COMPOSITIONAL STRATEGIES IN POPULAR SONG FORM
OF THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY*

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Popular song at the beginning of the twentieth century exhibited several new formal
tendencies that, over time, became audience favorites. During the 1890s, the prevalent
old-fashioned sentimental song, exemplified by Charles K. Harris’s “After the Ball” (1892), was
increasingly replaced by a new type of rude song, with syncopated melodies and vernacular
lyrics that centered on the comings and goings and perceived problems of lower-class African
American men and women, including issues such as thievery, inconstancy, and fights with razors
and guns.¹ Generally called by the unsavory term “coon song,” it took audiences by storm. Its
popularity was such that it was heard in all the popular venues: in vaudeville and variety shows,
in minstrel shows, and on Broadway. Such songs as A. Baldwin Sloane’s “When You Ain’t Got
No Money, Well You Needn’t Come ’Round” (1898), and James Weldon Johnson’s and J.
Rosamond Johnson’s “I Ain’t Gwintin Work No Mo’” (1900) achieved great popularity, which
in turn influenced the direction of popular song. The general form verse–chorus, already
common in earlier songs, still provided the basic structure. But the harmonies and internal struc-
ture of both sections moved in a new direction.

* A version of this paper was delivered at the “Song, Stage & Screen” conference in Kansas City, June 2011.
¹ For a brief discussion of the “coon song,” see Charles Hamm, Music in the New World (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983), 363–365. For a more recent study, see Part I (pp. 11–80) of Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, “Coon Songs,” and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2007).
By the end of the first decade of the century, as the popular music of Tin Pan Alley developed, song composers looked for new ways to vary the basic harmonic progressions in phrases that spanned four or eight measures. Among the variety of new forms used by composers was one, AABA, that would prove important to the golden age of popular song. While this form was used in both the verse and the chorus, I am limiting this discussion to its use in the latter.

In its first state, the form of the chorus consists of four four-measure phrases. By the late 1910s, the thirty-two measure chorus became more common. In the generic form of the latter, the first A section exhibits an eight-measure harmonic progression that usually begins on the tonic and ends on the dominant. The second A section usually begins with the same harmonies as the first, but near the end of the phrase the progression cadences on the tonic. The B section, called the “bridge” or “release,” provides the composer with an opportunity to explore other harmonic progressions; it usually ends on the dominant. The final A section begins as did the previous two; in some cases a new melody leads to the final cadence.

In this essay, I am interested in exploring the expansion of harmonic possibilities that took place in the release or bridge section of the chorus, with the adoption of the AABA form during the late 1910s and ’20s. While there are interesting connections that can be made between the verse and chorus—as, for example, when they are in different keys—these issues are beyond the scope of this investigation. So, too, is a discussion of the form of the verse and the relationship of the music to the lyrics. My sample is not intended to be encyclopedic; rather, I have chosen pieces that demonstrate the various harmonic strategies that popular song composers of the 1920s incorporated in their releases.
Background

In order to understand the changes that occurred, we need to look briefly at the formal structure of popular song after 1900. Many of the songs heard during the first two decades of the century employed the syncopated rhythms associated with ragtime. Formally, they tended to feature long verses of twenty-four to thirty-two measures that provided a narrative story. The chorus was significantly shorter, usually only sixteen measures in length, often in an AA¹ format, with each part beginning on the tonic. That describes the harmonic schema of a typical, well-known song: “Wait ’Til the Sun Shines, Nellie” (1905), by Harry Von Tilzer. Because the chorus is brief and requires a return to the tonic, there is little chance for composers like Von Tilzer to move harmonically beyond the tonic, subdominant, and dominant chords (with an occasional substitution of the supertonic at the cadence).

During the 1910s, some composers began to explore alternatives to the AA¹ schema. Several added a tag to the end of the second A, resulting in an eighteen- or twenty-measure chorus. Irving Berlin also experimented in several songs (including his hit song, “I Want To Go Back To Michigan” [1914]) with a twenty-four measure chorus, AA¹A², which allowed more harmonic freedom. Another schema that is seen with some frequency is ABCA.

As composers began to experiment with the AABA schema, the chorus was expanded to thirty-two measures. The form was slow to be accepted. The earliest songs may date from 1914 or ’15. Among the earliest examples I have been able to find are Egbert Van Alstyne’s “Pretty Baby” (1916), which was heard in The Passing Show of 1916, and Will Dillon’s “My Grandfather’s Girl” (1916), which was sung by Blanche Ring in Jane O’Day from Broadway. Adoption of the new form had an impact on the basic harmonic structure of the release of the chorus. As might be expected, the simplest strategies were to use the IV and V chords for four measures each, or to precede each of the chords with their dominants, two measures each. A good example
of this latter variant is Berlin’s “You Cannot Make Your Shimmy Shake On Tea” (1919), which was heard in the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1919*.

