



More Than 32 Bars

**Structure In
Songwriting**

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Contents

1. **What is structure, and are you writing songs like a 12 year old?**
2. **5 Structure models**
3. **6 Blog Posts on Structure**

Introduction

Structure (or form) is simply what happens when. Do you just have the first verse, then the second, then the third? Do you have an introduction, a chorus, a bridge, a guitar solo? What order do they happen in?

Getting it right is vital if you don't want to bore your listener. A twenty minute epic with a well thought out form will hold more people's attention than a three minute pop song that isn't well structured.



Structure matters

This ebook brings together a lot of the thoughts and ideas I've posted on songwriting structure over the last five years at my blog www.indiesongwriter.net

Hopefully it will help you think about the structure of your songs and give you some ideas for how you can use well thought out structures to make your songs as good as they can be.

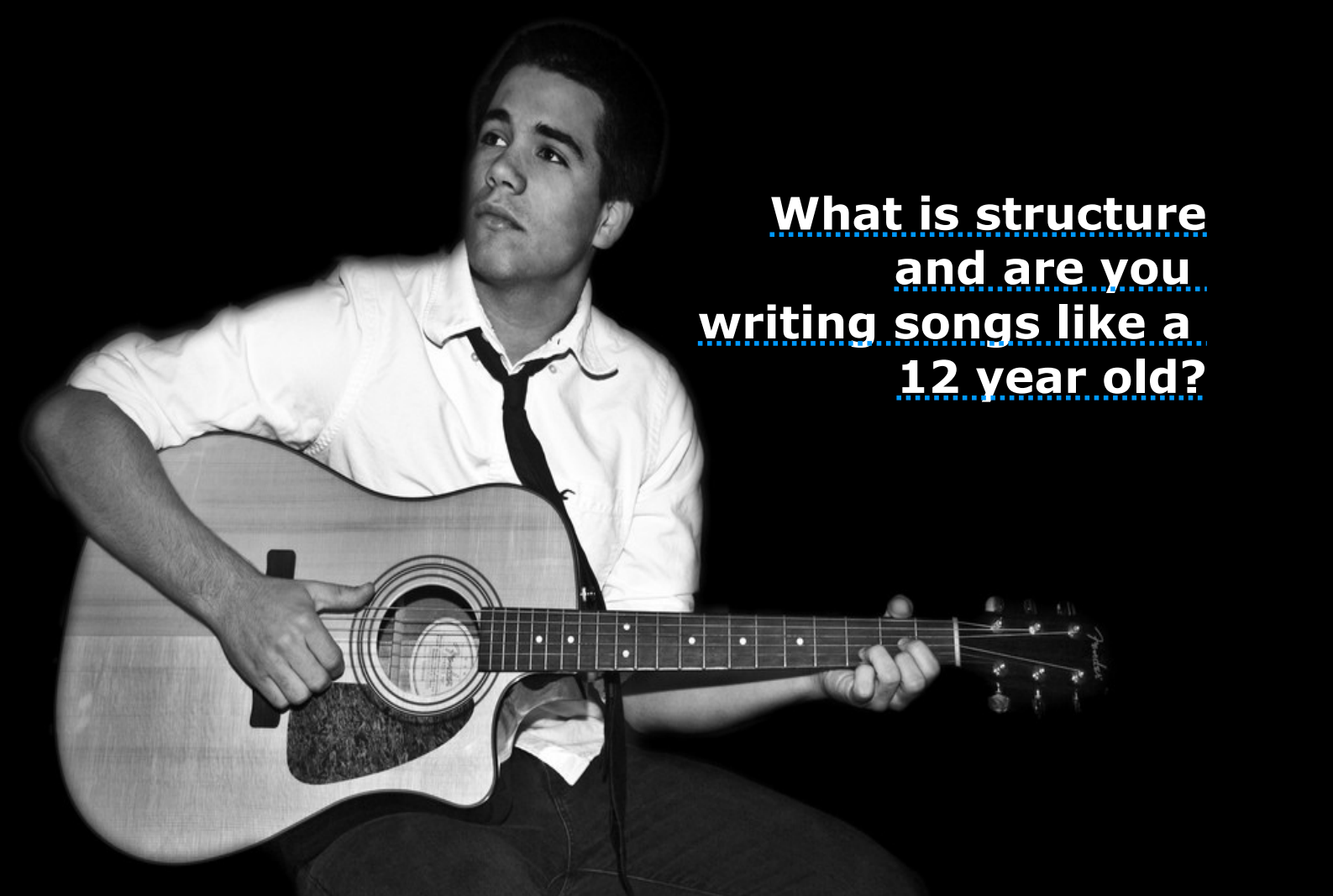
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What is structure and are you writing songs like a 12 year old?

My day job is teaching music in a London Secondary school to pupils aged 11 to 18.

I've one pupil who in UK education parlance is 'gifted'. He's an incredibly talented musician who leads ensembles, plays percussion instruments, sings and plays the guitar. He has a fantastic ear for melody, a great sense of rhythm, a true passion for music.

