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Hooked

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HOOKED

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VASSAR COLLEGE
MEDIA STUDIES
APRIL 24, 2015

LISTEN AT [HTTP://SOUNDCLOUD.COM/HOOKEDPODCAST](http://soundcloud.com/hookedpodcast)

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Introduction: Why A Podcast?

Different media create different kinds of audiences. They turn us into spectators, into readers, into listeners, manipulating our relationship with the information that they are trying to convey depending on what kind of engagement they require from us. Thus, when a medium re-presents information that was once contained in another medium, it can completely change our relationship to that information; the same underlying material gains new potential to push some information aside in order to highlight new ideas. *Hooked* employs this methodology of re-presentation by reconsidering the predominantly text-based discussion of what makes music catchy in the medium of a podcast in an effort to illuminate new ways of thinking about the subject.

The majority of academic work on what makes music catchy forces its audience to become readers in order to understand a concept that begins at the level of audition. The textual media of books and articles dominate the field; some online articles on the subject include hypertext, embedded videos, or audio files that connect their discussion with musical examples, but this extra-textual information is easily overlooked as supplementary and inessential to their discussions, ornamentations rather than arguments in and of themselves. The incompatibility of sound within physical textual media and the secondary nature of sound within virtual textual media free books and articles about catchiness to explore the phenomenon from a language-based, analytical perspective that tends to favor discussion of the role of the individual by way of the social, the cultural, the psyche, and the brain, over the role of the musical in uncovering what makes music catchy.

Using this generally person-centric approach, textual media have managed to make tremendous strides in furthering our understanding of the listener as a mediator between a piece

of music and the perception of that music as catchy, their use of language mimicking the processes of thought and interpretation that they are often trying to illuminate. But while the listener does play a significant role in determining whether or not a piece of music is catchy, they cannot ever reach this conclusion without engaging with the medium of music. It is at the intersection of these two media, the listener and the music that they hear, that we might begin to uncover new insight into how a piece of music ultimately achieves the distinction of “catchy.”

Hooked takes root in this intersectional area of catchiness by expressing itself primarily as a podcast. This auditory medium with the capacity to consolidate the seemingly disparate media of text and music into the shared medium of sound inevitably transforms its audience into listeners, resulting in the potential for an engagement with the concept of catchiness that is entirely unique from that offered by its text-based kin. A podcast can demonstrate concepts in real time, walking a listener through nuanced ideas step by step while lining the journey with temporal examples ranging from the voice to the heartbeat, from a Bach piece to a Justin Bieber song, all without breaking argumentative flow. It can employ the power of framing to imbue musical information with multiple meanings such that repeating the same section of the same Taylor Swift song in various contexts can support arguments about topics ranging from timbre to culture, from melody to Swift herself. *Hooked* literally places person-centric, generally text-based approaches to understanding what makes music catchy into conversation with musical information. And as the podcast’s audience listens to this conversation between listener and music, they become active participants in the production of catchiness, conscious contributors to the construction that they are trying to understand.

Hooked is not an answer key, but a toolbox. It activates physics, neuroscience, psychology, musicology, music theory, culture theory, and media studies through sound, laying

the foundation for a framework and methodology for understanding catchiness that can be applied to any and all types of music, from that which has already been created to that which is yet to come. Comprised of four podcasts (available at <http://soundcloud.com/hookedpodcast>), the scripts on which those podcasts are based, and four short, semi-formal meta-narratives that reflect on the process and experience of crafting each podcast, *Hooked* implores those who wish to understand what makes music catchy to listen.

Script for “Episode 1: Introduction/Listener As Hook”

[The chorus to “Blank Space” by Taylor Swift fades in, lowers in volume as speech enters]

We use the word “catchy” to describe a song that gets stuck in our heads, but why do these songs get stuck in our heads in the first place? What actually makes music catchy? Hi, I’m Jeremy Katzenstein, and you’re listening to *Hooked*, a podcast that deconstructs recorded music into physical, social, and cultural hooks in an effort to uncover what produces its overall catchiness. The following episode marks the first in a series of four episodes that will specifically explore the song “Blank Space” by Taylor Swift as a site for catchiness. This episode functions as an introduction to the series.

[The volume of “Blank Space” rises again, plays momentarily, and fades out completely as speech enters]

Whenever we hear a piece of music, we are unavoidably listening with the ears of someone who has heard thousands upon thousands of pieces of music.^{1 2} The film score from a movie we just watched [play “Main Theme” from *Star Wars*], the song that we heard over the intercom at the grocery store [play “You’ll Be In My Heart” by Phil Collins], the song our housemate won’t stop playing at an ungodly volume in the next room [play “Anaconda” by Nicki Minaj], and any other music that we’ve ever heard ever, can all contribute to the construction of a massive mental

¹ Steven Feld, “Communication, Music, and Speech About Music,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 16 (1984): 8, accessed October 16, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/768199>.

² Daniel J. Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music* (New York: Dutton, 2006), 115.

library of musical tropes pertaining to melody, style, distribution, and more, especially if we hear any of this music repeatedly.^{3 4}

These musical tropes that we internalize comprise the foundation of our personal musical schemas, metaphorical boxes full of musical knowledge and experience that we draw from in order to engage with and connect with any music that we encounter in the world around us.⁵

While these schemas have the potential to vary greatly from one to the next depending on personal experience, the media outlets through which the majority of music travels allow for the creation of a largely shared knowledge and experience of much of the music we encounter in our daily lives; radio, commercials, films, and other media forms all contribute to the construction of a shared experience in which never hearing something like the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony [play the opening seconds of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony] becomes more of an anomaly than a reasonable lapse in musical knowledge.^{6 7} So even though our personal musical schemas theoretically *can* vary greatly from one to the next, they generally do not, at least among people living within the same cultural jurisdiction. This jurisdiction can be bounded by age, gender, class, race, geographic location, and more.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Tom Barnes, "How The Music Industry Is Brainwashing You to Like Bad Pop Songs," *Brain.Mic*, last modified August 4, 2014, <http://mic.com/articles/95260/how-the-music-industry-is-brainwashing-you-to-like-bad-pop-songs>.

⁵ Ibid., 112, 114.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ J. Mark Percival, "Music Radio and the Record Industry: Songs, Sounds, and Power," *Popular Music and Society* 34, no. 4 (2011): 464, accessed September 21, 2014, doi: 10.1080/03007766.2011.601598.

But while the cores of our personal musical schemas are comprised largely of similar musical knowledge and experience, the ways in which we grow our personal musical schemas outward from these uniform cores is a very personal process.⁸ The shared aspects of our personal musical schemas provide us with the tools for connecting with any style of music on a shallow level, but we require a specific, intimate knowledge of a genre's stylistic and cultural tropes in order to connect with any music that we encounter on a deeper level.⁹ Just because we're familiar with the role of a guitar solo in a traditional pop song, for example, doesn't mean that we're guaranteed to be able to fully appreciate the virtuosity of Van Halen's "Eruption" [play "Eruption" by Van Halen; volume lowers, but continues playing as speech reenters]. That kind of appreciation requires a context that we have to create for ourselves, maybe by listening extensively to 80s hair metal, maybe even by having experience with playing the guitar. Thus, our personal musical schemas are actually simultaneously personal and interpersonal, deriving from both personally created and collectively constructed musical knowledge and experience.

