

“Welcome to a New Kind of Tension”:
A Musical Redefinition of Punk in Green Day’s *American Idiot*

Sam Mullooly

Introduction

I was 10 years old when Green Day’s seventh studio album *American Idiot* was released on September 21st, 2004. I had always enjoyed music, but until that point I had never owned an album of my own. That changed when I begged my parents to buy me *American Idiot* for my 11th birthday several weeks later. Every friend group I had, from school to theatre to my volleyball team, was talking about this album. I didn’t realize it then, but that was the first time I experienced a current cultural trend surrounding a piece of music. It was incredibly exciting, and I felt as though I needed to get my hands on this album in order to be with the “in” crowd. That was the first and last time I ever let something other than my ear or musical taste dictate my desire to own a piece of music, but years later, I’m very grateful I did. Over the next few years, I wore out my *American Idiot* CD to the point where it got too damaged to play an entire song all the way through. All I had was my memory of the songs, but that was good enough.

Most of the music I used to listen to and enjoy as a kid ended up falling out of favor at some point in time, being replaced by my continual broadening horizons of the past and present music world. My infatuation for Kidz Bop and radio hits were eventually replaced by classic rock, and soon after Classical and Renaissance music. However, the one piece of music that remained cherished from my childhood was *American Idiot*. Perhaps it was merely nostalgia, but given my intense passion, and shall I say a hint of pretentiousness, about music, I was determined to believe there were other reasons. As I reflected on this, I realized something rather

obvious: as I grew up, I was able to better understand the actual themes and contexts of the album, allowing my appreciation for the work to grow. As a 10 year old in 2004, this was an album with some catchy songs that allowed me to be cool by talking about it with friends. As a 28 year old in 2022, this is an album of immense personal and cultural magnitude, a testament to post-9/11 American subculture, and a timeless story that resonates with my identity. Growing up in a lower middle-class white suburban area and living through multiple horrors of American politics and tragic events, which reflects the experiences of the main character in the album's narrative, *American Idiot* speaks to me on multiple levels with its themes of rebellion, loneliness, drug abuse, war, love, and nihilism. It blended a traditionally countercultural medium with mainstream appeal; or, from another perspective, the climate of American society in the 2000s was such that the old counterculture transformed into the new mainstream¹, and this album simply came at an opportune time. In any case, I believe that *American Idiot* somehow helped redefine the cultural landscape of what "punk" could be.

As someone invested in attempting to understand the beauties of music and how I might explain my strong reactions to the art, I have come across a question: musically, what did *American Idiot* accomplish in order to become a prime example of a new wave of American punk culture? To begin to answer that, it makes sense to compare a previous version of American punk culture, that being the 1990s, which Green Day also was monumental in defining. Their 1994 album *Dookie*, the band's third studio album, is considered by many to be the most significant impetus for the pop-punk revival movement¹, itself helping to define a new era of American punk culture. So, in order to try and make progress on the question regarding how *American Idiot* may have musically helped redefine punk, I have decided to do a

comparative analysis on several specific musical parameters within *American Idiot* and *Dookie* to better understand their similarities and differences. An obvious difference on the surface is that *American Idiot* is a concept album that loosely tells a story, and *Dookie* is a collection of songs that carry no connecting narrative element to them. While that is already a significant difference in itself, I aim to dig deeper to understand the musical contrasts between the two, potentially explaining how such a difference was carried out compositionally, lyrics aside. On a basic level, this analysis attempts to uncover specific nuances developed in Green Day's compositional and sonic style between these two culturally monumental albums. Then, perhaps on a greater level, the analysis may reveal ways in which we can understand the differences between 1990s and 2000s American punk cultures, and how the album *American Idiot* introduced a new kind of tension to the musical genre of punk.

Methodology

For this analysis, I chose to focus on two broad musical elements that could be comparatively measured: form and timbre. I analyzed the formal structures and timbral character of each song from *American Idiot* and *Dookie* according to specific parameters. These parameters were chosen to not only provide a reasonable scope for this study, but to also uncover more nuanced details about the musical differences between the two albums.

Parameters: Form

To analyze the form of each song, I draw upon Drew Nobile's theory of the relationship between structural harmony and formal functions as discussed in his book *Form as Harmony in Rock Music* (2020)². Not only does this theory provide a sufficient framework to label and discuss musical form in this particular genre, but it also reveals crucial specifics on the usage of

structural harmony that come to bear significance for this analysis. In this theory, Nobile argues that formal function in rock music is most prominently defined by harmonic syntax, specifically in the way each song completes a particular harmonic circuit. This circuit, which Nobile labels the “functional circuit”, consists of a “harmonic trajectory spanning a complete formal unit, comprising the syntactical harmonic functions of tonic, pre-dominant, dominant, and back to tonic (T–PD–D–T)” (Nobile, 5)². This theory operates under the definition of harmonic function as being purely syntactical, meaning that chords are only defined by their role within the syntactic context of the functional circuit, rather than as predetermined categories of tonic, dominant, and predominant. Another foundation this theory is built upon is that of harmonic prolongation. Nobile takes this foundational concept from Schenkerian theory and applies it to rock music, arguing that small-scale chord progressions ultimately function as prolongations of single structural harmonies, and that each stage within the T-PD-D-T functional circuit “contains one main harmony that is prolonged throughout that particular stage” (Nobile, 38)².

Within this theory, Nobile defines several distinct types of formal sections that exist. The most consequential ones to be aware of for this particular study are the classifications of verses and choruses. Nobile argues that the verse and the chorus are the two main operators in carrying out the functional circuit, and that their harmonic relationship to each other is the most significant factor in determining the type of form. He explains that there are two types of verses: *sectional* verses, where a full T-PD-D-T functional circuit is completed within the section, and *initiating* verses, where tonic is prolonged throughout; and three types of choruses: *sectional* choruses, where an entire functional circuit is completed, *continuation* choruses, where the

section begins with a predominant function and concludes through resolving to dominant and tonic functions, and *telos* choruses, where tonic is prolonged throughout.

Other sections relevant to this study are the prechorus, bridge, and solo. A *prechorus* is defined as a functionally significant transition between verse and chorus that creates harmonic instability by carrying out the PD-D functions of the circuit. A *bridge*, according to Nobile, is a lyrical section between verse/chorus units with additional material external to the primary cycle.

In this study, I alter Nobile’s definition of a bridge slightly in order to include any section of

Figure 1

The four form types in rock music, as described in Drew Nobile’s theory

Form	Verse/Chorus Relationship	Standard Layout	Other Possible Layouts
AABA/Strophic	No chorus	Sectional Verse chain Verse Verse T-PD-D-T T-PD-D-T etc.	Initiating Verses + Classic Bridge
Sectional Verse-Chorus	Verse and chorus are separated	Sectional Verse + Sectional Chorus Verse Chorus T-PD-D-T T-PD-D-T	Initiating Verse + Sectional Chorus, Initiating Verse + Telos Chorus
Continuous Verse-Chorus	Verse and chorus are cohesive	Initiating Verse + Continuation Chorus Verse Chorus T—— PD-D-T	Sectional Verse + Continuation Chorus, Compound AABA (with classic bridge)
Verse-Prechorus-Chorus	Verse and chorus are endpoints	Initiating Verse + Prechorus + Telos Chorus Verse PC Chorus T—— PD-D- T——	Initiating Verse + Prechorus + Sectional Chorus

significant length and additional material outside of the primary cycle, with lyrics not being a requirement. This did not significantly alter the analysis. A *solo*, which Nobile includes in a broader category of “auxiliary sections”, is essentially a textless bridge where a single instrument is prominently melodically featured.

