

Band Roles

One of the best ways to become an effective member of the worship band on stage is to truly understand your instrument. I don't mean by this that you need to know how it works or how to technically play it (which you obviously do need to know!) but I'm talking about understanding its role and responsibilities in the band, how it interacts with other instruments and how to truly understand the way your instrument helps build the sound on stage. This handout goes into details on each instrument and it might be tempting to skip past the ones that don't apply to you, but it's good to have a rounded knowledge of each instrument in the band, even if the ones you don't play. So, let's get into it...

Building blocks of a band

First of all, it's important to have a good understanding of the different building blocks that make up a band. I'm not talking about the different instruments themselves, but the different kind of *parts* that each person is playing. These can be summed up as:

Rhythm – usually the drums but can be expanded to include all rhythmical instruments such as percussion and even parts of what the bass is playing if it's a particularly percussive part.

Bass – pretty self-explanatory. The lowest note of the chords sequence, usually played on the bass guitar or the left hand on a keyboard.

Chords – again pretty straightforward, usually played on the guitar and/or keys.

Melody – the top line of the song and can include vocal melodies as well as lead lines on the guitar or keyboard.

There is a lot of crossover amongst these parts too (think of a keyboard player playing chords as well as a melody line over the top). With these four areas defined, however, it's good to look at each instrument in detail.

1. Drums

Role in the band - Drums are pretty exclusive to playing rhythmical parts. They keep the track ticking along and often dictate the dynamics and feel of a track more than any other instrument on stage.

Responsibilities - *Time keeping* is vitally important as a drummer. This is not to say that other members of the band are not also trying to stay in time but that the drummer is the person that rest of the band is watching in terms of tempo, count ins and endings. If your drummer can't stay in time, neither will your band. The drummer is also pivotal in dictating *dynamics*. More than any other instrument they can take a track up or down in terms of the feel and they are often the person who needs to be most aware of what the worship leader is trying to get the band to do at any one time. If you see the worship leader wants the track to get louder, it's going to mainly fall to the drummer to drag the rest of the band up to that higher dynamic and energy. The same goes for taking a track down too.

Important relationships – The drummer has a really important role to play in interlocking their part with the *bass player*. Together they are often called the 'rhythm section' because their parts should fit seamlessly together. The bass player and kick

drum should be complimenting each other in terms of the rhythms they are playing. That's not to say that the bass should always be playing the same rhythm as the kick drum, but they should be doing more often than not.

The other important relationship that we've already touched upon is between the drummer and the *worship leader*. The drummer needs to think of themselves as almost leading the song *with* the worship leader, as the influence their playing has on the direction, arrangement and dynamics of a track is massive. They need to keep their head up and watching the leader at all times. They are also massively important in leading from one section to another. A well-timed build up or fill can really help lead the band from one section of a song to another.

2. Bass

Role in the band – The bass part underpins the chords being played by the keys and guitar. It helps define a chord sequence and adds depth to the sound on stage.

Responsibilities - *Time keeping* is important for a bass player, but in a slightly different way to the drummer. The bass player needs to be defining the chord sequence and the way this happens most of the time is by hitting the bass note at the start of each chord change. A badly timed bass note can really throw a chord sequence off or fail to give it definition. It's also their job to add *depth* to the sound on stage. The bass occupies a low frequency range that no other member of the band (barring the left hand of a keyboard part) can reach and it really creates a rich sound when you have a good bass part underneath your chord sequence. The bass can, of course, embellish their parts with passing notes, fills and even melodies at times, but it's important to understand the bass player's main responsibility is to reinforce the chord sequence with their bass notes.

Important relationships – The drummer is the most important person the bass player will be thinking about on stage (*see the important relationships section for the drummer*).

The other important relationship the bass player should be thinking about is with the *guitars* and *keys*. They need to be complimenting the chord sequences played by these instruments and making sure that their fills don't clash with any fills those guys are playing.

3. Guitars and Keys

Role in the band – The guitars and keyboards are some of the most versatile instruments on stage. They can feel quite at home playing the chords, melodies or even adding to the rhythm parts with a particularly percussive strumming pattern (think classic Nile Rodgers or Mumford and Sons).

