

The Best Beats of All Time

Ask 10 professional drummers or teachers for their best beats of all time, and you will surely get 10 distinct lists. As with all art, much of this is subjective, and as such, subject to the ear of the beholder. So keep that in mind when viewing any list (and you will probably understand my musical tastes better after reading this!). Just being considered for an “all time greatest beats” list means the drummer and the beat must be top notch and highest quality. But let me explain what cracks my list.

I am NOT looking for a B-side, rare, underground groove by a drummer nobody has ever heard of. I can walk into Miller’s in Charlottesville, VA, or Bar 55 in the West Village any night of the week and see mind-blowingly awesome drummers that I’ve never heard of - but sorry, they don’t make this list! I want legendary drummers in legendary bands whose creations made a significant impact on the larger musical world.

This list is also not “the hardest and most complicated grooves of all time.” Some of them are quite tricky and techy, but some of them can be easily played by a beginner. Regardless of how difficult these grooves are to play, the voice of the original drummer clearly shines through and beat made a huge impact on its song and the world of music.

Criteria for Manhattan Drum Studios Best Beats of All Time

- 1) **Uniquely Identifiable:** When you hear the beat, just for a couple seconds, even from the next room over and without the music around it, you know what it is – a unique groove that defines the song in which it lives. Ever try to play “name that tune” with just a drum beat? Try it with the grooves on this list and you will see why they score high here!
- 2) **Legendary Drummer:** The drummer ought to be at least up for consideration on the “top drummers of all time” list. I’m looking for legendary drummers playing memorable beats. I trust my greatest drummers of all time to come up with my greatest grooves of all time! This list is a who’s who in the history of drumming.
- 3) **Legendary Band:** Ideally the band that plays the song is also a big and impactful one. I’m looking for legendary drummers playing legendary beats in legendary bands! I trust my legendary drummers to be in legendary bands! This list is a trip through the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame!
- 4) **Generationally inspiring:** All of this – the groove, the drummer, the band – also helped define and inspire a generation of music and musicians.

Please also consider this: you don't see any grooves from the last 20 years or so on my list. This is partially because I am old! But also, we still need to give these grooves and drummers and bands time to mature and let history make of them what it will. This list will evolve as we all continue to borrow from the past, push the boundaries, and make great new music.

With no further ado...

THE CREAM OF THE CROP

“Sing Sing Sing” by The Benny Goodman Orchestra, Gene Krupa. 1937.

This beat gets 5 stars on all of my categories. The rolling, accented floor tom pattern starts the song and defines its deep, primal, big band swing feel. This beat inspired decades of drummers and music and has been featured in countless movies, TV shows, plays, commercials, video games etc. After over 80 years it still feels fresh and inspiring right from the first floor tom.

“When the Levee Breaks” by Led Zeppelin, John Bonham. 1971.

Oh how hard it is to choose the top track by Bonham and Zeppelin. “Levee” is utterly unique and distinct right from the first kick drum. “Name that tune” is over in 2 notes. This groove came at the peak of the band's powers, from their most popular album, and this gives it the nudge it needs to stand on top and represent all of Bonham's amazing beats.

“Smells Like Teen Spirit” by Nirvana, Dave Grohl. 1991.

Wow, 29 years old already. Yet this beat feels like the youngster on this block! Song structure is so clear and clean with Nirvana. The drum parts always fit absolutely perfectly to give their music such tight, heavy, kick-a** grunge-rock attitude. Dave Grohl hit hard and heavy and his grooves drove such high energy into their music. Yet his beats are super clean, clear and precise. I think it's safe to say that every drummer at a certain level learns this intro fill and heavy chorus beat.

“Roxanne” by The Police, Stewart Copeland. 1978.

When The Police hit the scene, nobody had heard music that sounded like that and nobody played the drums like Copeland. Power punk reggae ska pop. Crazy. How can you not have a kick on the ONE in a pop hit?! Like Dave Grohl, Stewart Copeland was always super meticulous in composing his drum parts and precise in executing them. This is the essence of the drum part not only fitting the song, but *defining* the song. This beat is just one measure, all 1/8 notes, pretty simple....yet there is no other beat like it and no questioning its place high atop this list.

“Cold Sweat” by James Brown, Clyde Stubblefield. 1967.

