

Broadcasting Multiculturalism— and Rap—on Crossover Radio

Fresh off Def Jam's 1987 national tour, rapper Chuck D penned a rhyme exposing radio programmers' reluctance to embrace rap: "Radio, suckers never play me/ On the mix they just okay me."¹ For any and all of the reasons discussed in the previous chapter, his group, Public Enemy, was rarely played on the radio. Even when DJs occasionally broadcast the group's songs during hip hop mix shows, they would sometimes only play the instrumentals.² On the whole, very few rap acts were heard in regular rotation on commercial radio; for instance, in 1987, just under 3 percent of the songs on *Billboard's* "Hot 100 Airplay" chart featured rapped vocals.³

But over the next few years this all changed, as commercial radio programmers across the country began regularly adding rap songs to their playlists. Though Public Enemy's intentionally radio-unfriendly music continued to be left off commercial playlists, plenty of other rap artists found their way onto the airwaves as rap began its long ascent into becoming the most popular genre in the United States.⁴ The next two chapters explore how this happened. Just as both economic and musical reasons explain why the Black-Oriented format failed to support rap in its early years, this new transformation concerned both money and sound, as radio stations found ways to monetize rap's audience and rap artists developed music that more easily fit on the radio.

First, we'll examine how the radio industry created space for rap within its segregated format structure. Rap's crossover did not happen through the standard procedure, wherein Black artists first experienced airplay on Black-Oriented stations. Rather, a new radio format produced the industry conditions necessary for rap to become part of the popular-music mainstream in the US. This format, which in the 1980s was most often called Crossover (but is now called Rhythmic or Rhythmic Contemporary), brought together multicultural audiences in mostly urban areas. It's in one of these areas where this story begins.

In 1986, Power 106, the first nationally renowned Crossover station, began broadcasting in Los Angeles. Crossover stations such as Power 106 challenged the radio industry's organization by playing diverse styles of music to an audience of Black, white, and Hispanic listeners. As the format became popular nationally, Crossover programmers carefully created playlists to cultivate multicultural audiences and monetize previously ignored demographics, participating in the broader cultural trend of embracing multiculturalism as a way to understand and commodify the country's increasing diversity. By the end of the decade these playlists regularly included rap songs, as Crossover programmers noticed rap's appeal among their diverse listeners. This format's success inspired Top 40 stations to program much of the same music, ushering rap into the mainstream. For the genre once considered "too black" to be played on the radio, its presence on commercial radio playlists illuminated the changing racial identity of the US mainstream.⁵ But rap's inclusion on commercial stations came at the expense of Black cultural ownership, as Crossover stations decentered the interests of people of color in the name of multicultural inclusion.

"NAME THE FORMAT"

In February 1986, white programmer Jeff Wyatt moved to the sunny City of Angels from Philadelphia, where he had been working at Urban station Power 99 for the last three years. In Los Angeles Wyatt became program director at KPWR Power 106, the month-old station owned by national radio group Emmis Broadcasting.⁶ Industry insiders celebrated the launch of what *Billboard* called the area's first "high-powered urban outlet," which came on the air playing what the station described as "a fresh new music mix."⁷ But Power 106 was not quite an Urban station: Emmis's regional vice president Doyle Rose, who helped create the station, admitted that he was not sure what format it fit into, joking that Emmis was "considering having an industry 'name the format' contest."⁸

Rose's confusion indicated that the station's playlist and audience did not match the standard conception of an Urban station. Many of its up-tempo selections could be found on the "Hot Black Singles" chart, as might be expected for the format. But Power 106 also played songs typically found on Top 40 playlists; about two-thirds of the new music played on local Top 40 station KIIS could also be heard on Power 106. This amount of overlap indicated the extent to which Power 106 was playing what the record industry considered to be crossover music: songs by Black artists aimed at wider and whiter audiences, and songs by white artists aimed at Black audiences. Crossover music was the product of record-company demands for songs that appealed to racially and ethnically diverse audiences, usually accomplished through collaboration or stylistic influence, and it was quite popular on the radio in 1986.⁹ Programmers at Power 106 capitalized on this trend while also playing club-oriented twelve-inch mixes of less popular dance and

up-tempo R&B hits, as well as songs with “crossover potential that ha[d] not yet been realized.”¹⁰

The playlist was designed to attract an audience made up of Black, white, and Hispanic young adults, ideally between the ages of eighteen and thirty.¹¹ While radio stations all over the country had long attracted multicultural audiences regardless of programming intent, contemporary commercial FM programmers rarely designed stations for this sort of audience so explicitly. Perhaps the quickly diversifying Los Angeles area was well-prepared for multicultural programming: R&B stations and local venues, as in many places across the country, fostered similarly diverse coalition audiences in the 1950s; and by the 1980s, punk and rock groups in Los Angeles were breaking down industry and social barriers between various racial and ethnic groups.¹² But Power 106’s targeting wasn’t a sure bet—reflecting on the station’s beginnings, Emmis vice president Rick Cummings claimed that his company did not know whether “something like this could reach two or three ethnic groups.”¹³ What Cummings neglected to mention was that stations across the country were already reaching “two or three ethnic groups,” but programmers usually didn’t pay attention to them.

Over the next six months, the station’s ratings soared; by July it was the number one station in the Los Angeles area, the second-largest radio market in the country.¹⁴ And Power 106 quickly made its mark on the industry: conventions that year were abuzz with discussions about the new hybrid format, twelve-inch single purchases were on the rise, and Emmis demonstrated their confidence in the concept by creating a similar “Contemporary Hit Urban” station in New York City that summer.¹⁵

Or at least that was the format description Yvonne Olson of *Radio & Records* used for Power 106. The radio industry did not know what to make of this station and had trouble classifying it within the racially defined format structure—industry professionals found it difficult to make sense of a station aimed at “two or three ethnic groups” given their long-standing Black/white binary. Power 106’s playlists, which *Billboard* described as “upbeat, pop/urban fare,” did not fit into the radio industry’s preexisting categories, although radio journals tried: *Billboard* called it an “urban hybrid” and an “Urban/hit” station, while *Radio & Records* maintained that it was an Urban station.¹⁶

This word choice was not simply a question of semantics or identity—money was on the line. The station’s categorization, which denoted whether audiences were mostly white or non-white, determined advertising rates. Indicating the station’s hybridity as well as his unwillingness to commit to one format for fear of financial consequences, Jeff Wyatt described the station as “CHR/Urban” (using one of the industry’s terms for Top 40, *CHR*). Urban programmer Lee Michaels agreed with his characterization of its hybridity, noting that it “isn’t really Urban and really isn’t CHR.”¹⁷ The station’s music mix deviated from the norms of the commercial radio industry; in the words of *Radio & Records*’ publisher, the station

was so “violently different” from the programming status quo that it “qualif[ied] in a whole new category.”¹⁸

Playing music for both Black and white listeners was not, however, the most “violently different” aspect of Power 106’s programming. According to the trade journals, radio stations were usually Top 40 *or* Black-Oriented, not some “pop/urban” mixture, and they typically targeted majority white *or* majority Black audiences, not both. But in the mid-1980s, playlists at Top 40 stations were racially mixed; in early 1986, for example, Los Angeles’s KIIS reported that half of the songs on their playlist were by Black musicians.¹⁹ And Urban stations were designed to attract Black and white audiences, which was why trade journals wanted to classify Power 106 as one.²⁰ The stir caused by Power 106’s programming revealed the white-centrism of the radio industry. It wasn’t that stations hadn’t tried to appeal to both Black and white audiences before, but that stations claiming to be white-oriented typically did not so explicitly try to attract Black listeners.

