

A Brief History of Brisbane Radio Station 4ZZZ-FM

compiled by *Radical Times*

4ZZZ-FM is an independent, community radio station operating in Brisbane, Queensland. 4ZZZ started a revolution in Australian radio by pioneering a new breed of community-based radio stations nationwide. 4ZZZ was the first to broadcast in both FM and stereo in Queensland, and the first FM stereo rock music station in Australia. The radio station was instrumental in promoting contemporary Australian music by showcasing Australian artists with undeniable impact, not only locally but also nationally.

4ZZZ-FM was the first Community FM broadcaster in Australia to take advantage of an initiative to extend radio broadcasting by the Whitlam Federal Government. After Whitlam and the Labor Party gained power in 1972, they introduced a wave of reformist legislation including proposed reforms to broadcasting. At the time, Australia had the second highest concentration of media ownership in the western world.

In 1971, political activists at the University of Queensland were discussing the possibility of setting up an illegal "pirate" radio station in Brisbane. This discussion came as a direct result of the National Party-dominated State Government's disreputable political maneuvering, and the media's one-sided and manipulative reporting of events during the 1971 South African Springbok national rugby union tour while in Brisbane. The idea of a pirate radio station was simply to allow other points of view to be heard in an otherwise repressive and anti-democratic atmosphere. The first meeting to explore the idea of using radio was on 14 July 1971, the very day a State of Emergency was declared in Queensland which was specifically designed to suppress demonstrations against the South Africa's apartheid system during the Springbok football tour.

A Brisbane activist, Jim Beatson, had lived in the UK in the late 1960s. There he witnessed first-hand how FM was transforming radio in Europe. Upon his return to Brisbane, Jim became aware of a move to promote community radio in Sydney, so he climbed onboard the slowly moving juggernaut of broadcasting reform and was eventually appointed to an Australian Government working party on public / community broadcasting.

Early on, Jim recognized an opportunity to "go up the right channels" in an endeavour to set up a radio station legally. He convinced others of his approach, since a pirate radio station was likely to be short lived, and the consequences for breaking the law could be severe with heavy penalties imposed. Lobbying for a legitimate broadcasting licence was generally considered the more desirable path to take, although much more difficult and time consuming to implement. The planning phase took three years without any guarantee of success. On the contrary, everything was stacked again this project succeeding.

The attraction of radio as a medium was that it was under Federal control, and not State Government control. So in theory at least, the State Government would have limited power to meddle in the new venture. Further protection might be provided by physically locating the radio station on the University of Queensland campus where interference by the Queensland police was less likely. Radio was also a relatively affordable medium in financial terms.

As the thinking shifted away from the idea of a pirate radio station, the then editor of the student newspaper in 1973, Alan Knight, set about establishing a Student Union Media Committee with a focus on radio. Alan called an inaugural meeting on the University of Queensland campus based on the idea that a collective could establish its own radio station. Just three people attended the first meeting in the Semper Floreat offices, Jim Beatson, Alan Knight and Ross Dannecker. Subsequently, a loose alliance of people interested in music, information, politics, and technology slowly joined forces. The group also became aligned with the commercial manufacturers and retailers of stereo equipment who were also pushing for the introduction of FM.

Australia was slow to move to FM at first, and the Government thought it might just be a passing fad. Supporters had to lobby against an industry proposal to locate FM in the UHF band instead of the internationally accepted VHF band. UHF receivers would have been prohibitively expensive for Brisbane's intended audience.

Those diverse interest groups meeting in Brisbane gained further unity through two Australian Government initiatives. In July 1974, the Whitlam Labour Government held a wide ranging conference to discuss developments in broadcasting. Secondly, they established a working party on Public Broadcasting in 1975 and Jim Beatson was among those appointed as a member of that working party.

As a member of the Government's working party, Jim Beatson learnt that 4ZZZ's application for a licence was viewed highly favourably, including by the Minister himself. That feedback gave the team in Brisbane extra incentive to press forward as they now felt reasonably certain they would be granted a licence in due course.

