



The Year the '80s Died

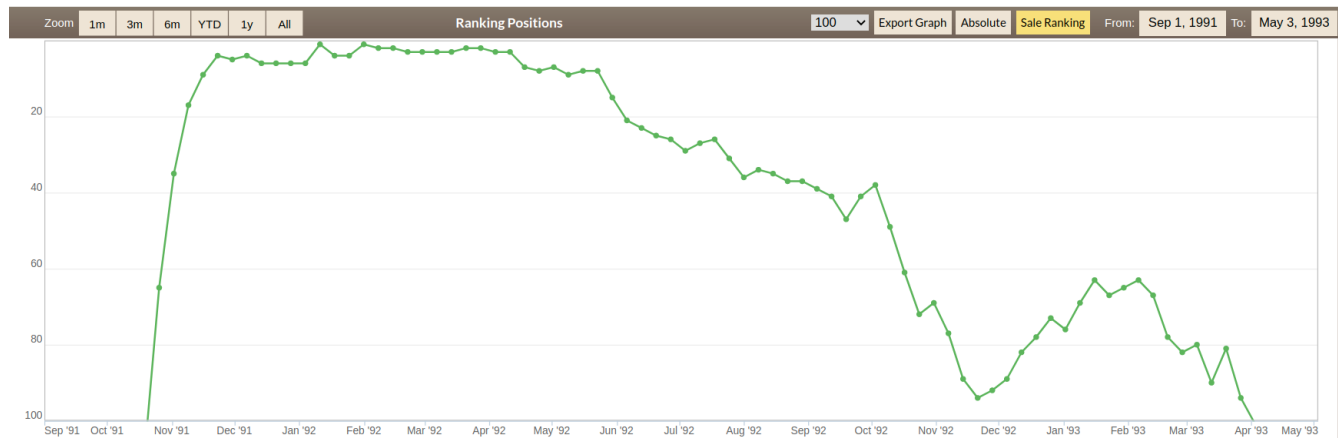
Nirvana, Michael Jackson, and Metallica in 1991

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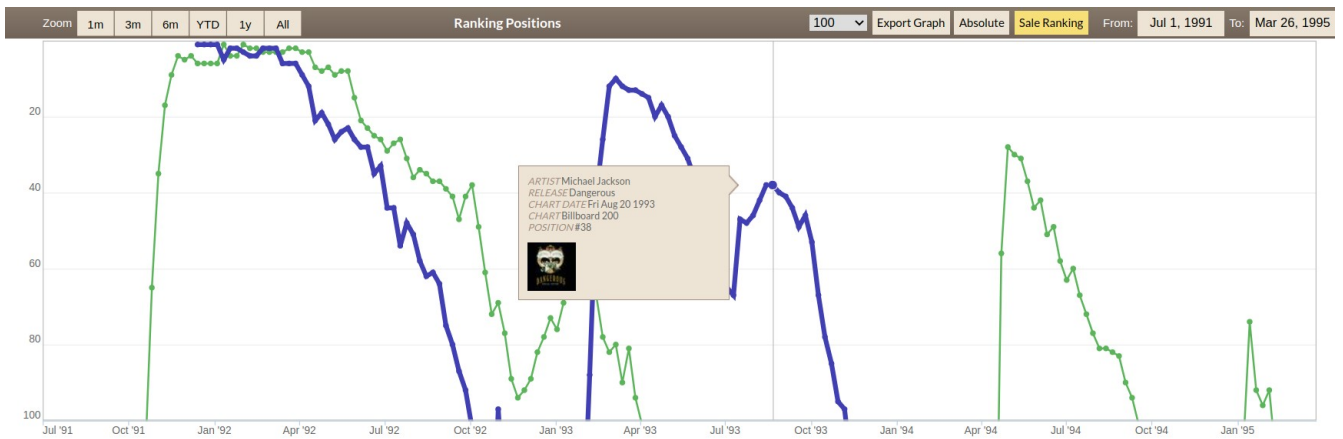
In this case study I look at the *Billboard 200* in 1991, when Nirvana brought Seattle's music scene into the national spotlight and overtook the King of Pop, Michael Jackson.

