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# What Constitutes "Success" for Professional Musicians?

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**UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE - KNOXVILLE**  
**DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT**  
**COLLEGE OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION**  
**UNIVERSITY HONORS THESIS – UNHO 498**

**What Constitutes “Success” for Professional Musicians?**

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16 April 2014

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## **1: ABSTRACT**

This research focuses on determining consumer perceptions of who the most successful musicians in the world are and putting these same musicians “under the microscope” to further examine the features and characteristics that make them stand out amongst their many peers. We developed hypotheses to test against all of the information we collected through a survey provided to over 1,200 people, gathering information on specific musical acts and asking consumers to list specific qualities that make these acts special. We also asked about consumer definitions of success in the music industry and attempted to decipher whether passion or buying power is a greater indicator of the buying decisions that consumers make in music purchases.

In the end what we found was that The Beatles are easily the most popular choice as the most successful band of all time, according to consumers polled, and that “Music Quality” is what matters above all else in determinations of success.

## 2: INTRODUCTION

### 2.1 Purpose and Scope of Study

*The hope is to advance the collective [career success] knowledge in a way that refines the desired goals for up-and-coming artists.*

The purpose of this study is to advance our knowledge largely by way of providing consumer insight on what makes a band successful to them. This will involve determining which bands are consistently mentioned when a consumer initially thinks in terms of success, discerning what attributes that consumer finds alluring in said bands, and then comparing responses to evaluate which common threads may exist among these highly successful artists. Success is commonly linked to high-level financial gains. However, this study will also seek to determine what important qualities lay beyond the scope of monetary success, and we will evaluate how these characteristics relate to one another. In addition, the competitive implications of music will also need to be assessed in future studies. The music industry is notoriously competitive, with bands and solo artists from all genres simultaneously vying for radio play, album sales, downloads, and venues for performing, among other things. The hope is that this insight will serve as a guide for up-and-coming musicians to take note of, providing a benchmark for internal assessment and identifying key areas to focus on for improvement.

The reality, according to O-Net figures, is that as of 2012, there are only 167,000 full-time, actively employed professional singers and musicians in the United States, and the industry is only projected to add 53,000 jobs over the course of the next ten years, which equates to a fairly lowly growth rate (O-Net OnLine, 2012). Music industry revenues for 2013 in the United States totaled just at \$7 billion (Lewis, 2014), and global revenues eclipsed \$15 billion (IFPI, 2014). Record companies spent almost \$5 billion in marketing their musicians, a true testament

to how difficult it is to promote an artist in today's cluttered musical environment. There are essentially four ways to earn revenue in the music industry: physical format sales (CDs, concert DVDs, vinyl, etc.), digital distribution, performance rights, and synchronization revenues. Physical sales accounted for 51% of the revenue stream from 2013. These sales have been on the decline for over a decade. Digital revenues, however, grew to 39%. Subscription streaming services like Spotify have seen a steady increase in paid memberships over the past several years and are helping the music industry make up for lost physical sales. Digital album sales through iTunes and the like are also included in this 39%. Seven percent of the total music industry revenue came from performance rights, and 2% comes from synchronization revenues (meaning music that has been set to some type of video and distributed for public consumption). The remaining 1% can likely be attributed to the rare donation and other odds and ends (IFPI, 2014).

The scope of this study is relatively large. Findings will contribute knowledge to many relevant fields, including career success, music consumption habits, marketing, social networking, entrepreneurship, and career strategy, among others. The most sincere hope is that this knowledge will provide a usable framework for use by, namely, independent musicians to achieve success in their careers and further our understanding of what needs to be done in order to shine in the eye of the consuming beholder.

Relatively few scholarly studies exist on the matter of success in the present day music scene. A few that have include:

- “What Constitutes Artist Success in the Australian Music Scene” – Hughes, et al (2013).
  - Researchers met with focus groups consisting of Australian music industry professionals and determined that success hinges on effective planning and capitalizing on small successes in areas including crowdfunding, obtaining

government grants, usage of online video as a means of distributing music, and interacting with fans through social media.

- “So you want to be a Rock ‘n’ Roll star? Career success of pop musicians in the Netherlands” – Zwaan, et al (2009).
  - This study specified three factors as essential for career achievement in the music industry: “background characteristics, personal attributes, and the professional environment of pop musicians.” It also found that social support and a professional attitude were positively correlated with career success, and conscientiousness as negatively correlated. Having a website and access to professionals already in the music industry are the strongest predictors of career success in the professional context.
- “Student Beliefs About the Causes of Success and Failure in Music: A Study of Achievement Motivation” – Asmus (1986).
  - In this study, “the students’ free responses were classified according to the two-dimensional model of Attribution Theory in which the causes of success and failure are categorized by locus of control, internal or external, and stability through time, stable or unstable.” The study found that the vast majority of reasons named for success and failure were internal, while stable reasons were often mentioned as the cause for success and external-unstable reasons were a common cause for failure.

Although many works cover the matter of general career success predictors, few actually narrow the scope to artists in the music industry. For this reason, we will use concepts developed from

these existing career success theories as a basis for our research, and the hope is to advance the collective knowledge in a way that refines the desired goals for up-and-coming artists.

## **2.2 Defining Success**

*Success is ultimately based on our individual perceptions more than anything.*

Success is defined in a plethora of ways due to its dual nature in being viewed as both subjective and objective. For the sake of simplicity, Webster's Dictionary defines success in its most basic form as the "achievement of something intended or desired" and further as the "attaining of wealth, fame, or prosperity." The former reflects on the subjective meaning of the word, while the latter is more reflective of the objective and measurable side. Our research will be focused on the consumer perspective, so the majority of this work will examine the objective nature of success.

A career is generally defined as being "the career or occupation a person takes in life" (Webster's Dictionary, 1997). The career paths we are concerned with are those of instrumental musicians, singers, band members, and solo artists. Specifically, our representative sample will consist of the top echelon of professional musical acts: the bands and musicians of the absolute highest status.

Further, career success is categorized by both extrinsic and intrinsic components. Extrinsic success refers to the highly objective and observable outcomes like compensation and ascendancy, while intrinsic success is characterized by an "individual's reactions to his or her own career, and is most commonly operationalized as career or job satisfaction" (Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999). Extrinsic and intrinsic successes have been found to be only "moderately correlated," and their outcomes only "relatively independent." We again stress that our study will mostly only seek to address the extrinsic and observable connotations of success.



