

Can the Circle Be Unbroken (1935)

The Carter Family

LISTEN FOR

- Hallmarks of country music
 - Guitar-oriented texture
 - Folk-like melody with southern white diction
 - Gospel qualities (confessional lyrics, vocal harmonization)
- 2/4 meter with “dropped” beats in verses (m. 12) and choruses (mm. 4, 12)

CREATION

Songwriters A. P. Carter (music, lyrics)

Label, Record Columbia 37669

Musicians Maybelle Carter (vocals), Sara Carter (vocals), A. P. Carter (vocals) ; acoustic guitar

Recording August 1935; mono

MUSIC

Genre Country, folk

Form Simple verse-chorus

Key A-flat major

Meter 2/4, with dropped beats

LISTENING GUIDE

Time	Form	Lyric Cue	Listen For
0:00	Intro (3)		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Guitar accompaniment
0:06	Verse 1 (16)	“I was standin’”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Solo vocal• Dropped beat in m. 12
0:26	Chorus (16)	“Can the circle be unbroken”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Choral vocal• Dropped beat in mm. 4 and 12
0:44	Instr. verse (16)		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Guitar solo• No dropped beat

Time	Form	Lyric Cue	Listen For
1:04	Verse 2 (16)	"I told the undertaker"	• Solo vocal
1:23	Chorus (16)	"Can the circle be unbroken"	• Choral vocal
1:41	Verse 3 (16)	"I followed close behind her"	• Solo vocal
2:00	Chorus (16)	"Can the circle be unbroken"	• Choral vocal
2:18	Instr. verse (8)		• Partial statement of verse
2:28	Verse 4 (16)	"Went back home, Lord"	• Solo vocal
2:47	Chorus (16)	"Can the circle be unbroken"	• Choral vocal

LYRICS

I was standing by the window
On one cold and cloudy day
And I saw the hearse come rolling
For to carry my mother away

I followed close beside her
Tried to hold up and be brave
But I could not hide my sorrow
When they laid her in the grave

Can the circle be unbroken
Bye and bye, Lord, bye and bye
There's a better home a-waiting
In the sky, Lord, in the sky

Went back home
Lord my home was lonesome
All my brothers sisters crying
What a home so sad and lone

Lord, I told the undertaker
Undertaker, please drive slow
For this body you are hauling
How I hate to see her go

SOURCES

- John Covach and Andrew Flory, *What's That Sound?* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), 17.
- http://www.lyricsmania.com/can_the_circle_be_unbroken_lyrics_carter_family.html