

## Song Analysis: “Easy Come Easy Go” (Kevin McClung)

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In this handout I offer an example analysis of a song off the new album from Berklee’s own Sierra Hull, *Daybreak* (Rounder Records). The album is Sierra’s sophomore effort (meaning it’s is her 2<sup>nd</sup> album, not that she’s a sophomore—c’mon folks!). This handout is written to be comprehensible mostly to Berklee songwriting students, so I won’t take the time to explain terms used here. (As a special one-time offer, though, if you know other songwriting students or musicians you think might be interested in this handout, you can distribute the PDF to them, as long as my copyright notice stays intact.) This is a nice way to see the approach to song analysis

Sierra’s in my Lyric Writing 1 class this semester—so she owes me, as a midterm song project, a trailing rhymed verse-refrain song. Sadly, this song isn’t that form of verse-refrain; but it does combine a refrain technique with a more conventional chorus. This is instructive to us, since my goal is to get you excited about the whole range of verse-refrain structures. (Unfortunately for Sierra, since this *isn’t* a rhymed trailing verse-refrain song, she still has homework to do over Spring Break. Oh—and I forgot to mention she didn’t write this song—Kevin McClung did...)

Start by giving the song and her beautiful rendition of it a listen here:

<http://www.cmt.com/videos/sierra-hull/628722/easy-come-easy-go.jhtml>

Then take a look at the Nashville chord chart on the last page of this handout while you listen for a 2<sup>nd</sup> time. (Every listen, by the way, helps a fellow Berklee student and helps promote better representation of bluegrass and acoustic music on CMT!) Now let’s look at a few lyrical and harmonic aspects of the song.

*Lyric Structure.* So where is the refrain here? The verses have a simple structure:

V1    A 7    (rhyme scheme, line length of 7 primary stresses)  
      A 7  
      R 5    “*I’m not a child anymore*”  
V2    B 7  
      B 7  
      R 5    “*I’m not afraid anymore*”    (in verse 3, “*I’m not that girl anymore*”...)

The first half of this verse, a three-line verse (AAX) section, is inherently unstable. Our ear wants to hear it matched – as it is, in this first verse, by the second 3-line section. This sets up the varying phrase “I’m not... anymore” as a refrain line *within the verse*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Notice my rhyme scheme notation shows “R” and “R” because this is a refrain coming in the middle *and* the end of the verse; so the refrain end-rhyme syllable is *repeated* rather than rhymed. I’d show a set-up line rhyming the refrain with a R’—though that’s just my preferred notation. So if you are feeling tired writing in other verse forms, remember that this form can provide you a little R and R. (Ouch!)

The two different line lengths parallel the rhyme scheme. The third and sixth lines are shorter lyrically (from 7 to 5 stresses), but stretch across twice the musical phrase length of each of the previous lines; so the overall affect is one of *deceleration*.

Hear how this form generates a lot of familiar and comforting structure for the ear, before you ever get to the chorus? The second half of the verse, repeating the refrain or at least the lyric formula, creates a strong balance point of stability. Thus the first entrance into the chorus section is relatively gentle, not a flying leap but a hop from a stable point.<sup>2</sup>

But now notice how this same form works differently in verse 3. (Or call the first 6 lines Verse 1a / 1b if you prefer.) Here we have only the first half of the verse, the part I said created *instability*. Now, as we move to the chorus, even with no pre-chorus section, what was a balanced verse section becomes unbalanced merely by *taking something away*. It still works and sounds not too fragmented, because our ear can remember the structure from the first two verses; but it changes our perception of the chorus by moving to it with a different energetic quality. It's like musical sleight of hand!

