

PERSONAL ESSAY

# Lend Me Your Ears: I Listened to Every Top 10 Single from the 1960s.

// BY CIELO GAZARD

Over the past few months, I have listened to every single song that charted in the Top 10 on the Billboard Hot 100 Singles Charts from 1960 to 1969. That was quite the task. There were just over 200 songs that hit No. 1 that decade alone. After I was 500 songs deep, I lost track of the numbers and focused, instead, on the music. 1960s music is already in my heavy rotation because of the artists who broke onto the American music scene in the middle to latter part of the decade — mainly the Beatles and Bob Dylan. With all my expertise taken into account, there weren’t too many songs I wasn’t already familiar with.

While I did rate each song on a scale of zero to five stars, the main objective of this musical journey was to get a better understanding of what is in my view the most consequential and transformative decade in the history of western popular music. I wanted to paint a more accurate picture of a decade that saw innovations in pop and rock that reverberate to this day. The bad songs told me a story as riveting as the great ones.

Listening through the first few years of the decade — 1960 to 1963 — was a test in how long I could go without saying “Why can’t the Beatles arrive in America already?” Every song on this list I was not already familiar with were from this four-year stretch, spanning Elvis Presley’s jaunt in the Army to just before the Fab Four made a splash on the American markets. When one thinks of the sounds of the ’60s, one usually thinks of the rock ‘n’ roll explosion that would take off a few years after. To those unfamiliar with teen idols like Bobby Rydell or melancholic crooners like Andy Williams or Connie Francis, the pre-British Invasion ’60s feel like a foreign land.

The top singles of 1960 didn’t earn a place in my liked songs — spare cuts by the Everly Brothers, Roy Orbison and Elvis upon his return from the military. But every decade has to start somewhere. The earliest rock ‘n’ roll innovations of the late-1950s feel absent from the charts, with very few exceptions. It’s as if “The Day the Music Died” — a title ascribed to February 3, 1959, the day early rock pioneers Buddy Holly, The Big Bopper and Ritchie Valens died in a plane crash — really did erase rock, and any listenable music, from the charts. The biggest song of the year was the theme from the movie “A Summer Place,” an instrumental, easy listening track. It’s great elevator music, but far removed from the infinitely more exciting rock ‘n’ roll scene.

While not my favorite from the year, one song in particular stood out from the rest for its lyrical content: “Let’s Think About Living” by Bob Luman. The song opens, “In every other song that I’ve heard lately / Some fellow gets shot.” Luman laments the fact that the big hit songs are about sadness, despair and death. There were quite a few songs from the earlier parts of the 1960s that involved failed teen romances ending in the vehicular death of one or both characters. I ascribe that trend to the popularity of James Dean, whose 1955 death in a car accident venerated him as the patron saint of

rebellious youths. Luman says singers ought to sing about the good times and stop moping. Boy, was he in for quite the turbulent decade!

When the British Invasion kicked off after the Beatles’ performance on the “Ed Sullivan Show” in 1964, it was as if the American music scene spent the rest of the year playing catch-up. Before “I Want to Hold Your Hand” topped the Billboard Hot 100 in February 1964, January’s list was quite bland. A lot of the ballads sounded the same, and the surf rock songs, while thankfully more upbeat and bright, followed nearly the same structure. The Beatles’ arrival was, really, a breath of fresh air.

An innovative American comeback, brewing in Detroit at the same time as the British Invasion, changed the game further. Motown recordings by the Supremes, who had three No. 1’s in 1964 alone, are also stand outs from the year, due in large part to Diana Ross’ signature voice and the tracks’ near-perfect arrangements by the Funk Brothers. It only took the American music scene a year to catch up to British groups, largely due to the groundbreaking Motown sound, which carved a new lane for Black American artists to gain success in the pop music scene.

If I had to pick one year that best describes the sound of popular music in the 1960s, I’d go with 1966. As becomes clear when doing any sort of deep dive into a year or decade in music, the “sound” of a certain era is always a mosaic of vastly different sounds. Some highlights from 1966 include the West Coast harmonies of the Mamas and the Papas on the No. 4 hit “California Dreamin,” the psychedelic masterclass “Paint it, Black” by the Rolling Stones, the garage rock classic “Wild Thing” by the Troggs and the soulful ballad “It’s a Man’s Man’s Man’s World” by James Brown. These songs, all wildly different in their own right, are perfectly stitched into the ’60s music tapestry.

