

The Van Halen HIT SONG FORMULA

In this brand new series, I examine Van Halen's top 10 Billboard Chart Hits in an attempt to learn the formula for their hit song success.

And you know what?

There is one.

If you're brave, feel free to upload an original song following this formula!
Cheers :)

Van Halen Biggest Billboard Chart Hits

1. "Jump," 1984
2. "Why Can't This Be Love," 1986
3. "When It's Love," 1988
4. "Finish What Ya Started," 1988
5. "Runnin W The Devil" 1979 - * N/A (Oh) Pretty Woman
6. "I'll Wait," 1984
7. "Panama," 1984
8. "Love Walks In," 1986
9. "Dance the Night Away," 1979
10. "Dreams," 1986

EDDIE VAN HALEN SONG WRITING STRUCTURE

Interviewer:

Again, it's like what you did with "Panama". The open chords on the verse and chorus are somewhat similar to AC/DC, but the intro and especially the middle section after the solo are very Van Halen.

EVH:

"From day one that was just the way I write. I always start with some intro or theme and establish a riff, then after the solo there's some kind of breakdown section. It's there in almost every song, or else it returns to the intro."

Quotes taken from Eruption: Conversations with Eddie Van Halen
Page(s) 116-117 Authors: Brad Tolinski and Chris Gill

THE SONGS

INTRO = CHORUS

Runnin' with the devil (VH I)
Little Dreamer (VH I)
And the cradle will rock (WACF)
Loss of control (WACF)
Unchained (Fair Warning)
Why Cant this be love (5150)
Dreams* (5150) *bridge
Best of both worlds (5150)
Love walks in (5150)
Feels so good (OU812)
Poundcake (F.U.C.K.)
Spanked (F.U.C.K.)
Runaround (F.U.C.K.)
Can't stop loving you (Balance)
Tattoo (ADKOT)
Big River (ADKOT)

INTRO = SOLO BREAKDOWN

Jaime's Cryin* (VH I) *ending
Atomic Punk (VH I)
Bottoms Up (VH II)
Hang 'em high (Diver Down)
Full Bug (Diver Down)
Girl gone bad (1984)
Summer nights (5150)
5150 (5150)
When it's Love (OU812)
Finish what ya started (OU812)
Black and blue (OU812)
Judgement day (F.U.C.K.)
The dream is over (F.U.C.K.)
Right now (F.U.C.K.) pre-solo/ending*
Top of the world (F.U.C.K.)
Don't tell me (Balance)
Amsterdam (Balance)
Aftershock* (Balance) *ending
Take me back* (Balance) *ending
Feelin' (Balance)
One I want (VH III)
Fire in the hole (VH III)
Josephine* (VH III) *ending
Ballot or the Bullet (VH III)
How many say I (VH III)
You and your blues* (ADKOT) *ending
Beats Workin' (ADKOT) *ending

INTRO = VERSE

Feel your love tonight (VH I)
Secrets (Diver Down)
Jump* (1984) *verse & chorus
Good Enough (5150)
Inside (5150)
Mine all mine (OU812)
Cabo Wabo (OU812)
Seventh Seal (Balance) pre-chorus
Once (VH III)
A year to the day (VH III)
Bullethead (ADKOT)

FORMULA:

1. The Riff Is King

- It's the hook. Set's up the whole song.
- Usually the chorus, or both chorus & verse
- It's Major
- All triads and sus chords (know your inversions)
- Same approach on guitar and keys (visual pattern based)

2. Driving 1/4, 1/8, or 1/16 Note Bass

- Pedal Tones (playing one note over whole riff / progression)
- Root Notes (no inversions or walking bass lines)

3. Minor Element Sets Up Major Chorus

- Verse or pre-chorus is minor
- Relative Minor (VImi)
- IImi (Dmi in key of C)
- Parallel Minor In Key Of D (Dmi verse, Dma Chorus)
- Chorus and Minor element almost always travel together

4. 2X Choruses With Harmonies

- Virtually every chorus features 2-3 part harmonies
- Super singable and memorable
- Always in a set of at least 2

5. Solo Section / Interlude = A Departure To Groove

- Unless soloing over the chorus / verse
- Groove On The Black Keys
- Usually 2 sections
- Pushes back to Intro / Chorus

6. End With Intro / Chorus W Harmonies

- Keep them singing until the end
- Same riff as the intro
- Full harmonies
- Loudest Part Of the Song

Game Formula

Game Center

- ~~Run~~ Running w/ deat ~~to~~ ~~same~~
- Double the name away
- Bonans
- Finish what ya started

.E

Keys TOP bits

- Jump

why can't this be love?

