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ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

THE SONG MACHINE

The hitmakers behind Rihanna.

BY JOHN SEABROOK

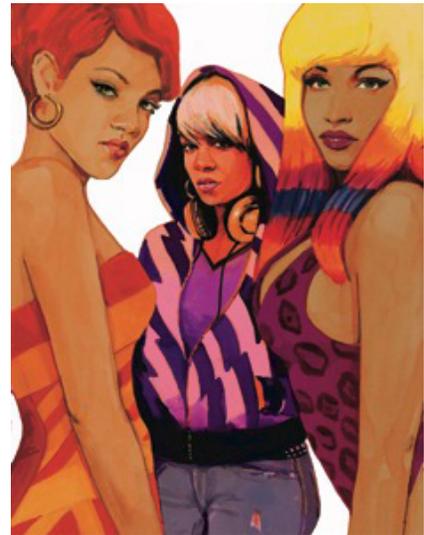
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On a mild Monday afternoon in mid-January, Ester Dean, a songwriter and vocalist, arrived at Roc the Mic Studios, on West Twenty-seventh Street in Manhattan, for the first of five days of songwriting sessions. Her engineer, Aubry Delaine, whom she calls Big Juice, accompanied her. Dean picked up an iced coffee at a Starbucks on Seventh Avenue, took the elevator up to Roc the Mic, and passed through a lounge that had a pool table covered in taupe-colored felt. Two sets of soundproofed doors led to the control room, a windowless cockpit that might have been the flight deck of a spaceship.

Tor Hermansen and Mikkel Eriksen, the team of Norwegian writer-producers professionally known as Stargate, were waiting there for Dean. Both are tall and skinny ectomorphs with pale shaved heads who would not look out of place in a “Matrix” movie. Dean, who is black, is neither skinny nor tall; she reached up to give them big hugs, which is how she greets almost everyone. They chatted for a while. Dean has a comical, Betty Boop-ish speaking voice, which will be featured in the upcoming animated film “Ice Age: Continental Drift.” (Sid, the giant ground sloth voiced by John Leguizamo, is finally getting a girlfriend, Dean’s Sloth Siren.) After ten minutes or so, she pronounced herself “ready to work.”

Most of the songs played on Top Forty radio are collaborations between producers like Stargate and “top line” writers like Ester Dean. The producers compose the chord progressions, program the beats, and arrange the “synths,” or computer-made instrumental sounds; the top-liners come up with primary melodies, lyrics, and the all-important hooks, the ear-friendly musical phrases that lock you into the song. “It’s not enough to have one hook anymore,” Jay Brown, the president of Roc Nation, and Dean’s manager, told me recently. “You’ve got to have a hook in the intro, a hook in the pre-chorus, a hook in the chorus, and a hook in the bridge.” The reason, he explained, is that “people on average give a song seven seconds on the radio before they change the channel, and you got to hook them.”

The top-liner is usually a singer, too, and often provides the vocal for the demo, a working draft of the song. If the song is for a particular artist, the top-liner may sing the demo in that artist’s style. Sometimes producers send out tracks to more than one top-line writer, which can cause problems. In 2009, both Beyoncé and Kelly Clarkson had hits (Beyoncé’s “Halo,” which charted in April, and Clarkson’s “Already Gone,” which charted in August) that were created from the same track, by Ryan Tedder. Clarkson wrote her own top line, while Beyoncé shared a credit with Evan Bogart. Tedder had neglected to tell the artists that he was double-dipping, and when Clarkson heard “Halo” and realized what had happened she tried to stop “Already Gone” from being released as a single, because she feared the public would think she had copied Beyoncé’s hit. But nobody cared, or perhaps even noticed; “Already Gone” became just as big a hit.



Ester Dean, center, has written smash hooks for Rihanna and Nicki Minaj.

A relatively small number of producers and top-liners create a disproportionately large share of contemporary hits, which may explain why so many of them sound similar. The producers are almost always male: Max Martin, Dr. Luke, David Guetta, Tricky Stewart, the Matrix, Timbaland, the Neptunes, Stargate. The top-liners are often, although not always, women: Makeba Riddick, Bonnie McKee, and Skylar Grey are among Dean's peers. The producer runs the session and serves as creative director of the song, but the top-liner supplies the crucial spark that will determine whether the song is a smash. (When I asked Tricky Stewart to define "smash," he said, "A hit is just a hit; a smash is a life changer.") As Eric Beall, an A. & R. executive with Shapiro, Bernstein & Co., a music publisher, puts it, "The top-line writer is the one who has to face a blank page." Stargate works with about twenty top-liners a year, and creates some eighty demos. These are sent out to A. & R. departments at record labels, to artists' managers, and, finally, to the artists, for approval. Around twenty-five of Stargate's songs end up on records each year.