[“Eruption” returns to full volume, then fades out after a few moments as speech reenters]

Appealing to a listener's personal musical schema from any angle functions as a very powerful hook, as our ability to form connections with a piece of music, whether it be on a conscious or unconscious level, significantly affects how likely we are to find that piece of music catchy.¹⁰

⁸ Feld, "Communication, Music, and Speech About Music," 8.

⁹ Simon Frith, "What Is Good Music?" *Canadian University Music Review* 10, no. 2 (1990): 98, accessed September 17, 2014, doi: 10.7202/1014887ar.

Consequently, appealing to a listener's personal musical schema and then defying their expectations that result from that personal schema arguably functions as an even more powerful hook, surprising and exciting the listener in a way that we perceive to be catchy.¹¹

[play "Blank Space" from the beginning; volume lowers and fades as speech reenters]

So, whether we are hearing a song like "Blank Space" for the very first time or for the hundredth time, we are engaging our personal musical schemas in order to form connections with and comprehend what we are listening to. However, listening to a song for the first time and listening to a song for the hundredth time are admittedly completely different experiences that engage our personal musical schemas in different ways. Listening to a song like "Blank Space" for the first time means that the song can only hook our attention by appealing to the musical knowledge and experience that we already have prior to ever hearing the song. If the song can successfully alternate between appealing to our pre-existing musical expectations and defying those expectations, it is very likely that the song will end up hooking our attention and that we will ultimately find the song catchy.

But if we are listening to a song like "Blank Space" for the hundredth time, the song has the added ability of hooking our attention by appealing to what we already know and have already experienced about the song in previous hearings. Instead of facing the task of having to incorporate new musical ideas into our personal musical schemas, listening to a song again

¹⁰ Gino Stefani, "Melody: A Popular Perspective," *Popular Music* 6, no. 1 (1987): 23, accessed September 21, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/853163>.

¹¹ Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, 109.

means reincorporating and reinforcing pre-existing musical knowledge and experience. This actually means that, the more times we hear a song, the more likely we are to find that song catchy¹²; repeated exposures to a song means more opportunities to form connections with that song and more opportunities to familiarize ourselves with that song to the point that it becomes a seamless part of our personal musical schemas.

And now, here is “Blank Space” by Taylor Swift. Whether this is your first time hearing the song or your hundredth time hearing the song, think about how the song succeeds or fails at connecting with you, surprising you, and hooking you in as you listen.

[play “Blank Space” in its entirety]

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Hooked*. For more information about how we engage with and interpret the music that we hear, check out Daniel Levitin’s book *This Is Your Brain on Music* and Steven Feld’s piece “Communication, Music, and Speech About Music.” In our next episode, we focus on melody, how it is used to create hooks, and how it contributes to the overall catchiness of a piece of music.

¹² Barnes, “How The Music Industry Is Brainwashing You to Like Bad Pop Songs,” *Brain.Mic*.

Script for “Episode 2: Melody As Hook”

[The chorus to “Blank Space” by Taylor Swift fades in]

We use the word “catchy” to describe a song that gets stuck in our heads, but why do these songs get stuck in our heads in the first place? What actually makes music catchy? Hi, I’m Jeremy Katzenstein, and you’re listening to “Hooked,” a podcast that deconstructs recorded music into physical, social, and cultural hooks in an effort to uncover what produces its overall catchiness. The following episode marks the second in a series of four episodes that will specifically explore the song “Blank Space” by Taylor Swift as a site for catchiness. In this episode, we focus on what makes Taylor Swift’s vocal melodies catchy.

Melodies are formed by the juxtaposition of two or more pitches in a sequence. This [play one sustained note] is not a melody, but this [play the first note followed by another note] is. Every melody in its most basic form is comprised of three components: pitch, rhythm, and to a more subtle extent, duration. By manipulating any or all of these three components, we can form different kinds of melodies [play some melodies]. Any two melodies that share the same or similar relational sequence of pitches and/or the same or similar rhythm are often perceived as musically related to one another.

Melody becomes a hook when it is able to appeal to or defy our expectations that derive from our personal musical schemas, our metaphorical boxes full of personally created and collectively constructed musical knowledge and experience that we use to engage with and connect with any

music that we hear in the world around us.^{13 14} But given that it is impossible for our personal musical schemas to consist of every possible melody ever, a melody that wants to hook our attention is faced with the task of not only appealing to musical tropes that we are already familiar with, but also contextualizing musical tropes that we may not have experienced before within tropes that we are sure to have already internalized. So in essence, melodies have to teach us how to listen to them in order to effectively hook our attention and for us to ultimately perceive them as catchy.

But even if we're not familiar with every possible melody ever, it is not unreasonable to argue that, as Western music listeners, we have a certain, indisputable, shared foundation of musical knowledge and experience that most of us don't even think of strictly as a musical trope because the concept is so omnipresent and basic. The trope I'm talking about is the Western pitch alphabet and the interval relationships that shape it, the twelve, nearly evenly spaced pitches that are responsible for the entirety of Western music [play the twelve pitches].¹⁵ Nothing about this set of pitches is fundamentally musically "true" or "correct," as demonstrated by the many other styles of music that stem from different cultures that don't compose music using the same sized intervals between pitches. A piece of Javanese or Balinese gamelan music, for instance [gamelan music fades in] is comprised of intervals that do not directly correspond with any intervals that we use in Western music.

¹³ Stefani, "Melody: A Popular Perspective," 23.

¹⁴ Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, 109.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

[gamelan music continues, fades out before next section]

So whenever we as Western music listeners encounter a melody, we listen with the assumption that the melody we are hearing is comprised of some arrangement of these twelve distinctly distributed pitches [play the twelve pitches], to the point that any piece of music that does not completely comply with the Western pitch alphabet will be defying such a fundamental expectation of our personal musical schemas; every melodic scrubbing sound or up-sweep in electronic music [play “Clarity” by Zedd] and every guitar slide [play “Space Cowboy” by Steve Miller Band] is arguably playing with and defying our internalized expectations of pitch relationships in order to hook our attention.

The majority of pieces of Western music are composed using subsets of the Western pitch alphabet called scales. There are as many scales as there are possible subsets of the alphabet’s twelve pitches, but Western music makes use of some scales *much* more often than it makes use of others. For our purposes, we will focus on one such prevalent scale, the major scale, which sounds like this [play a major scale]. It has seven unique pitches, or scale degrees, and the first pitch repeats itself at the top of the scale. We can play a major scale beginning on any pitch, as long as we maintain the same respective interval relationships between every pitch; this means that this [play a major scale in C] and this [play a major scale in A] are both major scales, even though they begin on different pitches. All of the melodies in “Blank Space” by Taylor Swift are composed using notes from one major scale, the F major scale [play an F major scale].

