I Left My iPod in San Francisco

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Card-carrying members of the iPod revolution spend a lot of time beating on radio, and with good reason. The playlists of corporate-owned stations lack soul, formats bear a bewildering assortment of subcategorizations that reek of slavish devotion to focus group results, and more and more of each hour of radio is being taken up by ear-shattering commercials.

Contempt for the listener -- disguised as catering to audience desires -- is a loathsome-yet-expected hallmark of the radio industry. That's why Infinity Broadcasting's move to go "all-iPod" on one of its California stations is a surprising and hopeful sign of things to come.

Wired.com reported that Infinity soon will convert KYCY-1500AM in San Francisco to iPod format. "The station, previously devoted to a talk-radio format, will be renamed KYOURadio," Wired said. "Infinity... will invite do-it-yourselfers to upload digital audio files for broadcast consideration by way of the KYOURadio.com website."

It's a fascinating way to keep radio relevant in changing times, when music fans are finding so many other ways to enjoy their favorite artists. It also is one of two developments that show how media companies are grappling with new twists on the old question of whether it's better to reach as wide or as narrow an audience as possible.

Let's start with radio. Infinity, the radio unit of Viacom Inc., made its move shortly after Bloomberg reported that the company's advertising sales are sputtering in the face of competition from satellite radio and digital music players like Apple's iPod. The company, with 183 stations, is one of the nation's largest radio operators. It also seems to be an attempt to respond to the new, hot "Jack" format that ditches the idea of "format" altogether, such as this example from the St. Paul Pioneer-Press: "There's a new radio format on the Twin Cities FM dial, and it goes by the name of Jack. At 9 a.m. Thursday, 104.1 WXPT-FM ditched its '80s music format for a larger, more
eclectic play list... On Thursday afternoon, Twin Cities listeners tuning in to Jack 104.1 heard back-to-back songs by Phil Collins, Uncle Kracker, AC/DC, Head East, Tom Petty, INXS and Lenny Kravitz. In the radio world, a lineup like that -- playing two unlikely songs together -- is known as a 'train wreck.' But one station's train wreck has become another's happy accident."

Back in San Francisco, Infinity chief executive Joel Hollander told Wired that he's "excited" because, "We're creating a new way to let a lot of people participate personally in radio -- sharing their feelings on music, news, politics,whatever matters to them." He also told the news service that he sees the station as a live talent development source. As for programming schedules, Infinity says they will be determined over time. Unfortunately, though inevitably, ads will continue to pepper the spaces between the songs.

What remains unclear is exactly what kind of music will be allowed on KYOURadio. Wired reported that the station will cover licensing fees for broadcasting copyrighted material. I'm not sure what that means, especially when the lengthy terms of use section on the Web site contains this nugget of legalese: "[We] prohibit the posting of any information that violates or infringes the copyright rights of any person or entity. If you believe that your work has been copied and is accessible on this Site in a way that constitutes copyright infringement, you must provide our DMCA Copyright Agent with a written notification."

Does this mean that my yen to share "Black Magic Woman" or "Tower of Song" with fellow KYOURadio listeners would result in Carlos Santana's and Leonard Cohen's legal dobermans tossing copyright violations my way? I asked that question in an e-mail to station management, but it's still early on the West Coast, so I'll have to give you the answer tomorrow.

Which Side of the Velvet Rope Are You on?

The Wall Street Journal published a story of its own on how social networking Web sites are dealing with the broadcast-vs.-narrowcast question, zooming in on the pop-culture aspect of things. In "The Gated Online Community," the Journal wrote that "an increasing number of sites are touting their exclusivity. A site called aSmallWorld (http://www.asmallworld.net/login.php) is geared toward those who regularly jet among places like St. Barths, London and New York. In November, it stopped letting the majority of the members invite others to join. Now, only 1% of the 60,000 members can do so, including people in countries like Brazil where the site wants more members. On Catch27 (http://www.catch27.com/), which claims thousands of users and touts itself as the 'most hip,' member profiles appear as baseball cards. The site encourages members, many of whom fall between the ages of 18 and 30, to trade their friends for 'hotter, smarter ones,' and rank others by their 'looks' and 'smarts.' The site also is launching a 'black ball' feature that some members will be able to use to kick others off."

Other sites like FunHi, which claims more than 150,000 active users, can bounce people who lack style, are "meatheads" and "look homeless," the site's co-founder Ray Savant told the Journal.

The paper said this is a trend away from giant online networking sites like Friendster where the clientele can make you feel more like you're in a city bus station and less like being in a tony VIP
airport lounge.

Some of these sites try to do what exclusive clubs do in the regular world -- charge fees for membership. But as the Journal noted, "most clubs cool off considerably a few months after opening. In fact, some new sites already are resorting to strategies like begging people to sign up via online ads. When a site called Closed Society (http://www.closedsociety.net/) launched, it opened its first 100 registrations to the public via a Google ad: 'Join now and be a VIP.' Only about 40 people applied."

That's Why I Sing the Blues

You'd never know it from my argument that people deserve a good legal whacking when they illegally share copyrighted music and movies, but I'm as fed up as the next guy with the entertainment factory. "Industry" is a good way to describe a conglomeration of corporations that turn their backs on any singer or band that doesn't fit their one-size-fits-all model for bucking up the bottom line.

Now, this is a bit of a tangent, but how could you feel affinity toward an industry that does something like this (courtesy of the San Francisco Chronicle): "California schools and libraries are slated to receive 665,000 free CDs starting this week as part of a $143 million antitrust settlement with music companies. But some Bay area librarians think they're getting stuck with moldy tunes the record labels couldn't sell. The San Francisco Public Library, for instance, will get 91 copies of a '60s rock compilation ('Feelin' Groovy'), 81 copies of an album by reality TV star Jessica Simpson ('Irresistible') and 73 copies of a 'Christmas with Yolanda Adams.' By contrast, it will receive only single copies of hundreds of other selections, like jazz great Louis Armstrong's 'I Love Jazz.'"

This is another sign that negative publicity won't stop the recording industry from poking you in the eye even after they've lost a fight. In this case it was a 2002 decision by the five big labels and three retailers to settle price-fixing allegations filed by dozens of states in a class-action lawsuit, the Chronicle reported. The corporations said they would pass out $67 million in refunds and $76 million in compact discs as compensation. It looks like, however, the CDs getting handed out are the stacks clogging the unsold merchandise bins in the companies' warehouses.

California Attorney General Bill Lockyer (D) tried to come up with a distribution system that wouldn't result in such a CD dump -- other states have experienced similar problems -- but apparently it's happening anyway.

San Mateo-Foster City School District official Mary Foster was somewhat charitable, telling the newspaper that "It's not all trash," but the fact remains that this is a cynical way of killing two birds with one stone that will not endear the recording industry toward a new generation that sees their favorite online activity as a God-given right, not as stealing. What else are they to do when someone gives them 1,000 copies of "Synkronized"? (Sorry, Jamiroquai fans.)

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