

Obviously, classic HITS span an enormous variety of sounds and styles, arranging, and production techniques—from the minimalist “What’s Love Got to Do With It” and “Every Breath You Take” to the lavish orchestrations of “Walk On By” or “Saving All My Love for You.” Within any group of hits, we will find few specific techniques—musical or recording—in common. To discover real commonalities, we must dig deeper to uncover the emotional basis of popular music and the ways in which it communicates messages to a broad audience. Beyond this, there are a few commonly observed conventions, particularly with song form and lyrics, and an unspoken set of dramatic questions that most great records answer, either directly or indirectly, to connect the artist and audience.

Toolkits for Enjoyment, Understanding, and Vivisection

We all know the purpose of a teddy bear or security blanket. These childhood companions serve the same purpose as Greek worry beads, a favorite pair of slippers, or a lucky necktie: they comfort us when we feel insecure, support us when we feel vulnerable, and prevent us from “losing it” emotionally in times of personal stress.

On a physical level, a warm shower before going to bed forces our internal thermostat to cool us off and helps put us to sleep. So does a cup of warm milk or herbal tea. Conversely, a cold shower shocks us and tells the body to warm up and get going. Two cups of coffee—especially with sugar—kick our brain into action in the morning, give us a shot of energy, and keep the plumbing “regular.” Onions and garlic allegedly stimulate the libido; alcohol relaxes taboos and makes us somewhat tired. We use drugs, prescription and recreational, solely for the effect they have on our bodies or minds.

Once we know how things affect us individually (the same thing may affect two people quite differently), we use them like tools to control our mental and physical states. In general, we have two possible goals: (a) to reinforce or enhance the way we already feel, or (b) to change our current mood or energy level. Music is among the most powerful tools for this brand of mind and body control. Many of us have a selection of “never-fail” records that reliably push our buttons every time we hear them.

Need some energy Friday after work to get up for partying? Need to get your head back in shape the next morning while the hangover peters out? Something to bring on tears when you’re down, or something stoic to prepare

you for a potentially traumatic event? Here are some of the records I use for various situations. They’re not all huge hits, but they work every time—for me:

- Friday night “power bar”: Fleetwood Mac, “Say You Love Me”
Donald Fagen, “I.G.Y.”
- Hangover mender: Bach Keyboard Partitas,
Segovia playing classical guitar
Doobie Brothers, “What a Fool Believes” or
“Minute by Minute”
- Instant tears: The Beatles, “Yesterday”
James Taylor, “If I Keep My Heart Out of Sight”
(from *JT*)
Paul Young, “Every Time You Go Away”
- Preparing for trauma: More Bach
Toto, “Africa”
The Beatles, “Hey Jude”
Tom Rush, *The Circle Game* album

From this short list, it’s easy to guess my age as fifty-ish, that I am white, and smack in the middle of baby-boomer experience and lifestyle. Write down your own list of old-reliables, and compare this with the lists of one or more friends. Doing this will help you understand how *your* musical vocabulary arose, what events in your life helped bond you with the records on your list, and what styles or types of emotional messages you respond to most easily.

It’s All Folk ‘n’ Roll to Me

As we will see in detail later, all popular music is folk music at heart. By definition, popular music appeals to a wide audience, cutting through racial, cultural, and economic divides. Its audience need not be musically educated or sophisticated; it is not written for ecclesiastical or courtly purposes; it works even if we ain’t been to college. It speaks to issues and emotions we all have in common. Stuffy or intellectual topics (unless wrapped in a clearly pop package, like the Police’s *Ghost in the Machine*) generally don’t go over well with mass audiences.

Doing a rough count of *Billboard*’s Top 5,000 hits of the rock era by subject, about eighty percent deal with aspects of love. Of these, about half are “I love you (or him or her)” and “It’s wonderful” songs, from the Jackson Five’s “ABC” to the Ohio Express’ “Yummy Yummy Yummy.” Another significant category covers the “It’s not working” situations, from Earth, Wind & Fire’s

“After the Love Is Gone” to the Righteous Brothers’ “You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feelin’.” Then there are the love-weirdoes, ranging from Robert Palmer’s ritualistic “Addicted to Love” to the Kinks’ crotch-busting “You Really Got Me,” or Sammy Hagar’s “Your Love Is Driving Me Crazy.” Love—in all its masks—is clearly humanity’s top pop concern. The same has been true in classical music since 1800, when liturgical music began to take a back seat to the back seat.

