Groove Elements

by Mark Shelton

“There’s not a percussion chart for this song. Can you just listen and come up with something?”

A musician can hear those sentences at a rehearsal, recording session, or mere moments before a performance. You respond with a smile and a confident nod followed by your brain, ears, and hand connections snapping to full attention. With creative juices flowing, you open up the filing cabinet in your cranium and prepare to pull something from your repertoire of precooked percussion licks. One of those nuggets might fit the moment “as is,” or perhaps a couple of the stored rhythmic gems could be combined and altered to create something fresh.

You do have a collection of groove elements waiting in your hippocampus, right?

While playing hundreds of worship services plus countless commercial gigs as a freelance musician, I have accumulated a collection of go-to percussion patterns. The classical music term for these repeated rhythmic figures is ostinato. The notated rhythms in this article are among the most common ostinato patterns that I use when playing percussion in a worship band that includes a drum set player. Nothing fancy--just the typical (and uncomplicated) rhythms played by hand percussionists on hundreds of songs. Something as simple as a downbeat rhythm (Pattern #1) on a cowbell can be the desired ingredient to solidify a groove.

Although the rhythms are straightforward, executing some of the notated patterns on certain instruments require a bit of practice (especially with shaking technique on tambourine, maracas, and shakers). Try each ostinato on various instruments using a broad range of tempos and dynamics. (Number 6 is the exception. This pattern is notated for rhythm triangle.) Practice starting each pattern with a clean attack and ending with an appropriate release. Each numbered ostinato in 4/4 has a corresponding pattern in 12/8.

Groove elements such as these can be heard in a wide range of music including rock, jazz, country, and hip hop as well as CCM and modern worship music.

Learn all of these rhythms, experiment to create variations, and be ready to grab the right groove elements out of your mental filing cabinet to fit the musical moment.



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