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Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Ellen Bakulina for her comments on this article.

THE “REBUFF CHORUS” IN 1960–2000 POP MUSIC

DAVID HEETDERKS

Introduction

In popular music from around 1960 to 2000, the formal structure *verse–prechorus–chorus* (henceforth VPC) was a common way of organizing the main repeating section of a song.¹ This formal layout gives the chorus climactic energy and a sense of satisfaction by placing it at the end of a process of acceleration and intensification and by using chords and melodic figures that predict resolution.² Tonal functions can help the chorus to deliver the song’s message: the chorus most often begins with or leads to a strong tonic arrival, so that the accompanying sense of satisfaction that this harmonic event brings becomes associated with the song’s main text.

However, there are songs where the prechorus creates an expectation for tonic arrival, only to have the chorus reject it. This event, which I call a “rebuff chorus,” happens often enough to form a specific, if less common, subtype of the VPC form. It often alters the expressive effect of

¹ I selected the years 1960 to 2000 for use of VPC form because (1) most authors agree that the form arose in the early 1960s, although it was based on models from the previous decade, especially those in doo-wop (Appen and Frei-Hauenschild 2015, 66–69; Everett 2009, 146–47; Summach 2011, 24) and “Great-American Songbook” A modules (Callahan 2013); and (2) while the form persisted after 2000, harmony began playing an increasingly smaller role in comparison to texture and dynamics, due in part to the influence of hip hop, grunge, and the increased use of digital audio workstations (Nobile 2020a, 236–237; Peres 2016). There may, of course, be instances of the form described in this article before 1960 or after 2000.

² The chorus is not only the conclusion of a formal process but also a rhetorical one, since it often contains a central, focal message of the song, as Covach (2005, 71) and Stephan–Robinson (2009, 96) note.

the chorus, transforming it from a zone of arrival to one of frustration, searching, or puzzlement.³

The rebuff chorus falls roughly into three types:

1. An *absent-tonic* rebuff chorus withholds a tonic throughout its section, thwarting an expectation for tonic arrival created by the prechorus.
2. A *modulating* rebuff chorus unexpectedly substitutes a new tonic that contradicts the tonal cues given by the prechorus.
3. An *ambiguous* rebuff chorus has an uncertain tonal relationship to the prechorus.

The rebuff chorus is an example of how popular songs make an expressive use of tonality, inserting unexpected harmonic events in order to maintain listener interest, highlight important passages, and illustrate the message or atmosphere of the song. Other scholars exploring expressive tonality in rock music—including Mark Spicer, Jocelyn Neal, Christopher Doll, and Drew Nobile—discuss examples that closely resemble rebuff choruses. More specifically, many rebuff choruses can be heard as special cases of Spicer’s “absent-tonic” passages or Doll’s “breakout” choruses. Nonetheless, it is valuable to recognize them as a separate category in order to understand how they play with the tonal expectations created by VPC form.

An Early Example of a Rebuff Chorus: “I’m Ready for Love”

An early and vivid example of a rebuff chorus appears in “I’m Ready for Love,” written by the Holland–Dozier–Holland songwriting team for Martha and the Vandellas in 1966. In the song, Martha Reeves sings from the perspective of a young woman who has conquered her previous fear of relationships and now feels a growing romantic desire. The musical setting of the chorus is

³ I am grateful to my anonymous reviewer for suggesting the term “rebuff chorus.”

ironic, drawing attention not to the protagonist's victory over her trepidation but instead to the unfulfilled longing and position of need that this victory creates in her. Example 1 shows the prechorus and chorus of the song.⁴ The prechorus contains a chromaticized descending-fifth sequence ($Gm^{7(b5)}-C^7-Fm-Bb$) that ends on Bb (V) at measure 23. When the progression repeats over mm. 25–32, the vocal line sings G, or scale degree $\hat{3}$, over V (m. 32), further adding dissonance and anticipating a resolution to the tonic.

EXAMPLE 1: An Analysis of the Prechorus and Chorus of Martha and the Vandellas, "I'm Ready for Love."

Prechorus

16 For so long I've been af raid to love, but right now, I feel the need
 [ii^o V] of ii ii

23 for love. And you, you have the love the love I need, oh to
 V [ii^o V] of ii ii

Rebuff Chorus

31 com fort me. Ooh, and I'm read y for love. I'm tru ly read y for love,
 V III^{6!} I

hypermeter: • • •

36 your wond er ful sweet, sweet love. Right now I'm read y for love.
 • IV • III • IV V

⁴ Examples in this article show chords in lead-sheet notation above the staff, and a tonal analysis with Roman numerals below the staff. To avoid clutter, Roman numerals are generally presented without added-note annotations. A letter following a slash indicates a different bass note than the chord indicated before. Roman numerals assume the major scale as a reference, whether the excerpt is in major or minor. For example, if the tonic is C, an Eb -major chord is $bIII$, whether the song primarily uses a C major or minor scale. This system is used for convenience and is not intended to imply that the major scale is normative in all popular styles. An appendix at the end of this article provides a glossary of lead-sheet symbols.

In the following chorus this resolution does not fully materialize. Instead, the bass moves up by half step to support a major III in first inversion, an unusual chromatic chord not often encountered in 1960s rock or R&B.⁵ Although a I chord appears two measures later, it is in a hypermetrically weak location and forms a chromatic third relation with the previous chord, which undermines its sense of harmonic resolution. In addition, the vocal line remains largely static on scale degree $\hat{3}$ over the section, precluding melodic closure. A satisfying tonic is tantalizingly kept at bay, as if portraying a longing for affection that is on the verge of fulfillment but still just out of reach, making the singer's desire burn even hotter.

Tonal Expectation in VPC Form

“I’m Ready for Love” demonstrates how deflecting the expectation for a tonic-functioning chord in a chorus creates an unusual section that is ripe for interpretation. This deflection is especially pronounced when it occurs after a prechorus that heightens listener expectation for both a tonic and the entrance of a focal idea. It is therefore necessary to understand what musical devices create a prechorus section and direct a listener’s expectations. They are listed in Table 1. No single device is essential to create a VPC form; however, all VPC songs will have at least some, and the more devices they contain, the more strongly the songs will invoke the formal type.⁶ I have conducted an unpublished survey of the 103 VPC songs in the McGill Billboard corpus and found that their chords largely confirm the harmonic features listed in Table 1; I will briefly discuss some of my relevant findings below.⁷

⁵ Temperley and de Clercq (2013, 199–200) note that the use of $\#5$ or $b6$ in the harmonic layer in major-mode songs is rare.

⁶ In a similar manner, Stephan-Robinson (2009, 103–104) argues that a change in one or more parameters—melody, harmony, text, texture, and so forth—creates a new formal section in a pop song. In the absence of harmonic changes, other types of parameters can signal a new section.

⁷ The McGill-Billboard corpus contains harmonic analyses, along with information on key, tempo,

TABLE 1: Typical musical devices found in VPC forms.

	Verse	Prechorus		Chorus
		first part	conclusion	
Textural Features	thinnest texture	instruments added higher distortion	textural break drum fill	thickest texture highest distortion
Melodic Features	low ambitus longer motives	higher ambitus shorter motives	anacrusis tonic anticipation	highest ambitus
Textual Features	moderate rhyme speed	faster rhymes		lyric invariance word loops more intimate level of address
Harmonic Features	chord loop tonic prolongation	novel chords avoidance of I in metrically strong locations emphasis on IV	pretonic chord (e.g., V)	tonic opening chord loop

The opening verse often contains a *chord loop*—that is, a brief progression that repeats throughout a section and becomes a static backdrop for other events.⁸ In other cases, it contains a directed chord progression: common types include a period, a reversed period in which the first phrase ends on the tonic and the second ends away from it, and a subsidiary key-defining

timestamps, and formal regions in a sample of songs from the Billboard Hot 100 from 1958–1991. Two annotators independently made a harmonic analysis of each song, and a third annotator reviewed their work and added formal labels, which may not precisely match the criteria for prechorus I use here. More information on format of the corpus and the process leading to its creation can be found in Burgoyne, Wild, and Fujinaga (2011). My data is available upon request.