BUILDING A COALITION AUDIENCE

What was harder to explain was Power 106’s interest in Hispanic listeners, as the commercial radio industry was only beginning to target this demographic. Like other forms of media, radio was rather slow to woo what are now categorized as Latinx audiences.²¹ The recording industry wasn’t much faster: the first Latin music division at a major label was created in 1983, and the Grammy Awards added some Latin music categories a year later.²² In many ways the history of Latinx-Oriented broadcasting aligns with that of Black-Oriented broadcasting; while a few radio stations began broadcasting Spanish-language programming in the 1920s when programmers bought time on English-language stations, the first Spanish-language station came on air in 1946 in San Antonio, Texas.²³ Media scholar Dolores Inés Casillas argues that, following the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act in 1967, Spanish-language or bilingual public radio stations have acted as “acoustic allies” for their local communities by acknowledging their presence and voicing their identity and political concerns.²⁴ However, the number of what Casillas describes as Spanish-oriented stations was limited; in 1980, there were only sixty-seven such stations nationwide, although this increased to 168 by 1986, 390 by 1990, and close to six hundred by 2000.²⁵

Defining and monetizing Latinx audiences was complicated. The stations Casillas details defined their audience through language preference, broadcasting mostly in Spanish to attract audiences of Spanish-language listeners. Advertising agencies in the 1980s also used language as a way to classify certain Hispanic audiences; they assumed that more “acculturated” Hispanic consumers, such as those whose families had been in the United States for several generations, were better targeted by English-language media.²⁶ Within the radio industry, however, language wasn’t

such a defining quality. Until 1990, radio ratings measurement firm Arbitron identified potential Hispanic radio listeners by Spanish surname rather than language preference. Further, as Casillas notes, the firm required the listeners they surveyed (or those around them) to have some English proficiency, as Spanish-language surveys were available only if requested in English.²⁷ This meant that during these years Arbitron failed to accurately measure the audience that Spanish-language stations were trying to cultivate, and almost certainly included English-dominant audiences in their Hispanic audience profile.²⁸ Until the mid-1980s, however, English-language radio stations rarely catered to these listeners.

Power 106, notably, acknowledged and took into account the distinct tastes and identities of English-speaking Hispanic listeners, creating an intentionally multiethnic audience. Indicating the station's awareness of this audience, a consultant who helped devise the station's programming classified it as part of the "Urban Coalition Format."²⁹ This formatting, what one programmer deemed "California Urban," reflected the area's large Hispanic population, which another programmer thought made it "diametrically different from any other market in the US."³⁰ It's important to note that English-speaking Hispanic audiences in Los Angeles had already been listening to other local Top 40 and Black-Oriented radio stations. It was not *their* listening habits that were remarkable; rather, it was Power 106's recognition of and orientation toward this "California Urban" coalition audience that deviated from standard commercial radio programming practices.

The station's monetization of this audience aligned with a wider contemporary shift towards acknowledging and profiting from the multicultural makeup of the United States. Scholar Jodi Melamed argues that during the 1980s and 1990s the left adopted a racial attitude of "liberal multiculturalism," advocating for pluralism in response to the growing diversity of the United States as well as critiques of civil rights-era race-based movements failing to exact equal opportunities for all.³¹ In contrast with the "more or less unchallenged ideological common sense of the first half of this century," the melting-pot ideal of monoculturalism, multiculturalism challenged the notion that the diverse US public should assimilate into a single, homogeneous culture.³² Instead, it highlighted the distinct identities of diverse racial and ethnic groups. Liberal multiculturalism in particular advocated for reforming preexisting institutions and constraints to better represent diverse interests; it inspired heightened visibility of the United States' multicultural population, which could be seen in more diverse reading lists in public schools, the institutionalization of ethnic studies programs in higher education, the politics of Reverend Jesse Jackson's National Rainbow Coalition, and even the creation of new skin-tone colored markers and crayons.³³ Like Power 106, each of these examples of liberal multiculturalism simultaneously recognized *and* commodified minority groups previously ignored by mainstream white America, using inclusion to create larger markets.³⁴

The radio industry did not know how to adjust to Power 106's multicultural spin on their racial project. For more than a year, the trade journals debated with the station's staff about whether it should report as a Top 40 or an Urban station, as mainstream or marginal. During this period, *Billboard* and *Radio & Records* offered to include the station's playlists in their Black-Oriented charts, but Power 106's staff refused to report their playlists because they objected to trade magazines trying to "pigeonhole" the station—or, just as likely, because they worried about the financial implications of being classified as a station for primarily Black audiences.³⁵ For this reason, the station's playlists were not included in *Billboard* chart calculations. This meant that, for over a year, airplay on the most popular station in the second-largest radio market in the country didn't affect official measures of song popularity because the organization of the radio industry couldn't make space for a station that so overtly desegregated its local radio market. Put another way: the playlist at one of the most successful stations in the country was excluded from *Billboard* chart calculations because the trade journal claimed that the station played too much music for Black and Hispanic audiences to count as a Top 40 station, and the station maintained that it played too much music for white audiences to count as anything else.³⁶

Power 106 challenged the radio industry's unsophisticated racial logic, which presumed that white audiences mostly listened to Top 40 and other white-oriented stations, Black audiences mostly listened to Black-Oriented stations, and Hispanic audiences mostly listened to Spanish-language stations (if locally available). Even less sophisticated was the industry's presumption that these three groups were it: the industry overlooked all other demographic groups who also tuned in to the radio. While still only attending to three demographic groups, Power 106 made a step toward acknowledging the diversity of its community. Defined by its coalition audience, the station desegregated part of the radio dial, monetizing multicultural audiences and normalizing their existence. In an industry that had conceived of its audiences as racially segregated for decades, Power 106 consciously created a multicultural public.

BECOMING A FORMAT

As the industry debated exactly how Power 106 fit within its preexisting format framework, programmers around the country who were inspired by Power 106's success created similar stations. Using slogans and descriptors such as "power," "hot," "a fresh new music mix," and "danceable top 40 without any hard-edged rock records," these stations played up-tempo dance music for multicultural audiences throughout the United States.³⁷ White programmer Joel Salkowitz, for example, designed Emmis's WQHT in New York to have "enough of a twist to appeal to the typical [Top 40] audience, and a great percentage of Hispanics and some blacks."³⁸ The popularity of these stations across the United States—in places

such as Milwaukee, New Orleans, San Antonio, and Honolulu—moved MTV, the music-video outlet famous for its reticence toward playing artists of color, to create a Friday night show of multicultural dance music.³⁹ Power 106, in turn, was likely inspired by a similar station in Miami, which had successfully been programming pop, R&B, and dance music for Hispanic, white, and Black audiences since early 1985.⁴⁰ Across the country, the ethnic and racial makeup of each station's audience varied depending on each city's demographics and the local radio market's makeup. For example, nine months after Power 106 came on air, research showed that at least half of their audience comprised non-Black listeners; on the other coast, Emmis's New York station WQHT reported after a year of broadcasting that their audience was "57% white, 31% Hispanic, and 12% black."⁴¹ By the fall of 1987, *Billboard* tallied thirteen hybrid stations like Power 106 in the United States, mostly in urban areas, and thirteen more with playlists that hewed a little closer to either Top 40 or Urban playlists.⁴² Together, these stations struck a blow to the radio industry's simplistic assumption that Hispanic, Black, and white listeners by and large tuned in to separate stations.

