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

JOHN GRAZIANO

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.<sup>1</sup> 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 Gwinter 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 structure of both sections moved in a new direction.

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\* A version of this paper was delivered at the "Song, Stage & Screen" conference in Kansas City, June 2011.

<sup>1</sup> 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 AA<sup>1</sup> 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 AA<sup>1</sup> 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, AA<sup>1</sup>A<sup>2</sup>, 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<sup>7</sup>), 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° 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<sup>#</sup> and D, converts it into the dominant of A minor (IV). In m. 20, through the passing-tone F, Warren reaches a D<sup>7</sup> chord, the V<sup>7</sup> of G major (III), which, in m. 22, serves as the dominant of C major (VI). It is followed by V<sup>7</sup>.

In Gershwin's "My One and Only," heard in *Funny Face* (1927; see Figure 10), the release unexpectedly begins on the tonic. A IV<sup>7</sup>, preceded by its dominant and followed by its minor version, leads back to the tonic at the start of the second half. The IV<sup>7</sup> once again follows, but this time Gershwin interpolates a bVI<sup>7</sup> before going to the dominant. However, the A section does not begin in the tonic, but on a II<sup>7</sup> 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<sup>6</sup><sub>4</sub>). 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  $F^7$  ( $V^7/V$ ) chord in m. 21 starts a cadential progression that is interrupted by a subdominant  $IV-II^7$  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  $III_4^6$  (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  $B^{\flat}_5^6$  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  $D^7$  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  $D^7$  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  $VII^7/V$ .

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 $\flat$ . 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 G<sup>7</sup> chord—the V<sup>7</sup> 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–V<sup>7</sup>–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 V<sup>7</sup>/VI, the harmony implies—without resolution—the submediant for most of the first half, before abruptly shifting back to a G<sup>7</sup> (V<sup>7</sup>) 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  $G^7$  chord, implying a move to a C-major chord, but through chromatic passing tones the progression goes instead to an  $F^7$  chord ( $V^7/V$ ), 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)  $II^9$  chord, which does not initiate an expected dominant preparation, but instead moves to a  $IV^9$  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  $B^{\flat 4}_3$  chord ( $II^4_3$  of A, which is II of G); it alternates with  $V^7/II$  for four measures. Instead of resolving to A (II) in m. 21,  $G^{\sharp}$  is lowered a half step to  $G^{\flat}$ , which elegantly changes its harmonic goal to the dominant; an auxiliary  $E^7$  chord alternates with  $A^7$  ( $V^7/V$ ) for three measures before reaching  $D^7$  ( $V^7$ ) 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  $V^7/II$ , 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

grow \_\_\_\_\_ To tell the truth it's

made me kind of cra - - zy A keep - er fol - lows

ev - 'ry-where I go, \_\_\_\_\_ But you can stop

(b) analysis

15 17 19 21 23 25

I V<sup>7</sup>/IV IV <sup>b3</sup> IV<sup>6</sup> I V/V 7 [susp.] V I



FIGURE 2. Warren, "Nagasaki" (1928), mm. 16–25

(a) score

woo Oh Fu - ji - a - ma You get a mom-mer And then your trou-bles in-crease —  
Oh sweet Ki - mo - na I pulled a bon - er I kept it up at high speed —

In some pa - go - da She or - ders so - da The earth shakes milk-shakes ten cents a piece They  
I got rheu-mat-ics And then sci-at-ics of hal - i - to - sis that's guar-an-tee'd You

(b) analysis

16 17 19 21 23

I IV IV<sup>b3</sup> I<sup>6</sup> V<sup>6</sup><sub>5</sub>/IV IV IV<sup>b3</sup> I<sup>6</sup> +6 V<sup>7</sup>/V V I

