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ALBUM ORIENTED ROCK

Whatever Happened To Rock 40?

It was just about this time last year that the Rock 40 frenzy reached its apex. Having already demonstrated a knack for achieving out-of-the-box 12+ success in several key markets — most notably Kansas City (KXXR) and Detroit (WDFX) — the format received its biggest boost to date when KQLZ (Pirate)/Los Angeles scored an impressive debut.

Buoyed by Pirate's success, more stations began experimenting with current-based rock formats — many of which were radically different from one another. It was at that point that Joint Communications, which service-marked the term Rock 40 in 1987 but had yet to aggressively market its version of the format, began a concerted effort to lay claim to the name and prepare to capitalize on Rock 40's increasing notoriety.

Twelve months later, Joint still has no Rock 40 clients. Meanwhile, virtually all the major market stations originally grouped under the Rock 40 banner have abandoned the approach. Pirate's still doing its thang, but the ratings have slipped from their once lofty levels, and some say it's only a matter of time before Scott Shannon and company steer the Pirate toward more mainstream CHR waters.

What does Joint Chairman Jon Sinton have to say about all this? "Frankly, it still may be a little early for Rock 40 in some markets. But we're just as bullish on the format as we were a year ago. When it's done right — when it's formatically pure — there's a position for Rock 40 in the larger markets.

"You're deluding yourself if you believe further fragmentation of 12-34 men is going away. While heritage stations like KLOL/Houston and WEBN/Cincinnati can get away with being 30%-40% current, I don't think that can last forever. Ultimately, AOR will have to fragment. Not because it's fashionable, but we'll need a way to serve the younger side of the demo. They're being disenfranchised by the thousands on a daily basis."

Rock 40 Vs. Rock CHR

It should be noted that what Joint calls Rock 40 (and what Burkhardt/Douglas & Associates calls "Male CHR," a format currently working at WAZU/Dayton) is a far different format than the one employed by the failed Rock CHRs. "Our concept of Rock 40 is much closer to AOR than most of the attempts we've seen thus far," says Sinton. "It seems silly to me to think that CHR is going to attract a lot of 18-34-year-old men. Musically, Rock 40 is an AOR format.

"I think what happens to stations that approach Rock 40 from a CHR perspective is that they look up and say, 'God, we're really going

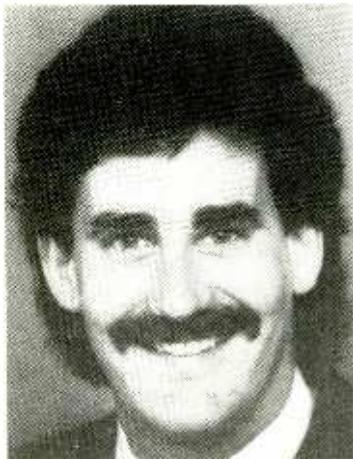
music to kill your parents by. As you'll recall, we had a lot of doubters and a number of failures back then.

"I have every confidence in the world in Rock 40's viability. There's an awful lot of groundwork that goes into something like this. Formats don't become successful overnight. It was a number of years before people stopped talking about Classic Rock as a short-lived permutation of AOR. I don't think it's a safe bet to count Rock 40 out at this point. The natural evolution of this medium is toward narrower and narrower targeting."

'Boutique' Format?

Interestingly, Pollack Media Group has not marketed any Rock 40-type formats. "As with most boutique formats, we never got involved with it," explains PMG President Tommy Hedges. "We're not against experimentation, but ours is a conservative company, and taking a gigantic twist in one direction is a tough sell in a highly competitive environment."

Hedges says the CHR-based Rock 40s "got stuck between a rock and a hard place. They didn't rock consistently enough to really compete with the broader male appeal of an AOR. Nor did they play enough nonrock product to appeal



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against the grain. It would sure be a lot easier to be a Dance CHR.' There's a natural push toward Dance CHR, as opposed to letting CHR fragment more toward the rock side."

While Sinton remains "bullish" on Rock 40 formatics, he knows first-hand how difficult they are to market. "Lee Abrams and I compared notes on this a couple of weeks ago," he says. "And we were laughing, because it's just like AOR was in the mid-'70s. You know it's out there, you know it's viable, you know it gets ratings, but you haven't found a way to talk GMs into it. You have two things working against you. One is the general bias against hard rock. Two is the general bias against anything that doesn't promise the glorious 25-54 demo.

