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Just How Long Is Your “Fifteen Minutes?”

An Empirical Analysis of Artists’ Time on the Popular Charts

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Introduction

In the late 1960s a line printed in the catalog for an exhibition by art icon Andy Warhol read, “In the future everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes.”¹ The line, in particular the time frame, has been used often in reference to pop culture and the entertainment industry, particularly toward celebrities whose notoriety has been seemingly gained quickly, but is ultimately fleeting.

For better or worse, the term could be applied to some recording artists and performers in the music industry, particularly in an age of social media, reality television, and viral distribution of attention-grabbing content. It would almost seem that it is increasingly possible for artists to become stars literally overnight. By May of 2011 the low-budget music video by a previously unknown fourteen-year old named Rebecca Black had already been viewed over 127 million times, an astounding number that gained her instant celebrity status despite the debatable quality of her performance.² Pundits would likely argue that despite this initial success, however acquired, Ms. Black’s ability to maintain the long-term attention of millions, or even thousands, of consumers might be questionable. Her “fifteen minutes” may be short-lived.

Though some may find fame by pure luck or seemingly improbable circumstances, every day thousands of aspiring musicians and songwriters work and study diligently to perfect and market their art in order to achieve a degree of success as a recording artist or performer that may not come so quickly, if at all. Success is defined in their own terms, based possibly on commercial or critical accomplishment, locally or worldwide. They may

simply be seeking fame at some level, using their own benchmark.

Notoriety and success, and the duration of it, can be difficult to evaluate numerically. But in the music business there is at least one quantifiable measurement of artists reaching a milestone of relative success in terms of the appeal of their recordings: the popular music charts. More commonly referred to in the music business and popular media as *the charts*, these summaries, like many other similar reports, have their advantages and disadvantages. However, the charts have for many years driven business decisions by artists, their support teams, and their record labels, where applicable. The charts have also provided a reference point for not only the popular media's description of an artist's success, but many artists' own definition as well. The concept of reaching *number one*, *top ten*, *top forty*, or even *making the charts*, especially at a national level, is generally among the goals of aspiring recording artists and their supporters.

There's little doubt that having one's recordings ranked on the national charts ("making" the charts) is a noteworthy achievement. Capitalizing on the initial placement, and being a recognized recording artist for as long as possible, would presumably be a goal as well. Viewed over time, chart data can offer a perspective of how long an artist continues that achievement. In this portion of a multi-part study, the goal has been to calculate, from empirical data, just how long artists have historically maintained a presence on the popular music charts. The aim is to develop a baseline understanding of success as measured by syndicated chart reports that identify recording artists' commercial popularity on a national level at any given time versus other artists.

There are several questions to be addressed from the analysis. Most importantly, just how long is the average "chart career" for a recording artist on a national level? Historically, if being on the charts is one measure of accomplishment in the music business, how long has it lasted for those who have enjoyed it? What have the extremes (appearing on the charts just once versus multiple placements for a notably long time) looked like? In general, how long is a recording artist's "fifteen minutes" in terms of measured commercial popularity?

Charting Is Not the Only Measure of Success

It is important to note that recordings are but one representation of an artist's talents and persona. One must also consider live appearances, songwriting, and even humanitarian efforts, among other things. There is

no suggestion here that selling many millions of albums or garnering massive radio airplay is requisite to becoming a successful artist or that it is the only path to fame. Critical acclaim and significant concert ticket sales are among many indicators of success that can sustain a musical career, regardless of the commercial success of recordings.

Artists may also elect to perform and record music within genres that do not generally have mass-market appeal (and thus a limited consumer base). There may also be fewer radio stations programming these formats. In terms of record sales and airplay of their recordings, this is logically a disadvantage, especially when these data are compared to those of more mainstream artists. Though they might appear on smaller, genre-focused charts or be highly recognized within their genres, placement on the national popular charts might be more difficult. Moreover, their releases might not rank as high when compared to those by more mainstream artists.

