

The WoL Index: Quantifying Incomprehensibly Bad Popular Music

Dan Morris
Studio Cobbler
dmorris@cs.stanford.edu

ABSTRACT

Warren Zevon’s “Werewolves of London” is a horrid song, yet has enjoyed sustained popularity for an inexplicably long period. While it is beyond the scope of this work to quantify *how bad* this song is, we attempt to quantify *how inexplicable* its popularity is, by introducing the “WoL Index”, a numeric measure of how surprised an intelligent person would be to find out how long a horrid, forgettable piece of garbage like “Werewolves of London” has received regular airtime on classic rock radio. We apply this measure to other pieces of popular media and discuss potential extensions of this approach.

Author Keywords

Werewolves, London, Warren Zevon, Awful, Horrid

ACM Classification Keywords

J.5.Arts and Humanities: Music.

INTRODUCTION

Since the introduction of recorded media in the early part of the 20th century, quantifying the popularity of music and video has been central to the entertainment industry. Sales charts are used to drive business in any industry, but the *consumer’s* obsession with sales figures and popularity is unique to the entertainment industry. Albums are sorted by popularity in both physical and online stores, and weekly “countdown” shows – organized around quantifiable popularity metrics – have long been a staple of American radio. Significant effort is made not only to quantify the objective (sales), but to quantify the subjective: awards are given for the “best” music and video productions each year.

However, for all the emphasis placed on quantifying the *good*, only limited effort is placed on quantifying the *bad*. This is not because we aren’t culturally interested in “bad”: Schadenfreude is the American way, as evidenced by reality television’s increasing devotion to criticism of sub-par characters and performances.

Rather, it is our hypothesis that we avoid quantifying the “bad” in popular media because the question of “what is



Figure 1: Warren Zevon’s “Werewolves of London”, represented graphically here by a picture of Warren Zevon (lower-right) next to a werewolf (center), is a horrible abomination that has received regular airplay for nearly 35 years. It is thus the standard by which we will evaluate all popular media whose popularity has lasted an incomprehensibly long time.

bad?” is ill-posed. Whether we use objective or subjective measures, it is almost impossible to define what we should include in our pool for judgment when considering the “worst” of popular media. Every day, thousands of garage bands create recordings that are neither “good” nor “bad”, they’re just “not a thing”, and are beyond the scope of popular evaluation.

In this work, we attempt to replace “how bad is [x]?” with a more quantitative question: “how *surprisingly* bad is [x]?”. We use “Werewolves of London”, which is horrid and awful, as a case study to motivate, define, and evaluate this metric.

WEREWOLVES OF LONDON

In order to help the reader understand the rationale behind the WoL index, we briefly discuss the history and content of “Werewolves of London” here.

History

“Werewolves of London”¹ was composed by LeRoy Marinell, Waddy Wachtel, and Warren Zevon; the exact

Copyright is held by the author/owner.

¹ ...which is awful and horrid.

role of each composer is not documented. It is also not known how it reached number 21 on the American Top 40 charts in April of 1978, when clearly no one would purchase this detestable, unlistenable single.

Time wasted

Its full length is three minutes and twenty-seven seconds, so we can approximate the total time this miserable, ridiculous piece of garbage has sucked from American radio as follows:

$$T_{\text{wasted}} = 3.5 \times \text{PR} \times N_s \times 365 \times 35$$

Here T_{wasted} is the time wasted on American airwaves in minutes, 3.5 is the length of the song, PR is the number of times it's played on average on a classic rock radio station per day, N_s is the approximate number of classic rock radio stations in the U.S., and 35 is the approximate number of years we've had to listen to "Werewolves of London". Using PR=1 and $N_s=500$ (both conservative), we compute:

$$T_{\text{wasted}} = 22,356,250 \text{ minutes}$$

Lyrics

For brevity, we do not reproduce the full lyrics of "Werewolves of London" here. However, to help unfamiliar readers understand how ridiculous this song is, we reproduce the complete lyrics to the chorus in Figure 2, where "Aaoooooo" represents an absurd howling sound.

Inexplicability of Popularity

There are several reasons why a song this terrible (see Figure 2) might enjoy sustained popularity. We explore each of those here, finding no correlation with "Werewolves of London".

1. **Popularity of artist.** If, for example, U2 released a subjectively sub-par single that achieved sustained popularity, this would be easily explained by devoted fans' interests in supporting the band and exploring their entire catalog. This does not apply here, because, without loss of generality, there are no other songs by Warren Zevon, and there are no Warren Zevon fans.
2. **"Rock blocks"**². The "rock block" is a staple of classic rock radio, and it is not unusual for a band with two popular songs to enjoy sustained popularity for a third on the basis that DJs need to complete such a block. This also does not apply here, because, as per (1) above, there are no other songs by Warren Zevon.
3. **Holidays.** Songs will often last beyond their expected lifetimes in the popular eye if they are recalled every year because of a specific holiday association: though the author is a huge Paul McCartney fan, "Wonderful

² Also called "Two-for Tuesdays", "Three-for Thursdays", "Favorites Fridays", "Block Party Weekends", and "Play a Bunch of Songs by the Same Artist Mondays".