Keys Dmi - Dma

- I'll wait
- when it's love

Stretching out

- Love walks in
- Dreams

Point Now

Piano Intro

Sunny

Dmi

5:13

96 BPM

- Verse 2x
- Pre-chorus 2x
- Chorus 2x - Post chorus
- Verse 2x
- Pre-chorus 2x
- Chorus 3x - Post chorus
- Piano Intro
- Interlude
- Guitar solo over ~~Pre-chorus~~ Pre-chorus
- Chorus 4x - Post chorus
- End w/ Piano Intro w/ hits (fateat)

And the whole will Rock

Point

~~3:33~~ 3:33

"A"

107 BPM

8th note Bass

Guitar Intro = Chorus

- Verse 2x
- Chorus
- Verse 2x
- Chorus
- Guitar solo Interlude
- DAVE
- Guitar solo over Chorus Fitt
- Verse 2x
- Chorus ... Rock on Fade out

Unchained

8th note Snags

• Intro riff = Chorus

• Verse

• Pre-chorus

• Chorus 2x

• Verse 2x

• Pre-chorus

• Chorus 2x

• Guitar solo over ~~Pre-chorus~~ Pre-chorus

• Chorus 2x

• Interlude w/ DAVE

• Build

• Chorus 2x

• Chorus w/ Guitar layer 2x

• Ending motif - fateat.

Rock

~~3:29~~ 3:29

138

Done the night Andy

Point

3:08

F

128

• Guitar intro same as Chorus

• Verse

• Verse

• Pre-chorus

• Chorus 2x

• Verse 2x

• Pre-chorus

• Chorus

• Interlude w/ build

• Chorus w/ Harmonies 6x → Rate

Billie Jean Dmi.
Roth
4:40
116

* 8th note bass

[Verse 4x (dmi.)
Chorus 2x (dmi.)
verse 3x
Chorus 2x]

key solo

Interlude Enharmonical

[verse 4x
Chorus 4x Fade out]

Noni ma E
Roth
3:42
144

[verse 2x
Pre chorus F-C#mi
Chorus 2x
verse 2x
Pre chorus
Chorus 2x -> Hits
Intro solo
Interlude / Bridge / DAVE
Hits TO END
* Chorus ~~4x~~

Love Takes In

8 bars = chorus

Chorus
Sammy
5:14
88 BPM (Ballad)

guitar solo/bw
chorus chorus.

Minor Verse 2x Dmi:

Pre-chorus

SOFT chorus 2x

verse 2x

Prechorus

SOFT chorus 2x

* Guitar solo 2x

Chorus chorus 2x

verse 2x

Pre-chorus

SOFT chorus

* Guitar solo w/ Chorus Hook 4x, Greater Finish. Hits.

Melody played
in c#m key
but includes

Harmonies on
Chorus "Love Comes
walking in"

Harmonies for
Chorus on a120.

Dreams

Keyboard Intro = Bridge

Chorus
Sammy
5:00
144

8/4 measure

* Verse 4x
* Chorus 2x
* Verse 4x
* Chorus 2x

↓
* Bridge / Hook 2x what Dreams more of

* Guitar solo / Enharmonical Interlude

* Chorus 3x

* Bridge

* Solo over Bridge 2x

* Bridge 1x

* Outro

Melody
Sammy
unison w/
keys.

Running w/ the Devil Roth

• Bass 1/4 NOTE Intro

• Intro riff = Chorus 4X

3:35

104 BPM

[• Verse 4X → Fm: vltc Parallel
• Chorus 2X → Fm

[• Verse 4X
• Chorus 2X

• Guitar solo - IV - I III

Intro (Chorus) 2X

[• Verse 4X
• Chorus 2X

• Guitar solo Same as Before

• Chorus ~~4X~~ 4X Hits at End

Hot for Teacher

Roth

A

4:46

292 Shuffles!

• Drum Intro

• Guitar solo Intro

→ F# Solo Riff

• Soft Verse Riff

• Lead Verse

• Pre-chorus

• Chorus = Verse Riff

• Soft Verse Riff w/ Roth...

