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AC

ADULT CONTEMPORARY

WKQX Concocts Latest Format Cure

Is female-based Rock AC the 'next prototype for the '90s?'

While Democrats discussed economic platform planks in New York and American League all-stars hammered their National League counterparts in San Diego, the radio community witnessed the unveiling (7/14) of yet another AC hybrid.

The latest pioneer is Emmis's WKQX (Q101)/Chicago, which jettisoned Hot AC in favor of female-based Rock AC. Joint Communications CEO John Parikhal played a major role in shaping the format, as did PD Bill Gamble. The resulting product — billed as "Chicago's New Rock Alternative" — combines elements of AC, AOR, CHR, and New Rock.

Breaking From Pack

"This isn't a direct attack on any other Chicago station. We want to be more responsive to our existing audience," VP/GM Chuck Hillier points out. "We've been blessed over the years to be the top-cumming station among women 25-44. There's no way we'd ever attempt to blow those people off and start from scratch. Instead, we're embracing them and want to determine how to become more relevant. They told us they were tired of the 'soft pop,' represented by [artists such as] Whitney Houston,



Chuck Hillier

Michael Bolton, Bette Midler, Amy Grant, and Mariah Carey."

Just prior to the on-air format flip, Q101's advertisers were informed of what was to come at a station-sponsored luncheon. A cassette of the station's new sound was played, then the on-air switch was ordered. "Advertiser response was

tremendous," Hillier recalls. "They see the logic of what we're doing and why we're doing it. We're proud and thrilled to be the station that broke from the pack."

Not everyone, it seems, fully understands the station's new direction. "Competitors have called New York buyers, telling them we changed to acid rock," Hillier notes. "Rock is 18-34 and male-based; AC is 25-44 and female-based. In Chicago, women in that 25-44 demo like to rock."

'Relevant Blend'

Believing that musical tastes have recently changed, Hillier claims the new format will satisfy mainstream listeners. "This isn't a cult-like, splinter format for a half dozen people. Our 25-44 women told us this is what they want to hear because it's the most relevant blend of music."

Hillier stresses that changes were made based on input from the station's existing audience, noting that nearly 600 WKQX 25-44 female listeners were involved in auditorium testing. "We asked what would make them listen to us longer. They're the ones who stand in line for Cure concert tickets and buy U2 and INXS CDs. But there wasn't any female-based environment where they could get that music, in combination with Q101's '80s-based songs by Don Henley, Tom Petty, and Steve Winwood."

Who's In, Who's Out

According to WKQX/Chicago VP/GM Chuck Hillier, the following artists are either receiving heavy play or have been dropped from the playlist:

IN

- Genesis
- Don Henley
- INXS
- John Mellencamp
- Police
- Bonnie Raitt
- Bruce Springsteen
- Steve Winwood

OUT

- Paula Abdul
- Taylor Dayne
- Gloria Estefan
- Hall & Oates
- Kenny Loggins
- Wilson Phillips

Audience-Sharing

Q101 had been locked in a format battle with WLIT, WTMX, and WPNT. WKQX switched formats one day before Arbitron spring results were released. Among 25-54s, WLIT ranked seventh, WPNT placed 14th, and Q101 tied WTMX for 16th.

"If WTMX and WPNT popped champagne corks [when the numbers came out], I hope they enjoyed their swigs," Hillier jokes. "They're nuts if they think they drove us out of the format. WLIT is in a category of its own. It's a great station and the softest spot on the dial. It won't be affected by our change."

Analyzing the audience-sharing among Q101, WTMX, and WPNT, Hillier relates, "Q101 receives 40% of WPNT's come and 40% of WTMX's come; WTMX: 30% of Q101, 30% of WPNT; and WPNT: 30% of Q101, 30% of WTMX. We were all playing music that has so much less appeal than it once had.

Females 25-44 were bouncing among these stations, spending less time with each."

No Cure-All

"Our new musical combination just leaps out," continues Hillier. "There's no longer any confusion as to who we are. We've added the punch our female listeners badly wanted. Based on our new format, we stand to be a much greater threat to WPNT and WTMX in all our target demos. If you're distinctive and unique, you have an opportunity to win big."

Cautioning those who may consider imitating Q101, Hillier asserts, "You have to be true to your own market and core. Otherwise, forget it. Some broadcasters will jump on this because they think it's new, hot, logical, and a cure-all. Quality research costs a bundle, but you must invest in it to know what your listeners want. The results can be very surprising. I wouldn't be surprised or shocked if this is the next prototype AC for the '90s."