But there's one thing he lacks and it's something that really stands out to me – he can't remember structures, or hold a whole piece of music in his head.

What he truly excels at is leading our school samba band, which is a kind of music based on cues, grooves and calls. You don't need to remember exactly how many bars a groove lasts, or which order the calls come in – the band are trained to follow the mestre's instructions and the piece is structured differently every time apart from the beginning and ending. When he's leading the samba band he doesn't need to have a clear idea of structure thought out.

However, my pupil's true love is his rock band and he's started to write songs for them. It's very clear to me that while he has great ideas for riffs, grooves and melodies he isn't thinking about the structure of his songs. As a consequence the songs go on too long, they get a little boring, and a lot of the time he misses changes when the band play them.

Are these big worries for a twelve year old? Absolutely not! We're talking about a young man who is years ahead of the average child.

Structuring songs is one of the skills we come to later in our songwriting career. First you have to learn how to play and sing (at least a little), how riffs and melodies work, how other people's songs are put together. If you've been writing songs for any length of time you'll be able to look back on early songs that you just wouldn't write now. Perhaps they went on far too long, with too many verses or over long verses, too many repeats of the chorus or even not enough repeats of good ideas.

I wouldn't expect a 12 year old songwriter to be able to structure a piece well, but if you're going to write the best songs you can you'll need to develop your knowledge and skills with structure.



Conventional Structure

There's a standard pop song structure that all of us know and some of us love:

Verse
Chorus
Verse
Chorus
Middle
Chorus

I'm sure you're very familiar with this structure. You'll have heard it before, exactly as presented, or with variations like intros, outros, solos, or middle 8s. Let's delve into it a little to make sure you understand it fully.

The idea of hearing one musical idea, then a contrasting one, followed by a return to the first one again is the basis of this structure and that of countless other musical forms. That happens in the classical ternary form and the slightly more complicated sonata form, to name just two.

This happens in the pop song too. We hear the verse/chorus section twice, followed by some sort of contrast in the middle, then a return to either the verse/chorus section, or just the chorus.

The idea here is of contrast – the familiar compared to the unfamiliar. The verse is different to the chorus, the middle is different to both. Moving from familiar to unfamiliar musical ideas creates tension and crucially returning to familiar ideas relieves that tension.

Tension and release – keep that in mind, because it's the central idea to effective song structure and we'll keep on returning to it throughout this book.

But what is a verse? What is a chorus?

Verse and Chorus are not arbitrary names to call the first and second sections of your song. There are general points that more or less stay true throughout all pop songs

(A little aside – what I'm about to say about verses and choruses isn't universal. It's, without wishing to sound too pretentious, a theoretical model. Models are very useful when talking about musical structure, but it should be remembered that no song necessarily conforms to every detail of the model. And a good thing too, because sticking to models and formulas exactly would lead to bland songwriting.

It's how you subvert and play with expectations that makes your songwriting interesting – models are useful as a starting point, not as a straitjacket.)

Musically...

Verses are rhythmic, choruses are melodic

Verses are low-pitched, Choruses are high-pitched

These are huge generalizations and you will be able to find exceptions that contradict them.

Lets take, as an example, [Disco 200 by Pulp](#) (The link takes you to the Youtube video).

The verse in this song is accompanied by a rhythmic riff that doesn't change chord much. The vocal melody here follows a similar rhythm and doesn't use a huge range. It also repeats notes a lot and uses a lot more quaver rhythms than the chorus.

Compare this with the chorus, and we find longer notes, a much higher pitch

and faster moving chords giving us more harmonic colour than the verse and a more melodic feeling.

Arguably it was rock music, via the blues and rock 'n' roll, that properly developed the verse-chorus pop song form, so maybe it isn't surprising that this rhythmic verse, melodic chorus contrast is most common.

So, verses are low pitched and rhythmic, Choruses high pitched and melodic. That's a model, a generalization to which you will find lots of exceptions, but it is useful to bare in mind.

...And Lyrically

Your verses are where you develop your idea. Here you advance the idea of the song for example by telling the next chapter in a story. They are paragraphs, developing lyrical ideas, giving detail.

In contrast the chorus sums up, gives the title, speaks to the general. The chorus contains the point of the song, the destination to which the rest of the song is aimed.

The Middle

There are several different options for the middle of a pop song, but in general the purpose of the middle section of a song is to provide a high point and/or a contrast to the rest of the song.

Lyrically the middle is likely to consider alternatives. In an upbeat major key love song this might be the minor key moment when we consider the possibility of the relationship not working. It might be the moment the protagonist realizes how lucky they are, with high pitched soaring melody to reflect this.

In a rock song, you might have a guitar solo at this point. In a teenybopper pop song this might be the point where the guest rapper takes his turn.

Harmonically you are most likely to go out of key at this point as well – providing a contrast with the chords you choose as well as the melody and instrumentation.

