

Young radio deejays inject radio stations with fresh ideas and a sense of vibrancy



Boon Chan
Media Correspondent

Video killed the radio star. This was the dire prognosis fired by MTV back in 1981 with its first music video from British synthpop group The Buggles.

The good news is that radio appears to be faring better than MTV, which has had to turn to reality TV programming to remain relevant in this age of YouTube dominance.

The bad news is that radio's market share in the mediascape is now under threat from other avenues, especially Internet radio where listeners can customise the content on websites such as Spotify.

And yet, amid the challenges, the number of FM radio stations in Singapore grew to 19 with the addition of SPH UnionWorks' Kiss 92 last September.

One of the ways that radio stations have freshened up their appeal is by bringing in deejays under 30 such as Gerald Koh, better known as Boy Thunder, on Hot FM91.3; Lin Weidong, or Ah Dong, on UFM 100.3; and Nity Baizura on Ria 89.7FM.

Ms Foong Wai See, senior programme director for MediaCorp's 93.3FM, says: "With young and energetic deejays joining the station, they bring in lots of enthusiasm and new ideas and this adds vibrancy to the station. We have to, and want to, build new radio personalities for the industry."

Some ideas include co-opting the competition. Nity, 29, uses social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Keek, a social networking service that lets its users upload video status updates, to keep in touch with her listeners.

To attract new blood, competitions are held. The fresh voices discovered have included Sonia Nicola Chew, 21, the champ of 987FM's Radio Star last year, and Chung Kun Wah, 27, winner of Y.E.S. 93.3FM's deejay search in 2005.

There is the hope that their youthfulness would be a magnet in attracting a younger audience.

Justin Ang was just 16 when he started with Safrá (Singapore Armed Forces Reservists Association) Radio. He was in school during the day and hosting a chart show at night. Half in jest, he says his biggest challenge then was "trying my best not to get fired".

Ang, now 31 and on 987FM, adds: "It was easy to relate to my listeners who were my peers then. I understood what they were going through."

Younger deejays are also seen as being more fun. Recently, FM91.3's Koh, 28, and fellow deejay Adam Piperdy, 22, talked for 77 hours - straight into a Guinness World Record for longest marathon show.

Beyond attracting new listeners to radio, the bigger challenge is to keep them surfing the airwaves for the long term. Programme director for UFM 100.3 Carine Ang notes: "Many started listening to the station back when they were in their teens or early 20s. This could have become a habit."

And there is anecdotal evidence that there are fans who grow up along with their favourite deejays. Jean Danker, 35, started out in radio when she was 16 and is currently with Class 95FM. She says that many of her listeners migrated from 987FM, where she started out, to her current station.

Even as younger deejays help to jazz up radio's appeal, it is worth noting that their drawing power is not necessarily limited to the under-30 set. Ms Foong says: "The personality of a deejay plays an important part in connecting with the listeners and they may attract different age groups too."

As Lin, 27, puts it: "To the older crowd, listening to my show is a gateway to understanding what the young are thinking about."

In the end, maybe age really is just a number.

Chung says: "Even if you are over 30, you can still be on the same frequency as younger listeners because you can continue to have a youthful lifestyle and image. So the key point here is that I hope to still appeal to that demographic even after I turn 30."

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LIVE WIRE



Sonia Nicola Chew, 21

987FM, Reload, weekdays, 1 to 4pm, and Say It With Music, Saturdays, 6 to 10pm

Like many young radio deejays here, Sonia Nicola Chew studied communications. The difference is that she had planned to go into TV rather than radio.

Her exposure to radio work while studying mass communication at Ngee Ann Polytechnic changed her route.

"I went on Radio Heatwave (Ngee Ann's campus radio station), took radio journalism and radio production modules. While I still love the TV business, I feel radio is more me. It suits my personality," says Chew, who is now studying for her degree in creative producing at Chapman University Singapore.

Last year, she won 987FM's deejay search, Radio Star, and signed a part-time contract with MediaCorp Radio.