Aaoooooo!
 Werewolves of London!
 Aaoooooo!
 Aaoooooo!
 Werewolves of London!
 Aaoooooo!

Figure 2: The complete lyrics to a single chorus of "Werewolves of London".

Christmastime" is also not very good, but has achieved popularity because there are only so many classic rock Christmas songs. While one might draw a loose association between Halloween and "Werewolves of London", the evidence does not bear out this association: this song is played *all year* on classic rock radio.

We thus conclude that the sustained popularity of "Werewolves of London" is *completely inexplicable*.

RELATED WORK

Assessing Werewolves of London

We are aware of only one piece of previous literature exploring the terribleness of "Werewolves of London". NPR staff et al. [1] chronicle the assessment of NPR listener Christina Pappas, who states:

"You know, if our parents are listening to songs with this kind of nonsensical lyrics, then how can we ever hope to inherit a better world [from] them?"

Another critical piece of assessment comes from co-writer and guitarist Waddy Watchel, who states in [2] that:

"We got a decent track, but there was something lacking in it. It didn't sound stupid enough."

Assessing Bad Media

Other work attempts to measure the undesirability of popular media, though only through subjective assessment of the content itself. The most *objective* assessment that we are aware of is Blender Magazine's assessment (later chronicled and repeated by Rolling Stone in [3]) of "We Built This City on Rock and Roll" as the worst song of the 1980s, on the objective grounds that it is a mind-blowingly corporate song denouncing the commercialization of rock and roll. Blender Magazine states this as follows:

"It purports to be anti-commercial but reeks of '80s corporate-rock commercialism. It's a real reflection of what practically killed rock music in the '80s."

While accurate, this is an extremely rare case of applying rational, objective criteria to quantify the degree to which one would not want to experience a particular piece of popular media.

Name	y_{popular}	y_{expected}	WoL index	Description
Werewolves of London (Warren Zevon)	35	0	36	Inexplicable
Two Princes (Spin Doctors)	5	5	1	About right
A Day in the Life (The Beatles)	45	75	1	About right
My Brave Face (Paul McCartney)	5	15	0.375	Underrated

Table 1: The WoL index computed for several popular pieces of music. Estimations of y_{popular} and y_{expected} are completely arbitrary and unsubstantiated.

THE WOL INDEX

Definition

Here we formally present the WoL index, which describes how inexplicable the popularity of “Werewolves of London” is. Specifically, we formulate the WoL index W as follows:

$$W = (y_{\text{popular}} + 1) / (\min(y_{\text{expected}}, dt) + 1)$$

Here y_{popular} is the number of years a piece of media remains popular, defined, for example as “receiving greater than 1000 plays nationally in a year”. y_{expected} is the number of years a sensible person would *expect* a piece of media to be popular. dt is the number of years elapsed since the media was released, i.e. the maximum possible value for y_{expected} . All are rounded *up* to the nearest integer, though W is continuous.

The WoL index is defined as “1.0” for media that have been available less than three years. This yields the same WoL index for all “new media” that is assigned to media that achieved a “just-about-right” run of popularity.

Examples

Table 1 presents several examples of the WoL index measured for popular media.

A piece of media that has been popular for about as long as one would expect is assigned a WoL index of 1. For example, “Two Princes” by the Spin Doctors had a sensible run of about five years. It’s pretty good, but is no “A Day in the Life”.

“Werewolves of London” has a y_{popular} of 35, and a y_{expected} of 0, and therefore has a WoL index of 36. We know of no media with a WoL index greater than 36.

FUTURE WORK

In future work, we hope to generalize this approach to other media, particularly film. We hypothesize that a similar method will apply to film based not on expected years of popularity (because the nature of the medium prevents theater runs longer than 1 year), but rather based on *anticipated* quality. For example, “Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull” should have been amazing, but it was unwatchable from the first minute to the last. Future work will attempt to quantify this phenomenon.

REFERENCES

1. NPR Staff. “From Scorn for Zevon, a Father-Daughter Moment is Born.” <http://www.npr.org/2012/07/26/157429964/from-scorn-for-zevon-a-father-daughter-moment-is-born>, 2012.
2. Correa, N. Waddy Wachtel: “Creating ‘Werewolves of London’”. <http://waddywachtelinfo.com/Nina1.html>
3. Rolling Stone. Readers' Poll: The 10 Worst Songs of the 1980s. June 2011.