

A Queer Orientation to Pop: Song Form in the Music of Laura Nyro

Rachel Avery

Pop songs take listeners on a journey through formal sections, drawing on conventions to conjure sections we recognise as verses, choruses, and bridges. These sections present enough features to make them recognisable, and tend to fall in the same sequence within any given song. But what happens when this succession is interrupted, or takes a different course entirely? Forms that pursue non-standard paths become marked, drawing attention to the song's structure and its relationship to these conventions. Examining songs by American songwriter-performer Laura Nyro (1947–1997), and engaging with Jennifer Rycenga's provocation to consider song form from a queer perspective,¹ I pursue queer aesthetic analysis to make sense of these wayward paths through song form.

Nyro's songs, particularly those on her second and third albums *Eli and the Thirteenth Confession* [*Eli*, 1968] and *New York Tendaberry* [*NYT*, 1969], feature atypical formal structures that may enthrall or baffle listeners depending on their aesthetic sensibilities. Her approach to songwriting inspired her peers including Elton John, Joni Mitchell, Rickie Lee Jones, and Todd

¹ Jennifer Rycenga, 'Endless Caresses: Queer Exuberance in Large-Scale Form in Rock,' in *Queering the Popular Pitch*, ed. Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga (New York: Routledge, 2006), 235–48.

Rundgren.² As a teenager she penned songs that, recorded by other artists, reached the *Billboard* Top Ten. Yet the albums she was recording at that time also elicited negative responses. For instance, *Rolling Stone's* Jon Landau criticised her for 'clutter[ing]' her music with 'superfluous emoting,' and Columbia Records' president Clive Davis lamented that Nyro was musically 'self-indulgent,' inhibiting potential pop success by going on 'a trip of her own.'³

Nyro's songs are eminently listenable and innovative, familiar and deviant, and her unconventional treatments of standard forms invite interrogation. Many of her songs include abrupt and repeated shifts of meter, sections that go on 'too long,'⁴ significant tempo fluctuations, frequently opaque lyrics, and eruptions and disappearances of orchestrated backing that are not necessarily motivated by location in the form. While my focus in this paper is on form, these features all mark Nyro's music as distinct from mainstream popular music, and, I suggest, a contribute to a queer aesthetic sensibility. Recollections from Clive Davis reveal Nyro's firm opposition to modifying her songs to conform with standard models for a successful single, suggesting that she highly valued their full forms.⁵ What is striking to me, and what I believe generates both surprise and engagement with her music, is the strong connection to traditional and contemporary pop song forms and genres that her music maintains even as it departs from them. In light of her queer sexuality, I aim to understand her approach to song form in the framework of queer aesthetics, finding meaning and value in the 'trip[s] of her own' that others have lamented.⁶ I use the term 'queer' in its fluid sense,⁷ while noting that Nyro herself generally resisted labels in her life and music.⁸

Nyro's divergent approach to form erodes the certainty that, for instance, a bridge leads to a chorus. Identifying a formal function in her music is not a secure cue to the next stop along the song's trajectory. Phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes of disorientation which spurs 'the intellectual experience of disorder [alongside] the vital experience of giddiness and nausea.'⁹ While Merleau-Ponty focuses on the re-orienting resolution of these experiences,

² John describes Nyro as 'one of my favourite singers of all time and writers of all time' (*American Masters*, 'Elton John: Inventing David Geffen,' American Masters Digital Archive (WNET), published 16 February 2010, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/archive/interview/elton-john>); Mitchell remarked, 'Laura exerted an influence on me. I looked to her and took some direction from her,' in Dave DiMartino, 'The Unfiltered Joni Mitchell,' *MOJO* (August 1998): 84; Jones commented, '[Nyro] was so unlike anything that I had ever heard. And I think it really inspired me in a great way' (*Morning Edition*, 'Intersections: The Education of Rickie Lee Jones,' on NPR, 9 February 2004, <https://www.npr.org/2004/02/09/1643112/intersections-the-education-of-rickie-lee-jones>); Rundgren recalled of *Eli*: 'It blew my mind, it blew everybody's mind ... the songwriting was hers, it wasn't like anybody else's songwriting ... I was such a fan' ('Todd Rundgren on Working With Laura Nyro,' *Red Bull Music Academy*, 4 October 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APZN_uL-z0A).

³ Jon Landau, 'Laura Nyro: Eli & The 13th Confession,' *Rolling Stone*, 28 September 1968, 29; Clive Davis and James Willwerth, *Clive: Inside the Record Business* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1975), 98–99.

