

# The Most Significant Factors in the Progression of Mainstream Pop Music Since the Late 1950s

## Abstract

Mainstream pop music has led the music industry through rapid progression in style, composition, instrumentation, and competition since its establishment in the late 1950s. In this study, the swift progression will be observed to better understand what caused such quick change and how this will affect the future of music and the music work force. Interviews and song observations were conducted to explore the many perspectives of mainstream pop music. The results of this research may help music professionals more effectively understand the progression of popular music so they may better navigate the competitive industry in hopes of achieving and sustaining successful music careers.

Interviews

## Methods

#1 Hits

- 1) **Mitch Holder**, L.A. Studio guitarist, active since the late 1960s - Barbra Streisand, Barry Manilow, the Bee Gees, Johnny Carson show.
- 2) **Matthew Malley**, Bass player/songwriter, The Counting Crows, 1993-2004.
- 3) **Tim Godwin**, Guitarist, Air Supply, Taylor Guitars.
- 4) **Dr. Phil Blackman**, Producer/Engineer, Stevie Wonder, The Fugees, Entertainment Law Professor, Ithaca College.
- 5) **Bjorn Englen**, Full-time L.A. Studio Bassist since 1980s.
- 6) **Austin Uphill**, Full-time L.A. Studio Bassist since 2000s.

## Cole Supple

Observation of the top two American Billboard #1 Hits from every year since its founding in 1958 to 2017. Compositions were observed for similarities and differences between songs over time and how these elements changed over time: **Tempo, Mood, Subgenres, Theme/Meaning, Instrumentation, Length, Inclusion of instrument solos.**

## Data

**1950s:** Mainstream pop music breaks out with the celebrity musicians Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry. Right out of the jazz era, music is very bluesy and rock-n-roll starts to take over. The main music was short love songs averaging 2:43.

**1960s:** The electric bass and electric guitar heavily influence the large uptake in rock-n-roll. However, many other subgenres including Latin, Folk, Singer-Songwriter, and Ballads takeover pop as well. Songs start to talk about genuine love and cheap love. Song length increases to 2:50. The music workforce is thriving, musicians in high demand.

**1970s:** The industry is very similar to the 1960s. Instruments become more advanced in technology and are used for different purposes to achieve innovative sounds. Songs average 3:40 because songwriting becomes more in-depth.

**1980s:** Everything changes when the digital era comes about. Electric synth and drums take over pop music. Studio musician necessity declines because many instruments are programmable. Very fun sounding songs averaging 3:30.

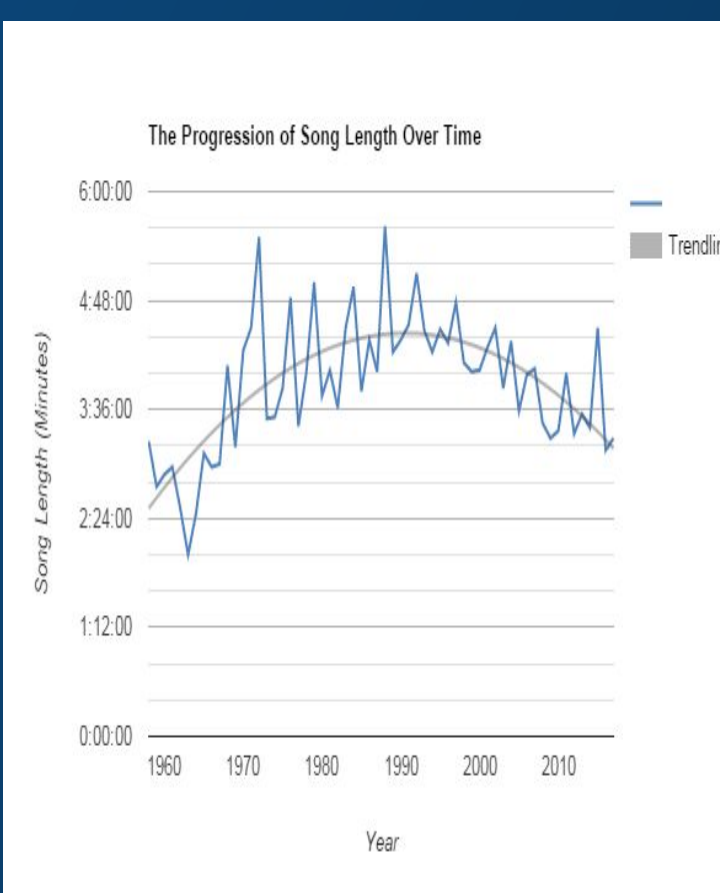
**1990s:** Songs all diverge towards the R&B ballad subgenre and hip hop. Catchy choruses get repeated continuously and song length increases to 4:15. Lyrics start to become suggestive and explicit.

**2000s:** Music starts to become very upbeat and electronic. Songs average 3:30.

**2010s:** There is a mix between ballads and heavy electronic pop. Themes discuss empowerment and acceptance but are still fairly sexually explicit.

## Discussion and Results

- Technology heavily impacts each generation, 1980s was most impactful shift.
- Contributes to lower use of studio musicians.
- Increased competition and struggle.
- Consistency: Love is a popular topic.
- Basic songwriting 1950s-early 1960s.
- Innovative songwriting late 1960s-late 1980s.
- Simplified in last 30 years, uniform, especially last 10 years (Trend: Song length typically has direct correlation to song complexity. See Graph.)
- Artists picked for talent, equally for beauty.
- Gradual increase in sexual emphasis on artist-image and lyrics.
- Artist has become more than just music, they're an entire business entity.



## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Swanson and my mentor Dr. Phil Blackman for helping me carry out my project goals.