

A comparative analysis of 'Such Great Heights' by The Postal Service and Iron and Wine

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‘Such Great Heights’, originally recorded by The Postal Service and covered by Iron and Wine, is a song about the desire for a fateful reunion with an absent love. The lyrics (see appendix A) are individualised, directed at the absent love, but the participants remain unnamed and anonymous (Machin 2010, p.88). The listener is placed in the position of the observer (Moore 2012, p.185). The lyrics firstly establish the singer’s speculation over the fateful, or even divinely ordained, nature of their love. In verses three and four, we find out that the he is separated from his lover who is instead travelling “on the road”: he hopes that the song will be heard by his absent love on the radio and it will help to reunite them. The chorus sees the singer find a sense of certainty in believing that they will be reunited, however, we are left unsure as to the true location of the heights at which their reunion will take place. In verses five and six we find that the singer has attempted to leave a recording of the song on the answering machine of his absent love, but was not satisfied with the sonic quality of that recording. The lyrics leave many ambiguities about the pair of lovers whose story we are witnessing. This creates space for the production of each track to enhance the meanings alluded to within the lyrical content as well as ascribing additional meanings to the song.

The timeline diagram (see appendix B) shows distinct differences in instrumentation between the highly synthesised and thickly textured Postal Service track and the sparsely orchestrated Iron and Wine track which is performed, almost entirely, on a single guitar. As seen in the sound box diagrams (see appendix C), the two tracks use their contrasting sound sources to also create very different sound stages (Moylan 2013, p.49). In the Iron and Wine track the single guitar is located centrally in the stereo space along with the single vocal to create the impression that the two sound sources originate from the same place, and therefore the same performer. Immediately we hear the performer in a sparse and solitary space, which, when combined with the audible paramusical sounds (Tagg 2012, p.270), immediately link the meaning of the space to the feelings of separation

expressed in the lyrics. Contrastingly, the Postal Service track starts with a percussive synth that bounces across the stereo image in a strict 8th note rhythm to create a wide space which is lifted within in the sound box. When joined by the synth bass and the fading in of the sequenced drum rhythms, there is a clear sense of the creation of a synthetic space.

The phonographic staging (Lacasse 2010) for each production also contrasts greatly (see appendix D). The single main vocal in the Iron and Wine track, with its clear vocal alternants, is placed within an intimate proxemic space (Moore et al 2001, p.102). The vocal is delivered with a breathy quality and very audible inward breathing between lines. We connect with a clear vocal identity (Frith 2002, p.196) that comes from the performers holding and joining of words, enhanced by the songs slowed tempo, to create lingering statements that suggest “slow burning internal emotion” (Machin 2010, p.112). In hearing the breath of the performer we connect with his soul (Barthes 1977, p.183), but, in the softening of the consonant sounds, we are kept from fully connecting with the body of the performer expressed through use of of his throat and mouth. The effect is to create an almost ghostly vocal performance. When the backing vocal is added in verse three, it is sung by the same voice and is placed directly behind the main vocal to become blended together. When combined with the intense proximity of the main vocal and it’s ghostly quality this creates the perception that the listener is so close to the performer that we are are hearing his internal voices and conflicts which acts to re-enforce his solitude.

The phonographic staging of the Postal Service track (see appendix D) sees the movement of the vocal within the stereo space for different sections of the song: alternating verses are panned half left and right and the choruses have a widened stereo vocal, possibly created by the use of double tracking or ADT (automatic double tracking). The effect is to create a ghostly and ephemeral image of the performer: like apparitions that appear, disappear and then re-appear elsewhere within the song. The backing vocal is sung by a female voice and is suggestive of playing the role of the absent lover. This idea is re-enforced by the backing vocal being used for the chorus where the lyrical content most strongly alludes to their reunion. However, the inclusion of the backing vocal

for the very first word of verse one is particularly interesting as it serves to plant the idea, from the very beginning, that the hope for the lovers fated reunion is shared by both voices.

