

Introduction to Songwriting Workshop

Music Terminology/Vocabulary

Some of these terms have been adapted from Chapter 1 of: The Songs of John Lennon The Beatles Years, John Stevens, copyright 2002, Berklee Press

GENERAL ELEMENTS

LEAD SHEET/CHART

An abbreviated/simplified musical score representing a song. Usually has a single treble clef staff showing the melody, chords (as chord symbols), and lyrics (if applicable). It is like a general blueprint for navigating the song, but often does not specify which instruments are to be used. Often found in a collection of charts called a "fake book."

MELODY

The main tune of a song – sung or played by an instrument.

HARMONY

The chords - units/groupings of usually 3 or 4 notes sounding simultaneously, used to support a song's melody.

LYRICS

The words of a song.

TIME SIGNATURE

A symbol of two vertical numbers at the beginning of a lead sheet that indicates how beats are grouped in regular patterns (usually in groups of three or four beats, as in "1-2-3" over and over, or "1-2-3-4" over and over). The time signature represents the "meter" of the music.

TEMPO

Not to be confused with the time signature, tempo indicates the speed of the music's beat, and possibly something about the rhythmic feel. Can be indicated with terms like "fast", "swing", "Ballad", "rock-feel", "slow", etc., or with a "BPM" (beats per minute) number.

DYNAMICS

The absolute volume of the music at any given moment. Shaping dynamics is an important part of musical expression.

PARTS OF A SONG

SECTIONAL LABELS (A...B...C... "solos")

This is a neutral way of identifying different sections of a song in chronological order.

VERSE

Usually the first section of music, and repeated several times. The words in the verse tell the main story. Most verses use the same melody and chords, but have different words/lyrics in each iteration in order to propel the narrative forward. Musically, verses tend to build tension, and finish with a sense of incompleteness or openness (not on the tonic chord), indicating that a chorus is on the way.

REFRAIN

An optional small section that comes at the end of each verse. It often includes the song title, like "I want to hold your hand...I want to hold your hand." It usually sounds the same with each occurrence. It can be considered a mini-chorus. A refrain tends to end with a sense of musical resolution (on the tonic chord).

CHORUS

Repeated several times in a song, usually with the same lyrics. The chorus often includes the song title, like in "Here Comes the Sun", or "Let it Be". A chorus usually ends with a musical sense of resolution (arriving on the tonic chord).

BRIDGE

A bridge is a "break-away" from the other parts of a song, often occurring only once. It usually happens about 2/3 of the way through a song and serves to "bridge" (reconnect) a chorus or instrument-solo back to a verse.

PRECHORUS/CLIMB

A small, optional section that links the verse to the chorus. It usually increases the musical tension that spills over (releases) into the chorus.

HOOK

A phrase or section that might double as the chorus, but more importantly is considered "catchy," especially memorable and easy to sing/hum.

FORM

The overall architecture of a song, referring to the number and ordering of sections.

FORM EXAMPLES

- Songs can take on many forms, but some typical ones are:
- AABA (similar to: verse, verse, chorus, verse) – found in many jazz songs
- verse, verse, chorus, verse bridge, verse chorus (or: AABACAB)
- verse, verse, verse, etc.
- verse, chorus (repeating)

BLUES FORM

A short, usually 12 measure/bar structure that repeats the same set of chords and melody (but with different lyrical "verses") throughout. Because of its short form, it often serves as a platform for improvisation.

CODA

Literally "tail" – it is the final section of a song, often incorporating a new idea.

TAG

Repeating the last portion of a section, usually the chorus. The "it's all right...it's all right" at the end of "Here Comes the Sun" is a good example of this. It acts as a type of small extension.

GENERAL FORM TERMS

PHRASE

A complete, independent musical thought, much like a grammatical sentence. It can finish with a resolved/closed feeling ("I went to the store."), or an unresolved/open feeling ("I went to the store, however..."), wherein the listener expects to hear more music. Similarly, open/closed lyric ideas will coincide with open/closed phrases and cadences.

