Guy Zapoleon, President, Zapoleon Consulting

Guy Zapoleon certainly needs no introduction. He's an iconic programmer/consultant and renowned historian of the evolution of contemporary music radio over the past four decades. His specialty has always been Top 40, he just never stops thinking about the format. His reference points, up to the present day, are encyclopedic, while he continues to entertain and pursue fresh approaches to the format as he projects its vision path.

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By Fred Deane

Guy Zapoleon's career-long ambition of Top 40 radio began at the young age of 13-years-old when he quickly became a student of legendary Pop stations like WABC/New York and KHJ/Los Angeles.

His often-celebrated Ten-Year Music Cycle theory has been a reliable source of Pop music trends and inclinations, aas well as a 50-year passion that allows him to have a multi-dimensional perspective of Pop music's effect on Pop Culture in general.

Throughout our careers, Guy and I have had countless discussions of just about everything having to do with both the radio and music industries, and although reflective at times, they typically focus on the core concerns of realistic solutions and courses of action, and moving forward.

Let's take a quick history lesson. What factors contributed to the fractionalization of the Top 40 format

There was a long series of events over the past three decades that effectively contributed to the migration from radio, mainly caused by the creation of great audio and visual content competitors, as well as some self-inflicted mistakes.

The first blow to Top 40 can be traced back to 1987 when Arbitron created the Soft-Diary, which changed the definition for recorded listening from "listen" to "hear." Workplace listening was also added as a new location for recorded listening, in addition to the primary locations of home and in the car.

The Arbitron Advisory Panel (COLRAM) had tried to make the diary more accurate by placing lines between the dayparts in the diary, but it was at the expense of actual listening itself. When ratings results of the new Daypart-Diary were in, radio lost around 25% of its GRP's, and revenue from national and local buyers was dramatically lower. All of a sudden everyone's freaking out!

A Beautiful Music station owner on the COLRAM committee at the time was given the task to solve the problems created by this diary. He created what was known as the Soft-Diary where the definition for giving stations credit suddenly became,

"listening is anytime you can hear a station whether you choose to or not." He also added At-Work as a listening location. As a result, workplace stations like AC were getting 40 hours of long-listening a week, which dwarfed the traditional average long-listening period of 10 hours for most active music stations like Top 40.

Suddenly, all of the Top 40, and a lot of the Rock stations, lost 3-4 shares and dropped precipitously in market rankings, often falling out of the Top 5, while AC stations replaced them at #1 in several markets.

The Soft-Diary dramatically changed radio's execution as owners, managers and programmers realized they could get 4-5 times the listening credit by focusing on the workplace. Radio began to figure out ways to get and retain people listening at work by removing listening "irritants" like too much talk or noisy imaging. Radio began its journey from an active listening content foreground experience toward more of a background listening utility.

How did you respond as a Top 40 programmer at the time?

I professionally did everything I could to fight this terrible diary change. **Rick Cummings** and I even took on that owner who was a Soft-Diary designer at a panel at the NAB.

In the late 80s I was programming Nationwide's KZZP in Phoenix, a Top 40 with a long successful track record, and I argued (to no avail) with my company to help fight the new diary. I remember being disgusted and angry knowing the consequences it would have on Top 40 radio.

Putting the debate aside, I began to take on a bigger role as National Program Director at Nationwide and handed the KZZP reins to another program director. What followed in the early 90s was the worst doldrums for radio (until now) when Top 40 refused to embrace Hip-Hop (exploding at the time), as well as a lot of the Rock music that was also flourishing.

How active were you and Nationwide in adjusting to the new diary and its tendencies?

As Top 40 eschewed the Pop Culture music trends of Hip-Hop and Rock,

it focused more on playing soft music. The music landscape rapidly became saturated with soft and midtempo Pop artists like **Billy Joel**, **Gloria Estefan** and **Rod Stewart**, along with soft Pop newcomers like **Michael Bolton**, **Celine Dion** and **Amy Grant**.

In 1990, Nationwide asked me to move to Houston to help program a new station they purchased. I worked with the KHMX/Mix 96.5 team creating a new format, an upbeat type of AC, a "Hot AC," designed for the workplace to take advantage of the new Soft-Diary. Given the Houston success at the time, Hot ACs sprang up across the country replacing the plummeting trends occurring at Top 40s as owners began to give up on the Top 40 format.

Two well-known consultants at that time pronounced that "Top 40 was dead" in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*. Owners responded by collectively dropping 500 stations out of the Top 40 panel (about 1/3 of the total).

When did the recovery of Top 40 commence?

The format didn't recover until around 1996-97 when teen-Pop reemerged and the all-time great programming team at Z100/New York of **Tom Poleman**, **Sharon Dastur** and **Paul "Cubby" Bryant** created magic and moved the station back in a true Pop-centric direction. Their success inspired stations across the country to embrace the Top 40 format once again.

