

## 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 melodic themes are usually arranged in 8-measure phrases, or sometimes 16-measure phrases. Examples have been given in class. 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 that the improvisation is based on. 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 C  
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 A C

Some songs have the form A B A C in which the two stanzas of the song are very similar, but the theme that follows the A-theme (what would normally be B) ends differently the second time, usually more dramatically.

Therefore, the second theme that follows A — even though it is similar to B — is given a different letter (C).

popular examples: "Our Love is Here To Stay" or "A Foggy Day"  
"Summertime."

jazz examples: Charlie Parker's "Donna Lee" or "Ornithology"

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.*