

Leah Weinstein

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Star-Maker Machinery: The Role of Billboard charts in the Modern Day

The Billboard Hot 100 is an institution of the music industry that holds an irreplicable mystique. It provides artists and bands intangible credibility through tangible means: cold, hard numbers. Music, like any artform, is subjective. But when people are tasked with generating revenue or making sure an advance is recoupable, they must rely on the few tangible qualifiers that *do* exist.

Take the art of hype stickers. Its designers are tasked with selling a physical record via what they can legibly fit in a couple square inches. Designers of those stickers are advised to use the space not already taken up by the title for one of two types of copy: one being press quotes and the other highlighting the records' hits. To passive onlookers or the otherwise ill-informed, those two aspects are tangible measures of a record's success and/or quality. When publicists are in my inbox pitching records for coverage, there are several tiers of intrigue they invoke to both grab and justify my attention. If an artist has won a Grammy, that often populates the subject line before the artist's name does.

The Billboard charts use the tangible to prove the intangible. There is an innate value to a top ten or #1 hit that cannot be redeemed elsewhere, so artists and the record labels backing them will do whatever necessary to obtain it. Charts and, in tandem, chart manipulation tells the story of two extremes of humanity. Those at the top fighting to maintain their status through pernicious means, and those whose art resonates despite any and all odds stacked against them.

In the earliest hours of January 10th, 2020, Justin Bieber posted a fan-made five part infographic to his Instagram grid. The infographic contained a multi-step guide for fans to boost the streams and downloads for Bieber's new single "Yummy" through every possible medium, providing instructions for inflating streams on Spotify, iTunes, and YouTube. Superimposed pictures of Bieber graced the remaining negative space on each slide. The instructions read as follows:

"SPOTIFY

Create a playlist with Yummy on repeat and stream it

Don't mute it!

Play at a low volume

Let it play while you sleep

If you are not from the US you can download a VNP [sic] app. Set the VPN to US. And then

create a Spotify account"

"ITUNES

Buy the song on iTunes

Buy the song multiple times on Justin's website"

"YOUTUBE

Don't repost the video. Link it instead

Stream on YouTube: log out of your account

Don't skip ads

Don't mute it

Don't repeat:

Refresh!”

The desperation did not translate to success. The efforts of the Beliebers and Bieber himself did not take him to #1. “Yummy” stalled out at #2, trailing Roddy Ricch’s “The Box,” a left field hit from a hip-hop newcomer that dominated the charts in the early months of 2020. Bieber deleted the post mere hours after it went up – it entered the pantheon of Bieber PR gaffes right next to him writing “Hopefully she would have been a belieber” in the Anne Frank House guestbook.

Bieber’s Instagram post was unprecedented in its transparency. Never has an artist so blatantly emboldened their fans to manually farm for streams in pursuit of a #1 hit. Chart manipulation and gaming has been happening since the Hot 100’s inception, but Bieber did what (shockingly) no other artist has had an impenetrable enough ego to do: he said the quiet part out loud, and in the process, publicized these tactics for other fandoms to use in the future. The west had become wild once more.

SECTION I: HISTORY OF HOT 100 CHART MANIPULATION

Many chartwatchers, be they hobbyists or professionals, will tell you that any chart produced before 1991 can be taken with a grain of salt at best and thrown in the trash at worst. They were determined by only two factors – airplay and raw sales – with sales weighted heavier than airplay. Despite the simplicity of the system, it had never been easier for industry insiders and record labels to game the charts through their relationships with radio DJs and record store clerks. It wasn’t some deep-state mafioso scam – the technology simply did not exist yet. But the murkiness of the old tabulation process relied on an honor code that had no reliable way to be

enforced. By more cynical estimations, record stores *never* reported accurate figures as long as record labels and distributors were in their ears with strong-arm tactics and keeping their arms full with gifts. Even without the presence of bribes, clerks and DJs would have to either meticulously keep tabs of their sales and spins or submit their charts based on pure estimation from their memory.

During this manual era of the charts, labels often paid radio DJs under the table to play specific songs in a practice known as “payola.” In the early 1960s Congress subpoenaed hundreds of radio DJs for a hearing about the practice. Multiple admitted to taking thousands of dollars from labels, so Congress amended FCC policy to force DJs to disclose if they were paid to play a certain song, but this was never really enforced. Labels would instead utilize a third party to do the bribing, sidestepping the FCC regulations. This loophole would not be closed until 1986 when an NBC News investigation called “The New Payola” exposed it and sparked another round of Congressional hearings.

Sometimes, the lack of data allowed chart positions to be swayed by a Billboard employee’s personal tastes. The most prolific offender of this was Bill Wardlow, who was the Director of Charts at Billboard from 1974 to 1983. In the book *And Party Everyday: The Inside Story of Casablanca Records*, Larry Harris, a cofounder of the famed label, described *Billboard* chart creation during the Wardlow era: “...I had had control over the *Billboard* charts and was able to significantly affect the positions of our records to help establish a perception that our company, Casablanca Records, and our artists . . . were the hottest in the music industry.” Later on, he goes so far as to say, “Eventually, I could walk into Bill’s office, tell him the position on the charts I felt a given album should have, and, lo and behold, there it would be.” Why did

Wardlow do this? He was a gay man that wanted to integrate himself into the disco scene, which was one of very few safe spaces for the LGBTQ community at the time. “Casablanca *was* disco,” Harris wrote. “Bill wanted very much to be part of our scene, even going so far as to create a separate disco chart called National Disco Action Top 40.”

These types of practices would be all but neutered in 1991 when Nielsen SoundScan and Broadcast Data Systems (BDS) were introduced and integrated into Billboard chart reporting. SoundScan allowed Billboard to easily track record store’s sales data by tracking how many times barcodes for a given release were scanned. Broadcast Data Systems (technology that was originally developed for military contractors to detect submarines) were able to detect and track which songs radio stations were playing in a fashion similar to the smartphone app Shazam. Both SoundScan and BDS eliminated both the need for Billboard to call record stores and radio stations directly, as well as the ability for clerks and program directors to lie on those calls.

