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Understanding the Business of Popular Songs

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The University of Southern Mississippi

UNDERSTANDING THE BUSINESS OF POPULAR SONGS

By

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A Thesis

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Abstract

UNDERSTANDING THE BUSINESS OF POPULAR SONGS

By Jeremiah Evan Stricklin

March 2012

This paper presents an analysis of Billboard Music Charts' top twenty popular songs from the year 2011. These songs are studied to determine whether or not their songwriters adhere to hypothetical rules left by songwriting scholars from the past. The criteria for analysis include: length of introduction, length of the entire song, the presence of a memorable 'hook', the connection between tempo and key tonality, and the form of each song. The research concludes that, while songwriters typically adhere to a loose set of rules, they do not follow them exactly. Therefore, the success of a popular song cannot be credited to any single songwriting formula.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Literary Review.....	2
Research Questions	8
Research method/sample technique.....	9
Procedure	10
Song attributes	
Introduction length.....	11
Hook.....	12
Song length.....	14
Mood/tempo.....	14
Song form.....	17
Findings.....	20
Discussion.....	21
Conclusion.....	24
References.....	25

Understanding the Business of Popular Songs

Introduction

Pop music brings in money. In 2007, the pop music genre contributed to 12% of a 12 billion dollar income, approximately 1.5 billion dollars, of the entire music industry (Hutchison, 2010). For this reason, it is important to study how to write popular songs. Popular songs can span many different genres of music. However, most popular songs carry similar characteristics that aid in identifying them. For example, Bruno Mars' single "Grenade" was a chart topping hit in 2011 (Billboard). The song is driven by piano and Bruno Mars' higher ranged vocals. Taylor Swift's "Back to December" is also a top pop song and it carries similar qualities to that of "Grenade." Both songs have the same song form: ABABCB (A=verse, B=Chorus, C=Bridge). Both songs have a memorable musical idea called a hook. Both songs have introductions of fewer than twenty seconds. Evidence such as this leads songwriters to believe that there is a legitimate routine for pop songwriters. Eleven-minute rock ballads typically do not find a place on mainstream radio stations. The value of a formula or model is obvious for any struggling songwriter attempting to gain commercial success. Some songs are so popular that they can be considered crossover-hit songs. This means that the song, no matter the genre, can span across many different charts. To do this, an artist is "reaching a broader audience by a change of medium or style" (Merriam-Webster). A successful crossover hit can be played on a country station, top 40 hit radio, or any other station that plays mainstream radio songs.

This has led the discussion of a “perfect song” formula within pop culture criticism. For instance, songwriters usually live by the idea that hit songs are simple. Harvey Rachlin states “[s]uccessful songs are memorable because they are not complicated. There is a pattern or form to them that makes them easy to remember” (Rachlin, 1977). Scholars like Citron suggest that the form of popular songs is very specific. The form of pop songs is illustrated with letters (A B and C), where each letter refers to a section type within the larger structure. Citron even feels that there are specific progressions in the form that make pop songs (Citron, 1985). Many scholars agree with Liggett in regards to a pop song’s “hook” as well as the overall length of the song (Liggett, 1993). Other points in the form of a perfect song include short introductions (about fourteen to seventeen seconds in length) as well as lyrics that have a universal appeal. Such aspects are commonly cited in the discussion regarding the “perfect song” format.

This study will examine Billboard Music’s top 20 popular songs of 2011 to assess the extent to which they follow, or suggest, a “perfect song” format.

Literary Review

Following the work of Citron and Braheny, scholarship addressing popular songwriting typically considers techniques such as formal pattern, introduction length, presence of a hook, length of the entire song, and correlation of mood and tempo. These techniques have also been taken to heart by contemporary songwriters in their effort to construct the perfect pop song. Most scholars, like Noonan and Liggett, suggest that there are common attributes that create the success of popular songs. But to understand

pop songs, it is important to have a working definition of popular music. Bill Lamb (October 2011) describes it as music that evolved out of the rock 'n roll revolution of the mid-1950's and continues in a definable path to today (October 2011). The Top 40 is a popular form of hearing the week's forty most popular pop songs. The Top 40 came from the idea of playing the most popular tracks from a jukebox. The reason the Top 40 is important for pop music is that it is "generally used as a label for mainstream pop music, particularly played on the radio" (2011). Pop music reaches many different genres of music. The genres include rock, rhythm and blues, and country, amongst many others. For this reason, crossover hits can reach even more people than typical, one-sound songs.

