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MUSIC, MONEymAKERS, MINORITIES AND MARGINALIZATION

A Statistical Look at African-American Pop Music
Success before and after the Radio Payola Scandal

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Abstract

The 1950's Payola scandal in radio affected the influence of rock 'n' roll disc jockeys (DJ) on music choice and potential phonograph record sales. Various broadcast historians who studied radio concluded the situation worsened for black performers after DJs lost their power to promote certain types of music with increased airplay. Program Directors and Record executives reportedly asserted greater influence and the music created by African-American singers was pushed to the margins, thus reducing opportunities for financial success and future opportunities. This study used data from *Billboard* magazine's annual Top-100 ranking system, from 1956 to 1963, to test whether the number and percentage of black singers who made the list dropped after Congress held hearings focused on Payola in 1959. Findings suggest black performers fared just as well in the early '60s as they did during the heyday of the influential DJ. In fact, the mean for both songs and performers actually grew after the scandal, although t-tests indicated a lack of statistical significance.

Keywords: Payola scandal, *Billboard* Top-100, African-American pop music, Disk Jockeys

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Throughout the 20th century, American radio experienced periodic tectonic shifts that invited government concern and oversight. That, in turn, led to new landscapes for both program creators and consumers to navigate. Examples include the 1927 Radio Act to address frequency chaos, the press-radio “war,” the publication of *Red Channels*, and of course, broadcast television’s rise in popularity. In fact, television created several seismic alterations to radio’s cultural terrain. The shifting of both talent and money from network radio to network television encouraged local radio programmers to fend for themselves. For many the solution seemed apparent—more music.

In post-war America, various social forces emerged and grew, including an economic middle class, greater educational opportunities, and more mobility. These forces affected radio as much as its inner workings. From the development of smaller transistor radios to standard issue car radios, young people grew more interested in the musical artists who wrote and performed for them on these newer media. This interest had the potential to reward performers with income from various sources, including record sales, concert appearances, and future recording contracts. According to many broadcast historians, the artists most responsible for the pop and rock-n-roll sensation of the 1950s were African-American (Garofalo, 1993; Hilmes, 2014; McDonald, 1979; Sterling and Kitross, 1978). And to some, these artists received neither the recognition nor the rewards they deserved from their labor of writing and recording. The question this study addressed was whether there was measurable, observable evidence to support this charge, and which years speak to this issue.

One of the more significant events in radio’s history followed an ethical scandal perpetrated by network television programmers, namely quiz show contestant manipulation.

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Congressional hearings shed light on the practice of helping certain contestants answer questions given them by the host. A somewhat comparable charge of manipulation was leveled at radio station personalities, known as disc jockeys (DJ). *Time* magazine laid out “The Big Payola” arrangement in June, 1959, when the magazine covered the Second International Radio Programming Seminar and Pop Music Disk Jockey Convention (Disc Jockeys, p. 50). Critics accused DJs of taking money from record labels and talent promoters in order to push, or promote, certain songs or artists. This Payola scandal played out in newspapers and on Capitol Hill later that year and into 1960. Part of the radio personalities’ defense rested on the precedent of political contributions; a gift doesn’t guarantee influence (Barnouw, 1970, p. 125). Some DJs lost their jobs and many radio program directors took back creative control of the content. While some date the beginning of rock ‘n’ roll, Top-40, and formula music formats to at least the early 1950s, as the radio industry felt the impact of television’s popularity (Hilliard, 1974; Keith, 2000), Hilmes (2014) marked the time of the Payola hearings and legislation as the beginning of the Top-40 “music clock,” wherein stations relied exclusively on a clock wheel. This wheel stipulated the times during each hour when news was presented, commercial breaks were scheduled, announcements and promotions were pushed, and, finally, when songs were played (p. 209-210). No matter when the formula originated, the music prescribed was always closely tied to record sales and the top selling songs compiled by *Billboard* magazine. Television personality Dick Clark acknowledged that “radio [had] been the engine pulling the music train behind it” (Keith, 2000, p. 59).