But these demographic terms failed to capture the diversity of each station's listeners. Mainstream understandings of race and ethnicity in the United States have often separated Black and Latinx populations into discrete, nonoverlapping identities, even though the government has officially measured those who identify as non-white Hispanic since the 1980 census. Radio industry personnel were no different, largely thinking about their Black, white, and Hispanic listeners as three distinct groups.⁴³ Arbitron and trade journals grouped together all listeners who self-identified as Hispanic even though, at the most superficial level, the musical tastes—not to mention the racial identities and cultural backgrounds—of the self-identified Hispanic listeners tuning in to Power 106 in Los Angeles were distinct from those tuning in to Milwaukee's Crossover station.⁴⁴ And by limiting their audience profile to these three demographic groups, stations failed to acknowledge other minority groups that may have made up sizeable portions of their audiences.

Just over a year after Power 106 launched, *Billboard* resolved the problem of how to categorize stations aimed at a multicultural coalition audience by introducing a new chart recording airplay at these stations, the "Hot Crossover 30."⁴⁵ Radio industry personnel often used the "Crossover" chart name to describe this burgeoning format, also referring to it as Rhythmic, Rhythmic Contemporary, and Churban. Programmers at these stations praised the creation of the chart, as they previously had been operating without the benefit of knowing programming trends in their format. And the chart demonstrated the popularity of certain songs that were not charting elsewhere because their airplay on Crossover stations had previously not been recorded. It also highlighted the rigidity of the radio industry, making it clear that the stations successfully challenging the racially demarcated radio landscape could not fit within previously existing categories. What's more,

the chart's acknowledgment of this format made it easier for Crossover stations to avoid the advertising stigma associated with Black-Oriented programming. By recognizing the uniqueness of this format, the chart gave these stations an identity separate from the Black-Oriented and Top 40 formats, meaning that, as one programmer put it, the stations could exist without having to be "lumped in with something we're not really doing."⁴⁶

But the chart also lumped *individual* Crossover stations in with something they were not really doing. Like many charts, the "Hot Crossover 30" consolidated data from stations across the country, despite vast and obvious differences in geography, demographics, and local radio markets, and despite Crossover programmers' insistence that local demographics mattered more to programming their stations than any chart did.⁴⁷ *Billboard* acknowledged part of this complexity by categorizing Crossover stations according to their proximity to the Top 40 or Urban formats. But the diversity of these stations did not stop there; the particular backgrounds of the Hispanic segment of a Crossover station's audience—such as the large proportion of listeners of Mexican heritage in Los Angeles, Cuban heritage in Miami, and Puerto Rican heritage in New York—accounted for what *Billboard* recognized were "significant programming differences."⁴⁸

A "FRESH NEW MUSIC MIX"

Due to the complex demographic makeup of their audiences, each Crossover station played a unique set of songs that often reflected the precise demographic profile of the intended audience. What united Crossover stations was their appetite for up-tempo pop, dance, and R&B, and their avoidance of the guitar-driven rock songs so popular on traditional Top 40 stations. The week that *Billboard* created the "Hot Crossover 30" chart in February 1987, for example, most Top 40 stations in the United States were playing quite a bit of pop and a fair amount of rock; their playlists contained Journey and Huey Lewis and the News, as well as Bon Jovi's number one single for three weeks running "Livin' on a Prayer."⁴⁹ These songs didn't appear on the Crossover chart. Instead, Crossover stations played music that listeners might have heard in the club: up-tempo music with audible roots in disco or other Black dance-music styles. In Jon Pareles's belittling but largely accurate words, Crossover stations played a lot of songs that "percolate[d] and kick[ed] with an electronic drumbeat, an overlay of gleaming keyboard sounds and Latin percussion and, most important, a chirpy, girlish vocal dispensing come-ons or back-offs."⁵⁰ In the last week of February 1987, this included up-tempo R&B music (by artists such as Club Nouveau and Cameo), dance-pop derived from disco (by artists such as Samantha Fox and Cyndi Lauper), and freestyle (by artists such as the Cover Girls and Exposé). But the week's chart revealed that Crossover stations also played more stylistically diverse songs such as Janet Jackson's shimmery ballad "Let's Wait Awhile," actor Bruce Willis's first foray into music with a cover of

the Staple Singers' 1970s soul hit "Respect Yourself," and the Beastie Boys' rock-rap hybrid "(You Gotta) Fight for Your Right (To Party!)." ⁵¹

At Power 106, programmer Jeff Wyatt honed in on a target audience of women ages eighteen to thirty-four, basing his playlists on what he heard while strolling the Santa Monica pier. He claimed to take notes at the beach of what tapes "Hispanic kids" were playing and advised other programmers to "be damned" with what was popular nationally because it didn't "make a lot of sense to care about anything but your audience."⁵² Despite a burgeoning local rap scene that "Hispanic kids" were almost certainly paying attention to, the station didn't play much rap. Instead, it played mostly up-tempo dance and R&B songs, with some ballads thrown in for balance.⁵³

Across the country in New York, WQHT's Joel Salkowitz considered the most acute similarity between his station and Power 106, the two biggest Crossover stations in the country, to be their "general affinity for uptempo, high-energy songs with a lot of high-end in the mix—like the 'Miami sound.'"⁵⁴ Power 106 and WQHT were not alone in this regard: many Crossover stations centered their playlists around the "Miami sound," the genre more often called *freestyle*. Occasionally referred to as "Latin hip-hop," freestyle arose in the 1980s out of the same New York communities from which hip hop emerged; venues would often play freestyle records in between rap songs or would alternate between rap and freestyle nights.⁵⁵ The genre combined the electronic-rich, fast-paced beats of electro songs like Afrika Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force's "Planet Rock" with vaguely Latin-inspired syncopation, repetitive synthesizer riffs, and often rather stifled female vocals.⁵⁶ Singer K7 of TKA, one of the few male freestyle groups, claimed that his group took the "same breaks and beats, the hardness of, say, a Rakim track," but sang instead of rapped because "we weren't being embraced as rappers."⁵⁷

As K7 describes, freestyle arose in response to the marginalization of Puerto Rican musicians as rap, gaining popularity, became understood as something created primarily by African American musicians (African American–male musicians in particular).⁵⁸ Complicating the common perception that hip hop originated in African American neighborhoods in New York City, Puerto Rican artists were integral members of New York's hip hop communities in the 1970s and early 1980s.⁵⁹ But by the mid-1980s, Puerto Rican musicians were largely excluded from the culture's center; journalist Raquel Z. Rivera argues that a "growing African Americanization of hip hop" occurred during the second half of the 1980s largely due to the media's misrepresentation of the culture, which articulated a "reductive notion of blackness as exclusively African American and suffer[ed] from severe cultural-historical amnesia."⁶⁰ Freestyle, writes Rivera, offered Puerto Rican and other New York Latinx populations a style of music that uniquely belonged to them, giving people from these marginalized communities a chance to become stars. Songwriter and producer Andy Panda, for example, thought that freestyle

gave Puerto Rican musicians a “sense of identity” and provided opportunities for Puerto Rican artists to thrive in the music industries.⁶¹ As Salkowitz’s allusion to the “Miami sound” indicates, freestyle was popular in Miami’s clubs; it also was frequently played on Crossover stations across the country.⁶²

To those not in touch with local community tastes, the mix at Crossover stations might seem a little odd. Bill Tanner, who at separate times programmed both of Miami’s Crossover stations, noted that club tracks might “seem like strange bed-fellows” with more standard crossover pop and R&B. But for him and his listeners the mashup of genres was “perfectly correct.”⁶³ These stations, according to dance-music journalist Brian Chin in *Billboard’s* 1987 special issue on dance music, didn’t try to cultivate a certain sound so much as they programmed records that other stations “generally ignored for an audience that was not directly served.”⁶⁴

THE “COMMON DENOMINATOR”

