Rough Guide to Transcribing
by Dennis Winge

Many students come to me wishing they could play songs by ear, so we do interval-training, which is essential to developing your aural skills. However, nothing is ever learned in isolation, so we also spend time transcribing songs by ear. Transcribing implies the writing down on paper the music you hear, but if the musical analysis skips the writing step and goes straight from your ears to your fingers, I also refer to that as transcribing.

When students first begin to transcribe, they typically say things like "there is so much going on I'm not sure what to listen for or to." This rough guide is the place to begin as to what to listen for, and also a kind of organizational chart by which sort to the aural information you're receiving. In addition, it may give musicians whose ears are more developed other ideas on applying ear training to everyday musical life.

First of all, when choosing material to transcribe, at least initially, keep in mind that pop and country songs are better than classical music, progressive rock, jazz or any other music where the harmony is less predictable. Second, just transcribe one section at a time. The choruses are typically the simplest and most direct part of the song, so I recommend to start with that first and then go back and do the verses. Third, if the first part of the song doesn't have the full band in yet, scroll to the middle or even 2/3 the way through where all the instruments are typically playing.

1. The Key

Everything must be analyzed in relation to the tonic, i.e. the root note of the key. Simply play all 12 notes while the song is playing and identify possibilities for the tonic. For guitarists this can be playing frets 0 to 11, one by one, slowly as the song progresses. You don't even have to know the note names at this stage. Just write down a few choices. Then, play each candidate for the tonic with the song and see which one sounds like it could be a good note to end on. Think of yourself as a bass player who is giving one final note while the singer is saying "thank you, good night!" to the audience. Which note feels most satisfying?

2. Roots of the Chords

Almost all of the time, the bass instrument plays the root of each chord on the first beat of each chord. Train your ears to listen to the bass. Since it's very tough to hear bass on a phone, transcribe with a good pair of headphones or through good speakers. If there is no bass in the song, as in a piece with only piano or guitars, then listen for the lowest notes you hear from the instruments that are playing.

Determine the pitch of the first chord by using the same method used to find the key. It may be the same note as the key, or it may be different. Make a contour line for the first

note of each subsequent chord. Did the note of the second chord go up or down from that of the first chord? This can help you identify the roots of the other chords quicker. For example, if you note that the first chord's root was the note *a* and the second chord's went up but only by a little bit, then it could be *b.* If it went up quite a bit, it might be *d* or *e*.

Once you find out all the roots of each chord, see if you can make sense of what is happening from a music theory standpoint. In other words, do a quick harmonic analysis of the chords in relation to the key. For example if you determined that the key was D and you also have the roots F and Bb, it might be song in Dm where the chord whose root is *d* is Dm, which would be the I chord, while the other two are an F and Bb chord, which would be III and VI respectively.

3. Chord Qualities

Notice in the above example we were led to guess that the key is a minor key based on the other roots in the song. Whether your music theory knowledge is strong or not, you will still have to check by using your ear. The song could well have a D major chord as its root but still employ the F and Bb chords, and thus mix minor and major harmonic territory. So you can use music theory to help speed up the process along the way, if you are so inclined, but your ear still takes precedence.

Determine whether each chord is major or minor by playing each one and comparing which one fits better. Do this for every chord. For more advanced students, try to determine if 7ths, 9ths, 11ths or 13ths are used, or if any other notes have been altered, as in sus4 or augmented chords for example.

4. Chord Progression

Do a complete harmonic analysis of the chord progression. Are there chords whose roots are outside the key (ex: a Bb chord in the key of C major)? Are there chords whose root is diatonic (i.e. in key) but the chord itself is a different quality (ex: an A7 in the key of G is a II7 chord, whereas normally the II chord is minor, i.e. Am in this case).

Once you have analyzed the progression, try various places to play it, i.e. with open chords or barre chords. You might even try transposing the song to a different key. All of this helps develop your ear because you will hear that the progression has the overall same character even though all the chords are different in the new key.

5. Melody

Draw a contour line tracing each phrase of the melody. For example, if the key is E and the melody is *g# - b – d# - c#,* the curve might look like:

Of course, you do not need to know the note names to draw the curve, just whether the notes went up or down in relation to each other. Also, it's a good idea to highlight where the roots are in the melody. In the above example, there are no *e* notes so we won't circle anything, but we would have if there were.

Once you find the notes in a phrase or passage, try different positions in which to play it. Keep in mind that if it's a vocal melody, you might try playing it up an octave from where the chords are being played so that the chords don't drown out the melody.

6. Chord Melody

Lastly, you may want to try putting chords and melody together at the same time. If this is the case, try writing out each interval in relation to the chords, not the key. You don't have to find a chord for every single note, but at least have chords in the prominent places. Begin by finding for at least the first beat of each bar and its melody note. Next, find voicings for any other place where the chords change, and then, any others. Find alternative voicings for trickier passages. Consider an alternative key for the whole piece and transpose chords & melody.

Conclusion

You will notice that in addition to ear training I also went into topics related to music theory and fretboard theory. It's great to learn your intervals in isolation, but too many students, I find, don't know what to do with this information. Diving into a song by transcribing both its chords and melody and then analyzing it and then playing it all helps reinforce your ear, and it also enhances your theory and fretboard knowledge. This is called "integrating."

So don't hold back. Don't simply look up the chords or tab of your favorite songs at some website. Try to figure it out by ear. Wrestle with it; enjoy the process. Of course, if you have a teacher, it can make the whole process way easier. Being able to hear a chord progression and know how and where to play it instantly is a highly rewarding skill that you can learn. It takes times, and the time to start is now.

Summary of Rough Guide to Transcribing

1. The Key

- Explore all 12 possibilities
- Write down likely candidates for the key
- Experiment with ending on each candidate to see which one feels most ‘final’
- Determine the key

2. Roots of the Chords

- Listen to bass (on good speakers or headphones)
- Mark the contour of the first note of each new chord
- Determine pitch of first chord, then second chord etc. by using same method as you did to find the key
- Intervallic analysis of chord roots in relation to key
- Determine if there are any non-diatonic roots to the key

3. Chord Qualities

- Play a major and minor chord based on root note of first chord
- Determine which of these sounds closer to that which is used in the song
- Repeat these 2 steps for every chord in the progression
- Determine if there are 7ths used in the chords
- Determine any extensions or alterations such as 9ths, 11ths, 13ths, sus4, sus2, etc.
- Determine which chords are non-diatonic within the key, even if the root note may be diatonic

4. Chord Progression

- Do a complete harmonic analysis of the chord progression
- Play the chords in open position or using open chords with capo
- Play the song in barre chords
- Transpose the song to different keys

5. Melody

- Draw a contour line tracing each phrase
- Find where the roots are in the melody
- Find all the other intervals used in relation to the key
- Play the melody in open position
- Play the melody 8va in a convenient position

6. Chord Melody

- Write out intervals in relation to the chords, not the key
- Find voicings for at least the first beat of each bar and its melody note
- Find voicings for any other place where the chords change
- Find voicings in between the above to the extend desired
- Find alternative voicings for trickier passages
- Consider an alternative key for the whole piece and transpose chords & melody