Lucky Stars

Why 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 Cher at the top, and not that similarly big-voiced songstress toiling away in the lounge at downtown Holiday Inn?

Differences in talent, you say. Perhaps. But statistics show that superstar phenomenon in popular music is not so much a function of talent—anyway, statistics have no answer for 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 the way the lottery works, twice a season.

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.

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. 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 tickets and album prices are rewards for unparalleled ability, “the superstar phenomenon may be socially admirable,” they wrote. But if it’s simply a matter of chance, then the “phenomenon may be perceived as unacceptable.”