1. RICHARD OSBORNE, 'AT THE SIGN OF THE SWINGIN' SYMBOL: THE MANIPULATION OF THE UK SINGLES CHART'

Entering the chart

What has been the purpose of the singles chart? Ostensibly it has reflected the popularity of music, but really it has driven it. To enter to the Top 40 has been to access a new promotional world: there have been Top 40 broadcasters, Top 40 retailers and Top 40 music journals. As Martin Parker has stated, a good position in the singles chart will 'amplify success as well as quantifying and advertising it' (1991: 208). The chart is as an echo chamber that resounds loudest at the top.

But what is it advertising? Singles promote themselves, yet they are just as likely to be promoting something else. They have been used as loss leaders for albums and they have provided an effective means of introducing the public to nascent acts. Their currency is newness. To this end, the popularity of a single has to be marshaled. The record business has desired that they generate the right publicity for the right product at the right time. Hence, if the singles chart is not working in their interests they will exploit and manipulate the statistical variables in the way it is compiled.

These variables are the subject of this chapter. I will address who is responsible for compiling the singles chart, the breadth of the survey, the representation of the results, the frequency of the chart and how a 'single' is defined. I will do so through the lens of the singles chart in Britain, but by way of comparison I will also address charts in the US. Britain has been chosen because it is a country where the singles chart has been particularly central to musical life. This has been attributed both to the national character and to the political economy of its media and music industries. In turn, this centrality has caused fears within these industries that the chart can be 'broken'. The

concern moves in cycles. It can be prompted by anxiety that the chart has been manipulated too much; therefore it no longer represents the public's taste and will not garner their attention. On other occasions it will arise because the public's taste is considered boring and is not serving the interests of the industries; therefore the chart needs to be manipulated to make it serviceable again. The effects of digital technologies have been felt keenly. The inclusion of data from downloads and streaming has transformed the construction and conceptualization of the chart. The great quandary for British music businesses is whether it has overturned its importance.

Who is doing the counting?

The UK singles chart and the US charts both have their roots in the entertainment press. The American charts were launched in trade papers such as *Variety* and *Billboard*, while the British chart arrived in journals aimed at the public. The *New Musical Express* (*NME*) issued the first chart based on singles sales in November 1952, followed by similar charts in the *Record Mirror* (1954) and *Melody Maker* (1956). The impetus was financial and promotional. Percy Dickens created the *NME* chart in the hope it would provide record companies with a tool to advertise in his publication. He was successful too. The first number one was Al Martino's 'Here in My Heart'. Within weeks it was being advertised by Capitol Records as a chart topping single ('Pop Charts Britannia' 2012).

The British trade journal *Record Retailer* launched its own chart in 1960, which has subsequently been used for historical chart data. Nonetheless, there continued to be a number of rival charts in the UK until 1969, when the British Market Research Bureau (BMRB), funded by *Record Retailer*, initiated a unified singles chart. Thereafter, this chart has been compiled by a variety of research organizations, funded in various forms of partnership by *Music Week* (the successor to *Record Retailer*), the BBC, retailers

associations and/or the British Phonographic Industry (BPI). BPI is the trade association for the UK recording industry. While it is possible for most British labels to become members, it has been viewed as being dominated by the multi-national major companies (Cloonan 2007: 49). Since 2001, the chart has been the responsibility of The Official Charts Company, an organization that is funded by BPI and the Entertainment Retailers Association (ERA). The UK singles chart has never been independent of industry interests.

How wide is the survey?

The first American record charts were introduced in *Variety* in the late 1930s. They concerned jukebox popularity. Jukeboxes were useful for statistical purposes as they tabulated each time a record was played. A 'Top 40' was chosen because this was the standard number of discs in a machine (Brewster and Broughton 2006: 58). The earliest British record charts, in contrast, were concerned with sales and their statistical basis was less systematic. Although it was billed as the first 'authentic weekly survey of the best-selling "pop" records', the original *NME* chart was compiled loosely, arrived at by asking a mere 25 retailers what records had been selling (Anon. 1952: 8). The breadth of the surveys had expanded by the mid-1960s, by which time the *Melody Maker* was targeting 250 'chart return' shops to gain their data (Leslie 1965: 50). The rigour of these surveys remained questionable, however. Writing in this period, Peter Leslie noted:

> Although the integrity of those who compile the charts from the returned
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> questionnaires (about 50 per cent only) is beyond question, the data on the
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> questionnaires must be suspect: no figures of actual sales are given, only the

order of customers' preference – and the compiler has no way whatever of

telling if the person who filled in the form was accurate or not. (1965: 50-51)

