CHAPTER 1

Introduction to HOOK PHRASES & FOCAL POINTS

Welcome to The Art of the Hook. As mentioned in the Preface, this book will explore the creativity and craft behind pop songs, particularly the construction of strong focal points that make a song appealing and memorable. Roughly 125 chart hits will be used to illustrate specific focal point devices, covering all aspects of music, including rhythm, melody, harmony, form, and timbre. We will start this chapter with an introduction to hooks.

Now the word "hook" is often used when describing pop songs, but what exactly is a "hook"? If we save specific details for later chapters, we could simply say that a hook is a **musical part that grabs your attention,** and **sticks in your head,** even after the song is over. We can divide hooks into two types:

1. Short **"HOOK PHRASES**," and
2. Larger areas of the song form that we will call **"FOCAL POINTS."**

Hook Phrases

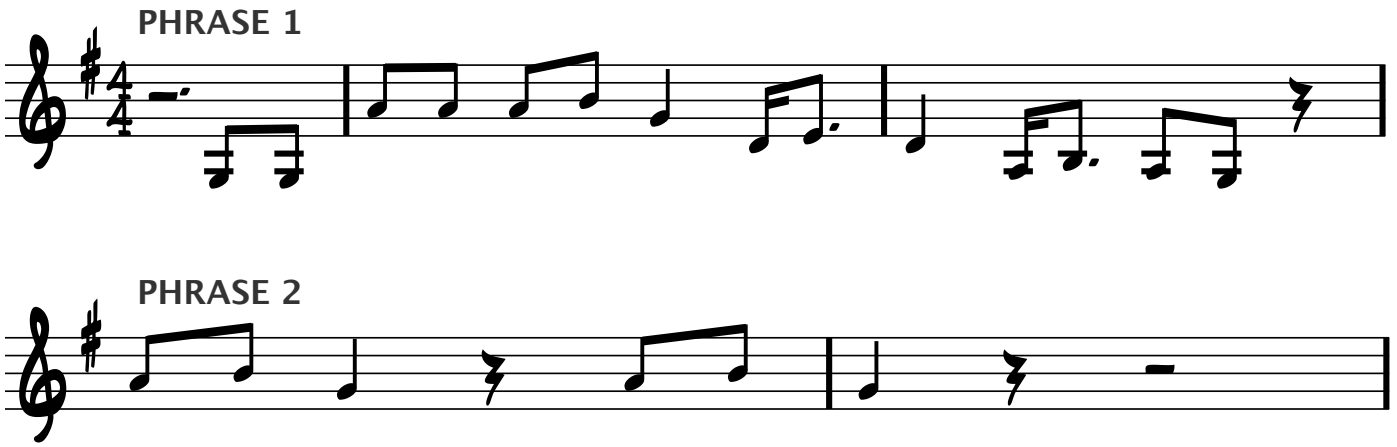
A short hook phrase could be something like an **instrumental riff** (usually on guitar or synth), or a **repeated phrase in the vocal melody**. These hook phrases usually last for only a few bars and are often repeated. In terms of vocal melody, think of Beyonce's repeated phrase "If you liked it then you should've put a ring on it," or

Queen's classic hook "We will, we will, rock you." A more recent example might be Chappell Roan's spelled out song title "H - O - T - T - O - G - O."

A variety of elements can contribute to the strength of a hook phrase, including pitch, rhythm, or even timbre. Let's look at another famous vocal hook where **pitch** is the main factor. This melody (shown below) is so distinctive and memorable that it can be recognized standing on its own, without the original voice or recording. See if you can name the song from this piano version.

Listening Ex. – Melody 1 Track 1

For AUDIO, see "Listening Exercises" on top-right sidebar, and click on Track 1



You probably recognized that this hook came from the chorus of Taylor Swift's song "Shake It Off." What makes this vocal hook so strong and memorable? Phrase 1 certainly stands out with the following elements:

