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► **To cite this version:**

Marc Kaiser. The Record Industry in the 1960-1970s: The Forgotten Story of French Popular Music. 2020. hal-02956336

HAL Id: hal-02956336

<https://univ-paris8.hal.science/hal-02956336>

Preprint submitted on 2 Oct 2020

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The Record Industry in the 1960-1970s: The Forgotten Story of French Popular Music

Marc KAISER

Little has been written on the history of the recording industry in France, particularly concerning the period covering the arrival of rock 'n' roll and its development within variety music.¹ This gap in scholarship is undoubtedly due to the fact that the study of French popular music is quite a recent phenomenon, resulting in limited data available for researchers. Nevertheless, the recording industry was marked by a series of crises and developments, which must be taken into account in order to contextualise its current situation, and thereby understand that rock is not 'a revolutionary form or moment, but an evolutionary one, the climax of (or possibly footnote to) a story that began with Edison's phonograph' (Frith, 1988:12). When it comes to France, the first forms of rock 'n' roll were incorporated by the major labels and large independent labels (especially Barclay and Vogue) into the modes of production and distribution, which had already been tested by variety music. The evolution of the record industry into a mass market at this time was not only related to the development of a new musical culture ('yé-yé' music), which corresponded to the youth of the 1960s. Other factors that must be taken account include: new modes of consumption (related to the development of 45-rpm singles); the arrival of new intermediaries into the industry specialised in the production of 'hits'; and more generally, the economic and demographic prosperity of this period. The establishment of official 'charts' in 1968 by the French recording industry association² intensified the logics of production of 'showbiz' (D'Angelo, 1989) and strengthened the divide of the French musical scene into French variety music on the one side and Anglo-American pop on the other. As a result, little space was left for new musical currents flourishing in the early 1970s, which had to evolve outside of established distribution and promotion channels. In terms of this article, the research carried out relies on various data obtained from unpublished archives held by the main French recording industry association.³

¹ In French, the term 'variétés' denotes popular music that arose from the tradition of cabaret and music hall.

² Then know as the SNICOP and later designated successively first as SNEPA and then as SNEP.

³ This included 5 linear metres of archives split into 12 boxes (containing correspondences, studies, reports, accounting documents, press cuttings, etc.).

I. From one crisis to another

Pathé played an important role in the industrialisation of French music at the beginning of the 20th century. It produced cylinders and 90-rpm sapphire records (by vertical cutting) in bulk at its factory in Chatou; it had a recording studio (with a catalogue of approximately one hundred artists); and it had a shop in Paris as well as numerous international subsidiaries (London, Milan, Moscow, New York, Shanghai, Hong Kong, etc.). Pathé was the first major French record label and had a leading position in the European market, particularly against its main competitor: the Gramophone Company, which produced needle records at their factory in Hanover.

However, with the electrification of modes of reproducing needle records in the mid-1920s – coupled with the electrification of recording methods (the microphone, the tube amplifier) and diffusion (speakers) – Pathé lost its monopoly within a few years. In fact, since it had a huge stock of matrix, Pathé wanted to improve its own material, but its engineers did not succeed in developing electric vertical cutting until 1927. It was already too late because the cylinders and their 90-rpm records were of poor quality compared to the competition's 78-rpm records (whose sound spectrum had increased from 100 to 5,000 Hz).

In 1928, the British record label Columbia seized Pathé's branch dedicated to the phonograph and imposed lateral cutting. Four years earlier, it had already bought Odéon and Parlophone. Following the merger between Columbia and Gramophone, the new British multinational Electric and Musical Industries (EMI) was established in 1931. The concentration of ownership on the French market was thus clearly visible: EMI brought together Pathé, Odéon, Parlophone, Columbia France, and the General Gramophone Company.

The First Crisis to Overcome

Although French trade of 'talking machines' only represented a few million dollars in the early 1920s, it reached more than 500 million in 1928 (Maisonneuve, 2009). Nevertheless, the 78-rpm records did not represent an object of mass consumption. At the time, 'phonos' were still associated with bicycle, haberdashery, and electricity shops. But with the all-important diversification of repertoires (especially with the rise of jazz) and the democratisation of normative discourse on recorded music (thanks to the appearance of specialised journals and prizes), the record was no longer considered as an object of curiosity or as a simple means of selling phonographs. It was now viewed as a medium for recorded music in its own right, which

depended upon a channel regrouping manufacturers of devices and materials, publishers, distributors, and retail stores.