Dean has a genius for infectious hooks. Somehow she is able to absorb the beat and the sound of a track, and to come out with its melodic essence. The words are more like vocalized beats than like lyrics, and they don't communicate meaning so much as feeling and attitude—they nudge you closer to the ecstasy promised by the beat and the "rise," or the "lift," when the track builds to a climax. Among Dean's best hooks are her three Rihanna smashes—"Rude Boy" ("Come on, rude boy, boy, can you get it up / Come on, rude boy, boy, is you big enough?"), "S&M" ("*Na-na-na-na* COME ON"), and "What's My Name" ("*Oh, na-na*, what's my name?"), all with backing tracks by Stargate—and her work on two Nicki Minaj smashes, "Super Bass" ("*Boom, badoom, boom / boom, badoom, boom / bass / yeah*, that's that super bass") and David Guetta's "Turn Me On" ("Make me come alive, come on and turn me on").

"Talk That Talk," a Dean-Stargate song that's the title track of Rihanna's most recent album, is built around one chord progression—F-sharp minor, E minor, B minor, D. The music combines genres that, twenty years ago, were distinct: the hard beats of hip-hop and the big melody "money notes" sung by nineties stars such as Whitney Houston, Mariah Carey, and Celine Dion. The first hook comes right away, in an abbreviated chorus that precedes a Jay-Z rap. Then comes the main hook: "One and two and three and four / come and let me know if you want some more," a salacious-sounding bit of rhythm singing, backed by dirty-sounding synths, which opens the chorus. Then there's a verse, which delivers the third hook: "Say what you want, say what you like / Say what you want me to do and I got you." The chorus rolls around again, this time with the lift, followed by the bridge, which delivers yet another hook: "What you say now, give it to me baby / I want it all night, give it to me baby," sung over a nasty-sounding snare drum (which, like all the instrumental sounds, is machine-made). The bridge also conveys the "breakdown," when the song's momentum pauses momentarily. Then comes the chorus for a final time. The song is neither clever nor subtle—we are a long way from Cole Porter here—but it is deeply seductive all the same.

Dean's preferred method of working is to delay listening to a producer's track until she is in the studio, in front of the mike. "I go into the booth and I scream and I sing and I yell, and sometimes it's words but most time it's not," she told me. "And I just see when I get this little chill, here"—she touched her upper arm, just below the shoulder—"and then I'm, like, 'Yeah, that's the hook.'" If she doesn't feel that chill after five minutes, she moves on to the next track, and tries again.

In advance of Dean's arrival at Roc the Mic, Stargate had prepared several dozen tracks. They created most of them by jamming together on keyboards until they came up with an "idea"—generally, a central chord progression or a riff—around which they quickly built up a track, using the vast array of preprogrammed sounds and beats at their disposal. Hermansen likens their tracks to new flavors awaiting the right soft-drink or potato-chip maker to come along and incorporate them into a product.

Their plan with Dean was to finish one or two songs at each session. Given their record of success, they dared hope that one of these would be a smash. The others would be relegated to the "good but not good enough" file. Around Roc the Mic, writing songs for any reason other than making hits is a waste of time.

Top Forty radio was invented by Todd Storz and Bill Stewart, the operator and program director, respectively, of KOWH, an AM station in Omaha, Nebraska, in the early fifties. Like most music programmers of the day, Storz and Stewart provided a little something for everyone. As Marc Fisher writes in his book “Something in the Air” (2007), “The gospel in radio in those days was that no tune ought to be repeated within twenty-four hours of its broadcast—surely listeners would resent having to hear the same song twice in one day.” The eureka moment, as Ben Fong-Torres describes it in “The Hits Just Keep on Coming” (1998), occurred in a restaurant across from the station, where Storz and Stewart would often wait for Storz’s girlfriend, a waitress, to get off work. They noticed that even though the waitresses listened to the same handful of songs on the jukebox all day long, played by different customers, when the place finally cleared out and the staff had the jukebox to themselves they played the very same songs. The men asked the waitresses to identify the most popular tunes on the jukebox, and they went back to the station and started playing them, in heavy rotation. Ratings soared.

