

Bleachers, and the Jack Antonoff Story

National Standards: 7-8, 10-11

When you think "rock star," plenty of over-the-top, center-of-attention images come to mind. But not all rock stars are alike. Jack Antonoff of the band Bleachers, and formerly of the band Fun, is a different kind of rock star. Sure, he's written and performed hits, but Antonoff is also comfortable in the behind-the-scenes role of producer.

Prepare:

Have students watch and listen to performances of Jack Antonoff in both Fun and Bleachers. How are the groups different? How does his performance and delivery change for each project? Also, have students listen to some artists who have co-written with Antonoff, or for whom he's produced, such as Taylor Swift and Lorde. Can you sense any of Antonoff's style in that music, or does he let the artist completely come into their own? Have students discuss the role of the "producer" and debate how much creative control a producer should have over a project or artist.

Key points in the article:

- Jack Antonoff isn't shy about the difficult times he's had in life. Deep loss can serve as inspiration for music, and that's certainly the case with Antonoff. One of his sisters passed away of brain cancer at age 13, when Antonoff was in high school. "Songwriting can be this tool to connect with people and talk about what you are going through," he told *Teen People*. "I used to write from a very lonely place, like, 'Here's my story, this is it.' Now I'm writing from a place, like: 'Well, everybody has that! Everybody's got a then and now, and everybody's trying to figure out how you not let go of the then but also not compromise the now.'"
- Antonoff has spoken about dealing with depression, anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder. So, if you think you can't "make it" in the music business because of your blemishes, think again. Antonoff's story proves otherwise.
- There are many ways to "make it" in the music business. While he does front his own band Bleachers, Antonoff has also achieved success by collaborating with other artists.

Begin:

Review vocabulary words from the article:

- **MUSIC PRODUCER:** Someone who assists an artist or ensemble with their recording projects, and by directing which instruments to use, and how to assemble sounds, helps bring the artist's vision to life.
- **CYNICISM:** A belief that people are motivated purely by self-interest.
- **DEPRESSION:** Emotions and feelings of severe and prolonged sadness.

- **INDICATIVE:** Serving as a sign of something.

Discuss:

Have students discuss their favorite artists and then research which producers work with those artists. It's a small world in the music business, and chances are, many of those artists share producers. Jack Antonoff has worked with a bevy of artist, including Lorde, Taylor Swift, St. Vincent, Lana Del Rey, Kevin Abstract and Carly Rae Jepsen. How can a producer work with multiple artists and ensure each one has their own distinct sound?

Questions:

1. What are Jack Antonoff's bands mentioned in the cover story?
2. Name some artists Jack Antonoff has worked with and produced.
3. Where did Jack Antonoff grow up?
4. Where did Jack Antonoff go to high school?
5. What is the major Fun hit mentioned in the cover story?
6. What's the name of Bleachers' latest album?
7. Which major musician is featured on the Bleachers song "Chinatown?"

Answers:

1. Steel Train, Fun and Bleachers
2. Lorde, Taylor Swift, St. Vincent, Lana Del Rey, Kevin Abstract and Carly Rae Jepsen
3. New Milford, New Jersey
4. Professional Children's School
5. "We Are Young"
6. *Take The Sadness Out Of Saturday Night*, out July 2021
7. Bruce Springsteen

Expand:

Have students perform Fun and Bleachers tunes. Divide the class up into two sections, and have each section take on a different band. At the end, have them perform for each other and discuss how each bands' music is different and/or similar. These are two very different bands, both featuring Antonoff. Have students discuss other band members who perform in multiple projects.

While that may have been rare in the past, today, it's rare to *not* have more than one band, it seems!

“Techniques” – Strengthen Your Sight Reading

National Standards: 1, 4-6, 10-11

Sight reading involves looking at notation on sheet music and playing or singing it immediately, without having the chance to practice it. Those who master the skill are able to play a musical piece perfectly the moment they see it. This is a particularly valuable skill, as many professional situations include little time to practice a piece of music before performing.

Prepare:

Have students discuss musicians throughout history known for their great sight-reading techniques. Classical-Music.com (<https://www.classical-music.com/features/articles/five-of-the-greatest-sight-reading-musicians-of-all-time/>) points out five expert sight readers from history: Niccolò Paganini, Felix Mendelssohn, Franz Liszt, Erno Dohnányi and John Ogdon.

Moreover, can students think of a situation where someone - perhaps a band member or stage performer - had to quickly learn a new part or song and perform it?