The environment created by both tracks can certainly be considered what Moore (2012, p.191) would call "*Interventionist*". In very different ways, the two spaces amplify and enact aspects of the lyrical content that is not explicitly there within the vocal itself. The deliberate presence of the audible noise floor along with background noises and creaking sounds in the Iron and Wine track is something that Kromhout (2012) identifies as a key feature of lo-fi productions. This serves to create a sense of the recording's genesis and bring the listener in to its authentic space by narrowing the distance between the recording and playback locations. The effect here is to enhance the sense of intimate proximity to the performer by creating an illusion of sharing the same space.

In contrast, The Postal Service track with its polished, crisp, clear sound, "full frequency range, and nuanced dynamics" (Zak 2012, p.45) could be thought of as a hi-fidelity production. In fact, the desire to create a faithful reproduction of the song's frequency range is the subject of lyrical attention in verse six. However, there is no attempt in the production to faithfully replicate and connect with an original performance or performance space. Rather, through electronic instrumentation, stereo placement, moving sound sources (Moylan 2013, p.51) and the use of multiple and contrasting reverbs to create spaces within the larger performance space (Gibson 2008 pp.39-44), there is a clear construction of a virtual performance space. For example, the panned synth (see appendix C) creates a wide stereo space of its own, whereas the kick and snare are much more finely placed and sit in much smaller spaces. By contrast again, the piano and hand claps are treated with large and long lasting reverbs. Zak (2012, pp. 51-4) argues that these types of productions are better thought of as "No-Fi" rather than "Hi-Fi". In No-Fi productions the record's fidelity is created not by accurate recreation of a real performance space but through the creation of its own space. The result is to place "the record in a universe of other records" (Zak 2012, p.43). This creates a conscious awareness of listening to a recorded song

which in turn leads the listener to the impression that they are, as the absent love would be, hearing the full sonic spectrum of the recorded song whilst driving the open road. The Lo-Fi production techniques of the Iron and Wine version also create a conscious awareness of the recorded song which alludes to the poor sound quality of the answer phone recording referred to in the lyrics of verse five and so suggest we may in fact be listening to that recording.

In the Postal Service track, the positioning of the listener within the song is re-enforced with the use of electronic drum rhythms to create the movements of kinetic anaphones (Tagg 2012, pp. 498-9). Smaller and more detailed movements of fine-motoric anaphones are created through production techniques, most notably in the swooshing of reversed sounds. Larger, gross-motoric anaphones are created through the selection of rhythms themselves. This is most obvious in the chorus where the kick drum plays persistent eighth note rhythms with the snare adding the backbeat to match the “pulsing bass drum and minimal snare” (Brockner 2011, p.102) used in the music of Kraftwerk, including the song ‘Autobahn’, and later described as “motorik”. The effect of the motorik beat is to create a rhythm which “mimics that of a car speeding along the open road” (Doran 2010). Kopf (2012) argues that the effect is to also create the illusion of endlessness: travelling on a road that goes on forever. In the introduction the rhythms arrive, fading in, like hearing the approach of a moving vehicle. The rhythms gain intensity in the choruses with the kick drum reaching full rhythmic vigour and the addition of extra percussive sounds, particularly in the higher frequency range. The rhythms continue throughout the song with the consistent tempo of 175 bpm re-enforcing the feeling of continued movement. There is some deconstruction of the beat within the instrumental and at the end of the song there is a breaking down of the rhythm, where the kick is played less frequently and the snare starts to move from its position on the back beat. As the rhythm ends, the kick drum disappears completely and the final percussive sounds we hear are two claps soaked in a large reverb. The effect is to create the illusion that the rhythms seem to have floated away into space rather than simply driven out of sight like the way they arrived.

