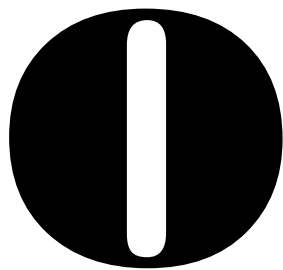


The Death of Rock 'n' Roll

Examining seven decades of rock 'n' roll on the Billboard Top 200

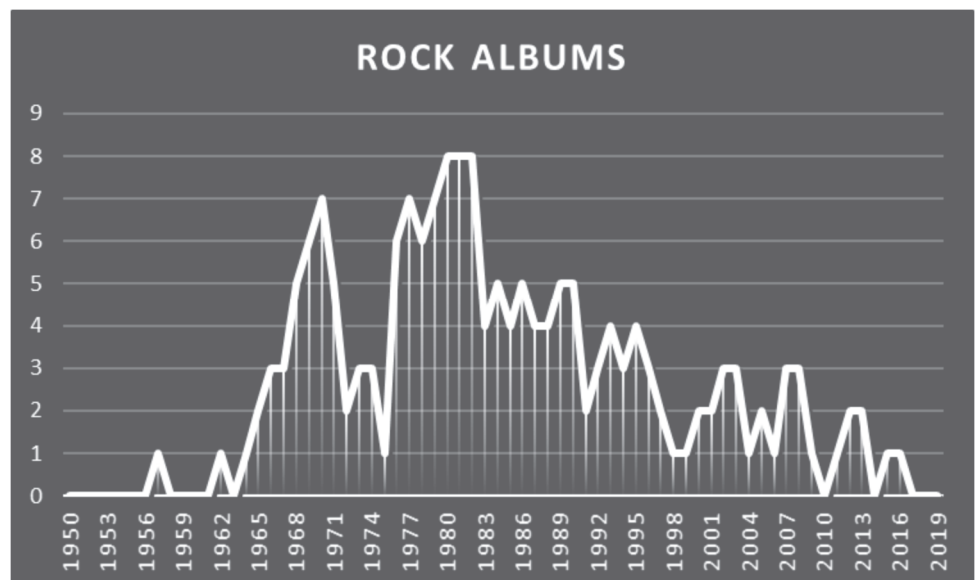
BY BRENDAN DUELL



Over the course of the last 25 years, rock 'n' roll has seen a significant decrease in popularity. In this article, we attempt to explain this trend by examining of the genre's success in the top ten rankings of Billboard's Top 200 year-end album chart from 1950 through 2019, as the 2020 chart has not yet been released. To compile this data, it was necessary to develop a definition of a rock 'n' roll album. For this article, a rock 'n' roll album is an album that contains three or more tracks with either a

distorted electric guitar or a heavy backbeat. This does not include albums that contain these elements that sit squarely in another genre category, such as jazz fusion or rhythm and blues.

Rock 'n' roll first hit the Billboard Top 200 year-end chart in 1956 with Elvis Presley's self-titled debut album. It wasn't until 1962 that this success was matched by Elvis again. With the dawn of the British Invasion in 1964, The Beatles and other rock 'n' roll acts come onto the scene and gain success in album sales. By the end of the 1960s, rock 'n' roll dominated the charts and hearts of American music fans.



1968 saw top ten album status for The Beatles, The Doors, Jimi Hendrix Experience, Cream, and Vanilla Fudge. And 1969 brought success for Iron Butterfly, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Led Zeppelin, and others.

The 1970s started hot for rock 'n' roll, with seven of the top ten albums of the year going to the genre. These artists include Chicago, Santana, Joe Cocker, and Three Dog Night. 1971 and 1972 saw successful releases for Janis Joplin, Alice Cooper, and The Rolling Stones. However, the early 1970s was a time of intense competition, as other genres such as singer/songwriter were booming from Carole King, Neil Young, Cat Stevens, Don McLean, John Denver,

and others. The music of Stevie Wonder, War, Sly & the Family Stone, Al Green, and others were creating a new wave of soul, jazz fusion, and rhythm and blues.

Elton John, The Moody Blues, ZZ Top, The Eagles, Chicago, Peter Frampton, Fleetwood Mac, Boston, Electric Light Orchestra, and Queen emerge on the scene by mid-1970. In 1979, seven of the top ten albums in the Billboard Top 200 are rock 'n' roll albums with releases from Bil-

ly Joel, The Cars, Supertramp, The Doobie Brothers, Styx, Rod Stewart, and Blondie. Rock 'n' roll was here to stay—or so we thought. Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers, Pink Floyd, and Pat Benatar usher in the 1980's with albums charting on the Billboard Top 200 in 1980. The first three years of the decade see eight of the top ten albums as rock 'n' roll.

