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# **The Urbanization of the Billboard Top Album and Singles Charts: How SoundScan Changed the Game**

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## **Abstract**

Resistance to *Billboard's* recent incorporation of digital download sales and streaming data along with radio to determine weekly chart rankings on the Hot Country and R&B/Hip-Hop Song charts was to be expected. Uproun over the magazine's changes to chart methodology date back more than sixty years to its first publication of the Hot 100, a weekly chart that determines the most popular singles in America. However, the most controversial change occurred with the publication's 1991 decision to incorporate SoundScan data in determining rankings on both the Top 200 Album and Hot 100 Singles charts. While some experts predicted the change would alter the make-up of specific genres of music appearing on the weekly monitors, few had the foresight to project the significant increase in certain types of music hitting the top of the charts after the alteration to these most important measurements of popularity of American music. Urban music (R&B/Rap) and Country titles roared to the top echelons of both charts immediately thereafter.

This paper will explore the severity of the change and its effects on the marketing, production, and business plan decisions that emerged as a result thereof, and led to Urban music dominating the charts for the next twenty years.

The document will delve into the history of *Billboard's* determination to change its methods in 1991 and, through an examination of both pre- and post-change data in charts, diagrams, and empirical evidence, investigate the resulting changes in both the complexion of the artists and the content of popular music in the last decade of the twentieth and the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Keywords: *Billboard*, SoundScan, music business, Urban music, chart rankings

## Introduction

It's been said anonymously, and repeated in many industry circles, "The music business is a game where you can't make a living, only a killing. The key is to try to have as many killings (successes) in a row as you can." Following that line of thinking, the reading, studying, and analyzing of *Billboard* magazine's weekly charts is a practice many music professionals engage in to make decisions on behalf of their companies, artists, clients, or associates in an attempt to create as many successive "killings" as possible. Every game has rules and regulations that have to be complied with in order for contestants to be successful. In addition to the rules, certain practices, procedures, and methods make the process of playing and chances of winning greater. Occasionally, certain rules, practices, and protocols undergo severe adjustments that may create controversy and redirect the course of the game. This article is written to both document and examine an adjustment in *Billboard* chart-ranking methodology that changed not only the genre make-up of the charts, but also influenced several elements of a burgeoning music industry during its peak period, the 1990s, and beyond.

*Billboard*, the leading and sole surviving weekly music publication,<sup>1</sup> has ranked black music since 1942 under various designations including Race Records, Harlem Hit Parade, R&B, Soul, and black music charts.<sup>2</sup> In 1948, *Billboard's* chart manager, Jerry Wexler, coined the term Rhythm and Blues (R&B) to identify music that was marketed primarily to black consumers and played on radio stations targeting black listeners. Since that time, R&B music has had a significant impact on the popular music scene. Soultracks.com's Chris Rizak says:

While its influence had been silently profound during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the 1960s black music firmly established itself as the music of a nation. Motown called itself "The Sound of Young America," and popular secular music derived from Gospel and Blues roots became the dominant creative and cultural driver—a role it would maintain for the next several decades.<sup>3</sup>

Motown's promulgation of the "Sound of Young America" did accelerate the popularity of black music among the general market audience. The influence of R&B/Soul music continues to this day with the recent

rise of an Electronic Dance Music (EDM) genre that was born out of the musical stylings of the R&B/Disco music of the 1970s.

Urban music initially was a term used to reference a musical genre of the 1980s and 90s defined by recordings by Rhythm and Blues or Soul artists with broad crossover appeal. Urban contemporary began as an American radio format designed to appeal to advertisers who felt that “black radio” would not reach a wide enough audience.<sup>4</sup> Rap/Hip-Hop music, also an urban art form, originated in the boroughs of New York City in the latter 1970s and 80s. As Rap/Hip-Hop music (an extension of R&B/Soul) grew during the last two decades of the twentieth century, the term “Urban Music” was employed to identify the aggregate genres.

