Reading the Charts - Making Sense with the Hit Parade

Author(s): Martin Parker

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MARTIN PARKER

Introduction

Competition in the weekly Top 40 race is ferocious; it is, perhaps, a more highly competitive race than those fought in sports arenas. It is the one race that continues year round, it never starts over, and yet it provides new standings every week of the year. With a plethora of Top 40 countdown programs . . . it is clear that this country is hooked on the unending dash to the top. (Whitburn 1987, p. 9)

One of the formations which helps to shape the meaning of modern pop music is the charts. In theory, the charts define the most popular of popular musics, the goal, the pinnacle of success. Both professionals and audience dedicate large amounts of time and money to producing and consuming this series of comparative market histories produced at rapid and regular intervals. Technology is bent to the service of the research in order that the figures be produced more quickly and with the appearance of accuracy. But why should we be interested in the Top 40 itself rather than its music? Writers on pop have provided us with some detailed descriptions of the charts (Frith 1978; Harker 1980; Wallis and Malm 1984; Street 1986), but few have noted that this level of consumer obsession with sales figures is almost unique to the record industry. Consumers of other commodities do not usually consult a specialist book or magazine in order to discover the past sales history of their favourite brand, nor do they listen to particular radio stations in order to ascertain the best selling product of the week. Why then should the sales results of EMI, Polygram, WEA and others be of interest to their consumers when the same data about multi-national corporations in other market sectors are primarily of interest to market insiders and analysts? An important caveat needs to be added in that popular music is now not the only type of cultural production that foregrounds sales figures. More recently popular literature (the 'Bestsellers List'), video and films have all begun to use this format but in none of these cases is the chart as central as it is with pop music. The question at the centre of this article is to explain why, to the fan of popular music, the charts are not merely quantifications of commodities but rather a major reference point around which their music displays itself in distinction and relation to other musical forms.

Three opening assumptions need to be stated since they are taken for granted in most of this article. Firstly, as will be evident, I am concentrating on the UK and US singles charts as the symbolic centres of this practice. Album, CD and cassette charts all exist but it is the 'Top 40' (or whichever number fits) that holds prominence despite its comparative insignificance in terms of market value and share. That the singles market accounted for only 11 per cent of total music sales in Britain in 1988 (British Phonographic Industry, 1989, p. 42) yet is still symbolically central

is something of an historical anachronism. This was well illustrated in 1989 when the British Phonographic Industry (BPI) lowered the qualifying levels for silver, gold and platinum discs. In 1978, thirty-one gold discs were awarded; by 1988 this was down to nine (ibid. p. 68). In 1979, 89 million singles were sold in the UK; by 1988 this was down to 60 million (BPI 1987, 1989). The continuing strength of the chart format that reports and valorises these declining sales would therefore seem odd and must indicate something about the attractiveness of this way of displaying music. Secondly, the chart is not central to all consumers and producers of pop music. Many either do not care about it or actively resist it, but enough see it as the essence of pop for the hit parade still to be centre stage within this cultural field. Thirdly, it is evident that I have assumed that most consumers were young, white and obsessive about pop. The pop audience is a good deal more diverse than that, but all the same the archetype of the teenager is undoubtedly still the dominant image for pop production and consumption.

I begin by outlining the history of the hit parade in the USA and UK. Following this is a political economy of the charts which views them in relation to capitalist industrial practices. Concluding that this perspective is insufficient to explain the attractiveness of the charts to the consumer I move on to a 'reading' of the charts. By reading I mean that I treat the charts as text and attempt to tease out the assumptions that go into constructing it. The final section attempts to draw out some conclusions from the reading and touches on the nature of consumer involvement in the play of the charts and its relevance for the post-modernity debate.

