

Radio stations scramble to be heard

Formats are changing as industry competes for listeners with iPods and satellite radio.

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The day the music died was quite a shock for Valerie Lynch.

A loyal listener to the station formerly known as Gold 104.5, she tuned in on her way to work March 14 -- as she often did during a break from NPR news -- expecting to sing along with Elvis and enjoy the friendly chatter of familiar DJs.

Instead, she was introduced to "Jack," a new freestyle radio format that uses no live DJs and promises to play hits from all over the music spectrum.

She quickly turned the dial back to public radio on WFYI-FM (90.1).

For Lynch, a 50-year-old Eastside resident who commutes daily to Downtown Indianapolis, the loss of her oldies was only half the pain. She also misses the personalities.

"It was a package. It brought me back to the '60s and the '70s when you always knew your DJs and your music," she said.

"Now the package is gone, and those people are out of work. It's like ugly corporate America, putting people out of work and letting a machine do it. I don't go along with that. So I don't plan to listen to that station."

In the biggest radio shakeup in two decades, the oldies are dead, the '80s are history and Indy



Ernie Mills, of 97.1, is off the air temporarily as the station switches to country music and new call letters, WLHK. Mills and colleague Ann Duran have been recording listeners' feedback. -- Charlie Nye / The Star

CHANGING THEIR TUNE

Four FM radio stations have changed their formats recently, the most at one time in the past two decades.

97.1 FM

- On Friday, changed from adult contemporary to "Hank" country music.
- Mission: "Play anything (and we mean ANYTHING) country."

104.5 FM

- On March 13, changed from oldies to "Jack," a variety format.
- Mission: "Imagine if your iPod was set on the shuffle mode ... with thousands of hit songs from the '70s, '80s, '90s and today."

93.9 FM

- In July 2004, changed from the '80s to Christian music.

101.9 FM

- In October 2004, changed from hip countercultural to classic rock from the '70s and '80s.

Sources: Star research by Dan McFeely

WHAT ARE YOU LISTENING TO?

The top 10 radio stations in Indianapolis for listeners ages 12 and older in the fall of 2004:

Rank	Station	Format
1	WFMS-FM (95.5)	Contemporary country

listeners are adjusting to Jack -- the new 104.5 format -- and "Hank" -- a mix of Johnny Cash-old and Tracy Byrd-new country hits on 97.1.

Indy's FM dial is following a nationwide radio trend, scrambling to get noticed by consumers with a smorgasbord of choices.

A surge of new technology -- from iPod digital music players to satellite radio and in-car DVD players -- is giving consumers unprecedented options for what they choose to hear.

Changes at four local stations have left some listeners enraged. It has also set up a battle for country music fans' loyalty and has prompted local advertisers to rethink their 2005 spending plans.

"There has not been this kind of massive change in 20 years," said Tom Severino, market manager for Emmis Communications, the corporate radio giant that flipped formats at 97.1 FM from adult contemporary to Hank.

Usually in times of transition, one station in the market will switch formats, and the rest will adjust. Severino calls that a "natural evolution."

But there is nothing natural about what's happened in Indianapolis:

- Over the weekend, 97.1 surprised listeners and advertisers by abandoning its "Real Radio" concept of witty chats mixed with Sheryl Crow to adopt the country format -- setting it up to be a competitor to the No. 1 station in the market, WFMS-FM (95.5), a national award-winning country music giant owned by Susquehanna Communications.

- Two weeks earlier, on March 13, the popular oldies station Gold 104.5 -- also owned by Susquehanna -- abruptly changed to the new free-form Jack, which bills itself as having the ability to play whatever kind of music it wants, free from the constraints of traditional radio formats.

- In October, WKLU-FM (101.9), a small Brownsburg-based station, changed hands and formats -- going from an eclectic play list that featured Frank Zappa and the Grateful Dead to classic rock featuring songs from the '70s and '80s, a format heavy on the Eagles, Fleetwood Mac and other classic rock groups.

- And in July, the '80s "retro" station, WGRL-FM (93.9), made a radical switch to Christian music, reinventing itself as The Song. That station also is owned by Susquehanna, but unlike the switch at 104.5, its new format includes a lineup of live DJs, including afternoon personality

2	WFBQ-FM (94.7)	Classic rock
3	WHHH-FM* (96.3)	Hip-hop
3	WIBC-AM* (1070)	Talk/news/sports
5	WGLD-FM (104.5)	Oldies (now Jack/variety)
6	WTLC-FM (106.7)	R&B
7	WRZX-FM (103.3)	Alternative rock
8	WYXB-FM (105.7)	Soft rock
9	WNOU-FM (93.1)	Pop contemporary
10	WTPI-FM* (107.9)	Soft rock
10	WZPL-FM* (99.5)	Pop contemporary

Best of the rest 12. WYJZ-FM (100.9); 13. WISG-FM (93.9); 14. WTTS-FM (92.3); 15. WKLU-FM (101.9)*; 15. WTLC-AM (1310)*; 17. WENS-FM (97.1)*; 17. WXNT-AM (1430)*; 19. WNDE-AM (1260); 20. WEDJ-FM (107.1)*; 20. WKKG-FM (101.5)*; 20. WRDZ-FM (98.3)*; 20. WXLW-AM (950)*.

