

FMQB CHR COVER STORY, April 2006

Zapoleon Music Cycle: The Rebirth of Pop, Cycle #6 Is Here

By Guy Zapoleon (edited by Fred Deane)

Our client **Dylan Sprague**, PD of **WWWQ/Q100/Atlanta**, and I were discussing my 10 year Zapoleon Music Cycle concept, which I haven't updated since 2002. The essence of Pop music blends the basic music styles of Pop, R&B and Rock, and when Top 40 is healthy there is a fairly equal balance of all three. But the Cycle never stays the same. It is driven by the leading edge listeners who adopt what's hot today; and what's hot today is yesterday's news in a few years. Little sister never wants what big sister or (heaven forbid) Mom is into, and so the Cycle repeats as each generation demands its own style of music (even if it's still a form of Rock, Pop or R&B). Recently it was Rock that was on the outs while Rhythmic music has been king. Yes, we've been in the Doldrums portion of the Zapoleon Music Cycle, where musically Top 40 struggles and it's harder to find great Pop music coming from the three key music genres.

There are other factors that have contributed to the problems for radio like the lack of funding and focus on programming in radio over the past 10 years of consolidation. Also alarming for radio is the fact that more and more young potential listeners are spending most of their time listening to and seeking out new music on the Internet. Satellite radio looms as a threat on the horizon offering more format diversity as radio attempts to counter with its proposed solution: HD radio. So a lot is changing for radio but more on that later. Let's first address the music changes in the Zapoleon Music Cycle and the reasons behind it.

Pop Is Back!

Things seem to be changing as in the past six months a lot of great Pop music hit the top of the charts, and Pop superstars like **Christina Aguilera** and **Justin Timberlake** are getting ready to release CD's in 2006. *American Idol*, a show that is all about finding the next big Pop superstar, has been successful and has risen to become America's #1 television show over the past year. Dylan Sprague wonders if the ten year cycle that started in 1996 was ready to repeat with a new rebirth of great Pop music from all three genres. Dylan reminded me that it was **Hanson's** "MMM Bop" in 1996 that started the rebirth phase of the fifth Cycle followed by a slew of hits from **Britney Spears** and **Backstreet Boys** that year. The next year brought us **NSYNC** and Christina Aguilera and the Pop explosion was upon us.

Let's take a look at the past few years to understand where the 10 Year Zapoleon Music Cycle has been. Many Mainstream Top 40's moved out of the balance as they mixed in more Hip Hop and R&B and less Rock based hits. The Pop hits became more Pop/Rhythmic and this moved us into the Extremes in 2000/2002. Without the Rock music influence, many of the younger Pop/Rock fans went to Alternative and the more adult Pop fans went to other formats, like Country and AC, and to a lesser extent Hot AC. This moved Mainstream Top 40 into **a** Doldrums in 2002, where we've been ever since.

What's strange is what brought on the Doldrums in past decades was 25+ -itis, after Top 40 lost its 25-54 adult numbers in the Extremes phases. During the Doldrums programmers in the early 90s avoided any music that was considered too extreme and moved the format in the opposite direction by embracing an overabundance of AC superstars of the time and avoiding anything Rhythmic, even a lot of the Pop music. This sends the format into a tailspin and in the early 90s over 500 Mainstream Top 40 stations left the format. Because of this the Doldrums lasted much longer in the 90s and when the Rebirth started it began with Rock forms of Pop, Lillith Fair Ladies and Hot AC instead of Top 40 being successful. It wasn't until 1996, with Hanson that the true Pop portion of the Rebirth began.

After learning lessons from the very rough period Mainstream Top 40 went through in the 90s, it seemed the new generation of PDs had learned its Cycle lessons from the past and was destined not to make the same mistakes of previous decades. These mistakes sent the format first into the

Extremes and then by overreacting to the Extremes, into the Doldrums. Smart programmers knew that musically the key was keeping Top 40 focused on playing a balance of Pop, Rock and R&B.

So what happened to cause Top 40 to enter the Doldrums again? Is it every decade's fate to follow this same pattern or did this happen for another reason. One reason was that two major music rotation tools programmers used to determine the hits became flawed simultaneously.

1. Programmers had depended on callout research to determine the hits for the past 20 years. Now research companies were struggling to get people to answer the phone to do weekly callout on current music. It became tougher and tougher to finish a weekly sample and in many cases the results became less and less dependable (and believable).

2. Starting in the early 90s the national charts, once completely sales oriented, became much more accurate in reflecting the hits by including national airplay from Mainstream Top 40. Therefore, national charts became much more of a tool in building music rotations by programmers. The charts became a better reflection of the true hits than they had been for decades. However, this changed a few years ago when it was decided to include both Urban and Rhythmic/Top 40 stations in some of the national airplay charts. These stations gave the charts a major Rhythm injection, but their influence was greater than Mainstream Top 40s because Rhythmic/Top 40 stations spun their currents much faster. The national charts changed dramatically resulting in R&B and Hip Hop owning as much as 50% of the Top 20 each week. This gave the impression to other forms of media that R&B and Hip Hop was SO dominant that both Pop, and especially Rock, music weren't the important factors they once were. In all forms of media including Movies, TV and certainly radio, R&B and Hip Hop became *the* definition of what was considered hip and even Mass Appeal.