Musical knowledge

The charts are produced by market research organisations sponsored by various branches of the media. They take the form of sale figures collated from week to week and are then published as a table illustrating which products have sold more than others during that period. There appears to have been a need to count the products of the music industry from early this century: the *Melody Maker* 'Honours List' was begun in 1928 and *The Gramophone* had a three-part chart (sales of sheet music, records and radio airplay) from 1934–6. Despite relying on highly subjective measurements, little changed until 1947, when the same paper introduced its '10 Best Sellers in Britain', based on wholesale orders for sheet music. A fairly accurate British singles chart was produced by the *New Musical Express* in 1952 (a top twelve with fifteen records in it), soon followed by other music papers, each using their own secret list of retailers' sales returns from which to produce a feature to sell newspaper. The *NME* chart grew to a twenty in 1954 and a thirty in 1956. Albums followed in the *Melody Maker* in 1958 but it was not until 1963 that an independently audited chart was set up, at first relying on postal returns from 250 record shops and being published in *Record Retailer*. This Top 50 chart was sold to the BBC from 1969 onwards.

At the present time there are two large independent charts produced within the UK, the Chart Information Network (CIN) and the Network/MRIB (Media Research and Information Bureau). The former is the one with the widest circulation since it is featured on BBC TV's 'Top of the Pops' and Radio One. In 1983 the contract to compile this chart was moved from the British Market Research Bureau to Gallup. From 1983 until 1990 the chart was 50 per cent financed by the British Phonographic Industry, 38 per cent by *Music Week*, which publishes the chart, and

12 per cent by the BBC. In 1990 this arrangement changed – largely because of wrangles over finance and control. The structure at the time of writing is that *Music Week*/CIN own the chart, use Gallup to produce it, and then sell it to the BPI and the BBC. It seems unlikely that this provisional arrangement will last. The chart costs approximately £0.75 million per year to produce and lists the top 200 singles and albums which could be broken down into charts for separate products – 12-inch singles, compact discs, music videos and so on. Data collection for the chart is now substantially computerised through bar codes read at point of sale, returns being taken from 500 retailers across the UK by automatically dialled night-time telephone lines. Once these returns have been collated, a check panel of 140 further shops, from a list of 400, are telephone interviewed on the titles climbing the charts in order that checks may be made on the accuracy of that data. The charts must be seen to be immune to any form of accidental or deliberate falsification. This is in part because of the constant spectre of chart rigging that has hung over the hit parade since the USA 'payola' scandals of the late fifties. BPI/Gallup have the power to remove records that they believe have been 'hyped' into the charts and even to fine the perpetrators but, as Wallis and Malm (1984, pp. 242–52) note, there is an inescapable conflict of interests in the practice of self-policing the charts. 'Payola, layola, flyola and freebies' are thus unlikely to disappear completely but, in order to ensure the impression of objectivity, there is continual recourse to rhetoric about market sampling strategies, data checking and the use of the latest information technologies (Gallup 1988; BPI 1989).

The second main British chart, the Network/MRIB chart, is compiled primarily for independent local radio and is constructed in a similar manner to the Gallup chart. It is also sold to Independent Television's teletext service and sections of the music press. The MRIB also compile many of the specialist charts featured in the music press, catering for particular genres of music that are unlikely to gain enough sales to put them into either of the other major charts. At the time of writing it is likely that there may be changes in the construction of the MRIB chart since *Music Week* now has an exclusivity clause with the major retailers for providing sales information.

The other chart that matters in the UK is the American 'Billboard Hot 100'. This has its origins in the 'Network Song Census' in *Billboard* (the major US trade paper) in 1934, leading directly to a series of radio 'Hit Parade' programmes from 1935 onwards. Frith (1987) suggests that the early importance of these charts reflected the fact that the main method of dissemination of recorded music, juke-boxes, were almost entirely American in production. The first fairly accurate tabulation of popular music sales was featured in the same magazine in 1940, leading finally to the 'Billboard Hot 100' from 1958 to the present day. Since then this has been the major chart sponsored by the American music industry. Though it indicates sales in the largest recorded music market in the world, it also takes into account radio airplay. This is largely because of the greater importance that commercial radio has in promoting records in the US market. Despite this, it is regularly featured in the UK music press and is studied from within the British music industry.

Whose interests?

