



He got jacked!

Radio Airwaves Go Jack

New format storms the airwaves with a playlist from Marvin Gaye to Van Halen

On a recent Wednesday morning, New York's WCBS-FM played Quiet Riot's "Cum On Feel the Noize," followed by a seemingly random string of songs: A Flock of Seagulls' "I Ran (So Far Away)," 3 Doors Down's "Kryptonite" and Marvin Gaye's "Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)." For thirty-three years, WCBS had been an oldies station, but on June 3rd it flipped to a hot new format -- Jack-FM -- which features a wildly eclectic playlist and replaces DJs on most stations with a recorded voice that shouts slogans like "Playing what we want!" The E Street Band's Steven Van Zandt likened WCBS' flip to exchanging the Statue of Liberty for a blowup doll.

Jack has spread to eleven major North American stations in a little more than a year, including New York, Los Angeles and Chicago - with as many as three dozen expected to launch by the end of this year. While most rock and pop stations air the same 300 or 400 songs repeatedly, the average Jack station rotates at least 1,200 - almost all hits, emphasizing Eighties pop and rock with some Seventies, Nineties and current tracks. Hip-hop, punk and metal are mostly ignored, although Green Day are a staple. "Everybody has an iPod," says Dave Robbins, general manager for Chicago Jack station WJMK. "They can relate to having a lot of music in one place."

But the format isn't actually random at all. In many cities, Jack has replaced oldies stations, exchanging listeners in their fifties and sixties with younger listeners who are likely to buy advertisers' products for years to come. And while the playlists may seem wacky, they're actually carefully prepared. "This isn't 'press a button and play any song in the world,'" says Infinity Broadcasting president of programming Rob Barnett. "This is 'look at your marketplace and determine what music mix is going to have the most success.'"

Jack began with Bob Perry, a longtime DJ from Island Park, New York, who created an eclectic online station in 2000 and named it after his on-air alias, Cadillac Jack Garrett. The format first hit the airwaves in Vancouver in 2002; the first U.S. station popped up in Denver last year. Perry now works with SparkNet Communications, which licenses the format. (Jack's popularity has spawned clones in many markets - like Simon in Greensboro, North Carolina, Mike in Boston and various Jills, Hanks and Bobs.)

The radio chain that has yet to jump on Jack's bandwagon is the biggest: Clear Channel. "Some stations that have flipped to the format are experiencing early ratings spikes followed by swift declines," says Sean Compton, Clear Channel's vice president of radio programming. A recent study by Arbitron and Edison Media Research supports

this thesis: Ratings for Jacks in Denver, Dallas and elsewhere spiked, then dipped, and the format rates poorly for time spent listening. "Jack is going to bite them in the ass," says Bruce "Cousin Brucie" Morrow, the veteran New York DJ who was replaced by the recorded Jack voice when WCBS flipped from oldies. "What's lacking is the human touch."

But Jack programmers say the experiment is paying off, with an average of one station a week changing over and generally strong ratings in the crucial twenty-five-to-fifty-four-year-old range. "Radio has been dominated by one train of thought for twenty years, and we broke it," says Mike Henry, CEO of Paragon Media Strategies, a Denver media consulting firm that helped develop Jack. "There will still be classic-rock stations, country stations, urban stations, but they're not going to be as narrow as they once were."

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(Posted Jul 26, 2005)