Indeed, success is still defined in many other ways depending on who you talk to. Bryn Mooser is an independent filmmaker who was charged with developing a short video series for the Esquire Network called *Brotherhood*. In the section on success, Bryn referred to a commonly cited definition of the word in stating “for me, success is not fancy cars and expensive watches; it’s getting to do what you love,” (2013). In this same video, the lead singer of the multi-platinum rock band Incubus, Brandon Boyd, was asked how he defined success. He replied, “For me, the definition of happiness and success is having a balance.” He then proceeds to talk about how he developed this sense of success. He claims that when the band was in its early stages, he forced himself to come to terms with the fact that he “probably would never make a living doing it,” and that success is ultimately based on our individual perceptions more than anything (Esquire Network, 2013).

Still yet, modern definitions of success are changing to accommodate the evolving music business. Traditional artist definitions usually involved financial independence or peer respect as the standard, but newer models of success require “leveraging smaller successes” and seeking grant funding and crowdfunding while also making a conscious effort to engage with fans through social media and marketing music through quality videos on websites like YouTube, which has become the greatest platform for music discovery over the past several years (Hughes, Keith, Evans, & Crowdy, 2013).

### **2.3 Achieving Success - Strategies**

*“I believe greatness is an evolutionary process that changes and evolves era to era.” – Michael Jordan*

Just as there are a multitude of ways to define success, there are also many lingering theories on the best practices for achieving success. Sam Walton, founder of Walmart, laid out ten rules for success in his book *Made in America*:

Commit to your business; share your profits with all of your associates and treat them as partners; motivate your partners; communicate everything you possibly can to your partners; appreciate everything your associates do for your business; celebrate your successes; listen to everyone in your company; exceed your customers' expectations; control your expenses better than your competition; and swim upstream (Walton & Huey, 1992).

Although Walton's experience lied largely in upper-level corporate management, his rules can still be reasonably applied to many career paths, including that of a fledgling musician. As is generally the case, musicians see themselves as entrepreneurs running a small enterprise. As such, if they ever hope to climb the ladder of success, they must commit to their instrument and to rehearsing, be fair in the sharing of profits with fellow band members, communicate goals with these band members to ensure a common desired path, and always be sure to celebrate the successes that arise.

Two very intriguing rules that Walton sets are especially applicable to the musician, especially in the early stages of a career. First, the need to control expenses seems obvious, but too often bands make rash decisions that ultimately hinder them financially. Some common examples would be attempting to line up a show in a distant city when a band lacks show experience, an online presence, and any precedent for what the turnout might be like there. When all three of these problems occur, the effects can be detrimental, and magnified even more by the number of members in the band that had to make travel arrangements. From another perspective,

perhaps a new band really wants to get in to the studio and record some tracks for distribution through social media to gather an online following with minimal effort. If members of the band are going into the studio for the first time, it is likely that their playing will be highly inefficient, causing the hourly fees to rack up.

In this day and age, the issue of playing in a distant city can be somewhat guarded against by strong online promotion for the show and the ability to put on a good show once you get there. Social media provides essentially free advertising to specific demographics that you want to target. And with the advent of home studio technology and the plummeting costs associated with it, it is likely beneficial to buy equipment and learn to mix an EP from home. This not only negates the potential for overspending on the recording process, but it also gives more experience in engineering an album, which will provide the option to record a better product the next time around, and one would also know how to better communicate with a producer should they choose to eventually enter a professional studio. These are just a few examples of capitalizing on smaller successes to hopefully snowball them into a larger successful career.

Moving on from the idea of smaller successes, we should also observe how icons from other industries explain the reasons for their success. *For the Love of the Game* is a book written by National Basketball Association Hall of Famer Michael Jordan in 1998. In it, he attributes his success to learning from the greats that dominated the courts before him; players like Julius Erving, David Thompson, Walter Davis, and Elgin Baylor were mentioned specifically. He studied their skill sets and challenged himself to be better than them in all of the strongest areas of their game. He used the challenge of being the absolute best to ever play the game as his motivation to continue to improve, and he stuck to that goal. While he was still an active player in the NBA, many already regarded him as the greatest of all time. To this reaction, Jordan said,

“I listened, I was aware of my success, but I never stopped trying to get better” (Jordan, 1998).

While these strategies certainly worked for Jordan in the realm of competitive sports, perhaps we can refine them to seem more applicable in a general, or even musical, perspective. One must study the industry greats that have succeeded before, find a way to acquire their skills and surpass the bar they have set, motivate oneself to reach that goal, and be relentless in the approach to greatness. How to go about this is up to the individual and the desired end state; this is merely one of many general outlines for formulating a plan to achieve success.

Self-promotion has also been identified as an influence tactic necessary for success. “Our success depends not just on our individual capabilities, but also on our network’s ability to magnify them” (Goodman, 2013). Goodman writes that two of the most effective ways to do this are to either make videos or write a book. A good video can provide massive exposure. YouTube has become the second most used search engine on the Internet, so to ignore it is a huge mistake. A good video allows a creator to establish a strong emotional connection with a viewer. “Doing it right is not about selling, it’s about tapping into that connection,” says Share Ross of Video Rock Star University. Felix Kjellberg, more commonly known by his YouTube moniker “Pewdiepie,” is an excellent example of this. In a little over 3 years of making daily videos for YouTube, Pewdiepie became the most subscribed channel of all time, and his success continues to skyrocket, largely due to his ability to establish a friendly connection with his fans through his videos. His videos have a very personable overtone, he affectionately refers to his subscribers as “Bros,” and he always goes out of his way to stay humble and thank his “Bro Army” for helping him do what he loves for a living. And when certain milestones have been reached, he posts special videos to celebrate the successes with the fans that have helped him get to where he is

today. This effective branding and the combined humility and coinciding grateful gestures has allowed Kjellberg to create an invaluable deep connection with fans on a global scale.

As was mentioned before, writing a book is also a valuable avenue for self-promotion. This is one of the best ways to position oneself as an expert. Other methods can include establishing a blog, working with local media, using email newsletters, and becoming searchable on major sites like LinkedIn and Facebook (Goodman, 2013). The Internet has given independent artists with low budgets the ability to do all of these things, and with a strong work ethic and plenty of patience, good results can be very attainable.