Those in power were still able to game SoundScan, but they had to get a little more creative. Instead of direct bribes, record labels would ship out brand new product to record stores at either a steep discount or free of cost. The best recorded example of this was the successful #1 push for Mariah Carey’s “One Sweet Day”. In his 1996 *New York Times* article *Are Pop Charts Manipulated?* Journalist Neil Strauss penned the following:

“Last week, record stores around the country received this fax from Columbia Records, the label for which Ms. Carey records, and Round the Globe Music, a marketing company: ‘Attention all Soundscan R&B singles panelists. Your product is on the way. Mariah Carey, “One Sweet Day.” We’re going for No. 1 this week. Thanks for the support!’

The fax is not the only way Columbia helped push "One Sweet Day" to No. 1, where it has remained for nine weeks. The label also encouraged a rush of sales in the early weeks by giving out free copies to stores reporting to Soundscan or by offering them four singles for the price of one. Stores could then put "One Sweet Day" on sale for 49 to 99 cents, more than \$2 below the average price of a single. This has become a common practice for promoting high-priority releases.

Several record-label executives described how playing with the charts could turn a borderline record into a major hit: In a crucial market like New York or Los Angeles, a label will load up retailers that report to Soundscan with free or discounted copies of a record. It will also send field representatives into stores to buy the album in small quantities and make deals for the store to display the record prominently, play it on the in-house sound system and in some cases scan extra copies."

Were record store employees staying after close feverishly scanning a couple dozen copies of whatever record Columbia deemed most important? Probably a few – but this marked a tangible improvement from the murkiness of the manual honor system. There was enough accurate data to at the very least make chart manipulation *more difficult*, taking some of the power out of the label's hands and into that of the consumers. "The old chart couldn't begin to touch the democracy of this chart," Timothy White, then *Billboard's* editor in chief, told *The New York Times* in January 1992. "There's no question that our old system was subject to manipulation, and that people abused it."

Most notably, the adoption of SoundScan allowed for more accurate and better chart placement for then-underrepresented genres like rap, country, and metal, which were found to be

much more popular than previously thought. The first benefactor of this shift was the Hair Metal band Skid Row with their 1991 record *Slave to the Grind*, which debuted at #1 on the Billboard albums chart. Only six records had previously been able to achieve that coveted #1 debut, and only living legends at the top of their game like Elton John and Stevie Wonder were able to crack it. *Slave to the Grind* wasn't even the most popular Skid Row record. Why is this? After the integration of SoundScan, albums began to debut at #1 all the time, similar to how movies open at the box office. As long as a given act has a fanbase with a pulse, a number one album debut is all but a guarantee. It's a metric that now means next to nothing because of this.

SoundScan is *technically* still used to this day, but after a 2019 acquisition from entertainment data company Luminate, SoundScan was merged with a sales tracking tool called MRC Data Music Connect. This merger sparked a retool of the Hot 100 formula to weigh streaming heavier to better reflect its continued dominance in music consumption. As career chart-watching journalist Chris Molanphy put it in his book about "Old Town Road," "By the late '10s, streaming went from less than one-third of the data making up the Hot 100 to more than half, dwarfing radio and sales." Ever wondered why Mariah Carey's "All I Want For Christmas is You" goes #1 every December? Thank Luminate.

But why do artists *want* a #1 in the first place? What do they get out of it? It's that tangible credibility – having a permanent mark on greater popular music history. But as streaming and social media have both changed the music industry in ways that are still being parsed by its scholars and veterans, what a #1 hit grants an artist (tangible or otherwise) is ever-changing.

Tom Breihan is the author of *The Number Ones*, a weekly column telling the story of and dissecting every Hot 100 #1 hit since its inception in the late 1950s, and its accompanying book of the same name highlighting the 20 most consequential hits among them.

When I asked him how the value of a #1 hit has changed with the introduction of streaming, he had this to say: “I think [a #1] holds a comparable weight, but I don’t think it’s exactly the same. It’s still a big deal to have a #1 song, and in some ways it holds more weight because all these different fan bases have become mobilized.” In the streaming era, the power to manipulate the charts has been taken from the label’s grasp. In theory, that onus is on the fanbases now more than ever. Labels are no longer urging radio stations about their number one push for their stars’ newest singles, fans are able to organize that push on their own. “You have songs debuting at #1 all the time, it’s more often than not,” Breihan tells me. “Now there’s this sort of flashy instant rollout to something like the Harry Styles song that’s #1 right now. It doesn’t matter if it’s good. It doesn’t matter if it has staying power in the same way.”

To put this paradigm shift in perspective, much like the albums chart, number one debuts were unheard of before SoundScan, and were still hard to come by prior to streaming. The first *ever* #1 debut for a single wasn’t until 1995. The person to break that record? Michael Jackson with “You Are Not Alone.” Molaphy explains, “By the ’90s, when Billboard’s charts were computerized, Sony used savvy chart gamesmanship to make Jackson’s high debuts possible. The label promoted the songs to radio for nearly a month, without releasing the singles in record stores. Under Billboard rules at the time, singles could not appear on the Hot 100 until they hit retail. Having built up their airplay, Epic then dropped the singles in stores, knowing diehard

Jackson fans would snap them up. It was now possible for a song with blockbuster sales to generate an instant high debut—even as high as No. 1.”

That reality has since completely shifted, and the coordinated effort by the label is now half as necessary as fans have been mobilized via social media. In just the first five months of 2026, it happened four times with Harry Styles’ “Aperture,” Bruno Mars’ “I Just Might,” BTS’ “SWIM,” and Olivia Rodrigo’s “drop dead.” For artists like Styles and Mars, who’ve both been around for more than a decade, these number one hits are votes of confidence in their respective statuses as pop stars. For Styles in particular, who’s British, the prospect of a #1 hit in America has heightened prestige as it cements his cultural prevalence in what’s ultimately the global capital of entertainment.

The charts give the artists tangible benchmarks for their legacy. That’s what’s referenced in their press releases and documentaries. That’s why J. Cole’s fans always bring up that he had two albums go #1 with no features. You can *say* that an artist is “influential” or “on the come-up,” but words can only take you so far. As labels’ influence over the charts has dwindled, artists have resorted to out-in-the-open desperation for high chart placement. And when they don’t get it, sometimes finger pointing and hissy fits follow.

