For Harry and Rose:
The Melody and the Beat

CONTENTS

HOOK: The Bliss Point

1. You Spin Me Round
2. A Continuity of Hits

FIRST VERSE: Cheiron: Mr. Pop and the Metalhead

3. Inside the Box
4. “The Sign”
5. Big Poppa
6. Martin Sandberg’s Terrible Secret
7. Britney Spears: Hit Me Baby
8. “I Want It That Way”

CHORUS: The Money Note: The Ballad of Kelly and Clive

9. My Ancestral Hit Parade
10. The Dragon’s Teeth
11. The Doldrums
12. American Idol
13. “Since U Been Gone”

SECOND VERSE: Factory Girls: Cultural Technology and the Making of K-Pop

14. “Gee”

CHORUS: Rihanna: Track-and-Hook

15. “Umbrella”
17. Stargate: Those Lanky Norwegian Dudes
18. “Rude Boy”

BRIDGE: Dr. Luke: Teenage Dream

19. Speed Chess
20. Katy Perry: Altar Call
21. Melodic Math
22. Kesha: Teenage Nightmare
One cannot live outside the machine for more perhaps than half an hour.

VIRGINIA WOOLF, *THE WAVES*

Bring the hooks in, where the bass at?

IGGY AZALEA, “FANCY”

### 1. You Spin Me Round

**IT STARTED WHEN** the Boy got big enough to claim shotgun. No sooner seated up front than he reprogrammed the presets, changing my classic and alternative rock stations to contemporary hits radio, or CHR—what used to be called Top 40.

I was irritated at first, but by the time we had crossed the Brooklyn Bridge and arrived at school, where he was a fifth-grader, I was pleased. Hadn’t I reconfigured my parents’ radio to play my music when I was his age? And since there are only so many times you can listen to the guitar solo in Pink Floyd’s “Comfortably Numb” without going a little numb yourself, I made the Boy my DJ, at least for the day.

*Thumpa thooka whompa whomp Pish pish pish Thumpa wompah wompah pah pah Maaakaka thomp peep bap boony Gunga gunga gung*

Was this music? The bass sounded like a recording of a massive undersea earthquake. The speakers produced sounds such as might have been heard on the Island of Dr. Moreau, had he been a DJ rather than a vivisectionist. What strange song machines made these half-brass, half-stringed-sounding noises?

It was the winter of 2009, and “Right Round,” by Flo Rida, was the number-one song on Billboard’s Hot 100. The song begins with a swirlly sound that goes right ’round your head in a tight circle.

*EEeeoooorrrroooan nnnnwwweeeyyeeeooowwwwouuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu
used double entendre to conceal the real meaning of the song. But in “Right Round,” the surface meaning—*From the top of the pole I watch her go down*—is as lewd as the hidden one.

The nation was near the bottom of its worst economic collapse since the Great Depression, but you wouldn’t know that from “Right Round.” Social realism is not what this song is about. Like a lot of CHR songs, it takes place in “da club,” where Pitbull oils his way around the floor, calling women “Dahling” and remarking on their shapely behinds. The club is both an earthly paradise where all sensual pleasures are realized, and the arena in which achievement is measured: the place where you prove your manhood. Exactly what is the Boy doing in this place? Fortunately, I will be here with him now, to keep an eye on things.

“I WANT TO HOLD YOUR HAND,” my first number one, came out when I was five; my sister had the 45. I heard pop music on the radio, on car-pool rides to and from the bus stop. (“Bus Stop” by the Hollies was one of the hits.) The mothers kept the radio tuned to WFIL, a Philadelphia Top 40 powerhouse in the mid-’60s. The Brill Building era, epitomized by professional songwriting teams like Gerry Goffin and Carole King, had given way to the Beatles. That led to the rock era, and I was fortunate enough to have lived my peak music-loving years during the glorious ’70s and ’80s up through the ’90s with Nirvana and grunge. For me, rock came to a spectacularly violent end on April 5, 1994, although Kurt Cobain’s body wasn’t discovered until three days later. By that point I’d mostly moved on to drum and bass (The Chemical Brothers, Fatboy Slim), then to techno and EDM. Otherwise I listened to hip-hop, but only on my headphones—you couldn’t spin that stuff around kids, and my wife hated the misogyny.