Given these different types of formal sections, Nobile defines four distinct form types, each of which determined by the type of verse and chorus involved. These four types are: AABA/Strophic, Sectional Verse-Chorus, Continuous Verse-Chorus, and Verse-Prechorus-Chorus. The chart in Figure 1 gives an overview of the four form types.

One important clarification to make is that Nobile only focused on rock music from the 1960s-1980s in creating this theory. He himself did not argue for the universal application of this theory across different eras². However, that is not to say its application must be limited to those decades. Part of this analysis, then, is determining the extent to which this theory does in fact apply to the later pop-punk genre of the 1990s and 2000s. It will reveal if/how Green Day maintained this correlation between structural harmony and formal function that was evident among popular music from an older generation, and if there are any significant differences that have helped define different compositional styles.

Parameters: Timbre

Within the element of timbre, I was most interested in measuring the extent to which Green Day diverged from their most commonly used timbral layout in *Dookie* and *American Idiot*. To do this, I first had to determine if there was such a common layout among the two albums, and then define what that layout was. Between the two albums, I noticed certain timbral/textural parameters that I could safely define as being a shared common layout. These parameters deal specifically with the placements and techniques of each instrument within the texture, as well as the actual instrumentation itself. The five categories I have established are: the vocal's proxemic zone, the guitar's play style, the presence/absence of a bass solo, the presence/absence of a drum solo, and the presence/absence of an instrument other than band's core instrumentation.

With these parameters defined, I took an idea regarding analytical procedure for timbral measurement from Megan Lavengood's article *The Cultural Significance of Timbre Analysis* (2020)³, where timbral features are categorized by a set of binary yes/no values, one being

considered “unmarked” and the other “marked”. In this case, as shown in Figure 2, I determined what features of these specific parameters were unmarked, meaning that they belong to the common layout, and what features would be considered marked, meaning they deviate from the common layout.

Figure 2

The five categories of timbral parameters used for this study with their unmarked/marked qualities

Categories	Unmarked	Marked
Vocal Proxemic Zone	Social zone	Any other zone
Guitar Playing Style	Chordal	Melodic
Bass Solo	Absent	Present
Drum Solo	Absent	Present
Novelty Layer	Absent	Present

The concept of the vocal proxemic zone is from the article *A Hermeneutics of Spatialization for Recorded Song* (2009)⁴ by Moore, Schmidt, and Dockwray. The idea itself is borrowed from the field of sociology, with the four proxemic zones of *intimate*, *personal*, *social*, and *public* used to describe relationships between humans and their environment. Moore, Schmidt, and Dockwray apply this to vocals in recorded music, using the same labels for each zone to describe the perceived distance between the listener and the vocal persona, the relationship between the persona and its environment, and vocal articulations of the persona. The social zone, the zone which I clearly sense being the standard zone that Billie Joe Armstrong’s vocals operate in among the two albums, is described as the vocals having a “medium distance from listener” with “intervening musical material”, while the vocal persona is rather integrated and less separate from their environment, using “medium to loud vocals” and

lyrics that “address a small/medium group of people”⁴. I considered any obvious deviation from this to be a marked quality of the album’s timbre.

The last category, which after Lavengood (2020) I am calling the “novelty layer”³, signifies the presence of any other instrument within the texture besides voice, electric guitar, electric bass, and rock drum kit. This includes other types of instruments within the same instrumental family, such as acoustic guitar or auxiliary percussion. Regarding the category of the guitar’s play style, it is important to note that this is not merely dealing with the presence of a solo section, but rather any instance of the guitar ceasing to play chords and rather playing singular notes that create some sort of linear melodic figure. The other two categories deal specifically with the presence of a solo section in the drum or bass layer. Given the undisputed historical fact that Green Day was a seminal influence on the style of pop-punk in the 1990s, it is not much of a stretch for one to claim that this common layout is shared not only among these two albums, but among the entire pop-punk revivalist genre.

Analytical Procedure

Before discussing the results from my analysis as a whole, I will present a closer look on what specifically went in to the analytical procedure, giving a more detailed explanation on my analyses of two songs, one from each album. The songs I will discuss are the first tracks on each album, “Burnout” from *Dookie* and “American Idiot” from *American Idiot*.

With the method I am using to analyze form, in order to determine a form type, I first have to do a harmonic analysis of the song’s structurally significant sections; in most cases, this is the verse and the chorus. I have included charts that outline my analysis of roman numeral harmony and syntactic function for each song to go along with my explanations.

The verse in the song “Burnout” is a period-like structure that involves two distinct phrases, each harmonically identical. It begins with tonic prolongation that utilizes I, IV, and bVII, then ends the phrase with a bVII-V motion and stands on V for two bars, which to my ear signals the PD-D section of the functional circuit. This parallel period structure is a common example of a sectional verse in rock music², as it works to complete the functional circuit within itself. Although neither phrase technically ends with a cadence on I, the actual cadence to I in

Burnout

Sectional Verse-Chorus

Verse (Sectional)	Chorus (Sectional)
I IV I IV bVII I bVII V	IV I IV bVII I IV bVII V
T————— PD-D	T—————PD——D

both instances comes almost immediately after the phrase. Nobile considers this to be a rather common occurrence in rock music, explaining that a section that includes the T-PD-D portion of the functional circuit with a cadence to I directly after can still be considered sectional, as it still functions to carry the music to a tonic cadence².

The chorus to “Burnout” contains a rather tricky situation regarding this model of formal analysis. Though I mentioned that a cadence to I comes directly after the verse, the chorus actually begins off tonic for a brief moment, delaying the cadence with the entrance of IV. Typically, the chorus beginning off tonic signifies that it is a continuation chorus, entering on the PD or D part of the circuit to eventually close back to T by the end. However, I read this IV chord at the start of the chorus as not acting as a structural harmony, but rather as a prolongation of V from the end of the verse. My main reason for labeling it as such is the short duration of the chord, as it lasts only a single bar; this takes away its potential for feeling cadential, still containing forward momentum to the actual cadence. I in turn read the following I chord as the

next structural harmony, where the syntactical T part of the circuit is simultaneously resolving the initial circuit and beginning the next circuit. The chorus proceeds to carry out another functional circuit, emphasized again by the use of a prolonged V chord at the end of the phrase, which gets resolved immediately in the next verse. Therefore, I conclude that “Burnout” is in sectional verse-chorus form, with the use of a sectional verse and a sectional chorus.

The verse in “American Idiot” employs a tonic prolonging chord loop of I-IV-bVII-IV-I.

American Idiot

Continuous Verse-Chorus

Verse (Initiating)	Chorus (Continuous)
I IV bVII IV I	IV I V I IV I V
T—————	PD-D-T PD-D

This only includes the T section of the functional circuit, with no PD or D motion involved.

Chord loops, according to Nobile, are continual repeated chord patterns that begin and end on tonic, used to only initiate the functional circuit rather than complete it². This is a clear example of an initiating verse.