By the early 1920s, composers began to experiment with more complex harmonic progressions. These new harmonic strategies paved the way for the freer tonal range of chords seen in so many songs of the 1930s.

*The Subdominant*

Since a move from the tonic to the subdominant requires only the addition of the seventh, composers used this progression to start the release. They continued with a number of chordal variations. Consider “Pickin’ Petals Off O’ Daisies” (1929; see Figure 1), heard in *Sunny Side Up*, by Buddy DeSylva, Lew Brown, and Ray Henderson. (All figures appear in succession, at the end of the text.) It prolongs the subdominant, in both its major and minor modes, for three measures before returning to the tonic. The second half of the release begins with the applied dominant of the dominant for two measures; it is followed by the suspension of the seventh of its dominant (C) for a measure. Harry Warren’s “Nagasaki” (1928; see Figure 2) prolongs IV in both halves of the release. In each four-bar group, Warren uses both major and minor forms of the chord before returning to the tonic in first inversion; in m. 24, he precedes the cadential return to the tonic with an augmented-sixth and an applied dominant. In Berlin’s “What Does It Matter?” (1927; see Figure 3), the IV–I first half is followed by a circle of fifths. This strategy is encountered in a number of songs; it was a progression that George Gershwin seemed to like. In his “Someone To Watch Over Me” (1926; see Figure 4), it is used with a chord change in each measure of the second half.

Another progression that appears in a number of variants is the subdominant/supertonic interchange. Gershwin’s “Hey! Hey! Let ’Er Go” (1924; see Figure 5), heard in *Sweet Little*
Devil, begins with IV with added sixth, which is followed by II (with its dominant). Rather unusually, the second half continues with II (and II\(^7\)), which is followed by two measures of the dominant. Berlin’s “Some Sunny Day” (1922; see Figure 6) expands the harmonic palate: the IV and II (preceded by their dominants) are heard in the first half; the second half utilizes the circle of fifths. In his later “How About Me?” (1928; see Figure 7), Berlin uses a sequential IV–III–II–V progression, with each chord preceded by its dominant. Another interesting example of this progression is seen in Johnny Burke’s “If I’m Dreaming,” which was heard in the film version of Jerome Kern’s Sally (1929; see Figure 8). In the first half, Burke substitutes a VII\(^6\) chord for V/III; in the second half, he prolongs the II for three measures before moving to V. Another variant is seen in Warren’s “Cryin’ for the Carolines” (1930; see Figure 9), unusually set in E minor. Ending the second A on the tonic, Warren, through the introduction of G\(^\#\) and D, converts it into the dominant of A minor (IV). In m. 20, through the passing-tone F, Warren reaches a D\(^7\) chord, the V\(^7\) of G major (III), which, in m. 22, serves as the dominant of C major (VI). It is followed by V\(^7\).

In Gershwin’s “My One and Only,” heard in Funny Face (1927; see Figure 10), the release unexpectedly begins on the tonic. A IV\(^7\), preceded by its dominant and followed by its minor version, leads back to the tonic at the start of the second half. The IV\(^7\) once again follows, but this time Gershwin interpolates a bVI\(^7\) before going to the dominant. However, the A section does not begin in the tonic, but on a II\(^7\) chord. This song also features an implicit rebarring of the release into 3 + 3 + 2 beats at the beginning of each half. In Berlin’s “What’ll I Do?” (1924; see Figure 11), the IV and II alternate in the first half of the release. The second half prolongs the dominant, with its applied chords, in second inversion (i.e., V\(^6\)_4). It does not resolve to its root-position form before the return of the tonic.
The Mediant