Hit songs are those found at the top of worldwide music charts and the US market for popular music produces the greatest revenue. Billboard ranks these lucrative, domestic hit songs and the issue of their internal similarities is pertinent for multiple reasons. While scholarship does not contradict the fact that these similarities provide hit pop songs with a characteristic sound, the relationship between form and profit is noteworthy. Music business educators like Geoffrey Hull and Tim Whitsett point out how an effectively constructed pop song generates revenue. A primary income stream for pop music is known as public performance royalties. Based on ownership of copyright in the composition, this royalty is collected by one of the three American Performing Rights Organizations (PROs): ASCAP, SESAC and BMI (Braheny, 2006). These PROs keep up with how many times a song is played via broadcast or live performance and collect money for that amount. The money is then split up between the publishers and the songwriters. Consider the following example of how one hit song can bring revenue to a

songwriter. Adele's song "Rolling in the Deep" from the album "21" (XL Recordings LTD.) is the highest selling single in digital format since digital music sales began being tracked in 2003 (Christman, 2011). The song was not only purchased digitally, but it was (and is) used in movies, played on the radio, and synched with TV shows. Every time "Rolling in the Deep" is used for any sort of media where profit is involved, Adele receives compensation for her work. As Whitsett points out, even a pop song charting in the Billboard top 5 will see PRO earnings of somewhere in the range of \$250,000 for the first year. The song is a perfect representation of what makes a pop song a hit.

Songwriters must answer to a certain amount of rules when aiming to write a great hit. Obviously, there are always exceptions. However, one major rule in making a successful pop song is mass appeal. The more people a song can reach, the more likely that the songwriter will receive income for his/her work. According to Braheny, "one of the most important functions of a song is to give people a vehicle to express hopes, dreams, and inner conflicts that they might otherwise keep inside" (2006). The context of a song is crucial to gaining the appeal of a great amount of people. Obscure subject matters or extremely specific personal affairs do not typically resonate with the masses. For this reason, pop songs are usually broad, relatable subjects to which people can easily identify. Some hit songs tell a story that the listener can follow although this isn't always the case either. But for those that make the effort to build a narrative, the story must be "something that resonates with the listener, but also ensure its universality has an element that's well, original, slightly off kilter, even twisted" (Hill, 2010).

Another characteristic in hit songs is the relationship between tempo and mood. Noonan claims, "fast music is associated with increased arousal; whereas low music is

associated with somber and mellow emotions” (Noonan, 2011). As an experiment, Noonan suggests playing a song 40 beats per minute faster to see the effects on arousal. The theory is that listeners tend to enjoy fast music that is in a major key and slow music if the song is in a minor key. “It appears that mode influences mood and tempo influences arousal independently, but the combination of the two predicts whether people will enjoy the musical piece” (2011). Essentially, the proper correlation of key tonality and tempo can significantly impact on the listener.

According to Gary Ewer, the form of a hit song is often predictable, and the music business is a “copy cat” industry. He states, “predictability will sell more songs than innovation” (Ewer, 2012). The specific parts of a pop song are typically what create a sense of predictability. Verses and choruses are in most every song in the mainstream of media. Usually verses are storylines that create dialogue pertaining to a certain subject. The chorus is often repeated multiple times and contains the most memorable of the lyrics. According to Citron, the song should include four sections: A, B, A2 or the “bridge” and C. The title of the song should be included in the A section as well as the “main melodic inspiration” (1985). Some writers, like Liggett, suggest that there are a number of variations on the form of a song. Such as: ABA, ABAC, and ABABCB (1993). This rule, however, has exceptions. It is not uncommon for a song to have a form that does not stick to any sort of rule but nonetheless manage to reach the top of charts.

