

A Historical Approach To Radio Jingles & Station Ids

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In the old days every radio station had a 3 or 4 letters id which is called "call signs (call name, call letters, call signal)" as some of them are still being used, for example WNYC or KEXP.

The idea started as a wireless signal transmission between ships and the harbor stations so they could identify each other easily. A convention in 1912 in London (International Radiotelegraphic Convention) assigned a range of call letters for each country's broadcast stations which for example USA got K, N and W. This idea expanded through Radio Stations too as the radio industry began to grow in 20's and the US government decided to assign four letters and divided them in a way that all the stations located in the west of Mississippi would start with "K" and the other ones in the east with "W". That's why we had radio stations such as: WINS(New York), WDGY(Minneapolis), WHB(Kansas City), KOMA(Oklahoma), etc.

With radio becoming more popular in 30's and 40's the number of radio stations increased and the need for being identified by the listeners too. So the radio stations began to request the musicians or bands that were playing in a show, to write and specially "sing" a short tune specifically for that station which later named as Station ID. They also used this feature for advertising so the musicians would create a short piece with saying the name of the product.

One of the first and biggest company in US which started making Jingles for radio Stations and commercial products was PAMS (production advertising merchandising service) which was created by Bill Meeks, a musician of the time which had started making jingles for commercials and station Ids. He used to prepare demo packages (Series) of different sketches of jingles so the clients could choose one of them and then he would change the lyrics and record it again with his band. They got famous around the country (and later worldwide) and many stations started ordering their ids from them. This could be one of the reasons that many of the jingles specially in 50's sounds like each other. They also sound like a music of that time and this characteristics became less dominant later as many genres been created and more musicians as BANDs to play live music. We can see from the examples that most of the jingles of 50's are longer than 60's & 70's. They're sometimes exactly like a music piece.

They have a musical intro similar to the jazz/blues scene of that time, you could analyze them by verse 1, verse 2, chorus, bridge and other song structures, most of them have an accompanying choral group which sometimes creates a Q&A with the lead singer or even they become the lead singers themselves which all of these are so common in the pop music of that time and also remind us so much of the movies of 50's too where there's always a musical scene like these radio ids. (File 1)

The most interesting part in my opinion is the lyrics and how they sang it. As in the older times (20's, 30's) the very first jingles were Acappella, the jingles or station ids in the 50's were based on the vocal too. Most of them were so "Inviting", it seems they were trying to invite people more to feel happy and lucky with the radio station they're listening to. Some of them had a story-telling based on a daily life of american people and a conclusion at the end related to the radio station in a way that the american life would be completed with listening to radio (File 2). The melody usually was the most important part of the jingles, specially the melody of the vocals because that was what would get stuck in minds and get repeated and whispered easily which is one of the most important characteristics of sound logos and jingles, they even sometimes mentioned that! (File 3). The other thing that should've been remembered in the listener's mind was the 3 or 4 letters of the radio stations and their corresponding frequencies So in those jingles they're always singing loud for example "KQEO 920".

Some lyrics example (File Lyrics):

" The weather the news
the pops no blues,
the latest the greatest
on WRL"

"Its a beautiful day today,
everything's gonna be okay,
1190 on your dial will make your day worthwhile,
Listen to the KLIF in Dallas"

"Sometimes I wonder why this melody haunt me so,
OoooOooo KELO "

In examples from 60's, we can see that most of the jingles are still following the same structure but with some changes in the music genre and the vocals. For example (file 4) the music is influenced by the psychedelic rock era of the time, an intro which consists of synthesizer sounds (which I could identify the first three letters as Morse code; WKNR .-- /-.- /-.- /-.-), a female vocal (without those choral accompanying) singing like Jefferson Airplane or some similar bands and the music which just reminds you of 60's psychedelic rock ending with a tremolo effect on vocal that was a common signature of that time.

Another innovative example is WIOQ from Philadelphia in which they have used extreme panning for two voices and almost no lyrics! A male voice saying the letter "W" accompanying with a shaker panned hard to left and a female singing "102" which is the frequency of the station accompanying with a keyboard and a percussive sound panned hard to right and male choral singing "Stereo" placed in the center. As we can see they decided to forget about all the previous tradition of musically thinking about melodies, lyrics, chorals and composition, and focused more on the sound it self (File 5).

Or for a program called "happy difference" they have used the voice of two girl kids saying the word "Difference" which they were actually twins (File 6).

The WEAM from Washington targeted mostly the young population specially the girls (or boys?!) with pointing in the lyrics:

"Washington girls have lots more fun with 1390 WEAM" (File 7).

One of the audio devices that became popular in 60's jingles was Sonovox. Its a device that shape the sound of an instrument based on the frequency contents of the human throat so it will sound like a voice (File 8). It has been used in some movies in 1940's but apparently the first appearance in the jingles was in 60's which it can also be due to the use of the band "The Who" in their album "The who sell out 1967". The album was made to be broadcasted on Radio London and it consisted of commercial jingles which was produced by "Pams". [1]

Probably was because of this, that use of sonovox got more popular for radio stations in 60's & 70's. It also had a future/alien characteristics which fits that era with all the sci-fi books and movies that had been made.

