fundamental ways. At the same time, however, it "pillaged the host body at random" (Webb) co-opting certain aspects of these cultures (people, scheduling, content, administration) which in turn implicated Double Jay in the material and cultural practices of those mainstream cultures against which it railed.

Counterculture on the Airwaves: Space for Youth to Play?

Before exploring these themes further, we should make clear that Double Jay's legitimacy as a "counterculture" organisation is observably tenuous against the more extreme renderings of the concept. Theodore Roszak, for example, requires of counterculture something "so radically disaffiliated from the mainstream assumptions of our society that it scarcely looks to many as a culture at all" (5). Double Jay was a brainchild of the state: an outcome of the Whitlam Government's efforts to open up the nation's airwaves (Davis, *Government*; McClelland). Further, the supervision of this station was given to the publicly funded Australian national broadcaster, the ABC (Inglis).

Any claim Double Jay has to counterculture status then is arguably located in less radical invocations of the term. Some definitions, for example, hold that counterculture contains value systems that run counter to culture, but these values are relational rather than divorced from each other. Kenneth Leech, for example, states that counterculture is "a way of life and philosophy which at central points *is in conflict with* the mainstream society" (Desmond et al. 245, our emphasis); E.D. Batzell defines counterculture as "a minority culture marked by a set of values, norms and behaviour patterns *which contradict* those of the dominant society" (116, our emphasis). Both definitions imply that counterculture requires the mainstream to make sense of what it is doing and why. In simple terms then, counterculture as the 'other' does not exist without its mainstream counterpoint.

The particular values with which counterculture is in conflict are generated by "the system" (Heath and Potter 6)—a system that imbues "manufactured needs and mass-produced desires" (Frank 15) in the masses to encourage order, conformity and consumption. Counterculture seeks to challenge this "system" via individualist, expression-oriented values such as difference, diversity, change, egalitarianism, and spontaneity (Davis *On Youth*; Leary; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli). It is these kinds of counterculture values that we demonstrate were embedded in the content, style and management practices within Double Jay.

The Whitlam Years and the Birth of Double Jay

Double Jay was borne of the Whitlam government's brief but impactful period in office from 1972 to 1975, after 23 years of conservative government in Australia. Key to the Labor Party's election platform was the principle of participatory democracy, the purpose of which was "breaking down apathy and maximising active citizen engagement" (Cunningham 123). Within this framework, the Labor Party committed to opening the airwaves, and reconfiguring the rhetoric of communication and media as a space of and for the people (Department of the Media 3).

Labor planned to honour this commitment via sweeping reforms that would counter the heavily concentrated Australian media landscape through "the encouragement of diversification of ownership of commercial radio and television"—and in doing so enable "the expression of a plurality of viewpoints and cultures throughout the media" (Department of the Media 3). Minority groups in particular were to be privileged, while some in the Party even argued for voices that would actively agitate. Senator Jim McClelland, for one, declared, "We say that somewhere in the system there must be broadcasting which not only must not be afraid to be controversial but has a *duty* to be controversial" (Senate Standing Committee 4).

One clear voice of controversy to emerge in the 1960s and resonate throughout the 1970s was the voice of youth (Gerster and Bassett; Langley). Indeed, counterculture is considered by some as synonymous with a particular strain of youth culture during this time (Roszak; Leech). The Labor Government acknowledged this hitherto unrecognised voice in its 1972 platform, with Minister for the Media Senator Doug McClelland claiming that his party would encourage the “whetting of the appetite” for “life and experimentation” of Australia’s youth – in particular through support for the arts (160). McClelland secured licenses for two “experimental-type” stations under the auspices of the ABC, with the youth station destined for Sydney via the ABC’s standby transmitter in Gore Hill (ABCB, 2).

Just as the political context in early 1970s Australia provided the necessary conditions for the appearance of Double Jay, so too did the cultural context. Counterculture emerged in the UK, USA and Europe as a clear and potent force in the late 1960s (Roszak; Leech; Frank; Braunstein and Doyle). In Australia this manifested in the 1960s and 1970s in various ways, including political protest (Langley; Horne); battles for the liberalisation of censorship (Hope and Dickerson, *Liberalisation*; Chipp and Larkin); sex and drugs (Dawson); and the art film scene (Hope and Dickerson, *Happiness*; Thoms).

