

Containing Black Sound on Top 40 Radio

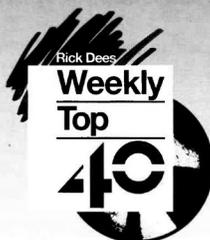
By 1992, Rick Dees, prominent Los Angeles DJ and syndicated Top 40 countdown host, was ready to pull the plug. In a full-page advertisement on the fourth page of trade journal *Radio & Records* (figure 7), Dees mused that while “it was fun while it lasted,” Top 40 radio had now “stopped rapping and resumed entertaining.” Featuring an image of a gravestone inscribed “R.I.P. RAP, 1988–1992,” his advertisement declared dead a genre much older than his tombstone suggested, and proposed that the Top 40 format had moved in a different direction, to “mainstream hits.” Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, many in the music industries believed rap would be a passing fad and had waited for it to go the way of the pet rock, as a letter to the editor of the *Los Angeles Times* put it.¹ But Dees’s advertisement went further; not content with rap slowly waning in popularity, Dees wanted it dead immediately.

Rap, however, wasn’t Dees’s only target. He also objected to the relatively recent rise in quantitative analysis within the industry, increasingly wielded by the growing number of radio consultants, who were typically successful programmers hired by other stations to improve their targeting. Near the bottom of the advertisement he declared, curiously relying on rap-inflected wording, that “Rap and stats don’t cut it no more!” But why would a man whose livelihood depended upon tabulating the hit parade encourage the demise of a style of hit music and the method that determined the hits?

In short, rap and stats were making Dees’s job difficult. Over the past half decade, Top 40 programmers had cautiously and methodically added rap songs they believed would appeal to most of their broad, age-diverse audience. But as rap became a ubiquitous sound on their stations, some programmers still worried that it could not sustain long-term mainstream appeal. Those working in the growing field of radio consulting agreed, as the increasingly complex data they collected and analyzed depicted a US public who would never agree on rap.

CHR HAS STOPPED RAPPING AND RESUMED ENTERTAINING

It was fun while it lasted. Most fads are. Hit Radio, though, is always in evolution. The mix shows and the rap music were alright, but CHR is now in another place.



- CHR is Mainstream Hits
- CHR is Personality
- CHR is "Rick Dees Weekly Top 40"

"Rick Dees Weekly Top 40" is the weekend winner for the '90s and beyond. 1993 will be the year of Change. Get ready for it now.

Call Tom Shovan at CD Media (212) 856-4435 to lock in with "Rick Dees Weekly Top 40."

RAP AND STATS DON'T CUT IT NO MORE!



FIGURE 7. "CHR Has Stopped Rapping and Resumed Entertaining," *Radio & Records*, October 30, 1992, 4. Note the various plugs coming out of the gravesite, indicating that rap has already been eradicated from the airwaves.

This chapter isn't really about rap—it's about the fear of rap, about what rap's mainstream inclusion might mean for a mainstream previously conceived of as white. And so it documents two Top 40 subformats that emerged at the turn of the decade in response to rap's popularity. The first, rock-oriented Top 40 stations, attempted to appeal to the tastes of white men by de-emphasizing rap and R&B. But these stations proved unsuccessful and the industry turned back to targeting a more lucrative audience: white adults. These listeners' purported dislike of rap fostered the growth of the second subformat, Adult Top 40 stations, which proudly advertised their rap-free playlists with exclusionary rhetoric. Despite the passage of time and many of rap's fans maturing into adults, this format lasts into the present. Comparing this subformat to another contemporary form of exclusion, gated communities, highlights how Adult Top 40 stations reflected a new understanding of race in the multicultural United States, as these stations promised safe, segregated spaces through colorblind rhetoric. Together these two subformats, informed by the radio-consulting industry and the consumer-preference data that so bothered Dees, created alternate mainstreams that ignored rap and the multicultural publics Crossover radio stations cultivated.

Dees's 1992 advertisement forecasting rap's early demise drew attention to the struggle over rap's place in the Top 40 mainstream, proclaiming his allegiance to a mainstream where rap didn't belong. But he also highlighted the crumbling nature of that very mainstream. For it was not rap and stats that died in the early 1990s—rather, it was the dominance of Top 40 radio and its coalition politics that perished as the format disintegrated into niche subformats, each targeting only a part of the American public.

CREATING A MAINSTREAM MIX

By 1990, rap had “become very much a part of mainstream America,” at least according to Taco Bell's spokesperson Elliot Moore.² Betting on the genre's new-found role as music for everybody, the company had recently launched a series of commercials featuring rappers. Young MC's television commercial for the chain, for example, featured four racially and ethnically diverse backup dancers alongside the “clean cut ALL American college boy” rapping about the merits of collectible soft-drink cups emblazoned with the *Yo! MTV Raps* logo. This commercial, and the company's others, made visible and audible rap's new role as the sound of hip, young multicultural America.³ Whether it was the sound of someone rapping or scratching a record, or the hard beats and empty middle registers of new jack swing, by the new decade rap was a ubiquitous part of mainstream popular music's sound.

Not everyone, however, endorsed Moore's vision of mainstream America. Playing Taco Bell's rapped advertisements on Rock radio stations led to listener complaints. “Every single time the thing plays, the phone rings. And it's *scary*,” reported one Las Vegas programmer, who suggested that someone from Taco Bell

listen to these phone calls because “some of these people are angry.” At another Las Vegas station, programmer Richard Reed recounted a particularly irate call from a listener who insisted that “we deal with these people with their ghetto blasters every damn day. We sure don’t need to hear that on our favorite station.”⁴

These negative calls indicated rap’s precarious position in the mainstream. Rock stations at the turn of the decade weren’t interested in being mainstream in the same way that Top 40 stations were; they often defined themselves against the sound and identity of Top 40 stations. Murphy’s station, for example, ran advertisements bragging about *not* playing MC Hammer and New Kids on the Block. Rather than articulating the center, these stations delineated one edge of the Top 40 mainstream, as Rock station playlists partially overlapped with those of Top 40 stations; this space of overlap shows what sort of rock-influenced music crossed over into the centrist mainstream.⁵ Not even five years earlier, rap had occupied this space, as some Rock stations had been receptive to Run-D.M.C.’s rock-rap hybrid “Walk This Way”—even Richard Reed’s Las Vegas station had played the song!⁶ But by 1990, rap was no longer welcome on these stations. As one consultant put it, listeners hearing Taco Bell’s commercials may have been tuning in to a Rock station “to *get away from* Young MC.”⁷ Stations such as San Diego’s KGB banned rap advertisements because, according to one programmer, a lot of their listeners “find rap *extremely* annoying.”⁸

Top 40 programmers also worried about the sonic differences between rock and rap. Creating a consistent and familiar sound was important for Top 40 programming; one consultant urged programmers to “define your limits—how far from the ‘center’ of your format you can go,” because meeting expectations is the “only reason” listeners tune in to a particular station.⁹ “Unfamiliarity can get people tuning out,” longtime Top 40 countdown host Casey Kasem insisted, claiming that “people want to know where you’re taking them, and they want to be led by the hand. They feel comfortable when they know that you’ve embraced them and that you and they have the same interests and loves in music. And they feel good about that as long as you’re driving the bus. But the minute the driver of the bus walks away from it, they get nervous.”¹⁰

To keep their “riders” from getting too nervous, programmers worked to keep their playlists within certain parameters, creating a consistent Top 40 sound.¹¹ Since the format’s beginnings in the 1950s, most Top 40 stations played almost all the national hits the *Billboard* “Hot 100” recorded. Indeed, the viability of the Top 40 format depended on the songs in the upper reaches of the *Billboard* “Hot 100,” ostensibly the nation’s most popular songs, being mainstream hits that most people in the Top 40 audience would at least tolerate.

But by 1990, programmers found it harder to imagine how a group of songs on the “Hot 100” (for example, R&B singer Michel’le’s rap-tinged release on Eazy-E’s label Ruthless Records “No More Lies,” Mötley Crüe’s metal thrasher “Kickstart My Heart,” and gravel-voiced British singer Joe Cocker’s “When the Night Comes,”

which appeared side by side in February's top thirty) might appeal to a single person, much less an entire segment of a given city's population.¹² One way programmers minimized the impact of less broadly popular songs was to *daypart*, or limit the hours their station played these songs. Crossover stations in the late 1980s took this approach to the extreme, eschewing most rock songs and filling those playlist spots with dance, freestyle, R&B, and rap. Other stations responded in exactly the opposite direction, leaning more heavily towards rock.

"WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE"

In March 1989, radio listeners in Los Angeles were invited to turn their dial to the newest Top 40 station in town, KQLZ Pirate Radio, when they got "tired of all the disco on Power 106."¹³ Owned by radio-syndication company Westwood One, Pirate Radio had recently invaded Los Angeles, announcing its presence in the market with the screaming guitars of "Welcome to the Jungle" by Guns N' Roses and the aggressive chatter of DJ Scott Shannon. Shannon was also the host of syndicated countdown show *Scott Shannon's Rockin' America: The Top 30 Countdown* and, before his move, the most popular morning DJ in New York City.¹⁴ The swashbuckling Los Angeles station began broadcasting a full two weeks before anyone in the industry expected it to, hastily constructing a makeshift studio out of plywood in the back of Westwood One's warehouse and going on air before installing listener request lines.¹⁵

Initially the station claimed to play "free-form Top 40." Its DJs created a sense of lawlessness on the air, proclaiming a "why the hell not" attitude toward playing supposedly untested music and listener requests—once the phone lines were in. Early playlists included pop-oriented artists Madonna, Rod Stewart, and Milli Vanilli alongside hard-rock legends Bon Jovi, Van Halen, and Def Leppard.¹⁶ The initial programming team hotly debated what dance-oriented pop it was willing to play, spending "four days just deciding whether to play New Kids On The Block, Debbie Gibson, and the Bangles."¹⁷ But listeners complained about the musical diversity on the station, expressing dislike and confusion about hearing, for example, Tone Loc's rap single "Wild Thing" alongside hard rock, despite the song's prominent Van Halen sample.¹⁸

As the station matured it either abandoned or ignored its musical diversity and began overtly marketing itself as an escape from the "disco" other stations played, assuming listeners would understand the disparaging connotation of the musical style since rebranded as dance music. Listeners were encouraged to call in and "flush" the dance-oriented sounds of Power 106 and Los Angeles's straight-ahead Top 40 station KIIS. As Shannon defined his playlist in opposition to the music on other Top 40 stations, Pirate Radio's sound coalesced around a rock-leaning hits-driven playlist that split the difference between Rock and Top 40 stations.¹⁹ By September 1989, an afternoon on Pirate Radio featured songs by Van Halen,

Billboard Crossover		Billboard "Hot 100"		Billboard Rock 40	
1	Paula Abdul – "Cold Hearted"	1	New Kids on the Block – "Hangin' Tough"	1	Warrant – "Heaven"
2	Milli Vanilli – "Girl I'm Gonna Miss You"	2	Paula Abdul – "Cold Hearted"	2	Skid Row – "18 and Life"
3	Surface – "Shower Me with Your Love"	3	Gloria Estefan – "Don't Wanna Lose You"	3	Richard Marx – "Right Here Waiting"
4	New Kids on the Block – "Hangin' Tough"	4	Warrant – "Heaven"	4	Tom Petty – "Runnin' Down a Dream"
5	Gloria Estefan – "Don't Wanna Lose You"	5	Richard Marx – "Right Here Waiting"	5	Jeff Healey Band – "Angel Eyes"
		6	Surface – "Shower Me with Your Love"		
		7	Milli Vanilli – "Girl I'm Gonna Miss You"		
		8	Jeff Healey Band – "Angel Eyes"		
		9	Cher – "If I Could Turn Back Time"		
		10	Skid Row – "18 and Life"		

FIGURE 8. Comparison of *Billboard* charts, September 9, 1989.

Def Leppard, New Order, Skid Row, Living Colour, Aerosmith, and Europe. There was a noticeable lack of Paula Abdul (whose song "Cold Hearted" was number two on the "Hot 100" the week of September 9) and Milli Vanilli (who topped the chart two weeks later). According to Shannon, the poppiest song the station had played in recent memory was Martika's synthesizer-heavy ballad "Toy Soldiers," but he admitted to playing Prince's "Batdance" once after being inundated by listener requests.²⁰ Six months later, the station ran an advertisement featuring Milli Vanilli and New Kids on the Block sound-alikes, who told listeners "you don't hear us on Pirate Radio because we suck."²¹ This rocking mix proved popular; the station rose to third in the Los Angeles radio market six months after its dramatic launch.²²

As Pirate Radio settled on a playlist of current rock and heavy metal, it joined a growing number of stations programming rockier-pop songs and poppier-rock songs in what came to be called the Rock 40 format. Reinforcing the libertarian positioning DJs expressed on these stations—Scott Shannon insisted that his music choices were informed more by "attitude" than format—playlists weren't consistent across Rock 40 stations.²³ Instead, the format's identity was based on exclusion, their bet that local listeners had grown weary of upbeat R&B, dance, and rap. Rock 40, according to Pirate Radio's operation manager, was "defined more by what we don't do than what we do," and he emphasized, "we don't play dance music."²⁴

In its September 9, 1989 issue, *Billboard* acknowledged the presence and influence of the Rock 40 subformat with its own chart, just as it had done for Crossover stations two years earlier. Playlists at Crossover and Rock 40 stations differed wildly, as figure 8 shows. Together, what *Billboard* now classified as the two Top 40

subformats played almost all the top ten songs on the “Hot 100,” but they had none of their top five songs in common; the only point of agreement was Richard Marx’s heartfelt ballad “Right Here Waiting,” which appeared at number thirteen on the Crossover chart and number three on the Rock 40 chart.²⁵

For *Billboard* this lack of overlap required rethinking what a Top 40 station was, because its longstanding definition, “stations that play all the hits in their local market, regardless of sound,” was not “useful or accurate” anymore.²⁶ No longer a coalition format that played all the hits, Top 40 could be thought of as comprising multiple subformats, each with its own sound only loosely based on *Billboard*’s “Hot 100” chart. In response, *Billboard* began classifying stations as Top 40—and including their playlists in calculating the “Hot 100”—as long as they played *some* variety of contemporary hit music aimed at a younger audience.²⁷ The mainstream had begun splintering.

“IF YOU AIN’T CRANKIN’ IT, YOU MUST
BE YANKIN’ IT”

While Pirate Radio was not the nation’s first Rock 40 station, its appearance in the Los Angeles market caused quite a stir within the industry: it was “primal radio that turned a lot of radio people on.”²⁸ The industry’s excitement had less to do with Pirate Radio’s music mix than with its renegade persona, as other stations across the country had similar playlists. For the station’s first two weeks on the air it refused to sell advertisements, attracting listeners with its anti-corporate stationality.²⁹ It regularly used mild profanity in station liners, which pushed listeners to not “be a dickhead” and to “crank it up, open your windows, and piss off your neighbors,” because in Los Angeles “you gotta be loud to cut through all the crap.”³⁰ While most promotions for the station used the slogan “Welcome to the Jungle,” one shirt the station printed read “If you ain’t crankin’ it, you must be yankin’ it.”³¹

This shirt made clear the intended demographic of Pirate Radio’s audience: men who had the necessary genitalia to “yank” lest they be accused of being the “wimps” another station liner forbade from listening to the station.³² The industry designed the Rock 40 format for young men; programmers referred to it as Male CHR or CHR-for-boys.³³ These stations created spaces where the masculine norms of rock were reasserted, spaces free from Crossover stations’ playlists full of freestyle, dance, R&B, and rap, and those genres’ associations with women, queer people, and people of color. For it wasn’t just young men that Rock 40 stations were designed for—it was young white men.³⁴

Various other radio formats, at least according to the industry’s simplified understanding of musical taste, have ignored local minority audiences by excluding most musicians of color from their playlists. Since the 1970s, Rock stations have played music by mostly white male artists for a majority white male audience.

Rock, of course, wasn't always the purview of white men; musicians of color were vital participants in early rock 'n' roll and the genre's origins as dance music centered women as active consumers. But in the late 1960s, Album-Oriented Rock stations began to create spaces of "masculine identity experimentation" at the same time as rock became a white genre through white critics and fans' development of authenticity frameworks that deliberately excluded people of color, casting them as primitive sources rather than contemporary creators.³⁵ And in the early 1980s, backlash against disco inspired many Top 40 stations to program whiter playlists.³⁶ By the mid 1980s, however, most Top 40 stations returned to programming a more racially diverse mix, and the growing influence of the nascent Crossover format contributed to Top 40's increasingly diverse playlists.³⁷

As officially part of the Top 40 format, Rock 40 reimagined what the mainstream was, casting rap and dance music as peripheral others. Rock 40 reasserted white male taste in the musical mainstream, articulating a vision of the public whiter and more masculine than that fostered by Crossover stations. Just as Crossover stations were beginning to convince straight-ahead Top 40 programmers that rap's Black sounds belonged in the musical mainstream, Rock 40 stations pushed back, moving the musical center towards rock and rock-aligned pop. By excising almost all music by Black artists from their playlists, Rock 40 stations reseggregated Top 40 radio.