FIGURE 3. Berlin, "What Does It Matter?" (1927), mm. 15–25

(a) score

mat - ter? Life is nev - er one sweet song

Things are lia - ble to go wrong What does it mat

(b) analysis

15 17 19 21 23 25

I V<sup>7</sup>/IV IV I V<sup>7</sup>/II V<sup>7</sup>/IV V<sup>7</sup> I

FIGURE 4. Gershwin, "Someone To Watch Over Me" (1926), mm. 15–25

(a) score

me. Al - though he may not be the  
me. She may be far she may be

man some girls think of as hand - some. To my heart, he car - ries the  
near - by; I'm prom - is - ing here - by, to my heart, she'll car - ry the

key. Won't  
key. And

(b) analysis

15 17 19 21 23 25

I IV V<sup>9</sup> I IV I<sup>6</sup> V<sup>7</sup>/ V<sup>7</sup>/ (7) V<sup>6</sup>/ V<sup>7</sup> V<sup>7</sup> I

(circle of fifths)

FIGURE 5. Gershwin, “Hey! Hey! Let 'Er Go” (1924), mm. 15–25

(a) score

The musical score for Gershwin's "Hey! Hey! Let 'Er Go" (mm. 15–25) is presented in three systems. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The first system (mm. 15–18) features a vocal line with the lyrics "crowd. Sing a song or tell a joke" and a piano accompaniment with a *cresc.* marking. The second system (mm. 19–22) continues the vocal line with "Take a chance and laugh right out" and the piano accompaniment, which includes a *ff* marking. The third system (mm. 23–25) shows the vocal line with "loud. Raise" and the piano accompaniment. The score is written in a standard musical notation with treble and bass staves for the piano and a single staff for the vocal line.

(b) analysis

The musical analysis of Gershwin's "Hey! Hey! Let 'Er Go" (mm. 15–25) is presented in a single system. The key signature is B-flat major. The analysis shows the harmonic structure of the piano accompaniment, with measures 15 through 25 numbered above the staff. The harmonic analysis below the staff identifies the chords used in each measure: I (m. 15), IV<sup>add 6</sup> (m. 16), II (m. 17), V<sup>7</sup>/II (m. 18), II<sup>6</sup> - - 7 (m. 19), V (m. 20), and I (m. 21). The analysis also includes a melodic line for the vocal part, with a long phrase spanning from measure 21 to 25, and a piano accompaniment line. The analysis is written in a standard musical notation with treble and bass staves for the piano and a single staff for the vocal line.

FIGURE 6. Berlin, "Some Sunny Day" (1922), mm. 17–25

(a) score

Some sun - ny day\_ I'll be on\_ that ex-press\_ Fly - ing a-way\_

\_ to my lit-tle bunch of hap-pi-ness\_ Oh,

The musical score for "Some Sunny Day" (mm. 17-25) is presented in two systems. The first system contains measures 17-20, and the second system contains measures 21-25. The score is in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The vocal line is written in a single staff with lyrics underneath. The piano accompaniment is written in two staves (treble and bass clef). The lyrics are: "Some sun - ny day\_ I'll be on\_ that ex-press\_ Fly - ing a-way\_" and "\_ to my lit-tle bunch of hap-pi-ness\_ Oh,".

(b) analysis

17 19 21 23 25

V<sup>7</sup> IV V<sup>4</sup><sub>3</sub> II V<sup>7</sup> V<sup>7</sup> V<sup>7</sup> I

/IV /II /V

The musical analysis of "Some Sunny Day" (mm. 17-25) is presented in two systems. The first system contains measures 17-20, and the second system contains measures 21-25. The analysis is in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The analysis shows the harmonic structure of the piano accompaniment. The chords are labeled as follows: V<sup>7</sup>/IV (m. 17), IV (m. 18), V<sup>4</sup><sub>3</sub>/II (m. 19), II (m. 20), V<sup>7</sup>/II (m. 21), V<sup>7</sup>/V (m. 22), V<sup>7</sup> (m. 23), and I (m. 24). A dashed line connects the notes in measures 19 and 20, indicating a melodic line.

FIGURE 7. Berlin, "How About Me?" (1928), mm. 15–25

(a) score

me? You'll find some bod-y new but what am I to do?

