

Music Radio Today

From Sensational to Soporific

Genesis

In December of 1952 the FCC reported 660 commercial radio stations on the air in the US, more than half as affiliates of one of the four national networks.

Elvis Presley was seventeen.

‘Music Radio’ began in the early 1950s as an emergency ‘fallback format’ arrived, the answer to Radio’s lament: “With what are we going to fill our airwaves now that television has ‘stolen’ our network programming”?

The easiest answer?

“Hell...we’re already paying ASCAP and BMI fees. Let’s just play music.”

OK...But What Music Exactly

The ‘Pop Music’ charts of the day featured Frank Sinatra, Patti Page, The Four Lads, the music of various big bands, etc., so that’s the music many radio stations played. Radio announcers of the day (personalities?) were of the ‘laid back’ variety – to say the least.

‘Talk Radio’ had not yet been invented.

No one knew that ‘Top Forty Radio’ was lurking in the shadows - just around the corner.

The Genius

Todd Storz is properly credited with creating Top Forty Radio at KOAH, his radio station in Omaha, Nebraska.

His ‘idea’ was to identify those songs that Omaha folks most wanted to hear and then play those songs on the radio.

In order to further determine the relative popularity of songs Storz decided to collect ‘plays data’ from jukeboxes and tally the number of plays each record was

getting. In other words, *songs that people had paid real money to hear*. When his tally was complete, for KOAH Radio he began to play - *for free* - those songs that had the most plays on the jukeboxes.

*(Think of how listeners must have greeted this news: "Wow! A never-ending series of my favorite songs'...and all for free! **I love this!**")*

And love it they did. KOAH was an instant hit and the Top 40 Radio evolution of *Music Radio* was born.

Sheer genius.

Rock And Roll

Word of KOAH's popularity spread throughout the industry and radio stations all over America began to switch their programming to the format. Playing Hit Music was proving to be a winning formula, but the stable of hit makers was about to undergo serious change.

Again, just around the proverbial corner lay a Memphis, Tennessee record producer named Sam Phillips...and his 'Sun Records' label.

On July 5, 1954 Phillips recorded Elvis Presley's 'That's All Right Mama.' The record was released on July 19.

SHAZAM!

'Hits Music' had a new leader – a swivel-hipped mega-cool rock 'n roll truck driver named Elvis Presley. His new style not only changed music forever – it signaled the birth of the multi-trillion-dollar 'music business' world-wide.

(Note: By 2004 the internet had destroyed the music business.)

Elvis' arrival triggered a tsunami of would-be stars who flooded studios and recorded songs of their own, then stood back and watched as some of their records soared to the top of the music charts. 'Rock And Roll' was indeed "Here To Stay!" American popular music was changed forever.

Quick to 'feel the beat,' Top Forty radio stations (all of them on AM) began adding chart-topping rock 'n roll records to their playlists. Naturally, the more popular the record the more 'plays' it received.

Young America was lovin' it.

Radio announcers? Mmmm...Not so much.

And it showed.

Speedy Clip

Soon these 'announcers' were replaced by upbeat (some would say "fast-talkin' crazy") 'Disc Jockeys' whose personalities and on-air patter were in alignment with the 'new music' they were playing.

You get this, right?

No? Well try this: Would listeners have found it credible if 'radio announcers' introed Chuck Berry's 'School Day' or 'Roll Over Beethoven' in the same way they might have introed Patti Page's 'How Much Is That Doggie In The Window'?

Right!

Anyhow...soon the Top Forty Radio explosion was producing great 'radio personalities' whose ability to relate to the music and their audiences was 'key' to their own success...and to that of their radio stations.

(Posit: Why was it 'Top Forty' and not 'Top Fifty'...or 'Thirty'?)

(Note: To hear a great parody of early Top Forty Radio and a fast-talkin' New York DJ named Peter Tripp google "Chaos, Part I and II" by Arbogast and Ross." In listening to this 'laff-fest' you'll quickly get the idea re: how 'announcers' felt about Top Forty. You're welcome! LOL)

Top Forty audiences were huge and mostly made up of folks under the age of thirty-five. Unintentionally, radio broadcasters were in the process of re-

educating the listening public as to what they should expect from radio. More on this later.

Music, Yes. Anything Else?

To be sure, the Top Forty Stations played music, but they also did lots of ‘other stuff’, most of it in ways different from anything anyone had ever heard on radio.

Music was ‘the cake’, but without ‘icing’ cake can be bland and tasteless.

At Top Forty Stations the ‘other stuff’ was the icing.

