

Feature Story: All About Riffs

National Standards: 1, 7-9, 10

There are elements of songwriting in addition to the basics - rhythm, melody, lyrics, harmony, etc. – that underpin the most popular compositions. The shorty, repeatable segments known as riffs are responsible for creating some of the most memorable songs in the modern canon. Learning to identify them, and then create them, will assist the developing music creator.

Prepare

Play each of the audio tracks included in the In Tune story on riffs and identify other popular songs with easily identifiable passages.

Inspire a discussion about why each riff is important to its song, and how the riff functions to connect each of the song's parts.

Key points in the article:

- Riffs introduce upcoming parts of songs
- Riffs fill spaces between song passages
- They're built into the songs of most popular genres and operate similarly in each

Begin

Choose one of the story's sample riffs

- Ask students what they like about the riff
- Ask your students how the riff supports the overall impact of the song
- Ask students to research other songs with great riffs, present a favorite and explain their choice.

Review vocabulary words from the article below:

- SONGCRAFT– the art or skill of writing or composing songs.
- DESCENDING: becoming lower in pitch
- VARIATION: the transformation of a melody or theme with changes or elaborations in harmony, rhythm, and melody.
- SUPERSTITION: a belief or notion, not based on reason or knowledge, in or of the ominous significance of a particular thing, circumstance, occurrence, proceeding, or the like.
- TRANSPOSE: to change the relative position, order, or sequence of; cause to change places; interchange:

Discuss

Ask students to listen to the Beatles song Daytripper and discuss the relationship of the riff to the song's melody, the riff's repetition and to imagine the song without the riff. How important is the riff to Daytripper?

Expand

Are there riffs in other forms of media? Are so-called “catch phrases,” perhaps in sports “calls,”

Q&A

1. What is the purpose of a riff?
2. Do all songs have riffs?
3. Must a riff come at a particular point in a song?
4. Are there any rules about how riffs operate?
5. What is the biggest impact a riff can have on a song?
6. Does it matter how often a riff occurs in a song?
7. Do riffs occur in all genres of music?

Answers

1. To introduce key parts of a song and to connect song parts
2. No. But many hit songs employ riffs because of their simplicity and ability to easily connect with listeners.
3. No. Many riffs will be introduced at the beginning of a song, but they can occur later.
4. No. Like other elements of songcraft, riffs can be created in any variety of ways.
5. The greatest impact a riff can have on a song is to make it memorable.
6. Not really, but an essential element of a riff is its repetition.
7. Riffs occur in many popular music genres. Some forms of music are noteworthy for their non-reliance on riffs in favor of freer forms, such as some styles of jazz and classical music.