

LOCAL RADIO STATIONS 'JACK' UP THEIR PLAYLISTS TO COMPETE WITH IPODS

By Diane Torioian Keaggy

The choking sound you heard last week was Slipknot fans gagging on their Red Bull. The Point (KPNT-FM, 105.7) -- home to the loudest, angriest bands in alternative music -- played the precious '80s band Depeche Mode. The Point, it appears, has gone "Jack" -- industry lingo for radio's hottest format. The Point has tweaked the idea for alternative radio, but most Jack stations play anything and everything. Country, hip-hop, rock, pop -- no matter, so long as the song charted anytime in the past, say, 35 years. About 30 outlets carry the official "Jack" moniker, and about 75 more have adopted the Jack concept, including St. Louis' top music station, the Arch (WARH-FM, 106.5).

"We're all adult hits stations," says Arch programmer Jules Riley. "What matters is that when you turn it on, you say, 'Hey I know that song.' It needs to be familiar."

The Point rolled out its new sound last month. Bands such as System of a Down and Korn remain the station's bread and butter. But now they sandwich one-time staples like Cake, Live and New Found Glory. The approach delivers the same thrill iPod listeners feel when they put their playlists on shuffle, Point programming director Tommy Mattern says.

"About 60 percent of what we play is new. That hasn't changed," says Mattern. "But the remaining 40 percent just got massive. Instead of playing just one song from Nirvana, we'll play 30. There is a lot more variety."

The 1,000-song library at the Arch (tagline: "'70s, '80s, Whatever We Want") also runs deep and wide. Programmer Riley says the broad playlist appeals to radio listeners who have grown tired of traditional radio stations that play 300, maybe 400 songs.

"I think listeners wanted a bigger variety for a long time," says Riley. "Most stations have a very short playlist, so you hear the song every few hours. Listeners got tired of that."

On a recent morning, the Arch played indie star Alanis Morissette, '70s supergroup Queen, one-hit wonder Katrina and the Waves, '80s icon Pat Benatar and soul singer Rick James. Like Slipknot and Depeche Mode, these bands share little besides varying degrees of popularity. Could one listener like them all?

"Maybe not," acknowledges Riley. "But I think there is enough variety that if they don't like Madonna, they can switch back in three minutes and hear Aerosmith."

The JACK format may seem like a fresh answer to new threats facing the industry -- satellite radio, iPods, a shrinking pool of new talent -- but its roots are in old-time Top 40 radio. In the 1950s and 1960s, Top 40 stations would play the biggest hits in every genre. But as radio evolved, stations concentrated more and more on their little niche of the market.

In 2000, broadcaster Bob Perry, A/K/A Cadillac Jack, revolted. He put together an online station that featured his favorite songs mixed with once-forgotten hits. He marketed the concept, and in 2002, Vancouver aired the first Jack station. Today, most major markets host a least one station that follows the Jack philosophy. In Chicago, the Point's sister station broadened its alternative playlist in April. Atlanta has "Hank," a country station that plays everything from Johnny Cash to Faith Hill. And in Indianapolis, four stations have adopted a Jack-like format.

"There's no sign of a falloff," says Ross. "Jack and all of the Bobs and Hanks like them have seemed to find an audience."