Around the time I stopped listening to rock, I began playing it. I rediscovered my teenage love of the guitar, and when the Boy came along, I gave him the gift of rock. By the age of three he had been treated to any number of intimate unplugged concerts, featuring me performing the folk and rock canon, during bath and bedtime. Why couldn’t my dad have been this cool?

Yet the little gentleman showed an unnatural lack of affection for my music. “Don’t play!” he’d say whenever I reached for my instrument. He’d leave the room when “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door” came around again. In his displeasure with my music he reminded me of my dad.

And now, age ten, the tables were turned and for the first time I was treated to a full blast of his music, rudely shaking me from my long rock slumber. The songs in the car weren’t soulful ballads played by the singer-songwriter. They were industrial-strength products, made for malls, stadiums, airports, casinos, gyms, and the Super Bowl half-time show. The music reminded me a little of the bubblegum pop of my preteen years, but it was vodka-flavored and laced with MDMA; it doesn’t taste like “Sugar, Sugar.” It is teen pop for adults.

Like the Brill Building songs of my youth, the hits on the radio are once again “manufactured” by songwriting pros. The hit makers aren’t on the same team, but they collaborate and work independently for the same few A-list artists. Collectively, they constitute a virtual Brill Building, the place where record men go when they have to have a hit. The song machine.

**MUSICALLY, THE SONG MACHINE MAKES TWO TYPES OF HITS.** One branch is descended from Europop, and the other from R&B. The former has longer, more progressive melodies and a sharper verse-chorus differentiation, and they seem more meticulously crafted. The latter have a rhythmic groove with a melodic hook on top that repeats throughout the song. But these templates are endlessly recombined. And the line between pop and urban is as blurry as it was in the ’50s when the record business was in its infancy, and the distinctions between R&B and pop were still fluid. Sam Smith, Hozier, and Iggy Azalea are all white artists with a black sound.

Phil Spector, an early master at mixing R&B and pop, required dozens of session musicians to build his famous Wall of Sound. CHR hit makers can make all the sounds they need with musical software and samples—no instruments required. This is democratizing, but it also feels a little like cheating. By employing technologically advanced equipment and digital-compression techniques, these hit makers create sounds that are more sonically engaging and powerful than even the most skilled instrumentalists can produce. And it’s so easy! You want the string section from Abbey Road on your record—you just punch it up. Whole subcultures of musical professionals—engineers, arrangers, session musicians—are disappearing, unable to compete with the software that automates their work.

Some instrumental sounds are based on samples of actual instruments, but they are no longer recognizable as such. And the electronic atmosphere and the dynamic changes in the density of the sound are more captivating than the virtuosity of the musicians. The computer is felt in the instrumentation, the cut-and-paste architecture, and in the rigorous perfection of timing and pitch—call it robopop. Melodies are fragmentary, and appear in strong short bursts, like espresso shots served throughout the song by a producer-barista. Then, slicing through the thunderous algorithms, like Tennyson’s eagle—*And like a thunderbolt he falls*—comes the “hook”: a short, sung line that grips the rhythm with melodic talons and soars skyward. The songs bristle with hooks, painstakingly crafted to tweak the brain’s delight in melody, rhythm, and repetition.
The artists occupy a central place in the songs, but more as vocal personalities than singers. The voices belong to real human beings, for the most part, although in some cases the vocals are so decked out in electronic finery that it doesn’t matter whether a human or a machine made them. On sheer vocal ability, the new artists fall short of the pop divas of the early ‘90s—Whitney, Mariah, Celine. And who are these artists? Britney? Kelly? Rihanna? Katy? Kesha? What do they stand for as artists? Their insights into the human condition seem to extend no further than the walls of the vocal booth. And who really writes their songs?