I'll still re-mem-ber you, when you have for - got - ten

(b) analysis

15 17 19 21 23 25

sus sus ant

I IV V<sup>7</sup>/III III V<sup>7</sup>/II II V<sup>7</sup>/V V<sup>7</sup> I

FIGURE 8. Burke, "If I'm Dreaming" (1929), mm. 15–25

(a) score

The musical score for "If I'm Dreaming" (mm. 15–25) is presented in two systems. The first system (mm. 15–18) features a vocal line with lyrics "soon And now, that it's blos-som time, who could be im -" and a piano accompaniment. The second system (mm. 19–25) continues the vocal line with lyrics "mune To all these temp - ta - tions of June? Here is a girl," and the piano accompaniment. The score is in G major, 4/4 time, and includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and accidentals.

(b) analysis

The musical analysis of "If I'm Dreaming" (mm. 15–25) is presented in two systems. The first system (mm. 15–18) shows the vocal line with lyrics "soon And now, that it's blos-som time, who could be im -" and the piano accompaniment. The second system (mm. 19–25) continues the vocal line with lyrics "mune To all these temp - ta - tions of June? Here is a girl," and the piano accompaniment. The analysis includes Roman numerals for the chords: I, V<sup>7</sup>/IV, IV, VII<sup>°</sup><sub>5</sub>/III, 7, III, V<sup>7</sup>/II, II, V<sup>7</sup>/II, II, V<sup>7</sup>, and I.

FIGURE 9. Warren, "Cryin' For the Carolines" (1930), mm. 16–25

(a) score

lines How can I

smile mile af - ter mile There's not a bit of green here

Bird - ies all stay far far a - way They're sel - dom ev - er

seen here Where

(b) analysis

16 17 19 21 23 25

I V<sup>7</sup> IV V<sup>7</sup> IV V<sup>7</sup> III V<sup>7</sup> III VI V 7 I

/IV /IV /III /III



FIGURE 10. Gershwin, "My One and Only" (1927), mm. 17–25

(a) score

*mf*

I'm not ask - ing an - y mir - a - cle; it can be done! It

*mf*

can be done! — I know a cler - gy - man who will grow lyr - i - cal

*p*

and make us one, and make us one. So my

*p*

(b) analysis

17 19 21 23 25

I V<sup>7</sup>/IV IV<sup>7</sup> IV<sup>b3</sup> I V<sup>7</sup>/IV IV<sup>7</sup> VI<sup>7</sup> V<sup>7</sup>||II<sup>7</sup>

FIGURE 11. Berlin, "What'll I Do? (1924), mm. 15–24

(a) score

do \_\_\_\_\_ What 'll I do \_\_\_\_\_ with just \_\_\_\_\_ a phot - o - graph \_\_\_\_\_ To tell \_\_\_\_\_ my troub - les to \_\_\_\_\_ When I'm a -

(b) analysis

15 17 19 21 23 25

I V<sup>7</sup>/IV IV II IV II<sup>6</sup> V<sup>4</sup><sub>4</sub>/II V<sup>7</sup>/V V<sup>7</sup> 4/3 V<sup>4</sup><sub>4</sub> I

FIGURE 12. Gershwin and Daly, “Innocent Ingenue Baby” (1922), mm. 16–25

(a) score

The musical score for "Innocent Ingenue Baby" (mm. 16–25) is presented in three systems. Each system consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The lyrics are: "But there's a some-thing, some-where, some-how, smil-ing in your smile That sets me wink-ing, blink-ing, think-ing, ev-'ry lit-tle while — Won't you make a trial? In -". The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line and a more active treble line with chords and arpeggios.

(b) analysis

The musical analysis of the piano accompaniment for "Innocent Ingenue Baby" (mm. 16–25) is presented in a single system. The analysis shows the harmonic structure of the piano accompaniment, with measures 16 through 25. The key signature is B-flat major. The analysis includes the following chord symbols: I, V<sup>7</sup>/III, III, V<sup>7</sup>/IV, V, V<sup>7</sup>/IV, IV, II<sup>7</sup>, V<sup>7</sup>, and I. The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line and a more active treble line with chords and arpeggios.

