

2012 Outlook: Doldrums On The Way

October 25, 2011

Over the last few months, I've had several important conversations about the 10-year music cycle with different people, including my long-time programming friend Brian Thomas. He and I both were new to radio, and programmed at the end of an Extremes and Doldrums period similar to what we're seeing now ... about that later.

Many programmers have had different views on the music cycle, and there are even some music cycle doubters. I've gotten into discussions with a lot of them over the past year. They have their doubts, despite the fact that the music cycle has repeated every 10 years since the mid-'50s.

Here are two facts about the music cycle:

First of all, we all know that music tastes change, and when one style is overplayed and every format is saturated in it, people grow tired of it and want the music style they haven't been hearing. So when people get too much Pop and not enough Rock, they want more Rock. When there is no R&B being played, people crave it. So if you imagine a pendulum with the three core styles -- Rock on the left, R&B on the right and Pop in the middle -- that pendulum swings based on the ebb and flow of what's being released by the labels, and what becomes popular.

The pendulum swings to a new position when one of these core styles is oversaturated at Mainstream Top 40, and gets overplayed as it crosses over to other formats. People always want variety of music styles at Top 40, Hot AC and Mainstream AC, and when they hear too much of one style and not enough of another, then the music pendulum swings the other way. We know that the three phases -- Pop Rebirth, Extremes and Doldrums -- always repeat based on this pendulum swing, but the way they occur is never exactly the same.

Second, the intensity of the cycles really depends on the gatekeepers' reaction to the cycles. Many people say the music cycle will change now with the Internet and social media being such a strong factor in the way people discover music. But studies show that radio is still the most dominant factor in music discovery, and Top 40 has always been the leader in making the hits ... and it still is. So radio -- and especially Top 40 radio -- determines what happens in the music cycle more than any other factor.

The programming team at Z100 -- Tom Poleman, Sharon Dastur and Jagger -- have always understood what Top 40 is all about, from the time they brought it back to success and worldwide admiration. They understand better than anyone that Top 40's success will always be based in delivering a variety of music styles. Yes, Top 40 is always about playing the hits, but playing them in balance. That's one major reason why Z100 has always been a success, and why they have been able to navigate through the Extremes and Doldrums phases that haven't always been kind to Top 40's ratings.

What phase has the music cycle been in these past few years? It's been in the Extremes. While R&B had a big year in 2010 with Jay Z and Eminem having #1 albums and multiple hits, the Danceable Pop trend that had started with Timbaland and Justin Timberlake in 2006 continued to grow, and this Extremes cycle was more about the massive volume of danceable Pop and R&B and the absence of Pop/Rock. This Extremes cycle resembles most the Extreme periods of 30 years ago during the Disco era in the late '70s and '80s, when Dance music dominated. People call danceable Pop music by Britney Spears and Lady Gaga different than Cascada, Afrojack or Alexandra Stan, but it's really not that different. And because it's a variation of Pop, we've seen the best Extremes for Top 40 ratings in 30 years, with an overabundance of Pop and Dance. Even R&B artists like Usher and Flo Rida were making Dance songs, not R&B hits.

At the same time, Pop music has been oversaturated at other formats. Even Country got poppy with Taylor Swift, The Band Perry and Lady Antebellum exploring the Pop side. You're beginning to see



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what looks like the Doldrums beginning ... the signs are all there! Pop/Pop Rhythm, after being so dominant, are starting to slow down a little in AMT's and callout, and the sudden acceptance of Pop Rock/Pop Alternative artists like Neon Trees and Foster The People, as well as Acoustic Pop & Pop Rock music like Adele, The Script and The Fray and new releases by Pop Rock artists like Daughtry are showing positive signs.

You've seen left-field genres like standards artists Michael Buble and Country crossovers becoming big hits as mentioned earlier ... all signs of the Doldrums approaching. So will the Doldrums be bad for Top 40 radio as they have been in the past? I don't believe that they will, for the same reasons that the last two Extremes periods -- when we went more Hip-Hop in the early part of last decade -- weren't bad for Top 40 radio.

Also, during the Doldrums the last time in the mid-'00s, Top 40 had plenty of help finding Pop music from America's #1 television show, American Idol. And now we have quadruple the amount of television music competition shows supplying us with Pop music from the X Factor and Sing Off, along with cable shows like Majors and Minors this Fall, and this winter the return of the very popular The Voice and the gold standard, American Idol. So Top 40 radio shouldn't be starving for Pop music like it did in the '60s, '70s, '80s and even '90s Doldrums phases of the Cycle.

Plus, since the first edition of the Zapoleon Music Cycle theory was published in Joel Denver's 1992 CHR Column in Radio & Records, you've now had two generations of radio programmers who have had time to study the Music Cycle, and now have a much better understanding of the need for balance, and how to program around the different phases of the Music Cycle.