We've discussed on several occasions, the effects of the Clinton administration's passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act. Can you elaborate on that as a catalyst to the highly centralized programming of radio?

The net effect was certainly not what **President Bill Clinton** expected. Instead of creating more diversity in broadcasting with more owners participating, it became more homogenized and centrally controlled.

Essentially, the Telecom Act eliminated the 10 TV/10 FM/10 AM (per market) ownership limits, and the deregulation permitted owners to own and operate multiple stations in any given market. The value of radio stations increased dramatically, causing the radio and music industries to become big businesses respectively, and on the radio side, resulting in less Mom & Pop ownership which was the original intention.

Large radio groups became bigger than ever, with fewer overall owners, as smaller groups were being eaten up by selling their groups at record high multiples. Money was being invested at a record pace and Top 40 was indeed huge business at an entirely different level.

Pop radio sustained itself as a healthy format by homogenization tactics of these fewer larger groups. Just like consultants had been doing before with their clients, companies spread winning programming strategies around their massive chains of stations, resulting in vastly improved ratings.

In later years ex-President Clinton spoke about this at a *Radio & Records* convention saying he was very disappointed since he didn't see the diversity of ownership and formats he was promised which prompted him to sign the Telecom Act in the first place.

What were the causes of your "devolution theory" of Top 40 at the turn of the century?

There were several disrupting factors that occurred.

In 1999 Napster created music consumption via digitized mp3 files allowing radio listeners electronically share music. Napster gave listeners a reason to leave radio to

discover new music virally as millions of passionate music fans created a sharing frenzy.

Over-commercialization also became a debilitating issue as these large radio groups had to manage bigger debt loads. In a ten-year period, spot-loads on Top 40s exploded from 8-12 minutes an hour, to as much as 20+ an hour.

At the same time, in the early 2000s, a major research company conducted a study revealing that listeners demanded less interruptions to their music. Radio groups embarked on a mission to reduce non-music elements and commenced to shut personalities up and soften and shorten music imaging, while commercials loads continued to rise.

When the iPod was born in 2001, Apple's **Steve Jobs** defined digital music as a source of customized mobile music consumption. His comments at the time resonated, "It's a digital music player that lets you put your entire music collection in your pocket and listen to it wherever you go." iTunes.com was launched as a companion piece to the iPod providing a digital music library with new and older titles alike.

Satellite radio begins with two players and then merges in 2008 (the formation of SiriusXM) and offers hundreds of music, sports and talk channels, becoming radio's first major blueprint-business competitor.

DSP's created challenges of a different (and more lethal) sort as Spotify and Pandora became all the rage for on-demand and self-curated music listening. Not to mention, YouTube, the iPhone, Amazon Music, TikTok and other social media platforms.

Can you address what conceivably could be the most extreme competition radio faces from DSP's and their listener customization options?

Why did we allow streaming to take our advantages away? It's incredibly hard to compete with the on-demand features of streaming platforms with little or no commercials at all.

Radio always had the advantage of being both a music discovery platform and the medium people depend on for hits. However, a generation of young listeners having grown up with streaming platforms as their go-to places for music has become an increasingly difficult problem to solve.

The younger-demo, especially 12–24-year-olds, rely less on music discovery via radio, going there mainly to hear the hits.

Do we risk losing most of the young-end who continue to adhere to these digital platforms and the optionality they afford?

I was always blessed with great mentors, one being **Jon Coleman** of Coleman Insights, always preached the need to stay in touch with the leading edge which in the past (and still today) have been the 12–17-year-old listeners.

As they drift to DSP's, they become more elusive to Top 40 radio. The same can be said about many of the 18-24 demo. Therefore, at this point, I think radio is really an 18+ medium, with the 18-24 cell as the leading edge, and the tonnage being 25+.

On the more optimistic side of the ledger, what's the silver lining for Top 40 going forward?

It's been established that when radio is compared to streaming platforms, we know it's difficult for radio to compete on a level playing field. But musically, radio still has the same powerful position it has always held as the destination listeners can depend on to hear the hits at all formats.

The one area in which radio has a distinct advantage is featuring great personalities (at least for now). That's really the key difference.

How about some courses of action?

Finding and developing personalities would be my #1 focus! That's radio's great advantage. Great radio stations throughout history had great personalities in every daypart. Radio still needs great personalities, so we need to invest in developing talent in all dayparts.