When streaming was fully integrated into Billboard’s formula to the extent it still is today, many artists went on to bundle their merch and concert tickets with digital downloads of albums in an attempt to maximize their chart placement. As Ben Sisario reported for The New York Times, “Of the 39 titles that went to No. 1 [in 2018], at least 18 were sold as part of ticket or merchandise deals. One of the most prolific bundlers has been the Houston rapper Travis Scott, who last year claimed the top spot by selling key chains, hats and access to concert

tickets.” This practice gained traction at this time specifically due to pure album sales declining in the face of streaming, meaning a pure album sale weighed much more than it ever had in the past. One of the most notable instances of outcry over bundling was in 2019 when DJ Khaled bundled his album *Father of Asahd* with Awake® Energy Shots from the nutraceutical brand Isotonix, a brand he had no affiliation with prior to or after this bundle. These energy shots were only available through the sketchy e-commerce site shop.com. Billboard had announced earlier that year that they planned to crack down on their rules for merchandise bundling, and their first executive decision of this initiative was disqualifying the sales generated by Khaled’s energy shot bundle. Billboard “...suspected that some of the marketing by Shop.com and its corporate parent, Market America, had crossed a line by encouraging unauthorized bulk sales.” One blog post from the company, for example, told its members to buy 12 packages to “push DJ Khaled and Market America to No. 1!” Because of this, *Father of Asahd* lost the #1 spot to Tyler, The Creator’s *IGOR*, an eclectic neo-soul record about queer romance and heartbreak. While Tyler had bundled the record with his own merch, his practices still aligned with Billboard’s guidelines at the time. It was seen by music fans as a win for artistic risk-taking, as much of DJ Khaled’s work involves getting as many famous artists on his tracks as possible taking precedence over the music itself (*Father of Asahd* included at least two features on every track, including the likes of Beyoncé, Justin Bieber, and Post Malone). After *Father of Asahd* debuted at No. 2, *Page Six* reported that DJ Khaled “stormed into Epic [Records, his label]” and “threw a temper tantrum.” His representatives later stated that his frustration was with Billboard’s calculation methods, not his label’s promotion of the album, according to *The FADER*. In a video posted to social media responding to Tyler, The Creator usurping #1, DJ Khaled said the following:

"Here's the thing, I make albums so people can play it. And you actually hear it. You know, driving your car you hear another car playing it. Go to the barber shop, you hear them playing it. You know, turn the radio on, and you hear them playing it. It's playing everywhere - it's called great music. It's called albums that [sic] you actually hear the songs. Not no mysterious shit, and you never hear it."

Less than a year later, rapper and registered sex offender Tekashi 6ix9ine took to social media to allege that the industry forces behind the Ariana Grande x Justin Bieber charity single “Stuck With U” illegitimately landed at #1 on the Hot 100, stealing the spot from his new single “GOOBA.” Among other things, 6ix9ine claimed that 30k sales of the single could be attributed to just six credit cards. This theory caused enough ruckus that Billboard issued a comprehensive rebuttal of all of 6ix9ine’s claims, as well as final totals for streams, airplay, and pure sales, where “GOOBA” fell significantly short in airplay and sales despite generating twice the streams as “Stuck With U.” While both songs have largely faded from public memory, “Stuck With U” was able to raise \$3.5 million for the First Responders Children’s Foundation.

Two #1 hits from this year that did not debut in the top spot highlight the difference of a (mostly) organic, gradual rise to the top and how major artists and their labels are able to *legally* stuff the ballot box and force a #1. Taylor Swift has had the most dedicated fanbase of any musician – living or dead. For a time, I carried a mild case of Swiftitis. But my status as an ex-Swiftie grants me with a continued understanding and fascination of her business acumen and obsession with tangible/statistical achievement and milestones. Swift’s deeply parasocial relationship with her fanbase is something she’s been cultivating since her mid 2000s debut when she facilitated regular interaction with fans on MySpace, Tumblr, and Twitter (this will be

explored further in Section II). So when it was time to make a #1 push for a second single from her newest album *The Life of a Showgirl*, she not only used every trick in the book, but also created new tricks that adapted to recent changes to Billboard's formula.

The music video for "Opalite," the second single in question, premiered exclusively on Spotify and Apple Music, something that had previously never been done. Why? YouTube streams stopped counting towards Billboard's chart formula a month prior due to "...a long-running dispute over *Billboard's* decision to weight subscriber streams more favorably than ad-supported streams in its chart tallies." The rest of the strategy for the #1 push was ultimately delayed by the Super Bowl, whose impact gave Puerto Rican pop star Bad Bunny his first ever #1 with "DTMF" following his widely celebrated halftime show performance. The same Super Bowl induced bump allowed Kendrick Lamar's "Not Like Us" to re-peak at number one following his halftime performance the previous year.

After the dust had settled following the Super Bowl, Swift released **two** extended versions of the "Opalite" music video, as well as four remixes, which were all available on four separate collectable CDs available for only 48 hours. The limited/scarce nature of the CDs provides fans with a sense of urgency to buy before they're gone forever. The comments under the Tweet promoting these CDs are half criticizing her for taking advantage of her cult-like fanbase, and half enthusiastic Swifties showing off screenshots of their order receipts showing they bought all four. These tactics worked, though. Opalite went #1 for the week these purchases counted for – no more, no less. It did not matter what the song was about or if the song was particularly good; all that matters is the song was by Taylor Swift.

This is perhaps the most blatant example of using the charts as a tool when there is a fanbase to sic. The hits that, intentionally or not, feel more “organic” hold a different narrative tool.

The #1 spot was usurped the next week by the song that rose to #1 right before the Super Bowl, Ella Langley’s “Choosin’ Texas.” The song’s ascent has been, as far as I can tell, about as organic as a charting song *can* be. If anything, it is a direct anti-example to the robust pop machinery behind “Opalite.” The success of “Choosin’ Texas” is indebted to the classic, timeless country tropes it draws from. In country music, Tennessee and Texas are the only two states in the US that matter, and they are diametrically opposed. The song follows Langley’s disappointment as she loses a lover to his hometown in Texas. It’s catchy, it’s forlorn in ways that many of the best country songs are, its warm guitars and pedal steels surround it like a warm hug, and it refuses to lean into the strange, trap-infused modernity that Nashville has been trying to push for the past half-decade.

