

The Nashville Number System

Part 1: The Breakdown

by Jim Riley

This article is a call-out to all of you working drummers out there. Have you ever had a ton of songs to learn but not a lot of time to prepare? Then this arti-

cle is for you. Do you want to do recording sessions? This article is for you, too. What's it all about? The Nashville number system.

The Nashville number system is a fast, accurate, and musical method for charting songs. Almost every chart used in Nashville recording sessions is a number chart. So if you want to play sessions, you'll need to understand how they work.

Number charts completely replace the chicken-scratch cheat sheets that many of us have used to get through unfamiliar gigs. The biggest problem with those types of charts is that only you can understand them. And even if you could explain them to another drummer, your notes give you no frame of reference with the rest of the band. However, if you learn to read and write number charts, you'll find that instead of counting bars, you'll actually be *listening* to the other musicians.

The Premise

The first thing you need to know about number charts is that each number refers to a scale degree. Instead of "Do-Re-Mi-Fa-So-La-Ti-Do," we substitute "1-2-3-4-5-6-7-1." But why use numbers when you can use the letters that represent the actual notes? Well, the problem with writing a chart based on note names is that a C is always a C. Therefore, if you write the entire chart in the key of C, and then the singer wants to raise the key to F, you have to write a new chart. When you use numbers, if you're in C, then C=1, D=2, and so on. However, if the key of C is too low, and you move to the key of F, then F=1, G=2, etc. In other words, when you write the chart with numbers, it can be played in *any* key.

Breaking It Down

Now let's dig into the structure of number charts. When you see a number standing alone, you can assume that that chord is played for one measure. Take a look at the four-bar sequence below, and you'll see what I mean.

The sequence is telling you to play one bar of the 1 chord, one bar of the 4 chord, one bar of the 1 chord, and one bar of the 5 chord. All of the chords are assumed to be major unless otherwise notated. (You can download mp3s of the progressions in this article at the Education page of www.moderndrummer.com.)

(Audio Example 1)

: 1 4 1 5 : | 1̇

Minor chords are notated with a "-" following the number, like this:

2-

You can also easily notate accidentals (sharps and flats). The symbol "#" raises the note a half step, and "b" lowers it a half step.

If you see two or more numbers underlined, then they occur in the same measure. This is referred to as a "split bar." In the following example, the 1 chord is played for two beats, the 4 chord is played for two beats, the minor 2 chord is played for two beats, and the 5 chord is played for two beats (assuming that the song is in 4/4 time, of course).

(Audio Example 2)

: 1 4 2- 5 1 4 2- 5 : | 1̇

Number charts are written in phrases, and those phrases are grouped into sections. The sections are represented with a "V" for the verse and a "CH" for the chorus. Here's a typical verse/chorus progression written using the number system.

(Audio Example 3)

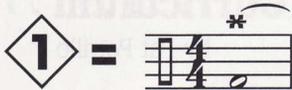
V	1	1	4	5	
	1	1	4	5	
	<u>4 1</u>	<u>5 1</u>	<u>4 1</u>	5	5 ^(#)

CH	1	5	4	5	5 ^(#)
	1	5	4	5	
	6-	5	4	1	1 ^(#)
	<u>4 1</u>	<u>5 1</u>	<u>4 1</u>	5	5 ^(#)

The song's sections are separated with a line to make them easier to identify. Notice how the form of the sections jumps out at you. At a glance, you can see that there are three four-bar phrases in the verse and the last phrase in the chorus is five bars long. To the right of each section, I've written out the drum patterns. This is a very helpful way to remember your parts in live and studio situations. Always use a pencil for personal notes. At recording sessions, bass drum patterns are frequently changed based on the producer's preference.

While many traditional notation symbols are used in number

charts (like repeat signs), there are shorthand symbols unique to this system as well. One such symbol is a diamond (\diamond), which is drawn around a number when you're supposed to play a whole note. As a drummer, you'll usually interpret this as a unison bass drum / crash cymbal hit on the first beat of that measure.



Here's a chart with whole notes notated in the second phrase.

(Audio Example 4)

1 5



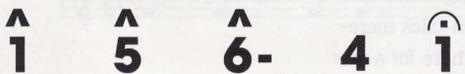
Another frequently used symbol is the rooftop symbol, "^^". When this symbol is placed over a number, play a short note



Here's the same progression as before, this time using short notes in the second phrase.

(Audio Example 5)

1 5



Even though the previous two progressions (Audio Examples 4 and 5) use the same numbers, the symbols radically change how the phrases sound. In our next installment, I'll share several more shorthand symbols that are used to create accurate number charts.

In the meantime, on the top of the next column you'll see a complete handwritten chart that I made for a recent session. (You can download an mp3 of the song at www.modrndrummer.com.) The first thing you should notice is how clear the form of the song is when written in numbers. Don't get me wrong; traditional notation charts are great for transcriptions and rhythmically challenging music. But when it comes to *songs*, these number charts are much quicker to write and easier to navigate. When you're reading a number chart, you'll find yourself thinking less about what rhythms to play and more about the music. And that's a good thing!

key of G

Alone in The House

$\text{♩} = 120$
straight 8th Rock

Handwritten drum chart for "Alone in The House" in G major, 4/4 time, 120 bpm. The chart is divided into two main sections. The first section consists of two phrases, each starting with a circled "ch" (crash) and a diamond "1". The first phrase is: 1 \flat 3 2-5 (with a triplet of eighth notes). The second phrase is: 1 \flat 3 2-5. The second section also consists of two phrases, each starting with a circled "ch" and a diamond "1". The first phrase is: 1 \flat 3 2-5. The second phrase is: 1 \flat 3 2-5. There are various annotations throughout, including "Vox Solo", "Break Down", "crazy fill!", and a note about a 5/7 chord. The chart includes musical notation for drums and guitar, with notes like "6-5", "4 1", "6-5", "4 1", "b7", "5", and "5/7".

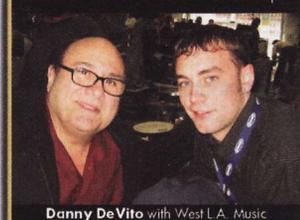


Jim Riley is the drummer and bandleader for Rascal Flatts, an active session drummer, and a freelance producer. He also teaches privately and performs several clinics throughout the year.



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