Their expectations were fulfilled in late 1975 when the then Minister for the Media, Dr. Moss Cass, awarded twelve experimental radio licences to educational institutions. One of them was granted to 4ZZZ. A real radio station could become a reality in Brisbane after all, and the 4ZZZ construction team immediately swung into action to build a studio.

An early suggestion for a name to call the new radio station was 4UM-FM (i.e. "Forum" FM). The name didn't stick. Another suggestion was 4FJ (after the iconic FJ Holden motor car). Then somebody suggested 4ZZ-FM "Rock Bottom Radio". The name struck a chord with many people involved with setting up the station at the time. This name was subsequently adopted from a list of proposed names by a majority vote at a meeting held at the Yellow Door Cinema at the Brisbane Filmmakers' Co-op at Coronation House in Edward Street, Brisbane.

From its inception, the project has been, and still is, largely run by volunteers. The original intention was to build the 4ZZZ studios on the top floor of the Student Union building. While demolishing the Clubs & Societies offices on the top floor, the construction team came to the realization that the building might not support the weight of the cavity brick walls needed to construct the individual studios. The use of cavity brick was the only affordable method of achieving adequate sound isolation for broadcast and recording studios. In subsequent negotiation with the Student Union, they changed their plans and relocated the building site to the more suitable basement area of the building known as The Cellar. It had once been home to "Smokos" and other student entertainments, but was largely underutilised at this time.

The volunteer crew continued the demolition at the new site, which resulted in substantial amounts of broken bluestone and brick. Working on a shoestring budget, they could not afford to remove the huge pile of masonry rubble. Then they came up with a stroke of genius....they built "the mound" in the car park in front of the building. Bill Michael (ex-Army) "borrowed" a front end loader from a nearby construction site, and the team re-landscaped the area in a single weekend. They added top soil and turf as the finishing touches to the project. This newly landscaped area could now be used for socializing and fundraising events for the station including the annual fundraising Radio-thon. 4ZZZ became famous for these creative solutions to difficult problems.

A new home was given to a baby-grand piano that was mostly being used as a "coffee table" in the Schonell Theatre. The 4ZZZ crew relocated the baby-grand inside the larger recording studio and built the cavity brick walls around it. The piano was eventually removed (with some difficulty) and returned to the Student Union in 1983.

Three weeks before the new radio station was due to open, Governor-General John Kerr, dramatically dismissed Gough Whitlam as Prime Minister. An experimental broadcasting licence had been approved for the new station by the dismissed Federal Government, but was not yet formally issued. In the turmoil and uncertainty that followed the dismissal on 11 November 1975, the opening of the station was delayed a week. All the while, the volunteers were rushing to complete the final fitting out of the studios. Fortunately, the new acting Postmaster General, Peter Nixon, reviewed the licences and decided to uphold Labor's policies.

4ZZZ (as 4ZZ-FM) first went to air at midday on 8 December 1975, on 105.7 MHz broadcasting with an experimental licence using a low-power transmitter. The original transmitter was hand built by the station engineer Ross Dannecker and volunteer, David Aberdeen. It was a copy of one used by 2MBS-FM which was a modified 2-metre transmitter using two 4CX250 valves giving a theoretical output of 500 watts (the actual output was less than this). The transmitter sat behind the wall behind the movie screen in the Schonell Theatre and the signal came from the radio studios via two balanced cables.

Announcer John Woods made the inaugural broadcast (a former Channel 9 journalist and sports reporter in Adelaide). Woods delivered a three-minute "editorial" introduction to the new radio station which argued it would be an important vehicle for free speech in Brisbane. He then played the station's first music track, The Who's "*Won't Get Fooled Again*" broadcast in glorious FM stereo. You can hear this opening broadcast and read a transcript of it under thumbnail 1B.

The Who's "*Won't Get Fooled Again*" is an ambiguous piece written in early 1971, voicing songwriter Pete Townshend's disillusionment with the sixties experiment and the so-called changes it had produced (see full lyrics under thumbnail 1B). Although the song was chosen largely to highlight the dismissal of the Whitlam Government, it was an apt metaphor for the new station. It carried a deeper meaning that the idealistic days of the sixties were over in Australia, and it was time to embrace the "new boss" of institutionalized counterculture. 4ZZZ was a very conscious experiment to do precisely this.

