BEN GREENMAN: What do the pop charts reflect? They measure sales, obviously, but is it possible to take the pulse of the nation with the most popular singles?

SASHA FRERE-JONES: Pop is like sports: there are rules, and fans get excited when someone succeeds within the rules. Some successes are more successful than others, like slam-dunking. It’s exciting to watch, and it scores points. The fans are happy and the owners are happy. The pop charts work the same way: the rules move and change, but more in reaction to themselves than to the fans. For example, people responded positively to Usher’s “Yeah!,” which Lil Jon produced: it went to No. 1. So Lil Jon produced Ciara’s “Goodies,” which is just “Yeah!” turned on its side, much like the Kinks’ “All Day and All of the Night” is “You Really Got Me” rearranged. As an example of choice, this might seem constrained. But it doesn’t necessarily make for bad art. “Yeah!” is great and so is “Goodies.” Lil Jon has a particular move that deserves a few repetitions. Movie sequels follow the same logic, capitalizing two or three times on what worked once. But pop has the upper hand over Hollywood. Movies are expensive and they last two hours. Pop songs are short and not always expensive to make—not that artists necessarily enjoy the benefits of that economy—and the pop cycle turns around
faster. There’s been a constant droning since I was four years old about pop all sounding the same, but that “same” changes pretty quickly. Lil Jon’s hegemony will be replaced in a few months by someone else’s. And that’s good.

**So the more things stay the same, the more they change?**

It's a feedback loop: radio hits inspire other radio hits, which in turn inspire songs that exhibit a certain novelty because they don't sound like the other radio hits—and they become hits for that reason. Hit songs create their own playing field. If people make choices, they're making choices from a set of commercially available iterations, and then reacting against them. This is usually cast in fairly negative terms by journalists and critics—you know, the big, bad money people forcing the poor people to hear focus-grouped music that all sounds the same. I don't see it quite that way, though there are certainly many aspects of the hit-making machine that we can all rue: usurious contracts, monopoly control of radio programming (which spurred the rise of file sharing, which I still see as a grassroots regrowth of radio). And I think it's probably a pain to be a pop star twenty-four hours a day. But commercial pressure is a great spur for artists. Record executives, even if they pray to Mammon, tend to have the same taste as I do: big hooks, lots of energy, and a general sense of vigor. Musicians are lazy, entitled people, and they need something to push them.

**So can you hear the world reflected in the music itself?**

I’ve always thought so, though I admit that it’s a less precise and empirical way of judging the social effect of music than, say, determining whether or not you’ve got a country station in your town. I think it’s no coincidence that ambient electronic music came up during the economic boom of the nineties. It's very untroubled music, good to listen to while working on your laptop or shopping. Now we have lots of high-impact, shiny hip-hop aimed at drinking and dancing, not unlike the swing and hot jazz made during the Second World War. There's an awful lot to be distracted from, and pop works as an anodyne before it acts as anything else.

**So why is Ashlee Simpson charting?**
It might be because her record’s pretty good—that’s one answer. A larger answer is that she’s this week’s popular teen. Teens are conservative creatures, and popularity is their coin. Any reasonably talented and attractive teen will get her fifteen seconds because teens can’t possibly risk being wrong, even for an hour. They have to buy in. But teens are not the only consumers of teenhood. The WB network is based entirely on the idea that acting like a teen-ager is a lifelong commitment. And on Fox’s “The O.C.,” the parents are more childish than the kids. Add the obsession with plastic surgery, and youth has been changed from one obsession among many into an accepted default position. Another reason could be that teen-age girls are the new teen-age guys. Guys today are too busy pouting and finding their pain to assert their egos in a bouncy and hummable way. So the girls are doing it. From Avril Lavigne on, pop-rock girls are now the ones asserting will and confidence. Everybody likes that.

In the old days, so many songs on the Billboard charts became embedded in the popular memory, thanks to radio, payola, etc. After the Boyz II Men era, though, it seems like a lot of Top 40 songs don't stick the same way. Is this true? Is it because, as people like to say, we're living in an age of producers rather than songwriters? Or is it a misunderstanding based on increasing age and decreasing adventurousness?

The idea of classics sort of creeps me out, as does "the old days." When was that? Was that when politicians were upright, bookish public servants? Because I can't find those old days. If by classic we mean a song that created its own aesthetic and which will always produce pleasure, no matter what the context, then Missy Elliott's "Work It" is as classic as it gets. I simply don't believe in the good old days. I prefer the radio now, give or take a few bad weeks. Something astonishing and white-hot always pops up.

As for songwriting, the process is so different from genre to genre. Indie-rock records are written almost exclusively by the people playing the music; country records are often written by professionals who neither play nor sing on the records. In hip-hop and R. & B., producers are songwriters. The only thing
we’ve lost is consensus. There are so many more people making and distributing music now than there were in the accepted consensus moments of 1967 or 1977. If consensus doesn’t happen, it’s as much about the feasibility of building a world-sized umbrella than it is about the quality of the umbrellas, if you know what I mean.

**On to Beyoncé. Like other huge pop stars, she faces a bit of a falling-off after her big peak (one great song, Grammy awards, performing with Prince). Will the new Destiny's Child album maintain her fame?**

The future is anyone's guess. I think Beyoncé's had a hand in many great songs, including "Crazy in Love," but most of her solo album was terrible. "Dangerously in Love" is the kind of ballad no one should ever have to sing. The third Destiny's Child album was not as thoroughly great as "The Writing’s on the Wall," though the high points, like "Survivor" and "Bootylicious" and "Apple Pie a la Mode," were worth seven albums of someone else's good stuff.

