Counting down to Number One: The Evolution of the Meaning of Popular Music Charts

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Counting down to number one: the evolution of the meaning of popular music charts

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Every weekday evening on Columbia Broadcasting's (CBS) *Late Show*, host David Letterman delivers his tongue-in-cheek top ten lists.[1] The lists have become one of the most recognisable symbols of American popular culture. Part of the humour lies in the pithy ranked statements about current events. However, much of the fun resides in Letterman's mockery of our obsession with rankings – rankings of everything from automobiles to college football teams to human attractiveness. The humour is sustained from night to night, week to week, year to year because of our uneasiness with rankings as a very powerful and enduring value-organising tool.

The popular music charts serve as a template for the ranking system. It is the most recognized, most referenced and one of the oldest ranking systems in popular culture. Letterman's tone reminds us of the seriousness of the 1950s television show *Your Hit Parade*. *Consumer Reports* use ranking systems reminiscent of *Billboard* charts. Local newspapers feature movie rankings that remind us of *American Bandstand*'s rating of new music releases. In common parlance, we talk about someone's success as their 'rising to the top of the charts'. These references identify popular music charts as a strong ideal type.

Billboard magazine's charts, in particular, stand as a model of the universal ranking system. Numbered slots from one to forty list names of artists and their art, publisher and recording company. A history of each song is charted by another number which denotes its previous positions, i.e. one week ago, two weeks ago, etc. Stars, bold print and colours are used to tell the reader how quickly the song is scaling the charts.

Charts seem to be ever expanding and approaching ubiquity, both in- and outside the pages of *Billboard*. *Billboard* currently publishes thirty-nine music charts (see Table 1). In addition to the well known *Billboard* 200 chart and the speciality R&B and Country charts, top-hits charts representing other 'genres' and countries are included in the industry's main publication. New charts have appeared, for example, 'Heatseekers' is a more recent addition. This new chart features artists and songs that are not currently on a chart and have never been on a chart – a chart for songs not on a chart!

Billboard is not the only place to find popular music charts. There seems to be an explosion of charts, both across media and into other venues. Local

Table 1. List of charts in Billboard (39 listed in order of appearance).

Amusement Boxscore Top 10 concerts based on gross receipts
Heatseekers Album Chart 40 best-selling artists who have never appeared in top 100 of Billboard Top 200 chart
Regional Roundup top 10 Heatseekers by region
Bubbling Under top 25 R&B singles under the top 100 R&B chart
Top R&B Albums Retail sales 100
Hot R&B Singles Radio 100 and retail sales
Hot R&B Airplay 75
Hot R&B Recurrent Airplay 25 recurrent titles not in top 50 airplay
Hot R&B Singles Sales 75
Hot Rap Singles 50
Hot Dance Club Music 50
Hot Dance Singles 50
Hot Country 75 top airplay
Hot Country Recurrents 25 that have appeared in top 20 but have dropped below
Top Country Albums retail 75
Top Country Catalog Albums retail 25
Top Contemporary Christian retail 40
Top Gospel retail 40
Hot Latin 50 retail albums
Hot Latin Tracks airplay 40

Hit of the World

Country	Singles	Albums
Japan	10	10
Australia	20	20
New Zealand	10	10
Canada	20	20
Germany	20	20
Italy	10	10
Spain	10	10
Netherlands	10	10
Hong Kong	10	10
'Euro'	20	20
Norway	10	10
Belgium	10	10
Ireland	10	10
Denmark	10	10
Switzerland	10	10
Argentina	10	—

Hits of the UK Singles 40
Hits of the UK Albums 40
Top Pop Catalog Albums retail 50
Top New Age Albums 15
Top World Music Albums 15
Top Reggae Albums 15
Album Rock Tracks airplay 40
Album Rock Recurrent Tracks 10
Modern Rock Tracks 30
Hot Adult Contemporary airplay 40
Hot Adult Contemporary Recurrents 10
Hot 100 Airplay 75
Hot 100 Recurrent Airplay 25
Hot 100 Singles Sales 75
Top 40 Airplay
Hot 100 Singles airplay and sales
Bubbling Under next 25 singles under Hot 100
Billboard 200 retail albums

newspapers print charts. Television and radio top-hits programmes are still on the air. What is more, charts crowd record stores (even in classical music sections!), representing either national, regional or in-store sales.

What are the functions of the charts? Charts serve the music business well as a marketing tool. Radio stations use them to develop playlists and fine tune their appeal. Retailers use them to order stock, suggest consumer purchases, and organise their stores. To a degree, the charts also serve the audiences as an information tool.

Beyond these marketing uses, however, a popular music chart is a complex signifier of relationships among business, musicians, music and consumer. A chart directly represents the music business for most consumers. Moreover, charts define not only what is popular but also what is popularity. It may be argued that a chart can be used by consumers as a symbol of their own perceived popularity. By simply knowing a chart the consumer builds a stronger sense of belonging to consumer culture.

