

Ithaca College Digital Commons @ IC

Music Theory, History, and Composition
Department Publications

Music Theory, History, and Composition
Department

2008

I Never Get Back: How 'Take Me Out to the Ball Game' Succeeds in Celebrating Failure

Timothy A. Johnson
Ithaca College, tjohnson@ithaca.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.ithaca.edu/musthc_faculty_pubs

 Part of the [Music Theory Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Timothy A., "I Never Get Back: How 'Take Me Out to the Ball Game' Succeeds in Celebrating Failure" (2008). *Music Theory, History, and Composition Department Publications*. Paper 6.
http://digitalcommons.ithaca.edu/musthc_faculty_pubs/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Music Theory, History, and Composition Department at Digital Commons @ IC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Music Theory, History, and Composition Department Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ IC.

I Never Get Back

How “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” Succeeds in Celebrating Failure

Timothy A. Johnson

In this centennial year of “Take Me Out to the Ball Game,” here is a close look at the melody of what for many fans represents the musical embodiment of the national pastime. Composed in 1908 by Albert Von Tilzer, with words by Jack Norworth, this song famously captures the essence of baseball as experienced by fans at the ballpark—the experience of joining with the crowd, buying the traditional ballpark food, cheering, being a good sport, and understanding the rules of the game. Bud Selig called the song “a major factor in the transformation of a trip to the ballpark into a communal event for all to enjoy.”¹

The full song actually consists of verse 1, chorus, verse 2, and then the chorus repeated, although it is only the chorus that usually is sung at the ballpark and that most fans know. “Katie Casey was baseball mad,” according to the first line of the lyrics. Her “beau” called to ask if she wanted to see a show. She “said no,” and it is in her voice that the chorus, beginning “Take me out to the ball game,” is sung. In verse 2, Katie jeers the umpires and, when the score is tied, she works to “cheer up the boys” by making them “sing this song” (repeat chorus).

“Take Me Out to the Ball Game” is believed to be the third-most frequently performed song in the United States, after the national anthem and “Happy Birthday.”² “It has a melody that was born with us,” as Carly Simon put it, “and will live on forever.”³ That melody, angular and memorable, coupled with the swaying rhythm, has come to suggest American culture itself, and its distinctive melodic shape is one reason the song has sprung such deep roots in our American consciousness.

What do I mean by “its distinctive melodic shape”?⁴ Consider two other popular songs, both of them associated with baseball—“The Star-Spangled Banner” and “God Bless America.” Their melodic shapes are more

normative. I will describe them in terms of an analytical method that is based on the work of Heinrich Schenker (1868–1935), an Austrian music theorist, pianist, music editor, and writer, whose work on tonal music has become the most influential in music theory in the United States. Many of Schenker’s students, fleeing the Nazis, emigrated to the United States where they became established professors in some of our most distinguished educational institutions in music, such as the Mannes College of Music, the City University of New York, Columbia University, and the New England Conservatory of Music.⁵ Schenker’s theory was developed for classical music from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but it may be applied effectively to most popular music of the last three centuries. Recent books by scholars working in the field have focused on popular music ranging from Tin Pan Alley to the Beatles.⁶ Moreover, the music to which this theory applies ranges from Bach to Brahms and Mahler, and from Scott Joplin to Norah Jones and 50 Cent. The theory was designed for tonal music—that is, music in a key, or, for readers for whom the terms *tonal* and *key* are not so meaningful, what may be referred to simply as *music*.

I will employ Schenker’s theory of melodic structure to show how “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” deviates from this theory in an important way, and I will uncover an essential link between the structural shape of the melodic line and the text and meaning of the song. Although my analytical approach is based on a complex theory of music, in writing this article I have taken care to make it intelligible to nonmusicians.