It was not long before suppliers were falsifying data or having it falsified for them. The return shops remained limited in number: after it was taken over by BMRB, the survey still addressed only seven per cent of record retailers (Hunter 1971: 11). Their identity was an open secret and they were therefore an easy target, falling prey to record companies, managers and agents, whose practice of chart 'hyping' was widespread and has since been openly admitted. As an example, Dave Arden, the son of manager Don Arden, has detailed how his father would employ agents to work upon chart return stores, getting them to elevate the sales figures of his own charges and decrease the popularity of his rivals (Rye 2017: 32-3). The bribes offered to record retailers took a number of forms, including money, gifts and free stock. Another method of manipulation was for the record companies to buy their own records. They would pay consumers to visit chart return shops and purchase copies of their singles.

It has been claimed that it was only possible to hype a record into the lower reaches of the charts. Radio producer Phil Swaren has stated, 'I don't think that many records became massive hits because of manipulation. I do believe that if the public didn't like a record they wouldn't buy it, no matter what you did' ('Pop Charts Britannia' 2012). The response of the chart hypers, however, is that they deliberately limited their activity. According to Arden, 'The old man was very careful, he always knew there's only so far you can push something, and then it's got to have its own legs and then he also didn't want people thinking it was being hyped' (Rye 2017: 32). Furthermore, by reaching the lower rungs of the charts, key promotional benefits would already have been gained. As Swaren states, 'a record going in the charts at number 39 and the radio

stations would suddenly take a bit more interest in it and therefore might begin to play it' ('Pop Charts Britannia' 2012).

By the early 1980s it was believed that the chart was 'clogged up with hyped records' (*The Chart Busters* 1980). This situation resulted in investigations by the *Daily Mirror* and the television programme *World in Action.* BPI countered that there was 'no widespread hyping' (ibid.). They also maintained there was nothing wrong with the fact that they were responsible for policing the chart and therefore the record industry in effect 'sat in judgement on themselves' (ibid.). In 1987, the BMRB's successor, the Gallup Organization, widened the chart survey to approximately 500 stores and brought in barcode scanners to monitor record sales. Chart return shops nevertheless continued to be targeted.

Throughout this period, the incompleteness of the survey had considerable effects. Although many singles were hyped, the success of some genres was overlooked, as was the output of smaller record labels and specialist record shops (Stanley 2013: 596). Significant sales of reggae and Asian records took place in localized stores that did not provide chart returns. Consequently, the popularity of this music was not accurately reflected in the Top 40. There were also chart rules stating that sales needed to be registered across retailers from around the country (Cope 1999: 91). As a result, the regional hits of independent labels were hampered.

It was only in the 1990s, when a particular aspect of barcode technology came to the fore, that the hyping of chart return shops was reduced. The larger record chains introduced the practice of centralized buying, whereby their head offices would use barcode data from sales to order stock for an entire chain of shops. As a result, the effectiveness of targeting individual retailers was negated (Negus 1992: 129). In the twenty-first century, it has been eliminated completely. This is in part because the vast

majority shops now provide chart data: the Official Chart Company claims to document the sales of '15,000-plus chart-reporting retailers, who together represent an estimated 99% of the singles market' (Official Charts 2019a). It is also because physical retail constitutes an insignificant element of singles 'sales'.

The Official Charts Company first incorporated download sales figures into its main singles chart in 2005, and has included information from streaming companies since 2014. In turn, these digital formats have come to dominate the charts. With their arrival, the practice of manipulating sales figures (or 'sales equivalent' figures, in the case of streaming) has lessened. It has not been eliminated entirely, though. There have been reports of people setting up false streaming accounts to register multiple plays for artists. Some of this activity is coming from 'superfans', who are attempting to raise the profile of their favourite artists (Montgomery 2018). Elsewhere, artists and record companies are employing 'streaming farms' to generate millions of plays for particular songs (Ingham 2018). These digital platforms have in addition raised new questions about the breadth of the survey. They have a worldwide span. Thus, it has been claimed that it is 'a genuine possibility that a global chart, pushed by the major record companies and adopted by these "gatekeepers", could become a bigger priority than local equivalent charts' (Lambot 2015: 9).

