STRUCTURE OF THE TALKIN' BLUES

Stephen Finlay

Abstract

The talkin' blues is a genre of American folk song characterized by a spoken text accompanied by a simple chord pattern played on guitar or banjo. This paper analyzes the phonological, grammatical, and semantic structures of the talkin' blues, the interaction of these structures with one another, and their interaction with the nonlinguistic structure of the musical accompaniment. Two important dynamics of discourse structure, both very active in the talkin' blues, are emphasized. The first of these is coordination of structures in order to create points of salience in the text; the second is use of discourse structures and rules to disambiguate surface forms or to elaborate the meaning expressed by them.
Structure of the Talkin' Blues

The talkin' blues is a genre of American folk song originating in the Southern Appalachians. It is characterized by a spoken, not sung, text, accompanied by a simple chord pattern played on guitar or occasionally banjo. In the twentieth century the talkin' blues form spread over most of the United States, largely thanks to Woody Guthrie's use of the form for a great many topical songs. Other artists then and since have followed Guthrie's lead, and the talkin' blues has consequently become a handy vehicle for any singer or social commentator's expression of his views on almost any topic.

In this essay I will outline the musical, phonological, grammatical, and semantic structure of the talkin' blues, and the interaction of these four aspects of the genre. The analysis is based on five examples of talkin' blues representing four different artists, selected from fourteen or so talkin' blues recordings available to me. The examples studied are:

Original Talkin' Blues
Original Talkin' Blues
Talkin' Guitar Blues
Talkin' Union
Talkin' Candy Bar Blues

The Weavers
Pat Foster & Dick Weissman
Cisco Houston
Pat Foster & Dick Weissman
Paul Stookey
1. Musical Structure:

In its most basic form, the chord pattern of the talkin' blues is diagrammed below. The staff is a musical staff with bar divisions indicated and note lines left out. Chord changes and phrase divisions are indicated.

\[
\begin{array}{c|c|c}
\text{1st phrase (repeated)} & \\
\hline
4/4 & \\
\hline
\text{Tonic} & \text{Subdominant} & \text{Dominant...} \\
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{c|c}
\text{2nd phrase} & \\
\hline
\text{Tonic} & \text{Subdominant...} \\
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{c|c|c|c|c}
\text{3rd phrase} & \\
\hline
\text{Dominant...} & \text{Tonic} & \text{Subdom.} & \text{Dom.} & \text{Tonic} \\
\end{array}
\]

I will call the two repetitions of the first phrase together the verse, the second and third phrases together the tag, and the third phrase the tail. One verse and one tag together will be called a stanza. These are terms of convenience, and should not be thought to have any meaning outside this essay.

In each bar, the musical accent falls on the first and third beats.

Certain variations of the above pattern are possible. Two fairly major variations appeared in the five examples under study, both occurring in the tag. Tag structure is
somewhat flexible, while verse structure is quite fixed. The two variations noted occurred in Cisco Houston's Talkin' Guitar Blues and in Paul Stookey's Talkin' Candy Bar Blues. Houston has a tag of about the same length as the standard tag, but plays the entire tag in the dominant. In linguistic structure, however, his tags follow the normal pattern. Stookey's stanzas each consist of a verse, two repetitions of the second phrase of Fig. 1, and a tail. The first repetition of the 2nd phrase acts linguistically like a continuation of the verse, while the second matches normal tag structure in all respects. Both these variations seem to be adjustments of the basic pattern rather than idio-syncratic and unrelated alternative patterns.

2. **Phonological Structure:**

2.1 **Metrical structure and musical structure**

The verse of a talkin' blues consists of four lines of iambic tetrameter, each line occupying two bars of music. There are therefore two lines in each repetition of the first musical phrase. There may be anywhere from one to three unstressed¹ syllables in each iamb. The stressed syllable of each iamb coincides with the musical accent on the first and third beats of the bars. Consequentially, the unstressed

---

¹ I use the terms **stressed** and **unstressed** to refer to phonological stress only, reserving **accented** and **unaccented** for musical "stress."
syllables of the first foot of each grammatical and phonological line are located after the third beat in the final bar of the musical subphrase containing the previous line. The first musical phrase of each verse has one or two pickup notes, taken from the end of the previous tag or from a short but indefinite interstanza bridge played in the tonic. The unstressed syllables of the first foot of the first line fill these pickup notes.