#### **2.4 Achieving Success - Qualities**

Although we have largely ignored personality as a factor in career success up to this point, it is still a very important piece to the puzzle, and many psychological studies have been centered on this as it turns out. Perhaps the most widely used and commonly accepted theory is the “Big-Five” Factor Model of Personality. Many studies involving this model have been performed across droves of cultures and peoples and the model has proven to remain stable throughout its existence. The five facets addressed by the model are neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Neuroticism, extraversion, and conscientiousness have been shown to be most closely related to career success, with conscientiousness being the most powerful predictor available (Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999).

Neuroticism is traceable in nearly every other measure of personality. Generally speaking, neuroticism is best defined as the extent to which an individual suffers from stress and emotional instability. Thus, low levels of neuroticism are correlated with higher levels of success. Like neuroticism, extraversion is similarly pervasive in other facets of personality as

well. People high on extraversion are seen as sociable and ambitious. Conscientiousness is the construct that most consistently serves as a predictor for successful performance. It is manifested through achievement orientation, dependability, and organization. As such, this facet most reflects ones' self-control (Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999). Interestingly enough, studies have actually shown conscientiousness to be negatively related to music career success. A survey of musicians' own perceptions shows that being "flexible" and "spontaneous" is more desirable than being overly conscientious (Zwaan, Bogt, & Raaijmakers, 2009).

The other two factors in the "Big 5" taxonomy are openness to experience and agreeableness. These have only been shown to be within the realm of possibility that they may have some effect on an individual's success. Openness to experience refers to an individual's pursuit of imaginative intellect, with a philosophical outlook on life. Agreeable people are cooperative and likeable (Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999). These two factors have issues, blatantly obvious in examples where one is too agreeable and, in their attempts to please others, disadvantages their own position to ensure the success of others. Those that are extremely open to new experiences may find traditional work outlets to be too mundane and have difficulty finding happiness in making a living. These are the reasons that agreeableness and openness are seen as the lesser factors.

Outside of the "Big 5," there are still other personal qualities to explore. Professionalism and networking are two qualities that are positively related to career success. In addition, perseverance, professional attitude, perfectionism, authenticity, musical skills, and musical talent have been identified as key characteristics of a successful musician (Zwaan, Bogt, & Raaijmakers, 2009). There also exists the widespread assumption that those educated in music fare better in the world and are, by and large, smarter. We must keep in mind that, as any

statistician would insist, correlation does not imply causation. There are many reasons that a music education might be correlated with higher intellectual capacities, one being the fact that the great majority of those who live with a family that can afford an education in music can also likely afford to spend more time and money on an all-around education. In addition, a child exhibiting perseverance in learning to play an instrument on a daily basis will likely be able to apply that same willpower towards completing homework assignments much more easily (Mehr, 2013). While there are certainly many benefits to learning about music, it has not been proven to hold as much weight as it is commonly credited for when it comes to serving as a predictor for performance and success.

There is an interesting theory related to this topic, however. It has been shown that the nervous system reacts to solving complex life problems in many of the same ways that it reacts to happenings in athletic endeavors, dancing, and musical performance. Throughout history, humans have engaged in “real-life dances” in their struggle for life and power (Willard, 1987). The brain’s real-time reaction to fighting off a wild coyote is not all that different from a jazz musician dealing with an improvisational solo requested of him by an audience. Essentially, in the practice of these dances in music, our nervous system becomes conditioned to dealing with impulse decisions and becomes much more efficient at dealing with future real-life dances. This is perhaps a much more plausible quality that music education provides us with, as opposed to inherent knowledge.

There is also the idea of one’s *locus of control*. There are essentially two types of people: those with internal locus of control and those with external. “Internals are those who believe that they are the masters of their own fate and are typically confident in their abilities to manage their environments. Externals... are those who believe that they do not have much control over their

lives and perceive themselves in passive roles with regard to mastering their environments.” Internals have been shown to have higher career success rates (Feldman & Ng, 2007).

## **2.5 Measuring Success**

Since this study is focused on the objective side of success, we have reviewed how similar studies have measured success. Multiple popular music studies have sculpted the viewpoint that musicians essentially communicate with their audiences “through media exposure, sales of their recordings, and live performances” (Zwaan, Bogt, & Raaijmakers, 2009). As such, media exposure, album sales, and the size and number of live performances are all measurable in their own right.

Here we must note a phenomenon involving mobility and the differing effects it can have on measures of subjective and objective success. In the instance of occupational mobility, subjective measures of success, such as job satisfaction, may be seen as a positive, while objectively it may be viewed negatively due to the fact that changing occupations entirely often results in beginning back at square one at a lower salary or hierarchical level (Feldman & Ng, 2007). For instance, think about if a member of a high-profile band were to leave the group, and thus the public eye, and move on to make music for video games and commercials. Perhaps this would diminish perceptions of his or her objective success, but increase feelings towards subjective success at the same time due to being free from the unhappy situation in the band and dedicated to a passion for video games and production music. It is also critical to keep in mind that subjective and objective successes are not always negatively related in situations like this, however. Take, for instance, the situation where a popular lead singer makes the crossover to television or film. This often only magnifies the perceptions of success. Still, mobility is an



intriguing determining factor that warrants further study and is hopefully something that our survey can shed more light on.

### **3: THEORIES AND HYPOTHESES ON CAREER SUCCESS IN MUSIC**

Bernard Weiner did much to further develop a psychological concept called *Attribution Theory* and adapted it for use in a musical context. Essentially, it holds that success and failure hinge on four causal categories: ability, task difficulty, luck and effort. Others have identified that self-concept is critical in motivating a musician to achieve success. In theory, positive self-concept perpetuates successful task performance; the two act in a cyclical manner on an upward trend. *Reinforcement Theory* holds that proper reinforcement techniques shape an individual's behavior to desire further success (Asmus, 1986). A supportive network may very well work to foster the factors included in both other theories mentioned thus far. However, self-concept and the effects of reinforcement will not be measurable in our study, though they are still important considerations to keep in mind going forward.

We have developed a set of hypotheses to test on the results of our survey:

***Hypothesis 1:*** Consumers believe that “Music Quality” is the best determinant of a band's or musician's success. (\*“Career Longevity” and “Innovativeness of Music” are also expected to be strong determinants.)

The rationale for observing this is to determine areas of focus for up-and-coming musicians. Hopefully it can provide some groundwork from which musicians can assess how to better connect with their fans.

***Hypothesis 2:*** The greater the buying power of the consumer, the more money they will spend (on average) on live performances and album purchases.

**Hypothesis 3:** Consumers will define success as being able to make a career out of performing and recording music.

If a sustainable career is not the soundest indicator of success, then what is? The logic for this rationale lies in one's ability to support life goals by participating in the music industry.

