



UNDER THE INFLUENCES

Whether straight or tangled, the lines of artistic inspiration traced by *In Tune's* Influences page can be drawn further in the classroom.

BY KATE KOENIG

One of the most interesting tasks we have at *In Tune Monthly* is the constructing of our Influences column. It begins as a kind of backwards scavenger hunt; we'll select a current artist (usually someone with a song or album in the charts at the time of selection), then we'll hunt down three of that artist's influencers, going further back in history for each one.

Whether we know the background of the featured artist or not, this exercise is likely to yield surprises. A central question that guides our hunt is: Who has the artist—not a fan, not a critic, not a biographer, but the actual artist—named as an influence?

[INFLUENCES] CONNECTING MUSICIANS THROUGH TIME

PHOTOS: (TOP) THABAROOS MCADAMS/WIREIMAGE; (MIDDLE) JOHNSON/EMMETT MALLON; (HARPER) LEFRANC/GAMMA-RAPHOD/GETTY IMAGES; (BOT) KARL MONTAGNA/RETNA/RETNA/SHUTTERSTOCK

Charlie Puth to Taj Mahal

CHARLIE PUTH is a classically trained pianist, but his influences have a lot to do with Mozart or Chopin. That said, he does play a slick snippet of the piano itself to open his 2016 hit "One Call Away." Puth studied jazz at the Manhattan School of Music and got his first exposure from a wide range of genres, but he's singled out the "surf rock" stylings of Jack Johnson as a key influence.

BEN HARPER is a soulful singer and gifted songwriter. Although BEN HARPER is a soulful singer and gifted songwriter, it was his exceptional guitar playing on a high-end steel guitar that first got the attention of the music press. Young, and a man who played guitar on his first major tour in 1990—was influenced by Taj Mahal.

TAJ MAHAL grew up in New Jersey, but his interest in the blues and Indian music have made him a legend. This singer-songwriter-instrumentalist has been crossing genre boundaries for more than 50 years.

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Our natural inclination to categorize individual artists by style can lead us to shortchange them of their individual backgrounds. Rather than assume that each artist must have been influenced by the older members of their genre, it's worth examining (where it's possible to do so) the specific influences they drew from their parents, teachers, bandmates, travels, and collaborations. Artists' personal circumstances tend to dictate their sound more than the history of the genre to which they appear to belong.

Some artists are eclectic, drawing inspiration from a varied mix of sounds, while others take a more linear path through the halls of a genre's founders and traditionalists. Some genres develop by being passed down

from generation to generation, while some are born new, the product of a unique convergence of styles and events. You'll find plenty of both types of artists and genres in these pages, but what we find especially intriguing are the lines of influence that catch us off guard. Here are three examples from past issues of *In Tune*, along with some suggestions on how you can make use of them in your classroom.

JANUARY 2017: PRINCE ROYCE TO MANUEL CALDERÓN

The January 2017 edition of Influences is a perfect illustration of a genre growing

Prince Royce to José Manuel Calderón

A major force in Latin pop, **PRINCE ROYCE**—born Geoffrey Royce Rojas to Dominican parents in the New York borough of the Bronx—started making music seriously in his teens. His debut album, released when he was 20, topped the *Billboard* Latin Albums chart and went double platinum. His fourth and most recent album, 2015's *Double Vision*, is his first with primarily English lyrics. Royce has frequently cited the group Aventura as a key early influence.



BLAS DURÁN's musical career began in the Dominican Republic in the 1960s, but it was his distinctive use of a four-string electric guitar in the mid-'80s that first put the bachata sound on the international map. Before Durán, the genre had mainly used acoustic instruments, following the example set by José Manuel Calderón.

With 1962's "Borracho de Amor," Dominican native **JOSÉ MANUEL CALDERÓN** became the first person to record a bachata song. The word "bachata" refers to an informal party in the country and was originally used to put down the genre (much like country music was once called "hillbilly"). In the '60s, bachata was gritty folk music. Today, thanks to Prince Royce and others, it's evolved into something more modern-sounding—and far more popular.



through generations, with each one making contributions to further the style. The progression from José Manuel Calderón to Prince Royce highlights a linear development within the same genre of music (bachata) and the same culture (Dominican).