*Billboard's* change of methodology in determining Top Album and Hot 100 Singles chart rankings to include the use of actual point-of-sale information from SoundScan in 1991 led to a significant increase in the sales, amount, and frequency of Urban music being programmed on Top 40 radio in the latter 90s and extending into the new millennium. It also gave rise to other significant changes in the music business in general that are worth noting.

### History of *Billboard's* Top Album and Singles Charts

On March 24, 1956 *Billboard* inaugurated a weekly Best Selling Popular Albums chart in response to the explosion in sales of R&B influenced Rock & Roll music. Prior to that time, R&B music was relegated to only R&B charts that marginalized the significance of its actual market appeal. Ironically, the chart's first number-one album was *Belafonte* by Harry Belafonte.<sup>5</sup> *Billboard* commenced publication of the weekly “Hot 100” singles chart in 1958. Touted at the time as the “complete, accurate, up-to-the minute information useful to all in the field as a reliable predictor of future sales”<sup>6</sup> the chart ranks what are considered the most popular records at the moment. The album format however, soon replaced the single record as the most profitable configuration for record companies and eventually, *Billboard* introduced a weekly list of the best selling albums, the Billboard Top 200 in 1991. On March 14, 1992 the moniker was changed to the Billboard 200<sup>7</sup> and became the new measure of success for both artists and their record companies.

*Billboard's* weekly charts of various categories of music has, at times, been a source of controversy, from the methods used to determine the important chart positions, to the decisions made by certain industry

parties based on the rankings. Chart information serves as a determinative factor in deciding which artists are signed, for how much, and the amount of funds allocated in marketing and promoting their careers.

### ***Billboard's* Ever-Changing Chart-Ranking Methodology**

The formula used to determine *Billboard* chart rankings has undergone a significant number of changes over the years. *Billboard* frequently alters the method of determining the rankings in its weekly charts.<sup>8</sup> In late 2012, the publication's change in the factors used to determine the rankings of various genre charts caused a new rancor within certain elements of the music industry. At that time, the Hot Country Songs, Urban Songs, Rock Songs, Rap Songs, and Latin Songs chart formulations were changed to factor in not only sales and multi-format radio play, but streaming data from digital services Spotify, Muve, Slacker, Rhapsody and others. Critics complain that the new system favors each genre's crossover-radio play artists and hinders both traditional and up-and-coming independent artists. Taylor Swift is an example of an immediate winner of the change in formula. Her Pop crossover singles *We are Never Ever Getting Back Together* and *Red* ascended to the top two positions of the revised Hot Country chart, relegating singles by more traditional country artists like Miranda Lambert, Jason Aldean, and Toby Keith to lower positions.<sup>9</sup>

In February 2013, *Billboard* made another controversial decision, adding YouTube streaming data to its methodology for determining chart position on the Billboard Hot 100. Commentator Eduardo Loret de Mola, states, "Online streaming, especially YouTube, is becoming increasingly relevant in today's music industry."<sup>10</sup> The impact of that decision was immediate, as the number-one track on the chart the first week of implementation, March 2, 2013, was viral sensation *Harlem Shake* by DJ/Producer Baaur. While the single's sales of 262,000 units that week would have placed it in the top fifteen on the chart without factoring in the YouTube views, the inclusion of this data accelerated the record to the top of the chart. The long-term impact of this decision is yet to be determined and the quality and long-term potential of artists that have substantial YouTube video success remains to be seen. However, while the history of *Billboard* chart-ranking formula alterations is constantly evolving, there was one change that drastically revised the course of popular music and the business surrounding it.

## The Introduction of SoundScan to *Billboard's* Chart Formulation

While several *Billboard* chart formulation changes have had varying effects on the course of the music industry, an important transformation occurred in 1991 when SoundScan data was first factored into the calculation of rankings on the Top 200 Album (May 25, 1991) and Hot 100 Single (November 30, 1991) charts. SoundScan, founded in 1991 by Michael Shalett and Michael Fine, is a computerized music retail sale tracking data resource that verifies sales as soon as an album's or single's barcode is scanned at retail outlets.