How are the figures represented?
Billboard has presented the main American singles chart as a 'Hot 100' since 1958. In Britain, the number of songs listed has varied and expanded with time. The original *NME* chart detailed twelve titles; the current Official Charts Company chart lists the hundred most popular singles. There has nevertheless been continuity and correspondence in the printed or online display of the figures. The published charts in

both countries place the number one single at the top; the bottom placed song is at the bottom. Beyond this there is little to distinguish the representation of each individual title. The top singles might be given a bit more space than those below, but only to a marginal extent. In addition, the only numbers provided are the order of preference. The charts do not publicly document a record's sales figures.

This presentation masks considerable differences between the chart positions. The charts in Britain and America have various cut-off points, the most important of which is the split between the Top 40 singles and those below. Although this division is not marked in the charts themselves, it has traditionally been at this point that media companies' most significant promotional activity has kicked in. This number is also utilized by record companies, who recognize a Top 40 position as a marker for the success of a record, as well as a trigger for the resources they will commit to an act. There are further cut-off points within the Top 40. A new level of promotional activity will ensue in if the single reaches number 30 or above. This process redoubles as the chart numbers ascend, reaching a climax with the number one record, which receives considerably more media and record company attention than any other chart position. There is something curious about this process. The companies influence the way the charts work, but then allow the charts to influence their own working practices.

The statistical dispersion is reflected in sales. In Britain, the number one record will regularly sell double the amount of the single below. The same is true of the top ten singles in relation to the singles from eleven to twenty, and of the top twenty when compared with singles in positions from 21 to 40 ('Pop Charts Britannia' 2012). The music industries have nevertheless chosen to mask the differences between these numbers, presenting the charts as a 'Top 40 democracy' (Weisbard 2014) and promoting a 'false equivalence' between its songs (Laing 1969: 28). This suits their dual

purpose of using the charts as a marketing tool for new material, which will gain its most important fillip as long as it reaches the top 40, as well for ensuring that blockbuster releases achieve maximum returns.

The presentation of the numbers has further effects. Most countries have an array of singles charts, covering different sectors of their markets. Yet they differ in the attention that they give to each chart and in the way their charts relate to one another: they are shaped by the political economies of national music industries and in turn help to shape them. Looking at America, for example, we can see how the country's scale and diversity is reflected in its charts. *Billboard*'s Hot 100 offers a broad overview of the popularity of recordings, but the trade journal also publishes significant minority charts, which are demographically and regionally based. Historically, the most notable have been the rhythm and blues chart (which has detailed the popularity of records among African-American audiences) and the country chart (which first tabulated this music's popularity in the southern states from which it hailed). These charts, along with others such as the Latin chart and the gospel chart, have commanded considerable attention. They have acted as barometers, taking the measure of discreet markets of American music. They have also been the source of 'cross-over' singles, records that have come to fruition in one sector but have then been promoted in other charts. An ideal has been to 'break' a hit in a minority chart and then work it towards the Hot 100. In fact, this is why the *Billboard* chart features one hundred songs. According to Ernest A. Hakanen, 'it expanded many times in the 1950s to accommodate primarily the crossover market' (1998: 105).

The UK also has a number of singles charts, addressing different formats, genres, regions and business practices. The national singles chart is more dominant and immediate than its American equivalent, however. The niche charts have rarely

operated as sources for it. Instead, for those with commercial ambition, the 'official' singles chart has been their target from the first. It has provided the major record labels with their main means of promoting new acts and new music. They have worked in sync with media companies and retailers to ensure this chart works quickly and effectively. Music journals such as *Melody Maker* (in the 1960s), *NME* (in the 1970s and 1990s) and *Smash Hits* (1978-2006) have let the Top 40 dictate their editorial decisions. The charts have similarly shaped (and been shaped by) the playlists of the BBC's national youth radio station, Radio 1(1967-present), and the selection policy of its most viewed music programme, *Top of the Pops* (1964-2006). High street record retailers have put the Top 40 countdown of the singles chart on prominent display. As well as providing a pull for UK record companies, this concentrated promotional activity has attracted interest from abroad. Writing in the early 1990s, Keith Negus documented how success in Britain was being 'used as a lever to negotiate the release of material in other territories' (1992: 11). The UK charts 'set the agenda for record companies and radio stations across Europe', while American labels sought 'British success as part of their global strategies rather than simply to gain more sales' (ibid.).

