MTO 19.4 Examples: Rings, A Foreign Sound to Your Ear

(Note: audio, video, and other interactive examples are only available online)

Figure 1. The first verse-refrain cycle, with end-rhymes indicated

Darkness at the break of noon
Shadows even the silver spoon
The handmade blade, the child's balloon
Eclipses both the sun and moon

To understand you know too soon
There is no sense in trying

Pointed threats, they bluff with scorn
While suicide remarks are torn
From the fool's gold mouthpiece the hollow horn

Plays wasted words, proves to warn
That he not busy being born
Is busy dying

Temptation's page flies out the door
You follow, find yourself at war

Watch waterfalls of pity roar
You feel to moan but unlike before
You discover that you'd just be one more
Person crying

So don't fear if you hear

A foreign sound to your ear
It's alright, Ma, I'm only sighing
**Figure 2.** The first verse scanned in trochaic tetrameter

1 2 3 4

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<tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>Dark-ness at the break of noon</td>
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<td>Sha- dows éven the sil- ver spoon</td>
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<td>The hand- made blade the child’s bal- loon</td>
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<td>E- clip- ses both the sun and moon</td>
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<td>To un- der- stand you know too soon</td>
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<tr>
<td>There is no sense in try- ing</td>
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**Figure 3.** (a) The final two lines of verse one scanned as a single, seven-foot line;

(b) the final two lines of verse two as independent lines;

(c) the same two lines scanned as a single, six-foot line

(a)

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<tr>
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(b)

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<tr>
<td>That he not bu- sy be- ing born</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is bu- sy dy- ing</td>
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(c)

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<tr>
<td>That he not bu- sy be- ing born is bu- sy dy- ing</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Figure 4. The guitar introduction, as performed on the 1965 studio recording

**Tuning:** DADGBE, with capo on 2nd fret

* = bend (ca. quarter tone)  × = muted or lightly played note (parenthesized in tab)
Figure 5. Schemata in the vamp/release

(a)
\[ bIII-IV \rightarrow bIII = \text{tonic vamp} \]
\[ bIII \quad IV \quad bIII \quad \text{tonic pedal} \]
(two bars)

(b)
\[ \frac{b\flat7}{b\flat8} \text{ tag} = \]
(two bars)

(c)
\[ \text{bass run} = \]
(one bar)

Figure 6. Schematic action path in the vamp/release
Solid arrows = through-line. Dashed arrows = possible insertions

(Two-bar schemata:)
\[ bIII-IV \rightarrow bIII \]
\[ \frac{b\flat7}{b\flat8} \text{ tag} \]

(One-bar schemata:)
\[ \text{bass run} \]
\[ \text{tonic vamp} \cdot \text{ad libitum} \]

\[ \text{to verse} \]
Figure 7. (a) The verse progression as played in verse one of the 1965 studio recording
(b) Linear continuities in the progression

Figure 8. The vocal line in the verse, schematically represented
Figure 9. (a) Reciting tone and escape tone
(b) Transcription of verse one as sung on the 1965 studio recording

(a) $\mathbb{H} = $ reciting tone
$\circ = $ escape tone

(b) $j = 116-120$

Darkness at the break of noon Shadows even the silver spoon The
handmade blade, the child’s balloon Eclipses both the sun and moon To
understand you know too soon There is no sense in trying.
Figure 10. Spectrogram of line one as sung on the 1965 studio recording, with timings indicated in milliseconds. Arrows mark beats as projected by the guitar (All spectrograms produced with Sonic Visualiser)
Figure 11. (a) Transcription of the first refrain as performed on the 1965 studio recording, aligned above three metric interpretations, (b), (c), and (d)

(Vamp/release)  |  refrain

So don't fear if you hear a foreign sound to your ear. It's all right, Ma.

Strumming as in verse.