It would seem fairly evident that the particular form of knowledge represented by music charts directly serves the financial interests of one particular group – those involved in the various branches of the music industry. For this group the sales charts empirically demonstrate the successes and failures of record companies, producers, designers, managers and recording artists, on the assumption that the more units sold the better the individuals have done their respective jobs. Sales of recorded music are very big business – £1,108 million (retail value) in the UK alone in 1988, with the world market in 1987 being approximately $17 billion (BPI 1989). However, investment risks are high: on average, only 8 per cent of releases become hits (Frith 1978, p. 118), and in a volatile market constant assessment of sales performance is crucial in order to avoid high losses. In no other sector of the economy are 700 new product lines issued every week. A huge amount of money is therefore spent in order that the industry can constantly feel its own pulse and test the market. The singles charts also have a significant promotional function; though singles are now continual loss makers, they do introduce artists to an audience which will hopefully then be enticed into buying a more expensive and profitable music product.

However, an understanding of the charts must involve more than this, since they amplify success as well as quantifying and advertising it. In the simplest terms the higher a record is placed in the charts, the more media exposure it will obtain and thus the more sales, and so on. This is especially true of the 'Billboard Hot 100' which is collated not only on the basis of record sales but also takes into account radio play. The circularity of this process becomes evident when it is noted that as a rule radio playlists are constructed overwhelmingly from chart records. As various commentators have noted (Rothenbuhler 1987; Hirsch 1990), the 'gatekeeping' function of the various individuals and organisations concerned with the music media thus becomes particularly important in selecting and influencing hits. In fact it could be said that the record companies spend more money buying records into the charts than they do ensuring that the charts are 'hype proof', though not all of these expenditures necessarily contravene industry regulations. In addition to this, it needs to be noted that the hit parade is not quite as accurate as is often suggested. The selection procedure tends to favour records that sell relatively quickly throughout the country and not those that sell more gradually or in specific regions. The result of this is that the charts represent what Street calls a 'highly selective populism' (1986, p. 116) which discriminates against minority musics in an apparently democratic fashion. They are, Harker claims, incapable of providing any genuine measure of popularity by their very nature:

> The charts can tell us only about the commercial transaction – and they can't do that very accurately. About how many times a song is played at home, on radio or television (in Britain at any rate), used in cinema, performed and adapted on football terraces, in the bath, in concert halls, clubs and pubs, the charts can tell us nothing. (Harker 1980, p. 97)

The political economy of the music industry is only half of the picture; the charts are also used by the consumers of the music media. Radio and television shows, and both the music and general press feature details of chart activity. There *is* even a thriving industry in the production of books displaying in painstaking detail the highest UK and US chart positions, dates of entry and number of weeks

in the chart, for records from the fifties onwards. It would seem evident that the consumer's interest in the charts is not as utilitarian as that of a music industry insider, but this does not necessarily mean that the fan's attention will be any the more casual. On the contrary, it often seems true that the consumer is more deeply 'involved' in the play of figures and faces than the professional ever is, the latter's enthusiasm ending with the (relative) autonomy of leisure, when the former's begins. What is it about the charts that has made them such a durable structure when both the record industry and the consumer have changed so much? In order to answer this question it is necessary to begin to read the charts as a way of structuring meaning, and not simply a means of satisfying the economic demands of capital.

Reading the charts

I want to say something more about the charts than the foregoing political economy of the pop industry will allow. I also want to begin to understand my own fascination with the hit parade. I am not at all concerned with the music as such here but trying to interpret the structure which is many consumers' first point of contact with the music. Despite my method being eclectically semiotic, I do not wish to suggest that it would be possible to (re)construct a code for the hit parade – simply that it is a structure enshrouded in myth (in an anthropological sense) that both validates and contests many of the myths of the society of which it is part. To analyse the charts as 'a type of speech' (Barthes 1973) does not mean that they can be translated or de-coded in a simple sense but does suggest that some of the assumptions on which they are based can be fruitfully exposed. I wish to understand better how this particular part of the economy of music is presented as if it were normal. The reading should be seen as suggestive, not exhaustive, being simply an attempt to indicate some of the strands in the cultural pattern that accretes to this particular amalgam of statistics and desire. Ideology is as manifest in the pop charts as it is in more obviously political discourses; the power of signs is not only their ubiquity but also their resulting invisibility.

