The Byrds, Eight Miles High, the Gavin Report, and Media Censorship of Alleged 'Drug Songs' in 1966: An Assessment

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Introduction

There has been considerable coverage about alleged 'drug songs' in rock music and their attempted banishment from radio airplay by the establishment during the 1967-1969 period, when the youth counterculture movement reached its zenith (see, for example, Martin and Segrave 1988, 199-213; and Denisoff 1975, 390). Nevertheless, for the preceding year of 1966, when such censorship efforts originated, less attention has been focused, and unverified general perceptions have persisted. The Byrds' "Eight Miles High" and Bob Dylan's "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35" were the first records from high profile rock music artists that were branded as drug songs, and 'un-recommended' from radio airplay, by Bill Gavin's Record Report (hereafter referred to as the Gavin Report), a popular tip sheet, on 29 April 1966. The Byrds, by virtue of their adaptation of Dylan's songs into an electrified accompaniment set to a Beatles-inspired 4/4 beat, had become America's answer to the Fab Four. They had attained two Number One smash singles that had ignited the landmark folk-rock boom after June 1965: "Mr. Tambourine Man", and "Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is A Season)" (words from the Book of Ecclesiastes, adaptation and music by Pete Seeger). Over the past forty-four years, Derek Taylor (the Byrds' publicist), Roger McGuinn (the group's co-founder and leader), and virtually all rock music writers have claimed that the Gavin Report, and alleged airplay bans, derailed "Eight Miles High" from becoming a Number One hit in the U.S. by limiting it to peaks of #12 (Cash Box) and #14 (Billboard) on 14 May 1966. As a result, the accepted historical view has been that the Byrds never recovered commercially from this setback, and fell behind their American folk-rock competitors.

In this article, my aim is to determine the validity of the entrenched Taylor-McGuinn theory concerning "Eight Miles High," through the use of a holistic approach to the topic. The methodology will include a detailed analysis of the surviving local music surveys, which is fundamental to reaching a sound conclusion. In addition, I will examine Top 40 radio programming issues, the synergistic relationship between local music surveys and the national charts, as well as CBS/Columbia Records' promotional strategy.

Background

Written primarily by Gene Clark, with contributions from Roger McGuinn and David Crosby, "Eight Miles High" was a revolutionary musical creation that was influenced heavily by the music of saxophonist John Coltrane (free-style jazz) and sitarist Ravi Shankar. Chris Hillman's deep, ominous solo bass lines on the intro, and McGuinn's 12-string guitar riffs that were borrowed from Coltrane's "India," set the tone for a pulsating sonic journey. McGuinn's inspired guitar solos enhanced the song's impact, while the group's eerie vocals cast a somber, menacing pall that, along with the tune's hum-drone sound, made it mesmerizing. "Eight Miles High" was unlike anything previously heard on Top 40 AM radio- with the exception of the Yardbirds' psychedelic classic, "Shapes Of Things," released slightly earlier- and it truly pushed the rock musical envelope, as it introduced a new, experimental style known as psychedelic rock. "Eight Miles High" was released on 14 March 1966 (Columbia single 43578).

The Byrds were cognizant of the dual connotation of the word 'high': the altitude of their plane flight to England and a reference to a drug trip. Gene Clark frankly acknowledged this in a 1985 interview with writer Domenic Priore: "It was about lots of things. It was about the airplane trip to England, it was about drugs, it was about all of that... during those days the new experimenting with all the drugs was a very vogue thing to do... " (Quoted in Einarson 2005, 85; see also Priore 2007, 82). While Roger McGuinn has echoed these thoughts, he defensively has stressed the 'folk' nature of the record, and that the drug angle "...wasn't the main thrust of the song." (Quoted in Unterberger 2003, 4; Nork 1997, 1).

Nevertheless, the Byrds and their management appeared to have been oblivious to the commercial ramifications of the song's dense sound, unorthodox arrangements, and extended length (three minutes and thirty-five seconds, or 3:35); radio programmers preferred lengths of 2:30 or less. Aside from the word 'high,' these factors suggested an experimental, asymmetrical drug trip. Perone has observed that the song featured both "...unusual melodic guitar material..." played in a non-traditional mode, and "...lyrics that convincingly describe an LSD trip..."(2004, 113). As another writer has noted, while the song certainly could have referred to both a plane flight and a drug experience, "...In the minds of millions of radio listeners... 'Eight Miles High' was obviously a drug song, and so it was a drug song." (Connors 1997, 3). Perception naturally became reality in this case.

While David Crosby had doubts about the song's commercial potential, fearing that it might "bomb completely," Derek Taylor and the rest of the group felt that "Eight Miles High" had an excellent chance of reaching Number One on the U.S. national charts (Quoted in Rogan 1990, 42; Hjort 2008, 91-92). It was noteworthy that Billboard, in its 2 April 1966 issue, projected this innovative
Before this record’s release in mid-March, cataclysmic political, musical, and social developments had been occurring in the San Francisco area since 1964, which would receive coverage in the national media and catch the attention of resident Bill Gavin. The free speech movement at the Berkeley campus of the University of California in 1964 had served as a clarion call for political activism among college students. Meanwhile, a musical metamorphosis had been occurring in San Francisco, which encompassed extended musical jams, while a pervasive and connected drug culture that centered on LSD-25 (acid) had evolved in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood (Breines 2004, 38-44; Hoskyns 1997, 51). Shortly after a series of public ‘acid tests’ and musical ‘Trips Festivals’ were held in the city from January 1966 onwards, Time magazine ran alarming articles titled “An Epidemic of ‘Acid Heads’” (11 March 1966), which equated that label with “psychedelics,” followed by a piece on “The Dangers Of LSD” (22 April 1966). Significantly, on the next day, an Associated Press story went into syndication that indirectly linked the Byrds with psychedelic drugs. Containing an ill-advised remark by David Crosby from an earlier press conference designed to promote “Eight Miles High,” it quoted Crosby answering a question about psychedelic music: “The only way we could perform [psychedelic music] would be to have all the musicians on LSD! I don’t think we’ve ever managed to play any jobs on LSD.” (Quoted in Hjort 2008, 89).