Throughout 1989, these stations blossomed across the country.³⁸ Westwood One, Pirate Radio's corporate owner, began distributing a Rock 40 show nationally, creating an opportunity for Scott Shannon and his merry crew of bandits to seize affiliates' airwaves for five hours on Saturday evenings.³⁹ Record companies warmly welcomed Rock 40 stations, noticing that the format gave their already-signed rock groups access to a different audience.⁴⁰

But despite early signs of potential, Rock 40 stations didn't provide the radio industry with a stable and lasting source of income. Young white men proved to be an unprofitable and hard-to-please audience. Given the choice, advertisers preferred the older audiences at standard Rock stations, who they assumed had more money than the young white men at Rock 40 stations. And listeners, too, appeared to prefer conventional stations over the hybrid format which was "too wimpy for the real rockers and too hard for mainstream people."⁴¹ By the end of 1990, few Rock 40 stations remained.⁴² While Pirate Radio held on for a few more months, the station's ratings steadily declined until February 1991, when Westwood One fired Shannon and switched formats to straight-ahead Rock.⁴³

Scott Shannon blamed his station's failure on Los Angeles's ethnic diversity, suggesting that the demographic makeup of the area couldn't support an additional station that played mostly music by white artists.⁴⁴ It's likely that Westwood One agreed; they continued recording their syndicated program even after their flagship station failed, distributing the program to areas where, perhaps, audience demographics were more conducive to the format's success.⁴⁵ Other programmers

concluded with Shannon; one claimed that in the Midwest a rock-leaning Top 40 station was “a very universal concept,” but “in markets with ethnic influence its potential may be limited.”⁴⁶ And *Radio & Records* gestured toward the same understanding. Confronted with offshoots of the Top 40 format, the journal decided in 1990 to compile its charts by market size, noting that two-thirds of stations in large cities (centers of racial and ethnic diversity) played much more dance and rap than stations in small towns, 95 percent of which took a “mainstream approach.”⁴⁷ The use of this description is telling, indicating at least one major radio industry publication’s inability to understand rap as part of the mainstream despite its diverse fan base. Mainstream, in other words, was about more than just popularity.

TROUBLE AT TOP 40

In the fall of 1990, as Rock 40 stations were failing, the Top 40 format received some unwelcome news. Across the country its audience was shrinking. Summer was usually friendly to Top 40 stations because teens and tweens, a large portion of their audience, were out of school and could listen to the radio more.⁴⁸ But that summer, listeners of nearly every demographic stopped tuning in to Top 40 stations.⁴⁹ As fall turned to winter and winter turned to spring, the format’s future looked increasingly grim.

At a conference in September 1991, moderator Steve Rivers plainly stated the facts: in the previous six months, 9 percent of the nation’s Top 40 stations had shuttered, switching to other formats or going off the air completely.⁵⁰ The format was coming off a recent boom; while Adult Contemporary stations outperformed all other formats in the 1980s, towards the end of the decade, Top 40 rose to a close second, reaching around 18 percent of listeners in the United States (see figure 9). But between spring 1990 and spring 1991, Top 40 stations lost over 4 percent of the total national audience, decreasing from 17.9 percent to 13.8 percent.⁵¹ Things just kept getting worse, as figure 9 demonstrates.

Programmers posited many explanations. The start of the Gulf War in the late summer of 1990 drew many listeners to News/Talk stations, and some programmers believed that the brief economic downturn during that year drew listeners to formats that played music programmers deemed less challenging, such as Country, Oldies, and Adult Contemporary.⁵² And while it’s easy to notice that Top 40’s downturn temporally aligned with the demise of the Rock 40 format, most people in the radio industry did not.⁵³ In fact, one programmer blamed the decline on not paying enough attention to male listeners, claiming that Top 40 didn’t have enough “dance tracks tolerable for males.”⁵⁴ Perhaps it was difficult for programmers to admit that they had made a mistake with Rock 40, perhaps they found it hard to fault the record industry’s long-standing darlings—young white men—or perhaps the timing was coincidental. In any case, radio programmers looked elsewhere to account for the format’s troubles, zeroing in on a more popular scapegoat: rap.

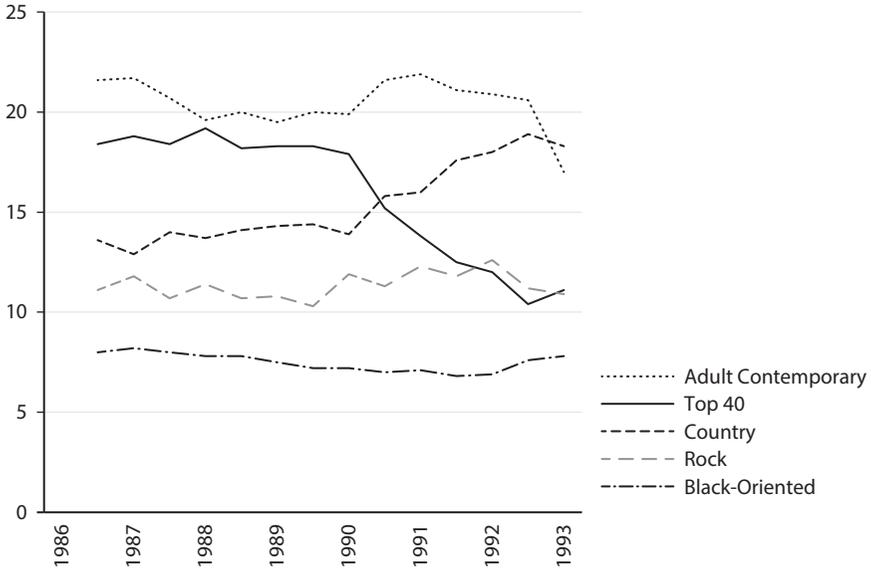


FIGURE 9. Percentage share of national audience, 1986–1993, as calculated by *Radio & Records*. Data comes from the “Format Reach Charts” in *Radio & Records Ratings Report & Directory* from these years.

In a December 1990 *Radio & Records* article titled “What the Hell’s Wrong with CHR?,” seven programmers blamed Top 40’s decreasing ratings on their music choices: one New York City programmer claimed that the format had “overindulged in disposable dance and rap product,” and Dallas programmer Randy Kabrich—who also described the music mix of the previous four years as “disposable”—questioned how often a station could play Milli Vanilli or Paula Abdul, artists who had sold millions of records over the last year. Sales, for Kabrich, didn’t ensure playability because a rap song could sell well but still be a “huge turn-off for the audience.” Age, he thought, best determined whether someone would like rap; he claimed listeners in their late twenties found it difficult to “relate to rap on a consistent basis,” neglecting to note that many rappers were themselves in their late twenties.⁵⁵ But another program director presented a more nuanced opinion, although his language choice betrayed the reductive nature of radio programmers’ conceptions of their audience: he blamed the format’s downturn on programmers who had overemphasized dance and rap to seem hip when faced with “increased ethnicity” among younger listeners in their markets, and advised other programmers to find new music with a “texture” that was amenable to listeners over twenty-five.⁵⁶

Of course, adults disliking rap’s “texture” was not news to programmers, who had spent the last four years playing only a specific type of rap, such as Milli

Vanilli, that they thought would not irritate older listeners.⁵⁷ But trade journals reported that adults still weren't sold on the genre. A 1989 study published in *Radio & Records* found that over half of respondents over the age of twenty disliked rap, while 60 percent of twelve-to-fifteen-year-old respondents liked the genre.⁵⁸ In 1990, Sean Ross of *Billboard* stated that rap caused a "sociological rift" between younger and older Top 40 listeners, and many programmers concurred: in Minneapolis, Young MC's "Bust a Move" was a favorite with younger listeners but was purported to be "death" for those over twenty-five; and Guy Zapoleon, program director of national radio conglomerate Nationwide Communications, claimed that he did not know of "any market in the country . . . where rap is not perceived poorly with adults."⁵⁹ For Top 40 programmers already struggling to maintain their audiences, playing the genre that a Bakersfield, California programmer characterized as "the biggest thing that would get anybody to [change the station]" could perhaps be the difference between financial viability and a format switch.⁶⁰ Over a decade after programmers first played rap on the radio, many worried that they hadn't convinced their listeners that rap was part of the mainstream.

"A BETTER MIX"

Noting adults' dislike of the genre, many Top 40 programmers in the early 1990s reduced the amount of rap they played to better target the lucrative adult portion of the Top 40 audience. One of these programmers was Scott Shannon who, after being fired from Pirate Radio, came back to New York. Instead of returning to his previous employer, he set out in April 1991 to revive its Top 40 rival and the station he was famous for criticizing on the air, WPLJ, now called Mojo Radio.⁶¹ Full of fanfare as always, he deemed his double-crossing return "the mother of all radio battles," and began his first shift by apologizing for the station's programming over the previous eight years, saying "we know we sucked."⁶²

Within Shannon's first couple weeks, Mojo Radio reduced the number of "dance-beat type records" on its playlist and added rock songs from the early 1980s that hadn't been popular in New York when they first came out.⁶³ Shannon wasn't fully responsible for this shift away from dance music and toward older hits; the station had added some oldies such as the Commodores' 1978 hit "Three Times a Lady" before he arrived. But under his direction the station moved in a noticeably adult direction, using the slogan "A better mix of music without all that rap" to describe their playlist.⁶⁴

