



**KEN ANTHONY**  
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PART ONE OF A TWO-PART SERIES

## Classic Rock's 20th Anniversary

A historical perspective

By Fred Jacobs

**I**t was 20 years ago today." OK, that was too easy. What wasn't easy was creating a new radio format for a disrespected listening audience and selling it through to broadcasters. The development of the Classic Rock format was probably the most challenging thing I've ever done. It's also been the most rewarding. While it fragmented Rock radio for the first time, it was one of mass media's first attempts to capitalize on the burgeoning baby boomer market.

In 1985 no one could have predicted that Classic Rock would become the most successful new radio format in the past two decades. Pundits from outside and inside radio scoffed at the notion of a Rock format that didn't play currents and was focused on what was then regarded as a small slice of the audience.

Yet, here we are, 20 years later, and there are a record number of Classic Rock stations. Ratings have been strong and extraordinarily stable. The format has become extremely profitable. After starting out as a so-called "niche format," Classic Rock has emerged as one of radio's best vehicles for directly targeting and owning the coveted 25-54 adult demographic.

While formats like "Jammin' Oldies," the '70s and "Arrow" have burned out like Roman candles, Classic Rock as a format — and a genre — has stood the test of time.

Advertisers, television shows, and movies prominently feature the music in an attempt to get boomers' attention while slyly marketing to their kids, and the careers of legendary artists have been extended.

As I write this, The Beatles and The Rolling Stones are touring America once again. OK, it's Paul McCartney, but odds are good that these two tours will be among the leaders when 2005 concert-ticket sales are tallied. And both the Stones and Sir Paul have released credible new CDs this year.

And they said it wouldn't last.

Along the way there have been a number of people who attempted short-lived versions of the format, and the name itself was even used by a station or two and then dropped. But it was in the mid-'80s when experimentation turned into reality.

As the originator of the Classic Rock format, I've been on the inside of an amazing revolution that has touched the lives of millions of broadcasters, fans, radio listeners and artists. I've been able to watch as Classic Rock radio has kept an art form vital, vibrant and relevant.

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In 2005 Classic Rock is larger than ever, with Gen X, Gen Y and teens being turned on to Jimi Hendrix, Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin. At a time when radio is under attack from new technology and delivery systems, Classic Rock remains stalwart. It's a story worth telling.

### Breaking The Rules

When Classic Rock was introduced in '83, Rock radio was generic. When WMMQ/Lansing, MI's owner, Bob Ottaway, boldly gave us the go-ahead to sign on our first FM client in the spring of '85, the AOR stations of the day typically ran the gamut from old rock (like The Beatles, the Stones and The Who) to whatever was new at the time (Loverboy, Def Leppard, AC/DC).

Classic Rock was the first format that fragmented AOR by focusing solely on older rock music from the format. In its earliest incarnation Classic Rock embraced the period from *Meet The Beatles* through the late '70s. It was the first time a Rock format staked out a particular territory and was positioned as a specialist.

The naysayers were many. Industry pundits declared that Classic Rock would end up as a one-year format because listeners would quickly tire of hearing just a gold library. Others noted that Classic Rock was a nice place to visit but not a long-term destination. And the record labels were understandably critical of the format, blaming it for lessening interest in new music among radio programmers.

Nonetheless, Classic Rock persevered. Its ratings were initially spectacular, damaging some heritage Rock stations along the way. Famous Rockers like WWDC (DC101)/Washington, WMMS/Cleveland and KMET/Los Angeles were all taken down or forced to change due to direct and indirect competition from Classic Rockers.

And for heritage Rockers like KQRS/Minneapolis; KGON/Portland, OR; WGRF/Buffalo; and many others, the successful transition to Classic Rock has helped these stations remain dominant in their markets to this day.

## R&R Remembers Classic Rock

Here's a look back at some of the press Classic Rock got in the pages of R&R.