⁴ A clear example of Nyro's composition being viewed as disproportionate is the near-complete cut of the final section of 'Eli's Comin' for its release as a single; comments by Davis, such as those cited above, indicate a general frustration with Nyro's writing for its disregard for conventional section lengths.

⁵ Davis and Willwerth, *Clive: Inside the Record Business*, 99.

⁶ Davis and Willwerth, *Clive: Inside the Record Business*, 99.

⁷ This sense is illuminated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who writes that queer 'can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically.' Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 8.

⁸ Michelle Kort, *Soul Picnic: the Music and Passion of Laura Nyro* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2002), 217.

⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 296.

Sara Ahmed proposes, 'if we stay with such moments then we might achieve a different orientation toward them; such moments may be the source of vitality as well as giddiness. We might even find joy and excitement in the horror.'¹⁰ A queer phenomenology, as Ahmed offers, allows Nyro's songs, and the disorientation that their forms provoke, to be regarded as queer deviations from the charted course of song form, offering a vitality that some listeners, including Nyro's many devoted fans, are drawn to even as others turn away.

Decades before Ahmed wrote of a queer slant, E.M. Forster described the queer poet C.P. Cavafy as 'standing ... at a slight angle to the universe,' employing this characterisation twice more in the short essay. Forster's use of 'slight' is important; the poet and his speech are at an angle such that they are not in line with the universe, but not so far off that they are alien, incomprehensible. Forster's descriptions bear quoting at length:

Such a writer can never be popular. He flies both too slowly and too high. Whether subjective or objective, he is equally remote from the bustle of the moment, he will never compose either a Royalist or a Venizelist Hymn. He has the strength (and of course the limitations) of the recluse, who, though not afraid of the world, always stands at a slight angle to it ... He may be prevailed upon to begin a sentence—an immense complicated yet shapely sentence, full of parentheses that never get mixed and of reservations that really do reserve; a sentence that moves with logic to its foreseen end, yet to an end that is always more vivid and thrilling than one foresaw ... And despite its intellectual richness and human outlook, despite the matured charity of its judgements, one feels that it too stands at a slight angle to the universe: it is the sentence of a poet.¹¹

Additionally, as Forster highlights, aesthetic tendencies and reception are fundamentally entwined; art forms approached at a slant are, he suggests, excluded from popularity. Although reception is not my focus here, Nyro's marginal position in the pop pantheon bears consideration, and I suggest that her approach to song form is one factor that contributes to this position.

Drawing on Ahmed's theorising of queer phenomenology, I will address Nyro's atypical uses of standard formal elements and design, illustrated through analysis of the songs 'Mercy on Broadway,' 'Timer,' and 'Sweet lovin baby.'¹²

A Queer View of Song Form

Form is an especially abstract aspect of song in terms of cultural meaning. Other features, such as lyrics, may contain more direct references to identities including gender and sexuality. However, feminist musicology has called attention to how classical music forms have long been viewed through gendered terms. Susan McClary notably illuminated the gendering of commonplace aspects of Western music including sonata form and cadences, advising that such features are 'habits of cultural thought,' asking, 'What are the assumptions that fuel these mechanisms so often called by the neutral name of "tension and release" ...? Whose models of subjectivity are they, given that they are not universal? To what ends are they employed in compositions? What is it, in other words, that the listener is being invited to desire and why?'¹³

¹⁰ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 4.

¹¹ E.M. Forster, 'The Poetry of C.P. Cavafy,' in *Pharos and Pharillon* (Surrey: Hogarth Press, 1923), 91–97, https://archive.org/stream/pharosandpharillon030745mbp/pharosandpharillon030745mbp_djvu.txt.

¹² Nyro exercised thorough and detailed artistic control over her albums, and her choices regarding capitalisation and punctuation in her lyrics are reflected here.

¹³ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 13, 16.

