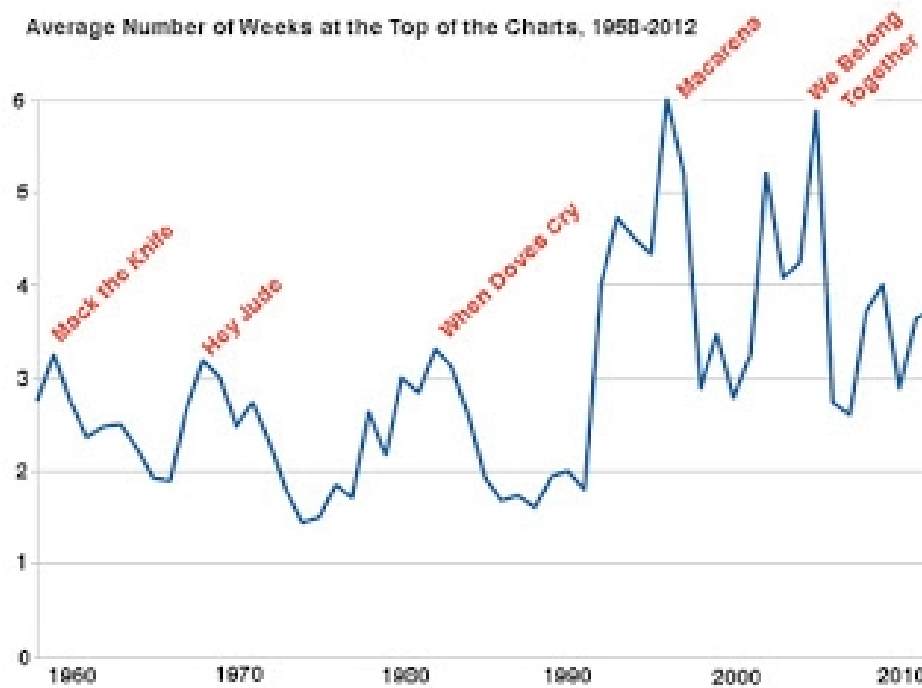


I Heard He Sang the Good Song

The other night, on an impulse, I listened to the longest-playing Billboard single for each year since 1958, when the Billboard Top 100 started. It is a fascinating walk through two generations of US history, from *At the Hop* to *Harlem Shake*. As a stand-alone history, these four hours of music manage to chronicle a great deal of what was going in US popular culture: the arrival of blacks, women, and Latinos to the cultural podium; the last stand of jingoism (*Ballad of the Green Berets*) and then the ascent of the counter-culture; the erosion of Puritanical self-censorship into frank lewdness (*I wanna Hold Your Hand* to (almost) *Get Low*); the rise of sarcasm (*You're so Vain*, *Loser*) and irony as standard modalities. And on and on and on.

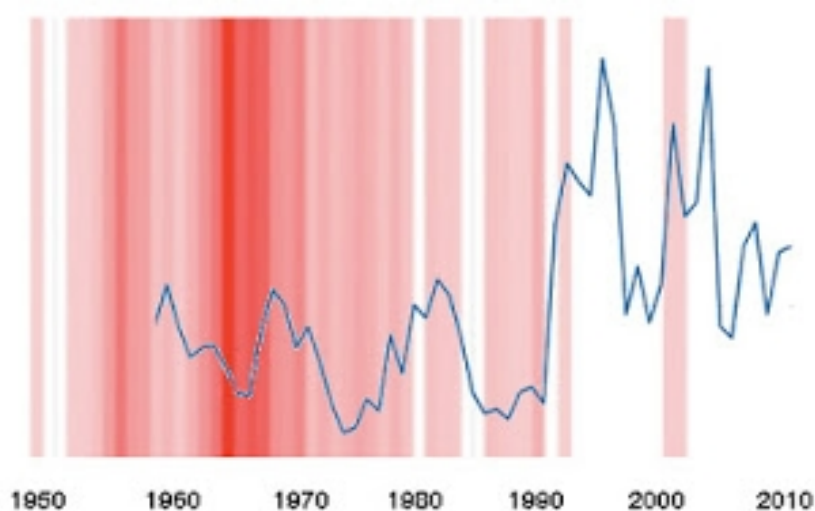
But in working through this litany, the question I found myself drawn to had less to do with the music as a reflection of the larger culture, and more to do with the music itself. It is fairly evident that the Billboard chart is consolidating as time goes by. In 1958, the longest-running top hit was *The Purple People Eater*, at six weeks. Six weeks would be the average longest-run for decades to follow, but in the last twenty years, the average longest run has moved up to eleven weeks. The lesser hits are consolidating, as well. There are fewer and fewer one-week wonders, so the average play time of any given top song has increased substantially. This pattern is somewhat obscured by a recent trend for the top hit to “shuffle” between two or three contenders, where songs in the past were likely to peak only once and then disappear.



The chart above can be explained in several different ways. There are issues of industry consolidation and payola, there is the possibly countervailing effect of radio's diminishing importance in the music landscape. But I don't believe that even Clearchannel is interested in playing *Call Me Maybe* on repeat for two months unless there is some kind of market demand for that to happen.

This raises a second question, which is more subjective, though not so subjective we can't quantify it. The chart above suggests waves where the culture wants to consider a new song every week, and waves where the culture just wants to listen to *The Macarena* for a whole fucking year. Which of these waves produce better music? To take a stab at this, I created a heat map for *Rolling Stone's* 200 greatest songs “of all time”, which really means from 1934 to 2003, with a heavy emphasis on the 1960s. *Rolling Stone* has a specific aesthetic and bias, which we can debate the merits of, but at least it's a well-known variable.