“Choosin’ Texas” beat the odds it had stacked against it, too. The last time a female country artist went to number one by herself was Dolly Parton in 1981 with “9 to 5” (This is notably excluding Beyoncé’s “Texas Hold ‘Em,” as she is primarily not a country artist, and “All Too Well (10 Minute Version) (Taylor’s Version) (From The Vault)” because that was not a new song. Both great songs in their own right, just contextually exist under very different circumstances). The single released October of 2025, debuted at #39 on the Hot 100 a couple weeks later, and has slowly risen up the chart until its peaks at #1 in February and March 2026. As opined by culture journalist Dan Solomon for *TexasMonthly*, “[‘Choosin’ Texas,’] could have been a hit in 2001 or 1976 just as easily as in 2026. And yet, there it is, leading the nation’s

leaderboard. It's a remarkable feat, and one that suggests that the song's success isn't a matter of good luck or good timing, but rather of something more lasting. Namely, a fresh take on a subject we know more than well." The one thing labels cannot manufacture is a purely timeless song.

Country as a genre isn't off the hook for chart manipulation, though. In the genre's lowest moments of pandering, songs made by outwardly conservative artists and non-musician political agitators perform a similar process to Swift on a much smaller and more concentrated scale. These artists cultivate an audience of older or otherwise sheltered individuals that consume music on a ~10 year lag from modern trends. Because digital downloads are a passé medium, a digital download would be weighed considerably more than streams, as it counts as a pure sale. Successful instances of this happened twice in the summer of 2023, when both "Try That in a Small Town" by Jason Aldean and "Rich Men North of Richmond" by Oliver Anthony Music went #1 nearly back to back (broken up by the final wind of the long, nonconsecutive #1 run for Morgan Wallen's "Last Night"). "Try That in a Small Town" is a song about how crime commonly associated with major cities isn't welcome in small towns, and that's the reason they have guns. The song's lyrics and its accompanying music video set at The Maury County Courthouse building in Columbia, Tenn (the site of race riots in 1946 as well as a 1927 lynching), found its way into the political news cycle as they contained several dog whistles and implications of Aldean condoning racially charged violence. The video was pulled by CMT, and soon afterwards, Aldean posted the following statement to Instagram: "I have been accused of releasing a pro-lynching song (a song that has been out since May) and was subject too [sic] the comparison that I was not too pleased with the nationwide BLM protests. These references are not only meritless, but dangerous... 'Try That In A Small Town,' for me, refers to the feeling of

a community that I had growing up, where we took care of our neighbors, regardless of differences of background or belief.” His statement did not address CMT’s decision to pull his video.

Many right-wingers embraced Aldean during this controversy, astroturfing the song all the way to #1, as many talking heads encouraged their audiences to buy the song. Lightning struck twice just three weeks later, as a completely unknown man with a metadata nightmare of an artist name and no press photos for journalists to choose from had an instant viral success on his hands. As reported by *Billboard* themselves, “From Aug. 10 — the day with the first sales and audio streaming activity — to Aug. 15, daily U.S. streams went from zero to nearly 700,000 in just two days, according to Luminate, while daily U.S. downloads went from zero to more than 20,000 in each of the next four days. To put that in context, in a typical *week* the top track on the Hot 100 might sell 15,000 downloads.” Again, it was right-wing influencers that astroturfed the song to #1 just as they did just a few weeks prior. It was dissected by every outlet that felt the need to take their crack at it to feed the beast of culture war content. The song itself was equally an indictment of the “coastal elite” and, for whatever reason, poor people on welfare. But the immediate success of “Rich Men” was much more jarring than that of “Small Town” — as far as anyone knows, Oliver Anthony had no institutional backing of any kind. Despite his glory days being behind him, Jason Aldean was at least a name people *knew*. The right-wing pundits that got “Small Town” to go #1 had figured out their winning tactics and messaging, and were thus equipped to make the same play on a complete nobody (who didn’t even approve of his music being co-opted like this in the first place).

This trend of conservative spite-buying seems to be proving as a relic of the Biden era. The culture war was grasping for straws as the country was attempting (and ultimately failing to) move past Trumpism. This is how we got boycotts of Anheuser-Busch products after Bud Light conducted a brand partnership with trans influencer Dylan Mulvaney. This is how we got Tucker Carlson using his airtime as the most viewed news broadcast in America to wax poetic about how the M&M's mascots are becoming less sexy because of woke. So when conservatives had the opportunity to make some kind of mark on the broader culture, they took it and ramped it up to 100. The astroturfed spite buying generated a marker of cultural political dissent – a “statement” of sorts. Whether said statement had any substance was irrelevant. What mattered is that these people were taking up space and, at least for a little bit, entered the news cycle.

As put by *Billboard* senior analyst Glenn Peoples, “What’s clearer, though, is that ‘Rich Men North of Richmond’ has a lot in common with K-pop tracks that soar to the top of the Hot 100 because fans buy downloads with the express purpose of getting the artist a good chart position. When Jimin’s ‘Like Crazy’ topped the Hot 100 for a week in April, 241,000 track downloads accounted for 85% of its revenue. When his BTS bandmate Jung Kook hit No.1 with ‘Seven’ in July, 59% of its revenue came from 138,000 downloads.” The abuse of the invested public is far from isolated to the conservative culture war, though. These guys were using a playbook that had already been pioneered elsewhere.

SECTION II: STAN WARS

“The songs that reach #1 these days seem more obscure to more people, but the fact that they get to #1 seems extremely important to fans of those artists. The #1 spot is like money; it

only means something if everyone agrees that it means something. And right now, a whole lot of people seem invested in the charts. When you get a story like ‘Running Up That Hill’ suddenly blowing up, people seem to get genuinely fired up about it. If anything, I think the idea of a #1 hit is more relevant now than it was 20 or 30 years ago, since everyone now has access to all that data.”

– Tom Breihan, via Reddit AMA on Nov. 14th, 2022

In the spring of 2024, Billboard launched the “Hot 100 Challenge.” As described by *Billboard*, it was a “first-of-its-kind mobile game [that] lets fans ‘predict the hits’ by applying fantasy-sports-style gameplay to the music business. To play, participants will listen to a new song each day — Monday through Friday — and guess the ultimate peak position each song will attain before the end of the contest on July 16, 2024. Points will be awarded based on the accuracy of each participant’s respective predictions. Once the season concludes, the winner will receive a grand prize of \$25,000 cash; the second-place winner will receive VIP access for two to a 2024 or 2025 *Billboard* event or conference; and the third-place winner will receive two concert tickets to a show in their area.”

