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K-Tel's Place in the Music Industry: Where Have All the One-Hit Wonders Gone?

Larry Jaffee

Comedian Robert Klein has a story about how you can call up K-tel and order every record ever made. A forty-foot trailer will drive up to your house and unload the truck's contents for the next three days. That might be a little exaggerated, but Minneapolis, Minnesota-based K-tel, the largest manufacturer of compilation-hit records, sold millions of copies of the 50-75 albums of different music categories it released in 1985, according to a company spokesperson.[1]

Americans are familiar with the compilation album through the staple of late-night television, direct-response commercials, hawking records that feature "20 GREAT HITS" by different artists. Like its low-budget cousin, Ronco, which offered multi-use household items until last year, K-tel's loud and quick commercials prey on an insomniac TV consumer audience that would be glad to dial a toll-free number and talk with someone else who's up at that ungodly hour.

So it's not hard to believe that K-tel International was initially engaged in the sale of housewares. The company was founded in Winnepeg, Canada in 1962, and later in the decade expanded into Australia and the U.S. In 1970, K-tel released its first records in the U.S. and then began expanding in Europe. Last year, the multi-interest (including oil and gas operations and real estate holdings) public company nearly went bankrupt after a series of disastrous investments and is now in the process of reorganization with the intention to make the consumer entertainment market its sole business.[2]

Company woes, officials say, had nothing whatever to do with the music end of things, which, they maintain, was always highly profitable, even when hard times afflicted the rest of the music business in 1978-81.[3]

"K-tel Music Ltd. pioneered the practice of licensing record masters from different companies and creating compilations albums," noted entertainment lawyer Alan H. Siegel in his book, *Breakin' in Music.*

"With the aid of extensive TV advertising, the resulting albums were marketed by mail order and through chain stores. The concept proves so successful that K-tel's name became an almost generic term for that type of record."[4]

Despite financial problems,K-tel has managed during the past few years to produce a slew of albums reflecting the various genres of popular music. Recent titles include: "Pop Encore;" "Get Dancin';" "Images;" "Horizons;" "Heartbeat of 80s;" "Rock Southern;" "Hit Express;" "Denim;" "Summer Fun;" "Rip Roarin' Country;" and "Breakdance."

Indicative of the company's turn-around last year, "Breakdance" had sold a gold-record qualifying 640,000 units in just two months as of June, 1985, entirely in retail outlets around the country and remarkably without the intense ad support upon which K-tel has traditionally relied. Since trimming its sails last year, the company can no longer afford to drive its product with the familiar blitz of "get-every-hit-song-ever-released" blurbs.[5]

Largely determined by the fleeting fancies of unpredictable adolescents, the record charts are constantly changing. In the'60s and early '70s they were full of mercurial one-hit wonders which often appeared on K-tel- type compilations. Brief hitmakers turned into has-beens almost overnight.

However, in the late'70s, record industry and radio emphasis on AOR (album-oriented rock) just about put an end to one-hit wonders. Today, the singles and album charts are usually mirrored images of one another (i.e., the same long-established artists dominate both charts simultaneously with a constant stream of gold and platinum records).

In the case of recent breakthroughs like Tears For Fears or Wham! who enjoy a corporate video marketing push, it's safe to speculate that they'll be around for a while. Radio's current swing back to "Top 40" is actually a misnomer. For the most part radio's tightly-controlled formats have trimmed playlists to 10 rotated songs.

There were 1,980 new 7-inch singles released in 1984 (3,370 in 1980), according to the Recording Industry Association of America, the business' trade group.[6] The market life of a single 45 RPM record is usually 60 days, and rarely over 120; according to social scientist Paul Hirsch in 1969, the market life of LPs can be accurately estimated to be the same period.[7]

One notable record industry change in the past 15 years is the emphasis on multi-platinum artists like Bruce Springsteen, Tina Turner, and Cyndi Lauper springing more than five singles from

one album. Otherwise, the charts are as volatile as they were in 1969; there are just fewer players.

