

Turning Into Bluegrass:

Characterizing a Genre through Comparative Analysis

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Bluegrass holds a noteworthy place in the repertoire of American popular music despite having only gained its name and many of its defining instrumental techniques sometime around the 1950s. An American-born style, bluegrass has built new musical traditions, exchanged influences with other musical traditions, and made its imprint on American culture from dance halls to feature film soundtracks. Although bluegrass has experienced many diverse stylistic periods and trends, its characteristic sound is generally considered to be quite distinctive from other genres.

Bluegrass fans and musicians have created terms to describe the features that comprise the bluegrass sound; terms like “drive,” which describes the exciting rhythmic character of the music; and “the high lonesome sound,” –used to describe bluegrass’s characteristic vocal quality and singing technique. Musicologists and other scholars who write about the genre attempt to define the genre by these and other characteristics such as the instrumental and vocal composition of the ensemble, the playing and singing techniques, its roots and namesake, and its relationship to other genres of American music. Thomas Goldsmith defines the genre in *Bluegrass: A History*:

It is an expansive, twentieth-century, acoustic string-band music based in traditional styles, including fiddle tunes, blues, and southern church music, and it features high-pitched lead and harmony singing and emphasizes instrumental virtuosity on fiddle, banjo, mandolin, guitar, and acoustic bass.¹

¹ Goldsmith, Thomas. *The Bluegrass Reader*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004: 1.

Definitions like Goldsmith's accurately describe several integral aspects of the genre, but do not address formal characteristics that comprise features such as "traditional styles," and "instrumental virtuosity" or the aforementioned "drive." This raises the question: what are the formal musical structures that make up these defining characteristics?

Joti Rockwell's essay, "Banjo Transformations and Bluegrass Rhythm," begins to address this question by examining "drive." Rockwell looks to the banjo as a source of "drive," claiming that the consistent rhythmic arpeggiation patterns of the Scruggs style technique account for the sense of quick tempo and continuous motion that constitutes "drive." He tests this hypothesis by analyzing banjo performances using beat class transformations.²

Analyses like Rockwell's begin to approach the question of what, exactly, makes bluegrass unique as a genre. However, in order to better understand characteristics like these as genre-specific and not just characteristics common to many musics, American musics, folk-based musics, or some other broader category, it may be useful to compare bluegrass performances to performances of the same or similar pieces in other genres. CMH Records, a label that records many bluegrass artists, has provided an excellent opportunity for this kind of comparative analysis with its "Pickin' On" series of bluegrass tributes to songs from other genres. The "Pickin' On" series is a multi-album, multi-artist phenomenon in which musicians "pay tribute" to many diverse popular genres by recording bluegrass versions of previously recorded songs.³

Tributes, compared to other types of musical reworkings such as covers, imply a certain amount of respect for the original version, and may appear to be less concerned with

² Rockwell, Joti. "Banjo Transformations and Bluegrass Rhythm." *Journal of Music Theory* vol. 53, no. 1 (2009): 137-162.

³ For more information on the "Pickin' On" series, see CMH Records, Wikipedia, last modified March 2, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CMH_Records.

commenting on the original. Mark Butler discusses the idea of commentary in musical reworkings in his essay, “Taking it seriously: intertextuality and authenticity in two covers by the Pet Shop Boys.” Butler writes that, “musicians often seek to define themselves in relation to traditions and genres other than their own. This dialogic relationship is exemplified by the practice of ‘covering’ a previously recorded song,” he adds that, “covers provide an intertextual commentary on another musical work or style.”⁴ Although the “Pickin’ On” tributes appear less concerned with commenting on the validity or function of the music they cover, they certainly define the genre of bluegrass in a profound way by comparison to the original. The distinction between the originals and tributes in the series is profound enough that it almost borders on parody. However, there is nothing else in the context of the tributes that would imply parody as an intention, and the self-proclaimed designation as tributes implies a sort of seriousness. Upon listening, however, there is no doubt that the CMH artists are not striving to create replicas of the originals, but are turning them into distinctive bluegrass pieces.

