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It's 2002, And The CHR Doldrums Are Here

□ A New Year's reality check

By Guy Zapoleon

Something strange is in the air. People don't seem as passionate about entertainment as they did a year ago, and there aren't many new songs becoming hits these days. We've hit the Doldrums phase of the music cycle. Just when I begin to wonder if I was right when I first identified this musical cycle, it falls right into line again.

After studying 40 years' worth of music charts dating back to the beginning of the rock 'n' roll era in the mid-1950s, I have identified a pattern that repeats about every 10 years. We are now finishing the fifth music cycle.

When the first cycle ended with the first Doldrums period (1962-1963), rock and rhythm hits became derivative of those of the previous eight years. The percentage of actual hits decreased as a slew of more traditional adult and country acts moved in, reflecting more conservative times.



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For a real understanding of what is to come, take a look at the most recent Doldrums phase, which hit in 1991. The similarities are astounding.

Understanding The Past

In 1991 pure teen pop (New Kids On The Block, Tiffany, Debbie Gibson) was being replaced by rhythmic pop (PM Dawn, Paula Abdul) and the extremes of rock (Guns N' Roses, Megadeth) and urban (MC Hammer, Public Enemy, Bell Biv DeVoe).

The onset of the Gulf War also occurred at this time, which aroused fears of global war. People were no longer in a mindset to experiment with their lifestyle choices, including their musical brands. Instead, they were seeking comfort from their music and embracing more traditional forms like AC, country, classic rock and oldies.

During this period Hot AC became the hot new format as "Mix" stations sprang up all over America (and the world), taking advantage of the pop rock explosion and the more conservative musical tastes of 25-34 females.

At the end of 2001 and leading into 2002 pure teen pop music ('N Sync and The Backstreet Boys) is struggling or just barely making the top 10 and is being replaced by rhythmic pop (Pink, Jennifer Lopez, Destiny's Child) and the extremes of rock (Linkin Park, Creed, 3 Doors Down, Staind) and urban (Jay-Z, Ja Rule, Missy Elliott).

The war in Afghanistan is close to ending, but the war on worldwide terrorism has just begun. Expect the nature of the world and its tastes to continue to grow more and more conservative as we go into a belt-tightening period. You should see the AC, Country and Oldies formats enjoy success during this period.

Two competitors will put CHR in a squeeze play. Hot ACs will experience a resurgence as pop rock continues to create more and more hits, and the format will then be poised to take 25-34 females away from CHR. Also, young CHR/Rhythmic stations with market-success stories will spring up to woo away 15-24 women.

Less Hits, Longer Stays

Why will this happen? One reason is that the extremes of music really please the more passionate music fans who may have been fans of pure teen pop originally but grew tired of it and looked for more cutting-edge styles of rock or rhythm. As CHR radio begins to reflect these more cutting-edge and extreme sounds, the silent majority (who prefer more pop styles) will begin to be dissatisfied with what they hear and become P1 to other formats.

For the next few years you can expect the hits to stay on the charts longer and fewer new hits to come through. Hits are pretty easy to identify: They garner a certain passion score in callout. This happens when the masses agree on what the hits are. But when there are wide differences

in taste during the Extreme period followed by waning excitement for music in the Doldrums, passion scores drop.

In the initial Rebirth years there are close to 100 legitimate hits, but during the Doldrums there will be only 60-70 hits per year. Just look at the callout scores in your market to see what I'm talking about. We are seeing the lowest averages in 10 years.

Have Owners Learned?

When there are more AC and country hits (and rock and urban), there are fewer hits owned exclusively by CHR, because pop has faded. When this happens, there is less of a draw to CHR because of its lack of exclusive product, and the ratings drop by 33%-40%.

Sadly, in the '90s people who should have known better — group programmers, consultants and other industry observers — all made pronouncements in the trades, the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* that CHR was over. Then, the CHR format began to be abandoned by owners who didn't have the foresight to see the value of owning the CHR brand three years down the line, when the hits would offer more mass-appeal.