If not for the work of the bachata artists before him, Prince Royce wouldn't be the artist he is today. José Manuel Calderón made

the first bachata recordings, giving the genre a respected platform. Blas Durán brought it into the modern era when he became the first bachata artist to play electric guitar. Aventura pushed the style further by being the first group to sing in English, while also blending bachata with American hip-hop and R&B influences.

PHOTOS: (ROYCE) ALEXANDER TAMARGO/GETTY IMAGES, (AVVENTURA) GARY GERSHOFF/WIREIMAGE

PHOTOS: (KARA) ANDREW LIPOVSKY/NETTIE, (LA HAYA) GUY STEPHENS/REDFERNS, (MIGUEL) GUY STEPHENS/REDFERNS, (CHAKA KHAN) ROBERT KIRSCHNER

La Cara to Chaka Khan



LA CARA—one of the most iconic figures of Latin jazz and funk has won many fans in the last five years, most notably through her duet with Prince Royce on his 2014 album *Art Official Age*. Not long ago, though, she says that as a producer, she made an even stronger connection with the music of La Bawita.

In the 1990s, **MARY J. BLIGE** became known as "The Queen of Hip-Hop Soul" with her megahit albums *What's the 411?* and *My Life*. Two decades later, the 46-year-old singer-songwriter has found the perfect combination of smoothness and grit in her influences, Chaka Khan.

CHAKA KHAN first came to attention in the 1970s as the lead vocal in the disco group Rufus. Since then, she has sold millions of records worldwide. Khan also has a new album, *Chaka*, the first major pop artist to include a rapper on one of her tracks, the title track hit "I'm for You," featuring grandmaster Flash.

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[INFLUENCES] CONNECTING MUSICIANS THROUGH TIME

Ruth B. to Barbra Streisand

Just Boy,” the debut single by 21-year-old American singer-songwriter **RUTH B.** could be the oddest song to make 2016’s pop charts in just over 50 minutes of solo piano and voice, with lyrics that make you wonder if Barrie’s Peter Pan, Ruth & Esmeralda, and the balladry also recalls Adele, another singer who likes to sing her songs down and wear her heart on her sleeve.

Best known for her 1990 hit cover of Prince’s “Nothing Compares 2 U,” **BARBRA STREISAND** has been a commanding presence in movies, TV, and on stage since she was 15. Her teacher, the late Marvin Hamlisch, was a very different type of song “Evergreen” by Barbra Streisand.



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[INFLUENCES] CONNECTING MUSICIANS THROUGH TIME

Usher to Lonnie Johnson

With his eighth album, 2016’s *Hard II Love*, Usher Raymond IV has shown that he’s a hugely successful singing career that began in the late 1990s. Over the past 20 years, his smooth blend of R&B and mainstream pop has made him one of the best-selling artists in American music history. His popularity and ambition link him to many influences: Michael Jackson, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye (whom Usher actually portrayed in a TV movie called *American Dreams*).

MARY GAYE was a star performer for the Motown label during the 1960s but made his greatest cultural impact in the 1970s. She sang on the title track of the 1971 album *Marvin's On*. Gaye deeply addressed many other subjects, including Franklin Sinatra, his “King Cole,” and Cyndi Lauper.

CIVILLE MCFARRETT’s high tenor voice was a crucial early ingredient of the Miracles, the R&B group he helped form in 1959. As a solo artist, he made his first waves with recordings of Motown hits at the Apollo Theater. The song he chose to sing here, “Lonnie Johnson,” is named after the bluesman.

Although he became best known as a blues singer, New Orleans native **LONNIE JOHNSON** was also a jazz harmonica player. His guitar work on a series of 1970s recordings had a major influence on the development of jazz, and he was the first blues musician to play an electrically amplified violin.



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What's interesting about this progression is that it shows how a genre developed before the age of globalization. Bachata evolved in the countryside of the Dominican Republic, played by artists whose talents were nurtured within their own culture rather than by the Internet, TV, radio, or international pop. It's folk music, and it couldn't have grown into its modern form without being personally shared between musicians—that's how the folk tradition has always worked.

Play your students songs by each of the bachata artists in chronological order and have them listen for common threads. The sequence shouldn't reveal dramatic changes, but rather building-block contributions from each individual artist.

