

The Undiscovered QSL of Radio Biafra

by

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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



LE REPRÉSENTANT SPÉCIAL

A Mr. William S. Sparks,
Attorney at Law,
1100 Hearst Building,
San Francisco, California 94103
U.S.A.

Dear Mr. Sparks,

Your letter of April 6th arrived when I was attending the abortive conference in search of peace in Monrovia, Liberia. I apologise for the delay in sending this acknowledgement.

I have passed on your letter to the Controller, Voice of Biafra and I hope sometime they would send you a proper acknowledgement. Meanwhile, I can at least confirm that your receptions accurately reflect the programmes broadcast from Biafra. 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 ones but our engineers have accepted the challenge and the fact that they continue to operate is a credit to their ingenuity. Spare parts are scarce and they have had to improvise with spares fabricated from materials bought in a rapidly dwindling 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 enemies 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,


(P. C. Chigbo)
Special Representative.



LE REPRÉSENTANT SPÉCIAL

(6145 M.H.
2200 GMT
8/29/69)
A Mr. Alvin V. Sizer,
367 Orange Street,
New Haven, Conn. 06503.
U.S.A.

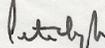
Dear Mr. Sizer,

Thank you for your letter of 8th September, 1969 containing a reception report. I have forwarded the letter to the Voice of Biafra who will be interested to read your report.

2. I thank you not only for listening to our Radio but for having so much interest in writing to us to submit your report.

3. I can confirm that you received the English Language Service of the Voice of Biafra, the External Service of the Broadcasting Corporation of Biafra. Our engineers will be gratified to learn that their efforts to make our people heard have reached as far away as the United States and we hope that in future we will replace our 10 KW transmitter with a more powerful transmitter for better reception by our friends all over the world.

Yours sincerely,


P. C. Chigbo,
Biafra Special Representative.





GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF BIAFRA
OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE
IVORY COAST

Telephone : 602-44
Telex : 607 BIAFRACY

No 6 Avenue Jean - Mermos
Boite Postale 8064
Cocody - Abidjan

Ref. N°.....

23rd January, 1970

Thank you very much for your recent letter.

Regular broadcast on Radio Biafra ceased on the 12th/13th January and make 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 fleeing into the bush. I assume only technical personnel continued to man Radio Biafra. In similar circumstances in the past, in the absence of programme staff, music would be played continuously, as actually happened.

However the transmission monitored here was on the 41 meter band 7.301 KHZ (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.



NIGERIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION

BROADCASTING HOUSE, LAGOS.

Telephone: 26411

Telegrams & Cables: BROADCASTS, LAGOS.

ENG/PROF/OL/414

6th May, 1970.

Mr. B.W. Churchill.,
1221 Spruance Road,
Monterey, California 93940,
U.S.A.

Dear Sir,

Many thanks for your report of 17th January, 1970.

For your interest we have explained below certain points you said you would like to know in your letter.

Apart from a portion in your letter where you mentioned that the station you heard on 7305 KHz was relaying newscast from Lagos, other points confirm that you were hearing the station used by the former Nigerian secessionists which was broadcasting from Onodo-Uku in the then secessionist enclave. This station now known as 'ECSES' East Central State Broadcasting Service, like the former NBS, is an integral part of the East Central State Government. Changing of the name became absolutely necessary after it was captured by troops of the Federal Government and moved to Enugu the state capital. The station was first called Radio Enugu.

We hope you would be satisfied with this explanation so far.

Thank you,

Yours Sincerely,

B. Leta (MS)
Propagation Engineer.

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,

BROADCASTING CORPORATION OF BIAFRA
P.O. BOX 350,
ENUGU.

Our Ref: BGB/ENG/54/10

27th March, 1969.

Mr. James G. Moffitt,
3107 Sharpview Lane,
Dallas, Texas,
U.S.A. 75228

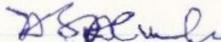
Dear Sir,

Your reception report dated 28th January, 1969 in regard to a shortwave broadcast from Biafra on 26th January, 1969 from 22.00 hours to 22.30 hours G.M.T. on the frequency of 7304 k.c/s. in the 41 meter band is confirmed as coming from Radio Biafra. The report is interesting to us, especially, coming at this time when the world is keenly watching the happenings in Biafra. It is our hope that people like you who have had the luck to tune to our Station may be able to pass this information to other radio amateurs, individuals, Government and private agencies, so that many people in the U.S.A. may be able to learn about Biafra and her people.

Our transmission hours on this same frequency is from 04.30 hours G.M.T. to 22.30 hours G.M.T.

I should, therefore, be grateful if you will send us further reports indicating how you receive us at various time during this period. This information will help us plan for future broadcasting.

Sincerely yours,



(A. S. Alaribe).
CHIEF ENGINEER

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.

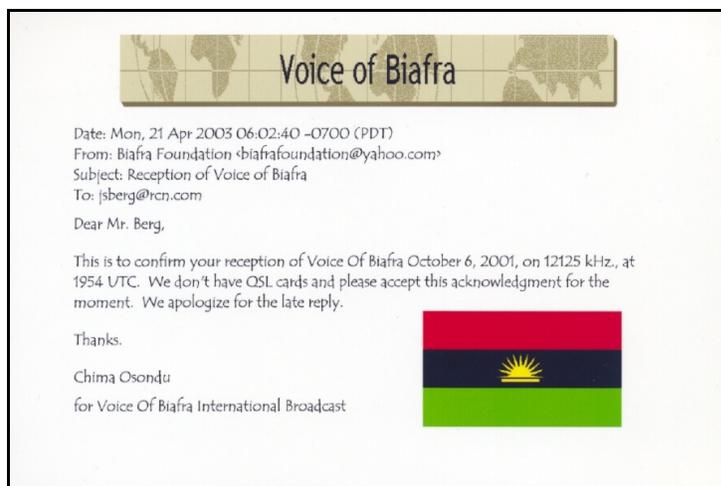
BIAFRA: Broadcasting Corp. of Biafra, by personal letter signed by A.S. Alaribe, C.E., for 7304 kHz, in 4 months. Reports should be sent in separate envelope to Republic of Biafra, 342 Madison Ave, Suite 814, New York, N.Y. 10017. 50 cents in US mint stamps must be sent. NY office forwards report by special messenger. Full data, and is first in the world! (Roth). Excellent, Alan - Congratulations!! (GAC)

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.