It has been argued that the British are 'more interested in charts than any other nation' (Jones 2002: 3) and that the singles chart has 'a special appeal to the British sensibility' (Stanley 2013: 3). It is not for everyone, however. While there are record companies, artists and audiences who regard the chart as the apex of their musical world, there are others who have viewed the Top 40 as something to kick against. At times this chart has been so pervasive that the market has bifurcated around it. Its most successful rival has tabulated independent singles. The independent chart first emerged in the polarized 1980s. Tellingly, it has not operated on a regional basis and nor has it been used as a feeder for the main chart. It has instead monitored the means of

production. If you are 'independent' of the major labels you are in; if you are signed or distributed by them, you are not. The usefulness of this chart has been debated. There are those within the independent scene who have purposefully sought escape from the Top 40; there are others who have not wanted to become ghettoized from the commercial centre of British musical life.

How frequent are the charts?

It has been a recurring feature of singles charts around the world that they are tabulated weekly. This accords with the rhythms of commercial life: retailers make singles available on a set day of the week; they reach peak points of sales according to daily shopping patterns. This policy is not without its effects. Martin Talbot, the chief executive of The Official Charts Company, has noted 'If the public don't like the record, it won't go to number one. If they like it, and the conditions are right. The sales come in over the right span [...] the planets have aligned' ('How to Make a Number One Record' 2015). The key words here are 'over the right span'. The weekly charts are biased towards records that can achieve popularity in a limited time period. This clearly favours the singles that are being promoted most heavily, as well as artists who have the most dedicated sets of fans. The weekly tally has had a further distorting effect. A hit record will have to sell fewer copies to reach the top of the charts in the summer than it will in the Christmas period. Record companies organize their release schedules accordingly, promoting their newer artists in quieter periods and saving major releases for the weeks of blockbuster sales. These phenomena were most notable when the charts were concentrated upon physical product. As we shall see, the larger record companies had means of getting consumers to buy chosen records at the most apposite time. Meanwhile, the task of creating a hit was harder for those with smaller budgets. As

Parker has noted, a weekly chart 'discriminates against minority musics in an apparently democratic fashion' (1991: 208).

Previously, chart weeks were marked by space as well as by time. Recordings were released in different territories at different times and on different days. The charts are now more global. The span of the Internet has meant that recordings released in one territory but not in another are liable to be pirated. The industry's solution has been to launch 'New Music Fridays', a worldwide correspondence of release dates, which was first established in 2015.[1] This initiative was opposed by smaller and more localized record labels, who feared that it would lead to a homogenization of the world's charts. Martin Mills, chairman of the Beggars Group, predicted that the resultant 'lack of diversity will strangle innovation and music will become moribund and uninteresting, and consumer interest will erode. It will also dis-empower the artist, since the major labels will regain total control of access to market. It will create short-termism, and damage career longevity' (Cooke 2015).

The results have been mixed. On the one hand, international artists are now responsible for a higher proportion of chart hits. In 2016, they claimed 95 per cent of the top ten most streamed tracks in the UK (the remaining five per cent was due to 'This is What You Came For', a collaboration between the British artist Calvin Harris and the Barbadian singer Rihanna) (Ingham 2017a). On the other hand, the concept of

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[1] A similar initiative is 'on air/on sale', which was launched in the summer of 2015. Where tracks were previously broadcast ahead of their release date, they are now made available to download or stream at the same time they issued to radio. While this initiative combats piracy, it clashes with British record companies' policy of using pre-release broadcasts to build pent-up demand. It has also been viewed as a contributory factor in the slowing down of the chart. In response a 'feeder' chart has been introduced in the UK. This 'trending chart' aims to identify 'those new artists showing most growth and greatest momentum' (Williamson 2016: 4).

'international' has become broader. Mills' fears appear to have been sparked by Americanization, but some of the biggest selling singles are now by Latin artists.

Turning full circle, downloads and streams have not only affected the geography of the singles chart, they have also raised questions about time. Rather than collating data and reporting it on a weekly basis, it is now possible to have a continual update of sales and usage. As such, there have been suggestions that the charts should be more frequent. This has been realized in America, where *Rolling Stone* launched daily updated charts in 2019. In Britain, details can be gained about mid-week chart positions but the official chart remains weekly. This has been defended as being in the national interest. Talbot has stated, 'we have 60 years of heritage: there have been more than 1,200 Number 1 singles. If the chart was changing day-by-day, you could multiply that by 19. It dilutes how special it is for an artist to take the crown' (Anon. 2012: 14).

What counts as a 'single'?