The rhyme scheme of the verse is AABB, sometimes AAAA.

A typical verse is given below with its musical structure and phonological stress indicated:

\[
\text{pickup / 1st phrase, 1st repetition} \\
\frac{4}{4} \quad \text{You wanna get to heaven, lemme tell you what to do} -- \\
\quad \text{Tonic} \quad \text{Subdominant} \\
\]

\[
\quad \text{You gotta grease your feet in mutton stew.} \\
\quad \text{Dominant} \\
\]

\[
\text{1st phrase, 2nd repetition} \\
\quad \text{You gotta slide out of the devil's hand} \\
\quad \text{Tonic} \quad \text{Subdominant} \\
\]

\[
\quad \text{And ooze over in the promised land.} \\
\quad \text{Dominant} \\
\]

\text{(from Original Talkin' Blues, Poste Weissman) Fig. 2}
In the tag, the metrical structure is less strict. It was noted in Section 1 that tag structures showed more variation than did verse structure musically; we will see that tag structure is in most respects less strictly defined than verse structure, and more amenable to modifications. The first three linguistic lines of the tag each occupy two bars, or one third of the second phrase of Fig. 1, but they are usually truncated to one or two feet. These feet are often quite vague, or do not have all their stresses matched to the musical accent. They may also be trochaic rather than iambic. The third line tends to be longer, with an even less clear metre, and is often not fully matched to the musical accent. The tail is usually instrumental, but occasionally contains a line of words, metrically unclear and badly matched to the musical accent in the same way as the third line. When there is no line of words in the tail, the last stressed syllable of the third line of words may often coincide with the first beat of the tail.

The tag has no rhyme scheme. An illustrative example:

\[\text{2nd phrase}\]

\begin{array}{c|c|c}
Unpatriotic! & Moscow's agents! & \\
Tonic & Subdominant & \\
\end{array}

\[\text{3rd phrase (tail)}\]

\begin{array}{c|c|c|c}
Trying to steal the atom bomb & \\
Dominant & Tonic & Sub. Dom. Ton. & \\
\end{array}

\textit{Fig. 3 (from Talkin' Union)}
In each of the first two lines of Fig. 3 there are two feet, but only the first has its stress coincident with the musical accent. The stressed syllable of the second foot is not even strongly stressed. In the third line only the first syllable of *trying* and the first syllable of *atom* are strongly stressed and co-ordinated with the accent. To the extent that the feet in the first two lines can be determined, they are trochaic.

2.2 Salience

The relation between musical structure as described in Section 1 and phonological structure as described in Sec. 2.1 is manipulated in order to give salience to certain words in a stanza. I will discuss this topic first with regard to the verse, then with regard to the tag.

In the verse, co-ordination of stress and accent is required, and hence cannot be used to lend special salience to one word in a line as opposed to others. Nevertheless, this co-ordination is not insignificant. Its absence is extremely conspicuous. A line in a verse in which one or more of the stresses are not co-ordinated with the accent, or in which key words are unstressed and off the accent, is at once recognizable as bad talkin' blues. The reader can illustrate the first type of error to himself simply by reading aloud any line of a verse of a talkin' blues and forcing himself to
separate stress and accent. As for the second type of error, consider the following two possible readings of a line from Talkin' Union. Stress and musical beat are co-ordinated, and are indicated by accents above the vowels.