Put simply, one of the main tenets of Schenker’s theory of tonal music is that all melodic lines eventually descend to the tonic note (or the first note of the scale), which Schenker claimed was the origin of tonality. He

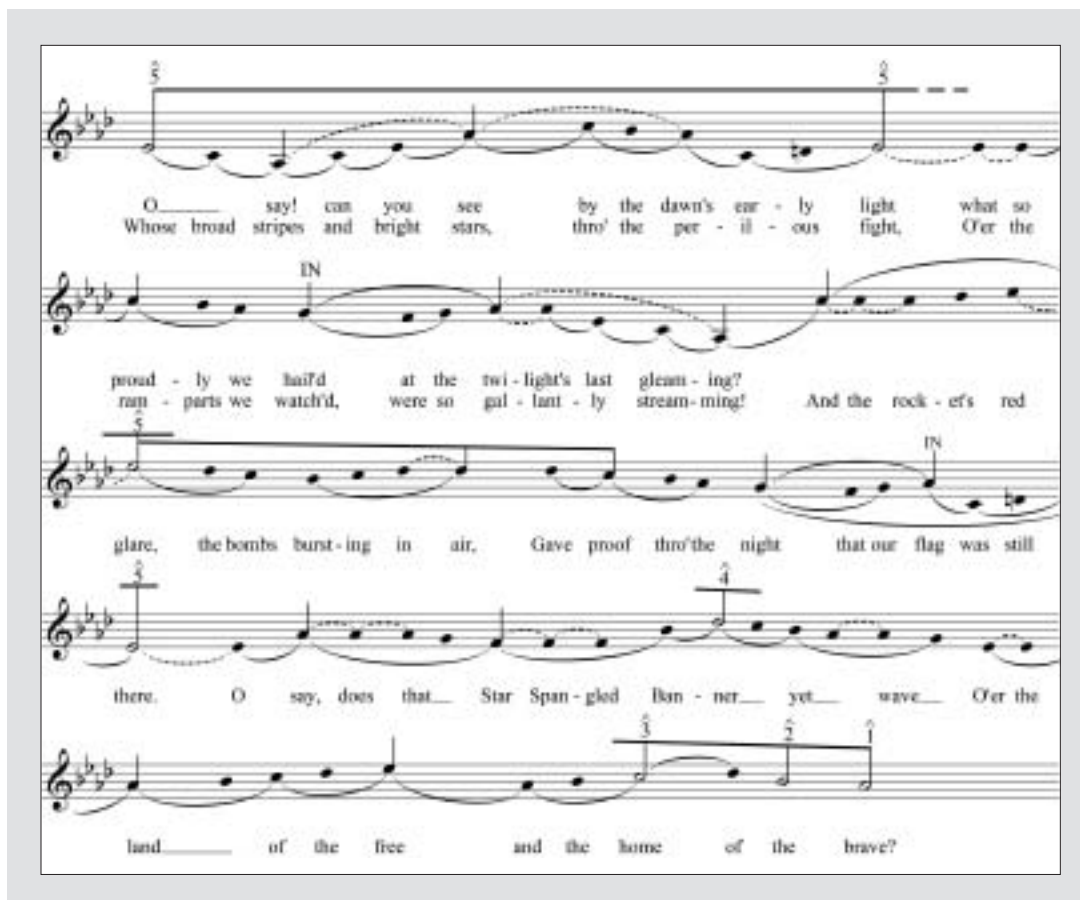


Figure 1. “The Star-Spangled Banner.” An analysis of melodic shape.

compared this behavior of melodic lines to the scientific principle of gravity: In the same way that objects respond to gravity, descending to earth, melodic lines respond to the attractive force of the tonic note (the first note of the scale, or the key) through a stepwise (or gradual) motion to this note. This fundamental descent of the structural melodic line is the linchpin of Schenker’s theory, and an understanding of this process in any musical composition yields important insights about the melodic line. However, some melodies have other shapes that a Schenkerian analytical approach can help illuminate, as we will see later in “Take Me Out to the Ball Game.” An analysis of the structure of a melody depends on harmony, but, in my description of the music of three baseball-related songs, I will discuss only the melody—the familiar tunes that baseball fans know and sing.

The Star-Spangled Banner

The most frequently heard song at the ballpark since

World War II is without a doubt the national anthem, “The Star-Spangled Banner,” with words famously penned by Francis Scott Key in 1814, set to a tune written decades earlier by John Stafford Smith (1780). Beginning in 1942, the national anthem has been sung before every major-league game, and this practice extends to the minor leagues and many amateur levels of baseball.⁷

The melodic analysis, shown in figure 1, reveals a heavy emphasis on scale step 5 for much of the song. This note begins the song and returns at the end of the first phrase (“dawn’s early *light*”). Scale step numbers signify the steps of the scale (where 1 is the tonic note, or key, and the other numbers are successive notes above that tonic note). Scale step numbers mark only the most important hierarchical notes, which also are indicated by open note heads. Those who do not read music should follow the words in the figures in order to keep their bearings. Also pay attention to the notes with vertical

lines (called stems) extending up from them. They designate the notes' structural importance.

