Form and Function of the Melodic 'Hook' in Contemporary Western Popular Music

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INTRODUCTION

Popular music remain a significant part of contemporary western culture. With today's development in digital technology and the world wide web, access to a wide variety of music has become much easier and much more immediate. Music lovers are now presented with a diverse range of musical playlists at their fingertips. As a result, musicians and artists now have the means and opportunity to be heard by people and played in places, previously not possible, regardless of style or genre.

This abundance in choice, however, have created an ephemeral landscape for popular music, where most 'chart-topping hits' are as short-lived as the next fad (Herrera, 2010). Artists are now, more than ever, being challenged to stand out among the pack. Every musician, every band, every song writer alike, regardless of wether they aim to reach the upper echelons of the pop charts or dominate their own specific genre, are now linked by one common goal - to be memorable. For the most part, this process begins with a hit song.

> "When we turn on a pop, country, R&B, rock, or other contemporary music station, we know we'll hear songs that will hold our attention with excellent production and arrangements, and that have frequent, regularly recurring changes in lyrical, musical, and rhythmic texture, and a fairly predictable form" (Braheny, 2006, p.42).

These songs will usually contain nuggets of catchy ideas or *motives*, "the smallest fragment of a theme that forms a melodic-rhythmic unit" (Forney & Machlis, 2007, p.30), designed to linger in the consciousness of the listener, long after they've stopped listening. These are aptly named 'hooks'. Knowing how these sticky elements are formed and how best to employ them will equip the composer/songwriter with the tools necessary to build the foundations of a memorable piece of music.

WESTERN POPULAR MUSIC CULTURE

A Brief History

Western music is widely thought to have its roots in the amphitheatres of ancient Greece and the coliseums of the Great Roman empire. According to Forney & Machlis (2007, p.70), theories devised from these ancient civilisations would provide much of the fundamental building blocks for the musical movements that were to follow in the common era. The earliest documented examples of music taking direct influence from these ancient theories were the Medieval Gregorian chants and its seven 'church' modes (Crickmore, 2003). These sacred music were also the first music form to be notated, transcribed and catalogued for distribution among the clergy for use during mass (Forney & Machlis, 2007, p.71). Thus began Western music notation and the ability to exchange, develop and make popular, musical ideas and forms.

This primitive notation system slowly filtered down to the common masses and was further developed by those who performed secular music (music distinct from that of the church). Ranging from different social classes, some of these performers were aristocratic poet-musicians, the *troubadours* and *trouveres* in France and *minnesingers* in Germany, and the wandering minstrels, or the *jongleurs,* of the city fringes and countryside who sang about general aspects of medieval life. (Forney & Machlis, 2007, p.85).

Simple Concepts and Simple Forms

These common ideas of everyday subject matter concerning life, love and war, gave secular music its popularity amongst the aristocrats and the general public who had a certain basic desire to be entertained. With simple lyricism, usually in the local vernacular, and performed in simple musical formats, usually in *strophic* form, repeated melody sequences for every stanza of the song (Forney & Machlis, 2007, p.87), secular music struck both an intellectual and emotional chord within the layman's collective consciousness. These were the earliest form of popular music.

Similarly, in today's contemporary society, popular music still remain conceptually and formatively simple. Phillip Tagg (1982), a leading Professor of Musicology, describes one important characteristic of popular music:

> The results of the detailed musematic analyses of both *Kojak* and *Fernando*…showed that this mainstream popular music was able to carry messages which, at a preconscious, affective and associative level of thought, were able to relate types of personality, environments and events to emotional attitudes, implicit evaluations and patterns of affective response (Tagg, 1982).

An immediate reveal of familiar intellectual and emotive cues by familiar subject matters is a key component when analysing popular music genre, regardless of wether it's a romantic ballad from the medieval courts of the Middle Ages or a chart topping pop tune played on one of today's more popular commercial radio stations.

