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### **The future of radio sounds a lot like the past.**

On Los Angeles' KCBS-FM -- now known as "93.1 Jack FM" -- AC/DC blends into the Police, followed by the B-52s and a disco track by Kool and the Gang.

A radio oddity just a year ago, the "variety hits" format -- known around the country by names like "Jack" or "Bob" -- has execs rethinking how to program their stations.

"It has definitely sparked a dialogue and many debates about radio itself," says SparkNet Communications co-prexy Garry Wall, whose company markets "Jack" nationwide.

"People are polarized about it in the industry. When we started doing this, 95% of people were politely or vehemently skeptical."

The format (also sometimes called "classic hits") first hit it big in Canada before working its way to the U.S. last year.

It's actually a rather obvious concept: Stick with the big rock and pop hits everyone remembers from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s -- and play 'em all.

Most Jack stations have a rotation of 1,200 songs. Top 40 radio, by contrast, tends to revolve around less than 100 songs.

At first glance, it doesn't sound too adventurous -- but in this age of consolidation, radio congloms have been loathe to mix things up.

These days, hip-hop stations play hip-hop. Alternative rock stations play alternative rock. Oldies outfits play oldies. A classic rock track followed by a new wave gem and a disco dustie? No way.

"One of the issues here, is we're trying to get people to take risks," says Infinity prexy [prexy](#) Joel Hollander. "You have to cut through the clutter."

Almost 70 stations across the country program the format -- which also sports handles like Mike, Max, Zack, Doug, Simon, Sam, Charlie, Ben or Abe, depending where you live.

"It's been Mr. Toad's Wild Ride," Bob Perry, an architect of the format, says of the "Jack" phenom. A radio consultant, Perry and his colleagues came up with the "Jack" concept as

an online experiment in 2000; soon after, Canadian broadcaster Howard Kroeger developed "Bob."

More recently, Infinity Radio group has aggressively embraced the new format, flipping nine of its stations to "Jack" in top markets including New York, Chicago and Los Angeles.

It's paying off. In just one Arbitron book, KCBS jumped to No. 4 from No. 16 in adults 25-54, and nearly doubled its average quarter-hour listenership vs. its previous life as the classic rock outfit "Arrow 93.1."

The press has latched on to the "Jack" format as a counter to the iPod and satellite radio because of its wider, hit-driven playlist. "Jack" also eschews DJs, traffic reports and weather forecasts, sticking to music and commercials.

But the lack of those local features -- which are exactly what set radio apart from the iPod and satellite -- may also lead to the format's downfall if Jack programmers aren't careful.

Infinity's Jack attack has angered listeners in some cities -- particularly New York, where legendary DJs like "Cousin Bruce" Murrow lost their jobs when WCBS-FM switched from oldies to the new format.

Infinity was also deluged with complaints in Chicago, where longtime oldies station WJMK also made way for Jack.

"These were good radio stations, but we needed to grow them faster and younger," says Hollander, who notes that the old WCBS still exists online (although without Murrow, who has signed a deal to work at Sirius Satellite Radio).

It's too soon to tell whether the format will have staying power -- or if auds will tune out once the new smell wears off like they did a few years ago with once-hot nationwide phenoms like "Jammin' Oldies" and all-'80s radio.

Reenergized programmers are already hungry for the next big thing. Some are trying to emulate Jack in other formats, such as Indianapolis' "Hank-FM," which plays "anything country," or R&[B](#)[R](#)[B](#) oldies with a wider Jack-inspired playlist.

"Jack is not the end-all and be-all of innovation," Wall says. "It's the beginning of an idea -- hopefully hundreds of ideas."