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The band is sounding hot as it blazes through an awesome rendition of a new song. Everything is going great, but then suddenly the rest of the group is staring at you with that deer-in-the-headlights look that can only mean one thing: "How do we end this tune?"

Why us? Who chose the drummer to place that final exclamation point on a well-played piece of music? I suppose it's because the drums can be the loudest of all instruments. Conversely, one reason why I love the drums is because they can ultimately dictate the band's overall volume level. Guitarists and bassists can strum and pluck as hard as they want, but turning the amplifier up or down ultimately determines the outcome.

In addition to determining when to end a tune, it's often the drummer's responsibility to figure out how, so we need to think about ways to send our signals to the other musicians as accurately as possible. In this article, we're going to talk about a few ways to approach that final, lasting moment.

We'll be focusing mostly on song endings in rock music, since that's the genre where the drums are often the loudest and where big, solid endings are most crucial. On the contrary, my jazz trio, EVE, often plays at much softer volumes, so endings can be much more subtle. For instance, I could elect to gracefully bow out of a tune by decreasing my volume to silence or by simply playing some colors on the cymbals. In those instances, the other instrumentalists can take the lead on how and when to end the song. Now, that's not to say that I don't also initiate endings in a jazz setting, but I simply feel they're more challenging at louder volumes.

THE RITARD

The toughest songs to end are the ones that weren't given a concrete ending on the original studio version, like classic-rock tunes from the 1960s and '70s, where the record usually ended with a fade-out. In today's computer-based recording process, composed "hard" endings are much more common.

The ritard (slowing down) is an old standby for endings, because it really spells out that something big is about to happen. When the drummer starts pulling back the tempo, it immediately forces the other musicians to pay attention. This method works well with players of all skill levels.

A good song for a ritard ending is Deep Purple's "Smoke on the Water." Suppose your band is riding out the main riff. In that case, try starting the ritard at the beginning of the riff (go ahead and hum it to yourself):

"Ba, ba, baaa...ba, ba, ba-baaa..."

Then slower: "Ba, ba, baaaaaa..." (The band holds the third chord while you go crazy, throwing in all your Ian Paice licks.)

When you're ready to end, look up at the band for the last two hits: "Ba-ba!"

Thank you, goodnight!

EYE CONTACT AND EXAGGERATED BODY MOVEMENTS

As with the end of our hypothetical version of "Smoke on the Water," signaling the ensemble with eye contact and body movement is a very effective way to bring everyone together. Even if the exact last note is ambiguous, if you use your Jedi mind skills well enough, these kinds of endings almost always work out. There have been times when I've thought, Wow, they nailed those hits with me perfectly, when even a millisecond's timing difference would've made it sound sloppy.

Using grandiose gestures to signal the final note of a song helps you avoid the dreaded train wreck. However, you may not want to relive the experience on video, as it might appear as if you're trying to propel your body into space.

SONG FORM SPELLS IT OUT

Songs that have very a specific and obvious form, like a twelve-bar blues, are a little easier to bring to a logical conclusion. ZZ Top's "Tush" is a good example of a rock song

with a blues form, and it's most common to end this tune at the completion of the twelve-bar cycle.

On the original studio version of "Tush," drummer Frank Beard and bassist Dusty Hill stop at the eleventh measure while guitarist Billy Gibbons plays a nifty lick. The band ends together in bar twelve.

Blues-rock songs usually allow for everyone, including the bartender, to take a solo. In this situation, I would incorporate several communication techniques. First, to make sure everyone gets his or her turn, whenever the twelve-bar cycle comes back around, I would put up my finger and spin it around to signal "Keep going."

Once the solos are complete, I'll often perch myself up like a cat that notices something moving in the bushes. This little movement alerts everyone, and then I'll confidently nod my head, as if to say, "Yes, this time we're ending."

When it comes time to play the very last note and I want everyone to stop on a dime, I've discovered that it helps to lean into the hit and then abruptly raise my hands so the other band members can see them. For some reason, that quick motion makes everyone freeze in place-assuming, of course, that they're actually looking at me.

THE LOGICAL SPOT

While songs like "Tush" have an obvious spot in their form to insert an ending, you can often find places in other songs where it feels right to stop, even if they differ from the original. For example, my horn band, Into the Spin, plays the Steely Dan tune "My Old School." The album version ends with a fade. We found a logical spot in the turnaround of the interlude (1:23) that we use to end the song.

When you're creating an ending, an ideal thing to do is to allow a musical phrase to complete itself first. An early cutoff point doesn't have a feeling of finality. It's like putting a period midway through a sentence.

ADDITIONAL SPICE

A fun way to add extra drama to the final note of a song is to signal to the band how many big hits you want them to play, by holding up that many fingers. In this case, the band usually plays the same power chord repeatedly while you accent with bass drum and crashes. Check out "Won't Get Fooled Again" by the Who for an example of this approach.

You can also announce that the end is coming with a big fill at the end of a musical phrase. Triplets work great for this. A more subtle approach would be to start building intensity as you get close to the point in the song where you want to end. The others will sense this increase in energy. Just remember that most musicians think in four-bar phrases, so time your build so that they have enough time to prepare for the ending.

WHATEVER WORKS

Whether you're rehearsing with your band or playing with new musicians for the first time, it's worth it to have these ending techniques in your arsenal. I recently had a comical experience while subbing for another drummer. Following an extended jam, the two guitarists turned around and slowly dipped their bodies to the ground. I wasn't sure if they were trying to cue the end of the tune or kneel in prayer. I'm sure that the confused look on my face expressed my exact thought, which was, I have no clue what this means! So I took matters into my own hands, and we finished in a way that everyone understood. The end!

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