

## 4ZZZ: a retrospective

by Derek Barry (3 May 2007)



4ZZZ is a community radio station that occupies a unique niche in Brisbane's media scene. Founded in 1975, it has now survived almost 32 years of broadcasting despite not having any government funding or commercial advertising. It was the first station on the Stereo-FM dial in Queensland and it was the product of a unique social environment where the federal government was socially progressive and the state government was socially repressive.

4ZZZ grew out of the idealism of the radical student movement of the 1960s. It was founded by students at the University of Queensland interested in new media. These students were already using printing presses to get their messages out. Their publications raged against the Vietnam war, gerrymander in the Queensland electoral system and civil libertarian concerns with freedom of speech.

Queensland had been ruled since 1959 by a Country Party led coalition which censored books and movies, banned political demonstrations and controlled written publications. They protected their power by using State Special Branch to keep watch over "subversives" and taking vigorous police action. Student publications had a short life span due to the law that made it illegal to circulate printed material without a permit, unless the material contained advertising or religious matters.

The attraction of radio was that it was under federal not state control. In 1972 the Labor party swept to power federally and introduced a wave of reformist legislation. Jim Beatson was an activist who became aware of a move to promote community radio in Sydney. Beatson had lived in the UK in the 1960s and saw how FM was transforming radio. Australia was slow to move to FM and the government thought it was a passing fad. Activists such as Beatson worked with the hifi industry to show the government they were wrong.

Beatson got involved in a working party on public broadcasting while UQ students lobbied the new government for an FM licence. They fought successfully against an industry proposal to locate FM in the UHF band instead of the internationally accepted VHF band as UHF receivers would have been prohibitively expensive for the new station's intended audience. The Minister finally announced he would license 12 additional stations which would be campus-based educational licences. 4ZZ (the extra Z was later forced on them by government legislation) based at UQ, was among them. They quickly built a makeshift studio in the Student Union building.

But the government was slow in handing out the promised licence. The first fully licensed public radio station 2MBS-FM went to air in Sydney in 1974. 11 more would follow suit in the next 18 months. But the situation became more of a concern through 1975 as the Labor government was in crisis and likely to collapse at any time. 4ZZ knew a new government would not look on a radical youth station as favourably. On 11 November 1975, the Labor government was sacked. The new acting Postmaster General, Peter Nixon reviewed the licences and decided in this case that Labor's policies would be upheld. Effectively he gave 4ZZ the right to broadcast, albeit on micropower.

4ZZ first took to the airwaves at midday, 8 December 1975 on 105.7 MHz with DJ John Woods at the microphone. Woods was a former Channel 9 journalist and sports reporter and his three minute introduction of the station argued it was an important act of free speech. He then played the station's first music - The Who's "Won't Get Fooled Again". Pete Townsend's song about revolution was an apt metaphor for the new station.



As well as music, 4ZZ had a strong newsroom with paid journalists. They became involved in many of the issues of the day such as East Timor and more local matters including the fire-bombing of the Brisbane Whiskey-a-Go-Go nightclub and the ongoing endemic police corruption. They broke what became an international story when Queensland police and a naval vessel raided a remote hippie community in Cedar Bay, incognito and without warrants. They destroyed possessions, set fire to buildings and arrested many in the commune. Police handouts painted it as a routine drug raid to compliant Brisbane media. 4ZZ told the real story after talking to witnesses in Cairns.

After three years in probation the station was granted a full licence in 1978. They also earned the right to broadcast on full power. They placed a new transmitter hut and mast on Mount Coot-tha (Brisbane's highest point), changed their call sign to 4ZZZ and their frequency to 102.1. They were now a very visible presence in Brisbane's media landscape.

4ZZZ's penchant for trouble-making meant they were a constant thorn in the side of authorities. On air language and taste raised hackles that saw their licence needing to be renewed at regular intervals. It was against the law to say the word "fuck" on air and the station ignored this by playing the Dead Kennedy's "Too Drunk to Fuck" and Marianne Faithful's "Why D'Ya Do It". A fringe organisation called the Society to Outlaw Pornography monitored the station and complained to the Australian Broadcasting Authority about 4ZZZ's "obscenities" in 1981. 4ZZZ got the case dismissed and made it legal to swear on Australian TV and radio.

In 1983, the station broke the story of the Boggo Road Prison riots. Conditions in the jail were deplorable. Prisoners went on hunger strike to protest government inaction after a food poisoning outbreak hospitalised 30 inmates. Because a journalist at 4ZZZ, John Baird, was part of a Prisoner's Action Group, the hunger strikers refused to speak to any media except the station. They smuggled a tape out which was played on air. The tape revealed the true conditions in the prison. The coverage led to better conditions and eventually the closure of the jail after the Kennedy Royal Commission of 1987 found conditions there to be unhealthy and inhuman.

4ZZZ saw off its arch-enemy Joh Bjelke Peterson who resigned in 1987 after 19 years as state premier. His deputy Bill Gunn launched the Fitzgerald Inquiry to investigate the serious allegations that were emerging about Queensland's Moonlight State. Its report blew the lid on the sleaze that was at the heart of Joh's government and its corrupt police force.

4ZZZ had problems of its own to deal with when the UQ Student Union was taken over by a hostile right-wing group. In December 1988, new UQ Student President Victoria Brazil evicted the station from its premises. Her group also shut down the radical newspaper and defunded most "progressive" activities. After a sit-in at the studios, 4ZZZ eventually regained the airwaves but accepted the inevitable and moved to temporary accommodation in Toowong six months later.

After three years in cramped surroundings, 4ZZZ moved to their current HQ in the Valley in 1992. The station was forced to re-invent itself in the 1990s after the Nationals finally lost their hold on long-term power. The station became a world music promoter, bringing rare acts to play live in Brisbane. But it remains forever financially strapped. 4ZZZ relies entirely on three income streams: subscribers, promotions and events. All staff and volunteers must be subscribers.

Many of its early staffers have moved on to bigger things. Jim Beatson went on to work at the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia. Marion Wilkinson and Amanda Collinge are respected national journalists. Stephen Stockwell is a lecturer in media at Griffith University. Andrew Bartlett is now a parliamentary senator. Now fully grown into adulthood, 4ZZZ enjoys a good reputation in the industry. But it still proclaims itself as an activist organisation with its longstanding motto of AGITATE, EDUCATE, ORGANISE. 4ZZZ continue to challenge the status quo, 32 years on.