

## How to Read a Pop Song (and Not Just the Lyrics): Formal Musical Analysis

Here are some key musical elements to organize your observations as you listen to a piece of popular music:

1) **Melody** – a linear series of **notes** or **itches**. The “tune” of the song. The part you hum when you think of a song is the melody.

2) **Rhythm** – the arrangement of sounds as they move through time. In popular music, rhythm takes the form of a cyclical (or repeated) pattern. It is the “beat” of a song. When we analyze the rhythm of a song, we often describe the pattern using numbers, paying attention to which beats are stressed or **accented** (for example 1,2,3,4 or 1, 2, 3 or 1, 2, 3, 4). In many forms of popular music, the drum set or machine is the instrument most responsible for establishing the rhythm, but in fact all musicians contribute to the rhythm. The tango, for example, typically has no drums, but it’s a very rhythmic music. Historically, popular music accentuates rhythm because popular music is often dance music, and rhythm is the aspect of music most relevant to dancers. One key rhythmic feature in the popular music of the Americas is **syncopation**, which is a shifting of the normal or expected accents.

3) **Harmony** – Notes that support the melody and are played simultaneously. In popular music, these supporting notes are usually in the form of note clusters called **chords**, played by instruments that are well-suited to playing multiple notes at the same time, such as the guitar and piano. When we analyze harmony, we talk about **chord progressions**, or in other words, the sequence of chords played. Or we could describe the type of chords being played. Jazz, for example, often uses more complex chords than, say, rock music. Harmony is also sometimes provided by a backup singer singing a different, but complementary melody behind the lead singer. When two notes played simultaneously sound nice together, we call that harmony **consonant**; when they don’t, we call it **dissonant**. If you have no background in playing in studying music, harmony is the most difficult element to understand. Don’t worry; you’ll get the hang of it.

4) **Tempo** – how fast or slow is the song? Note: this is different from the rhythm. The rhythm is the pattern of beats; the tempo is the speed.

5) **Instrumentation/Timbre** – What instruments are being played? Timbre (rhymes with “amber”) refers to the quality of the sound made by an instrument or voice: is it scratchy? brassy? thin? full? buzzy?

6) **Texture/Mix** – Texture is how the melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic materials are combined. One aspect of this is the mix -- how are the different instruments assembled? Which ones are louder and which ones are softer? We might describe a recording with many layers of instruments as dense or thick.

7) **Dynamics** – how loud or quiet is the music?