- From the March 30, 1984 issue of R&R, under the title "Fred Jacobs' Good Time Rock 'n' Roll": "Graduate school for album rock listeners" is how consultant Fred Jacobs describes his Good Time Rock 'n' Roll format. The former WRIF/Detroit PD developed the format in conjunction with Tom Bender, PD at KRQX/Dallas, the AM of KZEW. (Jacobs worked for Bender at WRIF as Research Director and then succeeded Bender in the PD chair at the ABC O&O.)

- KRQX and WNOR-AM/Norfolk, also the sister AM of an AOR heavyweight, are Jacobs' initial clients. Dallas uses "Good Time Rock 'n' Roll" as a handle, while Norfolk calls itself "Classic Rock 'n' Roll."

- From the July 13, 1990 issue of R&R, in then-AOR Editor Harvey Kojan's column titled "Still Classic After All These Years": Don't look now, but Classic Rock — the "fad" format they said would never last — is celebrating its seventh birthday. Founding father Fred Jacobs traces CR's evolution from "laetrile" format to mainstream success story and describes what it's like to be a pariah in the eyes of the record industry.

### Why It Worked

On the surface the reason for the success of Classic Rock was obvious. The AOR format was stretched too thin. By trying to appeal to both young and old listeners alike, the format was having trouble making anyone happy.

By superserving boomers, Classic Rock spoke directly to an entire generation that had grown up listening to The Beatles, Cream, Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin and other iconic rock bands from the '60s and '70s.

For years I had analyzed the growth and success of Classic Rock as essentially a great baby boom play. When you're appealing to the better part of a 70-million-strong generation, you're going to win. But we came to understand over time that it's not just about audience size. In fact, demographic opportunity may be a secondary factor in the format's success.

Instead, it's hard not to conclude that there's something very special about this music. Calling it *classic* rock gave the music a sense of timelessness and quality that few genres possess. I am convinced that 100 years into the future, music lovers will still enjoy and appreciate Jimi Hendrix, John Lennon, Eric Clapton and The Eagles.

**A technical innovation played into Classic Rock's success: At precisely the time when the format was gathering a head of steam, the compact disc was becoming the standard, trumping the vinyl record.**

segueing a new release and a classic from the same artist. To this day many Classic Rock stations continue to use this listener-friendly means of exposing new music from old friends.

### Getting Personal

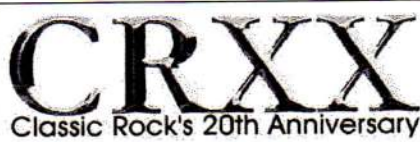
Finally, classic rock is personal. In focus group after focus group, from 1983 until today, the love for the music is the same. Fans tell anyone who will listen that classic rock is the music they grew up with.

Every generation has its own nostalgia. The music you first heard in your bedroom as a teen or your dorm room in college is the stuff that will have meaning and resonance for your entire life.

People get married to classic rock, they turn their kids on to it, and, more and more often, it's the soundtrack of funerals and memorial services. Nothing brings back that rush of memories more than that certain Pink Floyd song or that Elton John ballad. Most of us remember the songs that were playing when we first made love, met our life partner and started having children. Powerful stuff.

The fact is, classic rock is a musical phenomenon that comes equipped with stories, history and social change. It takes listeners on an important journey through the America of the '60s and '70s.

*Next week: Jacobs explores Classic Rock's growth and advertising strength on Madison Avenue. Jacobs is President of Jacobs Media, a Rock consulting firm based in Detroit. Check out the Classic Rock section of the Jacobs Media website at [www.jacobsmedia.com/crxx](http://www.jacobsmedia.com/crxx).*



Classic Rock also benefited from a drought in quality new rock at the time of its debut in the early '80s. The format provided a safe haven from some of the less exciting new music being released at the time.

### Yesterday & Today

Additionally, a technical innovation played into Classic Rock's success: At precisely the time when the format was gathering a head of steam, the compact disc was becoming the standard, trumping the vinyl record.

As more and more boomers began to replace their old, scratched or missing LPs, the CD came along as an attractive new music format, and their favorite music sounded better than ever.

And, unlike at the Oldies format, many classic rock artists were still recording and touring. Many came out of virtual retirement when it became obvious there was a viable radio format on the scene that would expose and promote their music and their tours.