African-American singer-songwriters enjoyed some success through the early ‘50s due to several factors. Industry expert Cecil Hale credited the rise of new AM licenses with boosting black radio (Keith, 2000, p. 118). Another assist came from the rise of the music-licensing

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organization Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI), which sought out new talent (Southern, 1983).

Another contribution came from young white Americans' embrace of the musical style that had grown out of the rhythm and blues genre (Walser, as cited in Nicholls, ed. 1998). Although not everyone would agree, one controversial variable known as the "cover syndrome," wherein white singers recorded existing songs originally written and performed by African-Americans, subsequently publicized and enhanced the future opportunities of the original songwriter (Shaw, 1986; Southern, 1983). There was also the proliferation of audio tape, a magnetic recording technology developed by Germany, which allowed record companies to economically preserve and promote a greater number of songs (Walser; Hilliard and Keith). Yet, as some used these factors to point to growing acceptance and opportunity for black artists, others saw only a limited boost to minorities' economic prospects (Hilmes; Garofalo). Because of embedded racism inside radio management, such success was destined to be short-lived. And with the demands of the Top-40 playlist, blacks were once again marginalized and victimized, similar to pre-World War Two discrimination. While he focused primarily on print media and the recording industry, Hamilton (2016), using Jimi Hendrix as a case study, described the world of rock music in the early '60s as one "in which white critics and commentators were often explicitly pushing black musicians to the margins" (p. 22).

The evidence for both vantage points is often anecdotal and somewhat subjective. One of the few material data points mentioned by several authors were the various weekly and annual listings published by *Billboard* magazine. At the end of each year an annual Top 100 was compiled. In *Only Connect* Hilmes (2014) noted 1957 as a high water mark for black artists in the Top 100, two years before the Payola scandal reached Congress. Her source, Garofalo (1993), used the list several times to emphasize a highlight or lowlight. While many broadcast

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radio scholars also regarded the Top-100 as a relevant database, actual numbers and rankings were normally mentioned in isolation or as a circumstantial reference.

The purpose of this research is to dig a bit deeper into these rankings and see if it's possible to add some quantitative support to the claims of the "marginalization" of African-American performers, from before the Payola fallout to what most regard as the next shift in radio's tectonic plates, the British invasion, beginning with Americans' introduction to the Beatles. Using the yearly Top-100 ranking from *Billboard*, and breaking down the entries by race, we should at least be able to see whether the averages prior to and including 1959 were indeed greater than those from 1960 to 1963. In addition, by comparing mean head counts of discrete names from these year-end listings, there may be signs pointing to opportunities and potential rewards offered writers and performers during this decade-long chapter of radio's evolution in America.

Background

A review of the historical literature can be broken down into at least two categories, the history of radio and the history of African-American music. In post-war America the two were often connected by many historians. And while broadcast history textbooks connected the Payola scandal with the television quiz show scandal, radio programming had been criticized throughout the '50s due to DJs' embrace (i.e. acknowledgement of the audience's attraction) to what became rock 'n' roll music. Criticism pointed to the practice of "covering" songs, or re-recording original work with a new artist. This linked black and white singers in a relationship that often benefitted the white artist only.

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As mentioned earlier, some scholars maintained a negative view of white acceptance of black music, from jazz to rock, often referencing Chapple and Garofalo's account of rock 'n' roll's history (Brackett, pp. 104-105). But others offered a different memory. According to Hamm (1983), "The history of white acceptance of black musicians predates the advent of rock 'n' roll by many years" (p. 626). He dated the early 1950s as a time when many whites found urban black popular music exciting and accessible. He also credited Berry Gordy, Jr., as did many others, with popularizing music created in his Motown studios in Detroit, throughout the '60s and '70s. Some individual artists and producers, like Ray Charles (Charles and Ritz, 1978) and Ellie Greenwich (Grieg, 1989) were able to control their professional and economic fortunes due to their talent. Some allowed that both radio station programmers and the record companies were more concerned about the lyrics than they were about the race of the artist, resulting in "radio's pressure on record companies and publishers to regulate themselves and eventually set codes for music intended for air use" (Redd, 1974, p. 41).

