

Master Class

By Richard Best



How to Learn a Tune

AFTER MANY JOYFUL HOURS of practicing polyrhythms, mastering linear beats and honing your soloing chops, you may at some point be required to play actual music. I find that many drummers know a lot of tunes, but don't really know how the tunes work. And the more abstract and convoluted the tune, the more important it is to analyse and master the way the tune is put together.

It's not enough to be interested in a tune, or to have a pretty good idea of what it's about. Tunes have specific components, all of which you should know (within reason — see below). To learn a new tune, tear it apart, learn it, devour it, own it. And it's not a lot of work. Begin by finding the downbeat. Count beats and bars to find out the time signature and to determine the basic form (I often use my fingers to do this). Is it a blues? Then it's 12 bars long in three 4-bar phrases. Something else? Just count. You don't have to read music to count beats and bars and to identify patterns. And take notes!

Tunes are built using rhythm, melody, harmony, and structure. The biggest help here is the melody, since most tunes are mostly melody. The melody will outline the phrasing and structure for you. The various parts will always be the same, so all you need to figure out is how long and in what order the sections appear. Also listen for familiar patterns: bass lines, chord changes, phrasing, and turn-arounds ... whatever can help you navigate and learn a tune. Pop tunes, for example will usually have a verse, a chorus and perhaps a bridge, e.g. the structure V, C, V, C, B, V, C, C is quite common.

Contemporary western music is also built on harmony. Most of the time this simply means chords, and understanding chords will give you access to the fundamental flow of the time. When there is no melody to fall back on, during a solo for example, the chords will still be there, continually mapping your course through the tune. If you play a melodic and/or chording instrument, you may already have a good handle on harmony as well as melody and rhythm. But there is no need to learn another instrument. Helpful, yes, but many great drummers only knew how to play drums and how to listen, and you don't need to know another instrument to do this. But you do need to master the tune. You need to know the melody well enough to sing it (and if you're a non-singer, nobody needs to hear your attempts). You need to know the structure: how many bars are in each phrase and section, and how the sections are arranged.

If sheet music helps, get hold of a copy. Lead sheets summarize the whole tune, often on a single page. Then go ahead and make notes on the sheet music, in a notebook or on file cards, or create your own personalized lead sheet.

BTW, don't spend a lot of time reviewing tunes you know. You already know them. Move on to something new.