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REVIEW ESSAY

Listomania

Uncharted Territory. What Numbers Tell Us About the Biggest Hit Songs and Ourselves. By Chris Dalla Riva. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025. 340pp. ISBN 9798765149843.

Introducing the bibliography of this entertaining book, Chris Dalla Riva writes that

> Fred Bronson's *The Billboard Book of Number One Hits* is not listed, despite being consulted in almost every chapter ... If you are looking for an obscure fact about a specific number one hit and can't locate it in any other sources, it almost certainly came from Bronson's book. (305)

Forty years ago, Greil Marcus reviewed Fred Bronson's book for *Popular Music.* 'The whole history of rock "n" roll, pop music since 1955', he wrote,

> is inexorably reduced to and enclosed by the vagaries of the number one spot on the *Billboard* chart ... The value of this remarkably thorough, responsible reference book is that, as a field of play, it opens up the structural possibility that the desire of any pop music fan or the theory of any scholar may be instantly reduced to meaninglessness, and that anyone's moment of meaninglessness might spark a theory, or a desire: an infinite number of essays worth reading could be derived from this book. (Marcus 1987 110-112)

Enter Dalla Riva, who 'decided to listen to every song ever to top the *Billboard* Hot 100', working chronologically from 4 August 1958 to 11 January 2025. His book is, one could say, a bold and ingenious attempt to make meaningful music history – 'the story of American popular music' – out of the meaninglessness of 'chart toppers'. In thirteen chapters, Dalla Riva covers thirteen 'eras', time periods organised by a kind of argumentative coherence of hit-making rather than by simple calendar time. The shortest era is less than three years (4 August 1958 to 19 June 1961); the longest is more than eight years (21 February 2004 to 3 March 2012); each chapter develops its own themes, a mix of those rooted in historical circumstance, and those seemingly serendipitous.

One effect of this approach, ironically, is that Dalla Riva has relatively little of interest to say about any particular number 1. He does end each chapter by organising the era's chart toppers into the good ('highlights'), the bad ('lowlights'), the can't-make-up-my-mind ('argument starters'), the 'odds and ends', and a list of the remaining number 1s about which he says nothing at all. The success of this book, in short, does not rest on Dalla Riva's critical sensibility. He is by trade a data analyst, and his classification of highlights and lowlights is determined by a ratings system, by the scores produced by a panel of three listeners – himself, a friend, and a (regularly changing) 'independent' assessor. But these scores are, in effect, an afterthought to each chapter. Dalla Riva's real purpose is to answer a much trickier question: what, if anything, does the *Billboard* chart, a particularly public way of measuring musical popularity for the last 70 years, tell us about cultural change?

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Popular music academics have, on the whole, been wary of drawing sociological conclusions from sales figures. Changes in chart music seem better explained by industry marketing practices – the practices that determine consumers' understanding of what it means to be a pop fan.[1] And the recurring media reports of pop sales statistics being used as big data from which to derive measures of the 'mass mind' are treated sceptically by most popular music scholars (see, for example, Behr 2018).[2]

I have to confess, then, that I was not expecting to admire Dalla Riva's book as much as I do. His authorial voice is disarming. He is clear and informative about the effects of commercial sales practices on the *Billboard* chart. And he is well aware of the problems of reading chart information as 'data' – one of the pleasures of this book is Dalla Riva's ability to come up with methodologies to test such readings and, indeed, many other familiar pop clichés.[3]

In looking back over the seventy years of the *Billboard* chart, Dalla Riva identifies two interlocking drivers of musical change: taste and technology. And he approaches the chart toppers in each of his eras from two perspectives: what they reveal about each era musically and how they reflect underlying changes in the way that popular music in the USA over the last seventy years has been made and sold.

This dual approach enables him to cover a great variety of issues. On the one hand, he traces changing hit records and song-writing conventions: instrumentals and fade-outs, death songs, lyrical language, loudness and length, politics and protest, gender and race, dance music, quotation and sampling, etc. On the other hand, he describes the changing technology of music making and sound selling: SoundScan, CDs, MTV, Autotune, ringtones, drum machines, Napster, TikTok, and Spotify (with a nice comparison to Muzak) alongside the history of copyright law, radio regulation, and the music industry's corporate structure. You name it, Dalla Silva covers it.