Most business commentators agree that about 10 percent of all records released (a little less for singles, a little more for LPs) make money. Simon Frith, an English sociologist and rock critic, wrote in his 1981 book *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll*

> The ratio of hits to releases seems remarkably small (Paul Hirsch once calculated that more than 60 percent of singles released are never played by anyone) and for all the professionalization of rock record making and selling, the market remains hard to control: one reason why it is so difficult for independent record companies to compete with the majors is that to achieve the necessary cash flow they have to have a much bigger hit-to-release ratio, they have to be more more single-minded in their pursuit of hits from every release. The majors' capital resources also provide them with their own safety net: the size and range of their back catalog gives them a continuing source of income, no matter what is happening to their new releases. Budget LPs and TV compilations (anthologies of old hits sold through TV commercials) command, between them, about half the LP market in Britain, for example.[8]

The TV compilation albums that Frith is referring to are a direct result of the constantly changing charts. In the U.S., these records do not comprise as large a percentage of total albums manufactured as they do in Britain, but they are abundantly produced for American consumers who want only hits.

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Recently going through my vast record collection, I found a genuine early-'70s artifact—K-tel's "20 EXPLOSIVE ORIGINAL HITS/ORIGINAL STARS"—complete with a psychedelic cover design. On closer examination, I realized that although most of the songs on the album were indeed memorable hits, at least half of them were performed by artists never heard from again—the stuff that is played regularly on such nationally-syndicated weekly nostalgia radio shows as "Gary Owen's 'Super Tracks'."

Musically, a lot of the songs contained here feature plenty of electric guitar and were—presumably—largely aimed at white male teenagers who still bought 45 singles. The perfect three-minute single destined for radio play is something of a lost art form these days. Typically, the songs on the K-tel record are the kind of late '60s and early '70s post-Beatles pop songs that successful groups like the Grassroots, the Guess Who and Three Dog Night continually churned out for long-term careers.

Most of the artists found here were not as fortunate and mostly had short-lived tenures on the charts. For example, the Jaggerz (no relation to Mick) scored big with "The Rapper" in the summer of 1970. It reached #7 and stayed on the charts for 13 weeks, according to *Joel Whitburn's Top Pop Records & Singles* 1955-78. The song's cliched and sexist lyrics tell of an unrelenting mod skirt-chaser: "Hey girl, he'll say 'excuse me, haven't I seen you before/he'll say he needs you, a companion, a girl he can talk to/he's made up his mind/he needs someone he can sock it to/you know what he's after/he's made an impression, so he makes a suggestion/Why don't you come up to my place, for some coffee, or tea, or me/girl, he's got you where he wants you/you've got to face reality..." The song ends with a background chorus of macho guys cheering and whistling.

John Swenson in the *Rolling Stone Record Guide* reviewed the group's one and only album by saying: "This is about as low as a one-hit wonder can get."[9]

Another one-hit wonder, Tee Set, reached #5 in May 1970 (the month of the Kent State and Jackson State campus killings) with "Ma Belle Amie," which stayed on the charts for three months. Partly sung in French, the love song features mostly innocuous lyrics like: "You were the child of the sun, the sky and clear blue sea/you were the answer of all my questions/I want to tell you I adore always do/that you amaze me/let the bells ring, let the birds sing/there was a time you though your only friend was me/I'm in love with you." The song now sounds dated with its great use of organ, not heard too often in these synthesized days.

Also included on the K-tel album is Shocking Blue's "Venus," which starts out with a memorable electric rhythm guitar riff that kids all over the country probably tried to copy when it was on the radio. The song hit #1 in February 1970 and stayed on the charts for 14 weeks with lyrics like: "A goddess on a mountain top was burning like a silver flame/the sound of beauty and love/and Venus was he name/she's got it, yep my baby's got it/I'm your Venus, I'm your fire of joy, desire..." (The music industry is truly cyclical in nature. Bananarama, the British, all-female vocal trio, topped the national singles charts in the summer of 1986 with a dance-oriented remake of "Venus.")

The compilation record also includes two great soul songs of the era—the Five Stairsteps' "O-O-H Child," which peaked at #8 in August 1970 and stayed on the charts for four months, and Alive'n Kickin's "Tighter & Tighter," which peaked at #7 the same month and stayed on the charts for 14 weeks.