The effect of this incendiary material on an already vigilant Bill Gavin cannot be underestimated. It would seem probable that Gavin made a connection between the publicized ‘Trips Festivals,’ with their improvisational music jams and widespread use of LSD, and “Eight Miles High.” Founded in 1958, Gavin’s publication recommended four records for airplay- from over 100 released each week- and provided programmers with valuable data on the progress of new singles in smaller medium and secondary markets, as well as the major centers. In addition, Gavin supplied a suggested play list of 25 to 50 records; he exchanged information with 200 correspondents across the U.S. (Fong-Torres 1998, 63; Denisoff 1975, 255-256). It was surely no coincidence that, within a week, on 29 April 1966, his influential report fired critical shots at the Byrds’ and Bob Dylan’s singles (the latter also on Columbia). Gavin accused both records of encouraging the use of drugs, and ‘un-recommended’ them from radio station airplay: “…In our opinion, these records imply encouragement and/or approval of the use of marijuana or LSD. We cannot conscientiously recommend such records for airplay….” (Quoted in Hjort 2008, 92). Two weeks later, in the UK Disc magazine (14 May 1966), Derek Taylor claimed that the Byrds’ record had been banned from airplay in Washington, D.C., Baltimore, and Houston. (Hjort 2008, 94).

Derek Taylor’s contemporaneous claims concerning the amount of airplay afforded “Eight Miles High,” its likelihood of reaching Number One, and its supposed banishment from airplay in three cities, have inspired the assertions that have permeated this topic. (Hjort 2008, 91-92; 94). Likewise, the sweeping allegations that, due to the Gavin Report’s “incorrect information”, American radio stations had "discontinued playing" “Eight Miles High", resulting in "a decline in sales" - contained in a legal letter sent by the Byrds’ management to the Gavin Report on 20 May 1966 which demanded that the publication print a "correction" of its "defamatory statements" concerning the record's meaning - have provided a further source for these views (Quoted in Rogan 2008, 161). In retrospect, Taylor felt that the Gavin Report had a fatal effect on the commercial destiny of “Eight Miles High,” and later quoted Roger McGuinn as stating that this imbroglio “blew us out of the game.” (Byrds 1990, 47). McGuinn in turn has claimed that, “The Gavin Report knocked it out… It would've gone to the Top 10.” (Nork 1997, 1). This view received support from a leading authority on the Byrds, who alleged that, “…Although the single smashed into the Top 20, its progress was dramatically halted when several major U.S. radio stations banned it from the airwaves on the grounds of its ‘drug connotations.’” (Rogan 1990, 62). Numerous historians have endorsed this outlook, including biographer John Einarson, who has noted that, “…the record was dropped in several key markets…” and that the disappointing #14 peak on Billboard represented “…a shattering defeat for such a dazzling single….” (2005, 85-86; see also Unterberger 2002, 229; 261; Priore 2007, 82; Perone 2004, 113). Elsewhere, Einarson has charged that “…Many radio stations refused to play it… Why such an incredibly innovative record was kept out of the top ten (it should have been #1) remains a travesty….” (2005, 243/40). A more balanced outlook has been posited by Hjort, who, while acknowledging the influence of the Gavin Report on program directors, has concluded that, “it cannot alone be blamed for the comparative failure of “Eight Miles High.”” (2008, 94).

Local Music Surveys in the 1960s: An Introduction

Sufficient local survey data for “Eight Miles High” has survived from a total of twenty-three U.S. cities, including the top three markets of the New York metropolitan area, Los Angeles, and Chicago; these twenty-three markets will be designated as the core sample. Sixteen markets in this core sample were within the leading twenty-five markets in the nation; eight centers were among the top ten. The local music surveys throughout the U.S. in the 1960s served as ground zero for the pulse of the popular music industry: they were the starting point where future national hits were created. While surveys from the top ten major markets realistically reflected local phone requests and retail sales of records, those from medium centers integrated national chart data into their rankings. As record companies often attempted to break a single in pivotal medium and secondary markets first, a record’s progress on such local surveys could be critical, serving “…as proof to a larger radio station that a record had merit.” (Hall and Hall 1977, 115; Denisoff 1975, 255).

Analysis of Local Surveys in Top Markets

In Los Angeles, the second-largest market, “Eight Miles High” had an ideal start, as it was added to the play list of LA’s top-rated pop station, ‘Boss Radio’ KHJ, two days after its release on 16 March 1966, and ten days before it would make its national chart...
The stark commercial reality was that in Los Angeles, “Eight Miles High” registered a respectable but unspectacular survey performance. Considering the high expectations placed upon it, these survey results were frankly disappointing. Referring to it as “tremendously popular on the local scene” was an exaggeration (Priore 2007, 24). In LA, “Eight Miles High” failed to come close to cracking the three stations’ Top 5’s, whose surveys showed consistent agreement in tracking its progress. It failed to dominate the group’s hometown charts and therefore did not demonstrate national Top Five hit potential. In comparison, Dylan’s “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35” peaked at a lofty #2 on all three LA stations’ surveys, and spent an impressive four weeks in their Top 5’s: that was a stellar achievement.

