



OLD TOWN ROAD

CHRIS MOLANPHY

A SONG BY LIL NAS X WITH BILLY RAY CYRUS



OLD TOWN ROAD



► A SERIES EDITED BY JOSHUA CLOVER AND EMILY J. LORDI

SINGLES



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For Anna and Loki

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CONTENTS

- 1 **II** Introduction **BONAFIDE** 'til I Can't No More
*"Old Town Road" as the Endpoint of a Century of Genre
and Chart Evolution*
- 7 **01** ▶ **WIDE-EYED** 'til I Can't No More
*The Maker of "Old Town Road" and the Elements of
Its Creation*
- 17 **02** ▶ **HIED** 'til I Can't No More
A Brief History of Country and Race
- 29 **03** ▶ **FLY** 'til I Can't No More
The Collision and Cross-Pollination of Rap and Country
- 41 **04** ▶ **REIFIED** 'til I Can't No More
What a No. 1 Hit Meant as the Hot 100 Evolved
- 51 **05** ▶ **DIVIDE** 'til I Can't No More
Genre Charts, Data, and Identity
- 69 **06** ▶ **WORLD WIDE** 'til I Can't No More
How Technology and Internet Culture Built "Old Town Road"

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87	07 ▶	BESTRIDE 'til I Can't No More <i>How Lil Nas X Dominated 2019</i>
121	⏮	Epilogue PRIDE 'til I Can't No More <i>How Lil Nas X Became a Multihit Wonder</i>
127		ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
129		BIBLIOGRAPHY
133		INDEX

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Introduction

BONAFIDE

'til I Can't

No More

*"Old Town Road" as the Endpoint of a
Century of Genre and Chart Evolution*

THE LAST DAY OF THE SCHOOL YEAR at Lander Elementary in Mayfield Heights, Ohio, was Wednesday, May 29, 2019. Five days earlier, the fifth graders had taken part in the school's annual talent show, capping off the day with a schoolwide performance of the No. 1 song in America. When video of that adorable performance got back to the artist behind the original song, he decided to visit

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Mayfield Heights and surprise the kids, just before summer, with an in-person performance of his hit, live in their gymnasium. The performer—a southern Black twenty-year-old born Montero Lamar Hill—arrived in his now-standard uniform of cowboy hat, boots, and fringed jacket. Hill adjusted his outfit and was escorted by the school principal into the gym.

And the kids lost their damn minds.

As the young man who had dubbed himself Lil Nas X began singing “Old Town Road” on the gym’s makeshift stage, the Lander Elementary kids practically screamed the lyrics back at him, including the titter-worthy line about “bull-ridin’ and boobies.”

Minutes before stepping out onstage to this frenzied reception, the twenty-year-old told a camera, “I’m finna do the biggest show of my life.” He was only half kidding. As recently as four months earlier, Hill hadn’t even been signed to a recording contract. Rapid rises to fame were becoming more commonplace in the post-YouTube, post-Spotify, early TikTok era of internet-fueled music virality. But even by those standards, Hill’s trajectory seemed meteoric. As the young man himself told *Rolling Stone* just one month before his Lander Elementary performance, “Time’s been going pretty fast.”

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“Old Town Road” was a singular phenomenon—a one of one. *New York Times* journalist Jazmine Hughes aptly calls it “an international anthem of defiance, tenacity and travel plans.” Few songs

have experienced its rapid and broad cultural penetration. Within months of its creation, it connected with grade-schoolers and grandparents, blue-staters and red-staters, the very online and the defiantly analog. It was heard in more than forty countries around the world. It was consumed by millions of fans of pop, R&B, rap, dance, rock, and, yes, also country music—some driven merely by curiosity, most because it's just a very catchy song.

In at least one key statistical sense, no song has done what “Old Town Road” did—as of this writing, it remains the longest-lasting No. 1 hit of all time on America's flagship pop chart, the *Billboard* Hot 100. Its nineteen weeks at No. 1 was more than twice as long as the Beatles' biggest hit, and more than the biggest hits by Michael Jackson and Madonna *combined*. And consider: those superstars' historic No. 1s (respectively: “Hey Jude,” nine weeks at No. 1 in 1968; “Billie Jean,” seven weeks, 1983; and “Take a Bow,” seven weeks, 1995) were deployed years into each hitmaker's career. “Old Town Road” was Lil Nas X's first-ever charting single.

Chart historians like the author of this book make hay out of comparisons like these, with the tacit understanding that the music business of 1968 and that of 2019 were very different. While the Hot 100's underlying formula has remained broadly the same over its sixty-five years of existence, the chart behaves very differently today than it once did. So, yes: explaining how Lil Nas X pulled off his historic chart feat with “Old Town Road” means dissecting the chart as much as dissecting the song. Not unlike the home-run record of Babe Ruth's day versus Barry

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Bonds's, we must reckon with the rules of the sport—and the performance-enhancers that warp those rules—as we weigh the players' feats.

Nonetheless, “Old Town Road” earned its climactic chart record. The song is an apotheosis, the culmination of a series of populist trends that had been building toward Lil Nas X's moment: trends in genre, in technology, in consumption, in identity. On his signature hit, Lil Nas X—whom I'll often reference as “Nas,” his preferred nickname—simultaneously lionized and satirized genre tropes. In so doing, he troubled the very idea of genre: whether it is necessary or even relevant.

Nas's smash is a country song built out of an alternative rock sample, a hip-hop song in which nobody really raps, a comical song that somehow transcends novelty. It achieved all of this organically, using profoundly inorganic technologies. To the then-twenty-year-old Hill's generation, these technologies have become so commonplace that they are now the lingua franca of musical creation. It took advantage of changes in our pop metabolism—how memes form movements, a virality that is now reified by the hit parade. “Old Town Road” even qualifies as a queer anthem—and not only because Montero Hill picked Pride Month 2019, right in the middle of his epic chart-topping run, to come out of the closet.

In sum, “Old Town Road” summarizes the musical past, while pointing the way toward our cultural future. “But,” you may be asking, “is it a great song?”

I'd argue that "Old Town Road" is an excellent pop song: sturdy, witty, inspired. But it's an even more amazing pop artifact. While listening to it, you can't help but think about its backstory, even if it's your first time hearing it. This only enhances its charms. Many great songs in pop history, at their core, revel in their own existence, from "Like a Rolling Stone" and "Stayin' Alive" to "Smells like Teen Spirit" and "Get Ur Freak On." They are, at a root level, about themselves. The self-consciousness of "Old Town Road" is one of many things that makes it great.

Charts, too, are reflexive and self-reinforcing. They are feedback loops that reflect popularity back at an industry eager to make things more popular, to turn once-cool things into commonplace things that are then replaced by the next cool thing. What makes charts exciting—the reason I focus on them in my writing, my podcast, and my scholarship—is that the industry rarely knows with any certainty what cool is. Truly unique songs are pop moments that reset our understanding of where cool lies.

"Old Town Road" was one of those—a pop moment that channeled decades of Americana and the bleeding edge of cool. All of which led up to those kids screaming at Lil Nas X about bull-riding and boobies in the Lander Elementary gym.

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