

THE MUSIC ROW #1 FORMULA

I present songwriting master classes and workshops internationally and have been teaching the BMI Nashville Songwriter's Workshops for twelve years. Writers come seeking the magic answer—the key that will open the door to fame, fortune, and success – a #1 single. Four of my students have achieved that, and countless others have signed publishing deals, artist deals, and have had their songs recorded.

I can't teach talent or impart creativity—but one of my primary tools as an instructor is an analysis of the current hits. I look for the common denominators—those melodic and lyric techniques that are found consistently in songs that rise to the top of the charts. I try to isolate the factors that allow a lyric and melody to resonate with millions of listeners. Then I encourage my students to apply those tools to the unique melodic and lyric concepts that come from their hearts.

I'm often asked, "What's the secret formula for a hit song?" So, I decided to undertake an analysis of the songs that reached the #1 position on Billboard's Country singles chart in 2009 to learn if there is indeed a "Music Row Formula."

Some of the assessments are admittedly subjective, such as whether a song's lyric is positive or negative; whether a tempo is slow, slow/mid, or mid, etc.; and whether a lyric is tongue-in-cheek. I also acknowledge that some different conclusions might have been reached had I examined every song that reached the top 10. But in studying a year's worth of #1's some trends were certainly apparent, and some prevalent misconceptions were rectified. Here's what I found:

Thirty different country songs reached #1 in 2009. Fourteen of them remained at the top of the chart for multiple weeks—with Lady Antebellum's five-week run at #1 with "Need You Now" being the longest.

See "Country_Singles_2009.pdf" for the chart of the #1 singles from 2009 with the detailed info.

WRITER(S):

When I asked a sample of hit songwriters what they believed constituted the formula for writing a #1 song, the response I heard most often was, "Write it with the artist." Eighteen of 2009's #1 singles were indeed written with the artist who recorded them. Twelve were written by an "outside writer"— someone other than the artist or producer. It's interesting to note that every #1 single of 2009 was co-written, as opposed to being written by one writer.

TEMPO:

This was a subjective assessment. There is no official definition of how many beats per minute constitutes a "slow" song, as opposed to one that is "mid-tempo."

Tempo: # of songs

Slow:	1
Slow/Mid:	3
Mid:	11

Mid/Up: 2
Up: 13

The conventional wisdom is that it's easier for songwriters to get up-tempo songs recorded than ballads. Twenty-six out of thirty of 2009's #1's--86.6%--were indeed mid-tempo or faster.

ARTIST'S GENDER:

It's easy to see that male artists ruled the country charts in 2009.

Male: 24
Female: 4
M/F Duet: 2

Note: I'm counting Sugarland's two #1's as being a female vocal, since the lead vocal was sung only by a female. The only solo females who attained #1's were Carrie Underwood and Taylor Swift; fifteen different male artists topped the chart.

TOPICS:

There's a common belief that most country songs are sad songs about cheating, lost love, and crying in your beer. In actuality, these themes were the basis of only three of 2009's #1 songs (10%).

Love Songs: 19

Of the (19) love songs thirteen were positive; five were negative; one was neutral.

Other Topics: 9

Three of these #1s extolled the virtues of being "country" ("Country Boy," "She's Country," "Small Town USA"). One dealt with cheating: "Cowboy Casanova."

Drinking Songs: 2

Note: both of these songs ("Out Last Night," and "Sideways") were about having a good time—not drinking over problems. Drinking was mentioned in a couple of the other songs—but was not their primary focus.

CLEVER, HUMOROUS, OR HEARTFELT:

Another prevalent misconception is that the majority of country songs are based on clever twists on words such as "Sleepin' Single in a Double Bed" and "Wishful Drinkin'." The reality is that only one of 2009's #1's ("It Happens") fell into that category.

Similarly, some people believe that most country songs are tongue-in-cheek or humorous—but that was only the case for six of 2009's #1's ("Start a Band," "Country Boy," "It Happens," "Out Last Night," "American Ride," "Toes").

In actuality, the majority of country hits had heartfelt lyrics crafted with conversational language, detailed imagery, and stories.

POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE EMOTION:

At my BMI workshops countless publishers have stated that the easiest songs for them to get recorded are uptempo songs with positive themes. Indeed, most of 2009's #1's expressed a positive emotion.

Positive: 22
Negative: 5
Neutral: 3

POINT OF VIEW:

First Person: 28
Third Person: 2

LENGTH:

Common wisdom has been that country singles should be shorter than 3:30. However, the average length of 2009's #1 country singles was 3:38. The shortest was Toby Keith's "American Ride" at 2:49; the longest was 4:17—"Start a Band," by Brad Paisley with Keith Urban. Note: The lengths listed are for the versions promoted to radio stations.

STRUCTURES:

Of the (30) songs that topped the chart (29) included choruses. The sole exception was "Down the Road."

All of 2009's #1's were crafted using verses (V), choruses (C), and bridges (B). Here's how they were structured:

VCVCBC: 13
VCVC: 9
VCVCBVC: 3
VCVCVC: 2
VCVCBVCBC: 1
VVBVBV: 1

Note: "Toes" was not included in the above tally. While it was crafted using verses, choruses, and bridges, it's difficult to identify its structure. My best guess is that it is either: VCVCCV or CVCBVCBC.

Pre-Choruses:

A pre-chorus is a two- or four-line section (typically four or eight musical bars and two or four lines of lyric), immediately preceding the chorus. Of those (29) songs that included choruses (12) included a pre-chorus; (17) did not.

Of the (29) songs that included choruses, in (23), the chorus lyrics remained the same each time they were sung.

Location of the Title:

Beginning of Chorus only: 1
End of Chorus only: 14
Beginning and End of Chorus: 5
End of Verse and End of Chorus: 1
Multiple times Within Chorus: 7

Note: “Toes” was not included in the above tally. If the structure is considered VCVCCV, the title is in the first line of each verse. If the structure is defined as CVCBVCBC, the title is in the first line of each chorus.

MELODY

A commonly held misconception is that country melodies aren't as important as the lyrics; that all country melodies sound similar. A listen to any of the #1's makes it clear that fresh, memorable, unique melodies are a crucial component of hit country songs.

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2009's composite #1 country song is an up-tempo, positive, love song recorded by a male artist who co-wrote it. It is heartfelt and sung from the first person point of view. Its lyric includes detailed imagery; its structure is VCVCBC with no pre-chorus; its title appears only at the end of each chorus; its melody is fresh and memorable; and the song is 3:38.

In my classes, I stress that there are no “rules” in songwriting—only tools. But it's clear that while there is not one “right way” to write a #1 single, there are elements that regularly occur in songs that top the charts.

Jason Blume is the author of 6 Steps to Songwriting Success, Inside Songwriting, and This Business of Songwriting, all published by Billboard Books. He teaches the BMI Nashville Songwriters Workshops and teaches for NSAI, as well as presenting master classes at Paul McCartney's Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts and for songwriting organizations throughout the world. His songs are on albums that have sold more than 50,000,000 copies and have been recorded by artists including Britney Spears, the Backstreet Boys, Jesse McCartney, the Gipsy Kings, Collin Raye, John Berry, and the Oak Ridge Boys, as well as superstars in Japan and Scandinavia.