It should also be noted that an artist could release and chart recordings for a limited amount of time and still sustain a career, possibly lucrative, thereafter. Even when the days of releasing recordings—or better yet, seeing them on the national charts—cease or slow considerably, an artist could remain popular or maintain an economically viable career through sales of merchandise and concert tickets, among other sources. This is especially possible for artists who have been quite successful at one point in establishing a recording career. They might also maintain a level of exposure through public appearances or on television as a result of their recognition as recording artists. Examples of artists who have sustained an apparently lucrative living long beyond their chart primes include Jimmy Buffett, Chicago, and Earth, Wind & Fire.

Though significant sales and airplay of recordings as measured by syndicated charts are not necessarily required for success as an artist, it is assumed that an appearance on the charts is something an artist would generally prefer to accomplish with the release of a recording, and that it would certainly not hurt a career to attain such status at any level. It may also be safely assumed that maintaining a presence on the charts for as long as possible is preferred over a shorter presence.

The Charts As Measurement

The *Billboard* magazine charts, which rank the national popularity of albums and songs, are the most widely known sources for such measure-

ment. *Billboard* has published weekly popularity charts for various genres and configurations of music since 1936.³ Various algorithms, reporting sources, and data have been utilized, depending on the type of chart and the changes in the music business over time.

For this analysis, the chart generally known as the Billboard Top 200, a comprehensive ranking of albums from all genres and all configurations, and the Billboard Hot 100, a ranking of top songs, were utilized. Most of the other *Billboard* album and singles charts are more genre-focused and would not provide as general a snapshot. However, utilizing the “big chart,” as the ranking of overall albums is sometimes referred to, has its challenges, especially when attempting to take a long-term empirical view. One such complication involving historical *Billboard* album chart data is the fact that there weren’t always 200 positions on the rankings. Prior to 1963 there were as few as fifteen.⁴ From 1963 to 1967, there were only 150 titles ranked.⁵ It wasn’t until 1967 that there were 200 positions, as there have been to this day.⁶

Methods of determining the individual rankings have changed through the years as well. Prior to September of 1991, the album chart rankings were based on ranked sales reports from retailers, one-stops, and rackjobbers, with no specificity of each title’s sales.⁷ Titles were weighted by rank and, starting in 1986, by the size of the reporting account.⁸

Since 1991 however, titles have been listed in an order based strictly on sales data. In the early years of this type of calculation, an album usually had to sell at least 5,000 copies in a week to make the Top 200.⁹ By 2001, a peak sales year for the music industry overall, a Top 200 title sold at least around 6,000 units per week.¹⁰ With the general decline in music sales since then, a more recent title could sell as few as 2,500 copies and land on the Top 200.¹¹ Therefore the prevailing economic times have in effect made an “apples to apples” comparison of album rankings through the years somewhat of a dilemma.

Data from the Billboard Hot 100 singles charts was also utilized in the research, primarily for an analysis of the overall frequency of appearances by new artists and their re-appearances on those charts. But to actually generate observations regarding the lengths of chart careers, *Billboard’s* album charts were deemed more applicable for several reasons. For instance, the release and availability of individual songs for sale has been inconsistent through the years.

For business or philosophical reasons, record companies and artists

have sometimes declined to release single songs from album releases. As a relatively recent example, in 2008, artist Kid Rock refused to put his album *ROCK N ROLL JESUS* on iTunes, where the retailer's policy is to sell individual tracks from albums.¹² Due to his refusal, the artist's hit song "All Summer Long" from that album was unavailable as a commercial single.

During the late 1990s, some major record companies thought that releasing singles by an artist, regardless of sales potential or the popularity of the artist, cannibalized sales of the full album containing the track.¹³ Consequently they refused to release singles into the marketplace, thus decrementing the true ranking of the track on the charts. The most recognized singles chart, the Hot 100, also factors in radio airplay. So, as of 1998, the song could still "chart," but without the same support as other tracks.¹⁴

Sometimes singles releases were used to simply introduce artists to the marketplace, hopefully spurring sales for artists' full albums or their other recordings. Once that was sufficiently accomplished record companies would discontinue production of the single release, or cease releasing singles by that artist.

Finally, sometimes songs have not been made available for sale individually simply because of their length, commercial potential as a single, or any number of other practical or economic reasons. All of these factors make the Hot 100 somewhat imprecise for true measurements of all charting artists' long-term popularity, though general data and trends are very useful.