The chorus, like the chorus in “Burnout”, begins off tonic on a IV chord. Unlike “Burnout”, though, this IV chord is structural, its entrance signifying a shift to the PD part of the circuit. I argue that this is due to both its temporal property of lasting a full two bars and its role in breaking the pattern of the preceding chord loop. The chorus proceeds with a IV-I-V-I progression, each chord two bars in length, with the V-I motion signaling the closing of the circuit midway through the chorus. Another circuit begins again, as the I chord is followed by a

Figure 3
Formal diagrams for “Burnout” and “American Idiot”

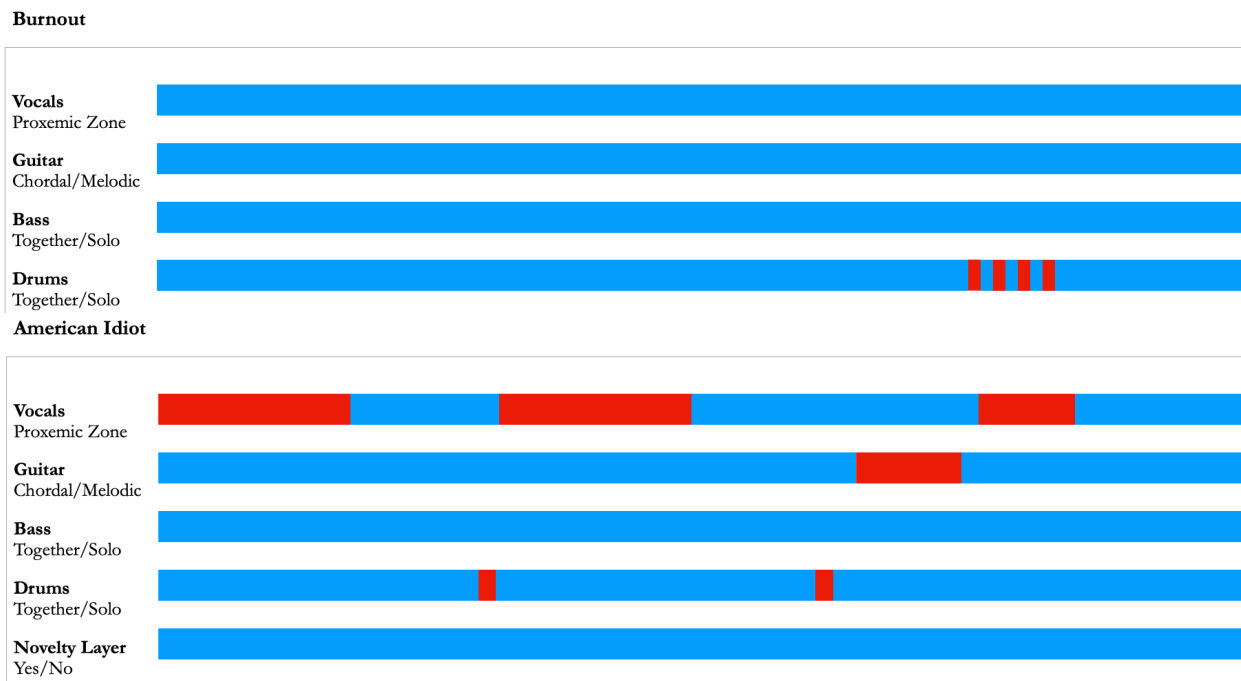


progression of IV-I-V, with the cadence on I landing immediately after the chorus in a transition section. With the chorus beginning on the PD part of the circuit and leading to the closing D-T sections, this is an example of continuous verse-chorus form with an initiating verse and a continuation chorus.

Using the software Audio Timeliner, I created form diagrams of each song and color-coded the different formal sections according to their type. A chart of each song’s form diagram, along with a key that details the meaning of each color, can be found in Appendix A. Figure 3 shows the two formal diagrams for “Burnout” and “American Idiot”.

Figure 4 shows diagrams of the timbral parameters I analyzed for these two songs. These diagrams act as a timeline, being a set of five different lines corresponding to the five categories, showing each category’s markedness/unmarkedness over the course of the song. The blue color indicates an unmarked passage of that particular category, whereas the red color indicates a

Figure 4
Marked vs. unmarked measurements of five timbral categories for “Burnout” and “American Idiot”



marked passage. Since the blue color stands for any point in which Green Day is using their most typical timbral and textural format, it should be no surprise that presence of blue heavily outweighs the presence of red in these diagrams. When comparing these timbral diagrams, it is not necessarily a question of how much blue exists between the songs, but rather how much red, specifically when and where on the diagram.

In focusing on the diagrams for these two songs specifically, there are a couple of interesting aspects to note. “Burnout” consists almost entirely of Green Day’s default sound as described by these categories, using only a small amount of isolated drums in a transition section toward the end. “Burnout” represents a good example of what one may expect sonically, texturally, and technique-wise in a given Green Day song from this era, as well as with pop-punk revival in general. In “American Idiot”, we can notice not only a larger presence of marked qualities overall, but also that the song spends more time in moments utilizing at least one marked quality than it does with all categories unmarked. Though Green Day’s most common timbral/textural layout still largely comes through, it is frequently interrupted by at least one instrumental layer throughout the song, especially with the change in vocal proxemic zone from verse to chorus. From my perspective, the vocal persona in the verse uses the *personal* zone rather than the typical *social* zone, as it is placed more forward in the virtual space and contains an audio filter that neatly centers the voice, along with the bass and guitar dropping out while the voice carries.

Results & Observations

I have followed the described procedures of formal and timbral analysis for all 15 songs on *Dookie* and all 13 songs on *American Idiot*. Appendix A shows all formal diagrams among

the two albums, Appendix B shows all timbral diagrams, and Appendix C shows charts of each harmonic analysis along with syntactical harmonic function that determines the types of formal sections.

Figure 5 displays the number of songs that use each formal type within the two albums. The two songs in the “other” category for *American Idiot* are the two suite-style songs “Jesus of Suburbia” and “Homecoming”, which as a whole do not fit Nobile’s theory, though particular

Figure 5

Allocation of formal types for each song in *Dookie* and *American Idiot*

	AABA/ Strophic	Sectional Verse-Chorus	Continuous Verse-Chorus	Verse-Prechorus- Chorus	Other
Dookie	4	5	6	0	0
American Idiot	1	1	7	2	2

types of verse-chorus units are still found within each suite’s different parts. Both *Dookie* and *American Idiot* use continuous verse-chorus form the most. However, in *Dookie*, the formal types are more evenly dispersed among the songs, whereas *American Idiot* uses continuous verse-chorus form almost exclusively. A broader discussion on the potential meaning of such a difference will come later. I first want to discuss the ways in which *Dookie* and *American Idiot* differ in their usage of structural harmonies and arrival points when it comes to dictating form.

As the harmonic analysis in Appendix C reveals, both albums make extensive use of beginning choruses off tonic. This concealing of the category of predominant and/or dominant harmonies until the chorus seems to demonstrate a compositional style of Green Day that continued through both the 1990s and 2000s. Only one song from each album, “Welcome To Paradise” from *Dookie* and “Holiday” from *American Idiot*, has a chorus that begins on tonic as a structural harmony to launch a new functional harmonic circuit. However, while “Holiday” is the only sectional verse-chorus song in *American Idiot*, there happens to be four others in

Dookie. This shows a difference in the way Green Day uses these concealed PD/D harmonies syntactically among the two albums.

As previously discussed in my analysis of the song “Burnout”, there are times when initial chords of formal sections do not act structurally according to their T-PD-D category, but rather as prolongations of the previous or next structural harmony. The circumstance found in the chorus of “Burnout” is not merely a fluke; it’s a happenstance that permeates the compositional structures in *Dookie*. Other songs where a significant formal section begins off tonic but merely prolongs the imminent cadence to tonic are “Chump”, “Pulling Teeth”, and “Basket Case”. The song “Longview” is a special case where the chorus modulates and begins on a tonic in a new key, which still feels perceptually similar to beginning off tonic. There are also several songs on *Dookie* where the chorus’s initial PD/D harmony is indeed structural within the functional circuit, creating a clear continuous verse-chorus form. So, it can be said that *Dookie* does not show consistency with using the arrival on chords such as IV, V, vi, and bVII at the chorus as either structural or prolongational; in other words, their syntactical function was not as significant as their mere presence of being a non-tonic harmony at such an arrival point.