The remaining twenty percent of pop music subjects include a hearty helping of third-person criticism, from Helen Reddy’s “Ain’t No Way to Treat a Lady” to Carly Simon’s pithy “You’re So Vain.” Philosophy and/or inspiration make appearances in hits from Dionne Warwick’s “Alfie” and Peggy Lee’s hedonistic “Is That All There Is,” to Debbie Boone’s fervent “You Light Up My Life” and Herb Alpert’s “Zorba the Greek.” Social diatribe and commentary are also prevalent, from Pink Floyd’s “Another Brick in the Wall” and Queen’s “Another One Bites the Dust,” to CSN&Y’s “Teach Your Children” and “Woodstock.”

On a lighter side, there are pure entertainment (sometimes “novelty”) hits: Ray Steven’s absurd “Ahab the Arab”; David Seville & the Chipmunks’ “Alvin’s Harmonica”; Bobby “Boris” Pickett and the Crypt-Kickers’ “Monster Mash”; the Beatles’ “She Came in Through the Bathroom Window” or “Yellow Submarine.” Somewhere in here, we also find instrumentals from Vangelis’s “Chariots of Fire” to the Champs’ “Tequila,” Average White Band’s “Pick Up the Pieces,” and Meco Monardo’s disco version of the “Star Wars Theme/Cantina Band.” Hybrids like M.C. Hammer’s “U Can’t Touch This” also abound.

While love leads the pack, almost any subject can grace a hit record. Conversely, not every song about love is a hit, so if you’re getting ideas about writing a statistically likely hit lyric, forget it. In 1965, friends programmed a computer with the titles of thousands of hits and their sales figures, then asked the computer to come up with a likely hit song title. It responded, “Go Away, Old Man.” Maybe the software was a bit primitive, but you get the point.

Musically, popular music must be simple enough that most listeners can figure it out and hum along. At the very least, they should be able to remember key melody or lyric lines and so-called **hooks**. Memorability is enhanced by repetition. While the meaning of the title line of the Police song “Spirits in the Material World” is a bit obscure, they sing it four times in each chorus over the same simple melody line. We find ourselves singing along, long before our mind asks, “What the hell is that about?” Even if we never ask that question, the song achieves its pop goal: heard, enjoyed, remembered, bought. If all you want to do is dance, the record works. If you want the buried mind/matter message, that’s there too.

Folk music began when humanity began. Ancient Egyptians sang in the fields and cities, describing animals and birds, the Nile, the Gods, the government, and their own emotions—the same as Adam de la Halle did in 1283 when he composed *Robin and Marion*, a musical filled with catchy refrains. Same as John Bull and his English Renaissance contemporaries, who wrote bawdy barroom ballads like “Oh, No, John!” and “With a Dildo.” Same as the dark, visionary blues songs of Robert Johnson in the 1930s; the love, prison, and children’s songs of Leadbelly and other Southern masters; and later Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, the Beatles, Bruce Springsteen, Curtis Mayfield, U2, and leaping ahead, Dr. Dre and Puff Daddy.

Style and subject matter may have changed, but the bottom-line message is the same: “I am an ordinary person describing and commenting on my world, my life, my emotions—in song. Sing along if you like.” The rock group Traffic said it perfectly in their 1968 ditty, “You Can All Join In,” from the album *Mr. Fantasy*. The first verse politely offers, “*Here’s a little song you can all join in with, It’s very simple and I hope it’s new...*” The second verse invites, “*Here’s a little dance you can all join in with...*” But the final verse says it all:

*Here’s a little life you can all join in with,
It’s very simple, and I hope it’s new.
Make your own life up if you want to,
Any old life that you think will do.*

In its own way, folk music sets the pace for its time, and often works itself into the high art that is remembered as the “essence of the age.” Interestingly, the flow is rarely reversed—symphonies seldom inspire folk tunes. However, the famous “Ode to Joy” of Beethoven’s 9th derived from a contemporary Austrian folk tune, as did themes in Bach, Schubert, Brahms, Dvorak, Mahler, Stravinsky, Copland, Gershwin, and Bernstein, for starters. Some would acknowledge their folk inspiration, and others would deny it emphatically. It is there, however, plain as day in the music.

Key Elements of a HIT

There is no way to say *for sure* what specific elements, sounds, or aspects of a record make it a hit. Yet every hit has a few key things that grab our attention and make it memorable. Reviewing a long list of hits, we find that many of the same or analogous elements work over and over to create charisma. Some of these have to do with the song itself; others, with the way it is arranged, performed, recorded, or produced. Finally, some factors may work from the outside—current events, trends in society, marketing.

While it may seem simplistic to reduce every record to generic elements, doing so can help us understand how much great records have in common, and how they meet our expectations for structure, story, emotion, and other bottom-line entertainment values. Here's a list of the common factors that again and again act as key elements in so many hits.

