


# Reels

## 2|2 or “cut time”

### *alla breve*

Characteristics of the reel form:

- The melody line consists largely of eighth-notes with accents on counts 1 and 3. In 4|4 time the count is identical to the beat. In 2|2 time with only two beats per measure, the accents occur on 1 and 2.
- The overwhelming proportion of reels are two part tunes, A and B with an overall form of AABB as one chorus of the melody. A few reels are played ABAB. These are the exception, not the rule.
- The A or B part of a reel are usually eight bars. These eight bars are subdivided into four-bar and sometimes two-bar phrases.
- Reels that have a C-part or that span more than 8-parts to a part are called “crooked” tunes.
- The reel is often the first dance learned when studying Irish step dancing. The dance movements are done in soft shoes.
- The reel is the most popular music form in Irish dancing.
- A treble reel is as dance form performed in hard shoes. The music is simply a reel.

The time signature for a reel is usually given as 4|4 [called “common time”]. BUT, playing a reel in this time signature makes for a choppy performance choppy. Most traditional musicians play reels in the time signature of 2|2 [called “cut time,  , or *alla breve* ].

The reel has a time signature of either 2|2 or 4|4. Much dispute can be found over which time signature is the “right” one. In both time signatures, measures span the same melodic content. Older transcriptions seem to make use of the 2|2 time signature. Contemporary transcriptions more often than not appear in 4|4 time signature.

### **How to count the reel**

In 4|4 there are four quarter notes in each measure and these are divided in half to form eight-eighth notes. Accents fall on beats 1 and 3.

### Beats and Counts of During One Measure of a Reel Transcribed in 4|4

4 4 Time Signature Note Value	θ		θ		θ		θ	
Beats Foot taps	1		2		3		4	
Count - - <i>How the music is played</i>	1 <b>accent</b>	and	2	and	3 <b>accent</b>	and	4	and
Common Note value in melody	ε	δε	ε	ε	ε	ε	ε	ε

In 2|2 there are two half-notes in each measure. These divide into four quarter-notes. Usually a transcription in 2|2 is easier to read than one in 4|4 because there are fewer eighth-notes and sixteenth-notes. Accents in 2|2 fall on count 1 and count 2. These are, of course, the principal beats of the time signature. This is one reason many traditional musicians argue that reels should be transcribed and played in 2|2 time signature. Many bodhran performance mix up the placement of accents to be only on count 1 and sometimes on counts 1 and 2.

### Beats and Counts During Two Measures of a Reel Transcribed in 2|2

2 2 Time Signature Note Value	η		η	
Beats Foot taps	1		2	
Count - - <i>How the music is played</i>	1 <b>accent</b>	and	2 <b>accent</b>	and
Common Note value in melody	θ	θ	θ	θ

In 4/4 time, emphasis falls on beats 1 and 3. In 2/2 time emphasis falls on beat 1 and sometimes beat 2. Some musicians find it easier to read music notated in 2/2 than music written in 4/4. 2/2 notation requires fewer eighth and sixteenth notes at fast tempos. However, a great deal of published reels are written in 4/4 time. Bodhran players often subdivide, or count, the beats of 2/2 in such a way that it may seem like playing in 4/4. This discussion of time signature may seem like a tempest in a teapot. But, it's very important to understand how rhythm works in practice. A performance played in 2/2 is more energetic than one played in 4/4. All the reel patterns below are explained assuming a time signature of 2/2

Many players find it helpful to remind themselves of the rhythm of a reel by speaking words that have four syllables. "Wa-ter Mel-lon" or if you are mathematically inclined say "Log-a-ri-thm". Emphasis falls on "wa" and "mel" or "log" and "ri". These word patterns can be helpful to bodhran players to locate the position of up and down strokes and rests. But, in the end, thinking in 2/2 must prevail to get the emphasis correct. So, work out the patterns counting in four, if need be. Then, place the pattern within a 2/2 context. That means emphasizing the first beat of each measure. In more complex patterns other beats may also be emphasized.









For longer patterns, count the measures. Let the measure number placing beat one. That pattern counts this was: 1 – 2, 2 – 2, 3 – 2, 4 – 2, and so on.

A set of suggested reel patterns follow. These begin with a few simple rhythmic patterns and gradually add embellishments to bring the performance alive. All of the embellishment techniques, which include tonality, triplets, rolls, shifting emphasis, can be interchanged and mixed into playing in any order. That's how a performance is kept interesting.