The purpose of this article is to examine the development of the meaning of the popular music charts. The title of the present work represents an outline for proceeding. 'Counting Down to Number One' is an obvious historical reference to early music charts. Announcers on radio and television would constantly remind the listener or viewer that the top hits of the week would eventually be revealed. 'Counting down to number one' is also a reference to the evolution of the charts from a simple signifier of a low cultural product code to a simulation of the mass production of the code (e.g., fame, artist, capitalism) to, finally, a simulacrum of mass consumption.

It is ultimately important to show the contemporary charts' relationship to social/consumer identity and marginalisation. 'Counting down', as a type of limiting process, refers to the hyper-technologised popular music charts that are, themselves, part of the production of a 'new' consumerism – one driven by the illusion of personal choice. 'Number one', so often used in common parlance to refer to the self as individual, is used here in the same way to refer to the delusional uniqueness of the post-modern self.

Along the way, it is hoped that this examination of the music charts as archetype may uncover some general truths about rankings in contemporary life. Rankings structure our ways of thinking about comparisons, contrasts and order. But the problem is that often the structure oversimplifies the content and, consequently, the 'reader'. Something is lost when beauty, truth, freedom, art, etc. are ordered in such a way – whether Letterman is doing the ordering or not.

Framework

One reason that the charts are taken for granted is that we imagine them as a mere reflection of the music business. Scholars have used the charts as indicators of the impact of MTV on the number of award winning records (Phillips and Schattmann 1990), of women in the business (Hesbacher *et al.* 1977; Cooper 1985; Wells 1986, 1991; Schlattmann 1991), and of new music charts on established charts (Ennis 1992). No one, however, has analysed the structural meanings of the charts *per se*. It seems that the previous analyses, as is true of most analyses of 'language', have focused on the parts (i.e. the words or *parole*) as the sole object of the lan-

guage or as accumulating to form an otherwise formless whole (i.e. a structure or *langue*) (see Hawkes 1977).

However, as in language or any other code, the structure of the whole is as important, if not more, as its singular parts. This can be said of the music charts as a structural system. Beyond the individual songs that are contained in any chart, there is a relatively more stable structure to the chart itself, e.g. its title, its perceived importance, genre reference, placement, use of rank, number of ranking slots, historical ranking references (weeks on the chart and placement one or two weeks ago), etc. As will be shown, the ranking structure itself has a set of strong cultural, historical meanings, meanings that are both structured and structuring. The format refers to, as coherently as possible, the music business. In turn, charts structure relationships among listeners, the music business, musicians and musics.

It is also argued that the charts have evolved into a very powerful, independent code. The code now channels more than just the notions of popular as opposed to elite culture or popularity of musics or musicians. The newer code defines 'popular' as the audience which embodies itself in a chart. The result is the hyper-consumerism of late capitalism and the marginalisation that accompanies it.

In order to advance and support this thesis, we must go beyond simple structural analysis. There is a need to go beyond the mechanistic relationships between the signified and signifier, business and the buyer, the market and the popular, the grand and the local, etc.

With this in mind, we must first define 'sign'. A sign as anything that 'can be used to significantly stand for something else' or 'to lie' (Eco 1976). This definition in its broadest sense could be used to identify almost anything and everything as a sign. However, in a more narrow sense it helps us identify signs that are increasingly used to tell greater lies about the reality. Therefore, signs that are taken for granted (Althusser 1977) as merely mirroring the things they signify, especially when those things are so closely representative of the major product (read: popular culture) of the dominant ideology (read: capitalism) are the most important signs for discussion. Signs are ideological in themselves.

Next, a theory that allows us to examine the historicised context of signs and post-capitalism, one that couches post-structural methods and post-modern observations in cultural, historical context (e.g., Foucault 1970; Jameson 1972; Best and Kellner 1991; Grossberg 1992; Gottdiener 1995), must be enlisted. All of these authors examine signs as evidence or indicators of the evolution of cultural ideology in Western capitalism. The present research speaks to mutations in the charts as representative of evolutionary developments in Western capitalism, not to revolutionary developments of individuals or social psychology. The purpose is not to speak directly to the local level of analysis nor to make empirical claims at the social-psychological level of analysis.

Now, the specific theory or framework which fits the approach defined above and the project at hand must be described at greater length. Baudrillard's (1983b) theory addresses the post-modern subversion of signs from a cultural, evolutionary point of view. Baudrillard believes that all signs have historically 'mutated' through three phases: 1) counterfeit, 2) production and 3) simulation. The counterfeit was the dominant scheme of the period from the Renaissance to the industrial revolution. Production is the dominant scheme in the industrial era. Simulation is the current mutation. Mutated means that subsequent phases do not replace previous phases, they contain and add to them. Therefore, we are in an era in which all interpretations are in place.