Music theory, an institution that is founded upon the practice of justifying the tropes that comprise Western classical music, and is thus also a reflection of Western music's most basic musical tropes, suggests that every scale degree of the major scale has a specific musical function that exposes itself in the context of any melody that uses that scale. Most of these specific musical functions have to do with how a given scale degree influences a melody's motion towards the first scale degree, which we call the tonic. In the context of a major scale [play F major scale], the tonic sounds like this [play F]. The tonic is far and away the most important scale degree of the major scale, functioning as the tonal center of any piece that uses the major scale as the foundation for its pitch alphabet.

When used in a piece of music, the tonic's function as a tonal center provides the listener with a sense of home and stability. This is why it is extremely common for melodies, especially at the beginning of a piece of music, to start on the tonic pitch and to repeat the tonic pitch throughout in order to keep the listener from getting lost and confused while listening. We hear these sorts of tonic-centric melodies in most types of Western music, from Bach [play "Prelude in C" from Well-Tempered Clavier] to Bieber [play "Baby" by Justin Bieber]. By grounding the listener within one of Western music's most basic musical tropes and appealing to our personal musical schemas in the process, the tonic pitch within the context of a melody has the capacity to hook our attention and make us more likely to perceive the melodic phrase that it is a part of as catchy.¹⁶

[“Baby” continues to play, fades out]

¹⁶ Ibid.

The opening vocal melody in Taylor Swift’s “Blank Space” begins on the tonic pitch [play “nice to meet you where you been”], appealing to our knowledge and experience of the tonic as a prevalent musical trope in order to immediately hook our attention. But the vocal melody in “Blank Space” doesn’t just *start* on the tonic pitch; it also goes on to repeat that tonic pitch seven times in a row, as if it is relentlessly trying to instill in us the importance of the tonic pitch within the context of the song before proceeding any further. This means that, at the same time that “Blank Space” is appealing to our personal musical schemas on a fundamental level with the pitch alphabet of its opening vocal melody, the song is also latching onto this trope of the tonic’s grounding function to highlight certain pitch relationships in order to begin the process of constructing the melodic vocabulary that the song will use throughout its duration.¹⁷

[play “nice to meet you where you been” and have it fade out]

Unlike pitch, which we can reduce to a basic Western musical trope within our personal musical schemas, rhythm is decidedly more difficult, if not impossible, to reduce down to a single trope or set of tropes within Western music. Rhythm has the potential for malleability in a way that pitch does not; while there are only twelve pitch possibilities in Western music, there exists infinitely many rhythmic possibilities. This is because rhythm at its core is just a spatial relationship between sounds across a set period of time, and time is infinitely divisible into smaller and smaller fractions; within the span of a few seconds, one could insert a four beat phrase [play four beat phrase], an eight beat phrase [play eight beat phrase], a sixteen beat phrase

¹⁷ Gary Burns, “A Typology of ‘Hooks’ in Popular Records,” *Popular Music* 6, no. 1 (1987): 8, accessed September 21, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/853162>.

[play a sixteen beat phrase], and still not have even scratched the surface of the rhythmic possibilities contained within that small moment in time. Begin combining the rhythms of these phrases [play a beat that combines the rhythms] and we start to uncover the truly infinite possibilities of rhythm.

Despite its potential for infinite divisibility, this notion of the consistent pulse [play four beat phrase again], a rhythm in which every sound, or small groups of sounds, are equidistant from each other, might be the closest we can get to a universal rhythmic trope that we all readily have access to within our personal musical schemas, as we all literally have these kinds of rhythms internalized in the form of our own heartbeats working at various speeds [play a heartbeat]. Any repeating drum beat [play beginning of “M+M’s” by Blink-182], pulsing bass line [play beginning of “Starlight” by Muse], or staccato piano progression [play beginning of “Losing Lisa” by Ben Folds] might actually be appealing to this universal trope of the heartbeat to hook our attention. Or maybe these are all just more examples of repetition at play, hooking our attention by rewarding our expectations that the same rhythm will continue to occur instead of appealing to any specific characteristics of that rhythm.¹⁸

[play intro to “Blank Space”]

So because rhythms are infinitely malleable, the potential for *any* rhythm to hook our attention relies largely on a rhythm’s ability to establish itself from scratch, contextualize itself, and to

¹⁸ Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, 109.

defy our constructed expectations of that rhythm.^{19 20} We hear this at play in the opening melody of “Blank Space,” where the rhythm of the phrase begins with three identical rhythmic couplets followed by one subtle variation on the established rhythm [play “nice to meet you where you been”]. Using repetition, “Blank Space” teaches us to expect this [play “ta-ta, ta-ta, ta-ta” rhythm] rhythm until the melody goes on to defy this rhythmic expectation within the very same line, hooking the listener in the process.

And this is only the first line of the song. While we *could* continue examining the manner in which “Blank Space” constructs its melodic vocabulary line by line and hooks our attention in the process, and subsequently bore everyone listening to this podcast to tears along the way, we might find it more effective and revealing to explore this construction process at the level of the song’s individual sections; verse, chorus, and bridge, are all just other terms for structural ideas that reflect the successful construction of a melodic vocabulary over time.

As the section of the song that gets repeated the most times, we can feasibly assert that the chorus of “Blank Space” functions as the anchor of the song’s melodic vocabulary, the recurring “review” section of the song that grounds the listener in certain aspects of the song’s melodic vocabulary while introducing its own unique and jarring melodic components in the process. A section that repeats often, and rewards and defies many expectations all at once; no wonder we usually think the chorus is the catchiest part of any song.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid., 115.

²⁰ Burns, “A Typology of ‘Hooks’ in Popular Records,” 6.

[play the chorus to “Blank Space”]

If we’re contextualizing the chorus of “Blank Space” as a sort of review of the essential elements of the song’s melodic vocabulary, then we should be able to locate a one-to-one correspondence between melodies that we hear before the chorus and melodies that we hear within the chorus itself. This is not to say that we should expect melodies to repeat exactly, but instead that we should readily be able to find certain pitch and rhythmic tropes that the song has already established before the chorus within the chorus as well.

In “Blank Space,” this one-to-one correspondence between chorus melody and other melodies first and most prominently occurs between the first few lines of the verse melody [play “nice to meet you where you been”] and the first line of the chorus melody [play “so it’s gonna be forever”]. Not only do the verse and the chorus both begin on the tonic pitch; they also both repeat the tonic pitch many times, six and seven times, respectively, before moving to a new pitch. This congruity reinforces even further the importance of the tonic within the context of “Blank Space” as an anchor of the song’s melodic vocabulary and as a recurring grounding force and hook.

