

Swing, Shuffle, Half-Time, Double: Beyond Traditional Time Signatures in Meter Classification for Pop/Rock Music

Trevor de Clercq
Middle Tennessee State University

OVERVIEW

The aural identification of meter—often taken to be a basic task relegated to the early weeks of musicianship coursework—typically involves assigning a piece of music to one of a limited number of traditional time signatures based on:

- 1) the number of beats per bar, and
- 2) into how many parts the beat regularly divides

Ignoring complex, mixed, additive, fractional, and irrational meters, this gives 6 fundamental time signatures:

| | Simple | Compound |
|-----------|---------------|----------------|
| Duple | $\frac{2}{4}$ | $\frac{6}{8}$ |
| Triple | $\frac{3}{4}$ | $\frac{9}{8}$ |
| Quadruple | $\frac{4}{4}$ | $\frac{12}{8}$ |

I have found that trying to assign any given pop/rock song into this framework is often like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. After extensive research on instructional drum manuals, I developed a simple yet more robust approach to classifying the rhythmic and metric organization of a pop/rock song. This approach uses traditional time signatures as a starting point, but includes two additional factors:

- 1) Whether the beat (sub)divisions are swung, and
- 2) The “feel” of the drum pattern

Specifically, I use three categories, each with three options:

| Time Sig. | Swing | Drum Feel |
|---------------|-------------|-------------|
| $\frac{6}{8}$ | Straight | Normal |
| $\frac{3}{4}$ | Swung 8ths | Half-Time |
| $\frac{4}{4}$ | Swung 16ths | Double-Time |

This system gives 27 theoretical meter classifications (3x3x3), although only 22 are viable (since 6/8 never has swing on the 8th notes and never occurs with a half-time feel). Note that the time signatures of 2/4, 9/8 and 12/8 are deprecated here.

In the following columns, I show some of the possible combinations, as illustrated through drum notation.

4/4, Straight, Normal

In a normal 4/4 drum feel, the snare lands on beats 2 and 4.
• Ex. “Do In It Right” (Daft Punk, 2013)



4/4, Straight, Half-Time

In a 4/4 half-time feel, the snare land only on beat 3 with any regularity. This creates the illusion of a slower tempo, despite a moderate pacing of melodic and harmonic content.
• Ex. “Human Nature” (Michael Jackson, 1982)



4/4, Straight, Double-Time

In a 4/4 double-time feel, the snare occurs on the “and” of every beat. This creates the illusion of a faster tempo, despite a moderate pacing of melodic and harmonic content.
• Ex. “Mama’s Broken Heart” (Miranda Lambert, 2011)



4/4, Swung 8ths, Normal

Due to the variability of swing timing, I deprecate 12/8 and prefer a 4/4 reading. The notation shows a 2:1 swing ratio (i.e., “shuffle”), but the exact swing ratio will vary from song to song.
• Ex. “Girl They Won’t Believe It” (Joss Stone, 2007)



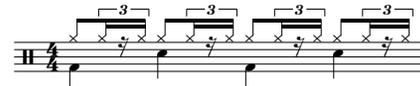
4/4, Swung 8ths, Half-Time

One of the most compelling grooves is the combination of swung 8ths and a half-time feel, also known as the “half-time shuffle.” No time signature alone is able to capture the unequal subdivisions two metric levels below the kick-snare alternation.
• Ex. “Fool in the Rain” (Led Zeppelin, 1979)



4/4, Swung 16ths, Normal

While 8th-note swing in 4/4 could be categorized as 12/8, no traditional time signature can capture 16th-note swing in 4/4.
• Ex. “Love On Top” (Beyoncé, 2011)



4/4, Swung 16ths, Double-Time

16th-note swing in 4/4 with a double-time feel sounds like a speeding-up of 8th-note swing in 4/4 with a normal-time feel.
• Ex. “Up From Below” (Edward Sharpe, 2009)



6/8, Straight, Normal

Although 9/8 and 12/8 are deprecated in favor of swing, 6/8 is useful compound meter. 6/8 meters usually have tempos where neither the 2 big beats (articulated by the kick and snare) nor the 6 subdivisions lie within an ideal tempo range.
• Ex. “Nothing Else Matters” (Metallica, 1991)



6/8, Swung 16ths, Normal

16th notes are often swung in 6/8, a metric structure that a traditional time signature alone cannot capture.
• Ex. “Trouble” (Ray LaMontagne, 2004)



3/4, Straight, Normal

A normal-time feel in 3/4 involves a kick on beat 1 and a snare on beat 3. This gives an unequal division of the bar into a longer first part followed by a shorter second part.
• Ex. “No Other One” (Weezer, 1996)



3/4, Swung 8ths, Normal

Most 3/4 time signatures in pop/rock involve 8th-note swing, a metric framework especially endemic to country music.
• Ex. “Hollywood Waltz” (The Eagles, 1975)



3/4, Swung 8ths, Double-Time

The combination of 8th-note swing with snare hits on the “ands” of each beat creates a “double-time” feel, which gives the illusion of speed despite the moderate pace of harmony.
• Ex. “Synchronicity” (The Police, 1983)



3/4, Swung 8ths, Half-Time

Swung 8th notes in 3/4 with a half-time feel could alternatively be read as a slow 6/8 with 16th-note swing, but the harmonic and melodic pacing implies shorter measure lengths.
• Ex. “Sometimes I Cry” (Chris Stapleton, 2015)



6/8, Straight, Double-Time

A double-time version of straight 6/8 could alternatively be read as a fast 3/4, but the harmonic and melodic pacing implies longer measure lengths.
• Ex. “Lorelai” (Fleet Foxes, 2011)



SELECT REFERENCES

- Butterfield, Matthew. 2011. “Why Do Jazz Musicians Swing Their Eighth Notes.” *Music Theory Spectrum* 33 (1): 3-26.
- de Clercq, Trevor. 2016. “Measuring a Measure: Absolute Time as a Factor for Determining Bar Lengths and Meter in Pop/Rock Music.” *Music Theory Online* 22/3.
- London, Justin. 2012. *Hearing in Time: Psychological Aspects of Musical Meter*. 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Riley, Jim. 2015. *Survival Guide for the Modern Drummer: A Crash Course in All Musical Styles for Drumset*. Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Music.
- Rosenberg, Nancy. 2011. “Popular Music in the College Music Theory class: Rhythm and Meter.” In *Pop-culture pedagogy in the music classroom*, ed. Nicole Blamonte, 47-71. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Stephenson, Ken. 2002. *What to Listen for in Rock: A Stylistic Analysis*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.