R&B and Hip Hop's growth in popularity over the past few years is largely due to the greater racial diversity in America, coupled with America's young adult (and teen) audience receiving heavy exposure to it from radio and every other form of media. However as a result of media exposure and inflated national chart positions, many Mainstream Top 40's went overboard with this genre and moved too far in this direction and suffered in the ratings. Especially considering there were little or no huge Rap and Hip-Hop hits in the 90s and only a trickle in 2000. The genre saw improvement in 2001, and had banner years in 2002 (with acts like **Nelly** and **Eminem**) and in 2003 with **50 Cent's** debut CD. In 2005 there was a chink in the armor as even acts like 50 Cent and Eminem released CDs with no where near the success of prior releases and were disappointments compared to past successes of the genre. While 2004 and 2005 saw its share of hits for the genre it marked the beginning of the slide for Hip Hop and R&B, as Rhythmic music became more about traditional melodies with Pop/R&B and Pop/Rhythm from **Usher**, **Alicia Keys** and **Beyonce**.

Rock Missing In Action

Finding Rock music to play at Mainstream Top 40 has been a challenge over the past two years. At *Promosquad HitPredictor* we've seen a lot of acceptance for Rock and Alternative songs with Mainstream Top 40 listeners, but most Top 40 stations turn up their nose at it, preferring to only play Pop & R&B. In recent years artists like **3 Days Grace**, **Trapt** and **Audioslave** had potential hit songs reach Top 10 in a lot of markets, but not get enough support at the format. It happened last year with **Crossfade** a Top 10 Pop hit, which researched in about ten markets (including

Minneapolis, Hartford and Tampa), and yet the same concern of it being too hard prevented the song from reaching Top 10 nationally. Mainstream Top 40 mistakenly avoided a lot of potential hits from the Rock side of the spectrum as it became more Rhythmic. Alternative and Active Rock radio was the only place to hear new Rock music and this was extremely successful during the early part of the decade. In the past few years though, a lot of Rock hits have been banging on the door. Rock acts like **Nickelback** and **Green Day**, and Pop/Punk acts like **Fallout Boy** and **All American Rejects**, had hits during a supposed "cold" time for Rock music at Mainstream Top 40, and opened up the doors for a lot of Rock acts to break over the past year. Another fact that's made Rock music more enticing to Mainstream Top 40 programmers is that these Rock acts are putting out a lot of power ballads. **Hoobastank**, **Evanescence** and **Finger 11** all had major hits with ballads. The sudden embrace of Rock again, is another clue that the Rebirth period is about to start.

The Industry & The Internet

Certainly, no one can deny that the past ten year period of radio consolidation is another major reason that brought on the Doldrums for radio. Radio operators in an attempt to bring in bigger and bigger quarterly earnings cut the bottom-line. Big companies had to figure out how to handle large groups of stations and people, and how to manage them while allowing local managers, programmers and staff the autonomy and creative freedom to serve and effectively target the local community. It isn't easy! The affect was a loss of a lot of special experienced broadcasters, talent and tools, and an overall stagnation of radio at a time when the medium needed to be more proactive in improving itself in response to listeners migrating to iPods, the Internet and Satellite.

At the same time the Internet exploded and it took the record industry years too long to react to free downloading music sites like *Napster*, and a generation of music fans grew up spending most of their time on the Internet and a lot less with radio. This has given the Internet, iPods and Satellite a big head start in offering improvements that radio wasn't able to give listeners.

HD radio is a fine idea to compete with the music diversity of satellite radio, but to be successful it must have the medium's focus and financial commitment, and offer all the elements great radio stations in the past (air talent, production, promotions) have offered and not just be jukeboxes of different music streams. Unfortunately HD radio comes at a time when terrestrial radio itself needs a company's undivided attention to improve itself and do a better job of servicing radio's existing and potentially new listeners.

The good news is whether we like it or not the Internet is where the audience we want is spending most of its time, and finding ways to utilize the Internet to offer listeners benefits is a key way for radio to catch up to other forms of media. Making station websites a destination for Internet users should be a key focus for radio. **Z100**/New York rewards every winner with an extra prize if they've gone online to become a Z-VIP (member of the Z100 database). *Fairwest Direct Freeloaders* campaign was magnificent at working and maximizing a radio database, but having listeners detect clues to win points and then create a radio mall of prizes on the stations' websites where they redeem points and pick their rewards further accentuates the exercise. Cutting edge tools like *Music2Go/Tunegenie* are a great way to do this. This becomes part of a radio station's website. It identifies songs played on the station in any given hour and listeners can click on the songs to download their favorites.

Every Rebirth of the Cycle has come from a superstar or music trend. **Elvis** started it all in 1956, **The Beatles**/British Invasion created the next phase, and MTV began the Rebirth in the 80s. This time around it's the continuing affect of *American Idol* giving the country a high intensity focus on pure Pop music. However, the biggest factor that's contributing to the Rebirth is because Internet music fans have thousands-of-times more access to more great music than in the past. The chance for an independent band or artist to be discovered first through MySpace.com or another music site is astronomically more likely. My friend **Huw Drury** at *MusicPulse* alerted me to the fact that it happened this week in Australia on his national callout survey. A new band aired in

Australia on the TV show *The OC* and then received a lot of exposure on MySpace.com. Consequently, "Forever Young" by **Youth Group** was #1. This set up Aussie radio and because they reacted quickly with airplay and they have a hit on their hands. The chance for a song like this to be a radio hit in the U.S. would depend on how quickly radio and records reacted by promoting it and giving it the airplay a #1 song deserves. The Internet can create a buzz and make a new song a hit almost immediately. If today's radio and record industry want to stay on top of the leading edge (and stay in business) they must keep an open mind to new music wherever it comes from and spend more time listening to and giving these potential hits a chance.

So for Top 40 radio the signs for the Rebirth of the Zapoleon Music Cycle are present when R&B is Pop, Rock is Pop, and you have a lot of Pop hits. It's a chance for Mainstream Top 40 to attract many more listeners. However, radio itself needs to wake up to the other issues they face, keep an open mind to new music and new ideas, and pour money and it's creative focus back into the medium to begin making a recovery.