Another important part of a hit song is what is coined as the “hook.” The hook is the portion of the song that the listener will most likely take away from the song. Also referred to as “ear worms,” these catchy sections get stuck in the heads of listeners who

may find themselves humming along once the song is over. As Beaman describes it, an earworm is “the experience of an inability to dislodge a song and prevent it from repeating itself in one's head” (2010). Liggett concurs in his assessment: “[i]t’s the repetitious part that’s implanted in your mind after hearing a song just once, it’s the words that everyone remembers, [and] it’s the melodic line you just can’t get out of your head” (1993). A song with a good, memorable hook increases its chance of being well received. Gary Stix even states, “earworms could conceivably provide a window onto what 19th century German memory research pioneer Hermann Ebbinghaus called involuntary memory retrieval” (Stix, 2011). The proper form of creating a good hook can be found in the words of David Gungor: “Keep it simple. Keep it themed. Keep it catchy” (Gungor, 2012).

The length of a song is vital to its viability as well. Even the introduction has a specific length based on the perfect song formula. Braheny suggests that the introduction to a popular song should be between thirteen and twenty seconds. However, the overall length is just as important. The length of a song determines how long a listener can or will pay attention. Liggett states that the “length of most commercial songs doesn’t exceed four minutes” (1993). However, this is also a well-known rule that is broken on a regular occasion. Adele’s “Someone Like You” stayed at number one on the singles chart for over a month (Billboard Charts, 2011). The significance of this is that “Someone Like You is four minutes and forty-three seconds; well over Liggett’s four minute limit. Although the rules to writing hit songs can be beneficial to the songwriting process, there are many different ways to successfully write hit songs. Eloquently put by Rachlin, “These are general rules and rules are made to be broken” (1977). Rules are not what

make songs well-received by the listener. Many more things go into a song that relates to listeners and moves them emotionally.

With so many popular songs generating so much revenue, it is important to see if there is a method to this process. If there is a set of rules that provide success in writing popular songs, is it vital for songwriters to abide by these rules? Also, if a song does not follow the set of rules of success left by other songwriters, what does that mean regarding the song's chances of breaking into the hit charts?

Research Questions

RQ1: Do popular songs stick to rules left by other songwriters in the business?

RQ2: Do songs that do not abide by the rules left by popular songwriters still manage to find success on popular music charts?

H-1 –The length of the introduction to most popular songs on the Billboard chart will be anywhere between thirteen and twenty seconds.

H-2- Popular songs on the Billboard charts will contain either a recognizable hook; whether it be instrumental or vocal.

H-3- The length of popular songs on the Billboard chart will be between three minutes and four and a half minutes

H-4- The key of a popular song on the Billboard charts will parallel the tempo of the song as stated by popular songwriting scholars

H-5- The form of a popular song on the Billboard chart will be a variation of Verse-Chorus-Verse-Chorus-Bridge-Chorus.

Research Method

Design

To understand the success of popular songs, the best way to approach such a large catalog of music would be to go to the Billboard charts. The design of my research will be to take songs from the Billboard charts and analyze each one. The current study will categorize each section of a song that corresponds with the “rules” left by other songwriters like Noonan and Liggett. The songs will be coded by one coder alone. The list will ensure popular songs ranging from at least three different genres. Some of the charts will include crossover hits. Those songs that fall under the category of popular crossover hits will be specified in the research.

Sampling Technique

I have selected a sample batch of twenty songs taken from the Hot 100 for 2011 - a Billboard popular song chart that contains the top hits from 2011. In order to determine which songs will be selected I have chosen a chart that recognizes the top selling songs over a 12-month period but one that does not discriminate based on genre. The reasons informing the sampling technique are twofold. One is that the Billboard weekly charts do not give as true of a measure of success as charts that track performance over a longer period of time. Thus, the sampling technique favors songs with staying power and tends to reject more trendy, one-hit wonders. Secondly, the Hot 100 does not discriminate based on genre. The reason for this criterion is that it tends to reject songwriting formulae that may work in one genre but not in another. Rather, it favors songs whose songwriting

formulae resonated across genres by appealing to the various social groups that tend to be divided along the lines suggested by genres. In sum, the selection of the top 20% of Billboard's "Hot 100" of 2011 ensures a significant sample of those songs whose performance over the course of the entire 2011 calendar year found the greatest success with the widest listenership.