* Denotes a tie.

Source: Fall 2004 Arbitron Report

Steve O'Brien, who previously worked for other Susquehanna stations.

Industry research has shown a growing dissatisfaction with radio stations having too many commercials and DJs talking too much, said Jeff Pollack, chief executive officer of the Pollack Media Group, a California-based radio consulting firm.

About 20 stations in America have made the switch to Jack, or its brethren -- "Bob," "Dave" and "Joe" -- each of which tries to emulate a mixing of songs from different genres.

"It's more like an iPod shuffle," Pollack said. And it just might be a strategy that works. "The Jack station in Dallas has quadrupled its ratings in adults 25-54 since launching."

At 27, Indianapolis resident Jason R. Sharp falls into that age category, but he is not one of the happy new listeners, especially after the switch was made so abruptly and without notice.

"One afternoon I'm listening to Monique and The Man (on 97.1), and the next afternoon I'm listening to Johnny Cash," the Southsider said.

"I had both 104.5 and 97.1 programmed into my radio. I now skip over them. I won't even give them a chance."

Sharp says he may become one of a growing number of consumers to abandon commercial radio in favor of XM or Sirius, the nation's two major satellite radio companies.

According to a January 2005 survey by **Arbitron/Edison Media Research**, awareness of XM satellite radio has grown to 50 percent from 17 percent of Americans over the past three years. Sirius satellite radio awareness has grown to 54 percent from 8 percent, thanks in part to the signing of shock-jock Howard Stern.

Steve Cannon, program director for the new 104.5 station, maintains the format switch has been positive.

"It's being very well-received in the community," Cannon said. "We initially felt the disappointment from the oldies listeners when we first flipped the format, but that now has subsided."

At Emmis, the switch at 97.1 may have been overdue. Severino said the station formerly known as WENS had gone through many small changes in 20 years, but it had always maintained its adult contemporary or light-rock format -- similar to formats at WYXB-FM (105.7) and WTPI-FM (107.9).

"The market in Indianapolis has been oversaturated with adult contemporary for years," said Severino. "Meanwhile, WFMS has gone unchallenged, except by themselves." He was referring to the former country station The Bear (93.9) which was owned by Susquehanna.

The new Hank format at 97.1 is similar to Jack, except it is country music.

"There is a vast amount of country music that does not get played anymore," said Severino. "Frankly, (WFMS) is a very good radio station. We did not want to try to copy what they do. We wanted to offer Indy a choice, a different kind of radio station."

Before deciding on Hank, Emmis researched the format with focus groups, other markets and national trends.

Unlike the Jack format on 104.5, Severino said, 97.1 will include live DJs -- including the return in four weeks of Wank and O'Brien's morning show. Severino said all of the 97.1 on-air personalities have agreed to make the transition to the new format, except for Monique Marvez Crosby -- who had the title role for Monique and the Man.

"She won't be making the transition," Severino said. "She may focus back on her career as a stand-up comedian."

Emmis did not give advertisers advance notice. It expected at least 35 percent of them to flee the new format. So far, 5 percent have left, according to Severino.

Susquehanna reports similar results from its advertising base, but offered no numbers.

Still, advertising experts are cautious.

"We generally wait until we get some ratings information before we move ahead with buys on a station (that flips)," said Rose Durbin, media director for Hirons & Co. Communications, the city's largest advertising agency.

"There is going to be a shift in the listeners. And it will take a while for the new core audience to find the station and develop a listening pattern."

Durbin said a typical major advertiser -- one who uses various media to market itself -- spends roughly 30 percent of its budget on radio ads. Other ad dollars go to newspapers, television stations, billboards and the Internet.

Radio is unique, she said, because listeners develop a personal relationship to stations. They often use their car preset buttons to rank their favorites.

According to the Arbitron/Edison study, the average consumer spends two hours, 48 minutes listening to traditional radio per day. That number drops by roughly 15 minutes for people who own iPods or portable MP3 devices or who subscribe to satellite radio, proving that local radio still commands attention.

"Radio is a very personal medium," she said. "People really feel their station is important to them . . . that it speaks to them. It is a big part of their day."

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