**I once interviewed Chuck D, and he had a three-song rule, which suggested that even though the pop charts might throw up a fluke now and then, any artist with three hits is legit. Maybe not a genius, but certainly talented and hardworking.**

Beyoncé is a genius, of her sort. I think the force of her delivery and the way she creates melodies and harmonies on top of beats is pretty astonishing. It’s the Madonna syndrome—people seem to have a hard time imagining that a young woman who works with other writers and producers might actually have a vision.

**How rare is it for a performer like Beyoncé to go solo and then return to the group setting? Is that just smart marketing, or do you think she's genuinely committed to both the solo and the group projects?**

Returns to the group setting aren’t common. Most people don’t even try—Sting, Björk, Diana Ross, Natalie Merchant. The Destiny’s Child organization is run by Beyoncé’s parents; I think the transition between Beyoncé’s solo and group albums was planned way in advance, as were side projects by Kelly and Michelle. But none of that can
overcome a dud. Look at Lauryn Hill, who is now performing with the Fugees again after becoming a huge solo star. Or, rather, she was a huge star until she took a lot of time off and released the “MTV Unplugged” album, which was a failure in about every way possible.

Of the current crop, will Beyoncé end up being the biggest star of tomorrow? Or will it be Justin Timberlake?

Impossible to tell. Justin could go either way. I think that the adorable little girl in the Missy Elliott videos could be huge. Jimmy Buffett’s just getting bigger and bigger. That’s the beauty. It is not a weatherman’s game. Anyone who works out a betting sheet will be proven wrong.

Let’s move on to talk about Gretchen Wilson, the country star, who has had a hit with “Redneck Woman” and is having another one with “Here for the Party.” In your article, you mention that country isn’t well represented in more liberal urban areas. Let’s start with the political. Why is country perceived as Republican but alt-country is perceived as the music of Democrats? Isn’t it much more complicated than that? Merle Haggard defended the Dixie Chicks, right?

The perceived affinity isn’t false. Sara Evans, Brooks & Dunn, and Darryl Worley all played at the Republican National Convention. John Mellencamp and Willie Nelson played at the D.N.C. There’s part of the difference—Willie Nelson was once an alpha dog of country, but he’s really a genre unto himself now. In the seventies, Nelson and Haggard wrote songs about class issues and were generally hostile to authority. That’s about lyrics. There are other reasons that country and alt-country don’t get the same intensity or quality of attention. Alt-country artists are more like the people who write about music, for one thing. And the signifiers of Art and Seriousness haven’t remained constant for at least the past thirty years. Dreary, plodding tempos are accepted as indicators of deep thought, and long stretches of synthesizer burping are seen as brave, possibly because the chance of making money is diminished by these burps. Much of this comes back to who’s making money and who isn’t. Critics and alt-country artists are closer
in income than alt-country and country artists are. There is a long-running hostility toward music that makes money, and Shania Twain and Alan Jackson make much more than alt-country artists ever will.

In your discussion of “Here for the Party,” you say that there are still places that country music can't get into to get thrown out of. What are the main factors that are keeping genres segregated? Is it natural, in that urban listeners don't like country music because it doesn't reflect their experience, or are there other forces at work?

Profit is the first engine of commercial segregation. If the companies who own country recordings think there’s a good chance that a market for those recordings does not exist, they’re not going to spend money promoting in that area. But I think that both critics and listeners are able to make leaps of imagination as participants in pop music, especially with hip-hop. How many people know what it feels like to drive a car with twenty-inch rims? How many people can drop it like it’s hot? Probably relatively few, yet both consumers and critics think it’s worth engaging the music that comes loaded with these ideas. Now it certainly isn’t the case that country music is entirely ignored—you’ll see album reviews in places like *Rolling Stone* and *Blender*, but profiles of country artists are less common and magazine covers are quite rare. It is the artists from an older and more romanticized canon who get critical coverage. Johnny Cash, Hank Williams, and George Jones are cool enough for younger artists to name-drop, but they also enjoy enough consensus to act as a link between those artists and older listeners. One of the most approved older country artists is Loretta Lynn, who is now sixty-nine years old. Metacritic.com currently lists “Van Lear Rose,” the album she made with Jack White, of the White Stripes, as the best-reviewed album of the year. Lynn has made some remarkable records through the years, but this one contains basically a few nice autobiographical narratives surrounded by some odd production choices. I get much more pleasure from Brad Paisley or Gretchen Wilson.

Some of the accusations against pop-country
music do hold water. Pop-country albums are formulaic, usually split evenly between ballads and up-tempo numbers. Pop-country songs rarely stray from the holy trinity of verse, chorus, and bridge. Christ, marital fidelity, alcohol, and lack of marital fidelity are popular subjects. Country singers are expected to sing. Not only do these constraints not prevent good songs from being written, I think they help. Country doesn’t worry much about reinventing the wheel; the goal is simply to execute one idea as well as possible. There are also long-standing biases about how music is made. Nashville songs are generally the synthetic product of a team of players, songwriters, producers and performers, rather than the work of an individual who both performs and writes a song. That these conditions of production are easier to name than to hear in a song does not stop them from being applied as aesthetic judgments.

What’s the best song on the charts at the moment?

I like “Nothing On But the Radio,” by Gary Allan. I love his voice, and I like songs about sex expressed entirely through suggestion. But I also love Ciara’s “Goodies,” which uses a food metaphor—cookies in a jar—to represent sex. Food as sex is an important subgenre: “Do Fries Go with That Shake?,” “Pour Some Sugar on Me,” “Milkshake.”

Do you think people get confused between Ciara and Cialis?

Yes, and it’s entirely intentional.

What’s the worst thing on the charts?

I am not terribly happy when I hear Alicia Keys sing. ♦
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