Queer musicology has pursued similar lines of questioning, yet form, particularly in popular music, remains under-theorised within queer aesthetics. Rycenga introduces a queer window towards extended forms in pop music. Drawing on theories of 'excess and exuberance' in the natural world advanced by Bruce Bagemihl,¹⁴ she considers how a queer organicism could be perceived in musical form. Asking whether pleasure can be understood as a component of organic form, Rycenga wonders, 'what if the organic was seen as extravagant, luxuriant, inelegant, even clitoral?' Rycenga distinguishes this proposed formal pleasure from that of traditional formal listening, wherein 'the (alleged) pleasure ... arises from measuring the music against an abstract and absent model,' a process that has 'a kind of compulsory reproductive mandate' and 'an imperative for abstraction.' In contrast, she proposes that a queer, somatic pleasure can be drawn from music such as that of Yes and PJ Harvey, wherein 'excess queers the form, merging the boundaries between content and form, making of form a somatic, temporal experience.'¹⁵

Rycenga's readings focus on music by heterosexual rock artists, and as such, her analysis is a queered reading rather than an argument for exuberant form as a queer expressive strategy (although she did not foreclose the possibility of applying this lens to queer expression). Her approach is also rooted more in a gay/lesbian, rather than queer, theoretical model. Additionally, I question Rycenga's hasty dismissal of traditional formal listening. This is not to invalidate Rycenga's concerns; indeed, questioning and finding alternatives to normalised structures and turning from the abstract to the somatic are significant components of feminist and queer thought. In this regard, her model is a valuable intervention. However, the relationship with norms that she dismisses is precisely a potential site of deviation; the 'excesses' in the material she discusses are necessarily perceived as such in relation to normative pop songs, whether this point of reference is explicitly acknowledged or not.

I suggest that it is possible to balance Rycenga's concerns with my contention that deviations or alternatives (both implicitly understood in relation to a norm) can be sites of queer meaning and indeed pleasure. In many cases formal differences are pronounced enough to register upon listeners who are familiar with standard forms without the need to count measures or consult a score, even if their particularity may not be described prior to such analytical listening. Perhaps more importantly, composers and songwriters engage with norms of the musical traditions they partake in, and overlooking that interaction would leave out a significant facet of musical expression.¹⁶ It is misguided to disregard entirely the tool of formalised listening to identify the relationship—however close or distant—that exists between a given work and the normalised structures it interacts with. To theorise queer aesthetics, attention to the dance with norms performed by queer artists may be more illuminating.

¹⁴ See, for example, Bruce Bagemihl, *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999).

¹⁵ Rycenga, 'Endless Caresses,' 236, 245.

¹⁶ Philip Brett offers a useful example in his focus on the experiential act of performing a duet from a gay subject position while attending to particular harmonic or formal moments. This enacts a balance between the freer listening practices Rycenga advocates for and the insight that can be gained from formal listening (Philip Brett, 'Piano Four-Hands: Schubert and the Performance of Gay Male Desire,' *19th-Century Music* 21.2 [1997]: 149–76). Susan McClary also addresses harmonic and organisational differences in Schubert's music in conjunction with gender and sexuality, in 'Constructions of Subjectivity in Schubert's Music,' in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, 2nd Edn, ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2006), 205–33.

Nonetheless, Rycenga's work offers an intriguing provocation to queerly read form in popular music. Finding Nyro's formal deviations distinct from the complexity and excess of rock forms discussed by others including Albin Zak and Walter Everett,¹⁷ I build upon Rycenga's prompt to consider Nyro's approach to song form as a queer aesthetic feature.

To interpret the path Nyro takes through these elements of song form, and the deviations therein, I draw on Ahmed's theory of queer as an orientation. Ahmed's phenomenological approach contemplates how 'orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others ... shap[ing] not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation.' In emphasising 'orientation,' Ahmed invokes spatial metaphors for the life paths of queerness and heterosexuality. Through the cultural repetition of heterosexual life paths as normative, the perspective of heterosexuality follows a straight line, with attendant features (such as heterosexual romantic partnerships, marriage, children) falling 'naturally' along this line. As Ahmed explains, 'the queer subject within straight culture hence deviates and is made socially present as a deviant.'¹⁸ A queer perspective—returning to the word's roots to indicate that which is twisted—falls slant-wise, viewing the world at an angle, rendering its features askew.

Nyro's skewed take on formal elements can be viewed through this lens of queer orientation that approaches existing components from a novel, slant-wise angle. Ahmed also stresses that 'queer lives do not simply transcend the lines they do not follow, as such lines are also the accumulation of points of attachment.'¹⁹ This notion of queer orientation as a course athwart the 'straight' line that nonetheless maintains points of attachment to it informs my approach to Nyro's music. As noted earlier, Nyro's music maintains deeply felt attachment to aspects of popular song, yet transforms them through treatment and context. When Nyro invokes a pop genre, she is not creating emotional or post-modern aesthetic distance from that point of attachment, but it is equally clear that her approach is not 'in line' with the invoked song form or the genre and tradition it represents. To illustrate Nyro's atypical uses of standard formal elements and design, I will discuss the songs 'Mercy on Broadway,' 'Timer,' and 'Sweet lovin baby.'

