

Architecture of a song

The structure of a song (or its architecture) is composed of “measures” which have a predetermined number of beats. Usually, a song will have 4 beats per measure; waltzes (of which there are a fair number in jazz, have 3 beats per measure. There are also many exceptions, a famous one being Dave Brubeck’s well-known “Take Five” which has 5 beats per measure.

In popular music and show tunes, the music is usually arranged in measures that are multiples of 8. In other words each musical theme is completed in 8-measure phrases. However, songs based on the blues, which are plentiful in jazz, are based on 12-measure themes (or musical ideas).

The structure of a song enables musicians to improvise together and always know where they are in the context of the music. If a jazz improvisation or solo seems disorganized or “random” to your ear, it may be that you’re not able to hear the structure of the composition being played. Understanding a song’s structure makes it easier to feel, follow, and understand the jazz performance of it. Fortunately, almost all jazz compositions and standard songs are in one of four patterns, which can be represented by letters, each of which refers to a musical theme, Here are the common structures; below them are some examples.

A
A A B A
A B
A B C D

At the simplest level, a song can be represented by the letter A. These songs have one musical theme:

Popular example: “Happy Birthday,” Sing it to yourself. There is only one complete musical idea in it.

Jazz example: “Blue Monk” Using Youtube, listen to “Blue Monk, preferably played by Thelonious Monk, its composer. The improvisations on it may be very complicated but there is only one 12-measure structure that is used repeatedly. So the structure of this composition is

simply be the letter A.

Many jazz compositions are based on the blues, but they are so varied rhythmically and melodically that you may not recognize them as blues.

A A B A

There are literally thousands of examples of A A B A songs: “Satin Doll” “Misty” “I Could Have Danced All Night,” “Blue Moon.” Let’s use “Over the Rainbow” as an example since almost everyone knows it.

“Over the Rainbow,” has two similar stanzas. They can be labeled “A” — because the musical idea is the same for each.

This musical theme is the first A

**Somewhere over the rainbow
Way up high
There’s a land that I heard of
Once in a lullaby**

The musical theme A is repeated:

**Somewhere over the rainbow
Skies are blue
And the dreams that you dare to dream
Really do come true**

Then the song has an interlude using a different melody than A. The interlude is sometimes called the “bridge.” It can be labeled “B”

B has a different musical theme than A.

**Someday I'll wish upon a star
And wake up where the clouds are
far behind me
Where troubles melt like lemon drops
High above the chimney tops
That's where you'll find me**

Finally, there is a repetition of the A theme in the last stanza.

**Somewhere over the rainbow
bluebirds fly
Birds fly over the rainbow,,
Then why, oh why can't I?**

Thus, the form of this song is A A B A. An improvising musician always has that form in mind and adheres to it no matter how distant the improvisation may seem. All the players know what part of the form they are in.

(Note: Some songs in this form have a slightly extended last stanza, for example, "All the Things You Are" and "I Got Rhythm." In these songs the final A is not 8 or 16 measures, but could be 10 or 18. A slight extension gives it a more dramatic conclusion.

A B

Some songs have the form A B in which two stanzas are very similar but the second stanza ends differently.

The B theme starts out like the A theme, but mid-way it takes a different tack leading to its conclusion.

popular example: Gershwin's "Our Love is Here To Stay" or "A Foggy Day"
jazz example: Charlie Parker's "Donna Lee"

A B C D

Listen to a recording of "Bye Bye Blackbird," for example the one played by Miles Davis in class. Or it could be a more popular version of the song. It begins with two 8-measure themes, which are similar but different enough to label A and B. Then there is C theme, that is like the "bridge" to the song because it is totally different from A and B. Lastly, a final theme, D (8 measures) starts out like A, but it ends differently.

NOTE: sometimes there is an Intro (at the beginning of a song) or an Outro (at the end) which are almost always in 4 or 8 measure phrases. However, these do not count as part of the A, B, or C scheme.