Procedure

With respect to musical attributes of songs like tempo, length, and song form, my procedure is to use the musical score of the song as a primary text of interpretation. I then apply the rules I have deduced from the existing scholarship on the topic (see "Literary Review" above) thus allowing me to check for compliance or deviation between these verifiable hits and the rules themselves. Each attribute is recorded accordingly. The hook of each song is logged as well. When a song does not adhere to the rules left by popular songwriters, the coders will specify that information on the coding sheets.

The following measures are fundamental to my procedure. Regarding tempo, length, and song form, I take the musical score of the song and compare the songs to the rules left by songwriters. Tempo is pivotal to the feel of the song. Songwriters like Noonan argue that songs in minor keys in popular music have a slower tempo and faster songs have a major key. In my research, I attempt to separate songs that do not conform to the rules of having a song length of 3:00-4:30 and the length of an introduction to be between thirteen and twenty seconds. The form of a song according to popular songwriters is Verse, Chorus, Verse, Chorus, Eight-Bar-Bridge, and Chorus (ABABCB). In my research, I highlight the popular songs in the top 100 Billboard charts that do not

align with the form laid out by songwriters. The “hook” of the song is determined by analyzing the sound recording of the songs in question. I identify the popular songs that do have hooks as opposed to the ones that do not. A coding sheet reflects each rule made by songwriters. The categories are separated by each rule (i.e.: there is a category for whether or not the song has a “hook” or not).

Introduction length

H-1 –The length of the introduction to most popular songs on the Billboard chart is anywhere between thirteen and twenty seconds.

As stated in the literature review, the introduction length is one of the key pieces in regards to analyzing popular songs. According to the collection of hypothetical rules of popular song writing, the introduction length to popular songs should be anywhere between thirteen and twenty seconds. With respect to popular song writing, the introduction is the instrumental section that leads up to the lyrical content of the song. Some songs, however, begin with a verse or start immediately with lyrics and contain no introduction. Of the twenty songs analyzed, only five songs contained an introduction between thirteen and twenty seconds long. A significant portion of the songs analyzed contained introductions of shorter than thirteen seconds. The fact that 50% of the songs analyzed do not follow this songwriting rule proves that the mythical formula only appears in sporadic fashion and cannot be considered as a consistent practice among songwriters. For example, “ET” by Katy Perry contains an introduction of a mere seven seconds before the verse begins. Some popular songs like Bruno Mars’ “Grenade”

contain no introduction. The lyrics of the verse begin the song and no theme or mood is established in the introduction. This is not a foreign concept in the realm of popular song writing. For example, P!nk's single "Perfect" also contains no introduction yet still managed to reach #19 on the Billboard charts for most popular songs of 2011. On the other hand, far more popular songs contain short introductions compared to no introduction at all. Often times, the introduction is shorter (around seven seconds). Some songs like Rihanna's "S&M" contain longer introductions (thirty two seconds). This proves that songwriters do, indeed, aim for a short introduction in regards to popular song writing. However, popular songwriters do not adhere to the rule of keeping an introduction between thirteen seconds and twenty seconds in length.

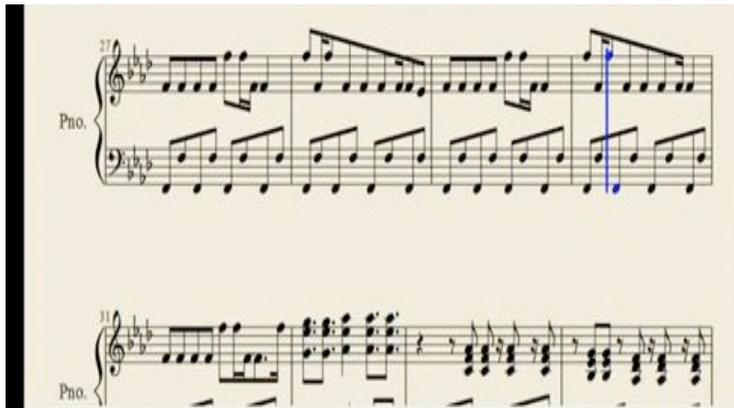
Hook

H-2- Popular songs on the Billboard charts will contain a recognizable hook; whether it be instrumental or vocal.