Yes, I could have reprogrammed the presets and gone back to “Comfortably Numb.” I didn’t. Now the Boy and I had something to talk about.

I had tried to interest him in watching sports. He’d seen the pain the Philadelphia Eagles organization has caused me over so many years; naturally he wanted no part of that. But he was pleased to debate the merits of beats, hooks, choruses, and bridges. Like me, he knew where hit songs stood on the Billboard Hot 100—the fast risers and quick fallers-off; the number of weeks spent at number one; whether or not Katy Perry’s Teenage Dream album would score its fifth number one and thus tie Michael Jackson’s Bad for most number ones ever on an album. When Katy did it, he was proud; it proved his pop stars could compete with mine.

And yet he was reluctant to share his true feelings about his music. He sensed there was something unnatural about my interest in it, and probably there was. After all, the songs on CHR were his. I’d had my glory days with the Sex Pistols; shouldn’t I step aside, take what pleasure I could in, say, Mark Knopfler’s amazing pickless guitar playing on the live version of “Sultans of Swing” on YouTube, and leave him to it? What if my parents had said, “Hey, son, the Pistols are really groovy!” or “Sid Vicious seems like a nifty guy!”? They’d only approved of one rock(ish) song, and that was “Teach Your Children,” by Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young. I could never listen to it with pleasure again.

Who are the hit makers? They are enormously influential culture shapers—the Spielbergs and Lucases of our national headphones—and yet they are mostly anonymous. Directors of films are public figures, but the people behind pop songs remain in the shadows, taking aliases, by necessity if not by choice, in order to preserve the illusion that the singer is the author of the song. I knew much more about the Brill Building writers of the early ‘60s than about the people behind current CHR hits.

They all have aliases—disco names. One of the most successful is called Dr. Luke. He and his frequent songwriting partner, a Swede called Max Martin (also an alias), have had more than thirty Top 10 hits between them since 2004, and Max Martin’s own streak goes back a decade before that; more recently, he’s become Taylor Swift’s magic man. In both volume of hits and longevity, Max Martin eclipses all previous hit makers, including the Beatles, Phil Spector, and Michael Jackson.

“Did you know that ‘Right Round,’ ‘I Kissed a Girl,’ ‘Since U Been Gone,’ and ‘Tik Tok’ are all done by Dr. Luke?”

“Really?”

“I doubt he’s a medical doctor!” I snorted. The Boy smirked uncertainly.

This became my mission: to find out more about who created these strange new songs, how they were made, and why they sounded the way they did, and report back to him. I shared tidbits I had gleaned about the process, and the Boy seemed pleased to know them. Our car rides together were full of song talk. It was bliss.

Some weeks passed. A new song or two appeared, but for the most part the same tunes played ad nauseam. There were few ballads, and fewer rock songs. The music sounded more like disco than rock. I thought disco was dead. Turns out disco had simply gone underground, where it became House, only to eventually reemerge, cicadalike, as the backing track to the CHR music and to bludgeon rock senseless with synths. Weirdly, the only place I consistently heard new guitar-driven rock music was on the girl-power cartoon shows my youngest watched on Nick Jr. There, guitar gods were still aspirational figures, albeit for five-year-old girls.

Taylor Swift was a welcome surprise. Her early hits—“Our Song,” “Love Story,” and “You Belong With Me”—were still playing on the radio. They’re sort of country rock songs with great rhythm guitar parts, and Nashville polish and production added. And Swift was at least recognizable as belonging to the old singer-songwriter tradition I grew up with. She actually wrote her own songs. We both loved her.

Some of the pop hits had a definite rock vibe, and I dutifully pointed out the spots where I heard it. The back beat in Kelly Clarkson’s “Since U Been Gone.” The opening riff in Katy Perry’s “I Kissed a Girl.” The baroque swoop of ’80s guitar lines in Kesha’s “Tik Tok,” except that they aren’t actually made with guitars. These songs are musical chimeras—rock bodies with disco souls. They have more melody than rap songs, but less melody than most ’80s music, and less chord complexity than songs from the ’60s and ’70s; they’re closer to punk that way. They get a lot of song mileage from simple and repetitive chord structures, thanks to the lush production.

