

Make It Pop!

25 Chart-Topping Arrangement Tricks that Work.

1. **“Drop to Vocals”** *Cotton Fields* by Creedence Clearwater Revival. As the intro fades John Fogerty and Co. punch out the first lines of the chorus a cappella. And everyone in the car WILL sing along. Find a reason to highlight a great vocal harmony by removing everything else.
2. **“Snare on Verse 2”** *I Won't Let You Go* by James Morrison. The first verse and chorus float along, but when the back beat enters on verse 2, we're moving. If your song has a slow start, get to the groove by verse 2 or else the audience is allowed to leave.
3. **“The Undeniable Hook”** *You're Beautiful* by James Blunt. By the first four notes of that intro we ALL know what's coming. Notice how the drums wait to enter until the verse, giving the acoustic instruments time to set the mood. If you have a good intro, lean into it by saving other elements for later.
4. **“Start the Song Twice”** *Listen to Her Heart* by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. The big guitar chords from the intro aren't life-changing. But the cymbal crashes and the out-of-time bass slides give you a sense of expectation before the beat comes in. Simple ingredients, clever execution.
5. **“Stacked Entrance”** *I'm Yours* by Jason Mraz. Listen again for the first time. Here they come in order: electric guitar, ukulele, lead vocal, background vocals, electric piano, drum fill, bass groove. Now we're moving- in the second verse I might add (see tip 2.) A staggered entrance gives the audience a reason to keep listening. Do likewise.
6. **“Splashy Fourth Beat”** *Learn to Fly* by Foo Fighters. Listen to the first verse and notice the sparkling tambourine on beat 4. It works because there's not much happening on that beat. Bass plays on beat 1, electric guitars play until the & of 2. So they filled the gap. Stuff each measure with music by adding a sparkle to beat 4.

7. **“Everyone Out But Fill”** *Up on Cripple Creek* by The Band. Talk about creating a moment. In the chorus we hear a warbly organ, swampy drums, and thick harmonies. But out of that melee comes the barking clavichord fill before we romp to the next verse. That contrast is a lovely break for the ear and iconic to the song. So if you have a busy groove, contrast it with a stripped-down fill.

8. **“Strings Steadily Rising”** *Stand By Me* by Ben E. King. This excellent string arrangement gives a simple song lift and polish. Notice how the strings methodically ascend registers, alternating between staccato and legato lines until the climactic instrumental. Imagining the song without the strings is disappointing. So if you have simple chords in a song, dress it up by writing a thoughtful string part.

9. **“Strings that Aren’t”** *How to Save a Life* by The Fray. Listen to the first chorus and you’ll hear a pad-like drone in the background. It’s actually an electric guitar using an Ebow. It’s a battery powered little box that vibrates a guitar string like a bow would. If you don’t have a pad sound in your team or are looking for something different, ask your electric guitarist if they have an Ebow. It has the added benefit of making him play just one string and really work on the arrangement. Just remember- the Ebow is like candy. You only need a little bit or you’ll get sick.

10. **“The Stupid Simple Drum Fill”** *Africa* by Toto. Listen to the fill before the chorus on this song. Most drummers would ignore this simple setup in favor of something flashier. But they are thinking like average drummers. Average drummers think of their drums above all else. Great drummers think of the song. And that iconic chorus is setup by that iconic drum fill. A double bass pedal fill with lot of cymbals would just impress the other drummers. But when this song comes on in the car and everyone plays air toms along with it, that is the proof. The elegant solution is the simple one.

11. **“Beat First”** *Superstition* by Stevie Wonder. That clavichord riff is one of the best moments in recorded music. But it really works because of the funky drum beat that started the song. Feel yourself swaying back and forth with the drums, waiting for Stevie to come in. The expectation is the thing. Find a way to do that in your own arrangements.

12. **“Chicks on 2 and 4”** *How Sweet It Is to Be Loved By You* by Marvin Gaye. Deep grooves with busy bass and drums don't need a lot of extra guitars. But they need a little in the right spot. Enter the Motown “chick”. the chick is just what it sounds like: a clean guitar chord stab on the top 2 or 3 strings. Add just a little reverb and you're there. Chicks on 2 and 4 support the snare drum and give the hits harmony. Just watch your drummer's snare hand and commit to matching him the whole song. He'll give you that knowing look, because you “get it”.

13. **“The Secret Weapon”** *You Are the Best Thing* by Ray LaMontagne. This song is so good you think it can't get better. And then the bridge starts and the Hollywood strings fire up. But that's what makes it so special. Saving the strings for the bridge and only the bridge is the gear change the song needs. So if you have a really special element in a song, have the courage to wait.

14. **“Hey Mr. Tambourine Chorus”** *The First Cut is the Deepest* as performed by Sheryl Crow. This trick is popular because it works. Listen to the chorus and you'll hear that tambourine cut through every. single. thing. Tambourines give your chorus extra motion and energy. But beware-don't hand the tambourine to just anyone. No matter what your drummer is doing with his hi-hat, people will follow the tempo of that love-it-or-hate-it tambourine. Professionals only please.