Programmers reading Chin’s article on Crossover stations had only to turn the magazine page to find two articles covering another style of music (and associated audience) that was also being “generally ignored”: rap. It should not be surprising that in 1987 rap would make an appearance in *Billboard’s* special issue on dance music; throughout the 1980s, the music industries often classified rap as dance music due to its popularity in nightclubs, the assumed racial identity of its performers, and its use of dance beats.⁶⁵ But the first article about rap in that issue didn’t associate it with dance; it claimed that rap’s popularity was growing despite radio’s lack of support.⁶⁶

The second article, however, highlighted styles of rap that could easily fit on Crossover station playlists. In it, author David Peaslee profiled “radiowise” rappers and producers who were making music that would work well on commercial radio stations. While rap was “originally developed as an alternative to radio,” he writes that by 1987 it was “often produced with radio exposure as a prime consideration.”⁶⁷ Peaslee primarily focuses on a style of rap characterized by its use of long, recognizable samples of non-rap songs. Inspired by early rappers’ “cover tunes,” as Kool Moe Dee called them, artists in the late 1980s were helping make rap legible for outsiders by repackaging the unfamiliar sounds of rap with a recognizable song.⁶⁸

One example of this trend, released in 1988, was the Fat Boys’ rap version of Chubby Checker’s “The Twist.” In this song, the Fat Boys alternate their contemporary slang—infused rapped verses with an updated chorus by Chubby Checker, accompanied by a synthesizer-driven cover of the song’s original instrumentals. This style of rap was not all that different from the music typically played on Crossover radio stations, as the chorus was upbeat, memorable, and sung. What’s more, the song’s production style was familiar to Crossover audiences who regularly heard the work of its producers, the Latin Rascals, on freestyle hits.⁶⁹ The

week of its release, the music director of a Crossover station in Charlotte, North Carolina recommended the song to *Billboard's* readership, and the Crossover format embraced it.⁷⁰

Other artists in the late 1980s made songs with rapped vocals that similarly attracted Crossover-station programmers' attention because the tracks sounded similar to the pop, R&B, freestyle, and other dance music played on Crossover radio. Occasionally these songs replicated the multicultural environment out of which freestyle and rap originated: freestyle group Lisa Lisa and Cult Jam teamed up with R&B-rap group Full Force on the 1987 track "Go For Yours," and Romeo J.D. of the Boogie Boys rapped on freestyle group Sweet Sensation's 1989 hit "Sincerely Yours." New jack swing artists, like freestyle artists, based their sound on rap's beats, and their blend of upbeat R&B and rap made the style easy to program on Crossover stations. Bobby Brown's "Don't Be Cruel," for example, peaked at number two on the "Hot Crossover 30" chart and featured Brown singing and rapping atop a sparse, metallic beat styled after rap's sound.⁷¹ And pop-rap artists used sung choruses and upbeat rapped lyrics to close the sonic distance between rap and pop; the chorus of Young MC's 1989 hit "Bust A Move" had a catchy, sung melody, and the album on which the song appeared featured lyrics that Janine McAdams of *Billboard* noted were "inventive, humorous" and "don't offend."⁷² Songs such as these, which shortened the sonic distance between rap and other contemporary popular genres, are the topic of the next chapter.

Developing playlists that appealed equally across their multicultural audience was a problem for many Crossover programmers, whose careers in the radio industry relied on recognizing (and generating) correspondences between musical styles and racially defined audiences—that is, reproducing the commercial radio industry's racial project. Despite a plethora of new releases designed to cross over between the R&B and pop charts, programmers found it challenging to please their coalition audiences, as their listeners' tastes did not always align.⁷³ Often, programmers' complaints about the difficulty of programming to a multicultural audience revealed a reductive understanding of their audience, one which racialized Hispanic listeners as a group separate from Black and white listeners regardless of the actual racial identities of those Hispanic listeners. Miami programmer Duff Lindsey, for example, described his station's playlist as a careful negotiation between the tastes of the Black, white, and Hispanic segments of his audience. During music meetings, the staff would "openly discuss" whom they thought a song "would appeal to, and who would be turned off by it," and they tried to only play songs that they anticipated would find favor with at least two of the three discrete demographic groups they assumed constituted their audience.⁷⁴ Another programmer recounted the "nightmare" experience of trying to "balance the sound" at his station, especially because it was difficult to find musical common ground between Hispanic and Black listeners.⁷⁵ Other programmers found that freestyle divided their coalition audience, as they thought it was more

popular with Hispanic listeners than Black or white listeners. All of these accounts demonstrate the inability of a multicultural framework to make sense of diversity *within* individuals or groups; multiculturalism, as scholar Angie Chabram Denerseian writes, presupposes that diversity occurs as “a mixture on the outside of us,” rather than one that is also on the inside.⁷⁶

For all these apparent complications, many Crossover programmers began noticing that all their audience segments seemed to agree on one style: melodic, upbeat songs with rapped vocals.⁷⁷ From the most unsophisticated programming perspective, freestyle-adjacent rap and pop-rap songs could solve programmers’ woes because these songs combined genres that were each associated with a different demographic group. But some programmers acknowledged this was too simplistic of an understanding. According to a group of program directors surveyed by *Billboard*, their Hispanic listeners’ tastes were “becoming blacker,” meaning that the listeners they categorized as Hispanic increasingly liked the same music as those they categorized as Black.⁷⁸ While this development likely failed to push programmers to acknowledge the diversity of their Hispanic listeners (or consider the possibility that many of their Hispanic listeners might already have also identified as Black), it made programming their stations easier because all members of their diverse audience agreed on one style of music. Indeed, listeners liked this style so uniformly that in 1990 *Billboard*’s Sean Ross hypothesized that rap or rap-adjacent artists like Bell Biv DeVoe and MC Hammer were safer to play on Crossover stations than the stations’ freestyle selections because not all listener demographics liked freestyle. Rap, on the other hand, was a “common denominator” between the three parts of Crossover stations’ multicultural audience, meaning that rap songs were easy and convenient additions to playlists.⁷⁹

This new understanding of musical taste, however, didn’t solve perhaps the most pressing concern programmers had about rap: adults’ reported dislike of the genre. Most radio formats were designed to appeal to more profitable older audiences, meaning that they were unlikely to play rap. Crossover stations’ upbeat dance mix, however, often attracted larger teenage audiences than Top 40 or Urban stations did.⁸⁰ Adding rap would only compound this demographic weighting, as older listeners continued to express their disdain for the genre; a 1989 study printed in *Radio & Records*, for example, showed programmers reading the periodical that most listeners over the age of twenty disliked rap.⁸¹

But many Crossover stations questioned contemporary sales practices that privileged older audiences, and sales staff at these stations resisted the idea that they had to pander to adult tastes to remain solvent.⁸² One Crossover programmer theorized that his station made “a lot of money” from generating adult listeners despite playing teen-oriented music because “almost all teens have parents, and teens often control the radio in the home and especially in the car.” He believed that while teens often got into new music first, women ages eighteen to thirty-four quickly followed their lead; programming for teens implied future adult listeners.⁸³

Power 106's general manager agreed, insisting that it was "bullshit to think you can't make money with teens."⁸⁴ Crossover stations often modified their sales strategies; for example, rather than try for the highly coveted advertising accounts that preferred adult audiences ages twenty-five to forty-nine, Power 106 worked to find advertisers who wanted audiences between age twelve and thirty-four because there were "more dollars available per station" for that demographic.⁸⁵ The station also priced commercial spots by demographic, charging more for commercials aimed at teens. With enough teen and young adult advertisement buys, it did not have to work with companies who wanted older audiences.⁸⁶ This meant that Power 106 and other stations like it did not need to cater to the tastes of older listeners, making it easier to add rap to their playlists.

