

CASE STUDY

WESTLIFE

DOES THE CRAFT OF STORYTELLING INFLUENCE THE SUCCESS OF AN ALBUM?

storiesinsongs.com/westlife

Hi. I'm Mel. I help Musicians Increase the Sales of their Albums by telling Powerful Stories in their Songs.

If you are a musician, you want your art to reach people, to resonate with your listeners, and maybe even to change lives. But the album sales are down and you might wonder if you've got what it takes to be a musician or a songwriter.

This is your dream! And lets turn your listeners into fans and increase the sales of your next album by telling powerful stories in songs.

It works. The Case Study of the Westlife Albums is proof that there is indeed a correlation between storytelling and the success of an album!

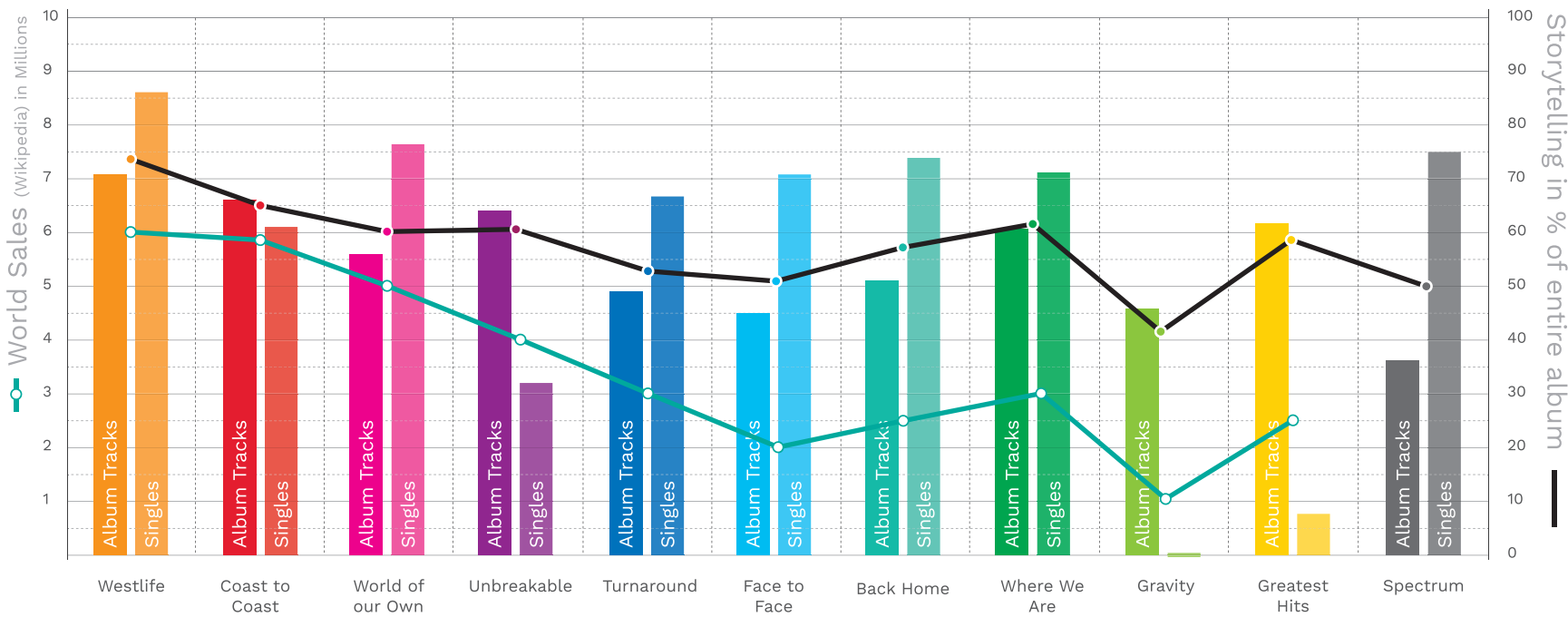


In this Case Study, I've analysed the storytelling of all the songs on the studio albums as well as the two compilation albums of the band Westlife. The questions I wanted to answer was:

DOES THE CRAFT OF TELLING CAPTIVATING STORIES IN SONGS INFLUENCE THE SALES OF AN ALBUM?

THE RESULT: HECK YES!

World Album Sales \circ in relation to how well the storytelling was on the single releases as well as on the album (\emptyset)



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Why is storytelling so important for songwriting?

If you want your song to resonate with your listeners, you need to tell a story. Songs are short but there is plenty of time to capture a moment that changed the main character for better or worse. And those moments allow your listeners to connect with your song. If they feel like you understand them, they'll not only buy your albums but they will also turn into your fans!

HOW DOES IT WORK?

How do I analyse a song or an album? The process is similar to editing a novel. You do not publish the first draft, but you hire an editor who helps you understand how strong the story is, what works and what doesn't.



The 161 songs analyzed include: Singles and Album Tracks (not released as singles):



Of all the 161 songs analyzed, 33 were cover songs.



In the following graphs, I show the values for each storytelling criteria. The graphs of the worldwide and the UK Album Sales are in the background. They are for comparison to find out which storytelling criteria influences the success of an album (follows the success lines) or which ones are not relevant. As soon as the lines take a similar trajectory line, we can say that this particular storytelling criteria matters and should be emphasized in future songwriting.

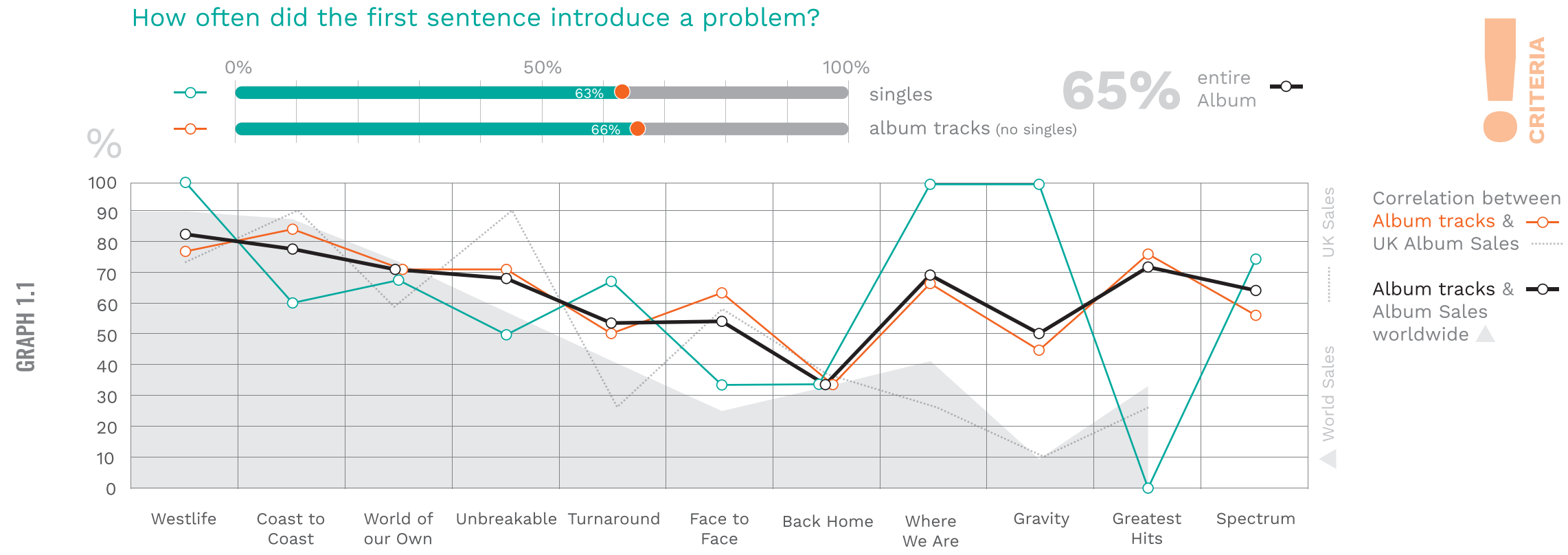
DOES STORYTELLING MATTER? STORIES IN SONGS

Stories are in our DNA from the time we’re born. But in order for a story to resonate, certain elements must be present. Songs are no different. Memorable songs, or songs that “work,” deal with a problem in a prescriptive way or are cautionary.

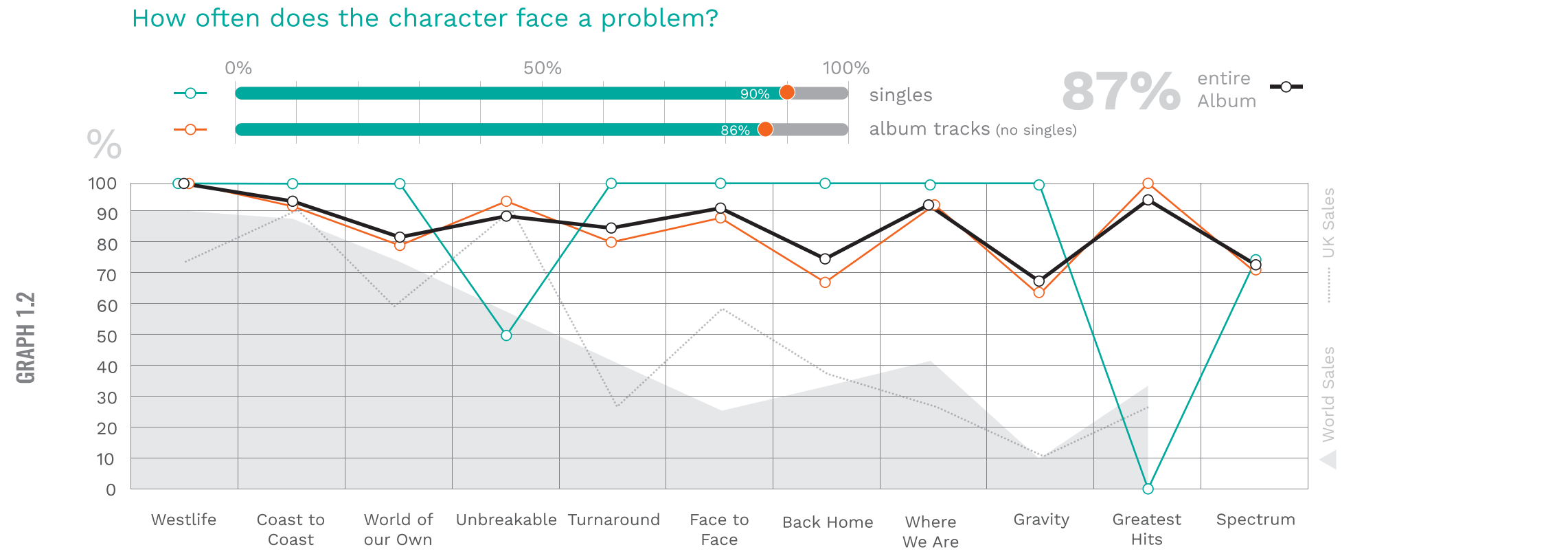
CONFLICT / PROBLEM

Including a problem in a song that the character has to face sets up an expectation. The character needs to find a solution for the conflict he faces. That’s his goal. In every story, the main character needs to WANT something. Or the audience would not invest themselves in hoping the character reaches (or not reaches) his goal. So you can hook the listener by having a protagonist who faces a problem. Include it by upending the character’s ordinary life / his status quo.

