

Rolling Stone's 500 Greatest Albums of All Time

"**The 500 Greatest Albums of All Time**" is a recurring music ranking of the finest albums in history as compiled by the American magazine *Rolling Stone*. It is based on weighted votes from selected musicians, critics, and industry figures. The first list was published in a special issue of the magazine in 2003 and a related book in 2005.^[1]

In 2012, *Rolling Stone* published a revised edition, drawing on the original and a later survey of albums released up until the early 2000s. As in the original list, most of the selections were albums by white, male rock musicians, with the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) remaining at the top.^[2]

Another updated edition of the list was published in 2020, with 154 new entries not in either of the two previous editions. It was based on a new survey and does not factor in the surveys that were conducted for the previous lists. This time, the list favored black and female artists, with Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On* (1971) listed at the number one spot.^[2]

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Background

The first version of the list, published as a magazine in November 2003, was based on the votes of 273 rock musicians, critics, and industry figures, each of whom submitted a weighted list of 50 albums. The accounting firm Ernst & Young devised a point system to weigh votes for 1,600 submitted titles.^[3] The Beatles' 1967 album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* topped the list, with *Rolling Stone's* editors describing it as "the most important rock 'n' roll album ever made".^[4] The Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* (1966) was ranked second in recognition of its influence on *Sgt. Pepper*.^[5] The list also included compilations and "greatest hits" collections.^[3]

An amended list was released as a book in 2005, with an introduction by guitarist Steven Van Zandt. Some compilation albums were removed, and Robert Johnson's *The Complete Recordings* was



The Beatles (1964)

substituted for both of his *King of the Delta Blues Singers* volumes, making room for a total of eight new entries on the list.^[nb 1]

On May 31, 2012, *Rolling Stone* published a revised list, drawing on the original and a later survey of albums up until the early 2000s.^[6] It was made available in "bookazine" format on newsstands in the US from April 27 to July 25. The new list contained 38 albums not present in the previous one, 16 of them released after 2003. The top listings remained unchanged.

Most of the albums on the initial lists were by white male rock musicians. Among the top 50 rankings, only 12 entries were by artists of non-white ethnicity, none of whom were female, and only three albums by white women figured in the top 50.^[2] On September 22, 2020, another revision of the list was published. It drew upon a new survey conducted with "more than 300 artists, producers, critics, and music-industry figures", including:^[7]



Marvin Gaye (1973)

- Craig Kallman
- Beyoncé
- Taylor Swift
- Billie Eilish
- H.E.R.
- Tierra Whack
- Lindsey Jordan
- Adam Clayton
- The Edge
- Raekwon
- Gene Simmons
- Stevie Nicks

This time, the list favored black and female musicians, with many such artists represented at higher rankings than on the previous lists.^[2] 86 of the entries were 21st-century releases. 154 new entries were not on either of the two previous editions, and rap albums figured three times as much.^[8] Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On* (1971) was featured at the number one spot.^[7]

Reception

The original *Rolling Stone* 500 was criticized for being male-dominated, outmoded and almost entirely Anglo-American in focus.^{[9][10]} Writing in *USA Today* newspaper, Edna Gundersen described the list as predictable and "weighted toward testosterone-fueled vintage rock". Following the publicity surrounding the list, rock critic Jim DeRogatis, a former *Rolling Stone* editor, published *Kill Your Idols: A New Generation of Rock Writers Reconsiders the Classics* in 2004. The book featured a number of critics arguing against the high evaluation of various "great" albums, many of which had been included in the list.^[11]

Jonny Sharp, a contributor to *NME's* own 500 greatest albums list, described the 2012 *Rolling Stone* list as a "soulless, canon-centric [list] of the same tired old titles," noting: "looking at their 500, when the only album in their top 10 less than 40 years old is *London Calling*, I think I prefer the *NME's* less critically-correct approach."^[12]

Responding to the 2020 revision, *Consequence of Sound*'s Alex Young wrote that the lesser representation of white male rock musicians was "the biggest takeaway".^[2] According to CNN's Leah Asmelash, "The change represents a massive shift for the magazine, moving to recognize more contemporary albums and a wider range of tastes."^[13]

InsideHook's Bonnie Stiernberg questioned whether the editors had made adjustments to the numbered rankings instead of presenting the true results, citing her own experience of helping to compile such lists.^[14] She reported that the list "sparked plenty of debate, angering rockist Boomers and causing cynics to question whether certain albums made the cut because they're really that great or because they happen to be made by someone who isn't a white man".^[14]

Statistics

Number of albums from each decade

2003 edition			2012 edition		
Decade	Number of albums	Percentage	Decade	Number of albums	Percentage
1950s	29	5.8%	1950s	10	2.0%
1960s	126	25.2%	1960s	105	21.0%
1970s	183	36.6%	1970s	186	37.2%
1980s	88	17.6%	1980s	84	16.8%
1990s	61	12.2%	1990s	73	14.6%
2000s	13	2.6%	2000s	40	8.0%
			2010s	2	0.4%