Contemporary Popular Music

Music styles and genre definitions have always considered the fundamental principles of its relevant political, economical, philosophical, sociological and cultural ideologies that have fostered its underlying theories and principles. These influences have also, to some extent, defined much of 'popular' music throughout the centuries. Proffering a 'contemporary' definition, however, has been made almost impossible due to the smorgasbord of musical styles and genres on offer by way of efficient and accessible electronic mediums:

> Fragmentation (and thus diversity) has increased considerably, to the point that divisions within the industry now have their own subdivisions…The bottom line: niches and fragmentation are increasing…which means public tastes must be broadening as well - or at least broadened public taste is being acknowledged by the record companies and radio stations (Sernoe, 2005)

To arrive at a singular definition of contemporary popular music is significantly complex, a task best reserved for musicologists and disciplinarians of popular music studies. Instead, a simpler working definition is offered to adequately sustain the smaller scope of this project's research topic; a definition which runs a similar vein to Morrison's 2007 description of popular music as "…belonging to any number of musical styles that are accessible to the general public and distributed commercially." From this point onwards, a common denominator of 'commercial' availability, accessibility and viability will be used as a general gauge or measure for defining *contemporary popular music.*

CONCEPTUALISING THE "HOOK"

Capturing the Listener's Attention

With the current proliferation of electronic and digital mediums of distribution, such as traditional and digital radio stations, podcasts and online stores, music is now able to reach a multitude of listeners. This inversely mean, however, that listeners are spoilt for choice, increasing the level of competition for their attention.

> "Some stations seek to reach a wide variety of listeners and age groups, with music that's interesting…once they have you tuned in, they don't want you to go away. Consequently, one of the most important requirements for music on the radio is that it holds the listener's attention" (Braheny, 2006, p.45).

Indeed, one expects, when tuning into a contemporary radio station to hear 'catchy' songs. The catchier it is the more it remains with the listener. This would usually means an increase in requests, thus generating higher airplay rotation which in turn yields an increase in potential audience numbers. This leads to people finding "…their way to the artist's online distribution network and…performances…they will [also] become much more likely to buy CDs and merch, and to tell their friends about the artist. This is often how careers are created" (Sinclair, 2010).

Admittedly, many other interdisciplinary elements, such as production and marketing, also play a decisive role in creating commercial success for any type of music. These are complex interrelated systems and will not necessarily be this project's main interest. Instead, the fundamental basics of song form and its importance in capturing the listener's attention, will be scrutinised and explored. As Farish (2010) elaborates - "…an effective song form…is critical. Structure gives a song coherence that it needs to garner and sustain a listener's attention…"

The 'Hook' as a Device

One of the more tried and true methods used by composers and songwriters to engage the listener's attention is the application of a "hook". A hook is usually the part or sections of a composition which a listener can easily recall and identify. It is a commercially viable device used to keep the interest and focus of the listener and serves as a point of memorable reference for the song (Braheny, 2006, p.93).

Kasha and Hirschhorn (as cited in Burns, 1987) specifies that a 'hook' should contain at least one of the following three features - "…a driving, danceable rhythm…a melody that stays in people's minds [and] a lyric that furthers the dramatic action, or defines a person or place." Burns then goes on to define fourteen classifications of 'hooks' within two major groups (Table 1). For this project, a specific focus on *melodic* hooks, as defined by Burns, will be the main research criteria.

TABLE 1

TEXTUAL ELEMENTS		NON-TEXTUAL ELEMENTS	
Lyrical Elements	Musical Elements	Performance Elements	Production Elements
meaning-based	*melody*	*instrumentation*	*sound effects*
sound-based	*rhythm*	*tempo*	*editing*
	harmony	*dynamics*	*mix*
		improvisation & accident	*channel balance*
			signal distortion

THE *MELODIC* "HOOK"

The Chorus 'Hook'

On of the most common places to locate a 'hook' in a song's structure is in its chorus. "The chorus is the bit in the song that you can't help but sing along with. It is the most important element in a hit single because it is the part that most people carry around with them in their head…" (Cauty & Drummond, 1988, p.33). The chorus will also usually contain the title of the song either in the first or last line of the stanza (Braheny, 2006, p.92). Its typically kept in the same melody and sung in the same lyrics in order to maximise its memorability and singability (Farsih, 2010).

