

Summer Hit (Me Baby One More Time)

Thaddeus Dieken

If you've ever wondered why some songs are so darn catchy or what causes certain tunes to soar to popularity while others remain in a state of anonymity, you're not alone. In this article, Thaddeus Dieken lets his curiosity about this very topic lead him on an exploration of the Number One hit singles of five recent summers. Along the way, he uses key music theory concepts to help him understand what makes some songs so likable.

Introduction

If I were to ask you to write me something, what would you do? Would you write an e-mail? A letter? Maybe even an essay? A large portion of people think that writing only applies to the forms of expression we learn about in our English classes. Contrary to this popular belief, writing does not have to be black and white; it can be colorful. Writing can take you on an intense journey without containing any words. One of these (mostly) non-alphabetic forms of composition is music, and for this writing research project, I am attempting to understand how to write successful music, specifically the “summer hit.”

Every summer there is that one song that we just can't seem to get enough of. No matter how hard we try to convince ourselves otherwise, it really is catchy. Like, *really* catchy. But what is it about a pop song that causes it to become so successful? As you may already know, “pop” music has received a lot of flack in the past decade or two for being “too predictable” and “very formulaic.” Rest assured, this is not going to be another interminable, pretentious rant about modern-day music. However, as a musician, I often find myself pondering the writing process of these “chart topping” singles, and what, exactly, launched

them to unprecedented levels of popularity. This is why I decided to take it upon myself to investigate what makes a song capable of taking the world by storm (even if it is for just a few months). As with many other things in the world, there is science and theory behind how pop songs work. There are reasons that a song sounds nice, and there are reasons that a song does not sound nice. My goal, by the end of my research, is to obtain an understanding of the factors that go into the composition format that is the “summer hit.”

I selected the summertime single because music is diverse, and I needed to have a smaller pool of options to select from. It would be impossible to compare Benjamin Britten’s “War Requiem” to “Ridin’” by Chamillionaire. Not only are these two songs in totally different genres, but they also vary tremendously in overall popularity. To ensure accurate results, the songs I chose to analyze had to be of the same genre. I then decided pop music would be the ideal genre for my study, as it is appreciated by so many people. However, it would be too easy to simply select five pop songs that sound similar and point out all the traits they have in common. My research would be more conclusive if I chose the songs based off of a factor that is something other than my own preference, allowing for unbiased results. The factors that went into my selection process would be popularity, season, and year released. After deciding on these factors, I visited the *Billboard Magazine* website and found an article titled “Summer Songs 1985–2013.” Thanks to this resource, I was able to choose the five ideal tunes. At the time I conducted my research, these were the No. 1 hits for the past five summers:

2013: “Blurred Lines” – Robin Thicke ft. T.I. & Pharrell

2012: “Call Me Maybe” – Carly Rae Jepsen

2011: “Party Rock Anthem” – LMFAO ft. Lauren Bennett and GoonRock

2010: “California Gurls” – Katy Perry ft. Snoop Dogg

2009: “I Gotta Feeling” – The Black Eyed Peas

Music Theory Explanation

I feel that I should warn you that I am an undergraduate music major, and throughout my analysis I use various skills that I have acquired from my music theory classes. Over the course of my research, I analyzed each song for its:

- Song structure (e.g. AABA, etc.)
- Major vs. minor key signatures
- Chord progressions

Without further ado, let’s dive into a brief, but hopefully informative, music theory lesson.

Song Structure

If you have experience in poetry, song structure may be something that you are familiar with. Essentially, music is all about repetition. Musicians will write a section of the song that will likely be repeated later on (rhythms, melodies, lyrics, or all of the above). We then take these individual repeating sections of a song, assign them a letter, and then put the letters in chronological order of when they appear in a song. So, let's say a song has a verse, followed by a chorus, followed by a verse, followed by a chorus. We would assign the verse a letter value of "A," and the chorus a letter value of "B," so the song's final structural label would be ABAB. Sounds pretty straightforward, right? It really is; however, it does get a little bit more complicated than that. The vast majority of songs nowadays contain a bridge, which is a unique section of the song, typically appearing before the last chorus. Say we have a verse, followed by a chorus, followed by a verse, followed by a chorus, followed by a bridge, followed by one final chorus. If we were to write it out, it would look something like ABABCB. This song structure is incredibly popular in modern music; in fact, I find it nearly impossible to think of any song on the radio that does not follow this pattern.