As we walk through 70's jingles, one of the first obvious changes is the length. Jingles and Station Ids became shorter. (File 9)

The variety of genres increased and got close to different popular music of 70's. They gradually came out of the old traditional clothes which they seemed like music pieces and began to experience new forms of production, for example using of sound effects such as explosion or sci-fi laser. (File 10)

Especially the last characteristics of exploring different kind of production expanded more after 70's. For example listen to commercials for "Close-up" toothpastes in 80's ; they have a musical jingle which is a rock music form 80's and a specific arrangement of the whole commercial in a way that they all start with a story between a boy and a girl that want to kiss each other and then music (sometimes goes to background as a bed) and end again with a short continue of the story. Even that the music has changed but they way companies and radio station looked at jingles and commercials also changed along with the variety of media production that has been introduced to the world every year. One of the advantages of this was that they became more & more able to target more variety of people for their products. A good example for this is Coca-cola. Listen to the different approaches for radio commercials also been produced in 80's. Coca-cola has used a strategy of hitting a larger target group by using different ideas for production; a fresh/young/wild pop music with the voice of Laura Branigan singing of freedom; The other one featuring Max-Headroom with his electronically modified samples being stuttered/ distorted/ pitched was a mixture of technology/ comedy/ creativity; and the last one with a radio station approach that starts with a classic coca-cola jingle and a commentary radio voice telling funny news about coca-cola!

"Dentyne" has used their short jingles several times on top of a music and a story being singed to indicate the use of dentyne as a solution for the story being told.

Despite of all these changes, there are several properties that is being kept and we can hear a similar structure underneath some of the jingles. Analyzing these two examples from JAM production for two Newyork's major radio stations (File 11) which both are news programs, we can see that they both start with an incomplete bar (half or less) with some lame hits on snare and toms while being accompanied with brass sections, and after that they goes to different way. The first one for wmca is more big and busy with strings and horns while the other one which is for sports wfan is carried by a much more empty bed, a simple and chill 80's pop music which is then filled with more sustained and long brass notes.

Another example is BBC Radio 2. They have some of the same structures that somehow became a common agreed signs between radio and tv stations and also people could relate more to those structures or type of jingles. In the example (File 12) we can listen to a collection of bbc radio 2 jingles in 1976 which is also produced by JAM production. We can find those common signs especially for the news or tho programs with a special Host, for example starting the jingle with some pre-bar beats of drums or timpani, trumpets or together.

For the jingles of music program the most combination that is used is a down-tempo and low velocity 4/4 beat of drum accompanying with a arpeggio guitar and bass guitar some times layered with strings and woodwind instruments and a choral which is mixed to sound more female choral singing the announcer of radio. We can find some words to express the difference of these jingles with news for example. The drums for the music programs are very easy to listen, soft and very much in background, the snare hits are sometimes just a side-stick or is just on some tabla percussions and for the cymbals there's usually soft hits on hi-hats or just some shakers, very subtle and not distracting at all. It was supposed to just keep you in the situation and make you feel chill and cozy. The guitars are an acoustic guitar playing simple rhythms or playing arpeggio or just some let rings on electric guitars. The orchestra is usually a mixture of strings with woodwinds especially flute as a solo instrument and sometimes harps.

Meanwhile in more alarming jingles for example news or especial programs there's an obvious change in instrumentation and dynamics. The tempo is much more higher and the use of brass ensemble with drums and timpani is more rhythmic and harder in dynamics. Rhythm motifs with a combination of 32th, 16th and triplets have been used especially for brass ensemble. The drums has much more dynamic and we can hear a use of the whole drums parts sometimes even in a marching rhythm. It was supposed to attract the people's attention to listen more carefully but at the same time not getting annoyed or too much distracted of what they're doing as many listen to radio while driving.

There's lot more combinations and structures (simply packages) that is being used for specific purposes which is hard to go into details of all of them but I'll try to analyze some packages (including jingles and beds) that is been made for a particular channel and how they have made several variations out of them and used it for different programs. I'll also discuss about more differences in different radio programs, for example between News and Music, where we'll listen to more modern examples of radio jingles and station ids too.

Lets start with a news package which is made by "TM Studios" for KGO news talk 810. This is the description the company have released about making this package for KGO:

"When the imaging staff at KGO News Talk 810 came to TM Studios, they wanted a sound that paid homage to its heritage place in the market, but they didn't want to get lost in the past. KGO needed something unique...an ultra-contemporary imaging package that stills sounded classy and 'expensive.' TM created a forward thinking package that doesn't waste time and gets to the point. It's energetic and cool, but still sounds big and powerful." [2]

In all of the beds there's a connected series of notes, usually we hear it as a sequenced synth sound with 16th or 32th notes even as a delay effect, or sometimes as an electric guitar palm-mute riffs. This idea can be seen many where else which also relates to the main idea of news; its a series of some information put in an order one after each other but the quality and the character of these series of data differs from each other as it does for its music too.