'Mercy on Broadway' (NYT)

'Mercy on Broadway' was included in *PopMatters'* write-up about the CD reissues of Nyro's early Columbia albums, where it was described by Ronnie Lankford as one of 'probably the most accessible tracks on NYT [alongside 'Save the Country']' as it 'revert[s] to more familiar structures,' in contrast to the preceding cuts which elicit descriptors including 'frenzy,' 'sluggish,' 'screech[ing],' 'avant garde,' and 'artistic chaos.'²⁰ This statement is surprising, even perplexing, since while 'Mercy on Broadway' certainly engages with familiar formal sections, it is arguably more notable for how it departs from and interrupts these structures.

¹⁷ As discussed in Albin Zak, 'Rock and Roll Rhapsody: Pop Epics of the 1970s,' in *Expression in Pop-Rock Music: Critical and Analytical Essays*, 2nd edn, ed. Walter Everett (New York: Routledge, 2008), 345–60, addressing music wherein formal sections are largely informed by lyric content. See also Walter Everett, *The Foundations of Rock: From 'Blue Suede Shoes' to 'Suite: Judy Blue Eyes'* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), which addresses formal complexity more akin to suites or medleys, and frequent use of teleological build-up.

¹⁸ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 3, 21.

¹⁹ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 75.

²⁰ Ronnie D. Lankford, Jr, 'Laura Nyro: Eli and the Thirteenth Confession/Gonna Take a Miracle/New York Tendaberry,' *PopMatters*, 25 July 2002, <https://www.popmatters.com/nyrolaura-reissues-2496008987.html>

But the song's ability to evoke a sense of familiarity—despite its departures—is exemplary of the queer cut along the bias that I propose hearing in Nyro's music. Here, Nyro engages with the song functions of verse, prechorus, chorus, and coda, but approaches these sections slantwise, engaging some prototypical features while eschewing others.²¹ An additional section, which I have identified as a 'collapse' (see Fig. 1), defies categorisation under familiar pop song terminology.

Figure 1. Form of 'Mercy on Broadway'

Time	Formal section	Lyrics
0:00	Verse	Madison smiled ...
0:24	Chorus?/Prechorus	July mercy on Broadway ...
0:37	Chorus	shine/everybody ...
0:47	Collapse	On Broadway jive and pray ...
1:06	Verse (altered)	People and the landlords shine ...
1:33	Chorus?/Prechorus	July mercy on Broadway ...
1:46	Chorus	shine/everybody ...
1:57	Coda	Mercy on Broadway ...

Broadly, 'Mercy on Broadway' is constructed of two very similar halves, interrupted with different material that, as noted above, does not suggest any formal function, and is capped by a coda. Each half is composed of three distinct sections which occur in the same order in both halves. The song begins with a section that functions as a verse, consisting of eleven and a half measures (ending with the lyric 'in my sweet July'). Similar material recurs later in the song (1:06 in Fig. 1) with largely different lyrics, although it concludes with the same line (preserved in both lyrics and music). The combination of new lyrics set to repeated music is a prototypical feature of a verse, and we can comfortably understand these two sections as such, though not without complication. Pop songs typically repeat the music of a verse with some modification to the vocal melody to accommodate new lyrics. Nyro, however, in some ways disrupts this expectation of recurrence.

The second verse of 'Mercy on Broadway' opens with different chords, turning quickly to the F major tonic rather than the vi (the relative minor) of the opening verse. The melody is altered accordingly, although it follows a similar contour. Notably, the metric regularity of 4/4 time is interrupted, and the verse is extended from the initial eleven and a half measures to twelve and a half. This metric disruption occurs with the line 'in the doom swept the band away,' which I propose hearing in 6/8. While it could be argued that this line is the 'extra' bar in the verse, I consider the following measure ('Baby on Broadway') a better candidate, despite its return to 4/4, as the harmonic functions of the first verse would be replicated without this

²¹ I draw on theorist Trevor de Clerq's use of prototype theory for my approach to formal section, as articulated in his dissertation, "Sections and Successions in Successful Songs: A Prototype Approach to Form in Rock Music" (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 2012). Rather than employing definitions that outline parameters for song components, de Clerq views each section (such as verse, bridge) as a collection of features that are indicative of its function within the song. The more features that are prototypical, the more prototypical a section is as a whole, but any one feature's absence does not preclude identification under a particular label as long as others suffice to orient us to the section's function. Beyond identifying the normative, this approach facilitates discussion of atypical instances, as well as hybrid sections.