This essay examines two of the musical characteristics mentioned above: the temporal characteristic of “drive,” as discussed by Joti Rockwell; and the vocal quality known as the “high lonesome sound.” My examination is presented in the form of a comparative analysis of indie rock band Modest Mouse’s 2003 song “Float On” and Iron Horse’s 2004 tribute to “Float On,” from the album, *Pickin’ On Modest Mouse*. This analysis compares the Iron Horse version with the original in order to locate aspects of the original that remain intact in some manner, and aspects which are changed in a way that signals a difference in the two genres. The discussion of “drive” includes aspects of Rockwell’s theory of beat class transformations and discussions of

⁴ Butler, Mark. “Taking it Seriously: intertextuality and authenticity in two covers by the Pet Shop Boys.” *Popular Music*, Nov. 22. No. 1 (2003): 1.

texture, density, and tempo. A closer look at text articulation and vocal part division highlights some features of the characteristic, “high lonesome sound.”

Monroe, Scruggs, and the Bluegrass Ensemble

The term, “bluegrass,” came into use around the 1950s in reference to Bill Monroe and his group, the Blue Grass Boys. Monroe and his contemporaries – most notably Earl Scruggs, Lester Flatt, Mave Wiseman, Chubby Wise, and the Stanley Brothers – are commonly considered to be something like what Goldsmith calls, “the collective brain trust that started bluegrass.”⁵ This group of musicians provided not only the material for the naming of the genre, but the specific instrumental techniques for which the genre is known. Monroe’s high, piercing vocal style was imitated by many, and began the “high lonesome” vocal style.⁶

The three-finger banjo technique which is characteristic of bluegrass music was pioneered by Earl Scruggs and came to be known as “Scruggs style” banjo.⁷ This technique consists of rolls which alternate strings and active fingers in a manner which allows for virtuosic speed.⁸ Steven Price writes that the result of Scruggs’ technique, “was unbroken streams of melody surrounded by cascades of grace notes.”⁹ Price adds that in addition to the fast arpeggiations, Scruggs also incorporated elements of the older “claw-hammer” technique. Scruggs, “used his left hand to slide through, hammer on, and pull off additional notes.”¹⁰

Most of the general characteristics associated with bluegrass are adopted directly from these early ensembles. These characteristics include the instruments that comprise the ensemble,

⁵ Goldsmith, *The Bluegrass Reader*, 4.

⁶ Rosenberg, Neil V. *Bluegrass: A History*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985: 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸ For an introductory explanation of basic roles, see ⁸ Price, Steven D. *Old as the Hills: the story of bluegrass music*. New York: Viking Press, 1975, 45.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

the arrangement of vocal parts and harmonies, the fast average tempo, the instrumental techniques, and even the clothing worn in performance.

A typical bluegrass ensemble consists of a five-string banjo, guitar, fiddle, mandolin, and double bass.¹¹ Dobro guitars eventually became standard instruments in many bluegrass ensembles as well. It is not uncommon for many or all of the instrumentalists in the ensemble to double as vocalists. Typically, the vocal part of the ensemble consists of a lead part (performing in the high-pitched style popularized by Monroe), a high tenor who sings a third or a fifth above the lead part, and a baritone or bass.¹²

The modern bluegrass band Iron Horse presents a slight variation on the traditional ensemble. Iron Horse is a quartet which excludes the use of the fiddle and Dobro guitar and utilizes all of the instrumentalists as vocalists. The vocal parts consist of two tenors who alternate as leads, a baritone, and a baritone/bass. The following analysis demonstrates how Iron Horse is able to maintain some integral aspects of the original Modest Mouse version of “Float On” by identifying various instrumental roles and vocal subsets with corresponding instrumental and vocal roles in the original. Iron Horse’s instrumental and vocal arrangement not only maintains recognizable characteristics of the original song, but reflects an ensemble dynamic which is characteristic of many bluegrass ensembles.

Modest Mouse, “Float On”

Modest Mouse’s 2003 song, “Float On” presents a repeating three-chord pattern (F# - B – A#min.) which is arranged as contrasting rhythmic motives in the two guitar parts and thematic melodic phrases in the vocal part. The text of the song dictates an asymmetrical verse/chorus

¹¹ Ibid., 2.