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| Melody: | Verse, Chorus, Title Line, Intro, and Turnarounds |
| Lyric: | Title, Story, Attitude, Relevance, or Timeliness |
| Song form: | Simple and Familiar, or Unusual |
| Arrangement: | The Build: Steady or Wildly Dynamic, Hooks and Riffs, Repeats, Harmony Vocals, Bass Line, Stylistic or Ethnic "package" |
| Performance: | Rhythmic Groove or Feel, Energy or Intensity, Mood, Lead Vocal, Solos |
| Recording: | Excellent or Unique |
| Production: | High or Unusual Production Value, Overall Sound and Blend, Space or Ambience, Unusual or Specific Sounds (instruments or studio effects) |
| Artist: | Public Persona, Previous Work, Looks |
| Outside factors: | Market Timing, Marketing/Promotion |

A few of these terms need clarification. "Relevance or Timeliness" is with regard to current events or things on the public mind; Aretha Franklin's "Respect" was quickly snapped up as the theme song for the Civil Rights and Women's Liberation movements. A "Steady Build" may happen in one rising tide of energy, as in Tracy Chapman's "Talkin' 'Bout a Revolution," or (more normally) have one intermediate drop in energy before a final assault, like the Turtles' "Happy Together." "Wild Dynamics" indicate an arrangement that stops and starts, has sudden key changes, or incorporates lots of other musical changes and surprises, like the arrangement of the Beach Boys' "I Get Around."

The repeating five-note guitar phrase that runs through the Kinks' "You Really Got Me," can be called a "Hook" or "Riff." "Groove" refers to the way a record "moves," influencing how we move or dance in response to its rhyth-

mic persona. The loose, happy groove of the Temptations' "My Girl" contrasts sharply with the tight, driving "Feel" of Donna Summer's "Hot Stuff."

"Energy or Intensity" do not necessarily imply a fast tempo, as Stevie Wonder's "Superstition" or Michael Jackson's "Thriller" show. Instead, intensity comes from an aggressive attitude on the part of musicians and singers, as in "You Really Got Me." "Production Value" refers to the apparent level of musical luxury, often created by full orchestration, harmony, or choral background vocals. "High Production Value" adds emotional scale to a record, from Dionne Warwick's "Walk On By" to "My Girl" to Toto's "Africa."

A short list of KEY ELEMENTS of each hit appears at the beginning of the discussion and analysis of each record. Stay focussed on these as you read and listen. In Part V, these keys are amplified with more complete descriptions of **signatures** of each record. Before the glossary, there is a "Key Elements Matrix" that indicates key elements used in each of the records discussed. This may help you to see which records—however different or separated in time—relied on the same elements to become hits. Single-word descriptions of the emotional quality of various elements also appear in some cells of the matrix.

The first thing you may notice from the matrix is that the melody, the lead vocal, and repeats (most often of the title) are key elements of almost every hit. After these come distinctive harmony vocals, the groove and/or feel, and surprisingly, the recording, either for its high quality, spatial aspects, or other factors.

Basic Conventions of Pop and Rock Lyrics

You already know a lot more about music and songwriting than you may think. Just by hearing thousands of records over the years, you have picked up an intuitive understanding of song forms, how lyrics work, and a good deal about musical keys, melodies, harmonies, phrasing, and a host of other details. Even if you cannot define specific forms or devices, past musical exposure cues you on what to expect when you hear a new song. Moreover, you may have taken a few piano or guitar lessons, or sung in a school choir.

In most popular songs, melody and chords are accompanied by lyrics. In sheet music, lyrics are written beneath each line or staff of music, showing exactly which syllables or words are sung along with each musical note. Since most people use real words and speak in sentences, most lyrics have some semblance of regular sentence structure. Others simply throw out phrases or images, and make the listener work to understand the story or situation.

Believe it or not, songwriters generally intend their lyrics to mean something. The meaning may or may not be clear—intentionally or by dint of plain old bad writing. Thus, song lyrics have all the powers of direct storytelling, insinuation, metaphor, symbolism, abstraction, and potential confusion that are normally ascribed to poetry, not to mention life. In fact, many a poem has become a song lyric, and many songwriters would call their lyrics, stripped of the music, poetry.

Who, for example, could have predicted that T.S. Eliot's uncharacteristically funny little illustrated poem, "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats," would later become the lyrics for Broadway's longest running musical, *Cats*? Or that Paul McCartney would use entire sections from a Renaissance ballad as lyrics for "Golden Slumbers"? Or that the lyric of the Loving Spoonful's "Summer in the City" began as a poem by John Sebastian's younger brother!

