



What A Mess!

Imagine that you are at a show you've really been looking forward to. You get very excited as the lights dim and you hear the guitar rip out a giant power chord. The bass guitar begins playing a great groove and the keyboard introduces a melody. Suddenly you realize that something isn't right. As you sit trying to figure out what's wrong, the singer begins singing but now things are even worse! The instruments seem to be playing on top of each other, with no real organization and it sounds like a giant train wreck!

This is what music would be like without a "beat" to keep everything in order. Luckily, to prevent this, musicians learn to all follow the same "beat" as a guide to keep them playing together properly.

Following The Beat

All music has a "pulse" or beat that the musicians are following together. The drummer's job is to communicate that beat to the band and to the listener. The drums are played on top of this "pulse." Whenever you listen to music and you find yourself bobbing your head or tapping your foot, you have found the beat.

If you've ever seen an orchestra play, they don't typically have a standard drum kit playing to keep them all together. Instead, there is a conductor who is aware of the pulse/beat and is leading the orchestra by using hand motions to indicate where the beat is.

Where is the Beat?

Think of a car driving along a road. If you were sitting in the grass, you'd probably only see the car, but yet the car indicates that there is a road there. It works the same way with the drums and the beat. Just like the car shows where the road is, the drum beat shows where the pulse/count is.

Sometimes the beat may only exist in your head, unless you are playing along with a metronome (click), but as you play, the other musicians will join in. This is also why you will hear a drummer "count-in" a song before everyone starts playing by saying, "1.... 2.... 1, 2, 3, 4." In doing this, everyone knows exactly where the beat will start.

Wait, You're Gonna Need These

Before we can play any beat, we need to find out 2 important things:

The Count - What count should we follow as we play the beat?

Tempo - How fast or slow should we play the beat?



The "COUNT" is basically what gives us our entire frame of reference as we play. Every musician in a band, orchestra, etc., is following the exact same count at the exact same time. That is how music sounds orderly and pleasant. Most popular music uses a 4-count, and that is what we will be focusing on for a while. Just be aware that there are other counts used, like a 6-count.

How Do I Find the Count?

Without getting into too much music theory, it is important to know that each piece of music has something called a TIME SIGNATURE that lets us know how many beats there will be in each measure. This is how we know what the COUNT will be for the song.



A time signature looks like this. The number on top tells us our count. This is a time signature for 4/4 time.

4/4 Time (4-Count)

To get started, we will be using the most common time signature, 4/4. In 4/4 time, there are 4 beats per measure, which means we will use a 4-count, "1, 2, 3, 4." Each time we count to 4 like this, it is called a **MEASURE**.

What is a Measure?

Measures are a way to communicate how long something will be played in music. For example, it is common to say that we will be playing something for 8 measures. The time signature tells us how many beats (counts) will be in each measure.

In a 4-count, "1, 2, 3, 4," = 1 measure

The Count Is Our Map

I find it helpful to use the count almost like a map that can help you learn where to hit certain drums. For example, in a 4-count song, the kick drum often hits on counts "1" & "3" and the snare often hits on counts "2" & "4." When I have to figure out a difficult drum part, I try to find out where drum hits are happening in relation to the count of the song.

Now that you know what the count is, let's take a look at what determines how fast or slow you will play your beat.



Should I Play Fast or Slow?

The speed that the song is played at is called the TEMPO. The tempo of a song will be indicated on the sheet music, chord chart or may even be told to you by other musicians. If you are playing by yourself, you can choose whatever tempo you'd like.

How Is Tempo Displayed?

A lot of the time, the tempo will be shown as BPM, which stands for "Beats Per Minute" and is a numerical value that can be set on a metronome. Tempo may also be displayed as a quarter note. For example, if you see (quarter note = 75, or BPM = 75), set the metronome to 75 bpm. Each click you hear represents a quarter note and with each click, count along, "1, 2, 3, 4."

If using sheet music, certain words will be shown throughout the music that indicate a faster or slower tempo, though I won't be covering that in this course.

Keep It Steady

Once you have a tempo to play at, begin to count it out to yourself ("1, 2, 3, 4"). Once you have the count established, you can begin playing. Just remember that your goal is to try and maintain a steady tempo without speeding up or slowing down. With training and practice, this will get easier.

What Is A Metronome?

A metronome is a device that helps musicians play at an even pace by producing a steady, repeating click, at a set tempo. The speed of the click is indicated in BPM (beats per minute) and can be adjusted to any speed, fast or slow.

The metronome's default setting for the click is usually a quarter note. However, you can choose other intervals / subdivisions you want the "click" to play at, if needed.

A metronome will help you learn to keep a consistent tempo so that you don't speed up or slow down as you are playing. No musician wants to play with a drummer who can't play at an even tempo.

Metronomes can easily be found in music stores, online or through apps for your devices. While most apps are free, some offer a few extra "bells and whistles" for only a few dollars – and are usually worth it!