If the mechanical repetition of the sequenced drum rhythms and the whooshing of passing percussive sounds creates the movement of driving on the open road suggested in the lyrics then it also helps to create the same sense of the inevitability that is suggested in the lyrics as well. The use of the persistent and moving beat is not only what prevents the song from being heard on the answering machine, but is also what makes the song feel like it was made for the radio of a moving car where fate will have it heard and use it to bring the two lovers together again. The floating of the rhythms away from the listener at the end of the song alludes to the travelling of the passenger to the heights where the two lovers are to be re-united. Paired with the mechanical 8th note movements of the heightened percussive synth that we hear during the introduction and throughout the song, there is also an allusion to the flying of an aeroplane. This allusion is reinforced in the selection of instrumentation and spatialisation where there is a commonality of sounds with Eno's (1978) *Music For Airports* including the shared use of the reverberant piano which is lifted in the sound box as well as the soft, wide, padded synth chords.

By contrast, in the Iron and Wine version, the persistent beat referred to in the lyrics is created by the rhythmic plucking on the acoustic guitar. The effect created is far less mechanical and so creates an anaphone that is far softer and more human. The listener finds themselves, not driving down the highway with mechanical evenness, but rather floating in the intensely human variation within the repetitive plucked rhythms as they move over the arpeggiated chords. In oceanic rock, a lack of pulse is used to create a sense of stasis and of envelopment within the music (Albiez 2003, p.13). Here we see the same effect at work. Together with the soft and intimately close vocal and the paramusical sounds of the environment, the listener is drawn in to the performance space by the moving pulse. During the outro, the solitary guitar is joined by a secondary guitar to play a plucked melody in a higher register. The brighter sound and higher pitched notes place it higher in the sound box, which could be suggestive of a feminine sound and which indicates that the singer may have been reconciled with his absent love. The appearance of the second guitar feels almost uncanny: it arrives, unexpectedly, almost eerily, in to the solitary space that has been established for so much of the song. Lo-fi production techniques suggest that he is being joined in a real space

being recreated in the recording. However, there is also a suggestion, through the placement of the backing vocal and the arrival of the female presence being abstracted through instrumental sound, that the space is in fact just as false as the one created in the Postal Service track.

Both tracks ascribe meaning to the song with their contrasting productions. The Postal Service version creates an artificial space which drives the listener along in the moving car of the absent love. The construction of spaces within spaces creates a feeling of “other worldliness” which is in turn populated by the moving and surrounding voices. The effect is to create a world where anything seems possible: we are led to believe that the lovers could really be flying at such great heights, by plane, or some other fanciful means that only our imagination could create. The Iron and Wine track however, creates a static and unchanging space which is populated by a solitary performer, only to be joined at the very end by an uncanny addition. In both songs however, we find hints towards ghostly and eternal themes that leave us wondering if the “such great heights” of the lovers reunion is in fact that of heavenly death.

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Appendix A: Lyrics

I am thinking it's a sign
That the freckles in our eyes
Are mirror images and when
We kiss they're perfectly aligned

And I have to speculate
That God himself did make
Us into corresponding shapes
Like puzzle pieces from the clay

And true, it may seem like a stretch,
But its thoughts like this that catch
My troubled head when you're away
When I am missing you to death

When you are out there on the road
For several weeks of shows
And when you scan the radio,
I hope this song will guide you home

They will see us waving from such great heights,
"Come down now," they'll say
But everything looks perfect from far away,
"Come down now," but we'll stay...

I tried my best to leave
This all on your machine
But the persistent beat it sounded thin
Upon listening

And that frankly will not fly.
You will hear the shrillest highs
And lowest lows with the windows down
When this is guiding you home

Appendix B: Timeline Diagrams

Sound sources plotted against a timeline (Moylan 2007, p.113) for 'Such Great Heights' by The Postal Service