The reason for all this is that soon after we will be returning to the chorus and the middle section is there to take us away from the chorus, providing musical tension that resolves at the chorus.



How to be creative within the pop song structure

So the model popular song has this structure:

Verse
Chorus
Verse
Chorus
Middle
Chorus

The verses are rhythmic and relatively low-pitched; the choruses are melodic and higher pitched; the middle are sections are higher-pitched still and provide a contrast so that the chorus is exciting again when we finally return to it.

That's a useful model, but does every song you write have to stick to it? Verse chorus verse chorus, middle, chorus. Rinse and repeat.

It can get a bit predictable.

The best songwriters tweak models, they never use exactly this but instead find creative ways to subtly subvert our expectations.

You might want to start off writing something completely different but doing something completely off the wall can throw both you and the audience off. If you need just a slight tweak why not try one of these ideas?

1. **Build up the intro** – It's vital to get to the hook quickly, right? That's what all the songwriting manuals tell you. Get to the hook, get to the part the audience will sing a long to, the part that sticks in their mind. Sometimes that's good advice, but it isn't the only option. Why not try a long, mood setting intro, that gradually builds up into the main riff or first verse?
2. **Use a bridge** - but only once. The Soundgarden song 'Burden in my Hand' has a bridge before the first chorus that isn't there before the second chorus. This works to speed us on to the second chorus and is a nice but simple surprise. An added bonus is that, by using a line from the later middle eight, that bridge foreshadows musical ideas we hear later, giving the piece greater cohesion.
3. **Don't return to the chorus** – Whoa! What am I talking about? You've got this great, singalong chorus, and now I'm telling you not to repeat it after the middle eight? Well why not, there are plenty of songs that don't.
4. **Expand the middle** – The first idea, a long intro, might sound odd stuck at the front of a three minute pop song. To make sure things don't overbalance and make your song one big introduction, something else needs to grow in proportion. So add two middle eights were one will do, put in an extra guitar solo section, or just stick in that killer chorus from another song that didn't quite work. Go through two key changes, then get back to the first chorus. Or combine this with idea 3 and don't return to the chorus at all

All right, by the end of my fourth idea I was clearly advocating a complete disregard for standard pop song structures. Models and formulas are a starting point. How do you be creative with the pop song structure? In short, remember it's just a guideline.

Don't be a Slave To Conventional Structure


A couple of months ago, marking students' coursework at my school, I came to a song that I gave almost full marks to.

One reason for the high marks was the song's fantastic, subtle playing with songwriting conventions.

- The Bridge – The bridge happens after the second chorus, right? Not according to my student. Instead she put it between the 2nd verse and 2nd chorus. Right at the point I was expecting to hear the chorus again, I instead heard a contrasting minor key and a new bridge I hadn't heard before. This the effect of creating a pleasing, balanced feel despite it being a short song. It was also surprising in musical way, which is always a good thing.

- 4s – Everything in popular song comes in fours, right? Four bar phrases, creating four line melodies, four line verses, four line choruses. Not according to my student. Instead, she had a really effective verse that had a three line melody.

Neither of these ideas is new, and neither is a radical departure from 'standard' structure. However, they do show a young songwriter who is confident enough to play with conventions without abandoning them.



5 Songwriting Models

The next section contains 5 examples of structural models. Some stick to the popular song structure, some show simpler forms that the pop song developed from. None of them are there to be copied exactly, and neither is this an exhaustive list of the common popular song models out there.

As I've said before, the best songwriters subvert our expectations by doing creative things with standard structures. However, you can't subvert structure until you understand it.

Model 1 Strophic form

Despite being a dyed-in-the-wool and unapologetic atheist, I love Christmas carols. Although the lyrics are universally awful they often contain useful musical ideas. Two traditional carols illustrate the most basic forms that we still hear in modern songwriting.

*While shepherds watched
Their flocks at night
All seated on the ground
The angel of the Lord came down
And glory shone around*

*Fear not said he for mighty dread
Had seized their troubled mind
Glad tidings of great joy I bring
To you and all man-kind*

'While shepherds watched...' is a good example of strophic form. What is that? It's where the melody and chords stay exactly the same from verse to verse, but the words change.

*God rest ye merry gentlemen
Let nothing you dismay
Remember Christ our Saviour
Was born on Christmas day
To save us all from Satan's power
When we were gone astray
O Tidings of Comfort and Joy
Comfort and Joy
O Tidings of Comfort and Joy*

*From God our heavenly father
A blessed angel came
And unto certain Shepherds
Brought tidings of the same
How that in Bethlehem
Was born the Son of God
O Tidings of Comfort and Joy
Comfort and Joy
O Tidings of Comfort and Joy*

What's the difference between this second song and plain old 'Strophic'? The refrain, a section of lyrics and melody that stays the same from verse to verse, while the other lyrics change. We call this strophic with refrain.

Both these structures are very common in older song forms. You see them in folk influenced music all the time. Bob Dylan for example has used both countless times. They might be tried and tested, but they still have a lot of mileage left in them.