The mere existence of this game was indicative of a larger trend, though. **Pop fans have been following music like it’s a sport.** They are invested in their favorite artist in a similar way to how people get invested in their favorite team. The star’s win is the fan’s win and the star’s loss is the fan’s loss. This is why die-hard fans of pop acts are so invested in their chart placement and why fans on Twitter will talk like marketing and PR consultants despite having algebra homework due the next day. As reported by my colleague Andy Steiner for *The Ringer*,

“It’s a feedback loop: The more weight that fans place on numbers, the more they try to influence them. And the more they influence the numbers, the more weight they give them as accurate representations of success and fandom... Of course, no matter how much a Lakers fan loves the Lakers, they cannot get on the court and take passes from LeBron. For pop fans, their sports-like devotion to their favorite stars isn’t just rooting for them, tracking their data, and cheering when they win. The power to influence pop—through social media, streaming, or purchasing—gives them a sense of buy-in. It’s participatory. It’s a game.”

The emergence of this mentality among pop fans is because of the fact that they have more impact on the charts than ever before due to technological advancements in both music consumption and chart reporting. Labels shmoozing radio DJs and record store clerks no longer have anywhere near the same leverage over the charts as they did pre-SoundScan. **Gaming the charts is now gaming the audience** as opposed to the inside baseball tactics of previous eras.

These fans are invested in their fave’s chart placement because of the tangible privileges it’s likely to grant them: higher-budget label advances, longer and bigger tours, media attention, etc.

“For some types of fans, the labor of fandom has shifted from free publicity to purposefully generating artists more money, fame, and chart success. Whether the fans are critiquing an album’s rollout strategy or trashing the streaming numbers of a competitor, the success of a pop star is now an integral part of a fan’s relationship with their favorite artist,” Steiner wrote.

Fandoms have become conscious of their ability to affect chart outcomes, and in turn mobilized in similar ways to that of labor unions and political movements. They’re hypervigilant towards their fave’s every move – every cryptic Instagram story, every Tweet, even keeping tabs on individual members of the artist’s team. They rally the troops in time to stream and purchase like

their lives depend on it, because to them, it basically does. “The average fan didn’t necessarily have the power in the ’80s and the ’90s to boost the numbers other than just buying the record,” music critic Steven Hyden stated for Steiner’s article. “I guess if you were really crazy, you could just buy every record in the store. But that would cost a lot of money and be hard.”

The power of fandom has surpassed that of ubiquity, whether manufactured or not. There’s a reason that countless Gen Z and millennial music industry workers are retired stans themselves (most notably, Lil Nas X was a member of Nicki Minaj’s stan community). Labels have taken keen notice of this in recent years. That’s why every top music executive is focused on “monetizing the superfan” as their primary business strategy. It’s why interns for Universal Music Group are being tasked to create fake fan accounts for artist development in an attempt to drum up hype among those who may be willing to get on board.

Because of the parasocialism incited by social media, idol culture in the US is the strongest it's ever been. Taylor Swift wrote the theory, BTS did the Praxis. Most of the fan engagement marketing strategies used across the music industry were pioneered by Swift and her camp. Label-run “fan headquarters” social media accounts have all been modeled off *Taylor Nation*, a faceless social media presence that’s been an arm of Swift’s promotion and fan engagement since 2009. The account boasts 3.2 million followers on Twitter and 9.5 million on Instagram. Artist’s teams hand-selecting superfans for pre-release album listening parties? Thank Taylor’s “secret sessions” that took place leading up to the releases of *1989*, *reputation*, and *Lover*. Even the fans that weren’t selected to be a part of these events took it to heart with the belief that one day, it could be *them* holding up the other half of Swift’s hand heart in person. My Swiftie friend from high school would write in her notes app “I will meet Taylor Swift” every

night before she went to bed. Even as a 21 year old, she will Tweet love notes to Swift intermittently, believing she may see them. Going off of the framework that one cannot become a billionaire ethically, Swift became a billionaire not by exploiting her workers (it's very well recorded she is very generous to those who work directly under her), but by exploiting her fans.

Swift has been, at least to an extent, exploiting her fans this entire time, but her tactics have been facing heightened scrutiny since she became a billionaire in the middle of her record-smashing *Eras* Tour. But even so, swaths of her fans came out of the woodwork to defend her, claiming she was the world's "first ethical billionaire." Swifties sort of exist in a self-contained authoritative state, so those among them that are willing to pose criticism towards her are attacked and sometimes excommunicated – similar to a religion or cult. Because of how vast and often viscous her fanbase is known to be, critical reporting on what Swift does (and doesn't do) with her wealth is scant. As *Bloomberg* opinion columnist Amanda Little penned just before Swift officially crossed over to billionaire status, "...investing meaningfully in the priorities of [Swift's] fans will look different, and the public should expect her to give back on an ambitious scale. Swift is well positioned to do this not just because she's a powerful lever of capitalism, but because of her role as an industry iconoclast. She has challenged misogyny, championed artists' rights and helped shift the paradigm of intellectual property ownership. She has also helped to reinvent the traditional album release model and radically pushed the boundaries of fan engagement." She concludes her plea for Swift to give back to her fans and young people at large in a structural way with the following: "After all, Swift's wealth has been built by multitudes of young consumers. Investing in their future is not just the morally

defensible path forward but an economically strategic one that would enable Swift to shake off the burdens of her profligacy.”