**Hypothesis 4:** Vocals will be the specific attribute that stands out among the very most successful artists.

Vocals would seem to be the most identifiable aspect of a band's or artist's sound (except, of course, in the case of solely instrumental music). However, we do not expect instrumental musicians to be perceived as the most successful of all time. With due respect to artists such as Mozart and Beethoven, we anticipate that the general population of today will primarily consider bands that performed during their lifetimes, where vocals and lyrics have a commanding presence in the current music scene.

**Hypothesis 5:** Subscribers to music magazines will spend more on music purchases (on average) than non-subscribers.

Fanatics that are dedicated enough to the industry to spend their money on magazine subscriptions - in the age of the Internet - will likely be willing to fork out a few extra dollars per year to see their favorite bands live and to make actual album or single purchases.

**Hypothesis 6:** Consumers will believe The Beatles to be the most successful band of all time.

Based on preliminary questioning of my own friends and family, The Beatles were, by far, the most mentioned name when asked for a shortlist of the most successful bands of all time. Other popular acts included: Michael Jackson, Elvis Presley, The Rolling

Stones, and Miley Cyrus. We shall just have to see where these artists rank among a larger consumer base.

#### **4: METHODS**

Data collection was conducted through the use of a survey developed by the researchers. This survey may be reviewed in the attached Appendix A. The survey was developed using Qualtrics and distributed through Amazon's Mechanical Turk population. The survey was open to the global population, but responses used were limited to those that are able to competently pass an English short-form assessment provided at the onset of the survey. Those that passed this assessment and provided their consent were allowed to complete the survey. Upon completion of the survey, respondents received compensation equivalent to US \$0.50, which was credited to the Amazon Mechanical Turk account that they provided.

After all responses were collected, the data was exported to an Excel file for management. Here, the data was "cleaned" to correct typing errors. In addition, a categorization process was used to make analysis of the data much easier. Given the open-ended nature of the questions asked within the survey, there was significant variance in the way that responses were worded. So, in an effort to ease our processing of quantitative data, we organized each response into groupings based on common, population-driven keywords so that we could tag these categories with uniform labels.

## 5: INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

We will begin interpreting results by revisiting the earlier hypotheses made and reviewing how the aforementioned predictions stack up against reality.

**Hypothesis 1:** Consumers believe that “Music Quality” is the best determinant of a band’s or musician’s success. (\*“Career Longevity” and “Innovativeness of Music” are also expected to be strong determinants.)

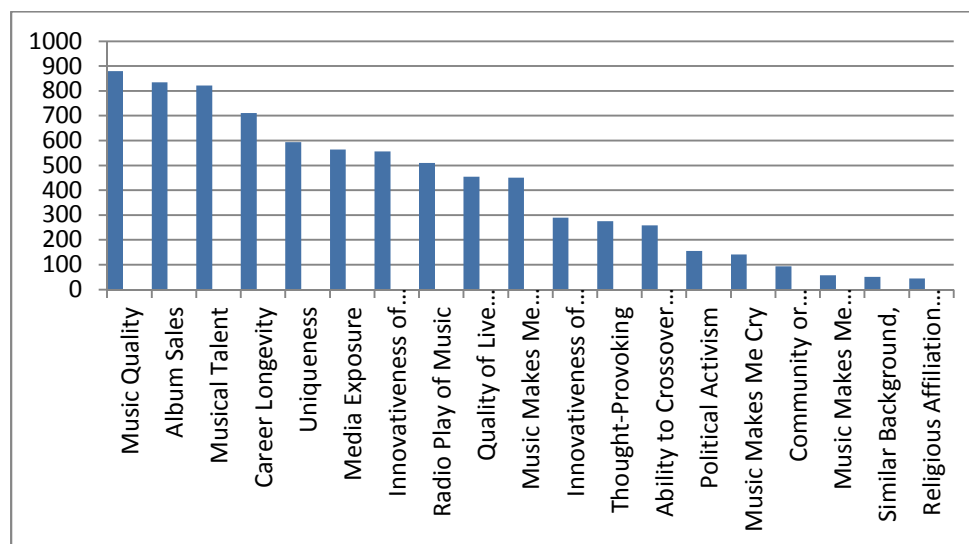


Figure 1 - Qualities of the Most Successful Bands or Musicians Given in Consumer Survey

Figure 1 confirms the hypothesis that “Music Quality” is the best determinant of a band’s or musician’s success. Out of 1211 total responses, 880 (72.6%) chose “Music Quality” as a reason for the success of the band or musician that they selected as the most successful of all time. This was followed closely by “Album Sales” (68.9%) and “Musical Talent” (67.7%). The other two qualities noted in the hypothesis, “Career Longevity” and “Innovativeness of Music,” finished in the top 7 at 58.7% and 45.9%, respectively.

This data seemingly falls in line with the notion that high-quality music is *the* driving force behind higher album sales. Innovative approaches and musical talent also have great value, and work in direct support of producing quality music. It is interesting to note that radio and

media exposure seemed to be better indicators of success than live performance quality.

Common industry knowledge and music professionals tell us that live performances are the key to gaining fans; and that may still be true yet. But mass distribution through these digital outlets looks to carry more weight in the actual eyes of the majority of consumers. This factor is of particular interest to independent solo artists and small bands that have solid recordings but lack the current capacity to perform many live shows.

**Hypothesis 2:** The greater the buying power of the consumer, the more money they will spend (on average) on live performances and album purchases.

