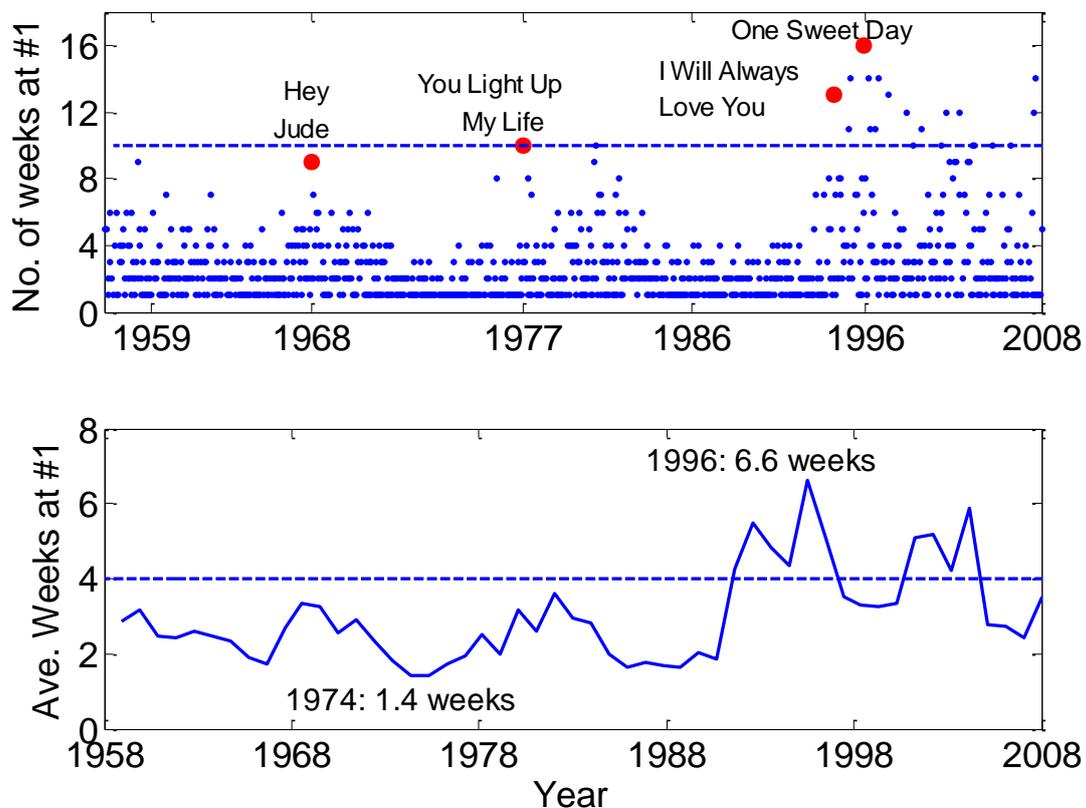


Music Statistics: Seeing the business side to songs

International Year of Statistics, September, 2013, John K. White, author of [Do The Math!](#)

Since August 4, 1958, Billboard has been compiling its Hot 100 from an amalgam of record sales and DJ plays. More than 2,500 weeks later with over 1,000 different No. 1s, such data tells us about changing styles. But can it also tell us about competition and business?

Here's where basic statistics helps. By plotting the length of time at No. 1 and the average number of weeks at No. 1 over the last 50 years an interesting trend is seen. Somewhere around 1990 the music business changed. Where once Hey Jude and You Light Up My Life were the exception, topping the charts for 9 weeks in 1968 for The Beatles and 10 weeks in 1977 for Debbie Boone, lengthier chart toppers such as I Will Always Love You (Whitney Houston, 13 weeks, 1993) and One Sweet Day (Mariah Carey and Boyz II Men's, 16 weeks, 1996) have become commonplace.



Number of weeks at No. 1 and average number of weeks at No. 1

In fact, prior to 1990, only five songs made it longer than 8 weeks at the top (“Theme From a Summer Place” by Percy Faith, “Hey Jude,” “You Light Up My Life,” “Endless Love” by Diana Ross and Lionel Richie, and “Physical” by Olivia Newton-John) compared with 24 after.

Highlighting the lesser-performing No. 1s prior to the '90s, 1974 and 1975 saw 37 different No. 1s each, with such immortal hits as “Hooked on a Feeling” by Blue Swede, “Can’t Get Enough of Your Love Babe” by Barry White, and “Thank God I’m a Country Boy” by John Denver, all chart toppers for only 1 week. The average time at the top for each No. 1 went from a low of 1.4 weeks in 1974 to a high of 6.6 weeks in 1996, a year that saw only eight different No. 1s, including the longest-ever chart topper “One Sweet Day” (16 weeks).

Lots of inferences can be made without getting too bogged down in the subjective study of likes and dislikes or generational differences. Perhaps there was more competition in the '60s and '70s with lots of new pop songs and start-up bands. One could also say that songs today are better, although, without being too subjective that seems unlikely as well as a much harder case to make. That the '60s and '70s fostered more diversity is beyond doubt, despite the perceived notion that modern independent bands abound today. The present notion of the independent music band seems to be a myth, at least when judged by sales. More likely, the music business is better at selling itself. Well, that is, according to the simplest of statistics.

The Beatles may have sung “Can’t Buy Me Love,” but it seems that money can also make a lot of “Daydream Believers.”

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Further examples are available on the [Do The Math! download site](#).