You’d think that in an age when anyone with basic computer skills can make a song on a laptop—no musical training or instrumental mastery is required—the charts would be flooded with newbie hit makers. The barriers to
entry are low. And yet it turns out that the same handful of top writers and producers are behind hit after hit—a mysterious priesthood of musical mages. They combine the talents of storied arrangers like Quincy Jones and George Martin, with the tune-making abilities of writer-producers like Holland–Dozier–Holland, Motown’s secret weapon. On the pop side, there’s Ryan Tedder, Jeff Bhasker, and Benny Blanco; on the urban side Pharrell Williams, Dr. Dre, and Timbaland. Bridging both genres are the über hit makers like Stargate, Ester Dean, Dr. Luke, and Max Martin.

The more I heard the songs, the more I liked them. How could that be? If you dislike a song the first time, surely you should loathe it the tenth. But apparently that’s not how it works. Familiarity with the song increases one’s emotional investment in it, even if you don’t like it.

This happens gradually, in stages. The initially annoying bits

*If I said I want your body now*

*Would you hold it against me*  

become the very parts you look forward to most in the song. You quote lines like “No lead in our zeppelin!” as if they are hoary oaths. In the car, I steel myself against hearing the same song yet again, but once it starts, I feel oddly elated. Melody and rhythm are deliciously entwined; in Brill Building songs, melody and rhythm sleep on opposite sides of the bed. The beats produce delightful vibrations in the sternum. And the hooks deliver the aural equivalent of what the snack-food industry calls the “bliss point”—when the rhythm, sound, melody, and harmony converge to create a single ecstatic moment, one felt more in the body than the head.

At the PS 234 graduation the following summer, there was a DJ in the schoolyard who played Kesha, Pink, Rihanna—the whole posse of post-aught pop stars. And because I knew the music, I had a great time dancing. I outdid myself twirling around to Chris Brown’s “Forever” with one of the younger moms, while the Boy looked on, mortified.

What can I say? Ordinary domestic life needs its bliss points, those moments of transcendence throughout the day—that just-behind-the-eyelids sense of quivering possibility that at any moment the supermarket aisle might explode into candy-colored light. The hooks promise that pleasure. But the ecstasy is fleeting, and like snack food it leaves you feeling unsatisfied, always craving just a little more.

2 | **A Continuity of Hits**

*Clive Davis has* a way of pronouncing the word “hits.” If the word occurs in the course of conversation, as it always does, the record man will huff it out, like a lion.

“I’m talking about HITS!” he barks in his curious Brooklyn-by-way-of-Bond-Street accent. It’s 2014, and Davis, who is the chief creative officer of Sony Music, has been talking about hits for fifty years, ever since he started at CBS Records as a music attorney in the mid-'60s. For a record man like Davis, hits are the whole ball game. A pop star is nothing without a hit, and a pop career depends on a “continuity of hits,” a favorite Davis phrase.

Of course, there have been swings in popular taste over Davis’s career. The pure pop center he aims for has periodically been purged by new, edgier styles, which, in turn, eventually become absorbed into the mainstream too, usually on a ten-year cycle. Teen tastes, which pop music has historically served, are the most fickle of all. But through all the cyclical changes, there have always been hits. Hits are the strait gate through which all the money, fame, and buzz passes on its way to heaven. Ninety percent of the revenues in the record business come from ten percent of the songs.

A recorded song has two principal sets of rights—the publishing and the master recording. The publishing covers the copyright of the composition, and the master is the sound-recording copyright. The master is the real estate; the publishing is the mineral rights under the land, and the air rights. In addition there are mechanical royalties, which are based on sales, and performance royalties, for when a song is played or performed in public, including on the radio. There are also synchronization rights, for use of a song in a commercial, ball game, TV show, or movie. In some countries (though not in the United States), there are neighboring rights, which are granted to non-authors who are closely connected to the song, such as the performers. The system is ridiculously complicated, as it’s supposed to be. It takes a music attorney like Davis to understand all the complexities in royalties payments. Labels have lots of them.