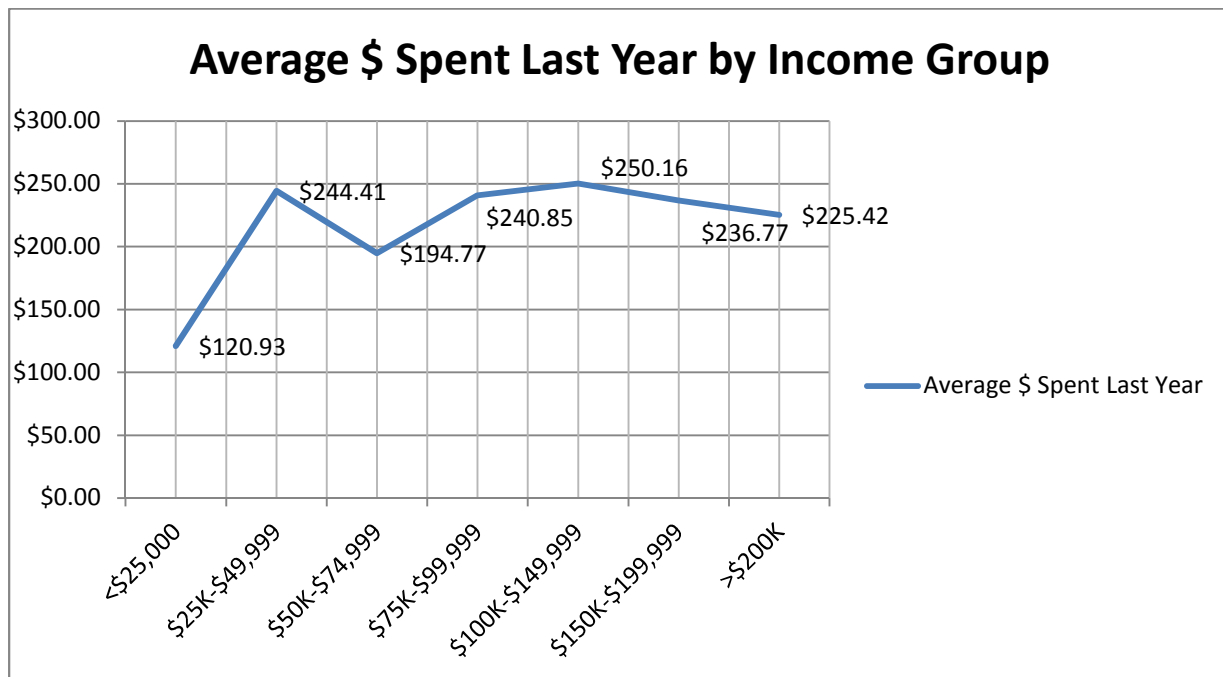


Figure 2 – Reported average amount of cash spent per survey respondent in each income group on music purchases

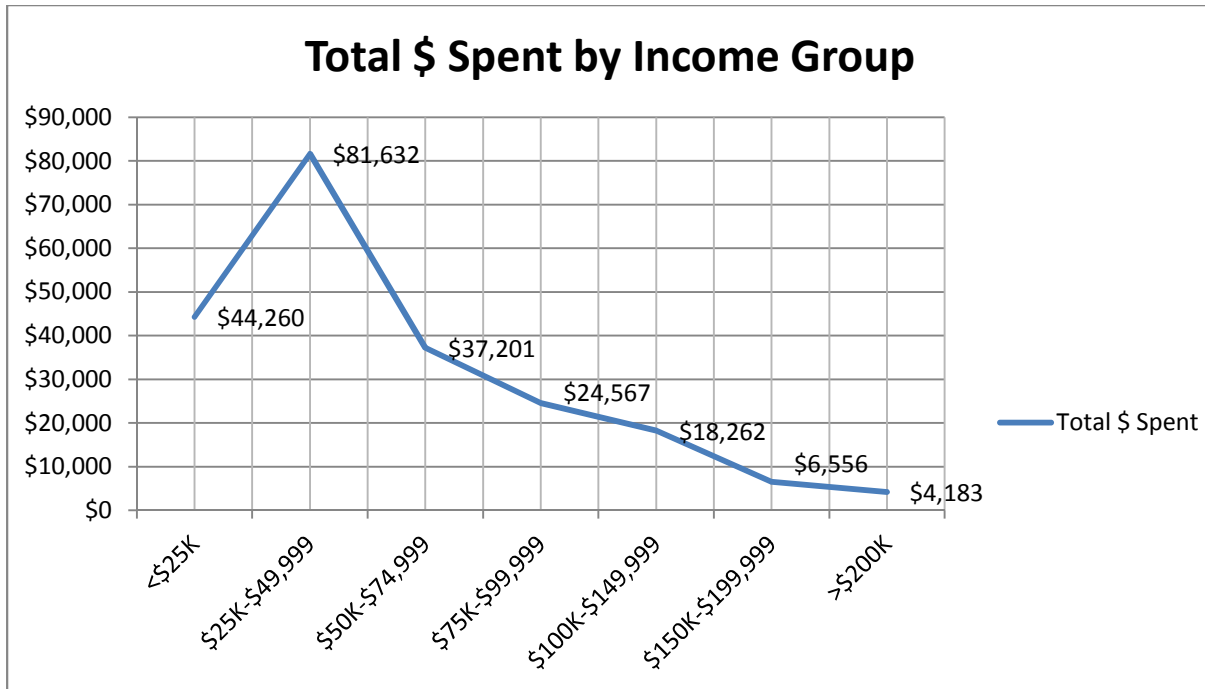


Figure 3 – Reported amount of total cash spent on music purchases by each income group

Figure 2 on the previous page does not provide evidence that consumers with greater buying power spend more on music purchases each year. On average, consumers with gross annual incomes of \$25,000 and higher allocate fairly similar amounts for these purchases. Table 1 below provides more detail from a statistical standpoint.

| Annual Salary (\$) | Mean     | Median | Mode  | Standard Deviation |
|--------------------|----------|--------|-------|--------------------|
| <25K               | \$120.93 | \$50   | \$50  | 181.501            |
| 25K-50K            | \$244.41 | \$100  | \$100 | 525.284            |
| 50K-75K            | \$194.77 | \$100  | \$0   | 395.067            |
| 75K-100K           | \$240.85 | \$100  | \$100 | 518.066            |
| 100K-150K          | \$250.16 | \$200  | \$200 | 392.880            |
| 150K-200K          | \$236.77 | \$150  | \$50  | 253.782            |
| >200K              | \$225.42 | \$50   | \$0   | 568.646            |

Table 1 – Statistical analysis of consumer spending on music purchases by income group

The correlation coefficient for the data listed given in Table 1 was found to be 0.03586, corresponding to a greater than 96% chance that the results from our collected data sample is not a random occurrence, and is indeed statistically significant. The relatively high standard deviations in each group represent the high variance in amounts reported, attesting to the level of

consumers' passion for music. The variance could be explained by a certain portion of the population downloading music for free (through illegal means) to get their fix, while others might simply stream free music through services like Spotify or Pandora. Then you have consumers on the other end of the spectrum that choose to spend the majority of their disposable income on all things related to music, including band t-shirts, albums, live performances, and concert DVDs. There are many factors that go into these purchase decisions, among them being the level of interest in the band or musician in question, the ethical beliefs of the consumer, the enforcement of piracy laws in the country of residence (Brown, 2013), the availability of merchandise and live performance schedules.