Columbia Records attempted to build early simultaneous momentum for “Eight Miles High” in the state of Ohio, particularly in Cleveland, the nation’s ninth-largest market and a vital barometer for gauging the potential of new records. After being added to Cleveland’s influential WKYC on 18 March and registering a major gain to #14 (4/1/66), “Eight Miles High” faltered over the next three weeks: a drop to #18 (4/8/66), a rebound to #13 (4/15/66), and then a final ominous decline to #19. On rival WIXY, the Byrds fared similarly: after climbing to #12 in its third week (4/18/66), their single slumped to #17 afterwards (4/25/66).

As a result of its misfires in Cleveland and Columbia’s uncoordinated promotion, “Eight Miles High” broke late (16 April) in Cincinnati, the 21st-largest market, and registered comparable results on station WSAI: a peak of #13 in its third week (4/30/66), and then a retreat to #14 (5/07/66). Elsewhere, the state capital of Columbus (31st-ranked) was viewed as a prototypical U.S. city in terms of advertising and demographics, and a viable testing ground for new records. (Denisoff 1986, 206). Unsurprisingly, influential station WCOL waited until 25 April before adding “Eight Miles High,” which achieved solid gains over the following two weeks (#25, #16) before stumbling badly, dropping to #31 (5/16/66) as it exited WCOL’s survey. In marked contrast one year earlier, WCOL had been one of the first stations beyond California to ‘go on’ “Mr. Tambourine Man” a mere three weeks after its release (‘Pick Hit,’ 5/3/65); three weeks later, it had vaulted to #6 (5/24/65).

These middling survey results from Ohio were a decisive disappointment for Columbia Records and the Byrds. The negative effects from them would be apparent in both the nearby regional centers and the national charts: the attempt to achieve a regional ‘breakout hit’ in this pivotal state had failed. Furthermore, as in Los Angeles, there was no indication that the Gavin Report played any role in this setback. “Eight Miles High” self-destructed on its own, raising serious questions about its chart potential elsewhere, as well as the caliber of Columbia’s promotional efforts.

In the third-largest market of Chicago, “Eight Miles High” fared even worse on the surveys of powerhouse station WLS, an ABC affiliate. After entering the WLS survey at #32 in its third week of airplay (4/8/66), it registered lackluster gains over the next two weeks (#29, #22), before showing some vitality, rising to #15 (4/29/66). However, just as it had done earlier in LA, this record flat-lined on the WLS charts: a #15 mark (5/6/66), and then a disappointing slip to #16 in its final week. On lower-rated, rival station WCFL, the Byrds were able to achieve better results, peaking at #8 on 19 May 1966. Nevertheless, it had taken five weeks of airplay before “Eight Miles High” entered the WCFL Top 20 (#20, 4/28/66). This activity on WCFL illustrated the truism that if a station’s survey remained un-synchronized with other leading stations, its effect on the national charts would be minimal.

The second-rate survey run of “Eight Miles High” in the major Chicago market dealt a serious blow to the record’s national chart progress. The harsh reality was that it lacked any semblance of dynamic survey activity, failing to exhibit hit potential. Once again, this data conclusively demonstrated that the Gavin Report was irrelevant: a dismal peak of only #15 on WLS after six weeks of airplay was revealing. Conversely, the fact that “Eight Miles High” continued to rise on the WCFL surveys for three consecutive weeks after the Gavin Report’s critical issue illustrated the overrated nature of its backend influence.

Despite the Byrds’ press conference held in Manhattan on 28 March 1966, and in the wake of a disastrous audition by Roger McGuinn of “Eight Miles High” supposedly made to a female disc jockey, their innovative single went over like a lead balloon in the New York metropolitan area— the nation’s leading market. (Hjort 2008, 88; Einarson 2005, 86; Nork 1997, 1; see also Gaar 1992, 111). On smaller (5,000 watt) WMCA, which routinely broke new records first in the core five boroughs of the city, “Eight Miles High” peaked at a pathetic #32 in its fifth week of charting (4/27/66). It would appear from this activity that it was dropped from the WMCA survey because of its poor requests, sales, and lack of chart progress—not because of the Gavin Report; the timing was coincidental. Such a deduction has been verified by this writer, via e-mail with a friend of Ruth Ann Meyer, who was the program director at WMCA (1958-1968) but could not be reached directly. Furthermore, two other records that had been castigated by the Gavin Report did well on the WMCA surveys: Dylan’s single (#4 peak, 5/4/66-5/11/66), and the Association’s “Along Comes Mary” (#7 peak, 6/22/66).

Giant 50,000 watt WABC, the #1-rated Top 40 AM station in the U.S., and an ABC-owned station with widespread audience reach, normally waited for new records to prove themselves on WMCA before adding them to its play list. WABC utilized a comprehensive tracking system in order to compile its music surveys. (Riccio 1999, 1-2; Henabery 2005, 11). Legendary program director Rick Sklar would also monitor the national charts for explosive movement from a single, including Top 30 placement. It was undoubtedly the sharp rise of “Eight Miles High” on both national trades for the week of 9 April that convinced Sklar and his music review committee to add it to the WABC survey on 12 April, at #37. It subsequently registered pedestrian moves: #25
If there was one major market where “Eight Miles High” never appeared, it was in Detroit, the fifth-largest center. Paul Cannon, the music director of bold station WKNR, was usually one of the first in the country to add promising new pop releases to his play list. However, Cannon failed to add it to WKNR’s rotation, so it never charted on that influential Top 30. Based on Cannon’s general recollections, it would appear that the record’s non-standard length (3:35) might have been his rationale against its inclusion: “…More often, it was a question of length. We had all these popular records we wanted to play that were too long for our format clock.” (Quoted in Westerman 2004-2009, 639). Otherwise, Cannon may have had doubts about the record’s appeal. Based on Cannon’s proclivity for adding new singles soon after their release, the Gavin Report can be eliminated as an influence on his decision, which likely was unrelated to the song’s perceived message. Corroborating this deduction was the fact that WKNR was one of the first stations in the U.S. to add Bob Dylan’s single to its play list, charting it on 6 April at #27. “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35,” which had a running time of 2:26 as a single- a reduction of over two minutes from the album version- peaked at #3 on WKNR (4/27/66). The Byrds’ failure in Detroit negatively affected the survey performance of “Eight Miles High” in the Midwest and nationally.