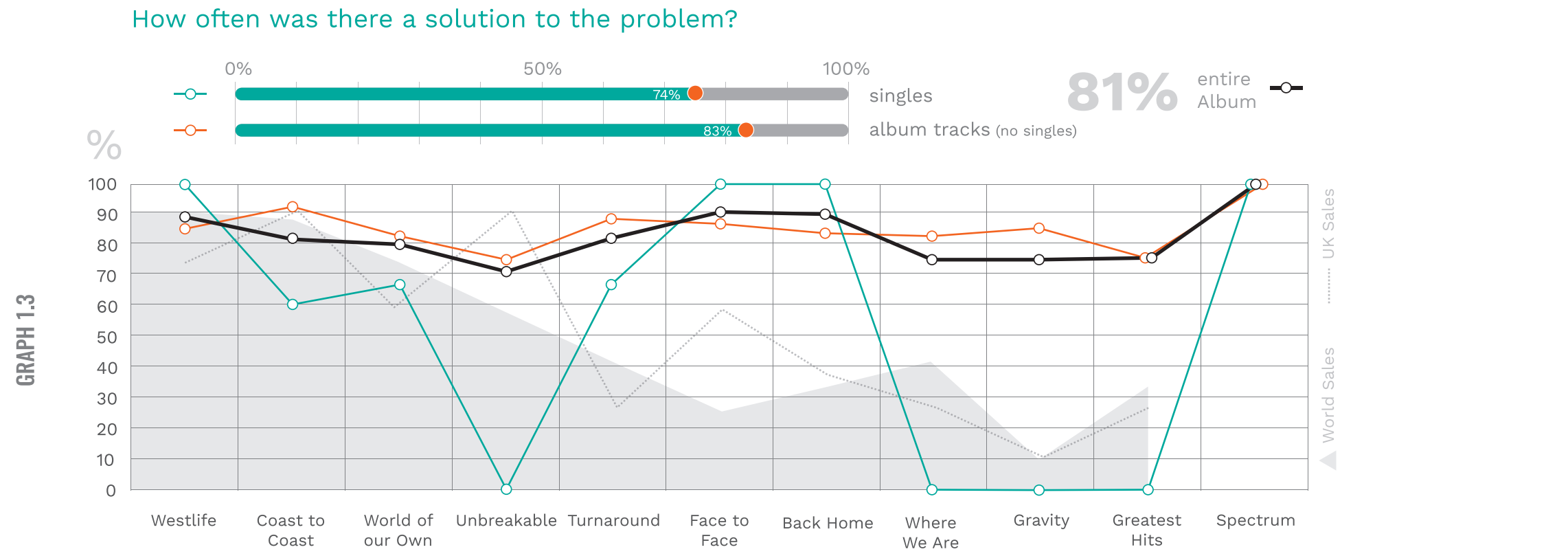
How often did the first sentence introduce a problem?



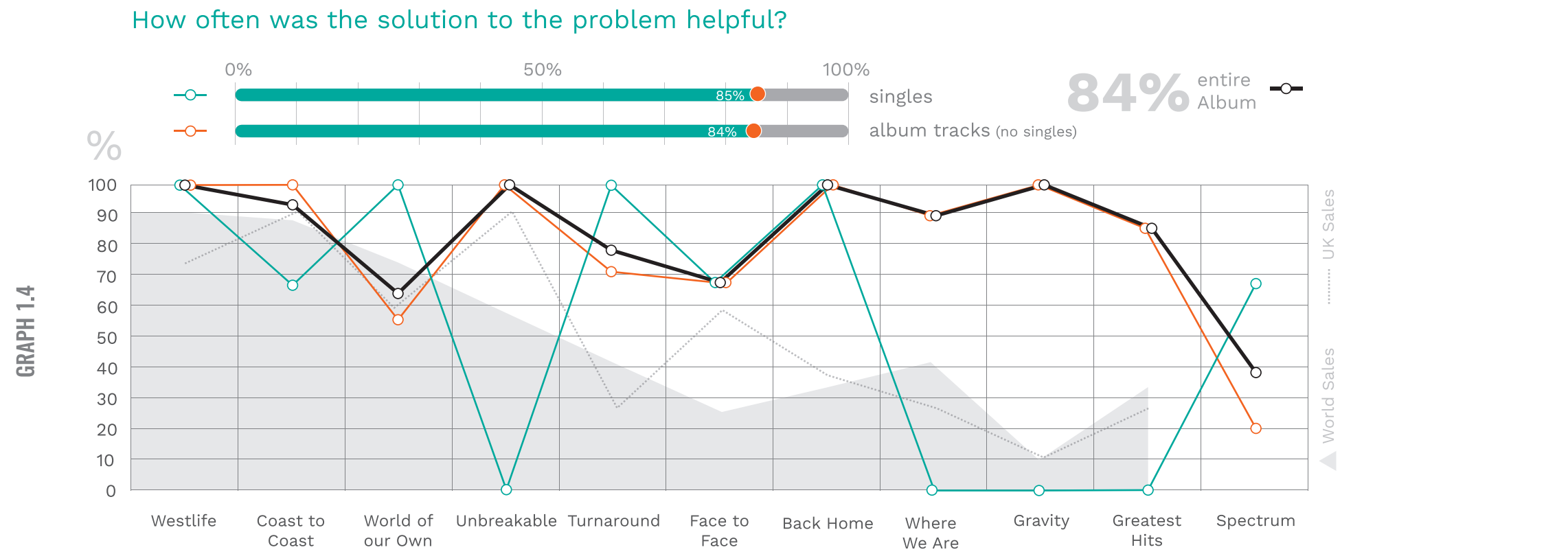
How often does the character face a problem?



How often was there a solution to the problem?



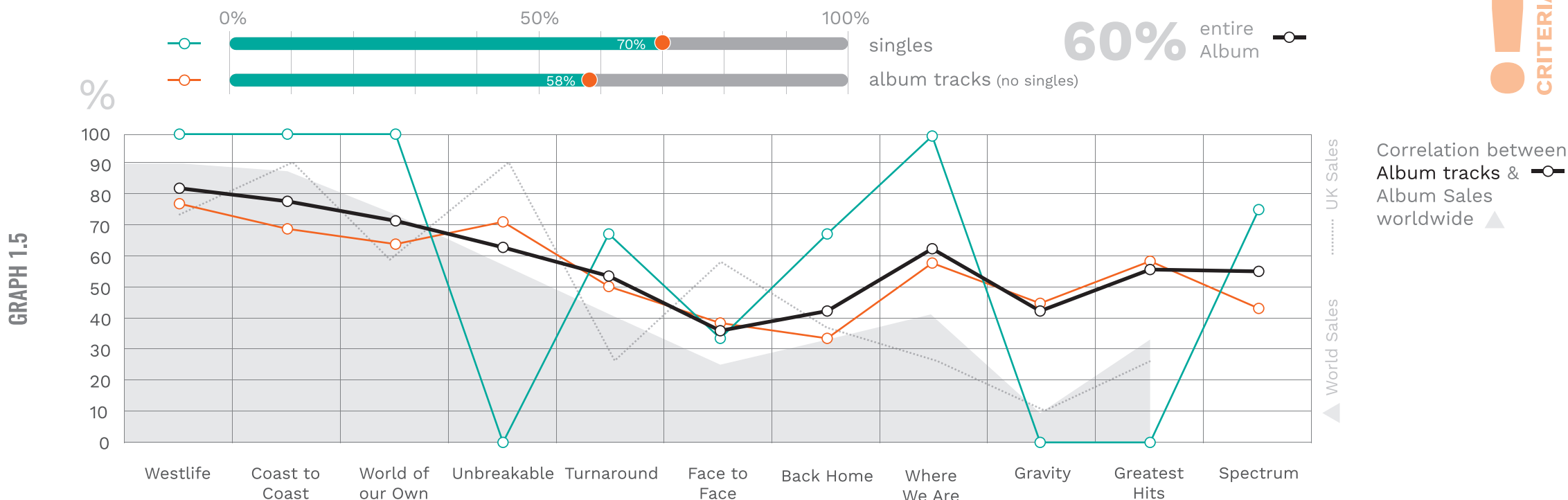
How often was the solution to the problem helpful?



THE TURNING POINT

In every great story, something very unexpected happens and the character's first strategy to reach his goal fails. The character is at a crossroad. Either because of another character's action or because of new information (a revelation) that comes forth that puts the character in a dilemma. He is presented with two options - and it becomes clear, what's at stake if he fails or succeeds.

Here's how many times something unexpected happens to the protagonist that puts him in a dilemma:



STORYTELLING MATTERS!

Storytelling is still important in Songwriting! Having an unexpected event happen is the criteria that decides if the song tells a story (or part of a story) or not.

And in graph 2.5, you can clearly see that the most important unit of story (unexpected event = turning point progressive complication) matters for the success of an album if the songs tell a story (part of a story) or not.

There's a correlation! In almost all albums the lines are parallel between worldwide album sales and all the entire album.

The unexpected moment is either caused by an action of another character or through some form of new information.



THE DILEMMA

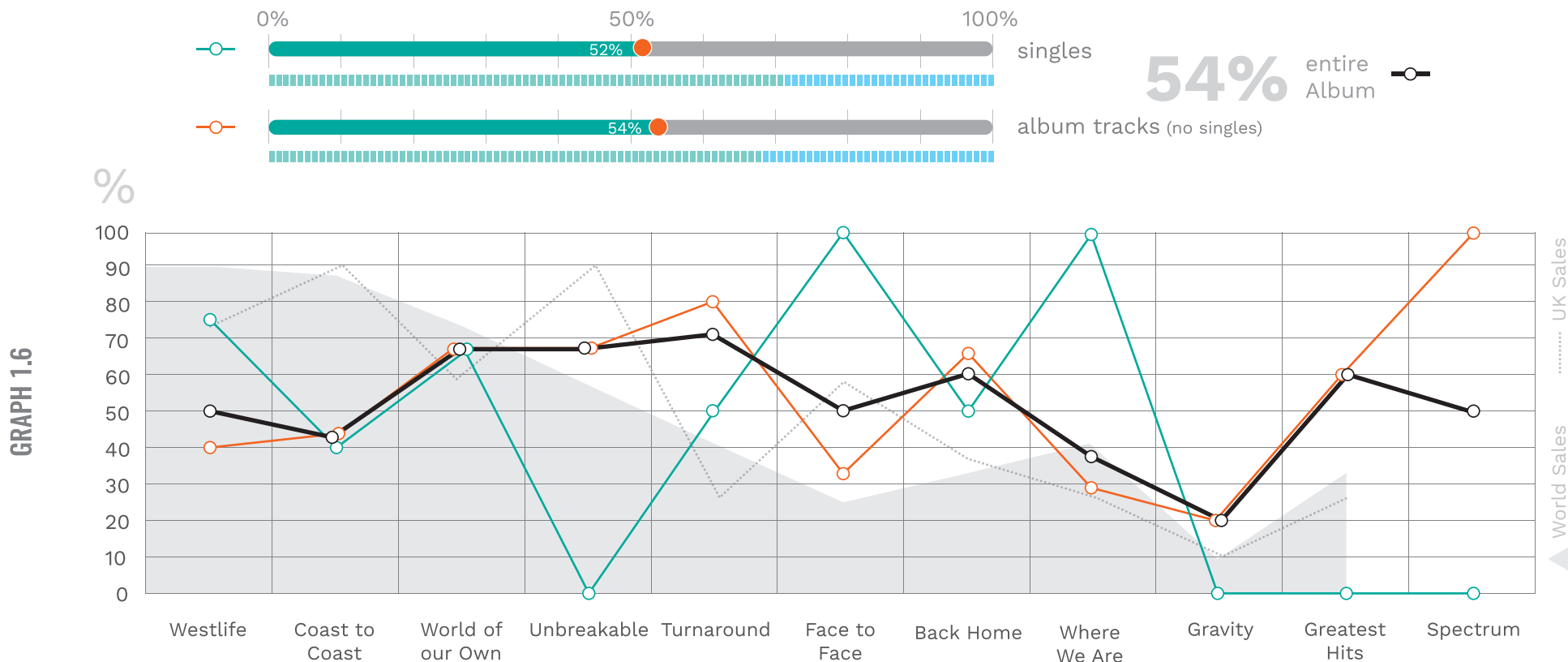
The unexpected event pushed the character into a crisis. He/She now faces either a Best Bad Choice or an Irreconcilable Goods Question. Best Bad Choice: a choice between two unpleasant or very bad options. Irreconcilable Goods: Two good options but you can't have both, or a choice that's good for you but bad for someone else (or vice versa).

How many songs explicitly state the crisis the character deals with?

What kind of crisis question does the character face?