Some key founding members in the team included activist, Jim Beatson; journalist, Marian Wilkinson; administrator, John Stanwell; journalist, Alan Knight; and announcer, Helen Hambling. A more comprehensive list of "first zedders" can be found under thumbnail 1D.

Three months after the initial broadcast, the call sign was changed to 4ZZZ-FM when the Broadcasting Control Board required all FM radio stations in Australia to have a three-letter call sign. By adding an extra "Z", the radio station has since been known as "4ZZZ" (pronounced "Four Triple Zed" or simply "Triple Zed").

4ZZZ is a music formatted station with no play-lists, although announcers are required to meet quotas related to Australian and local content, recent releases and the inclusion of women. Programming is divided between "strip" and "block" shows. Strip shifts are basic music programs that broadcast a variety of music styles and information. Block shifts cater for a specific group of listeners. 4ZZZ has gained significant recognition for news and current affairs since it first began broadcasting, from both the wider media and the community broadcasting sector.

Throughout its existence, the station has worked as a concert promoter for both large and small events featuring local, national and international acts playing live in Brisbane. This has been an important part of the station's income stream over the years.

A Radiothon with prizes and events is held each year to attract new subscribers and encourage the renewal of subscriptions. An outdoor festivals with stalls and local music called Market Days has also been a regular fundraising event up to 2002.

Since New Years Day 1977, the station has conducted a popular music poll called the *Hot 100* based on listener's votes.

On 30 November 1978, the station was granted a full licence earning them the right to broadcast with "full power". They constructed a transmitter hut and mast on Mount Coot-tha (Brisbane's highest point) and changed to a new frequency of 102.1 FM (a government requirement). These hard-fought-for changes raised the profile of the station across Brisbane and helped to significantly expand its listening audience.

4ZZZ used a mast that was relocated from an AM radio transmitter site that had to be removed because of extensions to the Brisbane airport. The mast was moved and erected on Mt Coot-tha. It was taller than needed, so they removed about 30 feet from the top which left about a 90 foot mast on which to mount the 4ZZZ antenna. Explosives had to be used when digging one of the four guy block holes which were 3 or 4 cubic feet in size.

"In the '80s it was not unusual for ZZZ breakfast announcers to phone Joh Bjelke-Petersen, direct, at his peanut farm in Kingaroy, to question him about his most recent attacks on democratic rights. 'Yu yu yu you people,' he would splutter, 'Yu you people come here with the young end of the stick talking about this and that and everything else. Y-y-y-you just stop it.' Not only were these exchanges endlessly entertaining, they also gave ZZZ listeners a real insight into the nature of the beast." (Karen Fredericks 1993)

In mid 1988, an Australian Labor Party aligned student union council tried to cut all funding to the campus-based radio station. This resulted in hundreds of 4ZZZ supporters occupying the union building with the result that the right-wing leaning council backed down.

When Young National Party member, Victoria Brazil, became president of the University of Queensland Student Union towards the end of 1988, her administration abruptly cut off all funding to 4ZZZ and forcibly closed down the radio station. Shortly after 4 am on the morning of 14 December 1988, four members of the new, right-wing student union executive (which included Victoria Brazil), together with four security guards, entered the radio station without warning and served a notice of eviction. They insisted that broadcasting cease and for the premises to be vacated immediately. Darren, the volunteer announcer who was on air at the time doing "The Graveyard Shift", had little choice but to comply with the directive. The station was then locked and guarded by the security firm.

The alarm was raised and broadcasting was quickly restarted directly from the 4ZZZ transmitter hut on Mount Coot-tha using a simple cassette player and a microphone. The call went out over the airwaves for support. By 1:30 pm, about 200 supporters had re-occupied the premises and the radio station was able to resume broadcasting from their studios. The student union responded by calling the police and also cutting off electrical power to the premises. The police arrived on the scene but were reluctant to interfere in a civil matter. Meanwhile, broadcasting was resumed once again by using the station's emergency generator. Later the occupiers took control of the situation by turning the power back on again themselves. Up to 300 supporters at a time occupied the station over the next two weeks to help ensure it kept operating. Both sides in the dispute agreed to negotiations which served to diffuse the situation.

