Towards an Understanding of Pop Music: New Rhetorical Tools Employed in the Analysis of Four Paul Simon Songs

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Towards an Understanding of Pop Music: 
New Rhetorical Tools Employed in the 
Analysis of Four Paul Simon Songs

by
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the 
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Music in Music Theory 
in the School of Music, Jordan College of Fine Arts of Butler University


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Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank Dr. Jeff Gillespie, my thesis advisor for dedicating his time to ensuring the quality of the study and encouraging me through the process. I would also like to thank Dr. Rusty Jones and Dr. Frank Felice for their guidance and advice throughout the process. Thanks to Dr. Eric Stark and the faculty of Butler University’s Jordan College of Fine Arts for making this possible.

I would especially like to thank my family, my wife Sarah in particular, for their sacrifice and support, without which this would not have been possible.

Thanks also to Juanita DeSilva and Paul Simon Music, Inc. for granting permission for the use of Paul Simon’s music for the study, and to Drs. Peter Kaminsky and Guy Capuzzo for allowing me to utilize their published illustrations to add to the study.
Introduction

Over the last quarter of a century, scholars from many disciplines have explored the realm of popular trends, music being no exception, including the music of Paul Simon. Simon has distinguished himself as an accomplished songwriter, performer, and he has chosen a path of perpetual self-improvement in these areas. Since his arrival on the music scene in the late 1950’s, much has been written about Simon. Most of the literature is purely biographical, recounting his life’s details and career accomplishments. The more analytical literature has been largely devoted to the study of his lyrics, which are rich in symbolism and colorfully descriptive. However, a number of scholars have begun to show interest in analyzing the music of pop artists. What has been written, though, tends to focus on one particular compositional technique or musical facet, as opposed to dissecting particular songs in any great detail. For example, Oussama Haddad’s thesis, entitled “Three Theoretical Essays on Various Music Topics” only discusses issues of what he refers to as “cyclic tonality” in Simon’s music. Walter Everett, in his article “Swallowed by a Song: Paul Simon’s Crisis of Chromaticism,” features a strong focus on Simon’s use of chromatic harmony and its impact on his commercial success.

Paul Simon has endeavored throughout his career to continually improve and, in some cases, reinvent his compositional style. At one point, well after achieving national renown as a songwriter, Simon actually took it upon himself to formally study music theory with bassist Chuck Israels in the 1970’s. The result of his efforts has been a body of work that seems to show a trend of increasing compositional complexity and creative

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exploration, which is worthy of study in greater detail. In this study, through the use of one or more analytical models, I plan to demonstrate with greater specificity some of the compositional nuance in selected examples of Paul Simon’s music.

Many researchers are taking a deeper look into the analysis of rock and popular music, including that of Paul Simon. However, of the songs that have been analyzed in published writings, they are few in number, and those analyses tended to highlight a singular facet of the music. For example, in a 2001 master’s thesis, Oussama Haddad focuses exclusively on tonal procedures in three selected Paul Simon pieces. Additionally, in his article in John Covach’s Understanding Rock, Walter Everett focuses on Simon’s increasing use of chromaticism in his music. Anna Stephan-Robinson wrote her doctoral dissertation on Simon’s treatment of musical form. Paul Simon has an extensive discography, fertile ground for in-depth analyses of individual pieces on a number of different musical facets. This type of analysis should attempt to uncover the intricacies of multiple aspects of each piece, including (but not limited to) scale/mode vocabulary, harmonic choices, text, formal structure, and texture.

I will begin with a brief biographical introduction to Paul Simon and his music. Following that, I will provide a review of selected literature pertaining to the music of Paul Simon and musical analysis of both his music and of rock/pop music in general. I will then provide a chapter detailing a proposal of new nomenclature regarding the formal sections of a rock/pop song. After that, I provide analysis of selected songs of Paul Simon. I conclude the study with suggestions for further study.

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Chapter 1: Biography

Born on October 13, 1941 in Newark, New Jersey, Paul Simon spent much of his early life in Queens, New York, watching his father, a professional bassist, perform both live and on television. It was also there that Simon met future stage-partner Art Garfunkel in an elementary school play. As teenagers, Simon and Garfunkel formed the moderately successful pop duo “Tom and Jerry,” but quickly split after the hits dried up in the late 1950’s. The two would not reunite until several years later, during which time Simon underwent several recording projects with various artists and groups, including Queens College classmate Carole King.

Simon and Garfunkel explored the emerging folk scene of New York’s Greenwich Village, producing the acoustic folk experiment album *Wednesday Morning, 3 A.M.* Lack of subsequent popular success once again caused Simon and Garfunkel to part ways. However, one year later, after “The Sound of Silence” became a smash hit (once producer Tom Wilson included some electronic instruments into the recording), Simon and Garfunkel collaborated once more to ride the wave of success. In 1966, the pair produced some of their most popular albums to date, including *Sound of Silence* and *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary, and Thyme*. These and subsequent albums *Bookends* (which represented a significant musical departure from the folk style) and *Bridge Over Troubled Water* produced well-known hits, including “I am a Rock,” “Scarborough Fair/Canticle,” “Homeward Bound,” “Mrs. Robinson,” “America,” “Cecilia,” and “The Boxer.”

Inclusion of some of their hits in the 1968 film “The Graduate” solidified the duo’s popular success. Yet again, Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel would separate to pursue a...
different artistic goals, and they would not reunite (apart from a brief collaboration on the single “My Little Town,” which appeared in Simon’s *Still Crazy After All These Years* (1975) and Garfunkel’s *Breakaway* that same year) until 1981 for a much celebrated concert in New York City’s Central Park. Simon’s first solo album, simply entitled *Paul Simon* (1972), includes lasting hits “Me and Julio Down by the Schoolyard” and Jamaican-influenced “Mother and Child Reunion.”

Even in light of a nearly twenty-year career of popular recording and songwriting success, Paul Simon was not content to settle into a singular musical style. To that end, in 1975 Simon began studying music theory under composer and jazz bass player Chuck Israels. Later, Simon also began studying composition with David Lewin. The album *Still Crazy After All These Years* bore the fruit of this study, featuring music that is more harmonically complex and influenced by jazz, such as the title track “Still Crazy After All These Years,” and “I Do it for Your Love.” The jazz influence continued into Simon’s brief foray into cinema in 1980, a film written by and starring Simon, entitled “One Trick Pony.”

Later projects feature a dizzying array of musical styles and influences, ranging from experiments in minimalism in *Hearts and Bones* (1983), to the “world” music of *Graceland* (1986), to a bold (yet commercially unsuccessful) Broadway musical *The Capeman* (1997), to the edgy and electronically synthesized *Surprise* (2006). The latter album *Surprise* was a collaborative effort between Simon and Brian Eno. Eno, a veteran record producer, artist, experimental composer, and serial collaborator offered his unique compositional approach to *Surprise* through the addition of heavy amounts of electronic

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experimentation. *Surprise* also offers a wide range of stylistic influences, including doowop, gospel, and more. His latest album *So Beautiful or So What* (2011) (which received broad critical acclaim and debuting at number four on Billboard’s top 200) represents a bit of a departure from *Surprise*, in that Simon gets back in touch with more of the “world music” influence and guitar virtuosity that he is famous for. Once again, Simon collaborates with a record producer doubling as a musical titan, this time Juilliard graduate and violin prodigy Phil Ramone. Ramone’s collaborations range from Burt Bacharach and James Taylor to Luciano Pavarotti.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I will briefly survey many of the sources that proved important to this study. Some of the sources focus on the life and career of Paul Simon. Others provide analysis of some of Simon’s music. Still others outline certain analytical models for analysis of rock/pop music. For a more thorough list of sources on Paul Simon and/or rock analysis, please see “Selected Bibliography.”