Time:	00:00	00:41	00:52	01:03	01:14	01:25	01:46	01:57	02:08	02:30	3:05	03:27	04:26	
Section:	Introduction (30 Bars)		Verse 1 (8 Bars)	Verse 2 (8 Bars)	Verse 3 (8 Bars)	Verse 4 (8 Bars)	Chorus (16 Bars)	Verse 5 (8 Bars)	Verse 6 (8 Bars)	Chorus (16 Bars)	Instrumental (25 Bars)		Chorus (16 Bars)	Outro (31 Bars)
Instrument (See note 1)														
Drums & Percussive Sounds	Building up of drum sounds		Kick on pulse Snare on beats 2 & 4. Hi Hat on off beats. Some additional rhythms, sounds and fills		Kick plays 8th note rhythm. Claps added. High sounds added on off beat		As verses 1-4	High sounds added	As previous chorus	No kick drum	Kick reintroduced. fill rhythms added	Big fill	Intensification of 8th note rhythms	Kick plays on pulse. Snare rhythm changes and moves from beats 2 and 4. Progressive deconstruction of beat
Percussive Synth (Panned)	Fade out												Fade out	
Percussive Synth (Central)	Fade out												Fade out	
Bass Synth													Fade out	
Piano														
Pad Chords														
Smooth Synth													Fade out	
Guitar													Guitar slide	
Main Vocal (for full vocal staging see appendix D)			Panned half left	Panned half right	Panned half left	Panned half right	Widened vocal		Panned half left	Panned half right	Widened vocal		Widened vocal	Processed vocal
Backing Vocal			"I"			"come down now" "everything looks perfect from far away. come down now"				"come down now" "everything looks perfect from far away. come down now"		"come down now" "everything looks perfect from far away. come down now"		"come down now"

Sound sources plotted against a timeline (Moylan 2007, p.113) for 'Such Great Heights' by Iron and Wine

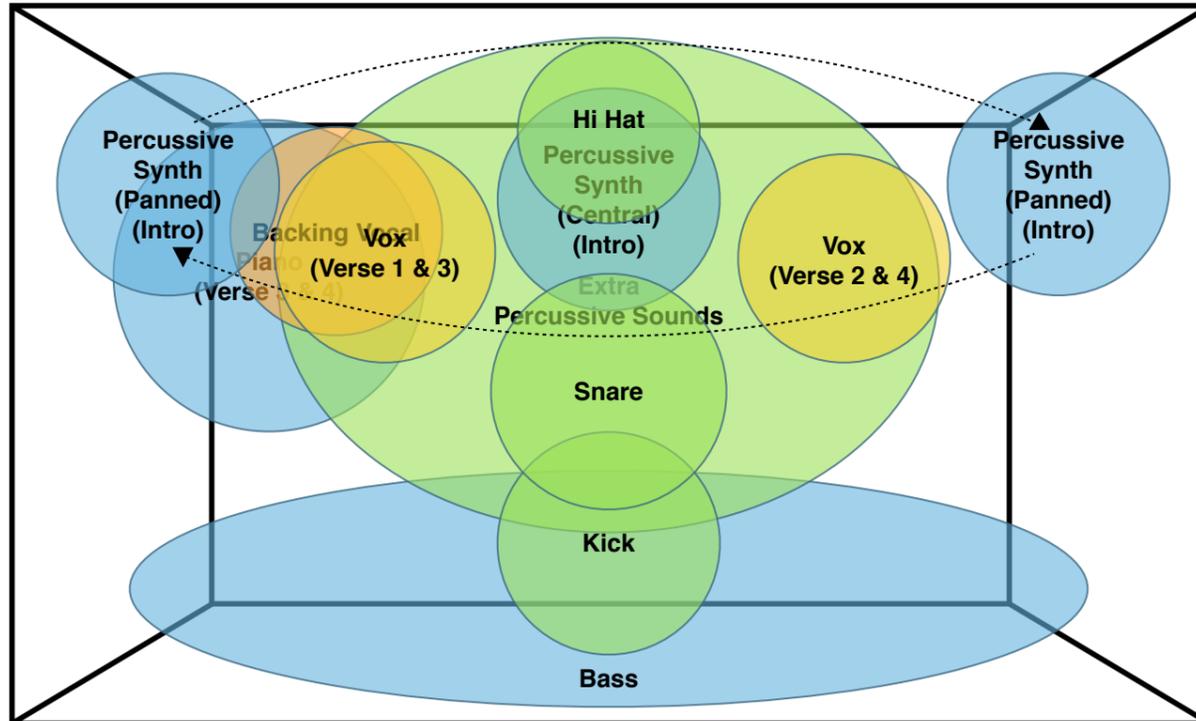
Time:	00:00	00:21	00:41	01:01	01:22	01:42	02:22	02:43	03:03	03:44	04:12
Section:	Introduction (8 Bars)	Verse 1 (8 Bars)	Verse 2 (8 Bars)	Verse 3 (8 Bars)	Verse 4 (8 Bars)	Chorus (16 Bars)		Verse 5 (8 Bars)	Verse 6 (8 Bars)	Chorus (16 Bars)	Outro (9 Bars)
Instrument											
Acoustic Guitar											
Solo Guitar											
Paramusical Events	Tape Hiss Creaking (00:15, 00:20)	Tape hiss continues									
Main Vocal (for full vocal staging see appendix D)											
Backing Vocal											