Coincidentally, many lyrics have lines whose last words rhyme, either in **couplets**—pairs of adjacent lines that rhyme—or some other structure. In another common **rhyme scheme**, à la the verses of "Lynin' Eyes," the first and third lines rhyme on one sound, while the second and fourth employ a different rhyme. Much more complicated schemes exist, but are not used often in popular music.

The lyrics of most songs are divided into sections commonly called verses, choruses, and bridges. These designations may apply to the sections of music that underlie various parts of the lyric, or may be used because certain parts of the lyric serve common storytelling functions. For example, the **verses** of many songs tell what happens to whom (i.e., the story line), while the **chorus** points out the story's moral, implication, or meaning. Moreover, the chorus often contains the strongest musical "hook" as well as the title line. By and large, choruses are the repeating, catchy section that we remember and hum, hopefully all the way to the record store.

The Beatles' "She Loves You" is a good example. The song begins with the title line from the chorus, repeated three times. Try forgetting that! In the first verse the singer tells a forlorn friend that he bumped into the friend's ex-girlfriend, and that he is still on her mind. The chorus drops the emotional bombshell: "She said she loves you," with commentary and recommendations, "that can't be bad" and "you should be glad!" Another good example is the Eagles' "Lynin' Eyes," a typically long country lyric that relates the downfall of a good girl in eight verses, interspersed with choruses. Each verse describes one situation in her life, while the choruses pronounce judgement on her evil ways.

Sometimes, the writer inserts a short **prechorus** between verse and chorus to ramp up the situation or tension, or as a dramatic aside. A separate **bridge**, or so-called "**c**" **section**, may be used for many purposes, including to indicate the passage of dramatic time, or comment on how the situation looks from another viewpoint. Musically, the bridge usually has a chord progression that is different from both the verse and chorus, and may actually be in a different key. This can help indicate its dramatic function.

Alternatively, a song may feature instrumental solos, so-called turnarounds, or interludes, rather than a bridge. Still others, like the Doobie Brothers' "What a Fool Believes," just plow ahead with no break in lyrics once the singer opens his mouth. In this case the **song form** is: verse, prechorus, chorus, then the same three sections again, fading on a repeated chorus. There are no hard and fast rules, just a few loose conventions for stringing these functional song units together into complete recorded arrangements.

If we designate a verse by the letter "A," a chorus by the letter "B," and a "c" section by "C," we can illustrate some common song structures:

A B A B B verse, chorus, verse, chorus, chorus
A A B A A B B doubles up on verses, as many "life story" songs do
A B C B A B throws in a bridge between the first two choruses

Except for the addition of instrumental sections, few popular song forms are much more complicated, so enough said.

Whatever the form adopted, repetition is one of the keys to success. The shortest hook, like the three-note title line of "She Loves You," quickly becomes a signature if repeated until the listener can't forget it. In this case, the repetition is bolstered by the fact that (1) the notes are the highest in the entire melody, and (2) the material between each repeat varies wildly, pointing a spotlight at the title. After the first "She Loves You," the next line drops down an octave to the song's lowest notes. After the second title line, different chords and melody bring us round to the pure fun and nursery rhyme sing-song of the repeats of "She Loves You, Yeah, Yeah, Yeah...." By the end of the two-minute record, three undistinguished notes—sol, la, and do—are burned into our neurons.

Rhythm, Timing, Tempo, Feel

Popular music relies heavily on rhythm and tempo to connect with its audience. A record's main rhythm or "beat" determines the energy, feel, groove, toe-tappability, danceability, ethnic style (e.g., Latin, African, or polka), and

other hard-to-define parameters by which we recognize a hit and buy into its overall persona. Musical time is divided into units called **measures** or **bars**. A bar normally contains two or more **beats**. The **time signature** of a song designates how many beats there are in each bar, and the duration of each beat. Fortunately, there are only two common time signatures used in most popular music, plus one or two variations on each.

The most common time signature is designated **straight** or **standard time**, written as 4/4. The numbers mean that each bar has four beats, and each beat is a **quarter note**. In rock, this is the most ordinary time unit. With this in mind, the matter of other note lengths is simple. A **whole note** is four times as long as a quarter note (lasting four beats) and fills a whole measure, or “bar,” in 4/4 time. A **half note**, as you might suspect, equals two quarter notes. It lasts for two beats, or half a measure in 4/4. The **eighth note** is half as long as a quarter note, which means it takes eight of them to fill a measure. It goes on, but we need not follow.

