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Creating a Potentially Popular Hit Song

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CREATING A POTENTIALLY POPULAR HIT SONG

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
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Thesis Summary

From as far back as I can remember I have always loved music. Not just listening to it but also creating it. I had my first piano lesson at the age of 4, my first violin at 6 years old, my dad's guitar in my hand at 13, and apparently I sang since I was able to form sounds. My dream as a child was to be a famous singer, but I never truly pursued it. As I grew older, I acquired new dreams, but deep down, I have never stopped wanting to be a singer. I have fulfilled part of this dream by being able to sing in The Cocktails all female a cappella group at USC, but I wanted to take another step by writing my own music.

In my thesis project, my main objective was to write my own "potentially popular hit song." This was to be achieved by listening to the number 1 chart topping songs between January 2013 and January 2014 to find commonalities among them. Such commonalities include lyric topics, instruments used, types of melodies, bass lines, drumbeats, song structure, genre, etc. From the commonalities found, I intended to create a song that has the potential to be liked by the masses, including researching articles that are devoted to pop song writing and taking into consideration their tips/opinions and possibly incorporate them into my song.

I initially had little knowledge on the technique of song writing. All I knew was that people like songs that are catchy and that they can easily relate to. I wanted to create a masterpiece that not only means a lot to me but also can mean something to many people. Throughout the process of writing my song titled "*Your Mind*," what was intended to be a potentially popular hit song turned to become a more personal song without the intent of making it to the Billboard charts. I decided that I wanted to forgo

trying to copy pop songs and instead write my own music that represented me. I wanted to create music that I wanted to create.

The process of my song writing and recording journey was a very intimate one. It included countless hours of lyric writing and music composing, only to erase what I had to start all over because I was not satisfied with my product. But overall, I would say that I am happy with “*Your Mind*” because I feel it really represents me as a person.

Introduction

Personally, I do not have a favorite genre of music. I feel that what's more important to me is that I enjoy the music that I listen to, in that I really feel the beat of the music or that I connect to the music on a deeper level. Regardless, genre is not really a huge factor. Like most people, I enjoy listening to the Top 40 Hits on the radio, the initial inspiration for my thesis project. Though as we have all experience, after overplaying them, some songs can become annoying. But though there are songs of many genres that become popular, there is most likely a reason that the songs that become popular are liked by so many. I have an acquaintance, who is actually a songwriter for famous record labels, and he once told me, "Popular songs aren't original. You basically take ideas from other songs that are popular and you change it to be your own." While I feel like this is very true, I want to see if I can create a product from this theory.

From the Top 40 on the radio, I will listen to the number 1 chart topping songs between January 2013 and January 2014:

1. Locked Out of Heaven – Bruno Mars
2. Thrift Shop – Macklemore ft. Ryan Lewis
3. When I Was Your Man – Bruno Mars
4. Just Give Me A Reason – Pink ft. Nate Ruess
5. Can't Hold Us – Macklemore ft. Ryan Lewis & Ray Dalton
6. Blurred Lines – Robin Thicke ft. T.I.
7. Roar – Katy Perry
8. Wrecking Ball – Miley Cyrus
9. Royals – Lorde
10. The Monster – Eminem ft. Rihanna
11. Timber – Pitbull ft. Kesha
12. Dark Horse – Katy Perry ft. Juicy J

There are twelve songs that reached the number one spot. By analyzing and comparing the songs, I will try to find commonalities within the music and incorporate them in to my song. But I will first need research the techniques of pop song writing because I currently have no knowledge of the process.

General Song Writing

Writing a song is a very intricate and creative process that involves many different aspects that varies from artist to artist. There is not a definitive formula that has been found to work 100% for any song, though there are a few general techniques that many pop song writers suggests and incorporate into writing their own music. The process of creating a song is a very personal journey and often reflects a moment, situation, emotion, or thought in the writer's life. The two components of song writing consist of lyrics, the words in a song, and melody, the musical tune of a song. Some writers begin by creating lyrics and then adding a melody that fits the mood of the words. Others are able to more easily compose a catchy melody line and then add lyrics that fit like a puzzle piece (1).