The ‘icing’ (*infotainment?*) included short fast-moving newscasts, up-to-date weather forecasts, great-sounding commercials (some loud and obnoxious, some ‘straight’, some funny), local information, and nutty/clever contests and promotions, all of this aimed at encouraging and inviting listener participation.

The sugar in the icing was supplied by talented, often ‘whacky’ personalities whose primary job was to make the cake tasty by slathering on the icing.

These were guys who had a knack for *identifying* with their audiences by sounding like they were *members* of their audiences, sometimes saying stuff on the air that the audience was *thinking* but wouldn’t dare say in the polite company of the day.

In the blink of an eye: in markets all over North America the Top Forty stations ascended to the top of the radio ratings where they reigned supreme thru the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s, until the 80’s when radio formatting began to splinter.

The Beginning Of The End

The seventies brought the emergence of FM radio, adding countless new radio stations as viable competitors for audience and revenue.

Sidebar: FM’s emergence led to the eventual splintering of ‘Top Forty Radio’ into ‘specific music’ formats – country, rock, adult contemporary, and many more.

This led to battles for audience between stations vying (for the very first time) not to be the number one station in the *market* but to be the number one station in

their format. By the mid-80's, in the thirty largest markets in America where once there may have been *two* stations fighting to be the *overall* #1 station, now there could be as many as three or four stations fighting for #1 *in their format*.

Example: In 'Big Market X' four stations are battling to be #1 in the *rock* format (insert other format here) which in the aggregate had, say, a nine-share of the *total* audience. Ergo, the station that garnered a five-share would be #1 in the format, leaving the other three competitors to split the remaining five shares – about a 1.3 share for each...with (no doubt) format changes and PD firings soon to come.

So, a story.

In the mid-seventies in, say, Los Angeles, such a battle is underway.

In the midst of the battle one of the program directors, frustrated by his station's lack of progress in the ratings race, falls to his knees and begs T G P DITS for help.

Always ready to help, T G P DITS ('The Great Program Director In The Sky') heard the plea. He descended from above and, in his booming echo-chamber enhanced voice said to this poor downtrodden PD:

“Anything that isn't music.....suuuuucks!”

What TGP DITS *meant* by this was, “Hey Dummy! Get the music right (the 'cake') and you will have taken the most important step toward victory.”

What the PD *heard* was, “I got this! Tighten the music rotation. Play fewer songs more often. Pull nearly all 'non-music content' from the station. Tell the personalities to shut up and play music and all will be well.”

PD : (said another way): “I'll just cut back on the butter and sugar and reduce the icing by 90%. This'll be great. Make my job so much easier. No 'programming' to direct, just select the right music and I'm golden! Plus, fewer DJ egos to deal with. This is great.”

Articles about this advice appeared in *Billboard Magazine* and the news spread like wildfire. Bringing with it a big problem.

See, large-market radio and small-market radio are distinctly different animals. However, waay impressed by their large-market brethren, small-market PD's (where no format battles were being waged...or ever would be) *followed this lead.*

Amongst most PD's, "Shut up and play the music" was now the mantra.

Thus began radio's un-needed 're-training' of the radio audience.

The 80's and 90's And Focus Groups

Next on the horizon were 'Focus Groups - gatherings of fifteen to twenty of a radio station's listeners seated at a long table in a room with a one-way mirror – listeners and an interviewer in the room and station execs (and the PD) secretly 'hidden' in a room on the other side of the mirror.

The interviewers job was to ask questions of the listeners who were prompted to randomly respond in any way they wished – no holds barred.

Light, friendly chit-chat started the meetings after which the interviewer usually began with, "So, what is it that you don't like about your favorite radio station"?

Most often the response would be, "They talk too much," or "They play too many commercials."

(It was at this point that the PD in the other room effectively shut down his mind and turned off his intellect. An 'ah-ha' moment had occurred in his mind. "See,' he said to himself. "See what I mean? I knew it. We just need to eliminate the icing and we'll win. Fewer commercials, too. The cake (music) can stand on its own." This, less than five minutes into the focus group!)

But there was more. Oh, so very much more.

Over the next thirty to fifty minutes the interviewer followed up with more questions to which the listeners responded with answers, and then spent a few minutes discussing the responses.

Interviewer: "So let me ask you. Do you like it when your favorite radio station broadcasts weather forecasts"?

Listeners: "Oh yes" and "Very important" or "Always". And in some instances "Yeah, and more than once an hour. I need to catch it as soon as I tune in."

I: "Do you want your favorite station to broadcast news?"