*This is a great technique to remember: you can use asymmetrical structures in your songs. I call this a “spiraling” move—in this case spiraling from longer to shorter structure, creating an overall feeling of acceleration, perfect for the midpoint of a song. If you don’t learn and consciously apply this technique, your habitual tendency will be to continue a song that starts V1 V2 CH with V3 V4 CH. Here is a nice example of how breaking that rule—really, not a rule but a pre-conceived too-rigid structure—can produce strong results. You can also spiral by adding material to a section, a better move for later in a song, especially the end.*

*Musical/phrase structure: Back-heavy phrasing.* Okay, let's look at another aspect of this song. As it happens, this is the aspect I've asked my Songwriting 1 students to address in *their* midterm song projects: using a combination of front-heavy and back-heavy phrasing to create sectional contrast in a song. So Sierra, at least you're good with this project. (Oh, I forgot—you're not taking Songwriting 1... and that's right, you didn't write this song... sorry!)

Listen to how all the phrases in the verses begin: with the first stressed syllable of the line (in most cases the *first* syllable) on the first downbeat of the measure. This is what we're calling *front-heavy phrasing*. It gives a stable, deliberate feeling, suited for the reflective tone and emotion with which the song begins. But we want to get things moving forward in the chorus. And back-heavy phrasing is a perfect way to do that: listen to how every line of this section begins on beat TWO of its respective measure or phrase. It creates the right emotion for its section, *and* it creates a clear differentiation *between* the sections.

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<sup>2</sup> You can build whole songs out of some version of this *unrhymed* trailing refrain form; although if you want this verse form to work without a chorus, then AAAX BBBX is better than this shorter form. That's the form I used in my song “Crazy Faith,” cut by an artist many are now calling “the previous Sierra Hull”—Alison Krauss.

It also creates a lovely counterpoint between vocal and the instruments. The empty beat at the start of the measure is a perfect place for the chord to hit without competing with the vocal for your attention—which means the vocal can be more prominent without being oversung or boosted dramatically in the mix. In bluegrass you always have to remember that the band is part of the scenery!

*Asymmetrical phrasing.* Back-heavy phrasing is one way of creating movement, instability and dynamic tension. There are other ways, and several are used here. First, look at the Nashville chart, play the song and listen to the way the phrasing shifts at the end of the chorus. The chart shows us that we have a 5-line rather than a conventional 4-line chorus—or, expressed in musical terms (with the chart showing chords moving on the half-measure), 10 measures instead of 8. This is not the most irregular or asymmetrical of options—not an odd time signature like a 5/4 or 7/8, or a dropped or added beat. It’s an added *phrase*, fairly gentle on our ears: still accessible, yet creating an unexpected closure; when we think it’s going to end, it fools us and stretches the chorus out a bit on “easy come, easy go.”

How else is the chorus differentiated from the verse? What tells our ear almost at the start of the section that we’re in a new section? It’s not that the first phrase starts on a 4 chord; we’ve heard that twice before in fact, once almost immediately before the chorus. But besides the switch to back-heavy phrasing, we change two other aspects. First, we *depart* the 4 chord for not the 1 (the “falling backward” move we heard in the verse) but the 5 chord, a forward-moving, progressing harmonic move. And we change the pace at which the chords arrive, the *harmonic rhythm*. In the verse we’ve moved at the pace of two chords to the measure; and we’ve held a chord for two measures. Now we move at a steady, one chord per measure pace for almost the whole chorus. That feels *slower* than the start of the verse—signaling a kind of decision, resolve, in contrast to the pensiveness and anxiety in the verse; yet it feels *faster* than the pace at the *end* of the verse, signaling a kind of quickening of the will. Here’s another musical sleight of hand, where a change in one element of the song can have two simultaneous qualities or effects, both of which somehow suit the emotion and meaning of the song. Land sakes—How does he does it?

*Use of color chords.* I’ll pick just one other thing to talk about in the musical structure of the chorus, because it’s a subtle thing to appreciate when the materials are so seemingly simple. Notice that the entire song uses only your basic 1, 4 and 5 chords, with only a few exceptions. The b7 chord is so ubiquitous in contemporary songwriting (and especially in bluegrass) that, even though technically not diatonic to major, it’s become part of a *de facto* expanded diatonic palette.<sup>3</sup> Aside from that “darkening” b7 chord there is exactly *one* minor chord in this whole song, the 2 min—and it is used exactly *one* time in the form, in the middle of the chorus (though of course, the chorus is heard multiple times).

