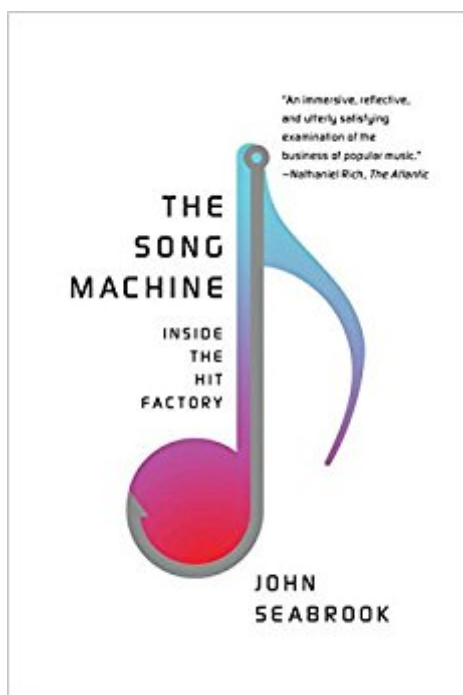


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# The Song Machine: Inside The Hit Factory



## Synopsis

“An utterly satisfying examination of the business of popular music.”

Nathaniel Rich, *The Atlantic*

Over the last two decades a new type of hit song has emerged, one that is almost inescapably catchy. Pop songs have always had a "hook," but today's songs bristle with them: a hook every seven seconds is the rule. Painstakingly crafted to tweak the brain's delight in melody, rhythm, and repetition, these songs are highly processed products. Like snack-food engineers, modern songwriters have discovered the musical "bliss point." And just like junk food, the bliss point leaves you wanting more.

In *The Song Machine*, longtime *New Yorker* staff writer John Seabrook tells the story of the massive cultural upheaval that produced these new, super-strength hits. Seabrook takes us into a strange and surprising world, full of unexpected and vivid characters, as he traces the growth of this new approach to hit-making from its obscure origins in early 1990s Sweden to its dominance of today's *Billboard* charts. Journeying from New York to Los Angeles, Stockholm to Korea, Seabrook visits specialized teams composing songs in digital labs with new "track-and-hook" techniques. The stories of artists like Katy Perry, Britney Spears, and Rihanna, as well as expert songsmiths like Max Martin, Stargate, Ester Dean, and Dr. Luke, *The Song Machine* shows what life is like in an industry that has been catastrophically disrupted—spurring innovation, competition, intense greed, and seductive new products. Going beyond music to discuss money, business, marketing, and technology, *The Song Machine* explores what the new hits may be doing to our brains and listening habits, especially as services like Spotify and Apple Music use streaming data to gather music into new genres invented by algorithms based on listener behavior. Fascinating, revelatory, and original, *The Song Machine* will change the way you listen to music.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Through immersive anecdotes and witty observations, Seabrook explores questions of ownership and taste, and about the music business as a whole, as we learn it’s not just the song machine that’s brilliant but also the people churning the gears.” - Isabella Biedenharn, Entertainment Weekly

“Well researched.” - Tour of Soul, New York Times Book Review

“Fascinating.” | lively, entertaining and often insightful, of interest both to pop mavens and to those who couldn’t imagine caring about the latest hits.” - Christopher Carroll, Wall Street Journal

“Fascinating.” | Copy editors will rejoice at Seabrook’s well-written and deeply researched book. He is a staff writer for The New Yorker and his book fits into that magazine’s penchant for telling very detailed stories about things you might not notice about pop culture.” - Charles R. Cross, Seattle Times

“A fascinating history, one that encompasses everything from the Brill Building and Phil Spector to Afrika Bambaataa to American Idol.” Running underneath the human stories like a bassline is the inexorable flow of technology.” - Kate Tuttle, Boston Globe

“Invaluable.” - Louis Bayard, Washington Post

“A revelatory ear-opener.” - Kirkus Reviews, Starred Review

“Brilliant.” - Michael Hann, The Guardian

John Seabrook has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 1993. The author of several books including *Nobrow*, he has taught narrative nonfiction writing at Princeton University. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

