

# Listening for form in popular music



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# Introduction

This free course, *Listening for form in popular music*, explores **form**, or how music is organised in time. You will study the form of several popular songs, including 'Be My Baby', 'Suspicious Minds', 'Midnight Special' and 'It's Only a Paper Moon'. You will look at three strategies for communicating form – through the use of specialist terms (such as 'chorus' and 'bridge'), alphabetic designations (for example AABA), and visual diagrams. You will also learn to hear and represent form yourself. Along the way, you will consider how the form of a song works together with its lyrics to create meaning.

You do not need to play an instrument or sing or have any prior musical knowledge to be able to complete the course. However, in order to get the most out of it, you will need access to six recordings and a media player that allows you to keep an eye on track timings while you listen. These recordings are listed below and are available to purchase or stream from a range of providers.

	Song title	Performers	Album	Length
1	'Be My Baby'	The Ronettes	<i>Be My Baby: The Very Best of the Ronettes</i>	02:41
2	'Midnight Special'	Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry	<i>Midnight Special</i>	04:05
3	'Suspicious Minds'	Fine Young Cannibals	<i>Fine Young Cannibals</i>	03:59
4	'Hang with Me'	Robyn	<i>Body Talk Pt. 2</i>	04:22
5	'It's Only a Paper Moon'	Nat King Cole	<i>The World of Nat King Cole</i>	02:56
6	'Fiddle Blast'	Aly Bain, Jenna Reid, Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh and Stuart Duncan	<i>Transatlantic Sessions 4: Volume 1</i>	04:53

Be sure to work with the correct versions of the songs, some of which exist in different versions or have been recorded by more than one performer. You can confirm that you are working with the right recordings by checking them against the titles, performers, albums and track lengths above.

You will frequently be asked to listen to what happens at particular moments in these songs, referring to specific track timings. Note that these may differ from those on your recordings by one or two seconds, depending among other things on your media player.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [A234 Understanding music](#).

# Learning Outcomes

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After studying this course, you should be able to:

- perceive common elements of form in Western popular song (including folksong and the jazz standard) in pieces including 'Suspicious Minds', 'Midnight Special' and 'It's Only a Paper Moon'
- understand three methods for communicating information about form: specialist terms, alphabetic designations, and visual representations
- recognise how form and lyrics work together to convey meaning.



# 1 Form and popular song

Fundamental to perceiving form in music is learning to distinguish **repetition**, **variation**, and **contrast**: that is, what you have heard before (repetition), an altered version of what you have heard before (variation), or something new (contrast). It may be helpful to think of the three as comprising a spectrum, with repetition at one end, contrast at the other, and variation in between, as shown in Figure 1. As this suggests, variation contains elements of both repetition and contrast.



**Figure 1** The spectrum between repetition and contrast

The best way to start recognising musical form is to listen for these three approaches to organising sound. It is often easier to hear them when lyrics are involved, and accordingly this course focuses on songs. Songs are also a good place to begin because many of them have uncomplicated forms, and because the terminology used to describe these forms is widely used in everyday talk.

For instance, many songs consist of a series of alternating **verses** and **choruses**. These are distinct in terms of both words and musical material, as indicated in Figure 2 through the use of different colours for verses and choruses. Verses are additionally distinct one from another, since each one has different lyrics, as indicated in the figure through a slightly darker shading of the box in the 'words' column and the 'verses' row.

	Words	Music
Verses	Distinct from the words of the chorus and different from verse to verse	Distinct from the music of the chorus, but the same (or very similar) from verse to verse
Choruses	Distinct from the words of the verses, but the same (or very similar) from chorus to chorus	Distinct from the music of the verses, but the same (or very similar) from chorus to chorus

**Figure 2** Distinguishing verses and choruses

## 2 Verses and choruses



**Figure 3** The Ronettes performing at the London Palladium, 1964. Photo: Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy.

The opening of 'Be My Baby' (1963) by The Ronettes features a particularly clear alternation between contrasting verses and choruses.

### Activity 1

Allow around 10 minutes for this activity

Listen at least twice to the first 01:37 of 'Be My Baby' while following along with Table 1, which outlines the alternation of verses and choruses by means of track timings and lyrics. Pay attention to how both the lyrics and the musical material recur from the first to the second chorus. Notice, too, how, although Verse 1 and Verse 2 have different lyrics, they are musically similar. (Verse 1 is preceded by a short instrumental introduction, one of the most widely imitated openings in pop music.)

**Table 1 Verse–chorus alternation in opening of 'Be My Baby'**

Section	Track time	Lyrics
Introduction	00:00	—
Verse 1	00:07	<p>The night we met I knew I needed you so,  And if I had the chance, I'd never let you go  So won't you say you love me; I'll make you so proud of me;  We'll make 'em turn their heads every place we go.</p>

Chorus	00:35	So won't you please (be my, be my baby) be my little baby (my one and only baby),  Say you'll be my darling (be my, be my baby), be my baby now (my one and only baby), a-whoa-oh-oh-oh.
Verse 2	00:52	I'll make you happy, baby, just wait and see;  For every kiss you give me, I'll give you three.  Oh, since the day I saw you, I have been waiting for you;  You know I will adore you till eternity.
Chorus	01:20	So won't you please (be my, be my baby) be my little baby (my one and only baby),  Say you'll be my darling (be my, be my baby), be my baby now (my one and only baby), a-whoa-oh-oh-oh oh.

