

Have a hammy Christmas

What do you give the nerd who has everything? How about a recording of endless numbers transmitted by radio stations that don't officially exist?

By Duncan Campbell

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Still without a gift to send your partner quickly to sleep or to perplex your friends? Forget "Perfect Day" and send £27.50 to Irdial, a London-based avant garde record label. Its latest 4-disc CD set, just launched, offers three hours of 150 different electronic voices in Spanish, Russian, German, English, Arabic, Hebrew, Mandarin and even Serbo-Croat reading out numbers, numbers . . . and more numbers.

Irdial's CDs are not a New Age get-to-sleep-quick system, but an attempt to crack a decades-old puzzle — the networks of mysterious radio "numbers stations". The stations' illicit broadcasts can be heard every hour of the day, all over the world. Most are in the short wave band, but some can be received on ordinary medium wave radios.

The numbers stations are not internationally registered and are therefore illegal. Almost without exception, no government has ever acknowledged knowing about, far less operating, a numbers station. No one has ever come forward and admitted that they have purposefully received transmissions from a numbers station — except amateurs like Irdial's contributors, who obsessively listen, catalogue, and wonder.

But radio listening is not as safe or as simple as trainspotting or stamp collecting. In Britain, it is still formally a crime to listen to unregistered or non-broadcast stations, or to tell anyone what you hear if you do (or to sell recordings of the stations). In this climate, paranoia still prospers alongside speculation that the stations are links to

alien observers or invaders, or the internal command networks of the mafia and drugs cartels.

The founder of the Irdial label, Akin Fernandez, is a 34-year-old expatriate New Yorker who came to Britain as a teenager. Irdial, his avant garde electronic music business (<http://www.pcug.co.uk/~irdial>), has previously released recordings of the electronic sounds of the Aurora Borealis. In 1993, he casually tuned his radio to a numbers station. His obsession began.

Via the Net, Fernandez and other numbers stations enthusiasts around the world exchange daily and weekly reports on Internet mailing lists (<http://www.qth.net/spooks-digest.archive>) and an IRC chatline.

“I try not to speculate about what these stations are or where they are coming from”, says Fernandez. “There’s a lot of rumour going round”, he adds. Most of that rumour suggests that numbers stations are run by the world’s intelligence agencies — and that they are instructions to secret agents.

But why should the CIA, MI6, Mossad and their Russian, French and German sisters still be using the methods of the 1940s and before in the era of cheap global telecommunications? The answer is that numbers stations can be heard without (in practice) anyone being able to tell who is receiving them, and without incriminating special equipment having to be in the agent’s possession.

Numbers stations are indeed links to secret agents, according to Oleg Gordievsky, the former KGB officer and SIS double agent who was the KGB’s number two in London during the 1980s. “In the cold war”, he said this week, “about 200 so-called illegals were run by the KGB and the Stasi [the East German intelligence service]”. Illegals were KGB and Stasi officers who, unlike Gordievsky and spies operating

under diplomatic protection, assumed false identities and lived and worked in their target country. Numbers stations, using the KGB's traditional system of "one time pads", were an effective and safe means of sending these agents their orders.

One illegal, whose case was known to Gordjevsky, was a Czech spy arrested in London in the mid 1980s. He had posed as a Dutchman, and had been trading in icons. He was arrested as he listened to instructions from a Prague-based numbers station, which uses the call-sign "OLX".

Similar cases have occurred in the US, where the FBI has caught agents whose instructions were being transmitted from KGB controlled stations in Cuba. Just two months ago, the FBI arrested three former East German Stasi agents in Washington. Their radio instructions had similarly been carried by short wave signals from Cuba.

But if Gordievsky's testimony and the sprinkling of known spy cases appears to confirm that numbers stations are involved in espionage, they also raise fresh mysteries. Why, with the end of the cold war, are most of them still going? Why have some new stations started since 1990?

OLX recently went back on air. It is not registered with the International Telecommunications Union, making it illegal. Yet enthusiasts who have written to OLX in Prague reporting the strength of their signals have received thank you cards from "Ministerstvo Vnitra CR" — the Interior Ministry of the Czech Republic.

So who are the democratic Czechs spying on now ? The Germans is the likely answer, says Gordievsky. They distrust them and want "to know what they are up to. They may be trying to create a new network. They shouldn't".

Britain's main contribution to the numbers station business is still active. This has long been understood to be an SIS station nicknamed the "Lincolnshire Poacher". This powerful station uses the traditional English folk song to identify itself between spoken sequences of 2,000 numbers (<http://www.access.digex.net/~cps/poacher.sked.html>). Poacher is believed to be transmitted from the British sovereign bases on Cyprus, beamed towards the Middle East. It is on the air every day — usually transmitting on three frequencies at once, which helps to overcome jamming believed to emanate from Iraq or Iran.

As recently as 1993, the Poacher acquired a far eastern sister, this time using another English folk song, "Cherry Ripe", as its callsign. Cherry Ripe's transmitters have not been accurately located, but appear to be in Hong Kong, Taiwan, or Guam. Its target may be China and its new province, Hong Kong.

"The sudden appearance of Cherry Ripe was really surprising for me," says Mike Gauffman, a Kent-based short wave listener and one of the two founders of Enigma — the European Numbers Information Gathering and Monitoring Association (<http://www.pcug.co.uk/~irdial/enigma.htm>). The group, which began in 1993, has 200 to 300 worldwide supporters who are on the Net and on the air every day, logging schedules but never understanding a single word of the messages they monitor.

Nor wanting to, apparently. "That would destroy the air of mystery that's around the stations. It's just a hobby — a special facet of a hobby", Gauffman said this week.

Only in the past few weeks have listeners started thinking about using direction-finding methods to discover where the transmissions are coming from. Several stations have already apparently been located — at government sites in the US, in Israel and at Israeli embassies, and in Cuba, France and Germany.

But knowing too much would, it seems, be spoiling the fun. “It’s all very spooky, very mysterious”, says Fernandez. And the listeners who huddle under airdials, and over dials seem to want to keep it that way. So listening to his CDs can be a true fantasy experience. The word you hear may convey a sentence of execution, a sabotage raid, perhaps even a precursor to war. Or they may be a grand deception, meaning nothing. Who knows? You can write your own script, and no one can say you’re wrong.

**Irdial’s numbers stations discs can be obtained from These Records, 112
Brook Drive, London SE11 4TQ tel: 0171-587 5349**