



Almost Spring



Ah, spring! And speaking of spring, one common spring-shape is the helix. Often I picture a song as a helix. A helix is that geometrical figure formed when you wrap a wire around and around a cylinder. Think of a screen door spring, or a vine growing up around a broomstick. There are special helices (that's the plural) like the *conical helix* and the famous *double helix* of DNA, but today I'm talking about a regular helix, like a slinky, or like the coil spring pictured above.

So imagine a helix of maybe a dozen coils. But make it a psychedelic helix, with each coil a different bright color. Now paint a band of deep black, the width of a fifth of the helix's circumference, all the way down the helix's side, so that each colored coil begins and ends at the black band. In other words, if you were to slide along and around the coil from top to bottom, your trip would take you over red, then black, then blue, then black again, then yellow, then black again, etc.

That's the way I often picture a song. In my mind's eye, each coil equals one verse of a song, with its unique color representing a slightly different sub-theme, and its black section representing the repeating chorus (which is why it's the same — black — for every coil).

Now, take four different colors of transparent pastel paint, and paint four narrow stripes down the sides of the cylinder, equally spaced within the non-black area. On each coil, these bands would represent words in each verse that rhyme in one way or another. The paint is transparent, so the transparently painted areas on each coil are similar to those of its neighbor coils, but different because the bright colors of each coil show through the transparent stripes. This indicates that the rhyming words

occur at the same spot in each coil, but are different words.

So each uniquely colored coil has four tinted stripes equally spaced, representing its rhymes, and one black area, representing its chorus. You could also draw an appropriate number of equally spaced lines down the coil, each line representing a syllable. This way, each coil — each verse — would be shown to have the same number of syllables, as is often the case.

And so forth; the variations of this helical analogy are endless. And maybe pointless, too. I have no idea if other people form geometric pictures in their mind of such things as songs, but I find it helpful, because it gives me a grasp of the thing as a whole. Not only that, it seems to happen whether I consciously plan to think of such a structure or not. The helix figure also shows up on my brainboard when I think about other varying but basically cyclical concepts. A twelve-coil helix would make a great model of a year, with each coil being a month, each month a bright but different color. Four bands of transparent color going the length of the helix would represent weeks, and seven lines in each transparent band would be days of the week. With a really big helix and a sharp Sharpie I suppose you could do 24 hour stripes in every day, sixty minute lines in every hour, and so forth, until your trifocals ran out of gasoline.

Of course, for things to line up properly in the year-helix, you have to pretend that all months are of an equal number of days, which, for heaven's sake, they should be. How did months ever develop with slightly different numbers of days? What if each hour of any given day had differing numbers of minutes? From eight to nine AM, fifty-eight minutes; from one to two in the afternoon, sixty-three minutes, etc. A day-helix would look like a drunken tornado. Now, if all months had 28 days, thirteen of them would equal a nice 364 days, leaving only one day dangling. But this idea was abandoned by the same sort of committee that dreamed up the incomprehensible logic of daylight savings time, which is like helping the farmers by making drought illegal.

But back to the helix. What I really intended to talk about was how the multicolored and striped helix represents visually how, in a song, things work so well because they are ALMOST the same in each verse, but not exactly. When you think about it, that's what makes a rhyme: two words that have ALMOST the same sound. If they're the same word, it's not a rhyme. If they're NOT ALMOST the same word, it's not a rhyme. If two verses have all identical words, the song doesn't work, and if the verses have too dissimilar a structure, it doesn't work either. In many ways, the verses have to be ALMOST the same.

The more I look at this crazy helix, the more I think that ALMOST is one of the big fat secrets of not only songwriting, but of life itself; maybe somehow we're lucky that months are ALMOST the same length. After all, the mutations that make natural selection — and therefore, evolution — possible are nothing but reproductions that are ALMOST the same. When shooting astronauts to the moon, the only way they could do it was aim ALMOST for the moon, so they could settle into a nice loop around it. An impressionist painting is ALMOST a reproduction of a scene; if it were an exact representation (photo-realistic), it wouldn't be as wonderful (according to me). Rembrandt, Van Gogh, Satchmo, Janis Joplin, Leadbelly, Mother Nature: masters of the ALMOST.

A banded multicolored helix of a normal week, at one coil per day, would represent nicely the ALMOSTS of the situation. Wake up groggy, shower long, put on blue togs, eat Cheerios, bus to work, walk home, eat pizza, watch Big Bang theory, go to bed. Next day, wake up perky, shower fast, put on green togs, eat cold pizza, bike to work, bike home, eat tacos, watch CSI: Cleveland, go to bed. The pizzazz is in the ALMOSTNESS of days. Like someone said, "History doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes." It ALMOST repeats itself.

That quote has been attributed to Mark Twain, by the way, but apparently it doesn't appear in his writings. Maybe he said something ALMOST like that.