LISTEN LIKE A DRUMMER

AN ESSENTIAL LISTENING GUIDE • INITIAL GRADE TO GRADE 8

Music is the best drum teacher.

These are suggested listening steps, not exam pieces or songs you must be able to play. Enjoy the full recording first. Then come back and pay attention to the drums.

1

FEEL THE PULSE

Tap along. Where are the strong beats, and where is the backbeat?

2

FOLLOW THE BASS

Listen for the partnership between bass drum, bass guitar and percussion.

3

NOTICE THE CHOICES

What changes in a verse, chorus, solo or ending? What stays steady?

4

ASK WHY

How does the drummer help the song, the singer or the soloist?

A ten-minute listening challenge

Choose one track. Listen once for pleasure, once while tapping the beat, and once to follow a single drum or percussion sound. Tell someone one thing you noticed.

Explore widely.

Rock and pop are only part of the story. Jazz, funk, reggae, bossa nova, salsa, Afrobeat and fusion offer different ways of making people move.

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THE GRADE START

INITIAL AND GRADES 1–2 • THREE RECORDINGS AT EACH LEVEL

INITIAL — Find the pulse

Queen — “We Will Rock You”
stomps & claps · rock
Copy the two stomps and clap; notice that a great rhythm needs no kit.

Bob Marley & The Wailers — “Three Little Birds”
Carlton Barrett · reggae
Feel where the bass drum lands; leave space for the song.

AC/DC — “Back in Black”
Phil Rudd · rock
Hear how steady the backbeat stays while the band changes around it.

GRADE 1 — Hear the song shape

Michael Jackson — “Billie Jean”
Ndugu Chancler · pop
Follow the unchanging groove; hear small accents rather than big fills.

The White Stripes — “Seven Nation Army”
Meg White · rock
Find the entrance, the backbeat and the lift into each chorus.

The Beatles — “Come Together”
Ringo Starr · rock
Listen to the toms: the drum part answers the vocal and bass.

GRADE 2 — Compare different feels

Stevie Wonder — “Superstition”
Stevie Wonder · funk
Feel the lilt in the sixteenth notes; the groove is not rigid.

The Police — “Walking on the Moon”
Stewart Copeland · reggae-influenced rock
Count the gaps; listen to hi-hat colour and the space between notes.

Santana — “Oye Como Va”
Michael Shrieve + percussion · Latin rock
Find the kit within the larger percussion conversation.

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Listening level is a doorway, not a playing requirement.

THE GRADE PATH

GRADES 3–5 • THREE RECORDINGS AT EACH LEVEL

GRADE 3 — Find the detail

The Meters — “Cissy Strut”
Zigaboo Modeliste · New Orleans funk
Sing the bass line, then hear how kick and snare answer it.

Getz / Gilberto — “The Girl from Ipanema”
Milton Banana · bossa nova
Hear the delicate kit pulse beneath the guitar and voice.

The Dave Brubeck Quartet — “Take Five”
Joe Morello · jazz, 5/4
Count five beats as 3 + 2; notice how calm the ride stays.

GRADE 4 — Listen between the beats

James Brown — “Funky Drummer”
Clyde Stubblefield · funk
Spot the ghost notes and the famous break; why does it dance?

Art Blakey & The Jazz Messengers — “Moanin’”
Art Blakey · hard bop
Hear the ride cymbal and the band’s call-and-response.

Fela Kuti & Africa ’70 — “Water No Get Enemy”
Tony Allen · Afrobeat
Follow one instrument at a time inside the layered groove.

GRADE 5 — Notice the choices

Paul Simon — “50 Ways to Leave Your Lover”
Steve Gadd · pop / jazz influence
Hear the memorable intro: how do its hands and feet interact?

Herbie Hancock — “Chameleon”
Harvey Mason · jazz-funk
Focus on the pocket with bass; hear the groove evolve slowly.

Tito Puente — “Oye Cómo Va”
Tito Puente · cha-cha-chá / timbales
Compare this version with Santana’s: what changes, what stays?

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THE GRADE PATH

GRADES 6–8 • THREE RECORDINGS AT EACH LEVEL

GRADE 6 — Feel versus complexity

Toto — “Rosanna”
Jeff Porcaro · half-time shuffle
Listen for triplet subdivisions and soft ghost notes.

Miles Davis — “So What”
Jimmy Cobb · modal jazz
Hear the ride cymbal settle under the soloists; notice restraint.

Santana — “Soul Sacrifice” (Woodstock)
Michael Shrieve + percussion · Latin rock
Follow how the live drum solo grows and rejoins the band.

GRADE 7 — Listen to interaction

Led Zeppelin — “Fool in the Rain”
John Bonham · rock shuffle
Compare its feel with “Rosanna”; focus on the hi-hat openings.

John Coltrane — “A Love Supreme, Pt. I”
Elvin Jones · jazz
Hear rolling triplets and conversation with the bass.

Herbie Hancock — “Actual Proof” (*Thrust*)
Mike Clark · fusion
Try to locate the pulse beneath dense syncopation.

GRADE 8 — Listen beyond the groove

Rush — “Tom Sawyer”
Neil Peart · progressive rock
Track the changing sections and how fills signal them.

