

9 | The Development of the Australian Pop Charts and the Changing Meaning of the ‘Number One’ Single

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The quest for a number one single has been part of pop music since the early days of rock ‘n’ roll; the Beatles aimed for the ‘toppermost of the poppermost’,¹ while AC/DC felt it was a ‘long way to the top if you want to rock and roll’.² Bob Stanley argues that for ‘over four decades the [pop charts] would be a national fixture in Britain, like the FA Cup, like Christmas’; this was also true in Australia.³ Beyond the musicians and fans, the recording industry relies on charts to measure success. Such charts play an important role in the decision-making of record companies, press, television, retail and online stores, and streaming platforms.

If we are trying to understand Australian music, it is useful to discuss not only music made by Australians but also the recordings that are the most popular among Australians in any particular week; the weekly pop chart is how the recording industry measures this popularity. The music at the top of the charts has often been dominated by American and British artists, rather than Australians. A weekly pop chart nonetheless reflects Australian tastes as they shape and are shaped by the Australian music industry ecosystem. In the 1960s, the Motown record company had much success in the United States, releasing fourteen top ten singles in 1967 alone. In contrast, according to the Australian national *Go-Set* charts, there was precisely one song released by Motown (‘The Happening’ by Diana Ross and the Supremes) that reached the top twenty in 1967 in Australia.⁴ Whether Australians found the Motown sound too ‘Black’ for its liking, or whether Motown had poor Australian distribution and promotion, it shows that Australian listening habits can differ from that of listeners elsewhere, even where Australian-made music is not involved.⁵

This chapter aims firstly to give an overview of the history of the pop chart, exploring how the charts began in an Australian context and the varying changes in the music industry that affect how charts are structured and calculated. Secondly, it will explore some of the factors that play a role in a recording reaching number one in Australia in the last decade, discussing three distinct ways in which a song may reach the top of the charts: audience awareness, audience engagement and continued listening.

In discussing these factors, we hope to give a sense of the most popular songs that Australian audiences listened to in the last decade and how these songs may have achieved success.

A Short History of the Australian Charts

Before 1966, singles charts in Australia were collated individually by radio stations (for example, Sydney's 2SM or Melbourne's 3AW). As such, these charts represented the tastes of specific capital cities, rather than the whole of Australia's national music taste. The first Australian national pop music chart appeared in October 1966 inside *Go-Set* magazine, Australia's first successful pop music newspaper for young people. This chart was topped by the Beatles' double A-side 'Yellow Submarine'/'Eleanor Rigby'.⁶ *Go-Set* began in Melbourne but rapidly expanded to having offices in most capital cities, printing both local news in these areas (such as gig guides) and more general national music news across Australia. The move from a local Melbourne paper to a national publication 'gave readers the opportunity to compare and contrast between the states and witness music tastes across Australia'.⁷ Beyond just the capturing of this data as a historical record, the publication of a national Top 40 chart also signified that Australia *had* a national music industry *and* a national musical identity that was worth representing.

Arrow situates the advent of *Go-Set* – and by extension the first national Australian charts – within the post-war rise of a philosophy of consumerism and the associated rise of a 'baby boomer' youth culture.⁸ In Australia, the rise of consumerism picked up speed in the 1950s, as post-war rationing ended and wages rose, giving the middle class significant amounts of disposable income and allowing the proliferation of electrical appliances and cars, among other items. Increased leisure time and disposable income also meant that sales of music recordings increased. In the 1950s, Australia saw the rise of the 'teenager' as a marketing category, amid a demographic 'teenager explosion';⁹ nonetheless, youth culture only very slowly gained a foothold in mainstream cultural outlets, with significant repression of youth culture by disapproving adults. When Beatlemania hit Australia during their 1964 tour, a national youth culture became less threatening to older Australians.¹⁰ It is likely no coincidence that a successful youth music-oriented magazine with a national chart occurred relatively soon after the Beatlemania of 1964 and the 'Easyfever' surrounding the Australian-based rock band the Easybeats in 1965.

