


NAV

THE PUDDING

HEADER



THE MOST  
TIMELESS SONGS  
OF ALL TIME

USING SPOTIFY TO MEASURE THE POPULARITY OF OLDER MUSIC

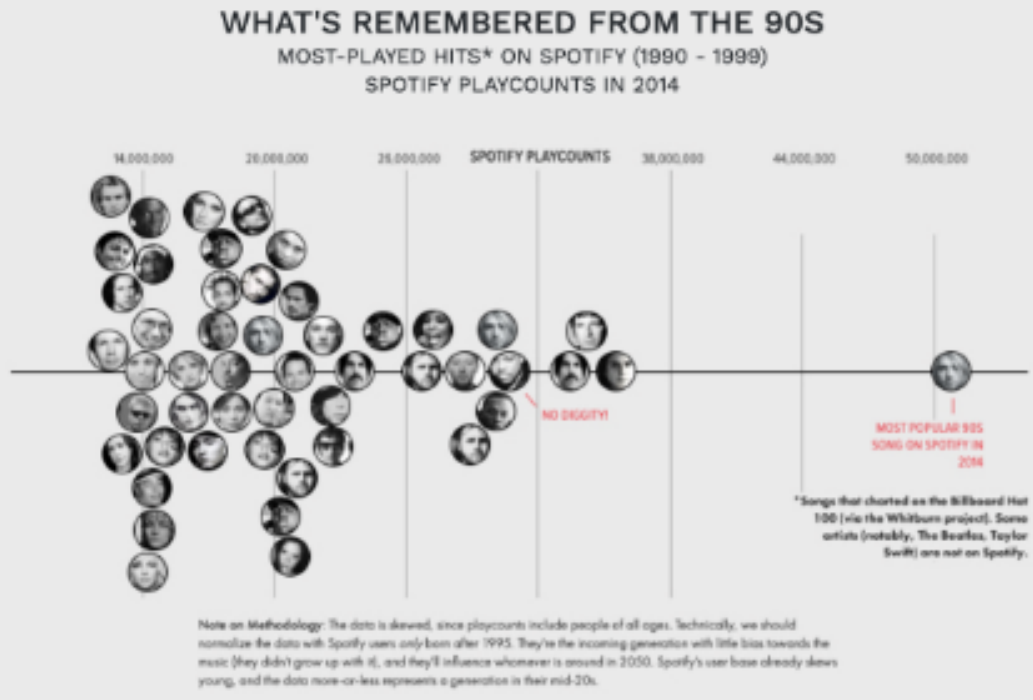
BY MATT DANIELS  
PUDDINGCOOL

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GRAPHIC-A



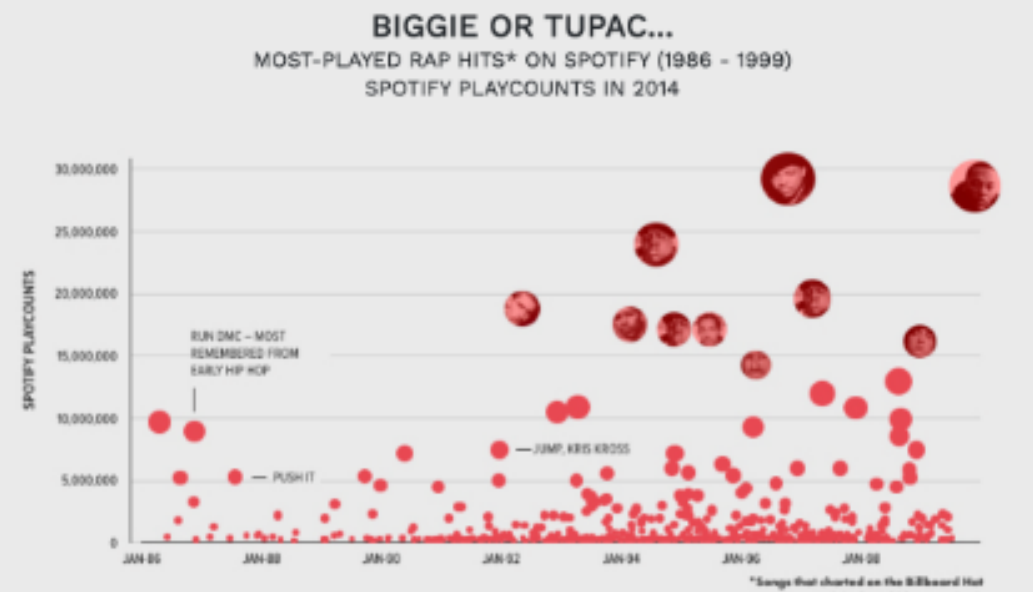
Out of the entire catalog of music from the 90s, these are the tracks on the trajectory to survive. Some of my friends were deeply disturbed by what's been lost in time (e.g., *Paul J. Smith*). And *No Diggity* isn't just anecdotally timeless, it's the fifth most-played song from the 90s.

