July 12, 2024 / The song of the summer is DEAD

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): I got a theory. I think the song of the summer is DEAD.

SCORING <“Crazy in Love” by Beyoncé and Jay-Z>

SEAN: Let’s go back to 2003. This song was inescapable. Sometimes it still is.

SCORING CHANGES TO <“Umbrella” by Rihanna feat. Jay-Z>

SEAN: Few years later another banger with Beyonce’s husband. Then Black Eyed Peas, Carly Rae, ‘Blurred Lines’, ‘One Dance’, ‘Despacito’. Beasts, all of them. And then in 2019 we get what I think was our last song of the summer. The series finale.

SCORING CHANGES TO <“Old Town Road” by Lil Nas X>

SEAN: The biggest songs on the charts in subsequent summers just haven’t been as big IMHO.

SCORING CHANGES TO <“Rockstar” by DaBaby>

SEAN: Did you hear ‘Rockstar’ everywhere you went? Or Morgan Wallen?

SCORING CHANGES TO <“Last Night” by Morgan Wallen>

SEAN: That guy who loves the N-word?! PLEASE! The song of the summer is dead!   
  
CHARLIE HARDING (*Switched on Pop* co-host): You’re usually right, but I think you’re wrong.

SEAN: We’ll see about that on *Today, Explained*.

*<CLIP> BLACK EYED PEAS ‘I Gotta Feeling’: Wooohooo!  
 <CLIP> PIXIES ‘Where Is My Mind’: Stop!*

[THEME]

SEAN: *Today, Explained.* Sean Rameswaram. Here once again with NYU Professor Charlie Harding, co-host of the *Switched on Pop* podcast. He’s got some thoughts on why last year’s supposed song of the summer and I just don’t connect.

CHARLIE: I'd say that there's three reasons for why you don't feel connected to Morgan Wallen's “Last Night”

SCORING <“Last Night” instrumental>

CHARLIE: The first reason is that you got old.

SEAN: <laughs>

CHARLIE: The neuroscientist Daniel J. Levitin has a study that shows that our musical tastes really peak ages 14 to 24. And so you're simply outside of that range. I'm sorry, Sean.

SCORING POST: *But baby, baby something’s telling me this ain’t over yet. No way… <back to instrumental>*

CHARLIE: But there are other reasons why Morgan Wallen might not connect with you. I think part of it is that maybe country isn't your thing, and country is having a meteoric rise. Like, from 2017 to 2022, only 2% of the songs on the hot 100 Billboard's major chart were country.

SCORING BUMP

CHARLIE: Last year, 25% of songs on the Hot 100 were country. Last summer – third reason why you might not have connected – last summer, country also became political. In fact, I think the charts became political. Like everything that is polarized in our country: Not only did we have Morgan Wallen, who was making a comeback after saying the N-word publicly, but we also had songs like “Try That in a Small Town” by Jason Aldean.

SCORING CHANGES TO <“Try That in a Small Town” by Jason Aldean>   
 *Got a gun my granddad gave me   
 They say one day they’re gonna round up   
 That shit might fly in a city   
 Good luck: try that in a small town…*

CHARLIE: We had Oliver Anthony Music, “Rich Men North of Richmond.”

SCORING CHANGES TO <“Rich Men North of Richmond” by Oliver Anthony Music>   
 *Cuz your dollar ain’t shit   
 And it’s taxed to no end*   
 *Cause of rich men   
 North of Richmond <under, out>*

CHARLIE: These, like, hyper-politicized songs. And so maybe you were just feeling like, ‘I'm not feeling the country right now.’ So these are why I think you might have not connected last year...

SEAN: Listen, Charlie, I like Bud Lite and pickup trucks as much as the next guy, but – I think these songs are *popular*.

CHARLIE: Yes.

SEAN: But they're not – the song of the summer needs to be universal. Isn't that the thing? I mean, “Old Town Road” was technically a country song, but the difference there was like…

SCORING <“Old Town Road” by Lil Nas X>

SEAN: ….Kids were dancing to it. They were playing it at clubs. And and everyone heard it. There was a video that was hilarious. It was in commercials. That was a song of the summer.