This is opposed to how these harmonies are treated in *American Idiot*. On this album, no discrepancies were found regarding the correlation between structural harmony and the beginning of a new significant formal section (aside from a telos chorus that begins a chord loop on V in the third part of the suite “Jesus of Suburbia”). In *American Idiot*, the arrivals on non-tonic chords at the chorus are consistently structural, carrying out the back end of the functional circuit by entering with a PD function. One can make the case that *American Idiot* follows Nobile’s theory of form being defined by harmony very precisely, and while the forms found in

Dookie can also be explained using this theory, there was a bit more ambiguity to it. This may signal a broader concept overall; though the two albums are harmonically similar in chord usage and placement, the harmonies on *Dookie* do not altogether act as cohesive functional units, whereas on *American Idiot* the harmonies constantly follow a structural, functional path that play a role in carrying out the form, giving multi-layered weight and importance to these moments. As discussed later, this concept applies to more than just harmony.

The actual dispersion and order of the formal types found in each album provide for some intriguing observations. The songs on *Dookie* are not only more varied in formal type, but also seem to be mostly grouped together based on their form within the song order. The first seven songs, apart of “Longview”, all use sectional verses, and this is also where we get all three songs that use sectional choruses. The songs “Chump” and “Longview” each use telos choruses, the only two on the album, and are placed consecutively. The second half of the album contains all but one of the continuous verse-chorus forms, also putting two strophic songs “When I Come Around” and “Coming Clean” consecutively. As the chart visually signifies in Appendix A, clear patterns can be seen in the groupings of songs with similar verse and chorus types. Though some of this may indeed be coincidental, as I’m sure Green Day did not consciously go so far as to group certain songs together based on the way their structural harmonies were employed, this at least shows a clue that the order of these songs was chosen by pairing similar compositional styles together, as perhaps the band thought that certain songs felt or sounded the same to each other. This is also evident in my experience as a listener. *Dookie* feels as though it is comprised of several distinct sections; at one level, putting the compositionally fleshed-out sectional forms toward the beginning while putting the strophic and continuous forms toward the end, and on

another level, pairing two or three songs together that use the same unique formal structure or even formal section.

On *American Idiot*, there is much more formal uniformity, with the consecutive verse-chorus form used consistently throughout. Rather than grouping all of the songs together by formal type, such as having all non continuous verse-chorus forms in a row, diversions from this form are instead scattered throughout the album. My analysis suggests that there is a more symmetrical pattern to the way these formal types are ordered, as beyond that, there may be an element of narrative device involved in the usage of specific formal sections.

“Holiday”, the third song on the album, sticks out for several reasons: it is the only song that uses sectional verse-chorus form, it is the only song on the album (or either album) in a minor key throughout, and it is one of the most overtly political songs on the record that breaks the fourth wall to provide striking anti-American political commentary⁵. This song follows right after the 9-minute suite “Jesus of Suburbia”, which in the story is when the main character Jesus of Suburbia ultimately decides to leave home for the city and leave his past behind. “Holiday”, then, represents the first impressions of Jesus of Suburbia being away from home, going on an extended holiday to find happiness, fully expressing his rebellious, anti-government sentiments. This singular usage of sectional verse-chorus form on the album signals an important moment in the narrative where the hero’s journey begins.

The third-to-last song on the album, “Wake Me Up When September Ends”, signals the metaphorical end to the hero’s journey, right before the album’s second suite “Homecoming” when Jesus of Suburbia returns home. While “Holiday” is the energetic and promising beginning of a journey, “Wake Me Up When September Ends” slows the momentum down and is

the journey's somber, introspective, tragic conclusion, where the hero is left in isolation with nothing⁵. This song is in strophic form, and like "Holiday", is the only form of its kind on the album. These tracks are the only two that make significant use of the sectional verse. While every other song contains phrases that require a combination of sections in order to carry out a structurally significant tonic cadence, these two reach such a cadence without the need of additional material, using phrases that function on their own. This signals a disruption in the album's typical method of taking a long time to reach points of resolution, instead being more direct in its paths to resolution. These particular breaks from the continuous verse-chorus forms on the album are used as significant bookends to the main portion of the story, and are connected to each other across the full album.

The rare use of the prechorus on *American Idiot* also warrants some discussion. Green Day does use any prechoruses in *Dookie*, but uses two in *American Idiot*. It's safe to say that including a prechorus is not typical of Green Day's compositional style, so its usage here is worth investigating. The two songs that employ a prechorus are the 5th song "Are We the Waiting" and the 10th song "Letterbomb". It should also be mentioned that, although the form diagrams do not reflect it, these are two different types of prechoruses, according to Nobile. The prechorus in "Are We the Waiting" is an example of a verse-prechorus fusion², where the prechorus enters on a hypermetrically weak beat that is contained within the verse's structure, whereas the prechorus in "Letterbomb" is a standard prechorus² that exists as its own defined section between the verse and the chorus. Just like the structural verses and suites being symmetrically opposed to each other on this album, so too are the prechoruses, with four songs that go by until the first one, and another four that go by until the second one.

The verse-prechorus-chorus form is built on anticipation, with the prechorus acting as a catalyst for momentum, building harmonic energy with the PD-D function until the arrival point on tonic at the chorus that the listener expects². It involves not just two, but three significant arrivals on structural harmonies that define its form. Narratively, this idea of anticipation makes sense. In “Are We the Waiting”, the hero is waiting for their situation to improve, to find the purpose and satisfaction that he set out to initially find⁵. The song itself can be felt as one long anticipatory bridge to the next track “St. Jimmy”, where Jesus of Suburbia finally finds a feeling of purpose. The use of the prechorus here musically reflects the yearning being done, both by the main character and by the listener.

This also foreshadows the second use of a prechorus in “Letterbomb”, which in my mind severs as the climax to the narrative. In “Letterbomb”, the hero’s romantic partner Whatshername leaves him, writing a letter to him that expresses her dissatisfaction with his rebel movement, self-destructive ways, and lack of responsibility⁵. This climax is not only felt lyrically, but also musically, when a surprising functionally-independent prechorus piles on the momentum created from the suddenly quick tempo and fast-paced guitar in the first verse to land with an authoritative cadence to tonic at the chorus, the likes of which have not happened throughout the entirety of the album. Green Day uses the prechorus on this album not only as timely breaks from the continuous verse-chorus form, but as a strong narrative device that builds tension in crucial moments.

“Letterbomb” also uses a particularly rare formal device that is shared among several other songs the album, which is that the song’s main chorus is not the final significantly structural formal section. The consecutive tracks “Having a Blast” and “Chump” from *Dookie*

do this to a degree as well, though they don't seem to serve any broader connective meaning that I find in *American Idiot*. Marc Spicer (2004) calls this phenomenon "cumulative form"⁶, where a song ends with a new cumulative chorus that functions as significant closure to a song. "St. Jimmy" and "Homecoming", tracks 6 and 12, respectively, are clear examples of this, using a telos chorus with new musical material the end the song. "Jesus of Suburbia" uses a miniature version of this, when a quick outro of new material ends the suite after a lengthy guitar solo. The cumulative chorus in "Homecoming" is particularly significant, concluding a 9-minute suite, and indeed the entire story arc, with a long triumphant passage exclaiming that Jesus of Suburbia is "coming home again".