Redd acknowledged that African-American musicians were exploited via covers by white singers in the early '50s, but allowed that by 1955 rhythm and blues artists enjoyed some success with more live performances in nightclubs, citing a *Billboard* article crediting radio DJs for promoting the music and the talent behind it (p. 33). Eliot (1989) maintained that neither black nor white artists reaped much else in the way monetary benefits, due to organized crime's control of the juke box industry, particularly in the northern states. These machines were an important engine that generated phonograph record sales and airplay. Supply and demand also played a role, since there was no shortage of individuals and groups looking for a recording contract. "To the kids, having a song on the radio was their only goal. Most of the time all they got out of it was the street glory and the best girls on the block." (p. 50).

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Eliot (1979) documented the revenue streams created by writers, singers, and publishers during these days. While songwriters and publishers enjoyed a 50-50 industry-standard split, performers usually had to fend for themselves, arranging deals with the record companies. “Obviously, it was the record companies that made the most out of a song” (p. 99).

Hamilton (2016) took ‘60s music critics to task for their criticism of black artists and record publishers like Gordy, for courting white audiences and seeking integration into the white-dominated music industry, thus endorsing a musical segregation (p. 220-221). In fact, both black-owned radio stations and programming focused on black audiences were in the middle of a growth spurt, in part helped by the growing number of new AM radio licenses granted after the war (Keith, pp. 117-18). Although there were more than 100 radio stations programming to black audiences by the mid-1960s (Hilliard, 1974), Hamilton decried any thesis that isolated black performers to a particular audience or format.

The post-war decade generated financial opportunities for most Americans, including minorities. This allowed consumers with disposable income to make convenience purchases, such as portable radios, phonograph players and records. Census data from 1959 compared median wage and salary income from 1947, and found an 81 percent increase (in 1960 dollars) for non-white families and individuals. And for regions outside the South, the ratio of non-white to white family average income was about 70 percent. In 1939 the ratio had been 37 percent (U.S. Department of Commerce, 5 January 1961, p. 6). Such confluence of more choices and purchasing power could imply more financial opportunities for popular musical artists, be they white or black.

In June, 1963 *Holiday* magazine portrayed “The New Age of Radio” (Bester) as a revival of the medium hit hard by television’s popularity. 1955 was identified as the low point for radio.

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Eight years later an increase of 1,500 stations proved “that business [was] pretty good” (p. 58). The article also outlined how music selections found their way on the air, at least at WMCA in New York. New releases were screened and voted on by everyone in the station. “The accepted releases [were] turned over to the program director, who fit them into the current schedule” (p. 64). So a biased program director or DJ may not have had as much control over the songs as some critics declared.

The goal of this study was not to add another critical voice to the discussion. Instead, if using a measurable variable might bring additional tools to more accurately assess this time in radio’s history, however subtly, it might contribute to the discussion. There may be many statistical resources to measure success (indeed there are many ways to define success itself) but one that has consistently gauged the pulse of achievement in the music industry is *Billboard* magazine rankings. Although it excluded black-oriented genres for a time (without explanation), it has been consistent in compiling lists. Hilmes, like Hamm and many other historians, used *Billboard* as a significant indicator of success, using both weekly charts and year-end rankings. Often, only one year was offered as an illustration or example of an author’s main point.

Based on the conclusions drawn by some scholars, referring to *Billboard*’s Top-100, that black artists were “marginalized” following the Payola hearings, this study asked for statistical clarification and substantiation of these claims. To operationalize the notion of marginalization, this study defined success as earning a spot in an annual ranking of *Billboard*’s Top-100 hits, assuming that some financial success would follow, whether it was comparable to white artists or not (a possibility for future research). For this study, the comparison looked at the years leading up to the scandal and those which followed, ending just prior to the “British Invasion.”

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Hypothesis 1 posited that during the four years leading up to the Congressional Hearings involving accusations of Payola by radio DJs (1956-1959), black musicians/singers enjoyed more popularity by virtue of record sales than the four years during and following the Hearings (1960-1963).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that the percentage of black artists who found their songs/records listed on the annual *Billboard* Top-100 from 1956 to 1959 would be greater than from 1960 to 1963.

