MUSIC THEORY FOR SONGWRITERS
A 5-PART COURSE

LESSON 4: RHYTHM
time signatures + subdivisions

Welcome to Lesson 4, and congrats on making it this far!

Today we’re going to be going over rhythm. We’re actually not going to be going over music-reading concepts like quarter notes and rests.

Since you’re probably not reading or notating your music as a songwriter, it's more important for you to understand where your rhythms fall in the measure than to know all the technical terms for note values and music notation.

1. THE BEAT

The beat is the steady pulse in music. It's can be fast or slow, depending on the song, but it is usually consistent throughout the whole song. The beat is measured in "beats per minute" or bpm. The faster the beat, the higher the bpm.

2. THE MEASURE

Measures are groups of beats. Dividing beats into measures makes it WAY easier to count and keep track of time, otherwise we’d end up counting to 3,000 for every song. Instead, we re-start the counting at the beginning of each measure.

3. SIMPLE TIME SIGNATURES

A time signature tells you how many beats are in a measure. There are two different types: simple and compound. We’ll start with simple:
2/4 - two beats in each measure. You'd count, "1, 2, 1, 2, 1, 2..."

3/4 - three beats in each measure. You'd count, "1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3..."

4/4 - four beats in each measure. You'd count, "1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4..."

5/4 - five beats in each measure. You'd count, "1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 1, 2, 3,..."

So a simple time signature always has a 4 on the bottom and the top number tells you how many beats are in each measure.

NOTE: These numbers actually aren't fractions even though they look like it. In normal music, they are directly on top of each other with no slash. To say them out loud, you'd say "three four time" or "five four time"

4. COMPOUND TIME SIGNATURES

Compound time signatures are a way to dive the beat into three. Since each beat has three parts, you have to think in multiples of three to find the number of triplet-beats.

6/8 - two beats in each measure. (1 & a, 2 & a, 1 & a, 2 & a..)

9/8 - three beats in each measure. (1 & a, 2 & a, 3 & a...)

12/8 - four beats in each measure. (1 & a, 2 & a, 3 & a, 4 & a...)

Compound time signatures are a little more confusing, but all you have to do is divide the top number by 3 to find the number of beats. Then just remember each beat is divided into three mini-beats, which we count with.. "[beat number] & a,"

5. BEAT DIVISIONS

We've already talked about how to divide the beat into three parts in compound time signatures, but what about in simple time signatures?

Let's say we're in 4/4 time. If we want to divide each beat in half, we would count,

"1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & , 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & "
Now what if there’s some super-fast stuff happening in the song and we want to divide it further?

"1 e & a 2 e & a 3 e & a 4 e & a"

(to get technical, you pronounce e "ee" and a "uh")

So practice saying this:

[slowly] 1, 2, 3, 4

[twice as fast] 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &

[twice as fast as that] 1 e & a 2 e & a 3 e & a 4 e & a

6. MELODIC RHYTHM

Now here’s where it gets hard. The melody/vocal line of a lot of pop music is pretty complex. Most songs aren’t going to have simple melodies where all the words line up perfectly on beat 1, 2, 3, or 4. They’ll be on the &'s and the a’s and the most unexpected places.

This is called syncopation: when words fall on unexpected beats, NOT the beats that would normally be emphasized (1 or 3).-
Lesson 4 Challenges

Time to take action!

- Pick a pop song. Figure out the time signature, then write out the beat divisions on a sheet of paper. Pick a line from that song and write out the words underneath the beat divisions where they land.

- Double check yourself - often a word will SOUND like it's on a beat, but when you listen closer it's actually on the "a" right BEFORE the beat. Pop music is deceptive like that - the rhythms sounds so simple, but so often they're not.

- One you've done it on paper, try doing it in your head - take note of where the words fall within the beat and try to notice syncopation as you're listening to music. If you hear a catchy rhythm, take a second to analyze it!

- Try doing this with one of your own songs. The more you do this, the more you'll start to notice patterns in your own writing and that awareness of where you are in the measure will start to become second nature to you.