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August 29, 2005

COLUMNISTS

They Don't Know Jack

But you will soon enough. It's the format that loves the '80s and loses the DJ. And it's taking over Canadian radio

Richard Gotlib is a pitch-perfect paragon of upper-middle-class life. On a career fast track as senior legal counsel for the Hudson's Bay Co., he recently renovated his comfortable house just south of Toronto's swank Forest Hill neighborhood, yet he still finds the time to be a committed dad to 3-year-old twins Benjamin and Jonathan. But when life seems too, well, predictable, Gotlib, 44, has an escape hatch. Alone in his minivan, he switches on Toronto's 92.5 Jack FM station and lets a warm wash of '80s music fill his head. The station's looped tracks of the Beastie Boys, Prince, Men at Workóplaying in no discernible orderóbring back his funky inner 20-year-old. "You never know what you're going to get, but it's usually good," says Gotlib. Even Jack FM's endlessly repeated catchphraseó"Playing What We Want"óis satisfying. Explains Gotlib with a mischievous grin: It's "kind of a f ___ - you attitude."

Call it the Jack effect. All over North America, millions of Jacked-up listeners are transforming the newest format in radio into a miracle pill for the struggling broadcast industry. The Jack programming formula dominates radio markets in Vancouver (where it started in 2002), Calgary, Toronto and dozens of cities in between. In the U.S., 17 stations have adopted the franchise, with equally stellar results. Wild 100.3, a drive radio station in DallasñFort Worth, was 20th in its market when it signed on last August. Four months later, it was No. 1. The metastasizing Jack phenomenon is being hailed as commercial broadcasting's ticket to survival in the new era of satellite radio and the buy-your-own-playlist mentality of iPods. While traditional radio is still a standby of popular culture, its audience has declinedóand with it the advertising revenue that earned station owners profit margins as high as 50%. "People will never stop saying radio is on the way out," says Scott McKenzie, editor of the New York Cityñbased Billboard Radio Monitor. "But radio has always

morphed, and now with Jack and other technological developments, we're seeing some of the biggest examples of that ever."

What makes Jack run? The concept is stunningly simple. Eliminate the chatty DJs, the weather reports, the news, the dorky contests and just about everything else that has typified Top 40 radio programming since the 1950s. Then replace them with random playlists of bands and artists from 1974 to now and attitude. "You know what happens when you request a song on Jack?" chided the announcer on New York's Jack FM (formerly wchs-FM 101.1) during a recent broadcast. "Nothing."

You find the same edginess in Jack's architects, who claim there is no typical Jack listener. "The audience is leading us. We're not heavily researching it," says Pat Bohn, a veteran Vancouver radio consultant. Bohn, who has successfully sold the concept in the U.S., says every station licensed to carry Jack will have a "screaming" listeners' advocate who will keep the station owners honest and thereby ensure that each Jack station has a separate personality. But the corporate suits who have bought into the idea, such as CBS-owned behemoth Infinity Broadcasting, know exactly what they're getting. Jack's core fans appear to be college-educated middle-management suburbanites in their 40s whose souls still harbor the spiky-haired new wavers or Duran Duran romantics they used to be when the world was young and the heaviest decision was what music to play at the school dance. That puts them smack in the middle of the 25-to-54 demographic, the sweetest spot for advertisers which proves, says McKenzie, that "there's still an amazing amount of money in radio."

Jack's special place in the mental jukebox of today's overstressed middle-income strivers comes from its uncanny skill at blending nostalgia with a dose of unconventionality. The much advertised 2,000-song playlist (three times the normal size of pop radio's) mixes genres at will, say, Rod Stewart, Madonna and Run-D.M.C. and allows listeners to re-experience the songs they loved or hated in a totally different context. "We chose to make Jack sort of an 'unradio' approach," says Rael Merson, president of Toronto's Rogers Broadcasting, which pioneered the format at Vancouver's Kiss FM station in 2002. "Radio tends to look for smoothness, but for us there'd be no smoothness; there would be surprise."

The biggest surprise of all: this radio revolution is being led from Canada. The first version of the formula was invented in 2001 by Bob Perry, a bored ex-DJ living in Connecticut, who began tinkering with Internet-radio software that allowed him

to randomize song order. On a whim, Perry, 45, named his creation Jack after a fictional cowboy and sent feelers around the industry. At the time, Rogers Broadcasting was looking for a way to reignite Kiss FM's fizzling mix of talk and music. Within four months, says Merson, "we knew we had a hit on our hands." Bohn signed on to help Rogers spread the good news in the U.S. after buying the Jack trademark from Perry and forming a company called SparkNet Communications to license the idea. Success has spawned U.S. imitators such as Bob and Hank (a country-music version of Jack). Also lawsuits: SparkNet sued Clear Channel Communications last week, charging the U.S. media giant with ripping off the Jack idea at its stations. A similar court challenge was launched against Bonneville Broadcasting six weeks ago. But like other successful Canadian cultural exports (Jim Carrey, cbc's *As It Happens*), Jack retains mildly subversive traces of its origins. For instance, the wry, sarcastic voice of Jack on U.S. stations is Howard Cogan, 40, a Toronto actor. Cogan prerecords snippets of Jack-ese at the request of local station managers to match their market. After New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg dismissed the Jack format with an expletive, the Cogan-Jack voice jibed, "Hey, Mayor Bloomberg, what's with all the swearin' like a sailor? It's just music."

Whether Jack is truly commercial radio's lifeline or just another strained attempt at market differentiation remains to be seen. For historical perspective, radio buffs point to the eclipse of the Jammin' Oldies soul-and-R&B formula that galvanized stations during the late 1990s. (Today just 10 stations in the U.S. retain that format.) Jack flopped in Chicago, where annoyed listeners forced a return to the classic Top 40 format. And it has fueled a backlash from New York to California among some music aficionados who complain they are being fed robot music. "It's like listening to an uber-iPod on permanent shuffle," says one angry Web poster. Steven Van Zandt of Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band led the counterculture charge of rock musicians by comparing Jack with replacing the Statue of Liberty with a blow-up doll. Even Gotlib found out just how difficult targeted music programming can be when he tried to upgrade his kids' musical tastes. Admits Gotlib: "My efforts to inculcate them with the Beatles haven't worked quite yet." *óWith reporting by Adam Pitluk/Dallas, Justin Smallbridge/Vancouver and Joel Stein/New York*

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