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2014, in 5 easy pieces



Who Replaced The DJ? It's Not Who You Think. (see #4)



“Fighting to Stay Free”

#189...January 2015

And now, ladies and gentlemen...

... for your holiday pleasure (or perhaps not), five short essays on 2014.

2014: The incredible shrinking playlist

Here's all you need to know about radio's biggest hits of 2014:

- a) Pharrell Williams, a featured performer in what was just about the biggest song of 2013 (Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines") scored what was just about the biggest song of 2014 ("Happy").
- b) Charli XCX and Ariana Grande - both of whom made their first chart appearances in 2013 - helped launch the career of Iggy Azalea, whose debut hit ("Fancy") featured XCX and who was featured on Grande's biggest hit to date ("Problem"). XCX later landed a big hit of her own ("Boom Clap") while Grande was later featured on Jessie J's biggest hit to date ("Bang Bang"), which also featured Nicki Minaj, who also scored her biggest hit to date ("Anaconda"). Got all that?
- c) Taylor Swift, famous for straddling the fence between pop and country, abandoned the latter and scored 2014's biggest album and two of its biggest singles ("Shake It Off" and "Blank Space") with the help of pop's winning-est producer, Max Martin.
- d) Come to think of it, there really is no d).



The girls of 2014: They got by with a little help from their friends.

Ok, the above is an oversimplification of top 40 in 2014, but not by all that much. Earlier this year *Hz So Good* pointed out the gradual decrease in hits reaching critical mass over the past 40 years: while a listen to the top 100 of 1966, when more songs hit the national top 40 than ever before or after, would reveal few if any titles that didn't take over at radio for at least a few weeks (not to mention exclude quite a few others that did), you'd be hard pressed to find 40 of this year's top 100 that did the same.

Why? To quote Thomas Dolby's one big hit: "Science!" (exclamation mark intended). Anyone in 1966 could have predicted charts would become more accurate with time, but would any have seen the day when an increase in metrics - in the case of 2014, streams, video views and "Shazams" in addition to old favorites sales, airplay and listener research - would lead to such a sharp decrease in hits? They'd have also had to have foreseen the consolidation in both the music and radio businesses, the increased competition for listeners given a by-the-minute ratings system awarding stations playing fewer songs with greater familiarity, and the far longer shelf life of hits due to the industry's higher expectations and need for other media in order to reach as many consumers as possible.

As a result of all the above, the number of #1 songs has fallen from 30 to 10, with similar shrinkage for top 5s, top 10s or any cutoff you choose. It also meant more songs failed to reach the penthouse of high rotation: beyond a)-c) above, few additional songs - maybe John Legend's "All of Me," Meaghan Trainor's "All About That Bass," Sam Smith's "Stay With Me" and Magic!'s "Rude" - hit that point where everyone knew them.

In earlier eras, acts with successful albums or at least those with some buzz were guaranteed a pop radio hit, but no longer. Most of 2014's best-reviewed and/or biggest-selling projects had no representation at top 40. Beyoncé's much-discussed and revered album was lucky to get one key hit, "Drunk in Love," on top 40. Critical darlings like Haim found commercial radio an impenetrable force. Country's biggest hitmakers, like Luke Bryan or Florida Georgia Line, weren't able to cross over big time. Even "Let It Go," from Disney's *Frozen* soundtrack and the year's #1 album – a song every kid and parent knew – never achieved radio success reflecting how huge it really was.

The irony of all this is, there's more new music out there than ever, thanks to the wonderful world of the Internet and specifically YouTube. The world we once knew where radio program directors lived to introduce us to the latest greatest thing that we'd go out and buy has been turned upside down: now, we're in control of new music, and radio plays only the strongest among those songs powered by our clicks. Our wide-spanning tastes ought to lead to wider playlists, but it's just the opposite: fewer songs reach a consensus, so fewer make the airwaves.

Only a change in radio's fortunes could also change this situation. Will we ever again see a day where top 40 really has 40 – ok, 30 – songs in the conversation? I'd say "stay tuned," but I'm not convinced that's going to happen, either.