Almost 50% of all CHRs changed format during the early '90s. There were 578 CHRs in 1992. The number dropped to 318 in 1995. It was an unbelievable four years before the Rebirth cycle began. Even when the pop music explosion came (first with pop rock, later with teen pop), there were cities that had no CHR station for two or three years. Why did this happen? Largely because owners refused to give the burgeoning pop music explosion a home by launching new CHR stations. Instead, cities remained without the format, or Modern AC's were launched to take satisfy the demand for pop music.

Finally, in the late '90s, after CHRs began reaching No. 1 by playing hit music and taking advantage of the huge interest in teen pop, the format spread. CHR once again had mass-appeal. There are now approximately 468 CHRs in America. It is ironic that these new CHR stations were born only two or three years after the Doldrums period, a tough ratings time for the format.



ROCKIN' THE SUBURBS

Interscope/IGA band No Doubt hung out with staffers from San Francisco Hot AC KLLC during the band's promotional stop in the Bay Area supporting their current chart-topper, "Hey Baby." Pictured here are (back, l-r) KLLC's Sterling; ND bass player Tony Kanal; KLLC PD John Peake; ND vocalist Gwen Stefani, guitarist Tom Dumont and drummer Adrian Young; KLLC MD Julie Nakahara and (front, l-r) morning sidekick Hooman; and IGA Promo Rep Michael Novia.

How should CHR react to the Doldrums? First, be listener-driven. Do your research, pay attention to what it says, and don't use instincts that reflect a more experimental time. Listeners want more familiar music and less new music. If you have young programmers, get more experienced opinions from consultants or group PDs to help interpret the research and understand the effects of the Doldrums on your radio station.

How should CHR react to the adult threat of Hot AC and the young female attack of CHR/Rhythmic? It shouldn't! It should be what listeners expect a 15-24-female-focused hit machine to be, balancing rock and rhythm and using available pop as the glue.

The Three M's

During the tough time for CHR it is not good enough to have only one of the three M's; your station must excel in all three: music, mornings and marketing.

• **Music:** The key to maintaining mass-appeal is sound balance — varying tempo and style so that both pop rock and pop rhythm fans will hear their favorites every two to three songs. The hard part during the Doldrums is finding pop music, which acts as the glue between the extremes of rock and rhythm.

As rock and rhythm get harder while pop music fades, it becomes more difficult to play both rock and rhythm on the same format. That is when CHRs change format to specialize in either rock or rhythm. Instead of going to this extreme, CHR should buffer rock and rhythm with pop oldies and look for the right dance, pop rock and pop rhythm songs that can be substituted for pure pop.

• **Mornings:** More music on morning shows will not save a format during the Doldrums. Successful CHR morning shows reflect what is happening in their communities and the world. Successful CHRs are the ones with morning shows that everyone is buzzing about each day. Great CHR programmers spend at least an hour a day working on the morning show to fine-tune it, prepare tomorrow's show and maxi-

mize potential morning show opportunities.

• **Marketing:** One major reason people listen to CHR is for the dose of adrenaline they get from the format. That comes not only from the music and personalities; it also comes from ongoing, exciting contests, which the CHR format is known for.

It is also essential during the Doldrums to maintain audience awareness of the format. Databasing; street presence; and billboards, bumper stickers and TV are critical during a time when people might forget about the one format that delivers ultimate variety — all types of music on one radio station.

Realistic Expectations

When you garner the kind of ratings that CHR has over the past five years, including scoring with 25-54 adults, you begin to think it will be that way forever. The Doldrums is a time to get back to basics, to focus and to protect the base 15-24 female target. During this time even that demo is at risk.

It is important to remember that all formats have healthy and sick stages during their product life cycles. When some formats do well, others will suffer. When CHR is on top, more traditional music formats like Country, Oldies and Classic Rock suffer lower ratings. During the Doldrums this trend is reversed.

Owners must remember that it takes much more money to start up and brand a new radio station than to spend what's necessary to fuel the existing product. At Zapoleon Media Strategies, we recommend supporting CHR by taking out "Radio Life Insurance" on your station. What is Radio Life Insurance? It is spending money on maintenance, music, perceptual research and marketing. It's budgeting the funds to buy the necessary equipment, hire the best people and conduct proper training for the staff. This Radio Life Insurance can prevent the death of a radio station, especially during the Doldrums.

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