Moving on, Figure 3 on page 20 effectively illustrates another issue. With the diminishing number of people existing in each sequential step up the income group ladder, we also see the diminishing total spending on music purchases due to their similar spending habits and budgets for music-related paraphernalia. This reinforces the idea that a consumer's individual level of interest in making these purchases is a much more important factor than their actual buying power.

***Hypothesis 3:*** Consumers will define success as being able to make a career out of performing and recording music.

This is essentially true, although the responses suggest this in a roundabout way.

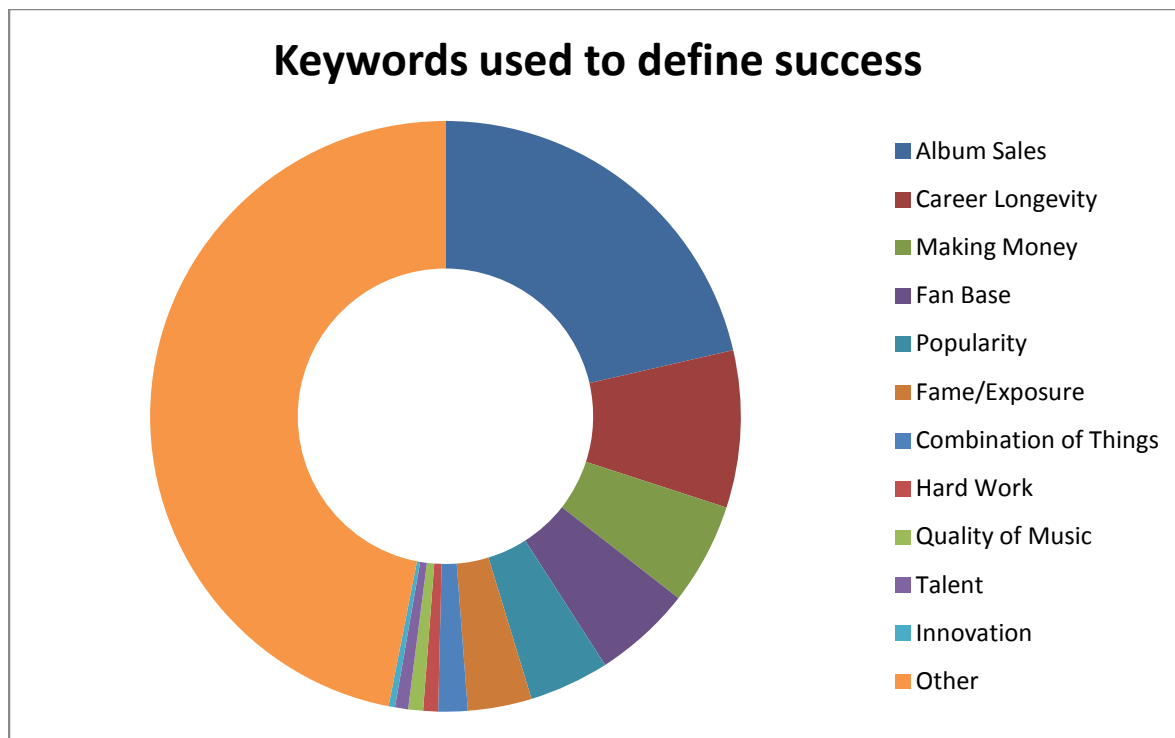


Figure 4 – Keywords consumers used in their own definitions of success

|                    |            |                              |           |
|--------------------|------------|------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Album Sales</b> | <b>239</b> | <b>Combination of Things</b> | <b>18</b> |
| Career Longevity   | 96         | Hard Work                    | 9         |
| Making Money       | 62         | Quality of Music             | 9         |
| Fan Base           | 60         | Talent                       | 8         |
| Popularity         | 49         | Innovation                   | 4         |
| Fame/Exposure      | 39         | Other                        | 524       |

Table 2 – Numerical breakdown of keywords in Figure 3

Out of 1117 definitions provided, 301 (26.9%) mentioned “Album Sales” and “Making Money” as the driving factors in determining success. Thus, financial success was by far the most common response. “Career Longevity” also received many votes with 8.6% of the total. In fact, this was the only definition provided in the top six responses that lies outside the realm of fame and fortune. This speaks volumes about consumer definitions of success in the music industry. Evidently, the common perception is that one must achieve fame and fortune to be widely considered a “success.”



**Hypothesis 4:** Vocals will be the specific attribute that stands out among the very most successful artists.

The top three most cited specific attributes were actually Uniqueness (54), Revolutionary/First of their kind/Pioneers/Innovativeness (54), and Career Longevity (27). Vocals were only specified 17 times by respondents. The variance of answers to this response was extremely high, and many responses were simply negative in nature. One of the more intriguing responses was “Business Acumen,” appearing five (5) times and all in reference to the rapper and business mogul Jay-Z. Apparently some consumers do have the capacity to recognize the excellence in the entrepreneurial spirit of musicians as a major determinant of success.

Others mentioned common media nicknames like the King of Pop for Michael Jackson, the King of Rock ‘n Roll for Elvis, and Beatle-Mania and the British Invasion for bands like The Beatles and The Rolling Stones. Michael Jackson, Beyonce, Britney Spears, and Elvis were all also hailed for their dancing prowess, among other things, and beauty was associated with acts like Katy Perry, Rihanna, Taylor Swift, Beyonce, Justin Bieber, and Britney Spears. Lyrics associated with some of the less common top-level acts propelled artists like Bright Eyes, Deftones, Creed, and Tom Petty to the top in some consumers’ eyes.

**Hypothesis 5:** Subscribers to music magazines will spend more on music purchases (on average) than non-subscribers.

| Music Magazine Subscriber? | # of Responses | Total \$ Spent in 2013 | Avg. \$ Spent per Respondent |
|----------------------------|----------------|------------------------|------------------------------|
| Yes                        | 162            | \$70,351               | \$437                        |
| No                         | 952            | \$166,009              | \$175                        |

**Table 3 – Spending habits of subscribers and non-subscribers to music magazines**

This is a really interesting result: our survey shows that subscribers to music magazines spend roughly two and a half times as much on music purchases throughout the year as their non-

subscribing counterparts. Here, the data may be slightly off due to the nature of the question posed within the survey, asking respondents to “Please estimate how much money you spent in equivalent U.S. dollars on music purchases, merchandise, and concerts last year?” But these estimations should still be relatively representative of actual figures. Future research will be needed to prove this phenomenon.