⁸ Heetderks (2020, 2–3) and Nobile (2020a, 17). Nobile regards *loops* as a “sustained tonic prolonged by a circular progression” (ibid.) In many cases this is a valid reading, but there can also be looped progressions in which the tonic is absent; the conclusion of this article lists a few instances in VPC form. For a detailed discussion of the abeyance of goal-oriented motion created by repeating chord patterns, including discussion of multiple possible tonal centers, see Heetderks (2015, [3.0.2]) and Tagg (2009, 180).

progression that begins and ends on the tonic but does not yet create a large-scale harmonic departure and return.⁹

The prechorus most often provides harmonic contrast and instability, and it contains musical markers that convey increasing energy. Harmonic contrast is achieved by breaking away from a harmonic loop, if there was one in the previous section, or by introducing a novel chord at or near the beginning of the section. The prechorus often creates tonal instability by avoiding I in hypermetrically strong positions—indeed, a common indication of a prechorus is the appearance of IV or a similar chord on a hypermetric downbeat.¹⁰ My survey of VPC songs from the McGill Billboard corpus shows that only around 18% of prechoruses begin on I. IV is the most common opening chord, and chords that common-practice harmonic theory groups into the subdominant family (\flat II, II, IV, VI, and \flat VI) comprise about 61%. Increasing energy is shown through using shorter melodic or accompanimental motives, thicker texture, or faster rhymes.¹¹

The prechorus often ends with harmonic, textural, and melodic cues that create expectation for an important tonic arrival at the beginning of the following section. Harmonically, such a cue may be a chord that causes listeners to predict a resolution to the tonic. Following Doll, I label this chord a “pretonic”.¹² This chord is often V, though other chordal roots are possible.¹³ Of the VPC songs in the McGill Billboard dataset, about 51% of the prechoruses end on V, and the other most common endings are chords that also frequently lead to I in popular styles: IV (11%) and \flat VII (10%). The chord at this point demands attention because it appears at the end of a process of

⁹ Heetderks (2020, 2), Nobile (2020a, 40–46).

¹⁰ De Clercq (2012, 97), Heetderks (2020, 2), Nobile (2020a, 95–104).

¹¹ De Clercq (2012, 97), Heetderks (2020, 2), Nobile (2014, 166), Summach (2011, 12).

¹² Doll (2017, 25).

¹³ Neal, for example, states that prechoruses typically consists of an extended predominant to dominant harmonic motion (2007, 45)

acceleration and intensification, it is often rhetorically emphasized, and it sometimes has a marked status through a unique quality or set of added notes.¹⁴ If we need greater terminological precision, we could label this chord a “strong pretonic” or “concluding pretonic” in order to distinguish it from garden-variety pretonics that create an expectation for lower-level tonic resolutions.¹⁵ Most often, the pretonic is in the same key as the verse, but in some cases, the prechorus modulates in order to prepare a chorus in a new key. The prechorus often ends with a textural break or drum fill (or both) to highlight the importance of the following section. Finally, the prechorus sometimes ends with a melodic anacrusis pointing toward the following downbeat at the beginning of the chorus. This anacrusis often outlines one or more members of the tonic triad, even if these notes disagree with the backing chords, anticipating the tonic resolution.¹⁶ We should note that not *all* prechoruses engage in these melodic/harmonic paradigms. Around 12% of the prechoruses in the McGill dataset, for example, end with I. In these cases, non-harmonic features such as texture, motivic length, and rhyme frequency serve instead to invoke the formal type.

The chorus usually emphasizes the tonic harmony: 76% of the choruses in VPC songs from the McGill Billboard Dataset begin with I, and another 14% repeat a cadential progression where I quickly appears. Whether this I sounds like the resolution of the previous chord or an initiation of a new harmonic progression depends on a number of factors;¹⁷ in either case, it reasserts the tonic after the instability of the prechorus. In some cases, the chorus uses another harmonic loop, creating a stable but high-energy zone of activity. This loop is sometimes followed

¹⁴ Summach (2012, 63) provides an extensive list of rhetorical devices used at the end of a transitional section.

¹⁵ Doll (2017, 70–72) defines pretonic as any chord that leads listeners to expect the tonic. He allows that the degree to which such chords engender this expectation can vary in strength.

¹⁶ See Heetderks (2020, 16–18) for a more detailed discussion of tonic-note anacruses that anticipate the following chorus.

¹⁷ For a discussion of this question, see Heetderks (2020) and Nobile (2020a, 225–229).

by a brief contrasting progression to prepare the next verse.¹⁸ In other cases, the chorus has a more involved harmonic progression, suggesting a new tonal departure and return.

Scholars disagree on the minimum length for each section. Drew Nobile argues that the sections are defined by not by their length but by their harmonic functions, so that a prechorus or chorus lasting only four measures, for example, is possible (2020a, 211–216). Summach, by contrast, argues that each section must sound sufficiently independent, so that at least eight measures are necessary (2011, [8]–[10]). Since my study is primarily concerned with tonality, I will use the labels *verse*, *prechorus*, and *chorus* when they follow the layout shown in Table 1, regardless of their length.

While the harmonic features shown in Table 1 are normative, they can be altered if enough of the other features are present in order to establish a VPC form. Nobile, for example, observes that occasionally a prechorus will lead to a “continuation chorus,” which begins not as expected with the tonic but instead returns to the dominant-preparation phase of the section’s harmonic circuit.¹⁹ Nobile cites John Lennon’s “Imagine” as an example: the prechorus begins with a IV (“Imagine all the people”), ends with a pretonic V (“in peace”), and ends with a textural break and melodic anacrusis (“ooh”). But the following chorus begins on IV (with the text “You may say I’m a dreamer”) and contains an elongated cadential progression that reaches its conclusion at the end of the section, effectively “[backing] up the harmonic trajectory, announcing we’re not done yet” (2020a, 229).

¹⁸ Nobile (2020a, 89–91).

¹⁹ The continuation chorus also appears in simple VC forms, but its appearance in VPC forms is much less common.

Absent-Tonic Rebuff Choruses

While a continuation chorus delays the entrance of the tonic through an extended cadential progression, a rebuff chorus rejects an expected tonic entirely. For example, “Hey You! Get Off My Mountain” (1973) by the R&B group the Dramatics uses several devices in its prechorus that are normally associated with an impending tonic resolution in the chorus. But this resolution is denied, and the chorus is played over an extended dominant pedal, creating an effect of suspension that matches the song’s text. This song thus provides an example of what I call an “absent-tonic rebuff chorus.”

The first part of Example 2, marked (a), shows the first VPC rotation. The prechorus begins in measure 9; it is signaled by the addition of brass instruments and backing vocals, as well as by a minor iii and major VI, two novel chords, at the beginning of the section. As shown in the transcription of the horn parts in mm. 10–11, marked (b) in the second part of Example 2, these two chords harmonize a descending chromatic line in the horn in the backing track. Over measures 14 to 16, the bass ascends by step from F# to A, or $\hat{3}$ to $\hat{5}$, and the final chord is a pure V triad, the first such chord that appears in the song (earlier instances of V were so-called “soul dominants,” consisting of the notes of ii⁷ or IV above a $\hat{5}$ bass).²⁰ A long vocal note and brief drum fill mark the end of the section, and over the V triad the vocal part reaches a high $\hat{1}$, anticipating the tonic arrival and creating extra dissonance that heightens expectation for resolution.

These devices are all associated with an impending tonic, both in 1960s–1970s R&B and the Dramatics’ own catalogue. For example, the Temptations’ “The Girl’s Alright with Me” features the same stepwise ascent to V and melodic tonic anticipation in the prechorus leading to a

²⁰ This chord is discussed in Spicer (2017, [3]) and several other articles.

tonic arrival in the chorus. The Dramatics' own "Be My Girl" has a prechorus that uses a similar stepwise ascent from ii to V, over which the lead vocal sings a major-pentatonic fragment that reaches a dramatic high $\hat{1}$ (1:47–1:49). The beginning of the following chorus resolves this chord to I.