Within each 4/4 bar of time, the first beat is called the **downbeat**, because a conductor marking 4/4 time with a baton waves it downward for the beginning of each new measure. While the **upbeat** is, strictly speaking, the last beat of the measure, most rock drummers render 4/4 time with a kick drum on the downbeat and third beat of each measure, and snare drum on the second and fourth beats. Effectively, they subgroup each measure into two, two-beat phrases. Thus, the second and fourth beats serve as upbeats.

While most popular songs are written in 4/4 time, their **tempo** may vary from that of a slow ballad (sixty beats or quarter notes per minute, or one beat per second) to a fast dance pace of 140 **bpm** or more, as in the Knack’s “My Sharona.” Since the early ’80s, promotional copies of many records have had their bpm tempos on the label. This enables dance floor DJs to sequence records that will fade smoothly from one to the next, or ride the overall energy level up or down.

The other common time signature is **waltz time**, designated 3/4 because there are three beats per bar, each being a quarter note in duration. In 3/4, the downbeat begins the measure, and the upbeat is normally on the third beat. Few rock or pop songs, except in country and sometimes folk music, are slow enough to be real waltzes. The Moody Blues’ “Go Now,” Aretha Franklin’s “Natural Woman,” and Dionne Warwick’s “What the World Needs Now” are wonderful pop-waltz exceptions.

A fast, or **uptempo**, song with a waltz feel may be written in 6/8, where two

quick waltz phrases comprise each measure, for a total of six eighth notes per bar. The Beatles’ “You’ve Got to Hide Your Love Away” is a good example. It’s too fast to waltz to, but obviously has a waltzy feel. If we crank the tempo up even more, the 6/8 feel turns into a **shuffle**, the musical equivalent of someone skipping down the sidewalk. The Doobie Brothers’ “Minute by Minute” can be called a fast 6/8, though it is more accurately a medium shuffle. Other medium shuffles include: Marvin Gaye’s “How Sweet It Is,” Mary Wells’ “My Guy,” and Donald Fagen’s “I.G.Y.” In general, the shuffle has a happy feel. After all, who skips down the sidewalk when they are feeling sad? Then again, the Stones’ “Midnight Rambler” and many a blues-rock songs are shuffles.

Beyond this, songwriters may designate that one section of a song be played in **half-time**, or another in **double-time**. As interpreted by most rock drummers, half-time stretches each bar to twice its normal length. They will often make half-time obvious by playing the snare only on the third beat of a 4/4 measure, instead of on the second *and* fourth beats. The stretched-out, half-time chorus of the Beatles’ “Magical Mystery Tour” heightens the drama after each straight 4/4 verse. Half-time is often used to make a grand statement of fact or feeling.

Double-time doubles the apparent tempo, and is used to give an anxious or urgent feel. It can be rendered in two ways. In Paul Simon’s “Kodachrome,” the song jumps into high gear when he begins the coda, repeating, “Mama don’t take my Kodachrome away...” Each measure now lasts half as long as earlier, since each beat is now an eighth note. A similar effect of urgency is created in many Motown records by simply having the snare drum play on each quarter note of the measure (e.g., the Four Tops’ “Reach Out, I’ll Be There” and the Supremes’ “You Keep Me Hangin’ On,” both of which are emphatic, emotionally charged messages to a loved one).

Strictly speaking, the rock versions of half- and double-time are not exactly what the formal notation dictates. However, few rock writers worry about notation. Instead, many just indicate half- or double-time over a section of the song or part of the melody on a simple lead sheet. Musicians know what that implies. For our purposes, once you know that most popular music is in a 4- or 3-feel and can recognize the major aspects of each, you can understand the rhythmic kernel of your favorite hits.

Where a Record Takes Us

We should not underestimate the importance of a song’s ability to create a fun and safe experience for the listener. Nursery-rhyme simplicity and repetition

say, "Come on in, the water's fine." Remember, many listeners consider the making of music an almost magical activity. They are awed by the willingness and ability of recording artists to expose their emotions in ways that mere mortals dare not. See Roy Orbison's comments on "Crying," in which he bravely admitted that it's okay for men to cry, previously a major no-no. After all, our fathers had stoically repressed the horrors of WWII and Korea, as we would soon repeat with respect to Vietnam. We were macho men bound for the moon. And women? John Lennon set off a storm of controversy in 1965 by tossing off one of his grating one-liners: "Women should be obscene and not heard." Sadly, this quip still represented the lingering, archaic vision of the fairer sex as services of men's "needs." John said he was only joking.

Later, female artists from Aretha to Suzanne Vega and Tracy Chapman would shatter societal conventions with songs advocating liberation. They openly discuss child and domestic abuse, and the emotional abyss of city life for minorities and the poor. Finally, rap graphically recreated how such problems manifest themselves on the streets. With each new revelation, someone had to be brave enough to break the ice and declare it worthy of artistic expression. In this way, recording artists lead, and we listeners follow.

