Form and Structure

From *Fundamentals of Jazz Improvisation: What Everybody Thinks You Already Know*

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Form

All music has some sort of organization or design. Most jazz tunes are sectional. Alphabetic indicators (A, B, C, etc.) are used to designate melodic and harmonic structures. If a significant portion of the composition recurs, the same indicator is used for each recurrence. Minor modifications to a melody or harmony usually don’t justify the use of a different alphabetic label.

Phrases tend to be in 8-measure units, especially those tunes taken from the songbook repertoire. Often, 8-measure units are in two groups of four in an antecedent/consequence (question/answer, call and response) manner. Amidst the commonality of 8-bar phrasing there are examples of different phrase lengths. Blues tunes are often organized into three 4-bar phrases. Benny Golson’s Stablemates (below) has phrases of 14+8+14. Other tunes might have 7, 9, 11, or other length phrases. Clues for analysis include harmonic cadences and recurring thematic material. Tunes with text have additional clues of sentence punctuation.

Example 1: Blues (AAB), 1st chorus (see below) of Fine and Mellow (Billie Holiday)

The A section melody is the same for each A except for three notes at the onset of the second A. The text is also similar with only one added word in the second A. The harmony moves to IV in m. 5 and returns to I in m. 7. These differences between A sections can be labeled A and A’ (prime) but usually are not.

The B section contrasts more distinctly in m. 9, enough to use a new letter. Instrumental renditions of tunes don’t use text; however, the example herein does and lends to the labeling of AAB as the first two 4-bar sections are similar but the third uses new text. The harmonic change is no more drastic than m. 5 but still adds to the contrast of AA to B.
Example 2: Blues (AAA), *Bag’s Groove* (Milt Jackson)

It is not uncommon for a blues to repeat the same 4-bar phrase three times in its 12-bar form. Even though the chords are different in each 4-bar section, it is labeled AAA because of the melody.

Example 3: Blues (through composed), *Blues for Alice* (Charlie Parker)

Tunes with no significant repetition of thematic material are labeled *through composed.*
Example 4: Rhythm Changes (AABA), *Anthropology* (Charlie Parker)

The 8-bar phrases in most rhythm tunes can be divided into 4-bar groups. The second A is often slightly different from the first A. Chords at the end of the first A are designed to lead into, or turnaround, and start the same phrase over; whereas, chords at the end of the second phrase prepare the bridge. Rhythm tunes usually resolve to the tonic chord at the end of the second A. This provides contrast into the bridge from tonic (B-flat) to the chromatic mediant (D7), an interesting color. Similar principles apply to the melody, often resolving to a note other than tonic at the end of the first A, less final. The third A in *Anthropology* melodically resolves to tonic whereas the first and second A sections do not.
Example 5: ABAB, *There Will Never Be Another You* (Mack Gordon and Harry Warren)

The A sections are identical but the B sections are not. A majority of the melodic and harmonic material in the second B is different than the first B; however, the onset of melody is the same giving the listener the impression of a return.
Example 6: AABC, *Autumn Leaves* (Johnny Mercer and Joseph Kosma)

A notable component of this tune is its recurring chord sequences. The first 4-bars of B are the same as the last 4-bars of A. The second 4-bars of B are the same as the first 4-bars of A. C begins the same as B but moves into a cycle of ii V7s. Melodically, the A sections are identical except for the more final resolution to tonic at the end of the second A.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{A} & \quad C- \quad F7 \quad G- \quad Bb7 \quad Eb7(11) \\
\text{A} & \quad C- \quad F7 \quad G- \\
\text{A} & \quad C- \quad F7 \quad G- \\
\text{B} & \quad C- \quad F7 \quad G- \\
\text{C} & \quad F- \quad Bb7 \quad C7 \\
\text{B} & \quad C- \quad F7 \quad G- \\
\text{C} & \quad F- \quad Bb7 \quad C7 \\
\text{A} & \quad C- \quad F7 \quad G- \\
\end{align*}
\]
Example 7: ABA irregular phrase lengths, *Stablemates* (Benny Golson)

This ABA form uses is organized into 14+8+14 measure melodic and harmonic units. The 14 measure phrases can be grouped into two 7-measure parts, the first resolving to G-flat major and the second to D-flat major. The B section (bridge) is an 8-bar phrase in two groups of four.
Structure

By structure it is meant how the Head is turned into a complete performance. How is the arrangement created on stage?

A few definitions are necessary:

*Backgrounds*: accompanying material improvised by players not soloing, can be behind head melody or improvised solo, usually by wind instrumentalists as opposed to rhythm section musicians or vocalists.

*Changes*: the chord sequence specific to a tune or structural component.

*Chorus*: one time through the form of the tune (what is found on the lead sheet).

*Coda*: same as tag, literally means *tail*, extra music at the end of the out head designed to help bring the performance to a conclusion.

*Form*: the phrase structure of the head including melody and chord sequence (i.e. AABA).

*Head*: composed melody and accompanying chords, what is often found on a lead sheet, usually played two times at the beginning and end but may be only once dependent upon length.

*Interlude*: a section of music performed between improvised solos or other parts of the structure.

*Intro*: (introduction), something played before the main melody starts. This is outlined in detail below.

*Kick*: any musical element that encourages a soloist, often by the drummer but can be a written line for wind players.

*Lead In*: and interlude between the head and the first soloist, also called a kick (although this term has other meanings).

*Lead Sheet*: a page of music containing a single-line melody and chord symbols. Some lead sheets may contain important harmony parts or contrapuntal lines. Lead sheets do not include written arrangements for all players.

*Solo Break*: space for soloist alone, rhythm section stops playing, most commonly when a head melody resolves on bar 7 of last A section two bars before return to top of the form.

*Tag*: a coda, extra music at the end of the out head designed to help bring the performance to a conclusion.
An outline of an on-stage performance might include some or all of the above segments, as follows:

Example 1: most simple

Example 2: perhaps most common

Example 3: most complex, requires prepared parts (memory or written)