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## Hit US radio format aims for UK

By Mark Savage

Entertainment reporter, BBC News

**A radio station that made New York mayor Michael Bloomberg so angry he literally swore he would never listen to it is launching in the UK in March.**



Called Jack, it has been described as an iPod shuffle on the radio, and has taken the US by storm since it was dreamt up in Canada four years ago.

Jack radio prides itself on an eclectic mix of music

North America now has 44 Jack stations, and a host of imitations with similar "everyman" names like Bob and Mike.

On tuning in, you could be forgiven for thinking the DJ had lost control.

Aerosmith rub shoulders with Simon and Garfunkel, whose Bridge Over Troubled Water segues into Wild Cherry's Play That Funky Music.

### 'Train wreck'

This grab-bag of musical styles has been labelled "train wreck" or "whatever radio" in the US, where Jack stands out from more traditional stations, which choose one genre of music and stick to it rigidly.

The format sets itself apart in one other important respect - it has almost entirely dispensed with DJs.



Mayor Bloomberg was angered when Jack replaced his favourite station

Indeed, the Los Angeles offshoot runs a promotional advert that says "talking only gets us in legal trouble".

That sarcastic, self-effacing sense of humour is how the stations provide a sense of personality, despite the lack of on-air talent.

“ Our brand doesn't want to make people angry ”

Garry Wall, Spraknet communications

But it has not attracted fans everywhere.

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When New York's legendary oldies station WCBS-FM was abruptly replaced by a Jack station, Mayor Bloomberg reportedly said he would "never listen to that f\*\*\*\*\* CBS radio again".

"It's interesting that the mayor would comment on it," says Garry Wall, co-president of the company which owns the Jack brand, Sparknet Communications.

"At first you think: 'that's horrible,' but on the other hand it gives the station tremendous publicity."

Indeed, the station capitalised on the mayor's outburst, joking on air: "Hey, Mayor Bloomberg... what's with all the swearing like a sailor? It's just music".

The tactic has been used on other Jack stations, too. A current promotion on California's Jack FM features a real caller yelling: "I've got a New Year's resolution for you - quit sucking!"

"Our brand doesn't want to make people angry," says Mr Wall, "but to have people hate you is not necessarily a bad thing.

"What we think is bad is when 80% of the people are indifferent to you."

### **BBC threat**

So what can UK listeners expect when the country's first Jack station launches in Oxford?

"We're aiming for an eclectic, cheeky style," says Clive Dickens, whose company Absolute Radio has bought the format for the UK.

"But we're not just taking what it does in the States and copying it".

Indeed, the Oxford station will break with tradition by having a four-hour breakfast programme, with real presenters.

"The opportunity in Oxford is a big one," says radio analyst Nik Goodman.

"If they get it right at the beginning, this could become a lot of people's favourite radio station.

"And they will inevitably draw audiences from Radio 2."

Many analysts agree with Mr Goodman that Jack is a direct rival to the UK's most-listened-to radio station, which has a

### **AN HOUR OF JACK**



Queen - Fat Bottomed Girls  
 Adam Ant - Goody Two Shoes  
 The Killers - Somebody Told Me  
 Fleetwood Mac - You Make Lovin' Fun  
 Van Halen - Jump  
 Hootie and the Blowfish - Good Times Roll  
 Cars - Good Times Roll  
 Gary Numan - Cars  
 Billy Idol - Eyes Without A Face  
 Blondie - Heart of Glass  
 Guns 'n' Roses - November Rain  
 Boston - Peace of Mind  
 The Police - Every Breath You Take  
 U2 - Vertigo

*Source: 101.1 Jack FM, New York*

similarly eclectic approach to music.

"Having competition out there is very healthy," says the station's head of music, Colin Martin, "but Radio 2 is very broad".

"We have jazz, folk and country music programmes, and we have presenters who like music and endorse the music they play - so we wouldn't be directly competing."

### 'Vast library'

The BBC radio chief also suggests that some Jack stations in the US are beginning to struggle.

"People in America initially found Jack appealing," he says, "but they tired of it quite quickly because the same tracks kept coming around again".



Jack has been described as an iPod shuffle on the radio

Mr Wall disagrees with this assessment. "We did an interesting study to see how many songs our stations had in common," he says

"These are stations that are playing 1,600 songs each week, but we found there were only 400 songs they shared.

"I mean, I listen all the time - it's my job - and even I was surprised by that."

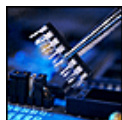
In Oxford, Jack FM promises a "vast library" of music on rotation - around 1,500 tracks compared to the 300 used by most commercial stations.

Industry analysts will be keeping a close eye on the station's fortunes but, in the end, it will be the listeners who decide if they'd rather Jack - even if it does play Fleetwood Mac.

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