OPEN/CLOSED CADENCES

A cadence is the ending moment of a phrase. Different cadences are defined by different chord combinations. A closed cadence will arrive on a tonic (I/i) chord. An open cadence will often end on a dominant (V) chord, or at least a non-tonic chord.

MOTIF/MOTIVE

A very short (usually a few notes) unique musical (often melodic) idea that motivates and guides a song or portion of one. It will be repeated (exactly or varied) multiple times to reinforce its significance. It is usually heard in the first fragment of a phrase.

GENERAL SCALE & HARMONY TERMS

TONIC

The first note (and last) in a typical scale – the first scale degree. It is considered the most important, stable and outstanding note in the scale, and is the note that a melody usually resolves to at the end of a chorus, or whenever a section wants to resolve. It's also referred to as a "home" note. (i.e. it is "stable").

The "tonic chord" is a chord built off of this first scale degree note. It is identified by a roman numeral ("I" for a major chord, "i" for a minor chord).

SUBDOMINANT

The fourth note in a typical scale (the fourth scale degree). It is considered less stable, and usually not a "final/finishing" note. It tends to want to move to another note (i.e. it is "unstable").

As a roman numeral, it is "IV" (major), or "iv" (minor). The subdominant chord usually is followed by the dominant ("V") chord, but might be followed by the tonic chord.

DOMINANT

The fifth scale degree. Considered very unstable as a melody note.

As a roman numeral, it is "V", and is almost always a major chord, and often a 7th chord (i.e. a "dominant" 7th). It is most often followed by the tonic chord. The dominant chord can also be a chord on which to arrive, making that moment feel unresolved and open – a sign that there's more to come.

GENERAL MELODY TERMS

BALANCE/IMBALANCE

Refers to verses or choruses where there are even (balanced) or odd (unbalanced) numbers of stanzas/lines/phrases.

ACCELERATION/DECELERATION

Refers to words, melody notes or chords that move from longer to shorter phrases/statements (acceleration); the opposite process is deceleration. This can be used to emphasize different song sections, or to highlight specific lyrics.

MELODY & PROSIDY

How the lyrics and music support each other, such as how a high or low point of a melody can support a particular lyric/word.

STABLE/UNSTABLE NOTES

Certain notes in a scale tend to feel stable/stationary (such as the tonic). It feels comfortable to "park" on these notes. Other notes, especially the 7th scale degree (called the "leading note") feel like they need to keep moving in order to resolve/rest.

CHORD-/NONCHORD-TONES

Melody notes that coincide with one of the notes in an underlying chord are called "chord tones" and they sound more comfortable to the ear. Melody notes that do not coincide with an underlying chord are "nonchord tones" and they sound more dissonant and potentially harsh to the ear. All melodies incorporate both kinds of tones. The mixture of consonance and dissonance helps melodies move along with varying degrees of intensity from moment to moment.

GENERAL RHYTHM TERMS

STRONG/WEAK BEATS

In a measure (regular grouping of beats), some beats are felt as stronger, others as weaker. In a four-beat measure (known as "4/4"), the first and third beats are considered stronger. The stronger/weaker syllables in words usually coincide with strong/weak beats. Or, a word can feel more significant if it occurs on a strong beat.

DOWNBEAT

The first and usually strong-feeling beat in a measure.

UPBEAT

The weaker beat(s) in a measure

PICKUP BEAT

A weak beat, or beats that precede the first full measure of a song, like the initial "Happy..." in the song "Happy Birthday." ("birthday" Comes on the downbeat of the first measure).

BACKBEAT

Beats 2 & 4 in a 4/4 measure. Usually the snare drum hits these beats.

SYNCOPATION

When there are rhythmic accents on parts of a measure or beat that are normally unaccented – on an upbeat. Each word in the chorus of "Here Comes The Sun" is syncopated (on the "and" of each beat).

	Here		comes		the		sun
1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&