None of the songs I listed, though, were the biggest song of 1966. That title is held by the pro-military song “The Ballad of the Green Berets” by Staff Sgt. Barry Sadler. Do I like the song “The Ballad of the Green Berets”? Unequivocally no. But its unique political undertones, especially compared to the songs I just mentioned, highlights the complexities of the decade. When the ’60s are flattened to Spirit Halloween hippie flower power costumes, we tend to gloss over historical details like the fact that in a March 1966 Gallup poll, 47% of Americans considered themselves “hawkish” in regard to the Vietnam war, compared to only 26% self-describing as “doves.”

By far, my favorite year on the charts in the 1960s was 1967. When compiling my ratings of all of the songs, I rated 25 songs five out of five stars and 35 songs four out of five stars. For comparison, I only awarded 10 five-star ratings to songs from 1960. I still found a throughline in the charts, though. For example, the biggest-selling single of 1967 was Lulu’s “To Sir with Love,” the theme to the 1967 movie of the same name with Sidney Poitier. It passed my five-star test because of its



ILLUSTRATION BY CLARA WONG

compelling musicality. There’s something about the way Lulu’s vocals soar in the song’s chorus that melts my heart.

Moreover, traditional pop — a label attributed to popular music that came before the arrival of rock ‘n’ roll in the ’50s — still held its place on the charts. In fact, across the pond, “Release Me” by Engelbert Humperdinck, which peaked at No. 4 on the American Hot 100, blocked the Beatles’ “Strawberry Fields Forever” from the No. 1 spot. Many listeners still had soft spots for the older stylings of music and probably became sick of the Fab Four or the psychedelic sounds coming out of San Francisco. In fact, a spoken-word song by radio newscaster Victor Lundberg called “An Open Letter to My Teenage Son” peaked at No. 10. The song ends with the lyrics, “If you decide to burn your draft card, then burn your birth certificate at the same time. From that moment on, I have no son.” That song did not receive my coveted five-star rating, but it seems no other decade could have produced a song like this, let alone one

that was a hit record.

When looking at the Billboard Hot 100 charts of today, it is clear that there are some trends in the 1960s that have not remained. I cannot name a single spoken-word song that has charted in the Top 10 in the last 10, even 20 years. There were quite a few in the ’60s. Additionally, novelty songs have virtually disappeared from the charts. The last hugely popular novelty song I can name is “The Fox (What Does the Fox Say?)” from 2013. There were many more through the ’60s. Many of them are not that good, and some of them are quite racist and use outdated racial stereotypes as a form of humor. Others I ironically enjoyed for their absurdity like “They’re Coming to Take Me Away, Ha-Haaa!” or for their dastardly ways of getting into my head like “Surfin’ Bird.” With our generational rejection of ‘cringe’ in public spaces or online, I don’t expect to see novelty songs on the charts any time soon.

The last No. 1 hit of the 1960s was “Someday We’ll Be Together” by Diana Ross and the Supremes. The song served as Ross’ farewell to

the group as she embarked on a solo career. I can’t think of a better way to close out the decade — one that started in black and white and ended in pure technicolor. The song is a pop masterpiece as well, easily one of my favorites by the Supremes. It’s pensive and reflective, the lyrics lamenting the desire to be reunited with a long-distance lover. With the mentality of no turning back and time marching on, the song perfectly encapsulates feelings at the tail-end of the decade.

Each song that charted in the Hot 100, whether it was good or bad, memorable or forgettable, helps us to look back and see the 1960s through a different musical lens. The kaleidoscope becomes all the more colorful while zooming out on the entire decade.

Even still, with my Beatles craving fulfilled, I think I’ll die happily without the array of racist novelty songs on any of my ’60s playlists. Thank God for the British Invasion.

Contact  
**CIELO GAZARD** at  
cielo.gazard@yale.edu.

WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:  
AVOIDING THE FLOODED ROOMS IN BASS