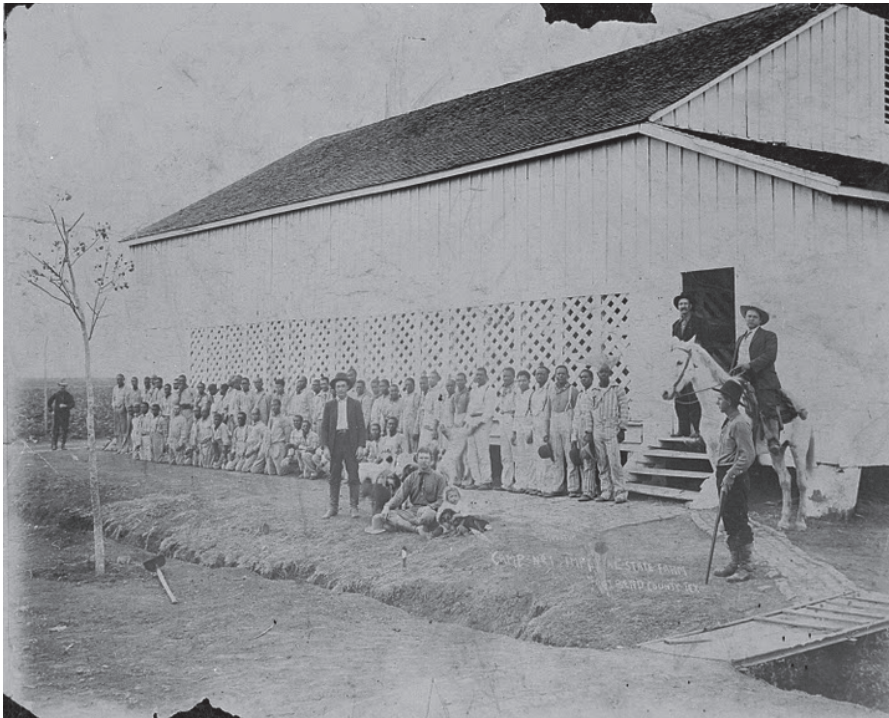
(Spector, Greenwich and Barry, 1963)

In listening, you may have observed some subtle musical differences between the two verses or the two choruses. The backup singers have a more prominent role in Verse 2 than in Verse 1; tougher to spot is that the second chorus has one more 'oh' than the first! It's because of such differences that relationships between components are described in Section 1 as 'the same or very similar'. Again, musical repetition and variation exist on a spectrum: even straightforward repetitions frequently contain *some* variation.

'Be My Baby' highlights a typical distinction between verses and choruses: verses tend to be text-centred and narrative-focused; choruses tend to be music-centred and expression-focused. It is no accident that the chorus of 'Be My Baby' features considerable repetition of words, and that by the end of it, the words have been replaced by **vocables** (sung, meaningless syllables): the music has established priority over the text. Related to this is that choruses also tend to contain a song's most memorable and engaging musical material. In the chorus of 'Be My Baby', the overlapping exchanges between the lead and backup singers and the use of simple, repeated texts seem to invite listeners to sing along. The point of a pop chorus such as this one is to get you to remember it.



## 3 Identifying choruses



**Figure 4** The Imperial State Prison Farm, Sugar Land, c.1908. Photo: Taken from Wikimedia, Texas Prison Museum/Public Domain.

The previous section introduced two specialist terms for describing form, namely ‘verse’ and ‘chorus’. In the next activities, you will try to identify verses and choruses yourself in a 1977 performance of ‘Midnight Special’ by the guitarist and singer Brownie McGhee and the harmonica player and singer Sonny Terry. The duo performs a folksong about prison life that originated in Texas in the early twentieth century (Cohen, 2000, p. 479). The ‘Midnight Special’ of the title is widely understood to refer to a train that left Houston at midnight and whose light shone through the windows of the Sugar Land state prison farm, 30 miles outside that city (Cohen, 2000, p. 479; Lomax and Lomax, 1947, p. 292).

### Activity 2

Allow around 25 minutes for this activity

Listen to ‘Midnight Special’ two or three times and try to determine which part of the performance is the chorus (this may not be immediately clear). In the box below, answer the following questions:

1. What are the words of the chorus? (Don’t worry if you can’t make these out exactly.)
2. How is the placement of this chorus different from that of ‘Be My Baby’?
3. How many times do you hear the chorus?
4. What is the track time at the beginning of each occurrence of the chorus? Use the format 00:00 to give your answer.

Provide your answer...

#### Discussion

1. The words are:

(Well) let the Midnight Special shine the light on me;  
(Well) let the Midnight Special shine the ever-loving light on me.

(Traditional, 1977)

2. Unlike in 'Be My Baby', where the first verse is heard before the first chorus, the chorus is the first vocal material to be heard in 'Midnight Special'.
3. The chorus is sung eight times during the performance.
4. The choruses begin around 00:11 00:40, 01:20, 01:59, 02:39, 03:00, 03:29 and 03:49.

Notice that the word 'well' is in parentheses in the transcription of the lyrics above; this indicates that the musicians only sometimes sing the word. There are a number of such differences from chorus to chorus, including at 03:29, where it sounds as though there may have been some confusion about which of the two singers should be leading. These are further examples of minor variations within repetitions. Together, they suggest that this is a somewhat **extemporised** (improvised) performance, and that the musicians have sung the song in slightly different ways from time to time.

As for the way the chorus is heard right at the beginning of this song, this is a relatively common practice. One way to understand it is as a bid to capture the listener's attention by deploying the most memorable material right away.

## 4 Identifying verses



**Figure 5** Sonny Terry (left) and Brownie McGhee performing at Lincoln Folk Festival, 1971. Photo: Estate Of Keith Morris/Redferns/Getty Images.

Having identified the eight instances of the chorus in ‘Midnight Special’, you will next identify the verses. Remember that verses have the same musical material as one another, but different words.

### Activity 3

Allow around 25 minutes for this activity

Listen again to ‘Midnight Special’, this time to identify the song’s verses. Using the text box below, write down the track time at the beginning of each verse (use the format 00:00), as well as a few words from the beginning of each verse.