Ironically, the Byrds’ trailblazing record failed to chart on San Francisco’s major station KYA until 29 April, at #25 (the 6th-ranked center, with Oakland); this outlet had been the first in the country to play “Mr. Tambourine Man” prior to its release, with help from David Crosby, a year earlier (Unterberger 2002, 131-132). In its third week on the KYA survey, “Eight Miles High” peaked at an ordinary #12 (5/13/66), before slipping to #13 (5/20/66) and then fading out over the next two weeks (#16, #23). Once again, it clearly was overshadowed by Dylan’s single, which had blasted up to #2 for two weeks (4/22/66, 4/29/66), spending a noteworthy six weeks in KYA’s Top 10. Such survey activity again demonstrated that, even in his home base, Bill Gavin’s tip sheet had no discernable effect.

Pittsburgh’s KQV, an ABC affiliate and a very influential Top 40 station in the eleventh-largest market, took a reactive approach similar to WABC regarding “Eight Miles High.” After a debut of #39 on 12 April, the single made steady gains over the next two weeks (#23, 4/19/66; #15, 4/26/66). As KQV music/program director John Rook would often call Bill Gavin daily to gain access to the latest chart trends, it was noteworthy that, even after the critical issue of the Gavin Report emerged, KQV maintained “Eight Miles High” at #15 (5/3/66); equally remarkable was the single’s minor rise to #13 on 10 May. Afterwards, it faded gradually from KQV’s surveys (#24; #30, 5/24/66). This represented a patented case of an acknowledged ‘Gavin Report station’ that categorically was not influenced by this report’s editorializing. Another indication of the limitations of that report’s influence was the fact that Dylan’s single reeled off three consecutive gains on the KQV surveys (#7, #4, and #3, 5/3/66-5/17/66) after the report’s critical issue surfaced.

Statistical Analysis of Local Survey Performance

By utilizing a combination of the average and peak survey positions among the core sample of twenty-three markets, I was able to calculate an average weighted peak local chart position for “Eight Miles High:” #14. As an alternative basis of comparison, the ten highest-ranked centers from our core sample yielded the same result. These results both corroborated, and were vindicated by, the national chart peaks for “Eight Miles High:” #12 (Cash Box) and #14 (Billboard).

The most striking fact derived from this analysis was that “Eight Miles High” failed to reach the Top Five in any of the sample’s twenty-three markets. Furthermore, it managed to achieve Top Ten charting in just five centers (22 percent). Likewise, among the 30 stations included within the sample, it reached the Top 10 on only seven of them (23 percent). On thirty-seven percent (11) of the 30 stations, “Eight Miles High” had peaked by 29-30 April. On the seventeen stations where it registered at least a one-week gain after that time, the average peak survey position was also #14. Remarkably, this record either had missed the Top 20 entirely (5), or spent only one week in it (5), on ten stations. Clearly, it had lost momentum on most surveys at this time, thus foreshadowing its stall-out nationally.

These results have been independently corroborated by Top 40 retail sales charts from fifteen top markets, published in Billboard from 2 April 1966 to 7 May 1966. Among this group, “Eight Miles High” had shown dynamic (5) or moderate (1) gains in just six cities in early May (40 percent), whereas it either had stagnated (2), regressed (3), recently debuted (1), or was missing (3) in nine others- a majority 60 percent. Notably, the record was conspicuously absent from the charts for the major markets of Detroit and St. Louis (10th-largest). By excluding the lowest two charting centers, I was able to calculate an average peak chart position, as of 7 May: #16. Significantly, it had reached the Top Ten of only one market (LA, #9 peak), and had charted for only 2-3 weeks in the vast majority (9).

It was quite apparent that the Gavin Report lacked the ability to cause a meaningful number of stations to drop a single from airplay after it was charted for a period of four to six weeks. The time to ‘kill’ a single was within 1-2 weeks of its release- not over a month later. Significantly, only three stations’ surveys- ten percent of the total in our core sample- evinced fallout from the Gavin Report: KBOX in Dallas (15th-largest), WHYN in the Springfield, Massachusetts center (46th), and WLOF in Orlando (68th)- the only station that abruptly dropped both the Byrds’ (#10) and Dylan’s (#7) singles from its survey two weeks later (5/13/66). For one to suggest that this relatively minor level of damage could have affected the national charting of “Eight Miles High” is...
Regarding the purported three banned markets (Washington, D.C.; Baltimore; and Houston), it was unfortunate that comprehensive survey data from stations in these three cities has not survived. Nonetheless, fragmentary evidence exists from the first two centers. In the Washington, D.C. area (8th-largest), “Eight Miles High” had reached the Top 10 of one station—among the six reporting over a nine-week period—just once (2nd-rated WEAM, #10, 4/23/66), while on the aforementioned Billboard Top 40 area retail sales charts, it had climbed to a modest #15 by 7 May. As well, in Baltimore (14th-ranked), the record had risen to #17 on the same date. While promising, these results were hardly indicative of a hit single, and suggested that, even if any airplay boycotts had occurred, they would have been relatively inconsequential. Furthermore, these three centers constituted only eight percent of the population of the top twenty-five markets, and thus would have been statistically insignificant regarding the record’s national charting.