RAP AS CROSSOVER MUSIC

Rap rapidly became an integral part of the sound of Crossover stations. The percentage of songs with rapped vocals on the "Hot Crossover 30" increased substantially between 1987 and 1990, from about 7 percent of the chart to one-third of it, and many other songs appeared on the chart that lacked rapped vocals but were otherwise sonically indebted to rap's musical texture.⁸⁷ In 1989 and 1990, songs with rapped vocals charted better than any other style—pop, R&B, ballads, free-style, rock—that the format played. And by 1989, Crossover stations were playing more rap than any other commercial radio format.⁸⁸

Many of the most popular songs on the "Hot Crossover 30" chart featured rapped vocals. Jody Watley's "Looking for a New Love," which not only coined the term "Hasta la vista, baby" but also featured a Blondie-esque rap toward the middle of the song, spent ten weeks in the chart's top five in 1987.⁸⁹ The following year, two of the ten most successful songs on the chart were by new jack swing vocalist Bobby Brown, including his aforementioned "Don't Be Cruel," which featured Brown rapping about his romance woes. The most programmed song the next year was Milli Vanilli's boppy pop-rap song "Girl You Know It's True," which spent twenty weeks on the chart in 1989, appeared at number one for six weeks, and was the second-most-played song across the chart's four years of existence. And in 1990, the top three songs on Crossover radio all had rapped vocals in them: MC Hammer's "U Can't Touch This" and two singles, "Do Me!" and "Poison," by new jack swing-group Bell Biv DeVoe. While it simplifies categorization, only examining songs with rapped vocals doesn't fully capture rap's impact on Crossover radio as many of the format's most popular songs were influenced by rap's beats, including one of the longest-charting singles, Bobby Brown's new jack swinger "My Prerogative."

Songs that combined elements of pop, dance, and R&B with rap were Crossover stations' bread and butter, but these stations also played songs by less crossover—inclined rappers. In June 1989, Philadelphia's Crossover station added Slick Rick's

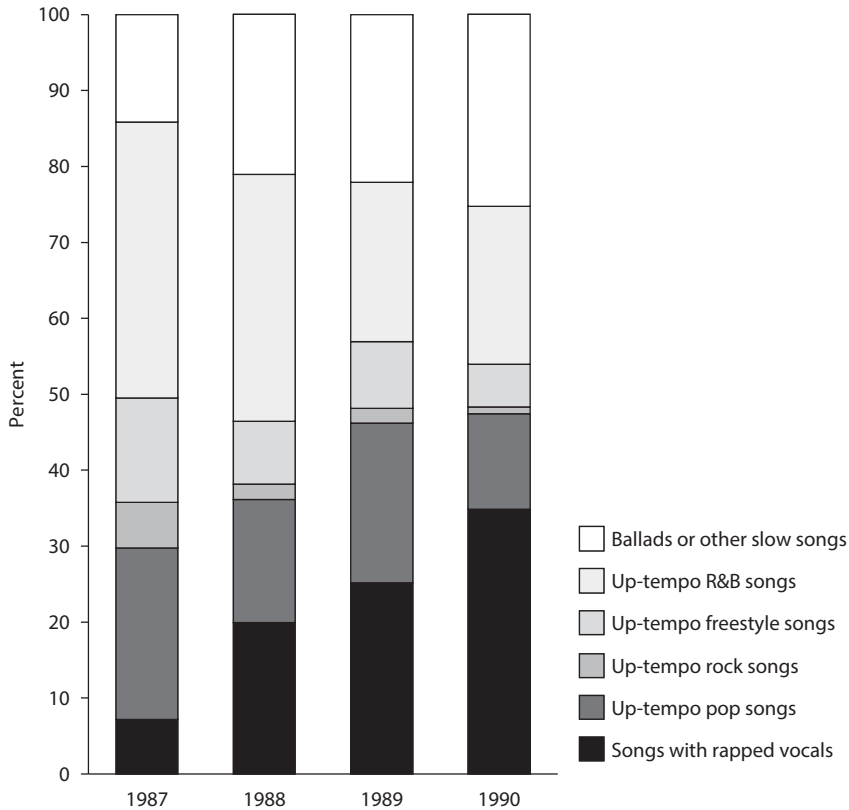


FIGURE 2. Stylistic composition of the *Billboard* “Hot Crossover 30” and “Top 40/Dance” charts, February 28, 1987–December 8, 1990 (the chart was renamed on September 9, 1989).

“Children’s Story” and LL Cool J’s “I’m That Type of Guy” to its playlist, which for much of the summer included De La Soul and Rob Base & DJ E-Z Rock in its top ten. A year later, Chicago’s B96 played Digital Underground, Salt-N-Pepa, and Mellow Man Ace; the year after that, Crossover radio in Miami played Monie Love, Ice-T, Chubb Rock, and local artists DJ Laz and Danny “D.”⁹⁰ Tuning in to Crossover stations, by the new decade, meant hearing rap.

Playing this much rap was extraordinary, and looking more closely at the format’s programming makes clear that programmers understood rap’s appeal across their multicultural audience. Prior to rap’s arrival on these stations, programmers had mostly played three up-tempo styles of music—pop, R&B, and freestyle—which they associated with distinct demographics: white, Black, and Hispanic listeners, respectively. As shown in figure 2, airtime for these three up-tempo styles all shrank between 1987 and 1990 to make room for songs with rapped vocals: up-tempo pop decreased by nearly half, from 23 percent to just 13 percent; up-tempo

R&B decreased from about 36 percent to 21 percent; and freestyle from 13 percent to less than 6 percent. The increase in rap songs on this chart came at the expense of every other style except ballads. And even considering the stylistic and demographic categorization of the ballads that Crossover stations played, the same trend emerges: rap increasingly took the place of styles previously chosen to appeal to any of the three groups within Crossover stations' coalition audiences.

While almost all of the songs with rapped vocals that Crossover stations played featured Black musicians, this style did not only take the playlist spots previously allotted to Black artists. Stations added rap in place of music by Black, Latinx, and white musicians, indicating that programmers not only understood songs with rapped vocals to be distinct from other styles by Black artists; they also used these songs to reach across their diverse audience. Rap, at least on these stations, was considered crossover music.

MAKING RAP MAINSTREAM

As Crossover stations tinkered with their playlists they exerted influence on more mainstream Top 40 stations, including those in suburban and rural parts of the country. Programmers typically look to their peers within the same format to evaluate whether to play a crossover style on their station; as sociologist Gabriel Rossman has shown, the "intrinsic qualities of the song are insufficient to motivate adoption."⁹¹ But the Crossover and Top 40 formats had plenty in common. Most of the operating staff at Crossover stations had experience working at Top 40 stations, were familiar with Top 40 audiences, and understood the game of how to simultaneously satisfy conservative advertisers and more adventurous listeners. Recognizing these similarities, many Top 40 programmers treated Crossover playlists as testing grounds for songs they were considering for their own stations, and began adding some of the most popular Crossover songs to their playlists.⁹² Indeed, when *Billboard* debuted the "Hot Crossover 30" chart in early 1987, New York programmer Joel Salkowitz noted the format's potential to sway programming on mainstream Top 40 stations, claiming that were *he* programming a Top 40 station he would "certainly be looking at this chart to pick up a competitive edge with some fresher music."⁹³ In 1988, *Billboard* made this type of monitoring easier by relocating the "Hot Crossover 30" chart closer to the "Hot 100" chart.⁹⁴ Early that year, the *Los Angeles Times* found that all but one of the fourteen songs that had reached number one on the "Hot Crossover 30" chart since its inception had made it to the top five on the "Hot 100," demonstrating that Top 40 programmers were regularly and frequently incorporating the popular songs from Crossover stations into their playlists.⁹⁵ And so as Crossover stations embraced so-called "common denominator" rap songs to help soothe their programming troubles, they inspired many Top 40 radio programmers across the country to add these songs to the mainstream they broadcast.