measure's inclusion. Furthermore, this vocal is presented as if it is a backing vocal, doubled by Nyro, sung closer to the microphone, and recorded with more reverb, setting it sonically apart from the rest of the verse. Nyro gives this line a full measure and sits it in the front of the mix, so that it steps into the foreground and occupies a metric space that it 'shouldn't' have. That these divergences occur in the first half of the verse make their effect that much stronger, as it is somewhat disorienting for the listener, with confirmation of repetition only arriving towards the end. While this section can be comfortably recognised as a second verse, it also challenges this label by interfering with identification at the outset and avoiding duplication of section length and musical material.

The second section of the first half of the song, commencing with the lyrics 'July mercy on Broadway' (labelled 'Chorus?/Prechorus' at 0:24 in Fig. 1), presents greater challenges when attempting to identify standard pop forms. The section gives many signals that it is acting as a chorus: it features a thicker texture, reaches a peak of melodic pitch, and introduces a doubled vocal for the first time within the song (and, all the more noticeable, for the first time in the album). The song's title, 'Mercy on Broadway,' is delivered in the first line, which is a common feature of a chorus. The similar recurrence of this 'chorus?/prechorus' (1:33 in Fig. 1) following the second verse adds support to its invocation of chorus function. This second iteration, however, includes a change in lyric and melodic contour in one line, which is atypical for a chorus. Additionally, while a chorus typically affirms the tonic (and often confirms it cadentially), such harmonic content is eschewed here in favour of stronger emphasis on the relative minor. Even greater doubt is cast upon its status as chorus in its last line ('she'll make you pay ...') and in light of the following section which commences with 'shine/everybody' (labelled 'Chorus' at 0:37 in Fig. 1). In this last line, the harmony moves through VI (D) major to a hybrid chord that, with a return to F natural, instead of sounding as tonic, effects a pull towards C major. This progression generates a sense of harmonic departure and motion, rather than closure, and a sense of arrival only occurs upon the start of the next section.

The next section, commencing 'shine/everybody' (labelled 'Chorus' at 0:37 in Fig. 1), is a much stronger candidate for the role of chorus. Nyro adds vocal harmonies to this section, the texture becomes thicker, it features a simple repeating lyric with repeated musical material, and repeats in full later in the song (1:46 in Fig. 1). It is still not a prototypical chorus, however; it does not clearly present the tonic, is only four measures long, and does not feature the song's title, so while it can be considered a chorus, it passes through only some of the prototypical parameters for this status. Nonetheless, it prompts a reconsideration of the section prior, which may be retrospectively understood as a prechorus (0:24 and 1:33 in Fig. 1). However, rather than characterising that section strictly as prechorus, I wish to respect the ambivalence generated by its initial invocations of chorus function.

In addition to these sections that clearly invoke formal prototypes, if passing through them on a slant, Nyro includes material that departs from familiar pop form. Beyond a slant-wise approach to objects on the straight line, Ahmed elaborates, 'the discontinuity of queer desires can be explained in terms of objects that are not points on the straight line: the subject has to go 'off line' to reach such objects.'²² I suggest that those moments where Nyro abandons formal prototypes more completely may be understood as a type of 'off-line' material.

²² Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 71.

In 'Mercy on Broadway,' this type of departure follows the first chorus, after which there is a sense of collapse. Rather than the chorus concluding, it is elided through a repetition of the lyric 'shine/everybody' which, rather than delivered in layers of harmony, is reduced to a solo vocal, winding its way down melodically and leading into the subsequent lyrics ('on Broadway jive and pray'). These lyrics do not invite a mimetic collapse; rather, the music is independently motivated. The previously steady pulse of the bass line (heard in the piano and/or electric bass throughout the song) slows dramatically and ceases articulating rhythms that provide clear meter or division of measures, causing listeners to lose entrainment to the beat. A low C is insistently struck three times, and the timing varies more over a detour through the pitches A, E, G, and C again. While the location of this section (labelled 'Collapse' at 0:47 in Fig. 1) in the formal succession of a song is a common place for a bridge, it does not internally signal another formal function. The overall effect is one of being unmoored rather than oriented to a new section.

