

Pop Radio Is Struggling — Will Opening Its Doors to Country Help Rejuvenate it?

Country and top 40 radio have always had a tenuous relationship, but at a time when the former is producing bigger hits, the latter may be embracing the crossover.

BY **ELIAS LEIGHT** BILLBOARD MAGAZINE

Morgan Wallen's "Last Night" climbed to No. 5 on Billboard's latest Pop Airplay chart. Ryan Smith

Kane Brown released “Heaven,” a love-drunk single that practically radiates romantic bliss, in the fall of 2017. The following May, the track topped Billboard’s **Country Airplay** chart and climbed to No. 15 on the Hot 100. Despite this success, “we never tried to cross it over” to pop radio, says **Martha Earls**, who manages Brown. “In what world would you have an almost Diamond-certified single that you didn’t try to take over to pop? It was a different time. Back then, that opportunity just was not there.”

Country Music Consumption Is Way Up in 2023 — and Morgan Wallen Is Leading the Charge

Today, Earls says, conditions are different — she “absolutely would” have promoted “Heaven” to the Top 40 format. “Let’s take it to pop [radio] tomorrow!” she jokes.

This summer, country singles are finally starting to fare better on the Billboard Pop Airplay chart: **Morgan Wallen**’s “Last Night” is at No. 5 on the latest ranking, while **Luke Combs**’ “Fast Car” hit No. 20. (They also sit at No. 1 and No. 2 on the Billboard Hot 100, respectively.) “Most Top 40 programmers are protective of pop music sounds,” says **Steven Shannon**, music director at KZFN in Moscow, Idaho. “It’s unusual to have two country songs out at the same time that are in the Top 20.”

With that in mind, “it’s nice to see more people being open to our format,” adds **Chris Kappy**, who manages Luke Combs. “I appreciate the fact that people can look at country music just like they look at any other genre.”

In the past, pop radio has flirted with country periodically but never really embraced the genre, suggesting that the success of Wallen and Combs could be another temporary blip. (Pop radio's arms-length approach to country is part of the reason why, before this year, the last track to top both Country Airplay and the Hot 100 was [Lonestar](#)'s "Amazed" in 2000.) "I guarantee that most Top 40 programmers are resistant" to adding country to their playlists, Shannon says. Sure enough, one pop PD tells [Billboard](#), "I'd rather be playing hip-hop."

As a result, country executives say they still only consider attempting a pop radio campaign in special cases. But shifts in the music landscape could point to a bigger role for country in the pop airplay mix moving forward. The genre's audience is surging — country's consumption has increased by a [whopping 20.3% year-over-year](#) in the first 26 weeks of 2023, according to Luminate, making its popularity tough to overlook. (By contrast, pop is up by 7.6%.)

Country singles get to shine on pop radio roughly once a decade, according to [Guy Zapoleon](#), a veteran radio consultant. He is known in radio circles for his "10-year music cycle" theory, which divides pop airplay into three distinct periods: the birth phase, the extremes phase, and the doldrums phase. Terrestrial radio is currently very much in the doldrums — "the worst doldrums of all times," Zapoleon declares — and during these periods, it's customary for Top 40 programmers to cast around for hits elsewhere, roping in singles from country or the format known as "adult contemporary."

In the past, Zapoleon says, this has led to increased airplay for country at Top 40 for periods lasting two to three years. In 1963, [Johnny Cash](#), Skeeter Davis, and Bobby Bare were beneficiaries of this trend; in 1974, programmers embraced Glen Campbell, [Charlie Rich](#), and Mac Davis; in the early 1980s, [Dolly Parton](#), Kenny Rogers, and Eddie Rabbitt were added on to Top 40 playlists, [boosted in part](#) in the wake of the success of John Travolta's 1980 film [Urban Cowboy](#).

This context suggests that Wallen and Combs may be helping Top 40 through a rough patch, but that the dalliance won't last. "If history is an indication, I think maybe this [playing more country at Top 40] might be just a trend," says [Matt Mony](#), program director for WYOY in Jackson, Mississippi. "It's sort of like what we saw with all the sample-songs that we were playing" — think [Bebe Rexha](#) and David Guetta's "I'm Good (Blue)" — "that's starting to lighten up a bit."