Album popularity for many years has also been a highly recognized measurement of an artist's recording career achievement, even when the artist had a weak or non-existent presence in the singles market. Garth Brooks, Metallica, and AC/DC, for example, are among the top twenty artists of all time in terms of albums sold¹⁵—but the singles market was not necessarily their forte. None of those artists had any single chart higher than number ten (Brooks technically did, but under a different name and persona).¹⁶ On the other hand, there have also been popular "Top 40" artists who have had hit singles that resonated with the marketplace while their full-length albums weren't comparably successful. In 2006 for example, the hip-hop group D4L infamously sold twice as many copies of their hit single, "Laffy Taffy" than they did of the album that featured the song.¹⁷ It should be noted, though, that in more recent years, as the sale of digital products has increased, the availability, and thus the sales, of single

tracks have grown immensely.

Billboard's syndicated charts of rankings of music releases have offered a relative data point to identify an artist's commercial achievements versus other artists on a regular basis. Having the No. 33 album on December 25, 1976 may not have meant exactly the same thing as having been ranked at the same position on July 12, 1968, or even February 4, 2005. But in all cases, that recording was ranked in popularity by the most trusted authority on the matter relative to all other albums available that week. Despite any shortcomings, the album chart data was the most ideal source for the purposes of this research to numerically assess the length of time that artists have been widely recognized in such a manner for their music. That said, the presence of varying quantities of titles and measurement processes through the years was taken into account as the research was conducted.

Methodology

For the calculations of the lengths of artists' chart longevity, data from the *Billboard* album charts for the years 1955-2010 (more specifically January 8, 1955 through May 29, 2010) were utilized. Over the course of those 55 years, 7,482 artists achieved at least one charted album.¹⁸ Album chart data was primarily drawn from author Joel Whitburn's *Top Pop Albums* book, which identifies all of these artists and includes information for each of their charted albums. For the detailed analysis and recording of data, a randomly selected sample population of 1,497 artists (20.01 % of all artists) was drawn for the analysis. Artists and/or albums that *debuted* on the charts after December 26, 2009 were not included. However, chart data from January 2, 2010 through May 29, 2010 *was* included for albums that debuted December 26, 2009 or prior and remained on the charts into 2010.¹⁹

In some situations, clarification was necessary in regard to counting an artist's charting albums as those of one or several artists. For example, Indiana rocker John Mellencamp also recorded as "John Cougar" and "John Cougar Mellencamp" but he was defined as one artist under all three names. The same rule was applied to the albums gathered under Sly and the Family Stone bass player Larry Graham's name, even though he charted with side projects under the name of "Graham Central Station" and "Larry Graham and Graham Central Station." Solo album releases by Mick Jagger, the ageless lead singer of the Rolling Stones, were catego-

rized under his name and not that of his band. On the other hand, albums by Gladys Knight, with or without her backing vocalists, the Pips, were classified solely under her name. In terms of classifications under these and other exceptional circumstances, the default fell to how they were listed in the *Top Pop Albums* book. The same deferment was applied to charted film soundtrack albums and hit compilations on which one artist performed or scored all or most of the tracks on an album (Bette Midler's soundtrack to the film *The Rose*, for example).

As of this writing, *Billboard* magazine continues to publish weekly Top 200 album charts. In fact, many of the artists currently on those charts first debuted during the researched period. In other words, the summary data calculated for this study is theoretically constantly being updated as some of the sample artists continue their chart careers. For them, the research becomes increasingly outdated as each week passes. As of this writing, for example, teen sensation Justin Bieber (whose first appearance on the Billboard Top 200 was in December 2009) is absolutely extending his chart career. For this situation, a separate calculation is presented in the results that does not include artists who charted in the last two years of the review period (2008 and 2009), the assumption being that those artists' careers are most likely to still be in progress. This is by no means a given, but their data are a moving target, and their album performance over the next few months cannot be predicted with any certainty. Therefore it was deemed appropriate to present separate results excluding their chart statistics.

There is also the likely possibility that an artist who hasn't hit the charts in the last five, eight, or even twenty years may for some reason return to the charts, thus also revising his or her chart career statistics. Again, this would be virtually impossible to predict or estimate.

