

BUZZ || RADIO | BEST SEAT

North American stations get to know Jack

A homegrown music format is changing the face of Canadian and American radio, writes Greg Quill

Radio across North America is in the throes of a mighty upheaval. You can blame Jack. Or, depending on the origins of the franchise licence, Bob. Or Larry, Mike or maybe Dick. The name doesn't matter. It's a new format — or, more accurately, a novel twist on an old format — that's causing radio heads across the continent to spin.

The heaping helping of forgotten pop and rock hits targets male and female listeners in their late 30s to early 50s who are too young to remember first-hand the classic rock of the 1960s and early '70s, and too old to give a hoot about the grunge, hip hop and rap of the '90s and later.

It's all served up with attitude — Bob's is a blasé "Whatever," Jack's the more acerbic "We play what we want" — and the music flows in seemingly random order, juxtaposing vastly dissimilar artists and genres in defiance of the most basic programming logic, and in many instances without DJs, news, weather and, most significantly, contests and promotions.

Commercials are cut by as much as 30 per cent over traditional formats, and playlists are three to four times the size — 900 to 1,250 tracks.

And listeners are loving every minute of it. In the super-competitive commercial radio market, threatened by the iPod, satellite radio, Internet radio and peer-to-peer music file sharing, any idea that nudges up ratings is hailed as a revolution.

Jack/Bob Radio certainly seems to qualify. Stations in major U.S. markets are succumbing to Jack's/Bob's charms daily, with about 25 having converted since the format was introduced there this year, and many rocketing to the top slots.

Canada already has about 10 Jacks/Bobs operating or about to switch. Toronto's Rogers-owned CJAQ-FM 92.5 Jack FM (formerly Top 40 station CISS-FM, and before that this city's first and only new-country station) went Jack in the fall of 2003.

Even New York City's legend-



ary oldies cash cow, WCBS-FM, went Jack last week, sacrificing most of its enduringly popular on-air hosts — Cousin Bruce (Morrow) and morning man (and former Monkee) Mickey Dolenz among them — prompting an uproar from fans. (In an ironic twist, Cousin Bruce signed a few days later with the Sirius Satellite Radio network.)

"Jack/Bob is breaking down barriers in the conservative platform of commercial radio in North America," says Toronto radio insider Bob Mackowycz, vice-president of programming of yet-to-be-licensed Canadian Satellite Radio, a partnership with Washington, D.C.-based XM Satellite Radio.

"It's a positive response to new technology, to tight formats and to the over-saturation of commercials that are turning listeners off commercial radio everywhere. It's not as exhilarating as satellite radio, and the playlists are only a fraction of the size, but you have to give them a nod.

"No other Canadian radio format has ever swept the American market. This is a first."

Whoa, Nellie, Canadian? It's true. It was conceived in 2002 at a friend's beery 40th birthday party by 44-year-old Winnipeg CHUM Broadcasting executive Howard Kroeger and refined a year later, then mar-

keted by competitor Rogers Broadcasting in Vancouver. Jack/Bob crossed the Canadian/U.S. border late last year after turning in astronomical ratings in this country in most regions where it has been adopted.

"We went straight to No. 1 in the 25 to 54 demographic in Winnipeg since we flipped to Bob FM 99.9 from a soft adult-contemporary format three and a half years ago," says Kroeger, who has worked for CHUM in his hometown for 20 years and is now director of operations and programming.

Sandy Sanderson, executive vice-president and national programming director of Toronto-based Rogers Broadcasting, took notice. His organization owned a similarly ailing soft-rock station in Vancouver, and Bob — or Sanderson's modified version, now franchised as Jack — "had the most potential, so we flipped. Overnight we owned the market. Same thing happened in Calgary."

While he admits the music programmed in both formats is essentially the same — "Top 10 hits at some point in time, however fleeting, between the late 1970s and early 1990s" — and that the only noticeable difference between Bob and Jack is attitude manifested in "splitters" (the one-line tags inserted

With the Jack format, the heaping helping of forgotten pop and rock hits targets male and female listeners in their late 30s to early 50s

occasionally between songs), Sanderson takes credit for seeing the revenue potential in Kroeger's gutsy idea.

"Any station converting to Jack has to buy the name from Rogers," he says. "And with that comes our expertise and programming advice."

Kroeger, along with Hawaii-based Audience Research International radio consultant and Bob co-founder Mike Dorn, independently propagate the Bob format to interested contenders in other markets. He is inundated these days with calls from American media anxious to tap his wisdom.

"I wish I could say it was genius," Kroeger chuckles, "but it was a stroke of luck."

Having been handed a slumbering new CHUM acquisition in Winnipeg, Kroeger found himself the butt of jokes at his friend's barbecue, where the default background music was classic rock and oldies.

