**Key Frequency In Songs**

A couple of years ago, I was reading some books on music theory, etc., and twice came across the statement that the most frequently encountered keys were C, A, G, E, and D. This struck me as odd, as in my limited experience, only two of these keys were really frequent (C & G), and I only occasionally saw two others (A & D). My concern was that the authors had equivocated between key frequency and the most common forms for barre chords.

I did a bit of poking around and came across a website where the author had analyzed 1,300 songs for key frequency, and came to the conclusion that the five most frequently encountered keys in songs were C, G, Eb, F, and D (followed by A and E); note that he combined major keys with their relative minors. I felt that his conclusion was better (it included the key of F), but I rarely see the key of Eb (unless I’m singing a lot of songs by Paul Simon who has a range of less than an octave according to one source that I read). The web page was titled “I analyzed the chords of 1300 popular songs for patterns. This is what I found.”, <https://www.hooktheory.com/blog/i-analyzed-the-chords-of-1300-popular-songs-for-patterns-this-is-what-i-found> (and he has an extensive write-up of his conclusions). His study was based on a two-year analysis of songs listed on Billboard, analyzing each one individually.

I grabbed a couple of my large collections of songs – one of which had 1,200 songs and the other had 275 songs, for a total of 1,475 songs – and did my own analysis (and I also combined major keys with their relative minors). Here are the results, and their percentages, in order:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| C | F | G | E♭ | B♭ | D | A | A♭ | E | D♭ | B | F# | G♭ |
| 24.29 | 22.38 | 17.07 | 14.15 | 10.27 | 3.95 | 2.93 | 2.72 | 1.22 | 0.61 | 0.20 | 0.14 | 0.07 |

Not surprisingly, there were no songs with either seven sharps or seven flats. This was a thoroughly unscientific analysis, but it was enlightening. The two collections that I used were:

* *The Ultimate Fake Book*. (Hal Leonard, undated); 853 pages.
* *The Ultimate Christmas Fake Book*. 4th Edition. (Hal Leonard, undated).

By the way, the results of the C, A, G, E, and D keys based on my analysis:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| C | A | G | E | D |
| 24% | 3% | 17% | 1% | 4% |

The total percentage of A, E, and D was 8%.

As an aside, when I’m preparing song sheets for the two groups that I play with, and especially where there is a large range of notes (greater than an octave), I usually prepare song sheets in five keys: C, F, G, A, and D, avoiding the keys of E / E♭ and B / B♭ (as so many uke players dislike the 3331 fingering found in those keys).