

Key Terms and Definitions

a cappella Vocal singing that involves no instrumental accompaniment.

A&R Abbreviation for “artists and repertoire.”

This is the department of a record company whose responsibility it is to discover and cultivate new musical talent and to find material for the artists to perform—naturally, with an eye toward commercial potential. As many artists today write and record their own material, the latter function of A&R has atrophied to some extent.

arranger A person who adapts (or arranges) the melody and chords of a song to exploit the capabilities and instrumental resources of a particular musical ensemble. For example, a simple pop tune originally written for voice and piano may be arranged for a jazz “big band” with many horns and a rhythm section.

ballad A type of song consisting usually of verses set to a repeating melody (see **strophic** form) in which a story, often romantic, historic, or tragic, is sung in narrative fashion.

blue notes Expressive notes or scalar inflections found primarily in blues and jazz music. The blue notes derive from African musical practice; although they do not correspond exactly to the Western system of **major** and **minor** scales, it is helpful to imagine them as “flatter” or “lower” versions of the scale degrees to which they are related, and thus one speaks of “blue” thirds, fifths, and sevenths.

blues A genre of music originating principally from the field hollers and work songs of rural blacks in the southern United States during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Themes treated by blues lyrics included the oppressive conditions suffered by African Americans, love gone wrong, alienation, misery, and the supernatural. The lyrics are often obscured by a coded, metaphorical language. The music of the blues is rich in Africanisms and earthy rhythms. Originally an acoustic music, the blues moved to the urban

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North in the mid-twentieth century, becoming electrified in the process.

bridge A passage consisting of new, contrasting material that serves as a link between repeated sections of melodic material.

A bridge is sometimes called a **release** (see discussion of Tin Pan Alley song form in Chapter 1).

cadence A melodic or harmonic event that signals the end of a musical line or section or of the piece as a whole.

call and response A characteristic feature of much African American music, in which musical forces alternate with one another, usually in quick succession: a solo singer with a chorus or backing group; sung lines with guitar or band passages; an instrumental solo with a larger instrumental group; and so forth.

This form of expression has spread to many musical styles and genres but is a characteristically African phenomenon in its

origins and so is most associated in America with African American expression.

chord The simultaneous sounding of different pitches.

chorus A repeating section within a song consisting of a fixed melody *and* lyric that is repeated exactly each time it occurs, typically following one or more verses.

coda The “tail end” of a musical composition, typically a brief passage after the last complete section that serves to bring the piece to its conclusion.

composer A person who creates a piece of music. Although the term may be, and often is, used to describe the creators of popular songs, it is more commonly applied to those who create more extended, formally notated works of music.

conjunto Spanish term for a musical group or ensemble, used widely in Latin America (e.g., Cuba and Mexico).

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counterculture A subculture existing in opposition to and espousing values contrary to that of the dominant culture. The term is most often used to describe the values and lifestyle of young people during the late 1960s and early 1970s (see Chapter 10).

counterpoint The sounding of two independent melodic lines or voices against one another.

cover version The term *cover* or *cover version* refers to a performance of a song other than that regarded as the “original” version (“original” usually because it preceded all others and sometimes because of its direct association with the creator[s] of the song).

dissonance A harsh or grating sound. (The perception of dissonance is culturally conditioned. For example, the smaller intervals employed in certain Asian and Middle Eastern musics may sound “out of tune” and dissonant to Western ears; within

their original context, however, they are regarded as perfectly consonant.)

distortion A buzzing, crunchy, or “fuzzy” tone color originally achieved by overdriving the vacuum tubes of a guitar amplifier. This effect can be simulated today by solid state and digital sound processors. Distortion is often heard in a hard rock or heavy metal context.

DJ Disc jockey (deejay); one who plays recordings (as on a radio program).

feedback Technically, an out-of-control sound oscillation that occurs when the output of a loudspeaker finds its way back into a microphone or electric instrument pickup and is reamplified, creating a sound loop that grows in intensity and continues until deliberately broken. Although feedback can be difficult to manage, it becomes a powerful expressive device in the hands of certain blues and rock musicians, most notably the guitarist

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Jimi Hendrix. Feedback can be recognized as a “screaming” or “crying” sound.

groove Term originally employed by jazz, rhythm & blues, and funk musicians to describe the channeled flow of swinging, “funky,” or “phat” rhythms.

hook A “catchy” or otherwise memorable musical phrase or pattern.

lyricist A person who supplies a poetic text (lyrics) to a piece of vocal music; not necessarily the composer.

major Refers to one of the two scale systems central to Western music (see **minor**); a major scale is arranged in the following order of whole- and half-step intervals: 1-1-½-1-1-1-½ (This pattern is easy to see if one begins at the pitch C on the piano keyboard and plays the next seven white notes in succession, which yields the C major scale: CDEFGABC.) A song is said to be in a major tonality or key if it uses melodies and chords that are constructed from the major scale. Of course, a

song may (and frequently does) “borrow” notes and chords from outside a particular major scale, and it may “modulate” or shift from key to key within the course of the song.

melisma One syllable of text spread out over many musical tones.