You effectively need one verse's worth of music to write in this form. After that the interest comes in your use of contrast, instrumentation and dynamics as the song develops.

Model 2 - The 32 bar song

You've heard it before. [Somewhere over the Rainbow](#) (the link leads to a youtube clip) is a perfect example, and a large chunk of tin pan alley's output follows the same structure.

Somewhere Over the Rainbow maybe sounds a little old-fashioned, but I think that might have more to do with the old fashioned harmony at play than the structure itself. The 32 bar structure is a very common and very important one that you find in lots of jazz and show songs.

Thirty two bars?

Yes, four times eight. That is, a four bar melody (A) that is repeated with different words (A), a contrasting four bar melody (B, sometimes called the bridge or middle 8) and then a repeat of the original (A).

AABA

Often introductions or codas are added, for example *Somewhere over the Rainbow* has a coda at the end that repeats part of the melody.

Is that all there is to it? Two four bar melodies?

Not quite. Harmony can have a huge effect on structure. In the key of C, to end on the note or chord of C brings us home. That sense of rest is what you often get at the end of the A section.

The contrasting B section however is often harmonically unstable, shifting to one or more new keys and finishing on a chord that doesn't give us that sense of rest, but instead leaves us wanting more. (Listen for the line *That's where you'll find me* to hear this point in *Somewhere over the Rainbow*).

But *Somewhere over the Rainbow* sounds so old fashioned!

It was written a long time ago! It is a matter of personal taste, but I find the major key, with its dominant seventh chord, more than a little cliched. I'd much rather have modal harmony and more interesting things happening with the key changes.

However you could choose very different chords and still write a song with an AABA structure. The basic idea of getting the listener used to one idea, then giving them a contrast, then returning to the original idea, is a very common and very effective one.

In Summary

The 32 bar structure still has legs and is a great way to inform your own writing. Making it conscious can also give a new kick to your enjoyment when listening to all those old songs because a thousand effective variations on this structure have been written.

Model 3 – The Anthem

The word 'Anthem' usually refers to a song designed to bring people together – it's the piece that everyone sings along to.

The particular kind of anthem I'm referring to in this article is the moderately paced, string laden singalong ballad that have provided hits for bands such as Snow Patrol, Kings of Leon and Take That; and that have become a ubiquitous part of TV mission documentaries.

Lyricaly, these songs tend to be relatively bittersweet – triumphant yet sad at the same time.

My favorite set of lyrics for this sort of song is atypical: [Motorcycle Emptiness](#) by the Manic Street Preachers has a wonderful set of lyrics that reference biker culture and seem to be about the distance between an individual and a hollow culture, rather than the distance between two individuals that so many other 'anthems' talk about. [Use Somebody](#) (Kings of Leon) and [The Space Between](#) (Dave Matthews Band) are great examples of this latter idea.

Of course, meaning doesn't come solely from the lyrics – it's clear from live footage of these songs that regardless of the words, all of them are as triumphant and celebratory as the more obvious [Greatest Day](#) by Take That.

Chords

There is one chord sequence that is common to a lot of these songs:

I V (1st inv) vi IV.

For example in C major: C G/B Am F.

This chord progression is used in Take That's Greatest Day and Manic Street Preachers' Motorcycle Emptiness.

Other songs use variations, for example Use Somebody by the Kings of Leon uses a much simpler version C C/E F. Snow Patrol's Chasing Cars is slightly

different again, but the important factors in this chord progression are:

The use of inversions – this gives us interest without having to change chords too much. An Anthem needs to sound easy, and have a flowing motion. Using inversions allows us a smooth bass line and interesting harmonic ideas without changing chord drastically. In particular, a bass line that starts on the tonic then descends to the leading note seems to be very popular.

Ending on chord IV – Which gives us a cadence of IV – I (eg. F to C). Why is that important? I think the so called 'plagal' cadence still has connotations of spirituality and contemplation (it's used in lots of hymns and gospel songs, so much so that it's known as the 'amen' cadence). That mood suits the anthem to a tee.

Example chord progressions

Motor Cycle Emptiness - E B/D# C#m A

Greatest Day - C G/b Am F

Use Somebody – C C/E F

Chasing Cars – A E/G# D A

Arrangement

The anthem is all about that triumphant-with-a-hint-of-sadness chorus.

Often this has to be built to. So in both Take That's 'Greatest Day' and Snow Patrol's '[Chasing Cars](#)' you get extended periods with little or no percussion, perhaps with repeated quavers from the chord instruments (or toms), emphasising the tension and build up to the inevitable chorus. Of course, a more traditional quiet verse, loud chorus approach works just as well, as in 'Use Somebody'.

High-pitched guitar arpeggios are also very popular, as in Chasing Cars, or the very lovely Space Between by Dave Matthews

Melody

The major pentatonic scale is your friend here (C D E G A) – Both 'Use Somebody' and 'Greatest Day' have melodies that make great use of the first three note of the major scale, with occasional leaps up to the fifth note on the title line.