Billboard's Hot 100 always reached beyond sales, as it incorporated radio play from the first. Aligned with America's commercial broadcasting system this meant radio stations were the major target of hyping activity. The trade journal married together sales figures and broadcast figures by weighting each component in the chart. Using the same technique, *Billboard* has found it relatively easy to incorporate streaming information into the Hot 100. They have included data from audio streaming services since 2012, and from YouTube since 2013. In that year *Billboard*'s average weighting was 35-45 per cent of the chart tally for physical and digital sales, 30-40 per cent for airplay information, and 20-30 per cent for streaming data (Trust 2013). In contrast, the UK charts have been focused solely on sales. As a result, the Official Charts Company has

found the incorporation of streaming data problematic both technically and conceptually.

The attempts to reconcile streaming with chart criteria have garnered considerable attention, but this masks the fact that there has long been flexibility and manipulation regarding what constitutes a 'single'. In the earliest years of the UK charts, some compilers listed the two sides of a single separately, while others incorporated separate cover versions within a single chart entry. The first charts also documented hits rather than singles per se. In the 1950s and early 1960s, most of the records sold were singles, but some artists also achieved significant album sales. Frank Sinatra was the most notable, and in 1956 his *Songs for Swingin' Lovers* collection became a top ten hit in these 'combined' charts. The same feat was realized by some of the Beatles' early albums. Nevertheless, as overall album sales increased it gradually became established that there should be separate charts for singles and albums. In addition, the idea of a 'single' coalesced so that in chart terms they were equated with physical products by individual acts: the b-side formed part of the chart placing; the cover version did not.

This did not mean that chart rules were fixed for all time. They have been expanded to accommodate other singles formats. Twelve-inch singles were included in the chart in 1983, and cassette singles and CD singles by the end of the 1980s. A 'single' chart entry, therefore, has not been made up of a single product. Instead, various formats have been collated to establish the result. There have been differing rules about the extent to which these formats should resemble each other. For example, it was originally stipulated that a twelve-inch single should have the same tracks as its seven-inch equivalent. There has also been flexibility. It later became acknowledged that, as long as the formats share a 'lead' track, it would be possible to have various b-sides and remixes across the different versions of a single. Restrictions have remained,

nonetheless. The Official Chart Company rules for July 2019 stipulate that a seven-inch single can have no more than three different songs and must be under 25 minutes duration; a twelve-inch single or CD single is limited to four different songs and must be under 25 minutes; a 'remix' single can have any number of remixes of the lead title, but must be under 40 minutes duration (Official Charts 2019b).

Following the 1980s introduction of barcode data as the source for chart information, record companies used multi-formatting as a means to hype records into the Top 40. They could increase sales of a single by issuing it in as many versions as possible, having realized that some dedicated fans would purchase every iteration of a release. Multi-formatting was also used to sustain a single's chart success. One of the reasons why Frankie Goes to Hollywood's 'Two Tribes' remained at number one for nine weeks in 1984 was because new twelve-inch versions were regularly being issued. This practice was viewed as getting out of hand, with some singles being released in ten or more editions. Chart rules were subsequently introduced that reduced the number of eligible formats: record companies were restricted to five in 1991, then four a few years later, and then three physical formats in 1994.

Singles have also been defined by their cost. Chart compilers have established rules about the minimum dealer price of a record. The July 2019 guidelines have these at 40 pence for a download, 50 pence for a seven-inch single, £1.79 for a CD single and £1.99 for a twelve-inch single (Official Charts 2019b). There have also been criteria about minimum retail price. For example, the independent singles issued by Crass in the 1980s were ruled out of chart contention because they were deemed to be too cheap (Stanley 2013: 312). BPI later changed its tune about this policy, lifting any restrictions on retail price (bar free product). This was in response to the major record companies' demands.

In the 1990s a new method hyping was adopted. Singles would be priced cheaply in the first few weeks of release (often at half the recommended retail price and thus selling at a loss) and would sometimes include limited edition free gifts (records that include gifts of posters, cards and/or stickers remain eligible for the charts). Record companies would issue these singles to broadcasters for radio play well ahead of their release dates. These tactics prompted fans to purchase records as soon as they were issued, ideally with the effect of forcing them into the charts. With these means the record industry was able to influence purchasing behaviour so that singles would enter at high chart positions, including at number one. This was not without consequences. Bob Stanley has noted how this 'looked very impressive in theory, but it just meant that people were losing interest in the chart because the charts weren't a consensus of what the country was listening to or what the country liked' ('Pop Charts Britannia' 2012).