(1) Now if you're underpaid and the boss says you ain't
(2) Now if you're underpaid and the boss says you ain't

Reading (2) is better than reading (1). The second person pronoun carries very little information, since the entire song is addressed to the second person. The word you're therefore expresses information that has been known for two verses, and it is therefore bad form to give it salience. In contrast, the morpheme under- in underpaid expresses information that has not been expressed before and that is absolutely indispensable to the sense of the verse and the song. Salience on under- is therefore all but obligatory.

In the tag, the looser co-ordination of accent and stress makes salience more prominent and significant where it does occur. Even if the metre is clear in one of the first two lines in the tag, the line is often short enough that it extends over only one or two points of salience. In addition to accent and stress, chord changes provide salience; the first beat of each chord change can lend prominence to a word co-ordinated with it. This beat will always receive musical
accent, since it is always the first beat in a bar. What is done with salience in the tag makes more difference to the quality of a talkin' blues than what is done with it in the verse, because the looser rules of tag structure leave more latitude for both bad and good use of salience.

An example of an error in salience placement in the tag comes from the Foster and Weissman version of Talkin' Union. The last two lines of the verse and the first line of the tag in one stanza are as follows:

(3) Till he looks out the window and what does he see,

But a thousand pickets, and they all agree

| He's a bastard! |
| Tonic |

In the first line of the tag, Foster and Weissman place salience on He's, which receives stress, accent, and the first beat of the tonic chord. In this particular case, even more salience is conferred on this beat by virtue of its being the first beat in a new musical phrase. Salience on bastard is secondary, since the most it can receive is stress and accent, which it does have in the Foster and Weissman version. The assignment of salience is obviously not in agreement with the importance of the information carried by the two words. The word He's merely makes anaphoric reference to the boss, who has been the focused participant (cf. Section
3, 4) throughout the verse, while bastard expresses the new information that the singer no doubt wishes to emphasize.

A better version of this tag's first line is Pete Seeger's, which runs:

(4) He's a bastard!

In this version, He's is located on an unstressed syllable in the last part of the last bar of the previous musical phrase, and bastard is co-ordinated with stress, accent, chord change, and phrase beginning. Primary salience therefore falls on bastard, as it should.

2.3 Square Pegs

One consequence of the strict metrical and musical form of the talkin' blues verse is that semantically meaningless material can be inserted into a story in order to fill out a metrical/musical line. In the following verse, the semantically null material is underlined:

(5) Other day out in the street
     I saw a dime a-laying at my feet
     And I'm telling you, folks, the joke's on me,
     For it wasn't a dime at all, you see.

Note that you see also serves to fill out the rhyme scheme.
Before leaving the topic of phonological structure, it is instructive to look at a tag in which structural rules are deliberately and effectively broken. The second tag in one verse of Paul Stookey's Talkin' Candy Bar Blues is as follows:

(6) and \[ I'm \text{ standing} \]
\[ \text{Tonic} \]

and everybody's looking \[ \text{Subdominant} \]

and everybody's staring ... at me ... heh-heh... Howdy Doody!
\[ \text{Dominant} \]

Y'all waiting for the bus?... uh... little late, isn't it?... heh-heh... Anybody got a watch?... We could...

uh... see how late it is... I got a better idea--let's find somebody with a watch and stare at him.

Tonic and tail

Here, the dominant chord in the first musical phrase of the tag is continued over an indefinite number of bars. In normal tags, this chord is continued for only two bars. In this tag, the normally fairly short third line is stretched into a long monologue. This lengthening of the musical and verbal line creates tension. The listener's expectation that the tail will begin hangs unfulfilled for several bars, and this structural tension reinforces and intensifies the tension felt on account of the narrator's situation at this point.

Furthermore, the release of tension as the tail finally appears
coincides with the narrator's attempt to relieve the pressure on himself by substituting another victim.