An alternative is to emphasise the seventh or leading note, as in Chasing Cars. Chasing Cars also makes great use of the first three notes of the major scale here.

It's interesting to note the common themes between the chord and melody ideas in these anthems – they're all pretty static and don't use a huge range. Almost as if the songs intend to keep us in stasis, slowly growing a mood rather than taking a journey.

A Summary – Ideas to Steal

If you want to compose your own anthem, try using these ingredients:

- Bittersweet lyrics about emotional distance
- A chord progression that includes inversions, perhaps chord I to the first inversion of chord V, a descending bass line and a plagal cadence (chord IV to I)
- A melody that emphasises the first three notes of the major scale, a leap up to the fifth, or an emphasis on the leading note (possibly over the IV chord)
- An arrangement that follows conventional pop song structure and/or includes a building dynamic and restrained use of percussion

Model 4 – The Stadium Rocker

Do you dream of playing to huge crowds in huge venues? As a life long rock and metal fan, I've always had those dreams and there's a type of song that fits them, a type of song that only makes sense when a crowd of tens of thousands sings along. Bon Jovi, Iron Maiden, Bruce Springsteen, Metallica and many other rock bands have written them: songs with melodies that demand to be shouted out from the middle of a packed arena, every member of the crowd screaming in out-of-tune unison.

Of course there's a formula that you could follow if you wanted to write a song like this.

Lyrics and Meaning

A common theme on this blog is that lyrics are not the primary means of expressing meaning in a song, they're just one ingredient. So stadium rock songs as diverse as You Give Love A Bad Name, Born to Run, The Trooper and Creeping Death are all actually about the same thing. Lyrically they cover topics such as love affairs (good and bad) doomed soldiers in the charge of the light brigade and monsters in ancient egypt, but see them performed in front of an audience and you realise that isn't what they're really about. Actually, they're about people coming together to feel part of the same group. They're about friendship and fraternity.

That meaning doesn't necessarily come from the lyrics, but rather the fact that ten thousand people can sing the same thing at the same time.

So, whatever your lyrics, you need to make space for the fact that everyone has to be able to sing along.

How do you write a melody that everyone can sing along to?

That's a tricky question to answer.

The masters of the singalong stadium chorus are Iron Maiden: just take a look at this recording of [Fear of the Dark](#) in front of an audience of 250,000.

Pretty much every melody in this is designed for a quarter of a million people to singalong to.

There's lots of the repetition – the opening guitar melody is the same as the opening vocal part; the chorus repeats the line 'fear of the dark'; the middle section repeats the same line, albeit with a different melody.

They all use simple scale patterns, in this case a minor scale mostly moving in step but with the occasional emotive leap of perhaps a fourth or fifth.

Sequences abound 'fear of the dark' repeated, slightly lower each time for example.

They use pretty simple rhythmic ideas with lots of long notes.

Call and response – lots of stadium rock songs use this, and building in is vital for your stadium rock song.

Call – 'Oh, we're half way there'
Response – 'Oh-oh, living on a prayer'

Call – 'Can I play with madness?'
Response – 'The prophet stared at his crystal ball'

Chords

You've got lots of choices here. Bruce Springsteen in Born to Run uses standard pop song chords, including I IV V (E A B) and I VI IV V (E C#m A B) which you could find in rock and roll songs. But since the innovations of 1970s heavy rock bands, a kind of progression has come to be synonymous with epic singalong choruses – the aeolian I VI VII.

For example Em C D or Am F G. This chord progression and variations on it have become ubiquitous to entire genres of music (heavy metal, hip-hop) and especially to stadium rock songs.

What chord choices give you this epic mood?

Em C D

Em C G D

Em C Am Em C D

For the chorus you'll need something like this. The verse is another matter. If you're going to use the same kind of chords, which many people do there are several things you could do. It's best to change chord less often, for example two bars of E minor and two of C, an/or have something riff based. Bon Jovi

song's are a good example of both. Of course a heavy rock or metal song is more likely to be rhythmic or riff based in the verse.

Arrangement and Structure

Big big bigger, that's the key for stadium rock songs. In particular you need a big, loud chorus, a long drawn out intro, a long guitar solo (or similar) in the middle, a huge reprise of the chorus, maybe a coda centered around repeated chanting of singing of a three note refrain on the syllable 'oh'. You certainly don't want the song to be shorter than about five or six minutes.

The stadium rock song is a difficult thing to master, and most of us will never be playing stadiums anyway. But certain genres lend themselves to this kind of song, no matter the venue and the central ideas – the use of aeolian chord progressions to sound 'epic', the use of call and response phrasing, the sprawling structure and the huge volume – are applicable in all sorts of songwriting situations.

Model 5 Compound AABA

I've included this model not because a compound AABA is particularly common, but because it illustrates how you can be creative with structures. The first models, strophic and 32 bar, are potentially quite short. A compound structure is one that combines more than one structure into one piece.