In essence, since charts continue to be published each week, calculations are a rolling target. Therefore the findings are based on a snapshot, with some unknown degree of resultant change that will absolutely occur as charts continue to be published and artists disappear and reappear in the marketplace. Mr. Bieber's career is extending at the moment, but we cannot predict for how long. So, in several datasets, we do not include his and other such artists' careers as observations.

For another part of the research, data was drawn from summaries of the Billboard Top Singles charts for the years 1955-2005. From November of 1955 until August of 1958 the key chart in this case was known as the

Billboard Top 100.²⁰ Since then, however, the Billboard Hot 100 has been the definitive chart for the most popular songs in the country.²¹

Data Collection

For each of the artists randomly selected for the sample, the following data were collected and separately logged:

- 1. The year and month an artist’s first album debuted on the album chart.
- 2. The year and month an artist’s most recent album debuted, as well as the number of weeks that album resided on the chart, in order to determine the last year and month each artist was present on the chart.
- 3. The number of listed charting albums during the artist’s career (including live albums, greatest hits compilations, and seasonally-themed albums).
- 4. The peak chart positions (highest ranking attained) for each album. (As these were recorded, a notation was included if any release was an anthology or a seasonally-themed album.)

Once the statistics for each artist in the overall sample population were gathered and entered, seven separate additional datasets were created from the master file (which was designated as dataset H). All datasets are defined in Table 1:

Dataset	Artists who charted during the dates...
(A)	January 8, 1955 – May 13, 1967
(B)	May 13, 1967 – September 7, 1991
(C)	September 7, 1991 – May 10, 2010
(D)	May 13, 1967 – December 31, 2007
(E)	September 7, 1991 – December 31, 2007
(F)	January 8, 1955 – December 31, 2007
(G)	May 13, 1967 – May 10, 2010
(H)	January 8, 1955 – May 10, 2010

Table 1. Datasets.

Datasets (A), (B), (C), and (G) were created in order to calculate results separately and to more fairly represent periods where the number of rankings on the charts varied or where there was a major change in how the rankings were determined. Dataset (A) collects those artists who charted when there were fewer than 200 titles on the album chart, while (G) collects all who charted when there were at least 200 titles. During part of that time period *Billboard* also listed albums that were ranked anywhere between 201-235 as “bubbling under,” and those placements were included in the data. Dataset (B) contains all artists who were on the charts during the time when rankings were determined without specific sales data while (C) includes only artists who charted when titles were ranked strictly on sales data electronically transmitted from retail cash register systems, based on album UPC codes.²²

Datasets (D), (E), and (F) were created to account for the presence in the sample of more recent artists, who are more likely to still be charting as research was conducted. The (D) grouping includes artists who charted when there were at least 200 titles ranked; but artists who charted after December 31, 2007 were excluded. Those post-2007 artists were also eliminated from group (E), which includes specifically artists who charted when only sales data determined chart rankings. Dataset (F) is essentially the entire master file with post-2007 artists excluded.

It should be noted that some artists are included in more than one dataset because their careers spanned more than one of the time frames.

Observation of the Extremes: “One-Hit Wonders”

Initial findings included observation of the extremes by identifying what percentage of artists have spent a particularly short time on the charts. Understanding those figures is pertinent to the overall analysis.

Discussions regarding the length of artists’ careers or their level of recording success sometimes generate references to so-called “one hit wonders”—artists who are known for having only one hit song or album and then either fading into obscurity or spending the rest of their careers known primarily for that one particular recording (especially if it is memorable). Labeling many of these artists under such a moniker is in a way a slight injustice since, in many cases, these artists find musical success in other ways, or they smartly capitalize on their notable song or album. That one hit may actually have enduring popularity. It may also be true that an artist spent several, or possibly many, years performing and recording pri-

or to having that first chart success, whether it is widely recognized or not.

When all artists in the sample population were observed, 39.5% of those artists that had appeared on the album charts did so with only one album. By removing all artists whose lone chart appearance occurred after 2007 (i.e., newer artists more likely to chart again) the figure decreased to 33.9%. All of these artists who placed only one album on the charts could have certainly released albums prior to or after their lone chart appearance that simply did not achieve enough commercial success to rank among the top albums.

