Structural and rhetorical closure in popular music; or, how do songs end?

Nick Braae
Waikato Institute of Technology

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Preliminaries

• How do songs end?

• Informed by broader concept of musical time in popular songs: the experiential pace, trajectory and flow of the music (de Sélincourt 1920; Langer 1953; Sauvage 1958; Pasler 1982; Kramer 1988; Danielsen 2006)
Endings in Popular Music

• The ending shapes our understanding of what has happened and/or what we imagine *might* happen

• Osborn (2013): terminally-climactic form—song ends with its structural highpoint; prevalent in post-1990s alternative rock

• See also Malawey (2011): musical emergence; Spicer (2004): (ac)cumulative form; Samorotto (2012): “trope of infinity”

• Models for understanding *specific* ending archetypes (cf. endings in general)
Closure in Popular Music (cont’d)

• A model of closure: the features that evoke ‘finality’ and/or ‘stability’ (Agawu 1988)

• Does closure exist? Vis-à-vis the fade out (Johnson 2002), temporal stasis (Danielsen 2006)

• Or, is closure associated with recapitulation and reprise? ‘a bridge necessarily begins with some kind of harmonic swerve away from the preceding material and typically culminates in a big V chord…that sets up a dramatic, fresh reentrance of a verse or chorus, usually on the tonic’ (Spicer 2011: 13)

• Closing gestures: the ‘Grand Plagal’ cadence in Led Zeppelin (‘Whole Lotta Love’), AC/DC (‘Back in Black’) (Temperley 2011)

• Distinction between ‘structural’ closure (completion of formal ideas) and ‘rheotrical’ closure (use of closing gestures) (from Agawu 1988, Hyland 2009)
**Table 1. Musical and lyrical devices that foster structural and rhetorical closure in popular songs**

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<th>Device that fosters structural closure</th>
<th>Device that fosters rhetorical closure</th>
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| Return of initial thematic material at the end of the song, such as a verse or chorus  
Bruce Springsteen, ‘Born to Run’  
*Introduction of new material (Guns N’ Roses, ‘Sweet Child O’ Mine’)* | Local cadence to conclude song  
Jeff Lynne, ‘When I Was a Boy’  
*Lack of final cadence (Queen, ‘My Fairy King’)* |
| Harmonic stability of closing section  
Aretha Franklin, ‘Think’  
*Modulation in final section (The Beatles, ‘The End’)* | Song concludes with a ‘final’ chord  
CCR, ‘Midnight Special’  
*Fade out (Fleetwood Mac, ‘Rhiannon’)* |
| Completion of vocal/instrumental melody on the tonic  
Elton John, ‘Your Song’  
*Vocal melody ends off-tonic (Dire Straits, ‘On Every Street’)* | Textural diminuendo through final section  
Queen, ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’  
*Constant texture through final section (David Bowie, ‘Rock ’n’ Roll Suicide’)* |
| Resolution of any ambiguities and/or conflicts in the song’s lyrical narrative  
Bread, ‘Diary’  
*Unresolved ambiguities and/or conflicts in the song’s lyrical narrative (Dolly Parton, ‘Jolene’)* | Textural expansion towards final climactic point  
The Darkness, ‘Love on the Rocks with No Ice’  
*Constant texture through final section (Eagles, ‘Hotel California’)* |
| Lyrical reference to ending  
Tracy Chapman, ‘Give Me One Reason’  
*Reference to continuing (Journey, ‘Don’t Stop Believing’)* | |


Examples

• The Darkness, ‘Love on the Rocks With No Ice’: structural reprise and emphasis of chorus; textural climax; grand plagal cadence; final chord; complete closure

• Billy Joel, ‘Piano Man’: vignettes of hopeless characters at the local bar; is the titular character the saviour?

• Finality of the ending; underscoring the definitive nature of the situation; there will be no change…
Disjunctures and Narrative Interpretation

- Billy Joel, ‘Scenes From an Italian Restaurant’

- Meeting of two friends; dream-like transition into reminiscing about high-school sweethearts Brenda and Eddie

- Return to original verse section (apparent structural closure; end of this story); subsequent modulation but rhetorical close (more stories to be told but another time…).
Disjunctures and Narrative Interpretation

• Meat Loaf, ‘Paradise By The Dashboard Light’

• Tale of teenage love (lust?)

• Builds to climactic point and narrative crux: ‘Stop right there!…Before we go any further, will you make me your wife?’

• The answer: ‘I couldn’t take it any longer, Lord I was crazed // I started swearing to myself and on my mother’s grave that I would love you till the end of time’

• But now he’s ‘praying for the end of time // So I can end my time with you’

• Complete structural closure of narrative, melodic-harmonic coincidence on tonic; but lack of rhetorical closure (chord pattern and background lyrics spinning out infinitely): narrator is definitively stuck in his endless misery
Disjunctures and Narrative Interpretation

• Bruce Springsteen, *Born to Run* (1975)

• Four ‘epics’—‘Thunder Road’, ‘Born to Run’, ‘Backstreets’, ‘Jungleland’—all celebrating the escapist possibilities from a life in a blue-collar town

• Will the characters enact their dreams and break free?

• ‘Thunder Road’: structural closure, but lack of rhetorical closure (infinite sense of dreaming); ‘Born to Run’ (rhetorical closure; relatively strong structural closure, but melody comes to rest on 5); ‘Backstreets’ (rhetorical closure; relatively strong structural closure, but melody comes to rest on 5); a sense of ambiguity about the celebratory tone of the songs…

• ‘Jungleland’: strong rhetorical and structural closure; elaborate conclusion but never the definitive, complete sense of closure in the vocal melody (Springsteen avoids the tonic); leaves the slightest of empty feelings about the characters’ fate

• ‘The River’: same characters five years on; no prospects of escape or a better life; complete lack of closure (structurally and rhetorically) suggesting their earlier dreams have been dashed for good
Conclusions

• Structural and rhetorical closure as a model for understanding song endings from technical and interpretative perspectives

• Relationship between approach to closure and style (e.g. Queen, 1970s rock/prog)

• Understanding of modes of storytelling (vis-à-vis ‘narrative’ analyses of popular songs; also potential for comparison with film/TV approaches to narrative closure)