

The Lollipop Music Theory™

By Bobby Susser

We have all heard songs that grabbed our attention and wanted to hear them again and again. It could have been a catchy repetitive lyrical phrase, musical line, unusual rhythm, or perhaps an entire section of the song like the chorus.

As adults, we often refer to songs that hook us this way as “hits.” Good songs for young children are not so different, though they should be structured to suit their lollipop listeners. While I am an advocate of exposing children to all styles of music such as jazz, classical, unusual melodies, sophisticated lyrics, intricate rhythms, great vocal intonations and ranges, popular show songs, and operas we need to consider the age appropriateness of the music for the child. The lyrics should be interesting and fun, but simple for children to understand, pronounce, and learn. The melodies should also be very simple so all children can sing along, including non-singers, because melodies that encourage children to sing along build self confidence and create interaction while they are having fun and learning. The tempo does not necessarily need to be fast, but the song should feel friendly and have some catchy phrase, section, or part that repeats itself, because very young listeners love that. The song “Happy Birthday” is a real good example of all these points. When appropriate, the simple lyrics and melodies should be enhanced with orchestrations and sounds that peak children’s interest.

A great way to test songs in order to know if they are striking the right chords for children is to play them for the kids. I personally visit early childhood classrooms and play songs that I have written for young children before recording them, and again, after the final mix of the studio recording. Actually, I never know if a song is a final recording until I play it for children and see and hear their responses.

After getting very little reaction to a completed song I had recorded and played for a first grade class some years ago, upon the suggestion of one of the six-year-old students, I went back into the recording studio and made some changes. He told me “The other kids didn’t like it because that boom, boom, boom is too low.”

“The what?” I asked.

“The boom, boom, boom,” he repeated. I told him that I wasn’t sure what he meant, and so I played it again and asked him where he heard that. As I played it over and over trying to figure out what he was referring to, he shouted enthusiastically “There it is, there it is!”

Finally I got it. It was a repetitive, simple, and catchy bass line. I thanked the young boy, and went back to the recording studio to re-mix the recorded song so that the repetitiveness of that “boom, boom, boom” bass line and its volume level would appeal to my six-year-old advisor and his classmates.

The engineer, one of the best in the music industry, thought it made no sense, because the mix sounded very right to him. And from his technical viewpoint, as well as a listener, it didn't make sense. But, he was forty years old, and the song was not written and recorded for him. It was written for a much younger audience such as the first grade class I had visited. Within a few days I revisited the class and played the new version. This time the kids were singing, clapping, and dancing to the same song they showed no interest in before I raised the volume level so they could hear the repetitive "boom, boom, boom." When I left the class that day, I received the most grand award for my work. As I said goodbye and waved, my six-year-old production advisor smiled at me and then gave me a "thumbs up." He not only made me feel ten feet tall, but he confirmed my "Lollipop Music Theory." That is, like adults, young children are hooked by a catchy lyrical line, melodic line, or rhythm. They just want to hear them more often.

Lollipops are like desserts. They can be colorful, sweet, tasty, and are treats as well as rewards. Adults like all that, but in most instances can wait until they finish their meals. Children usually want their lollipops now. There are various theories as to why, but all agree that's the way it is. And if a song for young children doesn't feed that need, one should question why that was written for young children, and why was it chosen by an adult for children to listen to when they wanted to frequently hear something like "boom, boom, boom."

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