A smash hit not only makes the songwriters a bundle on radio spins, it also moves the album, which generally benefits the label, and sells tickets to the world tour, which is how the artists make most of their money. A historic smash can be worth hundreds of millions for the rights holders over the term of its copyright, which, depending on
when the song was composed, is the life of its composers plus fifty or sixty years. “Stairway to Heaven” alone was said to have earned its rights holders more than half a billion dollars by 2008.

With so much dough potentially at stake, it is no surprise the hits are the source of hard dealings and dark deeds. In the old days, artists were induced to give away the publishing rights of their hits, which ended up being worth more than the records. Today, a top artist can insist on a full share of the publishing even though they had nothing to do with writing the song. (“Change a word, get a third,” the writers call this practice.) “The music business is a cruel and shallow money trench, a long plastic hallway where thieves and pimps run free, and good men die like dogs,” Hunter S. Thompson famously wrote, and that’s how the hits have always been accounted for. (Thompson added, “There’s also a negative side.”)

Does it make sense, this all-or-nothing way of doing business, in which one song becomes all the rage and ten equally worthy songs are ignored, for reasons that no one entirely understands? As Clive Davis’s former boss, the chairman of the Bertelsmann Music Group, Rolf Schmidt-Holtz, stated back in 2003, “We need reliable calculations of returns that are not based solely on hits because the way people get music doesn’t go with hits anymore. We have to get rid of the lottery mentality.” When Jason Flom, a top record man then at Atlantic Records, heard Schmidt-Holtz’s remarks, he looked stunned. “That ain’t gonna happen,” he told me at the time. “If anything, hits are more important than ever, because stars can emerge practically overnight on a global scale. The day we stop seeing hits is the day people stop buying records.”

That day has arrived. The selling of records, which sustained the business for more than half a century, and made fortunes for a few record men, is coming to an end. David Geffen sold his label (Geffen) to MCA for more than $550 million in 1990, and Richard Branson sold Virgin to EMI for $960 million in 1992. And in 2001 Clive Calder’s BMG-Zomba deal earned him $2.7 billion—placing the capstone on humankind’s ability to make money from hits. But ever since Napster set music free in 1998, the customer has been able to get any hit he wants without paying for it. This presents a problem, if you’re Clive Davis or Jason Flom, because making hits, as we will see, can be very expensive. “What would happen if shoppers had the option to get groceries or furniture for free?” Flom asks. “Those businesses would have to adapt rapidly, just as we’ve had to do.”

Even on the legal streaming services, such as Spotify, music consumption is “frictionless”—a favorite word of techies. It means—well, not “free” exactly, but at least unburdened by the inconvenience of purchasing a product. You’ve gone from a world of scarcity to one of abundance. Nothing is for sale, because everything is available. For both the pirates and the paying subscribers, buying records is rapidly becoming a thing of the past. And yet the hits go on and on.

In The Long Tail, the 2005 techno-utopian argument for the coming triumph of niches in popular culture, author Chris Anderson posits that hits are a scarcity-based phenomenon. Record stores have limited shelf space, he explains, and records that move 10,000 units are more profitable to stock than records that move 10. But on the Internet, shelf space is infinite, and therefore record companies don’t need to focus so much of their business on making hits. They can make money from the long tail of the artistic middle class—artists with small but loyal followings who will never be heard on CHR. Collectively these fans comprise what Anderson calls an “unseen majority,” a “market that rivals the hits.”

“If the twentieth-century entertainment industry was about hits, the twenty-first will be equally about niches,” Anderson declares early in the book. Using data from Rhapsody, an early streaming music subscription service, Anderson foresees the coming age of the “micro-hit.” He writes, “This is not a fantasy. It is the emerging state of music today.” Among other things, this means that the cool indie music that thinking people like Anderson and his friends like will finally have a fighting chance against “manufactured” boy bands that appeal to the teen masses.

