

## **Tightening Up Your Rhythm**

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

The rhythm, tempo and groove of music is crucial to getting that perfect "feel." If you want your music and performance to touch the soul of your audience, then you have to get the rhythm down. Everyone has heard the statement, "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing," right? In this lesson, we explore the fundamentals of rhythm and groove.\

### **Prepare**

Have students discuss some genres of music that are known for rhythm. Of course, blues and R&B come to mind. Other styles of music - from mainstream pop, rock, hip-hop, and R&B, to Puerto Rican salsa, Jamaican reggae, or Nigerian Highlife, to folk, classical and jazz - each have their own ways of relating to the basic elements of musical rhythm.

Who are some of the most famous musicians known for their mastery of rhythm and groove? Some that you could point out include Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, Etta James, Stevie Wonder and Otis Redding. Have students watch YouTube videos of those artists' live performances and note how their mastery of rhythm moves the audience.

Key points in the article:

- The basic elements of musical rhythm are pulse, division, and emphasis.
- In Western music, the downbeat is the biggest beat there is, so the foundation of good rhythm is to be able to keep these downbeats, and therefore the whole measure of music, steady yet energized.
- Another aspect of rhythm is to lock into the groove by feeling different subdivisions of the beat. Subdivision is a powerful tool for learning new rhythms and for having strong rhythm in general.

### **Begin**

Review vocabulary words from the article:

- **DOWNBEAT:** the initial beat of a measure; also, the downward stroke of a conductor.
- **SUBDIVISION:** feeling the smaller divisions inside the pulse.
- **CLAVE:** the name for a rhythm pattern that underlies a lot of Afro-Cuban music.

## **Discuss**

Read through and discuss the three examples in the feature: Feel the Big Beat, Get on the Grid and Catch the Clave. Can students come up with real-life examples of these? For "catching the clave," have students find examples of the unique rhythms in Latin and Afro-Cuban music.

Even if the clave is not in most American popular music, you can hear its rhythmic accents inside the beats of many hit songs. Have students listen for the clave in pop, rock, and hip-hop beats, which can bring out a new interpretation to the music.

Then, have students try to emulate the rhythm and feel of their examples. They're likely familiar with rhythm in Western music, so have them focus on the beats in Afro-Cuban and African music and see how they can try to get the feel of those genres. What makes this music unique, rhythmically?

### Questions

1. Clave is the name for what?
2. What does the word "clave" mean in Spanish?
3. Where did the clave originate?
4. What is the process of subdivision?
5. What is the downbeat in Western music?
6. What are the basic elements of musical rhythm?
7. What's a good way to subdivide the beat?

### Answers

1. Clave is the name for a rhythm pattern that underlies a lot of Afro-Cuban music.
2. The word clave in Spanish means "code" or "key," as in a key to a puzzle or a keystone that holds an arch together.
3. In sub-Saharan African music traditions.
4. Subdivision is feeling the smaller divisions inside the pulse
5. In Western music, the downbeat is the biggest beat there is.
6. Pulse, division, and emphasis.

7. A good way to subdivide the beat is to look at the music and choose the fastest rhythm you see.

**Expand**

Have students put together a YouTube playlist of their favorite examples of rhythmic music in a variety of genres, from jazz to blues to pop to African music to hip-hop. Then, have them send their playlist to another student, and have that student listen to the music and try to feel the different subdivisions of the beat, listen for the clave and find the big beat.

## **How To Play The Vaughan Brothers "Hard To Be"**

National Standards: 1-9

Jimmie and Stevie Ray Vaughan had played music together while growing up and as adults when they could but had never released an album together. Stevie Ray's label, Epic Records, suggested they do so, and that album, *Family Style*, was released in 1990. Sadly, Stevie Ray died in a helicopter crash right before the album's release.

In this lesson, students are learning the album's opening jam, "Hard to Be," which is in the key of Bb and the tempo is 158 BPM. It's a brisk, fast-sounding jam with great instruments.

### **Prepare**

Have students spend some time listening to different covers of "Hard to Be" on YouTube. They'll find many different versions in different genres. Have them listen to a variety of versions, from plugged-in, electric to acoustic, and note the uniqueness in each take. Which instruments and delivery best fit the song? How would students envision themselves covering the track? It's always a good idea to envision the song first before tackling it.