To begin with the obvious, consider the physical structure of the hit parade. It is a hierarchy and not a simple list. Parts of it are divided into sections of increasing prestige: the top twenty, the top ten, and at the pinnacle, the number one. 'These are the songs that climbed the chart ladder to its highest rungs' (Whitburn 1986, p. 5). The relative positions of records within the chart indicate much about their value, even when they come from musical (sub)cultures which are ostensibly not concerned with commercial considerations. The mobility of records is also an object of interest; whether a particular song is going up or down is of as much importance as its current position because this makes possible predictions about its future trajectory within the hit parade and its future importance to the media in general. The rating of many performers depends largely on their ability to place records in the higher reaches of the chart. Get a 'hit' and you make an impact on the world – it changes. The mobility embodied in the movements of music product on the charts thus influences the actual mobility of the artist – from an origin within the social stratification system to a destination which appears to transcend it. 'Rising into the Top 40 stratosphere places an artist in elite company' (Whitburn 1987, p. 9). 'Social climbing and the star system have been profoundly connected . . . the image of the group member who made it is a formidable instrument of social order, of hope and

submission simultaneously, of initiative and resignation' (Attali 1985, p. 77). Within this demarcated arena, certain qualities are seen to ensure success ('a good tune', 'a lovely voice'). The majority of artists appear to accede to accounts that stress 'authenticity' over manipulation, the skill of the individual over the advantages conferred by the adoption of certain cultural, economic or political practices. The metaphorical similarity between this area of explanation and conservative explanations of social mobility does not seem to be coincidental. Accounts of success within capitalism are often based on some notion of individualism and the entrepreneurial spirit. 'Most involved in the ongoing pursuit of the top position are the dynamic contenders – the artists' (Whitburn 1987, p. 9). The record industry is a particularly intense form of capitalist practice, and it is therefore hardly surprising that its sales charts should reflect this. The higher objectivity of the market is seen as the proper arbiter of success, quantity of sales becoming translated into quality of product. 'The more people buy a record, the more successful it is – not only commercially but artistically' (Manfred Mann, quoted in Middleton 1990, p. 252). The higher an individual gets, the more valued (s)he is, by both fans and record company alike.

This analogy can be taken further to include the democratic process itself. One feature of the charts which is constantly reiterated is the fact that it is constructed by the free choices of unconstrained consumers. The radio DJ tells *us* to make this record a success. According to classic liberal economics, the individual is free to make purchases and these choices help to determine the success and failure of traders in the market. This ideology is paralleled in the music industry by its constant expression of the mythology of the market, particularly with regard to 'quality' being revealed by the consensus of consumers. Greil Marcus gives us the positive side of this formulation:

> We fight our way through the massed and levelled collective safe taste of the Top 40, just looking for a little something we can call our own. But when we find it and jam the radio to hear it again it isn't just ours – it is a link to thousands of others who are sharing it with us. (quoted in Street 1986, p. 186)

In an era of rapid communications the consumer is given the impression that the charts can create a sense of belonging (MacLuhan's vision of a 'global village') based around a shared interest in popular music. Indeed the whole notion of a separate youth culture so beloved of sixties social commentators relies heavily on this kind of re-creation of community. The presentation of the charts suggests firmly that this is a democracy of taste.

Walter Benjamin's view of the liberating possibilities of the new media, most particularly the cinema, is another version of this optimism. He believed that it was now possible for the 'aura' of tradition that had previously surrounded the objects of bourgeois art to be dissipated (Benjamin 1977). In theory 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' is exemplified by the career of the vinyl disc on the backdrop of the hit parade. It is based on visibly democratic principles – each record is worthy of attention because of its own merits and needs no special knowledge or critical ability to justify its purchase. Mass production ensures that the products are available to the average wage earner and the increasing number of technologies of reproduction within the home allows for consumption of the products of one's choice in the way that the consumer desires. Public pressures which firmly located music in certain circumscribed social occasions are now seen to be of

little influence since 'art' has become a matter for individual gratification and not the production of social distinction.

