

The Future Of Radio: Rock Is Out, Talk And Latin In As Industry Reinvents Itself

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iPods, changing demographics, satellite radio and Howard Stern have shifted landscape.

Sirius, reggaeton, XM, Free FM, FM talk. "Jack," "Hurban," HD.

Whatever happened to good old FM and AM? All of a sudden, it feels like radio has become a brave and baffling new world.

Instead of the old dilemma of which local rock, pop or hip-hop station to turn to, listeners now have the luxury of choosing between podcasts, dozens of commercial-free music channels on satellite radio and several new terrestrial-radio formats, all of which aim to be the next big thing.

Some cities are losing their modern-rock outlets while others are gaining all-reggaeton stations and/or a new format, Hurban (short for Hispanic urban), which is spreading all over the country as radio syndicates reach out to the fastest-growing demographic in the U.S. (41 million and counting).

And that's just the beginning.

Terrestrial radio outlets are also embracing "alternative FM talk" radio and experimenting with all-request music shows and the iPod-like, DJ-less "Jack" stations, which play five times more music than typical pop outlets. They are also booking more celebrities for morning-drive time and gearing up to hit back at upstart satellite outlets XM and Sirius by ramping up high-definition (HD) broadcasts, which will bring more channels in better sound quality to specially equipped (and currently pricey) radios in the next few years.

All of this means that you will be hearing more, and more diverse, music and voices anywhere you look on the dial — but will you be able to find what you're looking for?

Is Rock Radio Dead?

If you live in New York and turn on the radio in the afternoon, hoping to hear blocks of new songs by Fall Out Boy and the Killers, you're out of luck. Or you will be soon.

There has been much ado in the media about Howard Stern's flight to satellite radio dealing a death blow to rock radio (see "David Lee Roth Replacing Howard Stern On Morning Radio"). And with nine stations owned by Infinity Broadcasting (the #2 radio network in the country, which is owned by MTV's parent company, Viacom, and currently broadcasts Stern's show) in major markets like Dallas, Boston and San Diego switching to a new talk format called Free FM — which Infinity's Rob Barnett described as "non-formatted" radio filled with talent taken from outside the usual radio gene pool — once Stern signs off from terrestrial radio on December 16, you might well ask, "Is rock radio dead?"

Experts say the answer is yes ... and no.

Stern's departure will mark the end of new rock on K-Rock (WXRK), New York's flagship station, during the prime weekday daylight hours. The station will switch to Free FM and run the new David Lee Roth morning show and a mix of sports, politics and pop-culture talk, returning to music on weekends and after 7 p.m. weekdays, beginning on January 3.

At the same time, K-Rock has launched K-Rock2, an online-only station that plays the familiar mix of new and old alternative and classic rock. Two other popular and recently shuttered new-rock outlets, WHFS in Baltimore (which became a Latin station) and WPLY (Y100) in Philadelphia have also launched streaming Internet channels very similar to their old formats in order to stem the outrage of longtime listeners. Other discontinued outlets, like the tiny but highly influential Oxford, Ohio, alternative station WOXY (97X), have gone online-only.

But that still leaves New York, the biggest radio market in the country, with the classic-rock Q104.3 as its sole all-rock outlet. Thanks to recent shakeouts, Philadelphia now has one instead of three.

Barnett, Infinity's president of programming, noted that the sky isn't falling just because some former Stern stations are switching to Free FM. Some will continue to play a mix of music and talk during the day, while others will follow Roth (or, on the West Coast, Adam Carolla) or regional morning shows with half-hour blocks from comedian Penn Jillette and other talk. Barnett said Infinity still has 24 rock stations across the country, including Los Angeles' KROQ, Live 105 in San Francisco and Boston's WBCN, which will continue to play a mix of alternative and hard rock.

"We aren't losing scads of rock stations," said Tom Taylor, editor-in-chief of *Inside Radio* magazine. "But the visible ones are going away, and a lot of it is driven by the one-time-event of Stern leaving. Some stations have been lost in the conversion to Spanish-language programming, but radio always changes to reflect changing demographics and tastes."

Perhaps It's Really A Market Correction ...

Even those who have jumped on the "rock is dead" bandwagon are having second thoughts. Bram Teitelman, rock editor for *Billboard Radio Monitor*, notes that there are plenty of major outlets for hearing new rock on radio around the country — stations like KBZT in San Diego and Indie 103.1 in Los Angeles often take a lead in breaking new bands — but the format has been on the wane for several years and was in need of a shakeout. In the past two years, nearly a dozen stations have dropped off the *Monitor* radar because of declining listenership.

In fact, Stern's defection may be a stronger indication of his dominance than of a rock-radio retreat. "A lot of Stern stations were so taken over by him that they never had a franchise during the rest of the day," said Sean Ross of radio-research firm Edison Research. "A lot of the people who were there for his show were there for talk, not to hear music. With him gone, some of the stations aren't going to find the rock franchise worth defending."

If anything, Ross said the loss of a few rock stations across the country is a healthy reconsolidation: Few markets can support four or five overlapping rock formats and are reducing to one or two. Thus, you might hear more stations with varied playlists like that on Washington, D.C.'s DC101, which plays everything from the Killers to AC/DC.