Major vs. Minor Key Signatures

“♪ Do, a deer, a female deer. Re, a drop of golden sun. Mi, a name I call myself . . . ♪” It is probably safe to say most of us are at least vaguely familiar with the classic *Sound of Music* song, “Do-Re-Mi.” But did you know that when you sing this song, you are actually singing a major scale? The major scale consists of seven repeating values. These values are: do, re, mi, fa, so, la, and ti (then the cycle repeats). If you have access to a piano, you can actually play a major scale very easily. Or you can hear a C major scale being played at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAAUcj7nngI>.

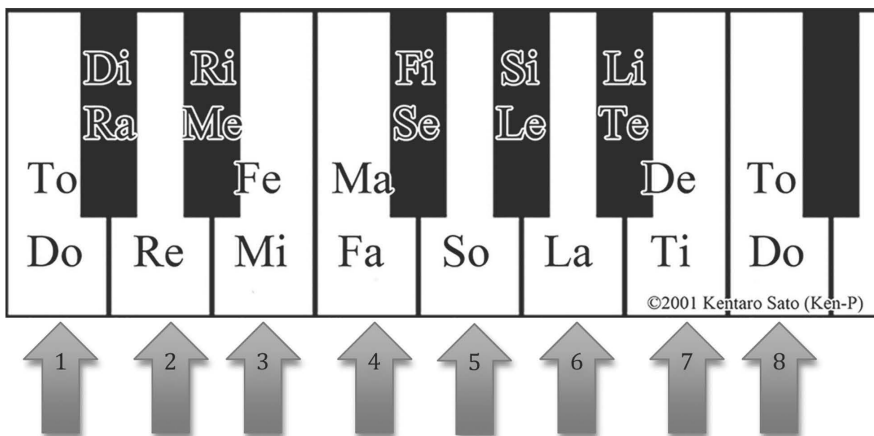


Figure 1: This C major scale is a modification of a Solfège syllable system for scales created by Kentaro Sato, available at www.wisemanproject.com/education-e-solfège.html. I added the arrows to the image to make it clear how the C major scale is played.

Go up to the piano and, starting on the note with an arrow labeled “1” in Figure 1, play all the white keys in the numerical order indicated. Congratulations! You have now played a C major scale. The reason it is called ‘C major’ is due to the fact that your first note (‘do’) has the pitch value of C. Please note that I chose the key of C for this demonstration because it is considered one of the easiest to play (because it is all white keys; not every key is this way).

Now that I have explained major keys, it is time to flip the page and explain minor key signatures. Minor is a very similar concept, except the third, sixth, and seventh notes of the scale are lowered by one-half step (there are other variations of minor, but for time’s sake I’m only explaining this one).