Best Bad Choice

Irreconcilable Goods

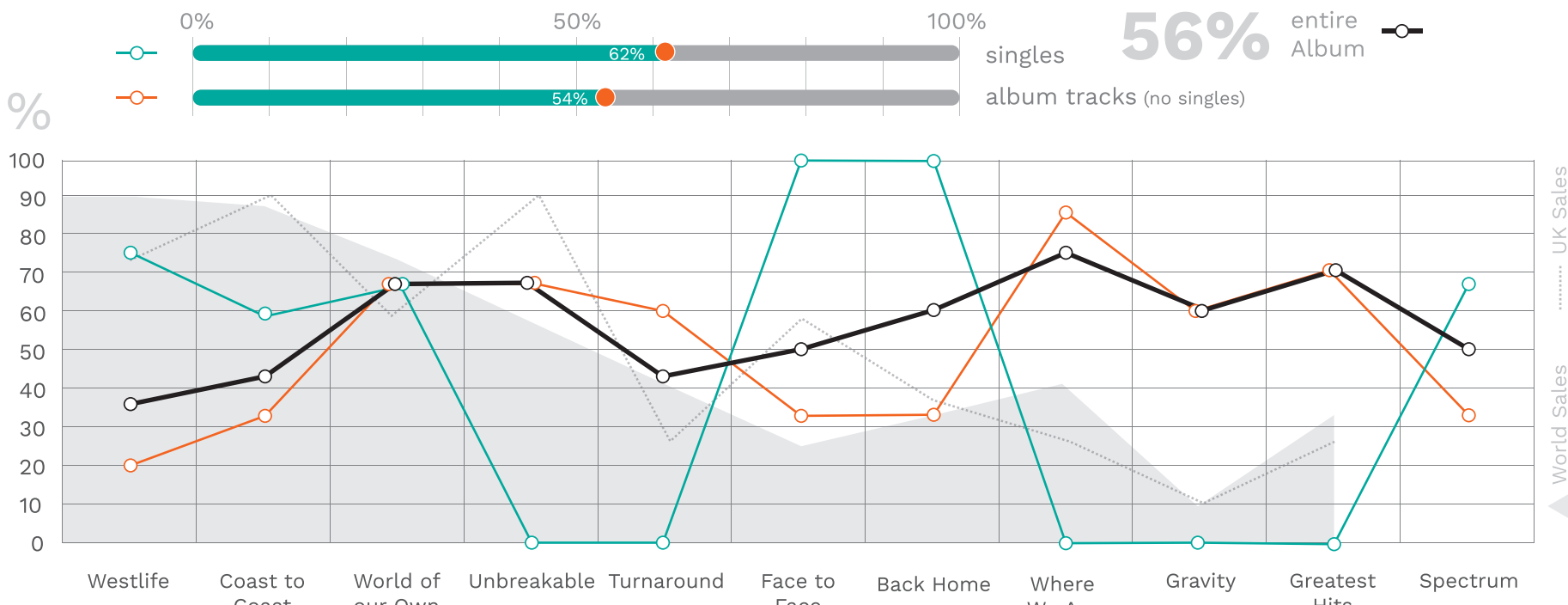


THE RESOLUTION

To make the story in a song complete and so that listeners better understand the message of the song, include a resolution. That means: What are the consequences of the decision made after they faced a crisis? Has the protagonist gained something by fighting for what he wanted? Did he lose because he was a coward or made a wrong choice? Did he reach a better understanding even though he lost something?

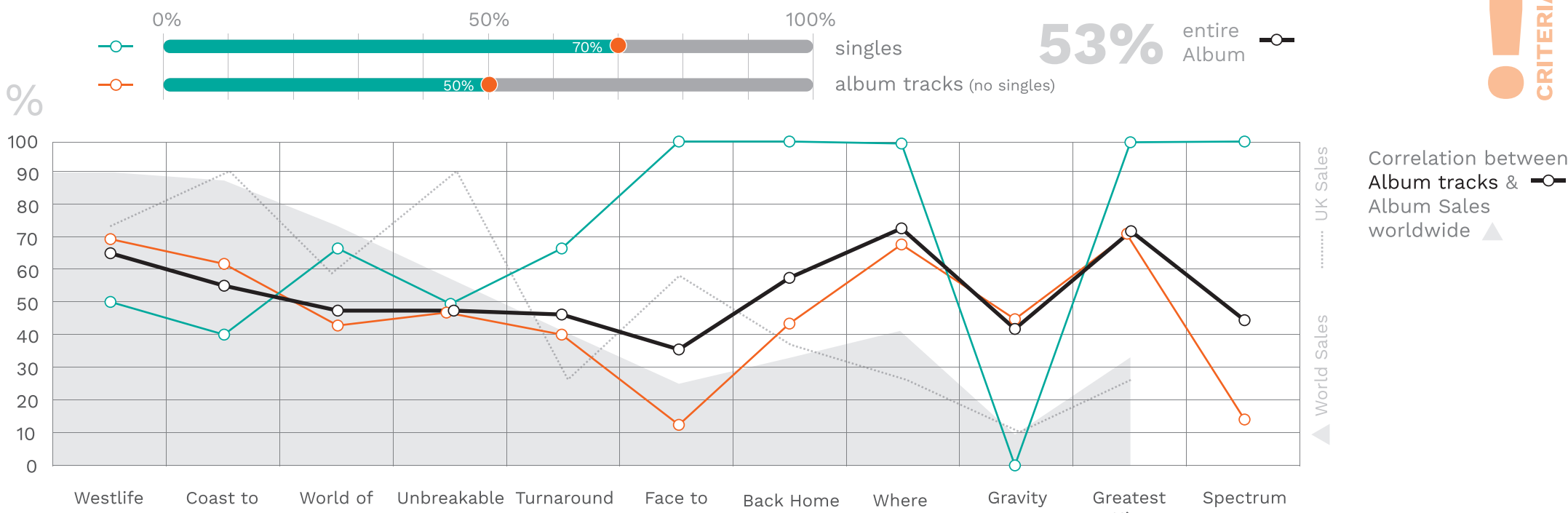
How many songs explicitly state how everything turned out for the character in the end? ■ ●

GRAPH 1.7



How many times do the songs on the album tell prescriptive tales (not cautionary ones)?

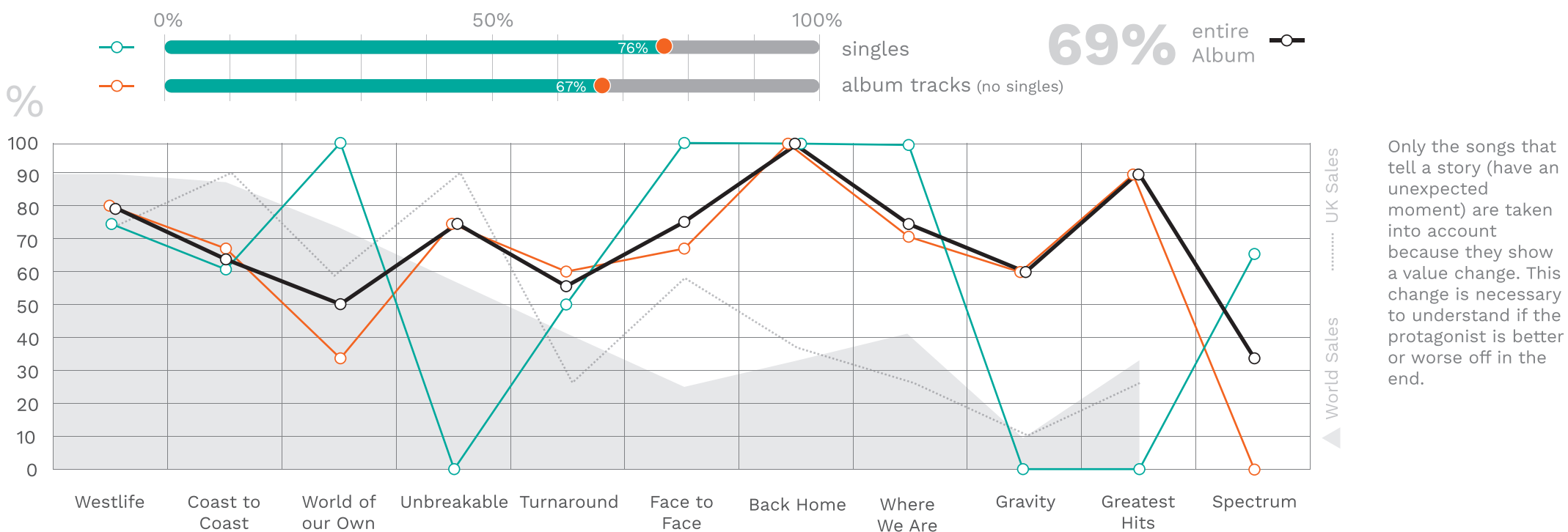
GRAPH 1.8



No matter if the problem is solved or not, there will be an emotional reaction in the listener at the end of the song. In love stories we might enjoy the sensation of a faster beating heart, romance, relief, loss or even pity. It all depends on how the character faced his/her problem, chose in the dilemma and what the outcome of his/her choices are.

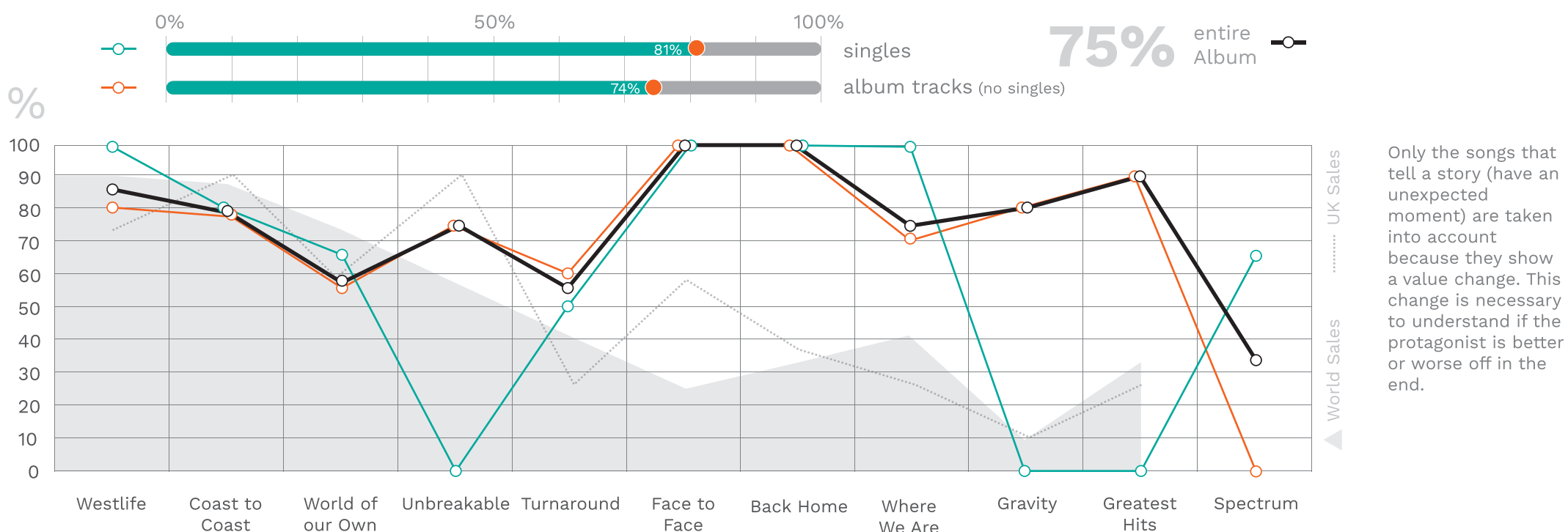
Protagonist is externally better off after dealing with his problem:

GRAPH 1.9



Protagonist changed internally for the better:

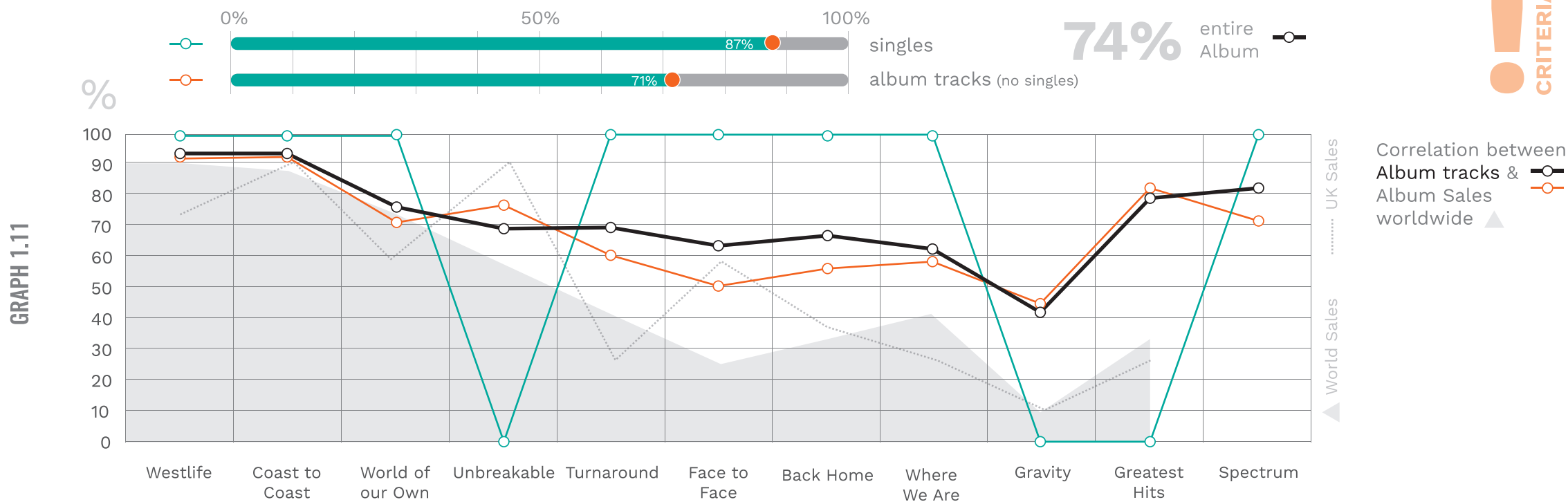
GRAPH 1.10



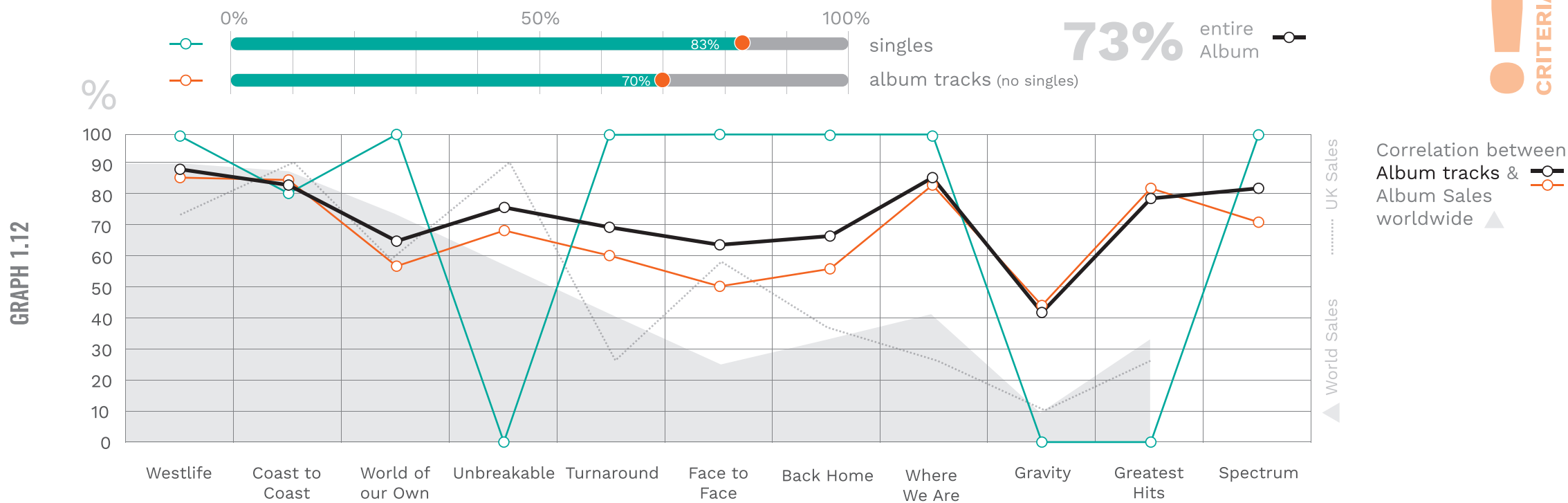
THE MESSAGE

If a song has a message, it makes the listener feel like there's someone out there who understands them. And that's the whole point of including something meaningful, something worth communicating. Because you can help someone by listening to your songs. You can provide guidance., self-Help, joy, or even tell them what not to do in order to avoid certain bad consequences.

The Message comes across clearly in the song:



The Message refers to the title of the song:

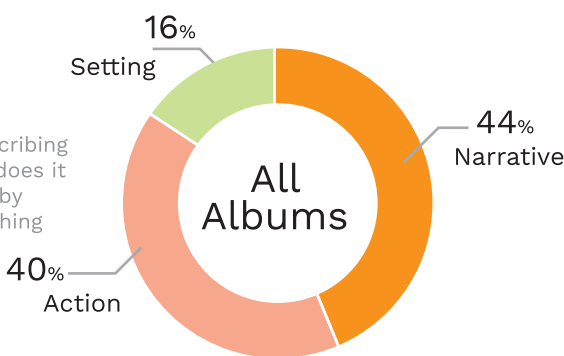


HOOK & ENGAGEMENT

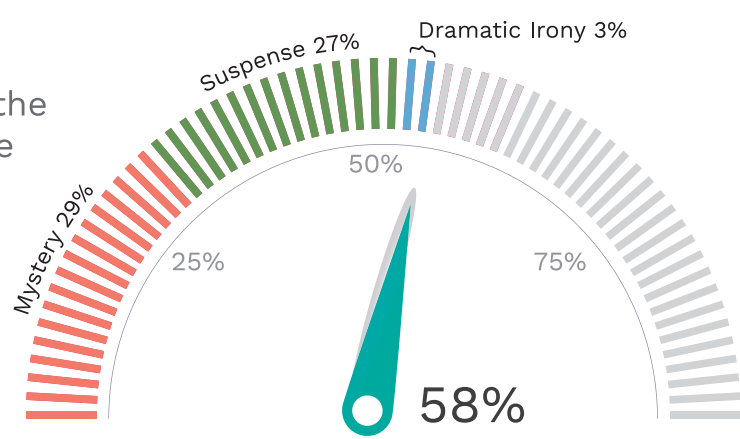
GRAPH 1.13

Type of Beginning (of all the songs)

Does the song begin by simply stating a fact (narrative) or describing the surroundings (setting)? Or does it take us right into the moment by using dialogue or letting something happen (action)?



Mystery & Suspense were the form of Narrative Drive that was used the most.

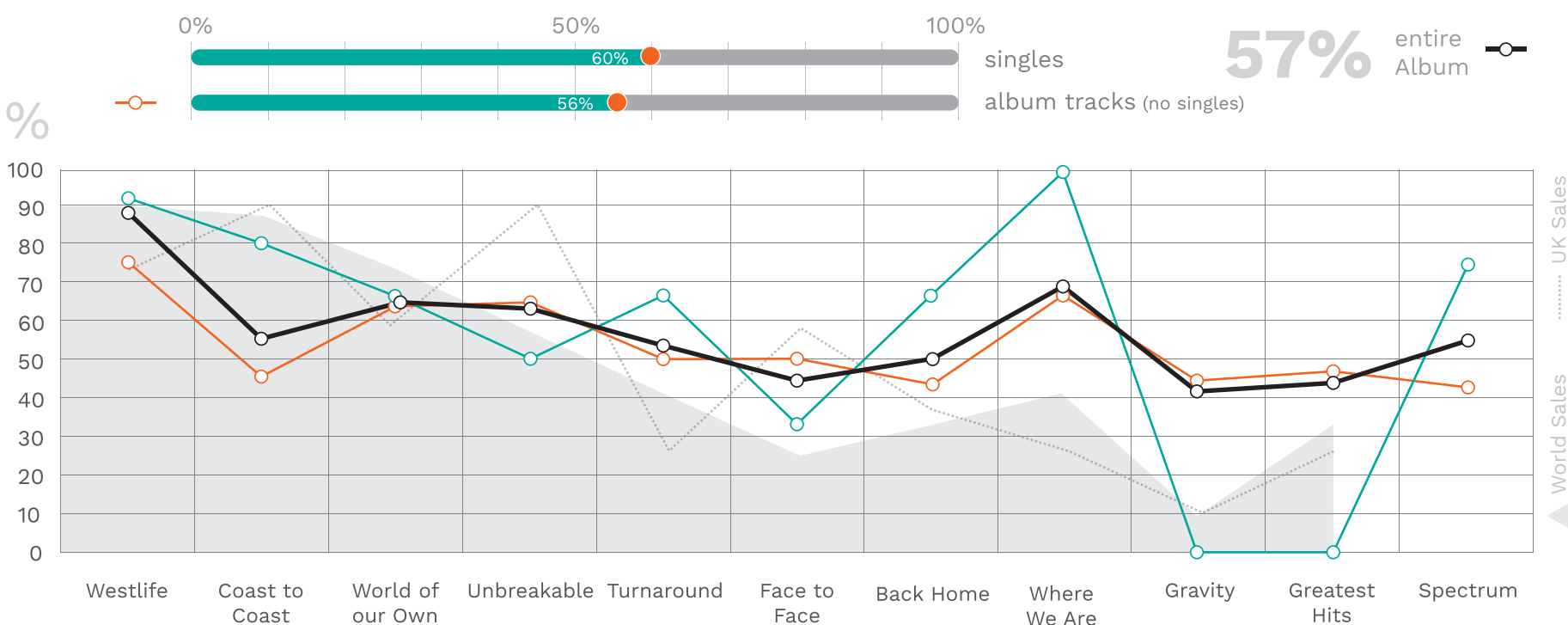


GRAPH 1.14

Using action or narrative at the beginning of a song is one possibility to hook the listener. Keeping them engaged can be achieved through using one form of Narrative Drive which is all about how much information a listener has in relation to the protagonist. There are three possibilities to create Narrative Drive: Use mystery (we know less than the protagonist), choose suspense (we know as much as the protagonist), or create dramatic irony (we know more than the protagonist).

Here's how many songs use one form of Narrative Drive to keep the listener engaged in the storytelling:

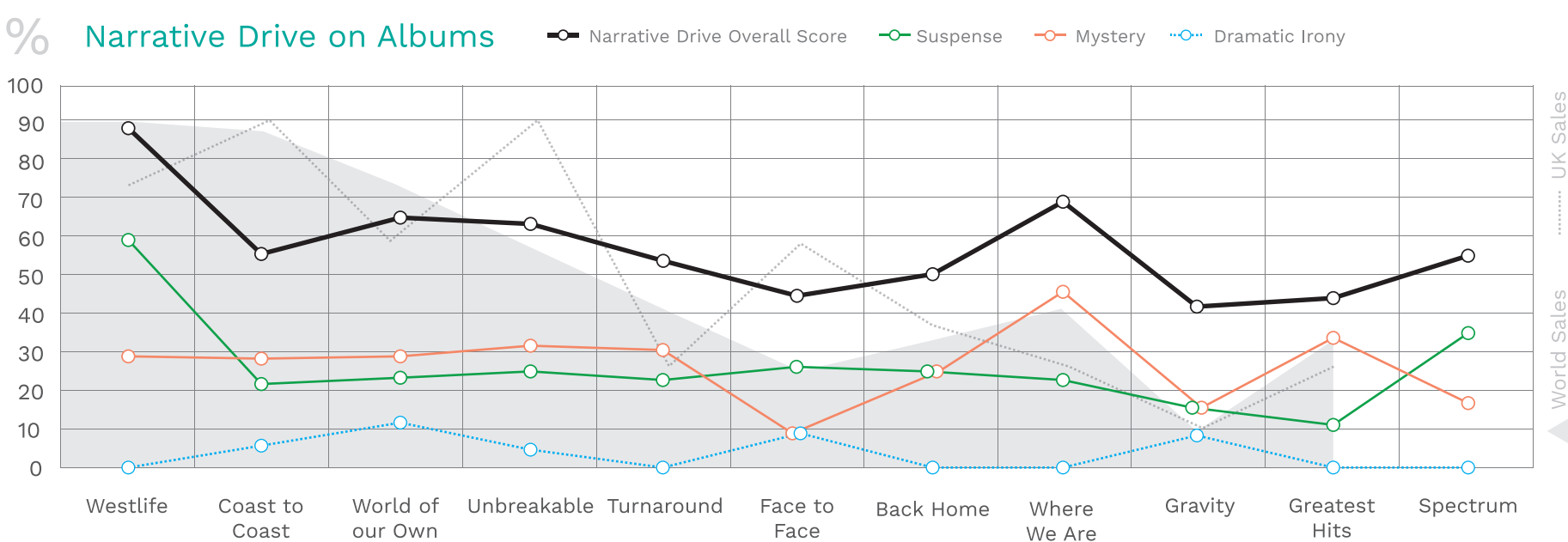
GRAPH 1.15



CRITERIA

Correlation between Album tracks & Album Sales worldwide

GRAPH 1.16



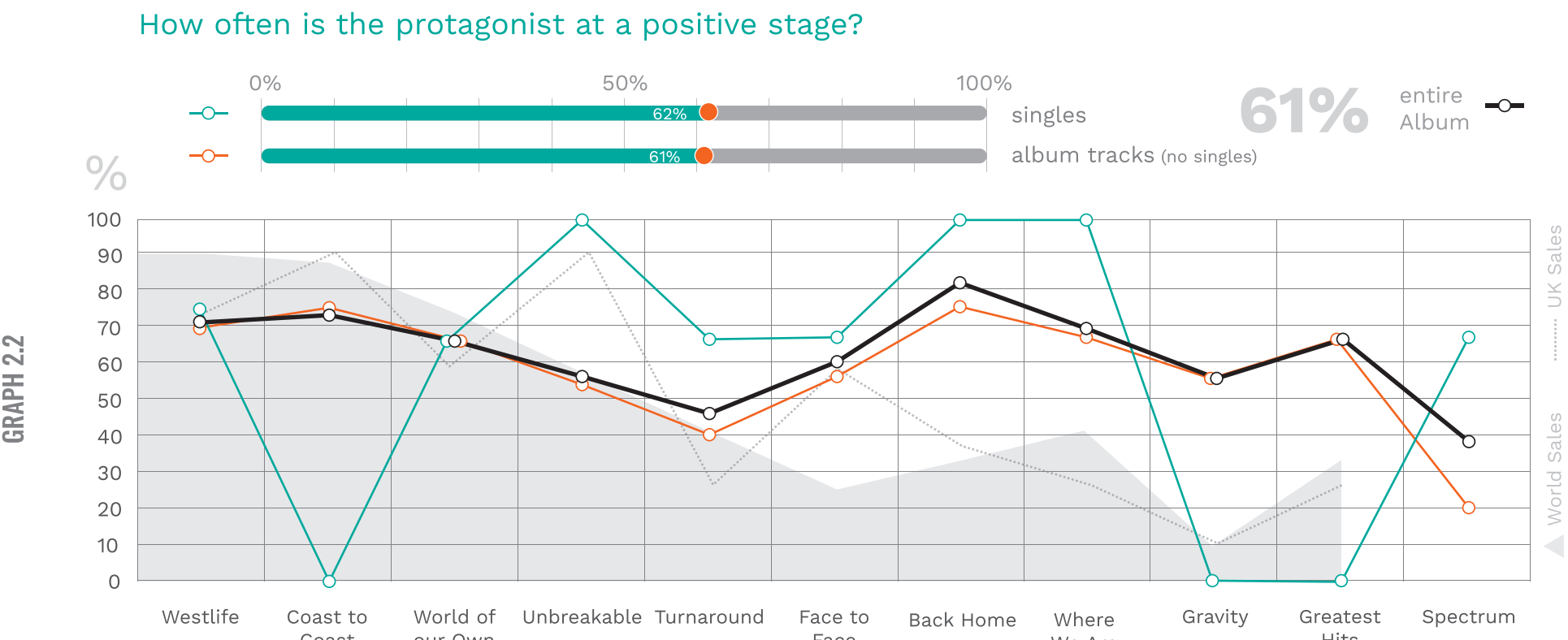
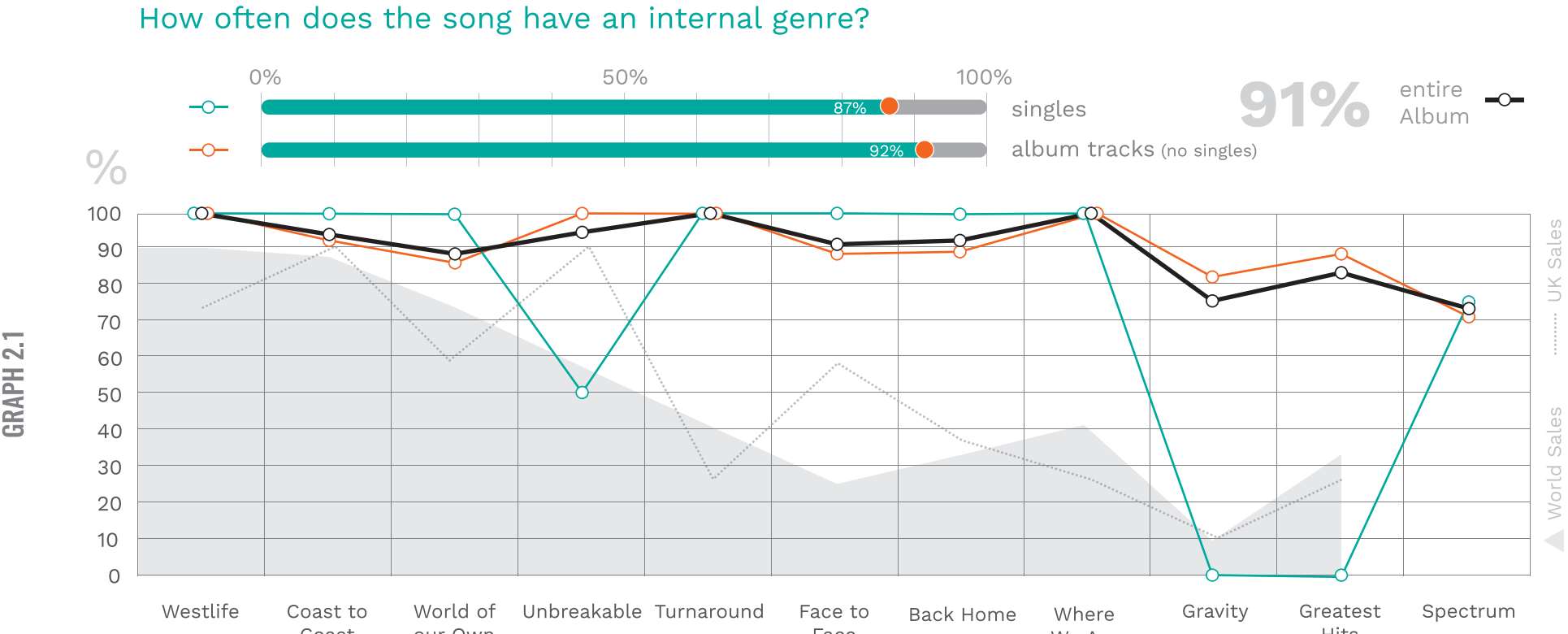
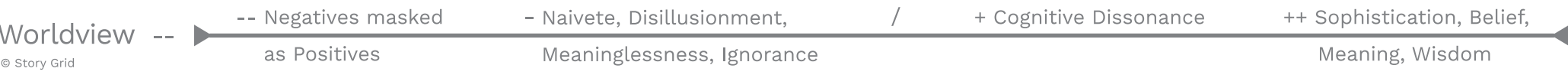
CRITERIA

Correlation between Album tracks & Album Sales worldwide

Listeners don't like songs with dramatic irony when they already know that the situation is hopeless for the protagonist.

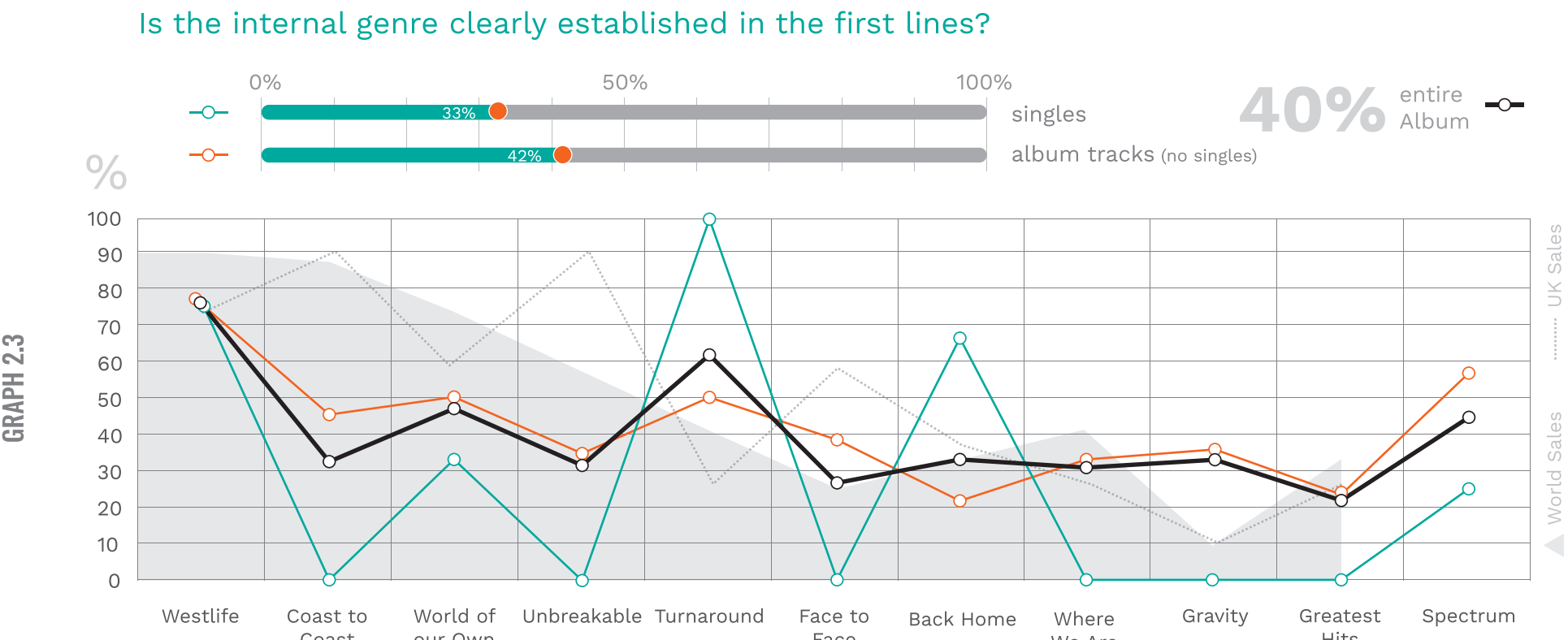
2. WHO IS THE CHARACTER?

Having a character is essential for songwriting because a song should address a problem. And only a person can face a problem. The way the character faces the problem shows the stage of their own personal journey they're at. A character moves through stages of personal development - either concerning their worldview, their moral or their status.



CRITERIA

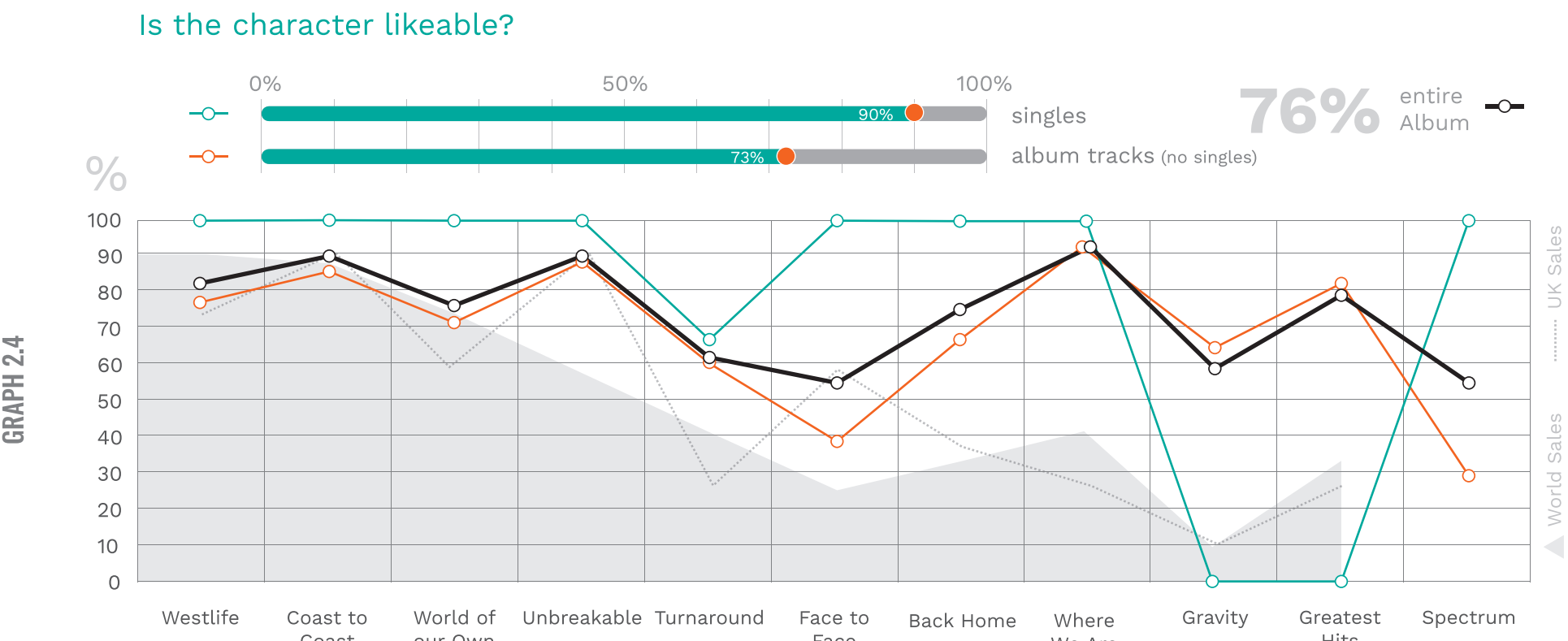
Correlation between Album tracks & Album Sales worldwide