2014: The decline of 'precision pop'

What did happen to change contemporary music for the better in 2014? 1) Bigger hits representing a wider variety of sounds and influences, in large part due to 2) Superstars mostly taking a back seat to the newer acts having knocked out those hits.

While some of that was due to major artists not showing up to play in 2014 (Rihanna, P!nk, Adele, fun., Black Eyed Peas), we also saw acts who'd always been counted on to deliver big hits slip from the perch. In the summer of 2013, both Katy Perry and Lady Gaga released much-publicized first singles from new projects; by summer 2014, both projects were essentially over, with three of Perry's five singles underperforming (yes, granted, the other two, "Roar" and "Dark Horse" were huge), and Gaga not even bringing a third single from an album that turned out to be more art-flop than *ARTPOP*. In past years Eminem, Pitbull and Kesha – who headlined #1s at the beginning of 2014 – would have all been good bets to continue that dominance throughout the year, but not in 2014. Even Maroon 5's latest round of hits didn't reach the heights of earlier efforts.

The story doesn't end there. There was also a noticeable decline in formulaic hits in 2014, following a period dominated by the by-now predictable danceable pop hit with no intro, a rap break and the fadeless shutdown. This year we got reggae, piano ballads, retro hooks harkening back to just about every decade gone by, and generally a fresher take on pop. There was even at least one real rock song in the bunch by year's end with newcomer Hozier's "Take Me to Church."



Left to right: Staples Katy, Katy Perry.

The idea that 'precision pop' (as I call it) is being replaced by styles that feel looser (and that's literal in the case of One Direction, whose big hit of '14 was in a folk-pop vein) goes hand in hand with what may be the beginning of a shift away from acts with corporate connections. While it's not clear whether Perry's Staples sponsorship hurt her overall image, it feels like we're starting to see the limits on how far pop acts can go in the endorsement world. No, we won't be returning to the days of "The Who (or any artist of that era) Sell Out," but we may have reached the limits of over-commercialism - in terms of both sponsorship and music itself.

2014: The rise of "Beavis-and-Butthead journalism"

Although I wrote fewer stories for *Billboard* this year (read, no weekly column(s)), I'm proud of what I did write, and that everything I wrote treated its subjects fairly and with proper respect.

2014 saw much of online journalism - which clearly exists to connect clickers with advertisers and move the social media meter - taken over by stories heavy on opinion and genre- and artist-bashing. What was once a

style limited to the Perez Hiltons and TMZs of the wired world spread across youth-targeted pop culture sites. I call it “Beavis and Butthead journalism” for a probably obvious reason: its writers, who grew up watching MTV’s animated duo pass judgment on popular music and artists, have now appointed themselves experts on what’s cool and what sucks.



“Heh heh...Robin Thicke sucks now. Thanks, GawkBuzz dot com.”

Here’s the thing: it was great when Beavis and Butthead were a rock version of Siskel and Ebert because we knew it was comedy (even if many of us felt the same way about “college music” or David Lee Roth’s solo career). Making the assumption that everyone reading who liked “Blurred Lines” a year ago hates it now is not journalism, it’s foisting your own opinions on everyone in the guise of news. I know it brings in readers, gets the twitterverse going and must make advertisers happy, but...it’s still wrong.

Not that how I feel about it matters, as it’s not going away anytime soon. Youth has spoken. Rude lights up the Internet.

2014: Who replaced the DJ?

“Judy in Disguise.’ ‘Judy in Disguise’ what? Judy in Disguise apartment.”

- Dan Ingram on WABC, 1967

“I came, I saw, I conquered...or should I say, I saw, I conquered, I came?”

- Pitbull, from “Fireball,” 2014

I was wrong when I predicted back in *Hz #130* (January 2009) that “the mouth will rise again,” referring to all-day live radio air talent. I made what I felt then was a strong case for turnaround, based on listener demand as well as on research, the needs of a new generation and the business just doing the right thing (it could happen).

But I didn’t consider – seriously, at least – the almighty god of radio in the 21st century, the PPM. I naively suggested commercial radio could succeed by counterprogramming digital jukeboxes with more human beings talking in and out of music.

