

INSIDERADIO.COM
Thursday, December 15, 2005

The Inside Story with Mike Kinosian: The new "Rhythm & Gold" format.

Rhythm Is Going To Get You

An underlying precept of the "Play Anything" Adult Hits format is that plenty of great and forgotten music no longer had a radio home.

Entities like "Jack," "Bob," "The Arch", et. al. seized the chance to re-package and re-present that product to those longing to hear it again.

On first blush, the introduction of a specialized niche version of that concept may give the appearance of piling on - but "Rhythm & Gold" has actually been in the planning stages for several years.

Representative artists for the format that combines crossover R&B, Disco, blue-eyed soul and 1980s rhythmic pop/dance include Earth, Wind & Fire, Aretha Franklin, Marvin Gaye, Hall & Oates, Kool & The Gang, Prince, Smokey Robinson, the Temptations and Stevie Wonder.

Fun Music

Along with Famous Amos, former WNEW-AM/New York Assistant PD Anita Bonita developed R&G, which will have the inevitable comparisons to Jack-like formats and Jammin' Oldies. But Bonita emphatically declares, "Famous and I discussed [Rhythm & Gold] before there even was a Jammin' Oldies. We thought of this idea in 1997 with emails back and forth to each other, expounding on what was happening in the radio business. We were delighted to find that, without any input from us, the crew at [the former Chancellor Media] decided to make a play for R&B oldies in a similar format."

The most noteworthy difference between Rhythm & Gold and Jammin' Oldies will be the wideness of the playlist. "The success of Jack in many places has shown that listeners are clamoring for more," remarks Bonita, who is Media Monitors' Music Manager. "Like most other people, I want more variety on my airwaves. In addition to emphasizing a stream of great music, we also want to emphasize that this music is fun."

That task is accomplished through personalities and stationality. The most important lesson Bonita learned from Jammin' Oldies is that the format had great initial success because it had music listeners wanted to hear. "It also had [air talent] who had personality," she opines. "Not all Jack stations are the same as [those owned by Infinity]. There are actually some Jack stations that have been successful by using [on-air personalities]."

Personalities Who Jell

There will be also be expected contrasts of Rhythm & Gold to Urban AC and Rhythmic AC, but both those formats – unlike R&G - play currents. "They also don't generally have the breadth we do," Bonita maintains. "In presence and stationality, Urban AC tends to be reflective of one ethnic group. Likewise, Rhythmic AC generally caters to another ethnic group."

The format's co-creator envisions Rhythm & Gold as a mass appeal format. "The music isn't the

exclusive province of one particular audience; neither is the stationality [nor the personalities]," Bonita remarks. "The idea is that it's something everybody can listen to and feel welcome as part of the family."

Nearly seven years ago to the day (12-4-1998), WBIX/New York City adopted a Disco/Dance format and, on Christmas Eve of that year, officially became "Jammin' 105." It picked up the WTJM calls approximately two months later and has since become Clear Channel Urban Contemporary "Power 105" (WWPR).

Famous Amos was Jammin' 105's original afternoon driver, before segueing to nights. "That station had real personalities," states Bonita, who is nothing short of a Gotham voiceover legend. "They were black, white and Hispanic. As soon as Jammin' went off the air, [many of the oldies] were almost immediately assimilated into [Clear Channel Adult Contemporary] Lite-FM [WLTW]. That shows you the validity of the music."

Soul And Beat

Another thing gleaned from that experience was that the 400-song library wasn't large enough. "The original downfall of the Jammin' stations is they don't make new oldies," Bonita notes with a smile in her distinctive voice. "Let's just say we believe we have more titles in active rotation than Jack boasts of. There's such a broad swath of music you just don't hear anymore. The whole idea behind Rhythm & Gold is that it's supposed to be colorblind and all-inclusive. It's a place where [anyone] can feel comfortable."