SCORING BUMP*: Yeah, I’m gonna take my horse to the Old Town Road  
 I’m gonna ride till I can’t no more  
 I’m gonna take my horse…*

CHARLIE: When I teach ‘Old Town Road’ to my students at NYU, they're like, ‘Oh, that old song?’

SCORING OUT ABRUPTLY

SEAN: <laughs>

CHARLIE: Just saying. We not – we may be outside of peak culture, Sean.

SEAN: Let's go back. Let's go back. I went back to 2003. But, but, how old is the song of the summer, Charlie?

CHARLIE: The song of the summer is an ancient institution. Every season needs a song. In my digging, I could find newspapers from the 1800s where people were writing songs of summer, poems, lyrics and so on. There's a really good *Vox* explainer by our former colleague Phil Edwards from 2016.

SEAN: Love Phil.

CHARLIE: He found a *New York Tribune* story from 1910 asking, ‘About this time, look out for the song of summer. What will it be this season? Will it be humorous? Will it be sentimental? Will it be unmitigated trash?’  
  
SEAN: Mm!  
  
CHARLIE: They named the 1909 song of summer “My Wife's Gone to the Country. Hooray! Hooray!”

SEAN: Classic.

CHARLIE: <laughs>

*<CLIP> “My Wife’s Gone to the Country. Hooray! Hooray!”*

CHARLIE: But I feel like it really solidifies as a thing when Billboard launches its Hot 100 chart in 1958 and there is an official bean counter, and we can chart…

SEAN: Mm!

CHARLIE: … who! is! the biggest song of each season.

SEAN: What was the first song of the summer in 1958? Once we had the beans counting.

CHARLIE: It wasn't Elvis. It wasn't the Everly Brothers.   
  
SEAN: Huh.   
  
CHARLIE: It was Domenico Modugno’s “Volare”.

SEAN: Aaah. <chuckles> Of course it was.

*<CLIP> “Volare” by Domenico Modugno, under*

CHARLIE: Italian ballad with some R&B piano vibes.

SEAN: I don't know that I remember this from 1958, to tell you the truth. <chuckles>

CHARLIE: You're not that old, Sean.   
  
SEAN: <laughs>   
  
CHARLIE: Pretty old, but not that old.

SEAN: <laughs some more>

CHARLIE: I mean, you could say in 1965, Sonny and Cher had “I Got You, Babe.”

SEAN: Oh! Now we’re talkin’!

*<CLIP> “I Got You, Babe,” by Sonny and Cher*

*<CLIP> “Best of My Love” by The Emotions, under*

CHARLIE: How about 1977? “Best of My Love” by The Emotions.

SEAN: Oh yeah. For sure!

*<CLIP> “Best of My Love” by The Emotions, under*

CHARLIE: I feel like if you go to 1984, you could fight between Prince's “When Doves Cry”…

*<CLIP> “When Doves Cry” by Prince*

CHARLIE: …and Tina Turner's “What's Love Got to Do With It”.

*<CLIP> “What’s Love Got to Do With It” by Tina Turner*

SEAN: Oh my gosh. What a year 1984 was. And then the 90s, you got to have, like, what? Like Spice Girls’ ‘Wannabe’, maybe the ‘Macarena’ in there?

CHARLIE: I mean, those are great hits, but I feel like 1997 was the year of “MMMBop” by Hanson. <laughs>

SEAN: Oh my gosh, yes it was!

*<CLIP> “MMMBop” by Hanson*

SEAN: But is there always a clear song of the summer? I mean, I showcased a couple of years where, in my personal opinion, there was.  
  
CHARLIE: Yeah.  
  
SEAN: But I'm sure there's someone out there in the listening audience who's like, I don't remember ‘Umbrella’ by Rihanna and Jay-Z. I guess that person probably exists.