EXAMPLE 2: An Analysis of the VPC Sections of the Dramatics, "Hey, You! Get Off My Mountain."

(a) Verse

1 D^{A9} 2 D^{A9} 3 G/A 4 G/A 5 D^{A9} 6 D^{A9}

bring me down. And you laugh in my face. Make me feel like a clown. Ba by, I think I better

D: I V I

Prechorus

7 G/A 8 G/A 9 $F\#m7/A$ 10 $F\#m7$ B^7 11 G/A

put you in your place. That kind of action I don't need. (that kind of action.) That kind of heart ache I can't use.

V V iii⁶ iii VI V

*see (b) below

12 $F\#m7$ B^7 13 G/A 14 $F\#m7$ 15 G^{A7}

(that kind of heart ache) That kind of love in' I can do without, so go and play your game with some one

iii VI V iii IV

stepwise ascent to $\hat{5}$ in bass

Rebuff Chorus

16 A anticipatory $\hat{1}$ G/A Hey you! 18 $F\#m7/A$ 19 G/A 20 $F\#m7/A$

new. Oh, hey you! Get off my mountain. Hey you! Get off my cloud. Hey

V V $\hat{5}$ pedal in bass

21 G/A Hey you! 22 $F\#m7/A$ 23 G/A cadential hemiola 24 G/A

you! get off my mountain. You're just trying to You're just trying to

[V]

25 G/A 26 G/A 27 A^5 dissipation of rhythmic dissonance 28 D^{A9} Next Verse

You're just trying to bring me down.

[V] I

(b)

m. 10–11 $F\#m7$ B^7 G/A

horn

By contrast, in “Hey You! Get Off My Mountain,” the bass holds a pedal on $\hat{5}$ throughout the chorus, sustaining a dominant function even where rhythmic and melodic events indicate closure. In measure 23, the group sings a new rhythmic figure that marks the only appearance of rhythmic grouping dissonance in the melody. The accented notes (“you’re,” “try-,” and “to”) form a 3+3+2 tresillo rhythm, which is repeated over the next three measures. Biamonte (2015, [7.4]) argues that a triple rhythmic grouping at the end of a section indicates an impending cadence, labeling the device a “cadential hemiola.” The section reaches a closure of sorts, since the rhythmic dissonance ceases at measure 27, indicating the end of the chorus section, but it still withholds resolution of the dominant chord, instead moving to an A power chord.

The V chord does not resolve until the beginning of the next verse—appropriately enough, it begins with the text “bring me down”—which is indicated by a new tessitura and a thinner texture. In this song, the singer admonishes a lover for their teasing, abuse, and games, and in the chorus, attempts to retreat to an elevated space—representing enlightenment or inner peace—that is free from the harmful effects of this behavior. This enlightenment is indicated by high vocals and harmonic stasis, but the stasis is over a dominant chord, suggesting that it is not as firm or self-contained as the protagonist would wish.

As in 19th-century music, 20th-century popular song often withholds or attenuates the tonic to maintain tension and momentum and to reflect the expressive nature of the text. Mark Spicer has catalogued and discussed various techniques popular artists use toward this end; they include destabilizing tonic chords by inverting them or placing them mid-phrase (a *fragile* tonic) and implying the tonic but never explicitly stating it (an *absent* tonic) (2017, [1]). Spicer’s *emergent* tonic occurs when the tonic is withheld until its triumphant entry later, typically the chorus, but he notes that some songs reverse this layout. For example, Elton John’s “Someone

Saved My Life Tonight” has a verse that ends on a cadential six-four progression, setting up an expectation for a tonic, but this expectation is thwarted by the bass moving down by step to IV at the beginning of the chorus. Whenever the tonic appears later in the chorus, it is inverted. The lack of stable resolution, Spicer suggests, reflects the fragile state of the protagonist (2017, [7]–[10]). In the Psychedelic Furs’ “The Ghost in You,” the tonic chord can be heard in the verse but then disappears in later sections: the prechorus has a IV-iii shuttle and the chorus a V–IV shuttle. Spicer proposes the term “submergent” as opposed to “emergent” tonic to indicate this inverted norm (2017, [19]–[20]). A absent-tonic rebuff chorus similarly suppresses the tonic across the entire section in a way that rejects or thwarts expectation set up by the prechorus.

“We Don’t Need Another Hero,” a theme song from a Mad Max Movie written by Terry Britten and Graham Lyle for soul artist Tina Turner, similarly suppresses the tonic function in the chorus section and rebuffs an expected resolution. Reflecting both the narrative of the movie and contemporaneous fears of nuclear destruction during the Cold War, the song describes a generation searching for a better society while simultaneously expressing uncertainty about whether civilization will survive. The song's formal and harmonic devices can be interpreted as reinforcing the unsettled, searching nature of its text.

The first part of Example 3, marked (a), shows a transcription of the first VPC rotation. The song begins with a shuttle between I and V. Already in the opening, the tonic is undermined by added notes—a sixth and ninth—and a missing third, which contrasts with the pure triad used for V. Tina Turner’s first phrase creates a moment of closure by making a stepwise descent to G#—the same note that began the phrase—in m. 7, but this final pitch is harmonized deceptively with a C# power chord. The next phrase in the verse (mm. 9–16) is identical, except that the

original B tonic is further undermined by having a new bass note of G#, the relative minor, substitute for the original.

EXAMPLE 3: An Analysis of the VPC Sections of Tina Turner, “We Don't Need Another Hero.”

(a) Verse

(a) B⁵(ADD6)(ADD2) F# B⁵(ADD6)(ADD2) F#

Out of the ru ins, out from the wreck age,

5 E⁹ F# C#⁵

can't make the same mis take this time.

9 B⁵(ADD6)(ADD2)/G# F# B⁵(ADD6)(ADD2)/G# F#

We are the chil dren, the last ge ner a tion.

13 E(ADD2) F# C#⁵

We are the ones they left be hin'. And I

Prechorus

17 E F#⁵ C#m(ADD2) E

won der when we are ev er gon na change, liv ing un der the fear 'til

Rebuff Chorus

22 F#(no3) C#m(ADD2) N.C. F# F#sus4/G# F# E F#

noth ing else re mains. [break] We don't need an oth er he ro.

26 F#sus4/G# F# E F# D#m⁷ B/D# D#m⁷ E F# C#m

We don't need to know the way home. All we want is life be - yond the Thun der dome.

(b) synth pad nbr keyboard bass

m.28

Although the prechorus does not introduce any new chord roots, a new section is indicated at m. 17 with IV on a hypermetric downbeat and contrasting chord qualities. In addition, Turner moves into a new melodic register and sings shorter motives and quicker rhymes. A textural break at m. 24, beat 1 signals the end of the section, after which Turner sings an anacrusis figure over a V chord, which commonly leads into a chorus.²¹

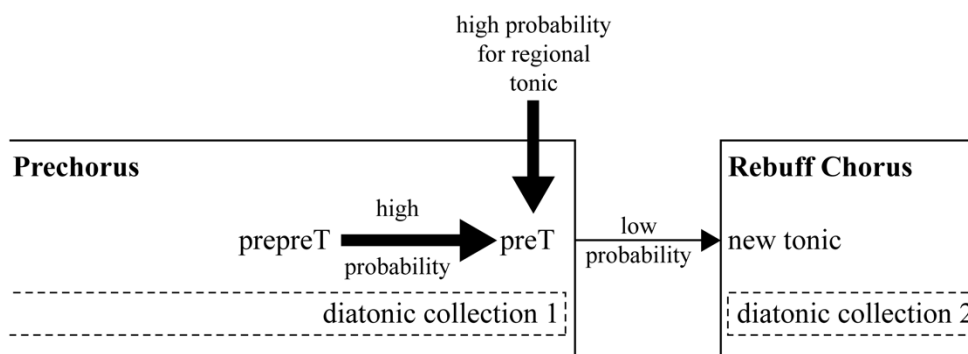
As with “Hey You! Get Off My Mountain,” the chorus rejects expected resolution and instead prolongs the dominant, primarily through neighboring chords over scale degrees $\hat{6}$ and $\hat{4}$ in the bass. In m. 28, the bass changes to D-sharp, or scale degree $\hat{3}$, and two members of the I chord briefly appear in the second half of the measure. As shown in the staff transcription of the synthesizer parts, marked (b) at the bottom of Example 3, these notes do not create a tonic-functioning resolution; instead, they are part of a neighboring-note figure embellishing the D#m7 in the measure, which leads back to E (IV) and F# (V) in the next measure. In measures 29 to 30, the voice part suggests a cadence by breaking from its previous range, completing a sentence, and making a melodic descent. But again, resolution is thwarted, since the V moves to a minor ii. This grim ending becomes even more portentous when Turner repeats the chorus at the end of the song: the final ii is both unresolved and has an added 2nd. It sustains in the synthesizer for a full 15 seconds before fading to silence, aptly reflecting fears about global destruction present in both the film and song text.