Note the tracks that hardly charted on Billboard, in their day. *Smells Like Teen Spirit*, a track that never reached the Billboard Top 5 when it was released in 1992, is now the most-played song from the 90s.

Using Spotify plays, we can also see which rappers are still remembered from the early days of hip hop (e.g., *Ragga w. Tupac*).

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GRAPHIC-A




Biggie has three of the Top 10 hip-hop songs between 1980 and 1999. This is a strong signal that future generations will remember Biggie as the reformer artist of the mid-90s hip-hop. And there's no *Diggity* on the top – perhaps it's that glorious Dr. Dre verse.

Hip hop heads will lament the omission of Rakim, Public Enemy, or Jay-Z's *Unbeatable*. But it's a depressing reality that exists for every genre and generation: not every artist will be remembered. The incoming generation will control what's relevant from the 90s and carried into the future, independent of quality and commercial success. For rock, that might be *Blind Mel*. For electronics, that might be *Daft Punk*.

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GRAPHIC-B

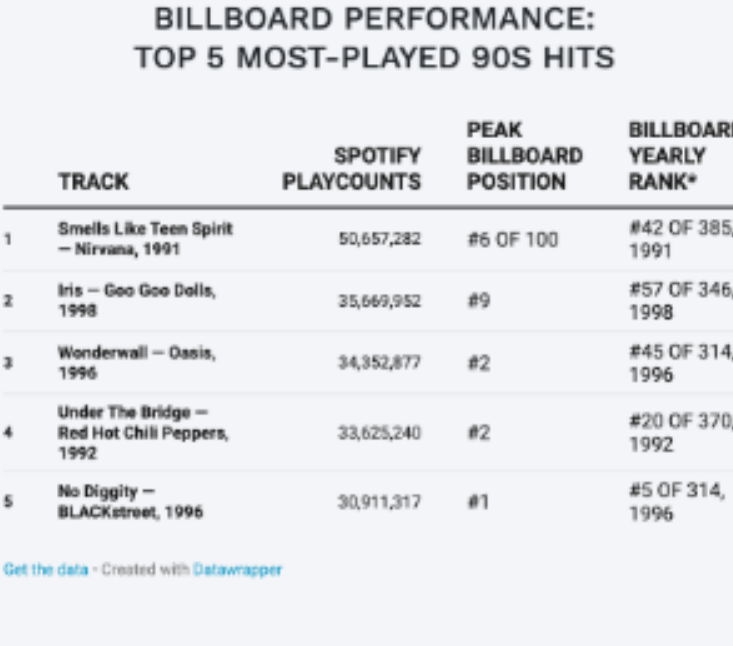


For the entire 1980s, Don't Stop Believin' is the most-played song on Spotify. This song barely charted on Billboard. From the 70s: Bohemian Rhapsody. If we were to time travel to other decades, no one would reasonably believe that these two songs would be cultural touchstones for their respective decades in 2015.

Over time, our biggest stars will fade, and sometimes surprising acts emerge. Let's examine this pattern to better understand the present-day popularity of historic superstars.