"The jokes began to get to me,

so I asked my friends, all in their late 30s and early 40s, what they really wanted to hear. They wanted nothing from the '60s — they're not old enough, they weren't there. They hate contemporary pop, hip-hop and rap — it's too young for them, the product of a later teenage culture.

"What they really wanted was songs from the years of their own young lives, from the '80s and a couple of years on either side. That's when we were in high school and college. That's when our best memories formed. And no one plays that music on radio."

A light bulb blazing above his cranium, Kroeger went home and started digging through all his old *Billboard* Top 100 charts, starting as far back as 1974, and compiling lists of songs that he hadn't heard on radio in the intervening years. He and Dorn put together a 50-second montage, and tested their hunch on a target demographic group.

"The response went through the roof," Kroeger says. "So we put it on air."

"We created a format that filled a huge hole in the radio market with 1,000 songs no one had heard on radio for 20 years."

The 20-year factor is key to the format's success, he says. "Every decade looks back 20 years ... you try to reclaim in mid-life what made you happy when you were young and free of responsibility."

There's more to it than that, of course. The fledgling format also had to reflect the bemused, cynical mindset of its numerically huge and educated yet culturally disenfranchised audience, while paying close attention to its current musical and technological preoccupations.

"When people my age listen to music, it's in random order on their iPods or computers or MP3 players," says Kroeger. "Part of the pleasure of this technology is the surprise element — you never know what's coming up next. So that's the way we program the music ... The Clash into ABBA, AC/DC into Madonna, The Eagles into Tina Turner, Bryan Adams into Nickelback. Conventional radio says that's inappropriate, but to this audience it's no big deal."

But there's method to Jack's/Bob's madness, and part of it is keeping "uncool" contemporary pop off the table, says Kroeger.

"No Britney Spears, no Christina Aguilera ..."

The "We play what we want" claim and the "Whatever" attitude are a tad misleading as well, he admits.

"Some programmers think

they can do this on their own, just throw in songs in any random order, but that won't work. It has to be carefully designed and structured to fit each specific market."

Dismissing the other myth about Jack's/Bob's runaway success, Sanderson says Jack/Bob "is no cheaper to run than any other radio station. Most of our stations have morning, lunch, drive time and weekend deejays. It's important to give listeners a live link to their communities — that's what radio's about. And we spend a lot more money on writers and announcers for the 'splitters' in this format. They have to be particularly well done."

While U.S. radio analysts are delving into prior "unradio" and "variety radio" experiments in their own territory for proof that Jack/Bob is not, in fact, a Canadian invention, they contend that the peculiarities of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) Canadian content regulations provided more fertile ground here for such a novel concept.

"The success of the format in Canada, swift as it was, has Canadian law to thank," writes Cleveland, Ohio-based media consultant Mike McVay in a recent analysis of the Jack/Bob sweep.

"CanCon rules require 35 per cent of the music in every hour to be Canadian content. And the CRTC (Canada's FCC) enforces this by insisting that all FM stations must play 50 per cent 'non-hit' music. The CRTC determined that 1980 is the cut-off year for determining 'hit status,' effectively blocking FM stations from playing 1950s/'60s/'70s material. Anything after 1980 is considered a non-hit. So, in Canada, the '50s/'60s/'70s oldies format isn't permitted on FM, protectionism for AM owners who still play music. Variety formats appeal to the Canadian listener who would otherwise tune in to oldies FM formats."

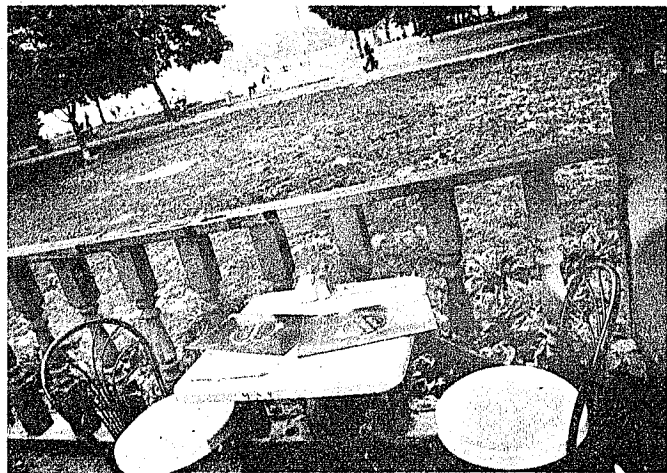
Kroeger acknowledges McVay's assessment but adds that the Canadian radio environment, particularly in the West, also allows more room for experimentation.

"Winnipeg is a comfortably sized city of 720,000, but it's rich in radio history and it's a big signal market — lots of competition. There are some very sharp radio people here.

"Radio is the business of plagiarism," he continues. "No idea is ever completely original, but I honestly think the germ of innovation is more alive in this country. All it takes is one person thinking outside the box."

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To enjoy the sights of summer



Place: The Boardwalk Pub, 1681 Lake Shore Blvd. E., at Coxwell.
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