Straight horizontal lines (called beams) connect stepwise patterns of notes (adjacent notes in a scale in a single direction) and also repeated structural notes (such as the first two open notes, each of which are scale step 5). These beamed patterns have a special significance and indicate the most structurally important connections between notes. A beam connects the first two notes marked as scale step 5, and the dashed beam afterward implies the continuation of this beam. Other connections between notes are shown by curved lines (called slurs), which group notes together. Dashed slurs indicate the continuation or repetition of a note.

As the song continues after the repetition of the first part of the verse, shown with lyrics overlaid to save space because of the direct repetition of the melody, scale step 5 becomes even more prominent. The rising line, "And the rocket's red *glare*," leads to another scale step 5, this time at a higher level of pitch (which many people find very difficult to sing). This higher level emphasizes scale step 5 in a profound way, often punctuated by flyovers or spontaneous fireworks at ballparks. The beam continues from before and continues over this note, connecting this scale step 5 with the prior ones, before another beam leads down as "the bombs bursting in *air gave proof*." Eventually the passage arrives back at the initial note, scale step 5, confirming "that our flag was still *there*"—for many ballpark crowds, a moving moment.

As the chorus of the song begins, the melodic line starts to succumb to the force of musical gravity, and the structural melodic line (shown by the numbered notes 4-3-2-1 and a beam to connect them) moves down to the tonic note. First the structural melodic line connects directly from scale step 5 at its higher level ("the rocket's red *glare*") to scale step 4 one note below it ("that Star Spangled Ban-*ner*"). Then the passage quickly descends through scale steps 3-2-1 on the last words of the song ("*home of the brave*"). The significance of this descent is that the melodic line comes to rest on scale step 1 as the song ends; the force of gravity has prevailed, and the song arrives at a satisfactory conclusion, from both a patriotic and a Schenkerian perspective.

God Bless America

Another song heard frequently at ballgames, especially since September 2001, is "God Bless America" by Irving Berlin (1939). At some ballparks, even now, it remains the song of choice for the seventh-inning stretch, most visibly and perhaps appropriately at Yankee Stadium, while other parks reserve the song for special occasions and holidays. Some fans may always link the song to baseball through its ubiquity at the end of the 2001 season. "I've stood, with the rest of the fans, and the ballplayers, who come out and stand in front of the dugouts," as Ira Berkow poignantly put it. "It is moving. The game stops dead in its tracks and we remember."⁸

At an Atlantic City Surf game that I attended the following season, I experienced what for me was the most moving performance of "God Bless America" at a ballpark. The public-address announcer with a roving microphone stood next to a fan in the club level in the middle of the seventh inning and asked him to sing "Take Me Out to the Ball Game." But the gentleman took the microphone and said, "I don't want to sing 'Take Me Out to the Ball Game,' I want to sing 'God Bless America.'" With his beautiful baritone voice he immediately launched into the song. But on the field the players were not prepared for this change in plan. Unlike the players at Yankee Stadium who stand solemnly in front of the dugouts, the players here were already warming up. One by one they began dropping their gloves and taking off their caps. And they stood with all of us in a beautiful, unscripted tribute to our country and those who lost their lives on that horrible day. Too often the singing of "God Bless America" at ballparks seems overly produced—more of a show than a tribute. But this spontaneous act by a bunch of independent-league ballplayers bestowed on that moment and on that song an authenticity that I will never forget. For that evening in May 2002, the lumps in our throats and the tears in our eyes were real.

Given its strong association with baseball over the past several years, the chorus of "God Bless America," shown in figure 2, provides a fitting second example of melodic shape for us to examine. Unlike "The Star-Spangled Banner," which begins with a numbered, structural note, "God Bless America" begins by leading

"GOD BLESS AMERICA" BY IRVING BERLIN. © COPYRIGHT 1938, 1939 (RENEWED)
 THE TRUSTEES OF THE GOD BLESS AMERICA FUND. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

