





# LITTLE VOICE

Pop's brightest unsung heroine is a DJ called Goldierocks whose broadcasts are winning worldwide fans for unknown British bands. Is she the funky new face of soft propaganda? Katie Glass reports. Photographs: Muir Vidler

**I**t plays in the skyscrapers of Jakarta as the smog breaks into a twinkling Saturday night. In the mornings it sings in Mexico City, to university students yawning their way through halls. It streams across white-sand beaches in Mauritius and bullet-ridden buildings in Bosnia. Three million people in 33 countries are listening intently to the same sound: a British radio show you have probably never heard of.

"This is The Selector," goes the jingle. It's the most cutting-edge music show coming out of Britain, delivering a soundscape of young British life. It's as irresistible as the best of John Peel; intriguing but never too abrasive on the ear. Yet the most surprising thing about the country's coolest radio show is that it was created by the British Council.

The British Council is not synonymous with cool. Producing a yoof-culture show sounds like a disaster waiting to happen. Yet The Selector is a screaming success. How did the BC get down with the kidz? The answer has got her feet up on a yellow chair in an office in east London. DJ Goldierocks (real name Sam Hall) is as easy on the eye as she is on the ear. Gold waist-length hair, fat black fake lashes, a willowy '70s flower-power dress. But her radio following is not down to how she looks. She's one of the best-connected DJs — a party animal, a player, an ear-to-the-ground, a sometime Radio 1 presenter and a regular on the music scene, with a web of promoters, A&Rs, online



**Transmission control**  
DJ Goldierocks watches Dan Heptinstall, from the band Skinny Lister, at the east London studio of The Selector

up dubstep; in Poland they like drum and bass". Since she started fronting The Selector in 2009, audience numbers have increased threefold. Now she's taken the show live in many of the countries where it airs: DJing in a tower block in Shanghai; a jungle in Malawi, and a Soviet-style bunker-club in Kazakhstan.

Goldie's not a shoo-in for a global DJ. She grew up in Surrey attending an all-girls private school, with a dad in IT and a housewife mum who "makes jam for the village fete". But while they were "outwardly conservative, in their views they were quite bohemian". Sam found her ear for music in Jamaica, where her family has a holiday home, and in her parents' record collection: "My Dad loves old Motown records; my mum, '70s rock stuff, blues, Janis Joplin."

It was during a theatre studies BA at Goldsmiths that she decided to get into music. She got a job as a journalist on Rockfeedback.com, became a promo girl at her local radio station, interned at Capital FM, and played more DJ sets and put on more live shows than you've listened to Madonna songs. Her huge break came when she was picked to play a slot at Glastonbury in the VIP zone with Keira Knightley and Kate Moss on the dance floor.

Goldierocks tips up her chair to listen as her producer digs out a track. Smoky jazz vocals fill the room, and she nods: "It's quite Beirut." Kid Creole and the Coconuts play but "it doesn't sound fresh enough". Then Michael Kiwanuka, a 24-year-old singer from London with the buttery vocals of Otis Redding. "He's got a timeless old soul in his voice." What is she looking for? She frowns. "Anything as long as it's innovative. Fresh. New."

Sending the music of unknown artists out into the world has had amazing knock-on effects. When the singer Jamie Woon's single Lady Luck was played on The Selector it was picked up and playlisted on stations across Kazakhstan. Now he's landed a six-week stint as an artist-in-residence in Xi'an, China, next year. Dinosaur Pile-Up, a virtually unknown alternative-rock band from Leeds, landed a 3,500-strong gig in Mexico City. "It was pretty mindblowing," laughs 26-year-old singer Matt Bigland. "That's bigger than any gig we'd played here." Now Dinosaur Pile-Up is big right across South America.

In Bratislava, Slovakia, the 22-year-old student Marian Psar tells me she lies in bed every Thursday evening tuned into the show on Radio FM. Dina Ghoneim, a 29-year-old radio programmes manager in Cairo, ➤➤➤

## THE SHOW IS AS IRRESISTIBLE AS THE BEST OF JOHN PEEL

music contacts and friends from whom to cultivate her mix.

"People perceive the British Council as fuddy-duddy, but it's amazing," she grins. "I can't think of any other show in the world that does what we do: literally play a really dirty grime track next to a soul record, next to a free experimental jazz record, next to a pop thing, then thrash metal. It is totally cross-genre."

She has a global ear for music, which is essential given her breadth of listeners. She knows that "in Malawi they want a good bass line; in Kazakhstan they like hard techno; they're big on hip-hop in Jordan; Eastern Europe and the Americas have started picking



**London calling**  
Skinny Lister's performance for Goldierocks is streamed live to countries including Syria

listens on Friday nights while she's cooking. Ruzan Badalyan, a 26-year-old student in Armenia, listens via his phone on weekday afternoons. "I really love it," he grins. "Armenian songs are mainly about unhappy love. The Selector gives me positive energy."