DECEMBER 2016: BON IVER TO PAUL ROBESON

The sequence of the December 2016 Influences bolsters our earlier point that every artist has personal, at times surprising, tastes. Modern folk act Bon Iver, led by singer/songwriter Justin Vernon, is starkly one-of-a-kind. Vernon's songs are characterized by ethereal, celestial-sounding vocals and smatterings of electronics amid ambient folk instruments. On the evidence of the band's most recent release, *22, A Million*, it can be difficult to place them in any category at all, let alone determine their influences—which is why it's so fascinating to observe those influences on paper.

Unlike Prince Royce, Bon Iver's sound isn't one that comes from generations of tradition. The fact that Vernon would name Stevie Nicks as one of his biggest inspirations just goes to show how an individual artist can construct an entirely new sound out of his own personal perceptions of what he's grown up listening to. (Listen to the Bon Iver single "33 'GOD'" and see if you are at any point reminded of Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours*.)

The line from Nicks to Buffy Sainte-Marie is not as surprising, though the connection between Sainte-Marie and Paul Robeson is a bit more so—making another point that artists of different cultural backgrounds can have deep influence on one another that results in strong career parallels. Lead students through the same type of exercise as

Lorde to Ben E. King

With her 2013 debut single "Royals," **NORAH JONES** (born Ella Yelich-O'Connor) became a household name when she turned 17. Her new album, *Melodrama*, is due next month, and it shows she hasn't lost her taste for melodic, slightly charged electronic pop. You can hear many influences in Lorde's music, but its quirky randomness is the mark of another precious singer-songwriter: Fiona Apple.

In the 1970s, **LAURA NYRO** found fame while she was still in her teens, writing songs like "And I Love Her" and "Coney Island Lineup." Her songs have maintained an intimacy and depth that few other artists like Adele, Mariah Carey, and Laura Nyro.

Like Lorde, **FIONA APPLE** found fame while she was still in her teens, writing songs like "Royals" and "White Skies." Like Lorde, her songs have maintained an intimacy and depth that few other artists like Adele, Mariah Carey, and Laura Nyro.

In the 1970s, **BEN E. KING** became a big hit for a variety of offset performances, including more amorous, drew a rabid cult following. In the 1980s, she covered songs by 10 acts who'd been particularly inspirational to her, including Spanish singer "Spanish Harlem" by Eric Clapton.

As lead singer for the Drifters in the 1950s and then the Chambers Brothers in the 1960s, **BEN E. KING** became a soul icon. In the 1970s, he went solo and especially "Stand by Me" remains as an every example of his voice to be heard in soul music.

Bon Iver to Paul Robeson

BON IVER's hazy, gently muddling alternative folk music has won a pile of industry awards, including a 2016 Grammy for album *22, A Million* (which reached No. 2 on the *Billboard* chart). Listen to the song "Wild Heart" and make no secret of being inspired by multiple sources, including rock star Stevie Nicks. He recently called a 1981 clip of Nicks singing "Wild Heart" while preparing for a photo shoot "my favorite YouTube video of all time."

As both a core member of Fleetwood Mac and a solo artist, **STEVIE NICKS** has been creating a mythical mix of rock, folk, and country music since the mid-1970s, achieving world fame in the mid-1970s. She has also had a successful career mostly the work of folk artists like Bob Dylan, Donavan, and Buffy Sainte-Marie.

Born in Canada to Creole parents, **BUFFY SAINTE-MARIE** (born 1941) has a folk scene with powerful songs and a unique style of vocal inflections. In her music, her activism, and her political and social company (vanguard), she followed the path of singer Paul Robeson.

PAUL ROBESON was a man of many talents (actor, singer, football player, and political activist) but he's best remembered for his powerful bass singing voice, which he used in the definitive version of "Ol' Man River" from the 1937 musical *Show Boat*.

before, playing a song by each of the artists in chronological order, but this time ask students to identify connections between smaller ideas in each song rather than their overall sound. What pieces of Robeson's work would Sainte-Marie have borrowed, or would Nicks have borrowed from Sainte-Marie? Can students imagine how the ripple effect of Robeson's artistic impact could have shaped an aspect of Bon Iver's otherworldly sound in the present day?

MAY 2017: LORDE TO BEN E. KING

The lineup in the May 2017 Influences could leave a lot of readers scratching their heads at first. Listening to the fresh, electronic, often sparse sound of Lorde, it might not be

so easy to hear her connection to an old-school R&B artist like Ben E. King. But when you focus on one particular aspect of Lorde's artistry—the tonal warmth in her voice—that connection becomes a bit clearer.

