



How to memorize Songs effectively and efficiently

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Overview & Purpose

This guide is written help you learn and memorize a large number of songs for stage or studio in a short amount of time. I've had to learn many songs over my years of playing and I believe some of the techniques I've used to streamline this process could be helpful to others. This guide is dependent on you being able to learn a song by ear and having some knowledge of music theory. I believe reading music is an important skill to have but if you really want to play a song you need to commit it to memory. Your brain simply can not effectively focus on two things at once. If you are reading a chart you can't focus on all the little things that you have to do to make your instrument really speak.

Getting Started

So let's throw out some hypothetical situations where you would use these techniques.

1. You got hired by a new band and need to learn their tunes over a few days before playing the gig.
2. You are hired to record an album or EP for an artist and have to learn the tunes from demos leading up to the recording session.

3. Your own band is going into the studio and you need to learn songs that are written by other members of the band.
4. A band you already play in gives you some new songs to learn.

Step 1: Use your ear

Pull up the song on YouTube if possible (more on that later) or whatever program you're using to listen to music. Press play and immediately establish what key it's in. Once you've established the key put your instrument down, and re-start the song and listen without playing along. Try to figure the chord progression in your head as it's playing. Also start to take note of the song form. Make note of any sections that sound really difficult or are very different than the rest of the song.

Step 2: Play the tune & learn parts you couldn't by ear

Start the song and play along with it once. You should have a rough idea of what the chords are from your first listen. Don't worry about it being perfect on your first play through. Stop at any section you couldn't figure out by ear to get a rough idea of how to play the part. Again don't focus on perfection. We are starting with big picture and will zoom into the details later.

Step 3: Double up the speed

This where you unlock one of my favorite tricks for learning a song. 2x speed. I suggest learning most songs in YouTube as this feature and a couple others make it a quick learning tool. If the song is not on YouTube then get an MP3 of the song and use an music slow down software to speed it up. I use "Transcribe" by Seventh String Software. Here are a list of keyboard shortcuts for youtube to help you when learning a song. Make sure you click on the video screen somewhere otherwise when you hit spacebar it will scroll the page down.

- 1) Spacebar - controls play/pause
- 2) Right and Left arrow - skip forward or back by 5 seconds.
- 3) Shift + > - Increase speed. Moves from 1 to 1.25 to 1.5 to 2x with each key press.

4) Shift + < - Decrease speed. Moves from 1 to .75 to .5x with each key press

You can also access the speed control via the setting gear on the bottom right of the video. If you are on the youtube mobile app press the 3 vertical dots at the top right of the screen and select playback speed. The decrease speed function is great for learning fast solos or riffs that can be difficult to pick up all the notes at full speed.

Step 3 continued: How to use 2x speed

The first way we will use 2x speed to our advantage is to memorize the song form. It will sound funny when listening but it's so much easier to hear the song form and how many times a progression, riff, or section is played. You don't need to play along just listen to the form and for the number of repetitions of sections or parts. Do this a couple times until you've got the form down. Remember since you're listening at 2x speed you can listen to the song twice in the same same amount of time it would take to listen one time at normal speed.

Step 4: Digging into the details

Now is the time we focus on playing any small parts or sections we need to perfect or need extra attention. This could be solos, lead fills, tougher rhythms, and other difficult passages. If you have trouble remembering the rhythm of a certain section you can try and figure out what the rhythm would be if you notated it. Let's say there are 2 hits at the end of bridge and it would be a dotted quarter to a 16th note if you wrote it out. You can just remember that rhythm of a dotted quarter to a 16th as you're approaching that section and you should be able to play it.

Step 5: Playing along at 2x

Now this can be a little crazy depending on the genre. You're not gonna play some shred prog metal song at 2x speed. This is meant more for straightforward songs where you are mostly playing chords or riffs. Play the song once or twice at 2x or 1.5x speed. This will help you get down difficult passages at a higher tempo then you'll be performing it at and also helps you get through the song a couple times in a short time.

Step 6: Predicting the Future

Now play along with the song at normal speed. When you can predict the next chord or next section before it arrives and get it right all the way through you now have the song memorized. Another true test of whether you know the song is if you can play it without vocals and know the whole song in and out without relying on vocal cues to get to different parts.

Some Final Thoughts and Other Tips

If you need to figure out a bunch of songs you can figure out all the keys really quickly at home and write them down. Then you can do step 1 while you are driving or working out. If you want to listen but don't know the key and can't access an instrument, that's ok you can still figure out chords by labeling them in your head using the nashville number system instead of the actual chord name. A good thing to have is a piano app on your phone so you can always figure out the key of a song without needing your instrument.

Another way to commit something to long term memory is to do it for 10 minutes, 4 days in a row. So if you have a little more time to learn a song. If you play it for 10 minutes, 4 days in row, you will have it memorized.

When you are learning songs try to keep your phone on do not disturb and don't be checking it every 5 minutes. The more you laser focus on the task at hand and don't get distracted the faster you'll get the song memorized.