This practice reached a climax in the year 2000, when the UK chart featured 43 separate number one singles, all of which entered at the top. This marketing practice, coupled with the onset of file-sharing, led to a decline in sales of singles. Across the whole of 2004, only 32 million singles were sold, the lowest annual figure. In 2005, the re-release of Elvis Presley's 'One Night' reached number one selling just 20,463 copies, whereas in the 1980s a number one single would regularly sell ten times that amount (McLean 2005). The policy had an effect on the television chart show *Top of the Pops*, which since the 1970s had been the music industry's most valuable asset for promoting singles sales. According to BBC producer Trevor Dann, 'The old dynamic of the chart, where records entered low and rose, peaked and then fell, changed completely. Every number one was a new record and that meant that *Top Of The Pops* was not playing big hits, it was playing new releases' (Evans 2016: 259). Audiences for the show dwindled, leading to its cancellation in 2006.

This might be considered poor timing, as by this point the chart was incorporating downloads. The inclusion of this format boosted sales (189 million singles were sold in 2012, the highest annual figure) and was viewed as restoring the health of the Top 40. Downloads have rarely been sold to the public at discount prices and they do not include free gifts. Thus, as their contribution to the charts grew in importance, it made the record companies' pricing and promotional practices somewhat redundant. Consequently, the charts slowed down.

Compared with streaming, downloads were relatively easy to incorporate into the chart. Download singles are bought individually and their sales can be tabulated. In this sense they can be equated with physical singles. There were some hurdles to overcome before they could receive chart recognition, nevertheless. A lead track on a physical single is distinguished from a track on an album. It is given its own packaging, price and targeted promotion. It will also probably have limited availability: from the 1980s onwards it became standard practice that singles would be deleted shortly after they exited the charts (and sometimes before they did). In contrast, a downloading platform is full of 'single' songs, but there is little means to distinguish a song that is planned as a single from one that is an album track. There is also little to distinguish new songs from old songs. The Official Charts Company fought against this. When downloads were first incorporated in the chart there was a stipulation that for songs to qualify they must contemporaneously be issued as a physical single. However, as downloads came to dominate the Top 40 – by the first three months of 2006 they had come represent 88.7 per cent of all single sales (Williams 2007: 12) – the idea of releasing physical singles became less desirable. In response, the industry allowed itself to drop this chart ruling.

In January 2007 all download tracks were made eligible for the charts. This meant that any song of any age could be a single. Old songs entered the Top 40, including Rage Against the Machine's 'Killing in the Name', which reached number one in 2009 on the back of an anti-*X Factor* crowd-funding campaign. In general, these developments were viewed positively. The music journalist Miranda Sawyer argued, 'the charts are good again; with the resurgence of the single and downloads now being counted, there are climbers and non-movers and novelty tracks (2006). Reggie Yates, who was responsible for the chart countdown show on Radio 1 from 2007 until 2012, claimed that the charts had become 'important' once more ('Pop Charts Britannia' 2012).

Streaming, in contrast, has been regarded as diminishing the value of the chart. Reflecting some awareness of the problems to come, the chart compilers approached this format with notable reluctance. Spotify was launched in Britain in 2008, but audio streams were not incorporated into the charts until 2014. Talbot claimed that 'Because of the nature and the status of the Official Singles Chart here in the UK, with its 60 years of history and its cultural heritage, it wasn't something we could rush into' (McGuinness 2014). The main numerical difficulty was how to equate a stream with a sale. A ratio of 100:1 was eventually adopted. This was justified on the grounds that a single download would generate the same royalties for rights holders as one hundred streams. The Official Charts Company was cognizant of the fact that different streaming tiers deliver different royalty rates, but chose 'a blended rate' averaging out the royalties for subscription and ad-funded services (Anon. 2014: 1).

The main theoretical problem was how to move from a chart based solely on exchange to one that includes a focus on use. The issue here was not that sales provide a more accurate reflection of taste than streams do (after all, streaming details the

employment of a song, whereas buying a single does not guarantee it will be played).

Conversely, it was not felt that quantifying sales should be abandoned as being inferior

(it can be argued that the purchase of a single is indicative of a commitment to music,

whereas streaming gives no indication of a listener's investment in a song). Instead, the

public debate centred on the awkwardness of placing these two forms of quantification

together. The record companies, meanwhile, had a different concern. What was most

problematic for them was a shift in the chart's utility. They had valued the chart less as a

measure of popularity than as a guide to consumerism. An exchange has been useful for

them because it tabulates newness; ideally the engagement of a new consumer with a

new product. In contrast, a usage chart is statistically biased towards re-use; it details

the same consumers listening to the same old songs. It is therefore less effectual for the

industry's promotional and marketing campaigns.