Key points in the article:

- The rhythm guitar in "Hard to Be" is playing a typical blues figure all the way through. It's the same rhythm part as in Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode."
- The horns are a large part of the feel of this song. The horn section is small, most likely baritone sax, tenor sax, and trumpet, as it would be in a typical small blues and R&B band, but could easily expand to a full jazz band.
- Nailing the vocals is crucial to mastering "Hard to Be." Since the album was crafted by the brothers, the whole song is sung as a duet. And, because they are brothers there's a distinct family resemblance between their voices that makes that duet special. How can students bring that feel to their own cover versions?

### **Begin**

- Have students listen to the original record. Listen to "Hard to Be" here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mYLGcymAXN4>.

Also, because of the rhythm guitar, have students listen to Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode" here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uf4rxCB4lys>. Have them get familiar with the song's key of Bb and tempo of 158 BPM, as well as the up-tempo feel.

- Next, focus on the Texas blues feel and tradition of the song. "Hard to Be" is a traditional-sounding record, but it also breaks from tradition in form. The best interpretations of the song bring out the Texas blues tradition while giving the song a modern edge with its unique combination of forms.

Review vocabulary words from the article below:

- **HOOK:** a musical idea, passage, or phrase, in popular music that makes a song catchy and appealing.
- **BASS-AND-DRUMS POCKET:** successfully being in tempo and following the groove of the instrumentation with the other players in which you're performing.
- **INTERSPERSED:** to be scattered among or between other things.
- **STACCATO "HITS" OR STABS:** stabs, short notes that accentuate the rhythm as well as the harmony, interspersed with longer notes that add to the drama.

Discuss

How does "Hard to Be" epitomize the Texas blues style? When we think of Texas blues, artists such as Blind Lemon Jefferson, Lightnin' Hopkins, and T-Bone Walker come to mind, when it comes to the earliest names. Other big names in the genre include Johnny Copeland, Albert Collins, Freddie King and, of course, ZZ Top. Ask students to name some of their favorite Texas blues-style bands and artists. What makes this genre its own? What gives Texas blues its feel?

Q&A

1. Name one of the early giants of Texas blues.
2. Name the Vaughan brothers.
3. What was the Vaughan brothers' album called?
4. The rhythm guitar part for "Hard to Be" is the same as in what other song?
5. What hit's did Stevie Ray's album Texas Flood contain?

Answers

1. Blind Lemon Jefferson, Lightnin' Hopkins, and T-Bone Walker all count.
2. Jimmie Vaughan and Stevie Ray Vaughan.
3. Family Style.
4. It's the same rhythm part as in Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode."
5. "Love Struck Baby" and "Pride and Joy"

**Expand:**

Have students pick another Texas blues song to master. How is the song they picked different from "Hard to Be?" Have them perform both covers and point out the differences. Also, have them put together a YouTube or Spotify playlist of Texas blues to help pickup the feel and groove of the music. For more advanced students, have them write their own, original music with that Texas blues character.

## **Strike Up The Bands!**

National Standards: 7-8, 10-11

The pandemic has impacted the marching arts, in middle school, high school, college, and the elite corps. But the good news is that marching is back and promises to be better than ever.

### **Prepare**

Have students study the different kinds of marching bands. There are scholastic marching bands, including middle and high school. There are also university marching bands and the elite corps, the latter including the DCI and WGI, an extremely rigorous form of marching band for marchers ages 18 to 22.

### **Key points in the article:**

- Being a member of the marching band takes discipline and skill. "You have to have physical stamina," says Jeffrey Rowser, director of bands and department chair at Morgan County High School in Madison, Georgia. "You need a work ethic and skill set to accomplish the musical aspects of marching, plus the self-discipline and responsibility in the process."
- The elite corps include DCI and WGI, an extremely rigorous form of marching band for marchers ages 18 to 22. They're not associated with a school or university. The DCI takes place in the summer in football stadiums across the U.S. Meanwhile, the WGI takes place in the winter, with performances happening in gymnasiums.
- Looking ahead, the 2022-23 marching season is shaping up to be one of the most exciting, especially since it's expected to be more "normal" than the past two years. David Thorton, associate director of bands and director of the Spartan Marching Band at Michigan State University says, "We're in a good place for 2022. Our students that are in the athletic band program are very dedicated and committed to the MSU community. They love being around each other, which has been the hardest part of the past two years."

## **Begin**

Review vocabulary words from the article:

- DCI: Drum Corps International (DCI), a governing body for junior drum and bugle corps based in Indianapolis, Indiana.
- WGI: Winter Guard International (WGI), the world's premier organization producing indoor color guard, percussion, and winds competitions.
- OMBRE: Having colors that shade into each other.
- AUXILIARY: offering supplementary or added support.

