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Attack of Jack Radio

The new thing in oldies is an iPod imitator

By Joshua Davidovich

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When Greg Ostrozovich came back to suburban Chicago after a business trip in early June, his favorite oldies radio station was history. As Ostrozovich tuned in to WJMK, he heard the brass instead of playing hits from the '50s, '60s, and '70s, he would play what he wanted. Ostrozovich called it "Jacked."

As traditional radio stations face new competition for audiences from iPods and satellite radio, Jack radio is a new format that offers a rescue. The format--no DJ's and a wide selection of songs played with no regard for smooth transitions--has been likened to the shuffle feature on an iPod. Jack's U.S. debut last year and is now in 23 different cities, from Dallas to New York (www.jackradio.com). Imitators such as Bob, Sam, Hank, Jill, and others are in the markets Jack hasn't already filled. Jack shows how innovative ideas in one area of personal technology can ripple in unexpected ways.

In fact, Jack started as part of the Internet radio phenomenon. In 2000, DJ Bob Perry of Vancouver-based "Cadillac Jack" Garrett to spin a mix of everything he liked, regardless of genre. Vancouver-based Jack is a 24-hour Internet radio format.

Jack first moved to American radio last year on Denver station KJAC 105.5. The playlist is 1,200 songs, compared with 300 to 400 songs in a traditional station's library. But those 1,200 songs are the last 40-odd years. Matching tunes of similar styles is irrelevant on Jack stations--and song

The locomotion. "If they sound like they should go together, then we've done something wrong," says Bob Perry, program director at KBPA/Bob-FM, a Jack clone. The unlikely pairings are called "train wrecks" in Jack radio. Sometimes they sound like to listeners. The mixed hits go against the grain and can invite a wider audience (including white listeners) to tune in. "Even if you don't like a song, the next song you'll probably love," says Perry. "I do pick the tunes at Jack station, that's not a requirement. Over at Bob-FM, a computer arranges

"Jack," the gritty, sarcastic prerecorded voice that comes between songs, is the only talking li commercials. The decision to go without DJ s probably doesn't hurt the bottom line, either.

But many say that a familiar voice to go with the music is what makes radio special. "The [Ja there's no communication," says DJ Bruce "Cousin Brucie" Morrow, a former New York oldie

There are plenty who agree with Morrow. Lewis of Bob-FM asked listeners to sound off after being on the air in Austin. "Nine people said, 'I hate your guts, you've ruined my radio station they loved it.'" Not that Bob, or Jack, cares anyway.

Eclectic or Not?

Jack radio mostly sounds like hits from the '80s, as these eight songs played in order on Dall:

TOP CHART

SONG ARTIST YEAR POSITION GENRE

Girls on Film Duran Duran 1981 5 (UK) Pop

1985 Bowling for Soup 2004 3 Rock

Ballroom Blitz Sweet 1973 5 Rock

Fast Car Tracy Chapman 1988 6 Folk

You Might Think The Cars 1984 7 Rock

How Bizarre OMC 1996 1 Pop

All Right Now Free 1970 4 Rock

The Glamorous Life Sheila E. 1984 7 Pop

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