
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Songwriting



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Sam

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Sam.

Neil

And I'm Neil. [Singing] Du du dum dum! Da-da-da!

Sam

What's that song you're singing, Neil? Is it The Rolling Stones?

Neil

Well, I've had this song stuck in my head all day! It's a real **earworm** – you know, a song you keep hearing over and over again in your head.

Sam

Well, The Rolling Stones, for example, are famous for their catchy songs. But writing a memorable song isn't easy. Not only do you have to write a good tune, you also need to match it to the lyrics - the words of the song.

Neil

In this programme, we'll be discussing the art of songwriting – combining lyrics and music to make a hit song. And of course, we'll be learning some new vocabulary as well.

Sam

But first I have a question for you, Neil. Every week from 1964 until it ended in 2006, the BBC television programme, Top of the Pops, had a countdown of the most popular songs in the British music charts, from number forty up to number one. So who's had the most number one hit songs in the UK over the years? Is it:

- a) The Rolling Stones?
- b) The Beatles? or,

c) Elvis Presley?

Neil

You're showing your age there, Sam – those musicians were famous decades ago! I'm going to go for c), the King of rock'n'roll, Elvis Presley.

Sam

OK, Neil. I'll reveal the answer later in the programme. Professor Adam Bradley is the author of *The Book of Rhymes*, a study into the lyrics of hip-hop music. He knows a lot about how words and music combine to make hit songs. When he spoke to BBC Radio 4 programme, *Word of Mouth*, the presenter, Michael Rosen, asked Adam what music he was listening to at the moment.

Adam Bradley

These days I have a little bit of a **nostalgic streak**, so I go back to some of the earliest music that mattered to me as a young person, music that my mother played for me, things like Crosby, Stills and Nash 'Suite: Judy Blue Eyes'... things like the earliest music that I discovered as an independent **tastemaker** for myself, things like De La Soul and A Tribe Called Quest.

Neil

Adam says he's currently listening to the music his mother played him when he was young because he has a **nostalgic streak** - an affectionate feeling for a happy time in the past. His mum liked 1960s American singer-songwriters like Crosby, Stills and Nash.

Sam

Adam is also listening to hip-hop groups like De La Soul - the music he chose when he started finding his own taste in music, becoming a tastemaker for himself. A **tastemaker** is someone who influences what is considered fashionable or popular at the moment.

Neil

As well as hip-hop, Adam also loves rock'n'roll music, and – like me – is a big fan of The Rolling Stones whose singer, Mick Jagger, and guitar player, Keith Richards, are two of the most successful songwriters ever. Here Adam tells BBC Radio 4's, *Word of Mouth*, how the rock stars worked together to write some of the best known songs in rock'n'roll history:

Adam Bradley

Often Keith Richards would go on one of his historic **benders** and wake up with a recording device next to him in the morning where he had put the melody down for a song, and had the **chord structure** and everything in place. And he might take

that to Mick, and Mick would listen through and he would write lyrics... And in Mick's mind, as he said in an interview once, he would impose his melodies as a singer on Keith's chord structure. So there would be this **give and take**, this tension.

Sam

Keith Richards is famous for **going on benders** – a period of time spent in heavy alcohol drinking and non-stop partying. During these, he often thought up the **chord structure** for a song. A chord is three or more musical notes played together, so a **chord structure** is a sequence of chords played one after the other.

Neil

Later, Mick Jagger would listen to the music Keith had thought up, and write lyrics to match. Adam describes this relationship as **give and take** – a compromise where you are willing to accept suggestions from another person and give up some ideas of your own.

Sam

Mick and Keith's legendary friendship has certainly been up and down over the years, and there's no doubt they've written some of the best rock songs ever. But have they been top when it comes to number one hits? It's time to reveal the answer to my question...

Neil

Yes, you asked who has had the most number one hits in the UK music charts, and I said it was Elvis Presley.

Sam

Which was... the correct answer, Neil! With twenty-one number one hits, Elvis, the King of rock'n'roll, is the most successful chart-topper, followed by The Beatles with seventeen number ones, and further down the list, The Rolling Stones with eight.

Neil

OK, let's recap the vocabulary we've learned starting with **earworm** - a song that you can't stop hearing over and over in your head.

Sam

A **nostalgic streak** is an affectionate or bittersweet feeling you have for a happy time in the past.

Neil

A **tastemaker** is a person that influences what people think is popular or fashionable at the moment.

Sam

If you **go on a bender**, you spend time drinking alcohol heavily.

Neil

A **chord structure** is a sequence of musical chords.

Sam

And finally, **give and take** between two people is a compromise in which they are willing to accept suggestions from each another, and give up some of their own ideas.

Neil

Don't forget that there is more to BBC Learning English than 6 Minute English! Why not try to improve your vocabulary through the language in news headlines? Try the News Review video on our website or download the podcast. And, of course, we have a free app – it's full of useful programmes and activities to help you improve your English.

Sam

Once again, our six minutes are up. Bye for now!

Neil

Bye!

VOCABULARY

earworm

(informal) a song that you keep hearing in your head, to the point of irritation

nostalgic streak

affectionate and slightly sad feeling you have for a happy time in the past

tastemaker

person who influences what is currently popular or fashionable

(go on a) bender

keep drinking a lot of alcohol for an extended period of time

chord structure

sequence of musical chords

give and take

compromise in which you are willing to accept suggestions from another person and give up some ideas of your own