Records in the vast library have a common thread of soul and beat, and Bonita explains, "Soul can be Hall & Oates, The Righteous Brothers, Parliament/Funkadelic and the 1970s' Santana. They were huge hits in their day and are still popular today. People don't even know to test them. These songs are the AC of the 21st century."

Bulls-eye decade for Rhythm & Gold is the 1970s, but the format also plays from before and after that era. "We've noticed teenagers are singing along to about three of every four songs," Bonita states. "It's been a source of astonishment to see 16-year-olds singing our playlist."

Aiming For High TSL

It's her opinion that the prospect of hearing Rhythm & Gold as an in-office option is quite realistic. "It's fun and has a little bit of an edge," Bonita comments. "It's designed in such a way it won't put you to sleep [but it's also] not in your face. Everybody has iPods and hard drives chock full of music, but there's still something very special when your favorite song comes on the radio. You weren't planning for it and it just happens to hit at the right moment. I can still remember things that struck at isolated moments in my life that were accented by the song on the radio."

This new format also seems to be accessible to a wide audience. Someone who listened to a website demo stream dropped Bonita a note that made a distinct impression. "He knew virtually all the music and grew up in 'white-bread' Green Bay, WI," she notes. "We worked hard to construct the right mix and flow that would result in high TSL. We want people to listen for long periods; [the format] is strategically [built] to do that. In terms of in-office listening, people aren't going to get tired of this format. There's a flow to it that makes sense and people aren't going to be jarred by transitions."

While Bonita doesn't have a feel for whether Rhythm & Gold will be restricted in any way by

market size, she hopes initial participants will have sufficient resources to make it a viable market force. "They should be able to get the [personalities], jingles, promotions and all [other] necessary [elements] that are needed to make a format and a station successful," she advises.

Susceptible Stations

Expectations are that Rhythm & Gold's audience composition will be very close to 50% Male/50% Female. "Mainstream Oldies has traditionally skewed slightly Male and dance records have always skewed slightly more Female; this format kind of meets in the middle," she explains. "We've worked a long time to bring this to light and really think we have something. We've honed and refined it and it will be gratifying to actually hear this on the air and done right – the way radio should be. It should be fun and it should touch people."

Formats most likely to be vulnerable to a Rhythm & Gold sign-on include traditional Oldies, Urban AC, Hot AC and Mainstream AC. "We have a weekend special [Saturdays and Sundays at 6am and 6pm, ET] that features Bob Shannon, who was most recently on WCBS-FM/New York City," Bonita points out. "We've been doing it on our stream and are actively seeking a syndicator for it. It's a demo with special programming."

There's nothing but absolute certainty on her part that Rhythm & Gold is a fulltime format rather than a weekend feature and that it won't be a novelty without legs. "We've been listening to it every day for five years and I'm not tired of it yet," Bonita enthusiastically declares. "I'm the one who schedules the music and, if I'm not tired of it, I really have no fear that [average listeners] are going to get tired of it. We think of Rhythm & Gold as something that can liberate AC as being the only [format] that can be played in an office. The success of Ben & Jerry's and Häagen-Dazs has proven that, while vanilla is a very tasty flavor, it's not the only one out there."

First-Rate Reputation

Buzznet Media's Famous Amos and Bonita have delivered their pet project to Houston-based Zapoleon Media Strategies President Guy Zapoleon and ZMS Consultant Mark St. John.

The format's originators will be part of the brain trust. All four individuals will have input to what goes on. "We went to [ZMS] because of Guy and Mark's outstanding reputations in this business," Bonita comments. "They were on the same page philosophically as we were to try to get our baby to air. They were our first choice and were kind enough to work with us."

Common Ground

So it's now Zapoleon's charge to market and implement Rhythm & Gold in local markets. "We entered the picture several months ago," he notes. "They'd been looking for the right partner to help launch Rhythm & Gold. We found common ground on style and philosophy and decided to work together to bring the format to the radio marketplace."