While the second verse gets the song 'back on track,' following the second iteration of the chorus, a coda occurs which takes another unexpected turn. The song slows suddenly and dramatically, suggesting a move to sharp keys with hints of D major before turning to flat keys. The F major tonic of the song's verses is abandoned. This sonically rich gesture, with overdubbed harmonies, does not end the song. Instead, this is done by a cheeky, defiant 'ha!' over pitch C. In light of this conclusion, bare as it is harmonically, we can understand the preceding chords as an Aeolian cadence moving towards C (Ab-Bb-C as bVI-bVII-I). This C in the bass recalls the C that dubiously tolled in the earlier section marked 'collapse' (0:47 in Fig. 1), which, along with the harmonic content, leaves one questioning the certainty of closure.

In addition to formal irregularity, Nyro's performance decisions—particularly concerning tempo—bear noting. Tempo fluctuation is characteristic of Nyro's style, exceeding the norms of popular music which typically features fewer and/or less dramatic changes. 'Mercy on Broadway' picks up roughly ten beats per minute over its first line, reverts to the original tempo, and again gains ten beats per minute in the second line. It gains another eight beats in the second section before dropping fourteen for the chorus. At the beginning of the second verse the beat drops at least fifteen below the original tempo. This rapid fluctuation between tempi contributes to an idiosyncratic style (and one that caused frustration for the prospect of arranging for session musicians²³). While not a component of form, tempo regulation exerts a normative function in popular music, and Nyro's style disregards this norm in favour of musical expression through frequent tempo fluctuations.

'Timer' (Eli)

'Timer' demonstrates other deployments of a slant-wise take on form. It does not offer repeated sections like those in 'Mercy on Broadway,' but it adheres to prototypical section roles in other ways. A chart of the overall form of 'Timer' might appear relatively standard, but its constituent parts belie such simplicity. In isolation, the opening of the song (0:00 in Fig. 2) might seem to defy prototypes, as it moves through different tonal areas, metric feels, and general character. However, given Nyro's demonstrated familiarity with, and fondness for, Tin Pan Alley,²⁴ the

²³ Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 30.

²⁴ Nyro's childhood listening included Broadway musical recordings (Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 6), a genre that features Tin Pan Alley form

Figure 2. Form of 'Timer'

Time	Formal section	Lyrics
0:00	Introductory verse	Uptown/goin down ...
0:42	Verse A	Oh I belong to Timer ...
1:19 or 1:20	Proto-chorus/Transition	Pleasure ground ... or it was sweet and funny ...
1:37	Verse B	Holdin/to my cradle ...
2:00	Chorus (+ interpolation)	So let the wind blow Timer ...
2:37	Coda	God is a jigsaw ...

first section of 'Timer' can be considered an introductory verse in this style. Yet, even though the introduction can be understood within this formal role, its unpredictability and varied character may inhibit identification on first hearing, instead disorienting the listener.

The following section (labelled 'Verse A' at 0:42 in Fig. 2), commencing with the line 'Oh I belong to Timer' (the preceding line, 'My darling friends,' may be considered introductory to this section), is recognisable as a verse by its internal characteristics. However, its lack of recurrence later in the song is a turn away from prototypical function in relation to the song as a whole. There are different ways the subdivision and ending of this section can be understood. In one hearing, following the expectations set out by the first measures, the section can be taken as a 16-measure verse, following the fairly common SRDC grouping of phrases,²⁵ with relatively prototypical characteristics, despite the uneven distribution of measures in the final two phrases (5+3 rather than 4+4). But the final phrase does not convincingly project closure. Alternatively, the verse might be heard as beginning along the lines of this structure, with a four-measure phrase and its restatement, followed by a five-measure phrase that departs from the previous phrase, but then rather than concluding, goes to a two-measure transition that is elided into the following section. The two proposed hearings result in different lengths for the section, with differing implications for how the beginning of following section is heard, as well as its resulting length. The elision of these sections, compounded by irregular phrase lengths, allows for ambiguity in identifying where they begin and end. These unclear boundaries, alongside the lack of recurrence, undermine this section's status as a verse even though it can still be identified as such.

The next segment—understood either as the eight measures from 'onto a pleasure ground' or the seven measures from 'it was sweet and funny,' and ending before 'Holdin/to my cradle'—is somewhat more ambiguous. The melodic contour is similar to that of the first phrases of the verse, but compressed in time and more repetitive, and delivered with doubled vocals. These elements signal functions akin to those of a chorus. However, it avoids the C tonic, and ends with a move towards IV: the chord that concludes the phrase splits the difference between V/IV and IV/IV, giving the root of V/IV in the bass while suggesting the IV/IV above it. These latter qualities suggest a transitional role. This section may be regarded as proto-chorus/transition (1:19 or 1:20 in Fig. 2), but as this label makes clear, it lies between section roles and complicates the process of identification.