Toward the end of the decade, what had once been the “violently different” programming on Crossover stations so shaped Top 40’s playlists that the two formats became virtually indistinguishable. In 1988, *Billboard* chart editor Michael Ellis described the relationship between the formats by writing that Crossover stations “play a music mix that’s a twist on top 40” that could be “the new top 40 for some large urban markets, particularly those with a large Hispanic population.”⁹⁶ A year later, *Billboard* renamed the “Hot Crossover 30” chart the “Top 40/Dance” chart, deeming Crossover a subformat associated with the Top 40 format.⁹⁷ By the end of 1990, the “twist” that distinguished the subformat from Top 40 was so negligible that *Billboard* eliminated the recently rebranded chart altogether. While some Crossover stations had moved closer to a Top 40 sound since the chart’s inception, this was not the reason *Billboard* cited for the change. Rather, the periodical claimed that the format’s “success has influenced the Hot 100 Singles chart to such a great extent that a separate chart to break out dance titles is no longer necessary.”⁹⁸

A formatting idea once so foreign that it demanded its own chart was now simply Top 40. The playlists that had once been only for specially cultivated multicultural audiences in urban areas were now mainstream; they were music for all of the United States, extending from the cities, through the suburbs, and into rural areas.⁹⁹ And on these playlists was rap, the genre once considered “too black” to even be played on Black-Oriented stations. Top 40 programmers—taking their cue from programmers on Crossover stations—rearticulated the boundaries of the mainstream, inviting danceable rap into the center.

BROADCASTING MULTICULTURALISM

In recognizing and monetizing young, diverse audiences, and by acknowledging the presence and unique tastes of Hispanic listeners, Crossover stations reshaped the radio industry’s understanding of local markets. In so doing, Crossover programmers capitalized on one of the fastest-growing demographics in the United States: the Hispanic population grew by over 50 percent during the 1980s.¹⁰⁰ The number of Spanish-language radio stations increased five times over the same period, but Spanish-language stations did not always meet the needs of young, language-diverse Hispanic listeners, who were the “linchpin” of Crossover station audiences.¹⁰¹ Many Crossover programmers, like Jeff Wyatt walking along the Santa Monica pier, intently focused their programming on Hispanic audiences. San Antonio Crossover programmer Bob Perry, for example, understood his demographic target as “Hispanic, aged 18–34,” or more precisely as a “25- or 26-year-old woman who likes dance music and thinks she’s up to date on music, movies, fashions, and the new nightclubs and restaurants. She may not be a trendsetter, but in her mind she is.”¹⁰² But the musical preferences of his oddly specific target listener were changing. By 1990, Crossover station programmers recognized

that musical taste was not bound by demographics—their multicultural audiences agreed on melodic, danceable rap—and they acknowledged that their Hispanic listeners' tastes were not all that different than those of their other audience segments. "If you go to the Spanish clubs where they play Tejano music," Perry noted, "you'll discover those artists and songs sound like Exposé or Bobby Brown."¹⁰³ By playing music for a coalition audience of Black, white, and Hispanic listeners, and by recognizing the commonalities and distinctions between these demographic groups, Crossover stations embraced the type of pluralism associated with liberal multiculturalism.

But like other commodities aimed at a multicultural audience, representation on playlists did not often extend to corporate power or cultural ownership. Crossover programming, as scholar Lisa Lowe writes about multiculturalism more generally, "obscure[d] the ways in which . . . aesthetic representation [was] not an analog for the material positions, means, or resources of those populations."¹⁰⁴ Most Crossover stations were owned and operated by white radio professionals who hired mostly white DJs, program directors, and sales staff with experience at Top 40 stations.¹⁰⁵ And although these stations' playlists were racially and ethnically diverse, their nonmusical presentations rarely represented the diversity of the artists they played. Knowing that to do otherwise would endanger their advertising rates, many programmers tried to maintain a Top 40 identity, usually by encouraging white-sounding DJ patter from their live hosts to give their stations a white stationality.¹⁰⁶ When asked how a Black DJ could get a job at a Crossover station, white New York programmer Joel Salkowitz replied that any DJ he would consider hiring needed to sound like they fit on his radio station, implying verbal whiteness as the norm regardless of the station's multicultural mix of music.¹⁰⁷ But representation perhaps wasn't all that important to some listeners: one study done by a Black-Oriented station revealed that listeners knew the programming staff at the local Crossover station was white "but they really didn't care."¹⁰⁸

As Crossover stations generated multicultural audiences by capitalizing on the popularity of rap, a genre mostly made by Black artists, these same stations often failed to represent their local Black communities. Some Crossover stations, such as KMEL in the Bay Area, programmed music and community-affairs shows that directly engaged local Black listeners.¹⁰⁹ But others, in the words of one consultant, "ha[d] a problem aligning themselves with the black population."¹¹⁰ In his critique of multiracial political movements of the 1990s, scholar Jared Sexton demonstrates that, although these movements claimed to be the "logical extension of the civil rights movement," they had profound anti-Black effects.¹¹¹ Indeed, Black activists during that decade criticized multicultural movements, such as the one proposing a multiracial census category, for their potential to weaken Black political power and civil rights protections.¹¹² Sexton writes that multiracialism instead acted as a "rationalizing discourse for the continued and increasing social, political, and economic *isolation* of blacks," as the coalition politics of these movements decentered

Black interests.¹¹³ Stations like Power 106, which Jeff Wyatt claimed was “not defined in color” but was instead “defined in sound,” similarly downplayed their Black audiences, rarely playing advertisements from identifiably Black businesses and denying the station’s closeness to Black-Oriented stations because of advertiser prejudice.¹¹⁴

Black-Oriented programmers often criticized these “zebra” stations for playing Black artists while failing to engage with their local Black listeners.¹¹⁵ An Urban programmer in Norfolk, Virginia complained that Crossover stations were “*not going into the projects*. They [were not] going into black neighborhoods—not even affluent black neighborhoods—because they [did not] want to ‘damage their image.’ . . . [They] will play black music, but they don’t want to be black.”¹¹⁶ San Antonio programmer Bob Perry reported that his multicultural audience wasn’t even all that interested in hearing about certain Black communities; they would rather hear “a record about cruising the park trying to get laid” than one about “inner-city ghetto life in New York.”¹¹⁷ The rise of Crossover stations led one white programmer from Pittsburgh to agree that “white people like black music, but they’re not really into the black experience.”¹¹⁸

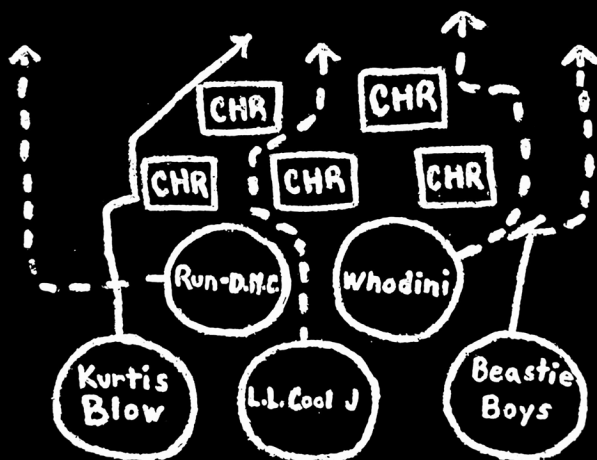
The format that historically *was* into the Black experience, the Black-Oriented format, continued for the most part to only offer tepid support to rap. For example, of the twenty-eight rap songs that appeared in the top forty positions on *Billboard*’s 1988 chart measuring sales and airplay of songs aimed at Black audiences, only sixteen ever appeared on the chart measuring just airplay on Black-Oriented stations. This indicated that Black-Oriented programmers considered certain rap songs inappropriate for their playlists regardless of their demonstrated popularity. A *Billboard* columnist calculated at the year’s end that Black-Oriented programmers would have to play at least three times as much rap in order for Black-Oriented airplay to be commensurate with rap’s sales.¹¹⁹