Miles Davis — “Nefertiti”
Tony Williams · modern jazz
Hear how the drums develop while the horns repeat the theme.

Snarky Puppy — “Lingus”
Larnell Lewis · modern fusion
Notice dynamics and how groove supports complex improvisation.

Listening level is a doorway, not a playing requirement.

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THE ALBUM SHELF

ROCK • SOUL • FUNK • REGGAE • AFROBEAT

Hear the whole album when you can.

Start with the named track, then hear what the drummer does in different songs.

The Beatles — Abbey Road
1969 · rock
Start: “Come Together” — Ringo makes the kit sing.

Stevie Wonder — Talking Book
1972 · soul / funk
Start: “Superstition” — listen to the drum feel.

Bob Marley & The Wailers — Exodus
1977 · reggae
Start: “Three Little Birds” — Carlton Barrett’s space.

The Meters — The Meters
1969 · New Orleans funk
Start: “Cissy Strut” — tiny accents matter.

James Brown — In the Jungle Groove
1986 compilation · funk
Start: “Funky Drummer” — Clyde Stubblefield’s break.

Led Zeppelin — Led Zeppelin IV
1971 · rock
Start: “When the Levee Breaks” — Bonham’s sound.

Santana — Abraxas
1970 · Latin rock
Start: “Oye Como Va” — kit and percussion together.

Toto — Toto IV
1982 · pop / rock
Start: “Rosanna” — the half-time shuffle.

Nirvana — Nevermind
1991 · rock
Start: “Smells Like Teen Spirit” — energy and structure.

Fela Kuti & Africa ’70 — Expensive Shit
1975 · Afrobeat
Start: “Water No Get Enemy” — Tony Allen’s layers.

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THE ALBUM SHELF

JAZZ • BOSSA NOVA • MAMBO • SALSA • FUSION

Hear the whole album when you can.

Start with the named track, then hear what the drummer does in different songs.

Miles Davis — Kind of Blue
1959 · modal jazz
Start: “So What” — Jimmy Cobb’s patient swing.

The Dave Brubeck Quartet — Time Out
1959 · jazz
Start: “Take Five” — Joe Morello in five.

Art Blakey & The Jazz Messengers — Moanin’
1958 · hard bop
Start: “Moanin’” — Blakey drives the band.

John Coltrane — A Love Supreme
1965 · jazz
Start: “Acknowledgement” — Elvin Jones’s motion.

Stan Getz & João Gilberto — Getz / Gilberto
1964 · Brazilian bossa nova
Start: “The Girl from Ipanema” — Milton Banana’s touch.

Tito Puente — Dance Mania
1958 · mambo / Latin
Hear timbales, congas and bells as one ensemble.

Herbie Hancock — Head Hunters
1973 · jazz-funk
Start: “Chameleon” — Harvey Mason and Paul Jackson.

Herbie Hancock — Thrust
1974 · fusion
Start: “Actual Proof” — Mike Clark’s shifting accents.

Willie Colón & Rubén Blades — Siembra
1978 · salsa
Start: “Plástico” — listen for clave and percussion roles.

Snarky Puppy — We Like It Here
2014 · contemporary fusion
Start: “Lingus” — Larnell Lewis, live with the band.

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TEN DRUM MOMENTS

TRY TO RECOGNISE THE RHYTHM BEFORE THE REST OF THE BAND ENTERS

1. **Gene Krupa • “Sing, Sing, Sing” — Benny Goodman**
   A tom rhythm that helped bring drums to the front.

2. **Ringo Starr • “Come Together” — The Beatles**
   A musical opening made from space and descending toms.

3. **Joe Morello • “Take Five” — Dave Brubeck Quartet**
   Five beats that feel natural and an unforgettable solo.

4. **Zigaboo Modeliste • “Cissy Strut” — The Meters**
   New Orleans funk with wonderfully placed accents.

5. **Clyde Stubblefield • “Funky Drummer” — James Brown**
   The drum break that travelled through generations of hip-hop.

6. **Steve Gadd • “50 Ways to Leave Your Lover” — Paul Simon**
   An intro that tells you the song before the voice starts.

7. **Michael Shrieve • “Soul Sacrifice” — Santana at Woodstock**
   A young drummer building a live solo with the whole band.

8. **Jeff Porcaro • “Rosanna” — Toto**
   The half-time shuffle: layers, ghost notes and deep pocket.

9. **Tito Puente • “Oye Cómo Va” — Tito Puente**
   Timbales and cha-cha-chá: hear the rhythm section as a team.

10. **Tony Williams • “Nefertiti” — Miles Davis**
    The horn melody repeats while the drums tell a new story.

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LISTEN, NOTICE, TALK

A PRINTABLE PUPIL LISTENING PAGE

RECORDING 1

Artist and track:

Style and drummer / percussion:

Where did I feel the beat?

What did the drums change?

One thing I want to try:

RECORDING 2

Artist and track:

Style and drummer / percussion:

Where did I feel the beat?

What did the drums change?

One thing I want to try:

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Selected research and recording sources

- Trinity Rock & Pop Drums song lists
- ABRSM Drum Kit styles and grades
- Smithsonian Folkways: jazz anthology
- Smithsonian Folkways: Afro-Caribbean rhythms
- Blue Note, Fania, artist and label album notes