Of particular interest here is the “lifestyle” aspect of counterculture, within which the value-expressions against the dominant culture manifest in cultural products and practices (Bloodworth 304; Leary ix), and more specifically, music. Many authors have suggested that music was pivotal to counterculture (Bloodworth 309; Leech 8), a key “social force” through which the values of counterculture were articulated (Whiteley 1).

The youth music broadcasting scene in Australia was extremely narrow prior to Double Jay, monopolised by a handful of media proprietors who maintained a stranglehold over the youth music scene from the mid-50s. This dominance was in part fuelled by the rising profitability of pop music, driven by “the dreamy teenage market”, whose spending was purely discretionary (Doherty 52) and whose underdeveloped tastes made them “immune to any sophisticated disdain of run-of-the-mill” cultural products (Doherty 230-231). Over the course of the 1950s the commercial stations pursued this market by “skewing” their programs toward the youth demographic (Griffen-Foley 264).

The growing popularity of pop music saw radio shift from a “multidimensional” to “mono-dimensional” medium according to rock journalist Bruce Elder, in which the “lowest-common-denominator formula of pop song-chat-commercial-pop-song” dominated the commercial music stations (12). Emblematic of this mono-dimensionalism was the appearance of the Top 40 Playlist in 1958 (Griffen-Foley 265), which might see as few as 10–15 songs in rotation in peak shifts. Elder claims that this trend became more pronounced over the course of the 1960s and peaked in 1970, with playlists that

were controlled with almost mechanical precision [and] compiled according to American-devised market research methods which tended to reinforce repetition and familiarity at the expense of novelty and diversity. (12)

Colin Vercoe, whose job was to sell the music catalogues of Festival Records to stations like 2UE, 2SER and SUW, says it was “an incredibly frustrating affair” to market new releases because of the rigid attachment by commercials to the “Top 40 of endless repeats” (Vercoe).

While some air time was given to youth music beyond the Top 40, this happened mostly in non-peak shifts and on weekends. Bill Drake at 2SM (who was poached by Double Jay and allowed to reclaim his real name, Holger Brockmann) played non-Top 40 music in his Sunday afternoon programme *The Album Show* (Brockmann). A more notable exception was Chris Winter’s *Room to Move* on the ABC, considered by many as the predecessor of Double Jay. Introduced in 1971, *Room to Move* played all forms of contemporary music not represented by the commercial broadcasters, including whole albums and B sides.

Rock music’s isolation to the fringes was exacerbated by the lack of musical sales outlets for rock and other forms of non-pop music, with much music sourced through catalogues, music magazines and word of mouth (Winter; Walker). In this context a small number of independent record stores, like *Anthem Records* in Sydney and *Archie and Jugheads* in Melbourne, appear in the early 1970s. Vercoe claims that the commercial record companies relentlessly pursued the closure of these independents on the grounds they were illegal entities:

The record companies hated them and they did everything they could do close them down. When (the companies) bought the catalogue to overseas music, they bought the rights. And they thought these record stores were impinging on their rights.

It was clear that a niche market existed for rock and alternative forms of music. Keith Glass and David Pepperell from *Archie and Jugheads* realised this when stock sold out in the first week of trade. Pepperell notes, “We had some feeling we were doing something new relating to people our own age but little idea of the forces we were about to unleash”.

Challenging the “System” from the Inside

At the same time as interested individuals clamoured to buy from independent record stores, the nation’s first youth radio station was being instituted within the ABC. In October 1974, three young staffers—Marius Webb, Ron Moss and Chris Winter— with the requisite youth credentials were briefed by ABC executives to build a youth-style station for launch in January 1975. According to Winter “All they said was ‘We want you to set up a station for young people’ and that was it!”, leaving the three with a conceptual carte blanche—although assumedly within the working parameters of the ABC (Webb). A Contemporary Radio Unit (CRU) was formed in order to meet the requirements of the ABC while also creating a clear distinction between the youth station and the ABC. According to Webb “the CRU gave us a lot of latitude [...] we didn’t have to go to other ABC Departments to do things”.

The CRU was conscious from the outset of positioning itself against the mainstream practices of both the commercial stations and the ABC. The publicly funded status of Double Jay freed it from the shackles of profit motive that enslaved the commercial stations, in turn liberating its turntables from baser capitalist imperatives. The two coordinators Ron Moss and Marius Webb also bypassed the conventions of typecasting the announcer line-up (as was practice in both commercial and ABC radio), seeking instead people with charisma, individual style and youth appeal. Webb told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that Double Jay’s announcers were “not

required to have a frontal lobotomy before they go on air." In line with the individual- and expression-oriented character of the counterculture lifestyle, it was made clear that "real people" with "individuality and personality" would fill the airwaves of Double Jay (Nicklin 9).