National Charting Analysis

Of the two national trades, Billboard was held in the highest regard due to the general accuracy of its rankings, which were based on both local radio station airplay and sales data. Airplay information was assigned heavier weight for the lower half of its ‘Hot 100’ singles, and was compiled weekly from between 63 to 125 sample radio stations via phone calls and station play lists. Retail sales numbers were given more credit for the Top 50 records, and were gathered from 25 record distributors and 80 record stores (from a sample of 100) located in 22 metropolitan markets. (Chapple and Garofalo 1977, 155; Denisoff 1986, 2; 323-324). As Denisoff observed, “… For a record to be a hit, a sufficient number of radio stations throughout the country must get on a record…. Even now heavy airplay on a handful of stations charts a record….” (1986, 205). The timely manner in which a single was ‘spread’ across the country by a record company was critical, as was overall coordination; market synchronicity was “terribly important.” (Davis and Willwerth 1975, 197). Alternately, the rival Cash Box ‘Top 100’ was based exclusively on national record sales data—airplay was not factored into its rankings.

From a possible total of nine weeks for potentially explosive chart movement—defined as virtually reducing its chart position in half—through 30 April 1966, “Eight Miles High” managed to achieve only three weeks of dynamic charting: one on Cash Box (4/9/66, from #66 to #33), and two weeks on Billboard (4/9/66, from #87 to #53; and 4/23/66, from #42 to #22). Clearly, the Top 10 survey activity in LA had been the primary ignition source behind its early ascent up the national charts. While “Eight Miles High” had earned weekly highlighted gains through 30 April, in fact, the record clearly had been decelerating prior to the end of April, notably on Cash Box, where it gained only six spots, to #18 (4/23/66). This pattern was repeated in the next week, when the single registered minimal progress on both trades: #14 on Cash Box, and a minor rise of five spots on Billboard to #17 (4/30/66). In marked contrast, "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35" had demonstrated truly explosive chart action on both magazines. On Cash Box, it blitzed up their Top 100 in lightning fashion, by reducing its survey positions in half for five consecutive weeks: #76, #37, #12, #6, #3, and #2 on 14 May 1966. Likewise, Dylan’s single had rocketed inside Billboard’s Top Fifteen within three weeks (#14, 4/23/66).

The un-highlighted, weak gains of “Eight Miles High” during the following two weeks of May (#13, #12 on Cash Box; #16, #14 on Billboard; 5/7/66 and 5/14/66) were a result of the single’s descent in the critical LA and Cleveland markets, stagnation in Pittsburgh, as well as its disappointing showing in Chicago and New York and critical absence from Detroit. Given this lack of local chart ‘steam,’ the Byrds had no possibility of making the national Top Ten—to say nothing of the Number One position: that was a pipedream. Despite the coincidental timelines, the Gavin Report categorically cannot be blamed for the stalling of “Eight Miles High” on the national trades.

Crucial Negative Issues

There existed more compelling reasons why “Eight Miles High” failed to attain the unrealistic commercial expectations placed upon it by Derek Taylor. One could contend that it was far ahead of its time and musically too complex to have been a smash hit on AM radio in the spring of 1966. Its dense, foreboding hum drone sound, jazz-like arrangements, and non-standard length curtailed both its programming potential and commercial appeal. Many program directors might have been reluctant to play it on the crucial 6-9 AM and 3-6 PM ‘drive time,’ and 9-12 AM ‘housewife,’ slots. This record’s extraordinary tone may have left those in the 9-18 age demographic, who purchased the majority of pop singles, confused and unimpressed. It was noteworthy that Rogan has conceded, “… its chart potential was debatable….“ (1990, 62). This point has been reinforced by reviews in the contemporary British popular music press, which insightfully questioned the song’s chart potential (see Hjort 2008, 92). “Eight Miles High” desperately needed FM airplay, but unfortunately that new progressive rock music radio format would not emerge until 1967-1968.

A significant loss to the Byrds, which should not be overlooked within the context of this discussion, was the departure of Gene Clark from the group on 22 February 1966 (Hjort 2008, 84). While the Byrds lost their best songwriter, his exit had ramifications far beyond front cover shots and stories in Hit Parader. As manager Jim Dickson revealed, the plans of the CBS art director to implement first-class photo shoots (with Avedon and Penn), along with a catalog book on the Byrds (a la the Beatles), were scrapped after Gene Clark left, and thus, “…CBS put the group on the back burner after that.” (Quoted in Einarson 2005, 88). One authority on the folk-rock movement has concluded that Gene Clark’s exit from the group was considerably “more worrisome”
Another critical issue that seriously hampered the commercial fortunes of “Eight Miles High” was the inefficient marketing campaign conducted by Columbia Records on its behalf. While CBS/Columbia Records had developed an independent branch distribution system, which gave the company full control over promoting its releases to radio stations and stocking its records in retail stores, there were indications that some field operatives in this vaunted network had difficulty in supporting “Eight Miles High.” This stood in marked contrast to the system’s instrumental role in breaking the Byrds’ two earlier Number One singles. Significantly, there was credible evidence that between December 1965-April 1966, the national marketing division of Columbia Records lacked proper direction from top management. This situation occurred because its head, marketing vice-president Bill Gallagher, also had designs on operating the label’s Artist and Repertoire (A&R) division himself, in the wake of the retirement of the legendary Mitch Miller. Gallagher had resisted orders to appoint a new, separate A&R chief for over nine months. As a result, he had “…been spending 80 to 90 percent of his time supervising A&R.” (Davis and Willwerth 1975, 27). Meanwhile, in marketing, Gallagher “… even admitted that things had backed up in that area…”(ibid; see also Dannen 1990, 69).