As Stratton notes, 'the 1970s saw the beginning of a shift in importance away from state identities to a sense of Australia as having an over-determining, single Australian cultural identity'.¹¹ One part of creating this cultural identity in relation to music was *Countdown*, a music television programme which was broadcast on the ABC between 1974 and 1987.¹² Designed for family viewing, *Countdown* featured weekly chart updates, along with interviews and performances by charting artists. So popular was the programme that appearances on it became part of the feedback loop of success, which also played a role in developing 'the sense of Australia as having a nationally identifiable popular music tradition'.¹³ After *Countdown* ended in 1987, other music television programmes on Australian television – in particular *Video Hits* (Channel 10) and *rage* (ABC) – continued to influence the mainstream of Australian popular music.¹⁴

After the demise of *Go-Set* in 1974, the Kent Music Report emerged, prepared by journalist David Kent. In 1983, a *Countdown*-branded version of the Kent Music Report began to be published by the Australian Recording Industry Association (ARIA). By 1988, after the end of *Countdown*, ARIA made the decision to calculate the charts 'in-house' and this saw the end of the prominence of the Kent Music Report and the rise of the ARIA charts. ARIA now calculates Top 50 singles and albums charts, along with charts for genres including jazz and blues, classical, dance, hip hop/R&B, and country.

Over the last decade, the ARIA charts have progressively transitioned from measuring sales to measuring plays on streaming services such as Spotify, Apple Music and YouTube.¹⁵ According to a March 2023 ARIA press release, streaming audio and video together account for 78.1 per cent of recording-industry revenue, which as we argue is reflected in the makeup of the charts.¹⁶ With this historical background in mind, we next move on to a discussion of the meaning of a number one single, and the way that the changes in the charts have altered that meaning.

What Is a Number One Single?

While there might be hard numbers – streaming numbers and sales – behind a single reaching number one, the national number one single is also based on decisions made by the chart's collators. Decisions have been made (a) to issue the chart weekly, rather than daily or fortnightly; (b) to count from a particular day of the week; and (c) about what data to include

and how much weight to give each data source (for example, streaming versus physical sales). All of these choices affect what song may reach number one.

Even the idea of a 'single' is somewhat amorphous, especially in the age of downloads and streaming services. Take the ARIA singles charts of the 19 March 2017, when the English singer-songwriter Ed Sheeran had the #1, #2, #5, #6, #10, #11, #16, #19, #20, #24, #31, #32, #36, #37 and #39 singles in the ARIA charts.¹⁷ Ed Sheeran's appeal to Australian consumers here accentuates a recent change in how a single is conceptualised.

Before the internet age, singles were mass produced and distributed physical products – whether 7" singles, 'cassingles' on cassette or CDs. In 1966, the 7" vinyl singles appearing in the *Go-Set* chart usually included two songs, with the more commercially viable song considered the 'A-side'. The Beatles single that topped the first *Go-Set* chart was considered a 'double A-side' as both songs were thought to have commercial potential. Record companies would typically focus on promoting and distributing one single by an artist at a time, often ceasing production of that single to encourage the promotion of the next one. In this situation, the existence of a single was clearly the product of a set of commercial decisions about the production, promotion and distribution of a physical product.

However, in the current era, the streaming of individual songs on streaming services counts towards the charts, regardless of whether those songs have been officially released as singles. Thus, when a highly successful pop musician like Sheeran releases a new album, each album track potentially may enter the singles chart. The singles on the charts are therefore no longer required to be released separately from the context of an album but are simply whichever songs are most listened to and/or downloaded.

This change in what the charts are measuring – from sales of a physical product to listens to a song on a digital streaming service – means that the charts now measure engagement rather than sales.¹⁸ Data based on what consumers buy leads to different patterns of song popularity compared to data based on what consumers listen to. Buying a physical 7" single once and putting the same song on a streaming service playlist might result in the same amount of listening to the song, but the 7" single will only contribute to the charts once, while the streaming service plays might contribute to the charts for months or even years.

This has led to songs often spending longer in the charts. On 11 April 2022, for example, six of the top ten songs in the ARIA charts had previously spent more than half a year – twenty-six weeks – in the charts. The number two single in that week, 'Heat Waves' by Glass Animals, was in its seventieth week

in the charts. The 'new normal' here did not occur in the days of physical singles. In the ARIA singles chart of 25 August 1991, the song that had spent longest in the charts was 'Rhythm of My Heart' by Rod Stewart, which had spent eighteen weeks in the charts. Only two songs in the Top 10 that week had been in the charts for longer than ten weeks.

The case of 'Dreams' by Fleetwood Mac encapsulates the changes in what the Australian charts represent. In 1977, 'Dreams' spent only two weeks in the Top 20 of the Kent Music Report singles chart, indicating that sales of the 'Dreams' single were respectable but not among the highest of the year. However, Fleetwood Mac's 1977 *Rumours* album, featuring 'Dreams', was a big hit on the Kent Music Report album charts; *Rumours* stayed in the Top 10 of the album charts between February 1977 and April 1978, and was often at #1. As a result, many more listeners in 1977 would have heard 'Dreams' than its place in the singles chart represents. In contrast, in 2020, 'Dreams' was featured in a viral TikTok video, which led to the song spending ten weeks in the Top 10 and eighty-six weeks in the Top 50 as of 23 March 2023.