The songs "Letterbomb" and the final track, "Whatsername", accomplish this to a slightly different degree, using previously introduced material that was once perhaps considered a bridge to come back after the last chorus to finish the song. I would argue that these two cases have altogether similar functions and produce comparable perceptions of unexpectedness and boundlessness. This specific subversion of form at the end of the song compels the listener to lose their sense of direction, making them unsure of where they are in the form and unable to predict what comes next. This instability and loss of direction is a crucial part of the album's listening experience, a stark difference from the straightforward beginnings and endings in *Dookie*. *American Idiot* ends with this disruption of form in "Whatsername", providing a lasting impression of uncertainty and elusiveness to the listener.

Turning our focus to the less structurally significant formal sections, there are still a few interesting observations to make. One is the difference in the use of introductions between the two albums. Most of the songs on *Dookie* begin immediately with a verse, and when they don't,

they likely only contain a short 1-2 bar opening phrase that transitions seamlessly into the verse. On *American Idiot*, there are only two songs that don't start with an introduction. Also, many of the introductions, like the ones in "St. Jimmy", "Extraordinary Girl", "Letterbomb", and "Homecoming", are quite lengthy sections that use different musical material than the rest of the song. One could explain this as *Dookie* not having as broad of an emotional range overall and therefore not needing to take time in setting each scene, but with the concept album structure of *American Idiot*, scene setting is more necessary. While *Dookie* typically gets the listener into the core substance of the music right away, the songs on *American Idiot* often take their time in solidifying their presence and give the listener moments to further immerse themselves in new, continually developing emotional settings.

Another section type with a clear difference in usage is the solo. Only one song on *Dookie*, "When I Come Around", contains an actual guitar solo, and it only lasts about 10 seconds. Six songs on *American Idiot* employ the use of guitar solos, each coming in moments of climax after two verses or verse-chorus units have been completed. Although some may explain the increase of guitar solos on this album as Green Day attempting to employ more mainstream rock conventions, and therefore serve as an example on its own of the counterculture/mainstream collision in music of its time, I would like to offer a different observation. Based on what this analysis has depicted overall regarding the musical contrasts of *Dookie* and *American Idiot*, I see the increased use of guitar solos as a further example of Green Day elongating the emotional space that each track offers, allowing the listener to spend more time in the current moment of the narrative along with their own thoughts, which serves an important narrative purpose.

The usage of guitar solos do not just offer interesting observations from the perspective of form, but from the perspective of timbre as well. Guitar solos provide a distinct contrast to Green Day's typical relentless power chord strumming. Along with providing additional space that stretches out the emotional environment, these solo moments act as important instances of timbral diversity. A small degree of this type of timbral diversity also existed on *Dookie*; of the five timbral categories measured, the guitar's play style spent the most time as a marked feature on this album. Though this strategy of creating some sort of sonic variety was something that Green Day seemed to be well aware of at the time, these moments of melodic guitar often came in transition sections that equally featured other instruments (as in "Welcome to Paradise"), or as single-note decorations to choral roots (as in "Pulling Teeth"), and not as prominent musical features. In *American Idiot*, these solos are all quite prominent as both a timbral feature and as an architect to the formal structure. This is another example of the multi-layered structural importance one continuously encounters in *American Idiot* as opposed to *Dookie*.

This discussion on the differences of guitar solo usage among the two albums is essentially a microcosm for the contrast in marked vs. unmarked timbral style overall. As one can observe from the charts in Appendix B, the most obvious point is that *Dookie* simply does not use as many marked features of the instrumentation as *American Idiot* does. *Dookie* spends more time using Green Day's most common timbral layout with respect to these categories, and *American Idiot* employs more moments of divergence from said layout. In looking specifically at when and where such divergence occurs among the two albums, a more detailed observation can be made regarding structural significance, which has been a common theme in this comparison. The marked timbral features used in *Dookie* are not only rather infrequent, but also

inconsistent regarding placement and type. However, the marked timbral features in *American Idiot* are not only more common but also more structured in order to create specific, heightened moments of arrival. The marked timbral properties come at particular moments within songs, and within the album overall, to function not only as timbral diversification but as unstable moments that unfold to eventually become stabilized.

One such example of this in *American Idiot* is the introductions. Only two songs, “Jesus of Suburbia” and “Holiday”, begin without any marked features of the timbre. The rest begin with some sort of alteration to the expected sound in at least one instrumental layer, a common one being the vocals altering the proxemic zone to either the personal or intimate zone. This sets up an unstable sonic environment that, eventually, finds an arrival point to the fully typical pop-punk sound. The songs on this album rarely give the listener instant sonic gratification or stability. Instead, the songs use the standard timbral format as a goal to work towards and eventually reach.

The goal is reached right away in some songs, such as “St. Jimmy” and “She’s a Rebel”, where the initial vocal filter gets ripped off like a band-aid to jumpstart a very pop-punk sounding tune. Others don’t reach this arrival point until the chorus, as in “American Idiot”, “Boulevard of Broken Dreams”, “Give Me Novacaine”, and “Extraordinary Girl”. Perhaps the most well-known example of this is in “Wake Me When September Ends”, where there is a sudden timbral shift from soft and acoustic to loud and electric midway through the second strophe. “Are We the Waiting” never actually resolves to the standard sound, as the melodic arpeggiations of the guitar persist throughout, which a listener may experience as one long passage of timbral instability that builds tension until the gratifying resolution at “St. Jimmy”.

Most songs, having set up this initial resolution, also continue a back and forth struggle between marked and unmarked sections, containing multiple arrival points back to the standard sound.

A timbral contrast between verse and chorus, or simply from one section to another section, is seemingly a common tactic among popular music, one that is likely even taken for granted. However, as we see in *Dookie*, this was not necessarily the case for pop-punk. At least, not until *American Idiot*. I would argue that such a tactic used in this particular stylistic setting should not be taken for granted, and instead understood as structural deviations from a singular sonic format that functions as a progression from timbral instability to timbral stability. Like the usage of guitar solos, this phenomenon should not simply be regarded as an instance of mainstream influence, but rather as something that acts on multiple experiential levels to further the narrative and the listening experience.

Conclusions

Circling back to my initial question on the correlation between the musical components of *American Idiot* and the new wave of punk culture in America, I believe I have found some intriguing answers. These answers are by no means authoritative; they are merely my subjective reading of a largely objective analysis. Speculation is all I can offer at this stage, but I find it interesting nonetheless.

Throughout my observations, the theme of structural significance came up rather frequently, a central part in the analyses of both form and timbre. In general, the musical elements on *Dookie* were found to be less involved in creating cohesive structural significance, both locally within tracks and globally across the album. Harmonies that defined new phrases and sections were less indicative of formal function, not always acting as structural components

to the goal of completing a T-PD-D-T harmonic circuit. Formal types were grouped together based on sameness and carried no broader significance to their order. Timbral diversification was rather sparse and seemingly only done for diversity's sake, not necessarily contributing to a song's direction on a significant scale. There is a solid compactness to *Dookie* that contributes to its lovable charm.

On the other hand, the musical elements in *American Idiot* seem to work consistently with broader structural implications. The harmonic designs align to build up and arrive at important tonic cadences that complete the functional circuit, clearly dictating the form in the process. Formal types, and even specific formal sections, are tied together across the album by developing the narrative, creating a larger cohesion amidst the variety of emotions. Timbrally, the deviations from a standard sound act as moments of sonic instability that work to achieve resolution. Overall, *American Idiot* contains a multitude of tension and release that exists on multiple levels, both local and global, contributing to one cohesive listening experience that tells a heartbreaking story from beginning to end.