This corporate disarray was corroborated circumstantially by the surviving local survey evidence, which patently indicated that “Eight Miles High” was added relatively late by stations in the pivotal Ohio markets of Cincinnati and Columbus. Such delays logically suggested a lack of timing and coordination, starting at the corporate level, and an absence of commitment in the field. The abject failure of this label’s promotional staff to persuade Detroit’s influential WKNR to add this record to its play list was extremely damaging. Another negative aspect to Columbia’s promotion was the sizeable number of markets in which this single was added to stations’ play lists belatedly- four weeks or more after its release. Among my core sample, in 43 percent of them (ten), “Eight Miles High” did not begin receiving airplay until 12 April or later. In five centers, the record did not appear until an extended six weeks after its release (22-30 April). Two telling examples of the latter were the St. Louis and Minneapolis-St. Paul (12th-largest) markets where the Byrds did not chart until 30 April. Although these late timelines might have been partially attributable to concerns on the part of program directors about the record’s hit potential, length, or perceived message, a case could be made that these widespread delays were caused primarily by a lack of concerted label promotion in the field.

The Airplay Conundrum

Although the coordinated radio airplay of “Eight Miles High” throughout the U.S. was compromised by a myriad of factors, none was more significant than the single’s mediocre survey performance in the major Cleveland market- a crucial indicator of a record’s hit potential. As a result, it failed to achieve breakout status in Ohio, thus receiving diminished and late airplay from many stations across the country. This situation would explain why the record stood at just #42 on Billboard on 16 April; while it made one final explosive gain to #22 the next week, this progress came too late and was unsustainable.

In order for a single to become a Top Five national hit, it needed to convert initial airplay into strong retail sales numbers. These in turn were the prime component of vibrant local survey activity, which drove the national charts. Otherwise, a record ran the risk of becoming a ‘turntable hit,’ “…which means that the single breaks into the charts all over the country- but doesn’t sell in the stores…..” (Davis and Willwerth 1975, 196). This phenomenon typified “Eight Miles High,” as reflected by its ordinary local survey performance. In the final analysis, airplay could only carry a record so far. In the first half of May 1966, devoid of any Top Ten survey strength from the Los Angeles market, and lacking any compensating robust activity from other regions, it failed to deliver the crucial sales numbers and thus stalled on the national charts.

A New Theory

The dual forces of CBS Records’ extensive national distribution system, and the seismic folk-rock boom after the summer of 1965, combined to place heightened pressure on Columbia Records to generate more hit singles. Their branch network required “an enormous amount of product” to sustain itself, leading to the ‘buckshot’ approach to releasing singles, and the infamous three to seven ratio of hits to ‘stiffs’: for every ten records released, CBS Records needed at least three of them to become national smash hits in order to recoup losses from the failed seven singles, and to realize a profit (Denisoff 1975, 97). Inevitably, there was a limit to the marketing resources of CBS Records with regard to radio stations: no more than three to four singles could be effectively ‘plugged’ at any period of time (ibid. 99). Meanwhile, following the startling success of the Byrds’ first Number One hit, “Mr. Tambourine Man,” in June 1965, a flood of new American groups emerged in the blossoming folk-rock scene, all of whom had national hits: Sonny & Cher, the Turtles, the Lovin’ Spoonful, and the Mamas and Papas, among many others. The consequence was a tremendous outpouring of new music, numerous hits, and increased competition between record companies (for an excellent discussion, see Unterberger 2002, 133-183).

CBS Records/Columbia was in an advantageous position regarding this new folk-rock genre, with other artists besides the Byrds, who had also achieved Number One hits, and Top Ten singles: Bob Dylan (“Like A Rolling Stone,” September 1965), and the duo of (Paul) Simon & (Art) Garfunkel (“The Sounds Of Silence,” December 1965- January 1966). It had become clear that the Byrds were now facing stiffer competition from artists on the same label, aside from the horde of bands from other record companies.

Nevertheless, CBS Records/Columbia needed additional musical options in order to operate successfully. Aside from the folk-rock artists on their roster, Columbia had another ‘ace in their deck’ that- after three years of grooming- was ready to be played: Paul Revere & the Raiders. This raw band that had performed energetic live shows throughout the Pacific Northwest since 1960,
The Raiders and Terry Melcher unleashed a powerful single in mid-February 1966 which, in my view, seriously undermined the later promotion of “Eight Miles High” and allowed Columbia to promote more mainstream pop music: “Kicks.” (Columbia 43556). The ultimate anti-drug song, written by the successful songwriting team of Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil, “Kicks” featured excellent musical arrangements and production values, due in large part to the talented Melcher, and masterfully combined “Beatles lead guitar lines and Byrds bass figures...” (Whitcomb 1983, 277). Incredibly, it was labeled as a pro-drug song in some quarters (Denisoff 1975, 390). After four weeks, “Kicks” finally entered Billboard at #62 as the week’s second highest debuting single (3/12/66). Subsequently, “Kicks” literally exploded on the surveys of stations in the following influential markets: Cleveland (#1 peak, WKYC, 3/25/66); San Francisco (#2, KYA, 3/25/66-4/15/66); Cincinnati (#2, WUBE; #3, WSAI, 4/2/66); Chicago (#1, WLS, 4/8/66-4/29/66); Detroit (#6, WKNR, 3/23/66); and Washington, D.C. (#3, WPAC, 4/16/66-4/23/66). Thus, Columbia’s marketing division was forced to take notice: the field operatives in their vaunted branch distribution system now had a hot record that had developed chart ‘steam,’ and one that they could promote enthusiastically.