Not all bridge sections utilize a subdominant–dominant progression. As I have demonstrated, a number of progressions that begin on the subdominant follow a different schema. In some songs, composers eschew the use of the subdominant entirely. One compositional strategy used by many is an inflection to the mediant. Consider Gershwin’s “Innocent Ingenue Baby” (1922, composed with William Daly; see Figure 12), heard in Our Nell. Following the cadence on I at the end of the second A, the composer shifts to the dominant of III for two measures, then to III for the next two measures. An F⁺⁷ (V⁷/V) chord in m. 21 starts a cadential progression that is interrupted by a subdominant IV–II⁷ interpolation, before returning to the dominant. In “‘S Wonderful” (1927; see Figure 13), which was heard in Funny Face, Gershwin moves directly from the tonic to the borrowed III₆⁴ (G major) followed by its dominant. The mediant returns, this time in first inversion, and is again followed by its dominant. But in m. 21, instead of returning to III, Gershwin, through voice leading, arrives on a B°₆₅ chord (VII of C minor). Instead of resolving this chord in the diatonic manner, however, he continues with a circle-of-fifths progression. “My Fate is in Your Hands” (1929; see Figure 14), by Thomas “Fats” Waller, devotes the first three measures of its release to a prolongation of III (A within F major) In m. 20, Waller suddenly shifts to a D⁷ chord, implying a move to II. Instead, he builds a C-major chord over the expected root, G, to prepare for the cadence. But just before the V is reestablished, Waller again returns to the D⁷ chord (m. 22) heard two measures earlier. This time, there is an A in the bass, which does not resolve as expected. A chromatic descent to G seems to indicate the beginning of a cadential progression, but Waller leaves it unresolved, as the A section returns with VII⁷/V.
One of the more unusual releases appears in “Pompanola,” heard in *Three Cheers* (1928; see Figure 15), with music by DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson. Here a borrowed III chord (E major within C major) is unexpectedly heard in m. 17, and prolonged for seven measures. In the middle of m. 18, the bass abruptly ascends a tritone from E to B♭. After a chromatic descent in mm. 19–20, the III chord (with its dominant) returns for another two measures, before an abrupt move to the dominant. Of interest is the chromatic descending line heard in mm. 18–20, which when played out of context sounds very much like an Edward MacDowell progression.

*The Submediant*

The submediant is a tonal area that can provide both variety and surprise. Gershwin’s “The Man I Love” (1924; see Figure 16), settles on VI (C minor) for six-and-one-half measures, though the prolongation is disguised by chromatic passing tones. After cadencing on the tonic in m. 16, Gershwin uses chromatic voice leading to get to a G7 chord—the V7 of C minor. The establishment of VI is clear, even though chromatic voice leading in the inner voices of mm. 17–18 give the impression that the passage is modulating. The return of the dominant in m. 20 confirms the prolongation of VI for this eight-measure phrase. After a restatement of mm. 17, 18, and the first half of 19, Gershwin prepares for the return of the A section, once again through chromatic passing tones with a II–V7–I cadence. Another song that focuses on the submediant is “Varsity Drag,” heard in the 1927 Broadway musical *Good News*, by DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson (see Figure 17). Preceded by V7/VI, the harmony implies—without resolution—the submediant for most of the first half, before abruptly shifting back to a G7 (V7) chord. In the final four measures, the progression alternates between the tonic and the minor subdominant (!) chord before returning to the preparatory dominant.
Circle of Fifths

Occasionally, composers will use the circle of fifths for the entire release. Gershwin’s “Nashville Nightingale,” heard in Nifties of 1923 (see Figure 18), provides a good example. Each of the seventh chords extends for two measures, providing a stable structure for the progression. Coming after the I–IV–V–I progression heard in both A sections, in which each of the first three chords’ sevenths precedes the following chord, Gershwin’s use of a fifths progression seems compositionally apt. Another example is seen in DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson’s “I’m On the Crest of a Wave” (1928; see Figure 19). In this release, the progression is disguised by the addition of upper neighbors.

Incomplete and Unexpected Progressions

While the songs discussed above demonstrate the variety of tonal progressions used during the 1920s, a few songs look forward to the 1930s and beyond. Waller’s “I’ve Got a Feeling I’m Falling” (1929, composed with Harry Link; see Figure 20), which demonstrates the fluidity of harmonic practice of the decade’s end, begins traditionally with a plagal cadence in m. 15, that, through the addition of a seventh, becomes the dominant of IV. In m. 19, however, Waller deceptively moves to F minor, the II chord. In m. 21, there is a G7 chord, implying a move to a C-major chord, but through chromatic passing tones the progression goes instead to an F7 chord (V7/V), to set up the cadential progression. Gershwin’s “Sweet and Low Down,” from Tip Toes (1925; see Figure 21), begins with a circle-of-fifths progression for the first six measures of the release. He breaks the sequence, however, by changing the A dominant-ninth chord to a (diatonic) II9 chord, which does not initiate an expected dominant preparation, but instead moves to a IV9 chord, which provides the listener with a plagal-cadence return to the A section.
“Because You’re Beautiful,” by DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson, was heard in Three Cheers (1928; see Figure 22). The release of this G-major song begins on a B⁴₄ chord (II₃ of A, which is II of G); it alternates with V⁷/II for four measures. Instead of resolving to A (II) in m. 21, G♯ is lowered a half step to G♭, which elegantly changes its harmonic goal to the dominant; an auxiliary E⁷ chord alternates with A⁷ (V⁷/V) for three measures before reaching D⁷ (V⁷) in m. 24.