Note 1:

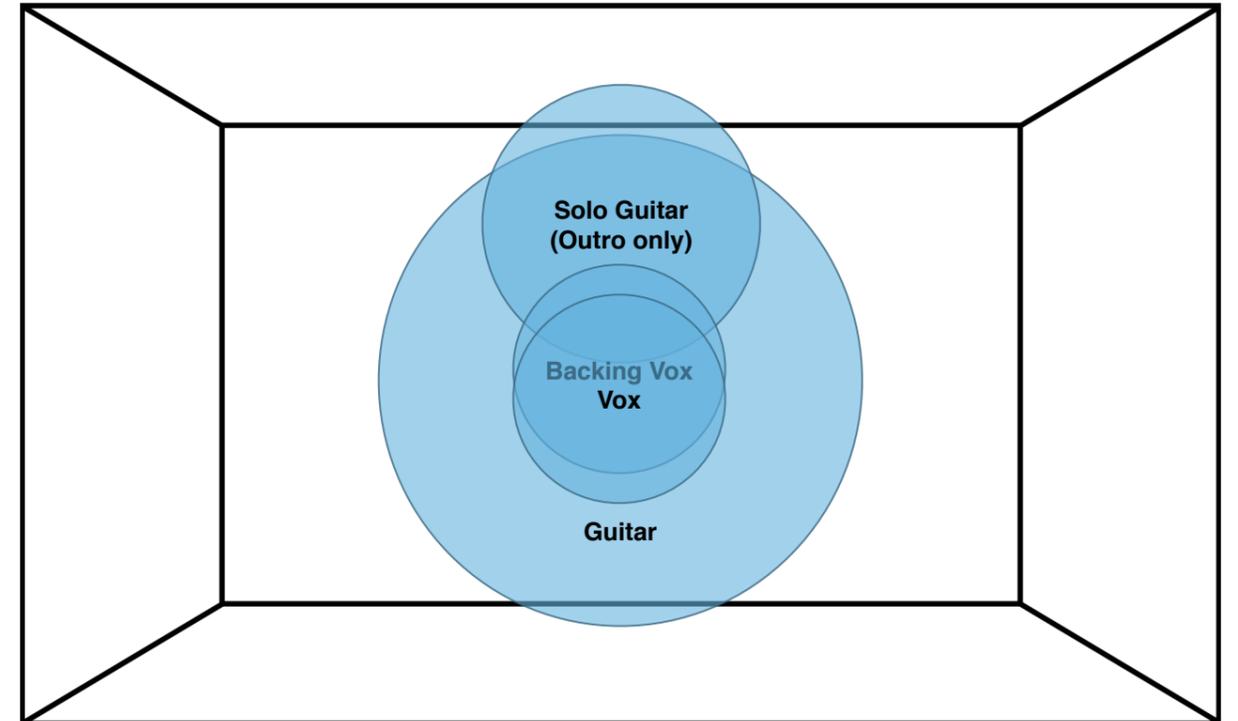
Here, “musical materials” (Moylan 2013, p.65) along with the sound events and objects that they are made up of (Moylan 2007, p.103) are identified. Whilst some instruments are clearly identifiable whilst others, due their unknown synthesised origin or to layering within the mix, are harder to identify. In naming synthesised sounds, where possible, an ‘anaphone’ descriptor (Tagg 2012, p.486) has been added to distinguish between sound sources.