Other parts of the song like the verse, middle eight (bridge), pre-chorus (lead-ins) and breakdowns may also contain some 'hook' elements but is usually designated second in importance and primarily serves to propel the song forward for the return of the chorus; "…verses usually concentrate on detail, the chorus can make a broader statement that bears more repetition" (Braheny, 2006, p.83).

The Power of the "Hook"

This repetitive nature of melodic hooks have been cited by many musicologists and neurologists as the leading cause for the phenomenon called 'earworms'; defined by Bartlett & Halpern (2011) as "persistent musical and verbal retrieval episodes" and by Beaman & Williams (2010) as "the experience of an inability to dislodge a song and prevent it from repeating itself in one's head." Author and leading professor in music related neurological disorders Oliver Sacks, observe that the main culprits for triggering such episodes are film, television and advertising theme music.

> "This is not coincidental, for such music is designed, in the terms of the music industry, to 'hook' the listener, to be 'catchy' or 'sticky,' to bore its way, like an earwig, into the ear or mind; hence the term 'earworms' – though one might be inclined to call them 'brainworms' instead." (Sacks, 2007, p.42)

This 'earworm' phenomena is most exploited by advertising and marketing agencies who have long since realised the cost-effectiveness of creating jingles from familiar catchy songs to sell their products. Popular classics are almost always certain to elicit strong feelings of nostalgia, familiarity and comfort and is the primary reason why most music publishing companies who have rights to these music have dedicated major parts of their business for such licensing deals. Lichtman (1998) notes, "Jingle usages of well known music result in immediate consumer recognition and retention. There, much less media time is required to establish a campaign".

Deconstructing the 'Hook'

Several in depth studies in melodic contours (Schmuckler, 2010), melodic perception (Temperley, 2008), contextual similarities (Bregman & Eerola, 2007) and tonal predictability (Berry, 2006) have attempted to find the relationship between melodic pitch intervals and its inherent 'hookiness'. A study by Mercer-Taylor of two songs, two and a half centuries apart, find a strong resemblance in its approach to creating a memorable melody. The first example is Claudin de Sermisy's "Au joly boys", published in 1530 and the second is the middle eight from Johnny Marks's "Holly Jolly Christmas" composed for the 1964 film Rudolph, the Red Nosed Reindeer:

> In both cases, we find a descending chain of interlocking melodic thirds-six in the first example, five (roughly) in the second-whose similarities in rhythmic and melodic detail hardly need teasing out. Each excerpt breaks from this chain into a cadential gesture characteristic of its century, though even these resemble one another in their step-wise ascents. (Mercer-Taylor, 1999)

Psychologist Lola Cuddy, ran simple experiments in 1982 to "analyze the perceptual and cognitive capabilities of the listener that allow him or her to hear and to appreciate the music." Tests were conducted to measure responses for variables such as melodic memorability, melodic similarity, melodic deviations as well as degrees of pleasantness and interestingness. These types of determinant experiments and data will be the foundational elements for this research project.

CONCLUSION

A basic qualitative measure for a piece of music's success is in its ability to persist in the consciousness of the listener. The benefits of such an accomplishment are explicably desired by every musician. A well strategised melodic 'hook', in terms of construction and placement can greatly enhance the memorability of a piece of music. Further research into the form and function of these 'hooks', identifying pitch classes, configurations, combinations, etc., will ultimately give composers and songwriters the capacity to recognise a song's potential for success. As Mercer-Taylor (1999) comments on qualifying his own research, "…for it is by finding the formula at work in a wide variety of contexts that we assemble an aggregate impression of its 'absolute catchiness,'…providing an exceptionally clear image of how the hooking process can operate?"

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