3. Grammatical and Semantic Structure:

3.1 Syntactic Characteristics

Verse and tag differ again in their syntactic characteristics. Each line of a verse is typically either an independent sentence or an independent non-subordinate clause connected to the previous line by and or but, normally and. Frequently the subject of a clause will be absent under conditions discussed in Section 3.4 below. In contrast, the lines of the tag are often verb phrases, verb phrases with the tense-carrying element absent, or noun phrases. Tags sometimes show a progressive loss of structure from the first line through to the third. An example of a verse and tag follows:

(7) I'm a city dude a-living out of town.
    Everybody knows me as Moonshine Brown.
    I make beer and I drink the slop,
    Got nine little kids that call me Pop.
    I'm patriotic.

Raisin' soldiers (from Original Talkin' Blues, Foster/Weissman)
Red Cross nurses.
3.2 Time Reference and Tense

There are three possible time references in talkin' blues: narrative past, habitual present, and hypothetical/conditional. I use the term time reference loosely, incorporating much of what might be called aspect, and make no attempt to define it strictly. Examples of each of these time frames have already appeared above; narrative past occurs in (5) and (6), habitual present in (7), and hypothetical/conditional in Fig. 2.

A fourth type of time reference, future reference, seems to appear in such verses as the following:

(8) Now, boys, you come to the hardest time,
    The boss will try to bust your picket line, (from Talkin' Union)
    Call out the police and National Guard,
    Tell you it's a crime to have a union card.
    They'll raid your meeting, hit you on the head,
    Call every one of you a god-damn Red.

I consider examples such as this to be part of the hypothetical/conditional time frame, for two reasons. First, this verse is interpreted on the expressed understanding that these things are what will happen if you join a union. Verse (8) is therefore hypothetical/conditional in the same way as the following tag:

(9) If you stick together it won't be long
    TAG You'll have shorter hours (from Talkin' Union)
Better working conditions

Vacations with pay, take the kids to the seashore.

Secondly, the pronoun *you* is a major participant in (8).
The verse, like the whole song, is addressed to the second person.
To the best of my knowledge, verses with *you* as a participant
are always in hypothetical/conditional; verses without *you*
ever are. Given the semantics of *you*, this is not surprising.

Verse (8), incidentally, incorporates a slight
variation on normal verse structure--the first phrase of Fig.
1 is repeated three times rather than twice, with the couplet
rhyme scheme continued.

There is a simple, but not altogether systematic,
relationship between time reference and tense in a talkin' blues. The hypothetical/conditional and habitual present
time frames are expressed by the present tense. Narrative
past is expressed either by the past tense or by what is
commonly called the historical present. The alternation
between past tense and historical present may at first seem
quite without pattern, especially in the light of examples
like (10) and (11):

(10) Now I was down in the holler, I'm a-sitting on a log

(11) Now I'm in the wildwoods a-setting on a tree

And I sat down on a bumblebee. (both examples from
Original Talkin' Blues
Foster/Weissman)
What enables the singer to switch tense in (10) and (11) without changing time reference? In these cases, time reference remains narrative past regardless of the tense on the verb. The answer appears to be simply that time reference in any one verse remains constant throughout the verse unless some clear adverbial indicator forces and signals a change. The following two lines illustrate such a time frame change:

(12) Now I took me a wife about five years ago.
We got a little boy now, just about four.

(from Original Talkin' Blues, The Weavers)

In the second line, now tells the listener that time reference has shifted to present. Verse-initial now in (10-12) has no adverbial meaning; its function is discussed in Section 4 below.

A more difficult question is this: Given a present tense form, how does a listener determine whether it has narrative past or habitual present time reference? There are three aspects to the answer, at the least.

First, the fact that time reference remains constant in a verse unless otherwise indicated can force us to interpret present tense verbs as past in meaning. In both (10) and (11), there are past tense verbs unambiguously indicating past time reference. Since there is no adverbial indicator of a time
frame change, the requirement of constancy tells the reader that the present tense forms in (10) and (11) are past in reference as well.

Second, certain adverbials and structural markers can make a habitual interpretation impossible or difficult. Since the present progressive is not used in talkin' blues, a past interpretation will be the only possibility in such a case. For example, in (11) above the progressive meaning of the participle *a-setting* prevents a habitual reading and indicates a past interpretation, an interpretation that is confirmed in the next line.