Nobody worked harder than James Brown, except maybe the cats in his band!! The stories are the stuff of legends. The drum beat and groove are of utmost

importance in Soul and R&B music, and we must look no further than the Godfather of Soul to find our last Cream of the Crop groove. This is a 2 bar groove with a distinct “displaced snare” at the end of the 1st bar. Choc full of ghost notes and open hi hat work, this is a very rich and complete funk groove. It became something of a standard issue beat in the decades of funk music to follow. When Clyde and James did it in '67, it was brand spankin' new!

FIRST BALLOT

“Come Together” by The Beatles, Ringo Starr. 1969.

Opinions abound about how great Ringo actually was as a drummer, but one thing is clear: he was the drummer in the greatest band in the history of rock music. This list needs Ringo near the top. “Come Together” is off the charts on the unique, and identifiable metric. Imagine how different this song would sound with a straight-ahead rock beat. I’ve heard some amazing drummers fail miserably trying to reproduce the feel of this incredible beat. You know who thinks Ringo is the greatest rock drummer of all time? Ringo does.

“Superstition” by Stevie Wonder, Stevie Wonder. 1972.

Who knows how many tracks and overdubs Stevie’s drum parts actually have, but man do they sound thick and rich! And who knew that the drummer on this track was....Stevie Wonder himself!!? What a genius. The playful, dancing improv of the hi hat adds such a shine to this driving, 4 on the floor, back beat classic.

“Good Times Bad Times” by Led Zeppelin, John Bonham. 1969.

I just can’t imagine what one must have thought in 1969 putting on the debut record by this new English rock band, Led Zeppelin, and hearing the first 20 seconds of this song. Just. Wow. Right off the bat here we get the heavy left foot hi hat, the musical use of the toms, the rolling, accented sextuplets, and the impossibly fast yet heavy kick drums. I should have put this higher.

“Sunday Bloody Sunday” by U2, Larry Mullen, Jr. 1983.

Drummers don’t try to emulate LMJ’s “chops”, because he is the farthest thing from a showy or show off drummer. His playing epitomizes crafting a musical drum part that enhances the song. This is obviously a “name that tune” in 2 notes type of drum beat. The attitude of the beat matches perfectly with the theme of the song, and Mullen, Jr never has to stray away from those relentless 1/16 notes.

“Walk This Way” by Aerosmith, Joey Kramer. 1975.

What a sick, simple beat! That’s also what Run DMC thought when they heard this track and did their famous cover remake of the song 11 years later. Joey Kramer is another drummer who isn’t renowned for his crazy chops, but the man knows how to lay down some serious arena rock drum grooves!

“Sunshine of Your Love” by Cream, Ginger Baker. 1967.

Ginger Baker is a madman on the drums. How in the world did he come up with these drum beats? What IS he even doing here? Imagine what you would have come up with when Clapton presented you with this guitar riff and asked you to put some drums on it. It wouldn't have been this beat. And you wouldn't have been on this list!

SECOND BALLOT

“Fire” by Jimi Hendrix, Mitch Mitchell. 1967.

Watching Mitch Mitchell play the drums is intense, almost stressful. Is he gonna have time to finish that fill? Is he really already starting another fill?! How is he going to find his way back to the beat? I listened to this song for many years the wrong way, before realizing the guitar lick starts on the FOUR! Try counting it. Starting on 1 won't work. Trust me. I did it that way for 20 years. I'm not sure which measure would represent “the groove” from this song, but they are all amazing so just pick your favorite. I'll take “you gotta new fool, ha! I like to laugh at.”

“Billie Jean” by Michael Jackson, Leon Chancler. 1983.

Maybe Chancler isn't a household drummer name, and maybe we can all name 100 other songs with this exact same beat – I call it “Basic Rock 1” and teach it to kids in our first drum lesson. But Basic Rock 1 needs a representative on this list, and this is clearly it. I love the story of Chancler getting up on stage at a big celebrity drum festival. Others just shredded and annihilated the drums with face melting speed and chops and limb independence. Leon gets up there and lays into “Basic Rock 1” for a steady 4 minutes and had the crowd bumping and cheering!

“50 Ways to Leave Your Lover” by Paul Simon, Steve Gadd. 1975.

