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Fade-Out: New Rock Is Passé on Radio

By [JEFF LEEDS](#)

Major radio companies are abandoning rock music so quickly lately that sometimes their own employees don't know it.

Troy Hanson, the program director of WZTA in Miami, said that he first learned that his station's owner, Clear Channel Communications, had ditched the rock format - and his staff - when he tuned to the station one morning in February and heard talk-radio. His rock domain, known as Zeta, had vanished. "We didn't even get to play 'It's the End of the World as We Know It,' " the R.E.M. anthem, as a sign off, he said.

In the last four months, radio executives have switched the formats of four modern-rock, or alternative, stations in big media markets, including WHFS in Washington-Baltimore area, WPLY in Philadelphia and the year-old KRQI in Seattle. Earlier this month WXRK in New York discarded most newer songs in favor of a playlist laden with rock stars from the 80's and 90's.

Music executives say the lack of true stars today is partly the reason. Since rap-rock acts like Kid Rock and Limp Bizkit retreated from the scene, none of the heralded bands from recent rock movements, be it garage-rock (the Strokes, the Vines) or emo (Dashboard Confessional, Thursday), connected with radio listeners or CD buyers the way their predecessors did.

This sudden exit of so many marquee stations has not only renewed the perennial debate about the relative health of rock as a musical genre, but it also indicates that the alternative format, once the darling of radio a decade ago, is now taking perhaps the heaviest fire in the radio industry's battle to retain listeners in the face of Internet and satellite radio competition. Many rock stations may be in for another blow when the shock jock Howard Stern departs for Sirius Satellite Radio next year.

There are still signs that a fervent alternative scene survives. This weekend, for instance, 50,000 people a day are expected to visit Indio, Calif., for the sixth-annual Coachella Valley Music Festival, the biggest rock event of its kind in the United States, to cheer bands like the Arcade Fire and the Secret Machines. Moreover, while alternative programmers are searching for a solution, for the moment they have the benefit of new music by a clutch of reliable stars from the genre's heyday: Nine Inch Nails, Weezer and Beck are releasing their first albums in two years or more, and songs by each rocketed to the top of Billboard magazine's modern-rock airplay chart.

But many musicians in the newer bands on the alternative playlists "could be your waiter tomorrow night and you wouldn't know the difference," griped a radio promotion executive at one major label, who requested anonymity for fear of offending bands on his label.

Ratings for rock radio stations have been languishing for years. The share of the 18-to-34 age group that is tuning in to alternative stations has shrunk by more than 20 percent in the last five years, according to

Arbitron, while stations playing rap and R&B or Spanish-language formats have enjoyed an expanding audience.

As a result, many rock programmers aren't sure what to play.

"The format in the last couple of years has gone through an identity crisis," said Kevin Weatherly, program director of KROQ, a closely watched alternative powerhouse in Los Angeles. "You have stations that are too cool, that move too quickly and are only playing the coolest music, which doesn't at the end of the day attract enough of the audience. Or you have the other extreme, dumb rock, red-state rock that the cool kids just flat out aren't into."

Such scrambling to strike a balance has cost many alternative programmers large chunks of audience. Some radio executives said that they made a fateful choice in the last few years to jettison the pop-rock side of their genre to concentrate on heavier-sounding bands, and now are afraid to turn back. As part of that shift, many stations also decided to eliminate women from their audience research. These stations decided to aim at men almost exclusively because of the heavier sound. "You got yourself into a corner that you can't get out of," said Tom Calderone, senior vice president for music and talent at MTV, and a former radio programmer and consultant. "When you listen to alternative stations do their 90's flashback weekends, you can hear something as meaningful as Stone Temple Pilots and Soundgarden to something as silly and quirky as Harvey Danger and Presidents of the United States of America. When you become 65-75 percent guys, you're leaving a huge audience on the table."

At WZTA in Miami, the decision in 2003 to remove women from the equation "was definitely when we started to see Zeta's attrition," Mr. Hanson said. Days after Clear Channel took Zeta off the air, a rival company, Cox Radio, flipped the format of one of its Miami-area stations to rock.

Mr. Hanson also suggested that land-based radio had been too slow to respond to satellite radio, which offers access to dozens of commercial-free music channels for a monthly subscription fee and to digital music players, like Apple Computer's iPod. He said that he balked when a supervisor suggested running an on-air contest to give away an iPod loaded with 949 songs. (Zeta's frequency was 94.9-FM.) "I was like, 'Then they don't need to listen to Zeta anymore.' " Mr. Hanson wound up forgoing the contest.

"The people that are leading-edge technology consumers are not being embraced by terrestrial radio," said Jim McGuinn, who was program director of WPLY in Philadelphia, known as Y100, before its corporate parent, Radio One, flipped the station to rap and R&B in February. "The outsider image disappeared," Mr. McGuinn said.

Mr. McGuinn and a handful of other former WPLY employees have started an Internet radio station, y100rocks.com, to play music they say the terrestrial version had been missing, including songs by Interpol, Moby and Queens of the Stone Age.

But for now, Philadelphia has no terrestrial alternative-rock station.

Some analysts fear that, when radio stations switch from alternative rock to programming aimed at older listeners, they may be making a sacrifice. "Radio has ceded the younger demographic to other media," said Fred Jacobs, president of Jacobs Media, a radio consulting company in Southfield, Mich., specializing in rock. "I just don't know how we're going to get back people who didn't get into the radio habit in their teens," he said, adding, "It really becomes problematic down the road."

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