



Is AC radio the new Top 40 for Adults?

By Dave Rogerson

Over the course of the past two years, Strategic Media Solutions (SMS), in conjunction with online music researchers Music Pulse, has been tracking and identifying emerging trends in the growth and acceptance of newer artists and music among the traditional adult radio listeners and music lovers. Adult Contemporary (AC) radio, once described as the format that only radio listeners seem to like, has copped a lot of 'ho hum' in the past.

It seems that nowadays AC is evolving into the new 'Top 40 for Adults' driven by some fresh new artists for the format, coupled with an emerging interest in the format among radio operators. Just as the Walkman gave way to the digital music player, so too has the music tastes of AC listeners moved away from the mainstays of Elton John and Billy Joel. Today it's Pete Murray and Thirsty Merc. Is it a trend or just a short term fad? This week Dave Rogerson beams the interview satellite on two AC guys who have their dial-twiddling fingers on the pulse of what's happening with AC in Australia and North America.

Rogerson catches up with Australian Radio Network's Group Program Director, Jeremy Millar, who is responsible for the day to day programming strategy of ARN's Adult-formatted stations. It's the original home of the 'Hits & Memories' format that carved a way ahead for AC radio formats in Australia and continues so today.

Across the Pacific we point our musical eyes toward Mike McVay, President of McVay Media US. Mike's one of North America's most respected radio consultants with his company and fellow consultants covering a variety of formats in the northern hemisphere. McVay's special emphasis is on AC. He's uniquely qualified to comment not only on AC in the US but also locally through his experience in working with stations in Australia and New Zealand over the past fifteen years. He brings a special insight into the differences in the world of AC between Australia and his homeland.

The music and radio business model has changed and technology has helped move that model in a new direction. For radio that means new music can in fact add the spark/variety that gives depth to the AC format.

Jeremy, the observation that AC is the new Adult Top 40, in other words, playing hits for adults. How does this sit with you?

"I've always agreed with this notion. It's never been a secret in radio that 'less is more'. No-one ever put a coin in a jukebox only to request some B-side, so popular choices are nothing to be ashamed of. The 'Long Tail' theory suggests that the age of

the hit is over but I think humans crave being part of a group and monitoring popular culture, and its lists (e.g. music charts) help us mark our space and place as individuals."

From a US perspective, how do you see things Mike?

"Hot AC might be the new top 40. By that I mean the more up-tempo AC formats. I don't believe that Mainstream AC can be successful if it plays too many new songs. Hot AC is a recurrent and current based format... along with the very best of the 90s and 2000s... and a few 80s thrown in for spice. Mainstream AC is really an off-shoot of the Classic Hits format from Australia. We're playing music from the 70s, 80s, 90s, 2000s and one current per hour. In the US, probably because of the ethnicity of our population, hip-hop and R&B is the new top 40."

So guys, what are we seeing here, trends or fads? Jeremy, what is the view locally?

"Well, from my view in Australia we're seeing these as trends, as they seem to be patterns rather than spikes."

"Personality (really great and entertaining personality) can be the magnet that draws the audience to radio on a daily basis"

- Mike McVay, McVay Media

Mike - fad or trend?

"These are trends. A fad comes and goes. Trends are predictive, something which you've identified at SMS with research to back your observations. As we see more competition with personal players, we'll see listeners wanting to hear even more variety from their favourite radio station. I believe that the element of surprise will become very important. Why? You know what you put on your MP3 player. You don't know what's coming up next on your favourite radio station. This is a benefit that we need to bottle and market to our listeners."

Jeremy, as head of programming for ARN, one of Australia's largest AC format groups, what do you see as the challenges ahead for AC in 2007?

"The challenges I see are opportunities, namely the need to ensure our messages are getting through to the keeper. Recent findings from Marketing

guru Roy Williams (The Wizard of Ads) suggest that meaningful messages have never been more important than right now. He says that years of searching the internet has taught us to become experts at instantly filtering the irrelevant, the noise and the hyperbole. I think this is true for radio too regardless of format, we need to deliver our music and messages with precision and relevance."

Are the Australian challenges much the same in North America, Mike?