Since Rhythm & Gold is simply an industry name, don't expect to hear stations identifying it that way on the air. "We'll work with each station to develop its own brand identity," Zapoleon explains. "You won't travel from market to market and hear the exact same music recipe and production. If we hit our goal right, listeners in Los Angeles will think they have the greatest station they've ever heard. Similarly, people in [another market] will think their station is one of the best things about living there. We're doing more than playing a new and exciting music mix - we're devolving modern radio to the point where we intend to beat the rap for being

homogenized.”

No station is currently licensed to air it yet, but each affiliate will be custom-developed, depending on what Zapoleon labels “target audience needs, competitive environment, and ethnic and demographic compositions.”

Entertaining Fun Presentation

The broad demo being sought by the newcomer is 25-54 with an anticipated 35-49 core, and Zapoleon estimates R&G will have more titles than the typical Jack outlet. “It doesn’t come off as meandering and eclectic and stiff; we don’t burn out, either,” he predicts. “We did [our best] to develop a mega-listenable format, whose flow keeps the TSL high.”

Three of every four songs in the R&G library are from the 1970s and 1980s. The remainder, Zapoleon says, has a 1960s “flavor” and there’s a “sprinkling” from the 1990s. “We might occasionally go off the reservation, but there’s a flow to it all and it all fits together. Listeners can still maintain a comfort level with our core eras and never realize just how wide the pendulum technically swings. Younger demos have said they feel they’re listening to a 1980s station — which they actually call their oldies.”

In addition to an ambitious playlist, the new format hopes to embody CHR-style formatics. “We’re looking for high-energy, high entertainment, high personality and a fun presentation,” remarks Zapoleon, who strongly feels personalities are essential to this format. “The object is to have a more direct connection to the listeners. [Adult Hits `Jack`] has personality and attitude in the production elements. That works for them, but we think it’s time to bring the air personality back to the forefront to sell the music, brand and attitude.”

Arbitron Voting

Fine-tuning an intricate radio format doesn’t happen overnight and Zapoleon believes it’s an appropriate time to debut this new format. “There has been a proliferation of adult variety formats like Jack, as well as the virtual absence of mass-appeal rhythmic oldies in the radio marketplace,” he comments.

In addition to being a radio historian, Zapoleon is also one of the medium’s most outstanding/well-respected programming consultants - and highly cognizant why certain concepts fail. “Jammin’ Oldies started strong [but] quickly burned due to an ultra-tight playlist,” he contends. “That doesn’t mean listeners don’t have an appetite for rhythmic oldies. We feel we’ve gotten it right this time. We’ve learned a lot the last few years - especially that listeners will accept much broader playlists. In fact, they’re demanding them with their votes in Arbitron diaries. The great news is we can choose from a wide list of music spanning several decades and still play recognizable songs to the target audience without burning them out.”

Mass Appeal Format

There have already been tongue-in-cheek references to R&G as being “Black Jack,” but Zapoleon stresses, “This is not a `black’ or `Urban’ format, per se. The technical majority of artists are, but everyone we play has some soul and beat in the bloodstream. What we did was to appreciate who those artists were from a musical level. There’s potential in applying these principles to a specific genre of music and going wide within that genre — then adding unique personalities, marketing and production to create a different kind of audio environment than we’ve recently heard on radio.”

Motown and rhythmic pop are liberally represented in Rhythm & Gold's mix, prompting Zapoleon to proclaim, "It will have broad appeal across the entire audience spectrum. If it was on your radio when it was originally released — and you can dance to it or make love to it — it's on our playlist."

Houston Summer 2005 Overview

As Fall's "Phase Two" results start to roll out, this week's "Inside Story" ratings analysis details Houston - the homebase of (Guy) Zapoleon Media Strategies – and the way the No. 7 market changed from Summer 2004 - Summer 2005 according to 12+ Arbitron format share.

