

# Maxini' Stuff Up



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a must read...”**

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**“...Fun and entertaining.”**

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**secrets of song-craft  
& survival in the  
music-biz**

**by Rand Bishop**



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## chapter seven: The Chorus

**B**y now, we've laid the foundation of each of our co-writes-in-progress, in the form of two solid concepts. In the process, we've fabricated perhaps the most visible feature of these potential architectural wonders with our icon-phrases: a few critically important words attached to a bit of memorable melody. This is where I suggest we diverge from the traditional process of construction.

You're sitting there in that chair. I'm sitting here in this one. Now is when I ask the question, "Okay, where do we want to go with the chorus?"

"Hold on a dang minute," you might respond. "We don't even have an intro or a verse. Why are we leaping ahead to the chorus?"

"Ah," I say, nodding my XL sized brain, wizened by years of song toil. "I'm so glad you asked."

There are several reasons why I almost always prefer to start the actual composition of a song at the chorus. This, of course, is presuming that our song is actually gonna have a chorus—there's no hard and fast rule that says it absolutely must. However, the majority of pop songs have choruses, as will the tunes we're about to collaborate on, so let's proceed to examine my justifications for starting there.

A chorus usually represents the highest dynamic of the song—in language, range and intensity. In other words, the chorus is almost always designed to contain the hookiest lyrical substance, which is probably sung on higher notes, and with somewhat greater intensity than the material that surrounds it.

If we begin by writing ourselves a satisfying, fulfilling chorus, we'll know later on what we're building toward with our verses—both melodically and lyrically. In most cases, we'll want to keep the verse somewhat more sedate and in a lower register than our chorus, so the already-written chorus will suggest where we'll begin our verse, both intensity- and pitch-wise.

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More than that, since we probably don't want our verses to use any of the exact verbiage we're saving for that climactic chorus section, we'll know what vernacular can or can't be included in the verse.

Make sense? I hope so. Actually, you may think this is rudimentary stuff—to a large degree, self-explanatory. I'm just enjoying thinking this through, so I hope you'll tag along with me.

Now we begin, by endeavoring to complete the most visible, eye-catching component of our edifice first. Then, after we're pretty sure we've got at least a good mock-up chorus, we'll set it aside for a time, before hoisting it up and placing it on top of its supporting pieces.

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A chorus can be simple and repetitive, or it can be wordy and complex. It can contain long, sonorous vowels that invite the big belt, or brief, rat-a-tat syllables (intended to be as rhythmic as they are amusing). Your chorus can sum up the message of the song, further its story or take the listener to a completely new place. It can be enlightening, or completely inane. It can be conversational, professorial ... or a blathering, arcane bunch of nonsense.

The hint as to where to go with your chorus is probably right there in your icon-phrase. Most times, that little passage is going to be part of your chorus, and is more than likely your song's title and/or main hook. In any case, that select slice of words and music has its own mode, mood, cadence and melodic range, all built right into it. Let those syllables and notes tell you what your chorus is going to sound like, and the kind of character it will be assuming.

### Kinds of choruses

#### THE BIG BELT:

*All By Myself*, by Eric Carmen (Carmen, Celine Dion)

*Without You*, by Pete Ham & Tom Evans (Badfinger, Nilsson, Mariah Carey)

*A Broken Wing* by Phil Barnhart, Sam Hogin & James House (Martina McBride)

*How Do I Live*, by Diane Warren (Trisha Yearwood, LeAnn Rimes)

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These ballads are built for power. They invariably include those extended, open vowel-sounds that long for a big voice to sustain them with passion. (Take notice of the appealing tone of those sustained sounds. Long *A*'s, *I*'s, *Oh*'s and *Ooo*'s. You won't find a whole lot of *Eeee*'s; they can be too *screeeeeeetchy* and grating.)

Great singers love these kinds of choruses, because they're pretty much guaranteed to bring down the house. If you're gonna write a ballad, you might as well write one that performers crave performing. Every one of the above-mentioned titles has been recorded and performed time and time again. Big melodies, big lyrics ... big copyrights.