Record companies like Def Jam kept promoting rap records to Black-Oriented stations. One advertisement in *Black Radio Exclusive*, shown in figure 3, even made the case that the popularity of rap would help, rather than hinder, Black-Oriented stations. Stylized like a football-play diagram, the advertisement shows that rappers—not the non-rapping artists so regularly played on Black-Oriented stations—are the Black-Oriented format’s offensive-team players capable of thwarting the Top 40 (CHR) defense. But for the most part, Black-Oriented programmers in the latter part of the 1980s tended to follow the lead of Top 40 stations and play the rap records Crossover stations chose for their mass-appeal sound.¹²⁰ And Top 40 and Crossover stations noticed Black-Oriented stations’ reluctance to take Def Jam up on the “best offense”; one Top 40 programmer remarked in June 1988 that he was “elated” to pick up the slack from these stations, noting that he would “get their numbers . . . and they’ll pay the price in their ratings.”¹²¹

Crossover stations’ failure to fully represent minority listeners had financial payoffs. Regardless of how committed to the community these stations were,

Black/Urban Radio Strategy#1

"THE BEST
OFFENSE AGAINST
CHR IS A GOOD
DEFENSE..."



RUSH PRODUCTIONS

Def
Jam
recordings

FIGURE 3. "The Best Offense against CHR Is a Good Defense," *Black Radio Exclusive*, June 27, 1986, 41. Note how Def Jam's rappers are depicted as the offensive line against the Top 40 (CHR) team in this game play diagram.

they played music by Black and Latinx artists while trying to avoid “no Black/no ethnic” advertising mandates. And perhaps because their multicultural coalition audiences were not always reflected in the stations’ almost-entirely white management structures or political leanings, these stations could choose to eschew these audiences when necessary to reap financial rewards. This didn’t always work out for stations, as their local competitors were all too happy to reveal just how non-white Crossover stations’ listeners actually were, demonstrating what a critical role race played in the economic evaluation of radio stations.¹²² So while Crossover stations helped incorporate marginalized listeners and their musical tastes into the mainstream, they failed to dismantle racist advertising practices as many stations within the format benefited from their existence. *Radio & Records* columnists Walt Love and Sean Ross pointed out in early 1987 that the presence of Crossover stations alongside Black-Oriented stations raised the specter of “two separate but not very equal drinking fountains dispensing similar music”: one with industry connections and advertiser backing and the other fighting for solvency.¹²³

REDESIGNING CROSSOVER

While Crossover stations didn’t directly replace Black-Oriented stations in most urban areas, they chipped away at the cultural and economic power of the Black-Oriented format by monopolizing the crossover process.¹²⁴ Previously, crossing over onto Top 40 stations was dependent upon a Black artist’s track record on Black-Oriented stations. These stations (typically managed by, sometimes owned by, and certainly intended for Black Americans) thus had editorial control over which Black artists crossed over to the mostly white audiences at Top 40 stations.¹²⁵ But as the Crossover format prospered, Top 40 programmers gained a new source for determining which songs by Black artists had mass appeal. Instead of looking at Black-Oriented playlists, they began watching the playlists at Crossover stations—chosen by mostly white programmers looking to please a multicultural audience—which many Top 40 programmers came to consider a better indicator of what new songs their listeners might like. By the late 1980s, most songs by Black artists needed to demonstrate popularity on Crossover stations, rather than on Black-Oriented stations, before Top 40 programmers would consider playing them.¹²⁶

This meant that crossing over was no longer just a process, a reconfiguration of a sonic identity to modify potential audiences. Instead, crossover was a relatively stable sonic location that artists could pitch their music toward. Crossover stations didn’t just promote multicultural mass-appeal music, but rather carved out a space within the industry for this type of music to flourish, a place that existed somewhere between Urban, Spanish-language, and Top 40 stations. The new format created a committed market for music that appealed across diverse audiences.

But this new market altered existing ones. As Crossover stations established control over the crossover process, record companies changed their promotional strategies, noticing that Black-Oriented stations had lost some of their influence.¹²⁷ In 1990, the director of A&R for MCA's Black music division revealed to *Billboard* that labels no longer waited to see how Black acts did on Black-Oriented stations. They instead marketed the artists towards Black-Oriented, Crossover, and Top 40 stations at the same time, meaning that labels "almost [didn't] really need black radio."¹²⁸ And it increasingly seemed that perhaps labels no longer needed their Black music divisions. As songs by Black artists became more mainstream in the 1990s, thanks to the influence of Crossover stations, several major labels reduced the size of these divisions without finding other jobs for the mostly Black staff.¹²⁹

All of this affected the racial politics of the rap these stations played, in ways the following chapter will further elaborate. As Crossover stations became the go-to place for Black artists to enter the mainstream, the importance of Black-Oriented stations decreased. In many cities, play at Crossover stations became the standard of commercial radio success for rap acts, meaning that white programmers and white station owners looking out for the interests of a multicultural audience controlled the radio airplay of the genre. And the music came to reflect that. Rap, at least on the radio, was out of the hands of Black consumers, Black-music-focused record labels, and Black DJs, and was now controlled and consumed by white corporations eager for profits and a multiracial population eager for new sounds.

"WHERE HIP HOP LIVES" IN LOS ANGELES

To see one effect of this change, let's return to Los Angeles, where Power 106's Jeff Wyatt hadn't contributed to the mainstreaming of rap nearly as much as the national format he'd ushered into existence. Wyatt was not a strong advocate for rap; in the early 1990s, he claimed that playing a considerable amount of rap could be "dangerous" for a Top 40 station because rap was "so polariz[ing] that the gains can be outweighed by the losses if you're not careful."¹³⁰ Power 106 had moved toward a mainstream Top 40 sound since it initially came on air, playing up-tempo dance music—what white programmer Rick Cummings derisively described as "every cha-cha record in existence"—for mostly white and Hispanic listeners.¹³¹ But as the 1980s came to a close, the popularity of freestyle (and dance music more generally) decreased, and Wyatt watched as his once-solid dominance over the Los Angeles market withered. By the fall of 1990, the station had fallen to third in the market, receiving its lowest Arbitron rating in the nearly four years since the station began broadcasting; a year later it sagged to eighth in the market (figure 4).