Was 'Dreams' bigger in 1977–1978 or 2020–2022? Despite the singles chart performance in 2020–2022 being numerically superior, it is not easy to tell in which time period the song was biggest. 'Dreams' was likely one of the most listened-to songs in 1977–1978. However, the singles charts in 1977 ultimately measured sales, as record companies made money from sales, not from people listening to albums they already owned. This makes direct comparisons difficult, as the charts of different eras measure different things.

To summarise, sales in 1977 are a different form of measurement to listens in 2022. To buy a physical product to listen to a particular song requires a monetary investment, which likely occurs because a listener has relatively strong feelings about the music. In contrast, streaming-service listeners pay a flat fee to hear however much music they feel like listening to in a month; this likely means that what is represented on the charts often represents songs that the listener is only mildly passionate about, but which they nonetheless keep on playlists. As we will subsequently discuss, this changes the musician's path to a number one single.

Factors That Play a Role in a Song Becoming a Number One Single in Australia

Through an analysis of number one singles from 2013 to 2022, there appear to be three main underlying contributing factors to an Australian number one single: (a) many people need to become aware that the song exists; (b)

many people need to choose to listen to the song; (c) many people need to continue to choose to listen to the song. The following section highlights some of the factors that currently influence a song reaching number one on the Australian charts.

Audience Awareness

The easiest and most straightforward route to making audiences aware that a musician has released a new pop single is for that musician to already be internationally famous.¹⁹ Interiano *et al.* argue that there is a ‘winner-takes-all effect’ whereby audiences minimise the ‘cost of search’ by sticking with artists they know.²⁰ For example, a new song by former One Direction member Harry Styles, ‘As It Was’, debuted at #1 on the charts on 11 April 2022. There are effective hooks in ‘As It Was’ that play some role in its success, but Harry Styles’ dedicated fanbase means that he is usually a ‘winner’ in the pop marketplace.²¹ Number ones in 2021–2022 also include songs by Ed Sheeran, Adele, Taylor Swift and Justin Bieber – like Styles, all artists with dedicated fanbases and a decade of prior chart success, which justifies the expensive promotional push needed to make people aware of the music.

If an artist is not already a highly successful pop star, they will most likely need a well-organised and sustained international promotional push from an international ‘major label’ record company – Sony, Warner or Universal – to become successful. Given the popularity of international streaming services run by multinational corporations, such as Spotify, Apple and YouTube Music, there has been a massive centralisation of the global pop market. Australian audiences focused on mainstream pop find out about new music via a variety of different forums such as ‘subreddits’ such as /r/popheads, Twitter hashtags, YouTube reaction videos and viral Tiktoks – and few of these avenues will be Australia-centric. As such, many Australian pop audiences listen to much the same music as the international Anglophone community. Workers in the Australian music industry interviewed by Morrow and Beckett relate their uncertainty about how best to influence Australian consumers in this climate.²²

It appears that mainstream commercial radio is not as influential as it was before the advent of streaming services; only two of the songs in the RadioInfo Airplay Chart Top 10 on 6 April 2022 were also in the equivalent ARIA chart on 11 April 2022. Additionally, radio station playlists are increasingly conservative; six of those Top 10 most played songs on

Australian radio had been in the airplay charts for twenty weeks or more. Nonetheless, radio airplay still plays some role in the success of new songs.

Commercial radio station playlists in Australia are dominated by international acts on major labels. All but five of the songs in the Top 40 radio airplay chart on 6 April 2022 were from the three major labels or their subsidiaries. The only Australian act to have a song in the Top 20 of the airplay charts at this time was 5 Seconds of Summer, on BMG, despite content laws suggesting 25 per cent of content should be Australian. Research suggests that most commercial pop-music-focused broadcasters ignore content laws, preferring international hits.²³

