



**NO "Kiss"-ING ZONE:
IS TOP 40 DUE TO BE IN TROUBLE
AGAIN?**

HzS  G  d

"Fighting to Stay Free"

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And now, ladies and gentlemen...

...a few years ago, I wrote a thought piece for Radio-Info.com titled "You Can't Kill Top 40." While that may be true, history has shown you can hurt it.

The radio format created from a simple concept – playing the most popular songs all day – has run into trouble four specific times since its first days on KOWH Omaha in the early 1950s, each time for a different reason. Reviewing those points in Top 40's history makes it easier to see why a fifth time may be around the corner.

Trouble Era I: 1960-1962.

WHAT HAPPENED: The public shaming of stations, DJs, independent record labels and most of all rock 'n roll during Senate and Congressional

investigations of payola resulted in a period when major record companies were able to regain a foothold at Top 40, with decidedly non-rock hits topping the charts more regularly (such as Jim Reeves' "He'll Have to Go" and Ferrante & Teicher's "Exodus"), as more programmers shied away from indies.

WHY TOP 40 DIDN'T WORK: At this same time, Elvis Presley returned from his military service a changed man, with a series of adult-friendly ballads, while a steady series of dance-based hits – such as Chubby Checker's "The Twist," which went to #1 on two separate occasions during this era – and singles with string sections and production values closer to adult pop made rock 'n roll sound more derivative than during the preceding era, when the founding fathers made sparks fly from the speakers.

WHAT SAVED TOP 40: A wave of new and different sounds from acts such as the 4 Seasons, the Beach Boys and producers such as Phil Spector, the rise of a more socially-conscious folk music spearheaded by hits penned by a young Bob Dylan, and the eventual British takeover turned around this low period, although it can be argued that Top 40 never really suffered, as there was no other place listeners could then go to hear the hits.

Trouble Era II: 1970-1972.

WHAT HAPPENED: FM's rise in popularity, with stations offering songs and album tracks rarely given exposure on Top 40 stations - whose more limited playlists targeted even younger listeners, with a wave of "bubblegum" pop and acts like the Partridge Family and the Osmonds - led to a generation's abandonment of the format.

WHY TOP 40 DIDN'T WORK: During this era, many Top 40 outlets attempted to correct this by adding album songs not commercially released as singles, ignoring hits aimed at either demographic extreme, jettisoning jingles and dialing down DJ delivery to be closer to FM, often with disastrous results that sent away core listeners and drove ratings down.



WHAT SAVED TOP 40: The format turned around with an even narrower focus on tested hits, a higher-energy delivery, and greater emphasis on promotions and contests; so in other words, a return to Top 40's roots. Beatle fans returned to the fold thanks to the superstar status of another British artist with a hit output and album quality reminiscent of the early Fab Four – Elton John – and the straight-down-the-middle pop-rock of Paul McCartney's band Wings.

Trouble Era III: 1980-1982.

WHAT HAPPENED: 30 years into the format, the definition of “popularity” had changed, as album sales eclipsed those of singles, so that requests and research gave a more accurate read of what listeners wanted to hear. Also, FM surpassed AM in popularity, so heritage Top 40s such as WABC and KHJ were disappearing, often creating a void in the marketplace, as FMs were having more success with carefully-targeted formats such as Album-Oriented Rock (AOR), Soft Rock and at the time, Disco.

WHY TOP 40 DIDN'T WORK: Top 40 was systematically ignoring what were arguably the finest pop records of that time, those coming out of the British post-punk new wave scene (not to mention those by the American acts they influenced, such as the B-52's), leaving a new breed of FM format to own them and leaving Top 40 as a home for mostly softer, dare we say duller, pop, as disco also faded in popularity. This was really the first time you started hearing the phrase “Top 40 is dead” bandied about, although it was far from the truth.

WHAT SAVED TOP 40: FM station owners recognizing a void in their markets helped usher in a new era of Top 40, which wound up referencing its very beginnings with the help of consultants like Mike Joseph and station groups like CBS. So high-energy, big promotions and musical risk-taking (with the new wave songs in full force) attracted a large audience and brought the format back to the forefront.

Trouble Era IV: 1990-1996.

WHAT HAPPENED: A triumvirate of music extremes – alternative, hip-hop and country – gradually lured away top 40's listeners, leaving a shell of the format with whatever straight-laced pop, safe R&B and adult-targeted ballads were left.

WHY TOP 40 DIDN'T WORK: Alternative, Urban and Country radio offered better experiences for listeners wanting just those things. A modified version of the format aimed at an older audience ("Hot AC") further marginalized mainstream Top 40. Most stations that junked mainstream for an Alternative lean (such as, famously, New York's Z100) eventually saw their ratings further compromised as Alternative stations successfully super-served their audience.



WHAT SAVED TOP 40: Musically, what went around came around. As Alternative's popularity faded, Dance/Pop re-emerged ("Macarena," anybody?) and acts targeting a younger audience (Backstreet Boys, Spice Girls, Hanson, and later Britney and N Sync) took off, Top 40 was able to carve out its own niche again by playing the hits, which it has done quite nicely ever since.

With Top 40's current state - ratings-rich, firmly established in every market and appealing to a wider and older-skewing audience than ever, according to PPMs - it may be hard to imagine the format could ever stumble and fall again, especially since most of these stations are run by giant owners with access to endless sources of research on every song played. But, we all know to "never say never." So, let's lay out the possible scenario for...

Trouble Era V: 201?-202?.

WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN: Because Top 40 has evolved from being a direct reflection of the most popular songs across all genres to, like most formats, a key demo-targeting vehicle powered by a steady diet of proven hits, it has moved away from being, for a large part of the population, their first source for new music. And because current music now comes at us from all places - restaurants where we raise our phones to identify songs, commercials, TV shows, movies, music-intense sites like YouTube and Pandora, and of course other contemporary music formats on radio - many people learn about songs months before Top 40 takes the leap. As more and more listeners display this behavior, this presents an opportunity for other stations/services to take

advantage of, at Top 40's expense, suggesting the format could once again research itself into a corner.

WHY TOP 40 MAY NO LONGER WORK: To bring back 'what goes around comes around'...while we currently live in a 'pop world,' where the single rules regardless of the artist's other work, this could easily change again, and listeners could migrate to other genre-based formats and away from Top 40. Even if that never happens, should there become greater demand for an expanded menu of current hits (and taking all sources - and the observed behavior of younger listeners - into consideration, there are closer to 200 than 40 songs in play every week), Top 40 as it is currently programmed could be left in the dust, especially once cars become 'equal opportunity players' of stations emanating from anywhere vs. just AM, FM or Sirius XM.

WHAT COULD SAVE TOP 40: Reinventing itself for a new generation, which is a more likely course of action once terrestrial radio's numbers have dropped significantly among a younger demographic with lots of spending money. When the playing field is closer to leveled between FM and everything else, a Top 40 format that moves more quickly on buzz-driven songs and artists, moves closer to what tops streaming, Shazam and acquisition charts, and allows for a wider playlist reflecting what listeners are doing at home, may be necessary for the format to survive into the next and future eras.

Shameless plug section

BABY GOT BACK: I was extremely honored to be asked by Dann Isbell and Bill Carroll, authors of the new chart reference book *Ranking the '70s* (<http://www.ranking-the-70s.com>), to offer a testimonial on the book's back cover. And I'm in good company, given the other folks quoted, all luminaries of the radio and music businesses.

You may be aware that this is Dann and Bill's second chart reference book, following the terrific *Ranking the '60s*. Both are available now, or you could win them on *That Thing with Rich Appel* during our weekly reveal of "The Pumpkin 100," the top fall hits of the 60s and 70s, as compiled by Dann and Bill.

The Definitive '70s Pop Music Countdown

Finally—the complete and systematic ranking of every song and every act that peaked on Cash Box® magazine's Top 100 pop singles charts of the 1970s—5,350 songs performed by 1,698 acts representing all the genres and their styles that made the '70s such a diverse decade for popular music: from brassy funk to sassy punk with varieties of pop, rock, soul and more in between.

They're all here: from superstars like Elton John, Paul McCartney, the Bee Gees, Chicago and the Jackson 5 to shooting stars like Cooker, Crawler, Ginger and Splinter.

Ranking the '70s is the world's first and only uncut and unabridged ranking of pop music from the days of leisure suits and platform boots. That music stirred the passions of the "Me" generation from Earth Day, Kent State and women's lib through gas lines and the Bicentennial right up to inflation, ESPN and the Walkman and will transport early Gen X-ers back to family vacations, first dates, homework and high school graduation.

Open to just about any page and you'll find your memories come flooding back to you as every song and every act is a fresh reminder of the past. It's the final word in '70s countdowns.

But **Ranking the '70s** doesn't stop with song and act rankings. You can also immerse yourself in the following features:

- Each act's catalogue of song titles ordered by chart popularity
- A categorized listing of acts as soloists, duos and groups
- A revealing year-by-year ranking of every act's popularity during the decade
- The top 300 songs of each year
- A unique song title index with its own special features
- An appendix featuring the most intense records and acts, the top 150 one-hit wonders, fastest and slowest records to #1, highest entries and exits and more!

"The perfect guide to every hit of the 1970s, from 'ABC' to 'Y.M.C.A.,' from 'We've Only Just Begun' to 'Dim All the Lights.' Slip on your mood ring, hang that disco ball, crack open **Ranking the '70s** and 'Have a Nice Day!'"

—Rich Appel / *Billboard* writer, and host of radio's
That Thing with Rich Appel

"Most books on music tell it the way the author wished it was — and are thus distorted by his or her personal opinions. That's why **Ranking the '70s** is so valuable. It accurately conveys what songs and stars most successfully spoke to and for the hearts of the only critics that count: the fans who are moved enough by a recording to request it on the radio and buy a copy for themselves."

—Gary Theroux / *Writer-Producer-Host of*
The History of Rock 'n' Roll

I hear the front cover's nice, too.

LUCKY 7: And on that topic... *That Thing with Rich Appel* is now seven stations strong, and on iHeartRadio. Here's where and when you can catch the top 40 that was on *That Thing* every weekend (all times Eastern)...

* WXCT (<http://tunein.com/radio/WACM-1490-s26950/>) Southington, CT and WACM West Springfield, MA – Saturdays 2-5pm and Sundays 6-9pm

* WTBR (WTBRfm.com) Pittsfield, MA – Saturdays 6-9pm

* WOLD (WOLDradio.com) Edison, NJ – Saturdays 7-10pm

* WFDU-HD2 (WFDU.fm), Fairleigh Dickinson University, Teaneck, NJ and iHeartRadio – Saturdays 7-10pm

* Rewound Radio (rewoundradio.com) – Sundays 6-9pm (live)

* WXBJ (WXBJ941.wix.com/oldies941) Salisbury, MA – Sundays 6-9pm

Check out our website at <http://www.thatthingshow.com/>.

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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. His services are available for your publication or website. Contact Rich at richappel@verizon.net.