²¹ Melodically, m. 17 belongs to the following chorus, but metrically, it is still in the space of the prechorus. It is unclear whether the V in m. 17 represents the last chord of the prechorus or anticipates the first in the following section, but the next rotation through the verse and chorus gives more evidence in favor of the first interpretation by inserting an additional measure and vocal phrase that implies a motion to V before the anacrusis gesture occurs.

Modulating Rebuff Choruses

Another way that a chorus can rebuff the harmonic implications of the prechorus is by *changing* the tonic—that is, by abruptly modulating to a new key. Example 4 provides a schematic diagram that clarifies when this formal event occurs.

EXAMPLE 4: A Schematic Model for a Modulating Rebuff Chorus



A prechorus ends with a set of high-probability chord successions, as shown by the thick arrows in Example 4. One or more prepretonic chords lead to a pretonic, which is a likely chord in the local key.²² In other words, the prechorus typically ends on a chord that intensifies listener expectation for tonic, such as V, \flat VII, or IV. A modulating rebuff chorus changes to a tonal center that is *unlikely* to result from the pretonic chord at the end of the prechorus. The effect is reinforced if the prechorus and chorus use different diatonic collections.²³ The situation

²² The term prepretonic is derived from Doll (2017, 49–55). This harmonic function is analogous to predominant function but covers a wider variety of kinds of chord progressions that lead to the tonic.

²³ Modulating rebuff choruses can be heard as examples of what Capuzzo (2009, 158) calls “sectional centrality,” in which different sections of a pop song project distinct tonal centers without a larger-scale directed voice leading that unifies them around a single global tonic or transformational process. Unlike Capuzzo, I focus on how a VPC cycle makes a unified tonal process of beginning, acceleration toward a goal, and arrival of focal material. Thus, a rebuff chorus creates tension by the directed harmonic process and its abruptly redirected or suspended tonal goal.

diagrammed in Example 4 is notably different from the typical VPC modulation sequence outlined by Nobile, who states that “[w]ith few exceptions, this [modulation] occurs in the prechorus: the verse establishes one tonal center, the prechorus destabilizes that center, and the cadence into the chorus lands on a new center” (2020a, 204).

EXAMPLE 5: Analyses of the VPC Sections of (a) the Temptations & the Supremes, “I’m Gonna Make You Love Me” and (b) the Corrs, “Irresistible.”

(a) Verse	Prechorus	Rebuff Chorus
$\begin{array}{c} 1 \quad 2 \quad 3_x \quad 7 \quad 8 \\ \text{ : G}^{\Delta 7} \mid \text{Am}^7/\text{D}: \text{ } \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{c} 9 \quad 10 \quad 11 \quad 12 \\ \text{ : G}^{\Delta 7} \mid \text{E}^7 \mid \text{Am}^7 \text{Bm}^7 \mid \text{Am}^7 \text{Bm}^7 \mid \text{Am}^7 \mid \text{C}/\text{D} \text{ D} \text{ :} \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{c} 13 \quad 14 \quad 15 \quad 16 \\ \text{ : B}^b \text{ F}/\text{A} \mid \text{Gm} \text{ B}^b/\text{F} \mid \text{Cm}^7 \text{ E}^b/\text{B}^b \mid \text{F}/\text{A} \text{ F} \mid \end{array}$
$\text{G: I} \quad \text{V} \quad \text{I} \quad \text{V of ii} \quad \text{ii} \quad \text{iii} \quad \text{ii} \quad \text{iii} \quad \text{ii} \quad \text{V} \left(\begin{array}{c} 9-10 \\ 7-8 \\ 4-3 \end{array} \right) \text{ }$	$\text{Bb: I} \quad \text{vi} \quad \text{ii}^7 \quad \text{V}$	
$\begin{array}{c} 17 \quad 18 \quad 19 \quad 20 \\ \text{ : B}^b \text{ F}/\text{A} \mid \text{Gm} \text{ B}^b/\text{F} \mid \text{Cm}^7 \text{ E}^b/\text{B}^b \mid \text{D}^7/\text{A} \text{ D}^7 \mid \end{array}$		
$\begin{array}{c} \text{I} \quad \text{vi} \quad \text{ii}^7 \\ \text{G: iv} \quad \text{V} \end{array}$		

(b) Verse	Prechorus	Rebuff Chorus
$\begin{array}{c} 1 \quad 2 \quad 4_x \quad 9 \quad 10 \quad 15 \quad 16 \\ \text{ : D} \mid \text{F}^{\#m} \text{ : : G}^{\Delta 7} \mid \text{A}^7 \text{ : } \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{c} 17 \quad 18 \quad 19 \quad 20 \quad 25 \quad 26 \quad 27 \quad 28 \quad 29 \\ \text{ : F} \mid \text{Gm}^7 \mid \text{B}^b \mid \text{C} \text{ : : F} \mid \text{Gm}^7 \mid \text{B}^b \mid \text{Dm} \mid \end{array}$	
$\text{f\#:bVI} \quad \text{i} \quad \text{IV} \quad \text{V} \quad \text{vi} \quad \text{IV} \quad \text{V} \quad \text{ }$	$\text{F: I} \quad \text{ii} \quad \text{IV} \quad \text{V} \quad \text{I} \quad \text{ii} \quad \text{IV} \mid \text{D: bVI} \quad \text{i}$	

The first part of Example 5, marked (a), shows one instance of a modulating rebuff chorus: “I’m Gonna Make You Love Me,” originally recorded in 1966 by Dee Dee Warwick and made famous by a 1968 collaboration featuring the Temptations and Diana Ross and the Supremes. The prechorus is indicated at measure 9 by a higher density of rhymes, a higher vocal range, and beginning on ii, a novel chord. As in “Hey You! Get Off My Mountain,” the prechorus ends with a unique instance of a pure V triad, and the lead vocal sings scale degrees $\hat{3}$ and $\hat{1}$ over this chord, anticipating a resolution to a tonic G. But the chorus rejects this implication, instead modulating

up a minor third to the key of B \flat major and changing to a remote diatonic collection. A chromatic PL relationship occurs between the D-major and B \flat -major triads across the prechorus–chorus boundary, which is an unlikely succession in the style.²⁴ The chorus ends by using the Cm7 chord to pivot smoothly back to the original key. Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell’s “Your Precious Love” (1967) uses a similar relationship across the verse–chorus boundary: the verse ends with a crescendo on a V chord, which resolves down by major third.

In her analysis of Shania Twain’s collaborations with producer/songwriter Robert “Mutt” Lange, Jocelyn Neal notes that Lange frequently uses key changes in different stages of a VPC to maintain listener interest and help make Twain’s pop-infused country songs stand out from those of their competitors.²⁵ These strategies also appear in songs Lange helped write and produce for hair-metal band Def Leppard and folk-pop band the Corrs (2008, 306–7). When a chorus rebuffs the tonal center implied by the prechorus, the dramatic effect of the key change is heightened. For example, The Corrs’ 2000 song “Irresistible,” shown in the second part of Example 5, marked (b), uses a very similar tonal plan to that of “I’m Gonna Make You Love Me.” The verse and prechorus gradually build expectation for an arrival in D, only to have the chorus reject this expectation and modulate up a minor third to F. The verse begins by alternating between one-measure D-major and F \sharp -minor triads, most likely heard as a \flat VI–i Aeolian shuttle.²⁶ The prechorus is indicated by harmonic novelty, thicker texture, and quicker alternation between lead

²⁴ For a discussion of the frequency of chromatic major-third relations in pop harmony, see Forrest (2017, [7]).

