

# What makes pop songs so catchy?

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Dr. Timothy Byron. Credit: Paul Jones

"Hey, I just met you, and this is crazy... But here's my number, so call me, maybe."

These wise and catchy words are those of Canadian singer-songwriter Carly Rae Jepsen from her 2012 hit "Call Me Maybe." The song topped the music charts across the world, including in the United States, Canada and Australia.

But what was it about that song that made it so popular? Why, 10 years later, is it still so memorable? What makes any song stand out and be easily remembered?

These questions are just some of many that are explored in "[Hooks in Popular Music](#)" (Palgrave MacMillan 2022)—a new book co-authored by University of Wollongong (UOW) researcher Dr. Timothy Byron and Dr. Jadey O'Regan (Sydney Conservatorium of Music).

It's the first book-length study of [hooks](#) in [popular music](#) that attempts to explain why some songs get stuck in our heads and why these "hooks" are the guiding principle of modern popular music.

Dr. Byron from UOW's School of Psychology said the book defines a [hook](#) as a musical moment or musical phrase that stands out and is easily remembered. These are the bits of songs that are more likely to end up as "earworms," the elements of the songs that become stuck in our head.

"Hooks are deeply personal—what is a devastatingly effective hook for one person, might slide right past another person unnoticed," Dr. Byron said.

"Hooks can be a rhythm, a timbre, or a melody and they're not something that's added on top, they really are the defining fabric of pop music.

"That's not to say other genres don't use hooks, you see hooks in the riff in rock music, but for pop music itself, we just think it's the core of what makes it pop."

The book gives a range of examples of hooks in [popular songs](#) from the last 30 years, including the catchy chorus of the 2001 hit "Can't Get You Out Of My Head" by Kylie Minogue, Third Eye Blind's 1997 song

"Semi Charmed Life" and this 2022's memorable hit "As It Was" by Harry Styles.

Dr. Byron said hooks are important for modern pop music because artists want their songs to stand out.

"It's been said in radio that if people hear a song they don't know, they'll wait about seven seconds before changing the station and it's probably the same for modern streaming services," Dr. Byron said.

"Pop songs have to make an impact quickly and to stand out to the listener, they need to have a hook.

Dr. Byron adds that the concept of a hook is not new.

"Through our research we found the term hook being used to refer to a subsection of a piece of popular music that is notable in some way has occurred since at least the 1960s."

The authors are both musicians but had different motivations for writing the book. Dr. Byron's expertise lies in [music psychology](#), and in particular the way that music interacts with memory. While Dr. O'Regan focuses on teaching music at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music.

"I am very interested in the psychology of what makes a song stand out and why some songs are easy to remember and I wanted to explore that in this book," Dr. Byron said.

"For me as a psychologist, it's intriguing for something to be remembered because there are lots of things we don't remember at all. We barely remembered what we did a week ago, so for people to remember anything at all, there must be something special about it..

"If a bit of a song is getting our attention, if there is a bit of a song that we're remembering, then it's doing something right and it's almost exploiting the specifics of how our memory and attention works."

For Dr. O'Regan the impetus for the book came from her teaching background and experience.

"I teach contemporary [music](#) and a lot of my students are songwriters, producers and performers and in class we often talk about this idea of ear candy," Dr. O'Regan said.

"Students would ask me where they could go to learn more about these concepts, and I realized there wasn't really anywhere I could send them.

"And then I realized we really needed to write something."

The end result was a 459-page online textbook that covers everything from the psychology of memorability to the role of the study of hooks in popular musicology.

"Hooks in Popular Music" is a comprehensive piece of work that fills a gap in the literature discussing the importance of what makes a [song](#) catchy, and as Alanis Morissette memorably said in 1995, it's the kind of stuff "You Oughta Know."

Provided by University of Wollongong

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