Much has been written about Paul Simon in terms of biographical information. James Perone has written a brief yet informative biography of Simon, but he also includes a rather extensive bibliography on Paul Simon up to the date of publication, which was 2000. Laura Jackson’s Paul Simon: the Definitive Biography and Patrick Humphries’ The Boy in the Bubble: a Biography of Paul Simon are certainly more complete than Perone’s, though neither includes the extensive bibliography. Jackson has written myriad biographies of pop/rock music icons, movie stars, and other recent pop culture celebrities.

Perhaps the biography of most significance to this study would be James Bennighof’s The Words and Music of Paul Simon. Furthermore, Bennighof brings a music theorist’s perspective to Simon’s music. For example, Bennighof devotes large amounts of space detailing the compositional process of certain songs from each album.

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utilizing the language of music analysis. Consider the following excerpt taken from a section discussing "Slip Slidin' Away":

"'Slip Slidin' Away,' which received a great deal of airplay, is rather simple. Each of its four verses describes a scenario in which someone is unable to attain what he or she desires, and the refrain uses the title to express the inevitability of such situations. The refrain opens the song and appears after each verse, with an extra repetition at the end. The harmonies relate very simply to the home key of A-flat—most belong in the key (A-flat, D-flat, E-flat, F minor) and a bit of flavor is added by a D-flat 7 chord in each verse and a couple of G-flat chords (major triads built on the lowered seventh scale step, G-flat, rather than G-natural, after refrains)…"11

Other less recent biographies exist, and certainly much biographical information on Paul Simon has been included as introductory material in articles, graduate dissertations, and interviews.

Though not much has been written in terms of music analysis specifically devoted to the music of Paul Simon, there are some notable exceptions. As mentioned previously, Walter Everett has written a landmark article that appeared in John Covach’s Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis, entitled “Swallowed by a Song: Paul Simon’s Crisis of Chromaticism.”12 In the article, Everett highlights Simon’s increasing dissatisfaction with simple tonal procedures in songwriting, endeavoring to utilize an increasing amount of mode changes, modulations, and chromaticism (particularly in his music written during the 1970’s).

In 1992, Peter Kaminsky wrote an article that focuses on analysis of large-scale formal structures and unifying elements in pop albums as a whole, entitled “The Popular Album as Song Cycle: Paul Simon’s ‘Still Crazy After All These Years.’” Here, Kaminsky asserts that the ordered collection of songs in Simon’s album “Still Crazy After All These Years” constitutes a unified song cycle, akin to that of Schubert and other mid-nineteenth-century composers. Kaminsky centered his argument around two unifying components: first, the fluidity and continuity of subject matter in the text, and the second being completions of harmonic patterns shown through Schenkerian analysis of bass-line/root movement (see Example 2.1).

### Example 2.1 (Pattern completion by theme and tonal centers in the album “Still Crazy After All These Years,” used by permission of Dr. Peter Kaminsky):

#### Part I (Side I): Protagonist as victim

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time:</th>
<th>“Still Crazy”</th>
<th>“My Little Town”</th>
<th>“I Do It For Your Love”</th>
<th>“50 Ways”</th>
<th>“Night Game”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stasis;</td>
<td>past-present-future</td>
<td>childhood</td>
<td>breakup of marriage</td>
<td>breakup of post-marital affair</td>
<td>ritual death of baseball player (motivated by loss of love?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arrested development; arrested self to love</td>
<td>arrested development; arrest of stasis</td>
<td>need for acceptance / lack of self acceptance</td>
<td>a) conflict between inaction (thinking) and action (feeling)</td>
<td>b) irony</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Part II (Side 2): Protagonist as egoist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time:</th>
<th>“Gone At Last”</th>
<th>“Some Folk’s Lives”</th>
<th>“Have A Good Time”</th>
<th>“You’re Kind”</th>
<th>“Silent Eyes”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>start of new affair</td>
<td>meditation (out-of-time)</td>
<td>present (midpoint of affair)</td>
<td>breakup of affair started in “Gone at Last”</td>
<td>a) conflict between freedom and commitment</td>
<td>aftermath of affair; future Judgement Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rationalization; God will solve problems</td>
<td>anthem to egoism</td>
<td>a) conflict between freedom and commitment</td>
<td>b) irony</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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14 Ibid., 44.
It should be noted that, while the assertion that a popular album may contain enough unifying elements to make the argument that it constitutes an organized song cycle, this presupposes that such organization indeed took place. In many cases (if not most), control over the order in which the songs appear on an album lies solely with the record company. Therefore, while it remains possible that “Still Crazy After All These Years” constitutes a song cycle, it must be clearly shown that Simon both controlled the order of the songs and demonstrated intent in the unification of the songs.

Perhaps the most recent scholarship on Paul Simon is Stephan-Robinson’s dissertation, “Form in Paul Simon’s Music.”¹⁵ As the title suggests, the dissertation focuses chiefly on Simon’s use of formal procedure in his music. She begins with a detailed survey of scholarship on popular music analysis, particularly that of formal structures. She goes on to enumerate typical formal sections of a popular song and how they had been viewed by other scholars. The main body of the dissertation outlines typical popular song form types and to what extent certain Paul Simon songs fall into each category. These include what she terms “simple verse,” “simple verse-chorus,” “contrasting verse-chorus,” and “AABA.” The latter portion of the dissertation centers around those Paul Simon songs that fall outside of the typical formal structures and certain manipulations of these types to achieve a musical goal.

More generally, much has been written in recent years concerning the analysis of rock and pop music by Walter Everett, David Brackett, John Covach, Guy Capuzzo, Christopher Doll, Kevin Holm-Hudson, Chris Kennett, Tony Mitchell, Deborah Stein, Ken Stephenson, and others (see “Selected Bibliography”). Each of the aforementioned

authors has a unique, at times vastly contrasting, approach to the analysis of pop music. For example, regarding just harmonic analysis of pop music, Walter Everett and Peter Kaminsky utilize a strictly Schenkerian approach, while others such as Richard Middleton and Allan Moore focus more on root-movement functionality. Guy Capuzzo goes an altogether different direction with respect to harmony, namely using neo-Riemannian operations (or "NRO's," as he calls them), which focus more on the retention of common tones between chords, regardless of their functionality about a particular tonic pitch. Capuzzo lists four basic types of NRO's (categorized by number of common tones retained between two triads), as follows in Example 2.2:

**Example 2.2 (Overview of NRO's, used by permission of Dr. Guy Capuzzo):**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Operation that preserves three common tones</th>
<th>2. Operations that preserve two common tones</th>
<th>3. Operations that preserve one common tone</th>
<th>4. Compound operations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Name</em></td>
<td><em>Abbreviation</em></td>
<td><em>Example</em></td>
<td>Use right orthography: begin with the leftmost operation and proceed to the rightmost one. Example: PP' maps C+ onto B+.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>C+ ↔ C+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leading-tone exchange</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>C+ ↔ E-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parallel</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>C+ ↔ C-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>C+ ↔ A-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. prime</td>
<td>L'</td>
<td>C+ ↔ F-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P prime</td>
<td>P'</td>
<td>C+ ↔ C♭</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R prime</td>
<td>R'</td>
<td>C+ ↔ G-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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17 Ibid., 178
The use of NRO’s in harmonic analysis of pop/rock music may be particularly advantageous when analyzing passages in which Roman numeral analysis proves unnecessarily complex. Indeed, there may be instances in the analysis of a popular song when, while using NRO’s, one may notice emerging patterns in the retention of common tones that Roman numeral or Schenkerian analysis may not detect. He cites one such example in the chorus of Depeche Mode’s “Shake the Disease” as shown in Example 2.3:¹⁸

