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Entertainment News : Pop Music

BACKTRACKING/BOOKS

## This fan of charts is No. 1, with a bullet

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The cover of Joel Whitburn's "Top Pop Singles 1955-2006 Billboard."

Eggert Creative

### 'Top Pop Singles' by Joel Whitburn

By Robert Hilburn, Special to The Times

October 30, 2007

The slogan of Joel Whitburn's remarkable book company, Record Research, is "For Anyone With a Heart for the Charts," and his dozens of volumes over nearly four decades have lived up to that boast.

The latest update of the "Top Pop Singles" series is a treasure chest of information about pop music. The heart of the book is an exhaustive listing of every recording to make Billboard magazine's weekly Hot 100 lists since 1955, including the number of weeks it stayed on the charts and the highest position it achieved.

If you want to know about, say, Prince's singles history, "Top Pop Singles" tells you that 51 of his recordings have made the chart, from "Soft and Wet" (No. 92 in 1978) through "Black Sweat" (No. 60 in 2006).

Whitburn also helps us measure the relative impact of artists from different eras by ranking the most successful by decade as well as those with the most Top 100 singles (Elvis Presley, 151), the most Top 40 hits (Elvis, 104), the most No. 1 hits (the Beatles, 20) and so on.

Rather than simply update the figures every few years in new volumes of "Top Pop Singles," the Wisconsin publisher is such an obsessed fan that he keeps adding new elements. This time he borrows a page from baseball batting averages and assigns a "hit average" to recording artists.

Another pop book of special interest is "Lyrics by Sting." Rather than just provide words to his songs, Sting offers frequently engaging thoughts about many of them.

Joel Whitburn

"Top Pop Singles 1955-2006"

(Record Research, \$79.95)

**The back story:** The funny thing about Whitburn is that his readers are probably just as obsessed as he is, so they'll be intrigued by his new Top Pop Hit Average rankings. But they also may be quick to offer suggestions to refine the approach.

The idea was to find how high on the charts an artist's average pop hit went. If, for instance, an artist had 10 singles and they all went to No. 1, the artist's Pop Hit



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Average would be 1 -- the best possible score.

And who came up with the best pop hit average among artists with at least 20 pop hits?

Three Dog Night, with a hit average of 12, and that's why there will no doubt be outcries.

Three Dog Night, a fairly pedestrian hit machine in the late '60s and early '70s did well in Whitburn's formula because the trio had a relatively short chart life: just 21 singles in six years.

If you took the best six years of the Beatles, Elvis or other key artists, they would probably blow away Three Dog Night.

Meanwhile, Whitburn considers the book's Top 500 Artists chart the most prestigious because it is so comprehensive. For the list, Whitburn awards an artist points for every record that makes the Billboard chart, with bonus points for each week the single stays on the chart and for how high on the chart it climbs.

Elvis Presley (9,406 points) remains the runaway leader, but the Beatles (5,360) could soon lose their second spot to Elton John (5,045). Just behind them is Madonna (4,749) and Mariah Carey (4,295), who jumps from No. 14 in the 2002 edition to No. 5 in this one.

**Further reading:** Record Research also publishes chart books covering albums and other genres, including country music and R&B/hip-hop. Information is available at [books @recordresearch.com](mailto:books@recordresearch.com). They are endlessly fascinating.

Sting

"Lyrics by Sting"

(The Dial Press, \$28)

**The back story:** The book contains the words to more than 100 songs. Rather than write an overall essay about the songwriting process, Sting simply reflects on individual tunes.

On his most famous song, "Every Breath You Take," he writes, "My original intention was to make it a seductive love song, but what I ended up with was something much darker. . . . Everything around me seemed to be disintegrating: my marriage, my band, my sanity, and this at a time when, from the outside, I appeared to be one of the most successful musicians in the world."

Backtracking, a biweekly feature, highlights CD reissues and other historical pop items.



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