Back in the early days we developed the "Yesterday & Today" (or "Now & Then") feature,





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The format grows and matures

By Fred Jacobs

While the Oldies format was an accepted option for many broadcasters, the idea of a Rock format that was exclusively gold-based was foreign to many. Classic Rock was met with intense skepticism from the beginning. The big question "Will it last?" was frequently asked.

Yet listeners around the country never tired of hearing the music they grew up with. One of the keys to keeping the format fresh was positioning. Early on we brought in listeners who enjoyed the stations to find out what was working and what was tertiary to the format's success.

### The Listeners Speak

We learned that the library of music listeners envisioned for a Classic Rock station would fill a couple of football fields. This is one of the reasons we started adopting language ("The largest record library," etc.) that addressed the variety and breadth issue.

The early logo design we used — a stack of classic rock cassettes showing specific titles, along with some homemade tapes — epitomized the notion that these stations played a great collection of the audience's personal classic rock favorites.

While this visual was unveiled almost a couple of decades before the invention of the iPod, the idea was essentially the same: You've amassed a great library of classic rock that you enjoy, and now there's a station that plays it all.

Repetition was always a concern. Without new music to buffer the concentration of classic rock gold, this issue was central from the beginning. As a result, the "No-Repeat Day" was developed.

The idea was simple: Our library is so large we can go all day long without playing the same song twice. Our focus groups revealed unequivocally that this positioning was effective.

In fact, several Classic Rock stations, like KLSX/Los Angeles and WCSX/Detroit, offered a "No-Repeat Guarantee." If the station erred by

playing the same song twice in the same day, the first person to catch the mistake would win a CD player. It was a dramatically effective way of hammering home the point that the library was extremely large, and it staved off the repetition critics.



Fred Jacobs

Later, various musical stunts were developed. My recollection is that WKLH/Milwaukee was the first station to unveil "A-to-Z" — a weeklong (or more) playback of a station's entire library in alphabetical order. To this day a well-programmed A-to-Z can spike a ratings period.

Over time other reshuffling stunts and events were created, often driven by suggestions from enthusiastic listeners.

### A Name Change

Tom Bender, who has run Greater Media's Detroit cluster for 20 years, played a huge role in shaping my thinking, and the course of Classic Rock, from the very beginning.

In early 1983 he signed on KRQX/Dallas, the little AM station that could. We originally picked the music for the format in Tom's living room, going through album after album, trying to create just the right sound. Most people in the industry don't remember that Classic Rock was not the original name we used for the format. Our first stab, on KRQX, was "Good Time Rock 'n' Roll."

We were able to field focus groups just a few months after KRQX's debut. In these sessions it became obvious that "Good Time Rock 'n' Roll" wasn't memorable or particularly descriptive of the music. When we asked respondents what it should be called, they referred to the music as classic.

Hearing the audience use *classic* as a way to connote both quality and longevity, it became clear to us that "Classic" and "Rock" could be married to create a new way to describe the format.

While Classic Rock had sporadically shown up on various stations around the country in the past, it had never stuck or truly succeeded. But married to the music library we developed, the term "Classic Rock" became a format, like Oldies or Country, and both listeners and industry professionals used it comfortably.

As is often the case when a new format is in-

troduced, critics came out of the woodwork. In this case the knock was that some listeners confused the name with Classical, and thus Classic Rock, as a brand, was somehow flawed.

The name stuck, however, and real listeners started using Classic Rock to describe the music and the stations that presented it.

### The Power Of The 'C Word'

The concept crystallized in 1985, when Coca-Cola went through its infamous New Coke debacle. As you may recall, the company introduced a new formula, calling it New Coke, as a way of stemming falling sales and becoming more competitive with Pepsi.

The strategy backfired when core Coke fans came out of the woodwork to protest the new product. Petitions were signed, advocacy groups were formed, and the company found itself with a huge public relations gaffe, as well as a bona fide dilemma.