Just as with Pirate Radio, Shannon drew inspiration from other programmers when developing Mojo Radio. One of the more influential programmers of the era, Guy Zapoleon, had made a similar programming decision in Houston in 1990, hoping to fill what he saw as a hole in the market with a contemporary music station aimed at adults ages twenty-five to fifty-four.⁶⁵ Zapoleon's employer, Nationwide Communications, had recently softened the music mix at many of

their Top 40 stations to attract older demographics, toning down the amount of rap, dance, and hard rock. At their namesake station in Columbus, Ohio, Nationwide described this mix as “not too hard, not too lite”; on their Phoenix station, Nationwide was a little more specific about what “too hard” sounded like, employing a “no rap, no hard rock” slogan for a couple months.⁶⁶ In Houston, Nationwide carefully put together a superstar team of consultants who, alongside Zapoleon, completed months of research before launching KHMZ Mix 96.5 in July 1990.⁶⁷ The station highlighted its data-driven programming in advertisements; an early commercial for the station claimed that the consultants had asked thousands in the Houston area what they wanted from the station, resulting in “a better mix of music from artists like Phil Collins, Steve Winwood and Fleetwood Mac” without “a lot of meaningless talk.”⁶⁸

Initially, Mix 96.5 came on air with a Top 40 stationality but a playlist that fit somewhere between Adult Contemporary and Rock.⁶⁹ The station targeted women in their late twenties and early thirties by playing a mix of oldies—including classic rock songs like Jackson Browne’s “Running on Empty” and the Eagles’ “Peaceful Easy Feeling”—and softer new songs by artists like Mariah Carey, Taylor Dayne, and Celine Dion.⁷⁰ What Mix 96.5 didn’t play was much hard-hitting crossover music, as Zapoleon was convinced that most of his target adult audience wasn’t interested in “anything funkier” than Mariah Carey or Whitney Houston.⁷¹ This distinctive music mix garnered Zapoleon the high praise of “a musicologist,” and his creative programming won over local listeners.⁷² In its first couple months, the station did well, drawing listeners from Top 40 stations, Adult Contemporary stations, and even from the local Classic Rock station.⁷³

“NO KIDS, NO RAP, NO CRAP”

In a moment of format uncertainty, Scott Shannon wasn’t alone in copying Nationwide’s model of leaning toward more profitable adult audiences. For some programmers, appealing only to adults seemed simpler than a more traditional approach. One complained that the tastes of eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-olds were “becoming very fragmented, more than any other cell . . . You’ll find 10% of the demo that likes hardcore dance, 10% that likes rap, 10% that likes modern rock, 10% that likes hard rock, and so forth.” People ages twenty-five-to-thirty-four, he thought, shared more musical tastes, making them an easier target audience.⁷⁴

Many Top 40 stations—staring at declining ratings with no end in sight, reports about how much adults disliked rap, and directives from advertising accounts who preferred white women—took the easy road and simply stopped playing rap. In the spring of 1990, most new stations in big markets were stations that played “up-tempo, familiar, adult-oriented music . . . styled like a top 40,” which the industry was starting to categorize as Adult Top 40 or Hot Adult Contemporary.⁷⁵ For example, one Washington, DC, station became a hits station “that it was alright

for 25- to 40-year-old women to listen to”; and Nationwide replicated Mix 96.5’s formula in Boston to create a station that was “picking you up and making you feel good.”⁷⁶

Adult Top 40 stations often played more older music than standard Top 40 stations, but more new music than Adult Contemporary ones, which tended to play softer hits once they had proved popular on Top 40 stations. One programmer described his station’s mix as “currents that are appealing to adults, but which aren’t necessarily [Adult Contemporary] records.”⁷⁷ Guy Zapoleon insisted that Mix 96.5 wasn’t a Top 40 station, because “to be top 40, you have to play the majority of the records that are on the charts.”⁷⁸ But other Adult Top 40 programmers weren’t entirely sure, or didn’t care, how to classify their stations. Unlike Crossover stations, whose advertising rates depended on their relationship to minority audiences, it wasn’t as financially important for Adult Top 40 stations to indicate a relationship with a preexisting format. *Billboard* classified these stations as Top 40, claiming that most of them “operate as part of the top 40 community” because they paid more attention to the Top 40 charts and positioned themselves against their Top 40 competitors rather than against Adult Contemporary.⁷⁹ Adult Contemporary programmers, for their part, were fairly unconcerned by the newest subformat, which seemed unlikely to steal core Adult Contemporary listeners.⁸⁰

Some programmers had theoretical concerns about the new subformat, whose soft mix perhaps too-closely resembled Top 40 programming of the early 1980s. Reacting to disco and concerns about an aging population, programmers in the early 1980s had made Top 40 “wimpy”; this was “the format’s nadir,” what Zapoleon described as “a terrible era” when “stations put people to sleep.”⁸¹ Zapoleon, however, claimed that he was doing something quite different. He wanted to “force Top 40 to go back to the middle,” away from its dance and rap lean; he hoped the format would return to the sound of Top 40 from 1982–85.⁸² This meant turning the programming clock back to before Crossover stations brought into the mainstream rap and dance music made by people of color, and before the sounds of rap permeated pop music. And, for the most part, Adult Top 40 programmers returned to this “middle”: Adult Top 40 stations avoided what another Texas programmer described as “extreme” music, because “adults won’t tolerate it.”⁸³

What Adult Top 40 programmers thought their listeners might tolerate was quite subjective. Some stations, like WKQX Chicago, believed their audiences didn’t want to hear anything too dancey, meaning that the station drew the line just beyond Janet Jackson’s “Miss You Much” or Paula Abdul’s “(It’s Just) The Way That You Love Me.”⁸⁴ Nearly all Adult Top 40 stations avoided rap and hard rock, but they would often play edits of popular songs that eliminated the unwanted sounds of these genres.⁸⁵ Robin Jones, programmer for Satellite Music Network’s Adult Top 40 stations, reported that her company’s affiliated stations would play most of what was played on the Top 40 format, except for music that was “too young, too rock, or too urban” for the ears of her audience who, she imagined,

“think [Top 40 stations] are a little too rough and traditional [Adult Contemporary stations] are a little too boring.”⁸⁶ Her affiliated stations, she recounted, didn’t play music by artists like Ugly Kid Joe, Mary J. Blige, Snow, Shai, Silk, and Joey Lawrence. Of her avoidance of music that was “too young, too rock, or too urban” for listeners, in this instance “too urban” made the greatest difference in determining whether or not the stations would play a song: four of the six artists or groups were Black, and five of the six had recent rap-adjacent singles.

At Adult Top 40 stations, listeners could rest assured that they would never be bombarded with the “extreme” sounds of rap. These stations were direct responses to the rise of Crossover stations, creating space for listeners who weren’t served by Top 40 leaning “too far to the urban side,” as Zapoleon put it.⁸⁷ But Adult Top 40 was also designed to be a refuge from standard Top 40 stations, where adults might be bothered by the rap programmers had added after seeing its popularity on Crossover stations. By leaning “more adult”—which *Billboard* claimed “usually translates to ‘less rap,’”—radio programmers were creating, according to Scott Shannon, “comfort zones” that were key to the format’s success.⁸⁸ An Albany, New York programmer claimed that being more centrist in his music choices made his station “more palatable to older listeners.”⁸⁹ And some programmers understood their programming to have psychological effects; one Orlando program director described recent changes at his station, which included cautiously controlling rap’s airplay, as making it “safer to listen to the radio station.”⁹⁰

Adult Top 40 stations and others that forbade rap often commissioned new slogans and jingles advertising their unwillingness to play rap. Baltimore Top 40 station WBSB began using a “no rap and no hard rock” slogan in 1990, and Mix 96.5 used “no Kids, no rap, no crap” and “no rap and no heavy metal” to advertise the music mix on its station.⁹¹ One consultant explained to *Billboard* that he was “just looking for the most descriptive terms that touch on what the adult hates to hear.”⁹² But the slogans did more than describe music. Vocal no-rap stances, a programmer revealed, “sen[t] a message” to certain segments of the audience that the station was “for them” (and, by extension, not for other people).⁹³ Through these slogans and through their playlists, Adult Top 40 stations separated their audiences from the sounds of rap, but also from the people—predominantly Black youth—associated with rap.

When broadcast on television, these no-rap slogans gained a visual dimension, adding embodied identities to the people associated with the stations. In an advertisement from the early 1990s, Mix 96.5 asked listeners, “Why do you listen to Mix 96.5?” Most respondents, all of whom appear to be white, say some variation of the station liner: “it makes you feel good.” But one working-age white man, dressed in a collared shirt and tie, claims that he likes that the station doesn’t play certain styles: there’s “nothing banging [his] head out.”⁹⁴ Here, the advertisement indicated that feeling good as a white working professional meant not having to be bothered with music that banged, likely meaning rap or hard rock. Another advertisement

from around the same time—a variation of which was also broadcast in Boston for sister-station WBMX—showed a white hand pulling gold chains and a spiked collar out of a radio while a voiceover advertised the station as having a rap- and heavy metal-free “better mix.”⁹⁵ Music, in this commercial, represented something more than sound: it was fashion, a lifestyle, and perhaps even a type of person that this white hand wanted to shut out. Not everything—or everyone—was part of the mainstream these stations wanted to play.

