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Rock, Rolling Over

Pressured by Other Formats and Ways of Listening, a Radio Staple Is Crumbling

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 Tuesday, January 18, 2005; Page C01

Way back in 1979, when rock still ruled the radio, Neil Young offered this confident lyrical couplet in a popular tune of the day: "Hey hey, my my / Rock-and-roll can never die."

Young may still be right, but the radio stations that once played the Canadian rocker's music are showing clear signs of mortality. With baby boomers switching to other formats and younger listeners increasingly bypassing radio altogether, once-dominant rock stations are withering and in some cities dying.

The latest casualty turned up last week. WHFS-FM, the "alternative" station that pioneered free-form rock radio in Washington in the 1960s and '70s, abruptly pulled the plug on rock and began carrying Spanish-language pop. The move by WHFS's owner, Infinity Broadcasting, left the Washington region -- a radio market of more than 4 million people -- with just one area-wide station, DC-101 (WWDC-FM), playing contemporary rock.

In economic terms, the move made perfect sense. So-called urban -- black-oriented R&B hits and hip-hop -- and ethnic formats have been the radio industry's growth engine. Among these, Spanish-language programming has been the fastest growing of all over the past five years, according to Arbitron, the audience-research company. During the most recent quarterly ratings period, in fact, the combined audience of WHFS and DC-101 barely exceeded the collective audience of the five AM and FM stations that broadcast in Spanish in the Washington area.

Rock remains a major radio genre nationwide, but its overall share of the audience is tumbling. From mid-1999 to last summer, rock stations -- from those playing "classic" Pink Floyd cuts to those offering up-to-date "alternative" selections from Modest Mouse, Switchfoot and Three Days Grace -- lost an average of 13 percent of their audience.

This has prompted once-popular rock stations elsewhere to do what WHFS and Infinity did last week. Infinity-owned WNEW-FM of New York, once the most popular and widely copied rock station in the country, spotted the trend early and abandoned rock for a talk format in 1999 (it has since tried several other formats). KSJO-FM, a longtime rock station in the San Francisco Bay area, and KLOL-FM, once Houston's leading rocker, became Spanish-language stations last year.

Rock, and rock artists, aren't disappearing from the airwaves. The Beatles and Rolling Stones can still be heard on "classic" rock and "oldies" stations. At the same time, softer ballads by mega-selling artists such as U2 and Sheryl Crow will make it onto the playlists of many pop-oriented stations, like Washington's WWZZ-FM (Z104) and WRQX-FM (Mix 107).

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But for stations specializing in rock alone, the market may be evolving into something akin to daily newspapers: One to a city, with little room for a second competitor. "It's not that rock is going down to nothing," says Sean Ross, a radio programming consultant for Edison Media Research. "It's that two pretty similar stations can't be in a war of attrition forever. In a lot of markets, there's one [rock] station doing pretty good. It's the second or third station that's struggling."

Theories about the reason for that abound. Jeff Wyatt, who oversees programming for eight Washington area stations owned by radio giant Clear Channel Communications, including DC-101, offers the simplest: Rock just ain't what it used to be.

"A lot of musical genres go through peaks and valleys," he says. "Clearly, rock music is not in one of those peak periods. . . . People who run stations can't make the music better or more mass-appeal. We are, ultimately, in the business of distributing what the music industry produces, and we can't take a mediocre product and make it sound great."

But album sales figures show a somewhat more ambiguous case. Although only two albums by rock acts -- Evanescence and U2 -- were among the 20 bestsellers of 2004, rock's share of overall album sales has actually grown during the past five years from 16.1 percent to 19.8 percent of the total, according to Geoff Mayfield, senior analyst at Billboard, the music industry magazine. At the moment, for example, Green Day has the fastest-selling album in the nation.

"The media is often tempted to say rock is dead," he says. "It isn't."

Others think the trouble in rock radio reflects the radio business's broader malaise. Listeners have complained for years that corporate consolidation has made radio more bland, with endless commercials and shrinking playlists. Fearing a listener rebellion, Clear Channel announced last fall that it would cut back on the number of ads it airs.

But rock radio appears to be in a demographic squeeze unique among radio formats. Increasingly, it is pressed at both the younger and older ends of its audience.

Baby boomers, who tuned in to rock in droves during the 1970s, have drifted away to other formats, such as talk, news, jazz and country, says Kurt Hanson, publisher of RAIN: Radio and Internet Newsletter. At the same time, young people -- always rock's lifeblood -- have embraced more varied kinds of music. Hip-hop, which barely existed a generation ago, is now perhaps the most popular music on the airwaves, heard on several kinds of radio stations (Top 40, R&B, even rock) at once.

Perhaps more important, listeners are changing the way they listen to music and receive information. Instead of waiting for their favorite song on a radio station, they can download it off the Internet and listen to it whenever they want over portable music players like Apple Computer's iPod. Instead of being restricted to radio's relatively limited programming options, they can subscribe to one of two satellite radio systems and receive more than a hundred channels. The two services, Washington-based XM and New York-based Sirius, continue to lose money, but they have captured more than 4 million subscribers in about four years.

Hanson argues that Web streaming -- listening to far-flung radio stations over the Internet -- is an even bigger, but less publicized, phenomenon, and the ultimate threat to traditional radio. Streaming technology makes it possible to listen to thousands of stations around the world. Although it is hard to know precisely how many people are plugged into Webcast stations at a given time because there are so many, the three largest services -- provided by America Online, Yahoo and Windows Media -- have

averaged 4.1 million listeners a week, a figure comparable to XM and Sirius's audience, he said.

What's more, many new music releases pop up -- legitimately or otherwise -- on the Internet well before they get radio airplay, undercutting radio's traditional role as the place to hear the hottest new tunes. U2 recently moved up the release date of its new album, "How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb," after cuts from it leaked and were widely distributed over the Internet.

Over time, Hanson says, these technologies are eroding the audience for broadcast radio in much the same way that cable TV, VCRs and DVDs fragmented the audience for television during the 1990s. "I think broadcasters will remain the place to go to for the mass-appeal stuff," he says. "But their percentage of the audience will decline as the audience builds for niche programming."

That's already happening. Listening among adults ages 18 to 34 has fallen by about 8 percent in the past five years, according to Arbitron, a decline that does not bode well for the medium's future.

Yet over-the-air radio still has a long way to fall. More than 200 million Americans tune in their local radio stations at least once a week, according to the National Association of Broadcasters. And even as more new cars come equipped with satellite radios, the new gizmos enable listeners to switch back to their local stations for news, traffic and weather reports, if not the latest Nickelback hit.

To fight back, people in the rock radio business think the medium may have to mine some of the best features of its past. Instead of sounding like they were churned out of a corporate cookie-cutter, stations have to take some musical chances and emphasize their ties to the local community, says Sammy Simpson, program director at Washington's "modern" music Z104. His station, for example, runs a weekly program featuring unsigned local bands.

"We talk about building more passion into the station," Simpson says. "We're trying to be more innovative with our playlists. In an iPod and Internet world, we have to move away from a jukebox mentality to find ways to make radio hip and fun. We're all still searching for that answer."

Indeed, radio's demise has been predicted before -- first TV in the early 1950s was supposed to kill it, and then MTV in the 1980s. Each time, however, it has adapted, relying on its immediacy, localism and ability to move with its audience.

"Radio hasn't lost its primacy, but it has lost its critical mass," says Ross, the consultant. "It's a lot less of a shared experience. It doesn't mean it won't have a share of the audience. It just means that the share it gets will be smaller and smaller."

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