By the end of the decade, Top Forty was the most popular format in the nation. It thrived in the sixties, but began to struggle with the popularity of FM radio, and the rise of album-oriented rock, in the seventies. Rock music, with its artistic aspirations, didn’t fit the nakedly commercial format as well as the bubblegum pop of the pre-rock era had. Also, mainstream pop began to splinter into “adult contemporary,” “easy listening,” and “urban,” among other formats. Rock, meanwhile, gave birth to “classic,” “modern,” and, in the nineties, “alternative” formats. Top Forty never went away—Casey Kasem’s syndicated radio show, “American Top Forty,” kept the format going into the twenty-first century—but by the eighties it could no longer claim to be America’s soundtrack.

In the past decade, however, Top Forty has come back stronger than ever. You hear it in shops, in restaurants, and at sporting events; it’s the music my thirteen-year-old son and his friends listen to on their iPods and dance to at parties. Paradoxically, in an age when an unprecedented range of musical genres is easily available via the Internet, the public’s appetite for hits has never been greater. (The best-selling-singles chart on iTunes, which is calculated from digital sales, and YouTube’s most popular songs, based on online views, match up closely with *Billboard*’s Hot 100, which is mainly derived from radio play and sales.) In New York City, contemporary hit radio now dominates FM stations, a remarkable turn of events for anyone old enough to remember when FM radio was the antithesis of Top Forty.

How did this happen? How did mainstream rock, once the source of the catchiest hooks in popular music, become robotic, unimaginative, and predictable, while pop, always the soul of artifice, came to seem creative, experimental, and alive? (*Billboard*’s list of the top ten songwriters of the past decade includes only one rock writer, Rob Thomas, who ranks fifth, between Alicia Keys and Max Martin; Stargate comes in ninth.) Whereas rock is about the sound of a band playing together (even when its members aren’t actually together) and features virtuoso solos played on real instruments, today’s Top Forty is almost always machine-made: lush sonic landscapes of beats, loops, and synths in which all the sounds have square edges and shiny surfaces, the voices are Auto-Tuned for pitch, and there are no mistakes. The music sounds sort of like this: *thump thooka whompa whomp pish pish pish thumpaty wompah pah pah pah*. The people who create the songs are often in different places. The artists, who spend much of the year touring, don’t have time to come into the studio; they generally record new material in between shows, in mobile recording studios and hotel rooms, working with demos that producers and top-line writers make for them to use as a kind of vocal stencil pattern. (The production notes for Rihanna’s single “Talk That Talk” say that her vocal was recorded on “the Bus” in Birmingham, Alabama, in Room 538 of the Sofitel Paris Le Faubourg, and in Room 526 of the Savoy, in London. When I remarked on this peripatetic recording method to Hermansen, he replied, “It’s music as aspirational travel.”)

As was the case in the pre-rock era, when Phil Spector-produced girl groups led the hit parade, many of the leading artists of the post-rock era are women. Rarely a month goes by without a new song from Lady Gaga, Katy Perry, Beyoncé, Kelly Clarkson, Kesha, Rihanna, Nicki Minaj, or Pink near the top of the charts. But the artist who best

embodies the music and the style of the new Top Forty is Rihanna, the Barbados-born pop singer. At twenty-four, she is the queen of urban pop, and the consummate artist of the digital age, in which quantity is more important than quality and personality trumps song craft. She releases an album a year, often recording a new one while she is on an eighty-city world tour promoting the last one. To keep her supplied with material, her label, Def Jam, and her manager, Jay Brown, periodically convene “writer camps”—weeklong conclaves, generally held in Los Angeles, where dozens of top producers and writers from around the world are brought in to brainstorm on songs. After an album comes out, she may release remixes, like her recent ill-advised collaborations with Chris Brown, to give singles a boost. She has sold more digital singles than any other artist—a hundred and twenty million.