In the 1930s, the French record industry was hit hard by the economic crisis. While production at EMI's French branches was at 2,807,280 records in 1932, the French industry as a whole only produced 2.45 million units in 1938 (Masson-Forestier, 1969). This was also the period when radio became a direct competitor: not only were the rates of equipment of French households and various public places increasing, but the program schedules were increasingly occupied by music programs, notably from the illegal broadcasting of commercially purchased records.

Faced with these difficulties, EMI defined a new strategy for Pathé: the company began to produce radios and by 1934, this activity represented 75% of its turnover (Tournès, 2002). The group thus refocused its activities and developed 'The Pathé Marconi Musical and Electrical Industries' (in 1936) after Columbia France and the General Gramophone Company had integrated Pathé. EMI, which also benefited from an association of repertoires with its main competitor at the international level (RCA-Victor), was finally the undisputed leader on the French market.⁴

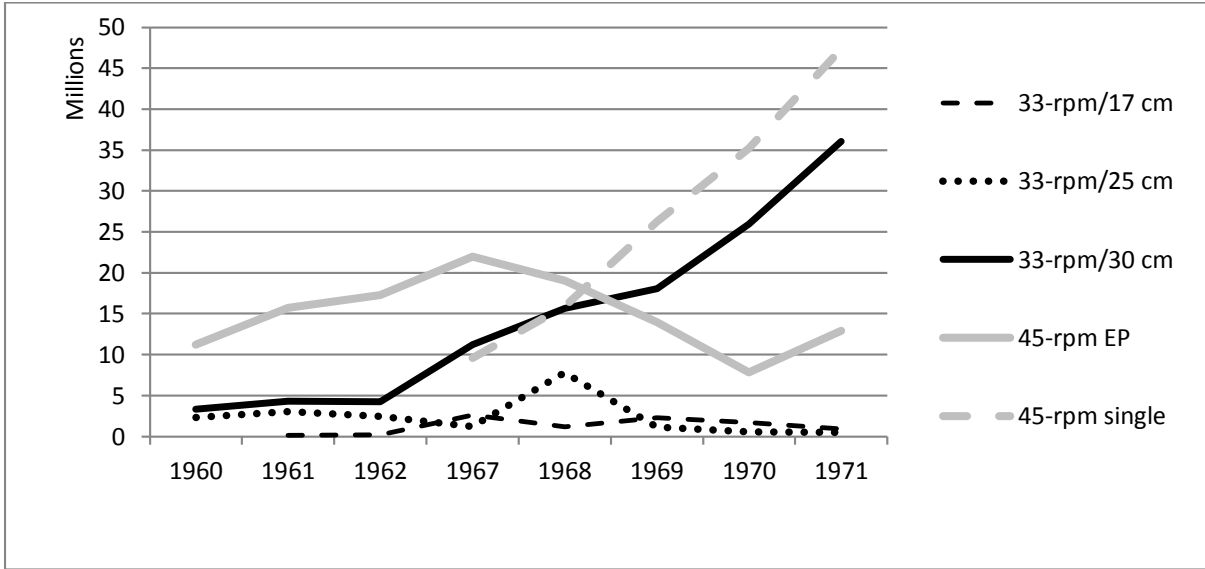
The Record Industry's Post-War Economic Boom

In the aftermath of World War II, new opportunities were available for French phonographic publishers thanks to the development of the LP coupled with a favourable socio-economic context (Kaiser, 2014). The first vinyl records were released⁵ before the manufacturing process was imported. Alongside the major labels, two independent record labels succeeded in making a name for themselves on the French market, thanks in particular to the development of variety music: the French Phonographic Company (created by Eddie Barclay in 1953) had up to 400 employees and would go on to have subsidiaries abroad, a recording studio, and a team of artistic directors (Boris Vian, Léo Missir, Jacques Souplet) and musicians (including Quincy Jones). The society Vogue (founded in 1947) employed up to 700 people, had its own factory with 20 subsidiaries in France and abroad, and had a team of artistic directors, a recording studio, a photo studio, and a printing company.