Additionally, the first few lines of the verse melody and the first few lines of the chorus melody in “Blank Space” share a nearly identical pitch alphabet [crossfade first few lines of verse

²¹ Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis, “Why Songs Get Stuck in Our Heads,” *The Atlantic*, January 16, 2014, http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/01/why-songs-get-stuck-in-your-head/282997/?single_page=true.

melody with first few lines of chorus melody]. With the exception of one pitch, both phrases use the same pitches in the same overall contour to construct melodies, positioning the two melodies as somewhat related to one another. This pitch relationship between different sections of the song allows us to form connections with the chorus melody because of its relationship to the verse melody; by rewarding the pitch expectations that the song itself has constructed, “Blank Space” manages to hook our attention and pushes us to perceive the chorus as catchy.²²

The rhythmic consistencies between the chorus melody in “Blank Space” and the melodies that precede it are harder to pin down, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t there; while the melodies that precede the chorus melody are primarily composed of scattered, syncopated rhythms, the latter half of the song’s verse melody consists of straight, pulsing rhythms that reflect the most predominant rhythms in the chorus melody [crossfade latter half of verse melody with latter half of chorus]. These rhythmic consistencies allow us to form connections with the chorus melody because of the verse melody that preceded it; by rewarding the rhythmic expectations that the song itself has constructed, “Blank Space” manages to hook our attention and pushes us to perceive the chorus as catchy.²³

So the melodic vocabulary that “Blank Space” constructs over time definitely contributes significantly to the ultimate catchiness of the song’s chorus melody, but do we really need all this context to perceive this chorus melody as catchy? Time and time again, studies show that the

²² Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, 112.

²³ Ibid.

chorus of a song is far and away the most likely segment of a song to get stuck in our heads²⁴, so is there something special about song choruses independent of the song that they are a part of that make them so able to hook our attention? If we want to explore the notion of an independently catchy chorus further, we need to talk about how melodies exploit the movement between distinct pitches to appeal to our personal musical schemas and to ultimately create hooks.

Melodies can arguably defy our expectations to varying degrees depending on the distance between two pitches in a given melody. Music theory suggests that we tend to perceive any jump between two pitches that is larger than a major second [play a major second] as jarring and unexpected. This arguably means that, the larger the distance from one note to the next, the more jarring we perceive that melodic leap to be, such that this interval [play a perfect fourth], while jarring, is not as jarring as this interval [play a major sixth].

Scientific research and case studies have found that melodies that we perceive to be catchy tend to feature fast runs of pitches that occur close together followed by a leap to a sustained pitch, or vice versa, which sounds something like this [play a run of close pitches followed by a leap].^{25 26}

We can readily hear this type of melody at work in many Top 40 songs, as these songs are

²⁴ Margulis, “Why Songs Get Stuck in Our Heads,” *The Atlantic*.

²⁵ Peter Mercer-Taylor, “Two-and-a-Half Centuries in the Life of a Hook,” *Popular Music and Society* 23, no. 2 (1999): 7, accessed September 21, 2014, doi: 10.1080/03007769908591729.

²⁶ Tom Barnes, “The Science Behind Why This Next Smash Hit Will Get Stuck in Your Head,” *Music.Mic*, last modified May 1, 2014, <http://mic.com/articles/88737/the-science-behind-why-this-next-smash-hit-will-get-stuck-in-your-head>.

expressly designed to hook the attention of their listeners as efficiently and as often as possible [play the pre-chorus of “Problem” by Ariana Grande]. Of course, there are catchy melodies that do not strictly follow this formula. But maybe we can think of this formulaic approach to constructing catchy melodies as a microcosm of a song or any piece of music constructing an extremely simple melodic vocabulary only to defy the expectations set up by that melodic vocabulary moments later, a bite-sized portion of standalone catchiness.²⁷

If we listen to the chorus melody of “Blank Space” again, paying special attention to how the melody moves, we’ll discover that the chorus melody is comprised almost completely of combinations of these quick, close together runs of pitches and leaps to sustained pitches that allow one catchy melody to crossover into the next. With a capacity for catchiness in context and on its own, the chorus melody of “Blank Space” is a force that our personal musical schemas can’t help but engage with.

[play the chorus of “Blank Space”]

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Hooked*. For more information about melody and how we engage with it, check out Daniel Levitin’s book *This Is Your Brain on Music* and Gino Stefani’s piece “Melody: A Popular Perspective.” In our next episode, we look at how the physical sound of a piece of music contributes to the overall catchiness of that piece.

²⁷ Burns, “A Typology of ‘Hooks’ in Popular Records,” 8.

Script for “Episode 3: Sound As Hook”

[The chorus to “Blank Space” by Taylor Swift fades in]

We use the word “catchy” to describe a song that gets stuck in our heads, but why do these songs get stuck in our heads in the first place? What actually makes music catchy? Hi, I’m Jeremy Katzenstein, and you’re listening to *Hooked*, a podcast that deconstructs recorded music into physical, social, and cultural hooks in an effort to uncover what produces its overall catchiness. The following episode marks the third in a series of four episodes that will specifically explore the song “Blank Space” by Taylor Swift as a site for catchiness. In this episode, we focus on how the physical sound of “Blank Space” contributes to the song’s overall catchiness. Headphones are strongly recommended for listening to this episode.

What does Taylor Swift’s “Blank Space” sound like, and how did it come to sound that way? To begin answering these questions, we need to talk about the roles that production, distribution, and consumption of a piece of music play in shaping how that piece of music will ultimately sound.

The word “production” usually just refers to the process of creating, but the word has a more nuanced definition in the world of music. In the broadest and most widely applicable sense of the word, “production” refers to everything about a recording of a song that isn’t innate to the song itself. So if we’re not talking about a lead vocal melody, lyrics, or sometimes structure, then we’re talking about production. We can also think about production as a deliberate form of presentation with the capacity to augment or mask the song that it is framing; in the same way

that there are an infinite number of ways to dress a person, production choices have the capacity to shape a song and what it physically sounds like in an infinite number of ways without usually changing the core elements of the song itself.

Perhaps the clearest way to recognize production at play is to compare two different versions of the same song, where both versions basically share the same vocal melody and lyrics, but not much else. Consider the Simon and Garfunkel version of “Mrs. Robinson,” for example [play that version] in comparison to the Lemonheads version of the same song [play that version]. If someone were to ask what makes the Simon and Garfunkel version of “Mrs. Robinson” different from the Lemonheads version of “Mrs. Robinson,” we would probably first want to talk about how the Lemonheads version of the song is faster than the Simon and Garfunkel version, or how the Lemonheads use electric guitars and loud, fast drums where Simon and Garfunkel use acoustic guitars and relatively understated drums.