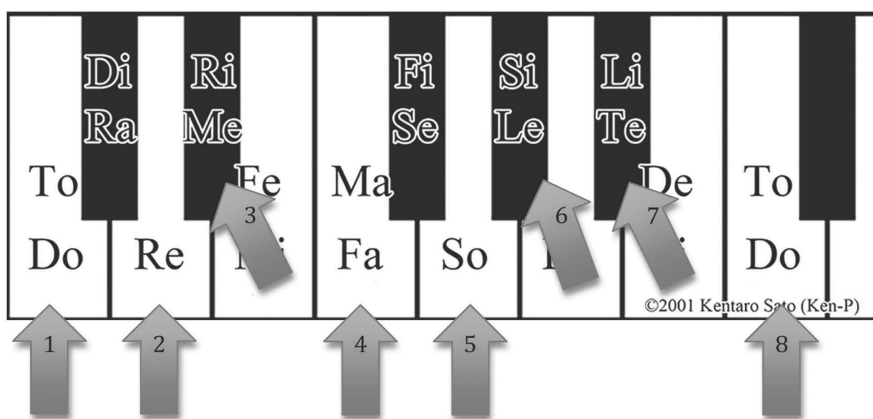


Figure 2: This C major scale is a modification of a Solfège syllable system for scales created by Kentaro Sato, available at www.wisemanproject.com/education-e-solfège.html. I added the arrows to the image to make it clear how the minor scale is played.

After playing this (Figure 2), you might notice that it sounds like a sad, dark, maybe even more “evil” version of what you played before. This is the cool thing about minor key signatures; they sound so unique. Minor keys are often used to narrate dark, gloomy times, which is why we associate them with sounding “sad.” This does not mean that every song that uses a minor key is supposed to be sad. Some can be happy; it is just a listening association people often make. Actually, minor keys are very popular in country, rock, and blues songs, though this isn’t to say they aren’t used in pop music as well; Lady Gaga and Adele use minor key signatures for a huge portion of their songs (which also explains why their songs sound so abstract and different than most pop songs).

Chord Progressions

Now that we have established a basic knowledge of key signatures, it’s time to move on to our last music theory lesson, chord progressions. In their book

The Musician's Guide to Theory and Analysis, Jane Piper Clendinning and Elizabeth West Marvin define a chord as “a group of pitches sounded together” (A55). What they are saying is that notes have a certain sound when played together, and a chord usually contains three or more notes that produce a certain overall sound. The note that a chord is based off is referred to as a “root.” The reason we refer to this chord as a “C major chord” is because the chord is built off of C.

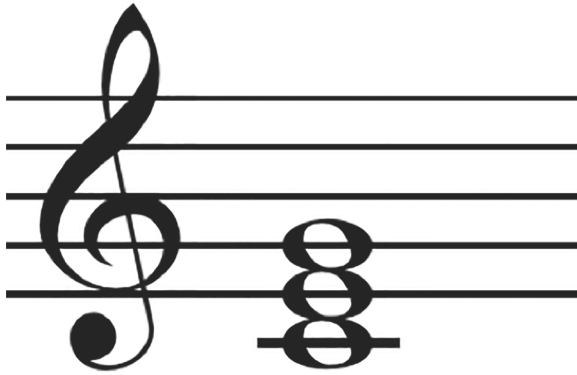


Figure 3: The C major cord contains the notes C, E, and G. Image created by Hyacinth available at www.commons.wikimedia.org.

Most musicians tend to play multiple chords throughout a song. Typically, these chords come in a sequence that is known as a “chord progression.” Chord progressions are the backbone of writing music, and they are crucial to know when you are analyzing music. When analyzing chord progressions, we give each chord a Roman numeral value based off of where its root appears in a key. Say we have a song in C major, and in this song we notice a G chord; we refer to this chord as a V chord because G is the fifth note in a C major scale (Figure 4).

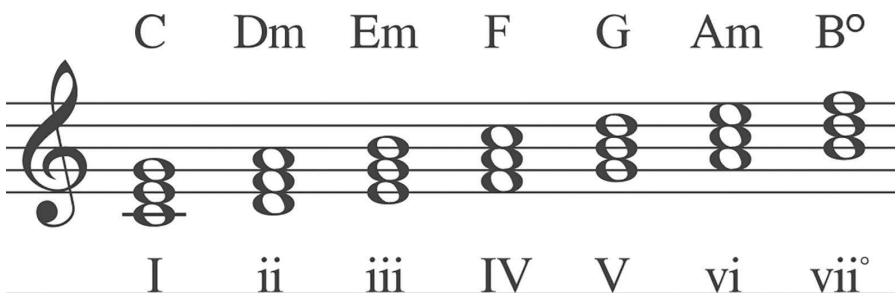


Figure 4: The C major chord progression with Roman numeral notation and scale, from “All You Need Is Love (And Perseverance)” (Fast), available at <http://writ330.finearts.uvic.ca/group4/2013/02/18/all-you-need-is-love-and-perseverance/>.

