CHORUS STRUCTURE

Much of jazz has an underlying structure that is cyclic: a single unchanging progression is repeated for the duration of a performance. This unvarying background structure, called a chorus, is naturally conducive to improvisation. Whether the structural background is 12-bars, 16-bars, 32-bars or 64-bars long, the feature which makes the cyclic repetition work is the non-coincidence of the *formal close* and the *harmonic close*. In almost all of these patterns, the harmonic progression reaches its final tonic in the penultimate measure and while the regular phrase structure is still to be completed, the harmony is "turned back" to the opening. (These final two measures are often called the "turnaround" or "turnback.") It is the overlapping of the formal and harmonic elements which provides the momentum for the chorus repetitions: the four-square pattern of the phrases necessitates the completion of the structure; at the same time the harmonic turnaround necessitates the return to the tonic of the opening measure.

In terms of formal models, the vast majority of chorus structures are 12-, 32- or 16-measures.

12-bar Blues:

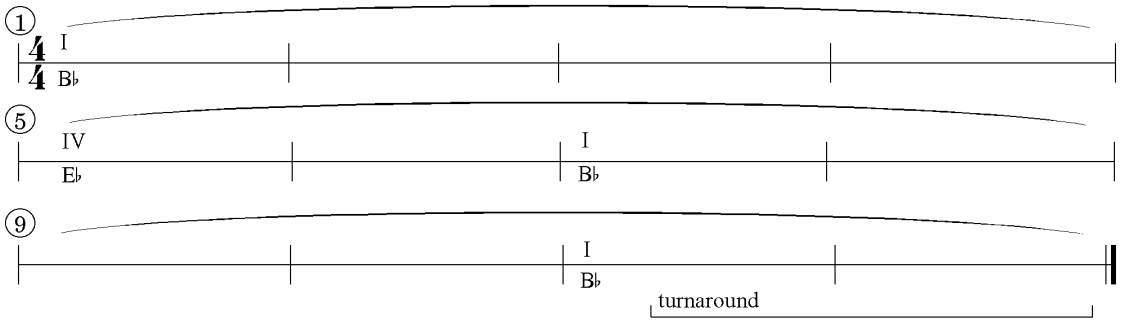
The blues is originally a vocal idiom. Some forms of early vocal blues, particularly country blues (usually featuring only voice and guitar) are flexible in terms of formal structure: the singer may add a few bars or beats here and there and the choruses may not be repeated exactly. But gradually a 12-bar chorus became the normative blues structure (though there are pieces titled "blues" which do not have this structure). The blues progression is by far the most common structure in jazz. Its basic characteristics can be refined and modified in a variety of ways and jazz musicians have continued to compose new melodies using this adaptable form.

The 12-bar pattern, and its subdivision into 4+4+4, is derived from blues lyrics, which have the poetic form *aab*. Usually a single idea or phrase is stated (4 measures), then repeated (4 measures), then the third line provides some sort of 'answer' (often humorous) to the statement:

a	Lord he's got that sweet somethin' and I told my girlfriend Lou	(4 meas.)
a	He's got that sweet somethin' and I told my girlfriend Lou	(4 meas.)
b	From the way she's raving, she must have gone and tried it too	(4 meas.)

Empty Bed Blues (Bessie Smith,1928)

The main harmonic points of arrival are measure four (the turn to subdominant harmony) and measure 11 (the return to tonic). There are *many* harmonic variants of the blues (we will discuss some of the possibilities) but these two points of arrival are the definitive harmonic characteristics of the structure.



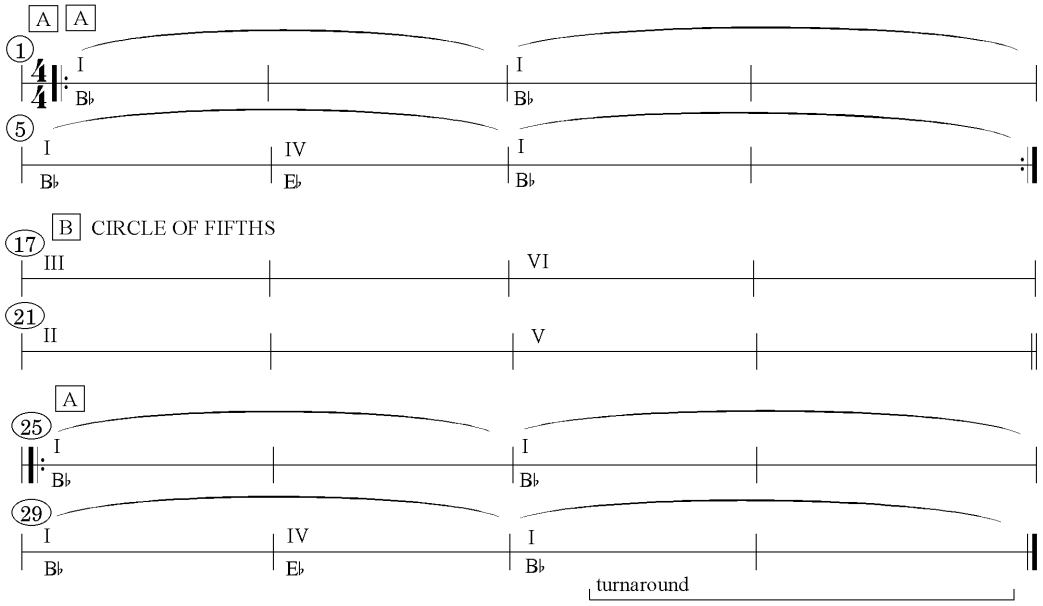
various examples:

Straight, No Chaser
Blues in the Closet
Blues for Alice
All Blues
Mr. P.C.
C Jam Blues
Blue Seven
One for Daddy-O
In the Mood
Sandu
One O'Clock Jump
Stolen Moments (essentially)
Sidewinder (essentially)

32-bar Song form

The 32-bar song form is the structure favored by composers of popular song (tin pan alley). The 32-bar chorus is used in this repertoire, with very few exceptions, throughout the 'teens, 20s, 30s and beyond. The structure can be subdivided in a number of ways, but the most common of these is AABA, with sections 8-measures in length. The most well-used example of this is undoubtedly "rhythm changes," the progression which accompanies George Gershwin's *I Got Rhythm*. This progression was frequently used by jazz musicians as the harmonic backdrop for newly composed melodies, particularly in the 1940s.

The A sections of rhythm changes are characterized by a single 2-measure progression (mm.1-2; 3-4 and 7-8) which circles around and returns to tonic harmony. Measures 5-6, in contrast, move to the subdominant. Listening for this move to IV is particularly helpful in hearing this progression. Also identifiable is the circle-of-fifths B section of the AABA structure, called variously the *bridge*, *release*, *channel* or *middle eight* (though it doesn't occur exactly in the middle). This B section is often appropriated into other pieces as a generic 8-measure bridge which can function in many contexts.



The 32-bar chorus structure is also frequently subdivided into two 16-measure sections: AB or AA' (or possibly in 8-measure sections ABAC). Characteristic of this binary subdivision is a first part which ends on the *dominant* and a second part which usually reiterates the opening progression, but with a *tonic* conclusion. The 32-bar progression is occasionally doubled, to 64 measures (but the subdivisions remain proportionally the same).

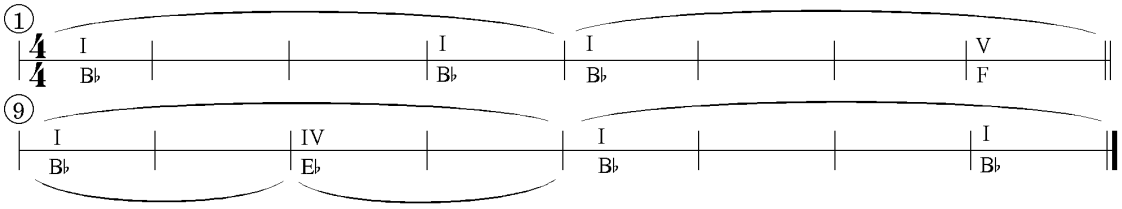
various examples:

All of Me (AA')
'Round Midnight (AABA)
Cherokee (AABA —64 bars)
I Got Rhythm (AABA —rhythm changes)
Oleo (AABA —rhythm changes)
Take the A Train (AABA)
There Will Never Be Another You (AA')
Autumn Leaves (AABA)
*Sunny Side of the Street (*AABA)
Honeysuckle Rose (AABA)
Moose the Mooche (AABA —rhythm changes)
Stella by Starlight (ABCA)
I Can't Get Started (AABA)
All the Things You Are (AA')
Cottontail (AABA —rhythm changes)

16-bar form

Though less common than either 12-bar or 32-bar chorus structures, 16-bar forms are not uncommon. It is more difficult to generalize about these forms as their sources are varied: gospel, blues hymn-tunes or jazz musicians themselves. Like the 32-bar AB (or AA') structure, the 16 measures are often divided in two with a first half which ends on the dominant. This can be further subdivided:

4 measures I to I
4 measures I to V
4 measure I to IV (or a bridge)
4 measures I to I



various examples:
Tune-Up
*The Preacher**
*Doxy**
Giant Steps
Solar

*Oh When the Saint*s*
Summertime
*Ja-Da**
Yesterdays
*Just a Closer Walk with Thee**
**use the subdivisions in the diagram above*

STRAIN FORM

Jazz from the 'teens and 20s borrows its formal underpinning not only from the blues, but also from ragtime (which is in turn derived formally from the march and trio). In the case of ragtime the formal organization is based on a series of 16-measure 'strains' which may move to different keys. A piece may contain anywhere from 2 to 5 strains (though usually fewer in jazz than in ragtime or stride). At least one of the strains (perhaps all of them) will be repeated cyclically—thus allowing, in a jazz context, a series of solos. Later strains may modulate to the subdominant—pieces may even end in different keys than they began. The tendency to modulate from tonic to subdominant is borrowed from the March/Trio pairing. (It is also common in the even earlier Minuet/Trio pairing.)

Scott Joplin's *Maple Leaf Rag*:

A	A	B	B	A	C	C	D	D
					(in the subdominant)			

Jelly Roll Morton's *Grandpa's Spells*:

A	A	B	B	A	C	C	C	C

"STATIC" or VARIABLE FORM

In the late 50s and 60s, jazz musicians became interested in exploring new formal models, and in particular, experimenting with ways to slow down the harmonic rate-of-change in the background progression in order to allow more melodic freedom—in some cases creating a type of harmonic stasis. At the same time musicians were exploring new ways of conceiving harmony—in terms of scales or 'modes' This new modal conception (we will talk more about what this actually means) was coupled with new formal ideas, including (occasionally) forms of indeterminate length (i.e., the length of sections is not pre-determined; it is decided on the spur of the moment).