This became apparent as streaming became dominant in the chart. Because there

is no weighting in the British system, it could quickly displace other formats. In early

2014, before streaming was incorporated, downloads were responsible for 99.5 per

cent of chart activity (McGuinness 2014). Immediately afterwards, streaming activity

made up half of the chart, and within a year it constituted the vast majority of 'sales'. It

was a blockbuster release that highlighted how things had changed. In the summer of

2016, Drake's 'One Dance' remained at number one for fifteen weeks. Its longevity

demonstrated wider trends: the Top 40 was slowing down and was featuring fewer new

releases (Sutherland 2017b: 1). Although the chart had once been engineered to reduce

the rate of change, people now complained that it was 'stagnating' and had become

'sluggish and dull' (Sutherland 2017a: 12; Jones 2016).

Playlists were held responsible. Identified by streaming companies as their

distinguishing feature, they were accounting for 58 per cent of their listeners' activity

by March 2017 (Mulligan 2016; Mulligan 2017). According to critics, it has not been the general public that determines playlist consumption, but instead the streaming companies' 'editors' (Sutherland 2016a: 1). The resulting listening experience has been deemed to be 'passive' (Ingham 2017b). Moreover, the streaming companies have agreed that they are 'presenting' music to the public:

> Most people in the world are passive listeners. They don't actively seek new music. They do not read music blogs. They hardly listen to radio. They don't read music magazines. They don't share music and they like being spoon-fed. What they are listening to just so happens because they are listening to it. (Anonymous Spotify employee, quoted in Sun 2019: 157, 158)

Playlists have been blamed for 'the lack of new artist breakthroughs' and 'the stagnation of the chart', as well as 'UK music being superseded by America' (Sutherland 2016b: 12). Facing the need to speed up the Top 40, the first response of the Official Charts Company was to rebalance its ratios. In January 2017 it was decided that 150 streams would now equate to one sale.

Streaming growth remained exponential. Despite this new ratio, its overall contribution to the chart still increased, accounting for 85 per cent of all calculations within six months (Sutherland 2017b: 1). Consequently, a further measure was introduced. In June 2017, it was stipulated that if a single had been in the charts for ten weeks, it would be made subject to 'accelerated decline'. Thereafter, if the single experienced three consecutive weeks of diminishing popularity, its stream to sale ratio would be increased to 300:1. Talbot stated, 'This is all about supporting new music.

We're making sure the chart continues to be a place that reflects the consumption of new records in a fast-changing world' (Sutherland 2017b: 1).

At the same time, the Official Charts Company tackled a separate issue, which was highlighted by another blockbuster release. When Ed Sheeran's album *Divide* was released in March 2017, all sixteen of its tracks made the singles top twenty, nine of them in the top ten. Sheeran proved that new releases could still have an impact on the charts, but for some this only served to illustrate the extent to which the charts were 'broken' (Mulligan 2017). It was suggested that the Ed Sheeran phenomenon was the result of including streaming data, but it in fact had its roots in an earlier decision. Streaming was incorporated in the charts in the same manner as downloads: all songs were eligible, regardless of their age or whether they had been promoted as single. This was no longer viewed as being fit for purpose. To ensure that individual performers would not clog up the charts, it was decided in June 2017 that in any given week only the three most popular 'singles' of any given artist would be allowed space in the Top 100. With this measure there was a return to the idea that a single was a bespoke object, albeit that singles were being determined by their popularity, and not necessarily because they had been chosen by the industry.

Further tinkering ensued. An argument was put forth that subscription streams should be valued more highly than ad-supported streams. This was on two grounds. First, it was claimed that paying subscribers were somehow more attentive than those who listened to streaming services for free (Ingham 2017b). Second, it was argued that the industry gains more income from subscription services. Therefore, if streaming ratios were supposed to reflect royalty payments, the 'blended rate' should be replaced with separate calculations for different types of streams. In June 2018 it was decided that the rate for subscription services would be 100 streams to one sale, whereas for ad-

supported it would be 600:1. The 'accelerated decline' figures were recalibrated accordingly: subscription services would be quantified at 200:1, while the ad-supported ratio would be 1200:1.