The first order of the sign, the counterfeit, mirrored that which it represented. Counterfeits were limited in number (like that which it represented) and, therefore, had to be clear and 'anything but arbitrary' (ibid., p. 84). The primary function of the counterfeit was to pass value from one class to another. To hold the sign represented an upward transcendence of class. Concurrently, counterfeits enforced class structures in their unequivocal reference to status and their production by the bourgeoisie. For example, an advertisement or facsimile copy of a status symbol, such as a Rolex watch, transmits its class referent. It reminds the user that they are not of the class that has the Rolex and of a class that prizes fakes. This still holds true, today. All signs are, to some degree, a reminder of the social class system.

The second order of signs references the boundless possibilities of mass production. The 'energetic-economic myth proper to modernity' (ibid., p. 97) is the industrial purpose for the sign. It conveys the modern myth of scientific production. The value of the industrial sign was no longer only in its referential value but also in its commercial value *vis-à-vis* other signs and is 'conceived from the point-of-view of [its] very reproducibility' (ibid., p. 100). To buy into the competition of signs and choosing a sign gave a stronger sense of belonging to industrial progress than holding a single counterfeit. For example, the multiplicity of ads or copies of the Rolex reminds us of the gifts of industrialisation.

The post-modern sign is a simulation in spite of the reality. It no longer has to signify just class or social reality. It signifies a relativistic reality – a reality held only by the individual[istic] consumer. The sign comes to signify the hyperreality of the cybernetic relationship between the market and consumer (Baudrillard 1981). In other words, the consumer believes that they are the sender of a message ('I get what I want') and the sign represents not a message but feedback (Sarup 1993). Consumers come to believe that the sign is their own creation. The sign must tactfully allow the consumer to believe that they are in complete control of the sign. 'The receiver/consumer is the god who guarantees that the [media content] "works" or has "meaning". Only the recipient of the message can guarantee that the language . . . is spoken well' (Poster 1990, p. 67).

The value of the sign is, therefore, in its emotional interaction with the consumer (I will continue to use the term 'consumer' for the sake of convention and organisation, although it implies a sense of receiver of messages instead of sender which is the illusion). Poster describes Baudrillard's position on media effects in terms of advertising:

> Baudrillard's argument is not that people 'believe' the ad; that itself would assume a representational logic, one subject to cause–effect analysis (how many people bought the product because they saw the ad). Nor is his argument based on irrational manipulation; the ad works on the unconscious of the viewer, subliminally hypnotizing the viewer to buy the product . . . Instead Baudrillard sets his argument in linguistic terms: the ad shapes a new language, a new set of meanings (floor wax/romance) which everyone speaks or better which speaks everyone. (1990, p. 58)

What is more seductive is that collecting (knowing) signs gives the consumer more emotional feedback or feeling of belonging to a world of free choices. The new consumer fetishism is the stockpiling of repetitious signs. The consumer 'freely' collects signs that signify the self. As they are caught up in a play of repetitive images, the consumer world becomes relative and external to 'reality'.

As in any evolutionary system, sameness and lack of reference points creates a greater level of comfort with day to day existence (Baudrillard 1983a).

This behaviour is reinforced by the market economy. Since information has become the key to moving product, information has been given precedence over product itself. To limit the probable confusion in the market distinction is given to information, while products are made to fit simple, broad and arbitrary categories. Once classified, products become more and more alike. The consumer is not concerned with product limitation since they equate the proliferation of information with the real product choice.

Both McLuhan (1964) and Baudrillard (1983a) have spoken about the explosion of information and implosion (Best and Kellner 1991) of real choice. McLuhan wrote of the explosion of technology and its relationship to an imploding understanding of place, i.e. the global village. As geographic locale expands, local becomes smaller and more personal.

Baudrillard describes this contradiction as a major social control device of late capitalism. He argues that implosion is a result of the erasing of the distinctions between communities, disciplines, politics, signs, etc. Everything is reduced to information. Baudrillard might agree that as perceived choice expands in the form of competing signs, real choice shrinks. Wants take precedence over and obscure any needs (Baudrillard 1983a). 'We are now living in an era of implosion, of the collapse of previous differences, distinctions, and hierarchies. There has been a transformation from stable referents to "floating signifiers" ' (Sarup 1993, p. 167). This describes the end of the consumer society and industrialisation and the beginning of a post-modern, post-industrial era.

In the end, product value is measured by its exposure and recognisability, not by its own use- or exchange-value. The actual products themselves can become more similar as long as an illusion of choice is constructed by and for the consumer through the media. This brings us full circle back to the glutinous consumer who emotionally envisions themselves as the prime mover in the explosion of information. Emotionally, in such an environment, the consumer wants to express themself in the increasingly visible explosion of brand information.

Ultimately, consumers identify themselves as being as unique as a brand (which underneath is not very unique).[2] Sarup refers to this production of consumer as the illusion of 'privatized individuals' (1993, p. 165). What the market 'does to you is what you do to yourself and the way it does this is by being about itself' (Wagner 1995 , p. 61). 'People are about *it* in somewhat the same way as the product is about it and it is the contingency of each to the other that the ad performs or replaces' (ibid., p. 60). In short, the market now produces consumers at the consumer's expense and compliance.