The top two spots are occupied by Radio One, with rhythmic CHR "The Box" (KBXX) maintaining a 0.3 advantage over sister Urban AC "Majic 102.1" (KMJQ).

A station's overall market rank is followed by calls; Summer 2004 12+ share; Summer 2005 12+ share; and 12+ Summer - Summer fluctuation.

Stations with at least a 1.0-share (12+) this Summer (2005) are included.

CHR/Rhythmic

01 KBXX-FM 05.8 05.9 +0.1
10 KPTY-FM 04.2 03.2 -1.0

Urban AC

02 KMJQ-FM 05.2 05.6 +0.4

Regional Mexican

03 KLTN-FM 05.7 05.5 -0.2
08 KJOJ-FM & KTJM-FM 02.7 03.6 +0.9
21 KQBU-FM 01.1 01.7 +0.6
25 KROI-FM 00.6 01.1 +0.5

Adult Contemporary

04 KODA-FM 05.0 05.4 +0.4

CHR/Pop

05 KRBE-FM 04.9 04.3 -0.6

Alternative

06 KTBZ-FM 03.6 03.9 +0.3

Talk

06 KTRH-AM 03.3 03.9 +0.6
12 KPRC-AM 03.8 03.1 -0.7

Country

08 KILT-FM 03.3 03.6 +0.3
10 KTHT-FM 02.9 03.2 +0.3
14 KKBQ-FM 03.7 03.0 -0.7

Hot AC

12 KHMx-FM 02.8 03.1 +0.3

Smooth Jazz

15 KHJZ-FM 03.0 02.9 -0.1

Classic Rock

15 KKRW-FM 02.3 02.9 +0.6

Hispanic Urban

15 KLOL-FM 02.8 02.9 +0.1

Spanish Contemporary

18 KOVE-FM 03.6 02.5 -1.1

23 KIOX-FM & KQOK-FM 00.8 01.3 +0.5

Oldies

19 KLDE-FM 02.2 02.0 -0.2

80s

20 KHPT-FM 02.0 01.8 -0.2

Rock

22 KIOL-FM 01.1 01.4 +0.3

Sports

23 KILT-AM 01.3 01.3 Flat

Gains & Losses

Lieberman Regional Mexican combo "La Raza" (KJOJ-FM & KTJM-FM) posted the largest (+0.9) Summer – Summer improvement.

08 KJOJ-FM & KTJM-FM Regional Mexican +0.9

06 KTRH-AM Talk +0.6

15 KKRW-FM Classic Rock +0.6

21 KQBU-FM Regional Mexican +0.6

23 KIOX-FM & KQOK-FM Spanish Contemporary +0.5

25 KROI-FM Regional Mexican +0.5

02 KMJQ-FM Urban AC +0.4

04 KODA-FM Adult Contemporary +0.4

06 KTBZ-FM Alternative +0.3

08 KILT-FM Country +0.3

10 KTHT-FM Country +0.3

12 KHMx-FM Hot AC +0.3

22 KIOL-FM Rock +0.3

01 KBXX-FM CHR/Rhythmic +0.1

15 KLOL-FM Hispanic Urban +0.1

23 KILT-AM Sports Flat

15 KHJZ-FM Smooth Jazz -0.1

03 KLTN-FM Regional Mexican -0.2

19 KLDE-FM Oldies -0.2

- 20 KHPT-FM 80s -0.2
- 05 KRBE-FM CHR/Pop -0.6
- 12 KPRC-AM Talk -0.7
- 14 KKQB-FM Country -0.7
- 10 KPTY-FM CHR/Rhythmic -1.0
- 18 KOVE-FM Spanish Contemporary -1.1

"Loveline" host Dr. Drew Pinsky is the latest person profiled in "The Mike Kinosian Interview: Personalities Inside Radio" (12-12-2005); FM Talk is the subject of last week's (12-8-2005) "Inside Story with Mike Kinosian."

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By Mike Kinosian

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