

HARRY CHRIS CARY

Mr. Radio Nova



Chris Cary

IF THERE'S one thing certain to console Chris Cary as he ponders his uncertain future in 1984, it's the thought of the cash-registers at Radio Nova ringing like a jammed door-bell between now and Christmas.

Cary is pulling out all the stops to squeeze the last penny from his illegal goldmine before Ted Nealon throttles the golden goose. On the strength of dubious ratings figures, Nova has jumped up its advertising rates to cash in on the festive season's advertising bonanza. Cary has also put Kiss FM back on the air to make an extra few bob, and he's planning further station promotions to consolidate Nova's already dominant position in Dublin.

Nobody knows what the new year will bring for the enigmatic Harry Christopher Cary (he calls himself Chris because Harry — well, it goes with flash, doesn't it). But whatever happens to him, Harry's place in the folklore of the Irish media is secure. Nobody, not even Hughie McLaughlin or Tit 'n Bum McGuinness, has ever turned such a quick buck in the media as our Harry. In less than three years, he's run rings around the competition, totally demoralised RTE and turned Nova into an institution that the politicians are scared of tampering with.

The secret of his success is very simple. Harry is a radio fanatic, he knows what the people want and he knows how to give it to them. But even more crucial to his success is his ability to motivate his staff to deliver the goods. He is a ruthless boss, with frightening moods, and when he says something he expects his minions to jump. They do.

Harry's love-affair with radio had a romantic beginning. In August 1967, when the British government tried to scupper Radio Caroline, Harry hopped on the last supply boat out of Felixstowe, bleached-blond and ambitious, and joined Ronan O'Rahilly and Robbie Robinson (now Sunshine Radio) on the legendary pirate.

It is said that Harry's midlands' accent was so broad that it was only after difficult election lessons that he was allowed on air. But he was good, and when Caroline was finally wrecked by a Dutch tug company Harry moved on to radio work in Luxembourg, and later in Birmingham.

Harry first showed signs that he might have something special when, in 1975, he anticipated the commercial possibilities of the micro-chip and got into the TV game business. Life was tough for Harry then, as he worked day and night assembling his new toys, but within a few years (after cornering the market in certain chips) he was big enough to open a retail computer chain, Comp Shop.

Comp Shop made Harry his fortune. Not only did he have the vision to be first into the market, he also whipped his competitors by by-passing normal agents and importing straight from the USA.

Despite this success, Harry still hadn't rid himself of the radio bug. With his old boss from Caroline, Robbie Robinson, Harry came to Dublin in 1980 and decided to start Sunshine Radio. Harry's commitment was

half-hearted at that stage, so when Sunshine's transmission mast was sabotaged in September he ran back to London like a scared chicken. Harry doesn't like violence.

Robinson had only 10% of the Sunshine action, and Cary offered to sell his 40% holding. Another investor, Phil Solomon, who also had 40%, did likewise. To everybody's surprise, Robinson, the Dutch rabbi lookalike, came up with £32,000 and Harry was out.

When in only a few weeks Robinson was proving that Sunshine could be a big business, Harry began to regret his impetuous retreat. The radio bug was really biting him now, and he haunted the Sands hotel in Portmarnock (Sunshine's base) trying to worm his way back in. But Robinson was no fool; now he had all the action, a position which even in his wildest dreams he could never have imagined.

So Robinson refused Harry's courting and Harry, true to form, went off in a huff to brood. He was furious; Sunshine was *his* station, the name was *his* but Robinson, a mere mortal, had edged him out.

Steeled by his fury, Harry decided to show them all that he alone could be the best. In the spring of 1981, he returned to Dublin, met up with Gene 'Warwick House' Brady, and started Radio Nova. Just for good measure, he beamed out on 88 FM, right on top of Sunshine on the dial. I'm on top now Robbie, and you'd better believe it!

Cary's strategy for Nova was brilliant. He took his cue from American FM programming — lots of laid-back rock, little talk from the jocks, catchy jingles and a crisp, clear signal to give the best sound. His real ingenuity was selling Nova to the public as 'clutter free' — for the first six months, he deliberately minimised the amount of commercials.

The strategy was a huge success. Nova's audience soared and by 1982 was totally dominant in the Dublin area. Once the audience was hooked, 'clutter free' went out the window and the ad agencies were beating down the door to get their ads on air.

Nova isn't so much a radio station as an extremely well-oiled machine. Harry knows exactly the sort of sound he wants from his DJs, and he has moulded them all to suit his concept. Harry's prime concern in the day-to-day running of the station concerns what goes on air and the technical side of things. He leaves the administration and sales side to his lap-dog

Mike Hogan. But there are no ground-rules in Nova. Harry interferes when he feels like it and he'll never back down even when he's made a mistake. Harry is always right. He's the boss.

Harry is clumsy in dealing with people. Although he maintains a sort of twisted loyalty to his wife Remy, he trusts nobody and is totally unpredictable. One day you're in with him and the next day you're fired. Most of his current staff have either been fired or suspended at some stage, and Dublin is littered with young casualties still wondering what they did to incur Harry's wrath.

When he wanders into work to drink his Lucozade at lunchtime, the tension shoots through the roof and nobody breathes safely until he's on his way home again. Few of the staff will miss him when he's gone.

Harry is a restless man. He's not happy unless he's scheming, planning or worrying. Because Nova almost runs itself, he has dabbled in other ventures like Exidy and Kiss to bring some excitement into his life. He nearly got his fingers badly burned when he attempted to make a go of Nova Park, and had to close it down when it got out of control. A rare blot on his copybook.

If he can't find drama in his business ventures, he imports it into his personal life. It's a fair bet that he's most happy socially when he's holding court in a bar with his flunkies, chatting up some pretty young thing and glancing over his shoulder to see who's throwing him the most daggers, Remy or Sybil. Surprisingly, he is painfully shy and has made few close friends since his move to Dublin.

Rather like JR Ewing, there is a tender and caring side to Harry's complex persona, but he likes to ignore it. People, even the women in his life, mean less to him than power and money. He loves showing off his power and likes to surround his power-base with a ridiculous smoke-screen of secrecy and paranoia. He likes to play the flash Harry occasionally, as was instanced by his staff party in the Mirabeau soon after Nealon tried to close him down.

He's also done his best to banjax his old mate, Robbie Robinson of Sunshine. Harry used his cheque-book to poach many of Sunshine's key staff. The war might have been more bitter had Robinson tried to compete with Nova. But Robinson, perhaps wary of Harry's fury, chose to take Sunshine down a different, less lucrative road. The difference between the two is that Robinson is a much more secure individual. He feels no compulsion to prove he's best at every turn, so his ambitions are more modest than Harry's.

Ironically for Harry, Sunshine stands a much better chance of getting a legal licence than Nova. Those most mediocre of people, the bureaucrats and politicians, want a radio service in their own image — so there's no room for Harry's brilliance. In an ideal world, Harry should be sent into RTE to sort out the mess there. But that's out of the question. The next challenge for Harry is satellite and cable TV. Some Irish business men, like Tony O'Reilly and Paddy McGrath, figure that Harry is just the man for the job. And given his track record, there's no reason to doubt that judgement.