Finally, the rules of temporal connection between stanzas may disambiguate the present tense for an entire stanza. This case will be discussed in Section 4 below. This factor does not contribute to examples (10-12) above, since these verses come from talkin' blues songs in which there is no temporal (or other) relationship between stanzas at all.

3.3 Event Organization

Again, the verse and the tag differ in how they relate the events described in different lines.

Events in the verse, unless clearly marked otherwise by adverbials or conjunctions, are either simultaneous or in
simple chronological sequence. In some cases, the first line or two of a verse describe a setting in which the sequence of events described in the remainder of the verse take place. Example (7) above is an instance of events, sometimes states, that are simultaneous. In example (8), the first line is a setting, describing a state that extends over all the actions in the remaining lines. Lines 2 to 4 then appear to be simultaneous, though this is far from definite, and are followed chronologically by lines 5 and 6, which may also be simultaneous. Example (8) is unusually complex; some more typical cases appear below:

(13) (chronological sequence)

Bought a candy bar the other day.
Only ate half, was gonna throw the rest away,
When I saw this kid playing in the street.
I said, "Hey kid, d'ya want something to eat?"
(from Talkin' Candy Bar Blues)

(14) (setting and action)

Now I was down in the holler, I'm a-sitting on a log
With my hand on the trigger and my eye on a hog
And I pulled the trigger and the gun went zip
And I grabbed the hog with all of my grip.
(from Original Talkin' Blues,
Foster/Weissman)
In (15) below, there are causal relations between events, indicated by conjunctions:

(15) It ain't quite this simple, I'd better explain
    Just why you gotta ride on that union train.
    If you wait for the boss to raise your pay,
    Well, you'll be waiting till the judgment day.
    
    (from Talkin' Union)

There is a certain amount of looseness in this area, since chronological sequence in English often involves an assumption of causality. The general tendency towards chronological sequence is strong, nevertheless.

In the tag, there is usually no time sequence. If the tag lines describe events, they are usually simultaneous, as in examples (6) and (7) above. Whether the tag lines describe events or are simply noun or adjective phrases, they usually give additional information about an event or person in the last line of the verse or the first line in the tag. Examples (6) and (7) elaborate on the tag's first line; a case of elaboration of the verse's last line follows:

(16)........

I went down home where the grass grows tall

TAG  Down there in Virginia

Good place to be if you got a guitar
Don't amount to a great deal if you ain't.

(from Talkin' Guitar Blues)
It was stated above (Section 1) that only the second repetition of the first tag phrase in Paul Stookey's double tag acts like a tag linguistically. Part of the evidence for this statement lies in examples like the following double tag, in which the first repetition describes an event sequence much as most verses do, while the second repetition elaborates its own first line:

(17) He says, "Show me."
I says, "Show you waht?"
He says, "The candy bar, you degenerut!"
2ND REP. and he grabs me
He grabs both my hands
Pretty easy to see
Which hand's got the chocolate!

3.4 Participant Identification and Focus

As was mentioned in Section 3.1 above, the subject of a clause in the verse of a talkin' blues is often omissible. In the tag, lines often consist of only a verb phrase, and hence have an understood subject of some sort. Tag lines consisting of a noun phrase are often the complement of an understood subject as well. In both these cases, the omitted subject is a focussed participant or thing in the following sense: it is the entity which the lines of the verse or tag are providing information about. Not surprisingly, the verse
and tag are different in the way they assign and utilize focus. I will discuss the characteristics of the verse first, then the tag.

In a verse, the first person singular pronoun is the unmarked focussed participant, in that if there is no indication of a subject in the first line of a verse, the subject and focussed participant will always be interpreted as I. For example, the second verse of Talkin' Guitar Blues begins:

(18) Bought a guitar about a year ago
The buyer is understood to be I, the narrator.