Lyrics in a pop song do not always make sense and essentially do not have to. The thought does not have to be cohesive from line to line, which is often in order to fit the lyrics into a melody line. There is a central topic to a song, often represented by the song title, but the lyrics often create an indirect story around the title. Rhyming is also not an essential make-it-or-break-it factor for a hit song, but it does help in allowing people to more easily remember the words to a song. Strategic and non-corny rhyming can also help a song to seem catchier to a listener.

The basic structure of a pop song usually incorporates an introduction/intro, multiple verses, a chorus, a bridge, and an exposition/outro. The intro can vary in length and is often completely instrumental, though some songs exhibit an artist speaking a few words or rapping a small portion. Verses are the components of a song where the most story telling occurs. The melody of all the verses virtually remains the same while the

words are usually different. The number of verses in a song generally ranges from one verse being repeated multiple times to a maximum of four different verses. Some songs do exhibit more than four verses, but it is quite rare in pop music. Some songs contain a section called the pre-chorus. It is a small section of the song, often a transition between a verse and a chorus. The chorus, also referred to as a refrain, is known the “catchiest part” of a pop song that most people remember. The words in the choruses usually remain the same throughout the entire song because the lyrics in this section usually hold the “point” of the song. The title of the song is most often derived from the chorus portion. The bridge is the part of a song that sounds different from anything else heard where the melody and lyrics are both different. This is often the part of the song that builds up to the final “loud” chorus and incorporates a moving line. This moving line in pop songs is either created by the beginning of a bridge being quieter than any other portion of the song and then crescendo-ing into the final chorus, or by having the words and melody being sung at a slower tempo than the rest of the song, gradually picking up speed. The outro is the end of the song that is often solely instrumental. It is not completely necessary in all songs, seeing that many pop songs that end abruptly are also very popular. These five components are the most common sections in a pop song (2).

The melodic structure of a song often exhibits the quietest and lowest notes in the verses and the loudest and highest notes in the chorus. This is to create dimension within a song so that it is not boring but instead has directionality. The most memorable hit songs often have verses that lead up to a climactic chorus (2). A well-known tried-and-true formula for pop songs is the ABACB(B) formula. In this case, A symbolizes a verse, B symbolizes a chorus, and C symbolizes the bridge. Another popular formula is

CABCADB, where A symbolizes a verse, B symbolizes a pre-chorus, C symbolizes a chorus, and D symbolizes the bridge. There are many other popular “formulas” for pop songs that have proven to be successful at creating top hit records apart from these two, but these two structures exhibit directionally in the music that is wanted by listeners (3).

Listening to other popular songs and emulating their style is also a technique used by pop songwriters. One example is taking a successfully popular melody and changing the key of the song, the rhythm of some of the notes, and the actual pitch of a few notes, and a completely new song is created. New lyrics and instrumental background are all that’s left to fill a “new pop song.” It is also said that the simpler the instrumentals, the more effective and catchier sounding the song will find itself turn out to be (4).

Song writing in general is a very non-specific process that is different for every songwriter. Using these techniques may work for some while other successful songwriters choose to do their own thing. These are just some of the more general and most widely used pop song writing techniques.

Modification

When listening to the list of number 1 chart topping songs, two things really caught my attention. First was that the songs are not very similar in terms of genre, lyric topic, and instrumentation. Six of the songs are actually collaborations, where the main artist of a song invites a guest artist to be featured in their song, in which rap is also incorporated. The songs are also from a wide variety of genres, supporting the idea that there really is no tried and true formula for a top hit song. Some songs are more upbeat while a couple songs are slower. In terms of lyric topic, the focuses are all different, though a majority of the songs reference topics of love. This does show to support the pop songwriting technique that there really is no specific formula to create a top chart song.

Secondly, I came to the overwhelming realization that I personally wanted to write a song based on my own feelings and musical preferences rather than having to mimic another songwriter's style. I came to this conclusion after listening to the top songs and realizing that even though they reached number one on the music charts, I didn't personally like all of the songs. Each song is admittedly catchy in its own way, but I realized that I did not want to have to copy another artist's style. I had initially decided to find commonalities within the songs and include some of them into my own music, but when writing my song, I decided to forgo this because I was not happy with the products I created by directly trying to emulate the twelve top songs. I did not enjoy being forced to incorporate elements that I did not like into a song that I was creating.

