

How to Learn A Tune (for drummers)

1 - LISTEN TO THE TUNE MANY TIMES (on a daily basis). Get to know the melody, the form, intro, coda, etc. Get familiar with the big picture. Get to know the album you are listening to as well - who are the players, when was it recorded, etc. Absorb some jazz history while you are learning and listening to the music.

2 - When you feel ready, sing the melody along with the recording. Be as accurate as possible with the pitches and intervals, although more important are the rhythms, contours, and phrasing.

3 - When you are comfortable singing the tune with the recording, try singing the tune WITHOUT the recording. Record yourself doing so so you can check and see if you are accurate or not.

4 - When you are sure you can sing the melody accurately without the recording, play the rhythms / contours / phrases of the melody on the SNARE DRUM - while still singing.

5 - When you feel comfortable with this, begin voicing the melody around the drum set, always keeping in mind phrasing and contour. Make it recognizable! And keep singing!

5a - Think about the texture of the melody - you can play it in a staccato manner (all on drums), or a more 'legato' manner (incorporating the melody into ongoing ride cymbal time). Some combination of these will allow for your performance to have a sense of development. You can also take this opportunity to explore tone color - think bright, dark, thick, thin.... How many sounds can you get out of a cymbal? It is possible to imply an entire melody on just the ride cymbal if you take advantage of all the available colors (striking on different parts of the cymbal, striking at different angles, with different parts of the stick, etc).... Be creative!

6 - When you feel confident in your ability to state the melody on the drums, practice making variations to the melody. Fragment it into smaller motifs to use as solo material. Be able to improvise in and around the melody, over the song's form. When you can do this, you really know the tune and have the ability to be creative with the tune's materials.

7 - Perform the tune as a stand-alone drum set solo - play the intro (if there is one), state the head clearly, solo over the form (making an effort to relate your solo ideas in some way to the melody of the tune), and take the head out, with a tag or coda at the end. Treat this as a piece of music - not an exercise.