*When learning any new rhythm pattern it will help to say the movements aloud as you play.*

## Foundational Reel Pattern #1 – Stroke on Every Beat

### #1 Basic Reel Pattern – two full measures

Measure 1				Measure 2			
1	and	2	and	1	and	2	and
DOWN	up	down	up	DOWN	up	down	up
							









Say aloud: DOWN and 2 and DOWN and 2 and

### #2 – Reel – with Stops

The “open” tones should be the lowest melodious pitch of the drum. That is not necessarily a fully “open”, hands off pitch. Try a gentle pressure on the inside of the head. This may ease the boominess of the drum.









Many players implement this stop-pattern by leaving the hand inside the drum at its lowest position. During the “open” beats, the hand is mostly off the drum head. During the “closed” beats the hand rest solidly on the drum head to choke off the sound and raise the pitch.

This pattern really pushes a melody. Mix it into other reel patterns. Use this pattern on one pass on one part of a tune, then move to a new pattern.

Measure 1				Measure 2			
1	and	2	and	1	and	2	and
open	open	closed	closed	open	open	closed	closed
DOWN	up	down	up	DOWN	up	down	up
							

### #3 - Reel Rhythm – Off beat emphasis

This pattern produces an exciting back beat. Sort of rock-n-roll for Celtic music







Measure 1				Measure 2			
1	and	2	and	1	and	2	and
DOWN	up	down	up	DOWN	up	down	up
		<i>tone</i>					
							

The “*tone*” can be either high or low. Take your pick. The tone can also be left out. However, the change in pitch really helps the drama of this pattern.

### Fundamental Reel Pattern #2 – Added Silence








#### #4 Reel Pattern – Add silence

Silence in music is just as important, sometimes more so, than sound. Dropping out a strike to add silence can be very effective and give your wrist a rest too.

Measure 1				Measure 2			
1	and	2	and	1	and	2	and
<b>DOWN</b>	<i>rest</i>	down	up	<b>DOWN</b>	<i>rest</i>	down	up
	γ				γ		

### #5 Reel Pattern – Add silence and stretch








Make a heavy down stroke on beat one. Then rest. Then count six strokes starting on a down stroke and repeat the pattern.

Measure 1				Measure 2			
1	and	2	and	1	and	2	and
<b>DOWN</b>	<i>rest</i>	down	up	<b>DOWN</b>	up	down	up
	γ						








### #6 Reel Pattern – Silence with rim shot

Rim shots add emphasis to playing. BUT! Like seasoning in any recipe, it's easy to overdo it. As a rule of thumb stop rim shots after one pass through one part of a tune. Even that may be too much. Use rim shots occasionally to spice up the playing.









The first of these patterns is #4 Reel Pattern but beat one becomes a rim shot. This places the rim shot on the down beat

Measure 1				Measure 2			
1	and	2	and	1	and	2	and
<b>Rim Shot</b>	<i>rest</i>	down	up	down	up	down	up
	γ						

Rim shots are often placed on the back beat which is generally the up stroke for bodhran players. This emphasizes arsis over thesis in the music. Doing this in each measure is a bit much. A useful alternative to this pattern is to place the rim shot at the end of every other measure.

Measure 1				Measure 2			
1	and	2	and	1	and	2	and
<b>DOWN</b>	<i>rest</i>	down	up	down	<i>rest</i>	down	<i>rim shot</i>
	7						








### #7 Reel Pattern with Tonality

Measure 1				Measure 2			
1	and	2	and	1	and	2	and
DOWN	up	down	up	DOWN	up	down	up
Low Tone		High Tone		Low Tone		High Tone	
							

Using tonality on the emphasized beat makes a huge difference in the feel of the pattern. It's the same steady up and down. But, the pitch change makes the pattern come alive.

This pattern makes use of low pitch tones on the first down-up pair and high pitch tones on the second down-up pair. Reversing this works well too. Do one pass of one part of the melody using. Do the second pass on the part by switching to an altogether different pattern. Mix up the patterns to keep the performance interesting.

### #8 - Reel Rhythm – Add silence and swoop

Measure 1				Measure 2			
1	and	2	and	1	and	2	and
<b>Swoop</b>	<i>rest</i>	down	up	down	up	down	up
	7						









This pattern makes a great sound. However, it requires a lot of movement and pressure on the drum head. You will also find that the friction heats both the drum head and the heel of your hand. Make certain that the interior of your drum head is smooth, conditioned and has talcum powder on the surface. It isn't realistic to do this for very long. Mix this pattern in with others to rest your interior hand. Too much of this will generate a blister on the heel of your hand!

## The Turn-Around

Most reels have two parts that are each eight bars long. Generally each part repeats the eight bars. The point in the music where the repeat occurs is called "the turn-around". In 2|2 time the turnaround is often two measures long. In 4|4 time the turnaround may be only one measure. It depends upon the melody. The turn-around is a spot when the bodhran can add a lot of texture to the music.