A long-tail record economy threatens the very vocation of the record man. Why bother to take on the risk of making hits, and endure the far more numerous failures, when the labels can make as much money licensing their back catalogue of hits, which are already paid for, so that the money goes straight to the company’s bottom line? The record label of the future will be like a 1-800 number, Flom says sarcastically. “Dial one for pop, dial two for the blues.”

But that’s not what happened. Not even close. Nine years after The Long Tail, the hits are bigger than ever. Of the 13 million songs available for purchase in 2008, 52,000 made up 80 percent of the industry’s revenue. Ten million of those tracks failed to sell a single copy. Today, 77 percent of the profits in the music business are accumulated by 1 percent of the artists. Even Eric Schmidt, the CEO of Google and an early supporter of long-tail theory, changed his mind. “Although the tail is very interesting, and we enable it, the vast majority of the revenue remains in the head,” he said in a 2008 interview with McKinsey, the management consulting firm. “In fact, it’s probable that the Internet will lead to larger blockbusters, more concentration of brands.” In her 2014 book Blockbusters, Harvard Business School professor Anita Elberse showed how mega hits have become more...
important across the whole entertainment industry. “Smart executives bet heavily on a few likely winners. That’s where the big payoffs come from,” she writes.

The long tail is a lovely concept—more prosperity for a larger number of artists—and it makes sense in the tech world, where it is an article of faith that the fundamental logic of networks will foster a meritocracy. But the music business doesn’t work logically, and merit doesn’t always matter. Power, fear, and greed are the laws of the land.

How did the hits survive such severely disruptive forces as free music and infinite shelf space? There are many different reasons, some of which are discussed at length in the following pages. Specialized teams of songwriter-producers employ a method of composition I call track-and-hook to make songs that are almost irresistible. Record labels have figured out how to orchestrate demand for top artists like Katy Perry and Rihanna, relying on their close alliance and long history with commercial radio. And the public, given the ability to call up any song they choose, still wants to listen to what everyone else is playing.

It’s telling that so many recent hits have been written by a Swede, Max Martin, and his Swedish-trained collaborators. The distinction between R&B and pop, which in the United States has as much to do with race as with music, is less pronounced in Sweden, a more racially homogenous country. Beginning with the Backstreet Boys and extending through major hits for Britney Spears and ’N Sync, Kelly Clarkson, Katy Perry, Kesha, and Taylor Swift, Max Martin and his fellow Swedish writers and producers have created a genre-bursting hybrid: pop music with a rhythmic R&B feel. Their foreign-ness to English and American music allows them to inhabit, and in certain ways co-opt, different genres—R&B, rock, hip-hop—and convert them to mainstream pop using working methods developed in Stockholm in the ’90s at a place called Cheiron Studios, where the song machine begins.

3 | Inside the Box

ONE DAY IN 1992, a demo tape addressed to Denniz PoP, a twenty-eight-year-old DJ, arrived at a Stockholm-based music company called SweMix.

So Californian-looking he could only be Swedish, Dag Krister Volle—Denniz PoP’s given name; friends called him Dagge—wore his long blond hair with plenty of volumizer, loosely parted in the middle, Jon Bon Jovi—style, a reminder that the New Jersey rocker had started his career as a hairdresser. When it hung down in his eyes, as it usually did, Denniz would blow upward, puffing aside hair strands with wheezy gouts of smoky breath; he always had a Marlboro Menthol going. “Maybe two hundred and fifty times a day he’d do that,” says Kristian Lundin, one of his later protégés, who Denniz called “Krille” (Dagge was big on nicknames). Denniz dressed like a teenager, in T-shirts and jeans, or in large green military-style trousers, and hoodies, everything worn loose. Seated in front of his Apple computer—he always had the latest Macs—his cigarette would stick straight up between the fingers of his right hand as he moved the mouse. He had a licentious-looking gap between his two front teeth that showed when he smiled. And he was always smiling.