MANUFACTURING EXCLUSION

An easy analog to the growing divisions in the Top 40 format could be found by looking to the physical landscape: as programmers made it “safer to listen to the radio,” developers and contractors all over the country built physical spaces that aimed to protect upper- and middle-class Americans from purportedly undesirable characters.⁹⁶ Through the 1980s, the US public became increasingly concerned about crime, despite the violent-crime rate dropping by 25 percent.⁹⁷ Capitalizing on these fears, gated communities sprung up around the country in the late 1980s and 1990s; one study estimated that by 1997 there were three-million units in gated communities across the United States.⁹⁸ Most gated communities were in urban areas, including Los Angeles, New York, Miami, Houston, Phoenix, and Chicago, places where rap was more likely to be heard on Crossover and Top 40 stations due to these cities’ high concentration of non-white listeners.⁹⁹

Like Adult Top 40 stations, gated communities offered the promise of safety through exclusion. Physically set apart by walls from less desirable areas and policed by guards, these private spaces separated upper- and middle-class Americans from perceived unlawful activity on the streets and soothed “anxiety about the spread of urban lawlessness.”¹⁰⁰ These communities provided residents with a sense of belonging in a place where everyone was “one of them,” where they didn’t have to worry about outsiders intruding on their safety and comfort, and where kids could play in the streets without parental oversight.¹⁰¹ Like Adult Top 40 stations playing older music, they promised a new spin on an idealized version of the past, claiming to be “your new hometown” or “an old community setting,” ideas that relied upon a nostalgic ideal of small-town life.¹⁰² Advertisements for gated communities featured pictures of private “public” spaces such as parks and pools where residents would find people like them behind the gates and concrete walls keeping others out.¹⁰³

From its beginnings, hip hop invited urban youth to occupy physical spaces in their communities as DJs stole power from streetlights to fuel their parties, b-boys and b-girls took over public parks, and graffiti artists claimed city structures as their own.¹⁰⁴ As rap transitioned to a recorded medium its sound was separated from embodied performers, but it often still took up physical space just as a person might. Boom boxes, car stereos, and other loud sound systems

asserted the presence of youth of color in public spaces where they were often otherwise silenced. Volume had political meaning; blasting rap wasn't simply an aesthetic choice. Rather, songs were "weapons in a battle over the right to occupy public space," as historian Robin D.G. Kelley writes.¹⁰⁵ For those on the receiving end, these weapons were often unwelcome. In an article discussing rap's critics, *Billboard* writer Sean Ross recounted that his mom, like others her age, disliked rap in part because she rarely heard it by choice. Instead, young people walking around with boom boxes or driving with their windows down imposed the "invariably noisy, hostile, and dirty" music upon her.¹⁰⁶ In the words of the listener complaining about rapped Taco Bell commercials, rap forced unsuspecting listeners to "deal with [those] people with their ghetto blasters every damn day."¹⁰⁷ But in gated communities residents didn't have to hear this "noisy" music, because they lived in privatized spaces designed to attract an idealized quiet public.¹⁰⁸ Just as programmers at Adult Top 40 stations reclaimed the slots that rap had filled on Top 40 playlists, gated communities exerted control over the once-public places where hip hop had begun, making sure their residents were not bothered by unwanted people or sounds.

This exclusion, at least on the face of it, was not about race. Rather, gated communities were bound by socioeconomic class, by the ability to buy in. And programmers at Adult Top 40 stations too insisted that their programming had nothing to do with race; indeed, Black performers like Luther Vandross and Whitney Houston were some of Adult Top 40's most popular artists. While Rock 40 stations had used the language of genre to select an idealized white audience, playing genres that were closely connected to white audiences, Adult Top 40 stations nuanced this practice, making it more colorblind. In their musical selections these stations were racially ambivalent, allowing any music onto their playlist that fit their sound.

John Sebastian, one of the programmers who popularized the controversial "no disco" slogan in the early 1980s, denied that advertisements touting "no rap" had anything to do with race. He claimed that were it applicable for his current station, he would use a similar slogan because "rap and disco are not very good musically. Neither is heavy metal. I would probably try to attack them in a similar fashion and position my station as the one playing real music." Sebastian said of his "real rock and roll, and no disco" slogan from the 1980s that he "really, sincerely [didn't] believe [there was a racist appeal] involved. I'm a liberal Democrat who was really at the other extreme. Did the audience turn it into that? I hope not. It certainly wasn't the intention." According to him, "people who are racist today don't necessarily carry it into their musical tastes. There are a lot of racists who love black music. Instead, it [stems from] a lack of melody and musicianship springing forth from top 40, not just rap. There's just a real lack of great artists. . . . I think [the no rap-hard rock slogan] will spread quickly. I think the positioning will work because it's necessary right now."¹⁰⁹

“A THREAT TO THE VALUES
OF MAINSTREAM AMERICA”

But this positioning had everything to do with race. At least in the press, rap was quickly coming to symbolize more than just a musical style. Throughout the 1980s, reporting on rap shows lent the genre a violent reputation due to substantial coverage of fights at concerts across the country; subsequent articles described concert insurers and the Fraternal Order of Police refusing to work with rap acts.¹¹⁰ But in the late 1980s, the tenor of news stories about rap changed, following the release of N.W.A.'s *Straight Outta Compton*. In response to an album that they characterized as threatening to the social fabric of mainstream life in the United States, the media cultivated public panic by publishing articles devoted to the possible criminal activity of rappers.¹¹¹

By the new decade, rap was cast as the face of obscenity, antisemitism, and violent sex crimes in judicial hearings and incidents up and down the eastern seaboard. 2 Live Crew were arrested for obscenity, Public Enemy's Professor Griff was criticized for antisemitic comments, and one of the wrongfully convicted members of the Central Park Five (who had reportedly sung Tone Loc's "Wild Thing" behind bars) delivered what the *Washington Post* described as a "rambling, angry rap poem" at his sentencing hearing.¹¹² Washington notable Tipper Gore offered a greatest-hits version of these concerns in a frenzied editorial in the same paper, fear-mongeringly titled "Hate, Rape, and Rap."¹¹³ *Newsweek's* 1990 cover stories on the genre depicted it as the face of everything white mainstream America should be scared of: a "culture of attitude [that] is repulsive," that is "bombastic, self-aggrandizing and yet as scary as sudden footsteps in the dark," with "coded language, mystic monikers and Martian-sounding background noises [that] keep outsiders outside."¹¹⁴ Readers didn't even have to read the magazine to get the point. The photos, journalist Abiola Sinclair notes, "were designed to frighten white readers, or at least make white readers agree that Black rappers were vile and gross."¹¹⁵ This sort of coverage influenced radio programmers; one consultant claimed many in the industry were "scared to death of rap" because, like some other musical trends of the past, it "threaten[ed] to take over the planet."¹¹⁶ In *Billboard*, Janine McAdams wrote that some considered rap's crossover "a threat to the values of mainstream America."¹¹⁷

Of course, not everyone was caught up in the hysteria. Much of this reporting was criticized for its lack of context and heavy-handed race-baiting, and 2 Live Crew won their obscenity trial after the jury (including an assistant middle-school principal who freestyled raps on the bus between the courtroom and the sequestration hotel) found artistic merit in the group's music and humorous vacuity in the prosecution's bumbling case.¹¹⁸ But rap's reputation aligned with the press's general characterization of socioeconomically disadvantaged urban-minority communities. Media outlets during the 1980s constructed a sense of panic about increasing drug use, crime, and violence among young residents of color in urban

communities, all the while employing Reagan-era color-blind discourse that cast crime, joblessness, and violence as the fault of those lacking the moral fiber to achieve a mainstream middle-class life.¹¹⁹

Some rappers *were* making music during this era that directly confronted white mainstream norms. Afrocentric groups and collectives like Boogie Down Productions, Public Enemy, X Clan, and Native Tongues introduced listeners to the work of Black Power activists and the teachings of the Nation of Islam in their songs. Boogie Down Productions' 1990 song "Blackman in Effect," for example, criticized the absence of Black history in the public-education system and reeducated listeners indoctrinated on white mainstream versions of history. Other rappers like N.W.A and the Geto Boys spoke back to racist preconceptions of Black youth, offering vital critiques of dominant racial narratives while playfully engaging with the stereotypes typically ascribed to them.¹²⁰ While these complex stories weren't often heard on the radio, a simplified version was readily available to viewers watching television coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles uprising following the acquittal of the four officers videotaped beating Rodney King. This event verified for white mainstream audiences rappers' depictions of life in urban neighborhoods, and listeners would hear its sounds later sampled as an accompaniment to the vivid storytelling on Dr. Dre's *The Chronic*.

Few of these artists found success on commercial radio, but their challenge to the white mainstream was felt more broadly than radio exposure might have enabled anyway. Together, rap artists' Afrocentric rhetoric and Black-nationalist ideas created what scholar Jeffrey Louis Decker describes as a "collective challenge to the consensus logic of U.S. nationalism."¹²¹ Rap's revolutionary potential was in its confrontation of white norms, a fact vividly illustrated on the cover of Ice-T's 1993 album *Home Invasion* (figure 10). Rap here is presented as an intruder, albeit one willingly summoned by a white kid wearing an Afrocentric necklace, listening to a stack of rap tapes, and sitting next to a book by Malcolm X. But the genre's threat to establishment figures is clear, as the cover also depicts multiple Black figures assaulting, presumably, the child's white guardians.