*<CLIP> JAY-Z, “UMBRELLA”: Uh huh, uh huh. Chyeah.*

CHARLIE: <laughs> I tend to think of more *songs* of summer than necessarily *song* of summer.

SEAN: Mmmmmmmm!

CHARLIE: Partially to be representative of, like, what people are listening to in Brooklyn is different than Miami is different than Houston. And so whatever your community is listening to, that's going to be your song of summer. And probably in the era of, like, mass media monoculture. We just weren't as talented at capturing people's collective listening. Sure, maybe they were being broadcast more of the same stuff, but you didn't know what people were playing back to back on their boombox. Now we can actually count exactly what people are listening to on streaming services.

SEAN: Mmm.

CHARLIE. We have moved from the broadcast era of mass media to a fractured media landscape based on on demand and algorithmic media. We are more fed our niche interests through playlists which are disseminated to us. You can see the trend of people's listening fragment even by looking at things like album sales over the years. In 2003, the biggest album of the year was 50 Cent's Get Rich or Die Tryin’. Sold 6.5 million copies.

SEAN: Hell yeah.

*<CLIP> “In Da Club” by 50 Cent*

CHARLIE: Fast forward a decade. Justin Timberlake's “2020 Experience” 2.4 million.

SEAN: Mmm.

*<CLIP> “Suit and Tie” by Justin Timberlake and Jay-Z*

CHARLIE: Fast forward just to last year. Taylor Swift's *Midnights* 2.8 million.

SEAN: Mmmm.

*<CLIP> “Anti-Hero” by Taylor Swift*

CHARLIE: So album sales today do actually reflect streaming. A certain number of streams actually is the equivalent of an album sale. So it's not just that people have moved from buying albums to streaming songs, it's also that I think our listening has fragmented into different communities.

SEAN: And, and this is why you see the occasional think piece, reflection essay, you know, round table saying that the song of the summer is dead. I've seen one from our colleagues at *Vulture*. I think *Rolling Stone* published one as well. When you see those, Charlie Harding, are you like, ‘Come on guys, take it easy on song of the summer.’   
  
CHARLIE: <chuckles>  
  
SEAN: Because it feels like this is not, this is not your opinion.

CHARLIE: <laughs> I think that big cultural moments can still exist.   
  
SEAN: Ah-hah.  
  
CHARLIE: Elections. Insurrections.

SEAN: <laughs>

CHARLIE: Football's doing amazing. The Super Bowl, depending on how you count, is at an all time high in its viewership. And really, songs are doing better and lasting longer on the Hot 100 than they are at any other point in history.

SEAN: Mmm.

CHARLIE: And so I think whether it's, you know, a Taylor Swift album that takes over the entire chart for a moment …

*<CLIP> “I Can Do It With a Broken Heart” by Taylor Swift  
 <sigh> Try and come for my job.*

CHARLIE: … or, you know, a viral TikTok song that can last for longer than you might expect. It's definitely possible for a song to break through.

SEAN: I'm glad you brought up the charts, Charlie, because I feel like the charts are part of the problem here.   
  
CHARLIE: Yeah. Yeah.   
  
SEAN: Because the charts, now that they account for streaming, are, like, no longer fully reflective of the moment like they used to be.

CHARLIE: No, no no no.

SEAN: Is that wrong?

CHARLIE: You're totally wrong. I totally object.

SEAN: <cackles>

CHARLIE: The charts right now reflect that we have a very diverse set of listening. Like, if you go to Billboard's Hot 100, which counts radio airplay, physical album sales *and* streaming, it shows that <scoff> wow, we are listening to a broad array of things. The number one song in the country right now is “A Bar Song” by Shaboozey.

*<CLIP> “A Bar Song (Tipsy)” by Shaboozey*

SEAN: This one I know. ‘Tipsy’! I'm not that old!

CHARLIE: Yeah yeah yeah! Black man leading the country charts – and the Hot 100. We also have legacy big three rapper Kendrick Lamar and his diss track.