Nirvana's breakthrough hit album *Nevermind* was released in the US on September 24, 1991. Looking at free resources such as Wikipedia or chart company websites, we can find snapshots of a record's reception history, but they don't tell us much about the record's performance over time, or how it stacked up against the competition. MusicID's visualisation tools uniquely encapsulate these narratives, turning big data into insight. So let's turn to the charts as only MusicID can show them.

Looking at the *Billboard 200*, we find that *Nevermind* wasn't an overnight success.



Nevermind entered the chart October 12 at #144. Adding Michael Jackson's much anticipated *Dangerous*, which came out a month after *Nevermind*, to a custom graph in MusicID, it's no surprise to find that it debuted at #1. Relative to Jackson and the juggernaut of his international publicity, you can see how Nirvana, shown in green, made a steady climb up the chart as word-of-mouth spread.



Dangerous broke new musical ground for Jackson and for American R&B, affirming the creative potential of new jack swing. But new as new jack swing was, its '80s pop roots were overcome by the more radically new sound of grunge. Even Nirvana's own manager had dismissed the possibility of dethroning the King, but on January 10, *Nevermind* rose to the #1 position as *Dangerous* dropped to #5. *Nevermind*'s producer, Butch Vig, told *Entertainment Weekly* that in retrospect, "September '91 was really the death of the '80s." ("Nirvana *Nevermind* anniversary: Go inside the making of the classic album", 23 Sep 2016)

Vig: September '91 was really the death of the '80s.

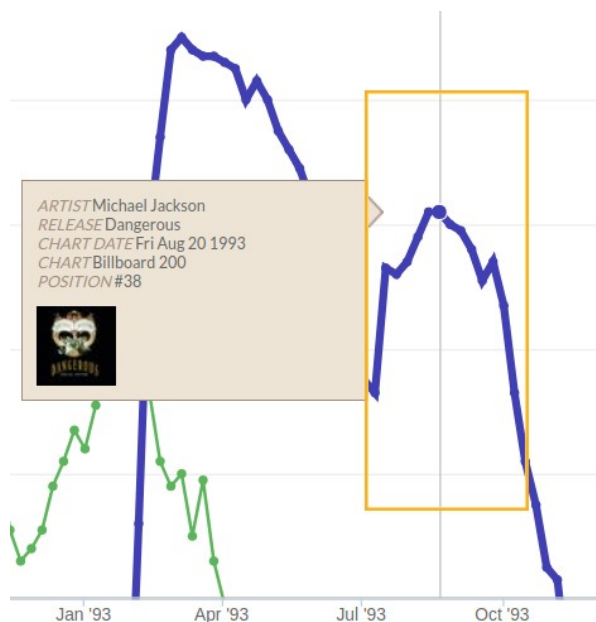
Grohl: If you look at the top 10 from June 1991 versus June 1992, it was like somebody came in with a broom and swept out all the Whitney Houston and Michael Bolton and replaced them with people with instruments.

Zooming out to both records' performance through 1994, one can see how *Nevermind* was more enduring, having a longer time in the top 10 and a slower descent, while Jackson's sales dropped off more steeply.



The long view also shows us how each artist's sales were affected by national publicity, with Jackson rocketing back into the top 20 after his landmark halftime performance at the 1993 Super Bowl,

and Nirvana's spiking after singer Kurt Cobain's tragic death in April 1994. (Curiously, the first molestation allegations levied against Jackson in August 1993 seem to have given him a brief uptick in sales, shown in the detail below.)



Nirvana's unexpected triumph is no great secret, but MusicID's visualisation tools make it easier for researchers to find the untold stories. While pulling up these charts in MusicID to compare the success of grunge artists against major pop artists, a user noted the diversity of the top albums in the fall of '91—which encompass everything from dance pop to country—and added some to her graph in curiosity, expecting their chart performance to demonstrate a more limited, niche appeal.