Therefore, in the end, I chose to forgo trying to write a top hit song and instead decided to write a song about what I wanted to write. Though my formula for song

writing may be completely wrong, I am deciding that I want to follow my own intuition and go with my own flow. It is interesting to point out that I did seem to end up using certain techniques that were used by the top songs, though, this is more likely due to me following some of the “rules” of pop song writing rather than trying to imitate the top songs.

Writing Process of “Your Mind”

Writing my song, “*Your Mind*,” has been very personal experience where I believe I have ended up writing more of the type of music I like to listen to rather than a “potentially popular hit song.” I incorporated suggestions by pop songwriters but also disregarded many of their suggestions because I wanted to create a piece that reflected a part of me.

My writing experience was filled with a mixture between lyric writing and melody composing. I initially came up with melody for the verses while driving in my car listening to the song “Red Lights” by Tiesto. While if you listen to that song and compare it to my song, there are there really are no distinguishable similarities between the two. From that point, I sporadically came up with single lines of lyrics that I jotted down, most of which I did not use. The bass line of the song and the bridge came to life at the same time one day when I was fiddling with beat-boxing, which is vocal percussion using the mouth. Next came the melody for the chorus and then pre-chorus while also being inspired to write lyrics for the bridge. I then wrote the initial percussion line, lyrics for the first two versus, filler instrumentals, and then finally lyrics for the chorus. Within this process, I wrote a lot of lyrics and a lot of melody lines that I erased because I didn’t like them.

The main inspiration for the lyrics to “*Your Mind*” is from my own thoughts in my head on the general outlook of other people’s thoughts. I wanted the lyrics of the song to mean something to me, and at this point in my life, this topic has created the greatest impression on me. The main point of my song was to emphasize the power of our thoughts and how we can use them to be free of other people’s thoughts. How no one

controls the thoughts in our minds except ourselves. I feel that living in our generation, cyberspace through the Internet or via text messaging has truly become an alternate reality for so many people. And because of that, people have lost the skills for face-to-face communication where you don't have time to think for 5-10 minutes about what you want to say. Instead, having to be able to think on your feet and speak what is on your mind has become less common and more of a struggle for many people. But, with the reality of cyberspace and the instant connection to millions of people online that would not be possible in "real life," people have lost confidence in their selves to say what they want to say because they are so afraid of what other people might think. So the lyrics to "*Your Mind*" are about how our own thoughts can and should be empowering. Even if the whole world is against us, we can still believe in ourselves, and with the thoughts in our minds, we have the power to essentially do and accomplish anything. I believe that this idea is something that everyone should realize and utilize starting now, in the present. We don't have to live in a society that forces us to conform and have to believe in the thoughts of others. We have our individual minds to think our own thoughts and choose who we want to be. The lyrics can be found in the appendix.

I tried to keep the instrumental lines fairly simple yet memorable. I wanted to create simple yet moving lines in the bass and drum that held a lot of force, grounding the song. I love the feeling of triplets, which I used only in the bass and drums, because I feel that it creates a very laid-back tone for the song, a heavier feeling where you can "sit" on the song. For filler instruments, I envisioned some type of brass instrument, possibly a horn, playing tied whole notes and a pad synthesizer playing the repetitive moving notes. It is not until the last chorus where I will admit it starts to sound a bit hectic. But this was

intentional in order to drive my point in the lyrics about the urgency of “now” and how our thoughts can push us to a more forward thinking society. I incorporated a lot of repeating melodic lines, which was suggested by pop songwriters. To be completely honest, the song “E.T.” sung by Katy Perry greatly inspired my song writing, so there may be discrete similarities that can be noted between the two songs. The music score was created using the program Finale NotePad 2012, which allowed me to compose the music easily on a computer.

