

Hooks

by John Braheny

"Hook" is the term you'll hear most often in the business and craft of commercial songwriting. (Well, maybe not as much as "Sorry, we can't use your song," but it's possible that the more you hear about hooks now, the less you'll hear "we can't use it" later.)

The hook has been described as "the part(s) you remember after the song is over," "the part that reaches out and grabs you," "the part you can't stop singing (even when you hate it)" and "the catchy repeated chorus." Some of the world's greatest hook crafters are commercial jingle writers: how many times have you had a jingle stick in your mind? Here are several categories of hooks.

THE STRUCTURAL HOOK

In this category, part of the structure of the song functions as the hook. The most common is the "hook chorus." It repeats several times during the song, and it should contain the title or "hook line," usually the first or last line (See "Chorus Construction" in next month's article.). We may also consider memorable "B" sections, particularly in an AABA form, to be hooks, but the chorus is almost universally referred to as "the hook."

INSTRUMENTAL HOOKS

There are melodic phrases in songs that may not be part of the vocal melody, yet stick in our minds as though they were. In the last line of the chorus of The Beatles' "Something" after "Don't want to leave her now, you know I believe and how. . ." is a melodic guitar figure that we think of whenever we think of the melody, though there's no lyric over it. If we heard that figure by itself, we'd be able to "name that tune." The repeated riffs or loops that introduce and run beneath Stevie Wonder's "Superstition," Michael Jackson's "Beat It," and Jay-Z's "Can I Get A..." are as memorable as any other parts of the songs.

Too often, I think, songwriters tend to believe that creating those instrumental hooks is the job of the arranger, producer or studio musicians. It should be kept in mind that if those are the hooks that sell the song to the public, they'll sell the song to the producer and artist if you create them first.

STORY LINE HOOKS

Have you ever heard a song and afterward couldn't quite remember the melody or the exact words but you could remember the story? Sometimes the story itself is so powerful and evocative that it's the thing that stays in your mind longer than

the exact words or melody. Examples are the Dixie Chicks' "Goodbye Earl," Clay Walker's "The Chain of Love," and Eminem's "Stan."

PRODUCTION HOOKS

Production hooks aren't always possible for a songwriter, but today more writers than ever before have access to sophisticated instrumental and recording technology. The sounds on both demos and master recordings have become very important. Experiment with the way various instruments sound in combination. Experiment with electronic keyboard synth "pre-sets" combined with acoustic instruments or natural sounds. You can digitally sample sound sources or buy them on disks, tapes or ROM cartridges and modify them yourself. MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) technology has made possible an almost infinite variety of sonic combinations.

Early recording effects such as "phasing" and "flanging" were later incorporated into electronic boxes that you could use at the tap of a button and today virtually any sound modification device used in the studio has been converted to some portable digital form that you can use at home or on stage. Certain sounds will evoke certain emotional responses. Use them as artistic tools along with lyric and melody to create mood and emotion. One of the most effective hooks is a sound no one has ever heard before. Remember, however, that once you get into the technology of creating sounds, it can be so much fun that you can easily forget that the song is still the most important thing. No matter how exciting those sounds are, they won't make up for a weak song.

Hooks are essential in commercial music. They are points of reference that keep us interested and focused on the song. They're devices that help us remember and an entertainment in themselves. Part of your job as a commercial writer is to be able to use as many different types of hooks as possible. Next month: We'll explore a variety of ways to construct choruses.

This excerpt from John Braheny's book, *The Craft and Business of Songwriting* (2nd edition, 2002, Writers Digest Books) has been edited for length. It's available at bookstores everywhere. For info about John's critiquing and consulting services, go to www.johnbraheny.com.