These general comments about tempo and instrumentation are actually comments about production choices; tempo and instrumentation are arguably the two most obvious and effective ways to completely shape the character of a song while leaving the song’s vocal melody and lyrics intact. In fact, tempo and instrumentation are such powerful manipulators of the overall feel of any song that we often use these two dimensions to characterize entire styles of music; reductively, we can recognize the Simon and Garfunkel version of “Mrs. Robinson” as a folk song and the Lemonheads version of “Mrs. Robinson” as a rock song just because of the respective tempo and instrumentation of the two songs. This means that production choices play a large role in making a folk song *sound* like a folk song, or for making a rock song *sound* like a

rock song; by appealing to or defying our expectations of what a certain style of music is supposed to sound like, production has the capacity to hook our attention and to shape the overall catchiness of a song.^{28 29}

Unlike folk music or rock music, which result from relatively standardized and predictable production choices, especially relating to tempo and instrumentation, pop music is and always has been a production free-for-all, a style whose sound is constantly in flux, shaped to appeal to whatever mass audiences will consume the most of at any given point in time.³⁰ This means that any style of music can become pop music and cease to be pop music at any point, and that other styles of music drift in and out of intersecting with the realm of pop music all the time; when doo-wop was the most likely style of music to be consumed by the masses in large quantities, for example, pop music was synonymous with doo-wop music [play “Earth Angel” by the Penguins]; when grunge was the most likely style of music to be consumed by the masses in large quantities, grunge was synonymous pop music [play “Smells Like Teen Spirit” by Nirvana]. However, just because these styles drift in and out of popularity does not mean that their influence within the overall institution of pop music is equally ephemeral; we still hear the influence of doo-wop [play “Dear Future Husband” by Meghan Trainor] and grunge [play “Holy Grail” by Jay-Z featuring Justin Timberlake] on today’s most popular songs, even if these new songs don’t explicitly embody these styles.

²⁸ Burns, “A Typology of ‘Hooks’ in Popular Records,” 13-14.

²⁹ Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, 111.

³⁰ David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), 15.

So if the production choices that shape pop music at any given moment in time are a function of the choices that will hopefully result in the most consumption of that music, pop music as a style can sound like absolutely anything. This means that, in order for us or any casual music listener to really grasp onto any of the fleeting tropes that characterize what pop music sounds like at a given moment in time, and to have any hope of incorporating those fleeting tropes into our metaphorical boxes of musical knowledge and experience that comprise our personal musical schemas, we essentially have to be bombarded by current pop music constantly.

Enter the radio, the pinnacle of musical bombardment. As a medium with access to us as listeners in our homes, our cars, our workplaces, our grocery stores, our malls, and countless other locations, radio reigns as the dominant channel through which we come into contact with music;³¹ even the advent of new media options for consuming music has been unable to trounce the radio's domineering status.³² Couple the access and ubiquity of the radio with the fact that a single company, iHeartMedia, owns the vast majority of popular radio stations in the United States,^{33 34} and we can begin to understand the almost monolithic power that the radio has to shape the music that we hear.

³¹ Tom McCourt and Eric W. Rothenbuhler, "Commercial Radio and Popular Music: Processes of Selection and Factors of Influence," in *Popular Music and Communication*, edited by J. Lull, (London: Sage, 1992), 101.

³² Percival, "Music Radio and the Record Industry: Songs, Sounds, and Power," 459.

³³ Emily Yahr, "Clear Channel's 'On the Verge' Program Helped Make Iggy Azalea A Star. Here's How It Works," *The Washington Post*, Last modified July 15, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/style-blog/wp/2014/07/15/clear-channels-on-the-verge-program-helped-make-iggy-azalea-a-star-heres-how-it-works/>.

iHeartMedia has infused musical bombardment into its governing practices with its “On the Verge” program, a program that requires that iHeartMedia radio stations broadcast certain relatively unknown, genre-appropriate songs at least 150 times over a six week period to the company’s 245 million listeners per month;³⁵ by repetitively exposing a large number of listeners to an “On the Verge” song, iHeartMedia provides mass audiences with many opportunities to incorporate certain sonic tropes into their personal musical schemas, essentially guaranteeing that a significant number of people will be able to form some sort of connection with the song which will render them more likely to perceive that song as catchy.³⁶

Whether or not a song gets to participate in iHeartMedia’s “On the Verge” program is completely dependent upon whether or not the company’s brand managers and radio programmers believe listeners will react to that song. This notion of “a song that listeners will react to” can admittedly mean almost anything, but for our purposes, we can safely assert that “a song that listeners will react to” has to be a song with which we as listeners can form some sort of connection, regardless of whether that connection is founded upon enjoyment, disgust, or mere exposure to the style of the song in question.

³⁴ Benny Evangelista, “Radio Titans to Combine / Clear Channel Buying AMFM for \$16.6 Billion,” *SFGate*, last modified October 5, 1999, <http://www.sfgate.com/business/article/Radio-Titans-to-Combine-Clear-Channel-buying-2904863.php>.

³⁵ Yahr, “Clear Channel’s ‘On the Verge’ Program Helped Make Iggy Azalea A Star. Here’s How It Works,” *The Washington Post*.

³⁶ Barnes, “How The Music Industry Is Brainwashing You to Like Bad Pop Songs,” *Brain.Mic*.

One of the most foolproof and obvious ways to assure that we will react to a song that we haven't heard before is to ensure that the song in question in some way resembles other songs that we have already formed connections with, a resemblance that we usually recognize on the level of sonic and production similarities.³⁷ This reliable and inoffensive method of selecting songs and relentlessly playing them perpetuates a cycle in which pop music that sounds a certain way produces more pop music that sounds that way until a new sound emerges as popular and disrupts the cycle.

In the process of normalizing a sonic style for consumption by a mass audience, the radio essentially creates, or at least upholds, pop music by functioning as an avenue through which we learn to incorporate the most current sonic tropes of pop music into our personal musical schemas. Production tropes that may have initially seemed fleeting grow to appeal to an eventually saturated musical knowledge and experience of these tropes, transforming what might have before been a sonically unapproachable piece of music into a viable source of catchiness.^{38,39}

iHeartMedia is not primarily concerned with the lack of musical variety or the relentless repetition of content on its radio stations because the company's end goal is not to stand as a harbinger of musical clout; radio stations sell advertising, not music, and repeatedly playing music that mass audiences are familiar with is an intuitively safe way to maintain high listener

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music*, 15.

retention and to justify high prices for advertising, regardless of how sonically uninteresting the result may be.⁴⁰

The record labels that plug music to these radio stations, on the other hand, are in the business of selling music, and they rely on the radio as a powerful promotional tool. Knowing the control that radio programmers have as gatekeepers who decide what music ultimately gets broadcasted to mass audiences and what music remains in the dark, record labels find themselves at the mercy of radio programmers, pushing their artists to craft music that they know radio programmers will want to play. In this sense, the radio plays a major role in shaping the sound of the music that artists try to produce, encouraging the perpetuation of a cycle in which pop music strives to sound like itself.⁴¹

So the institution of pop music has essentially embedded within any song that inhabits the space an overarching sonic palette that mass audiences will be sure to internalize within their personal musical schemas as a result of relentless musical bombardment; in other words, the catchiness of pop music is built upon a foundation of rewarding a set of constructed sonic expectations. But rewarding our expectations alone is not grounds for catchiness; a piece of music must alternate between satisfying and defying our expectations if we are to potentially find that piece of music catchy.⁴² To use an extreme example, we will find a constant, unchanging tone annoying before

⁴⁰ McCourt and Rothenbuhler, "Commercial Radio and Popular Music: Processes of Selection and Factors of Influence," 105.