According to songwriting scholars such as Liggett, the Hook of a popular song is a determining factor for success. The hook is the moment in the song that the listener will most likely take away from after the song is over. The Hook can be a short, catchy instrumental melody or a vocal phrase. Often times the hook is only a few notes to maintain simplicity. The instrumental hook in LMFAO's "Party Rock Anthem" is an example of this. (Figure 1) The vocal hook may not even contain actual words; merely noises or words accented in unique, memorable ways. For instance, Nicki Minaj's "Super Bass" contains a hook of nonsensical phrases in between other melodic phrases (Figure 2). The nonsensical phrases are used to stick in the head of the listener long after

the completion of the song. Of the twenty songs in question, all of the songs had a recognizable hook of some type. Only four of the hooks were noticeable instrumental hooks. This evidence suggests that songwriters aiming to write hit popular songs adhere to the rule of creating songs with recognizable hooks, especially vocal hooks.

Figure 1



The first five measures illustrate the hook to Party Rock Anthem by LMFAO. The simplicity is illustrated by the fact that the theme is essentially a repeated note. The F note is played in one octave then switched to a higher octave in rhythm. An Eb note is used once in the second measure. The repetition and simplicity take part in making this theme memorable. (Credit: The table above was taken from www.Shazamiomusic.com.)

Figure 2

Excerpt from Nicki Minaj's "Super Bass"

He's got that boom-ba-doom-boom-boom-ba-doom-boom Super Bass

Yeah that's that boom-ba-doom-boom-boom-ba-doom-boom Super

Bass

Above we see an example of a hook that expressed by way of a rhythmic combination of percussive syllables that work to represent the sound produced by another instrument in the ensemble. The hook may be memorable or effective not simply due to its melodic inspiration alone.

Song Length

H-3- The length of popular songs on the Billboard chart will be between three minutes and four and a half minutes.

The length of a pop song is one of the most detectable aspects of a song to analyze. Pop radio stations have a difficult time playing songs that are over the 4:30 minute mark. For this reason, most popular song academics argue that the length of a popular song should be between 3-4:30 minutes. However, this was not always the case. The Beatles, for example, had a famous hit entitled "Hey Jude." The song itself exceeds seven minutes in length. The Beatles also had many chart-topping hits, like "I'll Follow the Sun," that last less than two minutes. After study of the top popular songs of 2011,

the evidence is clear that this rule is enforced amongst most songwriters of today. All twenty of the songs analyzed were in the time frame of 3-4:30 minutes.

Mood/Tempo

H-4- The key of a popular song on the Billboard charts will parallel the tempo of the song as stated by popular songwriting scholars

Songwriters suggest that the tempo of the song should coincide with the key tonality. For example, an upbeat song should also be in a major key. According to Noonan, “It appears that mode influences mood and tempo influences arousal independently, but the combination of the two predicts whether or not people will enjoy the musical piece.” A slower song should be in a minor key to emphasis the mood. However, there is no concrete evidence to support the merit of this hypothetical rule. Some songs like “Last Friday Night” by Katy Perry abide by the rule. For example, it is a moderately upbeat tempo pop song in a major key. (Figure 3) This is not uncommon in the realm of popular songwriting. On the other hand, her other chart topping song “ET” featuring Kanye West is an upbeat song in the key of F minor. Another choice example would be “Pumped Up Kicks” by Foster the People. (Figure 4) The methodology to the concept is sound. However, much like the length of introductions, popular songwriters do not necessarily adhere to this concept.