minor Refers to one of the two scale systems central to Western music (see **major**); a minor scale is arranged in the following order of whole- and half-step intervals: 1-½-1-1-½-1-1. (This pattern represents the so-called natural minor scale, often found in blues and blues-based popular music; it is easy to see if one begins at the pitch A on the piano keyboard and plays the next seven white notes in succession, which yields the A minor scale: ABCDEFGA. The two other minor scales in common usage—the melodic minor and harmonic minor scales—have ascending and descending forms that differ somewhat from the natural minor scale.) A song is said to be in a minor tonality or key if it uses melodies

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and chords that are constructed from the minor scale. Of course, a song may (and frequently does) “borrow” notes and chords from outside a particular minor scale, and it may “modulate” or shift from key to key within the course of the song. In comparison with the major scale, the minor scale is often described as having a “sad” or “melancholy” sound.

montuno Spanish term for a formal section within a performance of Afro Cuban dance music (such as a rumba, mambo, or salsa). The *montuno*, generally the second half of a given piece, alternates a fixed vocal refrain (the *coro*) with a solo vocal improvisation (the **pregón**) and may also include instrumental solos.

MP3 A variant of the MPEG compression system, which allows sound files to be compressed to as little as one-twelfth of their original size.

payola The illegal and historically widespread practice of offering money or other inducements to a radio station or deejay in order to ensure the prominent airplay of a particular recording.

polyrhythm The simultaneous sounding of rhythms in two or more contrasting meters, such as three against two or five against four. Polyrhythms are found in abundance in African and Asian musics and their derivatives.

pregón Spanish term for “announcement.” In Afro Cuban music *pregón* refers to (1) an improvised vocal solo based on the cries of street vendors or (2) the improvised solo part in call-and-response singing (as in the *montuno* form).

producer A person engaged either by a recording artist or, more often, a record company who directs and assists the recording process. The producer’s duties may include securing the services of session musicians;

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deciding on arrangements; making technical decisions; motivating the artist creatively; helping to realize the artistic vision in a commercially viable way; and, not unimportantly, ensuring that the project comes in under budget. A good producer often develops a distinctive signature sound, and successful producers are always in great demand. They are often rewarded handsomely for their efforts, garnering a substantial share of a recording's earnings, in addition to a commission.

R&B Rhythm & blues. An African American musical genre emerging after World War II. It consisted of a loose cluster of styles derived from black musical traditions, characterized by energetic and hard-swinging rhythms. At first performed exclusively by black musicians and aimed at black audiences, R&B came to replace the older category of "race records" (see Chapter 7).

refrain In the verse-refrain song, the refrain is the "main part" of the song, usually constructed in AABA or ABAC form (see discussion of Tin Pan Alley song form in Chapter 1).

release See **bridge**.

reverb Short for *reverberation*—a prolongation of a sound by virtue of an ambient acoustical space created by hard, reflective surfaces. The sound bounces off these surfaces and recombines with the original sound, slightly delayed (reverb is measured in terms of seconds and fractions of seconds). Reverberation can occur naturally or be simulated either electronically or by digital sound processors.

riff A simple, repeating melodic idea or pattern that generates rhythmic momentum; typically played by the horns or the piano in a jazz ensemble or by an electric guitar in a rock 'n' roll context.

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rockabilly A vigorous form of country and western music (“hillbilly” music) informed by the rhythms of black R&B and electric blues. It is exemplified by such artists as Carl Perkins and the young Elvis Presley.

sampling A digital recording process wherein a sound source is recorded or “sampled” with a microphone, converted into a stream of binary numbers that represents the profile of the sound, quantized, and stored in computer memory. The digitized sound sample may then be retrieved in any number of ways, including by using “virtual recording studio” programs for the computer or by activating the sound from an electronic keyboard or drum machine.

scat singing A technique that involves the use of nonsense syllables as a vehicle for wordless vocal improvisation. It is most often found in a jazz context.

slap-back A distinctive short reverberation with few repetitions, often heard in the

recordings of rockabilly artists, such as the Sun Records recordings of Elvis Presley.

strophes Poetic stanzas; often, a pair of stanzas of alternating form that constitutes the structure of a poem. These stanzas could become the **verse** and **chorus** of a **strophic** song.

strophic A song form that employs the same music for each poetic unit in the lyrics.

syncopation Rhythmic patterns in which the stresses occur on what are ordinarily weak beats, thus displacing or suspending the sense of metric regularity.

tempo Literally, “time” (from Italian). The rate at which a musical composition proceeds, regulated by the speed of the beat or pulse to which it is performed.

timbre The “tone color” or characteristic sound of an instrument or voice, determined by its frequency and overtone components. Timbre is the aspect of sound that allows us, for example, to differentiate between the

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sounds of a violin and a flute when both instruments are playing the same pitch.

tonic Refers to the central or “home” pitch, or chord, of a musical piece—or sometimes of just a section of the piece.

tremolo The rapid reiteration of a single pitch to create a vibrating sound texture. This effect can be produced by acoustic instruments or by electronic means.

verse In general usage, this term refers to a group of lines of poetic text, often rhyming, that usually exhibits regularly recurring metrical patterns. In the verse-refrain song, the verse is an introductory section that precedes the main body of the song, the

refrain (see discussion of Tin Pan Alley song form in Chapter 1).

vibrato An expressive musical technique that involves minute wavering or fluctuation of a pitch.

waltz A dance in triple time with a strong emphasis on every third beat.