Appendix C: Sound Box Diagrams

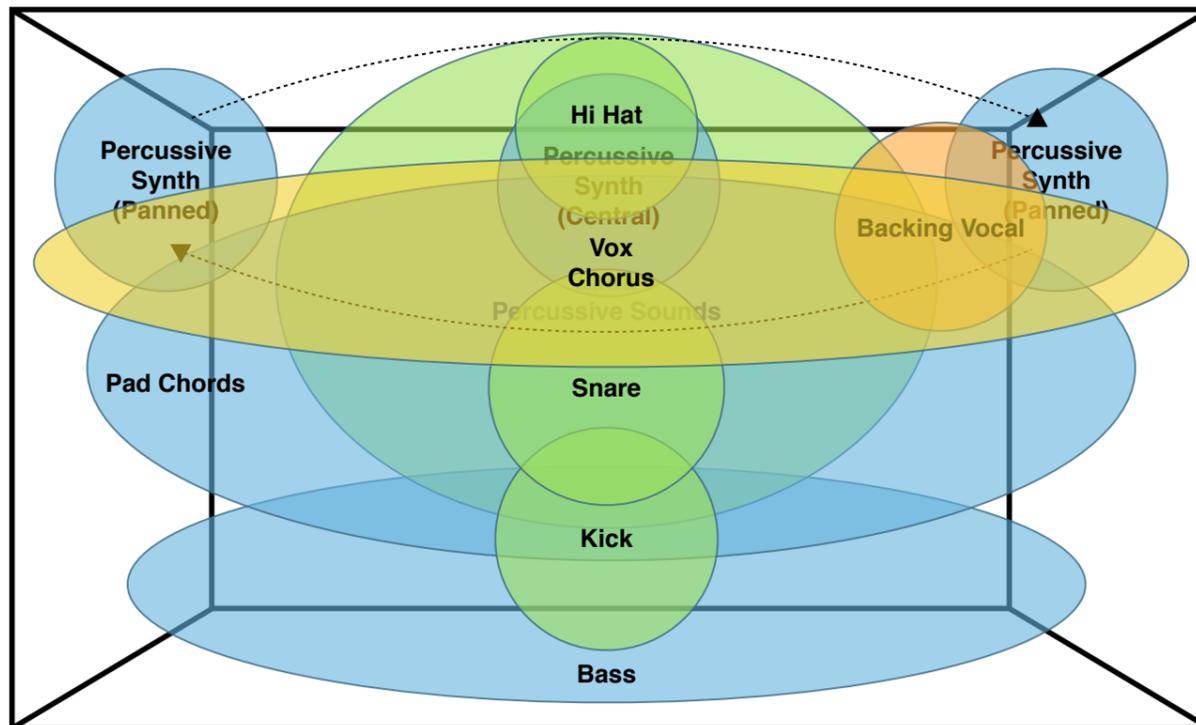
Sound Box Diagram (Moore 2012) (Gibson 2008)
 'Such Great Heights' by The Postal Service – Introduction, Verse 1–4



Sound Box Diagram (Moore 2012) (Gibson 2008)
 'Such Great Heights' by Iron and Wine



Sound Box Diagram (Moore 2012) (Gibson 2008)
 'Such Great Heights' by The Postal Service – Choruses