However, it is important to note the limits of this version of democracy. On a visit to America in 1946 Sartre observed that in some sense the buying of a disc is akin to buying into a collectivity. For Sartre, though, this is an illusory community, one based on a 'serial' (class in itself) ontology and not a 'fused' (class for itself) one. However, Sartre's collectivity is clearly very different to that which Marcus or Benjamin addresses. Instead it incorporates a profoundly alienated consumer who, '. . . if he listens to the radio every Saturday and if he can afford to buy every week's No 1 record, he will end up with the record collection of the Other, that is to say, the collection of no-one' (Sartre 1976, p. 650). By emphasising the fact that *you* have to make a choice in order to make a record successful, democracy is presented at work. However, the problems of democracy are magically resolved by allowing for decision making on an essentially trivial level. 'Everyone is asked their opinion of every detail in order to stop them having one of the totality' (Vaneigem, quoted in Laing 1969, p. 29). Baudrillard takes this critique to the limit in suggesting that all forms of audience response – phone polls, studio audiences and so on – are fabricated 'non-communication'. The arena within which the audience responds is so limited as to be a confirmation of its own muteness (Connor 1989, p. 53). In terms of the music industry this myth of democracy tends to conceal the extent to which the agenda of consumer choices is set in the first place by an oligopoly of transnational entertainment corporations based on a logic of profit. This is empirically exemplified in the hit parade by the fact that 64 per cent of single sales and nearly 69 per cent of album sales in 1987 went to the six largest companies (BPI 1989). The fact that we are free to choose does not mean that we are free to choose anything and ignores the fact that we are continually discouraged from choosing nothing.

The 'Juke Box Jury' myth of choice is supported by the levelling process that occurs when records occupy chart positions. Any difference that exists is difference within similarity; though one record may address itself to the problems of world hunger and another to the intricacies of personal relationships, the two become equal when competing for the highest chart place. Within the market-place there is only competition on the basis of assumed equivalence; any differences are reduced to differential calculations about exchange-value. Even where different charts are constructed, this is done on the basis of the same kind of tabulation, the same method of construction once again ensuring that any differences are submerged into global similarity. In one week in 1990 the three major music papers carried a total of 19 different generic charts, ranging from UK and US singles through to independent, compact disc, country and the reprinting of selected charts from the past. The differences between dancefloor hedonism and avant-garde 'Indies' are neatly classified as genres by their positioning within these hierarchies. This is what Attali calls 'a public display of relative values' (1985, p. 107) and the main pop chart is legitimised as the point to be relative to. In support of this, Garofalo (1987) observes that 'race' records 'cross over' into the main chart and not vice versa. The rules of the chart game require assumptions of equal competition and the desire to get to the top. Entering the charts tends to mean that these values are pinned to any musical product that is placed in the competition.

A further feature of the pop charts is the importance of youth. Mark Abrams 'discovered' the 'Teenage Consumer' in 1959 and statistically it is still true that 66

per cent of singles are bought by those under the age of twenty-five (BPI 1989). However, the largest and most profitable sections of the recorded music market, most particularly LPs and compact discs, are purchased by older sections of the population. This trend is supported by demographic changes in age structure and is likely to continue, but all the same the dominant images of production and consumption in pop are those of youth. The teenager is the 'mass subject' position created by the Top 40 (Middleton 1990). The singles chart is a particularly vivid example of this in its collation of the values of new technology, change and novelty. Pop is a young people's business, most particularly in the practice of consumption but also in its production. Pop single artists are predominantly young, partly because it is rarely believed that a lengthy period of apprenticeship or training is necessary, as it is supposed to be for classical music or jazz, but also because of the much repeated belief that only the young have the energy to play this kind of music, let alone dance to it. Though there are clear exceptions, the fact that they are continually remarked upon would seem to prove their unusualness. Even the intermediaries (pop presenters) place a premium on youth and, through clothes and language, attempt to stress their youthful characteristics and thus their closeness to the 'kids on the street'. This is despite the fact that contemporary youth is far from powerfully represented in the boardrooms of the media and music industries.

