

Chapter 5 – Beyond Basic Strumming Patterns

In Chapter 4 we discussed how to use the lyrics in a song to find logical chord placement. However, that was only the tip of the iceberg, mainly because it doesn't show you how to use strumming patterns that are much more advanced. It just gave you a beginner example. Let's make it much harder.

We'll be using the song "Killer Queen" by Queen. It's got a LOT of chord changes, and while the timing is easy, the strumming pattern could be quite confusing if not approached at the right angle.

Let's take the first few phrases:

(Intro is Am)

 Am G
She keeps Moet and Chandon, in her pretty cabinet.
Am G
"Let them eat cake" she says, just like Mary Antoinette.

The chords are easy – just Am and G. However, in a moment the chords change - and they begin to change a lot!

First you might be wondering, "How did he know where to place the chords?"

You know that the intro is Am. The easiest way to approach this song is by first LISTENING to the performance from the original version. It's a straight 1, 2, 3, 4 with notes that technically 'staccato' which means that you'll have an abrupt strum that leaves no trailing sound. In a way you can simply mute the chord after the first strum.

You'll also notice that even though the intro is Am, I still include the 'pickup note' as I like to call them. This is nothing more than a guide into the rest of the song. You are already playing the Am, but if for some reason you FEEL that you want to change the chord, you know by a quick glance that the chord stays until otherwise noted.

Another good reason I like to include the pickup note is because – as referred to in Chapter 4, we want to find the emphasis on certain lines within a phrase. By listening to the song, you'll hear an immediate emphasis from Mercury on the word "Moet." It just comes right out. What does that tell us? For starters, it begins the first chord influence. You can basically bold that right off the bat. There are only two chords in the first line, so we need to guess where the next chord comes in. Or do we? Guessing is a dangerous word. Let's just think logically.

 Am G
She keeps **Moet** and Chandon, in her pretty cabinet.
Am G
"Let them eat cake" she says, just like Mary Antoinette.

Where does Mercury bring his voice up in pitch in the first line – AFTER the word “Moet?” First you’ll need to speak the line, and then sing it based on the Am. If you come to the word “in” then you’ve done it right!

Am G
She keeps **Moet** and Chandon, **in** her pretty cabinet.

Am G
“Let them eat cake” she says, just like Mary Antoinette.

Based on the quick hint I just gave you, where would the NEXT bolded word come in? If you still keep in mind that you are playing this song in 1, 2, 3, 4 fashion, then you know that the next chord MUST come in at the opening line of the next phrase. In other words, we’ll be bolding the word “let”. It begins the next phrase.

Can you find the next word that will supply the G chord the change? Based on the PREVIOUS passage, we have a comma at the end of “Chandon.” Since we have roughly the same number of words in the line “...’let them eat cake” she says’ we know that we could apply the G chord after the comma. It stays within a logical realm of 2 chords and both lines of this verse contain commas that separate an expression. PLUS, if you sing the line you’ll notice that Mercury sings “just” in a much higher pitch than in the previous ‘let them eat cake’ so we know a chord change needs to come.

Am G
She keeps **Moet** and Chandon, **in** her pretty cabinet.
Am G
“**Let** them eat cake” she says, **just** like Mary Antoinette.

However, what is about to happen is going to get a little more challenging. While this song stays rather consistent with a 1, 2, 3, 4 approach, a bunch of chords are going to come flying your way. Check out the next phrase:

C G C7 F
A built-in remedy, for Kruschev and Kennedy...

Fm C G
And any time an invitation, you can’t decline!

Confused yet? Don’t be. Here you’ll see that the first line contains four chords instead of the previous line that contains two chords.

The easiest way to assume the positions of the chords would be to think that for every two chords that WERE played in the first and second lines of the verse, you’ll need to add a chord between each of these two chords to make a total of four chords.

Following the same format as the first and second line of the verse, you can assume that the following words would create an easy and logical progression:

C G C7 F

A **built-in remedy**, for **Kruschev** and **Kennedy**....

Based on what we've already learned, we know we need a chord change to come in somewhere at the beginning of the phrase so that we can establish a different phrase. Previously we used the comma to note the change from Am – G, so we can use it again in this case. Since we need TWO chords before the comma, we simply add the G chord in before the comma. Only two chords left here, so using the same format in "a built-in remedy" we can assume to add the two additional chords in ANYWHERE so long as they both stay within the phrasing of the lyrics.

But what about the next line?

Fm C G

And **any** time an **invitation**, **you** can't decline!

How in the world do we do this? There are only three chords, but we STILL see a comma. Hmm...what to do?

Here is where listening to the song comes in VERY handy. If you are familiar with the song at all, you know there is a break coming up. Just because there is a break it doesn't mean that the song needs to change much. I'll be focusing more on this in Chapter 6, but for now the easiest way to interpret this line is by (1) realizing that we need a chord change, so it MUST come in at the beginning of the line. We can add the Fm chord anywhere within the first two or three words because they are small words that run together. We also know that we can add an additional chord in before the comma, because so far EVERY part of every phrase has included a comma. That actually means we've taken care of two of the three chords. The last chord is a little trickier.

How do we know that we can add the G chord to the word 'you?'

To be honest, we don't really. Instead we have to listen to the vocal performance. We hear that Mercury raises his pitch, just like he did in the first and second lines of the verse, AND we know that we're still following the 1, 2, 3, 4 concept. We just so happen to need a small break in the song to establish an open area that moves into the next part of the verse. When you run into what you could call an 'incomplete' measure, based solely on there being an even number of chords (ex. First two lines of the verse contain two chords. Second line contains four chords) we know that based on four total lines being played, we're missing a chord to 'round out' the passage. All you have to do there is count the syllables. In the phrase 'you can't decline' there are a total of 4 syllables. You is 1. Can't is 1. Decline is 2.

What does that mean? If there are only three chords played during this entire line, and we have an ending of 'you can't decline' then it means that PART of this phrase will contain no chord usage.

Can you guess which part? Simply count your 1, 2, 3, 4 again. Assign each number to each word.

1 2 3 4

"You can't de-cline..."

Now we're back to that 'ghost' that we worked with in Chapter 4. There ARE only three chords in this line, but there is a gap there, which we will be working with in Chapter 6, that allows the turnaround into the upcoming stanza.

The biggest thing to realize when moving beyond basic strumming is that the lyrics are absolutely your guide. There is no real mystery. It's just a matter of trial and error. It doesn't matter HOW you sing the lyrics. As long as they stay logical and consistent within the realm of the chords that are needed, you will start to use the lyrics – not confusing tablature and time signatures – to decide how you want to strum a given song.

The exercise you will be working with in deciding the strumming pattern is actually – in many ways – easier than the previous exercise from "All Along The Watchtower." Because there aren't too many liberties you can take with this song due to its VERY firm structure, all you are really doing here is trying to keep up with the lyrics and chord changes. In many ways this is harder than deciding how to strum the song. The focus on this is really just how quick you can change chords when prompted to do so.