Prior to including SoundScan in the formula for calculating album chart positions, *Billboard's* method of ranking albums included primarily verbal reports from retail managers, who were subject to corruption. At the time, some in the industry alleged rampant record label bribing of music store managers to report their albums at a high position with the intent of manipulating the charts.<sup>11</sup> Prior to changing the Hot 100 ranking formula, the chart was compiled manually by a *Billboard* staff that spent hours on the telephone with record stores finding out which records were selling, and with radio stations to find out which songs were on or added to their playlists that week. However, on November 30, 1991 the magazine switched to two data collection services: Broadcast Data Systems (referred to as BDS, an automated digital tally of all broadcasts and internet play of recordings) and SoundScan. Both were developed by Nielsen.<sup>12</sup>

Much has been written on the positive effects this change has had on the Country music genre. Many with Country music pedigree hailed the introduction of SoundScan to chart ranking calculations. At the time of implementation, Jimmy Bowen, President of Capitol Record's Nashville operation offered, "SoundScan is the best thing that's happened to the music business in thirty-seven years. The real statistics that these two guys (Shalett and Fine) give the industry have completely overhauled America's perception of what a pop hit is."<sup>13</sup>

One of the few academic studies of this change was documented in *When Market Information Constitutes Fields: Sensemaking of Markets in the Commercial Music Industry* by N. Anand and Richard A. Peterson (Anand/Peterson) which focused on a case study of how the inclusion of SoundScan in the formula for determining the *Billboard* Top 200 album chart changed record industry participants' understanding of their markets. The paper noted differences the change had on music from various genres

appearing on the Billboard Top 200 Album chart.<sup>14</sup> Their study compared the number of albums from various genre charts (Rock, Country, R&B/Hip-Hop, etc.) appearing on the Billboard Top 200 Albums weekly chart for thirteen weeks prior and subsequent to *Billboard's* incorporation of SoundScan data in determining chart rankings. However, in discussing the results of their research, they chose to highlight the difference realized in only one market, Country music, noting that the number of Country albums appearing in the top fifty positions of the chart tripled following the introduction of SoundScan data to the formula. While the authors focused their comment on the increase of Country albums in the top fifty positions, in my estimation, they failed to assess the real impact the change made on the Urban music market by stating only briefly that the number of Urban albums appearing on the chart was relatively unchanged. Varied recollections of the event have been offered and a separate analysis of the pre- and post-change data leads to another conclusion.

### The Urbanization of the Billboard Top 200 Albums and Hot 100 Singles Charts

Even though a recording's appearance in the top fifty of either the Top 200 Album or Hot 100 Singles chart is noteworthy, the achievement of ranking in the top twenty of either chart is a traditional measure of greater popularity and success in the recording field. In order to test whether *Billboard's* adoption of SoundScan in determining chart position had an impact on the number of R&B/Hip-Hop Albums appearing in the upper echelon (top twenty) of the Top 200 album chart, a calculation of the number and percentage increase or decrease of Urban albums appearing in the top twenty of the chart before and after May 25, 1991 was made. The method used tracked the number of albums from the Top R&B/Hip-Hop Albums chart that also simultaneously appeared within the top twenty of the Billboard Top 200 Album charts each week during the same thirteen-week periods employed in the Anand/Peterson study. As can be seen in Figure 1, such analysis indicates a substantial increase in the number of Urban albums ranking in the top twenty of the chart after the SoundScan formula was introduced. In addition, Figure 2 shows a substantial post-period percentage increase of 24%.

In addition, research was conducted to discover whether there was a change in the number of Urban singles appearing on the Billboard Hot 100 chart immediately following the inclusion of SoundScan information as a