While the Australian charts often reflect international popularity, international artists can achieve success in Australia without being internationally successful. Examples include (a) Blondie's 1977 #2 Australian hit 'In the Flesh', which occurred before the band became successful in the US and UK; (b) Sonia Dada's 1993 Australian #1 'You Don't Treat Me No Good', a song that never charted in either the UK or US; and (c) Wynter Gordon's 2011 Australian #1 'Dirty Talk', which did not enter the Billboard Hot 100 and only reached #25 in the UK. In the early 2010s, it sometimes appeared that record companies were using Australia as a test market, placing a song on the smaller Australian market as a test of whether it would be worth investing in a more expensive US or international promo push for that song. One *Billboard* article in 2015 suggested that Australia is a 'popular test market for international brands looking to expand'.²⁴ For example, 'Blurred Lines' by Robin Thicke (featuring T.I. & Pharrell) hit the #1 spot in Australia on 19 May 2013; at that stage the song was at #54 on the US charts and had not yet appeared on the UK charts. It appears likely that, after the song hit #1 in Australia, a larger international promotional push led to the song's international success. However, more recently, the increasing internationalisation of the Australian pop market appears to make such test-market strategies less effective.

Streaming services often direct listeners to playlists; getting a song on these playlists has become an important part of achieving a number one single, both in Australia and elsewhere in the world. The major streaming services available in Australia – Spotify, YouTube Music and Apple Music – all have widespread global reach and an international focus. The most prominent streaming service in Australia is Spotify, which promotes playlists curated by Spotify staff, by users themselves and by algorithms that create personalised playlists based on previous listening preferences.²⁵

Many Australians on Spotify appear to listen to music via international playlists, a practice that plays a role in the decreasing quantity of number ones by Australian artists in the ARIA charts. The flow-on effect of this is outlined by Morrow and Beckett, whose research shows a decline in singles by Australian artists reaching the singles charts from 2016 onwards.²⁶

Artist collaboration is another method of achieving a number one single in Australia, as it is a way to reach multiple demographics at the same time, some who may be unfamiliar with the artist or with pop music in general. An illustrative example of this is Taylor Swift's 'Bad Blood' which hit #1 in Australia on 1 June 2015, remaining there for three weeks. This song had a crossover appeal due to the addition of Kendrick Lamar as a featured rapper. Ordanini *et al.* note that songs with 'featured' artists have increased exponentially in recent years, and these collaborations reflect a 'deliberate decision by two artists to combine their talents to create a conspicuously hybridised product'.²⁷ Further, their research suggests that songs that contain 'feature' artists from different genres are more likely to achieve success on the charts by 'bringing together omnivores, those who like variety and listen to different genres of music, and loyalists, those dedicated to one or other genre – hybrid songs can increase the potential audience size significantly'.²⁸

The video clip to 'Bad Blood' takes this collaborative power to the extreme, with a long list of prominent co-stars alongside Swift including actresses, singers and models. This attracted both Swift fans as well as fans of the co-stars, creating an overlapping Venn diagram of interests. The success of collaborations can be seen in Figure 9.1.

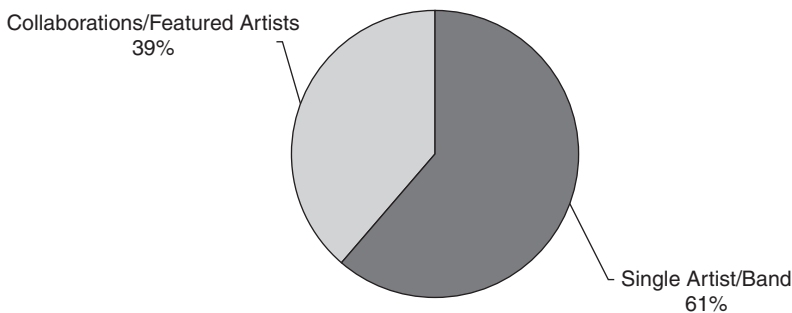


Figure 9.1 Australian number one singles between 2013 and 2021 divided into singles performed by solo artists/bands and singles that use a featured artist/collaboration.

Audience Awareness of Australian-Made Pop Music

One ramification of the rise of international streaming services is that Australian music is not as likely to be competitive on the Australian charts compared to when Australia had more of a closed, national media market – an issue which has seemingly intensified in the last five years. Australian artists now have comparatively little advantage on the Australian charts compared to international acts, where previously they had more chance of appearing in front of larger interested audiences on television variety shows and the radio. With younger Australian audiences now consuming television via international streaming services such as Netflix, Apple TV or Disney Plus, there is less scope for Australian-oriented content that promotes Australian music unless it has potential international appeal. Similarly, pop consumers in the past would be more likely to consume Australian versions of magazines such as *Smash Hits* or *Rolling Stone*, rather than magazines that needed to be shipped from the UK and US physically. In contrast, international news websites can be instantly accessed at the click of a button.