15. **“One New Thing Every Time Around”** *Give Me One Reason* by Tracy Chapman. Oh look, a 12-bar blues (zzzzzzzzzzzzzz). But listen to the order in which elements are added and subtracted: solo guitar, vocal, drum and bass, organ and background vocals in, organ and background vocals out, guitar solo, etc. Even though the chords don't change, with a little forethought you can keep an audience's attention without reverting to a bass solo.

16. **“The Well-Placed Clap”** *Stuck in the Middle With You* by Reservoir Dogs. Not only do claps add a fun element to a tune, they practically plead with the audience to participate. Which could go well, or it could be a train wreck. But it would be a fun train wreck.

17. **“No Snare? No Problem”** *Man of Constant Sorrow* by The Soggy Bottom Boys. This is well known in bluegrass music but it’s worth explaining. Your song needs a backbeat even if it doesn’t have a drummer. In bluegrass the mandolin player “chops” on beats 2 and 4 while his hand mutes the strings. Alternately, the violin player may do a quick chunk with the short end of the bow. Or you can have both elements at once. The bass and the chop alternate giving bluegrass its bounce and percussion without a drummer. But if your team isn’t familiar with this style beware- everyone thinks it’s easy until the train comes off the rails. A country groove played scared is the saddest thing you’ve ever heard.

18. **“The Drum Chorus”** *Brave* by Sara Bareilles. Yes, yes, we all know this one. But don’t overlook it. A well-executed drum chorus is what everyone wants to hear before the big finish. In *Brave*, the strings enter half-way through the chorus with a staccato line, just to let everyone know where they are headed. Try something similar.

19. **“The Acoustic Chorus”** *Hey Soul Sister* by Train. Similar to the drum chorus is the acoustic chorus. The song drops to a tiny-but-determined uke, organ, and a snare on 2 and 4. Halfway through, the bass brings the groove back before they take it home. “Smalling up” the sound before going big works every time.

20. **“Take Your Drummer’s Job”** *Go Your Own Way* by Fleetwood Mac. For the verse, Mic Fleetwood forsakes his role as a time keeper and plays a broken tom groove. It heightens the tension of the verse so that when he switches to a straight beat in the chorus you really notice. Be warned- this approach only works because the bass and two guitars are dedicated time keepers in the verse. The combination of three steady guitar rhythms contrasts the unpredictable drums. Someone has to keep things going.

21. **“Hollow Out The Middle”** *Clocks* by Coldplay. After getting our attention with descending arpeggios on piano, Chris Martin takes a break during the verse. All that’s left are drums, bass, and an airy synth above the vocal. No piano or guitars to be heard. This gives the verse the dreamy, floating feel Coldplay is known for. But the piano returns to give interest to the two-word chorus. That is a clever use of contrast. The wordy verse gets light instrumentation. The sparse chorus gets busy instrumentation.

22. **“Overdrive is for Choruses”** *Shattered* by O.a.R. This is why we have guitar pedals with foot switches. Listen to the first verse leading into the chorus. On the downbeat you can hear the electric guitar rip and take the chorus up a gear. Most rockers know this trick, but they forget to turn it off or pull back for the other parts. Remember, even rock and roll needs dynamics. *Smells Like Teen Spirit* anyone?

23. **“BIG BASS/tiny guitar”** *Uptown Funk* by Mark Ronson feat. Bruno Mars. Let’s head to the “too hot” section. What you hear is at least 2 layers of bass (vocal, electric bass) combining for a fat sound. But after that catchy riff you hear the tiny quack of an electric guitar. That call and response between a large and small element is classic funk. Remember-arranging a big sound isn’t about making everything bigger. It’s about contrast.

24. **“Fill, But Never on the Lyric”** *One More Last Chance* by Vince Gill. Country players have perfected the art of filling between lyrics. Electric guitars, honky tonk piano, fiddles, pedal steel, harmonicas, you name it. Everyone gets half a measure to rip it up. Good bands will even pre plan who goes when. There are two rules to the game. No 1: always lead into the next chord with your fill, and No 2: never step on the lyric. If people can’t hear the story of the song, you don’t get to play again.

25. **“Play Drums, not Cymbals”**. *Ophelia* by The Band. The back bone of the drums are the kick, snare, and hi hat. Notice how Levon Helm leans into those three elements and hits his cymbals very rarely. Instead, he fully commits to the groove and leaves room. Room for what? Air. The song is full of audio knick knacks: burpy horn lines, plinky guitars, gurgling piano fills, and pouty background vocals. You could spend a month picking out the gems. But all those little additions need air to breathe. A lesser drummer would lather everything in cymbal wash. So if you want your audience to hear the *band*, back off the cymbals and see how expressive you can be with your kick, snare, and hi hat.