(b) | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1

(c) | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1

(d) | 2 | 1

$\sharp = 1/4$ tune sharp.
Figure 12. Dylan’s performing career in overview, with performances of “It’s Alright, Ma” in black.
Table 1. Total Dylan concerts and performances of “It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding),” 1961–2013

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Concerts</th>
<th>“It’s Alright, Ma” performances</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>33</td>
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<td>1964</td>
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<td>2012</td>
<td>86</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>82‡</td>
<td>2‡</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3302</td>
<td>797</td>
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</table>

* Conservative estimate based on extant set lists and circulating shows.
† Two shows from 1978 do not circulate and four are incomplete. Björner thus counts only 109 performances of the song in this year. Nevertheless, it is at least certain that Dylan played it at all 114 shows, given the consistency of set lists for this big band and the song’s clinching role near the end of the concert (before the encores).
‡ Projected. See footnote 89 for a discussion of the two (surprising) performances of the song in October 2013.
Table 2. Live arrangements of “It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>version</th>
<th>years</th>
<th>solo or ensemble</th>
<th>acoustic or electric</th>
<th>key</th>
<th>comments</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1964–1965</td>
<td>solo</td>
<td>acoustic</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>drop-D tuning, capo on 5th fret</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>ensemble</td>
<td>electric</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>“Vegas” band, with background singers; heavy rock arrangement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>ensemble</td>
<td>acoustic</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>fast, old-time country feel; drums with brushes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1999–2002</td>
<td>ensemble</td>
<td>acoustic</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>mid-tempo country groove; double bass, brushes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2002–2007</td>
<td>ensemble</td>
<td>acoustic, later electric</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>slow blues shuffle; Celtic cittern introduction (through 2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7a</td>
<td>2007–2008</td>
<td>ensemble</td>
<td>electric</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>straight time, moderate tempo; electric guitar, fiddle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7b</td>
<td>2008–2009</td>
<td>ensemble</td>
<td>electric</td>
<td>B♭</td>
<td>tempo and feel as in 7a; prominent electric guitar, banjo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 13. The verse progression in the 1974 performance
Figure 14. Spectrograms of the first line as sung (a) in the January 1965 studio recording, and (b) at the Philharmonic Hall concert, Halloween 1964

(a)

Darkness at the break of noon
Darkness at the break of noon
Figure 15. The first line as sung on February 14, 1974 in Los Angeles (performance released on *Before the Flood*):

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<td>10</td>
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<td>5</td>
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</table>

Darkness at the break of noon
Figure 16. The conclusion of the first verse as sung on February 14, 1974 in Los Angeles.
Figure 17. (a) The reciting and escape tones in the 1974 performances
(b) Transcription of the first verse as sung on February 14, 1974

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{line endings} \\
\hat{=} = \text{reciting tone} \\
\circ = \text{escape tone}
\end{align*} \]

(b) \[ \begin{align*}
&\text{Darkness at the break of noon Shadows ev'en the silver spoon The} \\
&\text{hand-made blade the child's balloon Edipses both the sun and moon To} \\
&\text{understand you know too soon there is no sense in trying.}
\end{align*} \]
Figure 18. (a) The reciting and escape tones in the 1986 performances
(b) Transcription of the first verse as sung in Sydney on February 25, 1986

(a) \( \Rightarrow \) = reciting tone
\( \sigma \) = escape tone

(b) \( \approx 126 \)

Darkness at the break of noon Shadows even the silver spoon

hand-made blade the child’s balloon

Eclipses both the sun and moon

To understand you know too soon There is no sense in trying.
Figure 19. The instrumental arrangement in the 1978 version: (a) the vamp/release and verse; (b) the refrain.
Figure 20. Verse one as sung at three concerts in 1978:

(a) Tokyo, February 28 (released on At Budokan); 7th performance on the tour

(b) Paris, July 8; 46th performance on the tour

(c) Columbia, South Carolina, December 9; 109th performance on the tour
Figure 21. The vamp/release as played by Larry Campbell in 1999–2002

(a) Travis-picking pattern in version 5 (1999–2001)

(b) Strummed cittern in final months of version 5 (early 2002)

(c) Cittern blues shuffle—version 6 (late 2002–2004)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(a)} & \quad \text{Acoustic guitar in drop-D tuning, capo at 5th fret.} \\
\text{(b)} & \quad \text{Celtic cittern in modal-D tuning,* capo at fifth fret.} \\
\text{(c)} & \quad \text{Celtic cittern in modal-D tuning,* capo at fifth fret.}
\end{align*}
\]