My theory espouses that this dynamic survey action of “Kicks” in late March-April 1966 upstaged the already suspect promotion of “Eight Miles High,” and caused Columbia to switch its marketing priorities. While this hypothesis admittedly is based on circumstantial evidence, it is heavily supported by the preponderance of local survey data, as well as CBS Record’s diminished view of the Byrds in the wake of Gene Clark’s exit. One might contend that, following the exceptional national chart debut of “Kicks,” the probability of chart success for “Eight Miles High” had been diminished appreciably.

After mid-April, as “Eight Miles High” was stalling on the surveys of LA and the ‘litmus-test’ Cleveland market, Columbia’s delayed decision to focus its marketing resources on “Kicks” was fully vindicated nationally: a #3 peak on Cash Box (4/30/66), followed by a #4 crest on Billboard (5/7/66). It would spend an impressive fourteen weeks on both national charts. Not surprisingly, Clive Davis, later president of Columbia Records (1967-1973), recalled that the Raiders “…ironically, were then selling the most of the four.” (besides Columbia’s folk-rock artists; Davis and Willwerth 1975, 6).

In addition to “Kicks,” Columbia had two other strong singles that required heavy promotion at this time, further diluting support for the faltering Byrds’ record: Dylan’s “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35,” as well as Simon & Garfunkel’s “I Am A Rock,” which would become the highest-charting new entry on Billboard (#62, 4/30/66). In the later parlance of Clive Davis, these three hot records were treated as ‘A-listed’ singles that demanded heavier support; “Eight Miles High” seemingly was treated as a B-listed release (ibid. 194). The Byrds had become expendable in a business sense, as the regional charting of their latest record beyond LA had been average. They would learn the hard way about the dangers of being on a major label: “…There was just too much product that they [Columbia] were putting out that they couldn’t work properly....” (Michael Ochs, quoted in Unterberger 2002, 215; brackets added).

As a sub-plot to this topic that warrants discussion, the revisionist statements from David Crosby and writer Dave Zimmer that “Kicks” was released after “Eight Miles High” are totally erroneous: “Kicks” was released in mid-February, almost four weeks before the Byrds’ single. The official Columbia recording dates, the catalog numbers, and the LA survey debut date for “Kicks” (KHJ, 2/16/66) support this timeline. A misinformed Zimmer has referred to “Kicks” as a “subsequent release” following the Byrds’ record (2000, 36). In the later parlance of Clive Davis, these three hot records were treated as ‘A-listed’ singles that demanded heavier support: “Eight Miles High” seemingly was treated as a B-listed release (ibid. 194). The Byrds had become expendable in a business sense, as the regional charting of their latest record beyond LA had been average. They would learn the hard way about the dangers of being on a major label: “…There was just too much product that they [Columbia] were putting out that they couldn’t work properly....” (Quoted in Zimmer 2000, 36-37; brackets added).

If Bob Dylan’s carnival-like “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35’ had widely eclipsed the musically stunning “Eight Miles High” on the local and national charts, then the riveting “Kicks” had left it on the tarmac.

The Broader Context

The overall national chart performance of ten alleged drug songs in 1966 further buttressed the viewpoint that attempted media censorship of them was essentially ineffective in that year: eighty percent (eight) of those records reached the Top Ten of one of the national trades. Significantly, five of these singles climbed into the Top Three, with two songs reaching the Number One spot. Aside from “Eight Miles High,” the only other branded drug record that barely missed the Top Ten in 1966 was the Yardbirds’ “Over Under Sideways Down.” This definitive major trend was mirrored in the inclusive smaller sample of three songs, which were un-recommended for airplay by the Gavin Report, for their perceived drug references in the spring of 1966. Two of these singles easily made the national Top Ten: Dylan’s “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35” (#2 peak) and the Association’s “Along Comes Mary” (#7 peak, Billboard). The latter record “…was widely interpreted as referring to marijuana...” (Perone 2004, 114; see also Whitcomb 1983, 240-241). An analysis of the available local survey data indicated that the Gavin Report had no discernable effect on their national charting. Such data and the logical deductions derived from it further validated my independent conclusion that the Gavin Report absolutely did not play a role in the relatively unsatisfactory chart performance of “Eight Miles High.” In the final analysis, a record’s intrinsic commercial appeal, its related radio programming potential, and promotion, were still supreme in
References

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to assess the validity of the accepted historical view that “Eight Miles High” was commercially unsuccessful because of the Gavin Report and alleged airplay bans in three markets. It has become unequivocally clear that Derek Taylor, Roger McGuinn, and most writers have exaggerated the effect of that report on the record’s performance: their claims have been disingenuous and invalid, in effect amounting to an unsubstantiated conspiracy theory. Indeed, the numerous references to “a lot,” and “many,” radio stations that supposedly banned “Eight Miles High”- all without any documented support- are without merit and represent irresponsible overstatements. The surviving survey information from eight of the top ten major markets, and eight of the next fifteen medium centers, plainly indicated that “Eight Miles High” received varying airplay on all but one (WKNR) of their primary stations. It categorically was not dropped from airplay, or “banned”, by major stations due to the Gavin Report, which had a minimal impact on this single’s fortunes, and therefore cannot be blamed for them.