Windy City Rivals Respond

WKQX/Chicago's distinctive, female-targeted Rock AC has already attracted plenty of attention from fellow Chicagoland broadcasters. Here's a sampling:

AC Contingent

• **WLIT PD Mark Edwards:** "[Assume] Q101 is now aimed more at [AORs] WXRT and WWBZ than at the ACs. The music [Q101's] playing is for the AOR lifegroup; AC listeners won't find it appealing or accessible.

"They're working with a very good research person [John Parikhal] and they must [see] something I've never seen. [It may be wrong, and this may be brilliant. But the people who used to listen to Q101 aren't the same people who enjoy the Smithereens and the Cure."

• **WPNT GM Bill Bungeroth:** "WKQX is going from one lifestyle group to another. They're saying they're Rock AC, but it [sounds] more like an AOR. Now some AOR listeners will have to make some choices.

"They believe the AORs have a female audience that isn't being served, and they're going after it. Their research must have said there's room for another AOR, and they must feel good about it."

• **WTMX PD Ford Colley:** "WKQX is lighter in middays and heavies up as the day progresses.

We're delighted because it lessens the crowded AC arena. As Q101 takes on WXRT, WWBZ, and [AOR] WLUP-FM, we wish them all the luck. I don't see how it could hurt the other ACs; we'll probably all benefit to some extent."

The AOR Side

• **WWBZ PD John Edwards:** "The change doesn't affect us at all. We don't share any music they're playing. While it's [still] early, it appears that any audience Q101 gains will come from WXRT and WLUP-FM. I don't know what to label Q101; 'New Rock Alternative' doesn't define what they're actually doing."

• **WXRT GM Harvey Wells:** "Compared to us, Q101 has a totally different identity and mission. In a million years, we wouldn't go near a good percentage of music they're playing such as Elton John, Billy Joel, and Phil Collins.

"[WXRT and WKQX] are playing some of the same music, but [WKQX is] taking a hit-oriented approach. Their rotations are very fast, they're playing lots of currents, and they're programmed like an AC."

STORY BEHIND THE Q101 SWITCH

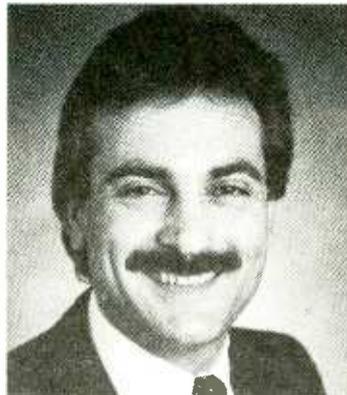
Designing The Right Format Fit

"There are fewer 'plug-in-and-turn-the-switch' transportable formats," says Joint Communications CEO John Parikhal. The consultant was a principal architect behind WKQX/Chicago's transformation from Hot AC to female-based Rock AC.

"There are lots of stillborn WMMO/Orlandos and Mark & Brians [KLOS/Los Angeles morning drivers] around the country," he adds. "Custom-made suits look and feel better; radio stations must customize to the market's competitive situation."

Parikhal was faced with several different challenges while orchestrating the switch. "We had to have a format that fit with Q101's existing core audience and would be compatible with [AM drive personality] Murphy In The Morning. With this new format, we win on both counts."

Pointing out that AC tends to underperform in the Windy City, Parikhal says, "There was a need to look for something different.



John Parikhal

There's a whole style of music that's emerged and moved into the mainstream. We found the fit of musical styles that makes our uni-

que blend of modern alternative, mainstream AC rock [appeal to] women."

'Phony' Music

Today's music trends helped lead Parikhal to his conclusions. "There's an anti-Mariah Carey, Whitney Houston, and Michael Bolton attitude. In addition, listeners are saying these type of artists don't sing songs that mean something to them. People want songs with feeling and emotion. "One reason AC has gotten into trouble is much of the music is phony. There are great voices and great techniques — but no soul. AC stopped telling stories in its songs."

Addressing the issue of finding the right format label, Parikhal notes, "The old ones just don't work anymore. WKQX is a female-based AC with an alternative modern rock twist. It's a pretty weird label and doesn't fit any previous pattern. But it will sell a ton of records."