In a few instances, the second A section (which precedes the release) does not close in the tonic. This strategy was used by Gershwin in several songs. In “Yankee Doodle Blues,” heard in Spice of 1922 (see Figure 23), the second A section ends on III. Through chromatic voice leading, it is altered to the dominant (m. 16). The release then begins on the tonic; it is followed by the IV and V chords, each preceded by its dominant. Gershwin follows a similar road in “Looking For a Boy,” from Tip Toes (1925; see Figure 24), where the second A section migrates from the tonic in m. 12 to the mediant in m. 15. Unlike in Figure 23, this release does not follow a I–IV–V pattern. Rather, the last two beats of m. 16 introduce V⁷/II, which is then prolonged through m. 21. In m. 22, Gershwin interpolates a VI chord before landing on V for the final two measures.

A little-known song by Richard Rodgers and lyricist Lorenz Hart, “My Man Is On the Make,” from their aborted 1929 musical, Me for You (see Figure 25), prolongs the subdominant, with its added sixth, for most of the first six measures of the release. (There is a cadential feint to the tonic in m. 20 that is not resolved.) On the surface, this progression is not unusual in itself. But Rodgers uses it to anchor a descending parallel-harmony progression that has no tonal meaning in the song. Instead, it is a sly invocation of wedding bells that are illustrating the lyrics of the song, in which a young woman is telling her parents that she has snared her future
husband. Thus, in m. 21, when the descending passage returns, it is chromatically altered to prepare for the return of the tonic. The $V_4^6$ (m. 23) is heard for two measures, with interpolated auxiliary chords filling in the voice leading. Surprisingly, after this two-measure preparation, the tonic does not begin the subsequent A section. Rather, we hear the applied dominant of the dominant ($C^7$).

Conclusions

There are many additional examples that demonstrate how composers of popular song explored unexpected tonal regions in the release sections of the chorus. The expansion of the chorus to thirty-two measures was undoubtedly important to the development of the AABA popular-song form. It gave composers the space to establish new tonal areas to contrast with the main tonal setting. But why did this form become the structure of choice for these varied harmonic progressions? Why didn’t the ABAB or ABAC forms generate them in the 1920s? I think the answer lies in how the tonic is established and prolonged in an AABA form. With sixteen consecutive measures devoted to tonic emphasis, a composer can safely move away from it in the release. That is not possible in either of the two other forms, where the B section, if it were to tonally wander too far from the tonic, would destabilize the listener’s comfort with tonal and melodic continuity. Hearing the repetition of a melody in a second A section, with essentially the same harmonies underlying it, allows the listener some comfort. That tonal comfort returns when the final A section ends the chorus. The B section, with its inflection to an “exotic” or unexpected chord, provides surprise for the listener. The addition of chromatic inflections similarly enrich the composer’s harmonic palate, allowing the returning A section to sound fresh, even as the listener is comforted by its familiarity. The expansion and development of the AABA form through the 1920s is crucial to changes found in the songs of the 1930s and beyond.
FIGURE 1. DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson, “Pickin’ Petals Off O’ Daisies” (1929), mm. 15–25

(a) score

(b) analysis
FIGURE 2. Warren, “Nagasaki” (1928), mm. 16–25

(a) score

(b) analysis

(a) score

(b) analysis
FIGURE 4. Gershwin, “Someone To Watch Over Me” (1926), mm. 15–25

(a) score

(b) analysis

15 17 19 21 23 25
I IV V7 I IV I6 V7 V7 (7) V7 V7 V7 I

(circle of fifths)
Figure 5. Gershwin, “Hey! Hey! Let ’Er Go” (1924), mm. 15–25

(a) score

Graziano: Compositional Strategies in Popular Song Form
FIGURE 6. Berlin, “Some Sunny Day” (1922), mm. 17–25
(a) score

(b) analysis
**FIGURE 7.** Berlin, “How About Me?” (1928), mm. 15–25

(a) score

(b) analysis
**Figure 8.** Burke, “If I’m Dreaming” (1929), mm. 15–25

(a) score

soon And now, that it’s blossom time, who could be im-
mune To all these temptations of June? Here is a girl,

(b) analysis

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FIGURE 9. Warren, “Cryin’ For the Carolines” (1930), mm. 16–25

(a) score

(b) analysis
**FIGURE 10.** Gershwin, “My One and Only” (1927), mm. 17–25

(a) score

I'm not asking any miracle; it can be done! I know a clergyman who will grow lyrical and make us one, and make us one. So my