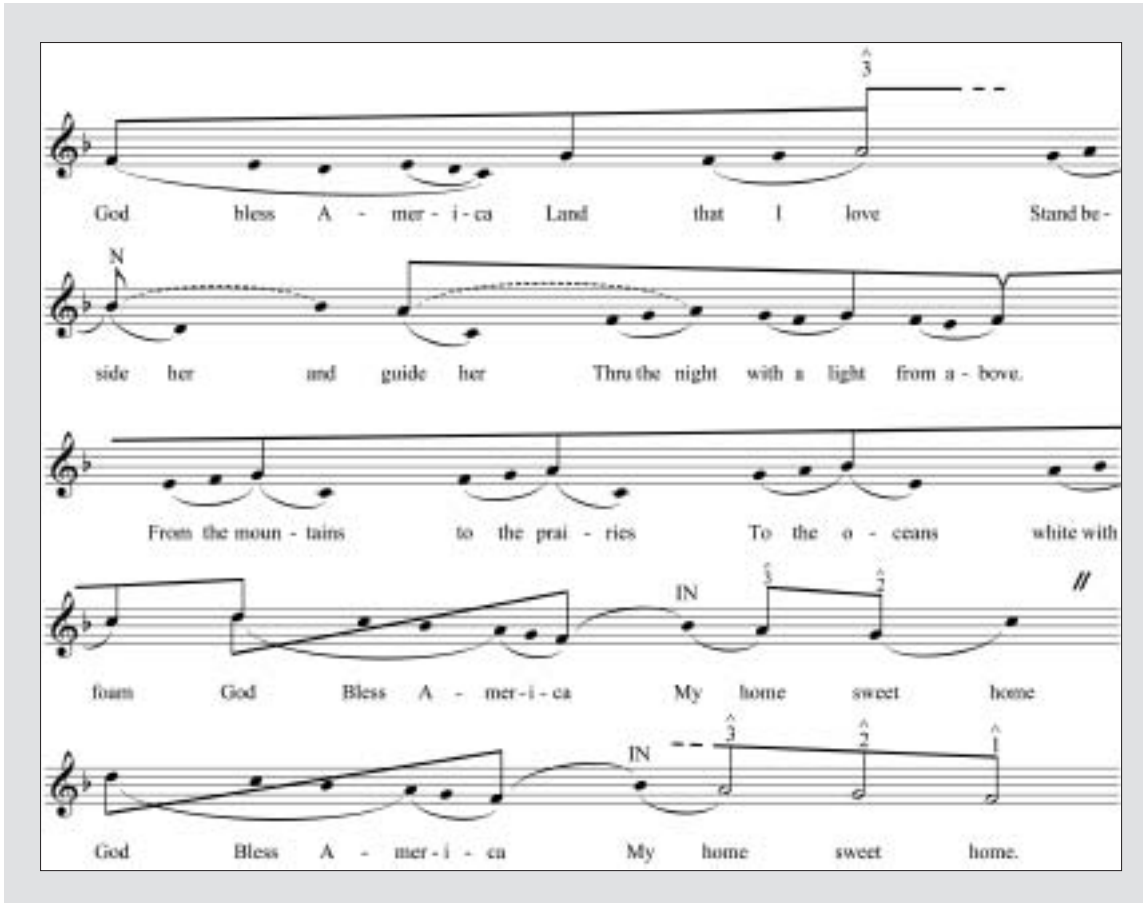


Figure 2. "God Bless America." An analysis of melodic shape.

up to the initial structural note, scale step 3, through a gradual stepwise pattern that emphasizes the importance of the words "God," "Land," and "love" (as shown by the stemmed notes beamed together at the beginning of figure 2).

The goal note of the opening section is enhanced by a structural neighbor note (marked N); a neighbor note is one that lies immediately next to another note in the scale. As the song progresses, the structural melodic line begins an early descent to the tonic note—"with a *light* from *a-bove*" (again, shown by a beam).

The ensuing passage is the most dramatic in the song. The line (beamed together in the figure) gradually climbs on each new noun, "from the *moun-tains* to the *prai-ries* to the *o-ceans* white with *foam* . . . *God*." This thrilling rise compensates for the early descent to the tonic note and helps prepare for the ultimate descent of the structural melodic line at the end of the song. But meanwhile another neighbor note, this time an incomplete neighbor

(marked IN), leads to a beamed line, from scale step 3 to scale step 2, that appears to be headed to the tonic goal. But this final descent is interrupted (shown by the two short diagonal lines at the end of the fourth line of music) as the signature line of the song repeats. This title phrase, "God bless America," reverses the long ascent described previously and descends quickly through the same series of notes (drawn together in the figure by the diagonal beam running through it, representing the melodic unfolding of the outer notes). And so the mountains, prairies, and oceans are musically linked with God's blessing in a direct way. Finally, the structural melodic line, established initially in the opening line of the chorus, succumbs to tonal gravity in the last line, as the song itself arrives at its point of rest, "*My home sweet home*."