⁴¹ Percival, "Music Radio and the Record Industry: Songs, Sounds, and Power," 459.

⁴² Burns, "A Typology of 'Hooks' in Popular Records," 1.

we find it catchy, even though we expect to continue hearing the tone [sine wave fades in]. Only when the tone stops and our expectations have been defied do we feel like our attention has been hooked, even if that hook only lasts for just a moment.

[sine wave stops]

So how does pop music defy expectations? How do we perceive something that on its surface seems to be sonically repetitive and monotonous as sonically varied, nuanced, and able to hook our attention? We can begin answering these questions by refining our definition of production. Our standing definition of production as a term that describes any aspects of a recording of a song that are not innate to the song itself, while correct, is daunting and unspecific, and it tells us nothing about how production actually works. To provide a more functional and effective definition of the term, we can alternatively describe production as the manipulation of timbre over time.

This concept of “timbre” describes the character and quality of a given sound. Timbre explains why a piano sounds like a piano [play a C on the piano] and not like an electronic kick drum [play a kick drum], and why the acoustic guitar in the Simon and Garfunkel version of Mrs. Robinson [play some] sounds completely different from the electric guitar in the Lemonheads version of the same song [play some]; it explains why yelling [yell] sounds different than whispering [whispering], and why my voice sounds different from yours. Timbre is what makes a sound unique.

In the pop music soundscape where timbral choices quickly become standardized into predictable tropes, the unique timbre of the individual human voice arguably arises as the most distinct sound within any pop song. This distinction makes manipulations to the timbre of the voice one of the most easily recognizable manipulations against a backdrop of standardized production tropes. The voice thus becomes one of the primary canvases upon which pop music strives to defy expectations, its unique, individual timbre rendering it less likely to fall into monotony at the hands of the standardized production tropes that shape it.

One of the most common ways that today's pop music manipulates the timbre of the voice is by doubling vocal tracks, which entails recording a vocal phrase in the exact same way twice and juxtaposing those similar recordings on top of one another, which ends up sounding something like this [double this phrase]. The resultant timbre is a thick, rich vocal texture whose nuance at twice the loudness works to hook our attention as we listen.⁴³ It is not uncommon for pop songs to expand this technique of doubling into tripling, quadrupling, or even quintupling vocal tracks in an effort to reap the full sonic potential of the effect.

Vocal doubling happens all over Taylor Swift's "Blank Space," but it doesn't occur throughout the whole song. Let's take a listen to some of the vocal doubling that occurs throughout the opening verse of the song, paying careful attention to what Swift's vocals *sound* like. If you're wearing headphones, try to distinguish between when you hear Swift's vocals spread across both ears, and when you hear Swift's vocals straight on [play some of the opening verse].

⁴³ Ibid., 14-15.

In this opening verse, Swift's vocals initially alternate line-by-line between a doubled and a single vocal, turning Swift's voice into a canvas of constant timbral manipulation; we are prone to perceive this alternation between vocal textures as unpredictable yet accessible, successfully hooking our attention in the process. However, after these two vocal textures alternate twice in a row, the alternation becomes increasingly predictable for us as listeners; what once defied our expectations quickly gets incorporated into our personal musical schemas as we learn to anticipate the constructed sonic trope. But just as this alternation between vocal textures begins to err on the side of too predictable, the alternation that we expect to happen does not occur; as the vocals transition into the latter part of this opening section, they remain undoubled, defying our expectations and hooking our attention in the process.

[play some of the opening verse again]

Once these sorts of vocal timbre patterns have created and defied our expectations within an individual section of a song, we are likely to have at least somewhat internalized those patterns as tropes by the time that section repeats. This means that we can use consistencies in vocal timbre and texture to locate ourselves within a song, even as a melody evolves or lyrics change; a verse will in part *sound* like the verse because of certain timbral and textural choices. In order to translate the listener's location within a song into an effective hook, pop songs will often inject variation into a sonically repetitive section by adding harmonies and other new melodies to successive repetitions of the section, thus appealing to our expectations of that section while simultaneously defying them as well.

As a section that not only repeats itself timbrally and texturally, but also melodically and lyrically, the chorus of any pop song requires variation perhaps more than any other repetitive section of a song in order to keep its repeating melodic and lyrical ideas fresh and appealing with each recurrence. “Blank Space” maintains this excitement and unpredictability within each chorus by having none of its choruses repeat in exactly the same way. Though the differences between each chorus are relatively subtle, we can uncover them by listening to two different iterations of the song’s chorus one after the next while paying special attention to what each individual chorus *sounds* like.

With that in mind, let’s listen to the song’s first chorus followed by the song’s second chorus. Here’s the first chorus now [play the first chorus]. And here’s the second chorus [play the second chorus]. Notice how the second iteration of the chorus features a harmony in the first half of the section and additional ad-libbed melodies throughout the section that are not present in the first iteration of the chorus. By adding new harmonies and melodies on top of the established chorus section, “Blank Space” creates an audible progression from one chorus to the next that locates us within the song and hooks our attention in the process.

The voice, of course, is just one of many possible sites of timbral manipulation within a recording of a pop song; while they might be more difficult to isolate within the recording, every single sonic layer of “Blank Space” offers a unique site for timbral manipulation where sound can function as a hook. The interweaving of all of these layers of timbral manipulation that both appeal to and defy our sonic expectations turn the overall soundscape of “Blank Space” into one giant juggernaut of a hook that pushes us to perceive the entire song as catchy.

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Hooked*. For more information about how musical bombardment affects our personal musical schemas, check out Tom Barnes' piece, "How The Music Industry Is Brainwashing You to Like Bad Pop Songs." For more information about how the radio shapes the music we hear, check out J. Mark Percival's piece, "Music Radio and the Record Industry: Songs, Sounds, and Power." And for more information about the many ways that timbral manipulation can be translated into hooks, check out Gary Burns' piece, "A Typology of 'Hooks' in Popular Records." In our next episode, we explore how the relationship between a piece of music and its performer can contribute to the overall catchiness of that piece.

Script for “Episode 4: Performer As Hook”

[The chorus to “Blank Space” by Taylor Swift fades in]

We use the word “catchy” to describe a song that gets stuck in our heads, but why do these songs get stuck in our heads in the first place? What actually makes music catchy? Hi, I’m Jeremy Katzenstein, and you’re listening to *Hooked*, a podcast that deconstructs recorded music into physical, social, and cultural hooks in an effort to uncover what produces its overall catchiness. The following episode marks the fourth and final episode in a series of four episodes that will specifically explore the song “Blank Space” by Taylor Swift as a site for catchiness. In this episode, we focus on how Taylor Swift’s image as a performer contributes to the overall catchiness of her song “Blank Space.”