Research Model

Attali's (1989) work is inspirational to the present research for two reasons. First, he shows how signs, in his case music, can be used to examine historical and cultural phenomena as both causes (structuring) and results (structured) of the sign. He writes specifically about the evolution of the 'music code' (ibid., p. 5). He believes that sound has fashioned society more than any other code, e.g., colour or form. Sound is uniquely versatile. Its clamour, melody, dissonance and harmony have powerful effects of repression, control, restraint, etc.: 'All music,

any organization of sounds is then a tool for the creation or consolidation of community, of a totality. It is what links a power center to its subjects, and thus . . . is an attribute of power in all of its forms' (ibid., p. 6).

Second, Attali melds critical and post-modern theory. He uses Baudrillard's phases to guide shifts in the political economy of music. At the same time, Attali strengthens and verifies some of Baudrillard's ideas.

Attali argues that the music code has been transformed through three dominant zones: sacrificing, representing and repeating. The first of Attali's zones, 'sacrificing', describes the development of the music code in the West as the conscious control of noise to forget the violent nature of birth and death. Whoever (usually royalty, court music) controlled the code held the knowledge to control the din of death and, therefore, controlled the community. Performers were kept from controlling the code by their imposed ambiguous job descriptions – i.e. they were organised as disorganised musician–shamen–doctor–vagabond. Audiences believed that the powers knew what was good for them. 'Believers' (ibid., p. 19) sacrificed themselves to the code. The result was a distinction between high and low cultural forms of the 'art'. 'Believers' could counterfeit the art of the royalty by listening to their music or create their own music. Paradoxically, in either case, both court and folk music acted as a reminder of class position.

Division and specialisation of labour erased old controls. As capitalism grew, the contradictions of this zone became more contentious. Attali notes the contradiction that created a new zone: 'No organized society can exist without structuring differences at its core. No market economy can develop without erasing those differences in mass production' (ibid., p. 6). The musician cast off his old master but was channelled forever as a commodity. In other words, as the artist and audiences broke down the controls over art by the elite, they gave in to new structural controls, in this case, market controls. Music finally came under control of the soul that created it but, simultaneously, music had to become a commodity. At least part of the musician's 'self' had to become marketable.

The result was 'representing', Attali's second zone of the political economy of music code. Massification or industrialisation of the art became essential to maintain control over one's own art. Historically, concessions were granted in copyright permissions and concomitant recognition of artists and their art. These artistic freedoms came with more subtle controls. The artist became more responsible for the capital of operations, for mass production (to achieve economies of scale), and for industrialisation (to cut expenses) of his art.

More music was forced to harmonise with the larger community. Mass production became 'deafening' as the market drove the artist to conform to its repetitive codes. 'Popularising' of music led to the last full zone, 'repeating'. Repetition became the key for success, but also led to inevitable failure. The art and artist were reduced to technique and technicians, respectively. Technologies of repetition and reproduction were now in the hand of the audience who control (re)creation. 'More of the same' is the key; more of the same sounds and more for the same tired, stereotypical categories. The goal became to organise the audience in easily recognisable and stereotypical (popular) categories.

Attali's phases mirror Baudrillard's mutation of the sign. Sacrificing is a diversion from the pain of the real and at the same time a reminder of class divisions. It is a counterfeit of someone else's enjoyment to help forget about ones own death, a kind of pacifier or production of class illusions. Representing is the means

of reproducing the very idea of the value of capitalist markets in its products, production of production itself. Finally, repeating is the life blood of simulation. Consumers are most interested in collecting multitudinous signs of identity, a production of consumption model.

Evolution of the popular music charts[3]

Counterfeit/sacrificing or production of class (approx. 1909–40)

Popular music charts have been in existence from the earliest days of the travelling road shows and vaudeville. Sheet music publishers circulated lists of their own best-sellers for self-promotion purposes. The lists were also used as subtle encouragement for payment for the public performance of the music. However, pay for play was rare because no legal forces backed the publishers. The publishers were not heavily promoting pay for play since they were making a good living from the sale of sheet music.

Performers were paid only if they performed songs 'plugged' on the publishers' lists. Musicians had little interest in composing their own music because of the lack of financial incentive. Composers worked directly for publishers and were paid only if they had a long track record with the publisher – a sort of indentured servitude. Neither performers nor composers controlled the music code. Authorship was not synonymous with ownership and, its result, financial compensation.

The Copyright Act of 1909 codified and expanded the control of music publishers. The Act provided for two means of payment to the music publishers. The first payment was for performance rights. Here, payment to the publishers for the public performance of their music was established. The second type of payment was for mechanical rights, i.e. a copyright fee levied on player piano scrolls. The player piano was the fastest growing music technology of the early 1900s. Publishers saw their sales of sheet music undermined by the sales of scrolls and demanded and received payment for the transcription for the use of the music.

