

Beats, Measures, Phrases

DJ Mix Tips: Beats, Bars & Phrases

Loosely adapted from Mobile Beat by Eric Rhodes

If you're just starting out as a DJ or want to revisit the basics, then this post will get you on the right track to understanding the music you play.

The first concepts you need to know when learning to understand your music are "Beats," "Bars" and "Phrases." I'll define each of them and explain how they are related to each other.

Beats

Beats are simply a measurement of time in music. Usually expressed as a drum beat (kick, snare, etc.), the typical beat pattern (or time signature) in EDM, Hip- Hop and other popular music is 4x4. That means the entire song is in a 4 beat pattern. Pick any popular song and hit play. Do it. Right now... Okay, are you ready? The very first drumbeat you hear is going to be the "one" beat, the next is "two" and so on. Now, you're going to count those beats as "one, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four..." That is the basic definition of a beat. Now onto bars...

Bars (Measures)

Bars (measures) are segments of time in music represented by beats, or simply put, the accumulation of a small set of beats. In the previous 4x4 example, the bar has 4 beats in it. Bar #1 = "One, Two, Three, Four" Bar #2 = "One, Two, Three, Four" ... and so on. That means an entire song usually has anywhere between 100-300 bars (measures) depending on the length of the song and its beats per minute. These bars (measures) are compiled into Phrases...

Phrases

Phrases are a little more complicated to explain in text. In order to understand phrases, you must think of a song as a story that is comprised of many chapters. Each phrase is its own chapter in the story. It has a beginning and an end. It could be a set of lyrics or a particular set of sounds that compile a phrase. In musical theatre, they are usually expressed in 4 or 8 bars (measures). Musical theatre auditions cutting are typically 16 to 32 bars (measures).

Knowing how to cut a musical theatre songs for an audition starts with being able to identify the phrases and count the bars (measures).