¹² Ibid., 2.

form that ends with a 23-measure coda which is derived from the material of the chorus. Figure 1 diagrams the large-scale formal units of the song. Figure 2 presents the lyrics as they divide the formal section. Each verse constitutes a periodic structure in which the first line of text outlines a two-measure phrase, and the second line of text a contrasting antecedent phrase. The chorus consists of repeating motives within the framework of the repeating 3-chord pattern.

Figure 1

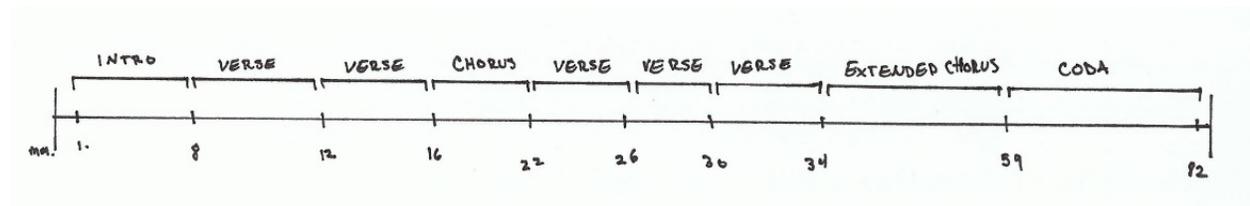


Figure 2

[Intro]

[Verse]

I backed my car into a cop car the other day
Well he just drove off, sometimes life's o.k.

[Verse]

I ran my mouth off a bit too much, oh, what did I say?
Well you just laughed it off, it was all o.k.

[Chorus]

And we'll all float on o.k.
And we'll all float on o.k.
And we'll all float on o.k.
And we'll all float on anyway (well)

[Verse]

A fake Jamaican took every last dime with that scam.
It was worth it just to learn some sleight of hand.

[Verse]

Bad news comes don't you worry even when it lands.
Good news will work its way to all them plans.

[Verse]

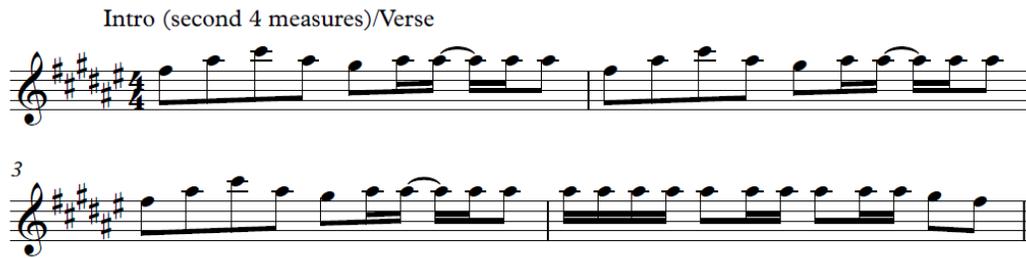
We both got fired on exactly the same day.
Well we'll float on, good news is on the way

[Chorus - extended]

[Coda]

And we'll all float on. Alright.
Already, we'll all float on. Alright.
Don't worry even if things end up a bit too heavy,
We'll all float on. Alright.
Already we'll all float on. Alright.
Already we'll all float on o.k.
Don't worry we'll all float on.
Even if things get heavy,
We'll all float on. Alright.
Already we'll all float on o.k.
Oh, don't you worry,
We'll all float on.
We'll all float on.

Figure 4 Guitar 2 introduction and verse



The two phrases that make up each statement of the verse are performed in a manner which presents the two moods of each couplet of text. For example, the first line of the first verse, “I backed my car into a cop car the other day,” presents the first phrase (A), or the “difficult situation” phrase of the verse. Textually, this phrase portrays some tension which is matched by the high-pitched, exasperated, somewhat unstable tone of the vocalist. The second phrase of the verse presents the “resolution” phrase (B), or the release of the tension of the first line with the statement, “Well, he just drove off, sometimes life’s o.k.” This is articulated by a calmer, more stable, quieter singing style. This two-part structure repeats in each verse of the song; a situation is presented in the first phrase and is resolved in the second with the emotional tension and release matched by the singing style. Figure 5 shows the first verse, chorus, and third verse of the vocal part. The melody itself is very simple, utilizing a great deal of repetition and outlining the F# major triad in both the verse and chorus.