Find inventive ways to connect with the listening audience wherever they are. I believe personalities can do this in a video broadcast similar to the way TV talk shows use today where guests, or even listeners, appear visually on the show. This would add an entertaining and surprise element to radio that doesn't exist now. Take a page from late-night TV talk show hosts like **Jimmy Kimmel**, or **Andy Cohen** with *Watch What Happens Live*, or **James Corden**. These hosts are especially brilliant in the way they execute their shows and interviews. Clearly, the money invested in these shows and the freedom to be creative has paid off.

Smart programmers are using social media platforms to connect directly and frequently in real time with listeners about content, contesting and station events. I also think charitable outreach is more important than ever right now.

Prior to deregulation, radio was expected to operate for the public good. Now, in these very tough times, a great radio station uses charitable events and survival information to help rescue listeners who are struggling. In this past year, as all of us had to endure life during COVID, great stations have risen to the occasion to help listeners struggling with basic needs, such as food, water, money, and have been instrumental in distributing simple information about how and where to get a vaccine. Radio can and should help to take care of its listeners.

Shifting gears to data research analysis. Has this overwhelmed our industry and led to more of a paralysis by analysis syndrome stifling the creativity of programmers?

I do think the science part is disproportionally higher than the art of radio. I've always been an extremely data-oriented programmer, and still am, but I always tried to see past the data into the future,

I enjoyed the ability to use my "educated gut" to make a decision that didn't agree with the data. Sometimes I'd make a decision and circle back to the data to confirm its accuracy. There was a sign that used to sit on a lot of CEO's desks, "Fall In Love With Risk," in other words have the courage to experiment.

We miss that concept, which in turn perpetuates the FOMO factor for radio. The feeling that you never know what's coming up, those hidden surprises. We need more "gray-area" thinkers. I always included in my PD questionnaires, questions that would help identify the PD applicants who could see the gray not just the black and white.

Following the data is critically important, BUT you need to have programmers who know how to use their "trained gut," acquired from their experiences. This gives you the confidence to use your instincts in the decision-making process, and lessen the TOTAL reliance on research, which a lot of times simply doesn't have the answers.

Sounds like you're advocating for a more equitable balance, even though that doesn't seem to follow the current trends.

Data needs to lead but you have to be able to project where the future will be with that song, that talent, that radio station, that audience segment. Use the data as a backup, but don't be afraid to speak up if you believe in a song or an idea, and be prepared to explain and defend your position. Sometimes you won't win and you might be less than correct, but that's often the best way to learn as a programmer.

Sometimes you may be the only one who sees the answer when everyone else (even the most experienced programmers) can't.

Strictly regarding the music, is music being properly assessed these days?

When it comes to finding the hits, we're at a crossroads regarding best practices. The national music charts are influenced heavily by streaming since that provides as much as 60% of labels' revenues. But streaming charts are 6-8 weeks ahead of radio and we have no idea which demographic is consuming that song the most.

Streaming, Shazam and sales are great tools but are 4-6 weeks ahead of reality. I also look at Mscore, *Rate The Music*, and *Hitpredicto*r is still effective at predicting the hits at multiple formats. But at the end of the day, callout is still king and the best indicator of what is a hit for your audience.

The traditional idea of expecting a song to come through in callout after 200 spins has to be thrown out. We need to remember that post 2020 listeners are listening to radio less not more than before. It may take 500-600 spins largely 6a-7p and anywhere from 6-8 callout reports (not 2-3) to really get an answer as to what songs will become long-term hits.

The great news is when you combine all of them and look at the results of each platform's chart across a page of data, you can determine which songs to put your faith in long-term before they come through in callout.

What advice can you impart to programmers who struggle with the daily and weekly issues of balancing an overloaded work agenda with the quest for creating imaginative and compelling programming that's not generic?

That's a real challenge for programmers and radio overall today. Honestly, sometimes I don't know how today's programmers do it.

Back in the day my job as a PD was listening and being responsible for the station's sound. I had my "radio headphones" on constantly. I was also committed to station's music mix, working with talent daily, promotions, events, marketing and charitable outreach, I always made time for creativity and brain-storming sessions with all members of my staff. I networked with the Top 40 programmers I admired. I kept up with engineering needs for our personalities and the overall station sound quality.

Today there are even more responsibilities. New corporate responsibilities require program directors to handle a lot of additional station requirements which didn't exist back in the day. Also, most programmers are in charge of multiple stations. So, all the brilliant basics they should be doing to make sure their stations are great are now double, triple or quadrupled.

My recommendation would be to take a "time management course." I did *Time Power* and the **Steven Covey** course was fantastic. It was one of the best decisions I ever made. Use the old Steven Covey line, *First Things First*. Prioritize what is most important and most urgent first in quadrants as follows:

- Quadrant 1: Urgent and important.
- Quadrant 2: Not urgent but important.
- Quadrant 3: Urgent but not important.
- Quadrant 4: Not urgent and not important.