Chapter 3: Song Structure

I started to pay more attention to song structure when I was working for the Drummers for Jesus celebration and clinic as co-founder in 2003. In said event, I had the honor of being a drum tech for my drum hero Vinnie Colaiuta. It was amazing how much attention he gave to his charts and made notes of certain sections that had a different emphasis. In fact, I went back to all of his recordings with Sting and it became even clearer how well he emphasized a groove for certain sections and re-introduced them in choruses from an intro. I had a paradigm shift at that point. I watched one of the greatest drummers alive with some of the greatest chops ever play the simplest grooves and complete a song. It felt right. It was a turning point for me. In fact, I had a gig the very next day and implemented what I learned into my charts and memory. It has truly revolutionized my playing. So thanks Vinnie!

In many of these charts I have lots of scribble markings like "I" for Intro and "v1" for verse 1 and so on. This indicates the song structure. It's like getting directions to someone's house. It shows you the way to your destination - in this case, the end of the song. This music road map I am teaching will be very useful to you as a musician.

Let’s study the different parts of a song. I’ll give you my best examples of how I would play a particular section.

Intro - 4 bars
Verse1 - 8 bars
Pre-Chorus1 - 4 bars
Chorus - 8 bars
Turnaround - 4 bars
Verse2 - 8 bars
Pre-Chorus2 - 4 bars
Chorus2 - 8 bars
Bridge - 8 Bars
Down Chorus - 4 bars
Chorus3 - 8 bars
Outro - 4 bars

Below is a common way I play or think of a drum part for each part of a song.

Intros: Usually a song introduces itself with instruments only and no vocals. Sometimes a song starts with all instruments and sometimes with only an acoustic guitar. The intro of a song is typically your entrance to the song.

In an Intro, I like to let everyone know I am there and that I am about to lay down the groove of the song. And by that I usually play a nice and tasty fill to begin with, then establish a groove you will more than likely hear again in the chorus, turnarounds, and outro.

- **MP3 1: Intro Example (all MP3s are in the MP3 folder you downloaded)**

Verses: The verse of the song is the part where the vocals are first introduced. By most standards in music dynamics, a drummer will typically come down in volume or possibly drop out completely.

I am varying my groove a bit in a verse from the groove in the intro. I am almost always playing a closed high hat since a verse tends to be quieter in volume. There are many options you can do with the snare in the verse. **Try using a cross stick pattern on 2 and 4, or cross stick on 2 and snare on 4.** Maybe the verse is only keeping time with a hi-hat, or could also be just hi-hat and kick drum. It should be the best drum part to support the vocal. It's also the part that gives you room to be louder or to vary in a chorus.

- **MP3 2: Verse Example**

Pre-Choruses: This is an optional part of a song structure. Most songwriters use it to give listeners a preview of the coming chorus. When it does happen it will often be short and either dip in volume or slowly ramp up to a bigger chorus.

Since a pre-chorus is usually brief I will do a variation of whatever groove I have been doing in a verse. Sometimes it involves just opening my hat a bit more with a different kick pattern than the verse, leading to a tasty fill into the chorus. Or it might be a groove involving my toms with a building fill into the chorus.

- **MP3 3: PreChorus Example**

Chorus: The chorus or refrain means to repeat. The parts previously mentioned usually support it. A chorus might sound and feel a lot like the intro and may usually be louder than the other parts of the song. It usually is the only part of a song that's repeated.

In a chorus I like to build upon the part I have already used in the intro. If there is not a drum part in the intro then I will build upon a drum part I have used in a verse. **More than likely I will be louder and more aggressive with a groove pattern.** If my intro pattern was a 4 on the floor groove then I will more than likely use the same pattern and only vary a little. Sometimes a chorus is nothing but cymbal swells along with keeping time on a ride cymbal for a softer and more dramatic song. But more than likely I will be at my loudest in a chorus.

MP3 4: Chorus Example

Turnarounds: Sometimes called a "connector" or "turn," a turnaround is also like the intro and a continuation of a chorus typically without vocals. In modern music it's usually instrumental, very brief, and is a bit of what I like to call a "lead in" to the next verse or a bridge. Just what it says, you are basically turning back around to the front of the song and going back into a verse. It's one of the most unnoticed parts of a song.

Turnarounds usually follow a chorus. I usually continue the same groove pattern I have been using in the chorus. Sometimes there is a stop at the end of the chorus before the turnaround or the chorus will seamlessly tie the two together. So I will usually be at the same intensity level that you heard in the previous MP3 example or I will be using a drum fill out of the chorus in a slower song to connect the chorus to the verse.

MP3 5: Turnaround Example

Bridges: The bridge of a song usually happens once and dynamically can be the loudest part of a song. It typically occurs after a second chorus. Sometimes called "The Payoff," it’s often where you are the loudest or making the song's point as much musically as you are lyrically. The bridge is a good prelude to how the rest of the song will be in volume. More than likely you will keep the same intensity from the bridge into the final chorus of the song.

I have an instinctual presupposition towards riding a crash cymbal or playing my high hats as open and as "sloshy" as possible for an up-tempo song in a bridge section. In my opinion, these are the loudest and most aggressive options on a drum kit. My groove might be the same from the chorus or it can vary to be more driving with snare hits on every quarter note. In a slower tempo song I will usually play open hi-hats with a single/duple kick pattern to compliment the rest of the band who might be playing driving eighth notes at this point. Whatever option I choose, I should be using a part of my drum kit that brings the dynamics to its loudest level to compliment what usually constitutes a bridge part in modern music.

- **MP3 6: Bridge Example**

Outros and Endings: The outro is like the intro, but differs in that you are more than likely going to be as loud as the bridge and final chorus. Sometimes it will be the mirror image of the intro and the turnarounds according to how the song is written. The outro is letting the listener knows that the song is about to end.

In an outro I usually keep the same characteristics of the groove in the final chorus. To really signal that we are "driving the song home" and leaving the chorus, I will often ride a crash cymbal, be washy on a ride cymbal, or play open hi-hats to the end of the song. I will end the song strong on a downbeat with a heavy cymbal crash on a downbeat. In some cases, I might go back to the same dynamics and groove from the intro and turnarounds if the song seems to be written in this manner. In a slower tempo song, I might drop out and play the song like I played it in the intro and end with a nice cymbal swell to signal the ending. Endings might gradually end slower than the tempo of the song, and this is called a *ritard*. At this point, I might play a nice tom fill that slows to the given pace of the tempo, gradually slowing down to a cymbal crash on a down beat. There are all types of endings that can be syncopated or come to a sudden stop. Whatever the song ending might be, I always play it with tasteful expression to accent the rest of the instruments ending the song. I want to always be in "sync" with the rest of the band on an ending.

- **MP3 7: Outro and Ending Example**