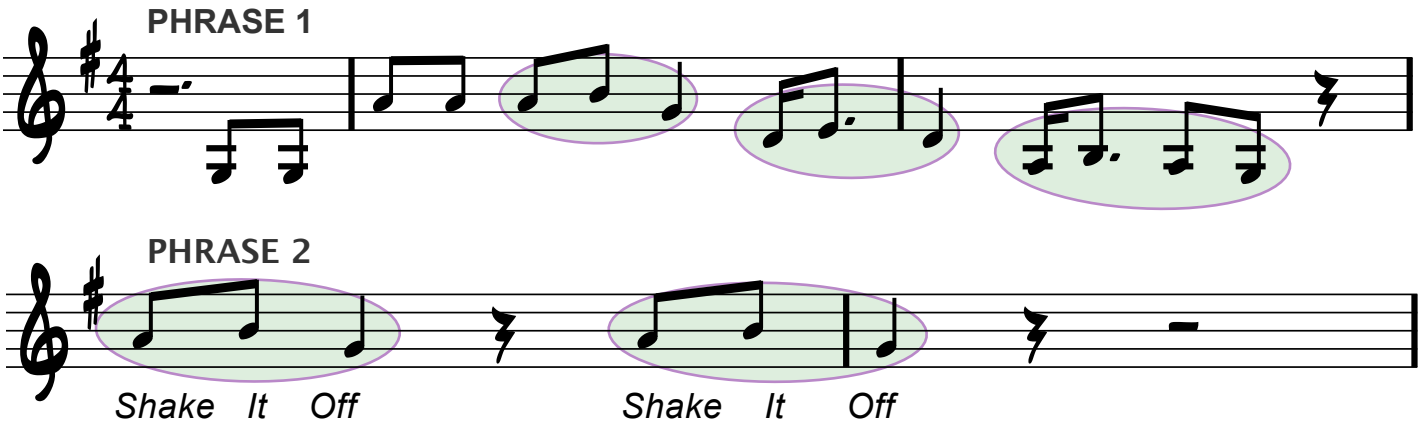
— **dramatic melodic leaps**

— **distinctive descending contour** (over an octave)

— **a wide variety of pitches**

Just to make sure we remember it, phrase 1 is repeated 3 times to start the chorus. When the repetition is finally broken, the chorus is capped off with Phrase 2, leaving the title words stuck in our head.

Perhaps you also noticed a **short melodic pattern** that adds to the distinctive contour. As you can see below, the pattern is almost like a melodic sequence — repeated several times at different pitch levels with slight variations.



Adding to the impact, the melody nicely compliments the sentiment of the lyrics. Just as we are feeling low, having descended over an octave to hit rock bottom on the low G, the melody springs back up with a huge leap, highlighting the optimistic title words "shake it off."

If you are unfamiliar with this song, you can hear it in the Song Examples playlist, Track 2. The chorus begins at **0:42**.

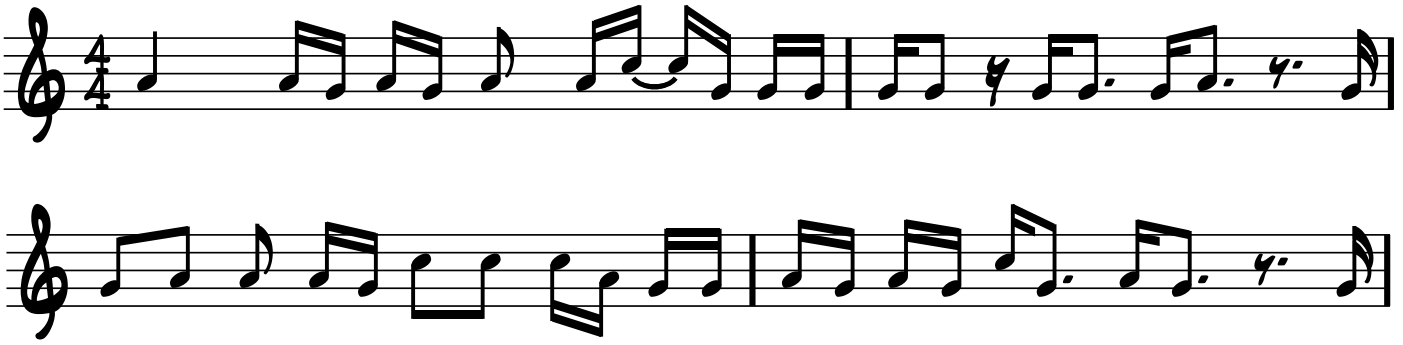
"Shake It Off" — Taylor Swift — 2014 **G major** 1

For AUDIO, see the "Song Examples" playlist in the right sidebar, and click on track 1 song title. To navigate within the audio track, slide the progress bar to the desired starting point.

Of course, most pop melodies do not have this strong of a hook. In fact, some very famous songs have no melodic hook at all, as in our next example. See if you can identify the next mystery song from the vocal melody alone. Only the first two lines are scored below, but you can hear the entire four-line verse in the Listening Exercises playlist. You will quickly notice that the last two lines are virtually the same as the first two.