²⁵ Neal (2008, 294–96). Neal also discusses key changes in the context of other formal areas, but they are not relevant to this article.

²⁶ The arrangement and vocal line create ambiguity about which chord occurs on the hypermetric downbeat, highlighting another strategy Neal (2008, 299) identifies in Lange’s production. Aeolian shuttles are discussed in Tagg (2009, 186–188), who ascribes to them the primary connotations of ominousness, loneliness, or alienation.

and backing vocals. While Neal hears the prechorus in A (2008, 307), I find a D tonal center more likely, given the use of A dominant-seventh chords, deceptive resolution to vi, and the melodic line, which is largely centered on D and outlines $\hat{1}-\hat{5}-\hat{4}-\hat{3}-\hat{2}$ in D major over measures 14–16. The use of a single diatonic collection across verse and prechorus allows a retrospective hearing of both sections in D major, as shown in Example 5. This gradual emergence of the D tonal center makes all the more surprising the burst of F-major tonality in the chorus, solidified by a I–ii–IV–V loop in that key. As in “I’m Gonna Make You Love Me,” the new tonic is introduced by a direct PL chromatic-median progression. A final deceptive resolution from IV to a D-minor chord, or vi, prepares the restatement of the verse material, following a shift back to D major. Several expressive interpretations might be made of this tonal change. The F tonality has the freshness of new love that the singer feels, or, the incongruous tonal centers reflect the conflicting viewpoints in the song, since the singer declares in the chorus that their romantic interest is irresistible while the context supplied in the verse indicates that this feeling is not reciprocated. The song’s conclusion, arguably, supports the latter interpretation, since it trails off on a D-minor chord, suggesting that the singer’s frustrated desires are not fulfilled.

The two previous analyses depend on the claim that the chorus’s tonic is an unlikely successor to the pretonic chord at the end of the prechorus. Whether listeners will deem a progression unlikely is partly a result of their experience and subjective judgment, although there are empirical studies measuring the frequency of chord successions that provide useful insight into this question.²⁷ There are some changes in tonic that many would *not* judge to be particularly surprising, even if the prechorus initially sounds like it was preparing a different key. The most common examples of these tonic changes come from relative major/minor pairings: many songs

²⁷ Examples include Temperley and de Clercq (2011) and Sears and Forrest (2021).

have a prechorus that ends on a pretonic in one relative key (\flat VII in minor or V in major) that is subsequently reinterpreted according to the other key.²⁸ More complex formal juxtapositions of relative key pairings are possible, and de Clercq (2021, [3.3]–[3.7]) discusses the range of possibilities in detail.²⁹ Other songs reinterpret the final chord of the chorus as a pretonic \flat VII or IV in order to change to a non-relative key, creating a modulation that is unexpected but, in retrospect, harmonically coherent. Examples in which the final chord of the prechorus is reinterpreted as \flat VII include Leo Sayer’s “You Make Me Feel Like Dancing” and The Talking Heads’ “Wild Wild Life.” Examples of a final I or V reinterpreted as IV include Shania Twain’s “Man! I Feel Like a Woman!” and The Corrs’ “All the Love in the World”—both of which are discussed in Neal (2008)—as well as David Bowie’s “Let’s Dance.” In these songs, the listener can make a retrospective reinterpretation of the final chord in the prechorus in relation to the following chorus. By contrast, in a rebuff chorus, the modulation in the chorus either sounds entirely unprepared, or it suggests a reinterpretation that is markedly unusual or difficult.

EXAMPLE 6: An Analysis of the VPC Sections of Talking Heads, “And She Was.”

1 Verse	2	3	4	9 Prechorus	10	11	12								
: E	A ⁷	E	E	: B ^b	F	C ¹¹	F	B ^b	C	F					
E: I	IV	I	I	F: IV	I	V	I	IV	V	I					
				Rebuff chorus											
13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20								
B ^b	F	C ¹¹	F	B ^b	G	C	: E	A	D	A	E	A	D	A	:
[F:] IV	I	V	I	IV	V _{of} V	V	: E: I	IV	\flat VII	IV	I	IV	\flat VII	IV	

²⁸ For example, Tina Turner’s “What’s Love Got to Do with It” has a verse in minor and chorus in the relative major, while Yvonne Elliman’s “If I Can’t Have You” and Billy Squier’s “My Kinda Lover” have the obverse.

²⁹ Freddie Jackson’s “Have You Ever Loved Somebody,” for example, has a prechorus in the relative major but a verse and chorus in minor.

Christopher Doll notes that a change of tonal center is often a facet of what he calls a *breakout chorus*, which occurs when the chorus makes a sudden, dramatic change in intensity through register, volume, or textural thickness. A new tonal center often reinforces this change, and the modulation can reinforce the song’s message or story in different ways.³⁰ Because the modulation in a chorus has become a part of many pop styles, Doll argues that the *manner* in which the modulation is achieved—whether the tonic is introduced immediately, ambiguously, or obliquely—can also take on expressive value (2011, [10]). A chorus that explicitly rejects the tonal center implied by the prechorus affords a range of options that Doll does not discuss in detail.³¹ For example, the Talking Heads’ “And She Was” (1985) uses immediate changes in pitch collection to create an effect of repeated abrupt modulations. As shown in Example 6, the song’s verse establishes an E tonal center through a repeated I–IV–I progression. The prechorus modulates up a half step to F major, and its second phrase ends with a half-cadential progression. The chorus rejects the new tonic and returns to E major, which is prolonged by a double-plagal loop (Biamonte 2010, 99–100). As with “I’m Gonna Make You Love Me” and “Irresistible,” a chromatic-mediant relation (C major to E major) occurs across the prechorus–chorus boundary—in this case, LP rather than PL.³² The chromatic changes in tonic across the three sections give an apt accompaniment to the song’s depiction of a fantastical journey that is perhaps aided by

³⁰ A motion from a minor verse to a relative-major chorus, for example, allows the singer to state what they “mean most,” according to Doll (2011, [16]). Other types of modulation carry their own expressive implications. For example, the less common modulation to relative minor in the chorus may potentially indicate a serious turn to a darker topic or a note of warning; while a modulation up by half or whole step might indicate a general excitement or a “passionate reaching upward” ([9]). We should not, of course, assume that these associations are always present. The variety of stylistic cues and melodic details in individual songs makes it impossible to make universal claims about each modulatory interval ([6]).

³¹ With the exception of the Beach Boys’ “Don’t Worry Baby,” Doll’s examples do not use VPC form.

³² The Talking Heads’ earlier song “Electric Guitar” (1979) explores similar relations in a VPC form and could be heard as a precursor to “And She Was.” I hear a verse in A minor, a prechorus in F major that ends on V (tonicized by V of V), and a chorus that moves immediately back to A minor via a third-relation.

psychedelic drugs, much like in The Beatles’ “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.” Indeed, both songs use a brief anacrusis of a resonant pounded tom-tom to usher in the chorus. But the Talking Heads’ sudden and unexpected changes in tonic are different in both type and effect from the Beatles’ smooth, pivot-chord modulations. The band's modulatory approach befits its new-wave “herky-jerky” style and suggests dispassionate observation rather than joyful participation.³³ XTC’s “Real by Reel” achieves a similar effect with a verse in F, prechorus in G, and chorus that abruptly modulates back to F, and it touches on similar themes of dispassionate observation in its descriptions of the details of human life being transformed into records by the machinery of state surveillance.³⁴

EXAMPLE 7: An Analysis of the VPC sections of Kate Bush, “Wuthering Heights.”