"AC has challenges, always has done, always will do and yet we manage to overcome them. Primarily we succeed because radio is a usage-based format. Listeners turn us on and leave us on for long periods of time. That puts pressure on AC stations and their PDs to carefully schedule the music and balance every quarter-hour.

"Giving heaps of credit where it is quite rightly due, the format is more vibrant in Australia than it is in the US. Here we have very few format exclusive artists. My experiences in Australia are that radio will give a new artist a chance to be exposed and you're not dependent upon other formats to make your music familiar to your audience.

"Right now, the biggest challenge facing AC faces all music formats. How do you create compelling and exciting radio in the face of an MP3 world? I can assure you that radio will not beat the iPod by becoming a music machine. Personality (really great and entertaining personality) can be the magnet that draws the audience to radio on a daily basis."

Jeremy, for ARN's stations, how does new music fit in your AC format of 2007?

"It's been a great period for our stations because ARN targets adult listeners, and there's been no shortage of outstanding songs. AC formats are a song-by-song format, so we can add a song from a rock band if it fits genre doesn't matter too much. The same is true for CHR's as pop and rock are so mainstream at the moment."

Is that how you're finding new music's role for AC, Mike, or are you seeing it from a different angle?

"As Jeremy says, new music can fit nicely into the AC format, but you have to sprinkle these unfamiliar tracks on the station just like you would pepper to a fine steak. Sparingly, and only if needed for flavour."

Mike, does that mean we should we only consider playing new music for spice on AC?

"I'm not saying that you should ignore new music. Not at all. What I'm saying is that you need to really pay attention to how a new song sounds on your station in relationship to the rest of your library. Australian Idol, Euro Star, Pop Idol and American

Idol are generating lots of pop and AC sounding songs to choose from. But, be sure to front sell and back sell the song when you do play a piece of new music. Adult listeners really like to know what they are hearing, particularly newer or less familiar music. There's no time in their busy world to go and figure it out for themselves."

Jeremy, what changes are you seeing for Adults and their music and /or station preferences?

"From the Australian perspective at ARN stations, the pop culture agenda of the day continues to be a driver – for example Britney shaving her hair – this may not have seemed to be a big deal to adult listeners at first glance but the fact is listeners to stations like Gold 104, 4KQ and WSFM live in the 'here and now' too, they're exposed to the same mass marketing messages as anyone else, so acknowledging and reflecting the current pop culture agenda remains important.

"Adults are probably more in touch with the music of their children's generation than their own parents were of theirs. Ten years ago the next word adults said after 'rap' started with a 'c'. These days, hip-hop sounds and styles have permeated the mainstream from music to movies and advertising. Sure, it's not everyone's cup of tea but we're in a cut-and-paste world of music, and thanks to services like iTunes and BigPond Music, the single is back this time for all ages, not just for youth markets."

Jeremy makes an interesting point. New technology and instant gratification via access to music takes us back to how top 40 started – playing people's favourite songs frequently. Mike, what is your view on that point?

"Spot on. Adults from the post-war Baby Boomer generation are more connected to their music today than their parents were forty years ago. Many 'boomers' share the musical tastes of their children. I know that my parents recoiled when I started listening to Led Zeppelin in 1972. Today my daughters and I fight over their Nickelback CD."

Jeremy, how does ARN handle new artists like Snow Patrol. Kelly Clarkson and Augie March et al on AC?



JEREMY MILLAR

"We judge everything on a song by song basis, as opposed to 'who's this artist?' If the song sounds like it fits and the big picture adds up, then we have to take it seriously. What I mean is that if Bono knocked on your door, you invited him in and he outlined plans for the next U2 tour, mentioned the TV shows he's appearing on this week, gave some views on his pet topics, and then asked if he could play you some of his new CD well, you've already decided you love it. But if we treat the song hook in isolation then we'll miss the big picture.

"Look at the success of the Dixie Chicks on radio – it's more than just a song hook, it's the overall story that finally took hold. Speaking of which, I'm pleased to see Augie March finished 2006 with their triple j award – and now a US distribution deal. I hope these kinds of threads come together to help bring them further success here and overseas. It most likely will happen because piece by piece the picture is built and then one day suddenly it's all go across multiple media!"

So Mike, is the US producing better AC singers and songwriters today than in the past?