CRITERIA

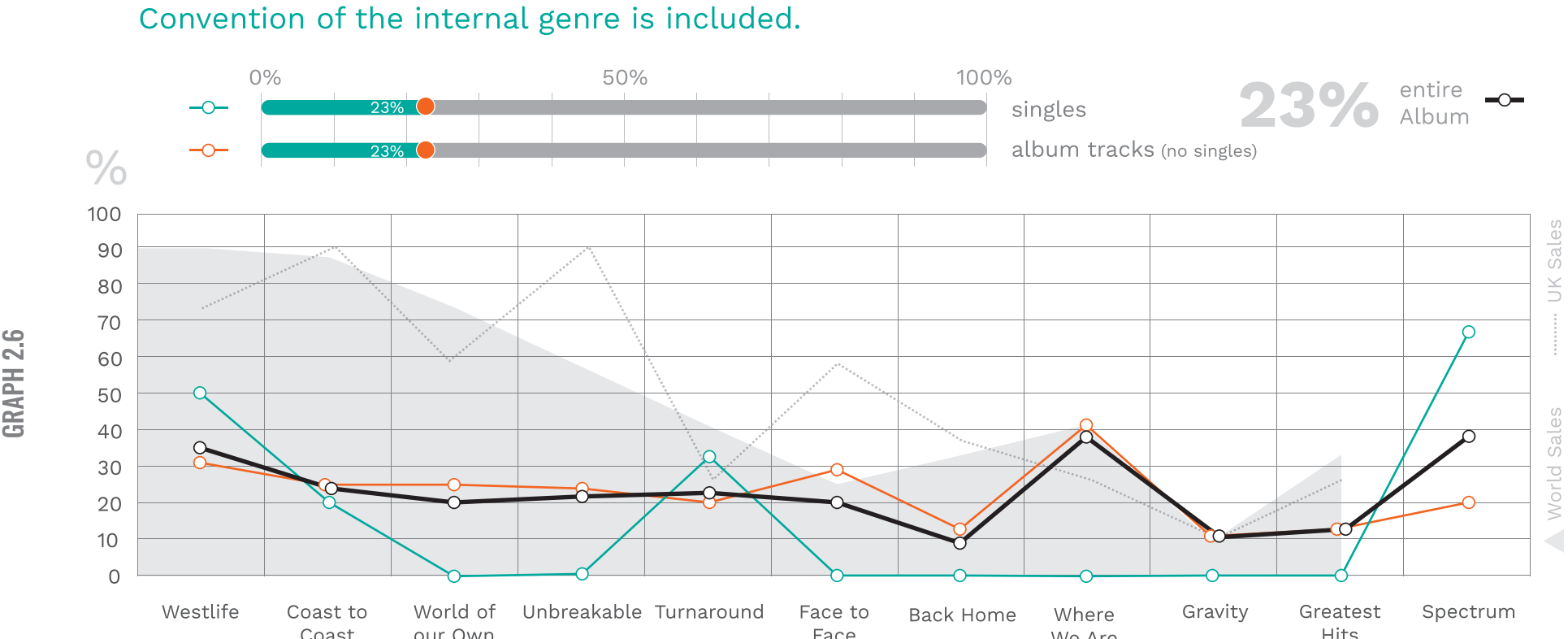
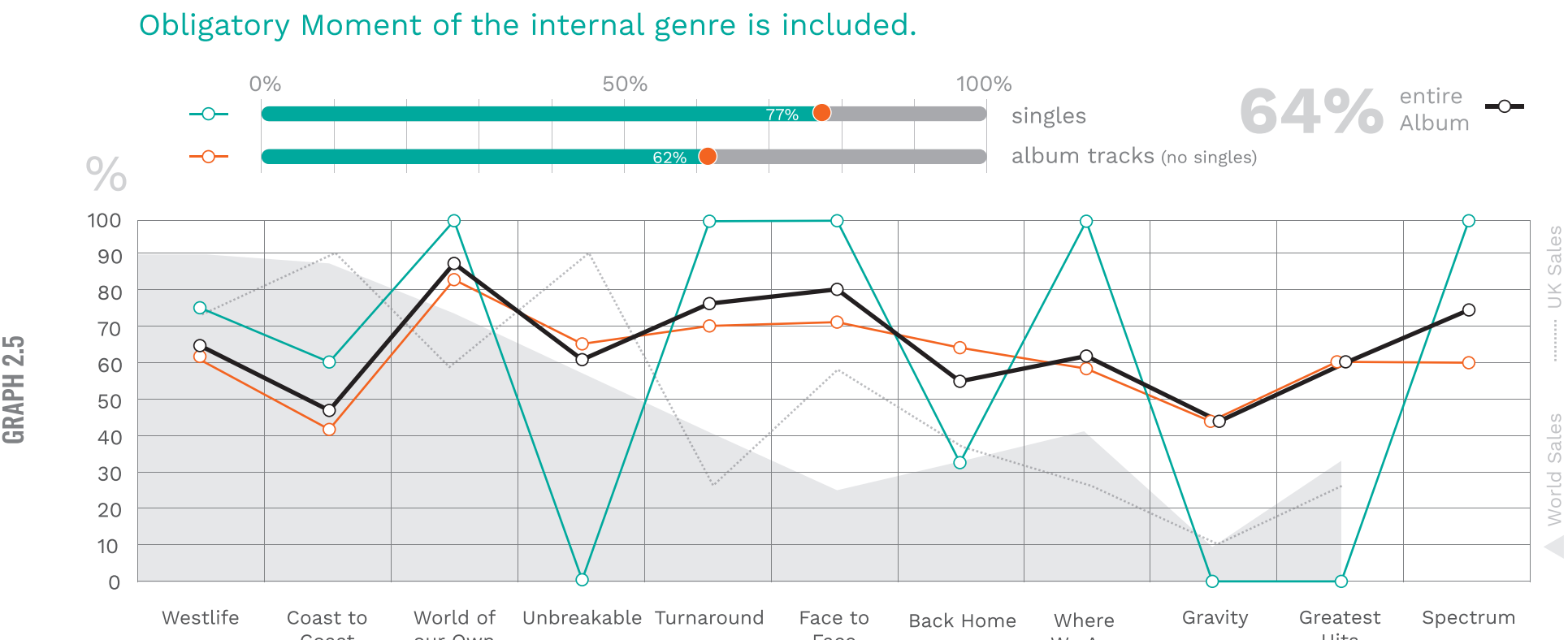
Correlation between all songs & UK Sales

Seems like UK fans like it when the internal genre is discovered later and not presented right in the beginning.



CRITERIA

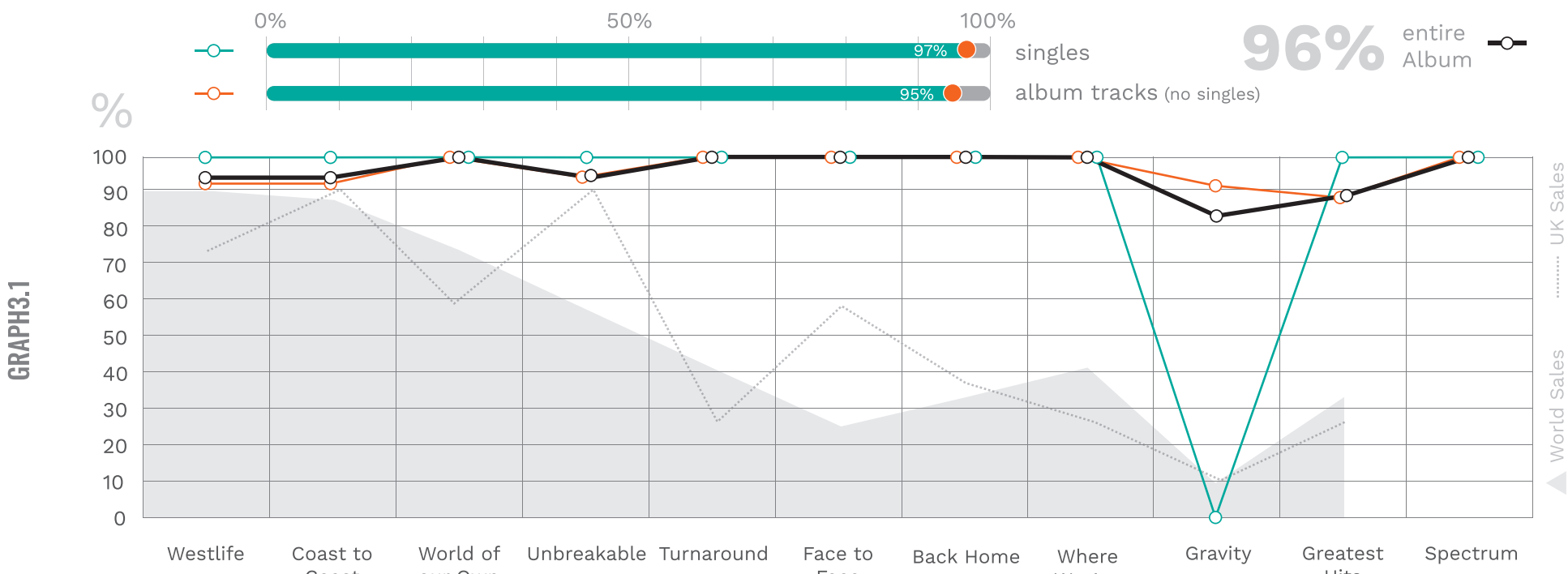
Correlation between entire album & Album Sales Worldwide



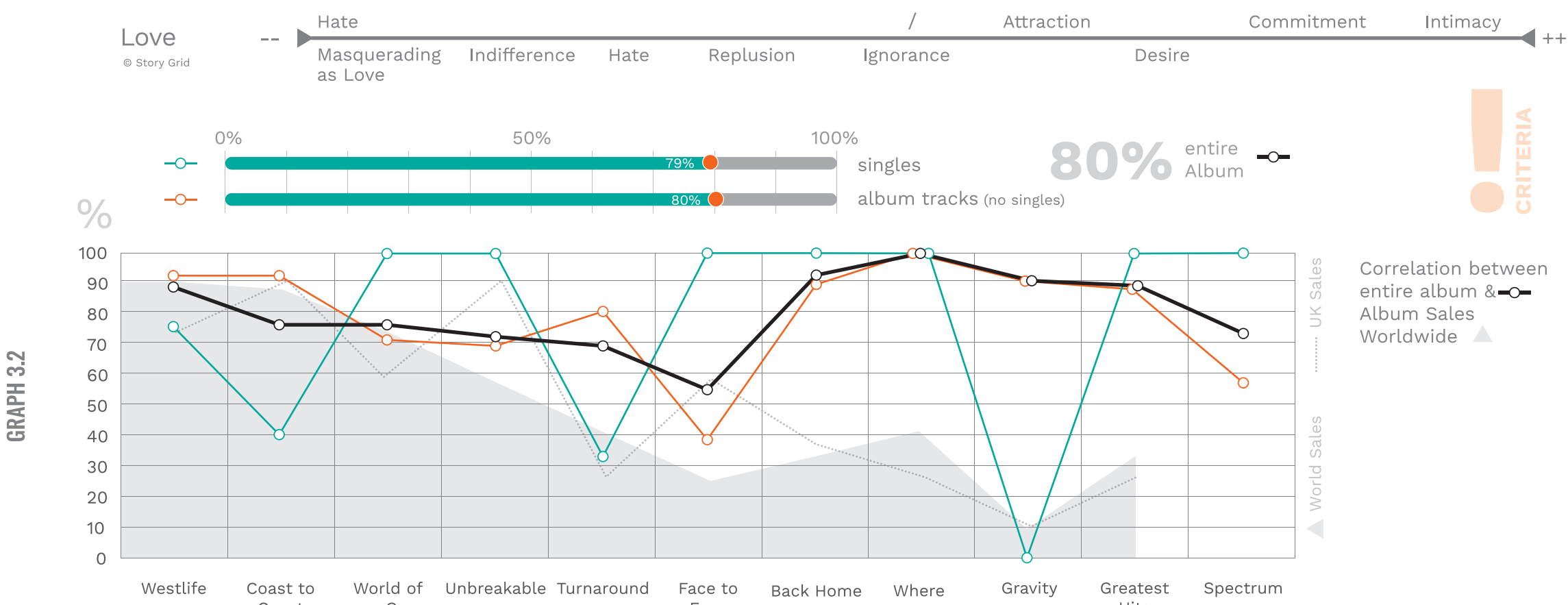
3. EXTERNAL TROUBLES

“The external content genres are driven primarily by extra-personal and/or personal conflict.” (Story Grid) Those types of external conflict are caused by an easily identifiable force of antagonism. Westlife is devoted to singing love songs. And in love stories, the force of antagonism are the potential lovers.