⁴ In front of DECCA, Ultraphone, Ducretet, Salabert, L'Oiseau Lyre....

⁵ The first LP published in France was the 'Apothéose de Lully' by L'Oiseau-Lyre in 1949.

In the 1960s, the market hit the jackpot when the 45-rpm EP became the preferred medium of variety music (D'Angelo, 1989; Currien, Moreau, 2006). The graph below shows how the EP was the best-selling format at the beginning of the decade until the introduction of the 45-rpm single in 1967:

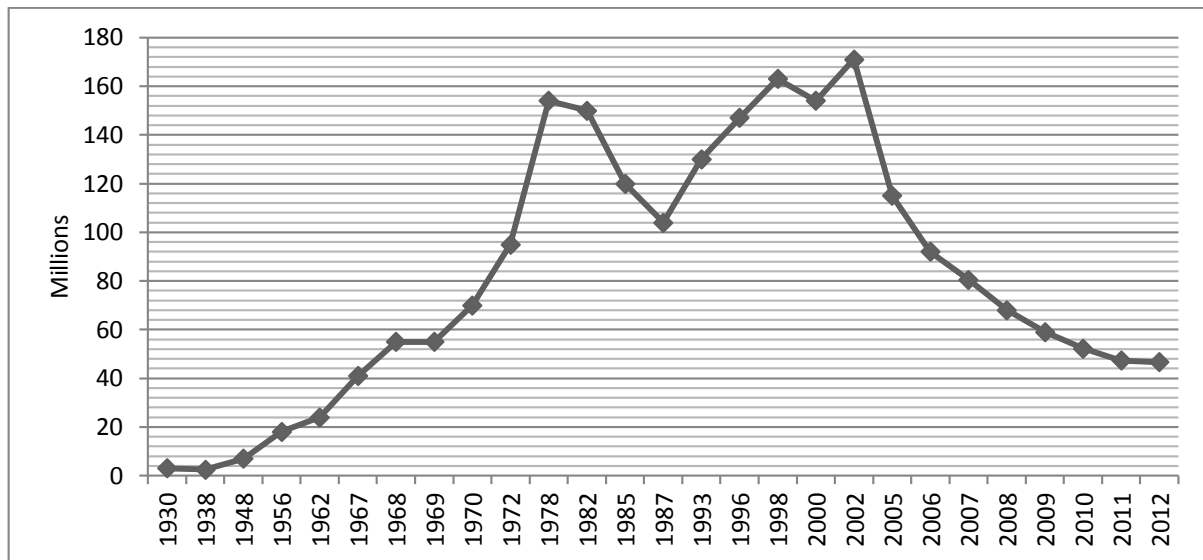


Numbers of records sold per year by type of format (France + exports)

11.2 million 45-rpm EPs were sold or exported in 1960 compared to 3.3 million 30cm LPs and 2.3 million 25cm LPs. In 1967, the 30cm record established itself over other 33-rpm formats (when the first ‘concept albums’ appeared), while sales of 45-rpm EPs reached almost 22 million. From 1969 onwards, when the concept of producing ‘hits’ took off, twice as many ‘singles’ were sold compared to ‘EPs’ (26.2 compared to 14 million). This was also the period when new intermediaries appeared in the industry (independent producers) and the distribution market was modernised (long-distance sales, multiplication of outlets, rack jobbing). At the beginning of the 1970s, popular music thus represented over 70% of sales.

New Crises and New Developments

The table below shows the evolution of sales of members belonging to the main French phonographic publishers union:



Numbers of physical formats sold per year by members of the main record industry union (SNICOP/SNEPA/SNEP)

The explosion of the record industry during the post-war economic boom is evident: 7 million units sold in 1948 compared to 154 million in 1978. The growth of the industry during this period was strong and relatively consistent, with an average of between 10 to 20% annual increase.⁶ The graph also shows how several economic crises (oil, monetary, etc.) impacted sales in France by the end of the 1970s. Not only were they affected by the decline in purchasing power, but also by the increase in production costs.