To illustrate one way of doing this we're going to look at [You are not Alone](#) by Michael Jackson.

This song, while sentimental and a little unpleasant, with a genuinely disturbing video, nevertheless illustrates an interesting way of adapting the 32 bar structure.

It does this by using a 32-bar structure as a verse (nearly. It's actually 40 bars AABAA).

After the first of these there's a small interval that uses some chromatic chords. The second verse is then a repeat of the 40 bar structure (with different words). This is followed by a middle section that takes us out of key again, before returning to the main melody, and repeating in ascending keys.

This too is a compound version of the 32 bar structure.

- * A (A'A'B'A'A')
- * Interlude
- * A (A'A'B'A'A')
- * B Bridge
- * A (A' section repeated in ascending keys)
- * Outro

What should you take from this for your own songwriting? The ternary structure is a basic structural idea, but a very useful one. The basic idea of using one idea, contrasting it with another, then returning to the original idea, is always effective.

Listeners like comprehensible structures. That doesn't mean they always need the same structure, but it does mean that adapting well known structures a little can be very effective. How could you adapt the 32 bar structure to your own ends?

How could you combine elements of different structures?

Strophic verses as an intro followed by a 32 bar song? Verse chorus, verse chorus, but with a contrasting 32 bar structure as a middle section?

There are countless ways of combining structural ideas, and countless models besides the ones we've just looked at. I would advise paying attention to songs you listen to and trying to draw parallels between them.

Remember, models are just that – following any of these exactly, particularly the more detailed models, will probably result in rather uninspiring songs. The key is to use these as a springboard to more creative songwriting.



6 Blog Posts on Structure

The final section of the book consists of six blog posts I wrote on various aspects of structure for my blog www.indiesongwriter.net

1 What should you do after the second chorus in a rock song?

I was in a song writing session with some of my sixth form students today. They were trying to come up with ideas for structuring their new song.

They're a heavy metal band, and are still developing their songwriting. The guitar player pointed out that they always do the same thing: – a slow paced, staccato break-down. He wanted to do something different, but wasn't sure what.

Off the top of my head, and keeping their rock and heavy metal tastes in mind, I gave them some options:

1. The Nirvana approach - Nirvana's songwriting often relied on dynamic contrast: a quiet verse followed by a loud chorus. What did they do after the second loud chorus? They got even quieter. There are several Nirvana songs that include a third verse that cuts out the guitar entirely, leaving just drums bass and vocals.

2. The Metallica approach - yes, Metallica have used several different techniques, but there are some common ideas. For example, several songs (Trapped under Ice, Disposable Heroes, Leper Messiah) do this: 2nd chorus -> bridge (with crowd participation chanting) -> guitar solo, then back to the verse and chorus.

3. The Bonjovi bridge - this is simple. after your second chorus, write a bridge that does the exact opposite to the rest of the song. So in a sad lost-love song, you have an upbeat bridge with lyrics that imagine the love as it used to be. In an upbeat, happy song, you have a sad, minor key bridge.

4. The Iron Maiden middle eight - Iron Maiden are another band who have used several song structures. One thing they've done a lot however is a duel guitar solo. One guitarist solos in one key, then the second guitarist solos over the same chord progression in a different key.

That helped my sixth formers out a little, so I thought I'd share it. What ways have you found to continue your song past the second chorus?

2 Gradual or Sudden?

My listening over the last few days has consisted mostly of In Rainbows by Radiohead and Paradise Lost by Symphony x, and it's got me thinking about change in music.

Generally, music has to change over time in some way. These two bands, from different genres, have quite different methods of achieving that change.

I've posted about Radiohead before, and mentioned that to begin with I wasn't blown away by In Rainbows. Generally the reviews it has received have been pretty positive, however, and after paying it a bit more attention my opinion of it has grown considerably.

One thing that stands out about later Radiohead songs is the structure. Almost every song is built around the idea of gradual change, and movement towards a climax. Yes there's very often a verse chorus thing going on, and the songs aren't a million miles away from the normal pop song form, but very often the main point seems to be to get to that final third of the song where everything is different.

They achieve this in several ways.

[Arpeggi/weird fishes](#)

This builds up through the layering of arpeggios (who'da thunk it with a title like that?) reaching a glorious climax of complicated repeating patterns, that then suddenly drop away for line 'I get eaten by the worms/and weird fishes'.

[Nude](#)

Another slow climax that peaks with the line '*You'll go to hell for what your dirty mind is thinking*'. The word '*thinking*' a long, falsetto melisma followed by a pregnant pause, and then some wonderfully melodic 'ooohs'.

Both these songs, and plenty of others, rely on the idea that the song should build and grow towards a climax. That climax is sometimes a single line, and sometimes a new, larger, different passage of music. This is often followed by a quiet coda that restates some of the opening.

[Symphony X](#)

This is quite different from how the songs on Paradise Lost are structured. There's a long tradition of using elements of classical music in heavy metal, particularly Baroque and Classical ideas. Symphony X do this more than most and have built a reputation as the 'classical music' prog metal band.