For all these reasons, rap was more than just music. It was a sign of the perceived difference between the mainstream and racialized urban residents, one that, as scholar D. Marvin Jones writes, pitted "urban culture versus mainstream culture and urban space versus suburban space."¹²² Never mind, of course, that rap *was* mainstream: as 2 Live Crew's obscenity case took center stage in national news, NBC premiered *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* starring the rapper-turned-actor whom the network considered key to their primetime lineup.¹²³ And never mind that mainstream suburbanites weren't wholly disinterested in what happened in urban spaces.¹²⁴ Rap became a symbol for racial difference and, in a country geographically demarcated by residential segregation, a symbol of the physical distance between the mainstream and an assumed Black other.



FIGURE 10. Ice-T, *Home Invasion*, Rhyme syndicate Records, 1993. Note how rap’s “invasion” doesn’t harm the young listener, just the white adults surrounding him.

RECONFIGURING RACE

As rap became a stand-in for race, a way to allude to the subject without naming it as such, the format that advertised its unwillingness to play rap suggested a new way of thinking about race in the age of multiculturalism. Adult Top 40’s discourse of exclusion reflected a shift in racial attitudes in the United States that sociologist George Yancey describes as the move from a “white/nonwhite dichotomy” to a “black/nonblack dichotomy.” This shift expanded the white category in ways that reflected the United States’ growing racial diversity; he writes that “instead of evaluating the social acceptance of a group by how ‘white’ they are,” in a black/nonblack dichotomy “social rejection of a group [is assessed] by how ‘black’ they are.”¹²⁵ Multiculturalism, here, depends upon the assimilation of Blackness into

some sort of multicultural identity, where racial exceptionalism doesn't exist; those who highlight their racial identity are seen as exceptions, unable to be reformed into civil and consumer society.¹²⁶ Rap came to symbolize this sort of Blackness that couldn't easily be incorporated into the United States' multicultural mix; its sound rendered it racially distinctive and thus "relegated to the sidelines of a properly post-racial society."¹²⁷ Importantly, this new racial attitude protected the non-Black population against charges of racism, because the non-Black population was racially diverse.

The growing number of Black-Oriented stations that also refused to play rap helped make the case that no-rap slogans weren't about race.¹²⁸ Throughout the late 1980s, the Urban Adult Contemporary (Urban AC) format grew in popularity as Black-Oriented programmers struggled to balance the musical tastes of their age-diverse listeners while Crossover stations were "taking large bites" of their rap-friendly audiences.¹²⁹ By 1992, *Billboard* chart editor Terri Rossi calculated that 10–15 percent of Black-Oriented stations targeted adults and would not play rap; a year later, *Billboard* began releasing two separate Black-Oriented airplay charts, one for adult-oriented stations and one for more age-diverse stations, recognizing that their playlists varied quite considerably.¹³⁰ When *Radio & Records* began running two separate charts, it was clear that the industry defined Urban AC stations by what they failed to play; the journal described them as playing "smooth R&B music instead of hip hop/rap."¹³¹ One record company executive credited rap with the proliferation of Urban AC stations, noting that "the kids who want to hear rap—or rather the adults who *don't* want to hear rap—are the reason why there's a lot of success at the Urban AC stations these days."¹³²

The presence of these stations revealed just how hard Black radio professionals were working to disassociate race with economic class in the hopes of gaining higher advertisement rates. Urban AC stations were often programmed with offices in mind. In 1988, a Black Raleigh programmer told *Billboard* that many government workers were not allowed to play rap at the office, and that playing too much rap would cause "sophisticated places" to switch stations, indicating that rap's identity was incongruous with the economic mobility these white-collar jobs represented.¹³³ The Urban AC format, one Black Philadelphia programmer thought, was a good fit for offices because "it [was] inoffensive."¹³⁴ Nearly a decade after rap had first been played on Black-Oriented radio, some in this segment of the industry were still using the genre as a way to signal their respectability, casting rap as antithetical to an appropriate work environment. Even as rap became more popular and as rap's audience aged, public places such as offices continued to avoid playing the genre.¹³⁵

But many people working in the radio and advertising industries still understood race as a proxy for class. Unlike housing in gated communities, which was sold to a group of people defined by their economic status, Adult Top 40 and Urban AC stations had to define their audience through racially identified musical

styles. They reconfigured their stations' politics of race by aligning their audiences with the non-Black normative public, redefining young Black urban life as the outsider while playing other Black artists like Whitney Houston and Luther Vandross. For these stations, rap was a way to signal their racial politics to advertisers and listeners alike without explicitly mentioning race, a necessity in the colorblind yet multicultural United States. Playlists, as they always had, stood in for racial attitudes, and music, the *Newsweek* staff opined in 1992, seemed to as well. "After nearly three decades of reflecting the promises of integration," they wrote, "pop music—from country to hard-core rap—has become our most pointed metaphor for volatile racial polarization."¹³⁶

This polarization was sure to continue, for the marginalization of rap on Adult Top 40 and Urban AC stations ensured a future where rappers' Black identities would remain in the periphery of the communities these stations cultivated. These stations encouraged a musical separation between rap and other popular music, encouraging a "narcotic elitism in listeners," as DJ Robert A. George wrote in a *Billboard* editorial, by loudly claiming that the "better mix" didn't include rap.¹³⁷ Promoting rap-free stations as safer and more desirable than more traditional Top 40 stations took advantage of *and* fueled apprehension about rap, and programmers failed to assuage these concerns, refusing to educate their listeners about the style. Instead, rap-free stations reinforced criticisms of rap and fostered an audience division between people willing to listen to rap and those who were against rap of any sort. Individual dislikes transformed into group condemnations as these stations created communities made up of listeners and critics who found the music, and its associations, unwelcome.

Stations defined by not playing rap created a "musical apartheid," media scholar Susan J. Douglas writes, that "in a corrosive, subterranean fashion legitimate[d] geographic apartheid as well."¹³⁸ But rap-free stations weren't subterranean; they were shouting that rap was distasteful from the rooftops, emphasizing the differences between the US cultural mainstream and a racialized other, and contributing to the mainstream's steady disinvestment from urban minorities. Gatekeepers in every sense of the word, programmers articulated a colorblind-yet-segregated vision of the mainstream US.

SPLITTING THE MAINSTREAM

Common sense might dictate that separating local listeners into those who liked the "bad elements," as deemed by one white Detroit programmer, and those who liked the "best hits" would hurt stations, because splitting a format's audience into several groups created smaller audiences.¹³⁹ But after a couple years of refining playlists and sales strategies, Adult Top 40 and Urban AC stations proved their solvency.¹⁴⁰ From an advertiser's perspective, a smaller, more discrete audience of women was preferable to a larger, more youthful audience.¹⁴¹ So while

one Baltimore programmer acknowledged that his station's "no rap" slogan would alienate some of his listeners and that others "aren't going to come in to replace them as quickly," it was a gamble he was willing to take because "the research showed a hole that we wanted to fill before someone else did."¹⁴²

In 1993, *Billboard* began adding Adult Top 40 stations' play counts to its "Hot 100" chart, acknowledging Adult Top 40 as a Top 40 subformat.¹⁴³ In so doing, it publicly recognized both the strength of the format and also its version of the mainstream that did not include rap. Adult Top 40's idealized audience held clout when it came to controlling the charts; at the end of 1993, out of the 190 Top 40 stations that *Billboard* monitored for chart purposes, sixty were Adult Top 40 stations, compared to seventy-four standard Top 40 stations and thirty-two Cross-over stations.¹⁴⁴

The popularity of adult-oriented stations translated to record sales. Indicating their belief in the potential of these stations, several record companies created new subsidiary labels to support adult-oriented releases.¹⁴⁵ So in 1993 when a quasi-ten-year reunion occurred on Adult Top 40 stations with programmers playing new music by pre-Crossover format hitmakers such as Tina Turner, Phil Collins, Huey Lewis and the News, and Kenny Loggins, sales soon followed.¹⁴⁶ These new songs were designed for cross-generational appeal; producers such as David Foster, who worked on Natalie Cole's *Unforgettable* and the soundtrack to *The Bodyguard*, helped update artists' older styles.¹⁴⁷ Adults, who were often not considered to be reliable record buyers, bought these albums in droves; for example, in July 1993, Barbra Streisand unseated Janet Jackson at the top of the *Billboard* albums chart with an album of Foster-produced Broadway hits.¹⁴⁸ One regional music buyer noticed that teens, surprisingly, were also buying adult-oriented pop because they "think it's OK to listen to this kind of stuff and it isn't considered lame."¹⁴⁹

