



TOP 40: MORE HITS MORE OFTEN

by Ben Fong-Torres

It's hard to imagine, but there was a time, not long ago, when radio was declared dead. In the early 1950s, television was taking over as the most popular form of entertainment for Americans. Radio's network stars fled for the greener pastures of TV land—even if it was still black and white. Goodbye, Red Skelton; hello, red ink.

Radio networks indeed had problems, but independent stations—the great majority of license holders—fought back by focusing on local listeners and advertisers. They hired announcers who could relate to listeners in ways that a Jack Benny or Marshall Matt Dillon never could. Market research showed that music was a major reason listeners used the radio, and stations began to program records. Radio survived. But it didn't really explode until rock and roll and the Top 40 format came along.

The format came first. In the early 1950s, a young man named Todd Storz was running KOWH, a small station in Omaha, Nebraska, that his father had purchased. He had replaced the network programming on KOWH with music and disc jockeys, and following such countdown shows as *Your Hit Parade*, gave the Top 10 songs heavy airplay. In a 1957 article in *Television* magazine, "The Storz Bombshell," Storz explained his formula. "I became convinced that people demand their favorites over and over while in the Army during the Second World War," he said. "I remember vividly what used to happen in restaurants here in the States. The customers would throw their nickels into the jukebox and come up repeatedly with the same tune."

At another of his father's stations—WTIX in New Orleans—Storz heard about rival WDSU's "Top 20 on 1280" show. Radio historian Richard Fatherley, a former Storz employee, recalls: "He [Storz] added 20 titles, upstaged WDSU by one hour, and went on for an hour after the other show had ended." Thus, he had a forty-song playlist. Another broadcaster often credited with pioneering the format is Gordon McLendon, who operated stations in Texas. McLendon, Fatherley notes, has conceded that Storz was first. But McLendon is credited with labeling the format "Top 40." By 1953, McLendon's Dallas station, KLIF, "burst into national prominence with its formula of music and news plus razzle-dazzle promotion," according to a broadcasting magazine. Edd Routt, a former McLendon employee, explained that "disc jockeys were selected for their sexiness, their voice, their ability to communicate excitement. Basic service consisted of time and temperature checks. Any idea of doing anything more than entertain the listener was out of the question." The listener, back

then, was adult; the music, pop. Before rock, it was Perry Como and Patti Page; Nat “King” Cole and Doris Day; Les Paul and Mary Ford.

And then came rock and roll. It was perfect for Top 40, and vice versa. Combined with new technology—in the 1950s, that meant the portable transistor radio—rock and roll and the Top 40 format opened the floodgates to a new audience: teenagers. Music, and the medium, would never be the same. Disc jockeys became local stars, and some gained even greater fame by doing local versions of *American Bandstand*. But Top 40 did more than rock. Dedicated to playing the top-selling songs of the day, these stations amounted to democratic jukeboxes. Rock and pop shared airtime with rhythm and blues, country and western, folk and novelty tunes, and jazz and blues records that sold enough copies to hit the charts.

Top 40 itself hit the top of the radio ratings in many markets. Around the country, jingles identified stations as “Color Radio” or “Boss Radio.” DJs—invariably men—were “Good Guys,” “Swingin’ Gentlemen,” or “Boss Jocks.” Stations fought one another for Beatles interviews, for star DJs, and for ratings and revenue. In the late 1960s, they

began fighting upstart stations on the FM band, which offered better audio fidelity, and “free-form” formats that rendered Top 40, with its jingles, screaming DJs, and tight playlists, somehow passé.

But Top 40 carried on. Ironically, as a popular format, Top 40 lasted just about forty years. But by the mid-’90s, industry publications had turned to other labels—like CHR, or “contemporary hit radio”—and many stations had zeroed in on one specific area of music. There was dance, “light rock” and “smooth jazz,” along with the old standby, R&B. Hip-hop further fragmented the format. Like rock itself, Top 40 was declared dead more than once. But it still exists—if not in name, then in concept. Wherever a station plays the hits of the day on a regular basis, and plays them with energy, though maybe without the jingles, newscasts, and stunts from yesteryear, it’s Top 40.

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