*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

There are at least two ways to perceive the verses. One is to hear five verses, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2 Five-verse model of ‘Midnight Special’**

Track time	Lyrics
00:21	Yonder come Miss Rosie ...
01:01	When you get up in the morning ...
01:41	If you ever go to Houston ...
02:20	When you get up in the morning ...
03:10	I was standing at the station ...



However, about halfway through each of these five segments, the musical material (parts of the vocal melody and guitar accompaniment) seems to repeat. Keeping in mind that in verses, the music repeats but the lyrics are new, it is also possible to identify ten rather than five verses. This interpretation is shown in Table 3.

**Table 3 Ten-verse model of ‘Midnight Special’**

Track time	Lyrics
00:21	Yonder come Miss Rosie ...
00:30	Umbrella on her shoulder ...
01:01	When you get up in the morning ...
01:10	No forks on the table ...
01:41	If you ever go to Houston ...
01:50	That cop will arrest you ...
02:20	When you get up in the morning ...
02:30	Flapjacks and molasses ...
03:10	I was standing at the station ...
03:19	When that train was leaving ...

At this early stage, it would be fine if you arrived at either conclusion identified in the discussion. This said, the argument is a little better for hearing five verses than ten. In the first place, the ‘half verses’ are always heard in pairs and never on their own; the chorus never appears after a ‘half verse’. Second, each of the five ‘full verses’ stands on its own as an independent narrative unit: Miss Rosie attempting to get her man out of prison; breakfast in prison; trouble with the police in Houston; breakfast in prison (again); saying goodbye to Miss Rosie.

As this suggests, the definitions of verses and choruses provided earlier may need qualification. In Section 1, you read that verses have the same musical material as one another, but different words. This can now be revised: in determining where a verse begins and ends, you should also take into account other aspects of the song, including the meaning of the lyrics. More generally, it is helpful to conceptualise form in larger, rather than smaller, groupings, since this helps a broader picture to emerge from the detail.

## 5 Song structure and meaning

Table 4 presents a complete picture of 'Midnight Special', showing how the verses and choruses fit together. It also introduces a few new terms for the parts of the song that are distinct from the verses and choruses: the introduction, conclusion and interludes. These will be discussed these later in the course.

**Table 4 Complete form of 'Midnight Special'**

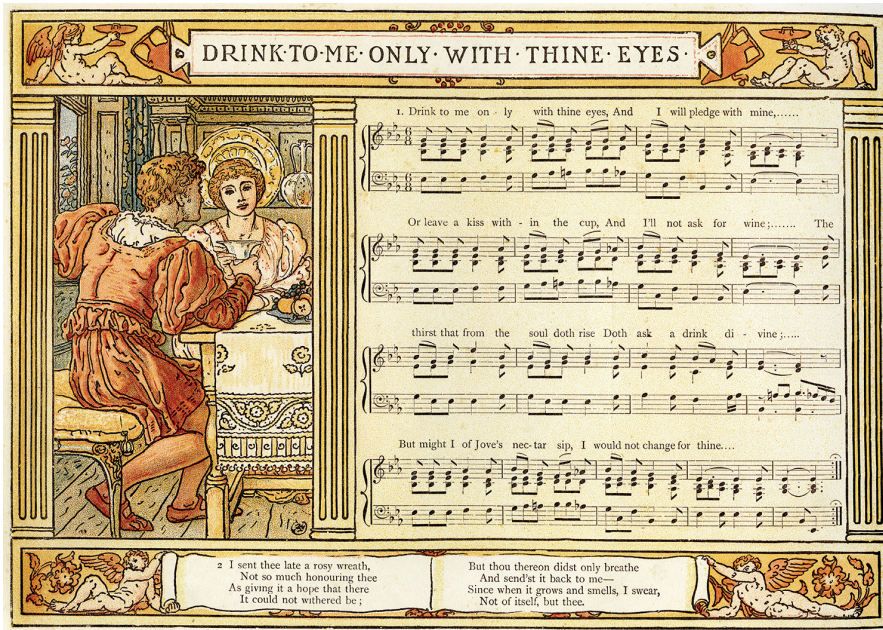
Track timing	Section
00:00	Instrumental introduction
00:11	Chorus 1
00:21	Verse 1 ('Yonder come Miss Rosie ...')
00:40	Chorus 2
00:50	Instrumental interlude
01:01	Verse 2 ('When you get up in the morning ...')
01:20	Chorus 3
01:29	Instrumental interlude
01:41	Verse 3 ('If you ever go to Houston ...')
01:59	Chorus 4
02:09	Instrumental interlude
02:20	Verse 4 ('When you get up in the morning ...')
02:39	Chorus 5
02:49	Instrumental interlude
03:00	Chorus 6
03:10	Verse 5 ('I was standing at the station ...')
03:29	Chorus 7
03:39	Instrumental interlude
03:49	Chorus 8
04:00	Instrumental conclusion

The big picture in Table 4 invites reflection on how the form of the song helps to convey its meaning. Given what is known about the train called the Midnight Special, the light mentioned in the chorus might be understood as a metaphor for hope for deliverance, a glimmer appearing at the moment when the prison is at its darkest. This hope is juxtaposed with the images of desperation in the verses: Miss Rosie hoping for the release of her man; prisoners facing the same breakfast each morning (or the same empty plates, depending on the verse); fear of imprisonment for petty crime; a lover left behind at the station.

The meaning of the song then emerges in the course of the alternation between verses and chorus: the verses present glimpses of unhappy lives, while the chorus dreams of deliverance. The song has a kind of accommodating structure, allowing the different stories in the verses to be connected by means of the same general theme. Just such

accommodation is evident when comparing early twentieth-century recordings of the song by other singers. The chorus remains much the same from version to version, but the verses can vary considerably. The structure of the song allows singers to add verses of their own, perhaps corresponding to their own experiences of desperate situations, and to connect these to the overarching theme of hope for release.

