Although shortwave has long been promoted–especially by receiver manufacturers–as a way to “be there” as history happened, I’ve always thought there was less to this promise than met the eye. Whether because of language, schedules, propagation, whatever, the number of opportunities to “tune in to history” have been fewer than one might think. But there have been some, and one was Radio Biafra.

On May 27, 1967, the Nigerian government divided the country into 12 new states, including three in what had been called the Eastern Region. One of the new states was East Central State, home to a large Igbo population. The longstanding tension between the Igbos and the other peoples of Nigeria, exacerbated by Igbo concerns over potential loss of eastern oil revenues as a result of the country’s reorganization, broke into violence, and three days after the reorganization, Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, military governor of the Eastern Region, declared it the Republic of Biafra, with (at the outset) the capital in Enugu. (For a brief time there was also an allied Republic of Benin, which included Benin City.) What followed was two and a half years of civil war that concluded in January 1970 with the surrender of the surviving Biafran forces and the reintegration of the area into Nigeria.

In 1967, Nigeria was well represented on the shortwave bands, with Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) stations in Lagos, Benin City, Ibadan, Kaduna and Enugu, and additional non-NBC stations in the latter three places (in Enugu, the non-NBCer was the Eastern Nigeria Broadcasting Service, or ENBS). All could be heard in North America with varying degrees of clarity.

Soon after the republic was proclaimed, the new political entity found its public voice in a radio station called Radio Biafra. Loggings started appearing in the summer of 1967. The late Don Jensen would describe the station’s history in two articles. “Biafra’s Incredible Radio” appeared in the December 1969-January 1970 issue of Science & Electronics, before Biafra’s fall and while the station was still on the air. Many years later he updated the article for Popular Communications; “The Life and Death of Radio Biafra” appeared in the September 1987 issue.

The station operated as the Broadcasting Corporation of Biafra, and would be on the air until January 14, 1970. The main shortwave frequency was 4855 kHz. until early 1969, when it moved to 7304v kHz. An “external service” called the Voice of Biafra was on 6145v (for a time, 6100). Three transmitters, originally located in Enugu, were in use at various times, one from the NBC station, two from ENBS. An additional, new Brown Boveri transmitter was put in operation circa October 1969, and fitted for mobile operation. All the transmitters were designed to operate at 10 kw. The station was best heard in the U.S. signing on around 0500 GMT on
4855/7304 kHz., and signing on circa 0500 and again at 2200 on 6145.

The Biafrans were resourceful. As ground was gained and lost in the fighting, they took the transmitters with them, and over its lifetime Radio Biafra actually transmitted from four different locations: Enugu, Aba, Umuahia and Orlu, in that order.

After the war, the original NBC station in Enugu resumed operation as the East Central State Broadcasting Service. ENBS never returned to the air.

Needless to say, Radio Biafra became an immediate QSL target, not least because, at 10 kw., it could be heard fairly well, and also because it was being operated by insurgent forces in an active military conflict that was of serious international concern. Biafra was also given separate country status on the NASWA country list. The first QSLs did not start appearing until spring of 1969, nearly two years after the station had come on the air. Biafra apparently had enough of a postal system to issue first day covers postmarked in Enugu (see below), but an embargo prevented outside mail from getting through.

One of the earliest Biafran replies was received by longtime DXer Bill Sparks, who logged the station in San Francisco. It is unclear exactly where he sent his report of April 6, but most likely it was via the Ivory Coast because on April 25, Biafra’s Special Representative in the Ivory Coast, P. C. Chigbo, wrote to him (p. 3), apologizing for the delay in responding (!) and advising that he had sent Bill’s letter on to the station but that he could confirm that his “receptions accurately reflect the programs broadcast from Radio Biafra.” He credited the station engineers with the good work they were doing under very difficult circumstances; he noted the jamming being practiced by Nigeria; and he expressed hope that the station would be able to reward listeners with a better signal in the future. Predicting occasional breakdowns, he vowed “we will always manage to come back.”

Although Sparks was a regular (and prolific) reporter of his loggings and QSLs to NASWA, his letter seems to have gone unreported, perhaps because he may have considered it an unofficial, interim reply. P. C. Chigbo’s name and address surfaced in the DX press in August 1969 at the latest, when he announced that the station was interested in reports, which could be sent to him at Box 8861, Abidjan. The Abidjan address also appeared in Gilfer’s 1969 SWL
Dear Mr. Sizer,

Your letter of April 5th arrived when I was attending the abortive conference in search of peace in Monrovia, Liberia. I apologize for the delay in sending this acknowledgment.

I have passed on your letter to the Controller, Voice of Biafra and I hope sometime they would send you a proper acknowledgment. Meanwhile, I can at least confirm that your reception accurately reflects the programmes broadcast from Monrovia. The Voice of Biafra transmits on 6,145 kc on the 49 metre band using a 10 kilowatt transmitter of uncertain age. The station is manned and operated exclusively by Biafran Engineers. The last two years have been difficult since our Engineers have accepted this challenge and the fact that they continue to operate in a credit to their ingenuity.