Most hits also extend a musical hand to the listener. They assure that the listener will not be embarrassed because the arrangement is so complex that he or she cannot remember it, and may make a mistake if singing along. Thus song structure itself provides signposts about what's coming next. So does the arrangement. The way a bass line moves at the end of a verse can tell us whether a chorus or a key change is coming. A double hit on the snare at the same point may announce, "Get ready for the crux!" As the Beatles showed, a tambourine played steadily can instruct us that a certain section or thought continues, and then, with a definitive double hit, that the section is over or the point made.

All this form without attention to content and style is meaningless. As songwriter Jimmy Webb—who penned "MacArthur Park," "Up, Up, and Away," and many other 1960s and 1970s hits—reiterates in George Martin's excellent book, *Making Music*, a song is the musical setting of a poem. The music need not be written first, but a lyric, when finished, "is the expression of thoughts that awake the higher and nobler emotions, or their opposites." Webb laments that many lyrics written by beginners are so poor that they keep songs from being recorded. He blames this on songwriters not taking the time to "read the great poets and absorb their techniques of writing and expressing imagery." To those who believe this cannot be the way to originality, Webb replies that without reading the classics, songwriters "would not possess the tools with which to create originality."

Of course, Webb's studied approach represents only one possible extreme. For contrast, check out the comments on songwriting by Roy Orbison, Mick Jagger, and Keith Richards, Burt Bacharach's thoughts on writing for Dionne Warwick, or those of Stephen Stills and Steely Dan. Some songwriters let intense thoughts flow straight through them and onto paper. Some intentionally wrote puzzles, allowing listeners plenty of room to flesh out the story and interpret. Still others used words for the pure fun of their sound. To hell with meaning.

No Personality, No HIT

Like any sprouting plant, a new artist has to sink roots into one musical style and audience before he or she can be transplanted into others. The only means the artist has to gain a foothold are records and personality. Obviously, records should reflect the artist's persona (real or invented). However, they alone, sans extra-vinyl info on how the artist looks, acts, and relates to an audience, are not enough. Elvis had to establish a country following and have a hit before he could start the hip swinging that initially shocked his country fans. They soon realized, however, that it was still Elvis. In fact, they liked swinging their hips too. Cut directly to Billy Ray Cyrus.

Personality: Roy Orbison with his dark glasses to match his dark emotions (a brilliant accident—he misplaced his normal glasses before a show); the Beach Boys' squeaky clean collegiate looks to match their squeaky clean sound; the cheeky behavior of the Beatles, a perfect match for their hormonal early songs filled with clever lyrics; the Stones, a walking picture of the rough and grubby quality captured in every groove. Cut to Tina Turner, the sexy embodiment of the feminine self-determination portrayed in her mid-'80s solo hits.

Artists do not always appreciate their public image, however. While Donna Summer disliked the fluffy, Disneyesque disco queen image her early records and visual image portrayed, they formed a consistent package in line with what an audience desired—a fleshy relief from the stress of 9-to-5 life. Only later would she say how distasteful it all seemed, even while the money was rolling in. It is odd that no artist has ever returned the money after such a revelation.

With almost every hit, the mention of the record brings to the listener the image of how the artist looks, acts, and relates to us through the media, and what he or she stands for. There's the key: every hitmaker stands for some quality the audience needs to emulate or express in their own lives. The artist and his records give the audience permission to be and act as they feel. To be themselves. What better gift can any art form bestow on its fans and followers?

What Tells the Story: A Set of Telling Questions

Most records with lyrics tell some kind of story. Elvis describes being in love in “All Shook Up”; Tracy Chapman predicts coming social upheaval in “Talkin’ Bout a Revolution.” The details of each story are as different as the characters and their situations, as were the social climates of the mid-’50s and -’80s. Elvis’s story, much like that of the Pointer Sisters’ “Automatic,” is set in the first person: “This is what love is doing to *me*, how it makes *me* feel and act.” Chapman relates her vision in the third person, observing what *is* and extrapolating to what must follow.

Each story, along with its music, production, and recording package, relates enough data so that if we close our eyes and imagine the record as a three-minute drama, we develop concrete images of the singer(s), the situation, and most important, the underlying human emotion being portrayed. Just like when we see a drama, musical, dance concert, film, or any real-time presentation, each listener brings details from his or her own life into play. (Music videos have supplied visual interpretations of hits since the early ’80s, but these often conflict with the images our own minds conjure, and thus can confuse our interpretations.)