## **Discuss**

Are any of your students marchers? Have them talk about their experience in marching band and what it's brought into their lives. Often, students in marching bands become something of a second family, since they're together so much. If students are interested in marching in college, have them talk about what they can do now to prepare. What skills should they sharpen? How important is musicianship vs. physical marching skills?

## **Questions**

1. What two organizations are considered to have elite corps?
2. When it comes to marching uniforms, does one kind of uniform serve all kinds of marching bands?
3. Which marching uniforms often have custom designs, which work in brilliant color palettes and specialty fabrics?
4. What's the most important thing to do to get ready for a marching band audition?

Answers

1. DCI and WGI



2. No. (The uniforms vary depending on the area of the country and type of marching band. For school uniforms, it often corresponds with how different county or city school administrations handle the uniforming for all of the schools in their specific districts.)

3. Uniforms for the elite corps.

4. To practice, practice, practice and prepare for their audition.

Expand

Have students watch YouTube videos of both DCI and WGI online. What differences do they see in these elite corps? What stands out to them most about the performances? For students who one day want to be part of the elite corps, what makes them want to be a part of the programs?

Also, have students discuss their desire to be part of marching band in college. What are they doing to prepare for their auditions?

## **Working For The Weeknd**

National Standards: 7-8, 10-11

You may not have heard of Abel Tesfaye, but you've certainly heard of his project The Weeknd. As The Weeknd, he's scored GRAMMY Awards, performed at the Super Bowl, and released the longest-charting song of all time on the *Billboard* Hot 100 Songs chart, 2020's "Blinding Lights." On his road to success, Tesfaye has made sure to surround himself with people who know him "when" and have his best interest at heart. This feature looks at the personalities and friendships behind The Weeknd.

### **Prepare**

Have students watch performances of The Weeknd. What makes him such a charismatic performer? What is it about The Weeknd's style of music that's so universally appealing? Also, have students look up the history of The Weeknd and his associates.

Key points in the article:

- The keys to The Weeknd's growth is his willingness to evolve and the support he receives from a trusted inner circle. Tesfaye surrounds himself with people he's worked with for years.
- Over the years, Tesfaye has worked consistently with two producers and songwriters, Martin "Doc" McKinney and Carlo Montagnese, known professionally as Illangelo. Both helped to produce Tesfaye's first three mixtapes and are still a major part of his writing team.
- Tesfaye also started his own independent record label with some close associates as a way to get his music to the masses. The label is called XO and released his first three mixtapes as The Weeknd.

### **Begin**

Review vocabulary words from the article:

- DIAMOND-CERTIFIED: honoring those artists whose sales of singles or albums reached 10,000,000 copies.
- ANONYMITY: the condition of being totally anonymous.

- **COLLABORATORS**: someone who works together on an activity or project.
- **ASTRONOMICAL**: referring to something extremely large.
- **VAGARIES**: referring to an unexpected change in a situation or behavior.

### **Discuss**

Have students discuss their favorite artists and then research those artists' close associates. Do those artists tend to work with the same people they did starting out? For example, do they have the same management team, publicist, label, etc.? Or, do they switch things up a great amount? Many popular artists are like The Weeknd and stick with their trusted team for years after making it big. Also, have artists research The Weeknd's team, from management to songwriting partners. What do these people bring to The Weeknd's success?

### Questions

1. What's the real name of the person who is The Weeknd?
2. Where did The Weeknd grow up?
3. Who was The Weeknd's best friend in high school (who he still works with today)?
4. In what way has The Weeknd worked with Kanye West and Daft Punk?
5. Since his early days, The Weeknd has worked consistently with two producers and songwriters. Who are they?
6. What's the name of The Weeknd's record label?
7. Which major musician is featured on the Bleachers song "Chinatown?"

### Answers

1. Abel Tesfaye
2. Toronto, Canada
3. La Mar Taylor

4. The Weeknd has collaborated with Kanye West and Daft Punk on songwriting.
5. Martin "Doc" McKinney and Carlo Montagnese, known professionally as Illangelo.
6. XO

Expand

Have students perform The Weeknd's songs. While his music is challenging, it presents opportunities for students to experiment with covering his songs in a totally new way. What about an acapella version of one The Weeknd's songs? Perhaps add a horn sections into his music? What about switching up the rhythms second with new beats? Encourage students to have fun bringing his music to life.

Or, have students look up cover versions of The Weeknd's songs. Which do they like most? Which make his sounds sound totally different from the original?