How about a demonstration? Say you play a song written in C major, and in this song you play a C chord, followed by an F chord, then a G chord,

and finally an A (minor) chord; we would analyze this as a I–IV–V–vi chord progression. (FYI: The Roman numeral for six is lowercase because it is a minor chord.) This progression is important because there are a large number of songs within the last century that contain this exact chord progression (e.g. “Let It Be” by The Beatles, “Don’t Stop Believing” by Journey, and “Paparazzi” by Lady Gaga all use a I–V–vi–IV progression).

This essentially wraps up our crash course in music theory. Now let’s take these concepts and apply them to the repertoire of songs we will be analyzing.

Hypothesis

Prior to any form of research or investigation, it can be important to create some embodiment of a hypothesis. Having selected my five songs, I instantly identified each of them as your standard, super-upbeat, repetitive pop song, easily capable of being stuck in your cranium for weeks at a time. Because of this, my hypotheses revolved around generalizations relating to pop music.

First off, the fact that I cannot remember the last time I heard a popular song play without a verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus format led me to automatically assume that each of these songs would have ABABCB song structure.

Next, I went out on a limb and said that all of these songs would be in a major key signature. Major keys are often associated with a feeling of happiness and joy when being listened to, and as far as I know, “Call Me Maybe” by Carly Rae Jepsen definitely does not give off any feeling of despair. This isn’t to say that the key has to be major for it to be happy; it is plausible for a minor key to sound happy. However, I did not think it was likely that any of these five songs would be in a minor key.

For my song structure hypothesis, I referenced Axis of Awesome’s very popular YouTube video, “4 Chords.” If you have not had the pleasure of watching this video, I would highly recommend it. They are an Australian comedic music group that demonstrates that a huge portion of modern-day songs all use the same chord progression of I–V–vi–IV. Now, when I say a huge portion, I mean a HUGE portion. In their video, this group goes through dozens of popular songs, transitioning seamlessly from one to the next due to the fact that they all use the same chords. (There are some live performances from this group, in which they use fifty or more songs.) Anyway, what I am attempting to say is that I predicted that all of these songs would have very standard and simple chord progressions, and I also predicted that at least one of these five songs would follow the I–V–vi–IV pattern.

I just want to make one thing clear: all of these were very rough guesses. I, by no means, full-heartedly believed that all of these predictions would be true.

Results & Analysis

To be honest, the analysis of each of these songs proved to be more time consuming than I initially had hoped. Altogether, I probably spent somewhere around eight hours finding sheet music on free sheet music sites, analyzing the chords, reading the lyrics, and writing summaries of my findings (see Figure 5 for an example). If you thought it was unbearable having to listen to some of these songs on the radio once or twice a day, imagine listening to them on repeat for an hour (I had “Call Me Maybe” stuck in my head for at least two days afterward).



Figure 5: “Call Me Maybe” analysis.
Personal photo by Thaddeus Dieken.

Chord Progressions

After my research concluded, I was relieved to find that not all of my hypotheses were complete rubbish. Though I was not perfect in my predictions, I found that I was spot-on when predicting that these songs would follow simple chord progressions. In fact, Robin Thicke’s “Blurred Lines” consists of two chords (I–V). Though the simplicity of this chart-topping single made me laugh, there is a lot to be said about how incredible it is that somebody was able to make two chords sound so catchy. I was also pleased to find that my hypothesis “at least one of these five songs will follow a I–V–vi–IV chord progression” was true. Interestingly enough, the song containing this progression is none other than “Call Me Maybe” by Carly Rae Jepsen. The remaining songs contained variations of a standard I–IV–V progression.