The rookie is still trying to develop her persona and people have told her that she is "really wacky and puny", which is miles apart from the initial "too cool for school" impression everyone has of her, says Chew, the only child of a video production company owner.

Youth is on her side and that may get her listeners to grow up with her. She says: "This is why radio personalities are so important. What sets radio apart is that you have someone there to keep you company."

Rachael Boon



DJ Boy Thunder, aka Gerald Koh (above), 28

Hot FM91.3, Hot Breakfast With Boy Thunder, Adam & Josh, weekdays, 6 to 10am

Gerald Koh was thrown into the hot seat in January when he and two other young deejays, Joshua Simon and Adam Piperdy, both 22, were assigned to take over the Hot FM91.3's morning show. They are the youngest team among radio stations competing in the radio primetime.

The previous hosts, Rod Monteiro And The Married Men, had their contract terminated over a telephone prank that the station deemed inappropriate and indefensible.

Making Koh and gang's task harder was the fact that Rod Monteiro And The Married Men had snared enough listeners to become No. 2 on the breakfast show scene in about two years, according to the Nielsen Radio Diary Survey. Koh, who joined the station full-time in 2008, says: "All I can do is to try my best, slide in and have fun."

The support he has received from Monteiro, who is one of the deejays he looks up to, encourages him. Apparently, Monteiro texted him: "Your show is good, keep up the faith, don't worry."

The memory of his late maternal grandmother also gives him strength. "She died at the time when I had entered radio. At her hospital bed, she told me: 'Why are you so scared? This is what you love. If you're scared, you'll never get what you love.'"

At 15, he was recording his voice as he practised how to introduce a song before it started playing. He went on to study mass communication at Ngee Ann Polytechnic and did well in radio modules.

Koh, who is engaged, got his Boy Thunder nickname as an intern at Hot FM91.3 in 2007 when he was tasked with driving the station's van, which is affectionately named "The Thunder Truck".

The internship was also when he made his debut on the airwaves, thanks to SPH UnionWorks' senior programme director Jamie Meldrum.

"I was learning the ropes from Jeremy Ratnam, now a DJ at Kiss 92. Jamie asked us what we were doing and I went on air. He liked it, put me on the weekend show and, after a few weeks, on a morning show where I did stunts outside and called back to the station."

Rachael Boon



Nona Kirana, 29

Warna 94.2FM, Sutera Warna, weekdays, 6 to 10pm

As a child, Nona Kirana wanted to be a radio deejay, an astronaut and a zoologist. Well, outer space and the animals have to wait.

Malay radio listeners have been getting their dose of Nona since 2007, when she signed on full-time with Warna as a producer and presenter after a part-time stint.

The communications and media management graduate from Temasek Polytechnic is known to share details of her life with her listeners, such as her marriage to a financial planner whom she met at Malam Warna, a live show organised by the station.

"I found love while in radio, got married and had a baby. Some listeners have taken a special interest in my life - that's what made radio special to me."

But Nona, whose son is almost 18 months old, is careful not to let her personal problems and emotions cloud her on-air duties. "The microphone is magic to me. Once I switch it on, I'm all sunshine and smiles because I really love my job."

A self-proclaimed "social media freak", she is active on social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Keek. "With the proliferation of social media, it's a challenge to get the young interested in radio and that's why we make special efforts to engage them on these platforms."

And while she is a lifelong radio fan, Nona is also keen on branching out into television - she is an occasional newsreader on Malay television station Suria.

"I'd love to explore more work on TV, so we'll see when the opportunity presents itself. I'd love to host a travel documentary some day."

Eddino Abdul Hadi

Ivy Tan, 29

Y.E.S. 93.3FM, Utopia, weekdays, 11pm to 2am

The most distinctive quality about Ivy Tan on air is her laugh. It is big and, to fans, joyous.

Then there are listeners who object to it, asking "Why do you laugh like that?" and "Why do you laugh so loud?" and scolding her for it.

