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'The Song Machine' details the songwriters behind pop's biggest stars

By **Scott Porch**

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They write the songs — and it's not the pop stars.

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Unless you work in the music industry or follow its every move, you have probably never heard of Lauren Christy, who is part of a writing/producing team called The Matrix. Christy kicked a hornet's nest in 2003 in Rolling Stone magazine when she described how The Matrix and punk-pop star Avril Lavigne co-wrote "Complicated," "Sk8er Boi" and "I'm With You," the three biggest hits from Lavigne's "Let Go" album, which sold more than 20 million copies.

"Avril would come in and sing a few melodies, change a word here or there," Christy said. "She came up with a couple of things in 'Complicated,' like, instead of 'Take off your stupid clothes,' she wanted it to say 'preppy clothes.'" Duly insulted, Lavigne in the UK newspaper The Mirror: "What they said was incorrect. I'm a writer and I don't appreciate someone trying to take the credit away from me."

Christy committed the apparently unpardonable sin of acknowledging that she co-wrote several hits that someone else made famous. If her comments challenge your illusion that those artists write most of their own music, this would be a good place to stop reading because John Seabrook, a staff writer at The New Yorker magazine who specializes in tech and popular culture, punches an iceberg-sized hole in that myth in "The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory," an ambitious, important and somewhat flawed new book that he reported from deep inside the music industry.

So, here's the thing: Even brand-name stars like Taylor Swift and Rihanna, who are very involved in writing their own songs, work with industry-insider producers with those snazzy stage names like The Matrix, Dr. Luke, Timbaland and Max Martin and lyricists like Ester Dean, all of whom figure prominently in "The Song Machine."

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Although the demo model — in which producers record a first-draft version of a song, shop it

around to talent managers and artists, and then re-create it with the artist in a recording studio — had been around since the 1960s, a group of Swedish songwriters and producers re-engineered it as an assembly-line process in the mid-1990s. In the highly collaborative and highly specialized "track and hook" process developed by DJ/producer Denniz PoP, producers built dozens of versions of the components of a song — intro, chorus, bridge — and shuffled and reshuffled those parts until they got "the track." Then a lyrical specialist known as a "topliner" would come into the studio and work out the lyrics, i.e., the "hook."

Within a few years, two unstoppable forces — consolidation of U.S. radio station ownership into large national networks and the hit-making Swedish record producer Max Martin — changed the pop music world as we know it. Clear Channel (now iHeartMedia) and Infinity Broadcasting built coast-to-coast networks of local radio stations that streamlined their playlist programming, and those playlists became increasingly stuffed with Max Martin songs.

Martin, born Martin Karl Sandberg, grew up in Sweden playing French horn, drums and keyboards, and studying music theory and composition. Although he was the frontman for a Swedish glam-metal band called It's Alive, which released two albums in the early 1990s, Martin mostly listened to pop groups like Depeche Mode and The Bangles during those years. After the band fizzled in 1994, he became a songwriter and record producer who wrote the Backstreet Boys' "We've Got It Goin' On," which never broke through on the American music charts but was a big hit in Europe.

"The song," Seabrook writes, "combines ABBA's pop chords and textures, Denniz PoP's song structure and dynamics, '80s arena rock's big choruses, and early '90s American R&B grooves." Martin worked that combination into hit after hit — Backstreet Boys' "Quit Playing Games (With My Heart)," [Robyn's](#) "Show Me Love," 'N Sync's "I Want You Back," and [Britney Spears'](#) "... Baby One More Time" — in a span of three years.

More recently, writers and producers have turned the "track-and-hook" process into something like a cross between speed dating and summer camp — holding a retreat where they assemble themselves into constantly shifting combinations to write songs for a particular artist. After her 2007 hit "Umbrella," Rihanna went into such a camp with top writer/producers like Dean, [Ne-Yo](#), and Stargate (the stage name of the Norwegian duo Mikkel Eriksen and Tor Hermansen). "Rude Boy," Rihanna's 2010 hit that spent five weeks as the No. 1 song on the Billboard Hot 100, was hatched at that camp.

"The Song Machine" is definitive to a point, but the book arrives already somewhat dated as a status report on an industry that has changed dramatically in the last two years. The only hint of the digital upheaval under way is a chapter about [Spotify](#) that Seabrook adapted from an article

that he wrote for The New Yorker, months before Apple launched its Apple Music streaming service. "Even if Spotify does manage to survive Apple," Seabrook writes, "it would take years to complete the paradigm shift to streaming." With CD sales and digital downloads in perpetual decline and streaming revenue leading the music industry, the paradigm shift to streaming has already happened.

Although Seabrook is excellent on Martin's years in Stockholm and his transition to Hollywood in the '90s, he doesn't get to Martin's transition to hip-hop and R&B-tinged pop and his enormous chart success over the last few years, including four No. 1 hits and a Grammy for producer of the Year in 2015. For that, you'll have to read his recent profile of Martin in The New Yorker, an excellent coda for a story that's moving faster than the speed of books.

Scott Porch is writing a book about social upheaval in the 1960s and '70s.

"The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory"

By John Seabrook, W.W. Norton & Company, 338 pages, \$26.95

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