In response to the station's rapid decline, Emmis hired radio-research firm Coleman Research to conduct focus groups aimed at helping the station reformulate its music mix. Coleman's findings backed up trends that Crossover

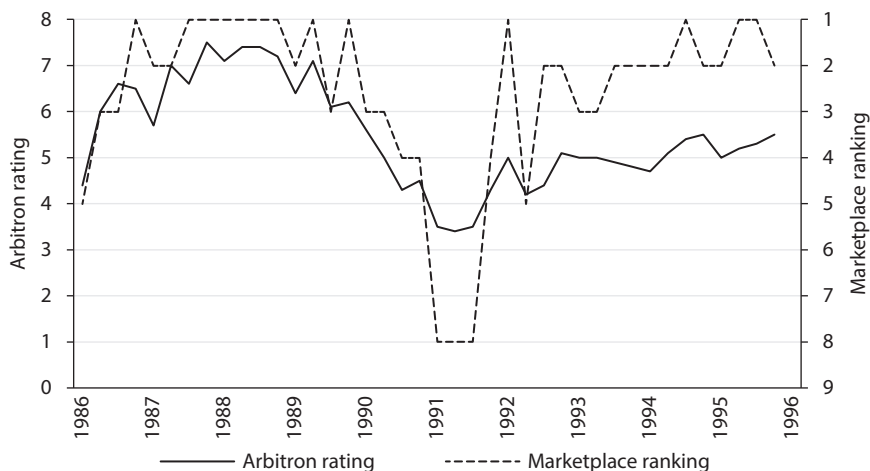


FIGURE 4. Power 106 Arbitron rating and Marketplace ranking, 1986–1996.

programmers across the country had noticed: their target audience (young Hispanic women) was no longer listening to freestyle, and was instead listening to “rap you can dance to.”¹³² Additional market research indicated that the station had two options: either move poppier and compete directly against Top 40 station KIIS, which could be difficult due to KIIS’s popular morning show with DJ Rick Dees, or “go more ‘street.’”¹³³ Emmis decided on the latter and Jeff Wyatt resigned in protest, landing at rival station KIIS.¹³⁴

Following this, Cummings voluntarily took a demotion to run music programming at Power 106. He immediately got rid of the endless cha-cha records (the freestyle and dance the station had been playing) and began researching and playing whatever music was popular at area high schools.¹³⁵ This was rap, unsurprising to almost anyone who knew the demographics of the genre’s audience. By the end of 1991, nearly half of the songs Power 106 reported playing had rapped vocals in them.¹³⁶ The station’s incorporation of rap coincided with the demise of local AM rap station KDAY, which had been in a tailspin after switching to an all-rap format for its last two years.¹³⁷ Taking KDAY’s place as Los Angeles’s rap station, Power 106 rebranded to become the place “Where Hip Hop Lives” on the West Coast; sister station WQHT in New York made a similar programming move a couple years later, in time adopting the same slogan and becoming what is arguably the most important rap radio station in the country today, Hot 97.¹³⁸ Cummings claimed that the turn toward rap was unintentional. He wanted “to go from being sound-driven to being hit-driven,” and he had trouble finding new dance records that performed as well as the rap he was playing.¹³⁹ Hit-driven playlists generated audiences, and the station immediately turned its numbers around, as figure 4 shows.¹⁴⁰

A few years later, Cummings hired local brothers Eric and Nick Vidal to host "Friday Nite Flavas," a rap mix show. Known professionally as the Baka Boyz, the brothers had produced records for a variety of Los Angeles rap acts and had previously worked as co-music directors, hosts, and DJs of a mix show on Bakersfield station KKXX.¹⁴¹ Thanks to this history the duo was familiar with the Los Angeles rap scene, and their Power 106 show proved very popular. By welcoming rappers into the station and making these artists "feel loved and comfortable," the Boyz helped bridge the divide between the rap game and the sterile corporate environment of Power 106.¹⁴² But Cummings credited the pair's success to what he thought was their difference from others associated with rap music; rather than having this "compulsion to be hard-core gang rappers," the two were "fun" and "positive."¹⁴³

Within eight months of the Boyz arrival at Power 106, the station promoted them to host the morning show, where they minimized talk, increased the number of songs, and—most uniquely—invited listeners to call in and freestyle along with them. During the "rap roll call" listeners noted their location, connecting regional affiliation in rap with the oft-repeated "where are you calling from" discourse of radio call-in shows. After this introduction listeners would participate in a sort of virtual cypher with the Boyz, trading bars as the hosts rapped mostly pre-written lines that hyped up the roll-call segment while occasionally copying phrases from the callers. By hiring the Baka Boyz to host one of the regular segments of commercial radio programming, the morning show, Power 106 institutionalized rap, making the genre and those associated with it part of the organizational fabric of the station. In a market dominated by older morning hosts who had long-ago perfected their light morning banter, the Baka Boyz were notable for their lack of experience and "hip-hopping, spontaneous style" which was, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, "completely unlike anything else on the dial."¹⁴⁴ Their distinctive show captivated the Los Angeles market, and its popularity, along with afternoon and evening DJ sets by Big Boy and a rap-filled playlist, reinvigorated the station. By the end of 1994, Power 106 was tied for first place in the market.¹⁴⁵

In many ways, the Baka Boyz represented the type of public fostered by Power 106 and the Crossover format more generally. The Boyz were proudly Latino, boisterously describing themselves as "2 Fat Mexicanz," and fit within the eighteen-to-thirty-four age profile of the station's desired audience.¹⁴⁶ And they understood the "common denominator" nature of rap. Nick Vidal claimed in late 1994 that "rap music is bringing everybody together" to the extent that "pop culture is rap music right now." Aside from its base audience of "Latin females," he found that his show attracted a diverse audience including film executives and "40-year-old guys who live in Beverly Hills and own helicopter companies."¹⁴⁷

But like Crossover stations, the Baka Boyz were criticized for their lack of commitment to local minority communities.¹⁴⁸ In 1994, they were accused of propagating negative stereotypes when they appeared on a billboard that showed them eating a pizza while sitting on the toilet, captioned with their signature slogan "2 Fat

Mexicanz.”¹⁴⁹ Power 106 took down the billboard, replacing it with one of the pair holding a surfboard, and worked with a local organization to come to a compromise on the duo’s description, changing the text on the billboard to “2 Fat Proud Mexicanz.”¹⁵⁰ This, however, wasn’t the first time the station had upset local minority leaders. A year earlier, as gangsta rap became popular in part because of airplay on stations like Power 106, the Stop The Violence, Increase the Peace Foundation asked Power 106 to stop airing “violent, sexist, and racially demeaning” songs.¹⁵¹ Nationally, many Black-Oriented stations responded to these requests by editing out certain profanities and deleting more offensive songs from their playlists.¹⁵² But Power 106, like other Crossover and Top 40 stations that “didn’t have to deal that much with community pressures and . . . advertising concerns,” continued playing songs like Onyx’s “Throw Ya Gunz” or Dr. Dre’s “Dre Day” regardless of community concerns.¹⁵³ Indeed, Power 106 justified playing these songs by pointing to its multiculturalism, maintaining that the station only played songs that “unifie[d] the largest possible multicultural audience.”¹⁵⁴ Only after members of the local Black community launched a boycott of companies advertising on the station did Cummings decide to bleep three of the most offensive words, including the n-word. Although he did not want to “tell Snoop Doggy Dogg how to address his homies,” he conceded that the station might be “doing harm by legitimizing the word for other cultures that can’t or don’t understand the black culture.”¹⁵⁵

Cummings’s comment points to the unremarkable fact that simply playing rap music without acknowledging what scholar and activist Angela Y. Davis describes as “the political character of culture” would not dismantle the structural racism of the music industries.¹⁵⁶ While some Crossover stations made clear their political commitments, attending to the concerns of their audiences and working to represent their diverse communities, others simply did not.

Crossover stations altered the structure of the radio industry in the late 1980s, creating a space for rap to cross over into the mainstream. These stations transformed the sound of the mainstream and changed the nature of crossover by creating a multicultural, though white-owned and white-operated, space toward which Black artists could direct their music. They also challenged the identity of the previously *de facto* white mainstream, consciously creating multiracial playlists while acknowledging and bringing together multicultural young listeners, a novel concept in an industry based on segregating audiences by race. But although Crossover stations challenged the racial segregation of the radio and record industries by commodifying multiracial publics, the musical color line was simply too ingrained, and they failed to dismantle these industries’ structural racism. Instead, they helped turn hip hop into hit pop, as the next chapter will explore.