The lyrically optimistic "O-O-H Child" sounds a little like the Chi-lites' hits "Have You Seen Her" and "Oh Girl." In a Michael Jackson-like soft falsetto, one lead singer starts: "O-O-H Child things are going to get easier, things will be brighter." Then a stronger but warm tenor continues confidently: "Some day we'll walk in the rains of a beautiful sun/someday when the world is much brighter."

With just the right touch of strings/horns orchestration, the song borrows from the signature Motown sound, as does "Tighter & Tighter," which also features a Jimi Hendrix-like, fuzz guitar solo probably stuck in to attract the white-rock/crossover market. As it turns out, the record was produced by Tommy James of "& the Shondells" fame, who had at least a dozen hits of his own during the period, and is represented on the K-tel album by one of the least known, "Ball & Chain."

"Tighter & Tighter's" lead vocal is alternated between a male and female singer. The song develops into a musical conversation in which both express their love for each other and combine on the chorus: "Hold on just a bit tighter/I love you so much I can't let go..."

"That genre of music (the one-hit wonders) was during a period of social upheaval and tended to take the edge off," disc jockey Roger Corey recently told me after his show at WMAJ, an AM station in State College, PA. The 32-year-old Corey is program director and morning man of the station and has been working in radio since he was 15. Corey says he remembers playing a lot of the songs that appear on the K-tel "20 Explosive Hits" album while in high school. "I grew up in this era and I remember all this stuff like it was yesterday."[10]

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Just how hard is it to come up with a hit single? One of K-tel's competitors in the compilation-hit market, Pickwick Records (also based in Minneapolis, Minnesota), addressed this question on the liner notes of one of its albums featuring "Super Hits" of the mid-'70s: "Well to give you a general idea, record labels large and small release in excess of 200 singles a week—and if three or four percent eventually make the charts it's a lot. A hit single is an achievement, and not one to be taken lightly."

Geoffrey Stokes explains the process in his book *Star-Making Machinery*, which chronicles the production and marketing of an unsuccessful album by Commander Cody and the Lost Planet Airmen:

The record we hear on the radio or our own equipment is the end product of a long chain of events that shapes the nature of the music as surely as the commercial imperatives of the thirties' Hollywood dream factories changed their films—which in turn changed their audiences. The rock chain may begin with a musician strumming his guitar in a tenement walk-up, but it includes a bewildering array of technology, armies of lawyers and accountants, and considerable wheeling and dealing in money and in drugs. All those elements are among the complicated mix that Joni Mitchell called ¢the star maker machinery/behind the popular song'.[11]

Ellen Sander, in her book *Trips: Rock Life in the Sixties*, broke down the cyclical process by each critical component:

Artists, with producers, make records. Record companies foot the bills and coordinate promotion. The actual manufacture of the record is either contracted to an outside pressing plant or one owned by the record company complex itself. From there it goes to a network of distributors, the dealers, the retail stores. It is the distribution factor that is the critical point of failure for the most part, for the distributor neither identifies nor cares about the product he handles nor does he make any effort to improve the situation. It's a constant hustle. Somebody must sit on the record company to hustle the record to the distributors. The record company must sit on the distributors to get the record in the stores. Promotion people must sit on radio stations to air the records. Coordinated, these processes, given the right product, make for commercial hits. But on the way to heaven, a snag could occur at any of these points.[12]

Evidently, the artists found on the K-tel album succeeded sans snags during the making of their first records. But maybe it was the "sophomore jinx" or some other unforeseen event that prevented a repeat performance.

Of course, in the'80s the hit-making process has been further complicated by the rise of video and the importance of exposure on MTV, which greatly increases the odds for a hit. These days, an unknown band just starting out doesn't have a good chance of making it without first coming up with a hundred grand for a slick, independently-produced video. And then there's no guarantee that a record company executive will even take the time to watch it, let alone sign the band to a contract.