• Lead Verse

• Pre-chorus

• Chorus

→ • Guitar solo F# Groove

• Soft Verse w/ Roth

• ~~Chorus~~ Chorus w/ Hits

Poundcake

Sammy

Drill intro

E

• 16th note Bass

104 BPM

• Intro = Chorus

S: 21

• Verse 2X

• Chorus - Homegrown 2X

• Verse 3X

• Pre-chorus 2X

• Chorus 2X

• Post-chorus 2X

• Guitar solo

• Pre-chorus

• short bridge

• Chorus 3X

• Post chorus

• Chorus w/ Guitar solo Fare ad-

And Then We Love

Roth

Ani

3:48

138 BPM

• Guitar Intro Riff

• Same as Chorus Verse

• Verse 4X

• Chorus 2X

• Verse 4X

• Chorus 2X

→ • Guitar solo Same as Verse/chorus

• Chorus 2X

• Soft Verse 2X

• Verse 4X w/ Hits

• Chorus 4X

→ • Guitar solo Same

• Chorus "Hey Hey Hey" 2X

• Ending w/ Hits

When it's late -

Honor D major (D=1)

Intro 1:08 Dmo

100 Blm
Sigs

• ~~Delayed~~ melody

• Introduce

• Verse first 2X

Verse 2X - Dmi

Chorus 2X - Dma

verse first 1X

verse 2X

Chorus 2X

Bridge fma - dma - Ami ...

• Solo over verse 2X

Bridge

Chorus 3X

~~Intro~~

Intro = Intro w/ harmonies forming melody

• Count 4m Along.

• End w/ Double.

Once the main body

Part E (E₁)

3:03

149 Blm

From intro

• Guitar Riff w/ rhythmic bass

• 145 E (sus)

• same as verse

• Verse 2X

• Pre-chorus (III mi.)

• ~~Pre-chorus~~ Chorus = verse 2X → harmonies

• Verse

• Pre-chorus

• Chorus 2X → harmonies

• Solo/Bridge Bass - Bass

• Chorus 2X Fade out

Finish what Ya started

Hand

4:31

E

176 Blm.

Intro snare E - 6X.. 50 sounds
MDD

• Verse Song as intro 2X

• Pre-chorus 2 parts. B-X

• Chorus = verse 2X (Chorus - D)

• Verse 2X

• Pre-chorus

• Chorus 2X

• Solo Signature 4X f#? Lorian?
• End on B

• End 2X

• Chorus ~~2X~~ Harmonies Till End 1/2X....

Formula

1. The RIFF IS King - Intro About 30 sec

• Introduce the Song / Hook • Piano & basic
• Powerful, Epic, & Simple. • generic keys

• Triads & sus chords.

• Jump • Dance music • Hot for teacher

2. Steady 8th/16th note Bass & Rock Drums • Drums

• 4/4 - Driving

• Pedal tones in Bass

* • Love walks in line w/

• Bass
• melody
• chords

* • Alex on Song someone
• kids worth.

* • walkway Song

3. * Major Chorus - minor verse / Pre-chorus

• Especially on keyboard tunes

• Generally I'mi or U'mi focus

* • I'll wait is parallel (Dma-Dmi) - when it's Lac-Dm10s, Dm10s*

• Jump minor pre-chorus

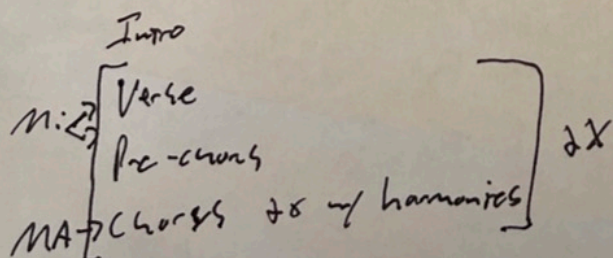
Usually 2X Chorus.

A/B Section

4. Capped Interlude / Solo Section

Same (• Jump - B'minor/D'minor - (All Black keys vs. all white keys)

• why can't this be love - B'minor-D'major (all black vs all white)



Solo / Interlude

Intro (B'minor chords)

• End w/ Chorus + Harmonies

Harmonies

RIP The Might EVH.

- Michael Palmisano

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'MP' followed by a stylized flourish.