Here are the top-5 tracks from the 90s, along with Billboard performance in the year of each song's release date.

GRAPHIC-B



There were 41 more popular songs in 1991 than *Smells Like Teen Spirit*: *End Of The Road* (Boyz II Men), *Baby Got Back* (Sir Mix A-Lot), *Save The Best For Last* (Vanessa Williams), and *I'm Too Sexy* (Right Said Fred).

Since 1991, these songs have slowly faded from culture with the incoming generation, whereas Nirvana's music has not only maintained its popularity, but augmented it.

For example, in 1991, Bobby Lewis's *Tonin'* and *Turnin'* spent 7 weeks at #1. For all intents and purposes, Bobby Lewis was the Beyoncé of 1991. Yet, have you heard of it? Do you know who Bobby Lewis is? Meanwhile, Etta James' debut album dropped the same year, with *At Last* peaking on Billboard at #68.

Music historians will regard Bobby Lewis as a pioneer in rock and roll and R&B, yet whatever led to *Tonin'* and *Turnin'* popularity in 1991 has faded over time. His music, for countless reasons, didn't persevere in the same way as Etta James'.

One hypothesis: *Tonin'* and *Turnin'* success had more to do than just the song... perhaps Bobby Lewis was a huge personality. Great looks. Amazing dancer. When we examine pop hits, popularity is so much more than song quality.

But future generations don't remember Bobby Lewis's dancing and good looks. Spotify only catalogues his music. And unfortunately, that quality didn't endure in the same way as *At Last*. (And of course, we have not even considered the role of covers, samples, and movie soundtracks, etc. – a future project to undertake).

And for this reason, it will be weird to hear future generations reverently listen to groups such as Nickelback – the kids only know their music, not what they culturally stood for in 2005.

Thus far we've only examined two sets of data points: popularity at release (Billboard) and popularity today (Spotify).

Yet, we don't know what happened in between: a song's trajectory from peak popularity until today. If we had such data points, we'd be able to understand how major cultural events or changes in taste influenced this trajectory of a song.

With Spotify, we have so much more detail: daily playcounts. We can understand a track's decay rate from its peak popularity: whether it's quickly fading from culture or holding steady to be played by future generations.

If we were to review "Best of 2015" lists, Daft Punk's *Get Lucky* and Robin Thicke's *Blurred Lines* would be the cultural touchstones. Get Lucky won the Grammy for Record of the Year and *Blurred Lines* was nominated.

If my children's children were to ask what we listened to in 2015, I'd pick either of these two collaborations or someone like Calvin Harris.

But that was two years ago, and we expect popularity to fade. Today, one track in particular has the most interesting trajectory: OneRepublic's *Counting Stars*. *Counting Stars* never had breakout success following its release, yet it has managed to stay in the cultural zeitgeist for more than a year after its peak popularity.

One hypothesis: *Counting Stars* had a chance to spread organically via word-of-mouth since its April 2013 release, cascading from indie music circles to casual listeners. Get Lucky, on the other hand, dominated music channels in its heyday. Most people likely heard the track via mass media rather than friends.

When a track experiences such a rapid ascent, it's a deal with the devil: the song achieves commercial success, but is also saturated culture in such a way that there's immense listening fatigue among fans and fan-like connections.

Lata Doi Ray's *Young and Beautiful* and Arctic Monkeys' *Do I Wanna Know* look like modern equivalents of *At Last*: little commercial success on its release, but steady growth over time. Today in 2015, both tracks are at parity with *Boyz n the City* and *Get Lucky*, and probably never again.

What's still popular from different periods in history is almost never the obvious choice. Accolades, Grammys, and cultural dominance mean nothing to future generations.

The artists who have cult followings and underground appeal: it's a signal for some undefined, mystical quality that's responsible for a hit song to replicate. Perhaps it means that they are culturally ahead of their time. Or perhaps generations will feel obligated to share it, for fear of it fading.

Either way, time will tell.

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