Figure 5 Vocal verse 1 and chorus

A I backed my car in - to a cop car the oth - er day_ **B** well

4 **C** he just drove off some - times life's O. K. And we'll all float on O. K.____

7 _____ and we'll all float on o. K.____ And we'll all float on O. K.

11 **A'** _____ And we'll all____float on an - y way____ A fake Ja - mai - can took ev -

14 **B'** 'ry last dime with that scam_ it was worth it just to learn_ some slight of hand.

17 **D** And we'll all____float on al - right al - ready - y we'll all____float on no don't you wor - ry we'll

22 all float on al - right al - ready - y we'll all____float on al -

25 right don't wor - ry we'll all float on._____

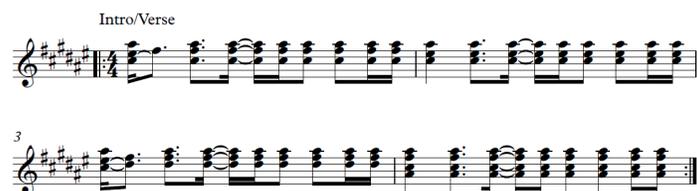
Iron Horse, “Float On”

Iron Horse’s tribute to “Float On” maintains the same repeating three-chord pattern, transposed up a minor third (A – D – C#min.). Although there are potentially many reasons one could speculate as to why Iron Horse opted to transpose the song, the placement of the first vocal phrase seems a likely reason, as it exaggerates the “high and lonesome” quality. Rhythmically, the tribute maintains some crucial aspects of the two-guitar cumulative rhythmic motivic material, but changes the background rhythmic accent from the heavy on-the-beat articulation of the drum kit to a second eighth-note backbeat on the guitar. The Scruggs style technique in the banjo may lend the Iron Horse version its characteristic sense of drive that Rockwell attributes to it. The temporal speed is also accelerated quite literally from an increase in tempo from 100 to 120 beats per minute.

Despite the change in rhythmic/temporal character that the banjo and guitar create in this version, the mandolin is able to maintain much of the integrity of the rhythmic motives held by the guitars in the Modest Mouse version. [Figure 6](#) shows the mandolin introduction as a replica of the guitar 1 introduction and the mandolin chorus as a replica of the guitar 2 intro/verse material. In the next section, an analysis using cumulative beat class sets derived from Rockwell’s theory will demonstrate how dynamically or registrally accented tones in the banjo help to create a cumulative rhythm that is very close to that of the original version.

Figure 6

Guitar 1 intro and mandolin intro

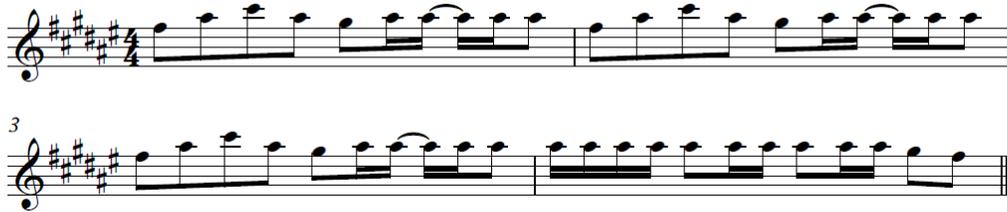


Mandolin Intro



Guitar 2 intro/verse and mandolin chorus

Intro (second 4 measures)/Verse



9 Mandolin Chorus



“Drive”

In, “Banjo Transformations and Bluegrass Rhythm,” Joti Rockwell relates beat-class sets drawn from transformational theory and rhythm and meter theory to the idea of “drive” which he relates to banjo technique playing technique.¹⁴ Rather than conceiving of banjo music as pitches as they would be notated, Rockwell suggests conceiving of it in terms of combination of the three fingers that create plucking patterns. These plucking patterns create dynamic and registral accents as certain chordal members in the arpeggiation are articulated on certain strings by certain fingers. From the strongly articulated notes, beat-classes can be drawn from the continuous texture of the playing style.

¹⁴ Rockwell, Joti. “Banjo Transformations and Bluegrass Rhythm.” *Journal of Music Theory* vol. 53, no. 1 (2009): 137.

Figure 7 shows the banjo part as a string of sixteenth notes, the literal rhythm of the Scruggs style pattern. The rhythms of the other instruments are shown as well. This sixteenth note motor-rhythm creates a sense of speed and density in this version. This speed and density allows for a perpetual, steady meter and energy to be maintained throughout.