Related to the importance of youth is the foregrounding of technology. As has already been mentioned, advanced techniques of information control are employed to ensure the efficient production of music sales figures and the virtues of this technology are constantly stressed in the presentation of the charts. Gallup and the BBC are keen to point out that new technology allows them to broadcast the charts on Sunday, only twenty hours after the last sale has taken place. Consequently it seems apparent that the symbolic importance of new technology is very much tied in with chart production. Technology is the embodiment of the news, and the newer the better. For the Italian Futurists of the early twentieth century, technology was aesthetically important in itself and had a value quite apart from its concrete utility. The hit parade is certainly influenced by these formulations and 'high tech' media presentations of the charts are a singular reflection of this ideal, with their preponderance of novel typefaces and the liberal use of computer graphics.

A category that in some senses captures both youth and technology is that of newness. The charts are a process that moves from one state of certainty to another. The latest trends are presented as being the high point of popular music, but this stasis is entirely ephemeral since it is continually replaced by the next development. The parade marches on. This operates as a tension on a number of levels; 'this year's/month's/week's thing' is simultaneously standing on its own and at the same time is part of a succession of styles. The past is collated and counted by the makers of lists but is always superseded, for the archetypal consumer, by the attractions of the present. In the music industry most artists are only regarded as being as good as their last record, and newness becomes a quality with a value quite apart from the product itself.

Haug (1986) refers to a poster for Polydor records in Germany – a pile of broken discs with the caption 'Old Records are Boring'. In the charts newness brings with it the possibility of mobility; reissues are old records that have been made new again, not merely records that have been around for longer than others.

For the fan of pop singles especially, it should be noted that the product is usually used obsessively for a short while and then allowed to fade into the realm of memory and nostalgia. Coping with the speed of these changes, never allowing the consumer to stop looking forwards, is one function performed by the hit parade – last week's sales do not contribute to this week's chart and number ones constantly change. An old hit record is rarely worth as much as a new one, for the producer or the consumer. Continual watchfulness on the part of the consumer therefore becomes a precondition for the acquisition of valuable pop knowledge and often this means consumer expenditure or, at the very least, voluntary exposure to advertisements for products. In a sense pop knowledge is ranked and the older it is, the less important it becomes.

In tension with this sense of ephemerality is the construction of a pop tradition. There is a thriving book industry rotating around the older pop presenters in which they document pop history (e.g. Whitburn 1986, 1987; Gambaccini *et al.* 1989). Lists abound and trends are compared and catalogued, often using chart data as empirical validations of theses about the movements of pop. The books of 500 hit singles oppose a faith in the future with a faith in the past. The history of pop can then be captured and represented as a set of great moments and pieces of statistical knowledge. 'Most consecutive number twos' and 'one hit wonders' are combined with the cataloguing of a golden treasury of past hits. This is essentially the charting of a Leavisite great tradition, with certain writers seeking to present themselves as having a greater understanding of its periodisation and value. Not only is this a profitable business but it can be seen as an attempt to place some order on the vast amount of chart data that now exists. The hurtling rush into next week's chart is disciplined through the use of a list of lists. History with meaning is constructed to validate a seemingly uncontrollable present and nostalgia is the organising principle.

The counter move to this is to argue that the charts are an implicit attack on classic theories of aesthetic value and on the very notion of a great tradition. The values of newness, youth and technology and the importance of sales figures are implicitly contrary to any formulation of musical importance in terms of the intrinsic skill of performer or composer, or the competence of the listener.

> It is this that really galls people about the Pop Arts; printed words are the sacred tablets of their culture; they build libraries, universities and literary supplements to maintain their permanency, while Pop consumers treat them like coke and chewing gum. (Banham, quoted in Chambers 1986, p. 10)

This tension is nowhere more clearly articulated than in the continual search for the next star. This is a quest based on apparently contrary assumptions about the deification of individual creativity and, on the other hand, the continual supersession of pop idols. The charts continually push both artist and audience forward to the next moment yet contrary movements within popular music attempt to halt this process in the person of a star who stands above the continual change.