Here is another one where you gotta be like, “how did he come up with that?!” When Paul Simon showed him this song it was a blank canvas. The drummer's choices completely define what the song will ultimately become. And WHAT a choice Steve Gadd made here! Gadd is a total monster who can, and has, played anything in any style. Flams and double stroke buzzes, syncopated left foot hi hat, linear combos, and plenty of space & taste make this beat legendary.

“Honky Tonk Woman” by The Rolling Stones, Charlie Watts. 1969.

There are certain bands that must have representation on this list simply by the stature their music holds in rock lore. The Rolling Stones, people. You won't see Charlie Watts blowing you away with linear independence exercises on his Instagram page. But his unique, hold-the-hat back beats on the snare have filled arenas, living rooms, and headphones for 7 decades now. 98% of all humans throw their fingers in the air to play air cowbell at the top of this song. Try it at a party.

“Fool in the Rain” by Led Zeppelin, John Bonham. 1979.

Earlier I wrote about the very first song on Zep’s first album. 10 years later FITR was the last single the band released. Give me a call right now and I’ll teach you this beat. I love teaching this beat, I love playing this beat. I love hearing this beat. And imagine that Bonham was quite likely 3 sheets to the wind while recording it. Impossible. This rolling triplet half time shuffle is full of ghost notes and the signature special sauce of Bonham’s left foot hi hat. And the B section takes it to the next level by adding $\frac{1}{4}$ note triplet syncopation on the ride bell. Can you tell who is my favorite drummer?

“Tom Sawyer” by Rush, Neil Peart. 1981.

There are many who consider Neil Peart to be the best rock drummer of all time. Whether or not you love his style, the band’s sound, his massive and over the top drum setup, or prog rock in general, we gotta give props to a clear creative and technical monster in the drumming world. Tom Sawyer is one of his and Rush’s great works, though it might be hard to find which part of the song to quote when learning the beat – there are like 17 parts! I choose the $\frac{7}{8}$ groove in the middle!

“Give it Away” by Red Hot Chili Peppers, Chad Smith. 1991.

Chad Smith straight up LAYS it down, man. Relentless. Every song. For decades. Smith’s go-to groove is more of a breathing-pulsing hi hat behind tons of ghost notes and a fat back beat. Give it Away is heavier, no ghost notes, steady washy hi hat, and a killer syncopated double kick groove. It holds the song together alongside the slippery smooth and capricious bass line and the wandering, *almost* dissonant single note guitar explorations.

“You Shook Me All Night Long” by ACDC, Phil Rudd. 1980.

Some joke that you can learn everything Phil Rudd ever played with ACDC in 2 drum lessons. But as is the case with so many on this list, it’s not about the chops and technical prowess all the time. Rather, it’s more often about making the song come to life and serving the music. Rudd is a banner for simple, heavy, no frills rock drumming that serves the song. I call this beat Basic Rock 5, and it’s true, I often do teach it within the first few drum lessons. But in 25 years I’ve never heard a student play it like Phil Rudd. I bet his teacher is just glowing!

“I Shot the Sherriff” by Bob Marley, Carlton Barrett. 1973.

It’s said that Carlton Barrett was like a clock, keeping perfect time back there behind Bob Marley. At the high point of classic Reggae music, Barrett perfected and popularized the “one drop” reggae groove. One kick, on the 3; a surprisingly busy, highly syncopated off-the-beat hi hat; and melodic, dancing, cross stick snares complete this masterful exhibition of reggae drumming.

“Baba O’Reilly” by The Who, Keith Moon. 1971

The only reason Keith Moon isn’t higher and more often on this list is the same as for Mitch Mitchell (jimi Hendrix). He never plays the same thing twice and it’s impossible to pin him down! Every song is half beats and half fills, a total maniac on the drums! Unquestionably one of the greatest rock drummers of all time, and in one of the great rock bands of all time, Moon is known much more for fills and energy than beats and grooves. But his and The Who’s legendary status warrant him this spot. Can you see the stadium lights flashing when you hear him hit those crash cymbals?

“My Sharonfa” by The Knack, Bruce Gary. 1979.

Legend has it that Bruce Gary didn’t even like this song when he first heard it. Ha! I bet he liked it a couple years later! This drum beat is so immediately recognizable, a classic, a simple and strong, dancing interplay between kick, floor, and snare. Gary might not be on the list of all time great drummers, and The Knack is a notch below some of the other bands here, but this groove is so great it made it’s way onto the list anyway. A Cinderella Story. Like Sharona getting her picture on the front of this record!