SweMix was located in the soundproofed basement of a building on Kocksgatan street, in Södermalm. It was a collective of ten Swedish DJs led by RenéHedemyr, who as JackMaster Fax spun records at Tramps, one of the city’s biggest discos. When they weren’t in the studio or working a club, most of them clerked at the Vinyl Mania record store in Vasagatan, close to the Stockholm train station. “They were all a bit cocky,” Jan Gradvall, a prominent Swedish music journalist, remembers. “I was always a little nervous when shopping there. A bit like High Fidelity but with dance music.” Apart from René and Denniz, the best known of the SweMix DJs was Sten Hallström, who goes by the name StoneBridge and is still active in Stockholm.

At Ritz, Stockholm’s premier dance club, Denniz was much in demand as a DJ. Unlike his SweMix colleagues, who spun house and acid house at the Bar Club—as Thursday nights at Ritz were called—Denniz loved funk and soul. Parliament-Funkadelic, Cameo; “anything with a funky bass line Denniz loved,” says Lundin. StoneBridge says, “I grew up with Chic and Nile Rodgers, but Denniz was never into disco; he was a bit younger than us.” In 1986, when Hedemyr showed up with a stack of house records he’d gotten from Stax in Chicago, Denniz didn’t like it; it threatened the funk and soul that was his true love. StoneBridge adds, “Denniz also hated jazz. It wasn’t simple enough. He liked chords you could play with three fingers. Whenever I would play my complicated jazzy chords, Denniz would make a face. That was the thing that drew him to pop—the simplicity of it.” Denniz much preferred the synth-pop bands coming out of London in the early ’80s—Depeche Mode, Human
League, OMD. He also adored Def Leppard, especially the production work by superproducer Mutt Lange. As Jan Gradvall notes, “Def Leppard were used as a blueprint when they made their own Swedish pop/R&B-mashups.”

In 1987, Denniz was in the booth at Ritz one night in November, that month Stockholm descends into its long winter darkness, when on the club’s small stage, for the first time ever in Sweden, Public Enemy appeared, in their trademark military uniforms, followed by LL Cool J. Gradvall, who was also in the club that night (in later years virtually every significant music figure in Sweden would claim to have been in the club that night) recalls, “It was like seeing the light: visual proof that exciting music didn’t have to be played on guitars, bass, and drums, but with only a Technics 1200,” a high-fidelity turntable favored by DJs.

SweMix remixed US and UK hits for European audiences, working largely by hand. StoneBridge says, “The very first mixes were pure edits with added samples. Then, about 1987 we got various take-outs from the original mix session tapes. It could be drums and vocal or dubby parts, but still the original music. We still had very limited sampling time, but sometimes there were a cappellas on the vinyl and we simply synced them manually.”

“We sat and cut by hand, razor blades and stuff like that, and spliced the songs in real ’80s fashion,” Denniz said in an interview in the mid-’90s:

Nowadays we use digital, but when we first started it was tape that you’d measure. You took the tape in your hand and then you’d just listen. Tuk, tuk, tuk. OK there’s the first stroke. Then you’d manually fast forward until you found the second stroke, and mark the tape . . . then fold the tape in the middle and made a line where you ended up, which gave you a half rhythm or half stroke. Fold it one more time and you got one quarter. If you were really talented you could do one eighth. Then you’d take a bunch of different strokes, sounds or yells, and cut these incredibly small segments into different formats. Finally it turns into long segments of sounds —drrrr tuk tuk tuk tang-eeeeee—typical ’80s hysterical sounds . . . You’d sit with tape parts around your neck, meters and meters all with little notes jotted down on them, like, ‘kick backwards,’ and then you’d take a chance and cut them together with Scotch tape. If I were to do the same thing now, I’d do it on the computer. It’s a completely different thing.