Another common focussed participant in the verse is you. As noted in Section 3.2, this participant is associated with hypothetical/conditional time reference. Focus on you is normally signalled by the auxiliary wanna in the first line, followed by clauses in the imperative. An example:

(19) Wanna get in trouble, I'll tell you how to do it--
    Just get a guitar, and then you're into it.
    Practice all day and half the night,
    Folks tell you you never will get it right.

(from Talkin' Guitar Blues)
Focus on any participant other than I or you is usually indicated by that participant's appearance as the subject of the verse's first line. As long as that participant remains in focus, the subject of a following line in the verse can be omitted, and will be interpreted as that participant. An example:

(20) Well, he's puffing a seegar, feeling slick,
    Thinks he's got your union licked
    (from Talkin' Union)

The focussed participant in (20) is he, the boss. Not surprisingly, deletion of the subject is much less frequent for third person focussed participants than for I and you. A first or second person subject need only be recognized as first or second person to have a unique reference, while a third person subject must somehow be distinguished from a large set of possible third persons. Any noun phrase indicating a third person subject therefore carries more information than a noun phrase indicating first or second person, and should be less likely to delete.

In many verses, there is no one consistent focus. In these cases, subjects are not omitted. An interesting exception is (8), where the omitted subject in the third line is the boss, but the omitted subject in the sixth line is the police (stressed on the first syllable) and the National
Guard. Two interpretations are possible. One is that before
the police and National Guard become available for inter-
pretation as the subject of the sixth line, a pronoun
representing them must get into subject position in the
fifth line. To over-simplify, we can say that any partici-
pant is available for focusing when it is introduced, but
is not actually focused until it gets into subject position.
This is not a consistent rule generally, however. In the
light of the other examples studied, a second interpretation
is more credible: that one verse gets one focused parti-
cipant, and that in (8) the treatment of two different
participants as focuses gives the impression that they are
one conflated entity. This view is supported by the fact
that it is not quite clear just who the subject of the
fourth line is, and by the fact that such a conflation implies
that the boss, the police, and the government are all united
in one big conspiracy. This impression is no doubt exactly
what the singer would want to convey, subtly and on the un-
conscious level, to his listeners.

The focus of a tag, as stated above, is the understood
subject of the verb phrases or the understood referent of the
noun phrases. In the first line of the tag is a full sentence,
as in (7), its subject will usually be selected as topic and
omissible subject for the rest of the tag. In (7), there is
only one empty subject after the first line, and its antecedent
is the first line's subject. If, however, the tag's first line is a verb phrase or noun phrase, its subject comes from the last line of the verse, and this participant becomes the focussed participant of the tag. If there is more than one participant in the last line of the verse, the following option hierarchy determines which participant is chosen as tag focus:

(21) 1. Choose the object of the last verse line. If it is not present, or is not what you want to focus.
   2. Choose the subject of the last verse line, omitted or present. If it is not a good focus.
   3. Do not pick a focus. In this case, the tag will elaborate the action described in the last verse line.

An example of the first case of this hierarchy is the tag in Fig. 3, which is the tag of (8). An example of the second is the following tag, which is the tag of (19):

(22) Always fussin' at you
    Grousing
    Won't let you practice
    Trying to run you out in the henhouse.

An instance of the third case of (21) is this, from the Foster/Weissman Original Talkin' Blues:
(23) And I went sliding down that mantelpiece
TAG among matches
    cigarette stubs
    all kinds of leftovers.
    Dirty housekeeping.
On occasion, the object of the tag's first line, or even the action described by that line, can be made the focus of a tag. An example of each of these cases follows:

(24) drinking home brew
    Makes you happy!
    Hic! Hic!
    Yeah...
    (from Original Talkin' Blues, The Weavers)
The second case, elaboration of the action described by the first line of the tag, is found in the second repetition in (17) above.