Figure 22. The seventh verse as sung at two concerts in fall 1999:

(a) September 15, Austin, Texas

(b) October 31, Chicago, Illinois

(a)

\begin{music}
\begin{musicnotation}
\begin{notationitems}
\item \text{Advertising signs...uh they con.}
\item \text{You in-to thinking you're the one.}
\item \text{That can do what's never been done.}
\item \text{?? can win that's never been won.}
\item \text{And meantime life outside goes on.}
\item \text{All a-round you.}
\end{notationitems}
\end{musicnotation}
\end{music}
Figure 23. Verses 1–3 as sung in Fairfax, Virginia, November 22, 2002

Verse 1
Darkness at the break of noon
Shadows even the silver spoon

Verse 2
Pointed threats they bluff with scorn
Suicide remarks are torn From the

Verse 3
Temptation's page flies out the door You follow find yourself at war Watch

RN: IV^6
Chord: I

Handmade blade the child's balloon
Eclipses both the sun and moon

Soul's gold mouth piece the hollow horn Plays wasted words and proves to warn

Waterfalls of pity roar Feel to mean but unlike before You dis

VII
3
IV^6

To understand you know too soon There is no sense in trying

He not busy being born Is busy dying,

Cover there'd just need be one more person crying...

iv^6
5
Figure 24. Two verses as sung in Tulsa, Oklahoma, February 28, 2004:

(a) Verse one

(b) Verse five

(a)

\[\text{Darkness at the break of noon} \quad \text{Shadows even the silver spoon} \quad \text{The}
\]

\[\text{hand-made blade the child's balloon} \quad \text{Eclipses both the sun and moon} \quad \text{To understand you know too soon} \quad \text{There is no sense in trying.} \]

(b)

\[\text{Disillusion'd words like uh bullets bark} \quad \text{Human gods aim for their mark}
\]

\[\text{Make ev'ry thing from toy guns that spark} \quad \text{To flesh colored Christs that glow}
\]

\[\text{--- in the dark} \quad \text{Easy to see without looking too far}
\]

\[
\times = \text{coarse shout with weak fundamental} \quad \text{Warble}
\]

Figure 25. Coarse shout and warble, Tulsa, Oklahoma, February 28, 2004
Figure 26. The first refrain as sung in

(a) Fairfax, Virginia, on November 22, 2002

(b) Tulsa, Oklahoma, February 28, 2004
Figure 27. Verses 1–6 as sung in Trento, Italy, June 15, 2008

page 1 (verses 1–3) | page 2 (verses 4–6)

Verse 1

Darkness at the break of noon
Shadows even the silver spoon

Verse 2

Pointed threats they bluff with scorn
Suicide remarks are torn

Verse 3

Temptation’s page flies out the door
You follow find yourself at war

Hand-made blade the child’s balloon
Eclipses both the sun and moon

From the fool’s gold mouth-piece the hollow horn
Plays wasted words and proves

Watch water falls of pity roar
You feel to moan but un-

To understand you know too soon
That there is no sense in trying.

to warn
He is busy dying,

like before
You discover that you’re just one more

Perso

sighing

\( \times \) = coarse growl
\( \uparrow \) = nasal break
\( \downarrow \) = round, clipped “hoot”
Figure 27. Verses 1–6 as sung in Trento, Italy, June 15, 2008

Verse 4
Some... uh warn ah vic-to-ry some... down fall... Private rea-sons great

Verse 5
Dis ill-us-ion'd words like bol-lers bark... Human gods aim for their mark

Verse 6
Preachers preach of evil faces Teachers teach that knowl-edge

or small Can be seen in the eyes of those that call Make all that should be kill'd to crawl

Make ev'ry thing from guns that spark... To flesh col-ored Christ's that grow in

waits Can lead to hun-dred dol-lar places... And good-ness hides... behind its

Oth-ers say don't hate no thin' at all... 'Copt uh hat-ed.

the dark Easy to see with-out look-ing to far... Not much is re-ally sac-red.

gates And the pres'-dent of the U-nit-ed States... Some-times must have to stand uh nak-ed.

= course growl = nasal break = warble