Some of the mixes merely extended songs for dancers by adding instrumental sections and long drum breaks, like Tom Moulton’s pioneering disco remixes at the Sandpiper Club on Fire Island a decade earlier. But Denniz got far more creative than that, as in his remix of Soul II Soul’s track “Keep On Movin’,” which he combined with Donna Summer’s “Love to Love You Baby,” creating a sort of proto-mashup. He slowed down the tempo of Michael Jackson’s “Billie Jean” (without changing the key, which is hard to do), and he rearranged Philip Oakey’s and Susan Ann Sulley’s voices in Human League’s 1981 smash “Don’t You Want Me,” to create more of a dialogue between the man and the woman. He would often debut his sonic concoctions at Ritz, from where they would make their way around clubs in Sweden, then to Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy. Eventually, twelve-inch “white label” vinyl discs would be offered for sale, which was how SweMix made money.

Remixing was a lucrative and growing business, but that success had kindled larger ambitions in Denniz. Instead of merely remixing US and UK hits for Europeans, he dreamed about making his own hits. “In the end,” he said, “you have remade an original song so much that you’ve now made your own song and just added the vocals from the original. And that’s where the idea that, ‘Dammit now we can make our own song!’ came from.” He would regale his fellow SweMix DJs with his vision of the gold and platinum records from the UK and the United States that would one day decorate the walls of the studio, signaling Sweden’s global power in pop music. No one believed him.

THE ‘80S WERE A good time to be in the record business. The post-disco doldrums were over, and the modern music “industry” was about to explode. In 1983, the president of PolyGram, Jan Timmer, introduced what he hoped would become the new platform for the sale of recorded music—the compact disc—at a recording-industry convention in Miami. On a CD, music takes the form of digital strings of ones and zeros, which are encoded on specially treated plastic disks. The high-tech allure of the CD would allow the industry to raise the cost of an album from $8.98 to $15.98 (even though CDs were soon cheaper to manufacture than vinyl records), and the record companies got to keep a larger share of money. The industry would even persuade artists not to raise royalty rates, arguing that the extra money was needed to market the new format to customers.
Sure enough, in spite of costing almost twice as much, CDs turned out to be extremely popular with record buyers. Fans who already owned music on vinyl dutifully replaced their records with CDs. By the early ’90s hit albums on CD were selling in far greater numbers than hit albums on vinyl had sold. CDs also turned out to be a brilliant way of repackaging a label’s catalogue—all the recordings that were no longer in production on vinyl. CDs spawned a generation of record executives whose skill was in putting together compilations of existing music rather than in discovering new artists. Through the stock market crash of 1987 and the recession of the early ’90s, the CD market grew steadily.

But these thin plastic disks, which brought so much treasure to record labels, were the seeds of their downfall. Because digitized songs had to be compatible both with CD players and computers (CDs would soon replace floppy disks as the standard storage medium), they weren’t copy-protected. Songs could be “ripped” from the labels’ CDs and “burned” onto blank CDs with home computers. Homemade CD compilations didn’t pose any greater threat to the music business than homemade tapes had. But when it became possible to compress these digitized song files into much smaller packets of bits known as MP3s, and share them over the Internet, the record business would face its extinction.

“GIMME SOME MO’ (Bass on Me)” is the first track to have “Denniz PoP” listed as the artist. PoP was a double entendre: an acronym for “Prince of Pick-ups,” which was a reference to his prowess with a stylus arm, and also a sardonic jibe at his colleagues’ rarefied musical tastes. “During that time ‘pop’ was almost like a swear word,” he said in a 1998 interview with Anders Löwstedt on Swedish Radio. “Everything was hip-hop and break, and you weren’t allowed to say ‘pop.’ It was no fun at all.” And Dagge was all about fun. So “I took ‘Denniz’ from the cartoon character”—Dennis the Menace, whose refusal to do anything that didn’t strike him as fun echoed Dagge’s spirit—“and then I just added Pop to that. And now I’ve had to live with it. Overseas they only call me “Denniz.” But here, ‘Ah, Mr. Pop!’ is what I get when I register at the hotel under that name.”

End of this sample Kindle book.

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