But she has never reined it in. "That's my natural laugh so I've laughed this way from the start. I suppose some people have had to get used to it," says Tan.

Her personality on- and off-air is the same. "In real life, I speak more like a Singaporean, less precisely, but the personality is the same. I'm not your sweet girl next door."

Tan first did radio work while studying mass communication at Ngee Ann Polytechnic. Since joining MediaCorp in 2007, she has helmed morning and night shows, with others and alone.

"When you host alone, you are totally in control, from what you want to say to the content of the show - 100 per cent, it's all yours."

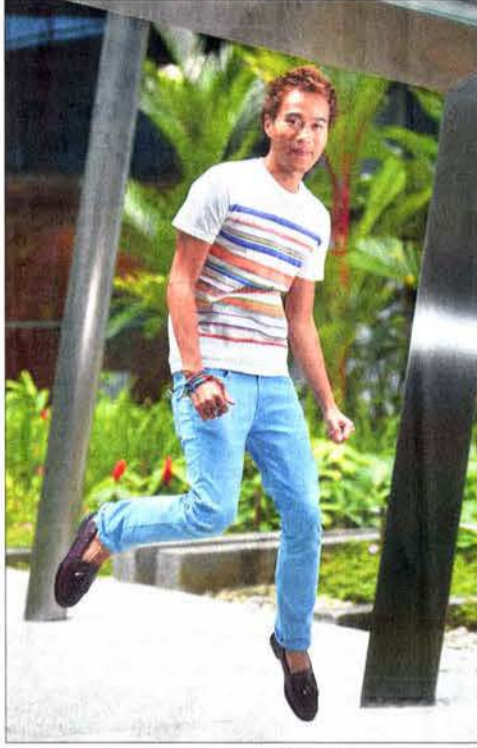
But there is an advantage to being part of a team, she reveals. Helming a show solo, "I have to run for my toilet breaks", while with a team, "I can walk normally".

For all the talk of media competition, she believes that radio has one key advantage.

"It's very personal. You are listening and I'm talking to you. I'm not talking to a whole bunch of people. Radio is more like a friend."

Tan says she is single but "hopefully after this article, I won't be anymore."

Boon Chan



ST PHOTOS: ASHLEIGH SIM, KEVIN LIM

Lin Weidong, 27

UFM 100.3, Feel The Night, weekdays, 8pm to midnight

The question of how radio can stay relevant is one that Lin Weidong has been thinking about. One way is to extend radio's reach by making it available online. Another is making quality programmes and conducting meaningful interviews with artists.

He says: "When I meet artists who are real and sincere, you realise that the conversations are something that are irreplaceable... They're immediate, personal and you get to hear the artist's voice."

Lin, who uses the moniker Ah Dong on air, broadcasts the interviews during his slot on weeknights. "It's easier for people to like you at night as they are more relaxed. There's more personality that comes out then and the sharing is more intimate."

It is a good fit for him as he used to listen to the radio at night while studying. The bachelor, who graduated from Singapore Management University with a degree in finance, started out in radio co-hosting a jazz segment on the same station in 2006.

Besides drawing in younger listeners with whom he says he has a natural affinity, Lin thinks that he has a connection with those in their 40s and older.

He led a tour to Shandong last year and he would entertain the participants by singing songs on the bus and chatting with them. One of them later said that talking to him was like talking to his own son.

Lin says: "For me, it was always about attracting the younger listeners. But to the older crowd, listening to my show is a gateway to understanding what the young are thinking about."

To keep his show fresh, he takes on side projects from multimedia work for theatre to photography. "We cannot just stay behind the microphone," he says. "It's about branching out. By being more well-rounded, you bring fresh perspectives to the job."

Boon Chan



Nity Baizura, 29

Ria 89.7FM, Groove Xpress & Skoolz, weekdays, 6 to 10pm

Malay radio deejay Nity Baizura has survived a major boo-boo on air. She once forgot to switch off her microphone in the radio studio and the conversation she had with a colleague was broadcast live on radio.

