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Why Adele Is Selling Records Like It's 1999

“Who in the hell is this [Adele](#)?” a stranger asked me at a Thanksgiving celebration in Texas hill country. “I bet she sucks!”

My dinner companion may be the last person who hasn't heard of the British songstress responsible for the fastest-selling album in recorded history. The numbers are in: [25](#) has [sold](#) a record-smashing 3.38 million copies in its first week. Over that span, Adele's album accounted for a staggering 42% of total album sales in the U.S. It only took half a week for her to beat the prior opening-week record held by *NSYNC's *No Strings Attached*, which sold 2.42 million units in its 2000 debut.

Back then, of course, the music [business](#) was virtually unrecognizable from today's. *No Strings Attached* was released at the all-time apex of music sales, which [peaked](#) at 785 million that

year on the heels of 1999, when 51 albums [earned](#) platinum certification. By 2008, though, sales had plunged 45%; by 2015 the total had fallen another 40% to 257 million. Even under the new definition of platinum, which incorporates streaming, there were barely a third as many such albums this year as there were sixteen years ago.

So how is it possible that Adele is not only selling albums like it's 1999, but blowing away turn-of-the-millennium records?

I spoke with over half a dozen industry players, some on the record, some on background, in Adele's camp and beyond, to try and find the answer. A handful of narratives emerged, including timing, skill, scarcity, down-to-earth likability, broadness of appeal and—especially—intangibles. And though 25's rollout was flawlessly executed, everyone agreed that the first-week performance couldn't be attributed to a single event.

"It's not a marketing play," said entertainment attorney Bernie Resnick. "This is talent."

It's been nearly five years since that talent shone through on Adele's last album, *21*. In the meantime, aside from an epic night in 2012 at the Grammys, where she [won](#) all six awards for which she was nominated (and took home more hardware the following year, when she [told](#) FORBES she was "not very far along" in recording her new album), she has largely avoided the limelight.

"Adele's multi-year 'break' helped build anticipation for her return, making 25's release an 'event' and setting the stage for Adele's full-court promotional press to promote it in the U.S. seem fun and exciting, rather than like over-exposure or a superstar hawking a new release," says Brittany Hodak, cofounder of deluxe album purveyor Zinepak. "Americans are really glad she's back, and they're proving that at stores this week."



Adele's new album *25* has sold 3.38 million copies in its first week, smashing all prior records. (Photo by Chris Pizzello/Invision/AP, File).

Those fans appear to be a diverse, multi-generational collection of people. Adele's music can be appealing to the easy-listening crowd, their children, and the broader pop music audience as well. With the release timed to the beginning of the U.S. holiday shopping season—and the album available only via physical copies and paid downloads, not streaming—*25* is an easy choice for many as a gift.

“Adele has broad appeal across different age groups,” says entertainment lawyer Sally Mattison. “With the holiday, people are buying for their kids and for each other.”

Another explanation of Adele's opening week performance revolves around tent-pole releases. As [Harvard Business School](#) professor Anita Elberse posited in her book *Blockbusters*, the entertainment industry is increasingly focused on throwing marketing dollars on sure-fire hits—and trying to make them even bigger hits, as studios have done with franchises like *Iron Man* and *The Avengers*.

Record labels rarely publicize marketing budgets, and Adele's is no different. But regardless of how much was spent on *25*, there's an argument to be made that Americans have become conditioned to consume the unavoidable film or sporting event that everyone else is talking about—and Adele's record is the blockbuster of the moment.

All of the above are plausible reasons for Adele's success, but they still don't quite explain its magnitude. The sources I spoke with agreed that there's something else at play: a once-in-a-generation x-factor, an ethereal *je-ne-sais quoi*, an indescribable secret sauce that you can't teach, learn or buy—something that Adele has in spades.

“Her huge first week is a result of the perfect storm of an artist having built up demand, a timeless and universally appealing style, great songs, likability, self-awareness and the most majestic voice in music,” says Will Griggs, a 30 [Under 30](#) alum who cofounded Cantora Records. “There isn’t a formula or shortcut you can take in creating that sort of demand.”

Additional reporting by Danielle La Rocco

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