The only formula to which the station held was to avoid (almost) all formula – a mantra enhanced by the purchase in the station's early days of thousands of albums and singles from 10 or so years of back catalogues (Robinson). This library provided presenters with the capacity to circumvent any need for repetition. According to Winter the DJs "just played whatever we wanted", from B sides to whole albums of music, most of which had never made it onto Australian radio. The station also adapted the ABC tradition of recording live classical music, but instead recorded open-air rock concerts and pub gigs. A recording van built from second-hand ABC equipment captured the grit of Sydney's live music scene for Double Jay, and in so doing undercut the polished sounds of its commercial counterparts (Walker).

Double Jay's counterculture tendencies further extended to its management style. The station's more political agitators, led by Webb, sought to subvert the traditional top-down organisational model in favour of a more egalitarian one, including a battle with the ABC to remove the bureaucratic distinction between technical staff and presenters and replace this with the single category "producer/presenter" (Cheney, Webb, Davis 41). The coordinators also actively subverted their own positions as coordinators by holding leaderless meetings open to all Double Jay employees – meetings that were infamously long and fraught, but also remembered as symbolic of the station's vibe at that time (Frolows, Matchett).

While Double Jay assumed the ABC's focus on music, news and comedy, at times it politicised the content contra to the ABC's non-partisan policy, ignored ABC policy and practice, and more frequently pushed its contents over the edges of what was considered propriety and taste. These trends were already present in pockets of the ABC prior to Double Jay: in current affairs programmes like *This Day Tonight* and *Four Corners* (Harding 49); and in overtly leftist figures like Alan Ashbolt (Bowman), who it should be noted had a profound influence over Webb and other Double Jay staff (Webb). However, such an approach to radio still remained on the edges of the ABC.

As one example of Double Jay's singularity, Webb made clear that the ABC's "gentleman's agreement" with the Federation of Australian Commercial Broadcasters to ban certain content from airplay would not apply to Double Jay because the station would not "impose any censorship on our people" – a fact demonstrated by the station's launch song (Nicklin 9). The station's "people" in turn made the most of this freedom with the production of programmes like Gayle Austin's *Horny Radio Porn Show*, the *Naked Vicar Show*, the adventures of *Colonel Chuck Chunder of the Space Patrol*, and the Sunday afternoon comic improvisations of *Nude Radio* from the team that made *Aunty Jack*. This openness also made its way into the news team, most famously in its second month on air with the production of *The Ins and Outs of Love*, a candid documentary of the sexual proclivities and encounters of Sydney's youth. Conservative ABC staffer Clement Semmler described the programme as containing such "disgustingly explicit accounts of the sexual behaviour of young teenagers" that it "aroused almost universal obloquy from listeners and the press" (35).

The playlist, announcers, comedy sketches, news reporting and management style of Double Jay represented direct challenges to the entrenched media culture of Australia in the mid 1970s. The Australian National Commission for UNESCO noted at the time that Double Jay was "variously described as political, subversive, offensive, pornographic, radical, revolutionary and obscene" (7). While these terms were understandable given the station's commitment to experiment and innovation, the "vital point" about Double Jay was that it "transmitted an electronic reflection of change":

What the station did was to zero in on the kind of questioning of traditional values now inherent in a significant section of the under 30s population. It played their music, talked in their jargon, pandered to their whims, tastes, prejudices and societal conflicts both intrinsic and extrinsic. (48)

Conclusion

From the outset, Double Jay was locked in an "uneasy symbiosis" with mainstream culture. On the one hand, the station was established by federal government and its infrastructure was provided by state funds. It also drew on elements of mainstream broadcasting in multiple ways. However, at the same time, it was a voice for and active agent of counterculture, representing through its content, form and style those values that were considered to challenge the 'system,' in turn creating an outlet for the expression of hitherto un-broadcast "ways of thinking and being" (Leary). As Henry Rosenbloom, press secretary to then Labor Minister Dr Moss Cass wrote, Double Jay had the potential to free its audience "from an automatic acceptance of the artificial rhythms of urban and suburban life. In a very real sense, JJ [was] a deconditioning agent" (Inglis 375-6). While Double Jay drew deeply from mainstream culture, its skilful and playful manipulation of this culture enabled it to both reflect and incite youth-based counterculture in Australia in the 1970s.

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