So how do we get to King from Lorde? You can definitely see how Fiona Apple's artsy, idiosyncratic songs would influence Lorde, not so much in their sound but in their honest, eclectic approach. Neither is it surprising that Apple, a piano-based singer/songwriter, would be influenced by the distinctive mix of jazz, R&B, and soul concocted by Laura Nyro, an earlier piano-based singer/songwriter. And finally, Nyro's appreciation of Ben E. King was made clear when she covered his "Spanish Harlem" on a 1971 tribute album to her inspirations.

Of course, King doesn't need a line of influenced artists to be remembered for his work—his 1961 song "Stand by Me" is still relevant in present-day culture, a timeless hit that maintains a regular presence in films and TV. He might not be the first person that comes to mind when listening to Lorde, but the more you think about it, the more it makes sense that Lorde's modern brand of soul music owes a great debt to singers like King.

Play songs by each of these artists in sequence, while encouraging students to focus especially on the artist's vocal expression and songwriting vision.

THE NEXT GENERATION

To take these exercises a step further, have students come up with their own Influences column, choosing a song they like and researching the artists that may have influenced the songwriter. Challenge them to identify not just songs that belong to the same genre, but songs that have similar vocal melodies, chord progressions, beats, and other elements. After they've chosen a series of artists, ask them to think critically about why they drew the connections they did, and be prepared to articulate why the influence is likely more than just a coincidence. Ultimately, students should understand that the development of an artist's personal taste can come from unexpected places—and without that personal taste, no one would sound like they do. **T**

Turning Down the Cymbal Sounds

The drum educator's solution to better lessons and healthier hearing

Let's face it. Jamming on the drums and crashing on a bright and cutting set of cymbals can be tough on the eardrums. While most musicians get used to it and accept the fact that they make a lot of noise, there can be limitations for when and where you can play the drums.

For music educators who teach in small lesson rooms, classrooms or home studios, noise levels may need to be controlled or the lessons may be limited to certain hours of the day.



Loud noises can lead to ear fatigue or even noise-induced hearing loss.

To help solve the challenge of noise levels, the world's #1 cymbal company, Zildjian has created a series of low volume cymbals that are up to 80% quieter than traditional cymbals. They are crafted using a specialized hole pattern that delivers the best of both worlds: musical sound and lower volume—all without losing the authentic Zildjian feel.

Larry Rodbell has been teaching drums to students of all ages in Annapolis, Maryland, for the last 20 years, and added Zildjian's L80 Low Volume cymbals into his home studio in 2016. "It's been great to be able to talk and play throughout the lesson. In the past, I had

to shout louder with a lot of stop and go. Now I can get more accomplished in a 30-minute lesson." Outside of Larry's home studio, he also teaches drums at a local Music & Arts location, the same studios where he learned to play drums at age 13. Larry feels that the low volume cymbals have helped cut down on the noise levels within rooms that are directly next to other studios.

Additionally, Larry praises the L80 Low Volume cymbals for helping reduce ear fatigue after 5-8 hours a day and over 50+ lessons taught each week. "My ears are more relaxed throughout the day and I see my students be able to put their full energy into their drumming without having the excess volume."

For the student drummer at home, having cymbals that are up to 80% quieter can allow for more practice time in a day. "Back in the '90s when I was living with a bunch of guys in a small apartment in Los Angeles, hoping to make it big on the Sunset Strip, I had very little space and could not make any loud noises without disturbing our neighbors. These cymbals would have helped me practice more, play later and longer."

Reducing the volume of a cymbal or drum set is nothing new, but what separates Zildjian's L80 Low Volume cymbals from muffle pads, t-shirts, e-drum kits or old rubber inner tubes is the feel. "When I was young, I used to put my own set of towels with holes over the cymbals like a blanket. With these low volume cymbals, they look beautiful, sound great and it's the closest thing you can get to playing a real Zildjian cymbal without the volume."

L80 Low Volume cymbals are designed for practice situations. When playing standard cymbals in performance, we recommend investing in earplugs. ●

ABOUT LARRY RODBELL

Larry is a professional drummer, clinician and educator and has been teaching drums to students of all ages for over 20 years. He has a home studio in Annapolis, MD and teaches at a Music & Arts in Severna Park, MD. Larry is also the Percussion Coach and Percussion Ensemble Director at Magogthy River Middle school in Arnold, MD.