Whereas modern minimalist classical music, of the type that I'd guess has had some influence on Radiohead, is sometimes about gradual change from one soundscape to the other, a lot of pre-romantic classical music had more clearly defined sections. And that's the case with Symphony X as well.

Rifftastic

The average Symphony X song is far from an ordinary verse-chorus affair. Heavy metal often extends the introduction and middle sections of the traditional pop song structure, and prog metal bands go even further, adding all sorts of different interludes and breaks.

On the whole what they don't do is build up and layer loops in order to get towards a single climax point.

So?

So, there are two structural ideas you could think about using here. One, the idea of gradual change, building towards the 'aah' moment. The other is the idea of sticking to clearly defined riffs and sections. Music requires change, but will that change be sudden or gradual?

3 The single most important tip for arranging your song

As a teacher I often help young songwriters with their work. Once they've got the hang of songwriting basics – melody and chords – the next big hurdle is arranging their verses, choruses and bridges into songs.

Generally, the basics of structure are easy to master. Verse chorus verse chorus bridge chorus is simple enough, and even a simple bass line and drum groove isn't too difficult with modern technology.

Where young songwriters often fall down is maintaining interest – they've an effective melody, chords that work, bass line and drum groove that works – but over the course of the song, things start to drag.

In that situation, there's one idea I put forward - Development.

Development is a word that fills with dread those of us who've had an education of a classical bent. It conjures up words like 'exposition', 'recapitulation', and all the other horrors of dry, unmusical music lessons (not that sonatas themselves can't be wonderful works).

But development is vital in the pop song too if you want your song to be interesting throughout.

How to achieve it? Simple – make sure something new happens in each section.

For example:

- * Do you need to bring the rhythm section in at the start? Could they join after the first verse? Or even after the first chorus?

- * The second verse – is it the same as the first verse? Why not add a counter melody or vocal harmony in the second one?

- * Is the whole song uptempo? Why not have the bridge half-time.

- * Is your singer at the top of their voice for the whole song? Stretch them,

take them down to the bottom of their range before they go back up again.

* Key change? It doesn't have to happen for just the last chorus. Change key somewhere else.

* Nirvana often had a third verse with just bass drums and vocals. Try taking out some of those instruments.

There are plenty more ideas you could try, but the basic idea is to make sure when arranging your song that you don't repeat yourself. Simple little changes can keep your music interesting.

4 Intro Options

A few days ago I received an email from a reader named Martin.

Martin writes:

Do you write on request?

I sure do

Here's a topic I'd like to see covered a bit more in depth, but seldom run into, although it's one of the most important parts of making a song: the Intro.

Do you have any tips on that one? I usually have no problem whatsoever writing words and chords, but when it comes to writing intros I more often than not find myself in a state of lack of inspiration. Sure, it's always possible to vamp for a while, or just play a chord progression that's somewhere else in the song, but most often that feels like a bad kind of compromise that doesn't really do the song justice.

Thanks for writing, Martin. A great question that really got me thinking about my own songwriting. I have to admit, I'm often a little lazy when it comes to writing intros.

After a little thought, I've come up with four different ways to introduce a song:

1. Establish the groove

This is very common, and pretty much the same as what Martin says he usually does:- vamping the chords for a while.

Popular song is very often based around a groove or beat, so why not begin by introducing that first? [This Sting song](#) has a great groove in five four that emphasizes the first beat of the bar and the off beat of the second beat.

2. Build tension

[This Metallica song](#) uses a variation on the main riff as an intro, but instead of introducing the groove straight away, it builds up, gradually adding layers of pounding toms and chugging guitars until the eventual appearance of the groove comes as a relief from the tension of the constant build up.

3. Use middle 8 material

[This great indie rock anthem](#) by the Manic Street Preachers has an intro that we hear again in the middle of the song. The middle of a song is where we need a break from the normal groove, harmony or feel of the song. Often we need something similar from the intro too, so why not use the same musical ideas in the intro and the middle eight?

4. Surprise the listener

[This song](#) by the prog-metal band Cynic has a great 'surprise' intro with a huge contrast between the first chords and the groove that crashes in a few seconds later.

I wanted to embed this live performance instead, but I wasn't allowed so check out the link if you want to hear the live version

In General

The intro is there to get the listener ready for the song, without giving away too much. It should introduce, tantalize, suggest.

A few extra tips:

- * End unresolved, for example end your intro on the second or fifth chord in the scale (Dm or G in C major)
- * Have less energy eg. slower tempo, lower key, less well defined rhythm or percussion
- * Balance – Longer intros only belong at the start of long songs – don't build up tension over two minutes, only to go to a song that lasts for two minutes.
 - Finally, consider whether you need an intro at all. A lot of the time, launching straight into the first verse can work just as well.