However, with big ballads (or ballads of any kind) you're putting yourself up against a whole lot of extremely heavy competition from the get-go. Professional songwriters probably pen twice as many slow songs as they do up-tempos. *Why is this?* you may be wondering. I think it's mostly because, when a writer sits down at a piano, or pulls out an acoustic guitar, a more placid tempo is the more natural way to go. With a drummer absent from the room, sustaining a brisk feel for the consecutive hours it takes to carve away at your sonic sculpture can be physically exhausting.

Consequently, we see many more (and more superbly composed) ballads, collecting dust every day. You can see (being the obviously intelligent person you are), by contributing yet another passionate, big-voiced belter to the already abundant supply, you're in all likelihood merely adding another piece of unused inventory to the stockpile.

To make this reality even bleaker, most artists (with the possible exception of Josh Groban and singers of his classical-pop ilk) commonly record only two, maybe three, ballads on each album project. Even if a singer has consistent single-success with ballads, he or she certainly intends to put together an entertaining stage show, infused with real dynamics; as a result, the artist and producer are usually inclined to mix up the tempos on their albums. With only a few slots available—and a ton of competition—your big belting ballad has far less chance of finding an adopted home than your sultry mid-tempo, or that high-octane foot-stomper.

However, in the long run, there's nothing more satisfying than to finish off a huge, heart-ripping ballad, with a soaring chorus, a screaming guitar solo and a modulated breakdown. *Yeah, Man! That's the good stuff.*

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Back to more chorus types ...

THE HOOKY REPEATER:

*Johnny B. Good*, by Chuck Berry

*All I Wanna Do*, by Sheryl Crow

*You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'*, by Barry Mann, Cynthia Weil & Phil Spector

*Listen To The Music*, by Tom Johnston (Doobie Brothers)

From these examples, it's clear that this style of chorus can be successfully utilized in your ballads, mids, *or* up-tempos. The most important common feature of these choruses is the repetition of the icon-phrase or hook of the song. Often, on the original hit recordings, these recurring chorus-lines continue into a lengthy fade, one that hammers the point home (to an absolutely absurd and, dare I say, mind-numbing degree).

Nevertheless, every one of these copyrights is massive—and has made its composers and publishers multi-millions—due to their easily relatable, ardent and unforgettable refrains. They all climax on a powerful emotional note, cling to it relentlessly, and then punch us in the heart with it until we surrender ...

*Okay, Doobie Bros. Woe-oh-oh, I'm list'nin' to the music! And I have been since 1971! Are you happy now?*

In 1981, after 14 years of spotty, erratic success, those brilliant purveyors of Philadelphia blue-eyed soul, Daryl Hall and John Oates, released a ditty entitled *Kiss On My List*. This song strayed from the R&B inflections of Hall and Oates' earlier charting records. A bubbly, lightweight record of nearly infinite redundancy, *Kiss* remained at #1 on the Billboard chart for three weeks and, at long last, established the deserving duo as consistent hit-makers for a number of years to come. There are thousands of examples of these somewhat tiresome, yet impossible-to-ignore hit songs.

When you're writing a chorus with this template, you run the risk of wearing out your welcome pretty quickly. It would thus serve you well to make sure that the key refrain you intend to repeat is actually worth repeating. (You know, something truly substantial, like ... *Who Let The Dogs Out?*)

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I kid. In fact, I used to joke about the writing session that led to the creation of that canine-themed dance sensation.

"I've got a great hook," writer one reveals.

"Well, come on," urges writer two, "spill it!"

"Okay," says writer one, with that smirk that spells H-I-T all over it. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah, Man! Let's hear it."

"Here it is." The first writer starts beating on his knees and shouting on a high droning tone, "Who let the dogs out? Who? Who?"

"Who what?" asks his dumbfounded collaborator.

(I used to crack myself up picturing that imaginary scene. Then I found out that Desmond Childs, co-writer of such classics as *Livin' On A Prayer* and *Livin' la Vida Loca*, was partially responsible for that shaggy little puppy. Oh, well. Genius dons many guises.)