(b) analysis

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GAMUT 6/2 (2013) 114
FIGURE 11. Berlin, “What’ll I Do? (1924), mm. 15–24

(a) score

(b) analysis

15 17 19 21 23 25

I V\(^7\) /IV IV II IV\(^6\) V\(^6\) /II V\(^7\) --- V\(^7\) --- V\(^6\) I
FIGURE 12. Gershwin and Daly, “Innocent Ingenue Baby” (1922), mm. 16–25

(a) score

(b) analysis

I V₇ /III III V₇ /V V V₇ IV II₇ V₇ I
FIGURE 13. Gershwin, “’S Wonderful” (1927), mm. 15–25

(a) score

(b) analysis
FIGURE 14. Waller, “My Fate Is In Your Hands” (1929), mm. 15–25

(a) score

hands. If the charge is loving you then I’m guilty dear.

Tell me that you love me too, and I’ll have no fear. It

(b) analysis

I V\(^7\)/III III V\(^7\)/III III\(^5\) III V\(^3\)/V V\(^6\)/VI V\(^3\) V\(^5\) V\(^7\)/VII\(^7\)
**FIGURE 15.** DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson, “Pompanola” (1928), mm. 15–26

(a) score

(b) analysis

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FIGURE 16. Gershwin, “The Man I Love” (1924), mm. 16–25

(a) score

word. May-be I shall meet him Sun-day, may-be Mon-day, may-be
word. May-be I shall meet her Sun-day, may-be Mon-day, may-be

mf poco espr.

not. Still I’m sure to meet him one day, may-be Tues-day will be
not. Still I’m sure to meet her one day, may-be Tues-day will be

poco lh.

my good news day. He’ll
my good news day. For

dim. p

(b) analysis

16 17 19 21 23 25
I V7 VI /VI V7 VI VII9° VI6 V7 I
FIGURE 17. DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson, “Varsity Drag” (1927), mm. 17–25

(a) score

You can pass man-y a class, wheth-er you’re dumb or wise. If you all

an-sw er the call, when your pro-fess-or cries: “Ev-ry-bo-dy down on the heels,

(b) analysis

\[
\begin{align*}
V^7 & V^7 & I & IV^{66} & I & IV^{55} & I^6 & V^7 & I \\
/VI & & & & & & & & \\
\end{align*}
\]
FIGURE 18. Gershwin, “Nashville Nightingale” (1923), mm. 16–25

(a) score

(b) analysis

\[ \text{(circle of fifths)} \]
Figure 19. DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson, “I’m On the Crest Of a Wave” (1928), mm. 15–25

(a) score

(b) analysis
FIGURE 20. Waller and Link, “I’ve Got a Feeling I’m Falling” (1929), mm. 15–25

(a) score

(b) analysis
**FIGURE 21.** Gershwin, “Sweet and Low Down” (1925), mm. 15–25

(a) score

(b) analysis
**Figure 22.** DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson, “Because You’re Beautiful” (1928), mm. 15–25

(a) score

(b) analysis
FIGURE 23. Gershwin, “Yankee Doodle Blues” (1922), mm. 15–25

(a) score

(b) analysis
FIGURE 24. Gershwin, “Looking For a Boy” (1925), mm. 12–25

(a) score

(b) analysis
FIGURE 25. Rodgers, “My Man Is On the Make” (1929), mm. 15–25

(a) score

(b) analysis
ABSTRACT

Popular song at the beginning of the twentieth century exhibited several new tendencies that, over time, became audience favorites. A new type of rude song, with syncopated melodies and vernacular lyrics (called by the unsavory term “coon song”), took audiences by storm. The general form used in the earlier songs—verse/chorus—still provided the basic structure. But the harmonies and internal structure of both sections moved in a new direction. As the popular music of Tin Pan Alley developed, song composers looked for new ways to vary the basic harmonic progressions in phrases that usually spanned eight measures. Among the variety of new forms was one—AABA—that would prove important to the future of popular song.

In this paper, I explore the expansion of harmonic possibilities that took place in the chorus with the adoption of the AABA form during the late 1910s and ’20s. I have chosen songs from Broadway shows and film musicals (by Berlin, Burke, Gershwin, Henderson, Rodgers, Waller, and Warren) that demonstrate how composers began to move away from the basic dominant and subdominant alternations to explore increasingly complex strategies in the harmonic progressions that comprise the release (i.e., bridge) sections of the chorus. These explorations proved fruitful to the development of the form and provided a foundation for the introduction of chromatic progressions that evolved in the 1930s.

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(An example based on a humanities-style note citation)

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