There is also an important sense in which the almost obsessive concern with thousands of other people's choices is not merely indicative of the desire to sell and buy records, but also of a move to increased cultural surveillance. It is obvious that a series of more effective methods for consumer analysis have been developed in order that the hit parade can be produced as it is. This does not necessarily mean that the individual datum gained is of great tactical importance in itself, but rather

that the sum of all these statistics has become of interest to many. Foucault believes that this is the essential characteristic of late capitalism; our surveillance of others and of ourselves, the extension of the panopticon into everyday life. Bauman, following Foucault, locates consumerism as the latest and most effective of the techniques of power:

> Consumerism is not about the emancipation of the body from control; it is about the joy of controlling the body of one's own will, with the help of sophisticated products of technology which offer all the visibility of the formidable power of one's controlling agency. (Bauman 1983)

Our leisure choices are thus subject to the same kind of disciplines that are engendered in the sphere of work. This need not be taken as an extension of the mass cultural critique but instead as a facet of the contemporary focus on style and individual identity. The importance of surfaces and images means that surveillance is not solely conducted by state apparatuses but by all of us, since we all watch each other.

Discussion

I have tried to demonstrate that a simple list of products can be problematised in terms of the dominant themes of the mythical structure of the hit parade. Those I identified were hierarchy, mobility, democracy, community, youth, technology, the new and surveillance. There are two related debates I wish to synthesise from this list. The first concerns the nature of the consumer's engagement with the charts and the second explores some of the implications of the analysis for the post-modernity debate.

It is easy to overstress the extent to which the charts might structure the way that the music is perceived. A Frankfurt School critical Marxist position would undoubtedly be that the myths of consumer capitalism legitimise certain kinds of music and leisure practice at the expense of others.

> To judge by its themes, neither musically nor semantically does pop announce a world of change. On the contrary, nothing happens in it any more, and for twenty years it has seen only marginal, or even cyclic, movement. Each series is thus repeated, with a slight modification enabling it to parade as an innovation, to constitute an event. The singles of the 1950s are back in fashion in the 1970s, and today's children enjoy their parents' records. (Attali 1985, p. 109)

There are certainly aspects of the charts that could be seen as 'functional' for capitalism, but to suggest that all music that touches the charts turns into opiate for the masses is clearly overstating the case. Against this kind of determinism I would suggest that an individual's engagement with the charts is experienced as play and not as a simple form of subordination.

The charts represent a facet of economic life but one that differs in its implications as between producer and consumer. The producer lives and dies by the charts, whilst the consumer can enjoy a form of bounded recreation. The charts are a game that we can involve ourselves in for a while if we get pleasure out of doing so. Like the football league tables they invite us to look and to judge, to become commentators and even participants in a small way. Not only can we know who had their first three hits at number one, but we can volunteer an opinion on them too. As Grossberg observes, pop gives us power.

> Rock and roll is a form of bricolage, a uniquely capitalist and postmodern practice. This practice is a form of resistance for generations with no faith in revolution. Because its resistance remains within the political space of the dominant culture, its opposition is only a 'simulacrum' of revolution. Rock and roll's resistance, its politics, is neither a direct rejection of the dominant culture nor a utopian negation (fantasy) of the structures of power. It plays with the very practice that the dominant culture uses to resist its resistances: incorporation and excorporation in a continuous dialectic that reproduces the very boundary of resistance. (Grossberg 1983)

We therefore make, and are made by, the games we play. A highly academic example of such hit parade play was a competition run by the publishers Unwin Hyman in 1990 to discover the Top 10 British Sociology books published since 1945. The aim was to publicise a new book but the chart format served the publisher's purpose well in promoting a piece of serious play – a 'desert island discs' of sociology books. However, in order to play a game you must accept its rules. The charts are attractive and make sense precisely because they do have such rules – both in a structural and a mythical sense – though as rules they are flexible.