It became obvious to them that the only way out of the morass was to somehow reintroduce original-formula Coke. But how to do it, and what to call it?

In meetings somewhere in Atlanta, the smarter marketers rejected "Old Coke" as a brand strategy — and for good reason. The challenge was how to bring back the original product with a name that would signify "the real thing," as well as quality and longevity.

The release of Coca-Cola Classic was a brilliant move for Coke, and it underscored the validity of the Classic Rock moniker for the format. Just as Coca-Cola Classic connoted timelessness and quality, so Classic Rock symbolized the time-honored value of the greatest rock music ever created.

And then the classic deluge began as company after company and brand after brand adopted the word to work the same magic with their longest-running, most traditional products.

At one time I had a shelf in my office where I kept all sorts of products, from pasta to candy to watches to toothpaste, that incorporated the "C word" into their names. I quickly ran out of room on the shelf.

### Madison Avenue Gets Classic

The turning point for classic rock came when agency creative writers began to realize that they could build and shape their brands by incorpo-



rating the music into their advertising strategies.

It began in earnest in the early 1990s. Microsoft used "Start Me Up" by The Rolling Stones to kick off Windows 95, The Beatles' "Revolution" showed up in a powerful Nike ad, the U.S. Postal Service re-imaged its brand with Steve Miller's "Fly Like an Eagle," and Chevy Trucks benefited from Motor City legend Bob Seger's "Like a Rock." The fad became a trend.

One of the biggest tamarounds in consumer marketing history occurred right here in Detroit, when Cadillac revived its brand with none other than Led Zeppelin. This project is even more interesting when you know the story behind it. Originally, the "Break Through" campaign was designed to feature The Doors' "Break on Through," but Doors drummer John Densmore wouldn't allow the band's music to be used for television advertising.

Cadillac's Plan B was Zeppelin's "Rock 'n' Roll," and the rest is history. Along with producing an improved lineup of cars, Cadillac has re-

**It seems like just about every financial-services company is using classic rock and related images to sell retirement programs to aging boomers.**

habbed its old, stodgy image and attracted a new generation of customers.

In subsequent automotive campaigns, The Who's "Happy Jack" humanized Hummer and "Magic Carpet Ride" from Steppenwolf became the musical theme for the entire Chevrolet line.

This fall it seems that just about every financial-services company is using classic rock and related images to sell retirement programs to aging boomers. Fidelity has signed on with Paul McCartney and Ameriprise uses 1960s footage along with Spencer Davis' "Gimme Some Lovin'" to sell its services. Meanwhile, mortgage giant Ameriquest has underwritten The Rolling Stones' Bigger Bang Tour.

These days it's not unusual to watch prime-time television and see several spots in clusters using classic rock as soundtracks. Of course, it doesn't always work. Just ask the ad mavens at Buick, who recently dropped Aerosmith's "Dream On" because of its bad fit with their stodgy passenger cars.

### The Music Of Generations

An odd phenomenon is the large number of teens who have come to discover classic rock. Some of this is due to the aforementioned use of classic rock in TV commercials, but motion-picture soundtracks have had a major impact too.

How else would today's kids know Lynryd Skynryd's "Sweet Home Alabama," if it wasn't for the hit movie of the same name? AC/DC's "Back in Black" made a major comeback in the movie *School of Rock*.

Of course, the whole thing probably started in earnest with that famous scene featuring Tom Cruise sliding across the floor in his briefs to Bob Seger's "Old Time Rock 'n' Roll," one of the more memorable moments in *Risky Business*.

This type of exposure creates fresh video highlights for classic rock songs, puts the songs in modern settings and makes new memories for the next generation of fans. While teens and 20-somethings have always enjoyed classic rock, the number of kids who appreciate this music has soared during the past few years.

Why? Some point the finger at a weak new-music environment, but the simple truth may be that the power of classic rock truly transcends generations. Boomers expose their kids to the music, and that exposure is reinforced through other media. In fact, taking your kid to a classic rock concert has become a common and acceptable parent-child activity.

Maybe that explains why so many kids are enjoying music that's more than 40 years old.

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