But not only does the music industry continually reward the Taylor Swift playbook of mass appeal and safe, identity-driven neoliberalism, they actively try to replicate it every chance they get – even in places it doesn’t necessarily belong. When Justin Bieber posted and deleted those infographics pushing “Yummy” to #1, it didn’t work as intended. What it did do, though, was reaffirm the notion that chart manipulation is now unequivocally fan-driven. The proof of concept? The magnitudinal feats of the BTS ARMY. In an article analyzing their chart domination, Forbes’ music industry reporter emeritus Bryan Rolli claimed, “In a way, you could consider the BTS ARMY the largest grassroots organization in pop music, supporting their favorite artist 69 cents at a time.” The 69 cents is in reference to the cost BTS sold digital downloads of their single “Butter” for, which is the main contributor to its Hot 100 #1 debut. The BTS ARMY is perhaps the fanbase most invested in the charts, and a plurality of them are more than willing to pony up \$1.38 (69 cents for the single and another 69 cents for the instrumental track) to contribute to that cause. Since BTS are Korean, the fans see that chart success as a mark of their global dominance. But because the fervor for BTS is largely contained within its fanbase, Tom Breihan claims, “if you look at the charts, then, you’re going to get a completely distorted idea of how popular BTS actually are.”

“The Hot 100 is the best historic marker we have for what’s big at any specific time,” Breihan continues. “In gaming the system, BTS are fucking that whole thing up.” BTS were able to rack up their first four #1 hits as quickly as The Jackson Five did in 1970. But can the average person name more than two BTS songs? Likely not – I certainly can’t. Again, this is proof that

strength of fandom is more effective than ubiquity when it comes to the charts. As Rolli suggests, “BTS aren’t tarnishing the credibility of the *Billboard* charts; they’re spotlighting just how fundamentally broken the charts, and the metrics by which they are calculated, have been for years.” Because streaming isn’t lucrative for pretty much anyone, labels have determined that it’s better to get 1,000 people to care about an artist forever than for 1,000,000 people to listen to a song or album once. So, much of their energy is put towards building and maintaining those fanbases as opposed to more traditional marketing tactics like music videos and interviews. I have a friend employed by Universal Music Group (UMG) whose entire job is to moderate fandom Discord servers for pop stars like Zayn and Conan Gray. According to UMG’s internal market studies, superfans make up 90% of revenue for the industry, as they’re the ones willing to buy several merch items and collect variants of physical records and go to multiple dates of a tour. Passive fans that stream artists on occasion may as well not even be there.

This superfan-focused business model (and the relative success of KPop in the US) is why we are seeing the Korean method being brought to the US. The Korean record label behind KPop powerhouses like BTS, NewJeans, and LE SSERAFIM entered a partnership with UMG subsidiary Geffen (named after storied record mogul David Geffen) in 2023 spearheaded by none other than Scooter Braun. Patient zero of this partnership is the “global” girl group now known as KATSEYE, whose music and performances mirror that of traditional KPop groups but with members from four different countries. The song’s lyrics are in English, but in similar fashion to KPop, the language of these songs is all but arbitrary given their lack of depth. The selection of the six members of KATSEYE was thoroughly documented through the Netflix reality/docuseries *Pop Star Academy*, which depicted the yearslong, arduous training and

development process the girls are put through, as well as the ruthless selection process determined by both the public and HYBE x Geffen executives. These girls, as young as 14 and no older than 21, were ruthlessly pit against each other (often especially between girls of the same race/nationality) and underwent label-mandated makeovers they had seemingly no say over. If this sort of exploitation of minors is what went through HYBE x Geffen's PR wing, it's harrowing to imagine what footage was conveniently left out of the docuseries.

As of now, KATSEYE is proving to be fairly successful, but the cracks in the foundation are already beginning to show. Manon Bannerman, the sole black member of the group, is on hiatus for particularly vague reasons, but many have deduced from her social media activity that it may be due to racially charged mistreatment. The group's January 2026 single "Internet Girl" fell off the Hot 100 after four weeks despite debuting at #29. Their most recent single "PINKY UP," their first without Bannerman, befell a nearly identical fate. "Internet Girl" was widely criticized for its absurdly banal lyrics ("Eat zucchini, eat zucchini / Do you read me? Like the emoji?"), and speculation arose that the people writing these songs have either gotten too cocky or have fallen asleep at the wheel.

Will idol culture prevail in the US? Only time will tell, but the hyper-online and emotionally charged behaviors of pop fans in recent years indicate that it certainly can. Ultimately, it is up to these media conglomerates and corporations to appropriately regulate it.

SECTION III: RULE CHANGES & THE ROLE OF RADIO IN MODERN CHARTING

Josh Holser worked as a researcher for a Seattle-based radio station, and later as a programming consultant for smaller-market radio stations. After his position was eliminated, he

made about as sharp of a career pivot as humanly possible by becoming an Episcopal priest. His love of music is still very much intact, though, as he's made a lifelong hobby as a chart-watcher and archivist. During his childhood, Holser would tune into Casey Kasem's American Top 40 countdown radio show and write down every song that played in his notebook. The #1 song during the first week he tuned in was "Everybody Wants to Rule the World" by Tears for Fears. "I brought my week-by-week lists to school and shared them with friends. Sometimes we even placed bets on which song would sit at #1 the next week," he says on his website that hosts his more recent archival work. "No matter how broad a picture this gave me, I kept finding ways to learn more and more."

I tell Holser's story to emphasize how indelible radio is to both pop music history and turning curious young minds into lifelong music nerds, myself included. I remember making fun of The Black Eyed Peas' "I Got A Feeling" with my mom because the random insertions of "Mazel Tov" and "L'chaim" felt like a ploy to become a long-running bar mitzvah playlist mainstay. I remember hearing Taylor Swift's "Love Story" during an early morning drive to the airport and longingly looking out the window, pondering whatever's on the mind of a seven-year-old. Every time "Tainted Love" by Soft Cell would come on my mom would crank the volume in time with its iconic synth stabs and I would try to hold back a giggle.

Despite how much the music industry has been pushing to make radio a relic of a time gone by, it still very much has its champions, especially public/community radio. Airplay used to be a near direct reflection of the charts, but as the medium grows more and more antiquated, it often ends up a couple months behind the curve. The power that it's lost more than anything is its ability to break an artist or craft people's taste. It's become an entirely passive medium only

consumed from the loudspeakers of a corner store or the backseat of an Uber. Throwback and adult contemporary stations are still stable business models because the older, passive listeners still tune in.

Radio researcher Sean Ross described the increasingly limited role of radio on the Hot 100 as follows:

“What the Hot 100 represents then is a few different silos. In some weeks (like the most recent week of 1/31) it can track relatively close to radio, but it can also be dominated by first week LP cut streaming or sales. Sometimes it creates a story for pop radio—which is now starting to acknowledge Ella Langley—but not always. There is still negligible pop airplay for Lil Uzi Vert.”