Listening Ex. – Melody 2

Track 2



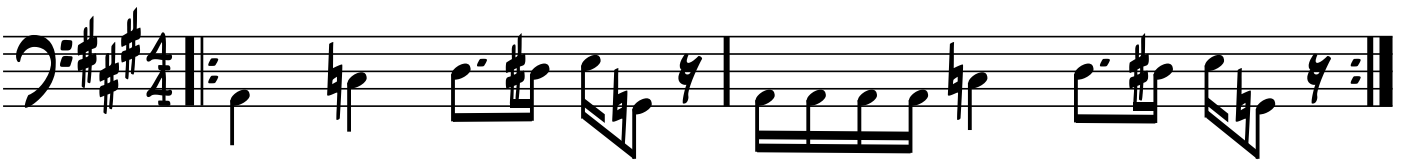
This melody is difficult to recognize without the singer's distinctive timbre on the original recording. The contour is not very unique and it has a fairly narrow range with only three pitches A, C, and G. These pitches (1, b3, and b7 in the key) are the foundation for hundreds of blues melodies, so in terms of pitch, it is hard to distinguish this melody from many other blues-based songs. Added to this is the lack of memorable phrasing or melodic rhythm.

However, on rock songs like this without a strong vocal hook, there is often a **signature guitar riff** that functions as a hook phrase. In fact, the instrumental riff may be the most interesting element of the entire song. Think of classic hits like "Satisfaction," "Walk This Way," "Come As You Are," or Michael Jackson's "Beat It." Most listeners could name these pieces after hearing just the riff, but they would have a hard time identifying the song from the vocal melody alone.

It just so happens that the previous mystery melody does have a very famous guitar riff functioning as a hook phrase. See if you can recognize the song from the riff alone:

Listening Ex. – Riff

Track 3



Perhaps you recognize the song now as Led Zeppelin's "Heartbreaker," based on the famous Jimmy Page guitar riff. This instrumental riff has many of the things lacking in the vocal melody, such as a **distinctive contour,** a larger **variety of pitches** (6), and

an interesting **mixture of leaps and small, half-step motion.** In addition, there is a very **distinctive melodic rhythm**. One takeaway from these listening exercises: songwriters may want to write strong vocal melodies with hooks, but never underestimate the power of adding a killer guitar riff!

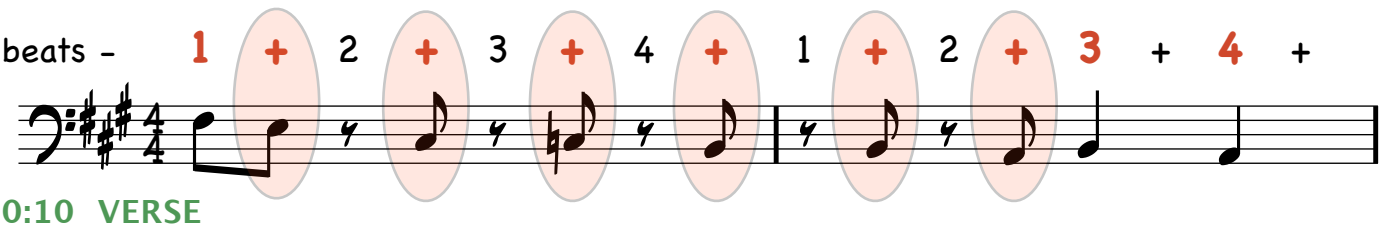
You can hear the original recording in the Song Examples playlist, Track 3. The song opens with the riff, and the verse starts at **0:25**.

"Heartbreaker" — Led Zeppelin — 1969 | **A blues** | 2

Syncopated rhythm (accents on the "up" beat) could be considered another trait that helps grab the listener's attention during both instrumental and vocal hooks. This type of rhythm seems to elicit physical movement beyond the polite toe tap, and it is a hallmark of most all pop and rock styles. Perhaps when accented notes fall on the weak half of the beat (upbeat) and nothing happens on the stronger downbeat, the listener feels compelled to fill in the "missing" sound. Just try listening to some highly syncopated funk or dance pop without moving your neck or head ever so slightly!

Syncopation is present in many signature guitar riffs. Here's a great example from Thomas Rhett's 2016 song "Vacation." You can see the upbeat accents circled in orange below.

"Vacation" — Thomas Rhett — 2016 | **F# minor** | 3



0:10 VERSE

Here are a few more songs with instrumental hooks that have come out in the last 25 years. Some of these also have strong syncopation.

