

In-Depth Song Analysis - Show 16

"I Walk The Line", Johnny Cash

Analysis and notes by 'TuneMoose' Matt Bates

Developed for the Music Circle - "Hits and Hooks" podcast

Produced by Every One's A Star Records

- I chose this song this week because of its simplicity. Where are the hooks in such a simply produced song?

FABRIC

- This is a folk song with a simple production. We have Johnny's rich bass vocals. There is a prominent picked guitar sound, just single notes, not chord strumming. And we have a subtle train groove on a snare drum. And, synced with the guitar we have a bass guitar playing the same notes as the guitar, but lower in pitch. That's it! Very simple

FUNCTIONS

- Similarly we have simple functions in the arrangement that match directly to the instrumentation fabric. The picked notes on the guitar are all that's in the midrange and, linked with the bass guitar, defines the harmony with an emphasis on the root and fifth of the chord of the moment. It also provides strong fills between song sections, and even into chord changes. The snare drum sets the pace with a train groove often found in country music. And of course we have Johnny's vocals. Without much distraction from other elements this shines through clearly and powerfully. That's it! No backing vocals. Nothing much in the higher frequencies. No second voice elements. No instrumental virtuosity. No solos. Simple

FORM

- Also very simple, the form is strophic, a string of sections whose harmonic structure is the same. He does seem to change keys but the harmonic structure remains the same in each key.

HOOKS

- It's a simple song. So where are the hooks then? What is keeping us engaged? It's a Folk song, some may say Country. It's a minimal production. So the vocal is super important, the lyrics and the story. The story is also very simple, actually. So let's dig in. Where are the hooks? Does this record live up to the 'a hook every 7 seconds' mantra?

- 0:00 Basic groove is set with a strong melody picked out on the guitar

- 0:00, 0:03 and so on... We hear run-ups, or fills, in the guitar melody that drive us into the next chord. Without much else going on these give us some strong forward motion, and hooks, until they become just part of the fabric of the song

- 0:10 There are some chord changes in the harmony that aren't so predictable. Not what we expect. In the opening sequence they act as hooks.

- 0:20 Johnny does this unusual pitch humming thing. He seems to do this throughout the song as if to get set for the key changes
- 0:28 Johnny's rich vocals come in
- 0:40 A third line rhymes with the previous two. Strong and stable rhyming
- 0:43 We get the refrain line for the first time. For anything other than the first listen this is a strong hook. It's also coupled with a guitar fill to the root chord for the key, a satisfying return to 'home'. And the refrain line itself has an internal rhyme in it, mine-line
- 0:49 Pitch humming thing again for the new key centre.
- 0:57 Vocals in again following the same structure as V1 with a triple rhyme in the first 3 lines. This repetition of form acts as a hook that comes from recognizing the repeated form.
- 1:08 Having changed keys, Johnny is singing at the upper end of his range here which brings a sense of urgency and importance to his vocal
- 1:12 Repeated lyric of the refrain line
- 1:18 Bit of an instrumental break giving the guitar a chance to get to the next key.
- 1:36 Pitch humming again
- 1:46 Vocals in again. I wouldn't normally call this a hook, but in such a sparse arrangement I believe at this point we're listening for what he's going to say and how he'll stick to the rhyming pattern set up in the previous two verses. And this time the rhyme of the first 3 lines is the same as the refrain rhymes... side - hide - tide - mine - line
- 2:06 Pitch humming thing again for yet another key
- 2:16 Vocals in at the low end of his range. The low pitch sticks out
- 2:20 Faintly we hear a thickening of the instrumentation with a strummed guitar sound coming in.
- 2:30 Another set of rhymes that match the refrain line rhymes
- 2:36 Repeated end line and fade out
- So altogether I'm counting 19 things that caught my attention, in a 3 min song, for an average of about 9 1/2 seconds between hooks. This is not bad, not 7, but still not bad. I wouldn't proclaim it as a hit song out of the gate, but a good album song, and it's very in keeping with the image of Johnny Cash.
- The most notable take-away from this song for me is the constant key changing. That's quite unusual and quite effective. It's also worth noting that he's leaning heavily on rhyme, and hardly at all on imagery in the lyric.