To be sure, some listeners simply enjoy the overall sonic and emotional statement made by a record. Yet it is amazing to discover just how much dramatic and “visual” information the artist and producer often pack into the grooves. To demonstrate this to my students, as each term begins I ask my record production class to examine in detail a few hits we all know well. Together we comb the lyrics, arrangement, performances, recording, and mix for data—stated and implied—that might be used to create an accurate cinematic adaptation. In most cases, students are stunned at how uniformly members of their diverse group, usually at least thirty percent from abroad, envision the record’s story and setting, as well as the very specific physical and emotional attributes of the character portrayed by the singer and song.

Most students (and music-loving listeners) have simply never looked at even their favorite records this way. On the other hand, if individual students—or you—disagree with the consensus interpretation, nobody’s right or wrong. We each see what we see. The important thing is to realize how much a record communicates in a scant three or four minutes, and how broad the range of concerns the artist and producer brought to their moment of truth in the studio.

Most great records respond to the same six questions answered in every good movie:

1. *Who is the character being portrayed by the vocalist(s)?* More specifically, how old is the protagonist, where is he or she from, how well educated is he or she, what kind of work might he or she do? In general terms, how might the character dress, move, act, think? Is he or she relaxed or uptight, optimistic or pessimistic, loving or emotionally walled off? The answers determine whether we like the character and sympathize with his or her tale.

2. *Who is the character or protagonist singing to?* A girl- or boyfriend, lover, parent, a close friend—and is the other person actually present? Or is the character singing to him- or herself, perhaps in a mirror, or to someone’s picture? Maybe the song is addressed to cruel or wonderful fate, the wind, humanity as a whole, the gods! One way or the other, we should be able to figure out who it is aimed at and what the “sing-ee” is like—age, sex, dress, relationship, attitudes. From this information, we decide whether we would like to be at the receiving end of the drama.

3. *What basic human situation or emotion is the singer trying to convey or illustrate?* Is it about unrequited love, being madly in love, being consumed by jealousy, or just being young and horny? Is the singer extolling activities like surfing, driving cars, or having sex, bewailing his or her lot in life, exposing a problem with society or the government, determining to change the world, or simply waxing nostalgic? When the answers call up analogous events from our own lives, we buy into the singer’s joy or angst.

4. *Where is the three-minute drama taking place?* More to the point, where would such a drama be most effectively staged in order to be convincing? Are we in the singer’s apartment, bedroom, kitchen, or at a girl- or boyfriend’s place? In a car or train, at a restaurant, or in some neutral territory such as a park? Is the drama happening during the daytime or at night, indoors or out, in the city or the country, and how do the ambient conditions affect what happens?

5. *What is the singer’s specific purpose for singing the song?* What result does he or she hope that singing will effect? Does she want him back, or gone for good? Is he trying hard to express his emotions or hide them? Is the object a quick roll in the hay, everlasting love, a reunion, a more tolerant and supportive society, or respect for Mother Earth? Or is the singer merely trying to purge pent-up emotions, getting something heavy off his or her chest, letting off steam, or confessing the darkest of secrets?

6. Does the singer get the desired result? Or, more simply, how does the story and record end? Is the situation resolved or is it about to be resolved, still in process but hopeful, dubious, impossible? Or are things essentially unchanged? Most important, how does the outcome affect the singer's mood, attitude, future prospects?

The way a record delineates these six issues prompts listeners to identify with the singer or reject him or her out of hand, to admire or pity the character at a distance, or to want to let the character cry on our shoulder. Let's run a classic hit through these questions and see how specifically the song, performance, production, and recording answers each. How about Roy Orbison's "Oh, Pretty Woman"? That seems a simple record—how could all that information be packed in there?

The record's musical intro is chopped up in short, incomplete phrases, none of which resolve to the home chord, or **tonic**. The drums pound away, a snare on each quarter note. Clearly this is a song about angst and unfulfilled need—question 3. The vocal comes in, a fluttery two-part male tenor. He is nervous, tense, or weak-kneed. We are beginning to learn of his emotions (question 3), and to understand who he is (question 1).