## 6 Other elements of song structure



**Figure 6** Walter Crane, 'Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes', colour lithograph, song illustration from *Pan-Pipes, A Book of Old Songs, Newly Arranged and with Accompaniments by Theo. Marzials*, London, George Routledge & Sons, 1884. Photo: Prismatic Pictures/Bridgeman Images.

The alternation between contrasting verses and choruses is fundamental to many songs, but it is often part of a larger structure with other components. You will now look at some additional formal elements encountered in popular songs, each with its own specialist term: bridge, **pre-chorus**, **introduction**, **coda** and **interlude**.

## 7 The bridge

A **bridge**, as the name suggests, is a passage that connects other components of a song. Although the term is used in a number of ways, the following broad meanings tend to hold. First, bridges are made up of musical material that contrasts with what has gone before – for the most part, verses and choruses. Second, when a bridge has lyrics, these tend to be different from what has been heard earlier. Finally, bridges appear some way into a song, after other important elements have been introduced.

One of the most famous bridges in Western pop is in Mark James's 'Suspicious Minds', a song made famous by Elvis Presley in 1969 and subsequently performed by many other musicians, including Fine Young Cannibals in 1985. It is the latter band's interpretation that is the basis of Activity 4.

As Table 5 shows, the song begins with a pair of verse–chorus alternations, followed by the bridge, which arrives at 01:45. (The table does not include the music that comes after the bridge.)

**Table 5 Structure of the opening of 'Suspicious Minds' by Fine Young Cannibals**

Track time	Section
00:00	Instrumental introduction
00:11	Verse 1 ('We're caught ...')
00:41	Chorus 1 ('We can't go on ...')
00:58	Verse 2 ('Should an old friend ...')
01:28	Chorus 2 ('We can't go on ...')
01:44	Bridge ('Oh, let our love survive ...')

## Activity 4

Allow around 25 minutes for this activity



**Figure 7** Fine Young Cannibals in performance, 1987. Photo: Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy.

Listen several times to the first 02:36 of 'Suspicious Minds', following the outline of the structure in Table 5 and trying to determine what happens immediately after the bridge. Then answer the following questions in the box below:

1. In what ways (other than the lyrics) is the bridge distinct from the preceding music? Focus on **tempo** (fastness/slowness), volume (loudness/softness), and the instrumental accompaniment. Do your best to describe what you hear, even if you are uncertain of the technical terms.
2. At what track time (00:00) do you think the bridge ends?
3. What music is heard after the bridge, and where have you heard it earlier?

*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

1. The bridge is both slower and quieter than the preceding material, although it increases in intensity in its final moments. The musical accompaniment also changes. Widely spaced, reverberating guitar chords replace the rapid passagework that drove the earlier parts of the song. Similarly, the formerly busy electric bass part becomes more sedate.
2. The bridge ends at 02:07.
3. The bridge is followed immediately by the first verse, repeated from the opening of the song.

Now that you are familiar with how the various formal components of 'Suspicious Minds' sound, it's appropriate to consider what they accomplish and, in particular, what the bridge contributes to the meaning of the song. The bridge seems to help produce a shift of mood



away from the indignation and worry expressed in other parts of the song and towards something more conciliatory. The verses make accusations: 'Why can't you see what you're doing to me?' and 'There you go again, asking where I've been.' The chorus describes the impossibility of the situation: 'We can't go on together with suspicious minds.' But the bridge pleads: 'Don't let this good thing die.' The sense of pleading is conveyed in part by musical changes: the bridge is slower, quieter and less frenetic; it sounds momentarily more intimate.

## 8 The pre-chorus

In contemporary pop songs, a verse often moves to a chorus by way of a pre-chorus. Like the chorus, the pre-chorus tends to make use of the same words and the same melody each time it is heard. Nonetheless, it can be distinguished from the chorus in that it helps to effect a transition to the chorus from the verse, and in that the chorus usually remains the most memorable and expressive section of the song. A good example of a pre-chorus can be heard in Robyn's performance of Klas Åhlund's 'Hang with Me' (Åhlund, 2010), the focus of the next activity. As Table 6 shows, following a brief instrumental introduction, listeners hear the first verse, the second verse, the pre-chorus, and then the chorus proper.

**Table 6 Structure of the opening of 'Hang with Me' by Robyn**

Track time	Section
00:00	Instrumental introduction
00:11	Verse 1 ('Will you tell me ...')
00:27	Verse 2 ('When my patience ...')
00:44	Pre-chorus ('And if you ...')
01:00	Chorus ('Just don't fall ...')

### Activity 5

Allow around 25 minutes for this activity

This activity has three parts.

#### Part A

Listen several times to the first 01:27 of Robyn's 'Hang with Me', following the form with the help of Table 6, until you can tell the difference between the verses, the pre-chorus and the chorus.

#### Part B

Now attempt to determine what happens between 01:27 and 02:30 (this isn't shown in Table 6). Do any of the earlier sections of the song recur? As you listen, write down a few notes about the material between 01:27 and 02:30 – for instance the lyrics and track time from the beginning of anything that sounds like the beginning of a section. Don't worry if you find it difficult to hear the form clearly on the first listen; this often becomes clearer in retrospect, after you have heard the music more than once. It will probably be helpful to move back and forth within the track, comparing the beginnings of sections directly with one another.

*Provide your answer...*

## Part C

Answer the questions below with the help of your recording of Robyn's 'Hang with Me' and your notes to Part B.

Following the first chorus, what do you hear beginning at 01:27?

- ☐ the pre-chorus
- ☐ the first verse
- ☐ a bridge
- ☐ the chorus
- ☐ a new verse

What do you hear beginning at 01:44?