The world of popular music has been inseparable from the world of images since its commodification in the early 20th century, the rise of the gramophone and sheet music industries solidifying the transformation of music into a physical object that could be bought and sold. Since Tin Pan Alley, whose assembly-line approach to creating and selling music essentially spawned the pop music industry, beautiful artwork and photographs have accompanied all popular musical objects, from vinyl records to digital albums, in the hope that these beautiful images would render musical objects more appealing to consumers. This relationship between popular music and images grew deeper with the creation of MTV and the rise of the music video, which put pop music in motion and added new potential for associations with visual imagery and narratives that could help bolster the appeal of musical objects for consumers.⁴⁴ Most recently,

⁴⁴ Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music*, 67.

social media has not only laid the foundation for the production of new types of images that are often closely linked with popular music, such as memes and Vines, but has also established avenues through which all types of images associated with popular music, old and new, can access more people across more diverse demographics than ever before, providing the image with an entirely new dimension of power with regard to its ability to influence the consumption of popular music by the masses.

But perhaps the most powerful, influential, and central image responsible for mediating the relationship between popular music and its consumers is the image of the performer. This image emerges as much from a performer's own words as it does from the songs they make, the music videos they star in, the clothes they wear, what the gossip magazines are saying about them, what they last posted on their Twitter account, popular opinion, and more, which means that, unlike other concrete images associated with pop music, the overall image of the performer is a fluid construction whose meaning is constantly getting complicated by sheer virtue of the performer's continued existence and activity. Once reduced to an image, the performer becomes an avenue through which musical and non-musical ideas can be sold to mass audiences; Miley Cyrus' recent adoption of a dismissive attitude, scandalous clothing choices, and general parental disapproval, for example, conveys an image of rebellion to her maturing teen fan base that is reflected in Cyrus' foray into club-influenced music with drug-centric lyrics.

[play some of "We Can't Stop" by Miley Cyrus]

Because of this fundamental link between the image of the performer and the music that the performer produces, we can actually think about the image of any given performer as an essential chunk of knowledge and experience within our personally created and collectively constructed personal musical schemas that we can use to engage more deeply with a piece of music by that performer. Any feature of a song that appeals to or defies our expectations of the image of the performer of that song, from its lyrical content to its accompanying music video, has the capacity to hook our attention and contribute to the overall catchiness of that song.

[play the intro of “Blank Space”]

Taylor Swift’s image begins at her relationship with her music. The fact that Swift openly takes the leading role in writing all of the songs she performs brands her personal, confessional songs that focus primarily on young love and heartbreak as authentic and unique within a sea of equally personal and confessional pop songs whose performers did not contribute in any significant way to the songwriting process. This perceived sincerity of Swift’s music has cultivated an image of Swift as a performer that portrays her songs as diary pages and her life as her diary’s source material; we scrutinize Swift’s life to try to predict the content of her current and future music, and we scrutinize her music to learn more about her life, all the while reinforcing the inextricable link between Taylor Swift’s image and the music she creates.

As Swift’s career has gone on, media outlets and listeners have responded to her music’s relatively consistent subject matter of young love and heartbreak with criticism that the artist has not been able to learn from her tumultuous romantic history and with questions that ponder

whether or not Swift, and not her romantic partners, is the problem within the artist's notoriously flawed relationships. Taylor Swift's "Blank Space" attempts to subvert the performer's image as a naïve and boy crazy person who blows her romantic life out of proportion by deliberately perpetuating this negative image of Swift by way of the song's lyrics and accompanying music video. In Swift's own words: [play YouTube interview with Swift].⁴⁵

The song's use of a doubled lyrical perspective in which its boy crazy narrator is simultaneously naïve and aware of the danger of the romantic relationships that she is choosing to enter into allows "Blank Space" to straddle the image of Swift that the song strives to subvert and a more mature image of Swift all at once. This ability to straddle two images at once positions the song to appeal to and defy our expectations of Swift's image at the same time, hooking our attention in the process⁴⁶ [play "Oh my god/look at that face/you look like my next mistake/love's a game/wanna play?"].

The music video for "Blank Space" converts the perceived image of Swift that the song grapples with into a literal image by having Swift physically embody her image as a boy crazy caricature of herself. While the song's music video adds no new sonic or lyrical material to "Blank Space," it establishes new avenues for associations between the song and Swift's image that can contribute to how we listen to and connect with the song when listening to it in the future⁴⁷; for

⁴⁵ "Taylor Swift on 'Blank Space' Video, Stunning '1989' Sales," YouTube video, 4:26, posted by "ABC News," November 11, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yrcfgbkYZHk>.

⁴⁶ Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, 112.

⁴⁷ Barnes, "How The Music Industry Is Brainwashing You to Like Bad Pop Songs." *Brain.Mic*.

example, our ability to recall the music video's satirically exaggerated image of Swift destroying her love interest's car while listening to the song's chorus can add a new layer of depth and energy to that moment that might be able to hook our attention as we listen [play the final chorus of the song].

In this process of subversion that Swift calls "taking back the narrative," "Blank Space" essentially appeals to our expectations of Swift's image until those expectations burst into smithereens, our attention aggressively hooked in the resulting explosion and reconfiguration of our conception of Swift's image.

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Hooked*. For more information about the history of the relationship between pop music and images, check out David Suisman's book *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music*.

This podcast has only deconstructed a few of the many hooks that inundate "Blank Space" by Taylor Swift. By continuing to cultivate our understanding of our personal musical schemas and the physical, social, and cultural factors that shape them, we can uncover hooks in any piece of music we listen to, and perhaps discover what truly makes music catchy along the way.

Meta-Narrative for “Episode 1: Introduction/Listener As Hook”

The role of this episode is essentially to empower the listener by appealing to the importance of the listener’s role in the production of catchiness. By empowering the listener, this episode primes the listener for employing a more active approach to listening to every episode that follows this one while also providing the necessary conceptual framework for understanding the following episodes in the process.

After introducing the premise of the podcast, I use Stephen Feld’s concept of “interpretive moves” and Daniel Levitin’s comments about the listener’s ability to recognize that which they have previously heard to establish the notion that, whenever we listen to music, we listen to that music within the context of all of the music that we have ever heard before. From here, I use Daniel Levitin’s idea of building schemas through listening as the foundation for my podcast’s guiding concept of the personal musical schema. I elaborate on this concept of the personal musical schema by acknowledging its duplicity as a truly personal, but also a somewhat impersonal entity; Simon Frith’s idea that we require particular cultural language to appropriately engage with that culture’s music contributes to the idea of a truly personal musical schema that is a function of the music that we have exposed ourselves to in depth, while Daniel Levitin’s idea of our capacity to internalize basic musical schemas along with J. Mark Percival’s argument that record labels, radio, and audiences all participate in the perpetuation of the idea of a somewhat uniform, impersonal musical schema.

From here, I use Gino Stefani’s idea of appropriation as catchiness along with Daniel Levitin’s idea of building up and defying expectations as catchiness in order to provide a general overview of how we as listeners ultimately grow to interpret what we hear as catchy. I add more nuance to this general overview by acknowledging that our ability to appropriate a song and/or

our expectations of a song change based on how much we have been exposed to a given song, and I use Daniel Levitin's language of the schema to describe these nuances. When discussing the process of reincorporating a song into our personal musical schemas as distinct from incorporating a song for the very first time, I use Tom Barnes' discussion of the "mere exposure effect" to augment my argument, using Barnes as a way to further justify how repeated exposures to a song familiarize us with that song's musical vocabulary and thus make us more inclined to find a piece of music catchy.