Take Me Out to the Ball Game

In the previous two baseball-related songs, we have seen how the structural melodic line follows a stepwise path

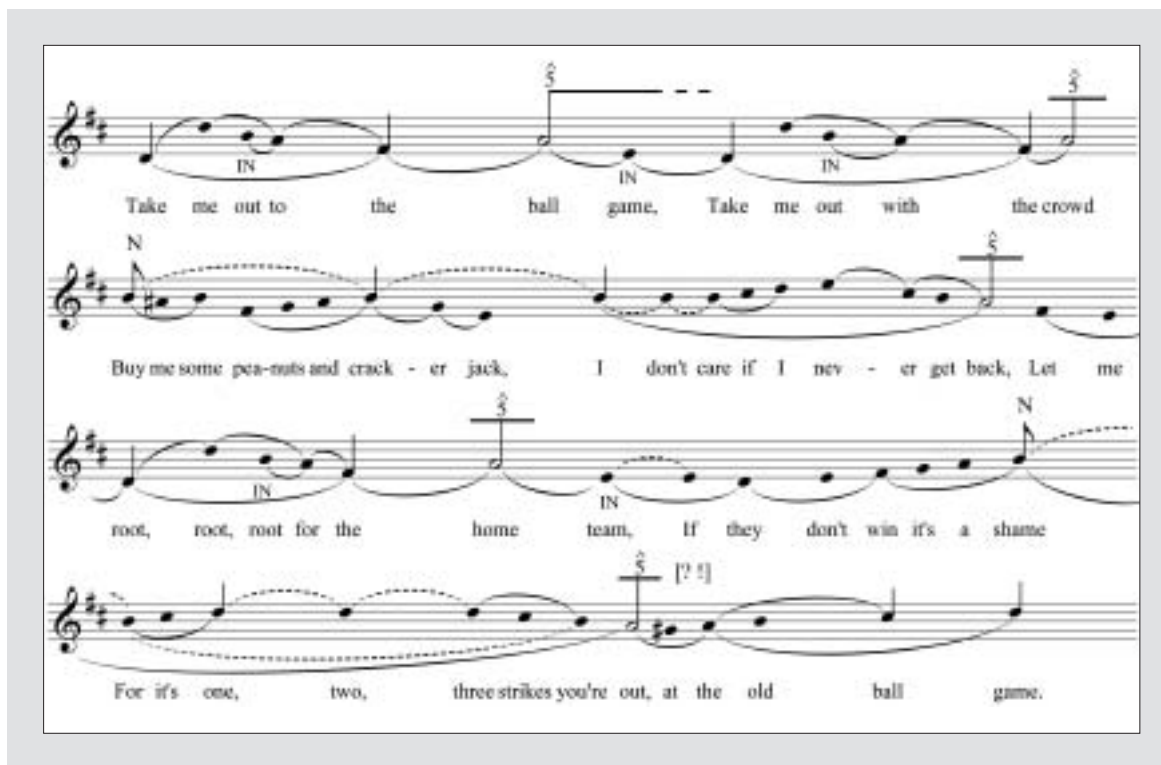


Figure 3. “Take Me Out to the Ball Game,” chorus. An analysis of melodic shape.

to the tonic note (or scale step 1) over the course of each song. Nearly every piece of tonal music follows this pattern in one way or another, although occasionally a piece will defy it, this force of tonal gravity. To appreciate why a melodic line forms some alternative shape, it helps to understand the reasons for deviation from the theory. Often, in music with texts, unusual melodic shapes can be explained through a close examination of the words.

“Take Me Out to the Ball Game” is one of the few tonal songs that do not adhere to this aspect of Schenker’s theory. Here the melodic line ends with an ascent rather than a descent, and even melodic analysis fails to identify a line that descends properly to the tonic.

As shown in figure 3, the melodic structure of the chorus of “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” features, instead of the expected descent to the tonic note, a different shape based on a neighbor-note pattern (an idea introduced in my discussion of “God Bless America,” where it plays a less significant role). The opening line establishes the importance of the neighbor-note pattern, where the angular melodic fragment “take me *out to*” forms an

incomplete neighbor (shown as IN). This basic idea permeates the melodic shape of the entire chorus, and this same melodic shape dominates the verse.