We can, however, at least speculate several potential causes for this. Subscribers to music magazines likely hold the desire to be more in tune with happenings in the music industry. Magazines like the Rolling Stone keep readers up to date with everything from major music events and festivals to in-depth artist interviews to album reviews and much more. Then, there are more niche magazines like Guitar World, which focuses on the art of the many differing aspects of the immortal instrument, ranging from interviews covering professional guitarists’ rigs and favored stage setups to tab sheets for popular songs and reviews of new guitar gear. The point is that the subscribers to these magazines are likely using the publications as learning tools to educate themselves on what music-related purchase decision they want to make next.

There also exists the possibility that consumers who have enough expendable income to pay for a subscription to a music magazine also have the capacity to spend more on other music-related purchases. Again, this may be an area worth exploring more in future research.

**Hypothesis 6:** Consumers will believe The Beatles to be the most successful band of all time.

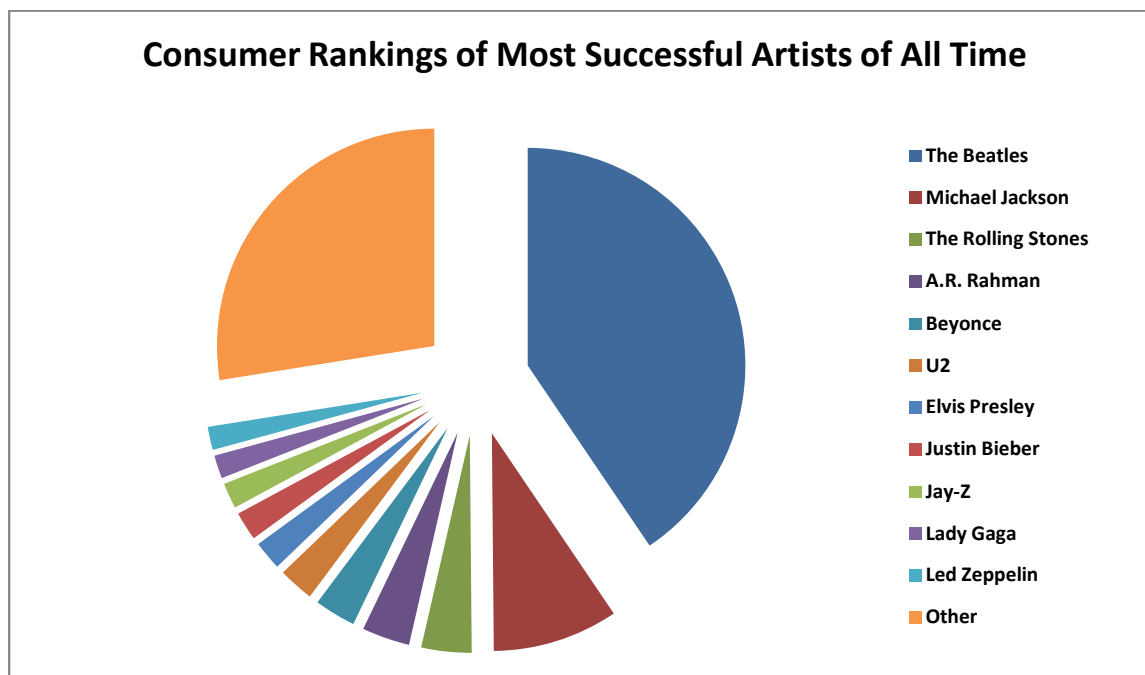


Figure 5 – Depicts the artists listed as the top overall successful act by consumers

|                    |     |               |     |
|--------------------|-----|---------------|-----|
| The Beatles        | 491 | Elvis Presley | 26  |
| Michael Jackson    | 113 | Justin Bieber | 26  |
| The Rolling Stones | 45  | Jay-Z         | 23  |
| A.R. Rahman        | 43  | Lady Gaga     | 21  |
| Beyonce            | 37  | Led Zepplin   | 21  |
| U2                 | 32  | Other         | 333 |

Table 4 – Numerical representations of the data in Figure 2

The Beatles are, by and large, the most successful musical group of all time, according to consumers. The band garnered 491 out of 1211 total top spots, equating to 40.5% of consumers polled believing them to be the biggest success. Michael Jackson was perceived to be second most successful, with 9.3% of the vote.

There are several interesting happenings in these numbers. First of all, we made the decision early on in the research process to leave the survey open to the world population. Limiting our study to consumers in the United States would potentially frame our findings to reflect only an American idea of success. We wanted a global view. This decision brought about an interesting find in that many respondents outside the United States had the Indian musician

A.R. Rahman listed somewhere in their top ten. Many in the Western world may not have heard of him but, according to the survey, he is an extremely popular sensation in India due to his humble nature and the deep connection he forms with his fans through a combination of a “hometown hero” factor, of sorts, and the soothing, emotionally satisfying music he makes.

To further analyze this group of elite musicians, we will refer to the diverse group of musicians in the top four: The Beatles, Michael Jackson, The Rolling Stones, and A.R. Rahman. Each of these acts are generally known for the following reasons, respectively: The Beatles are seen as revolutionaries for bringing rock to the mainstream, Michael Jackson was a childhood pop icon that eventually fused the pop and rock genres to leave his legacy as the “King of Pop,” The Rolling Stones have been a band for over 50 years, are credited as being a huge part of the “British Invasion,” and have a music magazine named after them, and A.R. Rahman is an Indian superstar that rose out of a humble upbringing to lift the spirits of his nation through his music. With the exception of both The Beatles and The Rolling Stones hailing from the same era and the same country, each of these groups and artists has vastly different backgrounds and niches, yet they find themselves in each other’s company at the highest peak of success in the same industry. What we should seek to know is: Is there a particular composition of factors that these bands possess that drove them to this point?