Notes:

The Postal Service track undergoes multiple changes in spatialisation and texture as elements are added and taken from the mix in different sections of the song. Contrastingly, the Iron and Wine track remains largely static and unchanged. The “virtual textural spaces” (Moore 2001, p. 121) created in the Postal service version include a densely filled “block” (Moore 2001, p. 121) made up of the bass, kick and snare, as well as “strands” made up for the vocals and synthesised elements. There are also “holes” (Moore 2001, p. 121) left in the mix which are then populated by sporadic percussive sounds. The Iron and Wine track creates a single textural block in the centre of the soundbox from the guitar and vocals and leaves a far greater space around the central elements which is occasionally populated with paramusical, atmospheric sounds. This helps to create the perception of a single performer isolated within a larger space. When the guitar arrives at the end of the song, it joins the same central location and textural block.

Appendix D: Phonographic Staging Effects

(Lacasse 2010)

Section	Lyrics	Phonographic Staging Effects (The Postal Service)	Phonographic Staging Effects (Iron and Wine)
Verse 1	I am thinking it's a sign That the freckles in our eyes Are mirror images and when We kiss they're perfectly aligned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short reverb • Panned half left • Positioned in a personal proxemic zone (Moore et al 2011, p.102) - see notes below for more detail • Use of equalisation to reduce lower vocal frequencies • Audible, but not prominent, inward breathing between lines • Delivered with clear sense of pulse and rhythm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small space • Placed centrally • Positioned in an intimate proxemic space (Moore et al 2001, p.102) • Very clear presence of paralinguistic alternants (Lacasse 2010, pp.228-30) - inward breaths, sounds of moistness in the mouth • Soft and gentle vocal delivery with breathy quality • Delivered with relaxed timing
Verse 2	And I have to speculate That God himself did make Us into corresponding shapes Like puzzle pieces from the clay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As above but panned half right 	
Verse 3	And true, it may seem like a stretch, But its thoughts like this that catch My troubled head when you're away When I am missing you to death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As verse 1 	
Verse 4	When you are out there on the road For several weeks of shows And when you scan the radio, I hope this song will guide you home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As verse 2 	
Chorus	They will see us waving from such great heights, "Come down now," they'll say But everything looks perfect from far away, "Come down now," but we'll stay...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • stereo widening of main vocal through possible double tracking effect • addition of female backing vocal 	
Verse 5	I tried my best to leave This all on your machine But the persistent beat it sounded thin Upon listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As verse 1 	
Verse 6	And that frankly will not fly. You will hear the shrillest highs And lowest lows with the windows down When this is guiding you home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As verse 2 	
Chorus	They will see us waving from such great heights, "Come down now," they'll say But everything looks perfect from far away, "Come down now," but we'll stay...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • as previous chorus 	
Chorus	They will see us waving from such great heights, "Come down now," they'll say But everything looks perfect from far away, "Come down now," but we'll stay...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • as previous chorus 	
Outro	They will see us waving from such great heights, "Come down now," They will see us waving from such great heights, "Come down now,"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • single vocal located centrally in the stereo space • vocal placed further back in the mix • widening of the vocal for first "come down now" • single echo repeat of first "come down now" • second "come down now" sung by female backing vocal 	

Notes:

In the Postal Service track it is difficult to identify the exact proxemic space in which the vocal is placed due to its movement within the environment and the way that the widening of the chorus vocal seems to create a sense of being surrounded in the vocal performance as a “spread image” rather than being positioned clearly as a “point source” within the stereo image (Moylan 2013, p. 51). We do not hear all the clear articulatory sounds of the intimate vocal of the Iron and Wine track, only the intake of breath between lines. Also, we do not feel pushed back to a social or public distance (Moore et al 2011, pp.102-3) by the lyrical content or the setting back of the vocal in to its environment. Rather, the vocal appears most likely within the personal proxemic space: always within touching distance, even if its location within the stereo space changes.