The word that I find most comprehensively explains the musical difference between *Dookie* and *American Idiot* is "expansion". The concept of expansion, be it expanding the time it takes to reach an arrival point, expanding an emotional mood, expanding the effect of a musical element to be significant later on, expanding the significance of a particular moment to reach multiple layers of importance, or expanding a song's story, is what Green Day used in *American Idiot* that contrasted with *Dookie*. In *Dookie*, an exciting, fun, fast-paced collection of 15 songs, the general intent that I get from Green Day is that they are saying what they want to say in the simplest of forms and then getting out. It makes for an enjoyable experience that mimics the

intentions of punk bands from previous generations, specifically the directness and sharpness of emotion. It's clear and to the point as an anthemic rally cry for teenage angst. *American Idiot* contrasts that by taking time with relaying its messages, allowing the listener to reflect and be immersed in something they do not necessarily understand in the moment, artfully creating one large cohesive direction that brings the listener through a telling of an anti-hero's journey that in itself is largely left up for interpretation.

An analogy I find particularly amusing is how different techniques in film editing can create completely different feelings on the story being told. As a massive fan of Star Wars, I will compare this specifically to the editing done in the original Star Wars trilogy. In *A New Hope*, the first Star Wars film released, there is a constant use of quick shots moving back and forth between characters and locations. There are hardly any moments of silence or pauses within the dialogue, and the pace moves quickly to get to the story's important moments. The audience has little time to breathe, being taken for a ride by the quickness of the compact dialogue and little time dwelt on any given visual.

Compare that with the next film, *The Empire Strikes Back*, where the editing is less focused on getting the audience to important plot moments as fast as possible, and instead includes lots of long shots on character's faces, capturing their more personal nuanced emotions, as well as giving more time to initial setup shots that introduce a scene. The story proceeds slowly, with very few locations to switch back and forth from, spending more time visually depicting the inner thoughts of the characters and allowing the audience a way to further empathize with them. Both films are incredible, and both used editing techniques that

appropriately fit the story. I find that this change in technique from contraction to expansion is similar to what happened musically with *Dookie* and *American Idiot*.

The question remains as to what this concept of expansion ultimately means on the cultural scale. In its inception as a cultural movement in the 1970's, punk was synonymous with counterculture, being a term "taken up by musicians and fans who wanted to remind the mainstream world that they wanted no part of it" (Sanneh, 217)¹. In the UK, bands such as The Clash and The Sex Pistols were leaders of this particular style of music that was edgy, curt, direct, and rebellious in nature¹. As punk reemerged in the US by the 1990s, with Green Day's *Dookie* at the center of its revival, we notice that the musical underpinnings of the style have mostly been left in tact. Though, one noticeable difference from UK punk culture in the 1970s to US punk culture in the 1990s is that the theme of rebellion towards the government mainly turned into stories of adolescent angst¹, still containing thematic hints of rebellion, which by many accounts attributed to the growth in punk's mainstream appeal from the younger generation.

The label "pop-punk" was adapted to fit this new style, defined as a holdover from punk's heyday in its continuation of compositional and sonic attributes that reflected the desires of a new generation of rebels¹. Ten years later, *American Idiot* enters and, while still maintaining the pop-punk label, dismantles the traditional edgy, curt, and direct punk style through the overall concept of expansion, also understood as the use of multi-layered structural significance and elongated moments of instability. Punk was historically built on being musically direct, plain, and in turn, stable; for many, *American Idiot* signified a change in that regard. In his article "*Between the Grooves: Green Day – 'American Idiot'*" (2021)⁵, journalist Jordan Blum

comments that “Before 2004, few people would classify Green Day’s music as particularly sophisticated, intellectual, or thematically mature”⁵, saying that ‘90s Green Day “emblemized a contemporary take on the rowdy counterculture retaliation of ’70s icons like the Clash”⁵. Blum then goes on to state “But then came *American Idiot*, and everything changed...the record came out of nowhere and blew everyone away with its biting political subversion, exploration of teenage angst, love, and uncertainty, and perhaps most importantly, brilliant structures, transitions, and overall cohesion”⁵. From my perspective, the attention to multilayered structural significance, instability to stability trajectory, and unpredictability created from the musical expansion in *American Idiot* provided a very important facet to punk culture that did not initially exist, which I would argue is *American Idiot*’s ultimate triumph in this regard: it introduced a sense of loss, defeat, and an overall darkness to being punk.

Punk had historically been built from a place of empowerment, desiring to rise up and challenge the fallacies of mainstream culture and authority by forging a different path¹. Despite the typically charged emotions of anger and resentment that accompanied this movement, it was fundamentally seen as a positive action by those involved, a movement that would make progress and provide self-worth in its effort. Musically, punk created an atmosphere to get one pumped up and excited to take on the world with their alternative ways of thinking and living. In the 1990s, Green Day arrived and built off of this atmosphere to create a testament to the hardships of adolescent life that would resonate with American youth who could finally feel like they belonged, which in turn mobilized a generation of rebellion-seekers. This is the world of punk as reflected by *Dookie*.

Unlike *Dookie* and the pop-punk that came before it, *American Idiot* incorporates a multitude of elusive moments that disturb the status quo, throw the listener off of the expected path, and participate in a continuous struggle to find a sense of security. It doesn't provide the listener with the feeling of empowerment that traditionally accompanied punk; instead, it shows a dark side to rebellion, to counterculture, and to the idea of progress. Reflecting the existing American sentiments post-9/11, it portrays a particular feeling of cynicism and nihilism, that no matter what you may righteously work towards, you may still fail, and it might end up not mattering at all. While the album's lyrical content and overall narrative are certainly the driving force of such thematic elements, this analysis has shown evidence that the musical content plays its own role in portraying this shift in punk's cultural landscape.

Ultimately, *American Idiot* demonstrates a shift in the focus of punk culture from being about rebellion against external forces to being focused on the self, and questioning the punk individual on their moral vindication. This signified a new kind of tension in the movement, and overall a new kind of rebellion; one that isn't content with simply being rebellious in principle and feeling good about it. The new wave of American punk culture in the 2000s replaced the glorification of rebellion with harsh realities of failure, moving towards more refined calls to action with significant purpose and cautioning the pitfalls of complacency and indulgence. This is the world of punk as reflected by *American Idiot*.