My song structure can be written out as $AABC_1AC_2BDC_2$, where A represents a verse, B represents the pre-chorus, C_1 represents half of the chorus, C_2 represents an entire chorus, and D represents the bridge. This structure is different from most all of the pop song structures, but lyrically and musically, I feel that it makes sense in the direction the song goes. There is also only a very short intro that features the bass and drums and there is no outro because the song ends right after the last word in the final chorus. I decide to create a short intro and a nonexistent outro simply because I wanted to end the song rather abruptly to symbolize how things will end unexpectedly, so people should not wait to take action.

Writing “*Your Mind*” was a constant battle within myself because it was hard for me to be completely satisfied with my work. As this is my first time writing a song, this lack of experience was at many times very frustrating. I could hear and see a picture of what I wanted to create in my head, but it was much harder to transfer these ideas onto paper. And also recording the music that I wrote proved to be a challenge because I was constantly changing my song.

Recording “Your Mind”

I used the free recording program “GarageBand” that came with my laptop to record all the parts of “*Your Mind*.” Recording turned out to be a much more tedious process than I had expected it to be, seeing as it took me almost 100 hours before the final product was completed. I have recorded YouTube covers using GarageBand before, but I usually only recorded my vocals or a live instrument. This was my first time ever creating a “beat” on GarageBand, and by having a very limited knowledge on recording and mastering, I would say it was quite a challenge.

In terms of electronic instruments, I was limited to the sounds the recording program provided me, but the sounds I had envisioned were either all available or there were other instruments very similar to what I had intended. The brass, synthesizer, and drum sounds were spot on. The bass turned out to be more electronic with a heavier distortion than I had intentionally wanted, but I actually ended up loving the heavier, crunchy sound after I recorded all the instrument parts. I was able to record all the instruments using an onscreen Musical Typing Keyboard that correlated certain typing keys to specific musical notes on any selected instrument displayed on a musical keyboard on the laptop screen. Having a solid background in piano definitely made the recording process of the instruments easier.

Recording my vocals was definitely the most frustrating part of the entire process. As many have said, “You are your worst critic,” and I would say I am a testament of this. I don’t know the exact number, but I would guess that I recorded and deleted more tracks of me singing than the number of people in the South Carolina’s Honors College. I knew

I would never completely be satisfied and in love with my song, but I wanted to like it at least somewhat, so I did not want to stop recording until I was happy with my product.

Something interesting to note is that as I was recording, I changed a lot of the song in general. The most noticeable parts are the melody lines, especially in the vocals. I found it interesting how time could change my opinion about my song. When I initially finished writing the melody, about a month before recording, I was reasonably happy with it. But when I was recording, I found that I basically despised most of it and changed a lot, basically all, of the notes around. The only melody line that remained entirely the same was the bridge. I even deleted parts of my actual song structure, so what was initially $AABC_1AC_2BDC_2$ changed to become $AABC_1AC_2DC_2$, where I deleted the second pre-chorus (B).

This constant changing might relate to me not liking any of the top songs anymore. I know that at one point I liked all of the songs to an extent, but as I listened to them more, I began to dislike them over time. As I kept writing, I found that I was no longer happy with what I had written a month prior and felt the urge to change it. It will be interesting to see if I will “like” my song within one-month time of recording it!

Audience Response

I asked approximately 30 people to listen to my song and give me feedback by completing an anonymous five-question survey online through SurveyMonkey Inc. It was anonymous so that people could answer truthfully without being afraid of me knowing who said what.

Overall, there was a consensus that people liked my song, where 29 out of the 30 people responded to the first question in the survey positively. The person who said that they did not like it said it was due to the genre of music. Most of the respondents said that my song did not sound like any other song that they heard before. This was very flattering to me, seeing as they are affirming that this is a new creative song. Influences from Katy Perry, Lorde, and Ellie Goulding were mentioned, which I would have to agree with, especially in terms of instrumentalization. In general, they said that they believed other people would like my song due to the lyrics and the atmosphere of the song, which they said was very laid back and smooth. There was also a majority vote that agreed that my song fit into a more electronic genre, especially because of the beat that I wrote.

