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RADIO

Jack lures fans by not saying much

■ KCBS-FM's format is catching on, but some wonder if it can endure.

By Martin Miller, Times Staff Writer

Nine voices scream out in quick succession, "You rock!" Then, another yells, "You [*do something we won't say in a family newspaper!*]"

The irreverent radio self-promotion, which finishes with "Nine out of 10 ain't bad," demonstrates part of the formula that helped rocket the new "Jack" format at KCBS-FM (93.1) up the ratings charts last week. And at least for now, it also provides a fairly accurate picture of how Los Angeles has reacted to the station's barely 5-month-old sound, built upon a huge library of classic rock and alternative hits from the '80s and '90s, then spun out in iPod shuffle-like fashion over the airwaves.

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If old radio was built upon distinctive personalities, lighthearted audience interaction and a narrowly defined playlist, the Jack format takes that vinyl-coated template and smashes it to bits. Jack dumped the DJs and doesn't take song requests or shout-outs or give weather reports. He doesn't name songs — of which he has roughly 1,200, about three or four times the number of other stations — either.

That same attitude animates the other 20 or so Jack-formatted radio stations across the country which since their unveiling a little more than a year ago have enjoyed mostly solid to excellent ratings. Central to the success is their fondness for what radio programmers call "train wrecks" — the collision of songs that normally would never be played on the same station, much less back to back. For instance, it wouldn't be unusual to hear Billy Joel run into LL Cool J, who then slams into Matchbox Twenty.

After all, as the solitary voice of Jack — actually a Canadian voice-over actor named Howard Cogan, who coolly reads his lines with a mix of quiet arrogance and defiant sarcasm — says, "We play what we want."

Look who's listening

In Jack's first full ratings period in Los Angeles, the format doubled its overall audience size compared to the station's previous classic rock formula, according to the Arbitron ratings service. Overall, it was in 11th place, but in the coveted English-speaking 25- to 54-year-old demographic, the station ranked No. 1 — up from 13th during the last ratings period.



Jack's jokers
(Annie Wells / LAT)

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The KCBS-FM station is indeed housed in a "dumpy" building — as Jack proclaims from time to time. However, it's not in downtown Culver City but in Los Angeles. Explained Jeff Federman, KCBS general manager, "Culver City sounded funnier."

Jack shares its broadcast facilities with KROQ-FM (106.7), both of which are owned by New York-based Infinity Broadcasting. The building's interior and its inhabitants are far from dumpy, with the former sporting the requisite number of music posters and the latter the exotic eyewear and Melrose Avenue-inspired clothing one would expect from a top Los Angeles radio station.

Singer-songwriter John Mayer recently summed up what a lot of fans feel about the revamped station. In the August issue of *Esquire*, he wrote that during a three-day L.A. visit he listened to only one station: Jack-FM.

"Imagine a place on the dial that interviews you and your friends, asks what songs you like, and then plays them one after another," wrote Mayer, who pens a short music column for the magazine. "Almost no DJs, few commercials and lots of songs you forgot you loved. It's radio turned inside out."

The Jack format, which originated in Canada several years ago, has already spawned a handful of one-name imitators, including Mike-FM in Boston, Doug-FM in Detroit and Max FM in San Francisco.

But critics, while applauding Jack's bold move within the profit-driven confines of mainstream radio, wonder whether the format is a novelty and destined for one-hit-wonder status. They also doubt whether such a form will be able to withstand the oncoming assault of audio innovation and technology.

"It's too soon to tell whether Jack will work in the long run," said Michael Harrison, editor of the radio trade publication *Talkers*, based in Springfield, Mass. "Personally, I think it's corporate radio's first line of defense against iPods and satellite radio, and I don't think it can hold."

Critics caution against over-hyping the station's seemingly impressive ratings. Jack's predecessor, "Arrow 93," was low in the ratings, so the station had little place to go but up after almost any change, they say. A better barometer might be the Jack format in New York City, which at least initially hasn't fared as well as in Los Angeles. At WCBS-FM, the former popular oldies station lost listeners shortly after adopting the Jack format, according to the spring ratings, and the firing of its DJs reportedly prompted cursing from Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

Infinity officials point out that those ratings were based on less than three weeks of Jack and say they are confident the numbers will vastly improve in the next ratings period.

Local flavor is key

In Los Angeles, where ditching DJs has yet to provoke swearing by public officials, on-air personalities may yet reemerge and work their way back into the spotlight with Jack, according to Federman and the station's programming director, Kevin Weatherly. The pair are weighing whether to hire new ones at some point.

"That's the million-dollar question," said Federman, who grew up in Southern California listening to KROQ and KMET.

Added Weatherly: "If we do bring back DJs, they will definitely have to have a personality that complements the vibe of Jack. We don't want to put on DJs just for the sake of having DJs, because then what's the point? They just become an irritant."

Even if KCBS throws DJs back into the mix, it doesn't mean that other Jack stations would follow. Jack is a format, but stations are different in style and content.

"The New York Jack and the Los Angeles Jack are not the same radio station," said Rob Barnett, Infinity's director of programming. "We have a core of hit music that might work coast to coast, but local flavor in all our Jack markets is the key to the long-term success."

Expanded, constrained

Critics admit the format allows for much larger playlists and thus more variety, but they point out that the Jack stations are constrained by the Top 40 of the last three decades. Some joke that, much like other mainstream radio these days, the Jack format is still just three songs away from a Phil Collins hit.

But Weatherly, a former DJ himself, rejects such criticisms and revels in customizing Jack's extensive playlist by featuring such L.A. Jack-specific groups as Oingo Boingo, Depeche Mode and the Cure. He prepares the lineup ultimately broadcast on L.A.'s Jack five or six days in advance and is constantly honing it for the right pace and balance, even up to airtime.

"The whole thing about this station is the 'wow' factor," added Federman. "How do you keep it going? That's our challenge."

Weatherly dislikes the notion that Jack programmers function as little more than glorified iPod shufflers.

"I handpick the music," said Weatherly. "It's not done by some computer."

And he delights in making last-minute changes here and there. One recent 80-degree Saturday inspired Weatherly to put on the Beach Boys' "Good Vibrations."

"We did it just because," he said with a smile, "hey, we're making this up as we go along."

Jack couldn't have said it better himself.

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