The 1980s were marked by the development of a global market for cultural goods related to new information and communication technologies and increased consolidation of cultural and media industries. The major labels developed new strategies (notably by buying labels and publishers) and introduced new formats that were of better quality and cheaper to produce (the videodisc and then the compact disc⁷). However, the CD had trouble establishing itself and did not help with the decline of sales: in 1982, the number of phonograms sold was down to 150 million units, which then fell to 104 million in 1987. Several economic factors thus contributed to reviving the music industry in France: the democratisation of laser turntables, the restructuring of the distribution market, reductions in VAT, advertising on TV, and, significantly, the broadcasting of music videos. In 1988, CD sales surpassed those of vinyl records⁸ and reached their highest level in 2002: 107 million CDs sold.

⁶ The 8-track tape and the cassette were introduced into the French market in 1969.

⁷ Videodiscs were introduced into the French market by the end of the 1970s; the CD arrived in 1983.

⁸ Large-scale production of LPs stopped at the beginning of the 1990s, and that of the single in 1993. According to the SNEPA, vinyl records represented 0,4% of the total market in 2012.

Since then, sales of physical formats have continued to fall with the increase in practices related to the digitisation of music. In 2012, the total number of units sold (physical + digital) was again growing. The entire music industry is working to find new ways of monetizing music, given the fact that the discography sector has always been confronted with many recurring problems, when going through cycles of growth/crisis /innovation/obsolescence of goods/etc.

II. Rock 'n' roll 'à la française' and the variety music kingdom

Although rock 'n' roll had not yet reached France, the music industry was undergoing change during the 1950s. In a market dominated by the major labels (who still viewed radio as a direct competitor), it was the independent labels that first seized the promotional potential of commercial radios. Unlike official radios, who had abandoned popular programs, radio stations broadcasted from neighbouring countries⁹ offered music programs that appealed to a large French audience. In 1956, Barclay thus associated itself with the radio station Europe n° 1 to get its young talent on stage at the Olympia during the broadcast of the music hall program 'Musicorama'. This new strategy would go on to launch many variety music stars: Gilbert Bécaud, Charles Aznavour, Jacques Brel, Dalida¹⁰...

This burgeoning 'showbiz' (D'Angelo, 1989) or 'music-hall' (Guibert, 2006) – which brought together professionals from the recording industry, performing arts, radio, and television – henceforth adopted new concepts of production and distribution: artistic directors made choices (both aesthetic and commercial) in order to introduce songs to commercial radios to be looped (using the technique of 'plugging'¹¹) in the hopes of obtaining significant record sales, with live performance seen as just another promotional tool.

'Yé-yé' Music: The Rock 'n' Roll of Variety music

In 1959, when the first French show dedicated to rock 'n' roll ('Salut les copains') was broadcast on Europe n° 1, it almost instantly became one of the key vectors for new youth culture (Blandin, 2013). Local bands formed and gathered in Golf Drouot's concert hall, which

⁹ To overturn the state monopoly, several commercial radios (called "radios périphériques") broadcast from regions adjacent to France: Europe n° 1 (in Saarbrücken), Radio-Luxembourg, Radio Monte-Carlo, Radio-Andorra, etc.

¹⁰ Dalida is the artist who sold the most vinyl records in France during the second half of the 1950s.

¹¹ Lucien Morisse, at the time artistic director on Europe n° 1, explains that "'plugging" ["matraquage"] (...) on the radio consisted of showing off – or rather imposing – the singer or the song that we liked and for which we sometimes had the exclusive rights' (Guibert, 2006: 107-108).

would become the epicentre of French rock 'n' roll (Guibert, 2006).¹² While foreign productions of R 'n' B, soul, and rock 'n' roll were distributed under license¹³, the first rock 'n' roll musicians were hired¹⁴, mostly to perform French versions of the latest American and British hits.

But this idea of a 'band' did not correspond to the standards of 'showbiz'. Artistic directors sought 'recordings talents' (Hennion, 1983) embodied solely by the singers of these bands, in line with the French tradition of cabaret and music hall singing tours. What's more, this strategy helped to expel the subversive nature of rock 'n' roll, which had emerged after several public gatherings (most notably after the 'Wild Night'¹⁵).