I was pleasantly surprised when people liked my song. It was a very rewarding feeling and a testament that all the effort I put in to writing a song that I wanted to write that others could relate to was indeed successful. It needs to be noted, though, that the results of this survey is definitely biased because the people who filled it out were my friends on Facebook. The survey questions can be found in the appendix.

Conclusion

Creating this thesis project has been some of the most challenging and rewarding times in my college career. There were times of sheer frustration where I would spend hours writing lyrics or creating chords only to listen to it and scrap the entire product. I also had many instances of writer's block and could not think of anything, staring at a blank page for hours. But there were also moments where I was utterly inspired and completely excited with what I had created. These times will remain with me.

This is the first song that I have ever written and recorded completely. To be completely honest, I am still not 100% in love with my product, but I would say that is just a part of my character. I always believe I can do better or make something better. I am never truly satisfied with myself or with what I do. But I am still very proud of "*Your Mind*" and all the hard work I put in to it and the challenge I put myself up to. I definitely respect songwriters and their talent for creating music loved by many people. I have come to realize that it is an incredibly time consuming, thought provoking, and boundary pushing task.

My thoughts on my song "*Your Mind*" is that it is definitely not a potentially popular hit song. This is because I do not believe that it is catchy enough to be liked by the majority of the people listening to the Billboard charts. I would personally categorize it as more of an alternative synthpop song because while I use completely synthesized instrumental, I feel that the underlying tones of my song are actually still considered pop. The sound itself is heavily electronic, but as many of the respondents to my questionnaire mentioned, the tone in which I sing my song is very ambient in comparison, but the contrast in the two actually works together quite harmoniously.

What I would do differently next time is invest in a better recording program and have someone knowledgeable about recording songs to teach me how to use it. I definitely feel that my lack of recording knowledge and skills were a limitation in this process. I basically taught myself how to record by watching various YouTube videos and reading online articles focused on recording and mastering tips. But I do not regret anything because I gained so much knowledge from first hand experience.

Overall, I would say that I enjoyed the process of creating and writing all the aspects of this thesis project. This was a new experience for me that I am fortunate to be able to say I have accomplished. I think that the fact that I changed the intent of my thesis is greatly reflected in the words of my song. I was at first conforming to what people wanted by trying to create a potentially popular hit song, but in the end, I was not happy with that and instead created what I wanted to create. It is funny how I believed one thing, yet I was trying to do opposite, only to end up having to follow what I believed because that is what I wanted deep down. It is hard to practice what you preach. But in the end, the effort will be worth it.

Now, will I ever write another song? Maybe not in the immediate future, but I definitely want to challenge myself again on day to create an even better masterpiece.

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Appendix

“Your Mind” Lyrics

Verse 1

Like a particle in the atmosphere
We seem to be so inconsequential
Or so that’s what we’re made to feel

Verse 2

“Never good enough” resounding in our heads
Aim to attain the point of perfection
Or so that’s what we’re made to think

Pre-Chorus

How can the world be so misguided to turn away and feign
Innocence is there no one to know the truth

Chorus 1

The power’s in our thoughts, command or follow, beat your own drum, choose yourself
Power’s in your mind

Verse 3

Don’t ever care, what other’s judge of you
Do what you can, be who you wanna be
Or so that’s what you can decide

Chorus 2

The power’s in our thoughts, command or follow, beat your own drum, choose yourself
The power’s in our thoughts, command or follow, beat your own drum, choose yourself
Power’s in your mind

Bridge

I know this is the time, to take a stand and rise, above the narrow minds
I know this is the time, create this path of mine, and in my mind
I know, I know, I know, I know, I know

Chorus 2

The power’s in our thoughts, command or follow, beat your own drum, choose yourself
The power’s in our thoughts, command or follow, beat your own drum, choose yourself
Power’s in your mind

Senior Thesis Questionnaire

1. Do you like this song? Please explain why or why not.
2. Does this sound like another song you have heard before? If so, please write down which song(s):
3. Do you think other people will like this song? Why or why not?
4. Which genre do you think this song fits into?
5. Please write down any other thoughts/opinions you have of this song (regarding lyrics, instrumentation, melody, your feelings, etc.):