Verse 1 *Pretty woman walkin' down the street.
Pretty woman, the kind I'd like to meet.
Pretty woman, I don't believe you—you're not
 the truth.
No one could look as good as you,
...Mercy!*

Verse 2 *Pretty woman, won't you pardon me.
Pretty woman, I couldn't help but see.
Pretty woman, you look lovely as can be.
Are you lonely just like me?
[Sexy growl]*

Bridge *Pretty woman, stop a while,
Pretty woman, talk a while.
Pretty woman, give your smile to me.
Pretty woman, yeah yeah yeah.
Pretty woman, look my way.
Pretty woman, say you'll stay with me...
'Cause I need you. I'll treat you right.
Come to me, baby. Be mine tonight...*

The first line tells us that the story take place outdoors, perhaps on a warm evening (as the coda reveals), in the city—question 4 answered. The first two lines also answer question 2: he's singing to the woman, but not to her face; his story is an interior monologue. Aha, he knows what he wants (question 5): to meet her and more, as his end-of-verse expostulations specify. The last two lines tell us his self-image is not that great, but he idolizes her—more info for question 1. By the end of the second verse, we know he's no teenager—it's "woman," not "babe" or "girl." Since he chooses words carefully and addresses her rather formally, he's probably well educated, in his mid-twenties or older, and is dressed casually—with neither torn jeans nor a three-piece suit.

Finally, the underlying emotion (question 3) comes into focus when he rehearses how he might introduce himself, asking, "Are you lonely just like me?" He is desperate for love and companionship—as we all are at times—and that's the underlying emotional basis of the record. We connect immediately, whether we imagine ourselves in his role or that of the woman. Beautiful people can be lonely too.

He goes on specifying more question 5 info in the bridge, where he recites exactly what he would like her to do—"stop a while, talk a while, share a smile, be mine tonight." Then we get an extended fake-out answer to question 6. Verse 3 and most of the coda indicate that she ignores him, as expected (same as in the later hit, "Alone Again, Naturally"). He even begins planning another evening on the prowl (confirmation for question 4's evening setting). Then she suddenly turns and approaches him. He is stunned and amazed—communicated musically as the song gets stuck on a tense 5 (Sol) chord. Does she actually greet him? The final tonic chord tells us that the situation resolves happily. It's yes to question 6! Later? More growling, probably.

Verse 3 *Pretty woman, don't walk on by.
Pretty woman, don't make me cry.
Don't walk away, hey. Okay.*

Coda *If that's the way it must be, okay.
I guess I'll go on home, it's late.
There'll be tomorrow night, but wait...
What do I see? Is she walking back to me?
Yeaaaah, she's walkin' back to me.
Oh, Oh, Pretty Woman.*

Thus, without going more than skin-deep on how the arrangement and production suggest answers or confirm those given in the lyrics, we know almost everything about the protagonist and his situation. The only question left largely unanswered is question 2. She remains little more than a pretty woman. No further details are given or even implied. The men in the audience can fill in their own images of beauty. Women can just plug themselves in as-is. Everybody wins.

Of course, not every lyric contains so much information. In this record, the music conveys the protagonist's emotional and scrotumal urgency, his worried, self-effacing tendencies, the touch-and-go drama of his approach, and her apparent nonresponse. The upward key change and light piano arpeggios in the bridge let in a breath of fresh air as he gains courage and imagines his dream may become real. The coda—returning to the choppy phrasing of the intro and, except for the final chord, sitting on the 5 chord again—is a real cliff hanger. Our hearts pound with his.

In other records, the use of stereo or particular types of reverb or echo can help identify the location, time of day, and other question 4 factors. Background voices and the way they are placed can give us question 1 data, supporting the singer's argument (mono backgrounds right behind his lead), or telling us that he is a windbag or dreamer (Greek chorus-style commentaries in broad stereo, which can dominate or belittle the lead). The singer's vocal technique can be loose and colloquial, implying he's an average guy, or highly stylized with careful pronunciation, implying that packaging is as important to him as content. Question 1 again.

To apply this question-1-to-6 analysis of each hit discussed in this book would be boring and didactic. Instead I will examine what happens lyrically and by musical implication in each hit, indicating the emotional impact each element may have or imply. You can then apply your own imagination and see if you agree.

A producer must have a concrete picture of the story that his or her records will tell. If a song doesn't provide answers, he might ask the writer to retrofit them by rewriting some of the lyrics. If this doesn't work, he can provide answers with the arrangement, percussion, studio effects, reverbs—virtually every tool at his disposal. Furthermore, the producer must make sure the artist has a clear picture of the story the vocal will convey. Like a good film director, a producer must know that the actors—vocal and instrumental—understand their roles in the drama.

From the average listener's standpoint, question 3—the basic emotional message—is the real crux. The record will not work if it doesn't spell out the emotional basis of the song. If we like the protagonist and find that his or her situation is like our own, the record connects. Wham! So what if two listeners disagree on whether the story takes place during the day or at night? Two producers might have answered this and the other questions differently, using different sound devices to portray their answers. Both versions might not be equal hits, but they would be equally plausible as pieces of musical drama.