“One-hit wonder” is also a term applied to artists with a lone hit single. Therefore, such an occurrence on the singles charts was also observed for comparison. For this part of the research the *Billboard* singles charts from 1955 through 2005 were utilized. Information from those charts, compiled by Mr. Whitburn in his *Billboard Hot 100 Annual*, was a key source and provided much more readily available data. It was relatively simpler to identify and document the artists who debuted on the singles chart each year, including those who never appeared on that chart again.

What follows is a summary of those findings. Table 2 lists, for each year, the number of debut artists (artists placing on that chart for the first time) who were on the chart during that calendar year. The number of those artists that never charted again is also listed. Those two numbers were compared for each year and then totaled to determine the percentage of debut artists that charted with one song and never appeared on the chart again.

Yearly Analysis of the Number of Debut Artists to Make the Billboard Hot 100/Top 100*

Data source: Joel Whitburn's Billboard Hot 100 Annual

Year	Number of debut artists	Number who never charted again	Percent who never charted again
1955	71	31	43.66
1956	98	41	41.84
1957	125	46	36.80
1958	143	76	53.15
1959	159	80	50.31
1960	114	60	52.63
1961	177	90	50.85
1962	139	54	38.85
1963	153	77	50.33
1964	138	56	40.58
1965	132	47	35.61
1966	152	67	44.08
1967	145	64	44.14
1968	125	62	49.60
1969	134	62	46.27
1970	148	62	41.89
1971	144	57	39.58
1972	125	55	44.00
1973	87	41	47.13
1974	102	43	42.16
1975	120	57	47.50
1976	121	61	50.41
1977	123	56	45.53
1978	107	52	48.60
1979	136	93	68.38
1980	114	65	57.02
1981	84	46	54.76
1982	93	43	46.24
1983	97	45	46.39
1984	87	49	56.32
1985	92	37	40.22
1986	87	43	49.43
1987	101	43	42.57
1988	95	39	41.05
1989	94	41	43.62
1990	106	56	52.83
1991	123	59	47.97

1992	108	53	49.07
1993	110	55	50.00
1994	127	53	41.73
1995	134	62	46.27
1996	124	65	52.42
1997	114	64	56.14
1998	127	86	67.72
1999	69	27	39.13
2000	69	33	47.83
2001	76	39	51.32
2002	71	34	47.89
2003	82	35	42.68
2004	71	33	46.48
2005	72	37	51.39
Totals	5,745	2,732	
Avg.	113	54	47.50

* “Debut artist” is defined as an artist who placed a song on this particular chart for the first time that year.

Table 2. Yearly analysis of the number of debut artists to make the Billboard Hot 100/Top 100*

We find that during the period 1955-2005, on average, almost forty-eight (47.5) percent of those artists who placed a song on the Billboard Hot 100/Top 100 chart for the first time *never placed another song on that chart again*.

It is interesting to note that the percentage of artists falling into this category is fairly consistent over the fifty-year time frame analyzed. Two notable spikes occur, however, in 1979 and 1998. The former is anecdotally explained by the number of disco acts that make up the population, who may have arrived on the charts at just the wrong time: before that genre fell quickly out of favor and record labels abandoned the format.²³ The latter notably upward spike, followed by a considerable drop, can be explained by a change in methodology for the calculation of the Hot 100 as detailed by Geoff Mayfield, Director of Charts for *Billboard* at the time:

We changed the chart in December 1998 because fewer retail singles by viable artists were being released. “Don’t Speak,” (by the band No Doubt) for example, was the biggest radio hit of its year, but never appeared on the

Hot 100 because it was never made available as a single. There was a dual motivation: no single motivates a CD purchase and to avoid chasing marketing and promotion dollars on running a song up the Hot 100. That meant that some of the 100 rungs of the chart were left open to lesser songs than would have happened earlier, when more singles were released, or happened later, when our new rules brought radio hits on the chart, regardless of retail component.²⁴

By 2000, however, the resulting percentages returned to approximately the same consistent percentages that had been true for decades.