Songs with Instrumental Hooks since 2000

2003	*Seven Nation Army*	White Stripes
2005	*Feel Good Inc.*	Gorillaz
2010	*Runaway Baby*	Bruno Mars
2010	*You and Your Heart*	Jack Johnson
2012	*Thrift Shop*	Macklemore & Ryan Lewis
2015	*Dark Side of The Sun*	Black Label Society
2015	*Parachute*	Chris Stapleton
2016	*Cake By The Ocean*	DNCE

Hook phrases are placed at prominent places in the song form. This is usually the very beginning of a song (especially for instrumental riffs), or during the chorus (especially for vocal hooks).

We'll encounter many more short hook phrases as we proceed through this and subsequent chapters However, our main topic moving forward will be the larger type of hooks mentioned earlier, known as "Focal Points."

Focal Points

In a typical hit song, songwriters and producers use a wide variety of musical devices to create peaks and valleys in the flow of musical energy. Simply put, **focal points** are the areas where the energy increases and peaks.

Of course, most people recognize the chorus as the most important and memorable section in a pop song. The chorus usually contains the song title and main theme of the lyrics, lots of repetition, and often a short hook phrase (either vocal or instrumental). However, it is specifically the **ENTRANCE** of the chorus that is most likely to grab your attention and stick with you.

Now one way to guarantee a prominent entrance would be to place the chorus at the very beginning of the song. However, most songs save the chorus for later in the song form, usually after a verse or pre-chorus. This allows the songwriter and producer to work their magic, creating musical elements that help "set up" the chorus and make the chorus entrance even stronger.

So what devices do songwriters and producers use to highlight the chorus on a pop record? Let's briefly start with some of the simplest, then move on to more specific songwriting devices that can be used to make this focal point even more powerful and memorable.

TEXTURE device # 1
ADDING or SUBTRACTING LAYERS in the MIX

One of the easiest ways to highlight the chorus is to change the texture by **adding or subtracting layers in the mix.** This is often done by simply adding vocal harmony to the chorus, as seen in the following example by Norah Jones and Dolly Parton:

"Creepin' In" - Norah Jones feat. Dolly Parton - 2004 **Bb major** 4

— **0:08** (verse) Solo vocal by Norah

— **0:26** (chorus) Dolly joins in with **VOCAL HARMONY**

The addition of vocal harmony is all that is needed to highlight the chorus - nothing else changes in the mix. Also notice that the song title occurs right at the chorus entrance. This is a perfect place for the title, since the words sung during a musical focal point are the lyrics most likely to be remembered by the listener.

Another obvious texture change is to add a new instrument to the mix. There are no doubt hundreds of songs that follow this familiar formula — start with minimal instruments on the verse, then add bass and/or drums on the chorus.

On the 2012 hit "Call Me Maybe," the verse starts quiet, with only faint bass kick drum outlining the beat. In the chorus, however, the drums enter full force with pounding bass kick and snare backbeat. Even more significant are the loud synth chords (orchestra sound) announcing the chorus entrance.

"Call Me Maybe" — Carly Rae Jepsen — 2012 | **G major** | 5

— **0:04** (verse) Soft, muted synth / guitar with faint bass drum on each beat.

— **0:20** (pre-chorus) Vocal harmony added

— **0:28** (chorus) Loud **SYNTH CHORDS** (orchestra sound) **BIG KICK DRUM**, and **MULTI-TRACK VOCAL**

This time the entrance of vocal harmony is not on the chorus, but during the pre-chorus, gradually building excitement. Also note that the orchestra chords are not technically in the background or providing parallel harmony as is often the case. Instead, there is a rapid call & response between the chords and the solo voice adding to the impact. One more bit of fine tuning - Carly's "solo" voice is definitely multi-tracked for extra punch on the chorus.

TIMBRE device # 1

TIMBRE CONTRAST WITH SAME INSTRUMENT

On other songs, the instruments may not technically change, but the **timbre** of an instrument may be dramatically altered. This is often true on rock songs, where the guitar changes from a soft, clean sound on the verse, to a louder, distorted sound on the chorus. Here's an example from Third Eye Blind.

"Semi-Charmed Life" — Third Eye Blind — 1997 | **G major** | 6

— **0:20** (verse) Guitar plays with a **CLEAN, MUTED** tone.

— **0:39** Very brief distorted guitar chord, then back to a clean but unmuted strum.

— **0:48** (chorus) **LOUD, DISTORTED** guitar throughout (still playing the exact same chord progression and rhythm)

On “Semi-Charmed Life” virtually the only thing different between the verse and chorus is the guitar sound.