For example in the one for the sports news(File 13-1), the jingle is following a familiar way of using brass ensemble as some lame pre-bar beats which in this case is layered with distorted electric guitars that helps it to sound more fresh and youngish. In the bed we can hear those sequenced notes distributed between synths and electric guitar, a horn is playing the jingle theme with slower pace which is followed by the solo electric guitar, later on two beats of timpani bring a “news” & “champion” characteristics which also gets dominated by horns.

For the traffic news(ex 13-2), the jingle starts with a Doppler sound effect with a moving panning from left to right channel which brings the speed parameter, the music is a bit more serious and we hear a synthesized brass or a filtered/ delayed one that sounds like car horns but very subtle again related to the content.

The breaking news (ex 13-3) is very powerful and energetic with metal power chords and a high dynamic and tempo drums which stand on top of the sequenced synths that are more in background.

The business news (ex 13-4) starts with an old ringing bell sound, which has two relation for me; education & work. I suppose they were trying to create a work space theme with a launch-break sound. The same sequenced synths in a more serious/ accurate atmosphere and we hear the jingle melody again with a much more bigger and mature horns than the one for the sport.

And the last one for Entertainment (ex 13-5) is the most different one compared to others; a funky chill/ cool music, perfect for saturday nights theme! The sequenced sound is given to a wah-wah guitar which seems like a good choice considering the genre that a 16th notes line for a Wah guitar can easily fit.

In another example (File 14) for CHQR which is a news/ talk/ sports radio channel produced by “Reelworld” [3], we can see the same common tradition for news but also different way of presenting the channel. The high tempo sequenced arp still exists but one of the differences with the other channel is that in most of the cases they've given the sequence role to drums and especially on hi-hat, sometimes is covered with a synth that is much more in background. This package sounds more musical, we can hear elements from different genres like Jazz/ Blues/ Hard rock/ Metal/ Electronic & orchestral instruments.

The traffic & Sports start with a much longer sound effect of a game whistle and the fans and the other one a sound of helicopter which continues till the rest of the bed, they have more musical elements and changes as we hear close to the end that even the whole composition and instrumentation change.

It seems that these elements have been accepted as an agreement for news, we can hear them in most of the radio news programs. CBS's KOOL-FM in Phoenix which is basically a music channel but has the news part too, have used the same elements for their news programs such as use of brass ensemble, timpani and those sequenced synths but the other slogans and beds are a lot different. The use of audio effects such as stutters/ glitch/ reverse etc are more identical, the lyrics are sang musically with the characteristics of being young, fresh & energetic. In general the products are more musical.

The process for music channels is dependent on the context, whether its a jazz channel or rock or pop, it's playing modern music or more classic, its local or international and finally the target group. Usually the jingles and Ids are created based on the contents of the playlist the channel is going to play. Due to this it's hard to define a structured sketch for music channels.

As we can see, in the example for “ La radio los 40 “ (File 15) in Spain jingles are sounding more like spanish music, but mostly just a taste of Spain, as the channel had requested some jingles that would fit their playlist such as Beyonce, Bob Sinclar and some spanish artists. The jingles are produced by “SOB” a jingle production company in Netherlands [4] in which flamenco guitars and latin american rhythms are mixed with electronic beats and sound effects creating a modern, young, fresh and summer-like jingles.

With the progress of technology and the possibility to making music with only a laptop, the variety and number of productions has increased so that there's a lot more methods and approaches for making radio jingles which makes it hard to categorize many of the them, but there are still some points in many jingles that can lead us to find the properties of a successful jingle. One of them is “Association”.

What I mean by association is what comes to the mind of listener when hearing (not necessarily listening!) a radio jingle like those classic 3 or 4 notes of brass with drums. Its something more in the background of consciousness (if we don't name it unconsciousness!). It's what people relate to when they're for example making food or driving in car or just having a talk in living room. I think this is the reason why most of the news programs follow a similar structure. As time has passed the jingles production companies and the radio stations has figured out that a basic receipt for news jingles and beds has always worked

considering the purpose; should take the attention, so it's supposed to be alarming in a cozy way which can be related to the use of Bells/ Brass ensemble/ Horns/ Timpani; It should be serious and focused which can be done with those neutral(usually not major or minor) sequenced sounds; Its about the time, meaning that the news should be heard in the specific times, and they might be very short so the message is kind of “Hurry up and come listen!”, which the reason why all the news jingles and beds have these high tempo and rhythmic structures. These properties are emerge from the keywords of a program or station and thats where the process begins.

As a conclusion, my approach to jingles would be to List the keywords, make a hierarchy based on the priority of importance and associations, find different kind of associations (melody, instrumentation, composition, sound effects etc) and all along this process we shouldn't forget about the audience or target group; the question that who is the listener and where/how they usually listen to this program or station would lead us to select the proper associations.

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1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Who_Sell_Out
 2. http://www.tmstudios.com/index.php/jingles/news-talk/item/kg0-san-francisco?category_id=8
 3. <http://www.reelworld.com/>