*<CLIP> “Not Like Us” by Kendrick Lamar   
 Say, Drake, I hear you like 'em young  
 You better not ever go to cell block one <under>*

SEAN: We made a whole show about it!

CHARLIE: A great episode. You also made a great episode about pop princess Sabrina Carpenter and her song, ‘Espresso’...

*<CLIP> “Espresso” by Sabrina Carpenter  
 Say you can’t sleep? Baby, I know   
 That’s that me espresso*

SEAN: Thanks for the plug!

CHARLIE: It's a good episode. We've got alt folk music by Hozier.

*<CLIP> “Too Sweet” by Hozier  
 You're too sweet for me  
 I take my whiskey neeeat..,*

CHARLIE: We've got drag-dressing artist, Chapell Roan.

*<CLIP> “Good Luck, Babe!”   
 Good luck, babe (well, good luck)  
 Well, good luck, babe (well, good luck)*

CHARLIE: Like, we've got so many different things happening in the top ten. I think it really actually represents all sorts of different communities of listening. I think you shouldn't stress about what everyone is listening to. I think you should pay attention to what your friends and community are connecting with.

SCORING <“365” by Charli XCX>

SEAN: We're going to come back with Charlie Harding and Brittany Spanos from *Rolling Stone* to talk about what songs your friends and community are singing this summer, on *Today, Explained*.

CHARLIE: Are they bumpin that, bumpin that, bumpin that, that beat.

SEAN: <laughs>

SCORING BUMPIN THAT

[BREAK]

*<CLIP> “A BAR SONG (TIPSY)”, SHABOOZEY: Everybody at the bar gettin’ –*

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back with Charlie HCX …  
  
CHARLIE: <laughs>  
  
SEAN: … and hashtag Brittany Spanos from *Rolling Stone.* Friends, community: When you guys look at the songs of the summer, do the songs tell a story?

BRITTANY SPANOS (*Rolling Stone* senior writer): I think there are a couple of really great narratives going on right now, in especially the top ten of the charts, in a way that I feel like has been more entertaining than the past few summers. I think we're seeing a lot of artists who have really strong fandoms, who have existed for a really long time. You know, Shaboozey has been making music for years now. Sabrina Carpenter is – this is, like, about to be her sixth album.

*<CLIP> “Please Please Please” by Sabrina Carpenter*

BRITTANY: Chappell Roan has been make… was signed to a major label, dropped from major label, re-signed to a new one and you know, released her debut album.

*<CLIP> “Hot To Go” by Chappell Roan*

BRITTANY: Hozier has his first number one and we all remember ‘Take Me to Church.’

*<CLIP> “Take Me to Church” by Hozier*

BRITTANY: That song is from over a decade ago. You know, it's a lot of really great sort of narratives happening of artists who have been hustling for a really long time who, you know, either had peaks before and are coming back. I mean, we're seeing this with Charli XCX and Tinashe as well, who aren't necessarily in the top ten, because charts are the only metric but are having really great sort of viral successes and moments.

*<CLIP> “Nasty” by Tinashe*

BRITTANY: We're seeing a lot of artists who just kind of have curated a great fandom and have cultivated that over years, toured, hustled, released music, and just happened to have these, like, incredible breaks simultaneously at once.

CHARLIE: Yeah, I feel like we have moved past the moment where every biggest song is a sudden breakout on TikTok overnight success. The reality is, if you want to have a big pop career, you need a community which is backing you. I think Brittany's totally right on. This is the summer where we are seeing and realizing the gains of a lot of hard work.

SEAN: Hm!

BRITTANY: That we espresso.

<everyone laughs>

BRITTANY: I feel like the industry has adjusted poorly to the streaming age. I mean, we all know that. Like, every artist knows that. And I feel like there's been a big lack of artist development in a lot of ways. You know, we've seen a lot of artists who have a viral hit ..   
  
CHARLIE: Mm-hm.

*<CLIP> “Dance Monkey” by Tones and I*

BRITTANY: … who have that one moment, and then the industry and labels don't really know how to keep that going or how to process that, sort of like we found this artist on TikTok, on YouTube, on Instagram, on, you know, whatever. And like we turned this into this big moment.

