

AABA, REFRAIN, CHORUS, BRIDGE, PRECHORUS – SONG FORMS AND THEIR HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This paper deals with different dimensions of the formal construction of songs in 20th century popular music. First, it proposes that the form of songs is not only an obligatory starting point for analysis but is actually itself a worthwhile object of interpretation. It explains how the analysis of the formal song structure can produce meaningful insights on a semantic, symbolic, and functional level. Secondly, the authors provide a critical discussion on the use of prevalent terms such as chorus, refrain, verse, bridge, etc. They show that a study of the historical evolution both of constituent song parts, and of song forms in general, is necessary to overcome the internal contradictions and incompatibilities of the current terminology. This approach is the center of this paper. It refers to the authors' analysis of c. 3000 songs spanning the whole 20th century with a focus on the decisive years 1920 to 1970. Illustrating the results with a large number of examples, the authors trace the development of the AABA-form, various verse/chorus-forms, the evolution of the prechorus and various other song parts, and song form models. The findings are supported by statistical data based on the US Billboard Top 100, and show the prevalence of certain models as well as specific trends in historic change. Finally, the paper shows that the awareness of formal conventions and particularities can be an essential pre-condition for the analysis of popular music's cultural meanings.