



ELLEN O'REILLY

## WHAT TIME IS IT? ELLEN UPS THE TEMPO

**H**ey bass buddies! In this column I would like to discuss time signatures and tempo. As bass players we need to be aware of time keeping and tempos, as we are part of the rhythm section with the drums. After all, we bass players provide the foundation to the song and hold the melody to the rhythm: we act like musical glue!

Most contemporary songs tend to be in either 4/4 or 3/4 time, you will see this given as the time signature at the beginning of a written piece of music. The number on top (or to the left) represents how many beats there are in a bar, and the number on the bottom (or to the right) indicates what kind of note it is. So 4/4 has four beats in a bar, and each note is a quarter note or crotchet, hence the use of the number four to represent it. For 3/4 time, there are three beats in a bar and these notes are quarter notes. This time signature is commonly found in the waltz style of music.

Every song has a particular tempo or pulse, known as 'beats per minute' or BPM for short. A good way of figuring out the BPM of a song is by referring to a clock. A clock's second hand ticks at 60BPM, as there are 60 seconds in a minute: double this and you get 120BPM. Use this as a rough guide when

trying to gauge the tempo of a song you are listening to. You'll know it when a song is played in the wrong tempo as it changes the whole feel of the song. On a written piece of music, the tempo is usually given at the top of the piece.

The time signature 6/8 is also fairly common, and can be heard in ballads such as 'Nothing Else Matters' by Metallica or 'Grace' by Jeff Buckley. 6/8 has six quaver notes per bar with the downbeat on the first and fourth, meaning that it is heard as two groups of three rather than three groups of two, as it would be in 3/4. It therefore has a more flowing feel to it. Compare the sound of a waltz in 3/4 to a ballad in 6/8 and you will hear the difference. 12/8 is a less commonly used meter, but can still be found in contemporary music, especially the blues. You would count it like this: 1 & a, 2 & a, 3 & a, 4 & a. So it's still four beats per bar but each beat is counted like a triplet: 1 & a. Time signatures are split up into two groups, simple time and compound time. Simple time signatures can be broken down into two-part rhythms; they are easier to count as they have a one-two pulse, for example 4/4 and 3/4. Compound time signatures are broken down into three-part rhythms: these have a one-two-three pulse, such as 6/8 and 12/8.

The best way of figuring out a song's time signature is by identifying the 'downbeat' or strongest beat. In 4/4 time the first beat is the strongest with the third being slightly weaker, the second and fourth beats are weak. Tap out the beats as you listen to a song, counting one, two, three... as you go. The off-beats are the &s, so count one & two & three and so on.

Try this each time you listen to a song, and see if you can figure out the time signature. Good luck! ■

### EXAMPLE 1

♩ = 60

### EXAMPLE 2

♩ = 60

### EXAMPLE 3

♩ = 60

### EXAMPLE 3

♩ = 60

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