²⁵ Walter Everett labels this common sentence-type phrase structure in pop music as 'SRDC': statement – restatement – departure – conclusion, in Everett, *The Foundations of Rock*, 140.

The subsequent material, starting with 'Holdin'/to my cradle' (1:37 in Fig. 2), signals verse function, but is not a repetition of the earlier verse (0:42). However, it moves through similar harmonic territory as the previous verse, following its tonicisation of IV with immediate clarification that this chord is still functioning as IV in the home key, and returning to the familiar cycle of diatonic minor keys. It counters this harmonic similarity with metric contrast, though, turning to straight rather than shuffle feel. Backing vocals are also added, which are not found in the first verse. Because it is musically distinct from the preceding verse, it defies expectations of the role of the verse within the context of the song.

The following section, beginning with 'Let the wind blow Timer' (2:00 in Fig. 2), strongly suggests chorus function. It invokes prototypical features including tonic confirmation, many iterations of the title, faster harmonic motion, shorter phrase lengths, and full texture. However, the phrase 'and if you love me true, I'll spend my life with you' stands out within this otherwise prototypical chorus: for two measures, it switches from the shuffle of the rest of the section to straight rhythm, and the melody reaches higher in register. This phrase is best considered an interpolation. Its distinctness from the surrounding material and sense of departure alludes to qualities of a bridge. Yet, another connection bears noting: the melodic contour, textural support, and pacing of this section recalls the opening of 'Luckie,' the first track on the album, lending it a sense of introductory quality. Despite these pronounced features, the concise nature of this phrase and its prompt return to material consistent with the chorus make it clear that it is not a separate section, but a noteworthy interruption. This chorus section does not recur, but its location within the song to this point is normative. It offers enough prototypical features to be identified as a chorus locally and globally, though the lack of repetition later in the song and the brief interpolation marks its departure from the norm.

Finally, a section acting as a coda closes out the song, fading out rather than reaching a conclusion. It has distinct sections within it, alternating rapidly between two starkly different phrases and straight/shuffle rhythms, and generating a sense of instability and uncertainty rather than closure. This instability is heightened by use of bVI in alternation with the tonic and iii and the persistent use of the flat third in the tonic as well as iv7 and v7. The last phrases, including that which fades out in repetition, linger on a minor-inflected chord that, despite the C pedal, does not lend a sense of resolution.

Overall, a description of the form appears relatively normative—introductory verse, modern verse, proto-chorus/transition, verse, chorus, coda—but the lack of repetition of any section, plus the abnormalities discussed above, transform it substantially from what those labels suggest, though not beyond recognition. 'Timer' is essentially through-composed, but Nyro nonetheless cleaves to familiar song components. While the path listeners are taken along may bear labels that appear unremarkable, the experience of each new section is one of novelty and disorientation.

'Sweet lovin baby' (NYT)

'Sweet lovin baby' vacillates between familiar form and artistic departure. Its opening section is sparse and ponderous, and its beginning is not clearly distinguished from the end of the preceding track, 'The man who sends me home.' This contributes to an uncertainty in both the ending of that song and the beginning of 'Sweet lovin baby.' In the opening section, labelled Verse A in Figure 3, Nyro explores the harmonic territory of both sharp and flat sides of the

song's home key of C, leaving it hanging on an A major chord. She also plays with time, avoiding a strong sense of meter and extending phrases to accommodate her vocals. Instead of grounding the listener with a steady pulse, this generates a sense of instability and uncertainty. While the opening section can be considered a verse for its general function within the song, it neither follows prototypes internally, with an expected phrase structure, nor on a larger scale since this music does not recur later in the song. Indeed, it could instead be regarded as an introduction, although it would be disproportionately long to fit our expectations of an intro. Because of this ambiguity, it does not evoke a familiar pop genre or form, instead suggesting a unique, personal artistic approach.

Figure 3. Form of 'Sweet lovin baby'

Time	Formal section	Lyrics
0:00	Verse A	I belong/to the man ...
1:25	Chorus	Sweet lovin baby ...
2:27	Verse B	natural windmill ...
3:21	Chorus (truncated)	That's lovin baby ...
3:29	Bridge	where is the night luster? ...