HARMONY device # 1
ADDING an INSTRUMENTAL HOOK PHRASE

Another way to highlight the chorus is to add an **instrumental hook phrase**. On the next example by Paul Simon, the chorus is marked by a synthesized horn riff that accompanies the vocals. However, you will also notice that the hook phrase is previewed in the song’s intro without the vocals. This type of preview occurs on many pop songs, giving the listener a heads-up regarding the signature riff of the song. When that riff returns, it feels a little more powerful because it’s familiar.

“You Can Call Me Al” — Paul Simon — 1986 | **F major** | 7

— **0:00** (intro) Signature **HORN RIFF** is introduced in the intro. Also note the big, explosive snare drum hits.

— **0:15** (verse) Horns and big snare exit, replaced with lighter treble guitar and bubbling bass.

— **0:44** (chorus) **HORN RIFF** and big snare return, marking the chorus.

Here’s one more example where the hook phrase is previewed in the intro - this time played on guitar.

"Life in the Fast Lane" — The Eagles — 1977 | **E blues** | 8

— **0:00** (intro) **SIGNATURE GUITAR RIFF** opens the song.

— **0:26** (verse) Guitar strums, but no riff.

— **1:02** (chorus) **GUITAR RIFF** returns, marking the chorus.

TIMBRE device # 2
ADDING A SIGNATURE TIMBRE

Sometimes the instrumental hook phrase is really just a **signature SOUND**. So instead of a melodic riff that you could sing or whistle, the only thing that makes the hook phrase unique and memorable is the **timbre** — a completely new sound, skillfully crafted and mixed with multiple layers by the sound engineer.

A WORD ABOUT TIMBRE

We have already used the word timbre several times in our discussion, but perhaps we should pause here for a moment, just to clarify the term and underline its importance in pop and rock.

Timbre is the specific sound quality that distinguishes one instrument from another. Timbre can be described in terms of "bright" vs. "dull" or "smooth" vs. "rough," but it should not be confused with pitch, which describes "high" vs. "low." For example, you could play a middle C on piano and a middle C on saxophone. It would be the exact same pitch, but it would sound very different on each instrument, due to their unique timbres.

Even within a single instrument, the timbre can change. Think of a trumpet player using a mute, a blues vocalist growling, or as we heard with the Third Eye Blind song, a rock guitarist switching from clean to distorted sound. In fact, rock guitarists often spend

hours carefully crafting their timbre by programming electronic effects and choosing from dozens of foot pedals during a performance.

Traditional musical analysis often focuses on other elements like melody or harmony, and the element of timbre is sometimes overlooked. However, timbre is often crucial to the overall presentation of a pop & rock song — sometimes more important than any other element, including melody.

We have already noted how many pop songs have melodies that are not distinct enough to "stand on their own" when removed from the original recording. Often the chord progression is also not compelling, with only a four-bar loop or even just one chord. The creativity may lie in the rhythm or lyrics, but if not, then it is most likely the unique timbre or "sound" of the record that makes it so appealing. This is why some rock songs that sounded great on the original recording just don't translate well to marching band or string quartet, no matter how good the musicians are.

So that brings us back to our idea of a "signature sound." As we mentioned, on some songs the signature hook is not a melodic riff, but just a unique timbre. The following song by Taylor Swift offers a good example, featuring the signature sound of delicate, treble chimes. Once again, the hook is previewed in the intro.

"Clean" — Taylor Swift — 2014 | **E major** | 9

— **0:00** (intro) Song starts with only bass & drums.

— **0:09** **SIGNATURE SOUND** enters (treble synth sounds like chimes)

— **0:18** (verse) Chimes sound disappears.

— **1:04** (chorus) **SIGNATURE SOUND** of chimes returns, marking the chorus.

Notice that the delicate sound of the chimes matches the lyric line. Swift sings "The rain came pouring down . . . . ," and if you use your imagination, the signature sound may remind you of raindrops gently falling.

The next song by Natalie Imbruglia features both a signature guitar riff and a signature sound (shimmering tremolo).

"Wishing I Was There" — Natalie Imbruglia — 1998 **F mixo** 10

— **0:00** (intro) **SIGNATURE GUITAR RIFF** opens the song — first time clean, second time with the **SIGNATURE SOUND** of shimmering tremolo.

— **0:22** (verse) Riff disappears. Clean guitar, bass & drums continue.

