

Odd Phrase Lengths in Helplessness Blues

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I. Introduction

Helplessness Blues was released on May 3, 2011 and is the second studio album recorded by the band Fleet Foxes. The album has “received widespread critical acclaim from contemporary music critics.” One interesting element of the album is its usage of “odd” formal lengths such as 6 or 9 bars instead of 8. *Helplessness Blues* cleverly implements nontraditional, or “odd”, formal lengths to facilitate a greater expression of emotions within the album.

This essay will be organized as such: Part II will discuss formal outlines of two songs from the album; Part III examines the relationship of formal deviations to lyrics; Part IV explores a potential relationship between nontraditional form lengths and song popularity; Part V ends the discussion.

II. Formal Outlines

The first song in *Helplessness Blues* is called “Montezuma” and is about a recollection of youth from the perspective of an aging adult. The song’s form is quite standard and consists of:

Intro - A - A - B - A’

The intro is 8 bars, the A section is 26 bars, the B section is 8 bars, and the A’ section is 23 bars.

The main sections of interest are the A and A’ sections. Within the two A sections are definite subsections arranged like:

X - X - Y

Where both X’s are 9 bars each, and Y is 8 bars. The A’ section also has subsections, and they are:

X’ - X’ - Z

Where both X's are 9 bars each, and Z is 5 bars. The main difference between A and A' is the lyrical content and the fact that A' is slightly shorter than A. Unlike A and A', the B section does not have any blatant subsections. Although the X - X - Y and X - X - Z structures could arguably be labelled as Verse - Pre Chorus - Chorus, the Y and Z sections (potential chorus areas) fail to significantly elevate the energy upon their arrival. This is supported by the fact that the percussion entrance in Y and Z only plays in quarter note subdivisions rather than eighth notes and emphasizes the introspective tempo.

The next song of importance for this discussion is "Helplessness Blues," the title track of the album. The song's form is as follows:

Intro - A - A - A - B - Outro

The intro is 8 bars, all A sections are 27 bars, the B section is 22 bars, and the Outro is 20 bars.

For this song, the interesting sections are the A and B sections. Like "Montezuma," the A section has clear subsections:

X - X - Y

Both X's are 8 bars each, and Y is 11 bars. However, unlike "Montezuma," the B section has definite subsections:

U - V - V

U is 6 bars, and both V's are 8 bars each.

III. Relationship of Deviations and Lyrics

The general tone of "Montezuma" is bittersweet and nostalgic, as the speaker mentions that they are getting older and ponders on the person they "used to be." With this context in

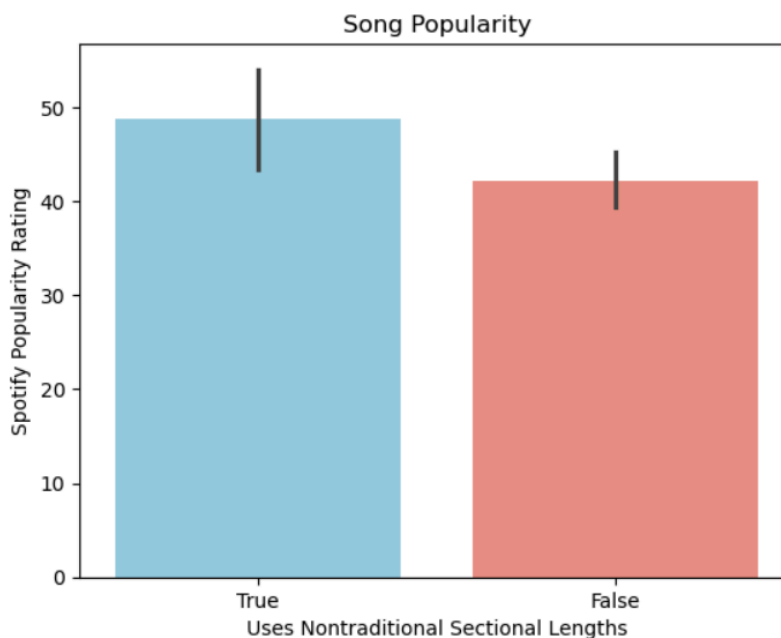
mind, it makes sense that the X subsections of the A section in “Montezuma” are 9 bars each. Typically, a length of 8 bars would be expected, so the extra bar feels uncomfortable. This emphasizes feelings of aging and—when adults no longer feel young, they instead feel unsettled, and this is highlighted by an extra 9th bar. Additionally, the absence of fast subdivisions from the percussion instruments (which was mentioned above) contributes to this nostalgic mood and lack of youth within the song.

The general tone of “Helplessness Blues” is regretful, melancholic, and helpless—like the title. The lyrics of the first A section state, “I was raised up believing \ I was somehow unique \ Like a snowflake distinct among snowflakes \ Unique in each way you’d conceive \ And now after some thinking \ I’d say I’d rather be \ A functioning cog in some great machinery”. The song explores the disappointment in having to conform to societal standards. Although the lyrics already convincingly communicate these “blue” emotions, the formal divisions of subsections in this track highlight the regret within the song. For example, the singer discusses being a “functioning cog” during the “Y” subsection—which lasts 11 bars; the irony of the subsection discussing conforming to society while having a nonstandard length furthers the helpless tone of “Helplessness Blues”. Another example is how the U subsection of B is only 6 bars instead of a standard 8 bars. The U subsection precedes the lyrics “If I had an orchard, I’d work till I’m raw \ If I had an orchard, I’d work till I’m sore \ And you would wait tables and soon run the store”. Clearly, the B section is about the protagonist’s dream of not needing to reconcile with society. The fact that the first subsection of B has an odd length of 6 bars only heightens unachievable and distant quality of this desire. Recursively, the fact that

“Helplessness Blues” uses a somewhat common formal structure of A-A-A-B also emphasizes the struggle of conforming and fitting in.

IV. Relationship of Deviations and Popularity

Although there is no quantitative measure of a song’s ability to convey emotions, it is interesting to examine the relationship between the popularity ratings of songs in *Helplessness Blues* and whether or not they employ nontraditional formal lengths. In addition to “Montezuma” and “Helplessness Blues”, “Battery Kinzie”, “The Shrine / An Argument”, and “Blue Spotted Tail” were also found to use “odd” lengths. There is a noticeable difference in the popularity of these songs and other tracks in the album. Using Python and the spotipy library, the mean popularity rating of “odd” songs was found to be 48.8, and the mean popularity rating of not “odd” songs was found to be 42.1. Here is a visualization of this difference:



This is not objective proof that nontraditional form lengths have a significant effect on a song's popularity and its ability to convey emotions. However, it is interesting to observe that there may be a potential effect from "odd" formal lengths.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Helplessness Blues* utilizes nontraditional form lengths to heighten the expressive capabilities of emotion within the album. Themes of nostalgia, regret, helplessness, and aging are explored. There are clear connections between lyrical content and "odd" section lengths, and the usage of "odd" lengths may have an effect on a song's popularity rating within the album.

Citations

Wikipedia Contributors. “Helplessness Blues.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 2 Apr. 2025, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helplessness_Blues.

Fleet Foxes. Helplessness Blues. Sub Pop Records, 2011. Spotify, <https://open.spotify.com/album/7D0rCfJjFj9x0bdgRKtvzb>.