"I realised this only when a listener sent me a text message. Thank goodness the conversation was not inappropriate."

The bubbly 29-year-old is a familiar voice for Ria 89.7FM listeners on their evening drive home and young listeners who tune in at night. The station plays both popular and contemporary Malay and English songs.

An eight-year veteran on Malay radio, she might have had a different career had she leveraged on her academic qualifications.

She graduated from Singapore Polytechnic with a diploma in chemical process technology, specialising in industrial chemistry.

The deejay, who is married to a teacher and is expecting her first child, says in jest: "The only chemistry that's in my life right now is my passionate relationship with radio."

She says the biggest challenge that she faces in her job is getting young radio listeners to tune in, instead of merely seeking music on the Internet. "We use social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Keek to communicate with them."

While making regular appearances as a host on Malay television channel Suria has also helped her build up her fan base, radio will always be her first love.

"I can't believe it's been eight years and I must say I have had many memorable moments. I don't see myself retiring from this job anytime soon. I love what I'm doing and I think doing something that you love and earning a living from it is a double blessing."

Eddino Abdul Hadi

Chung Kun Wah, 27

Y.E.S. 93.3FM, Good Evening, weekdays, 4 to 8pm

Chung Kun Wah, better known as Kunhua, says being in the radio studio as a solo deejay can be a lonely thing "because you don't know who's listening to you".

"But when you see someone leaving a message on your Facebook page, sending you an SMS or calling in and sharing his life with you, you realise you're not alone and that's a heart-warming feeling."

To him, that is the most unforgettable part of the job.

He joined 93.3FM as a part-timer in 2005 after winning a deejay search contest. After graduating from the Department of Radio and Television at Taipei's National Chengchi University in 2010, the Singaporean went on board full-time.

In 2011, he created his own show Moo...ve It On to give a lift to students doing homework or those tired after a day at work.

The Mandarin title was Newton Gives A Boost. "I wanted my show to have xiyinli (Mandarin for appeal) and while no one invented that, there was Newton who discovered yinli (gravity)."

He got a boost as well and has now moved on to the higher profile rush-hour evening slot. His co-host is Nico Chua, better known as Cai Wei Bin.

On air, he comes across as smart, amusing and playful, and while he has fun, he does not let his lips get too loose. The bachelor says: "On air, you hear only about 30 per cent of my spiciness. I can be more biting in private."

"And yet, I'm more interesting on radio because this is a service industry after all and I'm constantly thinking up ways and means to entertain listeners."

Boon Chan



Jerald Justin Ko, 26

Power 98FM, The Hot Date, weekdays, 9pm to midnight, and Wired On The Weekends, Sundays, 5 to 9pm

When Jerald Justin Ko is on the air, what you hear is what you get, he says. "I don't put on a persona. When I'm talking about my girlfriend, I am talking about her. I talk about a lot of my personal life and I try to be as personable as possible."

Ko, better known as JK, describes his style as "down-to-earth, a bit unorthodox, not afraid to talk about stuff".

In 2010, the communications graduate from the University of Western Australia saw an opening for a deejay at Power 98FM, went for the interview and got the job. He got his foundation hosting Teachers' Day events in secondary school and corporate dinners at his late father's restaurant in Singapore.

Ko's father died of thyroid cancer in 2007 and Ko wishes he were still here to see him realise his dream. "Being a deejay has been something I loved doing and I am lucky enough to do it for a living."

Unlike other young deejays whose listeners tend to be teenagers, Ko's tend to be around his age. They might not have grown up with him but have become "my buddies and friends, which is good".

"For most deejays under 30 in Singapore, their target audience is really very young. Mine is usually tertiary students and young or working adults. It shows in my prize winners and callers."

He intends to have a lifelong career in radio. "I don't ever want to get out of this industry. Even if I'm not on air in 30, 40 years, I want to give lectures about radio to students with potential. I hope I'll be a mainstay in this line in the years to come."

Rachael Boon