1 Verse	2	3	4	13	14 Prechorus	15	16
$\frac{4}{4}$: A	F	E ⁷	C [#]	x3 : A ^b	: E ^b m ⁷ G ^b	F _{sus} ⁴	x3 : F _{sus} ⁴
A: I	^b VI	V	III	B ^b : ^b III	^b VII	iv ^b VI	V
17 Rebuff chorus	18	19	20	21	22 link		
: G ^b E ^b m	$\frac{3}{2}$ A ^b - D ^b	$\frac{4}{4}$ G ^b	$\frac{3}{2}$ G ^b A ^b D ^b	$\frac{4}{4}$ G ^b	: A		
D ^b : IV	ii	V	I	IV	V	I	IV
						IV	A: I

Rebuffing a prechorus can draw listeners’ attention to the pretonic chord that is thwarted, since it does not resolve as expected. In Kate Bush’s “Wuthering Heights” (1978), shown in

³³ Cubitt (1997, 301–304) offers a neo-Freudian interpretation of the animated music video of “And She Was,” and it overlaps with some of the themes in my reading. He points out that the video has a “jerky” quality and that it reverses the typical video in presenting the vantage point of being seen rather than gazing fetishistically. These features underscore the video’s deliberate lack of authenticity and narcissistic viewpoint, negating the typical stance supplied in rock and pop. The opaque elements of the video further suggest that the self that is constructed in the video is fragile and constantly re-negotiated.

³⁴ Although “Real by Reel” has a similar tonal layout to “And She Was,” some listeners may not hear it as a rebuff chorus, because the C⁵ that ends the prechorus and F-major chord that begins the chorus can be heard as a V–I progression. I still hear the V–I progression as surprising in the context of the prechorus, in part because of the sudden change in diatonic collection.

Example 7, the pretonic chord that is rebuffed participates in larger-scale harmonic relations. David Forrest points out that the verse features several chromatic relationships that can be modeled through recurring neo-Riemannian voice leading transformations. The first two chords—A to F major—create a PL progression, and another PL progression is created as the C#-major triad in m. 4 returns to the A-major triad after the repeat. Forrest argues that pop music often uses these relations to depict uncanny states—in this case, the border between life and death as Cathy’s ghost calls Heathcliff (2017, [3], [28]). The larger V–PC–C cycle furthers this depiction by exploring distant key areas. The prechorus, which is indicated by shorter vocal motives, faster rhymes, harmonic novelty, and thicker texture, uses the final C# chord in the verse—reinterpreted as D \flat —to pivot to the key of B \flat minor. The section ends with F^{sus4}, a pretonic V that reinforces this new tonal center. The chord is rhetorically emphasized at the end of the section by being held for an extra measure with a swelling cymbal in the accompaniment and Bush repeating part of the title phrase. The following chorus rejects this tonal implication, swerving to the key of D \flat . The focal chords of each section retrace, at a larger level, the major-third chromatic relations Forrest identifies in the verse: the opening A-major tonic is a major third from F^{sus4} that ends the prechorus, which is a major third from the tonic D \flat in the chorus. Moreover, while the prechorus’s implication of B \flat is not fulfilled in the chorus, this tonal center does appear in the bridge, creating a larger tonal relation between the sections. The bridge dissolves back into the tonal uncertainty of the chorus, suggesting a large-scale wandering without a fixed destination, just as Cathy’s ghost wanders the highland moors.

Ambiguous Rebuff Prechoruses

In addition to changing tonic, a chorus can rebuff the tonal implications of a prechorus by suggesting an ambiguous tonal center or an ambiguous relation to the pretonic. As opposed to

making the chorus the section with the song’s focal message, this technique can make the chorus an area of puzzlement, searching, or ironic undercutting.

EXAMPLE 8: An Analysis of the VPC Sections and Ending of R.E.M., “Moral Kiosk.”

The musical score for "Moral Kiosk" is divided into several sections:

- Verse (Measures 1-6):** Lyrics: "Scratch the sand als in the twi light. Trying to shock but in stead id le hands all or i ent to her. Pass a mag ic pil low und er head." Guitar chords: D⁵(ADD2), D⁵(ADD2), E⁵, E⁵, E⁵, E⁵. Roman numerals: E: bVII, IV⁶, I, I⁶, V. [A: IV, I⁶, V].
- Prechorus (Measures 17-20):** Lyrics: "So much more at trac tive in side the mor al ki osk." Guitar chords: A^{ADD2}, E^{Δ7}, E, B¹¹. Roman numerals: ii, I⁶, I, V.
- Rebuff Chorus (Measures 25-28):** Lyrics: "In side, fire twi light." Guitar chords: A⁵(ADD2), A⁵(ADD2), A⁵(ADD2), A⁵(ADD2). Roman numerals: IV?, [A:I?].
- Second bridge (Measures 33-34):** Lyrics: (None). Guitar chords: G, G. Roman numerals: (None).
- Final chorus with new bass line (Measures 37-40):** Lyrics: "In side, fire twi light." Guitar chords: A⁵(ADD2), A⁵(ADD2), A⁵(ADD2), A⁵(ADD2). Roman numerals: (None).
- Final chord (Measure 41):** Guitar chord: D⁵.

R.E.M. was especially adept at these tonally ambiguous rebuff choruses; such choruses support the band’s cryptic or ironic lyrics.³⁵ For example, “Moral Kiosk” (1983), shown in

³⁵ Maus suggests that tonal multivalence in many of R.E.M.’s songs reflect lead singer Michael Stipe’s

Example 8, has ambiguous tonal centers in both the verse and the chorus.³⁶ I hear the verse's tonic as E, since an E-major chord is the only consonant chord in the section, appears in a hypermetrically strong position, and lasts longer than any other chord in the section. Michael Stipe's lead vocal contains short phrases that end on either G#, the third of the tonic triad, or E, the tonic. Moreover, the verse's chord progression outlines a double-plagal progression in E, a common key-defining progression, and the song's first bridge (1:45–1:56) ends on a dominant-functioning B power chord, pointing to an E tonic. Nonetheless, the added notes, use of chord inversion, and use of only three chords make any tonic hearing provisional: hearing the verse in A is also possible, especially given the song's opening, which strums a chord that contains the pitches A, E, and B.³⁷

The prechorus asserts a tonic E without ambiguity. An E-major chord is the only triad that appears in root position, the passage contains an ascending E-major scale in the bass line, and a high open E rings out in every chord.³⁸ This section ends with an altered V, creating an expectation for a tonic resolution, but the following chorus instead consists solely of an A^{5(ADD2)}. This chord is also ambiguous in function: it could be heard as a prolonged IV that delays tonal resolution across the entire section, much like “Hey You! Get Off My Mountain.” Or, the A could be heard as a new tonal center that rejects the prechorus's cue.³⁹ Due to its texture and rhythmic activity, the section clearly fits the definition of a breakout chorus. Stipe reaches his highest

ambivalence about divulging his queer identity and having it pinned to a single label (2006, 203–205).

³⁶ In R.E.M.'s songs, the guitar is often partially independent from the bass, and the bass plays a significant role in defining tonal areas, as discussed below. I have thus included both the melodic and bass lines in my transcription.

³⁷ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer who suggested this possibility.

³⁸ R.E.M. often lets high-pitched open strings continue to ring through different chord changes. Bannister notes this practice is a stylistic feature of several 1980s indie bands, calling this feature “jangle” (2006, 71).

³⁹ Pavement's “Billie” has a similar tonicized IV throughout its chorus, although it lacks a prechorus; instead, the verse ends on a pretonic IV.

register and a delay effect is added to his voice, backing vocals enter, and drummer Bill Berry plays a new pattern featuring pounding toms with an energetic two-16th-note anacrusis leading to each hypermetric downbeat. Unlike other breakout choruses, the tonal cues are ambivalent, matching the obscure lyrics and undermining any sense that the listeners have safely arrived at a stable harmonic region.