1983 and 1984 were dominated by Michael Jackson's groundbreaking pop album, *Thriller*. However, rock 'n' roll was still seeing innovations and chart success from acts such as Def Leopard and Van Halen. Many rock acts were developing a pop sound, trading electric guitars for synthesizers. 1985 saw a back-to-

basics rock success with Bruce Springsteen's *Born In The U.S.A.* Even so, artists like Madonna and Wham! were on the rise. In the late 1980s, Guns N' Roses, Heart, Dire Straits, John

Cougar Mellencamp, and U2 were in direct competition on the charts with pop acts like Whitney Houston, Janet Jackson, and Paula Abdul. The 1980s would be the last decade to see nearly half the top ten spots of the Billboard Top 200 with rock 'n' roll.

The 1980's would be the last decade that nearly half of the top ten spots on the Billboard Top 200 were covered by rock 'n' roll.

1990 was a significant year in rock 'n' roll's decline of chart success as M.C. Hammer broke the fifth spot on the Billboard Top 200 with a hip hop album. Now, rock 'n' roll was competing with another popular genre. In the same year, Janet Jackson took the top slot, and Michael Bolton took the third slot. Holdouts from the 1980s like Aerosmith, Motley Crue, Billy Joel, and others would be followed by new rock groups like Nirvana and Metallica. These new artists would have difficulty competing with popular acts like Mariah Carey, Garth Brooks, and Billy Ray Cyrus.

As pop, country, and hip hop soared, rock 'n' roll was quickly becoming a niche genre, no longer being the commercial success standard. Groups like Stone Temple Pilots, Counting Crows, and Pearl Jam had major successes. These albums were still not as widely popular as those from Mariah Carey, Snoop Dogg, or Boyz II Men. Hootie & the Blowfish managed to have a number one album in 1995 with *Cracked Year View*, and Alanis Morissette the next year with *Jagged Little Pill*. Still, Mariah Carey, Celine Dion, and Shania Twain sold more records than them over the course of several years.

In 1997 and 1998, Spice Girls became the number one selling record, accompanied by The Notorious B.I.G. and Puff Daddy on the chart. Pop and



Janice Joplin

hip hop were gaining favor over the masses as rock 'n' roll began to fade away. Celine Dion and Shania Twain continued their dominance during this period, and Backstreet Boys and Will Smith had incredibly successful debut records. 1999 saw Backstreet Boys at the top of the chart, followed by Britney Spears, Shania Twain, and N Sync. The end of an era was at hand.

From 2000 to the present day, not one year would have more than three rock 'n' roll albums in the top ten of Billboard's Top 200 list. 2000 was dominated by N Sync, Eminem, and Britney Spears. Although, Santana had a successful album due to the popularity of his song *Smooth*. The early 2000s belonged to hip hop. Eminem, Nelly, 50 Cent, OutKast, and Usher dominated the charts as rock acts like Linkin Park, Nickelback, Avril Lavigne, and Green Day managed to make the top ten.

By 2006, modern country had taken the lead in the charts with a top-ranked album from Carrie Underwood, and top ten albums from Rascal Flatts and Kenny Chesney. Rock 'n' roll saw only one top ten albums this year. The mid and late 2000s were overwhelmed by successes from a variety of artists such as Beyonce, Taylor Swift, Kanye West, Alicia

Keys, Lil Wayne, Black Eyed Peas, and Justin Timberlake. In 2010 we saw the first year since 1963 that rock acts spots claimed zero spots of the top ten of Billboard's Top 200.

No year in the 2010s saw more than two rock albums in the top ten of the chart. Years 2017, 2018, and 2019 all saw zero rock albums in the top ten. Pop, country, and hip hop made rock 'n' roll an obsolete genre in terms of chart success.

This is the same thing that happened to jazz when rock 'n' roll made its rise in the 1960s. Perhaps, rock 'n' roll will take on a renaissance in this new era like jazz did in the 1960s and 1970s once it was no longer the standard-bearer of genres. Or, perhaps it will fade away. Whatever the case, we have six decades to remember it by fondly.



John Lennon and Elton John