

Level 1 – Song Basics

Listen to the song all the way through and don't worry about focusing on the fine details at first. Just listen out for...

- Meter
 - Does feel like a simple 4/4 rhythm or are there some odd numbers in other sections?
Don't worry about counting length of sections yet!
- Tempo
 - Slow, medium or fast...does the tempo change in parts?
- Genre (Rock/Blues/Jazz/Pop etc.)
 - Can the song be defined? Don't worry if not but have a rough idea what style of music it is.
- Feel (Swung/Straight)
 - Are we going to be playing in triplets or playing any kind of shuffled rhythms?
- Drum layers
 - Are there percussion effects in background or electronic drum parts that you can ignore or even try to replicate?

Level 2 – Song Structure

Next, have multiple listens to the song with pauses and rewinds as required. Download the song and use something like VLC player so that you can also slow down the music as and when required.

- Find a counting system that works for the whole song, or each part, so that you can define how long a bar or counted measure is going to be. If you are not counting then listen for repeating melodies and phrases and count those melodic parts instead.
- Using the counting system you have chosen, notate how long each verse, chorus or bridge is. You might just list it as Verse, Verse, Chorus, Bridge, Verse etc. and not worry about the number of bars as the song melody makes this obvious.
- Are there stops and starts or parts where you don't play?
- Are there band stabs that you play with the rest of the band?
- Are there sections that change from heavy to light or the other way round?
- When do the drums come in? How does the song end and how do the drums end it? Maybe the band slows down over the last few bars or there is some drum solo ending?

Level 3 – Tips & Advice

Before diving into the finer details of the drum parts, consider these points and helpful tips...

- What level of skill are you? If you are new or beginner then just work on the main grooves and fills for each section and do not worry about all of the subtleties. You can add more parts to your performance over time....ghost notes, extra limbs, more bass drum notes etc.
- Notate using paper or notation software if possible, but if you can't then try to record each of the main drum parts. Try to do this anyway as it's a superb learning tool. It doesn't have to be good quality and can just be on a camera phone for example.
 - Does the part you are replicating sound like the recording? You might be surprised to hear differences and this can help you in working out what you are missing.
 - Hearing yourself back will also tell you what parts you need to work on and perhaps even which parts you need to simplify depending on your level of skill.
- Have a pair of sticks and a practice pad near the computer or device you are listening on so that you can quickly try out ideas as you work them out. Does it sound like the drum parts on the song? As you try to play a lick you might discover that the drum part was played

another way instead.

- Go on line (YouTube) and look for as many videos of the original drummer performing the song live as possible. Also look for any isolated drum tracks. You can't always trust the music video either as they are sometimes cut together in different orders by non drumming video editors!
 - You can use these videos to double check sections you have down or parts that you are stuck on. This can also give you ideas as to the stickings used by the drummer. You might even see the drummer perform something that you didn't hear on the original recording!
 - Be careful though, some drummers change their performance live and some isolated drum tracks are just programmed drums or performed by someone else, and not the original drummer.
 - You can also search for drummers performing drum covers of the song. This can give you ideas as to what other players think is being played. But be careful as the vast majority change the original drum parts to suit their own playing.
 - If you are really stuck then you can also search online for drum lessons and/or drum notation/tab for the song. This can be very helpful to see whether your interpretation matches up with other teachers and transcribers. Again, be very careful though as you might not know the skill level of the teacher/transcriber involved. Each teacher usually has their own interpretation of a song and so lessons can vary quite a bit. At the end of the day, all you can do is go with your gut instincts as to which you think to be the most accurate.

Level 4 – Details (Drum Beats)

- What is the right hand doing?
 - Is the drummer playing on the Hi-Hat, Ride cymbal or floor Tom for example? Is the Hi-Hat being played open or loose? Is the drummer washing on the Ride cymbal or near the bell? Is the drummer stepping on the Hi-Hat during Ride cymbal sections?
- Is the Snare drum playing a steady backbeat?
 - What is the repeating snare drum pattern? Is it every bar or over a few bars?
- Are there any ghost notes? You might choose to ignore these?
- What is the bass drum doing?
 - Is it following the bass guitar? It might be playing an independent pattern. Try to learn the bass drum part by singing the melody it follows if possible.
- Is it a one bar groove or over multiple bars?
 - The main drum groove might repeat over two, four or even 8 bars. Each bar might be exactly the same except for the last bar of each repeating section, so take note of the structure and length of the groove.
- If you are finding the right hand part too much then you can half the number of notes. For example, you could move from eighth notes to quarter notes on the hi-hat if required.
- If the main groove features too many bass drum notes then you could simplify. Decide which part of the bass drum melody is the most important and then remove some of the other notes.

Level 5 – Details (Drum Fills)

- Are there repeating fill ideas?
 - If there are then you will want to replicate these as closely as possible. If they are improvised or random sounding then you might choose to not even worry about replicating them. Play your own fills instead.

- How many toms does the drummer use?
 - If they use more Toms than you do, then you will need to simplify the fills. Usually just take out some of the toms used.
- Is the Bass drum or Hi-Hat foot played underneath the fills?
 - You might choose to ignore these extra parts. If the bass drum is part of the drum fill then you could replicate this using a low or floor tom instead.
- Dynamics and use of ghost notes?
 - Are the fills being used to build up or build down in intensity or volume when moving from one section to another? Do you hear any ghost notes, usually played on the snare drum? You might choose to just skip over these and leave gaps instead.

Level 6 – Finalising

- Now it's time to have a jam to the song. The first time through though, do not worry about making mistakes...you're just getting the feel for it. You are not performing! You can go back and practice specific parts later.
- Correct your notes if you notice mistakes in the song structure etc. You do not need to be counting whilst playing. You can just have a gut feel for the length of sections. If you know the song really well then you might not even need to worry about the structure at all.
- Make additional notes for parts that keep catching you out. Perhaps emphasise on your notes certain sections that you keep failing on. For example, a certain break in the song that you keep playing though.
- Practice how to recover from making mistakes...don't stop if you forget a drum fill, or go into a section late or early. Learning to recover from your mistakes and play on is a very useful skill. You can always, and should, go back and practice specific parts in isolation after playing the whole song.
- Saying that though, feel free after a few jams to stop and repeat parts that keep catching you out. If it is only a specific lick or beat you are messing up on, then isolate and practice just that specific part without the music at first.
- If certain drum parts are beyond your playing then change them to something simpler that you can play instead. Something sounding similar if possible, but don't keep playing something badly if you really can't get it.
 - As a drummer it's much easier for us to “get away” with playing our own parts to a song. If the beats and fills are not that iconic or essential to the song, or are not repeated at least once, then you can decide to change the parts to something easier instead.
 - If you do decide to change the drum parts though, then keep them simple. Do not try to play a completely different sounding lick or groove as this will really stand out and pull away from the original drummer's performance. If you're really not sure what to play instead, then just keep the new lick or beat simple and straightforward and you won't go wrong.
- Finally, try to record yourself playing the whole song from start to finish as accurately as possible. Just the act of watching yourself back is a very effective way to learn parts and structure to a song. You might find that after a few play backs you don't even need your original notes any more.