Superimposing the two charts, we see an interesting effect. The eras of heterogenous radio play generally correspond to a higher heat-map rating in terms of “greatest songs”. The eras of more homogenous radio play (most obviously the Macarena Bubble in the 1990s) correspond to lower greatness, per *Rolling Stone*.



An obvious line of doubt here is that *Rolling Stone*, like any bunch of cautious literary critics, prefers the old and the dead. But even allowing for that, we see an interesting disconnect in the 1960s. The music the *Rolling Stone* considers to be graven in stone comes from the mid-'60s: *Like a Rolling Stone*, *I Can't Get No Satisfaction*, *Respect*, *Good Vibrations*, *Yesterday*, and so forth. The Billboard trend for the same movement in music peaks in 1968, with *Hey Jude* (inarguably a classic), but also such month-plus forgettable hits as *Love is Blue*, *Honey*, and *This Guy's In Love With You*.

A similar pattern seems to occur in the late '70s and early '90s, where a creative musical genre appears at a time of diverse radio play, and gets consolidated into progressively longer-running hit songs that have less and less cultural impact.

DOING IT YOURSELF

Let's face it: if you don't want to replicate this experiment, you must hate America. So here is my [possibly somewhat decayed] set of links for doing it on Youtube. It takes about four hours, and it *must be done in one session*:

- 1958 - Sheb Wooley - [*Purple People Eater*](#)
- 1959 - Bobby Darin - [*Mack the Knife*](#)
- 1960 - Percy Faith - [*Theme from "A Summer Place"*](#)
- 1961 - Bobby Lewis - [*Tossin' and Turnin'*](#)
- 1962 - Frank Valli and the Four Seasons - [*Big Girls Don't Cry*](#)
- 1963 - Jimmy Gilmer and the Fireballs - [*Sugar Shack*](#)
- 1964 - The Beatles - [*I want to hold your hand*](#)
- 1965 - The Rolling Stones - [*I can't Get No Satisfaction*](#)
- 1966 - SSgt. Barry Sadler - [*The Ballad of the Green Berets*](#)
- 1967 - The Monkees - [*I'm a Believer*](#)
- 1968 - The Beatles - [*Hey Jude*](#)
- 1969 - The 5th Dimension - [*Aquarius / Let the Sunshine In \(The Flesh Failures\)*](#)
- 1970 - Simon & Garfunkel - [*Bridge over Troubled Waters*](#)
- 1971 - Three Dog Night - [*Joy to the World*](#)
- 1972 - Roberta Flack - [*The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face*](#)
- 1973 - Roberta Flack - [*Killing Me Softly with His Song*](#)
- 1974 - Ray Stevens - [*The Streak*](#)
- 1975 - Captain & Tenille - [*Love Will Keep us Together*](#)

- 1976 - Rod Stewart - [*Tonight's the Night \(Gonna be Alright\)*](#)
- 1977 - Debbie Boone - [*You Light Up My Life*](#)
- 1978 - Bee Gees - [*Night Fever*](#)
- 1979 - The Knack - [*My Sharona*](#)
- 1980 - Blondie - [*Call Me*](#)
- 1981 - Diana Ross and Lionel Richie - [*Endless Love*](#)
- 1982 - Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder - [*Ebony and Ivory*](#)
- 1983 - The Police - [*Every Breath You Take*](#)
- 1984 - Prince - [*When Doves Cry*](#)
- 1985 - Madonna - [*Like a Virgin*](#)
- 1986 - Dionne Warwick "and friends" - [*That's What Friends are For*](#)
- 1987 - Bon Jovi - [*Living on Prayer*](#)
- 1988 - Steve Winwood - [*Roll With It*](#)
- 1989 - Janet Jackson - [*Miss You Much*](#)
- 1990 - Sinéad O'Connor - [*Nothing Compares 2 U*](#)
- 1991 - Bryan Adams - [*Everything I do \(I Do It For You\)*](#)
- 1992 - Boyz II Men - [*End of the Road*](#)
- 1993 - Whitney Houston - [*I Will Always Love You*](#)
- 1994 - Boyz II Men - [*I'll Make Love To You*](#)
- 1995 - Montell Jordan - [*This is how we do it*](#)
- 1996 - Los Del Rio - [*Macerena*](#)
- 1997 - Elton John - [*Candle in the Wind 1997 / Something About the Way You Look Tonight*](#)
- 1998 - Brandy and Monica - [*The Boy is Mine*](#)
- 1999 - Santana and Rob Thomas - [*Smooth*](#)
- 2000 - Santana - [*Maria Maria*](#)
- 2001 - Destiny's Child - [*Independent Woman Part I*](#)
- 2002 - Ashanti - [*Foolish*](#)
- 2003 - 50 Cent - [*In Da Club*](#)
- 2004 - Usher with Ludacris and Lil Jon - [*Yeah!*](#)
- 2005 - Mariah Carey - [*We Belong Together*](#)
- 2006 - Justin Timberlake - [*Sexy Back*](#)
- 2007 - Beyoncé - [*Irreplaceable*](#)
- 2008 - Flo Rider with T Pain - [*Low*](#)
- 2009 - Black Eyed Peas - [*I Gotta Feeling*](#)
- 2010 - Kesha - [*Tik Tok*](#)
- 2011 - Rihanna with Calvin Harris - [*We Found Love*](#)
- 2012 - Carly Rae Jepsen - [*Call Me Maybe*](#)

Added since original posting:

- 2013 – Robin Thicke - [*Blurred Lines*](#) (4.17 week average)
- 2014 – Pharrell Williams – [*Happy*](#) (4.73 week average)