Within this category of choruses also reside those rope-skippin' nursery rhymes I mentioned earlier: *I Like It, I Love It*, by Mark Hall, Jeb Stuart Anderson and Steve Dukes, *What I Like About You*, by Wally Palmer and Mike Skill, and *That's The Way I Like It*, by Richard Finch and the inimitable Harry Wayne Casey ("KC" of Sunshine Band fame).

Imagine how much labor went into constructing this refrain... *That's the way, uh-huh, uh-huh, I like it, uh-huh, uh-huh*<sup>x</sup>, repeated without variation, ad nauseum.

And while we're at it, just try to get *this* sharp-toothed little monster out of your head: *Do a little dance, make a little love, get down tonight, get down tonight*<sup>x</sup> ... over and over and over, utilizing all of two notes on the scale.

Now let's imagine the checks that continue to land in Finch and Casey's mailboxes. Talk about *nauseam*. But it's genius stuff; we shouldn't kid ourselves about that.

Songs utilizing this kind of chorus define the term "hook." They are as hooky, hooky, hooky as they are repetitive, repetitive, repetitive—just as catchy and indelible as those first refrains repeated by the earliest cavemen/composers. If you've got one, go for it, but don't expect glowing reviews. Then again, if it somehow finds its way onto the playgrounds of America, prepare to spend the rest of your days counting your moolah.

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### THE LIST CHORUS:

*One Week*, by Ed Robertson (Barenaked Ladies)

*Fifty Ways To Leave Your Lover*, by Paul Simon (Paul Simon)

*Before He Cheats*, by Chris Thompkins & Josh Kear (Carrie Underwood)

*Daddy's Money*, by Bob DePiro, Craig Wiseman & Mark D. Sanders (Ricochet)

This approach to chorus-writing really appeals to me—and not just because I've had some substantial success (literally) in applying it. List choruses are usually wordy (can't make a list without a good bunch of words), rhythmic (to make room for all those words) and somewhat playful and/or poignant.

In order to make a three-minute song into a playlet, a complete short story—with fully developed characters and a satisfying plot—a writer needs to be very, very economical with language. Making a list in a chorus enables the composer to cram more information into limited space. With this tidy packing technique, you're able to fit an extra couple of outfits into your suitcase as you head out on your jaunt to Hitsville. That's the first reason why I like list choruses.

Second reason: I love a challenge. Listing offers an opportunity to assemble a more complex puzzle, thus making the writing process that much more amusing for a writer who truly enjoys playing with language. It usually requires a heck of a lot more time and concentration to come up with the perfect set (or sets) of succinct phrases—ones that not only work, but make sense, and rhyme to boot. Of course, once you've composed your list chorus, you're likely to discover that a number of the best, high-scoring words are already on the scrabble board, and you're hard-pressed for raw materials to construct your verses. *Fun, fun, fun!*

Third reason: Most list songs respect the intelligence of the public. I almost always prefer the kind of writing—in *all* forms of media (movies, TV series, fiction, non-fiction, journalism, theater, *et alia*)—that doesn't pander to the lowest common denominator. Because a list contains a lot more detail than a repetitive chorus, the writer is giving the listener credit for the ability to absorb, comprehend and appreciate this presumably more sophisticated listening experience. It takes a smart writer to compose a great list song, and a smart public to embrace it.

Fourth reason: List songs can often sustain the interest of their audience for a longer period of time. These titles can bear repeated



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listening, because the language is less redundant and therefore, at least ostensibly, stays fresher longer. These days, hit songs remain on radio playlists for six to nine months or more. Let's have some mercy on the battered ears of those millions of Top 40 fans, and give 'em somethin' they can listen to every 90 minutes for an entire year of their lives—without simultaneously giving them the overwhelming urge to barf! (Of course, there's no greater feeling than the guy next door complaining that he's sick and tired of hearing your song. That invariably means you can start making plans to move to a pricier neighborhood.)

List choruses are fun and challenging, and they give the writer an opportunity to stretch out a little bit more with language. Meanwhile (unless you or your collaborator happen to be one of those stream-of-consciousness geysers of instant brilliance), you'll labor long and hard over your list chorus, only to discover that your verses are equally, if not more difficult, because the good words left in your shopping cart are few and far between. Nevertheless, it's a very satisfactory way to go; take it from somebody who's been there and done that—and deposited the royalty checks.