There are a number of curious aspects to these developments. One is the fact that they were so openly discussed. In the past there had been a desire that the compilation of the Top 40 appear 'natural' to consumers. There was little mention of statistical methodology and amendments to rules were considered a trade concern only. The incorporation of streaming into the charts made public the idea that they must operate in the interests of the national music industries. Following on from this, changes to methodology have become more frequent. As it has become accepted practice that the charts can be manipulated, this has liberated the compilers to make repeated changes to get the balance right. The third development is more reactionary. One of the oddities about the solutions to these digital problems is the extent to which they are rooted in the physical past. Where the acceptance of streaming data used to be broad and open, single tracks are now distinguished from album tracks. In addition, the industry cannot stop equating value with money. The problem of passive streaming has been blamed upon playlist culture, a practice that exists across both subscription and ad-supported tiers. However, this is not where the chart compilers have looked for a remedy. Instead, listening for free is regarded as being six times less important than paying for a service.[2]

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[2] Music business analyst Mark Mulligan has offered a twist on this development. He argues that the record companies' concentration upon playlists means that casual listeners are now more economically important than engaged listeners, leading to the production of music that is 'creatively bankrupt' (Mulligan 2019). In order to reorient the industry towards committed listeners and creative artists, Mulligan suggests that royalty rates should be reduced for playlist streams. The question that follows on from this is whether a parallel penalization of playlists could offer a statistical salve for the 'broken' charts.

This outlook has coloured one of the latest developments in the UK charts. Data from YouTube was first incorporated in July 2018. The reason given for its previous exclusion was that YouTube was not a member of ERA and therefore not eligible for the chart. There was also concern that YouTube data would not be the sort to keep the chart alive. This service is free to access; the motivations for viewing a video are not clear; it contains unlicensed material; its content is international rather than localized; and it is enormously popular. The final factor was the one that was most feared. Globally, YouTube provides the main means for consuming music; it has the ultimate capacity to transform local charts. This popularity also provides the reason why the Official Charts Company had to come to terms with YouTube data at some point: if it had failed to do so the chart could have been considered irrelevant. The acceptance is only partial, however. The Official Charts Company accepts data from 'official' video platforms (that is, licensed material from recognized record companies). User-generated content does not contribute to the chart. In addition, YouTube content is penalized in the same manner as other ad-supported audio streams. It is calibrated at one sixth of the value of subscription services. It will not be a surprise if this ratio is ratcheted up further if the distorting pull of YouTube begins to be felt.

Exiting the chart

The singles chart is not broken because it has never been fixed. It is mutable and at no point has it offered a straightforward presentation of the public's preference for recordings. Record companies have manipulated it. They have falsified sales and bent the rules. The chart has symbols that swing.[3] The public has manipulated the chart too.

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[3] A sign of the centrality of the singles charts to British life is the redolence of the theme music that has been employed for radio and television chart shows. Popular music fans of

They may have fallen prey to the record companies' promotional strategies, buying into the popularity of records that have been hyped, lapping up multi-formats and rushing out to purchase cut-price singles on the day of release. But one of the reasons why they bought these records is because they wanted their favourite acts to be promoted. There was a desire to hear them on the radio, read about them in the music press and watch them on *Top of the Pops.* If they got them into the charts then this could happen.

This leads us to something that has been broken. The UK singles chart used to matter. But this was not because it documented what had already happened with a single, but instead because it triggered what would come next. There was a link between a single's chart position and the level of attention it would go on to receive. There was a system of mediators who would know what to do with it. It is this relationship that has been severed. The Official Charts Company may well find a formula that will make the rhythm of streaming consumption match their desired rhythm for the chart. What they will find harder to restore is the dynamic spark that a Top 40 chart placing used to provide. Record retailers have long since given up displaying the singles chart; there is no music journal that is tied in to it; radio broadcasters are no longer attuned to a Top 40 ideal. Streaming companies such as Spotify and YouTube are in fact the main mediators of their own hits. This means that when a song receives a high chart placing there is little impact for the consumer. The song will already be on the streaming company's playlists and its video will already have been viewed. If the singles chart has lost its significance it is because it is now doing the job that it originally purported to do. It no longer drives the popularity of music; it merely reflects it.

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certain ages will be familiar with 'Yellow Pearl' by Phil Lynott or the CCS version of 'Whole Lotta Love'. 'At the Sign of the Swingin' Cymbals' by Brian Fahey and his Orchestra was one the earliest and most evocative themes. It sound-tracked the chart countdown for Alan Freeman's 'Pick of the Pops' on the BBC Light Programme from 1961 to 1966.

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