Rihanna is often described as a “manufactured” pop star, because she doesn’t write her songs, but neither did Sinatra or Elvis. She embodies a song in the way an actor inhabits a role—and no one expects the actor to write the script. In the rock era, when the album was the standard unit of recorded music, listeners had ten or eleven songs to get to know the artist, but in the singles-oriented business of today the artist has only three or four minutes to put her personality across. The song must drip with attitude and swagger, or “swag,” and nobody delivers that better than Rihanna, even if a good deal of the swag originates with Ester Dean.

Several of the tracks that Stargate had prepared for Dean were “*cray-zee*,” one of two catchall superlatives used around the studio; “dope” is the other. But since they had five days of sessions ahead, and Dean often required time to get into her zone, there was no point in squandering the best tracks right away. So they warmed up with a throwaway number, which all parties knew immediately was not “the one.”

Their second attempt was more promising. Dean carried her iced coffee into the recording booth, which adjoined the control room. She was dimly visible through the soundproofed glass window, bathed in greenish light. She took out her BlackBerry, and as the track began to play she surfed through lists of phrases she had copied from magazines and television programs. She showed me a few: “life in the fast lane,” “crying shame,” “high and mighty,” “mirrors don’t lie,” “don’t let them see you cry.” Some phrases were categorized under headings like “Sex and the City,” “Interjections,” and “British Slang.”

The first sounds Dean uttered were subverbal—*na-na-na* and *ba-ba-ba*—and recalled her hooks for Rihanna. Then came disjointed words, culled from her phone—“taking control . . . never die tonight . . . I can’t live a lie”—in her low-down, growly singing voice, so different from her coquettish speaking voice. Had she been “writing” in a conventional sense—trying to come up with clever, meaningful lyrics—the words wouldn’t have fit the beat as snugly. Grabbing random words out of her BlackBerry also seemed to set Dean’s melodic gift free; a well-turned phrase would have restrained it. There was no verse or chorus in the singing, just different melodic and rhythmic parts. Her voice as we heard it in the control room had been Auto-Tuned, so that Dean could focus on making her vocal as expressive as possible and not worry about hitting all the notes.

After several minutes of nonsense singing, the song began to coalesce. Almost imperceptibly, the right words rooted themselves in the rhythm while melodies and harmonies emerged in Dean’s voice. Her voice isn’t hip-hop or rock or country or gospel or soul, exactly, but it could be any one of those. “I’ll come alive tonight,” she sang. Dancing now, Dean raised one arm in the air. After a few more minutes, the producers told her she could come back into the control room.

“See, I just go in there and scream and they fix it,” she said, emerging from the booth, looking elated, almost glowing.

Stargate went to work putting Dean’s wailings into traditional song structure. As is usually the case, Eriksen worked “the box”—the computer—using Avid’s Pro Tools editing program, while Hermansen critiqued the playbacks. Small colored rectangles, representing bits of Dean’s vocal, glowed on the computer screen, and Eriksen chopped and rearranged them, his fingers flying over the keys, frequently punching the space bar to listen to a playback, then

rearranging some more. The studio's sixty-four-channel professional mixing board, with its vast array of knobs and lights, which was installed when Roc the Mic Studios was constructed, only five years ago, sat idle, a relic of another age.

Within twenty minutes, Dean's rhythmic utterances had been organized into an intro, a verse, a pre-chorus (or "pre"), a chorus, and an "outro"; all that was missing was a bridge. (Friday, the final day of the sessions, was reserved for making bridges.) Delaine, the engineer, who hadn't said a word thus far, sat down at the computer and began tweaking the pitch of Dean's vocal. Dean went back into the booth and added more words: "Give me life . . . touch me and I'll come alive . . . I'll come alive tonight . . ."

Hermansen listened, his bald head bobbing to the beat. "You don't want 'I'll come alive at night,' " he said, over the booth's intercom. "That's too zombie."

"I'll come a-LI-I-IVE," Dean tried, drawing out the syllables.

Once the hook was finished, Dean wrote a couple of verses on her MacBook Air. In a little less than two hours, they had a finished demo.

Was this the one? Hermansen wasn't sure; they would listen to it again tomorrow. Big Juice seemed to like it, though. After hearing the final playback, he spoke for the first time.

"That's dope," he said.

