

Rule changes may see rebirth of Top 40 radio

IN THE AIR / *Now that the regulations have been relaxed, the future looks bright for pure-hit stations. But will the once-mighty format find an audience?*

BY HUGH GRAHAM
Special to The Globe and Mail

WHEN Doug Bingley decided to apply for the last FM spot in Toronto radio, he looked at the city's market, with its plethora of soft, generic-sounding adult contemporary stations, and saw a gaping hole. The result: a proposal at this spring's federal licensing hearings for a station that plays "contemporary hits."

It is a choice that seems both obvious and surprising: obvious because Canada's largest radio market has been without a full-fledged Contemporary Hit Radio station for almost four years; surprising because, over the past decade, the classification (commonly known as Top 40), has almost disappeared from Canadian airwaves. Bingley, who will hear this month whether his proposal is approved, faces stiff competition from the CBC, which wants to switch from 740 AM, and from proposals for multicultural stations.

Because of a recent rule change by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, however, the future of the once-mighty Top 40 format suddenly looks a lot brighter in Canada. And for many who lament the passing of a format that cuts across the many tightly defined genres and formats into which the pop music audience has splintered, it's about time.

When Toronto's 1050 CHUM abandoned its Top 40 format — which

played the top-selling singles regardless of musical category — in 1986 after almost 30 years as Canada's benchmark hit-music station, other AM Top 40 stations followed suit, citing advertiser disdain for youth markets, changing tastes and the inability to compete with FM. By 1997, the number of hit music stations on AM had dwindled to five, compared with 28 in 1989.

While listeners got sore fingers surfing FM in search of hits, FM stations were unable to fill the void, because, until recently, CRTC legislation restricted the number of hits (defined before the rule change as any song that had made the Top 40) that they were allowed to play to less than 50 per cent of their total content. The rule, designed in 1975 to protect AM stations and promote programming diversity, made pure hit formats a technical impossibility on FM.

When Bingley, president of Rock 95 Broadcasting, based in Barrie, Ont., applied to the CRTC, he modelled his proposal after quasi-Top 40 FM stations such as Vancouver's 295.3 and Edmonton's Power 92, which had made a science out of manoeuvring around the CRTC regulation. The way to do it, he said, was to play 50 per cent foreign hits, 35 per cent current Canadian hits (which, under CRTC rules, do not count as hits) and to make up the remaining 15 per cent by playing new material that had not charted yet. He concedes that his station would not have been "pure" Top 40, but he says it would have come close.

Should Bingley be awarded the licence, those byzantine programming mathematics will no longer be necessary. The industry breathed a collective sigh of relief when the CRTC announced that after 22 years, as of May 4, 1997, it would be changing the restrictions of hit content on FM stations. A hit is now defined as any song that reached Top 40 before 1981; songs reaching the Top 40 after that are not counted as hits under the regulations. (The 30 per cent Canadian-content rule still stands, as do restrictions on pre-1981 hits, in order to protect AM oldies stations.)

Duff Roman, vice-president of CHUM Ltd., calls the rule change "a major accomplishment" after years of frustration.

"When you described what was going on in Canada to your American friends," he said, "they'd fall out of their chair: 'What's that term you use for half of the music you play — non-hits?' They were incredulous. They'd say, 'So 50 per cent of the time you're forced by government regulation to play music that people don't want to hear?' I really didn't have much of a defence."

Since the decline of Top 40 in Canada, the radio landscape has changed dramatically. Pop music, in the sense of music that is part of mainstream popular culture, has become almost obsolete, at least in radioland. Music lovers have been lost in a sea of fragmented niche stations, with their tastes being market-researched, analyzed and categorized to death to meet advertisers' rigid demographic require-

ments: Broad-spectrum crossover pop hits have become increasingly rare, while radio has been carved into demographically correct little packages.

With the proliferation of niche stations, such as alternative, dance, album rock, and adult contemporary, a collective sense of popular music culture has dwindled. Just as dance music devotees might look blank when asked what they think of Blur's thrashy new guitar single, listeners to the hard-edged grunge of alternative stations probably couldn't hum the latest Spice Girls confection, despite the fact that they are currently the biggest-selling band on the planet. Even the Canadian Top 40 charts in *The Record* and *RPM* magazines rely on a mix of airplay and sales to decide which are the hottest songs.

Howard Christensen, radio columnist for the music industry bible *The Record*, agrees that radio's segregation of pop music has left a generation of listeners in the dark. "The Spice Girls are the hottest Top 40 group out there right now, but who's playing them? The rotation on that thing on radio has been pretty minimal. If the Spice Girls had been the Beatles, they'd be unknowns," he said. "Just go back to 1964. Can you imagine, a whole metropolitan area going, 'The Beatles? What's the Beatles?'"

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