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Zapoleon Music Cycle- POP VIEW;Birth and Rebirth On the Airwaves

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Arts

POP VIEW

POP VIEW;Birth and Rebirth On the Airwaves

By Neil Strauss

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FOR SOME TIME NOW, THE concept behind top-40 radio has been dead. Take a look at the charts. The music in the top 40 -- hard-core rap, bedroom rhythm-and-blues, Latin pop, alternative rock, techno dance, country ballads, classic rock, ska reggae, children's songs, gospel, novelty tunes -- is so varied that no commercial radio station could ever play it all and hold on to an audience. Yet the artists performing this mix have plenty in common. They're all making music in and about the same period in history, living under the same Government, recording for the same record labels, using the same technology, touring the same cities.

Trying to make sense of the wide range of popular and underground music is like being a character in a Kafka novel; one struggles to detect within a maze of petty

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rules and divisions a higher order that is completely inaccessible if it exists at all. Nonetheless, some people try to squeeze this music into a unified theory, to find a bridge that will link the pop ballads of Mariah Carey with the alternative rock of the Smashing Pumpkins and the staccato rap of Bone Thugs-n-Harmony. And though it is unlikely that anyone can come up with a theory into which every piece of music in the top 40 fits neatly (or not so neatly), some theories go a long way toward doing so.

A good metaphor for 20th-century popular music is the banyan tree. As it grows, its branches send shoots to the ground, and each branch takes root and forms a new trunk. Eventually, an intricate network of trees is created, with the trees having two things in common: all are rooted in the same ground and all are linked, either directly or remotely. And as the banyan tree sprouts new branches, even its oldest, most obscure ones remain alive. The banyan tree is popular music, its branches are different musical styles, and the earth that nourishes it is traditional African, European and Asian music.

Guy Zapoleon, one of radio's top consultants, has been studying the way the banyan tree of popular music has been growing from the dawn of top-40 radio in the mid-1950's to the present. He has been trying to figure out why, after a branch like acid rock has taken root, it has been followed by a contrary style like soft rock. His theory, one of the more plausible ones out there, is that the music on pop radio is cyclical. Every 10 years, it moves through the same three phases. It begins with "birth" (or "rebirth"), when an exciting musical trend appears, moves to "extremes," when the music loses its freshness and its audience gravitates to excessive, specialized polarities, then ends with "doldrums," when radio overcompensates for trendy indulgence and plays it safe with traditional, middle-of-the-road music.

Mr. Zapoleon believes that radio has been through four such cycles. The first began in 1956, with the emergence of Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry and rock-and-roll, and the fourth ended in 1991, with doldrums typified by the adult-oriented soft rock of Gloria Estefan and Billy Joel and the mild-mannered country of Garth Brooks and Billy Ray Cyrus. Here's an example of a complete cycle (the second): the rise of Motown and the beginning of the British invasion in the mid-60's triggered a rebirth, followed by

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the extremes of acid rock and hard-edged psychedelic soul in the late 60's, then the doldrums of James Taylor, John Denver and Anne Murray in the early 70's.

According to this theory, radio is in the early stages of a fifth cycle. The rebirth began brewing with the success of Seattle grunge bands like Nirvana and Pearl Jam in 1992, which led to the rise of modern, or alternative, rock as the country's most popular new radio format. In Manhattan alone, there are four stations playing Pearl Jam, Nirvana and their many clones. But this excessive attention to one style and the growing homogeneity of the alternative rock played on the radio are sure signs that the freshness is fast becoming stale. Top 40 is now not far from the "extremes" phase, and if Mr. Zapoleon's predictions are right, a hard, pessimistic variant of alternative rock will begin to dominate pop radio.

To anyone who listens to rock radio today and hears what sounds like Pearl Jam being played over and over again, the word rebirth may not come to mind as quickly as the word redundancy. So it may be useful to posit another theory on top of Mr. Zapoleon's: that top-40 radio is two to four years late in getting to the music that revitalizes it. CONSIDER, FOR EXAMPLE, radio's current "rebirth" bands, Nirvana and Pearl Jam. From 1988 to 1990, two years before either's first top-40 single, college radio stations were on top of this style, playing albums by Nirvana and Mother Love Bone (with members of Pearl Jam), as underground rock fans eagerly sought out any band from Seattle.

If this period seems like an exception, consider the year 1956, when Presley, Berry and others burst into the limelight. By then, Presley had already recorded what was arguably his best music, his singles on the Sun label: "That's All Right," "Good Rockin' Tonight" and "Mystery Train," which came out in 1954 and 1955. And the Chess label, on which Berry appeared, had for a couple of years been putting out blues and rhythm-and-blues songs by Little Walter, Bo Diddley and the Moonglows that appealed to the nascent (primarily white) rock audience.

So what is brewing in the underground today that may lead to the rebirth of top-40 radio in 2000?

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It's hard to tell. The exciting underground music of 1969, by bands like the Stooges and the Velvet Underground, was never picked up by top-40 radio. Nor, to any great extent, was the music of Parliament-Funkadelic or the Meters. But all these bands proved to be among the most influential of rock and rhythm-and-blues. So it remains to be seen whether non-Western music by performers like Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and Cesaria Evora or the soundtrack-meets-dance music of Tricky and Portishead or a variant of techno will lead to radio's next rebirth.

Though top-40 radio may be slow to pick up new styles of music, it may be ahead on one front: economic recession. Harold Zullo, a clinical psychologist who has analyzed the lyrics of every top-40 song from 1955 to the present, believes that increases in pessimistic song content precede recessions by one to two years. This theory makes sense; when the public isn't feeling good or optimistic, it isn't spending and investing a lot of money. The downcast hits of 1956 -- from Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel" and "Hound Dog" to Guy Mitchell's "Singing the Blues" -- preceded the recession of 1958. The big songs of 1979 -- Donna Summer's "Bad Girls" and the Eagles' "Heartache Tonight" -- preceded the downturn of the early 1980's.

So, look once more at Mariah Carey, the Smashing Pumpkins and Bone Thugs-n-Harmony, and you might find a link. Ms. Carey's "One Sweet Day" is about the death of a friend, and most of her new album, "Daydream," is about lost or unattainable love. Bone Thugs-n-Harmony's hit "Tha Crossroads" and almost all of its album "E. 1999 Eternal" are about the AIDS-related death of the rapper Eazy-E and the deaths of other friends. And on most of their album "Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness," the Smashing Pumpkins sing of depression and death.

If these theories have any validity, prepare to close this century with years of bad radio and a bad economy.