As a result of such changes, most Australian artists that have recently had number one hits in Australia, especially in the last five years (for example, Tones And I or The Kid Laroi; see Table 9.1), have also been successful elsewhere in the world, illustrating the extent to which Australia is part of a global market. In Table 9.1, it is noted if there are specific reasons for the success of each number one from an Australian artist from 2013 to 2023, most of which are connected to TV talent shows, synchronisation in TV and advertisements, working with an internationally established artist or already being well established themselves.

While there are social and technological factors that may influence a song in reaching number one, the song itself still needs to be something that people will choose to listen to, something shaped by musical factors such as hooks and lyrical concerns.²⁹

Continuous Listening

As the charts change to reflect not just sales numbers but continuous engagement, remaining in the number one spot depends on listeners continuing to play the song over and over for an extended period of time. It is for this reason that we see songs linger in the charts for longer than in previous decades. Part of this is due to the way streaming allows

Table 9.1 Number one singles by Australian acts from January 2013 to January 2023, with UK and US chart performance.

Year and Month	Artist	Title	Possible Reasons for Australian Success	Success in UK and US
2013 (November)	Taylor Henderson	'Borrow My Heart'	<i>X-Factor</i> winner	Not a hit in the UK or US
2014 (March)	5 Seconds of Summer	'She Looks So Perfect'	Established act	UK #1, US #24
2014 (April)	Sheppard	'Geronimo'	Radio airplay	UK #36, US #53
2014 (September)	The Veronicas	'You Ruin Me'	Established act, prominent TV appearances	UK #8, not a hit in the US
2015 (May)	Grace	'You Don't Own Me'	TV ad for <i>Love Child</i>	UK #4, US #57
2015 (June)	Conrad Sewell	'Start Again'	Use in prominent <i>Home and Away</i> scene	Not a hit in the UK or US
2015 (August)	Delta Goodrem	'Wings'	Judge on <i>The Voice</i>	Not a hit in the UK or US
2016 (February)	Flume	'Never Be Like You'	Publicity from winning the Triple J Hottest 100	UK #95, US #20
2016 (July)	The Veronicas	'In My Blood'	Established act, judges on <i>The Voice</i>	Not a hit in the UK or US
2018 (May)	5 Seconds Of Summer	'Youngblood'	Established act	UK #4, US #7
2018 (August)	Dean Lewis	'Be Alright'	Previous single appeared on US TV shows <i>Suits</i> , <i>Riverdale</i> , etc.	UK #1, US #23
2019 (August)	Tones And I	'Dance Monkey'	Triple J Unearthed	UK #1, US #4
2021 (July)	The Kid Laroi and Justin Bieber	'Stay'	Collaboration with established artist	UK #2, US #1

listeners to 'use' music in their everyday lives. Rarely is listening to music a focused exercise without distraction. More often, it is played during a commute, while doing exercise or household activities, or in the background to create a feeling or mood. As an experience-sampling study of British undergraduate students demonstrates, listeners only listened attentively to music as a sole activity 2.3 per cent of the time.³⁰ The utilisation of music in this way is often referred to as 'passive' or 'lean-back' listening, and this behaviour is supported by the vast array of mood and activity-themed playlists available on streaming platforms as background ambience to life's everyday events – chill-out playlists, study-music playlists, driving playlists, fitness playlists and so forth.³¹

As such, chart phenomena like the return of 'Heat Waves' by Glass Animals to the top of the charts in 2022 after first being released in 2020 are likely strongly influenced by the long-term appropriateness of the song to the ways that Australian audiences use the music; for a plurality of listeners at that time, this song created appropriate atmospheres, evoked specific moods and enhanced their activities as people went about their everyday lives.

Conclusion

The singles charts that determine number one singles are a site of constant weekly change, which in part makes it a difficult area of study with many considerations. Huber suggests that Top 40 songs 'might operate, both together and separately, as an index to the present, as a way of understanding a moment in time'.³² Each chart is a snapshot of Australia's musical taste and trends in any given week, and within it there may be fleeting successes that would be forgotten were it not for the chart capturing their presence.

The widespread upheaval in the data that is used to calculate a number one single has a flow-on effect on many areas of the industry, particularly Australian artists who seek chart success in the current climate. Data from international streaming services gives much more detailed information on who is listening to a number one single, where they are listening and how many times they are listening. Ultimately, this signals a shift in what the charts represent and what it means to reach the top.

Notes

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