The final time the chorus appears, additional musical information tilts listeners in favor of hearing the chorus in A. First, the section appears after a second bridge section (2:53–3:05) that prolongs a G-major chord for eight measures, which has the most likely function of \flat VII in the key of A. Second, the final chorus adds a new bass line that follows $\hat{1}-\hat{5}-\hat{1}-\hat{4}$ in A major. Finally, the song ends off-tonic with a long D-major triad. Based on my stylistic knowledge, I am inclined to believe that if a song ends on a long-held off-tonic chord, this chord is most likely IV,⁴⁰ further supporting an A tonic in the previous section. Throughout the song, the chorus repeats the word “inside,” but it is not until its final appearance that listeners truly feel inside the section, or at least in its tonal center.

The Crash Test Dummies’ “God Shuffled His Feet,” shown in the first part of Example 9, marked (a), achieves a similar tonally ambiguous effect in its chorus. The song’s prechorus begins at m. 9 and is indicated by avoidance of the tonic D on hypermetrically strong locations, motivic fragmentation, and faster rhymes, shown by the bold text. The end of the prechorus contains several musical cues that heighten expectation for resolution: a hypermetric extension at m. 13, a textural break created by the bass and snare dropping out, and a marked and dissonant $G^{\#11(ADD2)}$.

⁴⁰ Songs that end on long IV include The Beatles “Doctor Robert,” Jefferson Airplane’s “Someone to Love,” ELF’s “Do the Same Thing,” Michael Jackson’s “Man in the Mirror,” Kiss’s “Rocket Ride,” Pavement’s “Elevate Me Later,” the B-52’s “Rock Lobster,” and Collective Soul’s “The World I Know.” The ending on the long IV is probably related to the “Grand Plagal Cadence” that is used to end entire rock songs, a feature of the style discussed by Temperley (2011a [5.1]–[5.3]).

As shown in the second part of Example 9, marked (b), this chord is created by a B–C# motion in the synthesizer against the guitar’s continuing G-major chord, causing IV and two members of V to sound simultaneously. When this type of chord progression appears in other songs, it typically functions to mark a sectional close and heighten expectation for a tonic,⁴¹ but whether the Crash Test Dummies’ chorus achieves this resolution is ambiguous. The section loops through the chords A–E–A–D and the vocal line emphasizes the pitches A and E, creating a collection and progression that strongly suggest an A-major tonic, thwarting the expectation created by the pretonic in the chorus. Although a D chord appears at the end of the chord loop, it is in a hypermetrically weak position. In addition, hearing a D tonic would require hearing the E-major chord as containing #4, a less common scale degree in the rock style that often prompts a search for alternate tonal hearings (Temperley 2011b, [2.4]). Nonetheless, D was established as tonic in the previous two sections; moreover, moreover, when a G-major chord appears in measure 22, it further tilts listeners towards interpreting D as the tonic for the whole passage. The uncertain, hesitant nature of the tonal centers reinforce the song’s enigmatic lyrics.

⁴¹ Examples include John Denver’s “Rocky Mountain High” and Jane’s Addiction’s “Jane Says.” Insofar as it combines elements of the IV and V chords, the chord resembles the “soul dominant,” although the registral ordering of these elements is different.

EXAMPLE 9: An Analysis of the VPC Sections of Crash Test Dummies, "God Shuffled His Feet."

(a) **Verse**

1 D 2 Bm 3 G^{ADD6} 4 D A 5 D

Peop le sipped their wine, and what with God there, asked Himques tions, like: "do you have to

D: I vi IV I V I

6 Bm 7 G^{ADD6} 8 Bm G^{ADD6} 9 A **Prechorus** 10 D G

eat or get your hair cut in heav en?" "And if your eye got poked out in this life,

vi IV vi IV V I IV
hypermeter: ● ● ● ● ●

11 Em 12 D G^(ADD2) 13 G^{ADD2} G^{#11(ADD2)} 14 **Rebuff Chorus**

would it be wait ing up in heav en with your wife?" God shuf fled His

ii I IV I? V?
hypermeteric extension ● ● ● ● ●

15 E 16 A 17 D 18 A

feet, and glanced a round at them. The peop le cleared their

V? II? I? V? IV? I? I? V?
● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

19 E 20 A 21 D 22 G

throats and stared right back at Him. So He said,

V? II? I? V? IV? I? IV
● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

(b) m. 13 *synthesizer (guitar plays a G-major chord throughout measure)*

G^{ADD2} G^{#11(ADD2)}

In “Shiny Happy People” (1991), shown in Example 10, a rebuff chorus helps to reinforce other discontinuities in the song and signal that the song’s main message can be interpreted ironically. The verse repeats a progression that can be heard in F# minor, while the prechorus contains a G-major triad moving to an E-major triad. The most likely interpretation of these two chords is $\flat VII-V$,⁴² suggesting A as tonic for several reasons: (1) A turn to A would match the common practice of moving from the minor to relative major in pop styles. (2) The V chord becomes V^7 in the last measure of the prechorus, evident from Peter Buck’s guitar part. In some rock styles, especially those influenced by the blues, an added seventh has no effect on a chord’s function, but this principle does not apply to “Shiny Happy People,” since the E^7 at the end of the prechorus is the sole instance of a major-minor seventh chord, and the song’s folk-rock and baroque-pop stylistic references show minimal blues influence. Finally, (3) the prechorus most commonly ends with V, so it is the most likely interpretation in face of ambiguous evidence elsewhere.

⁴² For intra-opus—or at least intra-album—reinforcement of this hearing, we could note that “Half a World Away” from R.E.M.’s *Out of Time*, the same album on which “Shiny Happy People” appears, also uses a $\flat VII-V$ progression. Tagg, who calls the progression a “cowboy half-cadence” (2009, 124), suggests that it is so recognizable that it has been adopted and parodied in multiple styles.

EXAMPLE 10: An Analysis of the VPC Sections of R.E.M., “Shiny Happy People.”

1 **Verse** 2 3 4 9 10 11 12

Meet me in the crowd, Throw your love a round. peop le peop le. Love me, love me. Take it in to town, hap py, hap py.

guitar & backing vocals

F#m A⁵(ADD2) F#m A⁵(ADD2) A⁵(ADD2) E⁵ F#m A⁵(ADD2) F#m A⁵(ADD2) A⁵(ADD2) E⁵

f#: i bIII bVII i bIII bVII

13 **Prechorus** 14 15 16 17 18 19 20

Put it in the ground where the flo wers grow. Gold and sil ver shine.

F#m A⁵(ADD2) F#m A⁵(ADD2) A⁵(ADD2) E⁵ G G E E⁷

i bIII bVII A: bVII V V⁷

21 **Rebuff chorus** 22 23 24

guitar Shin y hap py peop le hold ing hands

bass etc.

E:

The following chorus rejects this preparation for a turn to A major, and instead asserts an E tonic, thwarting any sense of resolution to the pretonic E7 chord. In addition, this new tonic is fragile. Following the bass line and assuming chord changes on strong beats yields the looping progression V⁵–I⁵–ii.⁴³ The tonic appears in metrically weaker locations than the other chords, and each vocal phrase ends on a hypermetric downbeat, coinciding with V, rather than I. Scholars have noted potential irony in the bright timbres and putatively optimistic message in this song, as if the

⁴³ Readers may disagree on what the chords are in the section because the guitar plays a single line, which the bass largely doubles a fifth below. As Doll (2017, 67–68) notes, dividing a song into discrete chords is an act of subjective perception, which he calls the “entity effect.”

message of cheerfulness had an element of coercion or mental disability behind it.⁴⁴ The weakened tonic function and use of melodic-harmonic divorce—non-normative chorus features for a rock-style chorus⁴⁵—reinforce this irony by suggesting that the message is not as coherent firm as initially appears. The song’s introduction and instrumental bridge further contribute to this sense of discontinuity through differences in tempo, time signature, and key.

⁴⁴ Cawthorne, for example, proposes a “third” meaning of the song beyond its text and the general signification of its surface-level musemes (2014, 95–96). The song has also been used ironically in popular culture: in his 2004 political documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Michael Moore played the song while showing members of the Bush family greeting wealthy Saudis; the previous narrative suggested that the Saudis had bought the Bush family’s friendship and would influence the president in ways detrimental to the American public.