A Research Question asked whether African-American representation on each year's Top-100 would be greater than its representation in the overall national population from 1956 to 1959, and less from 1960 to 1963. A higher numerical representation in the music business than in the overall population could imply an eventual stronger voice and financial determinant vis-a-vis future music contracts.

Methodology

Joel Whitburn's Pop Annual and the U.S. Census were the two sources of data for this study. Since 1970, Whitburn (2013) published books providing results of his firm's research and rankings of music sales data compiled by *Billboard*. With the beginning of the 21st century his company began publishing an annual which included the top 100 songs for every year back to 1955 (2012). This publication and all of Whitburn's research was sanctioned by *Billboard* ownership and has been used in other studies and publications (see Hamilton, 2016).

For each year (1956-1963) the Top-100 songs were coded by the race of the performer(s). Groups that included both black and white singers were counted as black, since the objective was to determine if African-Americans in the music industry were selling more records

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and thus enjoying more popularity and potential financial rewards. For Hypothesis 1, the mean of black artists' songs in the Top-100 from 1956 to 1959 was compared with the mean from 1960 to 1963. Paired samples t-tests were conducted. For Hypothesis 2, the comparison grouped the number of black artists whose work landed them in the Top-100 from the total number of artists listed, again using the two time periods. Since some artists found more than one of their songs on the list in any given year, the total number for each was different. For example, in 1956 four songs by Elvis Presley were among the Top-100, and The Platters saw five of their songs make the list. Percentages of the total number of artists that were African- American were calculated.

For the research question, U.S. Census numbers were used to calculate the percentage of non-white Americans in the years 1950, 1960, and 1965 (based on the census' estimation). Prior to 1960 the category of "color" divided the American population into just two groups.

According to the Bureau of the Census, "persons of mixed white and other parentage were usually classified with the other race. A person of mixed parentage other than white was usually classified by the race of the father" (1975, p. 3). With the 1960 census such data were obtained using several different techniques, and by 1970 self-classification had become the norm. Such inconsistencies promised only rough estimates of the true population breakdown.

Findings

The comparison of means used the years 1956-1959 and 1960-1963, and the subjects consisted of the Top-100 songs' artists. For Hypothesis 1 the popularity of black artists' songs, as ranked by *Billboard*, prior to the Payola Congressional Hearings ($M = 24.75$, $SD = 6$, $n = 4$) was predicted to be higher than the songs of black artists after the Hearings ($M = 31.75$, $SD = 6.18$, $n = 4$). The difference in means was apparent, but in the opposite direction. However, a

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paired samples t-test failed to reach significance $t(6) = -1.54, p = .09$ (1 tail), confirming the null hypothesis (See Appendix A for more information on the means).

Hypothesis 2 compared a slightly different grouping. Since some artists enjoyed multiple hits in *Billboard's* Annual Top-100, a second data set looked at the percentage of black artists whose songs made the list. With these rankings, the total number of performers was different each year. Since it was different each year, ranging from 71 to 83, the mean percentage of black artists could provide a more accurate picture of success. Again, the hypothesis predicted greater success for black performers pre-1960 ($M = 25.76, SD = 5.94, n = 4$) than for those whose songs landed them in the Top-100 from 1960 to 1963 ($M = 32.33, SD = 5.62, n = 4$). As with the first hypothesis, the higher mean went to the latter years but failed the significance test $t(6) = -1.61, p = .08$ (1 tail). Consequently, the null hypothesis was again confirmed and it cannot be said that, statistically, the effect of the Payola scandal had much of an effect either way. Admittedly, the sample size of years recorded is small when split into two groups of four for the two tests (See Appendix B).

The research question could not be tested for a variety of reasons, primarily due to the classification of ethnicity recorded by Census Bureau enumerators at various times for the United States Census (1975). Prior to the 1960 Census, information regarding race was collected by means of observation. The enumerator could classify an individual by only two labels, white or non-white. Beginning with the 1960 Census, "data on race were collected by a combination of self-classification, direct interview, and observation by the enumerator" (p. 3).

Simply observing the general population characteristics of 1950, 1960, and 1965 (estimates) and comparing the percentage of African-Americans with the overall population would suggest an over-representation of participation and contribution in the music industry.