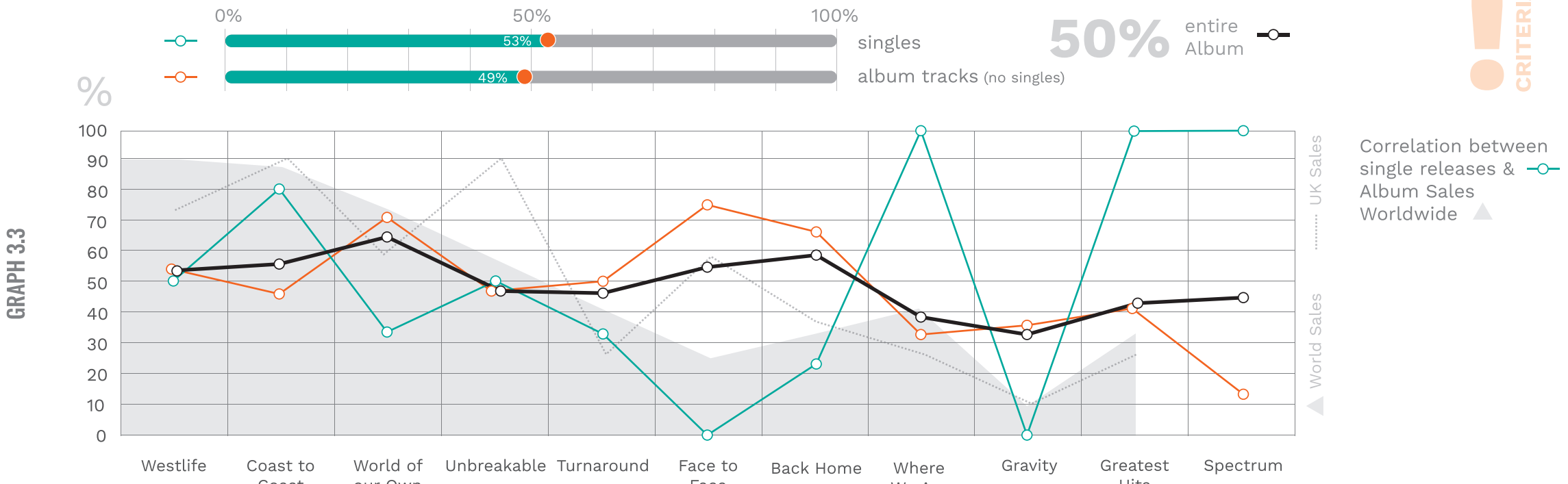
How often does the song have an external genre?



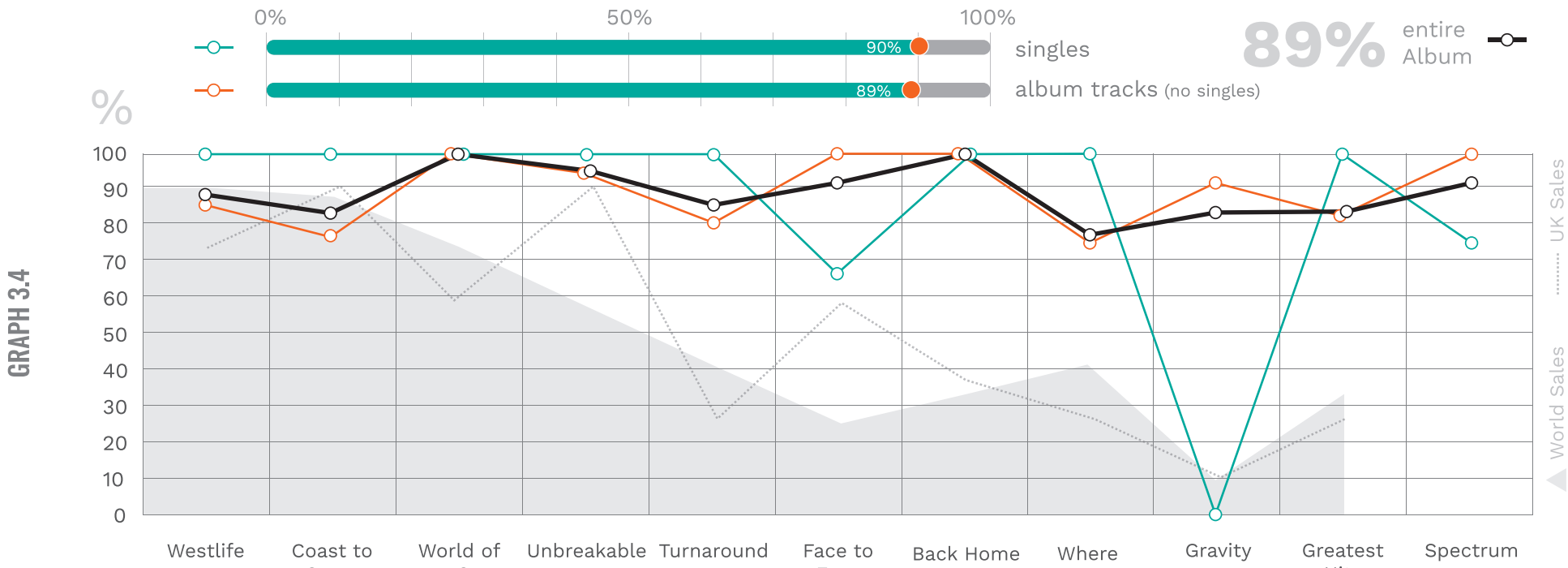
How often is the protagonist at a positive stage?



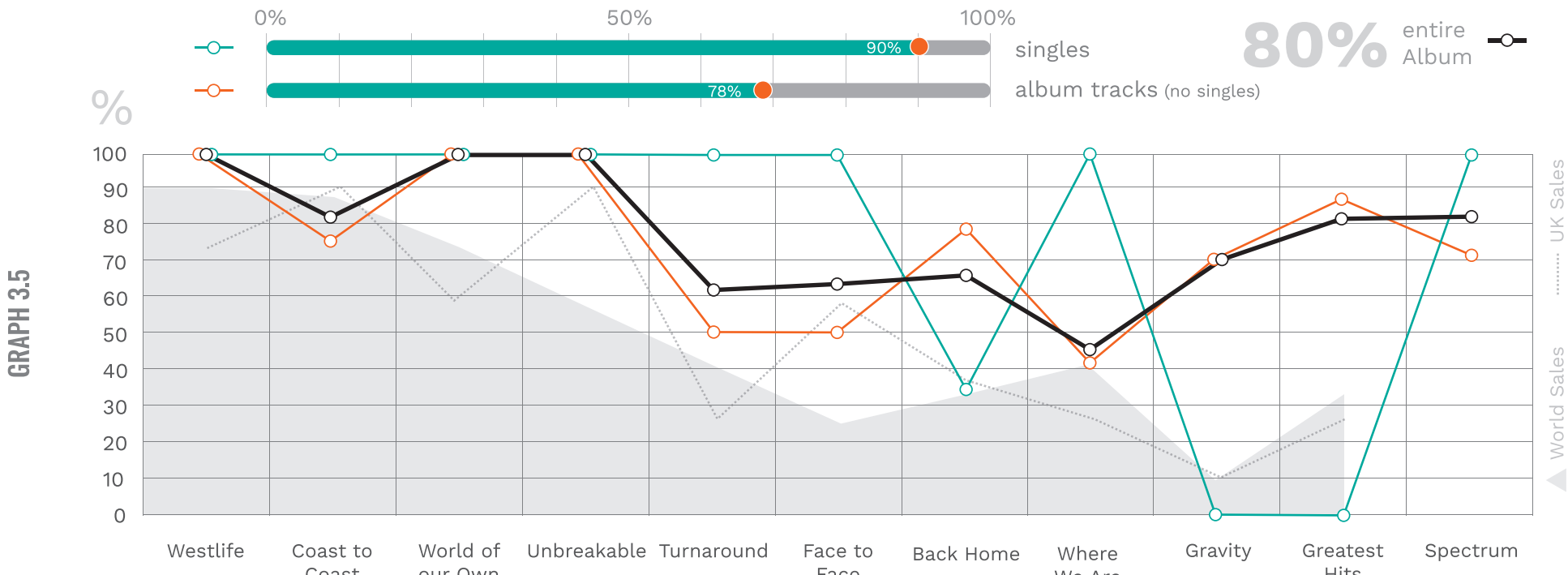
Is the external genre clearly established in the first lines?



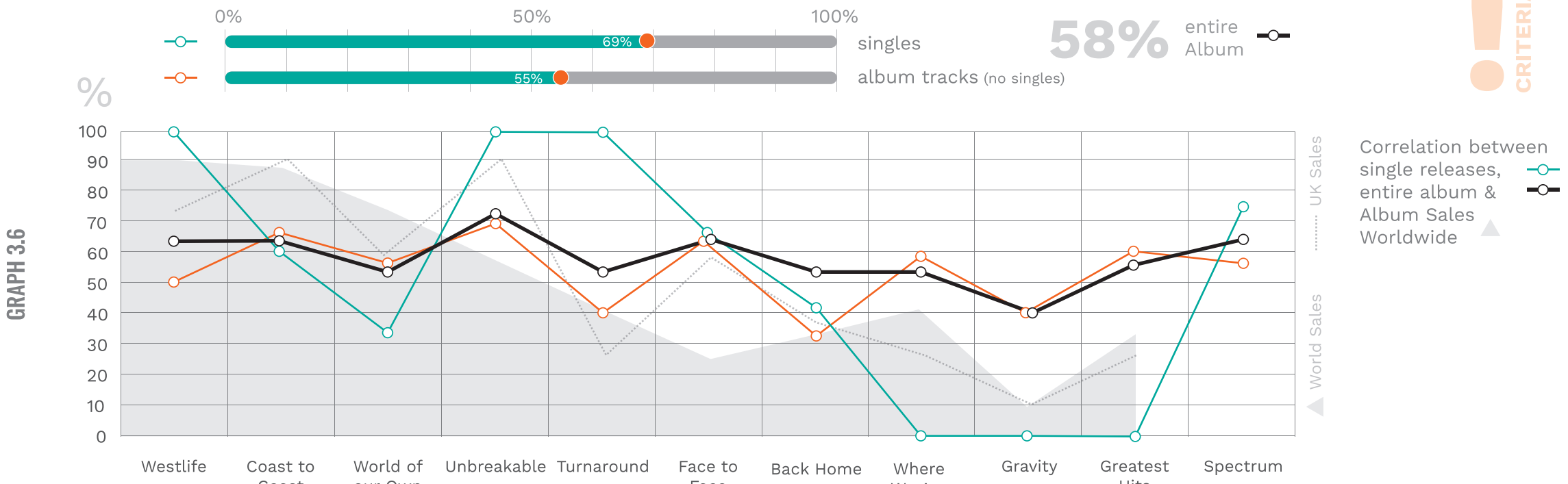
Is the external problem more prominent than the internal?



Obligatory Moment of the external genre is included.



Convention of the external genre is included.