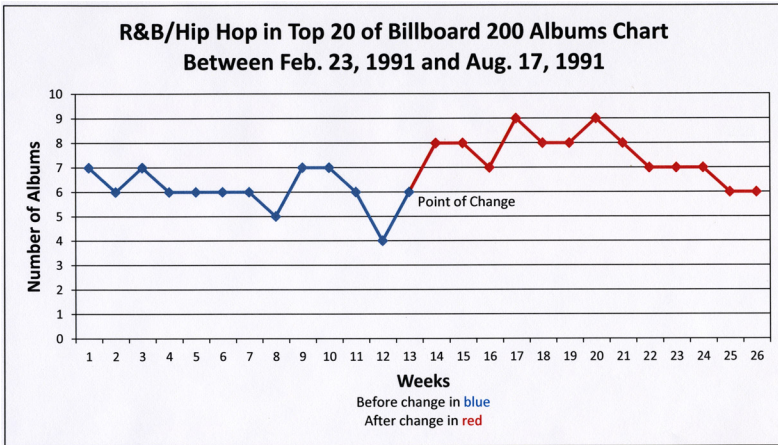


Figure 1. R&B/Hip Hop in Top 20 of Billboard 200 Albums Chart Between Feb. 23, 1991 and Aug. 17, 1991.

determinative factor. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate and calculate the percentage increase in appearances of Urban music on the big chart, as it is sometimes called. Using the same method of measure employed in the Top 200 Album chart analysis, the study showed a 32% average weekly increase in Urban singles reaching the upper echelon (top twenty) of the Hot 100 singles chart following the change.

### Ramifications of Incorporating SoundScan into the *Billboard* Chart Ranking Formula

The immediate difference in the number of Urban records appearing on the Top 200 Album and Hot 100 charts caused by adding SoundScan to the formula was even a surprise to *Billboard*.<sup>15</sup> The instant recognition of the selling power of Urban records also changed the initiatives of major and independent record labels. The influence of independent labels like Tommy Boy Records and Ruthless Records began to surge in recognition of sales of theretofore unheralded rap artists like N.W.A. Even major labels that had formerly turned a blind eye to the success of Urban music were forced to deal with this new force in the industry. Ray Tisdale, Director of Business and Legal Affairs of Capitol Records at the time, reveals, “SoundScan was very beneficial to R&B and black music because it showed it was selling in much better numbers than the labels actually thought. In the music business, they were saying the Pop artists were re-



Week	R&B/Hip-Hop Albums in Top 20 of the Billboard 200	Before Change (Feb. 23, 1991 - May 18, 1991)	After Change (May 25, 1991 - Aug. 17, 1991)
1		7	8
2		6	8
3		7	7
4		6	9
5		6	8
6		6	8
7		6	9
8		5	8
9		7	7
10		7	7
11		6	7
12		4	6
13		6	6
	Sum	79	98
	Average per week	6.1	7.5
	Average difference per week	1.5	
	Percentage change	24%	

Figure 2. R&B/Hip-Hop Albums in Top 20 of the Billboard 200.

ally selling and they really weren't. What *was* selling was the Hip-Hop and Rap artists and there was a refusal to accept what the reality was."<sup>16</sup>

Entertainment lawyer George Gilbert also supports that contention, sharing, "There were people at the major labels who were in complete and total denial about what was really happening with Hip-Hop and Rap music until SoundScan leveled the playing field. Urban music departments generated a lot of money."<sup>17</sup>

Several labels undertook new initiatives to expand their A&R reach in the Urban music areas, signing more Urban production companies and artists to fill their pipeline with high volume sales product. A&M partnered with producers Jimmy "Jam" Harris and Terry Lewis to form Perspective Records in 1991. Arista, which had already entered into a joint venture

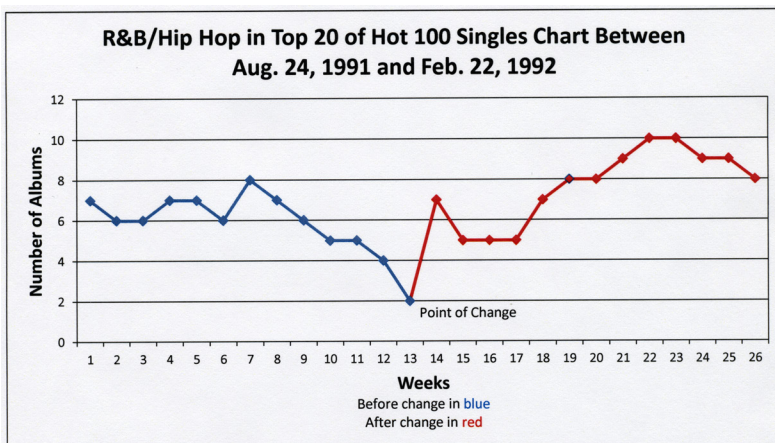


Figure 3. R&B/Hip Hop in Top 20 of Hot 100 Singles Chart Between Aug. 24, 1991 and Feb. 22, 1992.