Major vs. Minor Key Signatures

Unfortunately, my luck had worn thin, for not all of these songs were in major keys like I had initially predicted. I was surprised to find that LMFAO’s “Party Rock Anthem” was written in F minor. Granted, this does make some sense, as it has a techno feel to it, rather than a cliché, bright, “poppy” sound. Nevertheless, it does help illustrate my previous point that not all songs written in minor have to be sad; it just sounds sad when played in the context of a scale.

Song Structure

Every song I analyzed followed the standard ABABCBA song structure. The interesting thing was the variation of what the “bridge” was in each of the

songs. For example, in “Call Me Maybe” and “I Gotta Feeling,” the bridge was the one part of the song where the singer(s) simply sang a different melody than the rest of the song. However, in “Blurred Lines” and “Teenage Dream,” the bridge was the section in which the featured rap artist spit a few lines. The most interesting bridge, in my opinion, was in “Party Rock Anthem,” because it did not even have any words; it was simply a section right before the final chorus that contained a lengthy, catchy techno beat. So, even though each of these songs followed the exact same overall structure, they each had their own means of individualization. This means that even though my blunt hypothesis was correct, it is not nearly as poor of a reflection on the creativity of modern-day music writing as one might think.

Lyrics

The final piece of the puzzle that is writing a summer hit is lyrics. The lyrics of a song can sound ridiculous when they are being read or recited rather than sung. In my analysis, I found that every one of these songs used very simple, repetitive phrases. Take the Black Eyed Peas ballad, for example. They repeated the line “I gotta feelin’ that tonight’s gonna be a good night,” for a fairly large portion of the song. Another example would be Carly Rae Jepsen’s song that, again, contains no variation of lyrics in its choruses. You are free to feel however you want about this, but before you begin to accuse the writers of being dim-witted, there is actually a very intelligent reason behind this. Actually, there is a very intelligent reason behind why everything about these songs is simple.

The Genius Behind Simplification

Now I had my results, and, to be honest, I was really disappointed in modern-day music. I know this sounds pretentious, but I was really hoping to discover some hidden aspect of popular music that proves the stereotypes wrong. I began asking myself, “Why is this so well liked by such a large portion of people if it is so simple?” Then it hit me. *That’s the point.* If you think about it, pop is the musical equivalent of vanilla ice cream. It’s not usually anyone’s favorite, but almost everybody will still enjoy eating it. The same concept applies to this genre of music; it’s about the overall likeability, not the substance.

Sure, there is plenty of music that is unique, but that isn’t the point of a summer hit. In order to create a song capable of being the soundtrack for an entire season, it has to be liked by (almost) everybody, which means that the true formula for composing a summer jam is simplicity. Simplicity in music means containing as few chords as possible, being as short as possible, and being easy to relate to.

Sit and ponder all of the biggest summer hits. Have they ever been about something incredibly specific? No! By ensuring that the lyrics are as generic as possible, writers are able to appeal to a broader audience, possibly even creating a form of “call and response” between the performer and his or her audience. Not to mention that you can tell they were written with the summer season in mind. (It’s not like “California Gurls” was going to be popular in the winter, after all.) All of these songs are either about a fun party scene or a love interest, which, in the summer, are both very popular agendas. If the artist were to pour his or her heart out about something incredibly specific, a lot of people would not be able to relate to the song, which is crucial to sales.

Final Thoughts

At the end of the day, you have two choices. You can either write music because you love it, or you can write music because you love money. Sure, a lot of pretentious music listeners may ridicule you for writing for a paycheck, but if you want to make a living in music, you’ll have to accept the criticism (and the big fat check). There is nothing wrong with either choice, but if you want to be forever immortalized as the voice of a summer, just remember: simplicity is key.

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Thaddeus Dieken is currently a sophomore at Illinois State University majoring in Choral Music Education. This is not only his first time submitting an article to the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, but it is also his first time writing an essay in college. When he graduates college he hopes to obtain a position as a high school-level chorus teacher. In his free time, Thaddeus likes to find new music, hang with friends, and watch an absurd amount of TV shows/movies on Netflix.