The story of American pop told by *Uncharted Territory* is, in fact, probably familiar to most popular music scholars, but the book should still find a place on their reading lists. As an introductory text, it is entertaining, informative, and provocative (as well as providing insight into research practice). Dalla Riva's engaging use of examples, anecdotes, and character sketches undoubtedly brings the subject to life. I only once wrote 'rubbish!' in the margin. On page 134, Dalla Silva remarks that Bob Pittman, its co-founder, claimed that 'Before MTV, if you were a big act, no one knew what you looked like'. Dalla Silva apparently agrees:

> Of course, there were outliers like The Beatles and Elvis Presley, but realistically if you missed an artist perform on a handful of variety shows and didn't own one of their releases, you wouldn't have had an easy way to know what they looked like. (134)

Well, I started buying records in the late 1950s (before the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart was launched!) and I always knew what the artists looked like, not just from 'the handful of variety shows' on TV but also from the rather bigger variety of music and teen magazines passed round at school.

A music history written around *Billboard* number 1s obviously excludes a vast array of music makers whose records never reached the top of the charts, but it is a narrative device

[1] See, for example, Parker (1991) and Hakanen (1998)'s interesting reflections on why charts and lists seem so important in popular music culture, to which I will return.

[2] Behr is responding here to news stories that scientists at the University of California, Irvine had analysed half a million songs released in the UK over the previous thirty-year period and deduced from a broad trend towards sadder songs that British people were getting sadder. As it happens, Dalla Silva has a much subtler statistical take on the prevalence at various times of sad chart toppers – see pp. 270-275.

[3] See, for example, his exploratory use of Wikipedia as a way of measuring cultural memory (pp. 159-163).

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that gives Dalla Riva's book its energy and, more importantly, a strong sense of pop music as a community. Popular music history involves not just the weekly small changes in sales statistics but also the much longer drawn-out rhythm of growing up and growing old, moving from childhood to parenthood, from the community of family, school, and neighbourhood to the more scattered networks of college, friendship, and work. People's tastes are shaped by their own youth music, which remains different from the youth music of their children. *Billboard* charts can be used to map shifting generations, the effects of fashion: novelty followed by boredom, excitement followed by nostalgia. A chart topper may be 'of its era', but eras are what shape history.

The question becomes: how is pop music *heard* over time? Always in a musical context, notes Dalla Silva. His example is witnessing 'a cover band play the greatest version of "Rosalita"':

> How is this possible? How could I have seen Springsteen – one of rock music's great live performers – play the song yet suggest that a cover band bested him and his E Street compatriots? The reason I make this assertion is one fact: my grimy location … I'm talking about seeing a live band in a packed bar. (66)

I find this argument entirely convincing – it's my experience too that a young cover band in a crowded pub offers a more 'authentic' rock experience than the original – ageing – band does in an arena. But Dalla Silva never really discusses how the charts work as the musical context in which chart toppers are heard. Both Parker and Hakanen, in their 1990s *Popular Music* articles (see footnote 2), suggested that it was the charts themselves which determined not just the records people bought and took notice of but also how they listened to pop music, how they made sense of it. Certainly, as a teenager in Britain, the charts shaped what music I heard and saw on radio and television. Watching *Top of the Pops* (BBC TV 1964-2006) on Thursdays and listening to *Pick of the Pops* (BBC Radio 1962-1972) on Sundays were rituals of pop fandom.

But over the 1960s and 1970s, the charts lost their legitimating function. It was fun to see rock, reggae, punk and club acts, etc., on *Top of the Pops*, but the show no longer offered them any kind of validation. Britpop briefly made the hit parade the focus of attention again in 1995, when Oasis and Blur released new singles on the same day in a hyped-up competition for the number 1 spot, but Blur's 'victory' had little effect on either band's reputation or career.[4]

What survived from the pop chart era was the association of popular music with lists.[5] As a rock critic, for example, I was early on invited to submit my Top Ten to Paul Gambaccini's *Top 200 Albums* (1978) and *Top 100 Albums* (1987) and to provide records-of-the-year lists to December issues of various magazines and newspapers. These days, in Britain at least, there seems to be an endless succession of newspaper features listing acts' 'Greatest Records'.[6] Such lists are used not to sell records but to attract readers, readers who already have the records but like to argue about which ones are the best. Book publishers are also on the case, publishing various versions of *1000 Recordings to Hear before you die* (Moon 2008) – such books are both a way of getting people to look for records they don't have and to measure their taste (for the records they do have) against a kind of authoritative critical voice.[7]

[4] The story is told in John Niven's stage comedy, *The Battle*, which opened at the Birmingham Rep Theatre in February 2026.