Key points in the article:

- When looking to sight-read a piece of music, the first thing you need to do is gather as much information about it as quickly as possible. Start with big picture questions like, “What is the starting key and time signature?” “What is the starting tempo and feel?”
- Another way to tackle a new piece of music is to recognize patterns in a new piece. That allows us to bring the music we already know to a song we have never seen. Once you break down music into simple melodic phrases or rhythmic figures, different pieces of music will start to look the same, making it easier to master a new piece.
- Another exercise to help master new music is using your imagination to create variations on common musical phrases. Take a phrase and craft a bunch of simple rhythmic and melodic variations. The more comfortable you get creating variations, the easier it will be for you to instantly play new pieces.

Begin:

Review vocabulary words from the article:

- **DYNAMICS:** The element of **music** that deals with how loud or soft the sound is played. It also involves the direction of the volume in a phrase.
he act of being skilled as a musician.

- SEQUENCES: Simple melodic phrases or rhythmic figures that repeat starting on different notes.
- FLEXIBLE: Able to be easily changed or altered to respond to new circumstances.
- ARTICULATION: Determines the length of a note or phrase's sound and the shape of its attack and decay. They can also modify an event's timbre, dynamics, and pitch.

Discuss:

Listen to the musical examples discussed in the lesson. Have students play or sing along with the examples.

Have students take a scale and elaborate on it. Have them improvise off of the scale and create several variations. This is a form of recognizing patterns, which is discussed in example two of the lesson. Also, have students take a phrase and create simple rhythmic and melodic variations, as discussed in example three of the lesson.

Questions:

1. What's the benefit of practicing scales and chords in different sequences in regards to sight-reading?
2. When checking out a new piece of music, the first thing to do is _____?
3. Sight reading is _____.
4. What is a "core melody?"

Answers:

1. The more we practice scales and chords in different sequences, the faster we can recognize them and play them flawlessly when they show up in a piece.
2. When checking out a new piece of music, the first thing to do is gather as much information about it as quickly as possible.
3. Sight reading looking at notation on sheet music and playing or singing it immediately, without having the chance to practice it.
4. A simplified version of a melody.

Expand:

Give students some sheet music and have them interpret it after just a few minutes of practice. Have them employ the lessons learned in the article to quickly point out familiarities in the piece of music and do their best to bring it to life. Also, have students take their favorite songs and quickly perform a variation of it. These are all ways to improve sight-reading for real-life performance situations.

What It's Like To Work At... Paul Reed Smith Guitars

National Standards: 7-8, 10-11

Paul Reed Smith Guitars, also called PRS Guitars, is an American guitar and amplifier manufacturer founded in 1985. The company is headquartered in Stevensville, Maryland, and makes electric and acoustic guitars, basses, and amplifiers. So, what's it like to work at PRS Guitars? It's a dynamic environment, and an option for those with a musical background and who have or are interested in cultivating other skills.

Prepare:

Have students research Paul Reed Smith Guitars and get familiar with the company, their products and their high-profile artist endorsers. For example, some famous guitarists who use PRS include Alex Lifeson, Carlos Santana, David Grissom, Dustie Waring, Gary Grainger, John Mayer, Mark Holcomb and Mark Lettieri. Have students pull up YouTube videos of these players and try to identify which kind of PRS Guitar the performers are using.

Key points in the article:

- Areas and departments of Paul Reed Smith Guitars include marketing & PR, product engineering, sales, artist relations, information systems, human resources, and manufacturing.
- If students are interested in a career behind-the-scenes at a guitar company, such as PRS Guitars, there are many areas they can pursue. Each department runs a very different aspect of the company. If writing and creative ideas is your talent, maybe marketing & PR would be a good fit. If you're great at design, perhaps engineering would be a good fit.
- Paul Reed Smith Guitars is a major employer and guitar producer in the U.S., employing around 440 people and producing 105 guitars per day.

Begin:

Review vocabulary words and phrases from the article:

- **MARKETING:** the art and creative effort behind promoting and selling products and/or services.
- **PLAYABILITY:** the state or quality of being playable, especially with ease of playing.
- **PRODUCT ENGINEERING:** Using technical skills and creative artistry to transition from a concept to a production-ready product.
- **ARTIST RELATIONS:** The Artist Relations team is responsible for providing guitars and amplifiers to artists worldwide while also promoting their work with these instruments.