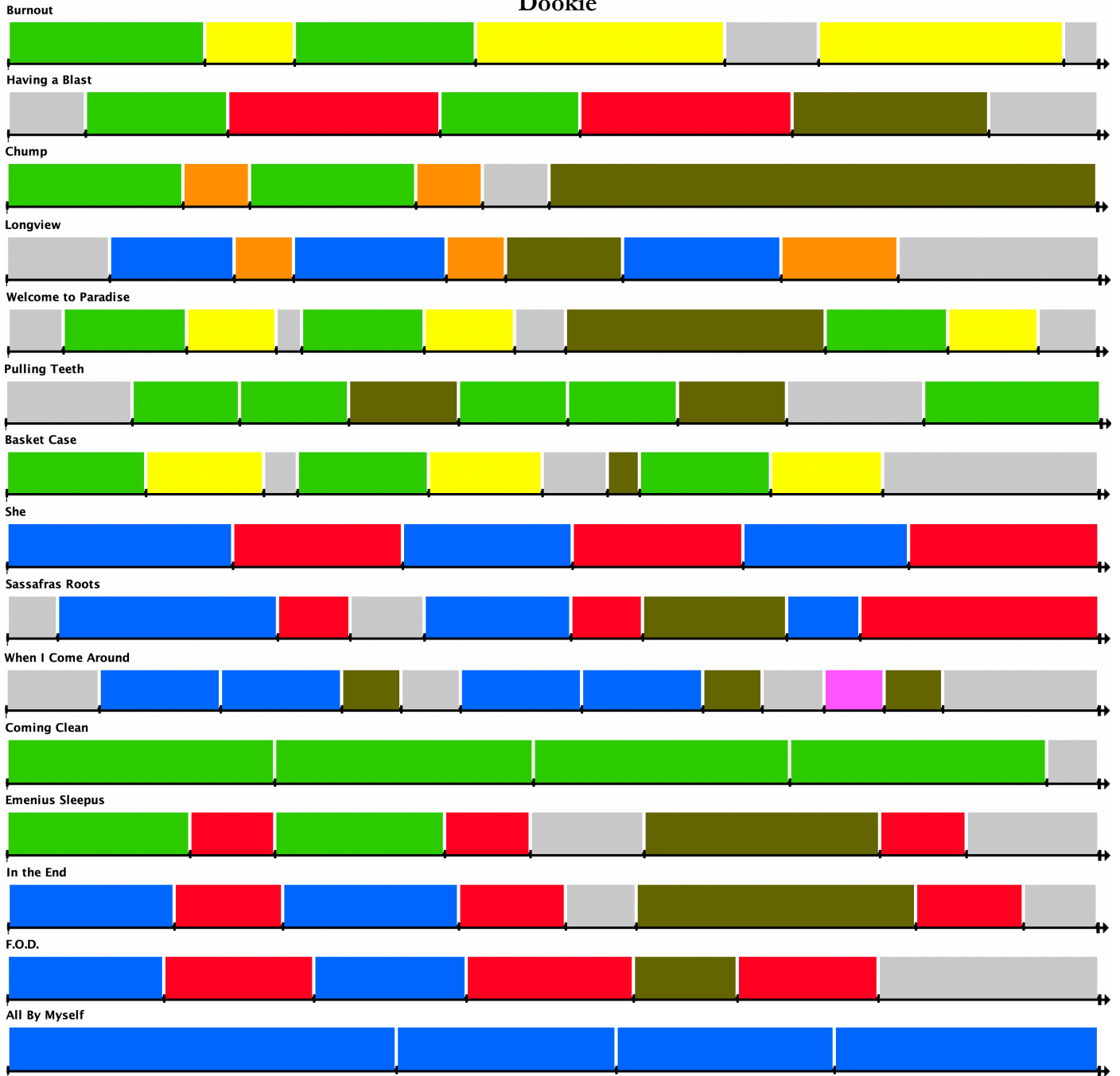
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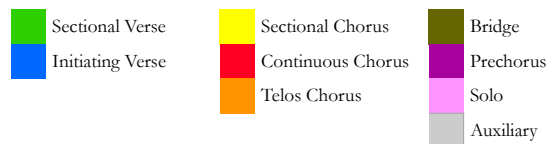
Appendix A

Formal Diagrams of *Dookie* and *American Idiot*

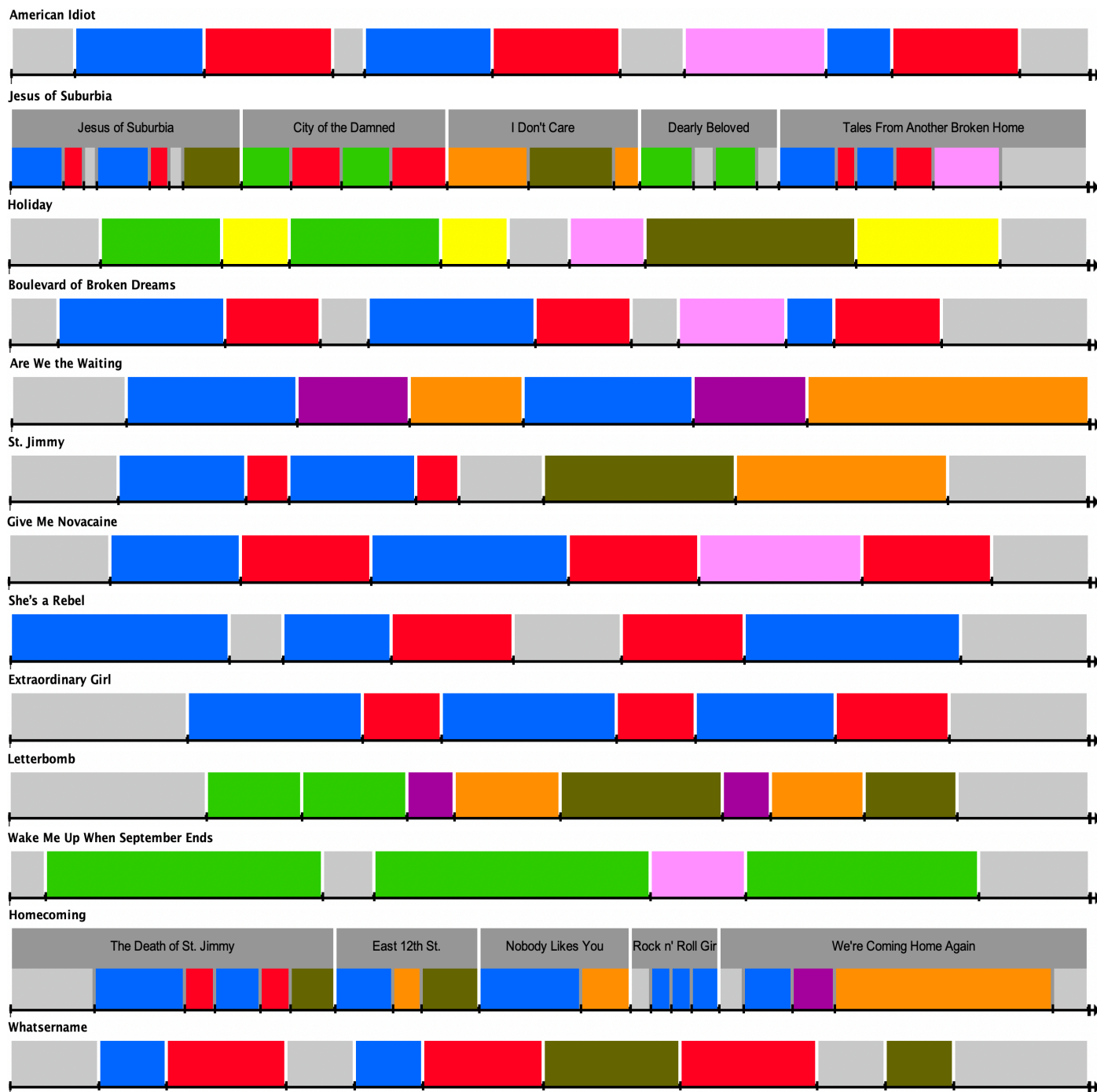
Dookie



KEY



American Idiot



KEY



Appendix B

Timbral Diagrams of *Dookie* and *American Idiot*

Dookie

Burnout



Having a Blast



Chump



Longview



Welcome to Paradise



Pulling Teeth



Basket Case



She



Sassafras Roots



When I Come Around



Coming Clean



Emenius Sleepus



In the End



F.O.D.