One station sticking to the alternative-rock format is San Francisco's Live 105, a longtime leader of the genre, which Barnett said is spearheading a totally new concept in January called the Morning Music Co-op, which will be focused on new, breaking alternative music and feature listener call-in/requests and minimal commercials.

At Clear Channel Radio (the nation's #1 network), programmers are also rethinking classic rock, opting to cook up what Senior Vice President of Programming Sean Compton called "classic rock without Steppenwolf," similar in concept to stations in Austin, Texas, and Minneapolis that are playing a version of the format that leaves out some of the usual artists and songs. Stations like KBCO in Denver are growing their format in a different way, focusing on bringing artists like Sheryl Crow and the Indigo Girls in for live performances.

"Jack" Went Over the Hill?

One of the most popular new formats in radio is "Jack," variously described as "Your radio on shuffle" or the on-air equivalent of an iPod. The stations typically have no DJs and have up to 10 times as many songs in rotation as typical pop outlets. Sounds great, right?

Well, in some stations — like KCBS in Los Angeles — are doing well, but in New York, the transition of longtime oldies favorite WCBS to Jack has been rougher, with the station slipping from the top 10 to 22nd place in the latest ratings book. (Infinity's Barnett notes that by dropping the station's oldies format overnight, WCBS had to "start over from scratch" and that it has already attracted 1 million new listeners.)

"Jack is really a double-edged sword," said radio consultant Fred Jacobs, who is credited with creating the classic-rock format more than 20 years ago. "It does break radio rules — rules which need to be broken — by putting songs together that you don't normally hear, but I think [the lack of on-air personalities] is a problem. At the end of the day, once you've heard all 1,000 songs on a station a couple of times, the ability to connect with a local audience without having any local personality or feeling is in question. It's the essence of radio and it's what my iPod or MTV can't really do: hold up a mirror to the local community."

Barnett said he thinks Jack has gotten a bad rap in some cities, but that the format will ultimately win out because listeners have plenty of other places to go for local content.

The Waves Of The Future: Talk, Latin And HD

Of course, talk radio has been undergoing reinvention as well. In fact, Infinity's Barnett said, "a very intense decision was made to break the mold at this company in the past year, and it started by blowing up the old rules and jumping into territories where we designed new formats." Infinity expanded on the concept of Jack stations to create Free FM, which Barnett calls "the place where we intend to trump the rights of freedom of speech and let these gifted, smart entertainers express themselves." (Ironically, Howard Stern has said repeatedly that he is leaving terrestrial radio because he feels the constraints on his speech are too tight.)

Jacobs applauds Infinity's attempt to "shuffle the deck" by creating new post-Stern formats and promoting talk as a viable FM format outside of public radio.

Clear Channel is revamping its talk format by mixing local personalities and national names like Rush Limbaugh and Jerry Springer (not on the same station, of course) with celebrity spots

sprinkled in, according to Compton. Donald Trump dispenses 60-to-90-second bits of wisdom on more than 330 stations nationwide, while January will bring daily tips on affordable home repair from "Extreme Makeover" host Ty Pennington. Hoping to build a new morning franchise on urban radio, Clear Channel recently rolled out a drive-time show on 12 stations with actor/comedian Steve Harvey.

But the format making the most noise these days is Hurban/reggaeton, with stations mixing artists like Tego Calderon and Daddy Yankee with non-Latin hip-hop. In Los Angeles, KXOL more than doubled its ratings after flipping to Hurban earlier this year, and Houston's KLOL has been playing the funky bilingual mix for more than a year, with solid results.

Inside Radio's Taylor said both Infinity and Clear Channel saw the demographic change in the country toward a taste for more hip-hop and Spanish-language tastes.

"They're looking down the road to where America is going," he said, noting that similar switches in Miami and Washington, D.C., were precipitated by declining ratings, a growing Hispanic population and a desire to diversify. Compton said in addition to Hurban stations in Houston, Atlanta and Miami, Clear Channel is also rolling out nearly a dozen Hispanic oldies stations across the country.

And although satellite networks XM and Sirius have grown by leaps and bounds over the past two years — with a combined audience of nearly 8 million — Compton said he believes HD will quiet the voices that are predicting terrestrial's demise.

"We are more engaged in HD than anything I've been involved in for a long time," he said. "And we've only got one shot at rolling it out, so it has to be right." Compton said a medium-sized market like Cincinnati could go from having 15 viable FM signals to more than 30 or 40 with HD, bringing back such waning formats as jazz, blues and oldies in markets where they've been eliminated or taking Hispanic, commercial-free music and comedy stations to new markets.

Of course, these changes are part of a cycle that gets repeated in the world of U.S. radio every decade or so, according to music-and-media consultant Jeff Pollack. "There's a huge amount of people who might have been listening to rock 10 years ago and are listening to hip-hop now," he said.

"And unless new stations pop up to fill the void, those people will go to the Internet or iPods or satellite to have their needs filled," he continued. "What this is really calling for is a new format that creates the excitement of mixing genres and styles, making for more interesting radio. *That's* what's going to come next: an interesting coalition of musical styles and genres that will never work ... until it works."

— Gil Kaufman

<http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1513542/20051111/index.jhtml?headlines=true>