



CYNDEE MAXWELL

ROCK

How To Define An Active Rocker...

... or maybe not, the way things are going these days

It was only about three and a half years ago that R&R decided to divide its Rock chart as a reflection of a significant separation that had occurred in the format. Now — like biological cell division — stations have continued to fragment, splinter and create their own unique methods for attracting a targeted demographic. Is it now time to redefine Active Rock?

Before we attempt to answer that, let's enter a brief overview of its initial evolution.

The Active Story

When R&R first coined the term, Active Rock described stations that targeted an 18-34-male demo, were current-intensive and added new records early and rotated them significantly. The active music scene at the time was led by Bush, White Zombie, Monster Magnet, Sponge, Green Day, Toadies, Mad Season and Filter. The week we split the chart, the Foo Fighters' "This Is a Call" was No. 1 Most Added at Active Rock with 37 adds, while Rock's No. 1 Most Added was Neil Young's "Downtown" with 17 adds.

The Rock side was distinguished by its 25-44 male target demo and conservatism in terms of adding and rotating new music. Additionally, Rock stations had a higher overall gold percentage. Rock's preferred artists were Neil Young, Blues Traveler, Tom Petty, Bad Company, Pink Floyd, Dave Matthews Band, Charlie Sexton and Ian Moore. Both sides embraced Collective Soul, Soul Asylum, U2, Black Crowes, Better Than Ezra and Live equally.

Over the past year, a handful of stations have taken elements from both sides of Rock and invented yet another faction. They are conservative hard-rock stations. It's a parallel to the Hard Classic Rock stations that play all the crunchy classics from the Scorpions, Van Halen, AC/DC, Ozzy Osbourne, Motley Crue, Black Sabbath, Guns 'N Roses, Rush, etc. "Classic Rock That Really Rocks" is often their slogan.

The key difference with the Active Rock stations emulating this approach is an element of compatible currents from such acts as Metallica, Rob Zombie, Monster Magnet, Marilyn Manson, Tool, etc. The focus is still on the library cuts, though, with lower current rotations and/or playlists.

This departure from current-intensive lists (whether in spins or playlist length) has led to a philosophical debate over whether such a strategy still qualifies a

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station as Active Rock. A random survey of programmers yielded some interesting results.

We posed the following question: In your opinion, what defines an Active Rock station? We then presented these two choices:

A. An exclusively hard-rock sound — Tool, Metallica, Manson, AC/DC — without respect to a certain amount of new music; can be classic-based or not, but is certainly genre-based.

B. A new-music-intensive station that tends to lean on hard-rock acts, yet still embraces Lenny Kravitz, Eve 6, Sugar Ray and Offspring. More current-intensive. Tries to help break new bands.

For this extremely unscientific survey, I polled 40 programmers in all market sizes. Twelve responded that the answer was the first choice. Nineteen said it was the latter. Five said it was a combination of both definitions. Four gave answers that amounted to neither.

In the words of one Active Rock PD, "It should be about programming to the demographic, not programming to an industry definition of whether it's hard or new. It's more about getting 18-34-year-old men to listen to your radio station."

Days Of The New

The most impassioned reactions came on behalf of the "B" camp, which desires to be current-driven and the place to break new artists. Here are some "verbatim" from that group.

"An Active Rocker that panders to trendy music should be shot. In my perfect world, an Active Rock station would play titles that are rock titles. Sugar Ray — and maybe Eve 6 and Lenny

Kravitz — are not rock acts. Active, for me, means actively pursuing new rock heights. By that definition, it simply could not be a classic-based station." (Rock programmer)

"My opinion of an Active Rock station leans toward the second of your descriptions. New music, period — not confined to a harder-edge stance. However, with each market being very different in terms of how a station has to niche itself in order to maximize its position, I can see where one may name itself active, yet focus on the music in your first description. It's hard to place a standard formatic description on each and every station, given those market-to-market differences." (Rock programmer)

"I would lean towards B, because we're calling them Active Rock stations rather than Active Hard Rock stations. Active Rock is really today's rock whatever the new trend appears to be. More and more Actives are filtering 'rap-rock' into their overall landscape. The successful Active Rockers are fine-tuned to the 18-29 demo tastes." (Rock programmer)

"I believe that Active Rock is the perfect description for a station that rocks and is active in the lifestyles of its audience; in the attitudes with which it communicates its position, personality and promotions — where active equals aggressive — and in the presentation of the product: the music. Yes, the station should be involved in introducing new acts to its audience, but they really need to fit the station's sound and the listener's expectations of what that station is all about. Mainstream Rock stations can do all but the third idea — presenting its product in an active fashion."