*“Dance Monkey” posts*

BRITTANY: But where does the album go from there? Where does the next song go from there? So I feel like it's kind of a big case for artist development and kind of putting resources into that, because these artists have done it on their own.  
  
SEAN: Mm.  
  
BRITTANY: You know, a lot of them have been working towards this for a long time without getting the same sort of like marketing or kind of promotion or support from the major label system that other kind of flash-in-the-pan artists have had over the last decade. And they've created those fandoms from scratch. They built them from the ground up just by touring a lot and from releasing music that made sense to them.

SEAN: There is something else going on this summer that I want to talk about. Brittany mentioned it briefly. It’s lime green. It’s slightly out of focus. It’s *Brat*.

*<CLIP> CHARLI XCX’s ‘APPLE’  
 I guess the apple don’t fall far from the tree  
 Cuz I been lookin at you so long, now I only see me*

SEAN: I feel like the popularity of the new Charli XCX album only backs up my theory that song of the summer is a thing of the past because if you’re terminally online, this is *Brat* summer; and if you’re in Los Angeles, this summer belongs to Kendrick; if you’re into country, maybe it’s Shaboozey; if you’re into Disney, maybe it’s Sabrina Carpenter or something.

CHARLIE: Sean, I think you've completely passed over Post Malone. Like, I feel like this is actually the summer of Post Malone. This is the season of Post Malone. Not only has he had a number-one hit with Morgan Wallen: the song “I Had Some Help”...

*<CLIP> “I Had Some Help” by Post Malone feat. Morgan Wallen*

CHARLIE: But he's also had hits as a featured artist with Beyonce on “LEVII’S JEANS”…

*<CLIP> “LEVII’S JEANS” by Beyoncé feat. Post Malone*

CHARLIE: …*and* Taylor Swift on ‘Fortnight’.

*<CLIP> “FORTNIGHT” by Taylor Swift feat. Post Malone*

CHARLIE: He is inescapable.

SEAN: I'm glad y'all brought up Post Malone, and in doing so, also brought up Beyoncé and Taylor Swift because Beyoncé, Taylor, and even like Dua Lipa, some of the biggest artists on streaming, some of the biggest artists touring right now, performing right now, releasing music right now. They've all released albums, but their names haven't really come up much. Is there something going on with like, the old favs, where they're just not charting the same way as the young blood?

CHARLIE: I think these albums all did phenomenally well and were simply released earlier in the year.

BRITTANY: Mhmm.   
  
SEAN: Hmm.

CHARLIE: In Beyonce's album *Cowboy Carter* dominated the conversation for weeks. It broke Billboard Hot 100 records. It was definitely the album of the spring.

*<CLIP> “TEXAS HOLD ‘EM” by Beyoncé*

CHARLIE: The song ‘Texas Hold 'Em’ was number one for two weeks and was on the charts for 20 weeks.   
  
BRITTANY: Mm-hm.  
  
CHARLIE: Taylor Swift's album *The Tortured Poets Department* also broke many records: all the songs were on the chart at the exact same moment.

*<CLIP> “I Can Do It With a Broken Heart” by Taylor Swift*

CHARLIE: Dua Lipa might be the one example where her album Radical Optimism has not been as radically optimistic as she might have hoped.

*<CLIP> “Illusion” by Dua Lipa*

CHARLIE: But she does have three really solid singles still on radio airplay: ‘Illusion’, ‘Houdini’, and “Dance the Night”, from the *Barbie* soundtrack. I think she's one song away from being the most dominant artist again. She just needs the next big hit single to hit.

BRITTANY: Yeah, and “Dance the Night” was such a big hit last summer, too, you know? They've definitely all cycled the song of the summer conversations repeatedly for the last several years, or decades, depending on which artist. But, you know, I think that people were kind of hungry for something new in a lot of ways, too. Like, I feel like we had sort of had a rough few years of new artists breaking through because of the pandemic, because of touring. And it's been such a big touring boom over the last couple of years where a lot of these artists have gotten boosted by being aligned with someone like Beyonce, with Shaboozey being on the Beyoncé album, and then now having his first number one hit.