Discuss:

- After reading the article, have students watch a portion or portions of the provided two-hour YouTube video, which is a personal look inside the company. The video, titled "Experience PRS 2021," offers glimpses of the PRS factory floor, artist clinics, live sessions and more. What aspects of the company interest students the most?
- Ask students, "How important is marketing a guitar?" Of course, a guitar has to be well crafted and deliver on sound and tone, but how crucial is a marketing campaign to the success of a line of guitars? Also, as part of a marketing campaign, how important is having high-profile guitarists using guitar brands on tour and in performance videos? How can that help a guitar brand go to the next level?

Questions:

1. When was Paul Reed Smith Guitars founded?
2. Where is Paul Reed Smith Guitars located?
3. How many people does Paul Reed Smith Guitars employ?
4. How many guitars per day does Paul Reed Smith Guitars produce?

Answers:

1. 1985
2. Stevensville, Maryland
3. Around 440 people
4. 105 guitars per day

Expand:

Ask students to create their own mock guitar companies. What would their product look like, sound like and what features would it have? How would they market and sell the guitar? Don't forget about artist relations, as their company can rely on artists to support and promote our brands through their work. Who would be on their "dream team" of guitarists promoting the product?

“Learning New Songs” — How To Play Kings of Leon's "Use Somebody"

National Standards: 1-9

Kings of Leon is a band from Nashville, Tennessee, with a straight-ahead melodic rock sound. This month in our Learning New Songs column, we take on the band's smash hit "Use Somebody," which was the second single off their 2008 release, *Only By the Night*. The song went to the top of the charts and won GRAMMYs for Record of the Year, Best Rock Song, and Best Rock Vocal Performance. It's a basic rock song for young musicians to cover and offers a chance to get creative with interpretation.

Prepare:

Give students a chance to listen to different versions of "Use Somebody" on YouTube. There are plenty of covers of the song. Have them listen to both acoustic and electric interpretations, and note how well the song fits in an acoustic setting. Which versions stick out to students as imaginative interpretations? Do any versions simply keep to the original? Maybe too much?

Key points in the article:

- It's okay to alter a song when you're covering it, but copyright laws say you can't change the lyrics to a song without the permission of the author.
- One very tricky part of the song is the groove. It's not too wild, but the drummer is playing a creative part on the snare for the entire song. Instead of playing the “backbeat” (beats 2 and 4 on the snare which would be much more typical), he’s playing an offbeat 2-bar pattern. This is key to getting the groove of the song.
- The bridge is another part of the song that stands out. It “modulates” from the key of C to the key of D for eight bars along with the background vocals, and then goes back to the original key of C for a guitar solo over the chorus.

Begin:

- Have students study the original recording. Listen to the original audio here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gnhXHvRoUd0>. Have them get comfortable with the original song's key of C Major and tempo of 132 BPM. Ask them how the parts of the song come together, from the synths to guitars to drum groove.
- Now, focus on the cover version of the song by Lusaint. This interpretation is also in the key of C Major, but at a tempo of 124 BPM. The orchestration of Lusaint's version is different, as it's denser yet feels very open and delicate.

Review vocabulary words from the article below:

- INTERPRETATION: a stylistic representation of a piece of music or other creative work.

- **MODULATE:** changing from one key to another; in addition, the process via which this change is brought to pass.
- **UNIVERSALITY:** the quality of something being shared by all and appropriate for every situation.
- **EXPRESSIVE:** effectively conveying feeling, emotion or thought.

Discuss:

How does having this song sung by a guy with a deep, raspy voice make the lyrics and interpretation sound different versus hearing it sung by a girl with a delicate voice? Does the story or theme of the song change? Which do you like better? Storytelling is a huge part of popular music. What stories do you hear in both interpretations of the song? Have students envision their own ideas for how to make the song something different from the original version.

Questions

1. Where is Kings of Leon from?
2. What year did Kings of Leon first release "Use Somebody"?
3. What GRAMMY Awards did "Use Somebody" win?
4. What tempo is Kings of Leon's version of "Use Somebody" in?
5. What key is Kings of Leon's version of "Use Somebody" in?
6. Are you allowed to change lyrics of a song when covering it?

Answers:

1. Nashville, Tennessee
2. 2008
3. Record of the Year, Best Rock Song, and Best Rock Vocal Performance.
4. 132 BPM
5. C Major
6. The copyright laws say you can't change the lyrics to a song without the permission of the author.

Expand:

Have students gather in small groups and write and create their own versions of "Use Somebody." How can they make the song stand out from the original? What new instruments can they bring into the song? Can they envision an electronic version of the song? Have them perform their versions for the class.