

# What Makes a Good Song?

Exploring Popular Songs and Musical Arrangements



## A. Popular Song Structure

**SONG STRUCTURE** – How a song is made up of or divided into different sections (see below) and the order in which these sections occur. To work out the structure of a song, it's helpful to analyse the **LYRICS** and listen to a recording for the song (for instrumental sections).

**INTRO** – often shortened to 'intro', the first section of a song which sets the mood of the song and is sometimes, but not always, an instrumental section using the song's chord pattern.

**VERSES** – songs normally have several verses. Verses introduce the song's theme and have the same melody but different lyrics for each verse which helps develop the song's narrative and story. Songs made up entirely of verses are called **STROPHIC**.

**LINK** – a optional short section often used to join different parts of a song together, often instrumental, and sometimes joins verses together or appears at other points within a song.

**PRE-CHORUS** – an optional section of music that occurs before the **CHORUS** which helps the music move forward and "prepare" for what is to come.

**CHORUS** – occurs several times within a song and contains the most memorable **HOOK/RIFF**. The chorus relays the message of the song and is repeated with the same melody and lyrics each time it is heard. In popular songs, the chorus is often repeated several times towards the end of the song.

**MIDDLE 8/BRIDGE** – a section (often 8 bars in length) that provides contrasting musical material often featuring an instrumental or vocal solo using new musical material allowing the performer to display their technical skill on their instrument or voice.

**CODA/OUTRO** – The final section of a popular song which brings it to an end (Coda is Italian for "tail"!)

## B. Key Words

**LYRICS** – The words of a song, usually consisting of **VERSES** and a **CHORUS**.

**HOOK** – A 'musical hook' is usually the 'catchy bit' of the song that you will remember. It is often short and used and repeated in different places throughout the piece. Hooks can be either **MELODIC, RHYTHMIC** or **VERBAL/LYRICAL**.

**RIFF** – A repeated musical pattern often used in the introduction and instrumental breaks in a song or piece of music. Riffs can be rhythmic, melodic or lyrical, short and repeated.

**MELODY** – The main tune of the song often sung by the **LEAD SINGER**.

**COUNTER-MELODY** – An 'extra' melody often performed 'on top of' the main melody that 'fits' with it a **DESCANT** or **INSTRUMENTAL SOLO**.

**TEXTURE** – The layers that make up a song e.g., *Melody, Counter-Melody, Hooks/Riffs, Chords, Accompaniment, Bass Line*.

## C. Lead Sheet Notation and Arrangements

A **LEAD SHEET** is a form of musical **NOTATION** that contains only the essential elements of a popular song such as the **MELODY, LYRICS, RIFFS, CHORDS** (often as guitar chord symbols) and **BASS LINE**; it is not as developed as a **FULL SCORE ARRANGEMENT** and is open to interpretation by

performers who need to use and adapt the given elements to create their own musical **ARRANGEMENT**: their "version" of an existing song.

**COVER (VERSION)** – A new performance, remake or recording by someone other than the original artist or composer of the song.

## D. Conjunct and Disjunct Melodic Motion

**CONJUNCT MELODIC MOTION** – Melodies which move mainly by step or use notes which are next to or close to one another.

**DISJUNCT MELODIC MOTION** – Melodies which move mainly by leap or use notes which are not next to or close to one another.

**MELODIC RANGE** – The distance between the lowest and highest pitched notes in a melody.

## E. Song Timbre and Sonority (Instruments that are used to Accompany Songs)



Pop Bands often feature a **DRUM KIT** and **PERCUSSION** to provide the rhythm along with **ELECTRIC GUITARS (LEAD GUITAR, RHYTHM GUITAR and BASS GUITAR)** and **KEYBOARDS**. Sometimes **ACOUSTIC INSTRUMENTS** are used such as the **PIANO** or **ACOUSTIC GUITAR**. **ORCHESTRAL INSTRUMENTS** are often found in pop songs such as the **STRINGS, SAXOPHONE, TROMBONE** and **TRUMPET**.



Singers are essential to a pop song - **LEAD SINGER** – Often the "frontline" member of the band (most famous) who sings most of the melody line to the song. **BACKING SINGERS** support the lead singer providing **HARMONY** or a **COUNTER-MELODY** (a melody that is often higher in pitch and different, but still 'fits with' the main melody) and do not sing all the time but just at certain points within a pop song e.g. in the chorus.