Likewise, there is a scarcity of evidence concerning the purported airplay prohibitions of “Eight Miles High” in three markets, thus rendering the prevailing notion of their existence-based on an unverified press release by Taylor- and supposed effect on the record, suspect. These three markets would have been statistically insignificant given their share within the top 25 centers. Such market-wide banning of pop records was extremely rare in the mid-1960s, especially in the absence of a public outcry. The overall strong chart performance of alleged drug songs in 1966 confirmed the ineffectiveness of media censorship attempts, and validated my independent findings on this topic. A further indication of the limits of pre-1967 industry suppression of pop singles was Barry McGuire’s controversial 1965 protest song, “Eve of Destruction.” Despite being reportedly banned in 40 percent of the fifty largest centers (Perone 2004, 15), this record still achieved strong sales in 64 percent of the top 25 cities, reaching #1 in eight of the top eleven markets, including New York and Los Angeles. Predictably, it reached Number One on both national trades (9/18/65).

My research has revealed that most writers have confused the musical brilliance of “Eight Miles High” with its commercial appeal; the former has never been a guarantee of the latter. As well, many have allowed their lofty opinions of the song and its artistic significance in rock music history to affect their conclusions; their discussions have been conducted naively, without regard to critical commercial considerations. Furthermore, the simplistic assertions that the chart deficiencies of “Eight Miles High” were primarily responsible for sabotaging the Byrds’ future career have been questionable. (see, for example, Unterberger 2002, 262, 266; Einarson 2005, 243/40; Priore 2007, 82). A more plausible explanation for the Byrds’ lack of subsequent business success would focus on the problematic chart appeal of their future single releases- despite their acknowledged artistic merit- and most notably, the lack of commitment from CBS/Columbia Records, which led to their inefficient promotion. As well, the Byrds became more focused on exploring their eclectic and creative musical ideas within the context of albums, which became a more suitable format than singles for some rock music artists after 1965.

Ironically, the unorthodox arrangements and extended length of “Eight Miles High” marginalized its programming promise on Top 40 radio, while the record’s musical complexity and innovation curtailed its sales potential. Notably, as the first rock song that featured free-form jazz arrangements, along with an unfamiliar dense sound, “Eight Miles High” mirrored the new sense of social-musical experimentation- including LSD usage- that had been occurring in San Francisco, where the emerging youth counterculture movement was being shaped. Predictably, as it originated from America’s leading rock music group, the song presented an obvious target to a conservative Top 40 analyst such as Bill Gavin. Bob Dylan’s more infectious, lyrically-blatant “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35” (“everybody must get stoned!”) undoubtedly drew further attention to this phenomenon, and elevated the perceived threat to traditional values. Significantly, Gavin’s denouncement of both singles resonated with his conservative audience, and helped to explain why this Byrds’ record misfired on the charts: the Raiders offered a safer, more accessible pop musical alternative to Columbia, radio stations, and the record-buying public. The convenient, but ultimately invalid, smokescreen of using the Gavin Report as an excuse for the chart limitations of “Eight Miles High” has obscured these realities for far too long; this urban legend should be laid to rest.

It could be argued that, following the pioneering intricacy and programming restrictions inherent in “Eight Miles High,” business considerations were paramount in determining its chart destiny, thus providing a more plausible explanation for the record’s unfulfilled expectations than the prevailing invalid one. Ultimately, this record’s patented failure to reach the Top 5 of any surviving local survey- due to weak sales- inevitably prevented it from attaining the national Top Ten. My theories concerning Columbia’s inefficient marketing campaign, and the effect of the wildly successful “Kicks” on the label’s promotional priorities, help to explain why this Byrds’ record misfired on the charts: the Raiders offered a safer, more accessible pop musical alternative to Columbia, radio stations, and the record-buying public. The convenient, but ultimately invalid, smokescreen of using the Gavin Report as an excuse for the chart limitations of “Eight Miles High” has obscured these realities for far too long; this urban legend should be laid to rest.

Not unexpectedly, the overall chart performance of twelve purported drug songs diminished markedly in 1967, as a result of the growth and heightened visibility of the youth counterculture movement, the increased public awareness of marijuana and LSD (made illegal in October 1966), and the strong lobbying efforts of certain station owners and politicians: only 42 percent (five songs) made the national Top Ten, while 25 percent reached the Top 25. As an indication that the ‘tide had turned,’ a full third fell far below the Top 25, with just one of them entering the Billboard Top 50, while their chart peak averaged a weak #67 (Denisoff 1975, 390; see also Martin and Segrave 1988, 202-213).

References
Eight miles high and when you touch down You'll find that it's stranger than known Signs in the street that say where you're going Are somewhere just being their own. Nowhere is there warmth to be found Among those afraid of losing their ground Rain grey town known for its sound In places small faces unbound. Round the squares huddled in storms Some laughing, some just shapeless forms Sidewalk scenes and black limousines Some living, some standing alone. 

"Eight Miles High" became The Byrds' third and final U.S. Top 20 hit, and also their last release before the departure of Gene Clark, who was the band's principal songwriter at the time. The song was subject to a U.S. radio ban shortly after its release, following allegations published in the broadcasting trade journal the Gavin Report regarding perceived drug connotations in its lyrics. The band strenuously denied these allegations at the time, but in later years both Clark and Crosby admitted that the song was at least partly inspired by their own drug use. The failure of "Eight Miles H...