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While the percentage of black artists whose works made it into *Billboard's* Top-100 ranged from 18 percent to almost 39 percent during the years this study observed, the percentage of blacks in the United States grew from a low of 9.9 percent of the overall population in 1950 (although this would include all other non-white classifications as well) to 10.5 in 1960 and an estimated 10.8 by 1965 (See Appendix C for more information on the population estimates).

Discussion

Any argument professing a conclusion requires data and testing to be taken seriously. Qualitative methods that rely on personal testimony and singular events can result in varying conclusions. These are not to be discounted, but often need measurable and observable data to support the thesis. The question of “marginalizing” black musical talent can be tested in more than one way, and should be. While this study utilized the ranking of individual songs as determined by record sales and recorded by *Billboard* magazine, it is not the only means. The Top 100 is only a portion of the ranking offered each year by *Billboard*. The total number each year ranged from 483 to 682. Furthermore, record sales are just one way to measure financial success. However, through much of its history, Top-40 music radio stations have relied on record/cassette/CD sales as an important determinant for airplay. Although it is debatable which comes first, the radio play or the record sale, the ultimate financial question for the artist is one of revenue. This study offered one piece of evidence to suggest that the years following the Payola scandal did not diminish the potential for African-Americans. Even the 1964 Top-100, wherein the Beatles secured 10 percent of the ranking, songs sung by black performers totaled 23, which was equal to the 1960 Top-100.

Although the data included only an eight-year window, black performers held their own. Almost 40 percent of the artists in 1963's Top-100 list were African-American, whether by

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group or individual. And these figures should be remembered in the context of an America whose black population registered in the 1960 Census, at less than 11 percent. This implies an over-representation of participation in the music industry.

Obviously two relatively simple comparisons should not end the discussion of the contributions of African-American artists on the music and pop culture scene of 20th Century America. Certainly pay discrimination and racial preferences played significant roles in post-war America. But when discrete numbers are used as evidence for or against an argument, it can be instructive to widen the window of observation and test whether that evidence supports a conclusion. And there certainly are other avenues that should be testable, including monetary compensation comparison, longitudinal tracking of Black-owned and managed radio stations, ASCAP and BMI clientele comparisons, and other data measuring musical success. This study did not take into account the success (financial or otherwise) of black-owned radio stations and the separate rankings focused on soul, rhythm and blues, or jazz, all of which offered African-American artists potential revenue streams. There is existing literature on the history and success of Motown and its founder, but more could be learned about local station music programming decisions of black DJs and program directors.

The impetus for this study came from the term “marginalize,” used by Hilmes (2014) to describe the discrimination experienced by African-American singers after 1959, when radio “formats started to “clean up” and harden, record labels consolidated and were absorbed by large media companies, rock ‘n’ roll became institutionalized, and, as usual, African-Americans found themselves squeezed out” (p. 210). While this study could not begin to address all of these charges, it could use the same database the author cited, in order to take a closer look—at least on the surface. And it did not come to the same conclusion. Future studies may find stronger

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evidence to clarify the effects of Payola, Top-40 formats, cover songs, disc jockeys and radio stations on minority artists, including women and Hispanics. The more measurable the findings, the better.

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Appendix A

Billboard Magazine's Annual Top-100 Songs

Race of Artist

Year	White	Black	Other
1956	82	18	0
1957	69	31	0
1958	78	20	2
1959	69	30	1
1960	76	23	1
1961	68	32	0
1962	65	35	0
1963	60	37	3

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Appendix B

Billboard Magazine Annual Top-100 Songs

Representation by Race as a Percentage of Artists

Year	% Black	Total number of artists
1956	18.31	71
1957	28.77	73
1958	24	75
1959	31.94	72
1960	25	72
1961	32	75
1962	33.78	74
1963	38.55	83

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Appendix C

Annual Estimates of the Population, by Sex and Race 1950-1970 (in thousands)

United States Bureau of the Census

Year	White	Percentage	Black (Negro)	Percentage
1950	135,814	89.5		
1960	160,023	88.5	19,008	10.5
1965	171,205	88.1	21,064	10.8
1970	179,491	87.6	22,787	11.1