Figure 3

Katy Perry's "Last Friday Night"

The image displays a musical score for Katy Perry's "Last Friday Night". It is set in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time, with a tempo of Moderately at 126 beats per minute. The score is divided into three systems. The first system shows the piano introduction with a *mf* dynamic, featuring a steady bass line and chords in the right hand. The second system includes the vocal melody starting with the lyrics "I. There's a". The third system is labeled "Verse:" and contains the lyrics: "stran-ger in my bed... There's a pound-ing in my head... Gilt-ter so con-nect the dots... Don't know what to tell my boss... Think the". The score includes chord diagrams for C, Am7, Em7, and D. A footnote at the bottom left states: "*Revised in F# major." The title "WIN DURING PHASE" is printed at the top right of the score area.

The example above validates Noonan's "Mood/Tempo" rule by showing a moderately upbeat song is played in a major key - G major to be exact, (credit-www.onlinesheetmusic.com). The basic idea of this rule is that songs set to a major key suggest a more optimistic frame of mind, and that a faster or more "upbeat" tempo is the natural match. Such a rule however is less adept at explaining moods like anger which tend to have an accelerated tempo but in a minor setting, as in the following example.

Figure 4

Foster the People's "Pumped Up Kicks"

The image displays a musical score for Foster the People's "Pumped Up Kicks". It is written in F minor (three flats) and 4/4 time. The tempo is marked as $\text{♩} = 140$. The score is divided into three systems. The first system shows the piano introduction with a "2nd ending" in the bass line. The second system continues the piano accompaniment. The third system includes the vocal melody with two verses of lyrics. The lyrics are: "1. Rob-ert's got a quick hand. He'll lock a-round the room. He won't tell... 2. Dad-dy works a long day. He'll be com-ing home late, yeah, he's". The score is marked with "NC" (No Chords) above the vocal line.

The song is actually at a higher bpm (beats per minute) than Katy Perry's Last Friday Night, yet it is in F minor, (credit: The table above is provided by www.onlinesheetmusic.com). While the pertinence of the example above lies in its contradiction of the Noonan's rule, we find other instances in the sample batch that also invite a more critical appreciation of the relationship between tempo and mood. Is their relationship a necessary one, as Noonan implies, or perhaps a more conventional or contrived one? The example below is illustrative of this question.

Figure 5

Excerpt from Bruno Mars's "Just the Way You Are."

*When I see your face, there's not a thing that I would change
Cause you're amazing, just the way you are
And when you smile, the whole world stops and stares for a while
Because girl you're amazing, just the way you are*

In the example above, the lyrics, although specific to gender, are a very broad concept. The narrator serenades his lover and compliments her physical beauty. This is a timeless literary trope derived from lyric poetry. Its effectiveness is independent of musical rhythm as a speedier recital only slightly shifts the semantic complexion in comparison to one that is more deliberate.

Song Form

H-5- The form of a popular song on the Billboard chart will be a variation of Verse-Chorus-Verse-Chorus-Bridge-Chorus.

The song form of the theoretical perfect song formula started by professional songwriters consists of a verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, and a last chorus. Some pop songs, like Katy Perry's "Firework" have a variation of a verse sometimes called a pre-chorus. The pre-chorus is an extension of the verse and is reflected often symmetrically with the second verse. The same holds true for "Firework" (Figure 6). In traditional pop song writing, the formula consists of an eight-measure bridge. However,

the research reveals that often times that is not the case. There are some songs with eight measures in the bridge but there are also many variations. For instance, Rhianna's "S & M", the bridge lasts sixteen measures before concluding with a final chorus. Some songs, instead of a bridge, contain a third verse after the second chorus. An example of this would be Maroon 5's "Moves Like Jagger" (Figure 7) The evidence concludes that although the rule isn't followed completely, songwriters definitely use the theory as a template to work with. However, more often than not, the songwriter will manipulate that part of the formula in particular.

Figure 6

Excerpt from Katy Perry's "Firework"

*Do you ever feel already buried deep?
6 feet under screams but no one seems to hear a thing
Do you know that there's still a chance for you
'Cause there's a spark in you*

*You just got to ignite, the light, and let it shine
Just own the night like the 4th of July*

The first stanza represents the traditional verse of the song. The pre-chorus, or verse extension, begins with the line "You just got to ignite..."