L: "Absolutely" or "Sure, two or three minutes of news each hour is good" or "Yes...especially local news."

I: "How about contests and things like that?"

L: "They're OK but not too often" or "Yep. They're fun but I never call in time" or "If its trivia I almost always know the answers. But I never play along."

(Sidebar: OK, but if you answered the trivia question in your mind, you really were playing along, right?)

I: "How about commercials?"

L: "I hate them" or "They play too many" or "Not so much...but I do like the ones that tell me about sales."

I: "What about well-produced or funny commercials?"

L: "Yeah...they're OK I guess" or "They can be entertaining at times" or "I never listen when commercials are playing"

I: "Really? Well...can anyone remember the Coke commercials?"

L's: (three in unison, sing): "It's The Real Thing, Coke Is."

I: "But you said you never listen when commercials play."

L's: "...crickets"

I: "OK, let's talk about DJ patter."

L: "Some of it's OK" or "I love it when (favorite DJ) makes fun of his boss" or "I don't notice it much but there is a guy that has a character he calls 'Ol' Dirty Shirt'. I think it's really him doing the voice. It's funny" or "It's good. Sometimes it seems like my favorite DJ is talking directly to me."

I: "How about station-sponsored events like 4th of July Fireworks, the local Antique Car Outdoor Expo or the County Fair. Do you like hearing about stuff like this?"

L's (heads nodding in unison: "Absolutely.")

Dear Reader, I know you are smart. You are getting what's happening here, right? While listeners *said* their favorite station 'talks too much'...they actually love the talk stuff they love. Most of them even *required* their favorite station to provide 'talk' stuff.

The Expectation

Each time these folks turned on their radio they confirmed the fact that they *expected* to hear *precisely all the stuff they claimed to hate*.

Yet they listened every day...for some music, some talk-stuff, some commercials, some DJ patter - most all of it 'local', and music. Years of exposure to radio 'trained' listeners to expect this, and ya know what?

It came to them for free. And for the most part...they liked it!

But the PD's in 'the other room' never heard *that* part of listeners' answers because they simply didn't *want* to hear it. They heard only that which aligned with their preconceived notions.

PD's minds snapped shut the instant they heard *'they talk too much'*.

Note: Each and every hour they are on the air radio stations are in a continual process of 'shaping' the expectations of their listeners via the content they present. Ergo, by only (or mostly) playing music, in a short period of time listeners will have been 'trained' to expect 'only music'.

Less To Do

This mantra made the PD's job much easier. All the PD had to do was select and rotate a short list of the most popular music and make sure the on-air folks understood that their 'talk' was to be restricted to reading the ten-to-fifteen second 'blurbs' on the file cards supplied by the PD.

Get it? No longer any 'programing' to 'direct'?
Easy Peasy?

Yes. But Stinky Winky!

All of this was the beginning of the end of the great radio that audiences had come to know and love from the '50's thru the eighties.

By eliminating the icing radio was sacrificing the best thing it had going for it. *Via diminished communication radio was losing direct connectivity with its listeners.*

Personal belief: Because it was free I believe listeners instinctively (unconsciously?) understood that radio needed to present commercial content as a way to pay for delivery of this free service.

'Sorry. The Laboratory Is Closed'

Mass adherence to the admonition of T G P DITS also led to the end of the development of true 'radio personalities'.

How?

'Back in the day' if a young person (we'll call him Johnny) was to have his interest in radio piqued it had to come via listening to the personalities on many 'great', and some not so great radio stations, some of which may have been located in places far from where Johnny lived.

Using examples set by the great personalities to whom he'd listened for hours, Johnny thought, *"I bet that's fun. If I could get a part-time job at a local station maybe I could learn to do this, too. Yeah! I gotta try that."*

Imitate those personalities? No. But the more he listened the more Johnny became intrigued. *"If I can get a job at the radio station maybe I can someday have a career in radio. I'm gonna try."*

For Johnny that first part-time job (and probably the next couple of *full-time* jobs) would be his own personal laboratory, a place where he could a). learn from the 'professors' he encountered and b). by way of on-air *experimentation* grow and develop his own style whilst on his way to becoming a true radio personality.

(I know this from personal experience. It describes the beginning of my on-air career as well as that of countless other outstanding radio personalities, many of whom were colleagues with whom I was privileged to work.)

The 'shuttering' of radio personalities closed this vast laboratory. As a result the interest of many creative young people who may otherwise have considered radio for a career, remained (and remains) 'un-piqued'.

