

"It Really Shoulda"

Been A
Top 10 Hit!

I.R.S.

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"Fighting to Stay Free"

#192...April-May 2015



THE

INCREDIBLE

SHRINKING

TOP

40 

And now, ladies and gentlemen...

...the latest commercial for New York's top 40 powerhouse Z100 – or, quite likely, any major market station in the format owned by iHeartMedia, the company formerly known as Clear Channel – probably wouldn't make you do a double-take. It's a now-familiar and dependable strategy: many of top 40's most prominent artists looking great and telling you how great Z100 is.

So why do I bring it up? Because, once upon a time, commercials for top 40 stations looked like this: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bTALzErTI8> . During the years Scott Shannon was morning man and programmed Z100, most of the station's TV spots featured Scott, often with a "listen at 7:15" or contest-related message, but always with the focus on personality as opposed to artists.

One theory on that: it was a lot tougher to come up with a short list of top 40's core artists in earlier eras. With more labels and station owners in play pre-deregulation, the odds of a smaller label getting a hit were a lot better than they are now. And now looks a lot like this Z100 ad: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVktxmadpik> , even if that was six years ago, as little has changed in terms of top 40's pare-down to fewer artists with more hits, post-deregulation: blame it on fewer owners and far fewer music companies. There still may be more artists than can be shown in a 30-second TV spot, but it's awfully close.

One thing that has changed since that 2009 spot is top 40's ever-shrinking universe of dependable all-day long-run hits. Over the past few years, we've seen a definite trend away from more songs in heavier rotation, and toward songs taking a far longer time – in a few cases, as long as a year – to become hits.

The bigger picture shows less songs achieving top ten, top five or number one status, whatever you pick. If you're thinking any of those core artists is promised a big hit every time, all you need do is look at the numbers for Rihanna's latest single (yes, the one with McCartney on guitar) to see that's just not true. (Side note: There is an irony to the fact that it's been easier for McCartney to resurface at top 40 than Madonna, who directly influenced nearly every act hitting at the format today.)



Who benefited most from ‘FourFiveSeconds’? Could have been Paul.

Does this mean there aren’t as many solid hit songs being produced? Not so fast. Seems to me it’s all about the 4 C’s: conglomeration, convergence, caution and competition. Put another way, the stakes today at top 40 are a lot higher than they’ve ever been. Let’s take the tour, ok?

Conglomeration. This one’s fairly obvious. The big radio groups got bigger. More stations = more value per rating point = more programming decisions from the top = greater (read, tighter) control of music.

Convergence. This I know a little about, as I teach a college course on it. More potential platforms for music means songs need to succeed on several smaller stages (read, digital activity/streaming/Shazam-ing, etc.) before making it to the big show. Used to be all a record had to be was good to get added. Now, like any other candidate, it too needs a resume.

Caution. Ratings again, specifically PPM and how electronic audience measurement has apparently shown that the more familiar the songs, the more people who stay to hear those songs, the greater the ‘stickiness’ of the station. Which is why both adding new music and moving songs up in rotation is riskier than it’s ever been. Maybe it is rocket science after all.

Competition. Top 40 is no longer a world of its own. In fact, it's become a victim of its own success. With very few exceptions, the Hot AC format has essentially become a clone of Top 40, just with a greater dependency on earlier hits, while the Rhythmic format duplicates Top 40 to a greater extent given the large amount of dance-oriented product and R&B acts looking to cross over (or under, as the case may be).

So there you have it. While the data may be more plentiful, with greater depth and better for business, from the music standpoint, the truth hurts. If we knew what we know now, well, we probably wouldn't have liked top 40 as much then there would have been far more songs qualifying for annual I.R.S.

But in this what-goes-around-comes-around world we're in, could the current situation reverse, as more listeners spend less time with traditionally formatted radio and more with on-demand, consumer-controlled and playlist-driven choices such as YouTube, Pandora and Spotify? My sense is...no. Most people like the familiar and will seek it out wherever they go to listen to new music. You could make the argument that the more time people spend with other new music sources, the greater (and earlier) the exposure to more songs, and therefore the potentially wider variety of hits that could move up faster and burn out more quickly. It's an interesting thought, but I think we're years away from such a scenario.

THING 1 AND THING 2: It's not quite syndication, but *That Thing with Rich Appel* can now be heard twice every week, and bookending every week. We're still on live at 6pm Eastern over Rewound Radio, and now Saturdays at 7pm on WOLDradio.com. So if you haven't checked it out, now you've got two chances to do so. And if you're a fan of top 40, especially from 1965-1975, you just might like it. We're also on Facebook at

<https://www.facebook.com/ThatThingRichAppel>.



Check out my *Billboard* “Revisionist History” and “Hot 100’s Hottest Weeks” stories at <http://www.billboard.com/author/rich-appel-4314453>.

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