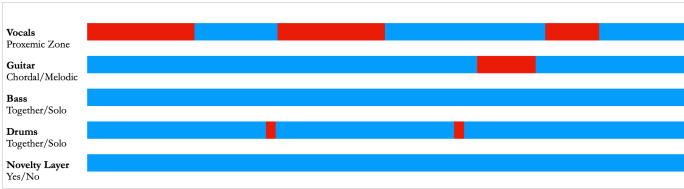


All By Myself

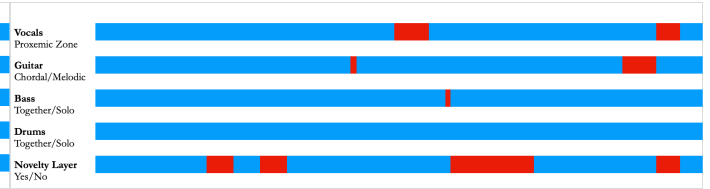


American Idiot

American Idiot



Jesus of Suburbia



Holiday



Boulevard of Broken Dreams



Are We the Waiting



St. Jimmy



Give Me Novacaine



She's a Rebel



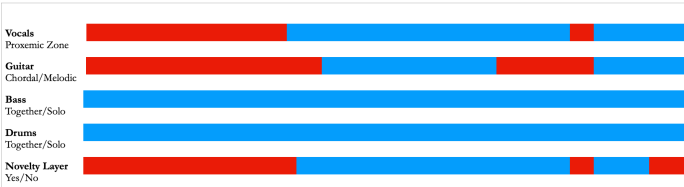
Extraordinary Girl



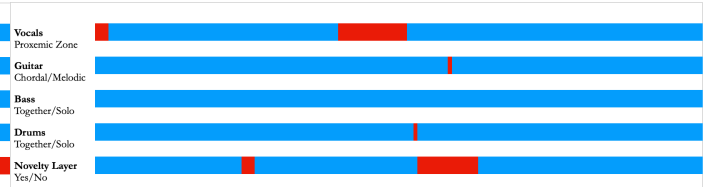
Letterbomb



Wake Me Up When September Ends



Homecoming



Whatsername



Appendix C

Harmonic Analyses

Dookie

Bold = structural harmonies
 Repeating harmonic progressions only notated once

1. Burnout

Sectional Verse-Chorus

Verse (Sectional)	Chorus (Sectional)
I IV I IV bVII I bVII V	IV I IV bVII I IV bVII V
T—————PD-D	T—————PD——D

2. Having a Blast

Continuous Verse-Chorus

Verse (Sectional)	Chorus (Continuous)
I vi bVII V	IV I ii bVII I bVII
T———D	PD——D—T

3. Chump

Sectional Verse-Chorus

Verse (Sectional)	Chorus (Telos)
I V IV V	bVII IV I
T———D	T———

4. Longview

Sectional Verse-Chorus

Verse (Initiating)	Chorus (Telos) (Mod)
I bVII	I bVII IV I
T———	T———

5. Welcome to Paradise

Sectional Verse-Chorus

Verse (Sectional)	Chorus (Sectional)
I bVII I bVII bIII V	I bIII IV bVI I bIII V
T—————PD-D	T—————PD-D

6. Pulling Teeth

AABA

Verse (Sectional)	Bridge
I IV I V I IV V I	vi I vi V
T———PD-D-T	T———D

7. Basket Case

Sectional Verse-Chorus

Verse (Sectional)	Chorus (Sectional)
I V vi iii IV I V	IV V I IV V I V vi IV V
T———D	T—————PD-D

Dookie (cont.)

8. She

Continuous Verse-Chorus

Verse (Initiating)	Chorus (Continuous)
I V IV I	V IV I IV I IV I IV I V
T—	PD-D-T PD—D

9. Sassafras Roots

Continuous Verse-Chorus

Verse (Initiating)	Chorus (Continuous)
I IV V	IV V IV I V
T—	PD—D

10. When I Come Around

Strophic

Verse (Initiating)	Refrain
I V vi IV	ii IV
T—	PD-D

11. Coming Clean

Strophic

Verse (Sectional)
I vi V IV
T—PD-D

12. Emenius Sleepus

Continuous Verse-Chorus

Verse (Sectional)	Chorus (Continuous)
I IV I IV I IV bVII V	IV V
T—D	PD-D

13. In the End

Continuous Verse-Chorus

Verse (Initiating)	Chorus (Continuous)
I bVII	IV V I vi IV V
T—	PD—D

14. F.O.D.

Continuous Verse-Chorus

Verse (Initiating)	Chorus (Continuous)
I bVII I	V bVII IV I V bVII IV
T—	PD—D-T PD—D

15. All By Myself

Strophic

Verse (Initiating)
I IV
T—

American Idiot

1. American Idiot

Continuous Verse-Chorus

Verse (Initiating)	Chorus (Continuous)
I IV bVII IV I	IV I V I IV I V
T————	PD-D-T PD-D

2. Jesus of Suburbia

Suite (CVC, CVC, ABA, Strophic, CVC)

Verse (Initiating)	Chorus (Continuous)	Verse (Sectional)	Chorus (Continuous)	
I vi IV V	IV V	I V vi V IV V	vi V I IV vi V IV	
T————	PD-D	T————PD-D	PD-D-T PD—D	
Chorus (Telos)	Bridge	Verse (Sectional)	Verse (Initiating)	Chorus (Continuous)
V I V I IV I V	i VI V	I iii IV I V	I bVII IV I	IV V
T————	T—	T—PD-D	T————	PD-D

3. Holiday

Sectional Verse-Chorus

Verse (Sectional)	Chorus (Sectional)
i VI III VII i VI III V i VI III VII V	i VI III VII i VI III V
T—————D	T—————D

4. Boulevard of Broken Dreams

Continuous Verse-Chorus

Verse (Initiating)	Chorus (Continuous)
i III VII IV	IV I V vi IV I V/vi
T————	PD————D

5. Are We the Waiting

Verse-Prechorus-Chorus

Verse (Initiating)	Prechorus	Chorus (Telos)
I IV	vi V IV	I IV
T—	PD—D	T—

6. St. Jimmy

Continuous Verse-Chorus

Verse (Initiating)	Chorus (Continuous)
I IV V I	IV I IV V
T—	PD—D

7. Give Me Novacaine

Continuous Verse-Chorus

Verse (Initiating)	Chorus (Continuous)
I vi ii V	IV I IV I IV vi ii V
T————	PD————D

American Idiot (cont.)

8. She's a Rebel

Continuous Verse-Chorus

Verse (Initiating)	Chorus (Continuous)
I IV I IV I IV V IV	vi iii IV I IV iii vi bVII V I IV
T—————	PD—D-T PD———D——

9. Extraordinary Girl

Continuous Verse-Chorus

Verse (Initiating)	Chorus (Continuous)
I iv I iv I bVII I	vi V IV V IV V IV iv
T—————	PD———D

10. Letterbomb

Verse-Prechorus-Chorus

Verse (Sectional)	Prechorus	Chorus (Telos)
I IV ii IV I iii vi iii vi IV ii V	IV I IV I V I V	I V IV I V IV bVII I V IV (ii IV)
T—————D	PD——D——	T—————

11. Wake Me Up When September Ends

Strophic

Verse (Sectional) (Small AABA)
I V vi V IV iv I vi iii IV I vi iii IV V I V vi V IV iv I
T——PD-D-T PD—D-T PD——D T——PD-D-T

12. Homecoming

Suite (CVC, SVC, SVC, Strophic, V-PC-C)

Verse (Initiating)	Chorus (Continuous)	Verse (Initiating)	Chorus (Telos)	Verse (Initiating)
I IV V I IV I IV V	vi V I vi V I vi V I IV V	I IV I IV V	I IV I V I	I IV V I
T—————	PD———D	T————	T————	T————

Chorus (Telos)	Verse (Initiating)	Verse (Initiating)	Prechorus	Chorus (Telos)
I	I IV I V	I vi IV V	IV V vi ii I IV V	I V
T—	T——	T——	PD———D	T——

13. Whatsername

Continuous Verse-Chorus

Verse (Initiating)	Chorus (Continuous)
I vi	IV I V/vi vi V
T—	D-T————