



## CAN ANYONE STILL MAKE MONEY PLAYING OLDIES?

# HzS G d

"Fighting to Stay Free"

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### **And now, ladies and gentlemen...**

...it's been nearly a decade since the traditional "Oldies" radio format was pronounced dead, or at least incurably ill. More specifically, the majority of top 40's hits from rock 'n roll's beginnings in the mid-1950s up through some point in the late 1960s or early 1970s were declared unplayable on commercial radio by the gods of ratings and advertisers.

From the ashes of the format's original blueprint rose "Classic Hits," which essentially targets the same listener demographic (ok, perhaps a bit older and more male) as Adult Contemporary, only offering an all-day diet of 70s/80s/some 90s as opposed to AC's rotation more focused on the past two decades. PPM numbers proved Classic Hits to be a hit with

adults having money to spend on cars, computers and all the other things that make our economy go 'round.

And that was the end of the story for Oldies. Or was it?

Simple answer: No. Slightly longer answer: No way.

Granted, the 50s-through-70s formula may not be a winner in most of the top 100 markets, but it can still turn a profit for the smart operator. Here are some of the ways that's being accomplished.

\* **Excellent programming.** It's no accident that so many surviving Oldies stations are run by folks who - who would have thought? - love oldies. Those who have a passion for - and quite likely grew up with - those songs would certainly like to keep them on the pop culture radar, hoping to share the joy that music brought them with those who also remember, as well as those just discovering it now.

The thing is, that's not all that easy to do, especially when it comes to "going deep." I like "Everlovin'" as much as nearly any other Rick Nelson record, but if I'm a typical listener, I don't think I need to hear it more than once every few months (if that) during whatever time I'm regularly tuned in. Conversely, I might be tired of "Runaround Sue" but I realize that's going to show up a lot, given how big a hit it was and how much lasting value it has to core listeners. Making that decision about every record to chart from 1955 (a few from '54, too) through maybe the early part of the 1980s (and a few after, if throwing the Nylons, Brian Setzer Orchestra et al into the mix makes sense) may be a fun challenge, but a challenge nonetheless.

\* **Perfect imaging.** Just playing oldies will attract listeners, but it's how you present that music that will keep them. While I've always felt presenting Oldies as a top 40-styled format is a no-brainer, I hear so many stations running few or even no jingles, and/or no reminders after every song about what the station is and what it stands for.

Much of what should surround these songs is imaging that captures the feel of the music, if not necessarily the era(s).

While I've got no research to back this up, I would imagine many listeners want an atmosphere that makes them feel young. If the jingles, liners and promos don't instantly transport a listener behind the wheel of a '65 Mustang with one arm around someone special - or something along those lines - what's the point?

\* **Local focus.** Many stations have been able to maintain an Oldies format because they're the only station that serves their community, and the established first place to turn for local news, especially in weather

emergencies. For many smaller markets, “hometown” and “Oldies” seem to go hand in hand.

The big question is, for how much longer? Are younger (as in age 40 or under) listeners automatically tuned in as well, or have they found other sources for local information? Although Oldies gives these stations a niche others might not touch, will they need to adapt to a changing audience, assuming they choose to want that audience (which is a safe assumption, if they want to continue being successful)?

\* **Personality.** Anyone who grew up listening to top 40 during the 1960s and 70s – even the 80s, for that matter – knows how much of a no-brainer this is. During the era of multiple top 40 stations in each market, it was the DJs who made the difference. If you were in New York in 1964, your nighttime preference – Bruce, Beemer or Murray – said a lot about who you were.

Today, you’re lucky to get Oldies DJs who captures that spirit, yet this remains extremely important. I have always said that at any time of day, it’s the person behind the microphone who runs the radio station, at least from the listener’s point of view. So that person needs to be truly alive, to be allowed to speak often and to touch the listener’s emotions. Because radio outside of mornings hasn’t focused on personality for so long, a generation of people working in the medium have little to no idea about how to express those feelings on the air. This represents a huge challenge to anyone running an Oldies outlet, especially given the budget they’ve got for talent (if they’ve got one at all...and that’s another issue).

\* **Special shows.** If you think I included this so I could toot my own horn, well...you’re partially right. It isn’t like special shows – especially on the weekend – don’t work on every format, but on Oldies they can make a real difference by offering music otherwise not heard (Doo-Wop, “lost hits,” etc.) and a personality who complements the rest of the regular air staff, and that listeners look forward to hearing at the same time every week.

While I know my entry in this sweepstakes isn’t going to be right for most stations, I’ve at least spent a lot of time thinking about what the weekend listener wants that he or she isn’t getting from any source of audio entertainment. I also value the feedback I get from listeners every week, in order to mold *That Thing...* into a program that stands out from everything else, while hopefully making people smile – even laugh, if I’m lucky – and touching their emotions.

Which brings us to...

**I GET AROUND:** The *That Thing with Rich Appel* revolution has spread to six stations as of press time. Here's where and when you can catch *That Thing* (all times Eastern)...

Live:

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

Re-air:

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

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

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

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

If you haven't yet checked out *That Thing...*, whaddaya waiting for? Join me for three hours of classic top 40 - jingles, commercials, countdowns, the whole kit and caboodle, at any of the days/times above.

Oh, and if you have tuned in, and you're a certified Applehead, why not show the world how much you like *That Thing* by wearing or showing it off proudly? Lots of ways to do that here - <http://www.cafepress.com/thatthingrichappel>. At the risk of sounding crass, this is as of now the only income I get from the program, so any support you offer is welcome. Thank you!



A few Oldies programmers know what time it is. ;) )

Finally, while still in test mode and not yet complete, the show website is here - <http://www.thatthingshow.com/>.

Either way, you know what to do...

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. His services are available for your publication or website. Contact Rich at [richappel@verizon.net](mailto:richappel@verizon.net).***