**Example 2.3** (Guy Capuzzo’s harmonic analysis of Depeche Mode’s “Shake the Disease,” utilizing both Roman numerals and NRO’s, used by permission of Dr. Guy Capuzzo):
Notice the awkwardness (nearly to the point of uselessness!) of the different Roman numeral interpretations. However, the NRO’s show a clear pattern of RP-L-RP-L. The disadvantage to this approach, however, becomes apparent when attempting to analyze relationships to adjacent chords that do not tend to retain common tones at all, or if they do, no relevant pattern emerges. Additionally, this procedure works for triads only, and only those that have either a major or minor chord quality. In instances of the use of seventh chords or triads of a different quality (such as diminished, for example) Capuzzo suggests some clever manipulation. This can include excising the chordal seventh or seeing seventh chords as transformations of triads (like C7 as a transformation of an Eb minor triad). However, Capuzzo himself sees these instances as a strain on Neo-Riemannian analysis.\(^{19}\)

In the same year that Capuzzo put forth his article (2004), Walter Everett wrote a piece for the Society of Music Theory, entitled “Making Sense of Rock’s Tonal Systems,”\(^{20}\) that served as a recognition of the broad array of harmonic systems employed throughout the whole of rock music. To do this, Everett highlights six tonal systems that have been used throughout rock’s history—namely, major and minor mode systems, diatonic modal systems, major-mode systems with modal mixture, blues-based rock (which is major-mode system mixed with minor-pentatonic mode), “triad-doubled or power-chord minor-pentatonic systems unique to rock styles,” and chromatically related scales with little resemblance or relationship to the pentatonic mode.\(^{21}\) Analysis of songs in each of the six categories would necessitate differing analytic approaches. For

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 189.
\(^{21}\) Ibid., Table 1.
example, Everett cites Billy Joel’s “She’s Always a Woman” as reminiscent of the common practice era of music, with all of its harmonic motions tonally predictable. Such an example could well be analyzed with Roman numerals. On the opposite end of the spectrum, according to Everett, is Beck’s “Lonesome Tears,” which must be considered nearly apart from “vertical” thinking completely:

“But ‘Lonesome Tears,’ like nearly all other rock music, is unavailable in a reliable score, the resourceful analyst might first look for a cheat at OLGA, the Online Guitar Archive, a database of song lyrics and tabs (guitar parts written by amateur contributors either with chord symbols showing root and color or with full tablature), and may be lucky enough to find chord symbols such as those shown in Figure 26. This information, with CD and guitar at the ready, will get the listener far into picking and singing through the pitch-world of "Lonesome Tears." But not too far. Even the pondering of the rectification of enharmonic spellings (B-flat minor = A-sharp minor?) and consideration of the clues offered by metric accent leave unanswered many questions regarding which pitch-class or pitch-classes might claim tonal centricity, which "chords" have harmonic function and which are embellishing, where harmonic syntax might be operating and where voice leading is purely or largely contrapuntal. Clearly, more work needs to be done before one could begin to classify the sort of tonal operations at work here. Only a consideration of voice leading will lead to progress with this puzzle...”

(Interestingly, Capuzzo discusses “Lonely Tears,” as well.)

Everett’s main argument, namely that one size certainly does not fit all in terms of harmonic analysis, is well-taken. Indeed, Everett states that, “many different tonal systems are now practiced by the same artist, on the same album.” It should be noted that in the absence of a written score, a sound analytical approach should be based upon the analyst’s transcription of the original recording, which effectively constitutes the Urtext. The point is well taken, however, that

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22 Ibid., paragraphs 34 and 35.
24 Ibid., paragraph 2.
it is necessary to analyze each piece as its own entity, carefully considering all contextual elements relating to that piece to gain a true understanding of the music.

In 2007, Christopher Doll published a doctoral dissertation for Columbia University, entitled “Listening to Rock Harmony.” In this work, Doll identifies what he sees are two specific harmonic operations utilized by rock musicians that can interfere with good theoretical analysis, namely operations of ambiguity and transformations. One example of harmonic ambiguity would be ambiguity of function. As a listener is listening to a piece of music and hears a chord that thwarts functional expectation, inarguable defense of that chord’s function in a theoretical analysis becomes difficult, if not impossible. Indeed, an analytical problem may be the assumption that the chord has a function at all! Transformations, according to Doll, could range from simple gestures like chord substitution all the way to more complex refutations of compositional norms. This approach to rock harmonic analysis is especially intriguing, since rock music (when compared to, say, common practice era music) is comparatively much more experiential. That is to say that in light of the absence of a printed score, contact with the music is fleeting. Thus, analysis rests on the listener’s memory of themes, moments, and transformations over time.

Kevin Holm-Hudson gathered and edited a collection of essays on the analysis of so-called “progressive” rock, entitled *Progressive Rock Reconsidered.* In the introduction to the book, Holm-Hudson takes issue with what must have been a prevailing opinion at the time that progressive rock was merely rock’s “square peg” being jammed into the round hole of “art music”: “[it is] a misconception to equate all (or even

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most) progressive rock with attempts to integrate aspects of art music into the rock medium.\textsuperscript{27} Though this book falls largely outside the scope of this particular study, with its emphasis solely on progressive rock, it is important to realize (as Holm-Hudson asserts) that rock and roll artists and the songs they create are worthy of serious academic pursuit and are not in all cases cheap imitations of “art music.” It is certainly true that rock owes its very existence to common practice music, but by the same token, Beethoven’s music was a direct result of the artistic foundations laid by Haydn and Mozart. That fact most certainly did not stop anyone from seeing Beethoven as a true artist.

It must be noted that the bulk of the scholarship cited above directs the discussion of popular music in terms of various perspectives on harmonic function. However, for well over a century, the nomenclature of the formal divisions of popular song has remained virtually unchanged. In the following chapter, I propose a set of new terms to discuss these formal divisions. These terms have been derived in an effort to (in this author’s opinion) more accurately reflect their rhetorical function. I believe that a discussion involving a variety of perspectives on this concept will, as it has in the realm of harmony, bring more clarity in the analysis of popular music.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 10.
Chapter 3: Nomenclature Regarding Form and Text

In 2006, James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy published a groundbreaking book regarding the analysis of pieces in “sonata form,” entitled *Elements of Sonata Theory.* Here, the authors asserted that formal procedures in such pieces were most fruitfully analyzed by understanding each section’s musical rhetoric or how each section functions, rather than seeking to label a section for label’s sake. It is in this spirit that I offer some terms and definitions that will be helpful in understanding the formal procedures that Simon uses in the music to be analyzed here.

Traditionally, discussions of formal sections of popular music include terms such as “intro,” “verse,” “chorus,” “bridge,” and “out-tro.” In some cases, terms borrowed from analysis of traditional art music, such as “coda” and “interlude” might be employed to assist in understanding sections of a popular song that do not fit into the aforementioned categories. Some of these terms are better at describing musical/rhetorical function than others. For example, the term “intro” (short for “introduction”) clearly demonstrates that the music in question serves to introduce more fundamental themes or sections and, as such, is not often repeated or developed in a meaningful way. Others, such as “verse” are far less clear in the description of musical function.

