

# The Art of the Hook in Pop Music



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# PREFACE

Welcome to The Art of the Hook. This book is first and foremost a celebration of pop music, exploring the creativity and craft behind the hits. It attempts to answer a fundamental question — What makes a pop song so appealing and memorable? This topic may be of interest to a wide range of music lovers, including everyone from casual listeners to devoted fans of a particular artist or genre. However, Art of the Hook is intended primarily as a textbook for music students, and it will speak most obviously to songwriters and producers who want to broaden their audience and achieve more commercial success.

The book will present a detailed discussion of how pop and rock hits are constructed, particularly the creation of hook phrases and focal points. Over 125 song examples will illustrate specific **focal point devices**, covering all aspects of music, including rhythm, melody, harmony, form, and timbre. It should be noted that the focus will be primarily on musical elements rather than lyrics. There is no doubt that lyrics are very important in pop songwriting, and they will be mentioned occasionally. But there are already several books and websites that do a great job with lyric writing. In contrast, not as much has been written about the music itself, so the discussion here will be mainly on the music.

For songwriting students, most of the focal point devices in this book do not require an advanced knowledge of music theory to be understood. However, there will be a few that assume a basic acquaintance with fundamentals like the major scale and diatonic triads. Roman numeral analysis will be included for all chord progressions in chapters three through eight, mainly to aid in recognizing the dominant V to I cadences at most focal points. In some songs, non-diatonic chords (secondary doms, modal interchange, dim7, etc.) will occasionally be found. A detailed knowledge of these may be helpful, but it is not necessary for understanding our main topic of hooks and focal points. All these terms and concepts can be found in the companion textbooks Spinning Gold, Vol. 1 and 2, available on the website [learnpoptheory.com](http://learnpoptheory.com)

Art of the Hook is the culmination of 20 years of personal research, based on an original database created from analysis of over 4,200 chart hits. Songs were equally sampled across seven decades of pop music history, including roughly 60 hits from each year 1955 to 2025. All songs made at least the top 40 of either the Billboard singles or album charts in a variety of genres. Thanks to this wealth of information, topics throughout the book are backed up with numerous playlists for additional listening.

As you progress through any music book with some theoretical analysis, it's possible to become overloaded with numbers — think of trying to memorize a major 7th chord as 1, 3, 5, 7, or a minor scale as 1, 2, b3, 4, 5, b6, b7, or the doowop progression as I - VI<sup>m</sup> - IV - V, etc., etc. In fact, music is often compared to mathematics. However, the crucial difference is that numbers in music are connected to emotions, thanks to the existence of musical tension and resolution. For example, the roman numeral V (dominant chord), or the 7th degree of the major scale (leading tone) usually represent a feeling of tension, and the number 1 represents a feeling of “home base” or resolution in both scales and chord progressions. Therefore, music theory should ultimately be experienced as a feeling, not just numbers.

Pop songwriters typically exploit this emotional quality, creating focal points or “hooks” that grab the listener’s attention — the tension peaks at the end of one section (verse or pre-chorus) and resolves at the beginning of the next section (usually a chorus). Art of the Hook clearly explains the numerous musical devices that can be used to create tension and memorable focal points, making the numbers truly come alive.

One final note — please use good quality headphones or speakers to listen to the song examples. If you use a laptop with no headphones or added external speakers, you will not hear all the music, especially the important bass line and kick drum, which are the foundations of the harmony and rhythm.

Best wishes on your musical journey,

Tom Schneider