LOS ANGELES - Music market tracker Billboard said Tuesday it will start publishing a chart ranking master ringtones, the audio snippets derived from original studio recordings that are used to customize cell phones.

The chart, dubbed Hot MasterTones, will be based on data compiled by Nielsen Mobile and represent the top 20 best-selling master ringtones for the week.

"This is really where the growth has been in ringtones," said Geoff Mayfield, Billboard's director of charts.

Billboard will start featuring the master tones rankings sometime this summer, Mayfield said.

The weekly publication began publishing a chart for monophonic and polyphonic ringtones — which unlike master ringtones are based on synthesized versions of recordings — in 2004.

Since then, master ringtones have become an increasingly important slice of recording industry sales, particularly in the United States.

Master ringtones have been popular for years in Asia and Europe, where use of handsets with better ringtone fidelity is more common than in the United States. But as more multimedia-friendly mobile phones have entered the U.S. market, users have increasingly opted to customize their phones with master ringtones.

That's good news for recording companies and artists who perform on an original track, because they reap royalties from master ringtones along with songwriters and publishers. Recording companies and performers don't get a cut of the synthesized ringtones.

The U.S. ringtone market is expected to exceed $600 million in sales this year, up from $500 million last year, according to BMI, a major performing rights organization that represents songwriters, composers and music publishers.
Billboard estimates global ringtone sales racked up $4.4 billion in 2005, up from $3.7 billion the previous year. Much of that growth was due to sales of master ringtones, according to the magazine.

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