- ☐ the chorus
- ☐ the second verse
- ☐ the pre-chorus
- ☐ a bridge
- ☐ a new verse

What do you hear beginning at 02:01?

- ☐ a bridge
- ☐ a new verse
- ☐ the chorus
- ☐ the second verse
- ☐ the pre-chorus

### Discussion

The organisation of the opening 02:30 of 'Hang with Me' is summarised in Figure 8; each kind of section – introduction, verse, pre-chorus, chorus – has its own colour. The structure from 00:11 to 01:27 (Verse 1, Verse 2, pre-chorus, chorus) is very similar to that from 01:27 to 02:30 (Verse 3, pre-chorus, chorus). The only difference is that from 01:27 to 02:30, there is one verse, rather than two.

Track time	Section
00:00	Instrumental introduction
00:11	Verse 1 ('Will you tell ...')
00:27	Verse 2 ('When my patience ...')
00:44	Pre-chorus ('And if you ...')
01:00	Chorus ('Just don't fall ...')
01:27	Verse 3 ('When you see ...')
01:44	Pre-chorus ('And if you ...')
02:01	Chorus ('Just don't fall ...')

**Figure 8** 'Hang with Me', structure of opening, continued

Figure 8 also helps clarify a number of things about pre-choruses that distinguish them from bridges (in case some of these terms are starting to blur together!): a pre-chorus is

introduced relatively early in a song, it functions as a 'connector' between verse and chorus, and it is more likely than a bridge to occur more than once.

The outline in Figure 8 does not account for every element of formal interest in 'Hang with Me'. If you listen to the song closely, you should be able to hear that each section ends with a similar concluding formula. This occurs in a slightly different way each time: as 'Then I guess you can hang with me' in the verses, 'If you hang with me' in the pre-choruses, and 'You can hang with me' in the choruses. But the same words are always sung to the same melody. Figure 9 represents this feature by means of the word 'tag' near the right side of the row representing each section.

Instrumental introduction	
Verse 1	tag
Verse 2	tag
Pre-chorus	tag
Chorus	tag
Verse 3	tag
Pre-chorus	tag
Chorus	tag

**Figure 9** 'Hang with Me', structure of opening showing repeated concluding formula

## 9 Music, meaning and the pre-chorus

There are a number of conventions associated with the chorus in popular songs. The chorus is typically melodic, memorable, and expressively heightened, and the other parts of the song usually build toward it. This is the case in 'Hang with Me'. During the verse and the pre-chorus, the text is sung in an almost speech-like way, with quick successions of syllables separated by longish pauses. But the words of the chorus are more 'sung' and sustained, and the music seems more expressive. This is complemented by a heightening of a more literal kind: each component of the song – verse, pre-chorus and chorus – begins a little higher in the singer's vocal range.



**Figure 10** Robyn performing at Carling Academy, Bristol, 2008. Photo: Lebrecht Music and Arts/Alamy.

How do the musical and formal elements of 'Hang with Me' help to convey the meaning of the song? There is a kind of productive tension between what is heard in the words and in the melody. The verse and the pre-chorus suggest the negotiations at the beginning of a relationship, a kind of 'Are you serious about this? Then maybe it will work.' Crucially, though, when the chorus arrives – the moment when a more sustained melody is heard and some kind of affirmation might be expected – the narrator pulls back, in effect saying, 'Just don't get too serious.' There is a kind of ambivalence in the structure of the song, then, the lyrics pulling away at the very moment the melody seems to be falling in love.



## 10 Introductions

The opening of a song – the material preceding the first verse or chorus – is usually called the introduction, sometimes abbreviated to 'intro.' The introduction is often a strictly instrumental version of music from elsewhere in the song, for instance the verse or the chorus. In 'Midnight Special', it is a version of the chorus.

### Activity 6

Allow around 5 minutes for this activity

Confirm the connection between the introduction and the chorus by singing or saying the lyrics of the chorus ('Let the Midnight Special shine the light on me / Let the Midnight Special shine the ever-loving light on me') in time with the music of the introduction (refer to the opening of your recording of 'Midnight Special'). Simply start the words the moment you hear the harmonica begin.

In other pieces, the introduction takes the form of a **vamp**: a short piece of opening material that can be repeated as desired. This is the case at the beginning of 'Suspicious Minds': in a live performance, the backing band can simply repeat the same two seconds of music until the vocalist is ready to come in. The vamp can also be built on material from another part of the song: in 'Suspicious Minds', it turns out to be the music accompanying the start of the verse. Listen again to your recording of 'Suspicious Minds' if you would like to confirm this.

The music heard four times at the beginning of 'Hang with Me' (just after the swell in the bass) could perhaps also be called a vamp, but here the designation is a little less clear, since the same musical material accompanies the entirety of the first and second verses. Like many pieces influenced by electronic dance music, 'Hang with Me' makes use of repeating musical patterns called **ostinatos** or sometimes (in electronic music) **loops**.

### Activity 7

Allow around 5 minutes for this activity

Listen to the introduction and the first two verses of 'Hang with Me', paying attention to the looped musical material.

# 11 Instrumental interludes

The opening discussion of 'Midnight Special' also introduced the instrumental interlude, which can be understood as a break from the vocal material of a song. Interludes are often opportunities for instrumental soloists to step into the spotlight; certain varieties are so well-established they have their own names (e.g. the guitar or saxophone solo).

Like introductions, interludes are often based on musical material from other parts of a song. In 'Midnight Special', interludes and introduction alike are textless versions of the chorus. For this reason, the designation 'based on chorus' has been incorporated at several points in Table 7. You can listen to your recording of the song again to confirm the relationship between the interlude and the chorus: do this in the same way as with the introduction, by singing or saying the words of the chorus during the interludes.