Country artists seeking Top 40 airplay don't just have to win over pop programmers, they also have to worry about country programmers' possessiveness. "In the past,

there was a sense that if an artist crossed over from country they were leaving the format,” Earls acknowledges. With Brown, “we almost created two careers,” she adds. “We would have a song go to Top 40” — including collaborations with Marshmello, [blackbear](#), and Swae Lee — but also “make sure that we released music to super-serve the country fans too.”

[Adrian Michaels](#), vp of innovation, radio, and streaming at BMG’s Stoney Creek Records, has been on an impressive streak with [Jelly Roll](#), a 38-year-old who spent time in prison for dealing drugs, got out and built a budding rap career, and then turned into a country breakout. Jelly Roll is now starting to receive some pop airplay after enjoying success at both country and rock radio. “It definitely bruises some [programming] people when they see” artists move to other formats, Michaels says. “I get yelled at a lot. But the audience has a much bigger voice than a gatekeeper saying, ‘this belongs on this station only, because we’re the ones who broke them.’”

And that voice has gotten a lot louder lately. The runaway success of “Last Night” and “Fast Car” is taking place amidst an eruption of interest in the genre that Wallen and Combs call home. “We’re seeing a global moment for the genre right now, and that is opening up some space at other formats,” explains [Stacy Blythe](#), svp of radio promotion at Wallen’s label, Big Loud.

Those other formats may not be able to continue to look past country if that growth continues. “What I hope happens is that [pop radio programmers] see the numbers coming in on streaming, and if this [country song] is streaming as much as this [pop single], obviously that shows there are people out there listening,” Kappy says. “It’s contemporary hits radio. They should be playing the contemporary hits of the day.”

In addition, terrestrial radio’s role in the music ecosystem has shifted dramatically in the last decade in ways that might make the pop airwaves more hospitable to country. One key difference is that many young listeners have abandoned radio for streaming services and TikTok; [a recent survey](#) from the consultancy Jacobs Media Strategy found that the average age of radio listeners is around 55 years old.

This bodes well for the cross-format popularity of country, which the radio industry historically views as a genre favored by more mature listeners. “Another reason country is working so well at Top 40 right now is because we’re dealing more with women 25-plus, and that’s a really good fit for that genre,” Mony says.

And “as the Top 40 format continues to age up, programmers should consider country crossovers,” adds [Cat Collins](#), a radio consultant and former vp of Top 40 and Hot AC for Townsquare Media.

Some radio experts also believe that the pop format has strayed from its roots in the past decade-ish as a platform that elevates all the hits, regardless of their origin. “The theoretical ideal of Top 40 is to play hits from across the spectrum of music, a notion that has largely faded, as most Top 40s have been sticking to a very narrow lane,” says **Larry Rosin**, president of Edison Research. Recent country singles that did well on pop radio — like **Dan + Shay**’s 2021 hit “10,000 Hours” and **Gabby Barrett**’s 2020 smash “I Hope,” both of which cracked the top 10 — gained access in part by incorporating Top 40 mainstays (Justin Bieber and Charlie Puth, respectively).

Top 40 stations are going through a brutal period of low ratings; could the “narrow lane” approach be adding to the format’s troubles? For Zapoleon, it’s simply a matter of numbers: Country singles accounted for more than 20% of the year-end Hot 100 in 2022, but around 1% of the year-end Mediabase Top 40 chart. “That’s a lot of country hits Top 40 isn’t playing,” he says. “Hopefully they wake up.”

SiriusXM’s Hits 1 is one of five Top 40 stations already testing “Need a Favor,” a growling, lighters-up power ball from Jelly Roll that has spent multiple weeks atop the rock radio chart and is inside the top five at country radio. “We’re not waiting for campaigns to come in our direction,” says **Alex Tear**, vp of music programming for SiriusXM and Pandora. Too often, “radio is late to the game.”

His peers may be more receptive to Jelly Roll this year than in years past. “I don’t want to jinx anything, but don’t be surprised if, by the time this comes out, you see [Jelly Roll] really popping up at Top 40,” Michaels says. “It’s a wonderful feeling for us to take somebody from Music Row here and have this much reach.”