

# TIME

## You Don't Know Jack

But you will. It's the automated format that loves the '80s and loses the DJ. And it's taking over radio

By JOEL STEIN, *TIME Magazine*, 8.10

A promo that ran last week on Los Angeles' 93.1 Jack FM consisted of a real caller yelling into the station's voice mail that he hated the station so much, it made him want to stick a hot poker in his ears. A few weeks earlier, in New York City, an angry Mayor Michael Bloomberg said a very bad word because 101.1 Jack FM replaced his beloved oldies station. (You'd think the guy could afford a satellite radio.) **Steven Van Zandt** of Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band said it was like replacing the Statue of Liberty with a blow-up doll, which he meant as a negative.

All that passion is being aroused, oddly, by possibly the catchiest, most democratic radio format yet invented. Jack mixes up a lot of '80s music--some classic rock, a slew of one-hit wonders, a few oldies, a touch of Top 40 and a tiny bit of rap. It has surgically removed everything that is annoying about radio. In most markets, Jack is just music--no weather, no traffic, no song IDs--and is completely automated, so there aren't even any wrongheaded DJs to endure. At 1,200 songs, the playlists are three times bigger than average, so it doesn't grate with repetitiveness, and the commercial breaks are noticeably shorter. If families still sat around the radio in happy little nuclear units, they would spend the night rocking out to Jack. In the year since it was introduced in the U.S., Jack radio has spread to 17 stations and spawned such copycats as Bob FM and Dave FM and has invented a format so widespread, it already has a name: variety hits. No concept has overtaken the nation's dials so successfully since the morning zoo hit in the early '80s.

So why does Jack inspire all the bile? It's not as if it were one of those seemingly hipster products that was actually created after much consumer testing by a conglomerate. Jack has a lovable indie backstory, starting out as one guy's website. In 2000, Bob Perry, a former DJ and station manager who had moved to Connecticut to be near his wife's aging parents, started fooling around with Internet radio. He got some cheap software that allowed him to randomize song order, causing "train wrecks"--ballads followed by headbangers. He put it up as jack.fm and slid in some promos revolving around a fictitious cowboy named Jack who made fun of the DJ clichés he had heard his whole life. "I started ripping in music and said, This is cool, and this is different," says Perry, 45. "We said we could probably sell this to some little AM station somewhere."

Instead in 2002 he sold it to an FM station in Vancouver, where it got so huge, it quickly was bought by five other Canadian stations; in April of last year, a station in Denver bought in,

and Jack metastasized. Former Vancouver DJ Howie (the Hitman) Cogan, who voices most of Jack's taped promos, is now repped by William Morris, while Perry has become a sought-after station consultant. "My involvement with Jack now is, 'Oh, look, the check just came in,'" he says.

Some of the reasons for Jack's surge are self-evident. Listeners like shorter commercial breaks and more songs. And Jack is centered on the '80s, which is still fascinating kids in high school and college. But the programming is shrewd in the way it affirms the identity of its listeners. At its heart, Jack is a nostalgia station for Generation X, but it disguises that fact with carefully selected obscure tunes (Walking Away by Information Society, Pop Goes the Weasel by 3rd Bass) that make listeners feel erudite and hip. Then there are the laconic, faux-rebellious promos. On Los Angeles' 93.1 Cogan recently announced, "If you're easily offended, maybe we're not for you." Immediately after which, the robot DJ segued into In a Big Country, a song so inoffensive, it is enjoyed even in small countries.

Perry brags that unlike previous '80s-based stations that only played rock, Jack mixes the broad array of metal, R&B and synth that truly represented the era. In high school cafeterias, the differences between those genres once defined which lunch table you sat at, but now any song from the era brings back muted, whitewashed memories of youth.

Perhaps therein also lies the answer to why Jack's ratings in many cities dip after its first two months. It soon dawns on the Gen Xers that their cool, eclectic music collection is actually the new American songbook, just as their snarky cynicism is the generic spawn of David Letterman. Worse yet, the big news being hidden behind Jack's robotic wall of attitude is this: Jack is the new oldies. Therefore, we all must be getting old.