Dean was born in Muskogee, Oklahoma. Her great-grandmother on her mother's side was a full-blooded Cherokee. She has a country twang in her voice, and uses it on her demos to amplify her swag. Her father drank, and after her parents split up she moved with her mother and five siblings (Ester is the youngest), first to Tulsa, then to Omaha. Dean left school after tenth grade and, after drifting around, wound up in Atlanta, working as a nurse's aide in various hospitals. One of her sisters and a nephew lived with her in her one-bedroom government-subsidized apartment. Later, her mother moved in, too. Dean wanted to be a singer. She had been writing songs since third grade, and she sang beautifully in school as a child—everyone told her so—but she didn't know how to break into the music business.

Early in 2005, Dean was at an outdoor concert given by the Gap Band, a funk ensemble made up of the three Wilson brothers, who, like Dean, are from Oklahoma. Dean, in the crowd, was singing along with Charlie Wilson, the lead singer. The producer Tricky Stewart happened to be nearby. "I heard this singing coming from somewhere around me," he told me, "and I'm trying to listen to Charlie Wilson, but my producer's ear is hearing this other voice, and I'm thinking, Wow, that is not natural. Charlie Wilson is a damn good singer, but this other voice is keeping right up, executing all the tricky little runs perfectly. Finally, I just had to find who that was." He followed the sound of the voice to Dean, and introduced himself. "I said, 'Do you have any musical training?'" he recalled. "She said she didn't. I said, 'Well, a person who can sing like you has a gift.'"

Stewart invited Dean to his studio, RedZone Entertainment, in Atlanta. "I just wanted to put her in a room with some other talented musicians to see what she could do," he told me. In addition to singing, they worked on writing, because, he added, "I truly believe if you can sing you can write songs." Dean sang some of her songs for Stewart, and he offered her a contract with his publishing company. She made some extra money by singing on demos, but she was still broke, living with her family in her cramped apartment and working at the hospital.

On Super Bowl weekend, 2008, Dean saw a movie called "The Secret." It purports to demonstrate "the law of attraction," an ancient principle, long suppressed by nefarious powers, that states that if you want something badly enough, and if you "manifest" your dreams clearly in your mind and remove any doubts you harbor about attaining them, they will come true. As an aid to this kind of thinking, the film (and the subsequent best-selling book, by Rhonda Byrne) advocates making a "vision board": a poster with taped-up pictures of people, achievements, and things you admire, aspire to, or covet. After watching the film, Dean took the plastic cover off a storage container in her apartment and taped to it a picture of Ciara, a pop singer and songwriter who happened to be from Atlanta. She cut out pictures of

a house, a car, and an American Express card, and taped those up, too.

In the fall of 2008, another producer, Polow da Don, brought Dean to Los Angeles, and she met Jimmy Iovine, the head of Interscope Records. She soon began writing for Ciara, and then for Christina Aguilera and Mary J. Blige. Dean describes herself as a “prude,” and she neither smokes nor drinks, nor does she frequent clubs or parties, but when she gets on the mike she becomes a person who does all those things, and more. (She told me that her raunchiest lyric, for Rihanna’s “S&M”—“I may be bad but I’m perfectly good at it / Sex in the air, I don’t care, I love the smell of it”—came to her on a Sunday, adding, “Father forgive me.”) It is when writing for Rihanna that her inner bad girl gets freest rein; she becomes the woman she imagines Rihanna might be, which Rihanna herself, tall and slim and sexy, would never aspire to with such urgency. If you listen to Dean’s demos for her Rihanna hits on YouTube (which someone uploaded without her permission), it’s hard to tell whether Dean is channelling Rihanna or Rihanna is copying Dean. “People put comments on my YouTube demos saying stuff like ‘This cover sucks,’ ” she told me indignantly. “I ain’t never covered a song in my life!”

Dean’s hits have made her a lot of money, both from record sales and from performance income, which writers earn when songs are played on the radio. (A No. 1 single can earn the writer a million dollars or more, and Dean has cowritten five.) She has a nice home in the Brentwood section of L.A., and another house nearby, which she uses as a recording studio. She generally prefers to have producers e-mail her tracks; she writes the top line and records her vocal in her own studio with the help of Delaine, who is her full-time engineer. “When I’m working alone, I have no feedback, just the occasional nod or ‘I like it’ from Aubry,” she said. “Stargate is the only producer where I go to their place, ’cause everyone else is so hit-minded. They’re always looking at you, going, ‘Didja get it? Didja get it? Is that the hit?’ And I don’t know what I’m going to give them. I never try to tap and find out what it is; I just do what I do.”