The owner of the copyright, the publisher, was identified as the owner of the music. Subsequent to selling their song, the composer received little or no performance rights to their own work. The strength of the publishers was enhanced again with the establishment of the American Society for Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) in 1914. The organisation collected fees for the use of music outside the publishers' direct control, especially for performance of music.

The early charts directly reflected the power of the publisher. Charts were, as mentioned, first published by the publishers themselves. *Variety* began listing an amalgam of the publishers' chart. Songs were listed alphabetically. There was no reference to order of any kind. Ranking songs would have been difficult and biased in any case as most songs remained on the charts for an average of three years (Ennis 1994). Even if songs were ranked, so little movement from week to week would have occurred that the process would have seemed pointless.

There were several reasons for this great length of stay. Sheet music was slow to market and the audience was relatively small and had to learn how to play the music. In addition, the publishers purposely slowed the process by only

agreeing to pay orchestra leaders for a few new songs or 'plugs'. Publishers 'released' songs slowly and methodically, making sure to pay only for 'plugs'. The process also helped them anticipate their market and maintain stock efficiently. 'Popular' then meant popular among popular music publishers. Audiences readily conferred status on successful publishers. Few artists were recognised by audiences.

More importantly, charts identified publishers of popular (low culture) as opposed to classical (high culture) music. This stereotype worked well for publishers as a marketing device. The charts codified proletariat taste in relation to bourgeois taste. They also gave the proletariat a cultural identification with a music all its own.

Overall, the charts in this era acted as a counterfeit. The chart as a sign was directly produced and, later, controlled for distribution by the producers of the code. The code shared the wealth of the producers but at the same time controlled what and how much the consumer could consume. The consumer was under the illusion that the wealth of the object, music, was being shared, while what the consumer really gained was a social definition of their tastes – low culture.

Reproduction/representing or production of production (1940–60)

By the early 1930s sheet music was becoming unimportant. Radio and the phonograph were taking the place of the piano player and the player piano. To recoup their loses in the sheet music market, publishers began to encourage the playing of more of their music by plugging more and more songs. This had two direct negative effects on their own business. First, plug payments became diluted – more songs divided by the same money. Second, as the market became 'overplugged' and the popularity of songs became shorter lived, what remained of the publishers' sheet music business was quickly lost.

The charts reflected the tempest in the music business. The emphasis moved to the ever faster rising and falling song. For the first time, songs began to be listed in order of number of plugs on the radio, either in solo performance or within a sponsored programme. Only the publisher and show (if it was a song from a Broadway show, which was very likely) were listed. Artists or composers were still not mentioned. The popularity of songs themselves was finally emphasised. Songs competed against one another, publisher recognition was disappearing.

Most importantly during this era was a shift of some control of the business to performers. Radio was the most important force in the rise of the performers and the transformation of the chart. The shift to the production of a performer-centred industry was the result of sheer numbers. More songs were appearing on the charts. The audience needed more information to help them differentiate among the products. The artist's name became a vital piece of information. The performers also had to be given more attention because it was common for the same song to appear on the charts several times differentiated by various artists. Performers could have multiple songs on the charts. Therefore, by pure saturation, the performers became as important as the song. In other words, the listener now heard the name of the performer more than the names of the performers' hits.

As performers became the centre of attention their bargaining power expanded. Their audience also grew by virtue of the phonograph, radio and jukebox, introduced in 1931. The battle cry soon went out, 'pay for play'.

Performers began to ask for royalty payments. However, most of the money was still going to publishers, who had long-term contracts with ASCAP. ASCAP could not further compensate anyone without drastically increasing demands on radio. But ASCAP did not want to upset its relationship with the powerful radio networks, who were paying for only a single licensing agreement for the entire network. At the same time, ASCAP could not go to the independent stations who were already hostile over the networks' single payment and their own flat-rate, overpriced licence. It seemed that the performers would not be able to break the ASCAP monopoly.

However, the performers would eventually receive help from the independent radio stations. In an attempt to break the monopoly and fee structure, the independent stations formed the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) for the purposes of supporting pay for play. In 1931, they were successful in getting the government to agree that network affiliates should pay individual licence fees. This increased revenues at ASCAP which could be used to pay royalties to composers and performers.

In 1939, the independents finally accomplished their goal of establishing pay for play by forming Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI), a copyright protection and collection organisation for incorporated artists' whose music was played on radio. The broadcasters who were aligned with BMI could control their own licence fees and costs by deciding what to play and how much to play. This benefited the composers and artists by putting them at the centre of the payment model and control of the code.

BMI's growth signalled chart growth. Charts began to list the name of the song, artist and copyright agency. Publisher recognition disappeared and was replaced with the name of the copyright licensing company.

It may be argued that the new charts signified a liberated performer and performance. However, the charts' use of rank narrowly inscribed the artist in a new system of manipulative power. Performers were no longer part of the background; they now became represented in the code itself. Rank creates a status symbol for and of the performer. Status may have liberated performers in many ways but at the same time they also agreed to become commodities and to commodify themselves. The performer sells the self (not the art) to an audience while reproducing the self not as artist but as a more marketable product.