**Table 7 Form of 'Midnight Special' (partial)**

Track timing	Section
0:00	Instrumental introduction (based on chorus)
0:11	Chorus 1
0:21	Verse 1 ('Yonder come Miss Rosie ...')
0:40	Chorus 2
0:50	Instrumental interlude (based on chorus)
1:01	Verse 2 ('When you get up in the morning ...')
1:20	Chorus 3
1:29	Instrumental interlude (based on chorus)
1:41	Verse 3 ('If you ever go to Houston ...')
1:59	Chorus 4
2:09	Instrumental interlude (based on chorus)

There are two instrumental interludes in the second half of 'Be My Baby' (Covach, 2005, pp. 71–2). As Table 8 shows, the first begins immediately after the second chorus and is based on the verse. The second is shorter and simpler, but no less effective. Almost all of the musicians drop out, and the simple rhythmic pattern that opened the song is heard again. A few seconds later, the chorus bursts in at full volume and takes the listener through to the end of the piece.

**Table 8 Structure of 'Be My Baby'**

Track time	Section
00:00	Instrumental introduction (includes vamp based on opening of verse)
00:07	Verse 1
00:35	Chorus
00:52	Verse 2
01:20	Chorus
01:36	Instrumental interlude (based on first half of verse)

---

01:50	Chorus
02:06	Short instrumental break (based on very beginning of introduction)
02:10	Chorus (heard twice with fadeout on second time)

---

### Activity 8

Allow around 10 minutes for this activity

Listen once or twice to 'Be My Baby', following along with Table 8. When you reach the first interlude at 01:36, try singing or saying the first half of the second verse in time with the violin part ('I'll make you happy, baby, just wait and see / For every kiss you give me, I'll give you three'). This should confirm the relationship between the interlude and the verse.

## 12 Endings

Table 9 captures an important aspect of the structure of pop songs that are based on verse–chorus alternation. They often start out straightforwardly, but get more complicated at around the halfway mark. For example, as mentioned earlier, the first instrumental interlude in ‘Be My Baby’ is based on the verse but is only half a verse in length.

**Table 9 Structure of ‘Be My Baby’ (Table 8 repeated)**

Track time	Section
00:00	Instrumental introduction (includes vamp based on opening of verse)
00:07	Verse 1
00:35	Chorus
00:52	Verse 2
01:20	Chorus
01:36	Instrumental interlude (based on first half of verse)
01:50	Chorus
02:06	Short instrumental break (based on very beginning of introduction)
02:10	Chorus (heard twice with fadeout on second time)

As this suggests, the orderly alternation of verses and choruses in the first half of a pop song can often go out of the window in the second half. Repetitions of earlier sections may be varied or abbreviated, verses from earlier in the song may be recycled, and material from completely different sections may be combined.

Consider what happens in the second half of ‘Suspicious Minds’ (Table 10). After the bridge, the first verse of the song returns (rather than a new verse being introduced). This is followed by the chorus, and then two more statements of the first verse. All of this departs from the careful layering of new and repeated material at the opening of the song. At the same time, a new musical process occurs *across* the elements at the end of the song. The music gradually increases in intensity: we hear more of the backing singer’s high **falsestto** vocal parts, the tambourine and trumpet parts become more prominent, and the drum part gets louder and more elaborate. All of this builds to a kind of explosive release at the end of the song, which you can hear by listening to ‘Suspicious Minds’ again.

**Table 10 Structure of ‘Suspicious Minds’ by Fine Young Cannibals**

Track time	Section
00:00	Introductory vamp
00:12	Verse 1 (‘We’re caught ...’)
00:42	Chorus (‘We can’t go on ...’)
00:59	Verse 2 (‘Should an old friend ...’)
01:29	Chorus (‘We can’t go on ...’)
01:45	Bridge (‘Oh, let our love survive ...’)

---

02:09	Verse 1 ('We're caught ...')
02:37	Chorus ('We can't go on ...')
02:54	Verse 1 ('We're caught ...')
03:24	Verse 1 ('We're caught ...')
03:53	Coda

---

Table 10 introduces a final technical term, **coda** (Latin for 'tail'), which musicians use to designate several kinds of musical endings. The word describes concluding material that is distinct from (or appended to) other sections of the song. In 'Suspicious Minds', the coda is the very brief span of music that follows the final verse, namely the 'Ooh, baby, baby, yeah!' that brings the song to a close. Most codas are longer than this, however. The term **outro** (a neologism playfully paralleling 'intro') is often used instead of 'coda' when discussing pop music.



## 13 Alphabetic representations of form

So far, this course has focused on song forms that make use of verse–chorus alternation, and this has involved introducing the terms commonly used to describe the component parts of those forms: verse, chorus, bridge, pre-chorus, introduction, interlude, and coda. There are other kinds of song forms, however, and some of these are easier to describe using alphabetic designations. The alphabetic system used in this course works as follows:

- upper-case letters (A, B) represent larger sections
- lower-case letters (a, b) represent subsections of larger sections
- prime ('), double prime ("), triple prime (""') etc. marks are used to show that a section or subsection is repeated, but in varied form (e.g. AA', aba'a").

To start with a simple example, in AABA forms, the same musical material is heard three times: twice at the beginning and once at the end – hence the three As. Between the second and the final iterations of A, contrasting material is presented in a B section. Harold Arlen's 'It's Only a Paper Moon', with lyrics by Billy Rose and E.Y. Harburg, is a good example.

### Activity 9

Allow around 15 minutes for this activity



**Figure 11** The Nat King Cole Trio. Photo: Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy.

Listen to Nat 'King' Cole performing 'It's Only a Paper Moon'. Focus on the section in which Cole first sings the lyrics – between 00:52 and 01:45 of the recording – following the lyrics and the form in Table 11.