Figure 7

Excerpt from Maroon 5's "Moves Like Jagger"

*You want to know how to make me smile
Take control, own me just for the night
And if I share my secret
You're gonna have to keep it
Nobody else can see this*

*So watch and learn
I won't show you twice
Head to toe, oh baby rub me right
But if I share my secret
You're gonna have to keep it
Nobody else can see this*

This is the third verse sung by Christina Aguilera. The song is unique due to its absence of a bridge in replacement of a third verse sung by an alternative singer.

Research Findings (Table 1)

Artist	Song Title	Song Length	Intro Length	Presence of a hook	Song Form ¹	Key tonality/mood
Adele	Rolling in the Deep	3:47	5 secs	Yes	V-C-V-C-V-C	Major/upbeat
LMFAO	Party Rock Anthem	4:23	30 secs	Yes	C-V-C-V-B-C	Major/upbeat
Katy Perry	Firework	3:47	9 secs	Yes	V-C-V-C-B-C	Major/upbeat
Katy Perry ft. Kanye West	ET	3:50	7 secs	Yes	V-V-C-C-V-C-B-C	Ambiguous/upbeat
Pitbull ft. Ne-yo, Afrojack and Nayer	Give me Everything	4:12	15 secs	Yes	V-C-C-V-C-V-C	Major/upbeat
Bruno Mars	Grenade	3:43	5 secs	Yes	V-C-V-C-B-C	Minor/upbeat
Cee Lo Green	F**k You	3:43	7 secs	Yes	C-V-C-V-C-B-C	Major/upbeat
Nicki Minaj	Super Bass	3:20	9 secs	Yes	V-C-V-C-B-C	Major/upbeat
Maroon 5 ft. Christina Aguilera	Moves Like Jagger	3:21	14 secs	Yes	V-C-V-C-V-C	Minor/upbeat
The Black Eyed Peas	Just Can't Get Enough	3:39	None	Yes	C-V-C-V-B	Minor/upbeat
Jennifer Lopez ft. Pitbull	On the Floor	3:50	20 secs	Yes	V-C-V-C-B-C	Minor/upbeat
Rihanna	S&M	4:03	32 secs	Yes	V-C-V-C-B-C	Minor/upbeat
Foster the People	Pumped up Kicks	3:59	34 secs	Yes	V-C-V-C-B-C	Minor/upbeat
Katy Perry	Last Friday Night	3:50	7 secs	Yes	V-C-V-C-B-C	Major/Upbeat
Bruno Mars	Just the Way You Are	3:41	18 secs	Yes	V-C-V-C-B-C	Major/upbeat
Enrique Iglesias Ft. Ludacris and Dr. Frank E	Tonight (I'm Loving You)	3:51	15 secs	Yes	V-C-V-C-V-C	Ambiguous/upbeat
P!nk	Raise your Glass	3:23	8 secs	Yes	V-C-V-C-B-C	Major/upbeat
Lady Gaga	Born this way	4:20	27 secs	Yes	V-C-V-C-B-C	Major/upbeat
P!nk	F**Kin' Perfect	3:34	None	Yes	V-C-V-C-B-C	Major/upbeat
Rihanna ft. Drake	What's my Name?	4:23	21 secs	Yes	V-C-V-C-B-C	Major/upbeat

¹ “V”-Verse, “C”- Chorus, “B”-Bridge

Discussion

The hypothetical formula for popular songwriters put forth by songwriter scholars such as Rachlin and Citron can be seen in modern popular songs. The results from the study suggest that although the rules left by these songwriters are not strictly enforced, they are definitely taken into consideration by modern songwriters. Although the research was only on the top twenty songs on the Billboard charts for the year 2011, the trends in regards to the song formula are evident enough to make an informed conclusion of the research question put forth. The hypothetical formula definitely exists. However, the formula has been modified to an extent. Whether or not these alterations are intentional is unknown. Also, it is unknown whether or not the success of a popular song is based on the rules of songwriting. Some of the songs on the chart adhere to each rule, yet others vary. But the fact remains that songwriters take the rules of past songwriters into consideration.