The pool that once was filled with aspiring young radio personalities dried up. Today very few young people aspire to careers in radio, especially on the air. Why?

Because 'personality-wise' today's music radio is boring beyond description.

In Latin: *tedium ad nauseum*.

Sad.

Next up: Wall Street

Radio is a magnificent 'cash-flow' business. When in the late eighties the 'financial types' discovered this they took over the industry. By the late 90's and into 2000 the changes they made served to ruin the art form.

Note: Great radio stations are not about fancy buildings, ultra-modern studios and shiny new equipment. All of this is nice. None of it required.

The most important asset any radio station can ever have, indeed, other than its FCC license its *only* asset - is a staff of talented, creative, focused and motivated *people...who are signed on to 'the plan.'*

To me radio has never been 'benign'. Radio is a living, breathing phenomenon, one capable of making a difference for its communities, listeners and advertisers - and *needing* to do so. But without a great staff this is unachievable.

For maximum success a radio station must physically get involved with its community and *sound* like it is doing so. Great community participation is an integral part of great programming. It's paramount.

And simply 'playing all the right music' can never win. Why?

Because 'for its next selection' no radio station can ever play a song that will please everyone who may be listening.

'Radio does not possess the power to 'out-select' someone's hi fi (today's MP3 player or iPod.')

Paul H. D. Rothfuss - 1975

Infotainment' is the difference-maker. It's the icing. The special 'flavoring' that sets radio stations apart. And great icing can only be created by great people.

Financial Type: "But Paul. People cost money. Horrors! Just play the damn music and forget this other crap. You have a 10-share of the audience. Just get us a 10-share of the revenue. Music is free. Stop spending on this other stuff."

The 'Sound Alike' Factor

Today there are more than 11,000 commercial radio stations in the United States. Many music stations sound the same.

Regardless of their music format, why do 'Music Radio' stations sound alike? Because they use nearly-identical 'format clocks.'

'Play two/three songs and some spots. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. Throw in a 30-second weather forecast, a station promo and a couple of time checks, give 'em 90-seconds of news headlines and start over at the top of the next hour.

And repeat.

And repeat.

Also, at the overwhelming majority of Music Radio stations every commercial spot is recorded and all spots have music backgrounds.

Even the *spots* sound alike!

'Announcers' read eight-to-twelve-second 'blurbs' from 3x5 cards. *(They'd probably faint if they were asked or [...ulp!] required to do a 60-second spot... 'live.'*)

Day after day. Hour after boring hour.

It's The Profit, Stupid.'

Many of today's 'Music Stations' are run by top executives who are 'financial types', folks who wouldn't recognize great radio if you were beating them to death with a bag full of Casey Kasem air-check tapes.

So what do *you* think is 'top of mind' for these execs?

The largest expense category in any radio company is 'personnel'. *(It's also the only real asset a radio station can ever have.)*

Now...what do *you* think gets cut?

Here's the Nega-Formula: "Short music lists + thin icing + less (and fewer) talented staff + non-local programming + no outside presence = boring radio."

About Profit

During my business lifetime our radio stations routinely dropped 30-to-40% to the bottom line and 40-to-45% was neither impossible nor uncommon. We achieved this with a full air staff and lots of money spent on promotion and outside participation.

Yes, I said 30 to 40% profit.

So...how much is enough?

The Principle Of Intended(?) Consequences

The mass blind acceptance by PD's of the admonition from T G P DITS + the misinterpretation of focus groups + management by 'financial types' was radio's own Nega-Trifecta that combined to bring an end to great local radio.

Today the last vestiges of 'great community-oriented radio' are mostly found in small-market privately-owned stations, and they're doing quite well, thank you.

To paraphrase Fox News: 'I report. You do your own research and decide.'

Just Sayin'

I spent nearly sixty years in radio and 'worked' maybe ten or fifteen days. The rest was pure joy - a wonderful blessing.

Every day I found myself in places surrounded by proud, creative, and yes, sometimes whacky folks...where we spent most of our time as 'imagineers', planning and implementing creative, productive, and yes, sometimes crazy commercials, promotions, community events and more.

All of this is chronicled in my book, "WIGGLES, WINKS AND WIZARDS'. Grab a copy on Amazon. Like it (or not) give me a call or send me an email.

We can talk.

To paraphrase the Beach Boys: "And We Had Fun, Fun, Fun, 'til Accountants Took The Icing Away."

Radio was my Laughing Place. God help me, I miss it so.

Paul H. D. Rothfuss *Copyright (C) 2021 All Rights Reserved*