[5] In her book *Listful* (2023), Joanna Nolan describes people's everyday use of lists – shopping lists, most commonly – but lists do seem to be particularly important for popular music culture.

[6] For an early example, see Alexis Petridis: 'Bob Dylan's 50 Greatest Songs – Ranked!' *Guardian* 9 April 2020.

[7] I have at least one friend who has, since he retired, spent much of his time searching second-hand vinyl shops with the object of owning all thousand records before he dies!

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Then there are setlists, a key to the live music business (for copyright reasons), and playlists, used by DJs on the radio and in clubs and dance halls. While such lists may tie in with record selling, their primary commercial purpose is to attract and keep audiences.

In *Uncharted Territory*, Dalla Silva notes that when Steve Jobs introduced iTunes at the 2001 Macworld conference, he explained to the assembled techies how to make a playlist:

> I want a song from this album, a song from this album … Put together in a playlist, rearrange the order, and listen to them in any order I want. The music compiled the way I want, not the way some record company wants. (214)

But people had been putting playlists together like this for at least twenty-five years by then, using an earlier recording device – the cassette recorder. One aspect of the brief (pre-CD) sales dominance of commercial cassettes (and personalised listening devices like the Ghetto Blaster and the Sony Walkman) was mix tape culture. In his moving memoir of his first wife (fellow critic Renée Crist), *Love is a Mix Tape. Life and Loss. One Song at a Time* – a book of lists, Rob Sheffield writes that 'There are all kinds of mix tapes. There is always a reason to make one' (Sheffield 2007 17). Functional reasons, of course (The Party Tape, The Holiday Tape, The Gym Tape, the Jogging Tape …) but emotional reasons too: The We're Going to be Friends Tape, The Courting Tape, The Break-Up Tape, the Remember This Tape … In Sheffield's words, 'There are millions of songs in the world, and millions of ways to connect them into mixes. Making the connection is part of the fun of being a fan' (23). And sharing them in the cassette age was a key expression of love and friendship. (I've still got the boxes of the cassettes I made or was given in those years.)

Dalla Silva describes well the effects of the new digital playlist technology that emerged at the end of the twentieth century. The passage from Napster through iTunes to Spotify marked a seemingly inexorable move from owning records to accessing them, to a different kind of possession. The *Billboard* charts encouraged people to acquire records for themselves in order to feel part of a consumer community. The materiality of that community was represented in the records' chart positions. In Spotify's business model, by contrast, music lovers have to be convinced that instant access to music is 'at least as good, if not better, than owning it' (260).

Dalla Silva describes two effects of the Spotify world. On the one hand, the supply of music seems to have become limitless.

> By 2023, over 100,000 tracks were being added to Spotify each day. If you also consider direct upload platforms – like YouTube, SoundCloud, and Audiomack – that number is much larger. In fact, Will Page, Spotify's former chief economist, told the online publication MusicRadar that 'More music is being released today (in a single day) than was released in the calendar year of 1989' (282).

On the other hand, Spotify is not in the business of creating consuming communities but of using algorithms to fine-tune users' individual tastes, their me-ness, by providing each subscriber with their own 'perfect playlist'.[8] That said, in everyday life playlists continue to have a social function, to be crucial, for example, to the organisation of weddings, birthday parties, anniversary celebrations, and funerals. In Britain the most culturally resonant BBC use of a music list is not *The Official Chart on Radio 1 with Jack Saunders* but *Desert Island Discs* (launched in 1942, sixteen years earlier than the *Billboard* Hot Hundred), in which famous guests reflect on their careers through their choice of the eight records they would take to a Desert Island (see Brown et al 2017). The programme's place in the UK imaginary has nothing to do with the guests or their choices but lies in its format. I know very few people who

[8] I take this term from Pelly (2025).

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haven't at some time or other drawn up their own list of the records they'd take to the island: their lives recollected in a playlist.

What I conclude from this is that the flaw of chart-based music histories (including this one) is their assumption that a record's final chart position marks the end of its journey, that it has reached the destination (number 1 or as near to it as possible) for which it was produced and marketed. But it is also the case that its journey – its place in listeners' lives – is only just beginning.

Simon Frith
Reid School of Music, Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh, UK
simon.frith@ed.ac.uk
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