In only a few years, Dean has achieved all the goals she taped up on her vision board. But she has one more goal (and another vision board for that): to be a recording artist herself. She had a modest hit with her recording of her 2009 song “Drop It Low,” featuring Chris Brown, but an EP or an album did not follow. In fact, Dean’s becoming an artist is the very last thing many people in the music industry want, because, as Dean put it to me, “to them, I’m a check. So their attitude is ‘Why you want to take away my check?’ ”

Nevertheless, Dean has declared—and Jay Brown, who became her manager last December, has agreed—that 2012 will be the year of Ester Dean. She sees herself as the second coming of Missy Elliott, in accordance with her somewhat mystical belief in artistic reincarnation: Beyoncé is Diana Ross, Lady Gaga is Madonna, Usher is R. Kelly, and Ester is Missy. She added, “I’m lucky I got people who truly believe in me, like Jay.” “Ester has an idea of what she wants to do,” Brown said. “And there’s a long precedent for it, from recent writers who became artists, like Ne-Yo and John Legend, and going back to people like Carole King and Smokey Robinson.” Shortly before Christmas, Polow da Don helped broker a deal with Jimmy Iovine, at Interscope Records, who signed Dean and plans to bring out an album of hers later this year. “Jay be, like, ‘I know what to do with you,’ ” Dean told me, “and I’m, like, ‘Yes! Finally somebody who sees me as more than a check!’ ” There is talk of calling the album “UnderESTimated.”

In Dean’s mind, that was what these sessions with Stargate were for: to create songs for her own album. (A first single, “Gimme Money,” showed up online in February, though it hasn’t been officially released.) Stargate was paying for the sessions, so they were under no obligation to give any of the songs to a particular artist or label. They only had to work it out among the three of them.

Growing up in Trondheim, a small seaside city in Norway, Mikkel Eriksen was nuts for American R. & B. and hip-hop, but there was no Norwegian urban-music scene. He made hip-hop drum loops on his Commodore 64 computer, and he kept all his electronic gear under the bed—keyboard, tape machine, reverb, sequencer. “That was my whole life,” he told me, “buying gear, and playing in cover bands to make money to buy more gear.” One day in 1998, a friend said to him, “You should meet this guy Tor Hermansen—you are the only two guys who listen to urban music

in Norway.”

Hermansen’s parents divorced when he was five, and he lived with his father, who drove a backhoe for work. He wasn’t around when Tor came home from school, so Tor listened to lots of music, to pass the time. “I got hooked on American culture from movies—Steven Spielberg, ‘Grease,’ and ‘Beat Street,’ ” he said. “I was obsessed with the South Bronx, from songs like ‘The Message,’ without even knowing where it was.” He started writing stories and taking pictures for local newspapers when he was thirteen. He wrote frequently about music, and eventually got a job at Warner Bros. in Oslo, where he worked his way up to head of A. & R.

Eriksen made an appointment with Hermansen and took along a demo of an artist he was working with. Hermansen didn’t like the artist, but he liked the backing track. “He said, ‘Did you make this music? It’s good,’ ” Eriksen recalled. Before long, Hermansen had quit his job and joined forces with the other half of Norway’s urban-music fan base.

Their big break came when they met Tim Blacksmith and Danny D., a British management duo, who brought them to London to remix American urban hits for the European market and to produce U.K. acts. Their job was to add Euro-pop sweetness to the city grit. “The idea at the time was that urban music needed to have more sparkly, brighter choruses, and more of a lift, to work in Europe,” Eriksen said. He added, “Our experience with remixing really has helped us in the way we work today, because we know that if we have a good vocal we can strip out the music and replace it with other music.” Their dream was to be on the radio in the United States. “We had tried a few times with labels in the U.S., without success,” Eriksen said, but “it wasn’t our time.” From around 2000 to 2003, hip-hop was dominated by big beats, created by producers like Timbaland and the Neptunes. “We loved it, but couldn’t make that kind of music,” Eriksen said. Hermansen added, “As much as we wanted to do the typical stripped-down hip-hop record, we were better at the melodic stuff.”