agreement with hit Urban producers L.A. and Babyface, creating the La-Face label in 1989, continued its expansion into the genre by crafting a similar agreement with Sean “Diddy” Combs’ Bad Boy Records in 1993.

However, Urban marketing executives at major labels were frustrated that the same efforts weren’t made to expand their marketing budgets. Former BMG Regional Urban Marketing Manager Michael Trammel states, “Prior to SoundScan, we (Urban marketing executives) knew that black music sales were sustaining a lot of these companies, but the Urban marketing budgets were under-funded. The Rock and Pop acts always seemed to have bigger budgets than the budgets we had for Urban acts. Even after the SoundScan change, the senior marketing executives would put a cap on the amount of marketing money the Urban division had to work with.”<sup>18</sup>

On the retail side, some independent stores located in urban areas initially resisted affiliating with, and reporting sales to, SoundScan. Many mom and pop retailers in the black community were hesitant to let the record companies know how many records they were actually selling. They were concerned that if they reported which records were selling in great numbers, the label’s sales representatives would alert the big-box and chain retailers, who could then stock the big sellers and sell them at a discounted price, undercutting their market. Further in the interview with Trammell, he expresses disbelief in *Billboard’s* chart ranking system prior

Week	R&B/Hip-Hop Albums in Top 20 of the Hot 100 Singles	Before Change (Aug. 24, 1991 - Nov. 23, 1991)	After Change (Nov. 30, 1991 - Feb. 22, 1992)
1		7	7
2		6	5
3		6	5
4		7	5
5		7	7
6		6	8
7		8	8
8		7	9
9		6	10
10		5	10
11		5	9
12		4	9
13		2	8
	Sum	76	100
	Average per week	5.8	7.7
	Average difference per week	1.8	
	Percentage change	32%	

Figure 4. R&B/Hip-Hop Albums in Top 20 of the Hot 100 Singles.

to SoundScan. “Prior to SoundScan, they had no clue which black artists were selling in big numbers.”<sup>19</sup> Dedry Jones, owner of Track One Records and spokesperson at the time for the twenty-one retail store member Urban Music Retailers Association, avers, “The labels get this information about what we’re selling...and then they’ll tell their large retail accounts so they will start buying the same thing.”<sup>20</sup> But soon major labels started showing more favor to SoundScan reporting retailers and eventually, to some of the reluctant retailers, the lure of receiving boxes of free singles and albums became a strong incentive to eventually conform to SoundScan.

The initial fears of Urban retailers may have been well founded. Mass merchants and chain stores provided stiff competition over the subsequent years and, due to several other factors, including the emerging

digital age, only a handful of Urban retailers remain. Jones could only identify five members of the Urban Music Retailers Association organization that are still in business.<sup>21</sup> Some Urban retailers were not so resistant. Skippy White, owner of Skippy White's retail operation in Boston, Massachusetts states, "I felt reporting to SoundScan was an advantage to me. They actually had to provide us with a computer, because prior to that, we didn't have a computer. Having three stores you don't know what's happening in the other two stores that you're not in at any one time. So this was a way of really keeping on top of the inventory."<sup>22</sup>

The rise of chart activity of Urban records in the upper echelon of the charts also had an impact on the type of deals Urban artists' attorneys could obtain from record labels and publishing companies. In the 1970s and 80s there was an unwritten rule that initial recording contract advances for new Urban artists were routinely one to two hundred thousand dollars less than those given to new Rock or Pop artists. As a result of having documented evidence of the selling power of Urban artists from SoundScan, the potential for Urban artists to receive higher advances and other more beneficial contractual terms was dramatically improved.<sup>23</sup>