5 Songwriting as a Wave

Imagine a wave building in the sea. As it moves towards the shore it rises and falls, higher, lower, higher still. Growing in height and energy, it reaches a climax, teetering at its greatest height before crashing into white froth on the beach.

The wave is a useful metaphor for songwriting.

The melodic contour of your melody

A melody which only rises, falls or stays on one line will probably not be engaging. Melodic interest comes from a wave-like pattern of peaks and troughs – notes rising to points of climax before falling again.

If each peak is higher than the last the emotion is heightened until finally you reach the highest point – the moment of greatest tension – before falling again to a point of rest.

The energy level of your song

There is more than one way of defining energy in your songs. Energy could come from speed, from the amount of layers, from the building complexity of rhythms or from harmonic tension. However energy is defined, staying at the same level is usually a bad move. Too much repetition of the same mood can destroy that mood. Instead, think of energy as a wave – you need peaks and troughs, with the highest peak towards the end of the song before you fall back down to a coda or outro which is relatively low in energy.

The structure of your song

Closely connected to energy levels then is structure. Let's consider the standard popular song structure:

Verse
Chorus
Verse
Chorus
Middle
Chorus

Generally speaking, the verse can act as a trough and the chorus as a peak. The chorus melody will very often be higher pitched than the verse and will have more energy.

The most energetic part of a wave is the moment before it breaks – when the tension is greatest, where the energy is highest.

In the standard pop song this moment is the end of the middle section – perhaps a bridge, or solo section. Here the melody will most likely be at its highest pitch, the harmony most dissonant. You have a moment at the very end of this section in which you can hold the listener in a state of tension.... before releasing that tension by returning to the chorus and slightly less energetic, more familiar material.

6 Troubleshooting Your Pop Song

Writing a standard pop song? Something not quite right?

Let's try going through some basic troubleshooting to see if we can find out what the problem is.

1. Have you used a pop song structure?

The standard pop song is an extension of the older 32 bar song structure. Or if you like, a compound AABA structure with each A containing a verse and a chorus.

What am I talking about? The pop song basically states the verse and chorus material, restates it, then contrasts this with a B section, then returns to the (verse and) chorus material.

Have you done that with your song? AABA? Have you forgotten one of the sections, or added too many? (you can use intro, pre-chorus or coda)

2. Do your chords work?

Lots of songwriters (myself included) start with a chord progression. What I mean by 'do they work?' depends on the key and harmonic ideas you're using, but one of the most important ideas is that of tension and release. Are you asking musical questions in the right place?

For example, have you used chords to create musical tension at the end of your bridge, leading into your chorus. Say your blues song has a chorus that starts on the tonic chord F. If the bridge also ends on an F, there won't be the same tension and release as there would be if your bridge ends on a C7 chord.

Do that and the move from C7 to F will be much more interesting for the listener.

Another important thing to look at is your harmonic rhythm: how often you change chords. Are you changing chord once per bar for the entire song? Maybe that's why it isn't working. Try having sections where the chords change more or less frequently.

3. Have you got contrast in the right places?

As a very very general map, a pop song often has a verse with a lower pitched melody than the chorus. A chorus often has a more 'lyrical' melody while the verse is more rhythmic.

One of the most important places that contrast is needed is after the second chorus. If you're really unsure, use the middle section to do the exact opposite of whatever the rest of the song does. Writing an up beat dance song? The middle section could be slow with no drum beat. Writing ballad? The middle is where you bring in the drums and pick up the pace.

None of this is gospel, but an effective song has to have contrast of some sort.

4. Does the song develop?

This one's the biggie – it lets down a lot of songs, even commercial hits (because as we all know a song can be a commercial hit and an artistic 'failure').

If the last chorus is exactly the same as the first, is there any point in repeating it? If the song stays at the same level dynamically, if it doesn't have enough contrast in harmony or instrumentation it will not work.

Common fixes, aside from the harmonic and dynamic ideas we spoke about in the middle section:

- * Change instrumentation in the second verse – a counter melody here, or even taking out the chord instruments to leave bass drums and vocals, can work wonders.

- * Add an extra part in the final chorus – vocal ad-libs, a counter melody, or if you're really brave save the drum kit until the final chorus

- * Change key – this needs to be handled with care, as you're in danger of sounding very cheesy if you change key for the last chorus. Then again, you might want to sound cheesy.

The point is that, however you do it, a song needs to gain energy as it progresses. There are multiple ways of doing that, by having a quiet intro, by contrasting half term and full time sections, by drastically changing instrumentation for some sections, by bringing in an unexpected sax solo.

However you do it, a successful song develops.

Will this article help with every possible problem? No. In fact there are whole areas of songwriting I haven't even touched on. Hopefully it should get you thinking about how to fix your songs.

Thank you for reading!

Many thanks for reading. This isn't an exhaustive look at structure, just a quick summary of some of the basics.

If you have any questions please feel free to email me at [tomslattermusic AT gmail.com](mailto:tomslattermusic@gmail.com)

If you find the book useful and want to read more like this please come and visit at www.indiesongwriter.net

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