Adult Top 40's success didn't save the Top 40 format, however, as the ratings decline continued. In 1992, Cleveland program director Keith Clark proclaimed that the reign of Top 40 was over, as the "glory of our beloved medium [was] fading."¹⁵⁰ But it wasn't entirely clear what the beloved medium *was* anymore, because among the stations still in the format there wasn't much agreement of what they should play. Michael Ellis of *Billboard* had been shocked in 1989 that "the total number of 'pure' top 40 stations—those that play all the hits—is under 100," but by 1991, not a single song was played by all of the Top 40 stations *Radio & Records* surveyed, a trend that the magazine recorded for the next two years as well.¹⁵¹ The growing popularity of gangsta rap and grunge, together with the industry's development of more accurate measures of their popularity, only added to the general impression of audience fragmentation. When *Billboard* debuted its revised album chart that measured sales of records via the SoundScan barcode reader, the music industries were forced to face the actual popularity of genres previously assumed to have niche audiences.¹⁵² By the end of 1992, new subformats of Top 40 had become

so popular that *Radio & Records* sarcastically noted that their competitor *Billboard* needed five different Top 40 charts to keep up with the format's fragmentation.¹⁵³

Keith Clark put the blame for Top 40 radio's decline squarely on his colleagues, claiming that "programmers—desperate to create new versions of contemporary formats for which they can take credit and become consultants—have ruined the marketplace for the almighty mainstream CHR."¹⁵⁴ And these consultants needed data, the stats that Rick Dees had complained about in his advertisement declaring rap dead. Rap may have been a wedge between teens and adults. But it was the overly ambitious programmers armed with data, hoping to make a name for themselves, and tired of competing for New Kids on the Block exclusives (as one programmer joked was the reason for the rise of Adult Top 40), that were holding the hammer.¹⁵⁵

GIVING LISTENERS "WHAT THEY WANT EVEN BEFORE THEY KNOW THEY WANT IT"

Many stations in the late 1980s and early 1990s hired radio consultants to help develop their playlists. These consultants were often programmers who had successful-enough careers to peddle their instincts—made valuable with a heap of substantiating survey data—to less effective programmers.¹⁵⁶ Like other types of industry analysis, radio consulting in the 1980s and 1990s was informed by psychographics, a form of demographic research that matched particular lifestyle habits with consumer choices. In the 1980s, programmer Lee Abrams began using psychographic research and advocated for playing more "horizontal" music because it could appeal to multiple psychographic groups; horizontal, here, was another term for crossover.¹⁵⁷

But psychographics could also be used to fashion narrowcast stations, allowing programmers to target exactly whom advertisers wanted. Throughout the 1990s, narrowcasting became more common, as the number of stations across the country increased.¹⁵⁸ More stations in a market allowed programmers to divide audiences into finer, more homogenous, and perhaps easier-to-please segments: one programmer jokingly claimed that psychographic methods allowed him to target just "men between the ages of 25 and 29, with vasectomies, who are left handed and have red hair."¹⁵⁹ While this wasn't their intended audience, this sort of narrow targeting was prevalent at stations playing rap—or those adamantly opposed to it. Narrowcasting often reduced revenue at individual stations; assuming a stable amount of advertising dollars, an increase in the number of stations in a given market often meant a decrease in each station's potential profits.¹⁶⁰ Understanding this math, many stations targeting niche audiences reduced their expenses by entering into agreements with other local stations to merge parts of their operations.¹⁶¹

In the early 1990s, the FCC endorsed this cost-saving measure when it raised station-ownership limits, legalizing local duopolies. Previously, companies could

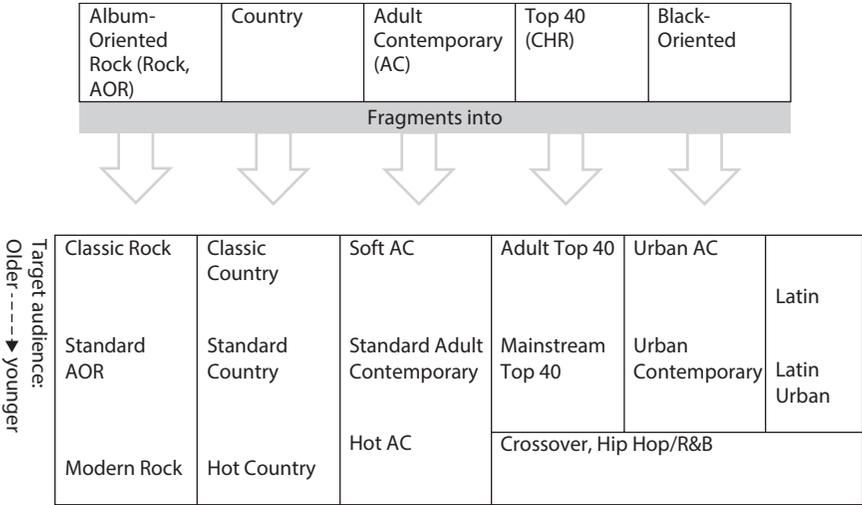


FIGURE 11. Radio format fragmentation in the mid-1990s.

own just one FM and one AM station in a market; in 1992, the FCC increased this to as many as six stations, depending on market size.¹⁶² Consolidating staff from their multiple stations helped owners cut costs. And owning more than one station in a market could boost advertising rates if owners strategically chose formats with nonoverlapping audiences and sold these audiences in combination.¹⁶³ A company could own, for example, both a younger-leaning Adult Top 40 station and an older-leaning Adult Contemporary station to corner the adult female listener market. Duopolies could potentially provide owners with “lots more latitude” because they could “combine impact in demographics and psychographics and shade each station in different directions to broaden the appeal.”¹⁶⁴

With the freedom and economic incentive to “shade” stations, owners more carefully targeted specific audiences, continuing the fragmentation of not just Top 40 but all formats on the radio dial (see figure 11). In Baton Rouge, for example, the two Black-Oriented stations Chris Clay programmed “ha[d] an almost exclusive lock on the market’s black listeners” by 1994 because they played different music: at night, one played rap while the other played a softer and jazzier show style called Quiet Storm.¹⁶⁵ If programmers were confused by the increasing number of formats or didn’t know what the best station combination for their area might be, they needn’t worry: consulting agencies developed “duopoly simulation” services to “reveal which format combinations will attain maximum market shares.”¹⁶⁶

More generally, increasingly sophisticated computer models enabled radio stations and radio-consulting agencies to finely tune their programming, reinforcing fragmentation. As computing power and data increased throughout the end of the twentieth century, so did demand for more intricate models predicting consumer

habits.¹⁶⁷ New data about listeners, scholar John Klaess contends, “occasioned new formats, and new formats occasioned novel listeners,” giving momentum to the already-incipient divisions within the Top 40 format.¹⁶⁸ Radio-ratings agencies such as Arbitron and Birch also increased the specificity and accuracy of their findings, providing more numbers for consultants and programmers to gather and assess.¹⁶⁹ In response to this granular information, radio stations shifted from bluntly dividing an area’s population by age and race—hoping that the time-tested association between an audience’s demographic profile and a performer’s race and musical style would apply—to programming music informed by consultant-guided, data-driven research, which demonstrated a correspondence between specific audiences and individual songs or styles. By 1995, these models were so sophisticated that *Radio & Records* offered an online service where stations could request an automated custom-Top 40 chart based on information about their local market and their desired subformat, eliminating the need for a human programmer.¹⁷⁰

In 1995, Coleman Research published “The Music Clustering of America,” a 300-page study that represented just one form of market-segmentation research. The first study to examine “the various bodies of tastes within the American radio listening audience,” it employed cluster analysis, the same method that the PRIZM modeling system had used in the 1970s to map consumer preferences onto zip codes.¹⁷¹ Michael Weiss describes the potential of such modeling systems for businesses: “Today, with the click of a computer mouse, businesses can pinpoint the one neighborhood within three miles of a store where they’ll find the highest number of college-educated, Toyota-owning camera buffs between the ages of 25 and 34 who live in \$175,000 homes. Increasingly, consumer maps and market profiles are helping marketers in their tireless efforts to give consumers what they want even before they know they want it.”¹⁷²

Predictive modeling—giving listeners “what they want even before they know they want it”—was precisely what Top 40 music programmers *did*, albeit previously without highly sophisticated computational grounding, when they forecasted what new hits might best appeal to their audience.¹⁷³ Improving predictions by using computerized models to create playlists might have made programmers’ jobs easier, but using models also had potential benefits for listeners. According to Weiss, cluster modeling didn’t just make selling things easier but also benefited consumers: “Target-marketing attempts not only to steer selected products toward selected people—say, baby formula toward expectant families in suburban homes—but to keep the same products away from those who aren’t interested, such as childless couples living in urban apartments. The goal, say marketers, is to eliminate waste for businesses and reduce information clutter for consumers.”¹⁷⁴

Reducing information clutter could seem noble—who wants to hear an ad for something they will never buy on the radio? And, perhaps more importantly, what company wants to pay to target the wrong consumer? But these cluster models

assumed that consumer taste and buying preferences were semistatic and required companies to make decisions based on already-existing data. This allowed companies to “give consumers what they want even before they know they want it,” but it also limited consumer choice because it didn’t introduce them to other, less familiar options. Coleman Research’s cluster modeling of musical taste revealed that while the people they surveyed didn’t agree on much, the styles of music they most commonly liked were older: Motown hits, standard Oldies radio fare, and even classical music.¹⁷⁵ Coleman was quick to note that liking a style did not necessarily equate to listening to a format playing that style, but it’s easy to imagine that programmers and musicians interested in mass appeal might use this information to create formats and music that relied on the easily palatable sounds of the past, rather than work to introduce listeners to newer styles such as rap.