Following this meandering verse is a section that evokes the familiar style of a soul ballad chorus, which also offers formal clarity. Distinct from the harmonic wandering of the previous section, this chorus (1:25 in Fig. 3) is grounded in F major, although it arrives there abruptly and without a clear cadence following the A major capping the previous section. This A major could be read as an alternative tonic standing in for the C, leading cadentially into F, but the leap from A down to C in the vocal line along with Nyro's choice of phrasing suggest a break between the sections. As Nyro sings the song's title (a feature characteristic of a chorus), the lyric sits squarely on the beat (as befits a chorus), but only for the first few words. She quickly adds rhythmic complexity to the vocal line, fitting many words in a short span of time, resulting in declamation more typical of a verse. Quickly following this pull away from chorus function, the first musical phrase of this section is heard again with different lyrics, suggesting that we are still indeed within the realm of chorus, albeit one that is not as straightforward as initially suggested. Thus, this section, while overall offering the warm, familiar sounds of a chorus in a soul ballad, also pulls away from the prototype.

The sense of chorus function grinds to a halt over a sudden harmonic shift from the chorus's local tonic of F to D major. This figure, over the word 'loneliness,' repeats in melody and harmony the 'loneliness' of the opening section, and suggests a departure from the chorus. This phrase has the sense of a breakdown: the contentment of the chorus cannot be sustained amidst the encroaching solitude. The steady pulse which lent a relaxed feel to the chorus is disturbed with insistent, descending chords pounded out to stress each word in the voice ('comes down like loneliness'). A return to C and a softer vocal delivery on the following phrase, 'Natural windmill,' suggest a new section that also functions as a verse. It is harmonically and melodically distinct from the opening section, although both, like in 'Timer,' may be considered verses even though they defy the expectation of musical repetition.

Once again, a turn from sharp to flat ushers in the chorus material at 3:21 in Figure 3. Like a prototypical chorus, it begins repeating the material from its previous iteration. However, it

is curtailed much sooner than expected: instead of the ten measures previously allotted to this material, only two measures appear here. This proves to be but a short allusion, leaving us without a full manifestation of a chorus. What follows is characterised by a marked increase in tempo, rapid harmonic rhythm, and a shift to straight rhythm in contrast with the relaxed shuffle of the chorus. This brief section (3:29 of Fig. 3) concludes the song, evoking bridge function despite its location at the end of the song. In 'Sweet lovin baby,' Nyro evokes soul ballad style while pulling away from those norms within the chorus, the verse material, and the concluding bridge-like section, freely stepping in and out of prototypical formal categories.

Conclusion

In both the nature of formal sections and in their overall organisation, these songs exhibit an approach to form that engages familiar principles while diverging from their standard deployment. While Nyro's unique style received criticism and her own recordings did not receive significant chart success, she nevertheless drew loyal fans and inspired many fellow songwriters. The admixture of popular and highly personal styles brings points of attachment—while approached at a slant—and 'off-line' loci together in a queer orientation to form. Returning to McClary's question of whose models of subjectivity and desire are employed in musical form, I suggest that Nyro's approach to form reflects a queer model of subjectivity and desire. Nyro's detours from prototypical forms can be understood in relation to a queer path through and around the 'straight' line and a capricious relationship to teleology familiar to queer subjects. In a featured interview with Nyro on the television program *Critique* in 1968, William Kroman wonders aloud whether listeners who see the world similarly to Nyro turn to her music. Implied in this question is the notion that Nyro's outlook is different, and picking up on this sentiment, she agrees, adding, 'I think that I see things differently than most people.'²⁶ I suggest that a queer aesthetic orientation is a source of this difference, and that others with whom such an outlook resonates may be drawn to her music, finding vitality and giddiness in her disorienting departures from standard song forms. While the particulars of her song forms may be unique, this understanding of queer approaches to form may offer insight into the deviations found in the work of other artists. Building on Ahmed's insights into queer orientation, and those of Forster before her, I posit that a slant-wise approach, found in Nyro's handling of song form, can be understood as a queer aesthetic orientation, expressing different modes of attachment to shared cultural forms.

About the Author

Rachel Avery holds a PhD in musicology from McGill University. Rachel's research includes topics of queer aesthetics and genre in popular music.

²⁶ *Critique*, 'Laura Nyro, featuring John Daly, Michael Thomas, Patrick O'Connor, Laura Nyro, and William Kroman,' aired 4 December 1968, on WNDT Newark.