I end the podcast by introducing and playing the subject of my podcast's case study, Taylor Swift's "Blank Space," in its entirety. By playing the song after spending the entire episode empowering the listener and providing tools for a more active approach to listening, I get the listener to engage with "Blank Space" in a more critical manner as they listen to it. This process of providing tools for critical listening followed by applying those tools emulates the form of all subsequent podcasts in this series. As such, this initial podcast functions as an introduction to my series of podcasts on multiple levels, providing listeners with both a general framework for critical listening and a general framework for the format of my podcast that they will need in order to engage with all future podcasts in the series.

Meta-Narrative for “Episode 2: Melody As Hook”

The primary role of this episode is to demolish everything that the podcast’s (assumedly Western) listeners presuppose about melody, namely, that melodies abide by a certain set of rules in which some melodies objectively “work” and some melodies objectively do not, in an effort to expose the concept of melody as something that is learned instead of something that is inherent. Whenever we listen to a piece of music, we take for granted the way that melodies move from one note to the next as a fundamental musical fact, when, in reality, this fact is actually a core construction within our personal musical schemas, the metaphorical boxes that we use to connect with and engage with the music that we hear in the world around us, and that ultimately determine a piece of music’s ability to hook our attention.

This cynical perspective of melody as a construct takes root in Daniel Levitin’s argument from his book *This Is Your Brain on Music* that “we have learned that certain sequences of tones go together, and we expect them to continue to do so” (Levitin 112). The episode combines Levitin’s argument with my own experience of studying Gamelan music in high school in order to re-present Western tonality, and consequently, the melodies that result from it, as constructions that we as listeners come to internalize within our personal musical schemas instead of as fundamental musical truths.

The episode goes on to superimpose this idea of Western tonality as a construction onto the institution of music theory, whose sole purpose (from a cynical, critical perspective, at least) is arguably to justify the practices of Western musicians of the past thousand years, and thus call attention to musical tropes that even the most casual listener of Western music is likely to have internalized. Even though this episode’s discussion of music theory becomes extremely important for understanding how we ultimately can perceive Taylor Swift’s “Blank Space” as

catchy, as we employ our constructed notions of melody in order to engage with the song, the episode's critical relationship with music theory reinforces the episode's overarching argument that our preconceived notions of melody are constructions and not facts.

Drawing from Gino Stefani's piece "Melody: A Popular Perspective," the episode goes on to argue that we use the constructions of Western tonality and music theory to engage with the melodies that we hear, and that these melodies are most likely to hook our attention when they appeal to or defy our understandings of these constructions. Taylor Swift's "Blank Space" then becomes a canvas for exploring how a piece of music uses these constructions to craft a simultaneously derivative and unique melodic vocabulary within preexisting tonal and melodic constructs. Through the construction of a melodic vocabulary that is both self-referential and also conducive to certain melodic constructs as laid out by Tom Barnes' piece "How The Music Industry Is Brainwashing You to Like Bad Pop Songs" and Peter Mercer-Taylor's piece "Two-and-a-Half Centuries in the Life of a Hook," Taylor Swift's "Blank Space" manages to consist of both context-dependent and independently catchy melodies throughout.

Meta-Narrative for “Episode 3: Sound As Hook”

This episode strives first to decontextualize the sounds we might hear in a recording in order to expose the distinct properties of these sounds; then to explore the physical, social, and cultural factors that shape these sounds; and finally, to recontextualize these sounds within “Blank Space” by Taylor Swift in order to hear the power of sound as a hook at play.

The episode begins by playing two different versions of the same song one after the next followed by a discussion of these differences, which decontextualizes the sounds within both songs as discrete entities within the respective recordings that they occupy. Soon after this decontextualization, the focus of the episode turns to pop music and its relative sonic fluidity; unlike a rock or a folk song, the sound of pop music is always in flux, sometimes drastically so. Drawing primarily from Tom Barnes’ piece “How The Music Industry Is Brainwashing You to Like Bad Pop Songs” and J. Mark Percival’s piece “Music Radio and the Record Industry: Songs, Sounds, and Power,” the episode argues for the radio as a powerful site for the musical bombardment that exposes us to pop music’s ever-changing sonic tropes, which significantly shapes our personal musical schemas, and thus, what we as listeners will ultimately find catchy. iHeartMedia’s “On the Verge” program becomes a case study for observing this practice of musical bombardment in action

The episode ultimately recontextualizes the power of sound to produce hooks, and consequently, catchiness, by drawing from various parts of Gary Burns’ piece “A Typology of ‘Hooks’ in Popular Records” to analyze the sound of Taylor Swift’s voice throughout her song “Blank Space.” This choice to focus on the voice alone is an attempt to simplify this process of recontextualization so as to not overwhelm the listener; while there are many different sounds at play within “Blank Space” whose individual qualities and interactions with one another certainly

contribute to the song's overall catchiness, the distinctness and prominence of Swift's voice within the song serves as the most easily accessible gateway into understanding how sound can contribute to the overall catchiness of a piece of music.

Meta-Narrative for “Episode 4: Performer As Hook”

This episode strives to incorporate the pervasive world of the image into the podcast’s overall discussion of catchiness by unpacking how our perception of the performer (or the image of that performer) of a piece of music influences how we listen to that piece. Unfortunately, the podcast medium constricts this exploration of the image to a purely auditory experience; unlike the episodes that precede it which comment almost exclusively on auditory examples, this episode is faced with the arguably impossible task of translating the world of the visual into the world of audio. However, by lacking the ability to display images to listeners as they listen, the podcast medium forces the listener to never disconnect from the audio content that the episode is exploring for catchiness in the first place; by positioning images as supplementary to this episode’s conversation instead of as fundamental, the podcast medium ensures an implicit focus on the world of sound.

In its effort to describe the value and power of the image in the world of music, particularly in pop music, this episode begins by using David Suisman’s book *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* to describe the long history of the close relationship between images and music, namely, how images have been used to sell music over time. After establishing the image of the performer as the most powerful, prominent, and flexible image that gets associated with a piece of music, this episode argues for the relevance of the image of the performer within our personal musical schemas, as we use our preconceived notions of the image of the performer to connect with and engage with music that we hear by that performer.

The episode then goes on to describe the image of Taylor Swift as a performer using general pop culture knowledge. Once this information is established, the episode explores how

lyrical content and the accompanying music video for Taylor Swift's "Blank Space" (two reflections of the image of the performer) align with and clash with Swift's image, and how both aligning with and clashing with the image results in the creation of hooks. The episode also explores how engaging with different facets of Swift's image can affect how we engage with "Blank Space" upon listening to again in the future; for example, after watching the song's music video, we might form connections between certain images and the song's lyrics that will heighten our overall connection with the song, and thus our chances of perceiving the song as catchy upon further hearings.

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