

PREDICTING HITS PAGE 1



How do you think record labels decide whether to release a song or not and how often do you think they get it right?

Listen to the first part of the report and check your ideas making notes below.

Listen to the next part of the report and answer these questions:

What does the computer program analyse?

Where have they gathered the data for their program from?

What is their success rate?

Listen to the next part of the report and make notes on why their technology is a tough sell to the music industry.

Listen to the final part of the report and make notes on how the music industry can use the technology to improve their music.

Discussion What types of music are popular where you live? Is there any common theme to the records that are hits in your country?

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Teacher's notes

Total pages 3 / student pages 1 / week of 04.06.07 / CD Track 3 / advanced

Transcript

PART 1

FLATOW: What does this song have in common with this one? And this one? Yes, they were all big hits, but why? My next guest says that he has figured it out: what makes one song a hit, one song a dud. In fact, he says he's picked two songs now rising on the charts to be hits way before they were. He says all hit songs from punk to rock to country fall into one of 60 patterns that he's identified. He says his company can analyse a song and tell the record company execs if they have a hit or a miss on their hands. Joining me now to talk more about it is my guest, Mike McCready. He is the CEO of Platinum Blue. He joins me here in our studio. Thanks for being with us today.

Mr. MIKE McCREADY (CEO, Platinum Blue, New York): Hi, Ira. Thanks for having me.

FLATOW: Mike McCready, tell us about how you're able to do this. Is this a computer program, or is it an analysis on your – you sit there and listen to a thousand songs, you play, that's the one?

Mr. McCREADY: No, actually, if we look at historically how the music industry has operated over the past 50 years since its inception, the labels have two criteria they apply to deciding whether a song is going to be released as a single. The first criteria is: does the song sound and feel like a hit? They have A and R professionals – artist and repertoire professionals – people with golden ears who – at the labels who listen to music and decide that. The second criteria they use is, are we able to promote the song effectively? That in that covers does the artist have an appropriate appeal to the audience or the target demographic that they're looking for? Is this you know, the song have somewhere to fit in? Is it written within the zeitgeist of the culture? They do also have some market research that they do, call-out research, where the radio stations sometimes call people up and play the hook of the song and try to get a feel for the audience. But using those two criteria and the best market research applications today, they're still only right about one out of every 10 times. And it can cost upwards of a million dollars to promote a single in the U.S. market, so when you're wrong nine out of 10 times, that one success is paying for all of those failures, and whatever's left over is for the you know. So we have a – we've added this third criteria. We have kind of accidentally – and this research was done both at the company I run now called Platinum Blue as well as at our former company, Polyphonic HMI, now called Music Intelligent Solutions. We've identified about 60 different mathematical patterns to which hit songs have conformed historically over time. So we go to the music labels and we say, look, if your songs - the songs that you're about to promote – continue to conform to these first two criteria, they sound like hits and you're going to be able to promote them effectively - in addition, if they also conform to one of these optimal mathematical patterns, your chances of success increase to about 80 to 85 percent.

PART 2

FLATOW: So do you, then, analyse the music to see if it conforms to the – one of those 60 patterns?

Mr. McCREADY: Right. We look – we have a computer program that can analyse a fully produced CD and isolate things like melody, harmony, beat, tempo, rhythm, octave, pitch, chord progression, fullness of sound, cadence, sonic variances – about 30 to 35 of these variables that we look at, and we look at how they fit together in the different kinds of patterns that they make up as they come together.

FLATOW: Is this an historical analysis that you've taken from hit songs and distilled what makes a hit?

Mr. McCREADY: It is. We've invented this observational tool. We can't – you know, the computer – again, it isn't telling you if the song sounds like a hit. That's still a human evaluation. Sometimes, we find these optimal mathematical patterns in songs that sound nothing like hits. They would never be successful.

FLATOW: Right. Right. And how good are you? What's your success rate?

Mr. McCREADY: Well, our public success rate, the work that we do, is very close to 100 percent. We have a lab accuracy rate of about 80 to 85 percent, but fortunately, most of the predictions and help that we've provided to our customers - which include Sony BMG, Warner, EMI et cetera - have always been on the money.

PART 3

FLATOW: We're going to listen to a couple of songs now that were predicted – I think by you – to be hits...