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For the purpose of this study, the term “introduction” or “intro” refers to music that is heard immediately and serves the purpose of orienting the listener to the tempo, meter, tonal center, style, etc., yet is not thematically significant. The intro might be a gesture that is repeated, perhaps as a way of re-orienting the listener prior to the beginning of a new section, such as a verse or chorus. Similarly, the “out-tro” (derived from the term “in-tro”) is a closing gesture, utilizing less thematically significant music to end a song. The out-tro may or may not be a literal reference to the intro, but the presence of such a gesture provides a certain amount of symmetry to the formal structure. Consider the intro and out-tro like the foyer of a house, in which guests both enter into the home (orienting themselves) and exit the home (saying necessary farewells upon leaving).

The remaining sections (verse, chorus, bridge, coda, and interlude) necessarily involve the structure of the text or lyrics of the song as well as that of the instrumental music. In most cases, the lyrics and music are inextricably linked. In other words, there is no need to analyze the lyrics and the music independent of one another. However, in other (arguably rarer) circumstances, these may not overlap as easily. For example, the music of the chorus may begin a measure or two earlier than the lyrics (or vice-versa), resulting in a difficulty in pin-pointing where the “chorus” truly begins and ends. In such cases, it may be more fruitful to discuss regions of measures as starting or ending points of a given section, rather than specific measures.

As previously mentioned, these terms remain nearly ubiquitous in their use among both scholars and the casual listener. Indeed, in Anna Stephan-Robinson’s dissertation, “Form in Paul Simon’s Music,” she states, “A somewhat standardized terminology is used to name these [formal] sections. In his books on The Beatles, Walter Everett
provides concise definitions for each of these sections...” The terms that Everett defines and Stephan-Robinson cites include (in part) “verse,” “chorus,” and “bridge.” The standardized, ubiquitous nature of these terms is sure to cause a good deal of controversy in attempts to deviate from them. However, such conversations are necessary in the pursuit of a clearer understanding of pop and rock music.

The term “verse” is a clear reference to poetry, thus betraying a reliance on lyrics to determine the function. To wit, Water Everett offers his definition of “verse” as, “…a song’s section equivalent to the stanza, usually placed directly after any introduction, that nearly always appears with two or three (or, rarely, more) different sets of lyrics, but in rare early cases ... has one set only.” I perceive the verse to, more often than not, operate in much the same way as the recitativo in opera. The recitativo is a setting of text that advances the action of the story, usually with little or no text repeating. Similarly, the text of the verse is rarely repeated and usually serves to either “tell the story” or provide supportive statements for the assertion(s) made in the text of the chorus. Also, as in operatic recitativo, the music of the verses of popular music tends to be less energetic and emotional than its counterpart (the operatic aria or the “chorus” in popular music). For these reasons, I will use the term “narration” in lieu of the term “verse.”

The “chorus” is often characterized by music that is the culmination of an emotional or energetic trajectory set up by the music that precedes it. This generally involves an increase in both overall dynamic and texture. Also, the music of the chorus will, in most cases, contain the “hook” or the musical gesture that is designed to leave the

most prominent, long-lasting impression on the listener. Indeed, as Mark Spicer notes, “In many respects, pop and rock songs are all about choruses. Typically, the chorus will contain the primary hooks and most memorable lyrics, and, more often than not, will function as the song’s climactic peak.”31 Lyrically, the chorus tends to highlight the emotional impact of the narrative given in the narration(s) or to assert the main argument. As previously mentioned, this is much like the operatic aria. Additionally, the chorus (like the aria) features a much smaller amount of text that is often repeated. There may also be a change of rhyme scheme from the narration to the “chorus.” For these reasons, I will use the term “emphatic return” to refer to the “chorus” of a popular song.

The term “bridge” might be particularly descriptive of function, if the music in these sections did exactly that: create a connection between two formal sections that were otherwise disconnected. This is rarely the case, however, and thus a better term might be employed. Rather than serving as a transition to altogether new musical material, the bridge typically serves as a brief contrast, followed by a return to previous material. Paul Simon, himself, in a 1991 interview with Paul Zollo describes a bridge this way: “[Bridges] set you up to come back to the other part. You’re ready to hear it again and you feel good. You feel like it’s the return of an old friend.”32 In most circumstances, the “bridge” is found after more than one narration and at least one statement of the emphatic return. It normally includes a tonal departure (usually to the subdominant, but sometimes in other less-related key areas) and might include a change in texture, tempo, lyrical rhyme scheme, meter, or any combination of musical elements. Notably, these changes

traditionally lead back to either the emphatic return or another statement of the narrative—both in the original key.

It is this latter point that, in my opinion, makes the term “bridge” something of a misnomer. If one were to drive a car up to the edge of a cliff, and the sign says, “Bridge out!” one would find it nearly (if not completely) impossible to move to the other side. Musically, if we were to remove the “bridge,” we might expect that movement to the next section would be likewise nigh on impossible (resulting in a jarring and uncomfortable transition). Therefore, in these instances in a popular song, I assert that the term “digression” more accurately describes the musical rhetoric. Minus the digression, the song would simply continue the previous tonal center, style, text, etc. The digression, therefore, acts as something of an aural palette cleanser to allow the composer yet more statements of the emphatic return and/or narration(s) without exhausting the listener. Furthermore, the use of the term “digression” in these instances would thereby liberate the term “bridge” to refer more appropriately to music that would smoothly connect formal sections that are otherwise disconnected tonally and stylistically from previous sections.

Within the narrations of many popular songs is a section traditionally known as the “refrain.” While narrations as a general rule do not feature any repeated text, the refrain is a notable exception. The refrain, when present, is normally (though not always) found at the end of a narration, usually a line or two, and is repeated in subsequent narrations. (Anna Stephan-Robinson, in her dissertation, goes as far as to distinguish among what she refers to as “opening, closing, and internal refrains.”) If a refrain is

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present, it may very well contain the song's title. While the refrain could not be
considered a true formal section of its own accord, it has a clear rhetorical purpose. The
purpose of the refrain is to provide an element of unity to the narrations, as well as to
serve (in many cases) as an energizing link between a narration and the emphatic return.
One could think of the refrain as something of an “on-ramp” between the streets of the
narration and the highway that is the emphatic return. I believe that a better term that is
descriptive of the rhetoric of the refrain would be the “narrative reiteration.”

Formally speaking, perhaps the most essential part of formal analysis of a popular
song is the location of what I call the “crux.” The crux is the portion of the song that
asserts the lyrical main idea or argument presented. The crux also will, in most instances,
feature the most musical energy and emotion. The difficulty in identifying the crux is that
it often directly coincides with another formal section, namely the emphatic return. In
these cases, I will refer to it as “crux as emphatic return.” However, in some cases (such
as Paul Simon’s “Still Crazy After All These Years,” which shall be explored further in
Chapter 3), the crux appears only as a refrain and nothing else. In such cases, I will call
this “crux as narrative reiteration.” The crux as narrative reiteration is normally present in
the absence of an emphatic return, though not always. The presence of a narrative
reiteration, in conjunction with the absence of a formal crux section, can create a concise
unity within a piece of music.

