

IS CURATED COMMERCIAL RADIO DEAD?



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“Fighting to stay free”

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And now, ladies and gentlemen...

...the current state of terrestrial commercial radio can be summed up in two formats: music and not music. For each, that's nearly all they do, almost to the exclusion of the other. You don't hear a lot of talk on music radio, nor a lot of music on news, talk or sports radio (unless it's being talked over).

It wasn't always this way. Radio's earliest stations did both: some network shows featured music, others didn't. Even after television took radio's place as the major source of entertainment in homes, most radio stations, even top 40 music stations, featured news and public service programming throughout the day.

Eventually, radio evolved to where listeners came to expect wall-to-wall music with minimal interruption on FM and anything that didn't involve music on AM (with the exception of talk-heavy morning shows). It's not clear when that shift began, but one clear sign of change came during the 1980s when FM rock hosts such as Howard Stern and Steve Dahl stopped playing music to focus on talk and comedy. While this turned out to be a good thing for talk listeners, it wasn't so good for anyone who enjoyed hearing radio DJs talk ABOUT music.

That, as most pains know, has become the biggest casualty of modern commercial radio. Blame Telecom, the Internet and perhaps most important, the aging of a population with little to no recollection of DJs who could talk – not only talk about music, but know enough to talk about it – into the “money demo.”

Most of curated music radio has been pushed off of the terrestrial commercial landscape and onto satellite/SiriusXM or the Internet. As such, the good news is that its future is likely secure, at least outside of radio heard on a traditional radio. The potentially bad news is that when the point is reached where car radios become an environment equally friendly to every source of audio entertainment out there, to paraphrase Jimmy Durante, everybody is going want to get into the act. Meaning radio's largest owners will surely create their own curated content to compete with everyone who's being doing it so well all along on the `net and satellite.

Even if this comes to pass, it doesn't paint a rosy picture for DJ-assisted music radio when it comes to new music, because younger listeners are probably already conditioned to finding out what they want to know elsewhere online. Which suggests that the next generation of informative and knowledgeable DJs, well, they ain't gonna be.

It would certainly be nice if they, like all radio hosts with something to say, survive. Hopefully, with all the inevitable coming changes in how people listen to radio, listeners aside from just us will want them to.

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