In this system, music is valued in a different way. It is no longer the primary item that is popular, bought or sold. Value of music was no longer negotiated on any level. What is popular is good; what is good is on the charts. This tautology makes value benign. Chart rankings created believers in a universal value of music. Universal value exists before the performance, external and intrinsic to representation. But more subtly and importantly, rank industrialised performers and their audiences. Performance, performer and audience were corrupted by this false exchange-value. All the players were convinced that they were part of this unvarying exchange-value. The model painted thus far is based on contradictions between realities and myths. What is not contradicted is the fact that the model is clearly a sales pitch for the industrialisation of markets, commodification of artists and capitalism. Musicians and their music were channelled in a 'star' system of cheap,

efficient production and planned obsolescence ('hits' are a short-term proposition) with little public sympathy.

All in all, in an attempt to stabilise the representation zone certain compromises were made: 'To make people believe in what is represented in a system, it is necessary at a certain point to put an end to dissonance, to announce compromises' (Attali 1989, p. 19). 'Stars' take big chances; capitalism takes no prisoners. The music business and the charts began to conquer and divide audiences into manageable parts.

BMI was largely responsible for drawing attention to market segmentation. BMI, in its search for artists, can be given credit for reintroducing Race music (now R&B) and Hillbilly (now Country–Western) back to the market. Stations licensed through BMI were indirectly exposed to these artists and indeed gave them a try. Charts for these musics appeared in the pages of *Billboard* by 1945 (see Ennis 1992). The expansion of charts would lead to an increasing marginalisation of performers and audiences, and musics masquerading as genres.

Almost as soon as there were alternative charts, there were crossovers. Crossovers are recordings that appear on more than one chart, ostensibly solely because of their crosscultural appeal. Crossovers are as much of a manipulation of the charts as they are a natural phenomenon rising among diversified audiences. The charts encourage the perception of greater crossover by manipulation of their size. A larger chart can hold more tunes including more top tunes from other charts. The main chart of national hits was expanded many times in the 1950s to accommodate primarily the crossover market. At the same time, the other charts remained smaller, not only to represent the size of production of that genre but also to create the perception of equal 'song-flow' through that chart with that of the main chart.[4]

Charts were becoming more than a mirror of the business. They were becoming a separate construction of the perception of popularity, manipulated with the consumer, not the business, in mind. Manipulation of the charts distinguishes it as science, following a universal law of perception or a constructed system of thought.

The 'scientised' charts began to include the number of weeks a song had been on the chart. Life expectancy of the very human, frail form was emphasised. Its frailty reminds the consumer of his own struggle to belong. Sixties' disc jockeys reached out to this ever lonelier crowd (Riesman 1961) as they searched for something with which to identify. Stereotypical categories used in the charts also reminded us of our need to fit a category for safety in the struggle for civil rights. Charts helped searchers find themselves and channelled them into increasingly marginalised, and lonelier, crowds. The consumers more than ever before identified themselves with a genre of music (Ennis 1992). Before this time one may have been a rocker or not, a bobbysoxer or not. In this era, one is a pop music lover and not a Motown lover, etc. Distinction is among genres, not between classes or generations as clearly as they had been in the past.

All of this history illustrates the transformation of the sign of the charts to a reproduction of the industry. The 'map' (i.e., Baudrillard) becomes seemingly indistinguishable from the business. The function of this reproductive sign was to define the benefits of mass production and marginalisation to willing consumers. By reinforcing the myths of capitalism, especially its inclusiveness, the charts sold the industry and the music followed.

Simulation/repetition or production of consumption (the present or, better, now)

In this section the focus is on the contemporary charts. Charts in the post-modern era exacerbate the previously explained phenomena of individuation and marginalisation. In the first part of this section, the physical changes in the structure of charts are examined. The argument is that the charts have come to hyperrepresent historicism and individualism.

The second part of this section discusses the explosion in the number of music charts and the resultant maintenance of older charts, especially those which perpetuate stereotypes. The argument here follows the previously articulated phenomenon of marginalisation of the charts and listeners.

Design: stockpiling sociality

Contemporary charts include the name of the artist and the rank determined by either airplay or sales.[5] Most charts have additional columns for number of weeks on the chart and previous position. Various statistics imply popularity, but it is 'history' that is important here.

> In order to accumulate profit, it becomes necessary to sell stockpilage sign production, not simply its spectacle. Once music became an object of exchange and consumption, it hit against a limit to accumulation that only recording could exceed. At the same time, repetition reduces the commodity consumption of music to a simulacrum of its original, ritualistic function, even more so than its representation. The growth of exchange is accompanied by the almost disappearance of the initial usage of the exchange. (Attali 1989, p. 89)

First, the statistics might imply 'history' in the sense of a symbolic warehouse in which to stockpile music. Charts provide a way to stockpile music. With the wealth of information, charts seemingly allow for knowing about the music's performance, rather than knowing the performance of music. Here, then, is the creation of a simulacrum of the 'real' music. The simulacrum makes for much easier participation. One need not actually know the original.