— **0:43** (pre-chorus) **SIGNATURE SOUND** (tremolo) returns, but only strums, not the riff.

— **1:03** (chorus) **SIGNATURE RIFF** returns with signature sound, marking the chorus.

MELODY device # 1
HIGHEST NOTE STARTS CHORUS

On many pop songs the **highest note of the melody** is sung right as the chorus enters, once again calling attention to this important focal point.

The 2013 song "The River" features a signature sound AND the highest melody note working together to highlight the chorus entrance. The signature sound comes from a high treble guitar sounding like ringing bells. As the signature sound pairs with the highest melody note, a triumphant feeling is created. This totally matches the uplifting lyrics, as the singer proclaims "Reach, it's not as bad as it seems." Once again, the signature sound is previewed in the intro.

"The River" — Imagine Dragons — 2013 **Db major** 11

— **0:00** (intro) **SIGNATURE SOUND** of ringing bells opens the song.

— **0:23** (verse) Much quieter - signature sound disappears.

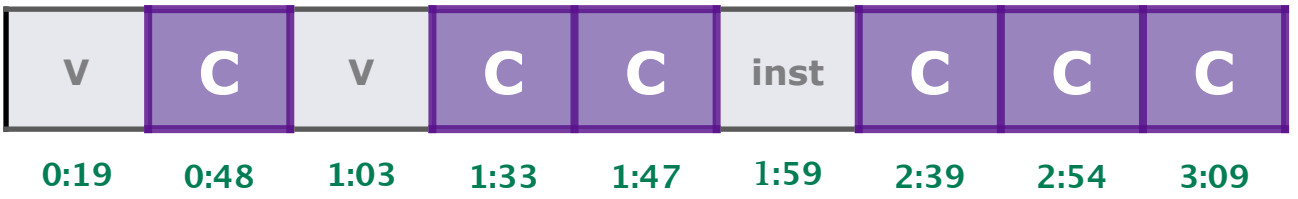
— 0:45 (chorus) **HIGHEST MELODY NOTES** and **SIGNATURE SOUND** create a triumphant feeling.

FORM device # 1
INCREASING PROMINENCE of CHORUS in ARRANGEMENT

Another way to highlight the chorus is to simply repeat it. Just think how many songs end with the chorus repeated over and over, making sure we don't forget it. Other songs take a more subtle approach, gradually increasing the number of choruses and decreasing the number (or length) of verses as the arrangement unfolds.

On the 1984 hit "Got a Hold on Me (shown below)," the chorus ("C") alternates with either verse ("v") or instrumental section ("inst"). Notice how repetitions of the chorus increase as the song moves forward.

"Got a Hold on Me" — Christine McVie — 1984 | E major | 12



Jason Derulo's "The Other Side" features the common three-part structure of verse, pre-chorus, and chorus. As you can see below, this song has both a lengthened chorus and a decreasing verse.

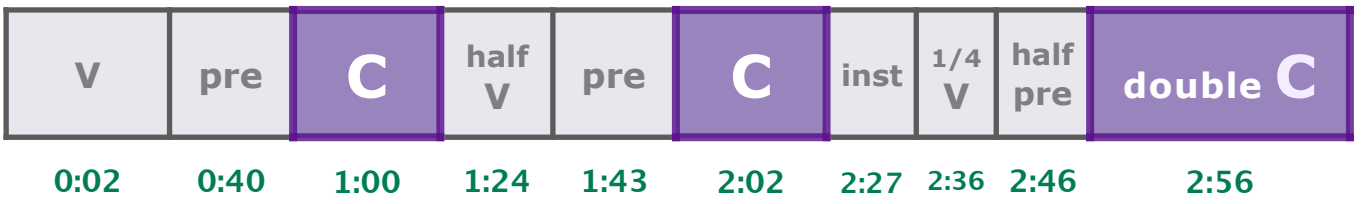
"The Other Side" — Jason Derulo — 2013 | A major | 13

The 2013 hit “Burning Gold” manipulates all three sections for maximum impact. It has decreasing verses (full to half to 1/4), decreasing pre-choruses (full, full, half), and increasing choruses (single, single, double) — all combining to emphasize the powerful chorus.

“Burning Gold” — Christina Perri — 2014

G major / E minor

14



This concludes our brief introduction to hook phrases and focal points in Chapter One. As mentioned, our main goal moving forward will be expanding our knowledge of focal points by discussing more detailed musical devices. Most of these remaining devices will utilize an important concept we are about to introduce in Chapters Two and Three - the creation of **musical tension and resolution**.