
Music in American Life: An Encyclopedia of the Songs, Styles, Stars, and Stories That Shaped Our Culture

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One-Hit Wonders

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The term “one-hit wonder” is commonly understood to describe a musical performer or group that achieves extreme popular success with one song but does not achieve any similar further success. In short, a one-hit wonder is a recording artist with only one hit song. (The term is also sometimes used to refer to the hit song itself.) In its typical usage, “one-hit wonder” carries a somewhat negative connotation, because a truly good artist would presumably be able to produce more than just a single popular song. As a result, some might dismiss the sole hit of a one-hit wonder as a random bit of good luck, due more to external factors than any significant artistic talent. Indeed, many one-hit wonders are linked with novelty, kitschy, or gimmicky songs, most of which have been all but forgotten. But while some one-hit wonders might be considered little more than passing musical curiosities, many have sustained long and productive careers. The inability to repeat mainstream commercial success does not necessarily imply a lack of artistic, musical, or even financial success. Success, in other words, can be measured in a number of ways, and the question of what exactly constitutes a one-hit wonder is somewhat open to interpretation.

The simplest way to measure the success of a band (or song) is via some objective criterion. Accordingly, authors traditionally use presence on the *Billboard* magazine Hot 100 chart—which tracks sales and airplay in the American market—as the definitive way to determine whether a song is a hit in the United States. (The UK equivalent is run by the Official Charts Company.) In general, a hit is considered to be a song that places in the top 40 of the Hot 100. Many authors (e.g., Jancik 1998; Mann 2003) thus define a one-hit wonder as an artist with only one top 40 song. Nevertheless, placement in the top 40 is not a surefire way to categorize a one-hit wonder. For example, the 1982 single “I Melt with You” by the band Modern English (active 1979–present) has received widespread circulation in the years since its release, and this song is far better known than any other by the group. The original release never charted above number seventy-eight on the Hot 100, however, so the band might not seem to qualify as having even a single hit. Yet Modern English is often included in many compilations of “greatest” one-hit wonders (e.g., VH1 2002). The opposite scenario can also be found, as exemplified by the band Tommy Tutone (active 1978–present). Its single “Angel Say No” reached number thirty-eight in 1980, but most people today remember the group solely for its single “867-5309/Jenny,” which rose to number four in 1982. Consequently, Tommy Tutone is often included in one-hit wonder compilations (e.g., VH1 2002), even though two of its songs ranked in the top 40.

In contrast, there are many reasons why a band with only one top 40 hit might not be considered a true one-hit wonder. A number of bands have enjoyed influential careers despite their performance on the *Billboard* charts. These artists often have solid album or concert ticket sales that compensate for the lack of single sales or airplay. The Grateful Dead (active 1965–1995), for example, broke the top 40 just once, with its 1987 song “Touch of Grey.” Yet the strong fan base and critical acclaim of the Grateful Dead certainly disqualifies the band from being considered a prototypical one-hit wonder. Other artists in the history of rock music might

also be technically considered one-hit wonders using the top 40 criterion, but are so iconic as to invalidate the application of this term. Undoubtedly, few people would say that Jimi Hendrix (1942–1970; “All Along the Watchtower”), Janis Joplin (1943–1970; “Me and Bobby McGee”), or Lou Reed (1942–; “Walk on the Wild Side”) should be considered a one-hit wonder in the same sense as are Los del Río (active 1989–2007; “Macarena”), Baha Men (active 1980–present; “Who Let the Dogs Out?”), and Right Said Fred (active 1989–present; “I’m Too Sexy”), even though all of these artists placed only a single song in the top 40 during their careers.

Public perception—more so than any specific chart data—can thus be seen as the strongest determinant of a one-hit wonder. Of course perception is highly subjective, and opinions can vary wildly with regard to one-hit

wonder status. This situation is especially common when comparing popular music markets in different countries. For example, Nena (1970–)—a classic one-hit wonder in the United States based on her sole hit, the 1983 song “99 Luftballons”—placed seven songs in the top 10 on the German charts. Conversely, the band Styx (active 1970–present), which scored sixteen top 40 hits in America, was only able to place a single song (the 1979 track “Babe”) in the top 40 in the United Kingdom. The issue of perception relates to different genres of music as well. In addition to the all-encompassing Hot 100 chart, *Billboard* magazine also publishes various genre-specific charts, such as “Hot Country Songs” and “Adult Contemporary.” Some artists may find great success on these subcharts even though only one song gains a solid footing in the mainstream Hot 100 listings. Queen Latifah (1970–), for example, has had more than a dozen songs place in the upper echelons of the hip-hop, R&B, and rap charts, but her 1994 single “U.N.I.T.Y.” was the only one to score in the top 40 of the Hot 100. Thus while Queen Latifah may seem like a one-hit wonder to someone unfamiliar with the hip-hop and rap genres, she does not seem so to those more familiar with these genres.