Stockpiling contributes to a culture in which overwhelming repetition is accepted as action, especially when there is a sense that nothing else is happening. The longer a favourite song stays on the charts, the more the listener feels a sense of belonging and contribution to mass society. In this sense, the listener's contribution to popular art is their ability to put up with more of the same over and over again.

More specifically, the information regarding the number of weeks on the chart, stars for fast rising songs, placement last week, two weeks ago, etc., further historicises the charts. The historicising of the sign lends to a greater sense of personal control and stability.

Hacking (1981, 1982) and Foucault (1982) come to similar conclusions about the nature of the individual in post-modern society. Hacking, in his histories of statistics, argues that the quantification of the individual through statistical analysis changed the way we think about ourselves in society. He believes that statistical studies of populations generated a discourse about a whole formerly not there. The new discourse caused individuals to categorise themselves within the whole. These categories are really exterior to the society and individual. The process served to reinforce class structure, the supposedly objective nature of capitalism or markets, and, finally, the illusion of individual as independent consumer.

Foucault similarly saw census enumerations as an individualisation technique within a totalisation procedure. First, he believed that 'grids' of statistical social analysis created not just a new individual, but also the very idea of an individual. There was no individual until there was a perceived need to fit into the larger picture. Consequently and conversely, when one begins to think about oneself as an individual, one must also begin to think more about the notion of the social. As we individuate to a greater degree, our society becomes much more complex. The need for additional grids becomes insatiable. The result is an increasingly fragmented person, owing all allegiances to many and none to a few. In agreement with Baudrillard, Foucault argues that the individual now spends most of their time fitting themselves into the market. The current era makes for a fragmented (Foucault 1970), schizophrenic (Baudrillard 1983a) or saturated self (Gergen 1991).

Postman names the 'calculable person' (1992, p. 138), one who knows their value as calculated by an external, refereed source. In the case of the charts, the 'calculable person' knows their general worth by the placement of their favourite song (it does not have to be high, especially for the outcast or alternative listener), staying power by the number of weeks it has been on the chart, creativity by the number of bullets, and popularity by the number of other songs with all of the above characteristics.

At the social level, stockpiling lends itself to illusions of socio-temporal control. Attali refers to this as the 'stockpiling of sociality'. Listeners no longer stockpile what they want to hear but 'stockpile what they want to find time to hear' (Attali 1989, p. 101). Reserves of 'knowledge' give a sense of future action. By the same token, the stockpiler can pretend to know about musics to which they really do not listen but know about even more perfectly through reading the charts. Being eclectic or understanding of other tastes no longer requires knowing the actual cultural product, only its ranking system (more about this in the next section).

In the end, what is the perceived value of the music itself? Exchange-value of the object has become the relationship of a song to other songs. The song no longer signifies itself and/or its artist as unique. A song on the chart signifies other songs in the grouping. This exchange is another type of repetition. The music economy is no longer based on the use-value market economy or pricing system of performance or on some extent representing. Strangely, supposedly diverse objects (recorded music) are now sold at relatively the same price (Attali 1989). The artist and art are reduced to technician and technique. The value of the object is confused with the emotional belonging to the group. 'Popular' comes to describe the audience as it delivers itself to the market.

The use-value of the product has become artificially constructed by the rating system, in this case the chart in which it appears. In this way, the charts have come to represent brands of music. Brands compete differently than do individual products. Based on easily marketed stereotypes and categories, brands hide and wrap a product that is highly volatile and full of contradictions to the category. This is discussed more thoroughly in the next section.

Stereotypes: implosion and explosion

The charts strengthen the consumer's illusion of control through stereotypical categorisation of music. The number of charts multiplies to include new music. The discourse of these charts supports an illusion of diversity and choice. The

consumer reacts emotionally to this 'new' sense of belonging to a more refined group and 'buys' into it. For example, one of the newer charts is a single 'alternative' chart. Obviously there is a category of music called 'alternative', which has historically been marked by its instability. The critical mass of the amount of music produced and the number of radio stations that may use this chart is not great enough to support the chart alone.

So why have this specific chart or any other 'alternative' chart? One reason is to create an artificially higher rank among the competing songs *vis-à-vis* one another and not with songs outside their genre. This then promotes a sense of seemingly more powerful choices across which the consumer feels a stronger and more refined identity with the market. This follows an economics of supply, not demand. However, what is supplied is a consumer profile (which they believe is self-determined) rather than musical diversity.

The Rhythm & Blues chart, still referred to in the business as the 'Black' chart, is the best example of the same sort of creation of the illusion of choice. But the continuance of this chart raises other concerns that I call 'ghettoising' (see Hakanen 1995). The mere continuance of R&B/Soul music charts represents the ever strengthening concentration and cohesion of the 'Black music' market. This phenomenon has two concomitant effects. First, the creation of a monolithic 'super genre' of 'Black music' overshadows the importance, history, richness and diversity of the music included in the R&B/Soul music charts. The label 'Black music' creates the perception of a nondescript music-ghetto to which Afro-Americans are confined and of which others must beware because of its association with race and not necessarily music genre.