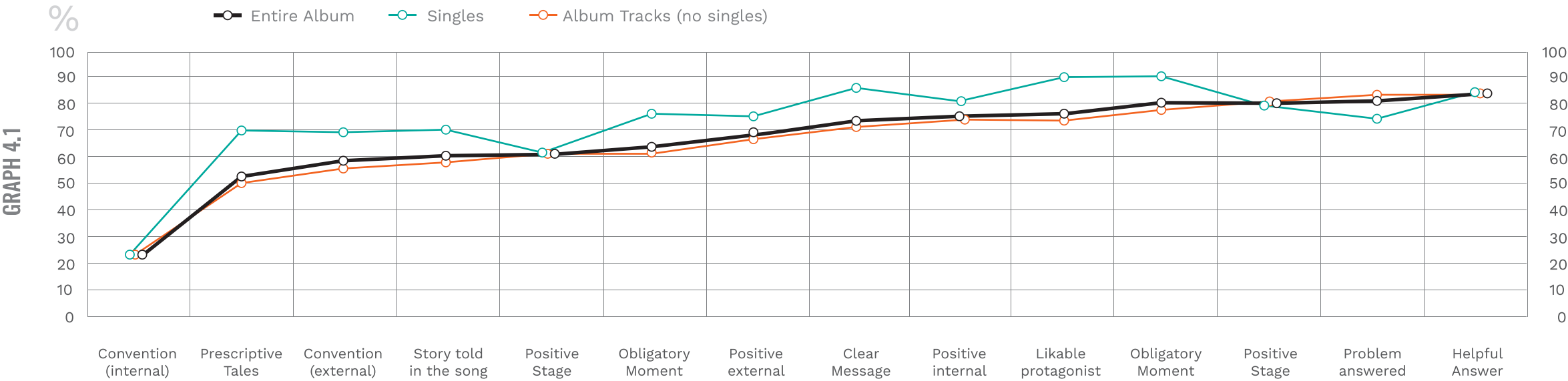
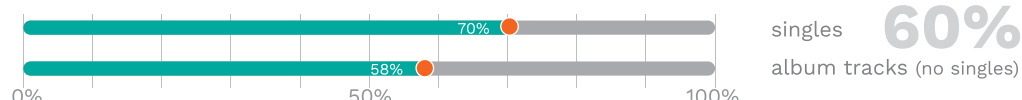


4. THE FINAL COMPARISON

THE FINAL RESULTS

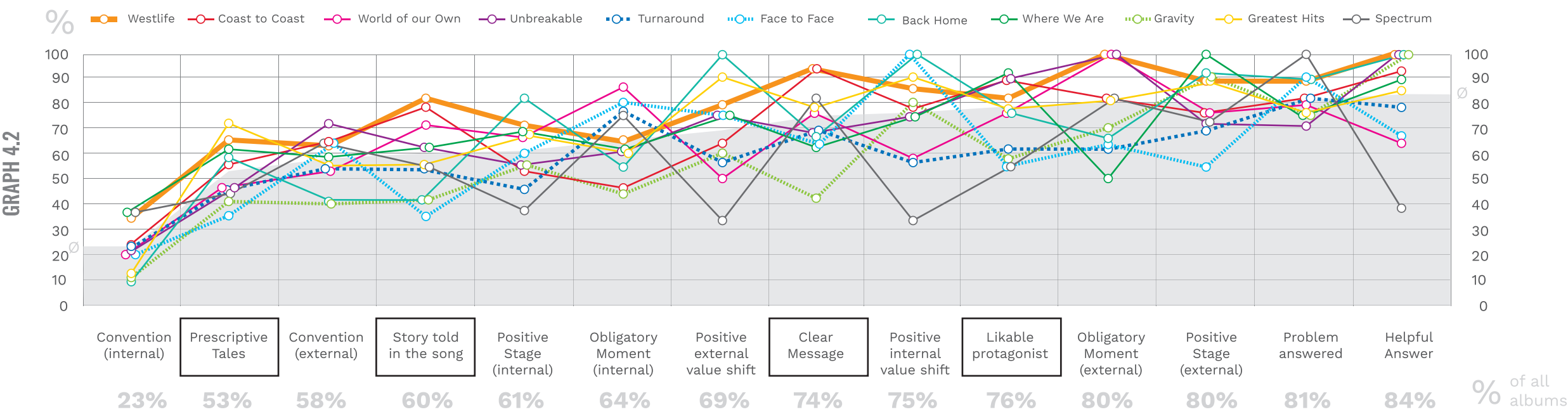
Here's an overview over the most important storytelling criteria and how each album fulfills that criteria.

Do single releases or album songs tell the most captivating stories?



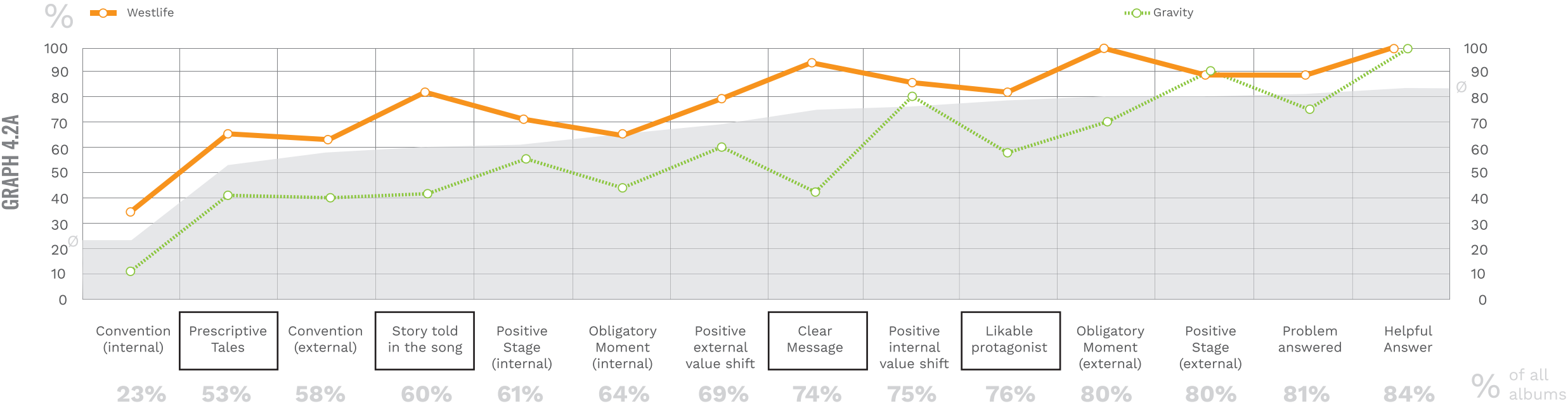
Complete Overview of the main Storytelling Criteria for all the Albums (Storytelling Criteria - Trajectory)

The grey background in graph 4.2 defines the average value of all the albums. The framed criteria is the storytelling criteria that has the largest impact on the success of the Westlife albums. The albums that didn't sell well ('Face to Face' and 'Gravity') were below average and had the lowest value among all the eleven albums.



Note: Since Westlife is all about delivering great love songs, it's important that the storytelling criteria is met or that they deliver beyond expectations. This graphic demonstrates the criteria that determine the expectations of the Westlife fans. And which album fulfills those expectations more or less than others do.

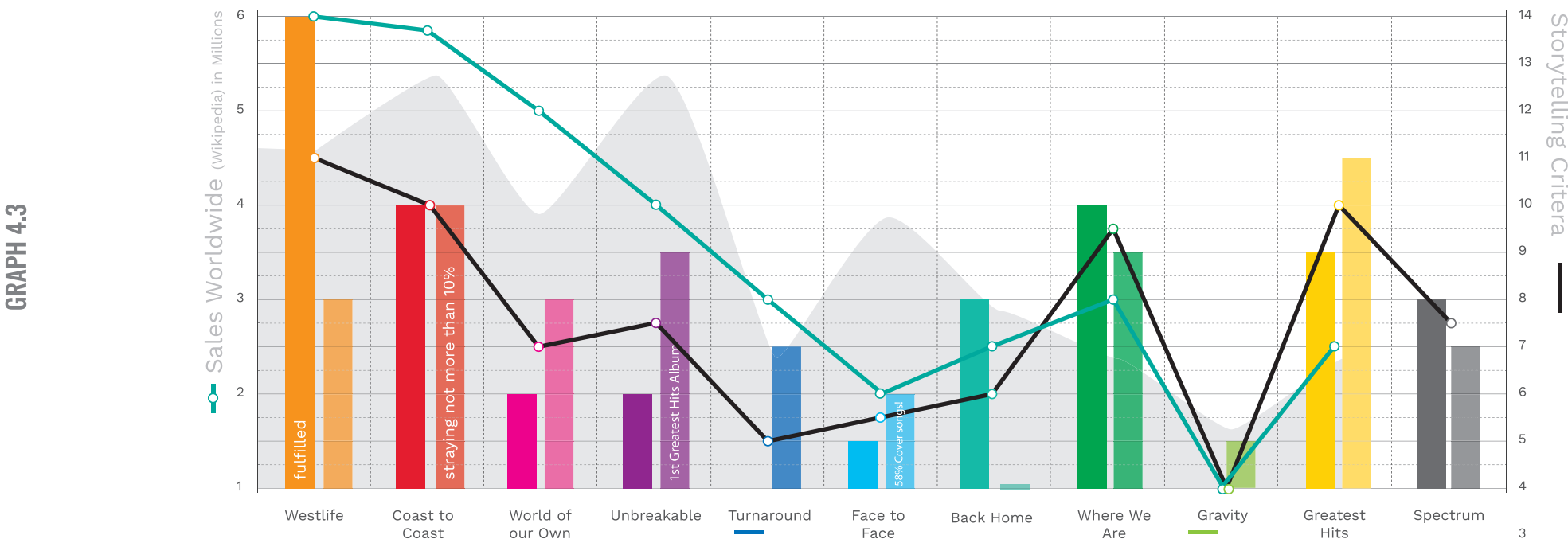
Westlife vs. Gravity - Best selling album vs. Least successful album



The first album „Westlife“ vs. „Gravity“

In the “Complete Overview Graphic” you can see the storytelling trajectory fans are used to when it comes to the songs of Westlife. The album “Westlife” is Westlife's most sold album because it follows that trajectory the most without deviating from the path and it meets or succeeds the storytelling criteria for a great love story told in a love song. If you look at “Gravity”, you can see that this album strays away the furthest and takes on a completely different path from what fans were expecting of Westlife. It just did not deliver.

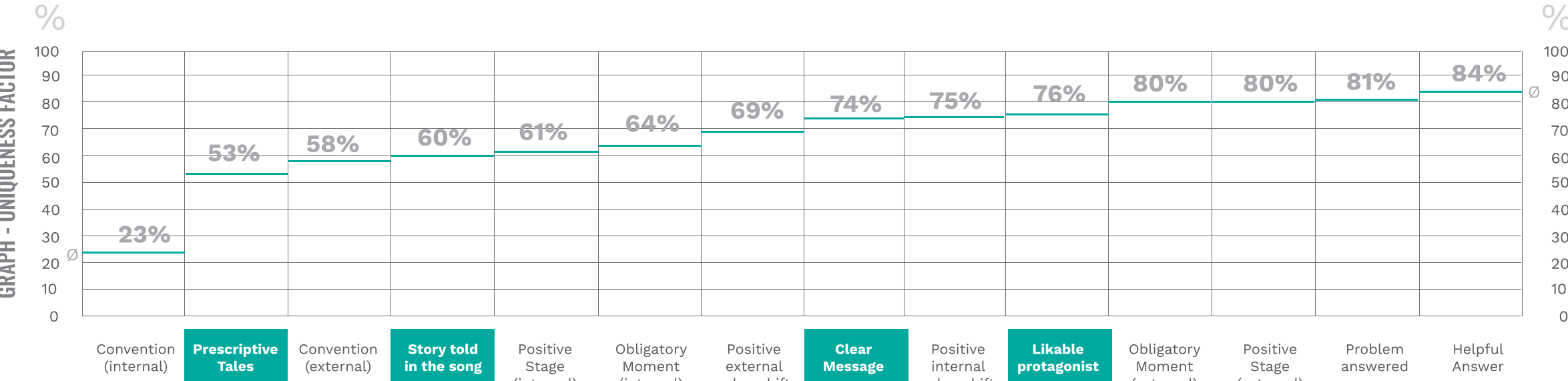
World Album Sales in relation to how many times each album met an important storytelling criteria (Ø)



Why are „Unbreakable“ and „Face to Face“ not in line?

“Unbreakable” was Westlife's very first Greatest Hits Album at a time when they were at the peak of their success. If you cut out “Unbreakable” from the graph above, the trajectory line would go further downwards, same as the worldwide and UK album sales would. “Face to Face” went higher than “Turnaround” because it consisted of over 58% of cover songs. “Turnaround” sold better because even if it strays a little further than 10% away from the trajectory line, it still does not deviate much from the path and in the criteria that matters most, it's better than “Face to Face”. “Face to Face” also jumps around a lot and is inconsistent to the main trajectory line.

Westlife's Uniqueness Factor:



If you want to change lives and create meaning through the stories you tell and the songs you sing, I'll be glad to work with you.

Write me an email: write@storiesinsongs.com.

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Note: You are allowed to use single graphs of this analysis, but you need to link back to: storiesinsongs.com/westlife, and write me an email telling me where my data will be published.