"Ultimately, what will happen is that as everyone goes for 25-54, at some point people will look up and say, 'There must be some money out there for 18-34.' It's going to take a process of education on our part for the media-buying community, just as we had to reeducate them in the '70s that all our listeners weren't wearing black T-shirts and waiting for us to play



Tommy Hedges

"Even the Rock CHRs that were able to create substantial 12+ numbers couldn't sell the format. The niche they tried to fill was too small and too specific."

— Tommy Hedges

to a CHR person.

"Even the stations that were able to create substantial 12+

Whatever Happened To The Edge?

Fred Jacobs is all too familiar with the problems of marketing a new format. As he noted in last week's column, it took over two years to get Classic Rock on FM, and even longer before the format realized its true potential.

Which brings us to the Edge, the New Rock format Jacobs introduced back in the summer of '88. Two years later, the Edge has but two clients: WBRU/Providence and KDGE/Dallas, the latter an AM. What's the dang deal?

"We really came out with the Edge earlier than we were prepared to market it," Jacobs candidly admits. "Between AOR, Classic Rock, and the research we're doing, we've got a lot of business to take care of, and the Edge has had to take a back seat. The fact that we elected not to market the Edge in markets where we already have a client also limits us to a certain degree.

"I also underestimated the marketing wall I might face. At least when it came to Classic Rock the GMs knew all about the Beatles and the Stones. Try talking to them about the Cure and Depeche Mode.

"But I'm not at all discouraged by what's happened. We just haven't gotten our marketing in gear. The Edge isn't even on the wheel of formats yet. When the GM sits down and says, 'We've got to change formats,' the Edge doesn't come to mind as one of the options.

"Our two stations are both doing fine. Ultimately, the key will be demographics, and one of the beauties of the format is that it's pretty much teen-less. It's proved to be more of an 18-28 format."

numbers simply couldn't sell the format. The fragment of the audience that was being dominated wasn't important enough to advertisers, who are still living in a 25-54 world. The niche they tried to fill was too small and too specific. Then there's the problem with advertisers not wanting to be associated with certain sounds — much of the Rock 40 music suffered from the heavy metal stereotype."

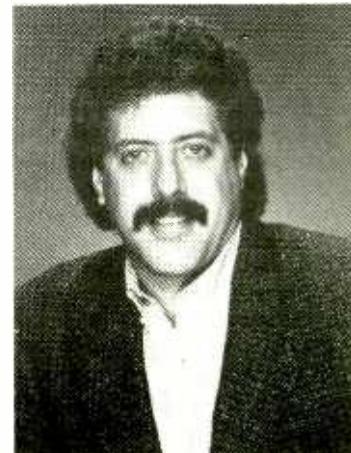
Like Hedges, Lee Abrams, whose version of Rock 40 is a little thing called Z-Rock, says the Rock CHRs "got caught in the middle. They were too wimpy for the real rockers and too hard for mainstream people. They wouldn't go far enough. Males 18-24 don't just want to hear a bunch of hard singles. It was a chicken version of hard rock. A real Def Leppard fan doesn't just want to hear the single. He wants the depth and all the trappings that go along with it.

"In some ways, the whole Rock 40 thing reminds me of the early AOR days, when some guys just couldn't get it. 'We can't play nine-minute songs,' they'd say. I remember when we first got involved with WKLS in Atlanta, and they didn't want to piss off the housewives. They had to keep playing Olivia Newton-John's 'I Honestly Love You' in middays. I'd say, 'No, no, you should be playing 'Free Bird.' And they'd say, 'But that's too long. What about those females?' Same problem with Rock CHR: great idea, but they just wouldn't take it home."

Tough Sell

Naturally, Abrams believes his Z-Rock approach is the best current-based rock format available. However, he readily admits selling the format is difficult.

"It's definitely tough, but it gets better every month as they realize all these people aren't devil worshippers. And it's certainly a lot easier in a market like Fresno, where we're on FM. The attitude is



Lee Abrams

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so different: people treat it like a real station because it's on FM and owned by a respectable company. Some of the AMs have real problems."

The consultants' consensus: if a current-based hard-rocking format is to succeed in the longterm, it will most likely be AOR — not CHR — based. I'll take a look at the handful of newer AORs which fit that description — including WXTB/Tampa, WLRS/Louisville, and WAZU — as soon as all the spring books are in. Also on the way: a more detailed examination of Z-Rock, which is just about to conclude its second year under Abrams.