The Selector show is produced in an innovative "kit" format — uploaded online in segments: tracks, jingles and Goldierocks' spoken links. The kit has several advantages for countries using it: they can play it wherever suits their schedule, and use as many or as few of the blocks as they like.

In Uganda, The Selector plays on Touch FM, a commercial station in the capital, Kampala, with an audience of mostly 25- to 45-year-olds, educated ABCI listeners. "It felt so good to hear Goldierocks mention us alongside listeners from Germany, Newcastle and Bogota," one listener, Tendo, explains. "I felt like, I might be in this Third World country, but I am sharing something with people from all these countries."

In Jakarta the show airs on Trax FM, one of the capital's edgiest stations, with a target audience of educated 15- to 25-year-olds. Worldwide, the majority of The Selector's listeners are aged 18-35. For the British Council, the advantages of looking cool to a young, educated, globally ambitious audience is obvious. Two-thirds of The British Council's funding comes from providing tuition and examinations abroad (the final third is from the British government).

The Selector is the only radio show in The British Council's arts group (apart from Learn English Radio). It's funded to the tune of £50,000 a year — each complete show costs £3,000. "It's opening up the British Council to a massive new young audience," says Phil Catchpole, the British Council rep behind the show. "It's about promoting Britain as a great place of diversity and creativity; as a great place to study. There is a trade element as well because bands, promoters and agents listen to the show, pick up and book artists."

The British Council enforces guidelines on the show: no sexually-explicit lyrics allowed, no glamorising of violence. Goldierocks' scripts are carefully pre-written. Yet despite being part-funded by the Foreign Office, the show's makers insist they are non-political.

The British Council was established in 1934 as a "soft" international propaganda tool,

especially helpful in fuelling sympathies for Britain in difficult territories such as the Middle East and Latin America. It still provides a canny way to build international relations. Plans for Arabic and Mandarin versions of The Selector are already afoot, and possibly a Farsi version to play in Afghanistan. The move has echoes of Radio Farda — an American radio station aired in Iran and other Persian-speaking countries, sponsored by the Broadcasting Board of Governors, itself an agency of



Unknown Leeds band Dinosaur Pile-Up playing to 3,500 in Mexico

## 'IT'S ABOUT THE MUSIC. WE'D NEVER MENTION AN ELECTION'

the US government. In some countries, tensions remain. It's only three years since Russian FSB (formerly the KGB) officers accused the British Council of being a front for MI6 officers gathering intelligence. This August in Afghanistan the British Council office in Kabul was bombed, killing 12 people. Sensitivity is required.

Cathy Graham, the British Council's head of music, insists: "The Foreign Office has nothing to do with The Selector or our choice of countries. The incident in Kabul was terrible because it politicised an organisation that everyone knows is non-political. The reason we can play in places where there is conflict is because we're just representing art." "It's about the music," agrees Goldierocks, at risk of sounding naive. "We'd never mention an election was happening or anything like that." Certainly the only news on the show is about the British Council's activities. In Syria, the

show plays on a station, Arabesque, that attracts 150,000 listeners per week.

The Selector does not consider itself in competition with the BBC. It's interesting to note that, while the Foreign Office has cut BBC World Service funding (asking the BBC to take over responsibility for it from 2014), it has not reduced funding for The Selector.

"I feel proud to be part of the British Council," says Goldierocks. "It's a true cultural exchange. It's not like we're going out and preaching the way of British music, flying the flag and wearing bowler hats. We're not the mothership. It's about everyone communicating together." If The Selector represents anything quintessentially British, she says, it's the vibrancy of our young music scene and the message of equality. "Somewhere like Malawi — from my observations — is still a very sexist society. In countries like that they see me behind the DJ desk, not just talking about it but doing it."

The Selector's diverse musical output fosters the impression that Britain is an accepting sort of society. "I now know that the UK is a place for everyone," was one Nigerian listener's feedback, apparently. In The Selector studio in Clerkenwell, London, I watch as a folk band, Skinny Lister, start up a song.

The singer Laura's voice whispers: "I'm rollin' over hills and valleys, roll back to your side. Promise lead me, to be with you God speed me, as

I roll, roll back to your side..." It's not an England I'm very familiar with — but it's easy to imagine how it sounds full of hope.

Skinny Lister's song streams to Damascus, where Waseem Katoub is listening. "It's great to feel connected to the new music from the UK," he considers. "At a time when many doors are closing for Syrians it's vital that we have opportunities for sharing and contact and exchange — and for a breath of air from the world beyond our borders." Maybe The Selector is the sound of the British Council's patriotic brainwashing machine. But hey — propaganda never sounded so good ■  
*The British Council's Selector show airs every Friday on NME Radio and at [www.selector-radio.com](http://www.selector-radio.com)*



See a live session from The Selector's pick, Skinny Lister, at [www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/goldierocks](http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/goldierocks)

# The Sunday Times Magazine

NOVEMBER 20 2011



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