Perhaps the most difficult assessment of the location of a crux would be in those
pieces that have both an emphatic return and a narrative reiteration, such as is the case in
Simon's “I Do it for Your Love,” which, again, will be explored in more detail in Chapter
4.
Determination of the location of the crux necessarily involves both textual and musical analysis and is not always cut and dried. In some cases, a good argument can be made for the location of the crux in more than one section of a song. Clues can be found within melody, texture, range, mode, and much more. While much space has been devoted to text and formal structure here, I will now discuss non-textual musical elements in relation to Simon’s music and how they contribute to a better understanding of the formal sections defined above.
Chapter 4: Analysis of Selected Songs

Prior to undergoing any analysis, a premise must be established, that being that each compositional gesture made by the composer has a strong likelihood of representing some rhetorical function that contributes to enhanced understanding of a piece. Such gestures could be melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, combinations thereof, and more. For each piece discussed below, an attempt will be made to link important compositional gestures to their respected contributions to the piece.

"Still Crazy After All These Years"

"Still Crazy After All These Years" (1974) is essentially a soliloquy, in which the poet describes himself as "still crazy after all these years." At first, he makes the statement almost in jest as a conclusion to a chance encounter with an old lover. The last narration, quite on the other hand, is more suggestive of a person who sees within himself the capacity to do something criminally harmful. As we analyze the musical setting of the text, we will see how the music's complexity and evolution contributes to the drama of the narrative. As stated earlier, the piece is an example of the use of "crux as narrative reiteration." It is formally constructed in Example 4.1. The piece, as is shown, constitutes a sort of AABA' form, is reminiscent of the rounded binary form of the common practice area.
Example 4.1 ("Still Crazy After All These Years"—"crux as narrative reiteration" in bold):

Narration 1: I met my old lover on the street last night;  
She seemed so glad to see me, I just smiled.  
And we talked about some old times, and we drank ourselves some beers.  
Still crazy after all these years; oh, still crazy after all these years.

Narration 2: I’m not the kind of man who tends to socialize;  
I seem to lean on old, familiar ways.  
And I ain’t no fool for love songs that whisper in my ears.  
Still crazy after all these years; oh, still crazy after all these years.

Digression: Four in the morning;  
Crapped out, yawning;  
Longing my life away.

I’ll never worry;  
Why should I?  
It’s all gonna fade.

Instrumental Interlude

Narration 3: Now I sit by my window and I watch the cars;  
I fear I’ll do some damage one fine day.  
But I would not be convicted by a jury of my peers.  
Still crazy after all these years; oh, still crazy,  
Still crazy, still crazy after all these years.

Within this particular example, the narrative reiteration is a single line that merely offers the logical conclusion of the pieces of evidence collected in the narration.

Therefore, one could summarize the piece in this way (notice how each narration offers support for the crux):

**Crux as Narrative Reiteration** (Thesis Statement): I am still crazy, even after all these years.  
**Narration 1** (Evidence): I am not emotionally moved by the sudden appearance of an old lover.  
**Narration 2** (Evidence): I am reclusive, bound by routine, and emotionally immovable.  
**Narration 3** (Evidence): I am afraid of myself.
The melody of the narrations is notated here in Example 4.2:

**Example 4.2 (Narration 1 melody of "Still Crazy After All These Years," mm. 8-27):**

```
07 C F7
~
07 C F7
```

```
I met my old lover on the street last night; she
```

```
G F#dim7 Bsus4 Em7 E7m7
```

```
seemed so glad to see me, I just smiled. And we talked about some old-
```

```
C#dim7
```

```
times, and we drank ourselves some beers. Still crazy after all these
```

```
Em C#dim7 G D7
```

```
years. Oh, still crazy after all these years.
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Notice the presence of the lowered third scale degree in the tenth complete measure. This device of mixing the major and minor thirds is reminiscent of urban blues and gospel, though the piece is in a gentle waltz feel. This altered tone provides just a pinch of grit in an otherwise lilting, traditional, major mode melody. (According to Walter Everett’s model for classification of rock’s tonal systems, “Still Crazy” would be an example of a major-mode system with certain amounts of modal mixture.)

To be sure, the melody follows the general compositional axiom of melody writing, in that it proceeds most often either in step-wise fashion or by arpeggiating the underlying harmony. This melody also features more than one instance of an arpeggiation of an “added sixth” chord over the tonic. This blend of four pitches constitutes a curious blend of both the tonic major triad and the subdominant minor triad, again thwarting the sense

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of true joy and contentment of a pure major chord. Both the intermittent presence of the
minor third and the emphasis on the tonic added sixth chord provide a fitting musical
backdrop for the assertion of the text that the songwriter is crazy, or (in other words)
emotionally unsettled.

The melody of the digression, as we should expect, is different in a number of
ways. (See Example 4.3.)

Example 4.3 (Digression melody of “Still Crazy After All These Years,” mm. 51-65):

First, it moves largely chromatically. The harmony (as we will explore later) swiftly
moves through a number of key areas. The range is also different from the narrations, in
that it is predominately much higher. Indeed the first note of the digression is a half-step
higher than the highest note attained in the narrations. A noteworthy moment of text-
painting involves range, in that the only instance of a grouping of lower pitches occurs in
the 13th-15th measures of the digression under the text, “It’s all gonna fade.”
If we look at the height of the melodic range in the digression in combination with the emotional lyrical content, it becomes clear that the purpose for Simon’s inclusion of the digression was not frivolous; rather, it was to provide the emotional impact of an emphatic return without the burden of its repeat. Furthermore, the music of the introduction is a direct quotation from the digression (albeit an octave lower, so as not to give away the emotional impact), rather than the narrations. (See Example 4.4.)

Example 4.4 (Instrumental introduction of “Still Crazy After All These Years,” mm. 1-8):

As previously mentioned, “Still Crazy After All These Years” is a work of striking harmonic complexity, especially in the realm of popular song, all the while retaining a strong sense of tonal functionality. The piece is, by and large, written in the major mode, specifically G major. This fact, combined with the moderate tempo and shuffle feel gives the sense that the protagonist of the story is completely at ease. If he truly feels as though he’s going insane, we as listeners do not get the sense that this notion is upsetting to him in any way. As we shall see, however, the presence of a variety seventh chords, other “added note” chords, and occasional instances of a lowered third scale degree complicate matters (the presence of which makes the use of NRO’s unnecessarily complicated). Numerous modulations (particularly in the digression and a
chromatic shift of tonal center in the last narration) seem to indicate the protagonist’s seeming inability to maintain a stable state of mind.

While the narrations remain centered around a single tonic pitch (lending itself to more functional harmonic analysis), the digression proves more difficult to pin down in terms of harmonic function (a prime example of what Christopher Doll might term “functional ambiguity”).35 Indeed, the digression moves fluidly through a number of tonal centers—not entirely unlike the development section of a sonata exposition. For example, the first four measures of the digression seem to center around E, followed by a cadence on F#, then a tonicization of C, before ending with a slippery transition into the home key of G major by the end of the instrumental interlude. Many (if not most) of the underlying chords contain at least four pitches, often including suspensions, chromatic passing tones, or secondary leading tones. This complexity, however, is made palatable to the listener through the use of a (more or less) circle-of-fifths bass line and the use of a short, two-measure motive quoted throughout the digression (as well as in the introduction and parts of the instrumental interlude).

Perhaps a more useful approach at analyzing the harmonic processes in this digression might be to look at each phrase as a separate harmonic/tonal event. For example, the harmonic motion from E major to the parallel minor over the text “crapped out, yawning” is merely a transformation of chord quality, the emotional significance being of greater importance than functionality. The next phrase over the text “longing my life away,” however, is a more traditional (ii7-V-I) imperfect authentic cadential function, giving the listener brief repose before being thrown back into the varying tonal winds of

the ensuing phrase (which is a modal transformation of the first phrase, necessitating a chord substitution of Em7 for A).

The uplift in emotional tension is brought to a close to usher in the third narration with a smooth transition to the home key of G major. Curiously, however, the second half of the third narration features a sudden transposition up a major second to A major to provide a high-impact finish, with repetitions of the narrative reiteration. Walter Everett describes the emotional rhetoric behind the piece quite well in his article "Swallowed by a Song: Paul Simon's Crisis of Chromaticism," particularly that of the final narration:

"He expresses antisocial, perhaps violent, instability with the line 'I fear I'll do some damage one fine day,' and then immediately adopts a defiantly arrogant tone with 'but I would not be convicted by a jury of my peers' (he will, he reasons, be judged criminally insane: 'still crazy after all these years'). This appearance of braggadocio is set with the defiant chromatic modulation to A major, and the (false) new stability is emphasized by the fact that the A major harmony at 2:50 functions as I, unlike the II of IV that had appeared at analogous places in verses 1 and 2 (as at 0:26). The independence from the original tonic of the final tonal center aptly symbolizes the singer's unpredictable mental and emotional state, ultimately one of an unwarranted swaggering self-confidence that seems oblivious to its lack of moorings, both psychological and tonal."36

Though the digression provides much emotional impact, I would argue that it does not, in this case, constitute the crux. Lyrically, it is absolutely essential to pay attention to that which is repeated most often. In this case, that would be the phrase "still crazy after all these years," which comprises the narrative reiteration. The highest emotional impact may very well lie in the second half of the third narration, in which the highest melodic note (and indeed loudest moment) is found. (See Example 4.5.)

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Example 4.5 (Excerpt of Narration 3 of “Still Crazy After All These Years,” mm. 78-87):

\[\begin{align*}
D & \quad A & \quad A7 & \quad D & \quad D\#\text{dim}7 \\
\end{align*}\]

But I would not be convicted by a jury of my peers.

\[\begin{align*}
A & \quad E & \quad F\text{dim}7 & \quad F\#m & \quad D\#\text{dim}7 & \quad A \\
\end{align*}\]

crazy after all these years. — — Oh, still crazy.

Titles are not insignificant, either. In many cases, the title can represent a distillation of what the writer wishes the listener to take away from that particular song. In this case, the narrative reiteration is the title, and vice versa (not to mention the title of the album itself). This fact, coupled with the repetition and the emotional uplift of the end of the third narration, causes me to argue for the narrative reiteration being the true crux of the song.

“I Do it for Your Love”

As mentioned earlier, “I Do it for Your Love” (1975) provides a bit more challenge in the determination of the location of the crux, due to its formal structure. In this instance, both a narrative reiteration and an emphatic return are present. (See Example 4.6.) The formal structure of “I Do it for Your Love” represents what Stephen-Robinson would term “contrasting verse-chorus,” in which the melodic and/or harmonic content of the narrations is unique to that of the emphatic return.  

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Example 4.6 (Formal layout of “I Do it for Your Love,” refrain in bold):

Narration 1: We were married on a rainy day.
   The sky was yellow and the grass was grey.
   We signed the papers, and we drove away.
   **I do it for your love.**

Narration 2: The rooms were musty, and the pipes were old.
   All that winter we shared a cold.
   Drank all the orange juice that we could hold.
   **I do it for your love.**

Emphatic Return: Found a rug in an old junk shop,
   Brought it home to you.
   Along the way the colors ran.
   The orange bled the blue.

Instrumental Interlude

Emphatic Return

Narration 3: The sting of reason, the splash of tears,
   The northern and the southern hemispheres.
   Love emerges, and it disappears.
   **I do it for your love.**
   **I do it for your love.**

Both sections are repeated and are, therefore, emphasized. Though the emphatic return almost always comprises the crux (especially in songs that are without a narrative reiteration), the narrative reiteration in this song (as was the case with “Still Crazy After All These Years”) comprises the title of the song. Thus, it becomes necessary to delve more deeply into the music to make an informed decision as to the location of the crux.

To make matters more difficult when analyzing the music of Paul Simon, Simon himself admits to the use of what he calls “musical irony.”\(^{38}\) This is the utilization of a musical style that may sound stylistically disjunct from the emotional overtones of the