**Turn-around Pattern #1 – descending tonality**

Play the pattern as it was introduced in Basic Reel Pattern #1. Begin with the interior hand high in the drum applying a lot of pressure to generate a very high pitch. As the pattern progresses with alternative strokes, slide the hand to the bottom of the drum and ease off on the pressure. The goal is to move decrease the pressure, and hence pitch, from high to low during the course of the two measures.

Measure 1				Measure 2			
1	and	2	and	1	and	2	and
DOWN	up	down	up	down	up	down	up
							
<b>high pitch</b>				→ <b>low pitch</b>			









**Turn-around Pattern #2 – descending tonality with a roll**

A roll is just a series of triplets. Replace each down and up stroke with a triplet throughout the turn-around. Move the pitch from high to low and the bodhran will create some drama at just the right time in the music.







Measure 1				Measure 2			
1	and	2	and	1	and	2	and
Triplet	Triplet	Triplet	Triplet	Triplet	Triplet	Triplet	Triplet
<b>high pitch</b>				→ <b>low pitch</b>			

**Turn-around Pattern #3 – descending tonality with strong backbeats**

There are many possibilities for this pattern. The goal is to emphasis the back beat while applying decreasing tension in order to drop the pitch. The pattern below is only one possibility.

Measure 1				Measure 2			
1	and	2	and	1	and	2	and
DOWN	up	down	UP	down	up	down	up
							
<b>high pitch</b>				→ <b>low pitch</b>			

It is also useful to create a pattern in which some of the strokes are omitted. Here is one possibility

Measure 1				Measure 2			
1	and	2	and	1	and	2	and
DOWN	<i>rest</i>	down	UP	down	<i>rest</i>	down	up
	γ				γ		
<b>high pitch</b>				<b>low pitch</b>			

### Turn-around Pattern #4 – *do nothing*

A good option is to stop playing during the turnaround. Let the melody and chords have this bar or two bars. It's good technique that gives your wrist a bit of a rest. When you resume playing on beat 1 of either the A or B part, it will help the listener identify a repeat or new beginning in the tune.

## Making a Performance

The chief technique for making a great performance on a tune is to keep the listener off-guard and the musicians at tempo. Doing the same thumping throughout two full passes of the tune (A BB and AA BB again) makes the music stale. One approach is to use a different pattern on each part of the tune. Here's an example.

<u>Part</u>	<u>Pattern</u>
A	#1 Basic Reel Pattern
Turn around	Turn Around Pattern #1 Descending tonality
A	#2 Reel Pattern with Stops
Turn around	Turn Around Pattern # 4 <i>do nothing</i>
B	#6 Reel Pattern – Silence with rim shot at end of pattern
Turn around	Turn-around Pattern #3 – <i>descending tonality with strong backbeats</i>
B	#8 - Reel Rhythm – <i>Add silence and swoop</i>



The second pass should be any mix of the patterns previously studied or new patterns.

Studying the patterns must not lock you into rigid performances. Patterns are learned so that you will build up a tool box filled with many different alternatives to support melodies. In the end you will begin to “think bodhran”. That is, rather than memorizing a specific pattern to play in any particular part of a tune, you will instinctively play a pattern you think fits well. Then when the part changes or repeats, you choose a new pattern. The turn-around is treated in the same way. You have several to choose from. Use them as you see fit. You will eventually have sufficient confidence to play intuitively. The key is to learn many different patterns, practice these regularly and apply them when you are in a session.

## Practice Techniques

To gain speed, confidence and recall of patterns, will require thoughtful practice time. Use these three techniques in your practice.

- 1. Work with a metronome.** These devices are inexpensive and indispensable for musicians, especially percussionists. Buy one and use it. No excuses. Many tablet computers have access to metronome apps.
- 2. Play Along with Recordings.** Pull out your CDs or mps and play along. If you don't have many Celtic recordings, try one of the online streaming services. I like [www.pandora.com](http://www.pandora.com). The service is available for free or subscription. Set up an “Irish” station and you'll hear a lot of jigs and reels. Also try [www.Tradconnect](http://www.Tradconnect). Scroll down the homepage to listen to this month's current selection of recordings. Or go into one of their groups such as fiddle or whistle and play along with tunes there. Yes, there is a bodhran group on this free website.
- 3. Purchase “The Amazing Slowdowner”.** This \$50 investment can be very helpful in getting quality practice time. The software is able to slow down the tempo of music WITHOUT distorting the pitch. If you have trouble playing at full tempo during practice, load the tune into The Amazing Slowdowner and drop the tempo to 70% or 80% of full speed. Practice at the slower tempo. Find the product here: <http://www.ronimusic.com/slowdown.htm>