FIGURE 13. Gershwin, “S Wonderful” (1927), mm. 15–25

(a) score

see! \_\_\_\_\_ You've made my life so  
 see! \_\_\_\_\_ My dear, it's four - leaf  
 see! \_\_\_\_\_ You've made my life so

glam - or - ous, \_\_\_\_\_ you can't blame me for feel - ing  
 clo - ver time, \_\_\_\_\_ from now on my heart's work - ing  
 tin - gl - ish, \_\_\_\_\_ I'll e - ven o - ver - look your

am - o - rous. \_\_\_\_\_ Oh! 'S won - der -  
 o - ver - time. \_\_\_\_\_ Oh! 'S won - der -  
 En - gl - ish! \_\_\_\_\_ 'S ex - cep - tion -

(b) analysis

15 17 19 21 23 25

sus sus sus pt

I<sup>add6</sup> V III<sup>4</sup> V<sup>2</sup> III<sup>6</sup> V<sup>7</sup> VII<sup>6</sup> V<sup>7</sup> V<sup>7</sup> V<sup>7</sup> I  
 /III /III [circle of fifths]

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

(a) score

hands. If the charge is lov - ing you then I'm guilt - y dear. Tell me that you love me too, and I'll have no fear. It

(b) analysis

15 17 19 21 23 25

I V<sup>7</sup>/III III V<sup>4</sup>/III III<sup>6</sup> III V<sup>4</sup> V<sup>2</sup>/IV V<sup>6</sup> V<sup>4</sup>/II V<sup>4</sup>-4-7 VII<sup>7</sup>

FIGURE 15. DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson, "Pompanola" (1928), mm. 15–26

(a) score

glance. Let's go Kick - ing

high dip - ping low! How can care and woe ad - vance

— Come ev - 'ry-bod-y strike up the Band!

(b) analysis

15 17 19 21 23 25

I III ——— III V<sup>7</sup> III V<sup>6</sup> V<sup>7</sup> I  
/III /III

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

(a) score

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

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

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

*mf poco espr.* *poco rit.* *dim.* *p*

(b) analysis

16 17 19 21 23 25

sus sus

I V<sup>7</sup>/V<sup>1</sup> VI V<sup>7</sup>/V<sup>1</sup> VI VII<sup>°3</sup>/II II<sup>6</sup> V<sup>7</sup> I

FIGURE 17. DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson, "Varsity Drag" (1927), mm. 17–25

(a) score

The musical score for "Varsity Drag" (mm. 17–25) is presented in two systems. The first system contains measures 17–20, and the second system contains measures 21–25. Each system features a vocal line on a single treble staff and a piano accompaniment on a grand staff (treble and bass staves). The lyrics are: "You can pass man-y a class, wheth-er you're dumb or wise. If you all an-swer the call, when your pro-fess-or cries: 'Ev-'ry-bo-dy down on the heels,". The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The piano accompaniment includes various chords, some with triplets and slurs, and a wavy line indicating a tremolo in measure 21.

(b) analysis

The musical analysis of "Varsity Drag" (mm. 17–25) is presented in two systems. The first system contains measures 17–20, and the second system contains measures 21–25. The analysis shows the harmonic structure of the piano accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The analysis includes a wavy line indicating a tremolo in measure 21. The harmonic analysis is as follows:

Measure	Harmonic Analysis
17	V <sup>7</sup> /VI
18	V <sup>7</sup>
19	I
20	IV <sup>b3</sup>
21	I
22	IV <sup>b3</sup>
23	I <sup>6</sup>
24	V <sup>7</sup>
25	I



**FIGURE 18.** Gershwin, “Nashville Nightingale” (1923), mm. 16–25

(a) score

When you sing di-do-do, di-do-do, di-do-do, di-do-do. Oh, oh, oh, oh,

bird-ie how you thrill me Di, do-do, di-do-do, di-do-do, di-do-do Dark-town Tet-raz -

zin-i how you kill me 'Neath the

(b) analysis

16 17 19 21 23 25

I V<sup>7</sup>/ V<sup>7</sup>/ V<sup>7</sup>/ V<sup>7</sup> I

(circle of fifths)