Figure 7

Mandolin Intro

Musical notation for the Mandolin Intro. It begins with a tempo marking of ♩=120 and a 4/4 time signature. The first measure contains a whole rest. The second measure features a five-finger roll (indicated by a '5' above the notes) of sixteenth notes. The piece continues with a series of eighth-note patterns, including some beamed eighth notes, and concludes with a whole rest.

Mandolin Chorus

Musical notation for the Mandolin Chorus, consisting of a single line of music with a continuous eighth-note pattern.

Banjo Intro/Verse

Musical notation for the Banjo Intro/Verse. It features a continuous, dense sixteenth-note motor rhythm across two staves.

Guitar Intro/Verse/chorus

Musical notation for the Guitar Intro/Verse/chorus. It consists of two staves of music featuring a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and rests.

Bass Intro/Verse/chorus

Musical notation for the Bass Intro/Verse/chorus. It consists of a single staff of music with a simple eighth-note pattern.

In order to create beat-class sets from the patterns of accented tones in the banjo pattern, Rockwell assigns each sixteenth note beat of a 2/4 measure an integer from 0 (the first sixteenth note in the measure) to 7 (the last sixteenth note in the measure). The sixteenth notes on which the accented beats fall are listed as integers in the set. [Figure 8](#) and [Figure 9](#) show beat-class sets for the introduction and chorus of the Modest Mouse and Iron Horse versions respectively. The Modest Mouse beat class sets compare the two guitar parts and the Iron Horse beat-class sets compare the mandolin and the banjo. In each of the graphs, the last line represents the cumulative beat class set. That is, all of the strongly articulated beats of both of the represented instrumental parts are added together to show the overall pattern of accent. Because the song is in 4/4 and not 2/4 like Rockwell's example, each measure is divided by a dotted barline into half-measures in order to maintain the same mod-eight system.

A chart comparing the results from two pieces to each other is provided in [Figure 10](#). This chart compares the mandolin with guitar 1 and the banjo with guitar 2 in the verse and then the chorus. It then takes the cumulative results of each piece and compares them to each other as (M) and (I). The cumulative beat class sets of (M) and (I) are then taken in order to show the cumulative rhythmic accent pattern for the verse and the chorus (T_1 and T_2). The last row shows the results of a comparison between T_1 and T_2 . In his analysis, Rockwell analyzes the beat-class data transformationally, as operations between two beat classes.¹⁵ In my analysis I have chosen to use set theory to represent the beat-classes as various subset and superset relations.

The T_1, T_2 results in the last row show that the overall cumulative rhythms of the verse and chorus are just about equal. This indicates that the piece, as a whole, has a characteristic beat-class map. Based on the results of the individual beat-class maps of the two pieces, this map

¹⁵ See Rockwell, 148 for transformations. Rockwell clarifies that, "the terms 'transformation' and 'operation' can be used only loosely here, since AUG and DIM change the set class and thus do not comfortably fit Lewin's definitions of the terms." (148)

is strongly tied to the cumulative beat-classes of the two guitars in the Modest Mouse version, and the mandolin and banjo in the Iron Horse version. The high degree of equal or nearly equal sets shows that there is a great deal of rhythmic consistency between the two pieces, despite the change in character from the use of the Scruggs style banjo technique. The greatest discrepancy in beat-class comparisons, in fact, is due occurrences in the banjo part. It appears that the banjo is the wild card which disrupts the rhythm of the original piece.

One could perceive this alteration in the banjo part as being somewhat separate from the rest of the ensemble. The banjo may be a defining feature that signals that this piece is a bluegrass piece and not just a copy of the original. This disturbance in the original, somewhat relaxed repetitive rhythm of the original may also contribute to the “drive”. The constant motion of the banjo, who’s accents are dissonant against the expected cumulative beat-class collections of the verse and chorus, creates a tension that drives the piece forward.

Figure 8 beat-class sets for Modest Mouse “Float On,” guitar 1, guitar 2

Intro/Verse

The Intro/Verse section consists of four measures. The notation includes staves for Guitar 1, Guitar 1 beat class, Guitar 2, Guitar 2 beat class, and Cumulative beat class, all in 4/4 time. Vertical dashed lines indicate the boundaries of the beat class sets.

