The History Of Top 40 Radio

By Clarke Ingram

In the period immediately after World War II, the 45rpm record and the 33 1/3rpm long-playing LP are introduced. These new inventions replace old, scratchy 78rpm discs and allow radio stations to play more high-fidelity pre-recorded music.

With the rising popularity of television, listenership to network programs on radio begins to fall rapidly. Radio is soon declared "dead" by many industry observers. While over 40 million households have radios, less than one million people listen regularly.

The earliest network programs featuring hosted, pre-recorded music are heard on NBC. A new phrase comes into use: disc jockey, or DJ. The first all-DJ format debuts at KLAC in Los Angeles. It is soon No. 1 in the market.

In 1952, a Cleveland disc jockey, Alan Freed begins playing "R&B" or "race" music on his nighttime show at WJW known as "The Moondog." Freed soon dominates the ratings and is credited with originating the musical use of the phrase "rock and roll.

In Omaha, Todd Storck notices that patrons are playing the same songs over and over on the jukebox. Thinking this might be a radio format idea, he does the same on local station KOWH. Within a few months, it has a 60% share of the listening audience.

Gordon McLendon invents his own format at KFLP in Dallas. His disc jockeys must play 40 different records during their airtight, thus the "Top 40." McLendon is credited with inventing modern jingles and the "wild and crazy" promotions radio still does today.

"Rock Around The Clock" by Bill Haley And His Comets becomes No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 singles chart. This is the beginning of the rock and roll era. Many rock and roll sounds by black artists are covered in sanitized versions by white artists.

Elvis Presley bursts onto the scene with his unique style of music — blending R&B and country — his undeniable sex appeal and star quality, he becomes a voice of the younger generation and a major influence on popular music.

KFWB in Los Angeles signs on with a Top 40 format. It soars to the top of the ratings and quickly becomes a format standard-bearer, imitated in many other markets.

Many disc jockeys and program directors face congressional hearings on "pogoing," the practice of accepting money for airplay. While this is not yet illegal, the hearings will end the careers of many disc jockeys and open a conservative period in Top 40 music characterized by "squarely clean" teen idols like Fabian and Pat Boone.

ABC switches two of its flagship AM stations, WABC in New York City and WLS in Chicago, to Top 40. With its other stations, including KQV in Pittsburgh and WXYZ in Detroit, ABC is a major player in the format throughout the Top 40 era.

The Beatles lead the "British invasion" and change the face of music forever. Motown music rises to the forefront, led by the Supremes, Four Tops, and Temptations. WABC becomes the most-listened-to radio station in America, with a weekly audience of more than six million people. This is the Golden Age of Top 40 radio on the AM dial.

Bill Drake debuts "Boss Radio" at KHJ in Los Angeles, which quickly climbs to the top of the ratings. Consisting of short jingles and quick DJ talkovers, Drake's approach is imitated everywhere and is still the basic format model for Top 40 today.

Two important, influential, and legendary AM Top 40 stations sign on during this year: KFRC in San Francisco and WFL in Philadelphia.

"The Summer of Love" ushers in the psychedelic era in music. Listeners tired of pop music and fast-talking DJs on AM radio begin to switch to progressive "album" rock on FM stations like KMPX in San Francisco, leading to a schism among younger listeners.

Buzz Bennett creates the "C" format, a Top 40 approach much wider than Bill Drake's. With screaming DJs, big-money contests, and an irreverent attitude, Bennett bears his former mentor Drake in many ways and helps to introduce Top 40 to the FM band.

"Rock The Boat" by The Husos Corporation, considered by many the first disco record, dances its way to the top of the charts. Disco rises sharply in popularity over the next few years. Some Top 40 stations largely abandon their formats for disco.

WTC-FM in Hartford, CT debuts a new, high-energy Top 40 format that is the brainchild of consultant Mike Joseph. This will evolve into an approach called "Hot Hits," which will prove to be the format's savior in a few years.

WKTU in New York City signs on with an all-Disco format. It quickly soars to the top of the ratings, trouncing legendary WABC and signaling the end of the dominance of Top 40 (and music in general) on the AM dial.

The beginning of a rock-oriented period at Top 40, with "corporate rock" by artists like Journey, Styx, Foreigner, REO Speedwagon, and Genesis dominating playlists, a more conversation- or "less talk" approach by DJs, and very little dance music.

Mike Joseph debuts "Hot Hits" at WJBL-FM in Philadelphia, followed shortly thereafter by WBBM-FM in Chicago. A fast-paced, energetic format with a large cube audience, it sends both stations to the top of the ratings and again changes the face of Top 40.

MTV ushers in a new era of Top 40 music. Shannon Shannon signs on at WHHT-FM (ZIP) in New York City, which goes from "worst to first" in 72 days and becomes the format's new role model. Many new Top 40 stations debut in the next few years.

Top 40 reaches its peak of influence and popularity for the decade, marked by the renewed influence of dance music, teenage audiences (Tiffany, Debbie Gibson), and the advent of rap music, which leaves damaging to the format's listenerhip.

A successful heritage Top 40 station, WKBW (Buffalo) is honored as "Program Director of the Year" and has been honored numerous times as "Program Director of the Year" and has been honored numerous times as " Program Director of the Year." This year, Ingram is celebrating 30 years in the radio industry. (1978-1998). You can reach Clarke Ingram at (716) 272-7260 or by e-mail at Chromag@jcom.com.

The Hits Just Keep Coming!

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