Given the challenge of working so hard to make the charts and then having to repeat the feat, perhaps it is no surprise that a significant number of artists have found it difficult to make the charts again. Indeed, it has been said that artists might work for years to create their first commercially successful album or song, but only have months to create their second. There have been many theories and observations attributed to the so-called “sophomore slump,” when successfully following up on a debut release doesn’t quite happen.²⁵ Such hypotheses include an insistence on writing one’s own songs rather than using outside writers or using all of one’s best material on the first release.²⁶ The success of an initial hit may simply have been a fluke that is difficult to replicate. Or a less-performing follow-up song might simply be a reflection that popularity of a particular genre has waned.

From a more optimistic perspective, a review of the number of albums charted by artists can also be looked at from the other extreme. The analysis indicates that 9.55%, or almost one out of every ten charting artists, has placed ten or more albums on the chart in a career. Almost a quarter (24.65%) of all artists who have charted on the Billboard Top Albums chart have done so with five or more albums, which is a significant accomplishment.

Indeed, simply making the national album charts, even once, is no small accomplishment. In 2010 there were 75,258 albums released.²⁷ Granted, that figure includes soundtracks, compilations, and other releases not necessarily by one artist; it also includes reissues of older catalog titles. Still, only 1,404 different albums were present at any time on the Billboard Top 200 during the year.²⁸ But that total would include albums that had

already debuted prior to 2010. So the percentage of album releases of any kind in 2010 that made the chart was most certainly less than 1.87 percent. There may even be some fixed percentage of new releases that will typically chart if 2009 is also taken into account. During that year there were 96,315 albums released.²⁹ But during 2009 the number of albums appearing on the chart was 1,440, a figure approximate to 2010's total despite the fact there were more than 20,000 additional albums released.³⁰ Given these numbers, to place one's album on the chart for even one week is absolutely worth recognition.

Artists' Presence On The Album Charts

The average number of charted albums during the sample artists' careers was 3.97, the median being two albums. As stated previously, about forty percent of artists have charted with only one album. Superstar artists like Elton John (43 charted albums during the era), Aretha Franklin (44), and the Beach Boys (50) tend to skew the average, as do terrifically prolific artists like gospel music stars Bill and Gloria Gaither, who charted with 55 albums in only ten years, essentially placing a new album in the Top 200 every three months!³¹ Given the presence of extremes like these in the sample, the median of two albums is arguably a more accurate representation.

The average length of time on the album chart for all 1,497 artists in the sample was found to be 5.24 years, or roughly five years and three months. After removing newer artists (the 141 who debuted on the charts after 2007) the overall average becomes 4.86 years, or a bit more than four years and ten months. As outlined earlier though, the changing nature of the charts through the years also necessitated the formulation of additional datasets. Results for each of those groupings are summarized in Table 3.

Results for datasets (A) and (B) (8.26 years and 6.16 years, respectively) might be defined as having purely historical significance, with less relevance to an artist today. On the other hand, an argument could be made for each of the remaining datasets in terms of which is truly the most relevant. Since datasets (C) (3.39 years), (G) (4.87), and (H) (5.24) include the most recent data, they are subject to the highest probability of revision because they include the most current artists who have the highest probability of charting again (or may have done so already).

Results from datasets (D), (E), and (F) are arguably the most relevant and definitive, though each has its individual strengths. Dataset (F), with

Average Length Of Chart Presence (time between first and last appearance) All Datasets		
(Dataset) Time Frame	Number of Artists	Average Length Of Chart Presence (Years)
(A) 1/8/1955 – 5/13/1967	166	8.26
(B) 5/13/1967 – 9/7/1991	712	6.16
(C) 9/7/1991 – 5/10/2010	619	3.39
(D) 5/13/1967 – 12/31/2007	1,237	5.22
(E) 9/7/1991 – 12/31/2007	524	3.95
(F) 1/8/1955 – 12/31/2007	1,403	5.58
(G) 5/13/1967 – 5/10/2010	1,331	4.87
(H) 1/8/1955 – 5/10/2010	1,497	5.24

Table 3. Average length of chart presence.

the result of 5.58 years, includes charts from pre-1967, when there were as few as fifteen positions on the charts, and excludes very recent artists. In regard to (D), with a finding of 5.22 years, it includes only charts where there were at least 200 positions and does not include very recent artists. Dataset (E), for which the observation was 3.95 years, has those same qualifications, though it excludes charts prior to 1991, when calculations were based on different criteria.