French rock 'n' roll thus ascribed to the strategy previously developed for variety music by professionals in the recording, performing arts, and media industries. They knew how to meet the expectations of French youth who were passionate about this new music and followed the actions of their new 'idols'.¹⁶ These 'idols' soon became the spokespeople of the 'yé-yé' movement (Morin, 1963a, 1963b), a term that refers more broadly to the emergence of a 'teenager moment' (Glevarec, 2003) in which the media played an important role.

The appropriation of rock 'n' roll by 'showbiz' resulted in a 'great divide' (Guibert, 2006) between, on the one hand, an electric version of variety music targeted at the youth market and, on the other, a craze for English-speaking artists. The emergence of a 'youth culture' coupled with a favourable economic and demographic climate finally allowed the record market to take off by becoming segmented.

¹² This Parisian café was one of the first places in Paris to have a jukebox in 1955, before transforming the mini-golf on the first floor of the Café d'Angleterre into a concert hall. It rapidly became the French equivalent to the Cavern in Liverpool or the Club in Eindhoven.

¹³ Barclay: Atlantic, Baccarola, Bang, Buddah, Chess, Jubilee-Jaygee, Stax... ; Vogue: Elektra, Pye, Red Bird...

¹⁴ Johnny Halliday, Richard Antony, Lucky Blondo, Long Chris, Les Chaussettes Noires, Les Chats Sauvages, El Toro et Les Cyclones, Les Vautours, Les Pirates...

¹⁵ To celebrate the first year of the magazine *Salut les copains*, inspired by the radio show, a free concert was organised at 'Place de la Nation' in Paris on June 22, 1963. Instead of the expected 50,000 'friends', more than 150,000 young people turned out for the event. The few acts of misbehaviour recorded at the first event of this kind evoked a slight backlash in the national press the following day - Philippe Bouvard, "What's the difference between a twist at Vincennes and Hitler's discourse at the Reichstag?", Pierre Charpy, "Hello hooligans!". De Gaulle made the following now famous comment: "Those young people have energy that could be bottled. If only we could make them use it to build roads!"

¹⁶ Johnny Halliday, Sylvie Vartan, Eddy Mitchell, Françoise Hardy, Sheila...

The Arrival of Independent Producers

Faced with the success of the 'yé-yé' artists, it was primarily the artistic directors¹⁷ and lyricists¹⁸ who gradually freed themselves from the major labels to produce their own artists. Although these new intermediaries could record at lower costs (notably with the development of independent studios), they still remained dependent on the distribution and promotion channels of the recording labels. The major labels in turn relied increasingly on producers to find new talent.

Nevertheless, these early independent producers followed the concept of the 'hit' because their productions could only exist within the established forms and channels of 'showbiz'. A year after the appearance of the single, a study conducted in 1968 on behalf of the SNICOP shows that over 80% of record dealers questioned felt that a 'hit' had better chances to sell if it was available in 45-rpm single format and not exclusively in 45-rpm EP format (Masson-Forestier, 1969).

While production of French variety music increased with these new intermediaries, new music from counterculture movements was emerging in France. New local scenes appeared (Mignon, 1982; Mignon, Hennion, 1991 ; Guibert, 2006), related to Leftist movements (Lagrée, 1979; Guibert, 2006), and labels were created¹⁹, sales made, and tours organized.²⁰ In the early 1970s, producer Francis Dreyfus declared that '85% of all records are now produced independently and about 70 percent of those independent producers are publishers', since 'it is not very interesting or exciting just competing for French cover versions of songs we sub-publish' (Hennessey, 1971).

But these new forms of popular music remained on the margins of 'showbiz' and were broadcast very little. This was even more so the case with the development of concept albums and multi-track consoles, with recording studios becoming veritable creative laboratories (arrangements, doubling of voices, etc.) – 'thus enabling rock to develop as a "serious" music in its own right' (Frith, 1988: 22) – which went against the norms in place. Although the French music industry had 'accommodated the hippie trend, just as it had accommodated rock 'n' roll

¹⁷ Jacques Canetti, Jacques Plait, Claude Carrère...

¹⁸ Frank Thomas, Jacques Revaux...