“Cissy Strut” by The Meters, Zigaboo Modeliste. 1969.

I saw Zigaboo Modeliste in 2001 play in San Francisco with his Ahkestra. It was one of those musical experiences that stuck in my mind and infected my playing and practicing for weeks afterwards. Everything I played had just a little more funk in the trunk. Zig dominated the stage and somehow finds a way to syncopate and chop up the beat while still laying it down, OH so fat. This is such an amazing groove. Both the A and the B parts. Gimme a call if you can’t figure out the hi-hat part. I got it.

“Paradise City” by Guns N’ Roses, Steven Adler. 1987.

Right when the drums come in during the intro. Those next 30 seconds. That’s what gets this song on the list. Who among us hasn’t air drummed those 30 seconds? GnR were instant rock legends, their music still sounds fresh and smart, and this was one of their mega hits. Put it on the list.

THIRD BALLOT

“I Got You (I Feel Good)” by James Brown, Clyde Stubblefield. 1964.

Tight and simple, super specific, and well-coordinated with the song, the drums on this early JB hit are signature Clyde. How many times does he hit the snare in the end after the final “so good, so good, I got you”? 10. The answer is 10.

“Take Five” by Dave Brubeck, Joe Morello. 1959.

Truly unique drum beats are less common in classic jazz as the drums play much more of an ensemble roll, layering and “comping” along in support of soloists. Jazz grooves deserve their own separate list! But this late 50’s hit by

Dave Brubeck has found a huge voice in popular culture. Joe Morello is a giant and a godfather in the jazz world. This 5/4 groove swings and moves so smoothly and fluidly it seems impossible that it could be “odd time”. And the drum solo?! Books have been written about that drum solo!

I took a private lesson from Joe Morello when I was in my early 20's, having just moved to New York City. I took the bus out to his studio in Orange, NJ. He was legally blind, sitting all the way across the room, and heard me play for about 20 seconds and he said, “loosen up the right hand. “ He was SO right. How did he know?

“Pretty Woman” by Roy Orbison, Buddy Harman. 1964.

Harmon is not on the same level of rock legend as most from this list, but this his drums MAKE this song able to be among the great classics of all time. It's a simple, 4-snare pattern, echoing the Motown grooves that were also so popular at the time. The rolling responses of the toms and the little fills in the B section give this drum part just the right amount of spice for its dish.

“Hot For Teacher” by Van Halen, Alex Van Halen. 1984.

I have a soft spot for early/mid 80's Van Halen. This was my first favorite album. There is no denying the instantly recognizable sound of this beat. Could this be like the early 80's hard rock equivalent of Sing Sing Sing? It drives the song in a similar way. Maybe there is some generous over-dubbing going on here, but this beat makes the list for it's high level of kick-a#*!!

“Amen Brother” by The Winstons, Gregory Coleman. 1969.

Most of us have heard this groove many times in many places without even realizing it. It's original location, this late 60's R&B track, didn't get nearly as much play as the 4 bar drum break in the middle of the song has gotten in the years since. It is considered to be by far the most sampled beat in history. Have a listen to the whole song...it won't take you long to find it! And it will be good for your 21st century lack of musical attention span.

“Highway Star” by Deep Purple, Ian Paice. 1972.

This song sounds just like 1972 heavy rock music. Ian Paice is so strong and precise and fast. The coordinated crashes with the guitars are so powerful and the long rolling 1/16 note fills really give this thing such intensity.

“We Will Rock You” by Queen, Roger Taylor. 1977.

This would be MUCH higher on the list if there were more kicks and snares and fewer boots and claps! But almost every person age 4 and up can name that tune right off the bat!

HONORABLE MENTION

- "The Pretender" by The Foo Fighters, Taylor Hawkins. 2007.**
- "Funky Drummer" by James Brown, Clyde Stubblefield. 1970.**
- "Kiss" by Prince, Marr Star. 1986.**
- "Jailhouse Rock" by Elvis Presley, D.J. Fontana. 1957.**
- "Schism" by Tool, Danny Carey. 2001.**
- "Use Me" by Bill Withers, James Gadson. 1972.**
- "One" by Metallica, Lars Ulrich, 1988.**
- "Nothin But a G Thang" by Dr Dre ft. Snoop Dogg, 1992.**