Mr. McCREADY: Mm-hmm.

FLATOW: ...before they were hits, and let's listen to that first one. And that is?

Mr. McCREADY: Yeah, that's "Crazy" by Gnarlz Barkley.

FLATOW: Right. And you predicted that song would be a hit before it was a hit.

Mr. McCREADY: Yeah, that's right. We were actually hired by a radio group in the U.K. to look at this song before they started playing it, and we were able to give them the green light on that.

FLATOW: And how high has that risen on the charts?

Mr. McCREADY: It was last summer's biggest hit in both the U.K. and the U.S.

FLATOW: Your stock, meaning both figuratively and literally must have been on the rise after that one. You could pick that, or somebody said, no, you just got lucky?

Mr. McCREADY: Well, you know, the music industry, in a race to adopt new technologies, finishes just ahead of the Amish. So you have a lot of naysayers in the music industry still, and – but then there are a lot of forward-thinking music label executives that use our technology. But when you find somebody who's just dead set against it or has the impression that we are trying to bring technology into an art form - which again isn't really the case. We have an observational tool; we didn't invent the fact that hit songs conform over and over again to one of these 60 mathematical patterns.

FLATOW: Right.

Mr. McCREADY: We've just been able to observe.

FLATOW: Right. Right.

Mr. McCREADY: But you know, you tell a music label, this song isn't going to work, and they say, well, we don't believe you. We're going to release it and promote it anyway. And then it doesn't work, and you would think we could go back and say, well, you know – in a nice way – we told you so.

FLATOW: Right. Right.

Mr. McCREADY: But they say, well, you know, we're wrong nine out of 10 times anyway, so that was just maybe statistically another time we were going to be wrong. If you do the opposite and say, well, this song is going to work, and they release it and promote it and it works, and you go back and you say, we were on the money, they say, well, you know, we thought it was going to be a hit, too, that's why we released it and promoted it. So it's hard to – you know, unless we're working on every release of every – of a particular label where we've been able to increase their percentages – and we do have cases like that - it can be a tough sell at the beginning.

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PART 4

FLATOW: Can you work in the opposite direction? Can you take those 60 variables that you know are going to be - make a hit and write a song that has those sounds?

Mr. McCREADY: Well, again, I mean, in a sense, but again it's just an observational tool, so what we can do if we get involved in the studio - say, you know, at the final mix stage - we can analyse the final mix that the producer gives us. We can isolate the variables - the melody, harmony, beat, et cetera - and we can say, look, we can't give you any creative direction. We don't know how you should change this song, but we can tell you that the problem appears to be in the base or the baseline of that song. So before the producer brings the bass player back in, he'll usually play around with the mix. Maybe he'll muddy up the base a little bit or increase the base a decibel or decrease it - sometimes the producer is the only person in the world who knows what the heck he did. But we'll come back to him and say, look, whatever you did on mix number three - because they'll send us four or five new mixes - we'll say, whatever you did on mix number three seems to be working. Just a little bit more of that and it puts you in this pattern. If the producer isn't comfortable with how that sounds, mix number three, obviously, they're not going to release it. It has to be a combination of the producer's ears, the A and R's ears and our technology. We actually call this technology music X-ray, because we compare it to the X-ray or an MRI machine when it was first introduced into medicine. It shows the doctor a patient in a way that the doctor couldn't see it before and allows the doctor to make better decisions. Our technology shows music industry executives their music and their market in a way that they couldn't see it.

FLATOW: But is it a universal market? I mean, would a different culture have its own cluster of what works versus the American culture...

Mr. McCREADY: Yes. We work...

FLATOW: ...Japanese, whatever, anything else?

Mr. McCREADY: Yeah. We work in the U.S., the U.K., Germany, Spain, and we're starting in Brazil and Japan now. What we see is that many of the clusters are present in all of those markets, and that would account for reasons that you have these international hits.

FLATOW: Right.

Mr. McCREADY: But you also have clusters that are very particular to individual cultures. So in Spain you have, two or three or four what we call clusters - these are mathematical patterns to which songs conform - that are present only in that market.

FLATOW: Talking with Mike McCready who is CEO of Platinum Blue. And he was here with, in our studios. Thank you for taking time...

Mr. McCREADY: Thank you very much, Ira. Thank you for letting me.