¹⁹ Saravah (Jacques Higelin, Brigitte Fontaine, Catharsis...), Byg Records (Gong, L'Âme son...), Motors et Somethin'Else (Christophe, Pop Corn Orchestra, J.-M. Jarre, Silence Hears, Dynastie Crisis...)

²⁰ If the Olympia was the 'holy grail' for variety music artists at the beginning of the 1970s and Bobino one of the so-called 'Left Bank' singers, French pop groups (which was the term used at the time instead of rock) could only come about within certain cultural institutions ('maisons de la Culture') and in the many places dedicated to popular education.

in the early 1960s and jazz in the 1920s, it has not made place for French rock bands' (Guibert, 2006: 140). One of the main reasons for this was the way in which the phonographic publishers union imposed two musical genres on the market (French and international variety music) with the introduction of official 'charts'.

III. Variety music and the rest

In the late 1960s, the French phonographic publishers union (the SNICOP) included around thirty companies²¹ that provided 85% of sales and 90% of production. However, the arrival of many new players disrupted the organization of the sector. Thus why the Centre for Information and Documentation on the Record ('Centre d'Information et de Documentation du Disque') (CIDD), directed by Jacques Masson-Forestier, was established in 1967, 'to serve the public and the natural intermediaries – the record dealers – by keeping them informed; in other words, by helping them in their buying' (Masson-Forestier, 1971). Four main areas were developed to achieve this goal: 'General Public' (aimed at the public to provide a practical information service); 'Record Dealers' (to provide information to help them with their orders²²); 'Press, Associations and Communities' (to provide basic information on records and tapes²³); and a 'National Chart'. The objective of the National Charts (HPND: 'Hit-Parade National du Disque') was twofold: on the one hand, to connect producers with record dealers (estimated at more than 3,000 at the time), and on the other hand, to inform the public and the retailers on a regular basis about the most requested songs in the country. The concept of rankings, established firstly from the number of sales and then from consumer opinions, was a popularity tactic, which would in turn increase the number of sales in places of distribution. The establishment of the HPND resulted in the segmentation of the popular music market around solely variety music (French and foreign), leaving aside music which did not correspond to these known genres (French rock, pop, and folk bands).

²¹ The major labels, the big independent labels, a few producers (Lucien Adès, Henri Salvador), but also pressing factories and recording studios.

²² Given the rapid increase in the number of producers and the reinforcement of distribution licences, a diversity of products was available on the French market. The CIDD released a directory (*Who produces what?*), which provided an inventory of all the marks, labels, collections and series, both French and foreign, distributed in France by each phonographic publishing house (whether or not a member of the union).

²³ Thanks most notably to the *ABC of Records (l'A.b.c. du disque)*, which retraced the important steps in the history of the record, giving technical data about its fabrication, the status of the French market in the world, some practical maintenance suggestions, and a list of SNICOP members.

French and International Variety Music Charts

In the case of variety music, several chart lists existed²⁴ or were offered at the time.²⁵ The establishment of a ranking by the publishers themselves was enforced specifically to 'clean a market cluttered with charts that were too often trivial, which complicated the information and restocking of records' (Masson-Forestier, 1968a). The first HPND of variety music, developed with the help of record dealers, covered all sales of singles without genre distinction from September 24, 1968 to October 8, 1968 (Masson-Forestier, 1968b). When observing this ranking, it is noteworthy that very few Francophone artists are at the top of the charts.²⁶ Record dealers immediately had reservations about this situation because, according to them, the results grouped together two distinct genres, which could have negative impacts on sales. Thereafter, a 'French' variety music chart (i.e. sung in French) was distinguished from a 'foreign' variety music chart (sung in foreign languages) for sales of singles. It is interesting to note that this division did not apply to the charts of popular music LPs, all grouped under the name '30cm Variety music'.