Measure	Guitar 1	Guitar 1 beat class	Guitar 2	Guitar 2 beat class	Cumulative beat class
1	[Musical notation]	{0,4,7}	[Musical notation]	{0,4}	{0,4,7}
2	[Musical notation]	{2,4}	[Musical notation]	{0,3,6}	{0,2,3,4,6}
3	[Musical notation]	{0,4,7}	[Musical notation]	{0,4}	{0,4,7}
4	[Musical notation]	{2,4}	[Musical notation]	{0,4,6}	{0,2,4,6}

Chorus

The Chorus section consists of four measures. The notation includes staves for Guitar 1, Guitar 1 beat class, Guitar 2, Guitar 2 beat class, and Cumulative beat class, all in 4/4 time. Vertical dashed lines indicate the boundaries of the beat class sets.

Measure	Guitar 1	Guitar 1 beat class	Guitar 2	Guitar 2 beat class	Cumulative beat class
1	[Musical notation]	{0,4}	[Musical notation]	{0,4}	{0,4}
2	[Musical notation]	{0,4}	[Musical notation]	{0,3,6}	{0,3,4,6}
3	[Musical notation]	{0,4}	[Musical notation]	{0,4}	{0,4}
4	[Musical notation]	{0,4}	[Musical notation]	{0,4,6}	{0,4,6}

Figure 9 beat class sets for Iron Horse, "Float On," mandolin, banjo

Intro

Mandolin

Mandolin beat class

Banjo

Banjo beat class

Cumulative beat class

Chorus

Mandolin

Mandolin beat class

Banjo

Banjo beat class

Cumulative beat class

Figure 10

INTRO				
Guitar 1	{0,4,7}	{2,4}	{0,4,7}	{2,4}
Mandolin	{0,4,6}	{2,4,6}	{0,4}	{0,2,4,6}
Guitar 2	{0,4}	{0,3,6}	{0,4}	{0,4,6}
Banjo	{0,2,4,7}	{2,4,6}	{0,2,4,7}	{2,4,6}
M Cumulative (M)	{0,4,7}	{0,2,3,4,6}	{0,4,7}	{0,2,4,6}
I Cumulative (I)	{0,2,4,6,7}	{2,4,6}	{0,2,4,7}	{0,2,4,6}
Total 1 (T₁)	{0,2,4,6,7}	{0,2,3,4,6}	{0,2,4,7}	{0,2,4,6}
	M ⊂ I	M ⊃ I	M ⊂ I	M ⊂ I
CHORUS				
Guitar 1	{0,4}	{0,4}	{0,4}	{0,4}
Mandolin	{0,4}	{0,4,6}	{0,4,6}	{0,4}
Guitar 2	{0,4}	{0,3,6}	{0,4}	{0,4,6}
Banjo	{0,2,4,7}	{2,4,6}	{0,2,4,7}	{2,4,6}
M Cumulative (M)	{0,4}	{0,3,4,6}	{0,4}	{0,4,6}
I Cumulative	{0,2,4,7}	{0,2,4,6}	{0,2,4,7}	{0,2,4,6}
Total 2 (T₂)	{0,2,4,7}	{0,2,3,4,6}	{0,2,4,7}	{0,2,4,6}
	M ⊂ I	M ∩ I {0,4,6}	M ⊂ I	M ⊂ I
T₁, T₂	T₁ ⊃ T₂	T₁ = T₂	T₁ = T₂	T₁ = T₂
M Total (M _t)	{0,4,7}	{0,2,3,4,6}	{0,4,7}	{0,2,4,6}
I Total (I _t)	{0,2,4,6,7}	{0,2,4,6}	{0,2,4,7}	{0,2,4,6}
	M _t ⊂ I _t	M _t ⊃ I _t	M _t ⊂ I _t	M _t = I _t

The “High Lonesome Sound”

Where the Modest Mouse version of “Float On” uses changing vocal articulation of a solo vocalist to articulate the building and release of tension in the text, Iron Horse uses different subsets of the vocal ensemble, whose traditional singing styles and roles create the same emotional effect maintaining classic bluegrass stylistic conventions. [Figure 11](#) shows the lyrics of the verses and chorus, which maintain the same phrase and periodic structure as the Modest Mouse version, and the vocal parts that perform each of the lines.

