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As Top 40 Rocks, Artist Ownership Questioned

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By Bram Teitelman

There is no other way to put it—lately, top 40 rocks.

Four of the format's top 10 songs have gotten or are still getting airplay at modern rock. While top 40 has always been a coalition of different genres, the inclusion of Green Day, Nickelback, Weezer and Fall Out Boy in the format's most-spun songs are a marked difference from the pop and R&B that usually dominates the top 10.

"It seems like collectively all the formats are less worried about which formats which artist belongs to and [are] playing hits," Island Def Jam VP of rock promotion David McGilvray says.

While the aforementioned songs are mass-appeal hits, their cross-format success raises the questions of how important it is to own music and whether top 40 success significantly dilutes a band's impact at rock radio.

One of the most interesting artist-development stories of the year is Fall Out Boy's "Sugar, We're Goin' Down." The song did not chart at modern rock until early June, after the band's sophomore album, "From Under the Cork Tree," debuted in the top 10 of The Billboard 200, selling 68,000 copies, according to Nielsen SoundScan. It has remained on the Modern Rock chart since. But the success of the song's video on MTV's "TRL" led to its debut on the Mainstream Top 40 chart, where it hit the top 10 in only eight weeks.

Even as "Sugar, We're Goin' Down" continues rising on that chart, it is getting attention from active rock and mainstream rock as well. McGilvray felt the tide begin to turn when Philadelphia rock stations Greater Media mainstream rock WMMR and Infinity active rock WYSP added the song in the same week.

"I haven't gotten any flak from those [rock stations] adding it," he says. "They've said, 'It's OK to have hit records that we can play.'" Another example: the Killers' "Mr. Brightside" getting spins on Clear Channel mainstream rock WHJY Providence, R.I., and WYSP when it was a pop hit.

"I think a lot of active and mainstream guys felt that if it was pop or modern rock, they'd stay away from it intentionally, prior to that," McGilvray says. "I've seen it with the Killers and Fall Out Boy especially that they're embracing a hit by a rock band, they're not overthinking it."

SEEKING ROCK

One reason top 40 is rocking so much lately is simply that labels worked those acts to the format.

Edison Media Research VP of music and programming Sean Ross cites Island, which chased Fall Out Boy and the Killers at top 40, as well as Geffen, which actively worked Weezer.

"Sometimes you just have to ask for the order," Ross says. "So to that extent, the difference between Fall Out Boy, which is still happening at modern, and Weezer, which is two singles later at modern, may just be when the label decided to go for it. Because if top 40 really paid as much attention to the Modern Rock chart as they should, Gorillaz wouldn't have taken so long.

"Top 40 PDs have been looking for pop/rock for the last two or three years," Ross continues. "They're still happy to have it from acts like Click Five that exist only at top 40, but they're also happy to have it from Weezer or Nickelback."

The exposure that mass-appeal songs get at additional formats is not of much concern to some programmers.

"The thing that's driving us for the most part is the quality of the song," says Danny Spanks, PD at Clear Channel active rock KRAB Bakersfield, Calif., of Fall Out Boy's track. "We started getting requests for it based on the video play it had been getting. The amount of exposure it had gotten from some of the video channels put it on the radar screen for us. We'd played it once or twice when the Warped tour was around, and the response was really favorable. As time went by, we started getting requests for it, so we started spiking it in, and the response was really good." Spanks adds that the station has since tested the song, with the response being "up and down."

McGilvray says some active rock stations have been comfortable playing modern rock-leaning songs, citing Citadel WBSX Wilkes-Barre, Pa., and Regent WWBN (Banana) Flint, Mich. They are "hybrids that dive into both worlds," he says. "But some mainstream rock stations, like WIYY, who can be the hardest add in the world, came in very naturally."

Hearst active rock WIYY (98 Rock) Baltimore was emboldened to add Fall Out Boy as a result of decreased modern rock competition. "It was a situation where we saw the opportunity to step in and cherry-pick some acts from modern," APD/MD Rob Heckmann says. "This market is unique in that the modern isn't as full-service as it once was, and there's no top 40 in the market, either.

"I'd heard Fall Out Boy on WYSP and thought it sounded pretty good in the mix, and we all like the song and thought it would fit . . . Most people are listening to the radio during the day when [Infinity talk/modern rock hybrid] WHFS can't play them, so we're their only source." Heckmann adds that the song performs well in callout.

"There are definitely fewer markets where there are two current-based rock stations fighting for the same acts," Ross says. "And some PDs may have become existential about it, overall, because they figure they can't compete with the Web or videogames. That said, there are also markets where top 40 is suddenly the only place to hear Weezer or Fall Out Boy."

MASS-APPEAL MADNESS

The combination of fewer rock stations and an appetite for mainstream rock could be to rock's benefit. "Although we're an active rock station, we're looking for songs that we can get away with playing that

have a broad appeal," Spanks says.

And a station's heritage status helps it stay broad-based by definition. "I also think as time goes on, we're going to see a lot more 'middle-of-the-rock' stations that try to reunite the all-ages rock coalition that split with Nirvana, because there aren't enough rock shares otherwise," Ross says.

He explains that most of those stations end up being library-based, like Saga mainstream rock WHQG (the Hog) Milwaukee. But Clear Channel modern rock WWDC (DC101) Washington, D.C., "is a great example of a station that plays it all," Ross notes. "DC101 can play Fall Out Boy, Seether, O.A.R., Shinedown and an occasional AC/DC—partially because they're called 'DC101.' "

Stations will always want to own artists, but getting involved with an act that is getting additional exposure elsewhere has benefits too.

"There's something to be said about branding an artist with a station, taking ownership of that artist, aligning it with its home format in a market," McGilvray says. "But then you have this other wave, where rock has come in at a crucial point, but might not have been a part of breaking it. They're absolutely exposing us to new consumers in each of those markets." But once it starts rising on the pop charts, he says, "you've got to get out of the way."

McGilvray brings up a good point. Some artists may be perceived as too pop for rock radio eventually. Spanks brings up the example of Good Charlotte. "We played them for a while, but as time went by, they wound up being labeled more of a teenybopper band," he says. Fall Out Boy "run the risk of the same thing happening, but when those artists first come out, they're accepted by a large audience. As time goes by, people stick them in whatever subcategory they want to."

ROCK NOT GOING ANYWHERE

As long as artists maintain credibility at the formats they started at, they will always have a place there. "Nickelback started at rock radio, and they'll be a rock band at the end of the day no matter how many singles cross over to pop," Heckmann says. "I don't know if we necessarily want to own Fall Out Boy—they're not at that level yet. It's important for us to own Metallica."

Top 40's current infusion of rock is more coincidence than trend, Ross says. "Rock is still far from the dominant flavor at top 40. There's a nice crop now, and there's a determination not to get too rappy, and yet the fast-breaking records right now still include Kanye West, Bow Wow, Chris Brown, Black Eyed Peas and David Banner. And there are a lot of songs that top 40 could play, such as [Rise Against's] 'Swing Life Away' and [the White Stripes'] 'My Doorbell' that may never be worked there."

McGilvray says it is "great" that top 40 is playing records by the likes of Green Day, Nickelback and Fall Out Boy.

"Simply put, the one thing I feel is most important about these bands' success is that there's rock titles in the top 10," he says. "A few weeks ago, Coheed and Cambria, Staind and Bon Jovi debuted in the top 10 of the album charts. You've seen a bunch of rock titles in the top 20, whereas for a while, it was all pop, country and hip-hop. I don't know that you can break it down to anything more than the fact that rock will always be around." ••••

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