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Wednesday, June 6, 2007

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The Message

Jacked

By [Michael Roberts](#)

Published: August 25, 2005

In New York City, Jack-FM is officially recognized as a giant killer, thanks to its June takeover of WCBS, a heritage operation that had been pumping out oldies for 33 years. Among those getting the gate were "**Cousin Brucie**" **Morrow**, remembered for introducing the **Beatles** at the band's landmark 1965 Shea Stadium concert, and former **Monkee**-turned-morning-man **Mickey Dolenz**, who learned of his fate while celebrating his 100th show at the station. Reaction to this bloodletting was so hysterical that even CBS's television arm took notice -- but instead of keeping the spotlight on bereaved boomers, the network newscast's story mainly paid homage to the growth of Jack, which is now heard in at least seventeen U.S. markets, plenty of them major. So, too, did an August 15 *Time* magazine article, in which snark-boy writer **Joel Stein** declared Jack to be "possibly the catchiest, most democratic radio format yet invented."

Mark Poutenis

Given all this attention, the folks at the Denver area's Jack, owned by NRC Broadcasting, ought to be in their glory. After all, their station was the first in America to take a chance on former DJ **Bob Perry**'s aural approach, which debuted in Vancouver, Canada, circa 2002. But instead of crowing, **Ray Skibitsky**,

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Old airport officials never seem to leave. They become consultants.
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Richard Gere and J. Lo *Dance*, and there's dirty about it.
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NRC's chief operating officer, takes the seemingly paradoxical tack of trying to distance his Jack from the other ones popping up on dials from coast to coast. "You can call it Jack, Bob, Henry, Hank, Ben -- there are a bunch of other names out there," he says. "But Jack-FM in Denver isn't a format as much as it is a concept. And that's what

we're using -- the concept, not the format."

Skibitsky goes on to suggest that the version of Jack he's honed with the assistance of program director **Bryan Schock** isn't all that far removed from the sonic blend he pioneered at KBCO, which he oversaw back in the '80s, and the Peak, an adult-album-alternative broadcaster that enjoyed a mid-'90s vogue prior to a new-millennium collapse. "Jack is about music variety, and that's exactly what I've done over my career," he notes. "It's just that we're playing different genres, as opposed to the variety of music at KBCO. The variety on Jack is a mile wide and a couple of inches deep."

This phrase is unexpectedly accurate. Rather than zeroing in on a specific style, Jack-FM transmits melodies from across the pop-radio spectrum and doesn't segregate them as vigorously as do most of its competitors -- hence a recent set that included faux-punkette **Avril Lavigne** and '80s pukemasters **REO Speedwagon**. Moreover, Jack draws almost exclusively from past hits, thereby ensuring that practically every cut will be recognizable to listeners no matter their backgrounds. In the beginning, this mix-and-mismatch philosophy was employed far too indiscriminately, with strong tracks juxtaposed against swill that's only grown more putrid over time. As judged by a recent week-long, **Huey Lewis**-free sampling of the signal, things have improved somewhat, if not quite enough to wholly justify the cocksure tone of its on-air bumpers. A link that asked why other stations don't sound as great as Jack would have been considerably more convincing if it hadn't come between **Tommy Tutone's** "Jenny (867-5309)" and "Gold,"

02:32PM 06/06/07

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10:52AM 06/06/07

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By David Zahni

Given that other Jacks use basically the same promotional imaging, how is the Denver edition different thing, its playlist numbers from 2,000 to 2,500 songs, as opposed to the 1,200 or so at similar outlets. (non-Jack stations seldom have more than 400 ditties in the active library at any given time.) Skibitsky emphasizes that the selections have been "tweaked" with Colorado in mind -- which apparently means R&B and soul than is cycled through NYC's Jack. Finally, Jack-FMs in other areas generally lack DJs, and absence results in cost savings that bean-counters love. In contrast, Denver's Jack has actual men and women working three Monday-to-Friday shifts, including afternoon drive time, when Peak graduate **Doug Clark** is at the wheel -- not that it's always easy to tell. The jocks rarely intrude, and the station's website makes no mention of them whatsoever, in order to keep the focus on tuneage. Skibitsky recalls a heavy news day when he told his audience, "There's so much to talk about. But this is Jack, so let's get back to the music." Length of commentary, ten seconds or less.

Jack's ratings dipped after a strong start, and although they've recently begun to trend upward again, they aren't spectacular; it was the 19th most popular outlet among locals age twelve and older in the most recent Arbitron survey. NRC's second Jack, based in Glenwood Springs, is doing better, topping the roster in Colorado's mountains, where the company has expanded vigorously. Eleven stations in locations such as Vail and Rifle are now officially in NRC's portfolio, and the sale of two more is being processed by the **Fred Brown**, NRC's chief executive officer, supervises these properties day to day, while Skibitsky oversees KCUV-AM, which gives every appearance of being in trouble. The latter was introduced in 2003 as an Americana station and featured a large, highly interactive website. Now, however, much of the website is gone, and Skibitsky no longer employs the Americana tag. "It's more of a singer-songwriter type of thing like early KBCO," he says. The shift has already alienated some of KCUV's aficionados, of which there are not enough; its twelve-plus ratings are only about a quarter of Jack's.

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