

# THE MICHIGAN BROADCASTER



Editorial

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## No Lie: People Like Songs That Like Them

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"I'm surprised by the results of this music test," said the radio research client. "How could 'Liar' by Three Dog Night not come back playable?"

There were a lot of reasons. Although this was a decade ago, Three Dog Night had already been reduced to a handful of songs at most Oldies/Greatest Hits stations. Even at this long-listed soft classic hits outlet, even testing "Liar" was a stretch. That song rode the momentum of "Joy to the World" into the top 10 in 1971, but was already pretty much lost to time. Only another music head would have possibly had any expectations to begin with.

And then there was the hook. If you've never heard it, [it comes at :55 here](#), but suffice it to say that it's a bellowed minor-chord accusation that is deliberately jarring in the context of the song. It's even more jarring on a tape of 700 hooks, but before anybody seizes on that as an example of why a seven-second hook can't convey the essence of a song, I feel safe in saying that this one does.

And to be clear, as is the case with zillions of other songs that don't test, I really like "Liar." I also like ["Liars" by Ian Thomas](#), unknown in the U.S., but a significant Canadian hit from 1976. While the Three Dog Night song is apparently about a romantic relationship, "Liars" sounds more like it's about managers or label executives. In that regard, it's more like Heart's "Barracuda," a hit a year later, which has a very similar musical feel as well. No matter, even though the subject is more nebulous, "Liars" is a spectacularly bad tester, too, even by the standards of deeper Canadian oldies. The "Liar" story took place during my second year or so in music research, and helped crystalize something for me that has become even clearer over the years. Songs built around any sort of second-person reproach, especially if it's in the hook, rarely become enduring hits. As with the friends they choose, people like songs that like them back.

Not every enduring hit is a second-person affirmation, of course. But many of the biggest songs of all time in the classic rock/classic hits/adult hits fall into a few different categories. In some, the hooks are neutral ("More Than a Feeling," "Summer of '69," "The Logical Song," "Down Under," "Bennie and the Jets"), but often they are either:

**Compliments or entreaties in the second person:** "I Want You to Want Me," "Wonderful Tonight," "Need You Tonight," "Any Way You Want It," "You Make My Dreams [Come True]," "Sweet Child O' Mine," "You Are So Beautiful." The latter is a 40-year-old Joe Cocker record that hardly seemed momentous, but has outlived almost all of the soft AC fodder that surrounded it at the time. Billy Joel's "Just the Way You Are" faded eventually, but not until Bruno Mars' song of the same name became one of the best-testing, most universal songs of this decade.

**Affirmation or encouragement, also often in the second person:** "Livin' on a Prayer," "Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)," "Carry On Wayward Son," "Life Is a Highway," "Dream On." Fleetwood Mac's "Don't Stop" and Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'" are two of the most enduring hits of all time, the latter probably the most enduring of the moment, and both for the same reasons. It's a pattern that continues today with "Shake It Off." And no, it doesn't matter that the

overall lyrical bent of “Sweet Dreams” is darker. As with “Every Breath You Take,” the hook sets the tone for how the listener genuinely feels about the song, regardless of the rest of the lyric.

The common thread of positivity doesn’t mean there are no negative lyrics or downer songs. But true enduring hits in which the narrator could be in any way construed as dressing down somebody directly are a relative handful: “You Give Love a Bad Name,” “I Will Survive,” “Tainted Love” (“once I ran to you/now I run from you”), “My Life” (“go ahead with your own life/leave me alone”), “Big Shot” (in which Billy Joel is actually addressing himself, but few listeners would know that), “Go Your Own Way,” and perhaps “You Oughta Know,” although that song is hardly as enduring as the others. In some cases, listeners are willing to accept the narrator’s annoyance as being on their behalf. Most people find “My Life” speaks for them in some situation in their own life, and understand that Billy Joel is not personally accusing them of meddling. Female-empowerment lyrics also figure into a lot of the exceptions, from “I Will Survive” to “You Oughta Know” to “Someone Like You.”

That makes the enduring appeal of “You Give Love a Bad Name” that much more of an outlier, and one probably helped both by Jon Bon Jovi’s own charisma at the time and by the more positive follow-up. But when it comes to later Bon Jovi, remember that “I’ll Be There For You” sometimes tests, but “[Your Love Is Like] Bad Medicine” never does. Like “Liar,” many songs written from a negative male vantage point have faded with time and probably couldn’t have become hits after research took hold — usually geared to women or at least giving female audiences veto power in most formats. Cliff Richard’s “Devil Woman” never hung around, and Electric Light Orchestra’s “Evil Woman” is mostly gone now. So are the slew of ‘70s hits about abandoning your girlfriend in the name of adventure — “Ramblin’ Man,” “Heard It in a Love Song,” “No Time” (“no time/left for you”). Most of those are now recognized as products of a very different time. Only Supertramp’s “Goodbye Stranger” remains born to run.

In that regard, it will be interesting to see what endures from the last few years. Even a look at the most-played Hot AC gold shows a trend toward the affirmative, general (“Brave,” “Roar,” “Safe and Sound”) or personal (“I Will Wait”). Most of the recent smashes that go against that trend — “Blow Me (One Last Kiss),” “Somebody That I Used to Know”, all the hits from Adele’s “21” — could continue to work for the same reason as “You Oughta Know” and “I Will Survive.” But they’ll be the likely exceptions, pitted against “Happy,” “All of Me” and “[There’s No Place I’d] Rather Be.”