Issues of definition aside, a variety of circumstances can contribute to the creation of a one-hit wonder. In some cases the lack of follow-up material is due to the untimely death of the artist. Minnie Riperton (1947–1979), for example, learned she had breast cancer shortly after her hit “Lovin’ You” topped the charts in 1975, and she passed away soon thereafter. In other cases, a musical group breaks up before its fame can gain any traction. This scenario is exemplified by the New Radicals (active 1997–1999), whose band members parted ways soon after their 1998 debut single “You Get What You Give” reached number thirty-six. Because one-hit wonders, by nature, achieve widespread fame at only a single point in history, the music of a one-hit wonder is often strongly associated with that era. For example, the 1955 song “Earth Angel”—the only top 40 hit for The Penguins (active 1953–1959)—is so intimately linked with the mid-1950s that many television shows and movies (e.g., *Back to the Future*) employ it to help conjure the era. The affiliation of a particular song with a particular era reveals the important aspect of timing that may be seen to account for many one-hit wonders. Often a one-hit wonder appears to arise in alignment with some current fad. The number one chart position achieved by the 1976 song “Disco Duck” by Rick Dees and His Cast of Idiots, for example, has arguably more to do with its release during the height of the disco boom than any other factor. The well-timed release of a song does not always relate to some trending craze, however. Sometimes a one-hit wonder simply captures the general emotions of the public. Consider, for example, the song “Get Here.” The original recording of the song, released in 1988 by Brenda Russell (1949–), failed to make any dent on the Hot 100 chart. Just two years later, however, the song was re-recorded by Oleta Adams (1953–) and rose all the way to number five. The success of this second release was due in large part to its coinciding with America’s entry into the Persian Gulf War. American troops and their families adopted this song as their anthem, as it expressed the hopes of millions for the safe return of military service members.

Perhaps ironically, the reasons for the success of one-hit wonders can also be seen as reasons for their subsequent inability to achieve further success. If an artist or song is tied to a momentary fad, the passing of that fad translates to a loss of public interest in similar material. For example, Buckner & Garcia (active 1980–present) scored a number nine hit in 1982 with “Pac-Man Fever,” but one song about a video game seemed to have been enough to satisfy consumers, as the band’s follow-up efforts (including “Ode to a Centipede” and “Do the Donkey Kong”) did not chart. Many one-hit wonders arise out of niche interests that can viably sustain only a sole hit song. The success of a one-hit wonder is thus often contextual, in that the artist cannot achieve similar success outside of that context. This situation is commonly found with songs that become popularized through a TV show or movie. John Sebastian (1944–), for example, may be more remembered for his number one hit song “Welcome Back,” which served as the theme song to the 1970s sitcom *Welcome Back, Kotter*, than for his numerous other songs as lead singer, guitarist, and founder of the group The Lovin’ Spoonful. And although the band Berlin (active 1978–1987, 1998–present) did succeed in placing a number of songs on the *Billboard* charts, none reached the widespread appeal of “Take My Breath Away” from the movie *Top Gun* (1986).

We could also reframe the quick rise and fall of many one-hit wonders as a consequence of a limited depth and diversity in repertoire. The surf rock band The Chantays (active 1960–present), for example, had its instrumental song “Pipeline” reach number four in 1963. The lack of further hit singles from this band may relate to a fading public interest in instrumental surf rock music. But we might also say that the band simply had no other material that could engage the record-buying masses to the same degree. Sometimes a particular song so perfectly encapsulates the sound of a band that additional tracks may seem redundant. The lively melange of British soul and Celtic folk was so distinctive to the sound of Dexys Midnight Runners (active 1978–1986, 2003–present) that after hearing its number one hit “Come on Eileen,” American consumers may have had their fill of

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such strongly Irish-flavored music. Similarly, the blend of hard-hitting rock, saxophones, and trombones was so characteristic to the ska-punk sound of The Mighty Mighty Bosstones (active 1983–2003) that the widespread success of its 1997 hit “The Impression That I Get” left future releases feeling like more of the same. The one-of-a-kind quality of many one-hit wonders thus often contributes both to their initial success as well as their consequent difficulty recapturing the attention of listeners.

In this regard, the phenomenon of the one-hit wonder has much to say about the appetites of the mass market. Specifically, audiences appear to have an insatiable desire for new content; they quickly digest one thing and are on to the next soon thereafter. The one-hit wonder, in essence, can be seen to expose the short attention span and desire for instant gratification in our modern culture. As a result, artists who want to achieve long-term mainstream commercial success endure great pressure to continually reinvent themselves, lest they be discarded in the changing tide of popular preference. The phenomenon of one-hit wonders also potentially reflects the enjoyment we take in rooting for the underdog. The obscureness of an unknown artist is hip and cool—something that makes the listener feel part of an exclusive club. Once the artist becomes a household name, however, that special secret luster is lost. The fan-base momentum that initially pushes the artist into the spotlight often starts to wane as mom, dad, brother, and sister become fans as well. Ultimately, a one-hit wonder exemplifies what popular music is all about: a fun yet fleeting sound track to our lives that captures the spirit of a time and place.

See also: [Disco](#); [Grateful Dead](#); [Hendrix, Jimi](#); [Hip-Hop](#); [Joplin, Janis](#); [Queen Latifah](#); [Music Magazines and Journalism](#); [Music Television](#); [Punk Rock](#); [R&B](#); [Rap and Rappers](#); [Surf Music](#);

[Video Games and Music: War and Music](#)

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Clercq, Trevor de. "One-Hit Wonders." *Music in American Life: An Encyclopedia of the Songs, Styles, Stars, and Stories That Shaped Our Culture*. Ed. Jacqueline Edmondson. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2013. *ABC-CLIO eBook Collection*. Web. 9 Jan 2014.

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