

7 GREAT THINGS RADIO GAVE UP



"Fighting to Stay Free"

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And now, ladies and gentlemen...

...more and more, the history of radio seems to be a history of those things for which the medium was once known and recognized, that over time it has, for one reason or other, relinquished and let others do better (or, in some cases, not do at all).

Here are seven of those, but I bet you'll come up with 77 more (WABC reference absolutely intended).

1. The actual top 40.

The term "top 40" was created when Todd Storz' New Orleans station decided to play back the market's 40 best-selling songs, thereby doubling the top 20 counted down daily on the station down the road. You don't have to remember 60+ years ago to recall a time when the top 40 format revolved around the literal top 40 (or 30, or 50, etc.): the local weekly countdown was THE reason to listen in the first place, and even if you didn't, each song's rank was referenced almost every time a DJ played one of those songs. Knowing that "You Don't Have to Say You Love Me" was number four and not number five was important, and as teenagers (or younger, maybe even older), our understanding of pop culture turned on this.

So...what happened? Three things, in this order: album rock, Casey Kasem and demographics. In the early 1970s, many stations dumped both the countdown and announcing song numbers in an effort to become more hip with listeners aging into the "money demo," many of those abandoning AM top 40 for greater music choice beyond just singles on FM. As *American Top 40* spread to more markets and gained popularity (and, in many places, became the only countdown in town), the difference between local and national rankings became less important. Except for a brief period in the 1980s when top 40 resurged on FM, local countdowns ceased being the focus of the format, replaced by simply playing the right music for the intended audience.

And, where did the local countdown go? Nowhere: national won. Not only that, iTunes has become, for most people, the immediate source for the top songs any day at any time, replacing the countdown and rank-citing DJs. But is that a missed opportunity? How important is it to today's listeners that "Trap Queen" is number two (which, in this example, reflects radio's under-playing of it, hence it would rarely if ever be mentioned on top 40)?

2. New songs when they're actually new.

During the days when as many as four top 40 stations competed in some markets, one of the major weapons in those wars was being first with the hits. Printed survey entries were often marked with asterisks to denote those songs "heard first on KXXX." By the late 1960s, going early on records was often the positioner for stations going up against the tighter Drake format. Either way, listeners knew top 40 was where to hear the new hot songs across genres.

While the issue of how many new songs to add/play has always been an issue for top 40, we had no idea how good we had it during the format's first two decades, given sales-driven charts where as many as ten new songs could appear in a week, or the multitude of labels bringing music to top 40 every week. Ironically, even then critics bitched about this, comparing top 40 to the freedom of FM where at the time, any song from any album was fair game every week.

Then came record company and radio owner Pac-Man - which reduced the number of songs taken to radio and eliminated the distribution issues that allowed for regional hits - and the increased importance of ratings, where new music was the casualty in an 'every point counts' world. And then came the Internet, which has become for an ever-increasing

number of listeners the first source for new music. It's gotten to the point where the station that steps out on an absolutely new song (like, out for the first time this week) by an unknown act is a rare thing. Now, most stations wait until songs have proven themselves via YouTube, iTunes, Spotify, Shazam before taking the plunge.

3. Contests/games for their own sake.

While I was writing for *Billboard's Top 40 Update*, I noticed a few stations had resurrected "Secret Sound" and other evergreen radio contests from as far back as 50 years ago. Unfortunately, those remained exceptions to the rule, which has become text-driven giveaways across all stations owned by mega-owners.

At some point during the 80s/90s, radio giveaways stopped being fun. What became of the hourly live call-in mini-game shows, where listeners had to yell "Stop!" before the buzzer/bomb went off in order to win every prize rattled off by your boss jock, or picking one of those jocks to win each hour's "DJ Derby"? It's not like these ideas couldn't be modified for top 40 today. Here's one: guess how many times Carly Rae will sing "really" in this hour's edited version of that chorus (thank you, Jimmy Fallon).

And that's the problem: it's people like Fallon who have benefited from radio giving up this franchise, which is probably due to PPMs favoring less breaks, talking or non-music content.

4. Talk shows about nothing.

It's bad enough that few local long-form talk shows exist as it is, with syndicated hosts ruling the roost. But what's really gone from radio are the late night/overnight talkers who purposely avoided the issues and any drama in favor of just plain fun. In a different era for AM, hosts like Herb Jepko, Bill Corsair, Larry Glick and yes, even the early Larry King offered a safe haven from issues-heavy talk. Amazingly enough, the next generation never warmed to this talk format, or to AM, really. Joey Reynolds' overnight show may have been the last to focus on laughs and unusual guests, as TV, cable and the Internet have taken the entertainment-demanding late night audience given up by radio.

5. Tracking an album all the way through.

Any FM album rocker worth its salt during the 70s knew the way to listeners' hearts was playing all of both sides (when that was the case, that is) of every major just-released album at midnight of the day of release. Either my or my roommate's tape deck was in record mode during that hour most every night, but clearly the record business wasn't worried: labels must have found it to be a tremendous promotional tool.

So what happened? CDs, right? Free downloading? Or album sales tanking, that's it, yes? If you ask me, it was none of the above. Playing an album uninterrupted became "breaking format." Too many unfamiliar songs in a row, and way too many by the same artist? The mostly passive listener won't stand for that.

Now, of course, there's Spotify, where you can hear most every new album in its entirety the day of release (with the exception of Taylor Swift's, that is). Another point lost by radio.

6. Brand extension via TV and print.

When radio personalities ruled the Earth, they could also host their own TV shows, and often did on the weekend night they weren't on the radio. It didn't matter that Dick Clark ruled that genre: more often than not: *American Bandstand* wasn't seen in many parts of the country on Saturdays, pre-empted by sports or more popular local programming, which opened the door for the local dance show hosted by the local night jock. During this era, stations also often extended their brands (even if that wasn't necessarily a thing at the time) with magazines such as *Go*, whose editor was the pre-*Lifestyles*... Robin Leach.

To radio's credit, brand extension is more important than ever, only now it's more about leveraging other media to get back the listeners radio's lost to them over the years. And while air personalities (as they're commonly referred to now) have their own webpages on station sites, and sometimes their own shows on station YouTube channels, let's face it: it's still about TV. A weekend show on a broadcast network affiliate with Elvis Duran talking with folks like Megan Trainor? Sure, I'd watch that.

7. Urgency.

All you need do is listen to airchecks from 50-60 years ago to understand how much more important radio was to people. That wasn't just because there wasn't that much other media competing with it, but because of how "big" it was. Top 40's earliest players were larger than life, from the sound of the music to the importance of the news to the insanity of the promotions. And of course, there were those jingles.

Is radio still urgent today? Not the way the smartphone has become. And I think that says it all.

OK, WHAT ELSE? *That Thing with Rich Appel* isn't going to change radio – damn it – but you can catch it twice each week and decide for yourself. We're live Sundays at 6pm Eastern on Rewound Radio, Saturdays at 7pm on WOLDRadio.com. We're also on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/ThatThingRichAppel>.

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