As you listen, try to determine what distinguishes A from B, considering both words and music. Write down a brief explanation in the box provided.

**Table 11 Structure of ‘It’s Only a Paper Moon’**

Section	Lyrics
A	It is only a paper moon hanging over a cardboard sea, But it wouldn’t be make believe if you believe in me.
A	It is only a canvas sky sailing over a muslin tree, But it wouldn’t be make believe if you believe in me.
B	Without your love, it’s a honky tonk parade; Without your love, it’s a melody played on a penny arcade.
A	It’s a Barnum and Bailey world, just as phony as it can be, But it wouldn’t be make believe if you believe in me.

(Rose and Harburg, 2004)

*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

The three A sections share some of the same words; each one ends ‘But it wouldn’t be make believe if you believe in me’. They also have related rhymes (sea/me, tree/me and be/me) while the B section differs (parade/arcade). Finally, the three A sections have the same melody.

If you wish, you can confirm this to yourself by singing or saying ‘It is only a canvas sky’ along with the recording while Cole is singing ‘It is only a paper moon’.

## 14 Studying form in traditional dance music

The alphabetic designations used to represent song forms are also used to describe **instrumental music**. Traditional dance music from north-western Europe makes widespread use of the form AABB, for instance. As the letters suggest, music in that form incorporates both contrast and repetition: it features two contrasting parts (A and B), each of which is immediately repeated (AA and BB). Moreover, it is not uncommon to perform the entire four-part pattern two or more times (AABB, AABB and so on). Musical form often incorporates nested structures – repetitions within repetitions.

‘Fiddle Blast’, a set of tunes performed by Aly Bain, Jenna Reid, Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh and Stuart Duncan for the BBC/RTÉ *Transatlantic Sessions* programme, starts off with a tune in AABB form, ‘The Teetotaller’. In Activity 10, you will attempt to distinguish its sections.

### Activity 10

Allow around 30 minutes for this activity



**Figure 12** Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh in performance, 1998. Photo: Al Schaben/Los Angeles Times/Getty Images.

Listen four or five times to ‘The Teetotaller’ and try to determine where the sections of the AABB form occur. The form is heard three times in total during the extract. Write down the track time at the beginning of each section, using the appropriate boxes in Table 12. You can always pause the recording to write in the table. This task may initially seem more difficult than determining the form of a song, since there are no words to help you to orient yourself, but repeated listens should reveal the structure.

**Table 12 Structure of 'The Teetotaller'**

Section	Track time
A	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
A	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
B	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
B	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
A	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
A	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
B	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
B	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
A	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
A	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
B	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
B	<i>Provide your answer...</i>

**Discussion**

The musicians cycle through the AABB form as follows:

**Table 12**  
**Structure of 'The**  
**Teetotaller'**  
**(completed)**

Section	Track time
A	00:00
A	00:08
B	00:16
B	00:24
A	00:32
A	00:40
B	00:48
B	00:56
A	01:04
A	01:12
B	01:20
B	01:28

Don't worry if your answers are substantially different to these, but do listen to the recording again, following along with the completed version of Table 12. It may help to listen for how the melody moves into a higher register at the beginning of the B section and back into a lower one when the A section returns.

An even finer-grained analysis of 'The Teetotaller' is possible. For example, section A can be divided into two shorter subsections, as shown in Table 13. These subsections begin with the same melodic material and might thus be understood as variations of one another. These have been notated as a and a', using lower-case letters to indicate that they are subsections of the larger A section and the prime symbol (') to indicate that the second subsection is a variation (rather than a straightforward repetition) of the first.

You may wish to listen to 'The Teetotaller' again to try to follow the sequence of subsections.

**Table 13 Sections and subsections of 'The Teetotaller'**

Section	Subsection	Track time
A	a	00:00
	a'	00:04
A	a	00:08
	a'	00:12

# 15 Strategies for representing form

You have now encountered a number of ways of representing form. The first of these makes use of specialist terminology (e.g. verse, chorus, pre-chorus, coda/outro) and the second employs alphabetic designations (e.g. AABA, aa'). Musicians tend to use dedicated terminology for some song forms and alphabetic designations for others, but it would be entirely possible to use alphabetic representations across the board.

For example, earlier in this course, the structure of 'Midnight Special' was mapped out using specialist terms to designate sections, as shown in Table 14. The table identifies 20 sections in total, a multitude of parts that makes the form difficult to grasp at a glance. In such situations, it is often helpful to look for overarching structures that allow you to organise the detail in a more manageable way, for instance as a set of sections and subsections.

**Table 14 Form of 'Midnight Special'**

Track timing	Section
00:00	Instrumental introduction
00:11	Chorus 1
00:21	Verse 1 (Yonder come Miss Rosie ...)
00:40	Chorus 2
00:50	Instrumental interlude
01:01	Verse 2 (When you get up in the morning ...)
01:20	Chorus 3
01:29	Instrumental interlude
01:41	Verse 3 (If you ever go to Houston ...)
01:59	Chorus 4
02:09	Instrumental interlude
02:20	Verse 4 (When you get up in the morning ...)
02:39	Chorus 5
02:49	Instrumental interlude
03:00	Chorus 6
03:10	Verse 5 (I was standing at the station ...)
03:29	Chorus 7
03:39	Instrumental interlude
03:49	Chorus 8
04:00	Instrumental conclusion

Figure 13 does just this. It contains the same details, but distinguishes two tiers of musical structure: sections, indicated by upper-case letters, and subsections, indicated by lower-case letters. The figure also employs the prime symbol to indicate when a section or subsection contains a varied version of music that occurs elsewhere. For example, in the Subsection column, the choruses are labelled b and the instrumental breaks are labelled b'. This acknowledges that the choruses contain sung material and the latter do not.