⁴⁵ Temperley (2007, 335–337).

EXAMPLE 11: An Analysis of the VPC Sections of R.E.M., “Second Guessing.”

(a) Verse 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 2nd time only: Oh

Why ya tryin' to sec - ond guess me?
What will be your look this sea - son?
I am tired of sec - ond guess sing.
Who will be your book this sea - son?

guitar chords
E⁵ E⁵ E⁵ E⁵ E⁵ B^{sus4} B¹¹

E: I IV I IV I IV V(4-6)

17 Prechorus 18 19 Oh 20 21 Oh 22 23 Rebuff chorus Here

Oh
A^{5(ADD2)} A^{5(ADD2)} A^{5(ADD2)} B^{7(sus4)} D⁵ Here

[E:] IV bIII Pre-tonic D: I

24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 Restated intro

we are. Here we are. Here we are. Here we are.

G^{ADD2} D⁵ G^{ADD2} D⁵ G^{ADD2} B^{7(sus4)}

[D:] IV I IV I IV Pre-tonic E: I

(b)

(c) End of last prechorus melodic arrival on E Rebuff chorus

Oh Here we are.

B^{7(sus4)} D⁵ G^{5(ADD2)}

[E:] Pre-tonic D: I IV etc.

R.E.M.’s “Second Guessing” (1984), shown in Example 11, second-guesses its tonal center several times over repeated cycles of its VPC form, due to the repeated appearance of an unusual pretonic chord and its ambiguous resolution. At the song’s conclusion, this ambiguity allows the harmony to reject the tonal center implied by the lead vocal. As shown in the first part

of Example 11, marked (a), the verse is in E, and the prechorus is signaled by a thicker texture and new set of upper pedal tones in the guitar (A, B, and E, or $A^{5(ADD2)}$), which raise the harmonic tension. Against these three notes, the bass and backing vocals move in contrary motion and reach a chord containing the notes F#, A, B, and E, written as $B^{7(sus4)}$ over a bass F# on the score reduction. As shown in the second part of Example 11, marked (b), this chord can be rewritten as a stack of perfect fourths, making it difficult to determine its root. The chord's dissonance and formal placement give it a drive for resolution, but not a clear destination. I have declined to attempt a Roman-numeral label, instead calling it a generic "pretonic" in the example. The first time the prechorus appears, this pretonic leads to a verse repetition, allowing the bass to resolve from F# to E, mimicking the same bass motion used across the repetition of the eight-measure cycle in the verse. The second time it appears, the pretonic chord resolves to a D-major tonic at the beginning of the chorus. The same chord appears at the end of the chorus but resolves back to E major for the subsequent verse, and the final chorus is repeated before leading to a final restatement of the intro, so that the chord first leads to a D and then to an E tonic at the song's conclusion.

Example 11 (b) shows the voice leading that allow this pretonic chord to resolve multiple ways. The notes E and B can be interpreted as $\hat{2}$ and $\hat{6}$, resolving down by step to form a D-major tonic triad, or the notes F# and A can be interpreted as $\hat{2}$ and $\hat{4}$, resolving down by step into an E-major tonic triad. The conflict between these two possible resolutions is brought to the fore in the last statement of the prechorus, the end of which is shown in the third part of Example 11, marked (c). The final prechorus first builds tension through an eight-measure extension (not shown on the example), repeating the first two chords. At the end of the section, Michael Stipe's lead vocal ascends the E minor pentatonic scale and inflects D to D#, creating a raised leading tone in E. The

lead vocal line ends on E on the downbeat of the chorus; these events are bracketed and labeled “melodic arrival on E” in the example. The rest of the bandmembers do not follow the lead vocal; instead, they resolve to D major as before, rejecting Stipe’s implied tonal center. In his discussion of double-tonic complexes created by relative major/minor pairs in pop/rock, Nobile notes ambiguous tonic-functioning sonorities are created by overlaying a melody and harmony that give conflicting tonal cues. For example, in Tina Turner’s “What’s Love Got to Do with It,” the vocal leads into the chorus with a $\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$ in G# minor, with $\hat{1}$ landing on its downbeat. On the next eighth note of the chorus, the band enters with a chord that might be interpreted as a B-major tonic: although the chord contains a G#, the bass and guitar prominently play the root and third, and the rest of the section asserts a B tonic (2020b, 215–217). “Second Guessing” suggests that this type of event is not restricted to instances of tonal pairing, but may instead be part of a larger practice of having the accompaniment rebuff the tonal cues supplied by the melody at formally important moments. “Hey You! Get Off My Mountain” can be heard as a similar instance, since the chords reject the tonic anticipation in the melody by sustaining the dominant harmony.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Pop/rock songs can assert a tonal center with different degrees of explicitness and confidence. By rejecting the prechorus’s tonal center, the songs I have analyzed above underscore how analysts and listeners should attend to discontinuities and distinctions between sections as much as underlying continuity, as Lori Burns advocates (2008, 68). The rebuff chorus is often a marked event that invites expressive interpretation, an activity naturally performed by fans (Doll 2017,

⁴⁶ A similar abrupt change in tonal center occurs as the chord leads to a linking passage in The Talking Heads’ “Wild Wild Life”: at the end of the chorus the vocal outlines $\hat{5}-\hat{4}-\hat{3}$ in A major, but its last note, C#, is harmonized with a new E-major tonic that contradicts it.

263). In combination with lyrics and melody, the rebuff chorus can suggest frustrated passion, failed attempts at transcendence or creating social cohesion, enigma, or dispassionate observation of psychedelic experience—as shown by the examples in this article—as well as other associations. Hanenberg (2016) has outlined many possible gestural or narrative possibilities created by unexpected modulations in recent pop/rock; this article further demonstrates the importance of attending to how a modulation relates to formal expectations. Artists might also use a rebuff chorus for what Hudson (2021, [2.6]) calls *aesthetic positioning*—that is, less for expressive communication and more for the broader goal of creating a particular style through realizing formal archetypes in recurring ways, creating a recognizable brand for fans. While it may be due to my selection bias, it is notable that several examples of rebuff choruses come from late 1970s and 1980s American post-punk bands such as the Talking Heads and R.E.M. The unusual choruses allow these artists to communicate a specific musical identity—simultaneously streamlined, mysterious, and quirky—that fans identify with and consume. To be sure, rebuff choruses also appear in other styles, including chromatically extravagant ones.

Nobile suggests that VPC form is best understood not as a tonal plan but rather a series of harmonic functions: tonic in the verse, predominant to dominant in the prechorus, and tonic again in the chorus. This conceptualization accommodates both monotonal songs and modulatory ones (2020a, 207). The examples in this article show that songs can both invoke and deform this model. The pretonic chord at the end of the prechorus does not have to lead to the same tonic as the chorus, and in some cases, a chorus might withhold resolution altogether. In some cases, the most important harmonic event in a VPC form may not involve the tonic but instead the pretonic-functioning chord at the end of the prechorus. For example, VPC songs such as the Human League’s “Don’t You Want Me,” David Bowie’s “Rebel Rebel,” and Utopia’s “Secret Society”

have a prechorus that ends with a pretonic establishing a tonal center sandwiched between verse and chorus sections that both use absent-tonic chord shuttles. By understanding pop/rock forms as a series of scripted events with more and less likely options, we will be in a better position to appreciate and discuss the creative solutions found by songwriters who by turns follow and deviate from them.

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Appendix

A GLOSSARY OF LEAD-SHEET SYMBOLS USED IN THIS ARTICLE.

The chart displays 16 chord symbols in two rows, each with its corresponding chord diagram in treble clef. The symbols are: C, C⁵, C_m, C⁷, C_m⁷, C^{ADD2}, C_m^{ADD2}, C^{SUS4}, C¹¹, C^{#11}, C^{7(sus4)}, C^{ADD6}, C^{7(b5)}, C^{Δ7}, C^{Δ9}, C/G, and C/F.