

Song Forms in Bob Dylan's Work

There are two basic ways to construct a song, depending how its building-blocks, the units that make up the song, are organized. These two kinds of songs can be called **strophic** and **non-strophic**.

Strophic Songs

A strophic song has a single kind of unit, called a **strophe** or **stanza**, which is repeated indefinitely many times. The unit is both musical and lyrical: the same music is repeated, and though the lyrics change they maintain formal constancies like the lengths of the lines (in beats) and the rhyme scheme. Strophic songs are especially associated with folk musical traditions.

"Bob Dylan's Dream" is a simply strophic song: a pattern of chords and melody is repeated seven times, matched with words grouped into lines of four beats each, rhymed in couplets (aabb).

Two special kinds of strophic song are important to identify: the **ballad** stanza and the classic or 12-bar **blues**. Notice that these forms are central to the two strains of American music that meet in Dylan's work.

The **ballad** stanza is a four-line strophe in which, typically, the first and third lines are four beats long and the second and fourth are three beats long. (Sometimes the first line is shortened to three beats. The form is very close to that used in hymns as well.) The second and fourth lines rhyme, and sometimes the first and third.

Though Dylan performed many traditional ballads early in his career, not many of his songs confine themselves to the ballad stanza in its pure form. "Boots of Spanish Leather" comes close. Sometimes he builds more complicated structures on a ballad-stanza foundation, as in "Gates of Eden": each strophe has three (not two) pairs of lines that add up to seven beats, and a final line that ends with the title-refrain.

The 12-bar **blues** traditionally uses strophes that are three lines long, all rhymed, with the second line repeating the first. Dylan's "Ballad [!] of Hollis Brown" is an example, and so are some, but not all, of his songs with "Blues" in the title: "Black Crow Blues" and "Call Letter Blues," but not "Bob Dylan's Blues." (The lyric line in classic vocal blues is often an iambic pentameter, but this is rarely if ever true in Dylan.)

Refrains

Very often a song's strophes are bound together by more specific repetitions in the words. **Refrain** is a general term for these repetitions, especially when (as is usual) it occurs at the end of the strophe.

"Desolation Row" is an example of a strophic song with a brief refrain: the title phrase ends every stanza. "A Simple Twist of Fate" is another example. The refrain can be more extended, as in "Blowin' in the Wind": its refrain is two lines long (and just to rub it in, those lines come close to repeating each other).

If the refrain grows long and complex enough, it's common to think of the song as having a **verse** and **chorus** structure. "Mr Tambourine Man" is a good example. The four-line section containing the title phrase is the **chorus**; the words as well as the music are the same every time, so it's an extended refrain. It always follows a **verse** in which the music is the same but the words change. The four verses are rhymed aabccb. As he often does, Dylan further complicates this pattern: the last verse is extended, and the chorus not only follows each verse but also begins the song.

Non-Strophic Structures

A verse-and-chorus song already strains the definition of strophic song, because it essentially alternates two different kinds of units. More elaborate **non-strophic** organizations of songs are especially associated with "Tin Pan Alley" or "American songbook" or "show-tune" music, and also with Ragtime.

These structures are described by assigning a letter to each kind of unit. The most standard structure is AABA. (Think of "As Time Goes By" or "I Wanna Hold Your Hand"—there are many thousands of examples.) The B part is called the **bridge** (or various other names).

A Dylan song that uses this structure is "I Threw it All Away." Another is "To Be Alone with You" from the same album; it's interesting to think about why *Nashville Skyline* should be the easiest place to find clear examples of this classic AABA structure.

Sometimes, again, Dylan complicates this pattern by extending it. "Absolutely Sweet Marie" is a good example: it has two bridges and some extra main strains, for an overall structure of AABABAAA. Furthermore, each A strain has a refrain line. *Blonde on Blonde* contains other related examples: "Most Likely You Go Your Way and I Go Mine" is an AABA song with refrains, and "Temporary Like Achilles" is AABAA.