Figure 11

[Verse] I backed my car into a cop car the other day Well he just drove off, sometimes life's o.k.	Tenor Soloist
[Verse] I ran my mouth off a bit too much, oh, what did I say? Well you just laughed it off, it was all o.k.	Tenor Soloist Soloist, Baritone, Bass
[Chorus] And we'll all float on o.k. (3X) And we'll all float on anyway	
[Verse] A fake Jamaican took every last dime with that scam. It was worth it just to learn some sleight of hand.	Soloist, Tenor, Baritone Soloist, Baritone, Bass Soloist, Tenor, Baritone Soloist, Baritone, Bass
[Verse] Bad news comes don't you worry even when it lands. Good news will work its way to all them plans.	Soloist, Tenor, Baritone Soloist, Baritone, Bass
[Verse] We both got fired on exactly the same day. Well we'll float on, good news is on the way	Soloist, Baritone, Bass Soloist
[Chorus] [Chorus Extension] Already we'll all float on alright Don't worry, we'll all float on alright (2X)	Soloist, Baritone, Bass Soloist, Baritone, Bass, occasional Tenor
[Coda]	

In the bluegrass vocal ensemble, the tenor or soloist are the parts associates with the “high lonesome sound.” This sound is characterized by singing in a high range at a loud dynamic with a somewhat pinched tone. The transposition of the harmony up a minor third moves the first note of the first phrase from an F#⁵ to an A⁵ which allows the tenor to exaggerate the high, pinched, “lonesome” sound. Whereas Isaac Brock, the singer for Modest Mouse performs the verse solo and uses a change of vocal timbre and technique to distinguish the “situation” phrase from the “resolution” phrase, Iron Horse passes the phrases between the high tenor and the lower solo voices, as shown in Figure 12.

Figure 12

Tenor----- Soloist--

I backed my car in - to a cop car___ the oth - er day_____ well

----- Tenor--

he just drove off some - times life's O. k. I ran my mouth off a bit

----- Soloist--

too much oh what did I say_____ well you just laughed it off was all O. K.

The harmonies sung in the three- or four-part response sections of the chorus are quite typical of bluegrass vocal ensembles. The tenor (or highest voice) sings a third or a fifth above the middle voice, and the lowest voice provides a bass line. The Modest Mouse version employs a chorus of its own during the chorus extension and the coda. This chorus plays a very different role than in the Iron Horse version, however. The chorus in the Modest Mouse version is secondary to Brock’s lead vocals. In the Iron Horse version, the three-part harmonization sounds as a unit of equal voices. This creates a sort of duet between the soloist and the three-part ensemble. This dynamic creates a responsorial effect in the extended chorus and coda that creates a different sense of ensemble than the secondary background vocals in the Modest Mouse version.

The use of the solo high tenor voice is limited to the “situation” phrase of the verse. The association of the “high lonesome sound” of the tenor with the distress of the first phrase of the verse creates a dynamic of many-against-one. Despite the distress of the tenor, the larger ensemble will “all float on.” In this way, Iron Horse uses a vocal dynamic of alternating the

“high lonesome” soloist with the mixed harmony as an ensemble, a common occurrence in bluegrass music, to emphasize the meaning of the text and portray a similar emotional dichotomy as the Modest Mouse version.

Comparative analyses such as this may prove to be a valuable resource for understanding distinct genres like bluegrass. Although this analysis points to some interesting musical structures which can be linked to the genre-specific ideas of “drive” and the “high lonesome sound,” one example cannot serve as proof of the defining characteristics of a genre. Collections such as the “Pickin’ On” series may provide affective means for comparing to genres in a way that is devoid of parody or extra musical commentary. Tributes like Iron Horse’s “Float On” can demonstrate the specific structural alterations that can turn a piece from another genre into bluegrass. Additionally, the work of theorists like Joti Rockwell, which examines the technical characteristics specific to the genre for links to the distinctive sound, can provide valuable tools for analyzing and understanding the formal structures of the genre. These methods of approaching the understanding of a specific genre may be useful for understanding other distinctive genres as well.

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