



Bennett, J. (2011) 'If you build it, they will come'. *Total Guitar*, 216, pp. 40. ISSN 1355-5049

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Songwriting



IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME

“You don’t hear AABA much now, but the odd singer-songwriter uses it to state their ‘timeless’ credentials”

MOST songs consist of a small number of basic building blocks and the order of these defines the form. Some of the blocks will be familiar to anyone – intro, verse, chorus, bridge and so on – and each has its own characteristics. A verse has the same melody and different lyrics each time it repeats, while a chorus usually has identical lyrics and melody each time you hear it. Intros and outros can have their own original music, but are often just an instrumental version of another section. (Ever noticed how the intro chords for lots of chart hits are the same as those for the chorus? This is a psychological trick played on the listener so that when the ‘real’ chorus arrives, we feel we already know it.)

The history of Western pop/rock music is dominated by two song forms – AABA (also called ‘jazz standard’ or ‘32-bar’ form) and AB (or ‘chorus form’). AABA was the most common for the first half of the 20th century, then AB took over during the birth of rock ‘n’ roll in the 50s and is still used in most songs today.

The 32-bar standard follows a few simple rules: each verse is eight bars long and usually includes the title at the beginning or end; after two verses there’s an eight-bar bridge, or ‘middle eight’, section with different music and

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a new idea introduced in the lyrics; then there’s a concluding verse. After solos, repeat to (good) taste. Thousands of UK and US hit songs from the early 20th century follow this template, including *Ain’t Misbehavin’*, *Makin’ Whoopee* and *Over The Rainbow*, and the trend continued into early rock ‘n’ roll (*Great Balls Of Fire*, *All I Have To Do Is Dream*). The Beatles were big fans – remember they used to cover a lot of old show tunes in the Hamburg days. *A Hard Day’s Night* and *Yesterday* are both AABA-form songs with tweaks (*Yesterday* has seven-bar verses and substitutes the title in verse two, while *A Hard Day’s Night* uses 12-bar verses and adds a solo during one repeated verse). AABA has been used with adaptations by many successful rock songwriters, including Pete Townshend (*Behind Blue Eyes*), Hetfield/Ulrich (*Nothing Else Matters*) and Sting (*Every Breath You Take*). You don’t hear AABA much these days, but the occasional singer-songwriter uses it to state their ‘timeless’ credentials (I’m looking at you, Katie Melua and Norah Jones!). You may find 32-bar songs can be pleasingly easy to write precisely because the form is so restrictive – and it’s surprising how ‘authentic’ the results can sound if you have a good title and melody.

AB form is simpler and more flexible – the term just refers to any song with a repeating chorus (even those with added breakdowns or bridges etc). But writing really effective choruses is easier said than done. One common difficulty experienced by many new writers is their choruses come out too long, involved, wordy or complicated. Here more than anywhere, the songwriter can benefit from simple repetition. Just look at the evidence: *Back In Black* and *Sweet Child O’ Mine* just repeat the title a few times, as do any number of other well-loved rock standards, including *Born In The USA*, *We Will Rock You* and *Killing In The Name*. Even songs with weirdo lyrics such as *Hotel California* and *Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds* save the complicated imagery for the verses and ramp up the title count in the chorus. Some chorus-form songs have an extra section called a pre-chorus, which as the name suggests, arrives immediately before the chorus and often has a chorus-like quality (Bon Jovi’s *Livin’ On A Prayer* has a pre-chorus that ends with ‘We’ll give it a shot’).

An honourable mention has to go to the chorus-less AAA (folk song) form, which dates back centuries and is still in occasional use (Squeeze’s *Cool For Cats*, Dylan’s *All Along The Watchtower*). And finally, there’s the option of ignoring the rulebook completely. Experimental form has been going on for decades (Genesis, Radiohead, even Girls Aloud) and there’s nothing wrong with bending the song into whatever shape suits your creative vision. But it’s amazing how many timeless classics have been written ‘inside the box’ and won the hearts of millions of music fans. Those Tin Pan Alley guys sure knew what they were doing. ●