Similarly, the Section column differentiates A and A' sections. Both A and A' start with the pattern verse–chorus–interlude, but each of the sections marked A' appends an 'extra' chorus. It is as though the A sections 'thicken' to become A' sections as the song progresses. This thickening is also reflected in the shading of the figure (a darker shade of blue is used for the A' sections than the A sections).

Track time	Section	Subsection	Part of song
00:00	I (intro)	b'	Instrumental introduction (chorus-based)
00:11		b	Chorus 1
00:21	A	a	Verse 1
00:40		b	Chorus 2
00:50		b'	Instrumental interlude (chorus-based)
01:01	A	a	Verse 2
01:20		b	Chorus 3
01:29		b'	Instrumental interlude (chorus-based)
01:41	A	a	Verse 3
01:59		b	Chorus 4
02:09		b'	Instrumental interlude (chorus-based)
02:20	A	a	Verse 4
02:39		b	Chorus 5
02:49		b'	Instrumental interlude (chorus-based)
01:41	A'	a	Verse 3
01:59		b	Chorus 4
02:09		b'	Instrumental interlude (chorus-based)
03:00		b	Chorus 6
03:10	A'	a	Verse 5
03:29		b	Chorus 7
03:39		b'	Instrumental interlude (chorus-based)
03:49		b	Chorus 8
04:00	C (coda)		Instrumental conclusion

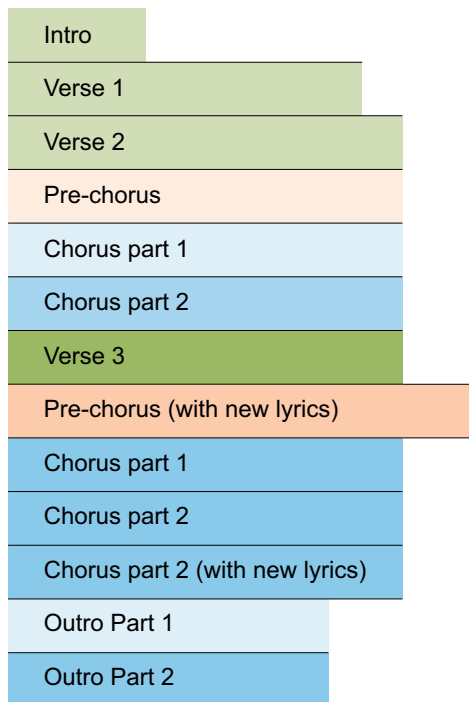
**Figure 13** 'Midnight Special', form, second version, employing alphabetic designations

The two levels of analysis in Figure 13 allow a reader to keep track of the detail without losing the broader picture. Describing a piece of music as having the form abb'abb'abb'abb'babb'b is altogether too confusing; AAAA'A' is much easier to grasp. In general, when analysing form, you should try to contextualise detail within a broader, simpler framework. You may wish to listen to 'Midnight Special' again to see whether you can follow the broader structure outlined in Figure 13.

Although much of this course has focused on specialist terminology and alphabetical designations, almost all of the discussions of form have been accompanied by visual representations of one kind or another, some incorporating colour, including Figures 1, 2, 8 ('hidden' inside the Discussion for Activity 5), 9 and 13.

Figure 14 introduces a final image, for a song you have not yet encountered but may wish to investigate for yourself. The various parts of the form are colour coded: greens for verses and verse-like material, oranges for pre-choruses and blues for choruses and chorus-like material. The intensity of the colours reflects the loudness and softness of the music. The length, left to right, of the sections corresponds to their relative duration. As this suggests, a figure can convey all kinds of information about the musical object it represents.





**Figure 14** Representation of musical elements in Céline Dion, 'Encore un soir'

## 16 Check your learning

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Have a go at the following quiz to check what you have learned.

[End-of-course quiz](#)

Open the quiz in a new tab or window and come back here when you're done.

## Conclusion

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You now have a sense of how music is organised formally – by means of repetition, variation, and contrast – as well as a number of ways this can be communicated, including through specialist terminology, alphabetic symbols and visual representations. You have also studied the form of several pieces of music in different styles, including ‘Be My Baby’, ‘Midnight Special’, ‘Suspicious Minds’, ‘It’s Only a Paper Moon’ and ‘The Teetotaller’.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [A234 Understanding music](#).

## Glossary

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### Bridge

A contrasting passage connecting other important components of a song.

### Chorus

A section of a song in which both music and text are repeated. The chorus is often sung in alternation with other sections (especially verses) and frequently contains the most memorable and engaging musical material in a song.

### Contrast

Formal technique in which new musical material is presented.

### Coda

A passage that brings a piece to a close.

### Extemporised

Composed in the course of performance. A synonym of ‘improvised’.

### Falsetto

Most commonly, the weaker upper range of the male voice.

### Form

How music is organised in time by means of repetition, variation and contrast.

### Instrumental music

Music made by instruments only, without singing.

### Interlude

An instrumental passage that comes between other sections of a song.

### Introduction

Also referred to as ‘Intro’. An instrumental passage heard at the opening of a piece of music.

### Loop

A repeating section, often purely instrumental. The term is most commonly used in describing electronic music.

### Ostinatos

A relatively short passage of music, continually repeated.

### Outro

Coda; an instrumental section that concludes a piece of music.

### Pre-chorus

A section of a song that connects the verse to the chorus. It typically uses the same words and the same melody each time it appears.

### Repetition

Formal technique involving the presentation of musical material that has been heard before.

### Tempo

The speed of the underlying beat.

### Vamp

A short piece of opening material that can be repeated as desired.

### Variation

Formal technique in which musical material that has been heard before is presented in altered form.

### Verse

A verse is a section of a song that has the same musical content as other verses, but different words. Verses tend to have more text and be more focused on narrative than choruses.

### Vocables

Sung, meaningless syllables.

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# Acknowledgements

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