"In many ways the singer/songwriters of today like The Fray, Five For Fighting, Train, Hinder, Kelly Clarkson and so on are all similar to the singer/songwriters of yesterday. James Taylor was yesterday. John Mayer is today.

"It's a case of learning the lessons; playlist fatigue is global so radio needs to give the audience some relief and serendipity"

- Jeremy Millar, ARN Network

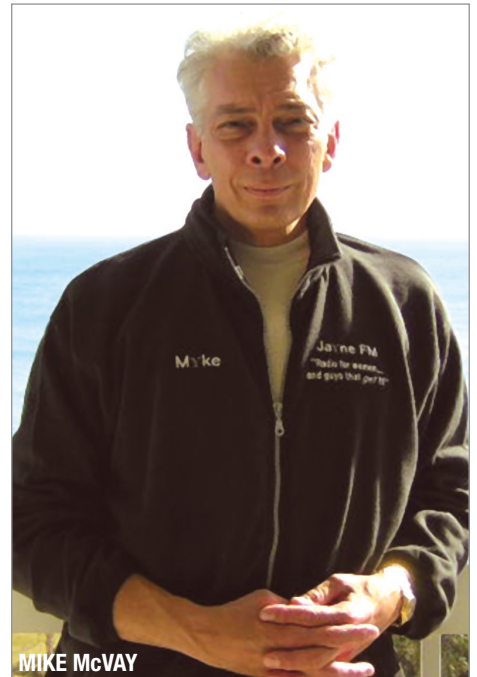
"We handle new artists dependent upon the strength of their song. Here, AC was an artist-driven format until about 1995. That's when we saw the last of Michael Bolton, Celine Dion and other one-time iconic AC artists. Today we're a song-driven format. If the song is great, we play it. That's a trait of top 40 which you mentioned quite rightly before... but more importantly it has an adult appeal to it."

Radio needs labels, and labels need radio. Jeremy, from your perspective is there an under-standing in Australia of where AC is heading? What's the reaction from the record companies toward AC music for your stations?

"I'm not sure any of us have a crystal ball on where music is heading but we do know that being entertained or stimulated by music you know and like is a key part of being a human. It makes you feel good. If a song can move you, make you tap your fingers on the steering wheel, hum along or simply turn the radio up, then it's a candidate for airplay. I think the record companies I've dealt with have been great, they know we're in different businesses, but both parties work together on the areas of common interest."

Mike, you consult some of AC's biggest radio stations as well as artist consult some of AC's biggest acts, how do you see label relations with radio?

"I can only speak for the relationship that I have



MIKE McVAY

with the labels the US and Canada, as that's where the majority of our consulting takes place. The general feeling that most label heads have is that AC doesn't sell music. These people are so busy trying to stay employed that their future right now is next month. However, if they would only read the book *The Long Tail* by Chris Anderson, they'd see that investing in AC and elongating a heritage artist's career (going beyond one-hit-wonders) will show that AC does move music."

Before we lose time on the satellite Mike, the Jack format has been hugely popular in the US in recent years, would you agree that Australia's version of Jack has been Classic Hits, a format primarily pioneered by stations like WS-FM, 4KQ and GOLD in Melbourne? Maybe we knew something you Americans didn't identify well in advance?

"I'm not a big fan of the Jack-type formats. Only because they're a middle-of-the-pack format. I like the concept of the Adult Variety format but there needs to be some personality and the format has to evolve. We're consulting a female-targeted adult variety format named Jayne-FM. Robin Marshall, the woman who invented Jayne-FM, understands that the format has to be about the listener, not about the station. Jayne looks outward. Jack looks inward. Jayne is generous. Jack is selfish. Come to think of it, Jack is like men and Jayne is like women."

Jeremy, you're the guy behind the Australian stations I mentioned – your final reaction to Mike's observations?

"In a way the 'Hits & Memories' stations that came before might have pioneered some of this. Others in Australia have adapted ideas from Jack too, and I think 'adapt' is a key word, and a wise approach. Remember that the pure Jack format in the US is announcer-free after Breakfast I don't see that working in Australia. Jack has been about craving more variety and depth but overseas it's been falling off. For us, this is where the Snow Patrols, Shannon Nolls and Dixie Chicks kick in. It's a case of learning the lessons; playlist fatigue is global so radio needs to give the audience some relief and serendipity."