FIGURE 19. DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson, "I'm On the Crest Of a Wave" (1928), mm. 15–25

(a) score

wave. — Once it was

Low tide No tide I could-nt win, — But now it's

my tide high tide, Here I come, roll-ing in With o -

(b) analysis

15 17 19 21 23 25

I 7/V 9/V 7/V 9/V I

[circle of 5ths]

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

(a) score

thru, I used to trav-el sing-le O, We chanced to ming-le O, Now

I'm a ting-le O - ver you. Say Mis-ter Par -

(b) analysis

15 17 19 21 23 25

I IV I V<sup>7</sup>/<sub>IV</sub> II<sup>6</sup> V<sup>3</sup>/<sub>II</sub> II V<sup>7</sup>/<sub>V</sub> V<sup>9</sup>---7 I

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

(a) score

Low - Down! Phi - los - o - pher or dea - con, You sim - ply have to weak - en.

Hear those shuf - fling feet! — You can't keep your seat! — Professor! Start your beat! — Come

(b) analysis

15 17 19 21 23 25

I V  $\frac{4}{3}$  /VI 6/5 7 V  $\frac{4}{3}$  /II V <sup>9</sup> /V II <sup>9</sup> II <sup>9</sup> IV <sup>9</sup> I

FIGURE 22. DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson, "Because You're Beautiful" (1928), mm. 15–25

(a) score

The musical score is presented in three systems, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are as follows:

sis - ter does!                      Though I know that you may pooh  
beau - ti - ful                      Though I know that you may pooh

- pooh                      it                      That's my sto - ry and I am  
- pooh                      it                      That's my sto - ry and I am

stick - ing —                      to it ev -  
stick - ing —                      to it ev -

The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line in the left hand and a more complex melody in the right hand, often using chords and arpeggios.

(b) analysis

The analysis shows the piano accompaniment from measures 15 to 25, with measure numbers 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, and 25 marked above the staff. The harmonic analysis is indicated by Roman numerals below the staff:

I                      V<sup>7</sup> / II                      II<sup>7</sup> V<sup>7</sup>                      V<sup>7</sup> I

The analysis highlights the harmonic structure of the piano accompaniment, showing a progression from I to V<sup>7</sup> / II, then to II<sup>7</sup> V<sup>7</sup>, and finally to V<sup>7</sup> I. The notation includes a dashed line connecting the notes in measures 21 and 22, and a '5' below the bass line in measure 25.

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

(a) score

mile! When I hear “Yan - kee Doo - dle”, that mel - o - dy

keeps on ring - ing in my ear; “Yan - kee Doo - dle,”

that mel - o - dy makes me stand right up and cheer, “I’m com-ing!” U.

(b) analysis

15 17 19 21 23 25

III I V<sup>7</sup>/IV IV V<sup>7</sup>/IV V I

FIGURE 24. Gershwin, "Looking For a Boy" (1925), mm. 12–25

(a) score

bring to me The har - mo - ny I'm dream - ing

of. It - 'll be good - bye, I know,

To my tale of woe, When he says "Hel -

-lo!" So I'

(b) analysis

12 14 16 17 19 21 23 25

I III  $V^7/III$  III  $V^7/II$  II  $II^7/II$   $V^7/II$  6  $II^7/II$   $V^7/II$  VI V ----- 7 I

FIGURE 25. Rodgers, "My Man Is On the Make" (1929), mm. 15–25

(a) score

fail! He's worked him - self in - to a lath - er,

He's start - ing to puff! All rea - dy to gath - er,

I'm rea - dy for rough hot stuff! Cut

(b) analysis

15 17 19 21 23 25

I V<sub>4</sub>/IV IV add6 II<sup>6</sup> V<sup>7</sup> IV add6 V<sub>4</sub> V<sub>4</sub>/V V<sup>7</sup>/V



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## 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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