4ZZZ continued to broadcast from their campus-based studios for the next 6 months. With hostilities continuing and the situation becoming increasingly untenable, the decision was made to relocate the station off campus. In July 1989, 4ZZZ moved to temporary premises on Coronation Drive in the nearby suburb of Toowong. In June 1992, the station was able to obtain a licence to buy the former Brisbane headquarters of the Communist Party of Australia. 4ZZZ-FM still broadcasts from these premises on St. Paul's Terrace in Fortitude Valley.

Historically, 4ZZ-FM/4ZZZ-FM was a remarkable achievement overcoming several monumental hurdles which John Stanwell points out:

Convincing the Australian Government to create a new category of mass-media, namely community radio, in a country where the media was already ruthlessly monopolised.

Inspiring the general campus population at the University of Queensland to support the project, and convincing the Students Union to assist in providing the practical infrastructure and initial financial support.

Building a functioning radio station with a minuscule budget using an army of volunteers, and without hiring professionals or tradespeople.

In a highly-charged political atmosphere, successfully opening the fledgling station following on the heels a unique change of Government in Australia history in November 1975.

Building support for the project from an unlikely triumvirate of Hi-Fi nuts & retailers; unhappy rock musos & music lovers; and frustrated politicians.

Insisting on staffing the station with eleven full-time members, albeit at very low pay, from the very beginning (increasing to about sixteen at its peak) when similar Australian community radio stations rarely got beyond the two or three staff members they started out with.

Insisting on using accredited journalists from "day one", and getting Trade Union and industry recognition for this.

Promoting an ever-changing variety of large, high-risk, entrepreneurial events, primarily based on contemporary rock music, again almost solely with volunteer help, that raised the money necessary to cover the station's daily-operating costs.

Successfully defending an obscenity hearing, and mounting a full-licence application, before a new Federal broadcasting tribunal.

Breaking major news stories such as the Cedar Bay police raid and the treatment of Boggo Road prisoners.

Becoming the de facto training ground for many other community radio stations around Australia, and even the ABC national youth station Triple J.

Making a monumental contribution to the growth of "The Brisbane Sound" and Australian contemporary rock music.

Continuing to survive for 40 years, when it was thought lucky if they succeeded in keeping the station running for more than a few years.

Continuing to operate successfully for this whole time without any government funding or on-air commercial advertising.

The station was forced to re-invent itself in the 1990s after the National Party finally lost their long hold on State Government power.

Around 1998, the Brisbane City Council decided that having three neighbouring transmission towers and associated huts on Mount Coot-tha was an unnecessary eyesore and encouraged 4ZZZ, 4MBS, and Family Radio to share facilities. The three radio stations set up a company called *Broadcasting Park* which consisted of three shares, one owned by each member station. They now broadcast from the one installation on Mt Coot-tha.

In 2009, the Triple Zed news team won a national CBAA award for Youth Contribution. This award recognised the news team's efforts in highlighting youth issues and providing a voice for marginalised groups.

4ZZZ is licensed to serve the general community with an emphasis on special interest and marginalised audiences. 4ZZZ provides free and informal training to volunteers in all areas of station operations. There is no access fee for broadcast time however all staff and volunteers are expected to become subscribers to the station and announcers are required to assist in major fund raising events. The management and decision making structure of the station involves both an active board of directors and a collective open to all 4ZZZ subscribers.

As a community radio station, 4ZZZ-FM is a member of the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA). The station now broadcasts to much of South-East Queensland including the Greater Brisbane area and reaching Noosa, Toowoomba, the Gold Coast and parts of Northern NSW. It also provides a live web stream from their web site: <http://www.4zzzfm.org.au>

The station remains, as it always has, financially struggling. 4ZZZ-FM relies entirely on three income streams: subscribers, promotions and events.

The motto for the station is "Agitate, Educate, Organise".