"I believe an Active Rock station can lean into either alternative or hard territory, or broaden into both as the conditions in its market warrant (listener preferences and competitive matrix). But not all-Active Rock stations can get away with mixing alternative-sounding artists with the heavier-based music. Hard classic rock songs are a part of the format, but I find that the compatibility of much of the pre-1980 material with the later '80s and '90s titles is dwindling."

Therefore, the format can be defined in terms of the station's overall era composition as well as musical genre or current/recurrent/gold ratios. I think an Active

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Rock station should be centered no more than eight to nine years from the current year (i.e., an average title era of 1991 or so). For us, it's all about compatibility with the core artist of the format — Metallica. Overtly alternative sounds don't do well with those who embrace Metallica. On the horizon, I see a lot more of the rap/rock merger coming into the format, and we've tried a little bit of it to mixed success." (Rock programmer)

"It's contemporary rock music mixed with a compatible library designed to attract the largest available audience in an 18-34 male demographic, whether it's AC/DC or the Violent Femmes, because it's market specific. Everyone has their own unique twist on what active rock is. The common thread is that we play contemporary music with library tracks, not that we play hard rock, the intensity, the tempo or the era." (Active Rock programmer)

"We think it's B without a doubt!" (Active Rock programmer)

It is a little bit of both, however the most important ingredient is attitude. Active Rock is a lifestyle.

Hard To Handle

Here are highlights from those who answered "A" as their choice.

"It's the genre. If there was a Hard Rock chart, then that is where we would belong." (Rock programmer)

"Active Rock, to me, seems more tempo-based than current-based." (Rock programmer)

"You can still break new music, but it's primarily about sound." (Rock programmer)

"Active Rock is based in a hard-rock, mostly up-tempo sound and is adorned by current music as the market dictates. True Active Rock stations are cutting edge with an eye to the future. If the station's definition stops at the hard-rock, up-tempo sound, it's most likely called "classic rock that rocks" and most likely has no

impact on current music. I believe that the depth of the station's commitment to current music is not something that can be measured against a national yardstick. It's either there or it's not; it's either relevant or it's not." (Active Rock programmer)

"It's genre-based — a sound, a texture, a mood, a feeling. New music doesn't matter, at least not until things swing around to where Active Rock isn't forced to play alternative all the time. Until then, we can't define it as being current-intensive." (Active Rock programmer)

Balancing Act

Finally, these are the remarks from those who see both sides of the coin.

"It's a little bit of both. Active Rock is obviously more current-leaning than a heritage Rock station, but it's not exclusively limited to hard-rock product. We play all types of currents that we think will appeal to the target age group of primarily men 18-34 or -44. We have an opportunity for the upper demos here, but we haven't reduced the number of currents, and we try to keep the rotations up there, so it's a balancing act. It's not just a hard-rock station; it's a blend of a fairly edgy station that will rock really hard, especially at night, with a pretty high number of spins on the currents that do fit from any genre." (Active Rock programmer)

"I think it is a little bit of both, however the most important ingredient is attitude. We're more classic-leaning in our musical approach from 6am to 5pm and much more current-intensive from 5pm to 6am. What gives us the consistency necessary for success in this format is our attitude and personality between the songs."

"Active Rock is a lifestyle. There are six rock signals in our market, and we share titles with all of them. Our unique ability to speak to the listeners in a language they understand about topics they are interested in with heritage personalities creates an emotional bond that cannot be duplicated. It's a combination of the right music and the right attitude that has made us No. 1 18-34 two out of the last three books in a very crowded Rock arena!" (Active Rock programmer)

If any hard and fast rules apply to your market, consider yourself lucky. But market conditions are clearly the basis on which to determine the best route to achieve success in any genre of the format.