“The Music Clustering of America” displays just how difficult playing rap on Top 40 stations could be. One graphic, a “Music Map of American Tastes,” indicated the degree to which age determined musical taste by depicting a giant chasm between the music younger listeners enjoyed and styles older audiences listened to. Grunge and Pop Alternative—two styles most liked by twelve-to-twenty-nine-year-old white males—and Churban and Pop Urban—two names for rap-friendly Crossover format sounds young female audiences listened to—are shown on one side of a two-dimensional graph, separated by a conspicuous white space from all other format sounds: Adult Contemporary, Country, New Soft Adult Contemporary, Jazz, Classical, Urban Adult Contemporary, Motown, Classical, Oldies, Soft ’70s, ’70s, Classic Rock, and AOR.¹⁷⁶ Bleakly showing the lack of overlapping taste among younger demographics *and* between younger and older demographics, the authors demarcate the segmentation of musical taste with a giant white space.¹⁷⁷ Elsewhere, the study supported programmers’ age-based concerns about rap’s uneven appeal, reporting that no listeners they surveyed over the age of thirty-five preferred the genre.¹⁷⁸ A few years later in a follow-up study, Coleman recommended that all Top 40 stations lean either toward rap or rock due to a “continued incompatibility between the most popular sounds” in the Top 40 format.¹⁷⁹ Straight-ahead Top 40 stations might temporarily receive strong ratings, Coleman found, but in the long term it was unlikely that these stations would survive, especially if a more narrowcast station were to begin broadcasting in their area.¹⁸⁰

THE DEMISE OF THE MAINSTREAM

While splitting the Top 40 format into tiny insular segments may have made financial sense for individual owners, some in the music industries believed that this shift had far-reaching and detrimental effects. In early 1992, recording studio president Paul Wickliffe pessimistically noted that “slicing the mainstream record-buying public into narrow ‘demographically correct’ formats has all but killed off pop radio and will never produce a mega-hit.”¹⁸¹ It seemed that once Top

40 subformats had separated listeners into niche categories, it was difficult to put them back together because narrowcast stations didn't expose listeners to a wide variety of styles. Subformats reinforced what might have been already diverging tastes: "traditional mainstream tastes," one station manager in Washington, DC, worried, "don't exist anymore."¹⁸²

The format built on broadcasting mainstream tastes—Top 40—was correspondingly foundering. Between 1989 and 1993, Top 40 lost over 38 percent of its national audience, and by 1994, there were only 358 Top 40 stations in the country, down from 931 in 1989. This made it the ninth-most-popular format, trailing format juggernauts Country and Adult Contemporary.¹⁸³ Rap, many programmers believed, was behind the decline, because it was incompatible with most other pop music. According to one Dallas programmer, a Top 40 station just *couldn't* play Michael Bolton, the Breeders, and Snoop Dogg. "Top 40," he postulated, "made a big mistake when it so heartily embraced extreme music and left most of the audience behind."¹⁸⁴ Radio consultant Alan Burns agreed, recounting that his study of over one thousand radio listeners revealed that Top 40 listeners were switching to other stations because, as one twenty-three-year-old woman put it, "I just don't like the music anymore—there's too much rap for me."¹⁸⁵

For stations, it wasn't just rap that was the problem—its associated listeners were also to blame. In a prescient 1988 article about the Top 40 format, programmer Bill Tanner wrote that the "presence of ethnic minorities" was causing the format to break apart.¹⁸⁶ By the new decade, people of color, which one Houston programmer clumsily described as having "higher levels of ethnic composition," were being blamed for Top 40's fragmentation.¹⁸⁷ While rappers were selling their records to a diverse public, radio programmers hadn't figured out how to, didn't want to, or couldn't monetize rap's multicultural audience. Instead, this audience was a problem for a format whose mainstream had previously been conceived of as white. And record companies too noted the splintering of the mainstream; one record-label executive thought that because of listener demographics, "certain stations are able to support a type of music that others can't touch."¹⁸⁸ Despite its popularity, programmers had never succeeded in making rap for everybody.

"THE NATURAL SELECTION"

And this brings us back to Rick Dees. Without a unified Top 40 and enough Top 40 stations to sell his show to, his countdown just didn't work. Dees, it should be said, was doing better than his competitor, Shadoe Stevens, who hosted *American Top 40*. For a few years, the two shows had been using different sources for their countdowns, with Dees using *Radio & Records'* airplay-only charts and *American Top 40* using *Billboard's* "Hot 100." Using the "Hot 100" was risky because that chart often included rap and heavy metal songs that were selling well but were not played on many stations broadcasting the countdown. For example, in 1989,

playing 2 Live Crew's song "Me So Horny" during the broadcast of *American Top 40* caused controversy because, according to one radio professional, it was too "urban-sounding" to appeal to "the typical *American Top 40* clientele." In response, the show shortened the song and Stevens declined to say the name of the song after its first week on the countdown.¹⁸⁹

Using airplay charts made Dees's countdown an easier sell. In 1991, he pitched the show as "America's PURELY Top 40 show," insinuating that incorporating sales data might sully the musical purity of the Top 40.¹⁹⁰ But even this didn't guarantee Dees a spot on all Top 40 stations, because those stations moving in a more adult direction were wary of any music—like Sir Mix-a-Lot's "Baby Got Back"—that might challenge their audience, despite countdown shows being an easy opportunity to showcase new music.¹⁹¹ And so Dees, trying to ensure the marketability of his countdown, proclaimed rap dead in 1992, hoping that by publicly aligning his countdown with the demise of rap, rap-weary radio stations would sign on. This, of course, did little to halt the genre's quickly growing popularity.

In 1994, Stevens's *American Top 40* folded, in large part because of the decline of the Top 40 format. This was a lucky break for Dees, who gained the affiliate stations of his major competitor. But Dees still struggled to make a countdown work, as more than 60 percent of Top 40 stations had switched formats in the previous five years.¹⁹² Reflecting the precarity of the format, Dees's new contract was contingent on creating an Adult Top 40/Hot AC version of the show, because even though the original show was designed to be "sensitive to the needs of Top 40 programmers," Dees's company claimed "we can't clear Rick in seven of the top ten markets."¹⁹³

In July 1994, Dees took out another full-page advertisement in *Radio & Records*, this time claiming that his countdown was "the natural selection."¹⁹⁴ Above this text were six mammals wearing polka-dot shorts, each slightly less hunched over and less hairy than the previous. Supposedly evolving, the first mammal finds a pair of headphones, the second picks them up, the third puts them across their shoulder, the fourth around their neck, the fifth finds the other end of the auxiliary cable, and the sixth plugs it into a radio with a picture of Rick Dees—leaning back, relaxed, with an easy smile—plastered across it. Tuning in to a countdown that barely recorded the musical tastes of the nation, it seemed, was the desired result, the way nature intended the Top 40 mainstream to sound.

But if that were the case, Dees was leading that mainstream to a natural extinction. Rap and research, as Dees predicted, had killed Top 40. But not for the reasons Dees was concerned about. Instead, Adult Top 40 stations and Dees's countdown shifted Top 40's focus to adults rather than younger listeners, creating a generation for whom Top 40 radio was no longer as important. By the mid-1990s, Top 40 was a mere shadow of its former self; in *Radio & Records*' 1995 format-reach survey, the format hit single-digit ratings for the first time since the magazine had started calculating them. Country and Adult Contemporary each had almost twice as many

listeners as Top 40. And this was an optimistic outlook, one that bundled together the many fragments of the format, each of which, one scholar has aptly described, was no longer “*the* Top 40” but instead “*a* Top 40.”¹⁹⁵

The demise of the Top 40 format had financial implications for record companies, artists, managers, radio stations, and DJs, to name just a few of the affected parties. But the consequences of the format’s decline extended far beyond the finances of these individual people and companies. As the Top 40 format fragmented into stations willing to play rap and stations intentionally excluding these sounds, one Black DJ noted that what “used to be a coming-together place . . . [is now] a segregating place,” emphasizing that he meant segregating in “all senses of the word.”¹⁹⁶ For the musical mainstream heard on Top 40 had served a greater purpose than just representing popularity—it brought people together. Top 40 radio, at its most idealistic, broadcasts solidarity and unity, integrating new styles into the mainstream. On stations where listeners were *not* encouraged to listen to different types of music, their audiences’ “patience for different kinds of music . . . shriveled” meaning that narrowcast radio formats only reinforced polarizing tastes.¹⁹⁷ By fragmenting Top 40, by including some and excluding others, Adult Top 40, Rock 40, and Crossover stations destroyed Top 40’s coalition audience, troubling the cohesion of the popular-music mainstream in the United States. Fragmentation, stemming from radio programmers’ reactions to rap, segregated Top 40 radio. It separated the popular-music mainstream from a Black other. It closed listeners’ minds, strengthening negative perceptions of urban people of color. And most insidious of all, it did so under the guise that this was what listeners wanted.