2020 edition

Decade	Number of albums	Percentage
1950s	9	1.8%
1960s	74	14.8%
1970s	157	31.4%
1980s	71	14.2%
1990s	103	20.6%
2000s	50	10.0%
2010s	36	7.2%

Artists with the most albums (2020 revision)

9 albums

- The Beatles (one in the top 10 at the No. 5 spot)

8 albums

- Bob Dylan (one credited to Bob Dylan and the Band; one in the top 10 at the No. 9 spot)

7 albums

- Neil Young (one with Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young; two credited as Neil Young & Crazy Horse)

6 albums

- Kanye West
- The Rolling Stones

5 albums

- Led Zeppelin
- Bruce Springsteen
- David Bowie

4 albums

- Aretha Franklin
- Radiohead
- The Who
- Joni Mitchell (one in the top 10 at the No. 3 spot)
- Pink Floyd

- Prince (one credited to Prince and the Revolution; one in the top 10 at the number 8 spot)
- Stevie Wonder (one in the top 10 at the No. 4 spot)
- The Velvet Underground (one album credited with Nico)

3 albums

- The Band (one credited to Bob Dylan and The Band)
- Outkast
- Kendrick Lamar
- Beyoncé (one with Destiny's Child)
- The Beach Boys (one in the top 10 at the No. 2 spot)
- Al Green
- Bob Marley and the Wailers
- D'Angelo (one with D'Angelo and the Vanguard)
- Big Star
- Fiona Apple
- Beastie Boys
- Tom Petty (one with Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers)
- Black Sabbath
- The Clash
- Paul Simon (one with Simon and Garfunkel)
- James Brown
- George Clinton (two with Funkadelic, one with Parliament)
- Marvin Gaye (one in the top 10 at the No. 1 spot)
- The Jimi Hendrix Experience
- Michael Jackson
- Janet Jackson
- Madonna
- Nirvana (one in the top 10 at the No. 6 spot)
- Elvis Presley
- Jay-Z
- Pavement
- Sly and the Family Stone

Artists with the most albums (2003 and 2012 revisions)

11 albums

- Bob Dylan (one credited to Bob Dylan and the Band; two in the top 10 at the No. 9 and No. 4 spots)

10 albums

- The Beatles (four in the top 10 at the No. 10, No. 5, No. 3, and No. 1 spots)
- The Rolling Stones (one in the top 10 at the No. 7 spot)

8 albums

- Bruce Springsteen

7 albums

- The Who

6 albums

- David Bowie
- Elton John
- Neil Young (one with Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, two credited to Neil Young and Crazy Horse)

5 albums

- Led Zeppelin
- Bob Marley and the Wailers
- Radiohead
- U2

4 albums

- James Brown
- The Byrds
- Elvis Costello (three credited with the Attractions)
- Grateful Dead
- Pink Floyd
- The Police
- Prince
- Otis Redding
- Roxy Music
- Sly and the Family Stone
- The Smiths
- Talking Heads
- Stevie Wonder
- The Velvet Underground (one album credited with Nico)

3 albums

- The Band (one credited to Bob Dylan and The Band)
- The Beach Boys (one in the top 10 at the No. 2 spot)
- Big Star
- Black Sabbath
- Jackson Browne
- Ray Charles
- The Clash (one in the top 10 at the No. 8 spot)
- George Clinton (two with Funkadelic, one with Parliament)
- Cream
- Creedence Clearwater Revival (in 2003 edition)

- Miles Davis
- The Doors
- Nick Drake (in 2003 edition)
- Eminem (in 2003 edition)
- Marvin Gaye (one in the top 10 at the No. 6 spot)
- Al Green
- The Jimi Hendrix Experience
- Michael Jackson
- The Kinks
- Madonna
- Nirvana
- Randy Newman
- Elvis Presley
- Public Enemy (in 2003 edition)
- R.E.M.
- Red Hot Chili Peppers (in 2003 edition)
- Simon & Garfunkel
- Steely Dan
- The Stooges
- Tom Waits
- Muddy Waters
- Kanye West (in 2012 edition)
- Jay-Z

See also

- NME's The 500 Greatest Albums of All Time
- All Time Top 1000 Albums
- 1001 Albums You Must Hear Before You Die
- Rolling Stone's 500 Greatest Songs of All Time
- Rolling Stone's 100 Greatest Songwriters of All Time
- Rolling Stone's 100 Greatest Artists of All Time

References

Note

1. *The Complete Recordings* would be reinstated to the list in the 2012 edition.

Citations

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Related news articles:

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 13. Leah Asmelash. "Rolling Stone places Marvin Gaye at the top of its new, less rock heavy list of the best albums ever" (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/23/us/rolling-stone-best-500-albums-trnd/index.html>). *CNN*. Retrieved 2020-09-28.
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External links

- [500 Greatest Albums of All Time \(2012 edition\)](https://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/500-greatest-albums-of-all-time-20120531) (<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/500-greatest-albums-of-all-time-20120531>) by *Rolling Stone*
- [500 Greatest Albums of All Time \(2020 edition\)](https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/best-albums-of-all-time-1062063/) (<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/best-albums-of-all-time-1062063/>) by *Rolling Stone*

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