### THE SIMPLE (or SIMPLY GREAT) CHORUS:

*Just Once*, by Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil (James Ingram)

*I Can't Make You Love Me*, by Mike Reid & Allen Shamblin (Bonnie Raitt)

*One More Day*, by Steven Dale Jones & Bobby Tomberlin (Diamond Rio)

*Both Sides Now*, by Joni Mitchell

This, I believe, is the most commonly attempted style of chorus. In fact, this is what most readily leaps to mind when we tune-scribes think “chorus:” a few, succinct, intelligently constructed, rhyming phrases that begin and/or conclude with the icon-phrase or title of the song. Most times, the lyric sums up or hammers home the song's central theme or lesson; it certainly represents and/or strengthens the emotional core of the composition. As those lines float effortlessly atop a memorable melody they serve to make the message even more poignant ... or inspiring, heart-rending or exuberant. As always, they must be absolutely unforgettable.

The examples above demonstrate it well: this chorus-writing technique can yield a result that is virtually watertight, classic and iconic. With every one of those four exemplary compositions, songwriters have accomplished brief paragraphs of flowing sonic poetry, the perfect response to their verses' call. These are choruses you can't wait to get

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back to; each time they mercifully return, to grace our ears and rattle our hearts again, they affect us even more profoundly than they did on their first visit.

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As we writers are provided with limited usable vernacular—both lyrically and musically—we're bound to struggle to assemble choruses that are both simple and relatable, while at the same time being inspired and special. Ironically, it's often the most mundane phrase that cries out for a new voice, a new treatment, a fresh point of view. That's where true songwriting genius has an opportunity to reveal itself.

*Just Once* is exactly that kind of chorus. Ever since the first time I heard the Quincy Jones-produced original recording of this stunningly perfect song, performed with soulful sincerity by James Ingram, I've been in awe of how Cynthia and Barry took such a common, two-syllable phrase and co-opted it into an emotionally true, yet sweet-flowing plea for romantic reconciliation.

Who among us hasn't been at a loss to explain why a relationship that began with such blissful promise keeps turning so sour? How many times has a lover longed for a "time out," a few minutes of peace to try to find common ground? There's nothing new about the situation or the language used here, and the melody doesn't invent notes or chords that haven't been heard before. So what *is* it that makes this chorus work so flawlessly, thereby making this song so special?

As in so many of Cynthia Weil's lyrics, the situation in which the singer finds himself is universally relatable, and the lyricist's language is completely conversational. There's no effort to invent an original metaphor, coin a new simile or paint an image never before utilized in song. That's another reason why Cynthia is the best "pop" lyricist of her generation. She's able to speak the way people really speak, while hitting the bulls-eye with every syllable. At the same time, the words sound beautiful when they're sung, because she pays such precise attention to where the vowel-sounds fall into the melody, thus exploiting their natural, internal sounds and rhymes.

Meanwhile, Barry Mann's musical bedding provides reinforcement to all of those very crafty and appealing qualities. There's not a split-second where the words don't phrase the exact way they would commonly be spoken in everyday dialogue. For instance, the tidy pair of notes accompanying the title mirror precisely the way we'd articulate the

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phrase, if we were ever so unfortunate to find ourselves in the sad circumstance of this desperate lover. The composer takes a short jab at the word “just,” then provides a longer, more emphatic note for “once.”

Say “just once” to yourself, as if you were the lover pleading for another chance. See? That’s exactly the way it should be, and so, it is exactly the way Mann and Weil make it work in their splendid song.

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On occasion, even though you’ve created a fantastic first chorus, you’re going to need to consider changing some words in the choruses to come, in order to make them work for the verses that precede them, and/or to further the progression of the song. I usually resist this with every fiber of my being, and try every way possible to use the same exact words in every chorus.

I resist—not just because custom-crafting each chorus means a whole lot more time and labor for me. I’m also reluctant to make these adjustments because each change creates an additional challenge for the listener, who may just be struck with the inclination to join in and sing along with that second and third chorus. What’s more, every new nuance makes the song more difficult for a singer to memorize; since established performers already often have a large repertoire already etched into their grey matter, some are bound to eschew test-driving a song, if it requires the additional concentration it takes to learn and retain several separate chorus lyrics.

