

Definitions for Musical Terms, Unit I

Backbeat: an emphasis on beats 2 and 4 usually articulated by the snare drum; a common syncopation in rock.

1 2 3 4 // 1 2 3 4

Bar or Measure: a cycle of beats articulated by an accent pattern that usually emphasizes the first beat (downbeat) of the cycle.

Beat(s): the temporally equidistant pulses that organize musical rhythm.

Break: dramatic change in the texture, usually an instrumental solo.

Bridge: contrasting or transitional section of music; section of music between (“bridging”) the verse and the chorus.

Chords: Three or more pitches sounding simultaneously or in close succession (arpeggio).

Chorus: a repeating section of both words and music; often including the title phrase and the most memorable portion of melody (melodic hook).

Clave: a 2-bar syncopated pattern that organizes most Afro-Caribbean music.

1 2 3 4 // 1 2 3 4
X X X X X

Fills: formal term describing the instrumental extensions of the melody line (guitar, drum, piano); fills “fill the place” of a vocal response; may be improvised or a riff.

Form: the road map of the song; the description of repeating and contrasting elements.

Groove: the rhythmic “feel” of a song created by the rhythmic patterns of the drums and bass guitar (and possibly other instruments) repeated throughout the song or a formal section of the song.

Hook: a phrase of music designed to be memorable; usually found in the chorus or refrain, but can also be the riff or bridge material. The memorable aspect is usually the melody, but could also be a rhythm, a chord progression, a certain texture, or some combination thereof.

Melody: a single line of music composed mostly from notes of a particular scale, and supported by chords.

Middle Eight: contrasting section of eight bars (see “bridge”), usually involves a change of key. In pop/rock: contrasting section to verse-bridge-chorus structure.

Phrase: a series of bars forming a musical “sentence”; usually four or eight bars long.

Refrain: short lyric and musical tag that may be repeated within or attached to the verse or bridge material.

Riff: descriptive term for short melodic or rhythmic phrase that is repeated at key moments, usually at the very beginning if songs, and at the ends of vocal phrases.

Shuffle Beat and Swung Beats: uneven subdivisions of the main pulse or beat; common in blues, r&b, and gospel.

Stop Time: a rhythmic device when the instrumental ensemble plays on the first beat of the bar (or the first beat every two bars) then stops playing while the vocal continues. It is a way to create a dramatic effect, or punctuate the vocal phrases.

Syncopation: rhythmic accents that are out of phase with the beat or emphasize a normally unaccented beat.

$$\begin{array}{cccc} \underline{1} & 2 & \underline{3} & 4 \\ & \text{X} & & \end{array} \quad // \quad \begin{array}{cccc} \underline{1} & 2 & \underline{3} & 4 \\ & \text{X} & & \end{array}$$

Texture: the number of musical forces and how they are deployed.

Timbre: the quality of a sound that distinguishes one source or type of sound from another (e.g. the voice from the guitar or a blues voice from a pop crooner voice).

Vamp: the indefinite repetition of a chord progression by accompanying players during solo or vocal improvisations.

Verse: the “story telling” section of music in which the words change with each repetition of the melody.