

John Seabrook. *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2015. www.wwnorton.com.

John Seabrook's *The Song Machine* presents a fast paced, behind the scenes look at the complex ecosystem of writers, producers, artists, and label executives that collaborate to create and market the latest pop music confections. Mixed in is a rich appreciation for pop music history and the author's own musical tastes, which makes for an eminently readable volume. The impetus for the work is laid out near the beginning of the book when the author states:

Who *are* the hitmakers? 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.

True to his word, Seabrook does unmask a great many of the most successful tunesmiths responsible for the past two decades of platinum pop hits, the product of the imaginary hit factory referenced in the title. One of the strongest sections of the book provides a detailed history of the transatlantic link that evolved in the 1990s between Sweden and the United States. Seabrook takes the reader back to Stockholm in 1992 and through a series of interviews, learns how Denniz Pop built the phenomenally successful Cheiron Studios. While the angst and slacker attitude of the grunge scene was taking American pop music by storm, Pop and his collaborators were literally changing the sound and approach to making hit songs. Churning out a series of 1990s top-ten worldwide hits for Ace of Base, Backstreet Boys, *NSYNC, and Britney Spears left no doubt that the Cheiron model produced gold and platinum success by the bucketful.

Pop, who had struggled to be taken seriously for years, proved to be not only a talented writer and producer, but an outstanding judge of talent, which he demonstrated by assembling a stable of the most talented Scandinavian collaborators under his umbrella who would jump in to contribute a new beat, a different lyric, or a bridge to the studio's latest creation. Similar to the model employed by Berry Gordy, Jr., at Motown, Pop pushed his

young charges to constantly better the latest version of each song or lyric, resulting in the most commercial, streamlined, danceable, radio-friendly tracks being made anywhere at that time. Emerging from this group was a pasty-faced singer plucked from a heavy metal band, Martin Sandberg, aka Max Martin, who would become the most prolific modern hit maker since Lennon and McCartney. Importantly, Seabrook points out that Martin, like many Swedes took advantage of the free after-school music training starting on recorder, then french horn and varied orchestral experience, before moving to drums and keyboards. This state-sponsored training provided Martin with the musical foundation with which he would change songwriting history.

Martin's work, and the work of another writer/producer, Lukasz Gottwald, an American guitarist better known as Dr. Luke, is woven throughout the remainder of the book, anchoring the insider's perspectives by the author's analysis of two of the most prolific hit makers today. As the narrative unfolds, the *American Idol* television show is introduced to guide readers through the evolution of the career of Kelly Clarkson from her audition in Dallas to her successful post-*Idol* career. Seabrook does a good job chronicling how a shy, twenty-year old from Dallas came to discover her own sensibility as an artist and writer over her first four albums, while simultaneously being buffeted by the strong direction of Clive Davis, who hand-picked the songs in her repertoire. The author wisely offers both sides of the Clarkson-Davis dispute, leaving the reader with a palpable sense of the tensions that arise at the highest levels of the business.

Another strength of the book is the fact that the author brings the reader into the studio during the song creation process. He offers a fascinating depiction of the "track and hook" approach so prevalent in today's songwriting milieu. Seabrook profiles Ester Dean, a top liner whose melodic gifts and ebullient spirit have formed the basis for hits by Rihanna, Nicki Minaj and Ciara. Sessions with Stargate and Ne-Yo provide further evidence of the trial and error approaches used to plot a path to the next *Billboard* hit, with the help of a revolving cast of collaborators, similar to the Cheiron model. What results is an informative, nuanced picture of the high stakes world of these musical Svengalis, the producers, beat makers, and top liners competing to get their tracks in front of the latest pop sensation.

The Song Machine lives up to its premise of illuminating the shadows the author references at the book's beginning and bringing the flesh

and blood writers and producers to life. But it doesn't shy away from some of the less appealing realities that have come to light lately. Seabrook outlines the tortured affairs of Kesha Sebert and Dr. Luke, detailing the artistic and business path that led to the ongoing high stakes, mudslinging battle in which there will likely be no real winners. Talent aside, it becomes clear that the heady power gained by being a top hit maker doesn't always come with commensurate good judgment.

Near the book's conclusion, the author interviews Spotify co-founder, Daniel Ek, who exudes optimism that Sweden's successful adoption of music streaming as a cure to the record industry's decline can be exported globally. As a counter, the author interviews mid-level artists Rosanne Cash and Marc Ribot, who see music streaming as a career dead-end if it becomes truly ubiquitous. Seabrook reports that even though Cash had 600,000 streams of her music in an eighteen-month period, her share of income from her record label was a paltry \$104. Readers will be left to ruminate just how such mid-level artists and writers will be able to survive unless twentieth-century (pre-streaming) record deals, which many argue are responsible for the dismal artist streaming payouts, are radically restructured.

Whether a reader is a casual fan of popular music or a serious researcher, *The Song Machine* offers an engaging, well-documented, and thought-provoking look behind the proverbial on-stage curtain, and should be an essential read for every aspiring songwriter, artist, and music manager who wishes to really understand the role hit songs can play in an artist's career.

Keith Hatschek

KEITH HATSCHKE is Professor of Music and Director of the Music Management Program at the University of the Pacific, Stockton, California. Prior to joining academia, he worked in the music business for more than twenty-five years. He is the author of two music industry books: *The Golden Moment: Recording Secrets of the Pros* and *How To Get a Job in the Music Industry*, which provides career development tools and strategies for young music professionals. A third edition of the music career text was released in 2015. Book projects in development include *The Historical Dictionary of the Music Industry*. He contributes monthly music industry commentary for the blog, *Echoes-Insights for Independent Artists*. Among his research interests are music industry curriculum and pedagogy, student-led music businesses, recording and music technology, and the life and work of jazz pianist, Dave Brubeck. He has presented a number of conference papers and public lectures at jazz festivals about Brubeck's role in Cold War jazz diplomacy, the Civil Rights movement, and musicians' collaborative efforts to address segregation in mid-twentieth-century United States. This latter topic will be the subject of a book about a jazz musical written in the mid-1950s by Dave and Iola Brubeck starring Louis Armstrong and Carmen McRae that tackled the problem of segregation.