Not only has the opposite occurred, the battleground between terrestrial radio and everything else hasn’t even focused on live, rather on commercials or the lack thereof. That’s because the entertainment value of the music element of music radio has gone up, while that of the air personality has nosedived. And it’s something the modern listener seems to be just fine with.

At some point over the past several decades, the top 40 DJ who made jokes about songs and artists became extinct. Ingram may have been the last, during his short return to afternoon drive on New York’s WKTU in 1985. Although that station would undergo a call letter, format and target audience change for it to happen, it still says a lot about the change in humor on contemporary radio that Ingram was replaced by Howard Stern.

Stern of course went on to define radio humor for the next two decades. It may have been Stern’s on-air ridiculing of DJs such as Ingram that led to the eventual end of clever talk-ups on top 40.

That hip-hop’s influence on pop music began to take hold after Ingram left might not be such a coincidence. Then as now, the most gifted rap artists can turn a phrase, play on words or make clever topical references like no one’s business. Unlike the novelty hits during top 40’s first three decades, rap hits and the pop tunes and artists they influenced have held up – that is, remained funny and entertaining – for as long as any other hits on top 40 radio.

Particularly over the last ten years, pop’s best artists and songwriters have purposely infused hits with can’t-forget lyrics that have in many cases become quotable or in the modern age tweet-worthy. Both Perry (“Is this a hickey or a bruise?”) and Kesha (“Brush my teeth with a bottle of Jack”) have made a career of it. In 2011, LMFAO’s “Sexy and I Know It” raised the bar – and reminded us of radio’s ‘theater of the mind’ power – by creating a character that rattled off a series of one-liners (“No shirt, no

shoes, but I still get service”). When was the last time a top 40 DJ did any of this?

In 2014, pop hit lyrics took on an even larger role, while air personalities were pushed even further out the door. Humor was still big, but so were songs that sounded as if they were recorded on a therapist’s couch, in an attempt to hook the moms and daughters comprising most of top 40’s audience. In “Habits (Stay High)” newcomer Tove Lo sang about going to sex clubs and throwing up Twinkies (not at the same time, mind you). Mary Lambert’s “Secrets” listed all the reasons you might not want to date her, from having bipolar disorder to using an analog clock. And Trainor’s “Bass” was essentially three minutes of Barbie-bashing; what better way to attract the middle-American woman?

Then there’s Nicki Minaj’s “Anaconda,” which, for all the attention its video received, is really – on radio, anyway – a stellar example of storytelling, another lost art on the medium. When you listen to Minaj recount her detail-driven sexual escapades with former cocaine- or dope-dealing lovers, you realize she’s to radio today what Jean Shepard was fifty years ago. I know, that’s kind of tough to wrap your head around, if you remember listening to Shep. Maybe 30 years from now our kids’ kids will be watching a Nicki Minaj movie every Christmas.



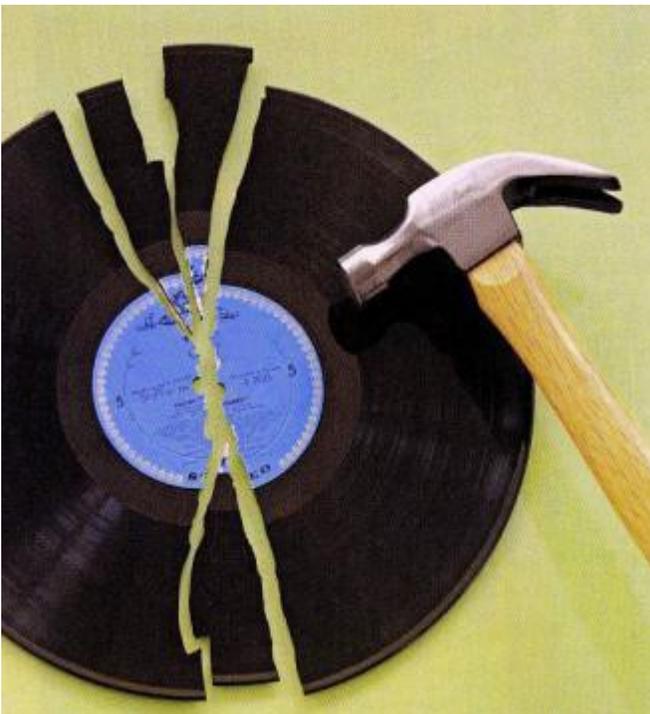
From “Open Road for Boys” to “Boy toy named Troy.”