Each month, the French public could now have access to these rankings by consulting the press²⁷, by listening to the radio, which from then on resumed the official charts, or by looking at the listings in retail outlets. The HPND was also published in many foreign countries.²⁸ This also gave rise to new strategies by phonographic publishers: once a song entered in the charts, it was performed by various artists and in different languages to take maximum advantage of the 'reputation' of the song.²⁹

By the early 1970s, however, the functioning of the HPND seemed to have reached its limits: the amount of paperwork to be filled in by record dealers was too large (every fortnight); the listings were inaccurate (titles not yet received for sale; titles for which sales had ended...); the figures were distorted (publishers deliberately inflated sales in order to submit more titles for judgment by retail outlets); sales were evaluated on memory and not on the actual figures;

²⁴ In the journal *Music-hall*, in the newspaper *Le Figaro*...

²⁵ In the radio show 'Salut les copains', on RTL with the 'Family Hits'...

²⁶ The first Francophone artist was J. Dassin, who came in 7th place (behind Mary Hopkin, Peter Holm, The Beatles, The Equals, The Aphrodite's Child, Arthur Brown).

²⁷ In the professional press (*Le Métier*, *La Discographie de la France*, *Show-Business*), and in over 50 newspapers.

²⁸ In the press (*Musikmarkt* in Germany; *Musica Dischi*, *Billboard Italia* and *Centro Italia Musica* in Italy; *Records Retailer*, *The Gramophone*, *Music Business Weekly Record World* in the UK; *Billboard* and *Cash Box* in the USA...) and on the radio (BBC, Radio Luxembourg, Radio Andorra, Radio Monte-Carlo...)

²⁹ For example, the song 'Those were the days', which became 'Le Temps des fleurs' in French, occupied five different spots – according to the different versions and performers – in the French and foreign variety music rankings of November 1968.

and the majority of the record dealers who participated in the charts were recommended by the commercial services of the major labels with whom they had distribution agreements. The CIDD therefore decided to use an accountant to check the rankings obtained and subsequently control the declared numbers directly with the accounting services of each publisher. Other special charts were developed: '30cm Jazz', 'Audiobooks for Children', 'Children's Records', 'Secular Vocal Music (30cm classical)', 'Instrumental Music'... But these were only annual and did not relate to other genres of popular music since they were meant to meet the expectations of other union members specialised in classical music and children's music.

From the HPND to the 'Top 50'

When the union changed its status in 1974 (to become the SNEPA), it was decided that consumers would be questioned directly in order to put an end to tensions connected with the HPND, which had become a real strategic issue. 11,560 households spread over the whole French territory, and representing the entire population, were then questioned throughout the year about their record purchases. When consumers reported records published by non-member companies, research was conducted to determine the distributing member of the SNEPA. Some non-member companies thus benefited indirectly from the promotional tool implemented by the union. But with the increase in production costs and the decrease in sales related to the oil shock of 1973, the members decided to suspend CIDD activities at the end of December 1975.

Given the central role of the charts in the modes of production, distribution, and promotion of French popular music, the HPND nonetheless continued to exist until the introduction of a 'Top 50' in 1984. Survey companies established a computer system to retrieve sales data, from each shop in the panel, to determine a list of the 50 best physical sales of singles in France, all genres included.³⁰ Incidentally, this chart gave birth to many television programs specialised in broadcasting music videos that helped perpetuate the logic of 'hits' (developed three decades earlier for variety music).

³⁰ Since 2012, physical and digital sales are grouped together in the Top 200.

In order to understand the specificity of popular music 'made in France', this chapter began by showing that a certain sense of linearity exists in the history of the French record industry (new technological advances, strategies by the various industry players to cope with market changes, new uses and modes of consumption). It then developed the fact that the music industry had already been restructured before the arrival of rock 'n' roll in France around the large independent labels specialised in the production of variety music on vinyl. The 1960s nevertheless marked an important step in the record history since it was during this decade that the market would take flight. The introduction of a new format met with new market expectations connected to the development of a 'youth culture' and this in turn intensified the logics of production of 'hits' with the arrival of new intermediaries in the sector. And when new musical movements emerged, independent productions exploded without being integrated into the distribution and promotion networks, which remained firmly in the hands of 'showbiz'. The official charts further legitimised the division of the French scene between French variety music and English-language popular music while new local scenes were emerging in the 1970s in reaction to this hegemony. The latter included several musical styles, each possessing elements of its own culture – though punk and DIY constitute the main catalysts (Guibert, 2006). But that is the story of another very specific point in history – the birth of French alternative music.

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