

Feature Story: Funk Essentials

National Standards: 1, 7-9, 10

So-called “Funk” music is a sub-genre of R&B and soul music, like reggae, built on a foundation of rhythm. But unlike reggae, which modifies tempo but almost always uses the same rhythmic structure, Funk can employ, as the writer of this In Tune story states, repetitive, interlocking, syncopated rhythmic patterns that can be molded into short songs or long jams. The long jams of funk artists inspired the adaptation of disco – which began as a song form – to the longer, free-form and rhythmically based “electronic dance music” jams that evolved in the late 80s and 90s. Hip-hop too borrowed from Funk in the performances of MCs and their stagecraft.

The lessons in this In Tune Techniques feature include the stylistic evolution of popular music – in this case R&B and soul – from its gospel, jazz and blues roots, and follow its branches as cultural and musical forces were applied over time.

Prepare

Focus on three artists – George Clinton, James Brown and Prince – to discuss how one influenced the other, and how the genre morphed through the work of successive individuals. Throughout history, one artist hears music and tries to imitate it in order to learn it. What comes out is inherently different, as no two musicians perform identically. Even when reading from scores, or playing the same instruments, there are deviations – sometimes subtle – whereby artists make the music “their own.” Preparing examples to illustrate this point should be instructive for all developing musicians and critical listeners.

Key points in the article:

- Funk music was a deviation from the standard set of R&B, jazz and blues music of the 1960s; it was something else, identified by unique beats and the energetic and musically urgent styles of a set of music creators.
- Funk’s beats are varied but defined, and can be heard in seminal recordings.
- Bass, drum and rhythm guitar parts – as opposed to the unstructured lead guitar solos of the era’s rock music – were the hallmarks of funk.
- The 1970s saw the creation of funk’s classic grooves, with James Brown becoming the genre’s biggest star.

Begin

Review vocabulary words from the article below:

- **GROOVE** – more than the pattern of a drummer’s stick movement, a groove describes the essence of a drummer – or an ensemble’s – rhythmic commitment to a piece of music.
- **ODYSSEY**: a long and storied journey, either physical or evolutionary

- **SYNCOPATED:** displacement of beats or accents so that strong beats become weak and vice versa.
- **LANDMARK:** an event of activity of outstanding historical, aesthetic, or cultural importance
- **PROGRESSION:** a move forward; in musical terms a chord progression is an ordered series of notes, each played at the same time.

Discuss

- While the beat, and the bass, drums and guitars that adhere to it, are the hallmarks of funk, what role have horns played?
 - Saxophone solos can be found in many funk compositions and recordings.
 - Horn sections became an important element of funk, also adhering to funk's rhythms, serving as punctuation for melodies and providing counterpoint in choruses and "hooks."

Select one or two Earth, Wind and Fire songs that have funk vibes and use horns to add this musical counterpoint.

Play any one of James Brown's songs where horns play an essential and rhythmic role.

Ask

- How does funk differ from 60's R&B and soul?
- What are the differences in the stage presence of R&B and soul artists of the 50's and 60's and those of funk artists in the 1970s?

Expand

Now play a video of a funk-driven Prince song from the 1980s.

- How does Prince's guitar playing change the essential funk form and what styles of music did he fuse with funk?