|                                 | The Beatles<br>(491) | Michael Jackson<br>(113) | The Rolling<br>Stones (45) | A.R. Rahman<br>(43) |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|
| Music Quality                   | 374 (76.2%)          | 89 (78.8%)               | 34 (75.6%)                 | 38 (88.3%)          |
| Album Sales                     | 393 (80%)            | 82 (72.6%)               | 34 (75.6%)                 | 15 (34.9%)          |
| Musical Talent                  | 336 (68.4%)          | 90 (79.6%)               | 26 (57.8%)                 | 39 (90.7%)          |
| Career Longevity                | 317 (64.6%)          | 74 (65.5%)               | 39 (86.7%)                 | 8 (18.6%)           |
| Uniqueness                      | 248 (50.5%)          | 70 (61.9%)               | 16 (35.6%)                 | 21 (48.8%)          |
| Media Exposure                  | 270 (55%)            | 58 (51.3%)               | 24 (53.3%)                 | 6 (13.9%)           |
| Innovativeness of<br>Music      | 275 (56%)            | 64 (56.6%)               | 17 (37.8%)                 | 20 (46.5%)          |
| Radio Play of<br>Music          | 242 (49.3%)          | 52 (46%)                 | 24 (53.3%)                 | 5 (11.6%)           |
| Quality of Live<br>Performances | 146 (29.7%)          | 65 (57.5%)               | 27 (60%)                   | 11 (25.5%)          |
| Music Makes Me<br>Happy         | 177 (36%)            | 49 (43.4%)               | 16 (35.6%)                 | 20 (46.5%)          |

**Table 5 – Indicators of the most successful bands and artists of all time**

Before any analysis, we should explain how this table was constructed. We chose to only include the top ten factors from Figure 1 (see page 19) to reduce clutter and form a more concise table (factors after the top ten saw a considerable drop-off in the number of total responses). The percentages in the columns reflect the percentage of respondents that chose that particular descriptor for the band or artist that they listed as the most successful of all time. This makes it a bit easier to compare and contrast across columns given the varying number of responses for each column.

As can be seen in Table 5, “Music Quality” was the only factor that scored in the highest quartile in all four columns. This reinforces the previous findings from Figure 1 (refer to page 19) in that “Music Quality” is the single best indicator of a successful musical act.

“Album Sales” also scored well for acts that are very prevalent in the United States, but not in the case of A.R. Rahman. This gives us some important insight on perceived success metrics outside of the United States. All but one of the respondents that listed A.R. Rahman as the most successful artist of all time listed India as their nation of origin. Perhaps Indian

nationals do not have a consumption-driven mindset as we so often do here in the United States. This is merely speculation, but the question may prove to be an interesting topic for future studies to address.

The data in Table 5 also confirms the stereotypes these bands and artists set for themselves. The Beatles ranked highest in the “Album Sales” percentage, and are often associated with the fact that they are the best-selling band of all time. Michael Jackson took a unique approach to style, dancing, and crafted his own genre out of two pre-existing ones to make his version of pop quite unique in and of itself. The seemingly impossible feat of maintaining a band for over 50 years was recognized in the data with nearly 87% of respondents citing “Career Longevity” as a major factor in the Stones’ success. And A.R. Rahman boasted the highest percentages in both “Music Quality” and “Music Talent”, which can be attributed to his dynamic vocal ability and the universally admired beauty in his song crafting.

Perhaps the most important takeaway from this set of data is that it reinforces the cliché that an artist needs to “find their niche,” but then go a step further and really embrace that special gift that they can provide to the world. This seems to be the common thread among the top four successful acts: they found what worked (possibly even just by some stroke of luck), embraced it, and ran with it to become legendary.

## 6: CONCLUSIONS

Though they may not appear all that earth-shattering, the result that our research has unearthed has proven to usefully advance the collective knowledge of career success in the music industry. Some highlights from our findings include:

- “Music Quality” is the single best determinant and predictor of a band’s or musician’s success.
- A consumer’s passion for music is a more important factor in the buying decision than his or her actual buying power.
- Consumers’ definitions of success in the music industry generally involve some form of fame and fortune.
- Unique individuals and pioneering sounds are the specific attributes in musicians and bands that stick out most to people.
- Subscribers to music magazines spend two and a half times more on music purchases each year than their non-subscribing counterparts.
- The Beatles are perceived to be the most successful band of all time. Out of 1211 respondents, 793 (65.5%) had The Beatles listed somewhere in their top ten, and 491 (40.4%) had them as the number one overall. To put that into perspective, Michael Jackson was second in both categories with 556 (45.9%) total mentions and 113 (9.3%) listings in the number one spot.

I was recently pleasantly (and coincidentally) surprised in one of my music business classes. Our instructor had managed to schedule the Doric String Quartet, an international touring group based in London, to come speak to our class and play a bit for us. During the discussion session with them, a student posed a question somewhat along the lines of, “What is the single most

important thing for musicians just beginning their careers to focus on?” The four members of the quartet took a moment to look back and forth at one another before the first violinist turned to the class with a reply: “The quality of your music.” The other members nodded in agreement. This moment served well to reaffirm my findings throughout my time spent on this research. These highly successful musicians from the classical realm recognized that, although many different factors have contributed to their success over the years - some coming, some going - still the quality of their music, both recorded and performed, is at the core of it all. If you do not have a quality product to sell, you cannot sustain a career.



## 7: APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. Please list the top 10 bands or musicians you believe are most successful (with 1 being the most successful)

2. What makes you describe (the #1 band or artist) as “successful”?

Choices: Music Quality, Career Longevity, Musical Talent, Uniqueness, Album Sales, Innovativeness of Music, Quality of Live Performances, Radio Play of Music, Innovativeness of Image or Costume, Ability to Crossover to other Media (e.g., television/movies), Community or Public Volunteerism, Political Activism, Religious Affiliation or Convictions, Media Exposure, Thought-Provoking, Similar Background, Music Makes Me Cry, Music Makes Me Angry, Music Makes Me Happy, Music Makes Me Relaxed, Other

3. Is there any specific attribute about (the #1 band) that stands out? If so, please describe below.

4. Are there any things that you share in common with this artist?

5. How did you learn about this band?

6. How many albums do you own by this band or artist?

7. How many DVDs or videos do you own of this band or artist?

8. How many live shows have you attended where this artist’s music is played?

9. How would you define success in the music industry?

10. Are you a subscriber to music magazines (e.g., Rolling Stone, Guitar Magazine)?

11. How much money did you spend on music purchases, merchandise, and concerts last year?

12. What is your age in years?

13. In what nation are you located?

14. What is your gender?

15. Are you married or in a committed relationship?

16. What is your employment status?

17. Are you a parent?

18. How many children under the age of 18 are in your home?
19. What is your gross household income?
20. What is your gross individual income?
21. What is your nation of origin?
22. What is your religious affiliation or belief system?
23. Does your government regulate the production and consumption of music in your country?
24. English competency short-form (5-items)

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**10: STUDENT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF ORIGINAL WORK**

*This paper represents my own work in accordance with University of Tennessee regulations.*

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