

THE EVOLUTION OF ROCK + ROLL

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The end of 2019 brought about list-o-mania. Social media was flooded with rankings of the decade's best movies, music, and everything in between. But it was Billboard's decade-end chart for the top rock songs of the 2010s that stole the show. People on Twitter were furious—as per usual—because the top slots on the chart were stolen by bands that, well, aren't really rock.

For starters, the list was dominated by Imagine Dragons. The group owned the top three hits and claimed eight spots on the Top 50. Then came Panic! At the Disco, a former emo-pop band who switches genres every other album. Next was The Lumineers with their lullaby folk single "Ho Hey." Portugal. The Man followed with their radio-perfect jingle "Feel It Still," which sounds tailored for a Super-Bowl ad.

The remainder of the list seemed just as scattered: Lorde and Hozier were lumped between the occasional rock veterans with the Foo Fighters and Muse sprinkled in like afterthoughts. I mean, the only "Disturbed" song was a Simon and

Garfunkel cover...come on.

Still, categorizing music has never been an exact science. And with the rock genre as broad as a bouncer's shoulders, it makes sense for labels to get blurry. So, is alternative replacing old school rock as its heavyweight champ? Or maybe "real" rock is dead? With Billboard's fuzzy ideology, it's worth wondering if today's definition of "rock" is a total reinvention of its meaning 10 years ago.

Rock music has historically existed to push boundaries, not to be an overplayed back-track in a suburban mall. And yet, many of Billboard's highlights are about as edgy as a Disney Channel original movie or an Abercrombie t-shirt. Just ask Stephen Tow, a history professor at Delaware Valley University who's written multiple books on the genre's phases: "[Rock] comes from a different place. It's an emotional and primal kind of music. It's just different."

Not only is rock visceral, it's also sonically diverse, changing its tune with each passing decade. "Early on you could have said [rock had] a blues or country influence," Tow says. "People started taking

it all kinds of different directions, bringing in classical influences, folk influences, and later on hip-hop. So what makes a band like Linkin Park versus the Rolling Stones all classified as rock? I don't know."

But this isn't the first time we're seeing old school rock change. Tow pointed to the late '80s when hair bands ruled the radio and commercialism was king. Musicians revolted and grunge was born from the Aqua Net ashes. The takeaway: rock as we know it exists in life cycles, and if this list signals a present low point, maybe we're in for something great. "I was hoping that when Trump got elected the music would get really good," Tow says. "Who knows, it still could."

In short, there's no singular sound for what's considered rock. Just because a song doesn't sound like the CDs you grew up with doesn't mean it can't wear the label. Does disappointment in Billboard mean these aren't great artists? Of course not. But it does signal an evolution: rock music today isn't what it was 10 years ago, and we probably won't recognize it in the decades to come.