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text. I believe that “I Do it for Your Love” is such an example. Lyrically, the song is a rather bleak depiction of an ultimately ill-fated marriage. Musically, however, the song is in an easy, soft rock style with an especially light-hearted instrumental interlude that includes a whimsical clarinet in unison with voice (giving something of a kazoo effect). It becomes more difficult, therefore, (yet not entirely impossible) to determine the location of the crux through the music’s emotional undertones. Simon’s use of this sort of “musical irony” serves as a reminder that his music is often more than a mere vehicle for the lyrics and should be treated with caution in its analysis.

Since the formal structure of this piece is of little help, I believe more clues lie in the contour of the melodic content in both sections. Example 4.7 shows the melody found in the narration. Notice the largely downward, chromatic motion of the line. Though the bulk of the melodic material in this piece is chromatic, thus deviating from a prevailing sense of tonal function, the listener is able to process it rather easily due to the lack of erratic leaps or otherwise unpredictable melodic movements. The gradual downward motion may seem to show the gradual emotional downturn that the marriage is taking over time. Most significantly, the narrative reiteration “I do it for your love” is the melodically lowest point in the narration.
Example 4.7 (Narration melody of “I Do it for Your Love,” mm. 9-16):

We were married on a rainy day. The sky was yellow, and the grass was gray. We signed the papers, and we drove away. I do it for your love.

Now, turning attention to the emphatic return (see Example 4.8), notice how the melody is drastically higher than the end of the narration. Furthermore, it begins with an upward motion, rather than downward. I believe this melodic gesture underscores the optimism in the lyrics of this section.

Example 4.8 (Emphatic return melody of “I Do it for Your Love,” mm. 24-31):

Found a rug in an old junk shop. Brought it home to you. 'Long the way the colors ran, the orange bled the blue.
Notice that the only instance of true leaps in the entire piece occurs in the first four measures of the emphatic return. I believe it is no coincidence that this is also the only incidence of an authentic cadence in the song, as well. Both of these are illustrative of the sudden yet significant change of mood of the piece. The emphatic return also features a notable increase in volume and texture, with the addition of vocal accompaniment throughout.

While the piece is largely harmonically chromatic, there is an authentic cadence tonicizing A that occurs in the middle of the emphatic return that is quite refreshing. It occurs under the lyrics “brought it home to you,” underscoring the contented optimism of the protagonist’s efforts to please his wife with the rug he had purchased. However, this is immediately thwarted by the minor and diminished chords that follow, highlighting the tragedy and ultimate futility of the effort. (See Example 4.9.)
Apart from one or two “functional” moments, the remainder of the harmony is tonally ambiguous, to say the least. However, the wide variety of chord qualities provides a deep harmonic richness. As the chords tend to bear little or no relationship to one another, the listener is left with a sense of being ill at ease, unsure of what will follow, savoring each chord as a separate event (not entirely unlike the harmonic processes of impressionist composers, such as Debussy or Ravel). This uneasiness draws the listener
into the emotion of the protagonist, who is equally ill at ease in his new marriage, never finding comfort.

It would seem that the emphatic return in this song becomes something of a microcosm of the entire piece—optimism ending in disappointment. For these reasons, I believe a better argument is made for the emphatic return being the crux, rather than the melodically de-energized narrative reiteration.

"American Tune"

A curious case, particularly regarding formal analysis, is "American Tune" (1973). The song is almost entirely devoid of repeated text and completely devoid of repeated sections of text. (See Example 4.10.) Notice there is no refrain and no emphatic return. This formal construction (rather unusual in the body of Simon’s work) is what Stephen-Robinson would categorize as “simple verse” form, in which the piece includes only one true section and does not include an emphatic return, refrain, or digression.39

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Example 4.10 (Formal layout of “American Tune”):

Narration 1: Many’s the time I’ve been mistaken,
And many times confused.
Yes, and I’ve often felt forsaken,
And certainly misused.
But I’m all right, I’m all right,
I’m just weary to my bones.
Still, you don’t expect to bright and bon vivant
So far away from home, so far away from home.

Narration 2: I don’t know a soul who’s not been battered;
I don’t have a friend who feels at ease.
I don’t know a dream that’s not been shattered
Or driven to its knees.
But it’s all right, it’s all right,
For we’ve lived so well so long.
Still, when I think of the road we’re travelling on,
I wonder what’s gone wrong, I can’t help it I wonder what’s gone wrong.

Narration 3: And I dreamed I was dying.
I dreamed that my soul rose unexpectedly,
And looking back down at me, smiled reassuringly,
And I dreamed I was flying.
High up above, my eyes could clearly see
The Statue of Liberty sailing away to sea,
And I dreamed I was flying.

Narration 4: Oh, we come on the ship they called the Mayflower.
We come on the ship that sailed the moon.
We come in the age’s most uncertain hours
And sing an American tune.
But it’s all right, it’s all right, it’s all right,
We can’t be forever blessed.
Still, tomorrow’s gonna be another working day,
And I’m trying to get some rest. That’s all, I’m trying to get some rest.

In a piece of music with such a dearth of repeated text, it is significant to note that which is repeated. The words “it’s all right” appear more often than any other word or phrase. Though the text doesn’t really tell a story in a narrative sort of way, each narration is a separate example of a similar theme, namely the protagonist’s entrance into a certain amount of uncertainty and his subsequent self-reassurance. Even in the third
narration, where the words “it’s all right” are conspicuously absent, the protagonist’s own soul smiles at him in a reassuring manner. The repetition of text and theme make this a strong candidate for the crux, but a look at the melodic contour of each iteration of the words “it’s all right” shows a downward, de-energizing gesture (see Example 4.11). Does this eliminate “it’s all right” as candidate for the crux?

Example 4.11 (Excerpt from Narration 2 of “American Tune,” mm. 30-32):

To complicate matters further, the music is not all Simon’s own. The music for “American Tune” is based on a tune written in 1601 by Hans Leo Hassler, entitled in English “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded,” which was adapted by J.S. Bach in 1729 as part of the “St. Matthew Passion.” Therefore, we cannot necessarily look to the music itself for evidence for the location of the crux. However, insight may be gained by contrasting the original music with that of “American Tune,” particularly regarding melody (harmonically, the two are identical). The tune of “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded” (as adapted by Bach) is listed in Example 4.12.
Example 4.12 (Melody of “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded” by Hans Leo Hassler, adapted by, J.S. Bach):

Here in Example 4.13 is the melody of the first narration of “American Tune”:

Example 4.13 (Narration 1 melody of “American Tune,” mm. 2-21):
Perhaps the most obvious difference between the two melodies is the difference of rhythm. Here in “American Tune,” Simon utilizes a great deal of syncopation, of which “O, Sacred Head Now Wounded” is entirely devoid. This syncopation is mostly in the placement of rhythmic ties into the first and/or third beats of the measure. The result, therefore, is a stronger rhythmic emphasis on beats two and four, more characteristic of rock. (It is this fact, and this alone, that seems to place “American Tune” into the broad category of rock at all. There is otherwise very little of the piece that one could point to in characterizing it as “rock.”)

Let’s look now at an excerpt of the melody of the fourth narration of “American Tune” shown in Example 4.14 below. Text has been included.

Example 4.14 (Excerpt of Narration 4 of “American Tune,” mm. 46-50):

\[G\quad C\quad G\quad Am7\quad G\]

\[D\quad F\#dim\quad Em\quad B7\quad Em\]

We come in the ages most uncertain

The melodic high-point in the fourth narration occurs over the words “sing an American tune,” consisting of the song’s title. Unlike “Still Crazy After All These Years,” wherein the title was repeated throughout, “American Tune” occurs in this singular instance. Its one-time occurrence (coupled with the unique melodic up-swing) makes this a strong candidate for the crux, as well. The dilemma brings us back to the definition of crux as I proposed above: The crux is the portion of the song that asserts the
lyrical main idea or argument presented. The crux also will, in most instances, feature the most musical energy and emotion.

The phrase “it’s all right” certainly fits the lyrical main idea of the piece, which is reassurance through uncertainty. Though it does not feature the most musical energy or emotion, I believe this is a rare example of a crux that is musically de-energized. The de-energizing of that moment is achieved by stretching the note values (this is the only presence of half notes inside of a phrase in the entire piece), as well as the gentle downward slope of the line along the scale toward an imperfect authentic cadence. If the lyrical main idea is reassurance, one should not expect the musical exemplification of that idea to be full of high-adrenaline energy. Therefore, though a strong case could be made otherwise, I believe “it’s all right” to be the crux of the piece.

“The Boxer”

“The Boxer” (1968) is a unique piece, especially in terms of its lyrical content, in that the only repeated text are nonsense syllables that occur in the emphatic return. The curious nature of the text makes the location of the crux challenging. A further complication of ascertaining the “lyrical main idea or argument” in “The Boxer” is that the main idea or argument presented isn’t as explicit as it was in “Still Crazy After All These Years.” The theme of the text revolves around a poor, young man who is striking out on his own for the first time. Each subsequent narration is another snapshot of his struggles, giving the listener an evolving perspective on his circumstances. As Example 4.15 shows, there is no narrative reiteration, and, as previously mentioned, the emphatic return is a series of nonsense syllables:
Example 4.15 (Formal layout of “The Boxer”):

Narration 1: I am just a poor boy. Though my story’s seldom told,
    I have squandered my resistance
    For a pocketful of mumbles, such are promises.
    All lies and jest, still a man hears what he wants to hear,
    And disregards the rest.

Narration 2: When I left my home and my family,
    I was no more than a boy in the company of strangers,
    In the quiet of the railway station, running scared.
    Laying low, seeking out the poorer quarters where the ragged people go,
    Looking for the places only they would know.

Emphatic return: Li la li, li la li la li la li,
    Li la li, li la li la la li la la la li.

Narration 3: Asking only workman’s wages, I come looking for a job,
    But I get no offers,
    Just a come-on from the whores on Seventh Avenue.
    I do declare, there were times when I was so lonesome,
    I took some comfort there. (Ooh la la la la la la la)

Narration 4: Now I’m laying out my winter clothes,
    Wishing I was gone, going home,
    Where the New York City winters aren’t bleeding me,
    Leading me, going home.

Narration 5: In the clearing stands a boxer, and a fighter by his trade,
    And he carries the reminders of every glove that laid him down,
    Or cut him ‘til he cried out in his anger and his shame,
    “I am leaving, I am leaving,” but the fighter still remains.

Emphatic return

Harmonically speaking, this song is a far simpler piece than “I Do It for Your Love,” for example. This piece never modulates or even tonicizes a pitch other than the tonic. The harmonic vocabulary for the piece consists entirely of I, ii\(^7\), a single instance of iii, IV, V (or V\(^7\)), and vi. The phrase structure is equally simple, featuring 4 or 8-measure phrases with predictable cadences ending each. Melodically, the piece is
completely diatonic, and the contour is smooth, with relatively few leaps. The simplicity of the musical construction contributes to the lyrical portrayal of the protagonist as young and somewhat naïve, entering a world that is less welcoming than he may have anticipated.

While Simon spends most of the piece in some sort of major triad, what truly strikes the ear then is each instance of a minor chord, the vi chord in particular. Perhaps even more interesting is how the lyrics line up with each iteration of the vi chord. As I show in the highlighted portions of Example 4.16, many of the most poignant lyrical moments directly coincide with the vi chord and/or the lead-up to it:

Example 4.16 (Formal layout of “American Tune” with instances of use of the vi chord highlighted):

Narration 1: I am just a poor boy. Though my story’s seldom told,
    I have squandered my resistance
    For a pocketful of mumbles, such are promises.
    All lies and jest, still a man hears what he wants to hear,
    And disregards the rest.

Narration 2: When I left my home and my family,
    I was no more than a boy in the company of strangers,
    In the quiet of the railway station, running scared.
    Laying low, seeking out the poorer quarters where the ragged people go,
    Looking for the places only they would know.

Narration 3: Asking only workman’s wages, I come looking for a job,
    But I get no offers,
    Just a come-on from the whores on Seventh Avenue.
    I do declare, there were times when I was so lonesome,
    I took some comfort there. (Ooh la la la la la la)

Narration 4: Now I’m laying out my winter clothes,
    Wishing I was gone, going home,
    Where the New York City winters aren’t bleeding me,
    Leading me, going home.

Narration 5: In the clearing stands a boxer, and a fighter by his trade,
    And he carries the reminders of every glove that laid him down,
    Or cut him ‘til he cried out in his anger and his shame,
    “I am leaving, I am leaving,” but the fighter still remains.
Each of the above instances also occurs in conjunction with the melodic high points of the narrations, as is shown in Example 4.17:

Example 4.17 (Narration 1 melody of "The Boxer," mm. 5-20):

There is another important difference between the narration and the emphatic return, namely the change in the implied meter. In the narrations, the song has a feel of a swift, yet gentle 4/4 meter. However, the underlying pulse of the emphatic return has a sort of “half-time” feel to it. I believe this “half-time” implied meter (in contrast with that of the narrations) signifies the slow struggle onward against adversity. The swifter, gentler 4/4 of the narrations seems to signify the protagonist’s somewhat naïve optimism as he proceeds in each phase of life.

The overall dichotomy of musical and lyrical content between the narrations and the emphatic return might call the mind to the juxtaposition of the recitative and aria in opera or oratorio. Here, the narrations (like operatic recitative) advance the “action” of
the story, and the emphatic return (like the aria) is an emotional reaction to the events of
the story. The salient difference between the aria and the emphatic return in “The Boxer”
is that this piece has no true text.

As was noted with “I Do It for Your Love,” in songs with little or no repeated
text, it is important to take note of what is repeated. In the emphatic return of “The
Boxer,” the text consists of nonsense syllables (“li la li,” etc.). The use of such nonsense
syllables in a song by a writer with such poetic prowess as Paul Simon should give any
analyst reason to consider the significance of their use. Indeed, it would seem that the
protagonist in the song uses these nonsense syllables to cry out in raw, wordless emotion.
He has no answers for his problems, no one to turn to, just cathartic, emotional outbursts.
The emotional energy of the emphatic return begins a bit violently and dark, with
emphasis on the vi chord and relatively higher melody (see Example 4.18). The contour
of each phrase trends downward slowly with strong upward leaps, as if to express a flash
of anguish that quickly extinguishes itself. Toward the end of the emphatic return, the
strong emotional energy dissipates with an authentic cadence and gently downward-
sloping melodic contour. This seems to show the protagonist eventually calming himself
down and returning to a state of emotional balance, wherein he can ready himself for his
struggle.
Example 4.18 (Emphatic return melody of “The Boxer,” mm. 45-55):

Though the nonsense syllables prove to be the only repeated textual elements, there may be a better candidate for the crux. In order to make that determination, a lyrical argument or main idea must be ascertained. In “The Boxer,” I believe that the main idea is the manner in which the protagonist responds to the hardships he has been forced to encounter, which are enumerated in Narrations 1-4. Narration 5 differs significantly, in that there is a shift in perspective, namely from first-person in the first four narrations to third-person in the fifth. This shift allows for the consideration that the final narration is not to be taken as a literal account of witnessing a boxing match, but rather as a metaphor for the way in which the protagonist views himself.

If, indeed, it is the case that the final narration is metaphorical, I contend that the crux lies within the line, “In his anger and his shame, ‘I am leaving, I am leaving,’ but the fighter still remains.” Amidst the anguish within the protagonist and the certainty of more struggles to come, he summons the strength to continue on heroically. Absent this narration containing these lines, the rest of the song would merely consist of a string of images disconnected one from another. Another piece of evidence in support of this lies in the live performance of “The Boxer” at Simon and Garfunkel’s reunion concert in New York City’s Central Park in 1981. When Simon sings “but the fighter still remains,” he
immediately repeats the idea rather emphatically by saying, "yes, he still remains." For these reasons, I contend that the phrase "but the fighter still remains" constitutes the crux of the piece.
Conclusion

As we have seen, each compositional gesture offers more insight into the artistic intent of the songwriter. Simon has written music that enriches the listener's experience at every level, from the cursory first hearing to more intimate analysis. The songs mentioned above are but a few examples out of a vast body of work that has spanned more than half a century. As long as Paul Simon continues to write music, he will most certainly continue to challenge the listener, explore new sounds, all the while retaining popularity among his fans.

Through review of the literature, we have also seen that there is no singular analytic approach that is useful in analyzing all pop/rock songs. This is mainly due to the breadth of the umbrella of "pop/rock" that covers a wide range of styles, even within the music of one songwriter, even on a single album.

It is my hope that others will continue to explore the richness of Paul Simon's music. In so doing, they would further show the artistic and academic value of popular song, particularly in light of its overwhelming cultural significance. These analyses should seek to uncover (at the very least) that which the writer intended to communicate, as we assume that no honest composer goes about the creative process simply for the sake of putting notes on paper. Therefore, the identification of that message—the crux—becomes essential not just to the understanding of that particular song, but to the understanding of that artist and the cultural climate in which that song became popular.

Furthermore, as Hepokoski and Darcy have done in seeking to create a more useful and honest model for understanding sonata forms, I hope that the work of theorists will ultimately create a useful and honest model for the understanding of popular song. I
believe this begins first with the belief that popular music does, indeed, communicate. Secondly, each formal section of a popular song contributes in a clear way to the communication of that idea. Last, we must be willing to adjust, or in some cases wholly abandon, nomenclature and analytical language that does not accomplish these purposes. To that end, I welcome analysts to make use of, revise, or offer thoughtful criticism of my terms “narration,” “emphatic return,” “narrative reiteration,” “digression,” and “crux,” in favor of something more useful.

Suggestions for further study on this topic might include analysis of many more of Paul Simon’s songs, particularly those that explored a wider range of stylistic variety. The analytical models offered in this study and those cited would likely not have been as useful in the study of the African styles of songs from Graceland, and Surprise offers some richly complex and interesting pieces, as well, all of which merit study. For further references on Paul Simon and/or popular music analysis, please see the “Selected Bibliography.”
Discography


Selected Bibliography