In regards to the length of an introduction, not all songwriters adhere to the rule of an introduction of thirteen to twenty seconds in length. However, the results proved that songwriters do maintain a short introduction length. The majority of the songs contained shorter introduction lengths of about seven seconds or no introduction at all. Some songs contained introductions of about thirty five seconds. Most of the songs with longer introductions of thirty seconds like LMFAO's "Party Rock Anthem" have more dance influenced songs. This suggests that the song is marketed more towards club play or at parties. For other cases of shorter introductions suggests that the introduction of a song is less important for the song as a whole. The introductions are short enough to establish the mood of the song but long enough to have any real impact on the song.

The song length rule of songwriting illustrated by Liggett suggests that a song should not exceed four minutes. However, more songwriters like Braheny believe that the length should be between three and four and a half minutes. This rule is followed closely by modern songwriters. Part of this could be because of the fact that radio stations do not usually play songs much longer than that length. Clearly that rule is followed by songwriters of today.

Another rule of songwriting, the hook, is proven to be followed by songwriters. Liggett suggests that the hook is “implanted in your mind after hearing a song just once.” After conducting research, this idea has been proven true. The hook of a song is often nonsensical phrases. The reasoning behind this could be to set the hook apart from the rest of the lyrics. The hook Nicki Minaj’s “Super Bass” is basically nonsense in every literary way. However, the catchiness of the hook is what makes the hook so memorable to the listener. Instrumental hooks are also common amongst modern popular songs. LMFAO’s “Party Rock Anthem” is memorable in the same way as Nicki Minaj’s “Super Bass.” The hook is often extremely simple musically. This is to make the hook as memorable as possible. Often times the hook is repeated frequently and only one note. “Super Bass” and “Party Rock Anthem” both illustrate this.

Perhaps a more difficult concept in the rules of songwriting would be Noonan’s idea of maintaining a coalition of key tonality and tempo. He argues that “fast music is associated with increased arousal, where as slow music is associated with somber and mellow emotions.” This rule did not have concrete evidence. Many of the songs reviewed did not adhere to this rule. Katy Perry’s “ET” and Foster the People’s “Pumped Up Kicks” demonstrates this. However, there are a fair amount of songs that are both upbeat

and major key related. There are just too many exceptions to prove the rule true. The majority of the songs that exempt the rule are club/dance related songs with heavy beats (“ET” illustrates this). More traditional pop songs like Adele’s “Rolling in the Deep” adhere to the rule. This fact suggests that the exceptions could be merely a trend in Dance/Club beat popular songs.

The final rule in question is the idea of the song form put forth by scholars such as Liggett and Citron. The rule given by the scholars is that songs should have a form of verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-chorus. The results of the study have proven that songwriters of today take these rules into consideration even though they do not follow them strictly. Many variations of the ideal song form can be found in several songs on the Billboard chart. For example, Maroon 5’s “Moves Like Jagger” contains three verses instead of two verses and a bridge. Another song that illustrates this fact is Adele’s “Rolling in the Deep.” The song contains an extension of the verse also known as a pre-chorus. The problem in identifying song structure is that different parts in the form of songs are extremely open to interpretation. This means that two people can see the same song form completely differently.

This is true of popular songs in general. How memorable a hook is would vary with each individual listener. A bridge could be perceived as another verse to certain popular song aficionados. Music, by its very nature is open to interpretation. Although the popular song formula left by these scholars provides trends that lead to the success of modern popular songs, the successfulness of a song cannot be determined solely on those rules. The success of a popular song is impossible to understand in a scientific, formulaic procedure.

Conclusion

The music industry is a constantly changing entity with very few constants. Pop music carries some of those constant attributes that bring some form of unity in the business. Much like many other artistic outlets, the trends and styles of popular songs can be interpreted as thoughtless to the untrained listener. For this reason, I sought to demonstrate trends and techniques studied and established by scholars like Braheny and Liggett. The end result was a great understanding to the art of popular songwriting. Although the techniques revealed themselves on many occasions, it has become evident that popular music still has its own sense of individualism within each unique song. The techniques are often modified in order to achieve originality. The blending of structure and originality provide an outlet for creativity in the realm of popular songwriting. Understanding the rules and traits of popular songs has provided a new outlook and appreciation when listening to the craft of popular music.

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