Outliers

As artists' chart statistics were entered, it was notated whenever there were more than ten years between the debut dates of any two subsequent album releases by an artist. When the album charting ten-plus years later was a "comeback" album or a compilation album suddenly charting for any number of reasons (the artist's collaboration with a modern-day music figure, a biopic film about the artist, a legendary band re-forming, the death of an artist, or simply a resurgence for any reason), the artist's chart history was classified as an outlier, due to the extraordinarily long lag time (more than 120 months) between album debuts on the charts. Examples include New Kids on the Block (14 years and 5 months between two of their chart appearances), The Stooges (23 years, 10 months), and Pat Boone (34 years, 10 months).³² Theoretically, such a long time frame of not charting likely suggests a lack of relative popularity or demand during the interven-

ing time, or perhaps a hiatus taken by the artist. For most artists, generally the time between their first week on the charts with their debut album and the final week on the charts for their last charting album included some degree of time in which they were not on the charts. More than ten years of inactivity, however, could easily be considered an extreme that might skew overall results. Additional calculations in which these artists are excluded yields the results found in Table 4. In the entire sample population, there are 47 such artists (3.1 percent) that can be categorized as outliers, but that percentage would of course vary among the datasets, depending on when they charted.

A higher percentage of those artists who were absent from the charts for ten or more years apparently debuted during the period 1/8/55 – 5/13/67, and removing them produced a marked difference in the calculation, reducing the results by almost 26%. Removing the outliers from the entire population reduced the average time on the charts from 5.24 years to 4.56, a significant 12.9% decrease.

Average Length Of Chart Presence (time between first and last appearance) All Datasets (With Outliers Excluded)					
(Dataset) Time Frame	Number of Artists	Number of Outliers Ex- cluded (%)	Original Result (Years)	New Result (Years)	% Effect
(A) 1/8/1955 – 5/13/1967	153	13 (7.8%)	8.26	6.13	-25.8%
(B) 5/13/1967 – 9/7/1991	683	29 (4.1)	6.16	5.35	-13.1
(C) 9/7/1991 – 5/10/2010	614	5 (.81)	3.39	3.30	-2.7
(D) 5/13/1967 – 12/31/2007	1,203	34 (2.7)	5.22	4.70	-9.9
(E) 9/7/1991 – 12/31/2007	519	5 (.95)	3.95	3.85	-2.5
(F) 1/8/1955 – 12/31/2007	1,356	47 (3.3)	5.58	4.86	-12.9
(G) 5/13/1967 – 5/10/2010	1,297	34 (2.6)	4.87	4.38	-10.0
(H) 1/8/1955 – 5/10/2010	1,450	47 (3.1)	5.24	4.56	-12.9

Table 4. Average length of chart presence with outliers excluded.

Further Investigation

There are other available data that could be combined and/or triangulated with these results to develop perhaps even more meaningful calculations. For example, the findings here might be compared to data from

concert and touring activity, video and radio airplay, and even publishing and licensing data to ascertain relationships to the length of an artist's commercial popularity. Past rankings and appearances on other charts, including *Billboard's* genre-specific tallies, could also be combined to provide a clearer and more detailed insight into artists' staying power in terms of all facets of their work.

Data recorded for this project but not utilized could be further developed to better inform as well. Analysis of the peak positions over time and the frequency of each artist's charted albums, for instance, could tell us much. Do bands (versus solo artists or duos), artists who write their own songs, or artists who release albums more frequently fare better or worse in terms of length of commercial popularity?

It would also be interesting to gather more data to enhance estimates of the length of time artists have remained commercially popular even beyond the sales of their recordings. Data from concert appearances for example could be included to better ascertain how long artists have maintained a commercially lucrative career in music. Though such measurements could be greatly affected by subjectivity (the definition of "lucrative," for example), findings could be compared to those of other entertainment professions.