Instead, our user found that sales of one of these other hits, Metallica's self-titled album (the so-called "Black Album") completely eclipsed both Nirvana and Michael Jackson. As shown before, *Dangerous* had a substantially stronger debut than *Nevermind*, opening to four consecutive weeks at #1, but *Nevermind* had greater longevity, charting higher and longer than *Dangerous* over 1992.

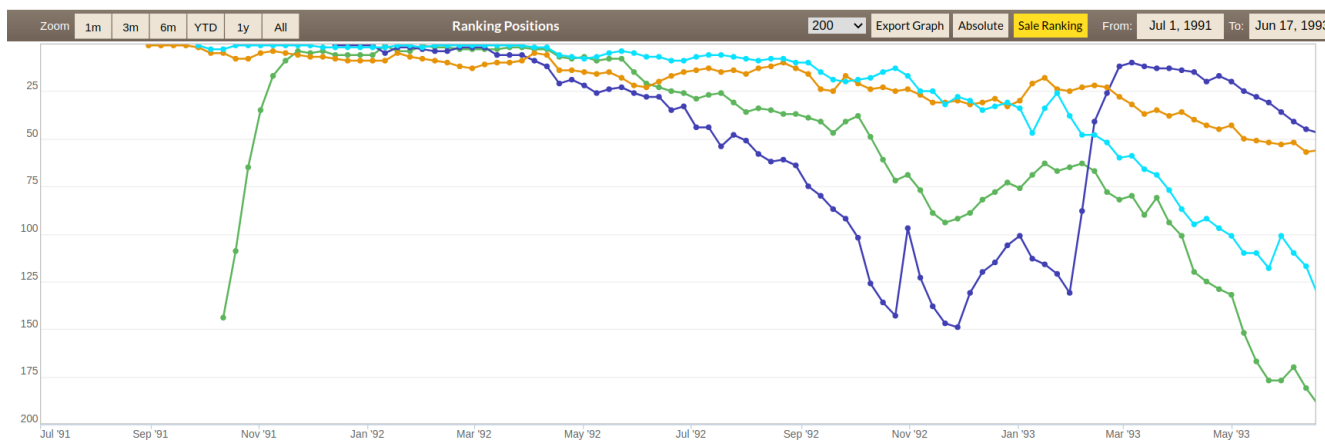


Metallica (shown in orange) was the band's first #1 album and it, too, debuted with four weeks at the top, before getting bumped by Garth Brooks's *Ropin' the Wind* (a milestone in itself, as the first country album to open at #1 on the 200)—but neither country nor pop nor grunge could stamp out metal. In the absolute view of the graph in MusicID, which superimposes each record's line from the same starting point, one can see that "The Black Album" charted even

longer than *Nevermind*. (73 weeks longer, to be precise, and 5 times longer than *Dangerous*, which charted for 119 weeks.) So Metallica not only matched the King of Pop's opening power, but had consistently higher sales than the hottest new phenomenon of the decade: grunge.



Just for fun, I added Garth Brooks into the graph. In terms of weeks at the top, clearly, none of the other players came close to *Ropin the Wind* (shown in aqua), which held onto the #1 and #2 positions from October 18 to March 27, with a total of 18 weeks at #1.



However, like *Dangerous*, it completely dropped out of the chart after 132 weeks, while *Metallica* endured to the start of 1997—592 weeks! To date, no other Metallica album has come close to the success of “The Black Album”, which has earned twice as many platinum records as the band’s second most successful album, *...and Justice for All*.

Metallica’s incredible success in 1991 puts the truism that the ‘80s died that year in an interesting light. Metallica’s brand of metal is firmly rooted in the ‘80s, and like grunge, thrash had its commercial peak in the early ‘90s. Only where grunge had gone suddenly from small clubs to the mainstage, Metallica had gone from a catalog of multi-platinum albums to platinum certifications in the double digits.

Thrash, grunge, and new jack swing are all genres which began in the ‘80s and declined in popularity after 1994. Synthpop and power ballads may have gone extinct after 1991, but looking at the decade’s music as a whole, it seems that the ‘80s weren’t quite so eager to die.