Responsibilities – Defining the *harmony* is the biggest responsibility a guitarist or keyboard player has. It's these instruments that fill out the chord sequence and sketch out the harmony that fits with the vocals. Knowing your chords and even knowing extended chords and inversions is an essential part of any guitarist or keyboard player's arsenal.

Texture is also a vital part of what these instruments offer in a band setting. By texture, we mean how thick or dense a section of the music is at any given time. The guitar or keyboards can help fill out the sound with a heavily strummed part or pad, or thin out a section with some finger picking, lead line or broken up chords on the piano.

The drummer may be the one dictating the dynamics of a section of a song but the guitarist or keyboard player is often the one helping them out by taking their playing up or down.

Providing *melodies* is also an important thing about playing guitar or keys in worship. You might want to double up on the vocals by playing the main melody but, more often than not, you might find yourself filling in with melodies in the linking sections between different sections of the song. You might also have to play a lead line over an instrumental section of a song (usually before or after the bridge).

Important relationships – The most important relationships the guitarists and keyboard players have is *between each other* on stage. If there is more than one guitar playing, it's important for each to understand what the other one is playing and find a way for their parts to compliment each other. If someone is strumming the chords on an acoustic guitar then it's up to the other guitarist to find some chord voicings further up the neck and not just duplicate what the first guitarist is playing. It's important for guitar and keyboard rhythms to fit in well with each other too. Make sure your part fits in rhythmically with the other chord instruments (and what the drummer is playing) because the easiest way to create an unfocussed, dense sound is to fill the space with everyone playing different rhythms on top of one another.

If the keyboard player is playing a melody over the linking passages between verses then it's going to sound incredibly busy if the guitarist also starts playing a different melody on top. Keep your ears open to what the other chordal instruments are playing and always be aware of whether your part is complimenting what they are playing or clashing.

4. Singers/ Worship Leader

Role in the band – The singers are singing the melodies in a band situation (obviously) but, more importantly, in a worship setting it's their job to lead the congregation and the band in worship. Even if you're not the nominal worship leader, you're still singing the most important part of any worship song: the lyrics.

Responsibilities – *Leading the congregation* through the song is the most important thing a singer needs to be doing in the band at the front of church. They are showing where the song is leading, helping the melody along and are the main focal point in the worship band. This may sound fairly straightforward but it's worth noting that even though you might embellish the melody and add harmonies, someone always needs to be singing the main vocal line, otherwise you're going to start to lose people in the congregation. There are moments when the spirit can take you to improvising and going completely off track from the melody, and this is a good thing, but doing this too often will lose the people you are supposed to be leading.

As a worship leader, you also need to be *leading the band*. You need to make sure that they understand any hand signals you're using, understand the feel and tempo you're going for and know about any linking sections between songs or any special parts in the arrangement. You also need to be listening to *where the Holy Spirit is leading*. This is very tricky to do and the more you lead worship and try to build up your spiritual relationship with God, the easier this gets. Always be prepared to adapt to the way a service is moving and always be clear with your band about the direction you want to take the music.

Important relationships – The relationship between the *singers* and the *worship leader* is pivotal. If you're a backing singer, you need to be really in tune with where the worship leader is going and be ready to follow them at all times.

As a worship leader you need to have good communication on stage with the entire band, but out of all of them, the *drums* are often your most important tool in dictating dynamics and direction of a track. If you want to build a section then once you've got your drummer building up, the rest of the band will follow their lead. This is not to ignore your communication with the other instruments as you need to be really clear about changing between sections, especially if you're taking the music in a direction you'd not planned for as a band. The role of worship leader needs unpacking fully in a further handout, but for the meantime, these are the most important aspects in a nutshell.

Summary

All these sections are very brief and, as a musician in the worship team, you should always be looking to improve what you are doing and to expand the knowledge of your instrument and how it fits in with the rest of the guys with you on stage. Sharing thoughts with the other people that play your instrument in the team, listening to how others play your parts, and listening to plenty of worship tracks in your own time are all great ways of improving. Searching out videos on youtube can often help too but if you need more guidance, speak to one of the leaders in the worship team and they'll be able to point you in the right direction.