

REVENGE ON THE AIR

Jay Rayner tells how a listener beat a radio station

IT WOULD be easy to dismiss Robin Katz as an obsessive. For five months, from November 1993 to March 1994, she stayed in almost every night, taping late-night phone-in host Nick Abbot on Virgin 1215.

Katz, a music writer and broadcaster, sees it another way. It wasn't obsession - she wanted revenge. Abbot had bad-mouthed her on air. His attacks were continuing. In turn she was determined to make life unpleasant for Virgin.

Over a 16-month battle she has been the cause of at least three watchdog rulings against Virgin for breaching codes of conduct; she has cost it £20,000 in a fine by the Radio Authority handed down just before Christmas; she even got Abbot's phone-in show scrapped.

The tussle has also forced the radio regulatory bodies to prove whether they really have teeth. For the executives of Talk Radio UK, the first national commercial talk station which launches next month, it is a fascinating case study. Talk Radio has promised to swamp the country with wall-to-wall shock jockery, its DJs commanded to win the nations hearts by attacking their sensibilities. The damage one committed listener has done to Virgin, a station which didn't even declare a desire to shock, may make it think twice before pushing back the taste boundaries too far.

Katz, an American expat, says that Virgin brought it all on itself. *"They thought that they could treat me like a Brit. A Brit would curl up and die rather than do what I did."*

The saga began with an article

by Katz in July 1993, criticising Virgin 1215 as a pale imitation of US adult rock stations. In a final, short paragraph she described Abbot's show as irresponsible. Abbot had told a teenager to dump his girlfriend because she wouldn't have sex with her.

The day the piece appeared the DJ referred to Katz as *"that bitch"*. *"I shall be ripping her a new arse for your listening pleasure,"* he said. Katz knew nothing of it until months later when she discovered that someone had complained to the Radio Authority. The complaint was upheld.

In November, she heard that Abbot was now jokingly proposing marriage to her on air. *"I felt this was sexual harassment,"* she says. The Radio Authority told her it had a gentleman's agreement with Virgin - no further Katz references - but that monitoring the station was not its job.

Katz took on the task. She began faxing collages about the station to trade journalists and filled up 90-minute cassettes with Abbots babble. Two further complaints, to the Broadcasting Complaints Commission and the Radio Authority, were upheld. Then, last September, Katz reported Abbot again for comments made by a caller to a programme about sexual perversions. The authority slapped on the £20,000 fine.

Why did she bother? Katz, who actually spent five years working freelance for a corner of the Virgin empire, felt it was important to expose a problem with British law. *"Virgin should have been willing to sit down and negotiate a financial settlement with me,"* she says. *"They said they would not compensate me*

unless required to do so by a court of law or regulatory body. But you can't take someone to court for sexual harassment on the airwaves in the UK, where you can in the US. And in the US advertisers will pull out support if consumers complain."

Virgin says Katz made unsubstantiated allegations against the station and that it put itself out to come to an agreement. With regard to Abbot, it believes it acted entirely responsibly. *"If somebody expresses his opinions on air there's nothing we can do about it. But Abbot has been reprimanded to the limit of our ability. We have suspended him twice, and he is no longer doing the phone-in show."* If he errs once more he will be sacked.

Is that the last Virgin will hear of Robin Katz? Probably not. She now wants to tell the good consumers of America about the awful things she thinks Virgin has been allowed to be broadcast in its name. The infant Talk Radio would be well advised to avoid baiting listeners like Ms. Katz when it finally hits the air.

Shock tactics may get listeners. But, as this story proves, they can also cost money.

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