Put another way, radio’s role as all-day live entertainer via the DJ has become, like so many other components of once-successful stations, reassigned to someone or somewhere else, in this case to the artists bringing you the hits. So these days when PDs add a song, think of it as they’re really hiring a new DJ. At this stage of the game, it’s unlikely this trend will re-reverse.

2014: The death of the 1960s

If you haven't taken your Jefferson Airplane albums down from the attic, here's a review of the reasons you might want to after 2014.

1. Classic hits radio stations purged most 1960s songs and many 1970s secondaries, something that had already happened at classic rock.
2. David Letterman announced his retirement in 2015, after which time the parade of musical guests dating back 40-50 years - no longer invited to either Jimmy's last night talker (legends like McCartney and Streisand excepted) - will surely end.
3. Veteran rock acts took it on the chin this year. Artists such as Springsteen, Foo Fighters, Tom Petty and especially U2 - all of whom released new music this year - were targeted by the aforementioned Beavis and Butthead journalists, who coined the term "Dad rock" (which many pains probably remember as having once been a contradiction in terms).



The 60s' smashes got smashed.

Once upon a time it was easy and natural for free radio to assume the roles of curator and archivist. As late as 1973, you could hear all of rock 'n roll's history on top 40, and as late as the early 2000s, you could find just about any hit song ever somewhere on the dial. But radio's primary business is business, and advertisers targeting a younger audience - with little appetite for a steady diet of oldies - must be served.

Thus, out go the 1960s, great, innovative and historic as they were.

For most of you, this isn't such a big deal: there are plenty of places to hear the remnants of pop's glorious history, mostly via Internet and satellite. But it's not any lack of availability, or the absence of most pre-1975 music on FM - or any older music, really - that bothers me: it's the lack of respect it gets, which it is always due.

Take the U2 incident: good album, apparently wrong strategy. But the media responded by treating *Songs of Innocence* like it was a fruitcake, as in, thanks, guys, but no thanks. Last I checked, there was nothing wrong with free music, especially from one of the biggest-selling artists long due for a return. You don't like U2, hit delete. Works for all that unwanted email.

Even before U2 returned, most artists with a 20+ year track record were already getting their one-and-done week of media attention: new album debuts at 1, 2 or 3, then goodbye. Even Weird Al faded away after his week o' parodies. U2 of course didn't even get this, given their circumstances. In fact, any long-standing rock act that tried something different got shoved in the same 'don't call us, we'll call you' drawer: Foo Fighters' HBO series preceding its new album blitz led to online bashing of a band that had always been worshiped as the last of rock's dying breed.

Which means, if you're going to blog about how great - or how much better - the music of the 1960s and 1970s was, or the continued importance of rock's pioneers, you can expect as many hits as those acts are getting lately.

PLUG-OLA: Miss the December 21 debut of *That Thing with Rich Appel* on RewoundRadio.com? No matter: come on back any Sunday at 6pm Eastern for 3 hours of radio as it once was...and never was. If you're on Facebook, we're at <https://www.facebook.com/ThatThingRichAppel>.



You can catch up with my *Billboard* "Revisionist History" series (also a part of *That Thing...*) at <http://www.billboard.com/author/rich-appel-4314453>.

And I hope you'll join me Saturday, December 27 at 1pm Eastern when I count down the top 100 hits of 1961 on PopGoldRadio.com's (*Time Machine* series. If you haven't already discovered Don Tandler's weekly trip to the pop chart past, I highly recommend it (especially when I'm not there).

Hz So Good online (current issue, and archive back to 2010) at <http://www.60s70s.org/HzSoGood/>.

Happy *H*zidays, pains one and all.

Click.

Rich Appel is a talented and experienced writer about the radio and music industries. He's written *Hz So Good* since 1996, and written for *Billboard* since 2011.

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