In 2004, things suddenly slowed down for Stargate in the U.K. “People got fed up with Stargate’s sound—things change fast in the music business—and there was no work,” Eriksen told me. “We were sitting back in Norway wondering, What do we do now? Should we shut it down? Our manager, Tim, said, ‘Let’s just go to New York, book a studio, and give it a shot there.’ We didn’t have much money left, but we paid for the trip. No one here knew who we were. We had a few sessions with writers, but nothing substantial. Our goal was to sell one song, and we did, we sold one, so we came back for one more week of sessions, and then we were going to call it quits.”

They reserved a room in the old Sony Music Studios, on Tenth Avenue. One day, they met the vocalist and songwriter Ne-Yo wandering the halls, and invited him into the studio. Hermansen says, “He heard our track and couldn’t believe two white guys had made this kind of music. So we set up a session, and ‘So Sick’ came out of that—Ne-Yo wrote it in twenty minutes. Afterward, we were just jumping up and down, buzzing.” “So Sick” went to No. 1 in 2006. “Irreplaceable,” written by Stargate and Ne-Yo and recorded by Beyoncé, spent ten weeks at the top of the U.S. singles chart in 2007, making it a bona-fide smash. Eriksen said, “We thought we’d have to adapt to the beat-driven music here, but it turned out that it was our more choral, melodic music that people gravitated toward.” Hermansen told me, “When we first got here, American pop music was linear and minimalistic, with few chord changes, and no big lift in the chorus. If you listen to radio today, there are big breakdowns, buildups, instrumental parts, and more tempo.” That is due in no small part to Stargate: by bringing a European remixer’s sensibility to the crunchy beats of hip-hop, they created a new kind of urban pop.

At Roc the Mic, Stargate carries on a glorious and disappearing New York tradition that stretches back to the Brill Building days of the late fifties and early sixties, when songwriting teams such as Gerry Goffin and Carole King, Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, and Ellie Greenwich and Jeff Barry cranked out hits for the top pop acts of the day; and further back still, to the nineteen-tens and twenties, when the Broadway-to-Sixth Avenue reach of West Twenty-eighth Street, known as Tin Pan Alley, for the sound of pianos coming from the upper floors, was the center of the music-publishing industry. With their managers, Blacksmith and Danny D., orchestrating demand, Stargate has become one of the very few writer-producers whom labels approach when they absolutely must have a hit single, or a “bullet,” as

Hermansen calls it, to market an album with. Often, panicked label execs approach them in the final weeks, or even days, before an album is mastered, because Stargate has a reputation for speed. “You can have two or three hot singles on an album, or no singles,” Hermansen explained, “and that’s the difference between selling five million copies worldwide and launching an eighty-date sold-out world tour, and selling two hundred thousand copies and having no tour. That’s like a twenty-million-dollar difference.”

“**I**ll Come Alive,” the best song from Monday’s session, wasn’t sounding as dope on the following day. Before Dean arrived, Hermansen listened to a playback and delivered his verdict: “That’s not the one.” He added that Ester, in creating top lines for songs she wanted to record herself, seemed to be suppressing the overtly sexual lyrics that emerged when she was writing for other singers, and which were, for better or worse, her trademark.

Dean arrived, dressed in a floppy knit hat, leather jacket, jeans, and boots—her usual “casual but fly” style. Stargate began the session by playing one of their craziest tracks. It started with a snare drum layered with handclaps, with an evil-sounding, distorted guitarlike synth moving in and out of the foreground. Dean listened to the track for about twenty seconds, until she began humming a melody softly. “O.K., got it,” she said. “Let’s do it.”

She went into the booth, got out her phone, and as the music started she began vocalizing: “How do I get it . . . walkin’ in the cold to get it . . . you gotta, I’m-a wanna.” She had the core of the melody, but it needed words. About a minute in, she hit on the main hook, “How you love it,” in which the words played syncopated rhythm with the beat. It was classic Dean, freestyle and suggestive-sounding. This was followed by a secondary hook: “Do you do it like *this*, do you do it like *that*, if you do it like *this* can I do it right *back*.”

In the control room, the Stargate guys sensed something special was happening, and they worked quickly to capture it in song structure.

“Let’s loop the first half.”

“Do the synth chords and then use the arpeggiator to set the rise.”

“I love the straightness of the beginning. Put a couple more notes in the pre.”

