

SALES OF SINGLES SOAR IN THE UK

British pop fans are buying more singles than at any time since the days of Bright Eyes and Blondie. Elisa Bray investigates (FRIDAY 14 JUNE 2013)

When the indie-pop band Ash announced in 2007 that they would release only singles instead of albums, they had a point. Six years later, as physical album sales continue to fall, singles continue to grow in popularity. The music industry breathed a sigh of relief this week with the news that singles sales are at their highest ever. So accustomed are we to reading about the death of music-buying, that it comes as some surprise that by the time we reach December 2013, this year will have been the biggest year on record for singles sales.

The Official Charts Company reported last week that it was the first time since 1999 that every No 1 single for eight weeks had sold more than 100,000 copies a week. Average sales for a No 1 over the past eight weeks have been 150,000 copies, compared with an average of just 106,000 in 2012. The current soaring sales are thanks to a raft of hits in recent weeks: Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines", featuring TI and Pharrell, was the year's fastest-selling single in its first seven days on sale, not only retaining its No 1 slot in its second week but breaking the record again when it went on to sell almost 199,000 that week – adding another 10,000 more sales than the previous week.

Meanwhile, the return of French electronica duo Daft Punk has helped to boost sales. This week's No 3 – "Get Lucky" featuring Pharrell – is Daft Punk's first single from their new album, *Random Access Memories*, and the biggest-selling single of the year to date, with nearly 900,000 sales.

Rising star Naughty Boy, who produced singles for Wiley and Chipmunk and worked with the likes of Cheryl Cole, Leona Lewis and Rihanna before stepping out of the backstage shadows with his forthcoming debut album *Hotel Cabana*, is at No 2 in the chart with his drum'n'bass-channelling single "La La La", featuring the Disclosure collaborator Sam Smith. Other popular acts that have sent single sales soaring include electronic act Rudimental.

It is undoubtedly an extraordinary run of hit songs, but the overall singles market was already booming. Last year saw 188 million singles sold in the UK – the biggest year on record, and sales are already ahead of where they were at this time last year. The market has grown so much at its top end that acts now need to sell more singles to make the Top 40 than they would have had to do at any other time in the past 25 years. In order to make the No 1 spot today, they must sell twice as many singles as they did back in 2003.

"Singles sales are definitely surging at the moment," says Martin Talbot, managing director of the Official Charts Company. "This is part of the long-term explosion in the singles market which has seen nine years of unbroken growth. But we are also in a truly rich period for enormous smash hit singles."

Music fans may not be queuing outside record shops in anticipation to physically buy the latest single on CD, but more people across the age ranges are buying singles than ever before, and it is all driven by the digital market, which now accounts for more than 99 per cent of all single tracks sold in the UK.

Sales have been rising since the first legitimate download services launched (iTunes UK went live in June 2004), steadily climbing from 30 million in 2003 to 188 million last year, as physical releases have given way to digital downloads. More people are downloading music than ever before. The percentage of people buying only digital music rose to more than a fifth last year, and it is all reflected in the fact that sales of Apple iPods and other MP3 players are outstripping purchases of CD players.

It is now so easy and instant to download a single – a click on the computer or smartphone from wherever you are at that moment – and a digital download is cheaper. The use of current pop hits in television advertising and in popular programmes (known as synching), means that people can hear a song as they are watching television and simultaneously download it. Before the digital revolution, the biggest year for singles was 1979, when 89 million singles by the likes of Blondie, The Police, Abba and Ian Dury & the Blockheads were sold in the UK.

“Digital music has revitalised the singles market,” says BPI chief executive Geoff Taylor. “More and more people are downloading music on to tablets and smartphones. We have made it easy for fans to get any song they want instantly – and that should promise a bright future for Britain’s world-leading music business.”

The rise in singles also reflects a trend for people downloading single tracks rather than entire albums. But before we revert to predicting the death of the album – because the spending on physical LPs is dropping year on year – digital album sales are also on the rise.

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