The first scale step number occurs on the word “ball,” as is fitting for a song about baseball. After another incomplete neighbor and a repeat of the opening gesture, scale step 5 returns “with the *crowd*.” As the crowd turns their attention to food, a large-scale neighbor-note pattern begins to take shape, expanding the idea introduced in the first four words of the chorus. This neighbor note appears three times—marked with stems, connected with dashed slurs, and emphasized initially with an N and a flag (the curly line at the top of the stem). This neighbor-note pattern gets back to scale step 5 simultaneously as the words of the text also “get *back*.” Scale step 5 gets back after that wonderful double negative, which is included in the original lyrics but which crowds sometimes seem reluctant to sing.

Another repetition of the opening gesture lands on scale step 5, as we “root, root, root for the *home* team.” Then a neighbor note again expands on the initial neighbor pattern, this time providing ironic emphasis to the

“shame” felt by the fans of the home team “if they don’t win.” The neighbor note here pulls the emphasis away from the primary note (scale step 5) as the crowd’s attention wanders to speculate about the outcome of the ballgame, just as the food distracted their attention earlier in the chorus. This neighbor note returns to scale step 5 after the song’s climax, “one, two, three strikes you’re out,” structurally emphasizing the final word and the result of the play, while the rhythmic organization of these words emphasizes the strikes through pauses.

The song ends, not with the usual stepwise descent to the tonic note (5-4-3-2-1), but with a quick ascent to the tonic note. The melodic shape fails to succumb to the force of gravity and descend properly and gradually to its goal. Instead the melodic structure remains on scale step 5, suspended with nowhere to go. How often, at the end of this song, have you felt like there was something more, something missing? I always feel like singing it again, and many ballparks follow a performance of this song either with an instrumental reprise of it or with another musical selection.

This failure of the melodic line to reach its rightful goal is embodied in the text. Instead of celebrating a run or a victory, the song celebrates the act of striking out, the batter’s utter failure. “For it’s one, two, three strikes you’re out” presents a paradox from the fan’s point of view, where the batter is unable even to hit the ball into fair territory. There is no spectacular hit to drive in runners—no heroic walk-off home run, no victory for the home team—and the structural melodic line, as understood through Schenkerian analysis, aptly reflects this failure. As with baseball-mad Katie, the song’s protagonist who excitedly declares, “I don’t care if I never get back,” the melodic line never gets back either. Striking out is represented musically, in a deep structural way, by the failure of the melodic line to reach its rightful goal—its home, its origin—through a proper descent to the tonic.

This analysis of the chorus reveals that its melodic shape features pattern repetition rather than the usual descent. From this perspective the song creates its own pattern of expectation, a series of neighbor notes, fulfilled through repetition. The song itself is not a failure. Rather, it sets up and achieves other goals through different means. ■

NOTES

A version of this article originally was presented at the Twentieth Cooperstown Symposium on Baseball and American Culture (Cooperstown, N.Y., National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, June 2008).

1. Allan H. “Bud” Selig, introduction to *Baseball’s Greatest Hit: The Story of Take Me Out to the Ball Game*, by Andy Strasberg, Bob Thompson, and Tim Wiles (New York: Hal Leonard Books, 2008), xiii.
2. *Baseball’s Greatest Hit*, 10.
3. Carly Simon, foreword to *Baseball’s Greatest Hit*, ix.
4. David Headlam offers a music analysis of the complete song, including the verse, in two sections of *Baseball’s Greatest Hit*. There Headlam provides a brief analysis “in layman’s terms” (86–87) as well as a more extensive analysis “for those . . . who can keep score!” (151–54). Headlam in his enlightening analyses takes a different approach to the music of this song and comes to different conclusions.
5. David Carson Berry, “Schenkerian Theory in the United States: A Review of Its Establishment and a Survey of Current Research Topics,” *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie* 2, no. 3 (2005).
6. Allen Forte, *Listening to Classic American Popular Songs* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); Walter Everett, *The Beatles as Musicians: Revolver through the Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Walter Everett, *The Beatles as Musicians: The Quarry Men through Rubber Soul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
7. *Baseball’s Greatest Hit*, 133.
8. Ira Berkow, “Sports of the Times: Eager to See the Return of Peanuts,” *New York Times*, 11 October 2001, section S, late edition, final.