

Critical listening for songwriters

When we hear songs in everyday life we are usually blissfully unaware of everything going on “under the hood” that gives us so much enjoyment and pleasure. We don’t think about things like phrasing, melodic form, structure or prosody, we just know we like the song.

Understanding why we like certain songs is essential to the improvement of our own songwriting and that’s why it’s important to develop the skill we call critical listening.

Critical listening is being able to identify individual features of a song as it is playing. Sometimes we only get one chance to hear it, for example on a car radio, so learning to do this quickly is an advantage.

To start learning this skill, find a song you like, grab a notebook and listen to the song very carefully, making notes as you go. Feel free to listen multiple times until you have all the information you need.

Here are our suggestions of what to listen for but do add your own ideas. Make sure at this stage you concentrate on songwriting, *not production*.

1. What is the structure of the song? Map out each section i.e. verse/pre-chorus/chorus/middle eight on a timeline so you can see how it is constructed, down to the exact second
2. How many sections does the song have
3. How long is the song
4. How long does it take to reach the first chorus
5. Is the song in a major or minor key
6. How many chords can you hear
7. Are there any surprise chords
8. Does the harmonic progression change between sections

9. What sort of melodic forms are used in each section i.e. static/conjunct/disjunct
10. How and where does the main melody rise and fall (this is called the melodic contour) Pay careful attention to the chorus
11. How much lyrical information are we given in each section and how does the amount of information vary between sections
12. Where does the lead vocal start before, on or after beat 1 of the bar
13. How does that positioning change between sections
14. What sort of rhyme schemes are used in the song
15. How many different hooks can you hear and where are they
16. Where is the strongest hook
17. How many syllables does the strongest hook have
18. Where does the song use repetition of a lyric
19. Where does the song use repetition of a melody
20. What do you find most attractive about the song
21. What do you find least attractive about the song

Try and practise critical listening as often as you can to develop a list of common denominators that your favourite hit songs share with each other.

And who knows, if they work for other writers, they could work for you too!

Have fun!