CHARLIE: Yeah.  
  
BRITTANY: With Sabrina Carpenter going on the Eras tour with Taylor. With Chappell going on with Olivia [Rodrigo] tour. All these artists, it's almost like, they are the ones now creating a new algorithm.  
  
CHARLIE: Mmmmm.  
  
BRITTANY: They are the ones boosting these artists and are as much a reason for these songs of the summer that we're seeing while kind of having their own albums that came out a little bit earlier.

SEAN: Is it a bummer to you two that none of these songs that you're clearly deeply invested in will be *the* song of the summer? I think we established with Charlie that we are in the era of *songs* of the Summer. Do you wish it could be just one? One song to rule them all?

CHARLIE: I mean, we are our own little fiefdoms. We all have our own song of summer, so who cares? For me, it's definitely Charlie ‘Von Dutch’, no doubt. No one can stop that from happening.

SEAN: Wow, the remix or the original, Charli?

CHARLIE: I’m an original.

<everyone laughs>

*<CLIP> “Von Dutch” by Charli XCX*

SEAN: Okay, respect. Brittany?

BRITTANY: I mean, I'm going to argue that we've never been just a one song of the Summer nation, you know?

SEAN: Ah-hah!

BRITTANY: I think like when you look back on the years, like it's going to be whatever defined your summer no matter what. I mean, we could go by the chart metrics, we can go by the conversation. But that's the beauty of like, all of it. It's like, yeah, there's sometimes those defining metrics that we can use, but no matter what, I think everyone kind of has their own song of the summer, and I think that's always what's kind of beautiful about it. Like, I always look back at my summers with like, okay, this song just happened to be playing at every party I was at, or this is the song that I was like, depressed listening to you on the beach, you know, like, it's like …

SEAN: You can’t be depressed at the beach, Brittany! It’s the beach! <laughs>

BRITTANY: Sometimes – listen, I'm a Lana Del Rey girl through and through, and sometimes you are. <laughs>

SEAN: So what's your song this year? I don't think Lana's got any new bops, but I might have missed them.

BRITTANY: She does have a new bop. I'm not sure it's my song of the summer yet. But I think my song of the summer is prob – oh god – it's actually, like, really difficult. I think it's probably ‘365’.

SEAN: Wow!!! <laughs>

SCORING <”365” by Charli XCX>

BRITTANY: Because *Brat* has really taken over my life in a crazy way – in a way that is kind of sick.

SEAN: I can relate.

SCORING BUMPIN THAT  
 *Okay okay okay   
 Here we go….*

SEAN: Charlie HCX, Hashtag Brittany Spanos. It's been an honor. Thank you for joining us. I wish you both a safe and happy *Brat* summer.

CHARLIE: Thank you, Sean.

BRITTANY: Thank you.

SCORING BUMPIN THAT

SEAN: Brittany Spanos writes about music for *Rolling Stone*. Her latest is titled “Welcome to the Hannah Montana Generation of Pop Music.” You can and should read it at Rolling Stone dot com.

Professor Charlie Harding makes *Switched On Pop*. You should be listening wherever you listen.   
  
Shadow Brat Amanda Lewellyn made our program today. We were fact checked by Laura Bullard who recently asked, “Wait, what is *Brat*?” We were edited by Amina Al-Sadi, mixed by Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kristinsdottir. And hosted by brat.

Before we go, have you noticed that this election is the nuttiest one we’ve ever had? Like, no exaggeration. Ever! Felon versus oldest president ever who’s constantly having to make the case for an even older presidency.

We know you have questions, about conventions, about delegates, about donors, about the legality of X, or the probability of Y. And we wanna know what those questions are and we wanna help you answer them in this wild and unpredictable moment.

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Thank you.

SCORING OUT

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]