

How Do Songs Get on the Radio?

Did you know that artists and record companies do *not* get paid when their song is played on the radio? The songwriter and the song publisher *do* get paid, however. And, of course, if the artist *is* the writer, or if the record company owns the publishing company, then they do get paid - but as the writer or publisher.

No, radio play is simply the best advertisement for the products that do earn income for the record company and the artist: for example, CD's, cassettes, or concert revenues.

But how does a song make it onto the radio, and what exactly *is* the "Top 40" or the "Hot 100" or any of those charts (the most famous of which are published by *Billboard Magazine* and reprinted in part in *Rolling Stone*)? Are they popularity charts, and if so, how is that popularity determined?

The answer will probably surprise you.

Most radio stations today pay a programming consultant to suggest their playlists. These very few consultants nationwide play a large role in choosing what songs get played on radio. Given the huge financial stakes involved, stations nowadays are conservative with their playlists, preferring a more level field with their competitors and relying upon the distinctiveness of their station personality for their relative edge.

There are only a limited number of slots in a given 24-hour period for songs - say, perhaps, 30 with hundreds of songs competing for those slots. A station wants to repeat the most popular songs as often as they dare, since these are the songs most likely to keep the listener tuned to their station.

A song is therefore scheduled - in the simplest of terms - for either "light," "medium" or "heavy" rotation. (Please note that I am oversimplifying in the interest of clarity.) Obviously, the songs most likely to keep listeners tuned in are put in heavy rotation, meaning that those songs will be repeated the most often throughout the day, whereas less familiar or popular songs - especially newer releases - will be scheduled for light rotation.

Each radio station has a specific market, a certain number of product consumers it can reach with its advertising for the companies which buy air time to attract consumers to their products. Arbitron ratings determine not only what percentage of that market a station is reaching, but also the demographic and consumer characteristics of that audience. A station which reaches a larger consumer audience can charge more for its advertising rates.

In the simplest of charting methods, therefore, a song on heavy rotation with a station with a large audience will earn more points for the charts than another song on light rotation or a heavy-rotation song with a radio station in a smaller market. Likewise, a song that is generally on medium-to-heavy rotation nationwide will earn more points than a song on heavy rotation only within a smaller region.

In addition, SoundScan uses bar code data from CD's and cassettes sold to determine actual sales figures. *Billboard* then combines airplay data reported by key "reporting stations" around the nation and SoundScan data to determine the chart positions of songs.

So pretend you head a record company that wants heavy airplay for your new artist's single to generate sales of CD's and cassettes. What are you going to do?

First, you have to decide how *much* you believe in the long-term commercial success of that artist. Why? So you can decide what you are willing to invest in promoting the artist.

You will target the radio consultants as well as key radio stations in key consumer markets and try to influence them to put your song on rotation for airplay. How?

You will obviously distribute copies to them. But you may also pay for major advertisements in music trade publications - like *Billboard* - and pay for an independent record promotion company to visit the consultants, wine and dine them, track the song's success in other venues and report them to their consultants, and of course use their business relationships to influence opinion. You might also choose to take on the usually significant expense of recording a video for the song.

And you may have the artist tour the country, and visit stations and consultants, be interviewed on shows, play concerts, and try to create a “buzz.” Obviously local radio stations are delighted to be able to feature a live studio visit by a nationally known artist.

In an ideal world, the artistic quality of a song would be the sole determining factor in its profitability, but like any other marketable product, a song in the real world is completely subject to the demands, pressures, and competition within the consumer marketplace. The importance of hooking a listener in only a few lines of a song is thus one of the most dominant criteria for choosing songs for inclusion on CD’s or for promotion as singles. Like it or not, the songwriter provides the basis for radio stations to advertise consumer products.

Nevertheless, a song’s appeal ultimately rests on its ability to reach people by touching their hearts, their minds, or their desire to escape the pressures and problems of their own daily lives. And the art and craft of being able to do that successfully is what the songwriter must master if he or she is to become commercially successful.

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