The charts at least provide objective (for the most part), measurable benchmarks for identifying the term of a recording artist's presence in the public limelight, so to speak. However, very few entertainment industries rank the popularity of individuals or their products similarly to the music industry so adequate comparison might be difficult. Still, it might be interesting to find some sort of data to compare. If one were to describe "chart careers" as the length of time they are most recognized as successful recording artists, there are at least figures to be found in three areas of one slightly similar industry: professional sports.

Sports figures also have to work very hard for achievement in an area where unique talent and determination can pay significant dividends. They also experience a period of time before they are recognized nationally (when they become a professional player). While in the "pros" they are rewarded with a period of notoriety and given a national audience. They accumulate statistics during their professional playing career by which they are compared and ranked versus their peers. During and after their time as a nationally recognized athlete many of them will monetarily capitalize for as long as they can on their national profile. One could argue

that for an athlete, time in the spotlight is more inherently limited, since physical limitations and the aging process are significant factors. Regardless, the figures may be worth at least some sort of comparison.

The average NBA (National Basketball Association) player as of 2007-2008 had been in the league 4.71 years.³³ A recent report from the National Football League Management Council lists the average career length for “a player who is on his club’s opening-day roster as a rookie” as 6.0 years.³⁴ According to a University of Colorado study, in major league baseball the average career of a player is 5.6 years, and “one in five position players will have only a single-year career.”³⁵ These numbers are somewhat similar to the findings here. But again, it could easily be argued that there is no entertainment profession that could be adequately compared to that of a recording artist. These statistics are presented purely as a somewhat relative perspective, however vague the comparison might be.

Conclusion

This investigation into artists’ accomplishments on the pop charts comes at a time when the future usefulness and importance of such charts, at least in their current form, is being debated. As music consumption and distribution shifts to the internet and the acquisition and sharing of music content by consumers increasingly occurs in a digital environment rather than physical, more accurate and timely data is available. Whereas *Billboard*’s charts have traditionally been published weekly, retailers like Amazon and iTunes update their charts on as little as an hourly basis. Real (not simply estimated) play counts on services like YouTube and Pandora, which are driven mostly by consumers rather than program directors, offer perhaps more valid insight into an artist’s commercial appeal in the evolving music industry. In terms of artist popularity, sales and radio airplay may take a back seat to the amount of “likes” artists achieve on social networks, how often people tweet about them, or what the blogosphere’s reaction to them might be. Even if these or other criteria become factored in as well, the music industry and music fans will likely always look to a ranking report of some kind to identify the popularity of artists and their recordings.

The average length of time between an artist’s first and last appearance on the nationwide popularity charts was determined to be anywhere from 3.30 to 8.26 years, depending on the perspective one chooses. Of the artists who debut a song on the Billboard Hot 100 each year, almost half

of them have never placed another song there again. Around 34-40% of the artists who have placed an album on the Billboard Top 200 have not returned to the charts with a subsequent album.

Perhaps it comes as no surprise that artists' time on the charts is not that long relative to the typical entire working career of most individuals. The euphemism that fame is fleeting might seem a given. Regardless, to someone striving to have a life-long, lucrative career as a recording artist, these findings should be taken into consideration. The odds against even making an appearance on the charts are significant. Still, although the real prospects of "making it big," especially for a long duration, might be daunting, it's likely doubtful that such information would convince most musicians to find another, less risky, profession. To deter them from their pursuit is certainly not the intent of this research.

An individual should use information such as this not only to take notice of what the reality has been, but also to bring into focus the activities that will sustain an artist's career path in spite of this information. The key is to plan and conduct one's business strategically in order to maximize the relatively short time spent on the charts, whether one is an artist, an artist manager, or a record label executive. The charts themselves are quite simply a reflection of what is happening in the marketplace. However they are transformed in the future, artists will still contend with the challenge of obtaining recognition in whatever ways that lets them know they have been successful or have achieved their goals. The real challenge is to extend that accomplishment and to maximize its potential.

Mr. Warhol's point was likely the same as that of the findings of this research: an artist's time in the spotlight of the pop charts will likely be quite short, relative to an entire career. It should be spent wisely.

Endnotes

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