The more accurate accounting of the sale of Urban music also impacted the amount and nature of the genre's radio play. *Billboard* inaugurated a Mainstream Top 40 chart in 1992 that, over the course of several years, was flooded with Urban records. During 1993, the first full year of the chart's existence, Urban titles made up 32% of each weekly top ten.<sup>24</sup> Current Vice-President of Promotion/Research & Information Systems at Island Def Jam Music Group, Rich Westover, recalls, "Hip-Hop had an amazing run in the nineties and early twenty-first century. With Jay-Z, every album he came out with was number one."<sup>25</sup> During the first few years of this century, Urban music dominated *Billboard's* weekly Hot 100, culminating with R&B or Hip-Hop artists performing all of the number one songs on that chart in 2004.<sup>26</sup>

The rapid increase of chart activity of Urban music was not the only charge led by the inclusion of SoundScan in determining rankings on *Billboard's* charts. The adoption of SoundScan as a measure of actual retail music sales also positively affected other areas of the music business. Former Senior Economist of ASCAP and now the President of Massarsky Consulting Inc., Barry Massarsky, says, "The development of SoundScan gave Wall Street a reason to consider purchasing both publishing and master recording catalogs. The information obtained from SoundScan not

only provided reliable data that enabled investors to forecast earnings and build new business models around these valuable assets but also took the enforcement of copyright to a new level because it provided data upon which to predict recoverable losses from infringement of copyright.”<sup>27</sup> In addition, the SoundScan information also made music executives aware that albums didn’t start at a low position and then climb the charts, as was thought prior to the change. Instead, albums would start close to the top of the chart and then fall, unless or until another hit single from the album was subsequently released.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

*Billboard’s* weekly charts are the most noteworthy measure of the popularity of singles and albums in the U.S. market. In an effort to maintain that status, the publication constantly changes the factors used to determine the cherished rankings. Recent changes in *Billboard’s* formula, that incorporate such factors as digital streaming, social media activity, and YouTube views, have drawn both criticism and acclaim from various sources within the music industry. However, one change resulted in a paradigm shift in the scope of the Urban music genre and its influence on the future of popular music. The insertion of SoundScan into the formula for determining chart position on *Billboard’s* charts in 1991 resulted in an immediate and significant increase in appearances of Urban music in the upper echelon (top twenty) of both the Top 200 *Billboard* Album and Top 100 Singles charts and changed the direction of the popular music industry in the 1990s and first part of the twenty-first century. The increase in recognition, sales, and radio play of Urban music afforded by the verification of the power of its sales, resulted in significant changes to music business practices not only in Urban music but across the music industry.

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Bad Boy Records, and served as a member of the management team for the late R&B recording star Gerald Levert, whom he represented throughout his career. A former vocalist with the group Cameo and author of the international best-seller *Take Care of Your Music Business: The Legal and Business Aspects You Need to Know to Grow in the Music Industry*, and numerous legal articles and editorials, Kellogg has been profiled in *Billboard*, *Ebony*, *Black Issues*, *Jet*, and *In the Black* magazines. Kellogg was a 2005 inductee into the Black Entertainment and Sports Lawyer's Association Hall of Fame (BESLA) and named to the *Ebony* magazine Power 150 list of African-American Organization Leaders. A current member of the Board of Directors of the Music and Entertainment Industry Educators Association (MEIEA), Kellogg was also the first African-American elected President of the organization in 2009. He provides a bi-weekly radio commentary about the entertainment business on Clear Channel station Power 620 AM, serves as a talent judge on Emmy-award winning television program *Community Auditions*, and frequently reports about current music industry issues on radio, television, and other media outlets. His clients include jazz saxophonist Walter Beasley, Emily Luther of internet sensation Emily Luther and Charlie Puth, composer and musical director Bill Banfield, Grammy-nominated gospel artist Jason Champion, Eddie Levert of The O'Jays, and others.