

**Choice FM is dead** - Name change to confirm Capitol takeover  
By Akosua Annobil-Doodoo – (*New Nation Newspaper*, 2 June 2003)

CHOICE FM are almost history - at least as we have come to know and love them.

Last week Capital FM's takeover of Britain's leading black radio station took several giant steps forward as top Djs were axed, daytime reggae slots scrapped and plans for a name change emerged

A spokeswoman for Capital spoke openly about their desire to complete their buy-out which began earlier this year when they purchased a 19 per cent stake in the company.

Choice was set up in March 1990 to give black people a station that catered for them. But last week when we asked their programme controller, Ivor Etienne, to tell us what was happening at his station he fell into an embarrassed silence.

In order to prepare themselves for the mainstream market, the station is shelving long-standing favourites including UK garage DJ CK Flash and one of the voices of the original Choice, Terry Peters.

Media analysts warned that only Pirate stations would be smiling at the changes.

'If Choice FM kept to the reason why they started you wouldn't need all them stations. But they've joined the commercial market place,' added one Choice Dj.

WHAT ON earth is going on at Choice FM? There is no more reggae being played between 7am and 7pm Top DJS have been axed and replaced by their Kiss counterparts. We're even hearing that long-time members of staff are walking out because they are unhappy with the controversial changes taking place there.

Last week, Choice Djs (some ex and some current) were calling our offices - refusing to give their names - telling us the situation is getting out of hand, and the leading black station that we all know and love will soon be no more.

So, what's the truth? Earlier this year we revealed that Capital had bought a 20 percent stake in the station, leading to speculation that they were embarking on a take-over by stealth. Last week, as concern over Choice's future mounted Capital's head of PR Ellie Smith admitted: 'Eventually, when the Communications Bill [currently going through parliament] comes in we hope to be able to acquire the remaining shares of Choice, but until that happens we are not allowed to control the station! She denied they were dictating content but that's not how many Choice staff and listeners see it.

So far:

- Daytime reggae music has been scrapped, reduced to night-time play only.
- Top Djs are being replaced by white Djs from mainstream radio stations.
- Terry Peters, one of the first voices to be heard on Choice has walked out.
- Another popular DJ Jigs, a MOBO award winner, resigned but later returned after being offered a prime-time slot.
- Two of the most popular and long-time Djs - Commander B and Lady G, have been restricted to airing just one show a week.
- It is even believed that the infamous Two Tons of Fun Breakfast Show (with Martin Jay and Geoff Schumann) is next to go.

### **Ridiculous**

One current Choice DJ who does not want to be named,said: 'It's ridiculous. People who have been there for years are just getting pushed to the side because they're trying to make the station more attractive to the mainstream. You might as well say Choice is no longer a station.'

*New Nation* can also reveal that the Choice name could soon be scrapped and replaced with the new name Capital Choice.

This re-branding exercise is likely to cause uproar in the community. One DJ who worked for the station for two years from 2000, told *New Nation*: 'The entire black community whether you're African, West Indian, UK black - everybody grew up listening to Choice, so we've all got an affiliation to what they're like.

'If Choice is changing their sound and getting even more commercial, it will end up sounded like a load of s\*\*t.

'But they're only doing that because they want to satisfy their commercial backers - if they were running that station for us, they would just be for us.'

But Capital executives, who many suspect are pulling the strings behind the scenes, will be aware of the commercial potential of changing Choice from a 'black station' to an 'urban station'. And that will mean less not more black Djs.

The former Choice favourite added: 'If you're from the black community you want to listen to somebody who sounds like you and looks like you, that's how it is - that's how white people do it when they have their radio stations. They take off Chris Tarrant and put on Doctor Fox, they're not going to put on no black DJ who doesn't even play like them' '

As well as changing the musical focus of the station from Mos Def to Nelly, those preparing Choice for its rebirth as 'Capital Choice', are making cut backs.

Their treatment of popular UK Garage DJ CK Flash bore all the hallmarks of a company on the make. He was axed from the station just two weeks ago after years of loyal service.

He told *New Nation*: 'I was told there is no room for me. I was on the drive-time with Masterstepz and they said they just wanted one man to do it all the way through the week.'

### **Dismissal**

They took me off and I just kept quiet about it. But when my brother [Commander B] went down there to speak to them, they said my dismissal is something to do with Capital and Choice - but then they said I'm one of their top boys along with Masterstepz [who now has a every weekday slot on 107.1fm]

'But if that's the case, that should mean that whatever they offer Steptz they should also offer me - but that's not what's happened.'

He added: 'What they're doing in general I can understand, but they've got a lot of old man there that are not connected with the streets and they're making the decisions that can't work. 'When you look at stations like 1Xtra you've got a man in his twenties he knows what's going on the streets - and that's why they'll have people like Heartless Crew on the radio.'

CK spoke of his fears for young upcoming artists who often relied on his shows to get their tunes played.

The Choice revamp could easily mean that aspiring black artists will have to rely on pirate radio stations to play their music. 'I always used to bring talent from the street,' he said. 'What Dj's do you see doing that except for my brother Commander? He has always looks after the youths and I have followed in his footsteps - I even work with them away from the radio. 'That's why your so-solids, Ms Dynamites and Dizzee Rascals and all them lot could blow up.

New Nation tried to speak to Ivor Etienne, the programme controller at Choice, about the issue but he refused to comment (see sidebar).

The unidentified ex-DJ added: 'Choice was there for a reason [to be a black radio station for black people], but that reason changed 13 years ago.

That's why you've got over 30 pirate stations in London. 'If Choice FM kept to the reason why they started, you wouldn't need all them stations. But Choice has become a commercial marketplace. They've sold the station out and they should just say they've sold the station out - what's wrong with that? 'They have sold the station that was set up for the black community and they know they've done the black community wrong. But they've made some money and they've sold it - why not let your listeners know that.

They're doing more damage by not saying anything. When Kiss FM changed their original format after being bought out by EMAP, they let everybody know. 'When Capital changed their agenda and started playing black music, they let people know. 'So why don't they want people to know about Choice? They should put out a statement - people would respect them more for that.'

Smith, Capital's PR woman, added: "we have no say in any of the changes made at Choice – we don't control their programming. 'We have a seat on the board so we have a role in the strategy not the content'.

**Why won't Choice talk about their new plans?**

*In an attempt to get to the bottom of the Capital takeover, New Nation called Choice Fm's programme controller, Ivor Etienne, in hope he would shed some light on the station's revamp. Unfortunately, we did not have much luck. Here's a transcript of the conversation:*

NN: hello, I'm trying about Capital buying out Choice, is that true?

Etienne: I have no comment.

NN: You can't confirm or deny that for me?

Etienne: No Comment

NN: You can't even tell us about the obvious changes – like the reggae slots?

Etienne: no comment

NN: Is this just for now or can you speak at another time.

Etienne: No Comment

NN: Is there anybody else I can talk to about it?

Etienne: No

NN: I thought this was something new and exciting for Choice, why wouldn't you want to comment on it?

Etienne: No Comment

NN: Could you at least indicate when you can talk about it?

Etienne: I've got no comment honestly, sorry.

NN: What about your listeners? Surely they want to know about the changes with DJ's, time slots etc?

Etienne: If you look at the website you will see the changes there, other than that I've got no comment.

NN: Will you be commenting when the deal's gone through:

Etienne: No Comment

NN: new Nation will be running the story on Choice and Capital, and what you're telling me is that the people who are in charge at Choice have nothing to say about it?