This book is a truly excellent overview of the current "hit factory" behind today's pop music. In all of this: history, movements, immediate affects, and some juicy stories, it's fantastic. What it isn't, really, is deeply insightful into what all this means for music as an art-form, nor for artists themselves. Each time an insight comes ('it's noticeable that Taylor Swifts 1989 is her first album that could have been sung by anyone') it passes without any real reflection on this. What does this mean? How does an artist speak in this factory and is it even possible? Were genuine artists ever speaking in popular music? Presumably so. What made those times so different? Was it just album sales? Etc...Also,

there is really only a passing mention of what it all means for actual musicians. Of course there's the standard "this is dying" stuff - but how are people adapting? What possibilities are there? And look, are any of these guys even good musicians? Dr Luke's utterly laughable analysis of a melody: Is that really the height of what the creatives know about music? It doesn't seem so, but then there's this final thing that isn't analysed: None of these people - not the singers, not the labels, not the producers - are actually trying to make good music. They are trying to make "hot products" that will by nature flare up temporarily and then make way for the next thing. This is the opposite of an artist, isn't it? So, while really enjoying this book, I wish there had been a lot more along these lines...

Beats? I'll confess as someone moderately capable on guitar and generally familiar with the heyday singer songwriter era of the 60's and 70's, I've heard the term bantered around but never understood it. From reading Mr. Seabrook's book I come to learn it's the computer generated drum beat that serves as the foundation to all modern pop, r&b, and rap songs. We've come a long ways from the Beatles, CSN and James Taylor. But as the author so eloquently explains, the more things change the more things stay the same in the music business. We're essentially back to the Brill Building/Phil Spector era where the artist, though perhaps rich and famous, is secondary to the production team. Not everyone appears to like it - see chapter on Kesha. Still no one can argue; the creation of hit music has become incredibly efficient. Mr. Seabrook tells a fun and fascinating tale that will please both music industry followers and non-followers equally.

I found this book to be extremely interesting. I am a little younger than John Seabrook but my dynamic with pop music is similar. I am a huge 40-something music fan who has been thrown back into "contemporary hits radio" via my kids emerging tastes. I was pretty unaware of the change in how pop music is currently made and this book unveils it all, especially interesting are the producers who make it all happen - Dennis POP (RIP), Dr. Luke, Max Martin and on. The book does a great job of being both a history lesson, a culture study with a bit of how-to manual thrown in. Who knew that most of what we hear on pop radio is produced by a collaborative of beat makers, "topliners", hook writers, bridge writers all under the watchful eye of these genius producers who get it all ready for the high wattage star to walk into that recording booth and DELIVER. Does an instrument ever get played in these studios? Kind of, it quickly becomes 1s and 0s in the song machine where the real magic happens. Very interesting.

I enjoyed learning about how pop tunes are constructed for the mega stars (and soon to be stars).

The author explains how endless combinations of hooks and bridges are toyed with by multiple talented people to construct songs. The industry is full of risk and randomness, and the formula's are constantly changing. I learned a lot from this book. Many of the artists in this book appeal to the mass market. I enjoy listening to the mega stars on movie soundtracks and on Youtube, but I am not their audience. N'Sync, Britney, Rihanna (fascinating story), and Jay Z songs, are fun to listen to with friends, dance to at weddings, and chant along with during loud basketball games. This is not the music that gets my undivided attention. Mega Pop Stars's attract a huge audience, and I give them credit for their accomplishments. There are certain bands who I can listen to over and over, year after year. Arcade Fire, Of Monsters and Men, BabyMetal, Bring Me the Horizon, Sigur Ros, early Bowie and Queen, Pink Floyd, and Radiohead, come to mind. These bands are my day to day soundtrack. I love songs that age well over time. I hope John does a follow up book on the alternative music business. He is an excellent writer.

Superbly written and researched, this book is a wonderful addition to the modern music literature. The writer, for the first time ever, goes deep into the hitherto hidden and little known industry behind the music hits to reveal the often surprising and shocking truths. We all know that the industry has evolved since the 80s and 90s but these changes are little known to outsiders. There has been seismic changes in terms of the music industry structure, the balance of power and in the music production that were kept hidden from the general public and the fans. Reading this book will open your eyes wide and you'll never see or hear a hit song the same way again.

Great insight into the current music making machine. Scary how controlled and orchestrated the music scene has grown over the years. The boy bands, the girls bands, kpop, Clarkston, Rihanna its all in here. Who really is writing the hits you love to hear? Why do you love to hear them? I feel like a laboratory rat being fed against my will. Good book, bought the audio version to listen to in the car while traveling, instead of the machine of the airwaves.

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