Rap is often neglected by pop radio altogether due to the fact that the teams behind mainstream rappers don’t bother with radio promotion campaigns. It is not the medium they thrive in, and most of the time it’s not worth the time, energy, or money to make clean versions of songs. Even when a hip-hop song becomes a cultural phenomenon like Kendrick Lamar’s “Not Like Us” or Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion’s “WAP,” the clean versions come out as shells of the original as those tasked with making clean edits must overcompensate on censorship due to the FCC’s vague bylaws on obscene, indecent, and profane broadcasts.

Ross continues:

“Similarly, the Mediabase Top 40 airplay chart is the scorecard for pop radio, although labels are putting fewer resources into promoting radio or trying to create hits not

already ratified by streaming. But there are still examples of some radio hits, according to that chart, that hang on either without streaming or after an initial streaming story has dissipated:

- *Tate McRae ‘Tit For Tat’ – #6 airplay, #25 Hot 100, but driven by an initial big streaming week*
- *Justin Bieber ‘Yukon’ – 8 airplay, 31 Hot 100*
- *David Guetta ‘Gone Gone Gone’ – 10 airplay; 58 Hot 100*
- *Sabrina Carpenter ‘When Did You Get Hot’ – 12 airplay, 57 Hot 100—again, had enough streaming pre-radio single to peak at No. 17 Hot 100*
- *Benson Boone ‘Mr. Electric Blue’ – 13 airplay, not currently on the Hot 100*

What’s particularly different now about the airplay charts is that they’re much softer. Only 42 songs have 100 spins at all of Top 40 radio, including overnight airplay. There was a time when that would have been closer to 100 songs, and even as recently as a year or so ago, it was in the mid-50s/low-60s range. It raises the question whether people are really liking ‘Ordinary’ and ‘Die With a Smile’ longer than they would have, or if there are just fewer new songs likely to push them off the charts sooner.”

The deemphasis of radio during the streaming era has allowed for non-singles from popular albums to pick up steam and for songs from decades ago to find themselves spontaneously back on the chart. The former phenomenon is what allowed a song like Taylor Swift’s “Cruel Summer” to hit #1 four years after it was initially released as a part of her

relatively modest-performing 2019 record *Lover*: “Cruel Summer” had been a fan favorite album cut since its release, but it finally got its flowers after being the first full song on the *Eras* tour setlist, eventually going #1 after it was released retroactively as a proper single. The latter has found chart re-entries and peaks for songs like Kate Bush’s “Running Up That Hill” after being introduced to a new generation via its needle drop in *Stranger Things*, and (to a lesser extent) Radiohead’s “Let Down” breaking onto the charts for the first time ever amid traction on TikTok.

The total democratization of music consumption didn’t happen overnight, though. iTunes, and digital downloads more generally, became a widely popular medium after piracy sites like Napster and Limewire were taken down by the legal system. The Hot 100 first added digital sales in 2005, and SoundScan’s incorporation of streaming numbers started way back in 2007 via the addition of “weekly data from Yahoo and AOL.” Major streaming services were incorporated in 2012 (which at the time was basically just Spotify and a bunch of services that are now defunct), and Billboard’s been tinkering with a convoluted but more or less accepted album-equivalent-streams format ever since. Billboard vows to update their formula and rules at least once a year to “maintain the chart’s integrity,” but what changes they’re making specifically and for what reason are not always publicized, especially when it comes to their formula. The formula has and always will be kept extremely close to the chest, but even still, Billboard’s rules act as a means to police (or at times aid in) the industry’s exploits.

The most valuable piece of information I took away from my conversation with Josh Holser was about the nature of Billboard’s rule changes: Billboard always reacts – they never anticipate. The most recent rule change wasn’t even in the interest of accuracy; it was over a disagreement between two disgruntled and very wealthy men. On January 16th, 2026, Billboard

ceased the inclusion of YouTube streams in their chart calculations. YouTube's global head of music Lyor Cohen blamed the change on a "long-running dispute over *Billboard*'s decision to weight subscriber streams more favorably than ad-supported streams in its chart tallies," as reported by Jazz Monroe for *Pitchfork*. YouTube pulled its data despite a recent rule change that suggests a compromise on the issue. In December 2025, "...Billboard announced it would more generously weigh ad-supported, on-demand streams in comparison to their subscriber counterparts. That shift equates a stream by a YouTube or Spotify subscriber to two and a half streams by a non-subscriber. Before that, the ratio was 3:1, meaning a free stream was worth even less. But Cohen maintains this is an 'outdated formula' that 'ignores the massive engagement from fans who don't have a subscription.' He notes that streaming makes up 84 percent of U.S. recorded music revenue and suggests that YouTube was pursuing a 1:1 ratio in streaming counts," Monroe explained. In a statement made by Billboard announcing the change, they made it clear they would welcome a renewal of their partnership with YouTube, but did not indicate they would be willing to compromise with the ratio.

YouTube was originally made a part of Billboard's metrics in reaction to the virility of "Gangnam Style" in 2012. "Gangnam Style," despite being one of the most memorable cultural phenomena of the early 2010s, never hit #1, as most of its plays were attributed to its over-the-top music video that brought it to the US in the first place. Even without its top driver of traffic counting towards its Hot 100 placement, it still managed to peak at #2, stalling out behind Maroon 5's "One More Night," a song that far fewer people still remember. Billboard started factoring YouTube streams into its formula in February of 2013, giving "Gangnam Style" an

instant 22 spot jump from #48 to #26 despite its waning popularity. The rule change had an immediate impact as it allowed for the YouTube viral “Harlem Shake” to debut at #1.

“The Billboard charts, especially the Hot 100, have always served to reflect the most popular songs in the country, based on the ways fans are consuming music,” Billboard director of charts Silvio Pietroluongo said on the heels of this change (Pietroluongo has since been promoted to a different role). “There is no denying the impact YouTube has today on music and popular culture. The inclusion of this type of interactive data to the formulas of the Hot 100, Streaming Songs and our many genre song charts is a perfect and natural complement to our varied data sources, assuring the Billboard charts are the most accurate gauge of song popularity.”

