

## UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM

New facts and hot stats from the social sciences • By Richard Morin

### LUCKY STARS

**W**hy exactly have Guns N' Roses broken from the pack to become rock superstars, and not some other motley musical crew with equally bad attitudes, ubiquitous tattoos and extravagant histories of substance abuse? Why, too, are Barbra Streisand and Gloria Estefan at the tippy top, and not that similarly big-voiced songstress toiling away in the lounge at the downtown Holiday Inn?

Differences in talent, you say? Perhaps. But statisticians who have analyzed the superstar phenomenon in popular music offer another likely explanation: Dumb luck.

That's right. Researchers Kee H. Chung and Raymond Cox have discovered that super stardom may be a random phenomenon that plucks a "few lucky individuals" from among equally talented performers and blesses them with excessive popularity—sort of like winning the lottery twice.

Chung and Cox examined the distribution of gold records between 1958 and 1989. During that time, 1,377 performers earned at least one gold record. Half of these artists won only one, while one out of six collected two.

But 11 percent of these performers received seven or more gold records—and these gold diggers accounted for 43

percent of the 4,408 gilded platters awarded in the 30-year study period. Chung and Cox reported in the latest issue of *The Review of Economics and Statistics*.

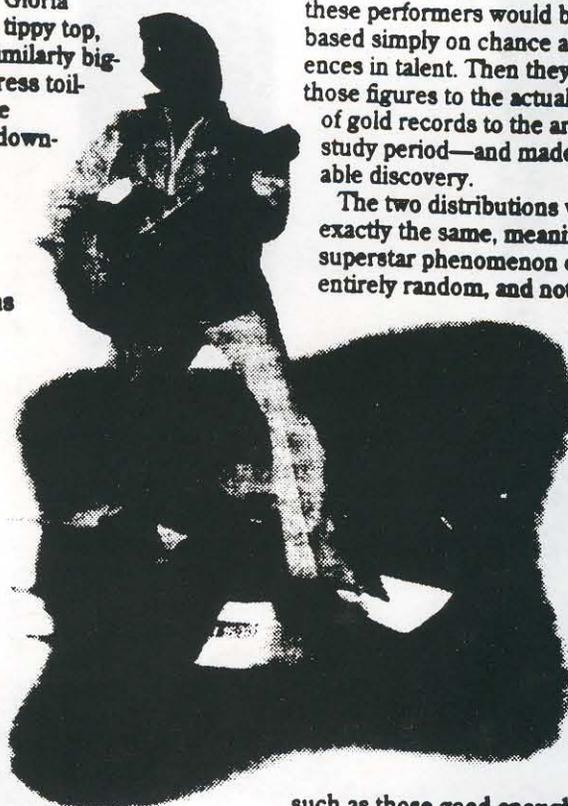
The researchers computed what the distribution of gold records among these performers would be if it were based simply on chance and not differences in talent. Then they compared those figures to the actual distribution of gold records to the artists over the study period—and made a remarkable discovery.

The two distributions were almost exactly the same, meaning that the superstar phenomenon could be entirely random, and not due to differences in ability, they wrote.

Chance likely works its wonders via the whims of disc jockeys, record execs and the marketplace—and only among genuinely talented people,

such as those good enough to win at least one gold record. These researchers don't argue that no-talents like you or me stand a chance of becoming juke box legends. This is statistics, after all, not magic.

They argue their numbers-crunching has social implications. If the exorbitant incomes earned by Frank, Aretha, Mick and Dolly from whopper ticket and album prices are rewards for unparalleled ability, "the superstar phenomenon may be socially admissible," they wrote. But if it's simply a matter of chance, then the "phenomenon may be perceived as inequitable."



### MOTHERS AND SONS

**W**omen who score high on psychological tests measuring dominance are more likely to give birth to boys, according to an article in the latest issue of the *British Journal of Medical Psychology*.

Medical researcher Valerie J. Grant of New Zealand reviewed six studies conducted since 1969 and found that in each "those women who later bore sons were significantly more likely to have scored higher on tests of dominance than those who later bore daughters."

In fact, the average score of women who gave birth to boys on tests measuring assertiveness, competitiveness and independence was as much as twice that of women who gave birth to girls.

Researchers aren't ready yet to say that the mother's personality type directly "causes" some babies to be boys and others to be girls. But "given all the above one would have to say that, as always, nature and nurture are inextricably intertwined," Grant wrote.

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