"The rock business is hardly known for its inherent stability," noted Nick Logan and Bob Woffinden in the introduction of their rock encyclopedia:

Most bands have turbulent histories, for example. Also, in a world where you're only as good as last night's gig (or last record), performers can change their image and musical direction at a moment's notice, while others will rise from the dole queue to become the proverbial overnight success. Some of the momentum in rock 'n' roll has traditionally been provided by so-called "One-Hit Wonders."[13]

Although he probably didn't realize it at the time, Paul Hirsch in a 1978 *Social Research* article on mass media was writing about the K-tel genre of compilation albums:

> Quite simply, the role of producer organizations and media is to create new cultural forms, ideas, patterns, and products, whereas distributor media select from these to present standardized and watered-down versions to the mass public... In so doing, they violate the creative artists' and production organization's own sensibilities, such as the high value these place on rewarding uniqueness of invention and bold innovation.[14]

Sidney Shemel and M. William Krasilovsky note in what has become an entertainment industry bible, *This Business of Music*, which was first published in 1964 and this year saw its fifth edition:

> It is common for record companies to issue recordings which couple the performances of various artists. It has been found that the public is interested in such multiple performances, and increased sales result. Such sales will enhance royalties payable to the artists whose performances are included in the composite albums. Nevertheless, there is a danger that an artist may be cheapened and damaged by poor association in an album with other artists, and to protect themselves artists will at times attempt to obtain the right to approve the coupling of their recording with other recordings.[15]

What Hirsch, Shemel and Krasilovsky cite as a problem (from the producer's and artist's perspectives) with compilation records, I encountered while researching this K-tel album. The cover and label on the actual record contain no information other than the names of the songs and artists. In fact, the times of the songs are not listed, let alone helpful data such as songwriters, photographs, lists of band members, producers, dates released and record companies. Such information probably would also be pleasing to the artists themselves, as well as consumers.

But any discussion of this issue should also consider just who these consumers are and why they are purchasing albums of "just hits". If they were serious, high-involvement music listeners, they would most likely buy the real thing in its original form. Yet the mass audience is not entirely that group; thus there always will be a market for K-tel-type records.

Notes

[1]Lisa Guenther, administrative assistant for K-tel International, Minnetonka, MN, telephone interview, 13 November 1985.

[2]The K-tel International 1984 Annual Report, in a message from president, states: "Fiscal 1984 has been a difficult year for K-tel International, Inc. We incurred our largest loss, and on October 5 and 25, 1984, the Parent Company and three of its U.S. subsidiaries filed petitions for reorganization under Chapter 11 of the U.S. Bankruptcy Code, p. 2."

[3]Henry Schipper, "K-Tel Seems Financially Stable Nine Mos. After Chapter 11 Filing." *Variety*, 12 June 1985, p. 77.

[4]Alan H. Siegel, *Breakin' Into The Music Business* (Port Chester, NY: Cherry Lane Books, 1983), p. 16.

[5]Schipper, op. cit., p. 77.

[6]Recording Industry Association of America, New York, press release, 15 April 1985, unpaginated.

[7]Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll.* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), pp. 147-48.

[8]Ibid.

[9]John Swenson, in his review of the Jaggerz's album, "We Went to Different Schools Together," called it "the pits." *Rolling Stone Record Guide*, (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 187.

[10]Roger Corey, Program Director, WMAJ-AM, State College, Pa., personal interview, 12 November 1985.

[11]Geoffrey Stokes, *Star-Making Machinery: The Odyssey of an Album*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976), pp. 2-3.

[12]Ellen Sander, *Trips: Rock Life in the Sixties*, (New York: Scribner, 1983), p. 67.

[13]Nick Logan and Bob Woffinden, *The Illustrated Rock Encyclopedia*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), p. 6.

[14]Paul Hirsch, "Production and Distribution Roles Among Cultural Organizations: On the Division Of Labor Across Intellectual Disciplines," 45, *Social Research*, 1978, p. 318.

[15]Sidney Shemel and M. William Krasilovsky, *This Business of Music*, 5th edition, (New York: Billboard Publications Inc., 1985), pp. 31-32.

Larry Jaffee received a masters degree in journalism from Pennsylvania State University in August 1986. He is a New York City-based writer specializing in music and entertainment topics, and has contributed articles to Rolling Stone, The New York Times, and Tower Records' Pulse, among many other publications. He has taught journalism and popular culture courses at Penn State and Hofstra University.