In the booth, Dean, feeling the chill, put her hands in the air and did a snaky dance, testing the effect of the hooks on her hips.

Back in the control room, Dean wrote a verse, which Eriksen looped. He copied parts of the vocal and stacked two or three copies on top of one another to create a choral effect, a technique known as double-tracking. Now they had half of a great song, but it “runs out of ammo in the middle,” as Hermansen put it. Then Eriksen remembered a rap that Nicki Minaj had written for another Dean-Stargate song that hadn’t made it onto Minaj’s debut album. He stripped out Minaj’s vocal and added it to their new track. “Let’s see if it fits,” he said, and it did. Another playback, and it sounded sensational.

“It’s a smash!” Hermansen declared.

Everyone was giddy, like children on Christmas morning. Blacksmith and Danny D. came into the control room and listened to the playback, whooping raucously at the choruses, perhaps the very first of countless revellers who would bounce to the song. Dean danced. Delaine bobbed his head and smiled. When it was over, everyone cheered.

Then Danny D. said, “Let me just interject one word. You know who’s looking? Pink.”

“I’m keeping that one for myself,” Ester said, firmly.

“I know. I’m just saying. Pink’s looking for an urban song with a contemporary beat.”

“No!”

“Kelly Clarkson’s supposedly looking. And Christina!”

Friday, the final day of sessions, was quiet. Dean came in, later than usual, to add bridges and some extra verses to the songs they had worked on. While waiting for her, Hermansen reviewed their output for the week. Besides “How You Love It,” there was a fiery up-tempo number called “Edge.” (Dean had also claimed this one for herself, on

Wednesday, when they wrote it, but by Friday the song was being referred to as “the Katy Perry song.”) There was also a promising R. & B. song they had composed on Thursday, although the hook wasn’t strong enough yet.

I asked Hermansen what would happen if a well-known artist wanted to record “How You Love It.” “If it’s a super-smash, and a Beyoncé or a Rihanna wants to do it, we’re going to want to do it with them,” he replied. “Because artists like that don’t come along every day. So Ester is going to have to make a decision.” He paused. “But Ester is smart.”

But what about her own album?

Eriksen said, “A lot of writers want to be artists. Most of them can sing, and a lot of them can sing really well. But, to be an artist, that’s another story. To be able to perform, to be the person everyone looks at when you walk into the room, with all the publicity and touring, and then to be able to get that sound on the record—that’s not easy. You can be a great singer, but when you hear the record it’s missing something.”

What is that? I asked.

Eriksen thought for a while. “It’s a fat sound,” he said, “and there’s a sparkle around the edges of the words.”

Dean arrived, with her iced coffee, but she couldn’t seem to get down to work. She chatted with her friend Traci Hale, whom she had brought along to help her write; she danced around the control room to playbacks; she played a game called Fruit Ninja on her iPad; she checked the iTunes ranking of her latest smash, David Guetta and Nicki Minaj’s “Turn Me On” (it had reached No. 1). Tim Blacksmith came in and tried to goose her along. Big Juice maintained his Buddha-like cone of silence.

The Stargate guys hung around for as long as they could, but they wanted to get home to their wives and young children. They were heading to Los Angeles the following week, for ten days of sessions at Westlake Recording Studios; the Grammys were coming up, and a lot of writers and artists would be in town. Stargate was nominated for record of the year (Katy Perry’s “Firework”) and rap song of the year (Wiz Khalifa’s “Black and Yellow”).

Dean had never been to the Grammys, although she has received multiple songwriter nominations and has been invited each time she’s been nominated. This year, she was nominated for her contributions to Rihanna’s “Loud,” which was up for album of the year, but she still wasn’t planning to go. “I don’t have anything to wear,” she said. “Anyway, Adele’s going to win everything.”

“You never know!” Blacksmith declared, trying to be positive. But with the mention of Adele the air pressure in the control room seemed to change. Stargate knew well from their experience in London how quickly fads come and go in the pop business; a massive smash such as Adele’s “Someone Like You,” with its heartfelt lyrics, accompanied by simple piano arpeggios—no arpeggiator required—could be the beginning of the end of urban pop.

Finally, the Norwegians left, saying they hoped they’d see Dean in Los Angeles. Dean decided she’d go get something to eat, and then she’d come back to Roc the Mic and “knock the bottom out of these songs.” ♦

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