Not everybody who is interested in popular music follows the charts; there are other ways of discovering the information one needs, and that provided by the charts is derided by many. Even for those who do use the charts, many involve themselves with half an eye and ear since it is only a minor interest. However, for *all* these groups the charts provide a reference point, a terrain around which judgements can be made. It can be argued that the strength of that centre is becoming increasingly uncertain as singles sales drop and adult markets grow but it still seems to continue. One possible reason is its historical durability – most pop fans will have had their first introduction to pop via the hit parade. Though their later listening preferences may not be contemporary pop, they categorise those preferences as related in some way to the charts as an institution that defines what 'pop' is. I am here, you are there and we can locate ourselves via where we stand on Number One.

The nature of this reference point is the concern of much of my 'reading'. The charts do seem to reflect many of the values of a highly capitalist industry. The fact that the Trustee Savings Bank began sponsoring the 'TSB Rock Steady Chart' in 1990 in order to bring in young customers is not surprising in this respect. The music industry is an intense form of entrepreneurial practice, but are things changing? Is the possible dethroning of charts as *the* centre of pop heralding a post-modern decentred era? As I have described them here, the charts are clearly modernist. Moving fast into a technological future, they represent a continually reiterated faith in the new. Against this, however, is the construction of a Leavisite great tradition. This hall of greats is essentially a version of the romantic artist as hero – the demigod who is capable of transcending the hurly-burly of chart activity. This comparison between the charts now and the charts then often results in the simple assertion that 'they don't make music like they used to' – hardly modernist, or post-modernist, in its implications. It may be that the fragmentation of music markets and the eventual demise of the 45 will usher in a more kaleidoscopic post-modern way of counting pop – if the need is still there.

However, I believe there are two factors at work against this. Firstly, the charts are strongly enshrined at the centre of pop; even the language we used to talk about music is shaped by them. That this is so may indicate that there is a form of 'homology' (Willis 1978) between the charts and the economic and social struc-

tures that surround them. The hit parade is 'good to think with' for both producers and consumers and it can be articulated in a way that reflects many of the central values of consumer capitalism. Secondly, I believe the charts are unlikely to be dethroned because, by their very construction, they are tolerant of diversity. It may be a circumscribed and rule bound diversity but it is capable of incorporating a wide variety of musical product. It is difficult to see how a post-modern chart could exist, and the conclusion would therefore be that the charts themselves would have to lose their importance; there appears to be little sign of this.

In conclusion, the charts are essentially modernist reflections of capitalist practice, but the impact of romantic discourses of the artist are visible in their mythological structure. They are a contested sign, but one that has a strong residue of preferred meanings that help to construct understandings of the music they contain. As Street (1986) notes, most of the politics within pop can be characterised as liberal individualism; the resistance takes place on the terrain of personal pleasures, however 'polymorphously perverse' some of them may be. The charts set an ideological agenda and part of their fascination for the consumer is a reading of, and engagement with, the micro-challenges to this field. After all, if 'bat' only signifies in opposition to 'cat', 'sat', and so on, as Saussure asserts, then so do the Sex Pistols only signify in opposition to Cliff Richard. The attraction of the charts is partly as a terrain for the display of this difference, but a display that is regulated to the point of negating difference within formal similarity. As with all games, you play by the rules or you end up not playing at all.

Finally, it seems important to contextualise this whole discussion in its origin as a personal fascination. As an adult and a sociologist who has long since given up all hopes of becoming a pop star, I want to explain to *myself* why I still listen to Top 40 radio and watch 'Top of the Pops'. This is despite the fact that I spend most of the time complaining that they never play *my* records. But they do play my records, and when they do I can see how wonderfully different they are from other people's records. Yet that display of distinction can only take place because we decide that this knowledge matters. If you want to play you've got to pay but it is easy to forget exactly what you have bought. As Barthes says,

> The starting point of these reflections was . . . a feeling of impatience at the sight of the 'naturalness' with which news-papers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live with, is undoubtedly determined by history. In short, in the account given of our contemporary circumstances, I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of 'what-goes-without-saying', the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there. (Barthes 1973, p. 11)

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