Since the turn of the decade, Billboard has also cleaned up loopholes regarding direct-to-consumer sales, especially as the practice of bundling continued to go entirely unchecked. In July 2020, Billboard claimed it would “eliminate” bundles from its charts altogether with the deceptive headline “No More Merch & Ticket Bundles,” but the fine print “was far less definitive,” as put by *New York Times* reporter Joe Coscarelli. “Albums can still be sold with merchandise and concert tickets, the article said, but the music must be promoted as an explicit add-on, with the cost disclosed to the consumer, rather than ‘as part of a baked-in, single-price option.’”

“We are eliminating the one-click, one-price bundle,” said Pietroluongo, who by then became Billboard’s senior vice president of charts and data development (one of three roles he still holds today) said in a phone interview with Coscarelli. “We had hoped that the changes we made at the beginning of the year would lessen the influence of bundles on the charts, but that hasn’t been the case.”

In January 2020, Billboard adjusted its merchandise bundle rules by requiring any item for sale with an album to also be available for purchase at a lower price *without* the album, at a difference of at least \$3.49. For ticket bundles, which were not affected by the January rule change, Billboard had previously allowed the cost of the album to be baked into the ticket price as long as it was “promoted to the customer at the beginning of their purchase experience,” and the customer went on to actively redeem the album, either via mail or download. Now, fans must opt in to paying more for the ticket-and-album combos, just as they would for a merch bundle. The redemption process for bundled albums was updated to include Captchas in February 2025 in an effort to prevent botting. These are changes that Billboard had the bandwidth to nip in the bud when it was affecting the charts most prolifically, but it’s possible the act of reaction as opposed to anticipation is to please the suits in the industry that are able to take advantage of these loopholes and exploits while they’re still allowed. As Holser put it in our conversation, “While the charts are, on one hand, journalism, they are on the other hand promotion. So, they’re trying to get them as journalistically accurate as possible, but that’s not in the artists or the label’s best interest necessarily.”

The exception here is Billboard’s rules regarding recurrence, the act of removing songs from the Hot 100 after they’ve reached certain thresholds of placement and weeks on the chart, which was instated in 1992. This allows for the charts to not be dominated by the same handful of songs perpetually. This is a system that benefits everyone, as Billboard needs to keep their charts fresh and reflective of new music, and labels need to make sure the singles they’re pushing aren’t stalling out behind years-old songs. Songs were pulled from the Hot 100 if they’d dropped below No. 25 after 52 weeks, or below No. 50 after 20 weeks. “That generally

prevented the chart's lower reaches from getting crowded with stubborn-but-declining hits — endlessly charting smashes like Post Malone's "I Had Some Help (feat. Morgan Wallen)" and Shaboozey's "A Bar Song (Topsy)" finally dropped off the chart in recent months thanks to this system — but didn't have an answer for songs that just weren't descending far enough or quickly enough,” NPR’s Stephen Thompson explained.

The metrics for recurrence were updated in October 2025 in reaction to “Lose Control” by Teddy Swims sitting peskily on the chart for 119 weeks (that’s more than two years). The first metric adjustment seemed to be targeted to get rid of this song specifically: songs are now pulled from the chart if they drop below #5 after 78 weeks (a year and a half). As late as early October, 2025 “Lose Control” was still #6. (It only fell out of the Top 10 because the 12 tracks from Taylor Swift’s *The Life Of A Showgirl* took over #1 through #12). Without this rule change, “Lose Control” likely would have re-entered the top 10 after the dust had settled from *Showgirl*. The rule change affected lower chart placements and shorter reigns as well. If a song drops below #10 after 52 weeks (a year), below #25 after 26 weeks (half a year), or below #50 after 20 weeks (the only metric that remained the same), it’ll be pulled as well. Benson Boone’s “Beautiful Things” and the Lady Gaga x Bruno Mars duet “Die With a Smile” also ended their year+ long reigns on the chart due to this rule change.

While Boone and Swims are signs that new faces can still find immense success on the charts, it’s been a decade since pop music has seen a real paradigm shift.

HOW THE CHARTS TELL A STORY

Joni Mitchell's "Free Man In Paris" follows record mogul David Geffen as he takes a break from his exorbitantly fast-paced professional life. But even in his supposed freedom, Mitchell's personification of him thinks about the work he has to get back to more than the beauty that lies before him in that very moment. "I do my best and I do good business / There's a lot of people asking for my time / They're trying to get ahead / They're trying to be a good friend of mine," she sings to end the first verse.

That's what the music industry does to people – it chews them up and spits them out. Once you find out how the sausage is made, your brain rewires. I've found my own brain has rewired over the last few years. When I look at a pop song, the content of the song immediately becomes the least important thing about it. While a song itself may tell a story, the *real* story lies within how it came to be: who an artist has worked with, what label they signed to, how they won people over, instances where they were in the right place at the right time. This notion evokes a vital quote from French social theorist Jacques Attali: **"The music industry is not devoted to the production of supply, but rather to the production of demand itself."** We're seeing this in spades with the rise of viral marketing tactics perpetuated both by independent agencies and major labels in-house. The art as an ideally impenetrable object is shrouded by its unknowable potential as a cultural artifact.

Record promotion as we knew it for nearly a century has fallen by the wayside. As a result, record labels have put the onus on developing artists more than ever before. A member of my cohort left to finish his degree online after signing a (seemingly bad and predatory) development deal. Instead of attending classes and working on a thesis of his own, he sits in his

parents' Malibu McMansion making short-form video content; not to promote his music, but to trick people into listening to said music. From a quick glance at his output, you can tell exactly which it-boys in pop he's attempting to emulate. I can't say I feel any modicum of sympathy for what this label seems to be making him do, but this absolutely should not be the standard. It's not best practice, it's an embarrassment to the artform.

It is due time for a reckoning in the music industry as social media and the "don't ask, don't tell" adoption of AI continue to cloud people's judgement, not allowing them to see the forest for the trees. The charts tell the story of an industry trying to stamp out the flames of fires they started themselves. While numbers may help make sense of the barometer of success, the value of music is supposed to remain intangible. How that truth is acted on by the artists and those that work for them is both a deeply personal and deeply consequential decision. The charts, in turn, tell the story of those decisions, with one's legacy determined by the hands of time – no matter how kind or cruel.

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