Spares are scarce and they have had to improvise with spares fabricated from materials bought in a rapidly declining local market.

In July and August 1968 the station was being heavily jammed by the Nigerians but the engineers found a way of beating even this challenge and the Nigerians gave up.

We hope that some day we shall reward faithful listeners like yourself with a powerful transmitter and better programmes.

Till then, please keep on listening, from time to time we have breakdowns but we will always manage to come back. We know, as well as our listeners that the Voice of Biafra is the only link we have with Biafrans and friends of Biafra and that link must never fail.

Yours Sincerely,

[Signature]

Special Representative.
Thank you very much for your recent letter.

Regular broadcast on Radio Biafra ceased on the 12th/13th January and made-shift broadcasts continued until the 13th/14th January.

On the 12th January General Effiong of Biafra made an appeal for disengagement of troops and for surrender terms to be worked out. The people of Biafra faced by decimation from starvation and military operations decided to opt to stop fighting in order to save the remaining millions.

From the 12th onwards therefore the administration at home fell apart as people started flooding into the bush. I assume only technical personnel continued to run Radio Biafra. In similar circumstances in the past, in the absence of programme staff, music was played continuously as actually happened.

However the transmission monitored here was on the 41 meter band 7,301 KIL (we had lost contact with the 49 meters transmission on the 12th).

From 14th January 1970 Radio Biafra closed down as Biafra Radio after a clear run of 30 months under the most difficult conditions in technical logistics and personnel terms.

The Spirit of Biafra lives on.

F. O. CHIODO
Special Representative
Address Book, the exact month unknown.

More Abidjan replies started coming through. The second reply shown above (p. 3) is dated October 8, 1969, and was to well-known DXer Al Sizer in Connecticut. You can hear Al’s recording of Voice of Biafra, 6145 kHz., made on September 8, 1969, 2140 GMT [IDs at 02:24 and 03:11]. Reception was not very good. Reports in the NASWA bulletin attested to the receipt of similar replies by many DXers during the last few months of 1969. Abidjan was replying in anywhere from two to six weeks, making it a good verifier (although not all reports were answered).

It appears that the final broadcast of Radio Biafra was on Wednesday, January 14, 1970. (See the chronology of the last four days of Radio Biafra in the Numero Uno newsletter, No. 14, January 20, 1970.) On January 23, 1970, P. C. Chigbo penned a form letter (p. 4 above) that many DXers received. He recounted the station’s final days, and ended with, “The Spirit of Biafra lives on.” One would be hard pressed to find a station that maintained better communications with DXers during the most trying of times than did Radio Biafra via Abidjan.

Also on p. 4 is a letter received from the NBC in Lagos by California DXer Bruce Churchill, who had sought a clarification of the situation a few days after Radio Biafra left the air. The NBC had no hesitation in confirming “that you were hearing the station used by the former Nigerian secessionists [sic] which was broadcasting from Obodo-Uku [near Orlu] in the then secessionist [sic] enclave.” It is interesting to see such a specific reference to what was a rebel transmitter site in a very out-of-the-way place.

There was believed to have been but one exception to the Radio Biafra QSLing pattern described above. It was a letter received by top DXer Alan Roth of Bridgeport, Connecticut, on April 18, 1969, which made it at least a candidate for the first Biafran QSL received by anybody. But Alan’s QSL was unique for another reason: it would be the only known QSL to have ever originated from within Biafra itself, rather than from Abidjan.

How did Alan do it? John Herkimer told the story in the May 1983 NASWA Shortwave Center column, of which he was editor at the time. According to Alan, with postal mail to Biafra embargoed, he sent his report to three stations—Radio Gabon, Radio Dahomey (now Benin), and Radio Clube de São Tomé—asking them to forward it to Biafra and hoping that one of them would. (Perhaps Bill Sparks had done something similar.) He later learned that the São Tomé letter had indeed gotten through. The reply was prepared by the station in Biafra, then hand carried by a Biafran representative working at a Biafran government office on Madison Avenue (most likely the Biafra International Foundation for Relief, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction). The reply was then mailed to Alan from New York via the U.S. mail. (A statement in Don Jensen’s 1987 PopComm article that Alan had taken the report to the Biafran office in New York appears to be mistaken.)

Alas, Alan died around 1986 and his QSLs did not survive him, but a rough image of the QSL, and the envelope it arrived in, did, and it appeared both in John Herkimer’s 1983 NASWA
writeup and in the 1987 Jensen *PopComm* article. (The image in the Jensen article, though not very good, is the better of the two.)

The letter, dated March 27, 1969, was on plain, blue-lined paper, with the typed “letterhead” of the Broadcasting Corporation of Biafra, P.O. Box 350, Enugu. It replied to Alan’s reception on January 26, 1969. It was “full-data,” that is, it contained date, time and frequency (7304 kHz.) of reception, and it was signed by A. S. Alaribe, Chief Engineer. The CE expressed the hope that people, like Alan, who had heard the station would spread the word about Biafra. He noted the station’s transmission hours, 0430-2230 GMT, and requested further reports.