Let’s look at how and why that chord is used, and why it is so effective.

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<sup>3</sup> This palette arguably also includes 2 major—especially when *not* used with a 7<sup>th</sup> voicing as a conventional secondary dominant heading to the 5 (*e.g.*, when the 2 maj returns straight to the 1 or moves back through the 4).

We know the 2 min is the relative minor of the 4, and so can serve as a substitute for the 4, also playing a sub-dominant role in the harmony. We also know that as a minor chord, it has a more pensive quality than the stronger 4 major chord. Relative to the tonal center, the root of the chord is an ascending step from the tonic (1 chord). So a move from 1 to 2 min has a dual quality: a rising quality in terms of intervallic motion in the root of the chords; but a shift from major to minor in the chord quality. When we depart the 2 min for the usual destination, the 5 chord, we get a more emotionally shifting change than the 4 -> 5: movement of the root up a 4<sup>th</sup> rather than up a 2<sup>nd</sup>; and shift from minor to major.

In this song, though, we don't approach the 2- from a chord with a tonic function (1 or 6-) but rather from a 4 chord. So here it functions not merely as a substitute for the 4. Let's look at a condensed version of the progression of the chorus:

CH:	4	5	1	4		
	2-	5	1	b7	4	5

We start the chorus with a loop through the chords: 4 -> 5 -> 1 -> 4. Up until the 1, this pattern moves in a functional direction. But by continuing around the circle until we land on 4 again, this harmonic resolution is left unbalanced at the end of the first phrase on the relatively unstable 4 chord. To have the second phrase echo that looping gesture we could simply repeat the loop, starting from the 4 chord where we had landed. But to do this from the 4 would create a problem:

CH:	4	5	1	4
	4	5	1	...

Note with this version we would hang on the 4 chord for 2 beats, changing the harmonic rhythm with the held-over chord at the start of the 2<sup>nd</sup> phrase. By using the 2 min instead at the start of the 2<sup>nd</sup> phrase, we get a continuing steady harmonic rhythm, while also preserving the sub-dominant feel of the original 4 chord with its closest substitute, the 2 min. Also, we approach the 2 min via a descending minor third in root motion, adding to the feeling of softened energy compared to the first phrase. Overall, as we listen to the chorus, when that lone 2 min comes along we feel as if we are diving a little deeper into the shadows, on the way to the ironic acceptance – easy come, easy go.

*Conclusion: the power of genre.* You may have listened to this simple, beautiful song and then read my analysis and scratched your head in puzzlement. After all, could the writer possibly have worried about any of this stuff when he put this song together? Well, yes and no. This is a song in the genre of contemporary bluegrass. One powerful benefit of writing within a clear genre is that the very conventions of the genre embed a great deal of musical wisdom. The twelve-bar blues is an archetypal form of tremendous power; you don't have to understand it completely to play it, feel it, write to it. So it is with the harmonic moves in contemporary bluegrass. And yet: this genre was also shaped and influenced by some very knowledgeable writers and composers—such as the great John Pennell, whose work is also featured on Sierra's album. I guess that means you'll have to get the whole album now to see what I mean!

# Easy Come Easy Go

© Kevin McClung

Nashville Number Style Chart (1 chord = ½ measure or two beats)

(written by Mark Simos after one listen – forgive any errors!)

## INTRO:

1	5/1	1	1add2
1	5/1	1	1add2
4	/	/	/
1	/	/	/

V1:

1	5/1	1	1add2
1	5/1	1	1add2
4	/	/	/
1	/	/	/

V1b:

1	5/1	1	1add2
1	5/1	1	1add2
4	/	/	/
1	/	/	/

CH:

4	/	5	/
1	/	4	/
2-	/	5	/
1	/	b7	/
4	/	5	/

MID: 1 5/1 1 1add2

## V3 CH

BR:

b7	/	4	/
1	/	/	/
b7	/	4	/
5	/	/	/

## V4 CH

## OUTRO:

1	5/1	1	1add2
1			