That being said, sometimes you just gotta bite that bullet and tweak a second or third chorus so it can do its job. Suppose you’ve got a hook that you intend to speak on behalf of two or three different characters, or during two or three periods in time. Maybe the speaker of the first chorus is the singer’s grandpappy, the second is the singer’s pappy, and the third is the singer his own self—now having become a pappy and speaking to his own kid.

Here’s my advice: try to change each chorus as little as possible, and *only* where absolutely necessary; re-use as many of the key words as you can; and (of utmost importance), if at all possible, make sure that icon-phrase or title always stays intact and works *verbatim*.

I strongly discourage you from changing tenses or gender in the actual hook-line of the song. After all, let’s face it: every slight difference in the hook makes it a little less hooky. Our ultimate goal is to make that one critically important phrase remain constant, so that every

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time the song arrives there, the words are repeated exactly the same way. (Of course, you can experiment with inverting the melody and/or stretching out the phrasing, as the piece develops, at appropriate points, in order to create dynamics, dramatic effect and a song that offers more impact in performance.)

*Both Sides Now* is not only a perfect song, but a perfect example of a song in which the chorus changes every time it appears. The first chorus describes looking at clouds *from both sides now*, the second addresses *love*, and the third examines *life*; each chorus had to be different to accommodate these varied subjects. However, the icon-phrase of the song re-occurs at the very same rhythmic and melodic spot in each chorus; it is also unchanged in tense, thus enriching its meaning and maintaining its innate hookiness.

And then, Joni (*who does she think she is, anyway?*) Mitchell has the brass to slay us softly with her song, by reprising the language of the first chorus, while replacing the word *cloud* with the word *life*. Absolute genius. That a songwriter had that much skill, savvy and wisdom at a mere 24 years old ... is entirely unfair to the rest of us tin-pan hacks.

Regardless of the style of chorus you feel compelled to write on any given day, you're striving to sum up the theme (or themes) of the song, using concise language and pleasing vowel sounds, while establishing what is likely the song's most intense musical dynamic. You want your chorus to be as hooky as possible, yet have the robustness to bear hundreds—hopefully thousands—of repeated listenings. Above all, you want that chorus to be the song's emotional high-point, and its most memorable section.

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I don't know how many times I've listened back to my own songs, and wondered how in the heck I ever accomplished them. I don't know how you and I did it, but here are the two choruses we've come up with.

First, sung with an upwardly moving arpeggiated melody and traveling in counterpoint to a descending chord pattern ... is our ballad, which we've decided to title, *Everything and Nothing*.

*She's everything to me  
And I'm nothing, if I'm not crazy for the girl*

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*She's everything I need  
And there's nothing I'd refuse her in the whole wide world  
She's everything, and I'm nothing without her*

It's direct and emotional, just like a love song should be. It has a fairly fresh twist as it plays on the words of the title, but not so clever as to blunt the song's sincerity. And it's pretty darn hooky, even if I do say so my own self.

Next, *Goin' Down Swingin'*, our fast-paced story-song, starring the guy who refuses to give up his girl without a fight (BTW, we've decided to name this stubborn lug Billy, and his ex-girl, Sally.):

*Sally left Billy back in San Antone  
He was past tense, 'least that was what she was thinkin'  
But Billy was a boy with a jealous bone  
If Billy's goin' down, Billy's goin' down swingin'*

This chorus tells us a good deal about the characters and the situation. It packs some witty language. *He was past tense* has special appeal to me, and our icon-phrase is a really strong one.

Not bad. Now I'm feelin' like an expectant daddy. We've got a pair of fraternal-twin buns in the oven. Both of 'em are definitely worthy of our further attention, and will require a great deal more gestation before we can call 'em fully cooked.

Next, we're gonna hafta get down to some heavy lifting—by writing some verses.

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– CYNTHIA WEIL (Grammy-winning lyricist, inductee – Songwriters Hall of Fame)

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– MARK VOLMAN (The Turtles, Assistant Professor of Entertainment and Music Business, Belmont University)



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