Receiving a QSL like this is what DXers live for. Alan’s QSL became known as a “battlefield” QSL, and has long been believed to be the only direct Radio Biafra reply in the world. All the other Biafra QSLs were in a sense “also-rans” because they did not originate from within the country. The QSL conferred bragging rights of the very highest order, and in the world of SWBC DXing, verifying Radio Biafra direct would be long remembered as a signal achievement (no pun intended).

Fast forward a half century to August 2018, and an activity that could not have been imagined in 1969—looking through eBay for interesting QSLs. What’s this? A Radio Biafra QSL? The Abidjan variety have shown up before. But this QSL (see p. 7 below) looked different, because . . . its text and setup are virtually identical to Alan’s one-of-a-kind QSL! Has Alan’s QSL now become a two-of-a-kind, at best?

Aside from the addressee of the eBay letter (one James G. Moffitt of Dallas, Texas), the two letters are identical in setup and content—the same blue-lined paper (but Moffitt’s has punched holes on the side), same typed letterhead, same “Our Ref.” number, similar signatures of A. S. Alaribe. But hold on—there are some oddities here. The date of the Moffitt QSL letter, March 27, 1969, is the same as the date on Alan’s letter. More significantly, the date, time and frequency of Moffitt’s reception are also identical to those in Alan’s letter, certainly an unlikely scenario. Third, you would expect the typewriter fonts to be the same if the letters were prepared on the same date, but they are different. And fourth, in his 1987 *PopComm* article, Don Jensen noted, with regard to the graphic of Alan’s QSL included in the article, that “A high-contrast photo was required to bring out the typing since a well-worn typewriter ribbon had been used.” (The same photo had been used in the 1983 NASWA article.) The Moffitt QSL looks like it had been typed with a good ribbon.

While there is a temptation to view the Moffitt QSL as not genuine for the above reasons—perhaps created after seeing Alan’s QSL in the 1987 *PopComm* article (where the text was legible)—it seems unlikely that someone would undertake a create a fake QSL after so many years. If they had, wouldn’t they have changed the date of the letter, and, more importantly, the date and time of reception, to make it look more credible?

The eBay seller, located in Ithaca, New York, had over 800 QSLs, mostly ham cards,
currently for sale when the Moffitt letter appeared. His recent auctions contained several dozen other SWBC veries from Moffitt covering the years 1969-71. They were generally from the easier-to-hear stations, making Biafra somewhat of an outlier in that respect, but it is clear that James G. Moffitt of Dallas was in fact an active SWL in the days of Radio Biafra.

In the United States, the report of Alan’s Biafra QSL first appeared publicly in the NASWA bulletin of June 1969 (see below; “GAC” is Gregg Calkin, the QSL Report editor). It had appeared in the bulletin of the Danish Shortwave Club International in May.
So after May/June 1969, the word was out. (The details were repeated in slightly modified form at the end of Don Jensen’s *January 1970 Science & Electronics* article.) Alan had obtained the QSL information above (address, need for separate envelope and stamps) in a phone call from C. A. Onyenai of the Biafra New York office, apparently after the Biafra reply had been received there, and he passed it on to NASWA. That is also how he learned that his report had been forwarded from São Tomé.

So what to make of the Moffitt QSL? Perhaps Moffitt had followed the same route as Alan in getting his report to the station, utilizing one or more third-party countries. Maybe he had private knowledge of Alan’s strategy and decided to follow it. Or maybe he came up with it on his own. QSLers have long used this strategy to get around mail embargoes.

But what about the common date, and date-time-frequency details, in the two veries? If the reports had arrived in Biafra at roughly the same time, it would not be unusual for the replies to be prepared on the same day. As to the common date-time-frequency details, perhaps whoever typed the letters thought these references were standard boilerplate rather than information that was to be tailored to the specific listener. Certainly the frequency could be expected to be the same. The common date of reception is harder to explain, but it is not difficult to see how the almost inevitable difference in dates of reception could have been overlooked. QSLers know that verifications can be wrong in their details, misdated, even sent to the wrong listener. As for the different fonts, and for Alan’s letter being light in appearance and Moffitt’s dark, perhaps the typist changed typewriters because one was running out of ink.

We will likely never know for sure, but I think the Moffitt verie (which sold on eBay for $81) is genuine. In any event, the story reminds us how, in every endeavor, even shortwave listening, today’s connected world can cast new light on old events and turn longstanding certainties into question marks.

Over the last 20 years, “the Spirit of Biafra” has indeed lived on, and been resurrected through several Voice of Biafra “stations” that have leased time over some of the major shortwave broadcast transmitter facilities (and used other media as well). This is a dressed-up e-mail from one of them.

“P.S.”: I knew Alan Roth well back in the late 1950s, when we were both in high school and DXing from our respective Connecticut QTHs. We would talk on the phone, visit each
other’s homes, meet at DX gatherings, and “tapespond,” which in those days was done using 3" reels of tape. If you want to hear Alan’s voice, and that of our mutual friend, Stan Schwartz, on a tape that was made in December, I believe 1961 (my freshman year of college), click here, and weep at what you could hear and QSL in those days.