The music industry also uses the amalgam of 'Black music' to manage and marginalise its audience. 'Black music', although no longer defined exclusively along racial lines as the artists and audiences become more diversified, is still recapitulated at all levels of marketing with young Afro-Americans in mind. This intensive targeting narrows the choices for Afro-American adolescents and, at the same time, provides the adolescent with a narrow image of themselves.

What is described here runs seemingly counter to a newer phenomenon in which greater number of listeners are crossing genre boundaries. This is especially apparent in the increasing number of white rap fans. The argument is not that this behaviour does not occur frequently, but that even though ethnicities cross over, the charts are still there to remind us of the 'tried and true[ly racist]' categories of traditional marketing. Those categories work even more efficiently in an age when the audience comes ready to wear the categories. They are even stronger and more subtle when the audience believes that they themselves are the creators of the categories.

Conclusion

Attali is right when he says, 'Charts give value, channel, and select things that would otherwise have none, that would float undifferentiated' (1989, p. 108). The charts provide greater public information and carry out an important marketing function.

On the other hand, popular music charts too easily define the art today as quantifiable, common, accessible, technological, digital, etc. rather than as quality,

unique, obscure, artistry, and analogy. Like all written lists, the charts reduce complexity to 'graphical simplicity, aggregating different forms of relationships between "pairs" into all embracing reality' (Goody 1977, p. 79). Our society and personal identities are subtly defined more and more by rating systems, imaginary or real. The charts, like all simulations, 'do not so much adapt to a common taste as they adapt that taste, and it is a taste wherein wanting is more important than liking' (Wagner 1995, p. 62).

The charts support a negative late-capitalist value system, but at the same time are desired for their order-giving value. This contemporary contradiction is embodied in the post-modern charts and is part of the larger dominant contradiction that defines our era: that we have come to accept the negative attributes of capitalism because we believe that it comes with the territory of the best (no longer just better) system – the taken-for-grantedness of this we must beware.

As have all contradictions that have defined past eras, so will the current contradiction explode. The contradiction supported by the charts may explode as new technologies and their markets emerge. For example, with public knowledge of simple advances in data collection will come a greater sense of security in chart accuracy and in our identity.

Advances in recording may create more viable markets for musicians who now cannot gain exposure due to capital restraints and/or economies of scale needed to support their music. The proliferation of new or just more music could undermine the stability of the charts. Movement of songs through the charts would be swifter, creating insecurity. More charts could also be a result, which could undermine the strength of the standard charts (i.e., *Billboard 200*). More than likely, however, greater fragmentation of the charts would strengthen the current, already fragmented sense of identity in charts.

Although highly unlikely, yet possible, free choice may be created by the information superhighway that will bring all possible music selections to us for a listen before purchase. Or better yet, the highway may deliver music that our personal computers have selected for us based on past experience. Imagine the creation of truly personal charts and the literal explosion of the charts as we know them.

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Endnotes

1. Some recent examples are: 'Top ten things President Clinton would do if aliens invaded America', 'Top ten things Bob Dole does for fun', 'Top ten signs that O.J. Simpson is looking for the real killers', 'Top ten least popular names for strippers', 'Top ten signs your camp counsellor is insane', 'Top ten changes in the Miss USA pageant if the judges were dogs', 'Top ten signs your brother is the Unibomber'.
2. In other words: what colour is a chameleon on a mirror? In the past the chameleon would have responded to the medium itself and become silver. Today, the chameleon is so familiar with the medium that it looks to the medium for a model of itself. The chameleon becomes colourless, less truthful to itself, but at the same time believes it has greater choice in the matter.
3. The main sources of information for the first two subsections of this main section are Ennis (1992) and Sanjek (1991). Ennis provides a good social/critical history. He speaks of social uses of music and, in respect to the uses of charts, shows the decision-making process at *Billboard* to 'manipulate' the charts. Sanjek

(considered one of the most authoritative historians of the business) writes a more 'administrative' history, which serves to corroborate 'facts' more than to analyse social phenomena. The book is considered by many to be the best chronology of the music business. The author did examine early issues of *Variety* and *Billboard* for consistency with the claims made about the structure of the charts by the authors cited. In the third section, the author relies on the rhetoric of Attali and primary sources, heavily using *Billboard* and *Spin* in general, *Billboard: 100th Anniversary Issue* (November 1, 1994), and his local Record Stores (which are increasingly more likely to be chains such as *Tower, HMV, Sam Goody,* etc.).

4. Songs were still the primary concern of charts and the same was true of crossovers. In the 1950s and 1960s, crossovers primarily pertained to songs that were covered by various artists (e.g., Little Richard in one chart and Pat Boone in the other with the hit 'Tootie Fruitie'). Crossovers are currently thought of in terms of artists.
5. Note that sales are not reported. They are still maintained as proprietary information by the record companies.

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