

The Art of Transcription Part Two

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Ok, here we go. In this second half of The Art of Transcription I'm going to walk you through the actual nuts and bolts of doing your first transcription.

Take some [staff paper](#) and mark off four blank measures. Your goal the first time you start transcribing should be just about four measures or so. If you can do more without getting frustrated, go ahead. If you can't even get that much, that's all right too.

Figure out what key you are in. Sometimes this is simple but other times can be quite a challenge. Figure out if the tune is in a major or minor key. Listen carefully to the first and last chord of each chorus and see if they are the same. Sing what sounds like the tonic pitch of the key and use that unless you decide later that it is in a different key. Also mark in your time signature.

Now listen to the first phrase again and sing along. Sing the very first pitch and then find that note on your instrument. Be sure to check this against the recording to be sure that you didn't let the pitch slip as you worked out what note it was. Now do the same with the very last note of the phrase. Write those two pitches in the measures and on the beats you think those pitches fall in, but leave out any rhythms for the moment. Be sure to check to see if the first phrase starts as a pickup to the first measure of the chorus. You will have something that looks a little like this:



Now fill in some of those spots on major downbeats or points in the phrase that you can hear clearly. Sing the lick to yourself slowly to help. You still should not worry about rhythms just yet. In fact, for many people, figuring out the proper rhythms is the most difficult part of transcribing a solo. Your measures might now look a little like this:



Now here is where knowing what the chords are can really help fill in the rest of the notes. Write the chords above the measures, if you haven't already, and keep finding pitches and marking in the note heads in the measures you think the pitches fall in. Again, singing the phrase to yourself slowly will help you find the pitches on your instrument.



You can see in this example how the notes in the phrase are almost all just notes that are present in the chord. Not every phrase will be this easy to pick out. If you know pitches that surround the notes you can't hear you should be able to make an educated guess from there. What is the chord in that measure? Find the typical scale or mode that is played over that chord. Now decide the shape of the lick. Does it start by moving above the pitches you have and then move back down to the last pitch or does it go in one direction to get between pitches? Are all the notes a step away from each other, like a scale, or are they larger interval leaps. Figure out what you can, and then make an educated guess as to what you can't and fill them in. You can check them by playing along with the recording. If they aren't correct, figure out which notes are wrong and try a different pitch until you think you've got it.

Once you've written down all the notes and you think they are correct, then go back in fill in the rhythms. Start by finding downbeats and other major points where you can easily hear the rhythms.



And then fill in the rest.



I hope this has shown you how; little by little you can begin to hear the notes, use the chord symbols as guides, and fill in the note values as you go. The more you transcribe the faster and easier it will become. Have patience and keep at it! It's worth the hard work. Good luck!

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