In general, then, the last line of the verse and the first line of the tag offer the same range of possible tag foci. The difference is that object is preferred in the case of the verse line, and subject in the case of the tag line. Because of this, there is a strong tendency for the tag to have a consistent internal focus that is different from the focus of the verse.
As might be expected, from the description of tag and verse syntax in Section 3.1, subject noun phrases referring to the focussed participant are rarely omitted throughout a verse, but are often omitted throughout a tag, as in (22).

3.5 Location of the "snapper"

The talkin' blues is basically a humorous genre, and the specific surprise comments and funny statements must occur in particular locations. In general, the last line of the tag contains a "snapper." A second joke may be located in the last line of the tag or the first line of the verse, but not in both these places in one stanza. All the tags quoted in this essay illustrate final-line jokes; example (3) illustrates a joke in the first tag line and examples (15) above and (25) below illustrate verse-final "snappers."

(25) I was down in the henhouse, down on my knees
    When I thought I heard a chicken sneeze
    But it was only the rooster, saying his prayers,
    Thanking the Lord for the hens upstairs.

    (from Original Talkin' Blues, The Weavers)

A complication in joke location is that the primary joke in the final tag line must be co-ordinated with the dominant
chord or the tail. If a tag has only two lines, with a joke in the second, it will be delayed so that the joke falls on the dominant rather than the subdominant. For example, in the following tag:

(26) I decided I'd go to some institution
    Get them to teach me elocution.
    TAG  How now, brown cow?
    Right now, green bull!

(from Original Talkin' Blues, The Weavers)

the tonic at the beginning of the tag is left empty, the first tag line occurs on the subdominant, and the second occurs on the dominant.

4. Interstanza Structure:

    In the original talkin' blues, there was essentially no relationship between stanzas. Each was a separate story, and while most stanzas were focussed on the narrator I, this was indicated or interpreted anew in each one. In later talkin' blues, however, there is often a story or theme running through the entire song. The connection between stanzas remains simple, though -- they are in simple chronological sequence, unless some other relation is clearly indicated in the first line of the second of two. This is very similar to the relation between lines in a verse, but
it appears to be an easier task to relate adjacent verse lines non-chronologically than it is to relate adjacent stanzas non-chronologically. The following stanza from Talkin' Union is related to the previous stanzas antithetically, as indicated by the initial But, but it also follows them chronologically.

(27) But out in Detroit, here's what they found,
    And down in 'Frisco, here's what they found,
    And out in Pittsburgh, here's what they found,
    And out in Bethlehem, here's what they found;
    If you don't let Red-baiting break you up,
    If you don't let stool pigeons break you up,
    If you don't let vigilantes break you up,
    If you don't let race hatred destroy you,
      You'll win!
      What I mean is
      Take it easy, but take it.
      (from Talkin' Union)

Certain words serve only to signal that stanza is beginning. These are well, now, or both, as in examples 8, 12, 14, 28. Note especially the difference between the two now's in (12).
(28) Well, some start picking up baseball bats
    And the others are pulling the pins from their hats.
    I think this thing's gone a little too far,
    Hell, I only offered him a candy bar!

    (from Talkin' Candy Bar Blues)

Focus is never carried over from one stanza to another. Time reference may be, when the stanzas are chronologically related. The following verse, for instance, is interpreted as narrative past in time reference, since it chronologically follows another narrative past stanza:

(29) Well, the kid comes back in a minute or two,
    But his mom's with him and the neighbours too
    And they got the kid scared, it's plain to see,
    And they say, "Which one done it?" He points to me.

    (from Talkin' Candy Bar Blues)

As noted in Section 3.2, this is one of the devices which enable a hearer to disambiguate the time reference of present tense verbs.

* * * * *
This summary of the structure of the talkin' blues may be incomplete or partly erroneous, but the basic structure of the genre is clear from rather few examples. Moreover, the structural principles outlined here provide explanations in certain cases for my intuitions about the relative quality of various talkin' blues. The analysis appears to be on the right track.

**Discography**


Classics Record Library, *Folk Song and Minstrelsy*, Vanguard RL 7624.