

## **Two For The Road: The Lives & Times of Majid Jordan**

National Standards: 7-8, 10-11

Although it is no longer uncommon for producers to become headline artists themselves, doing so represents a leap of faith and deep commitment to personal artistic values. For Majid Jordan, the producer duo behind Drake and many other pop/hip-hop titans, a career behind the scenes would have been easy to sustain. However, the duo had their own vision for their music and wanted to let it speak on their own terms. In all aspects of their musical lives, whether creating for themselves or others, Majid Al Maskati and Jordan Ullman rely on their connection to one another and decade-long partnership to craft their signature sound.

### **Prepare**

Ask students how many of them are familiar with Drake's massive hit "Hold On, We're Going Home" or "...Summers Over Interlude" from his 2016 album *Views*. Follow up by asking if they are familiar with the production/songwriting duo behind those songs, or if they know Majid Jordan from their own musical output. Listen to the single "Violet" from their latest album *Good People* to introduce the class to the duo's current sound and aesthetic.

*Key points in the article:*

- Majid Jordan is a musical duo made up of singer Majid Al Maskati and producer Jordan Ullman. They met at the University of Toronto, and Ullman's family eventually invited Al Maskati to live with them. It was in the Ullman family home that the two started producing music together, originally under the moniker Good People. Their early releases on Soundcloud gained enough traction and interest to earn them work producing for top tier pop artists like Drake.
- After producing Drake's smash hit "Hold On, We're Going Home", the duo decided to release their first album under their own name in 2014 on Drake's OVO label. Since then, they have released dozens of singles and four full length albums. Throughout the decade of their professional partnership, their connection with each other has sustained them and guided their creative and personal decisions. They frequently express their gratitude and appreciation for each other in interviews.
- To get in the right headspace for their latest album, *Good People*, the duo significantly dialed back their commitments and lifestyle. Not wanting anything to distract them from their creative process, they took time off from touring and producing other artists during the creation of the album. They also brought that simplified philosophy into their personal lives, slowing things down and focusing on surrounding themselves with close friends and family. The resulting songs embody these newfound values and lifestyle changes.

## **Begin**

*Review Vocabulary words from the article below:*

- **Anonymous:** not identified by name; of unknown name
- **Moniker:** a name or nickname
- **Obligation** the condition of being morally or legally bound to do something
- **Burgeoning:** beginning to grow or increase rapidly; flourishing
- **Endeavor:** an attempt to achieve a goal

## **Discuss**

Listen to “My Love” featuring Drake from Majid Jordan’s 2016 self-titled debut album and “Dancing on a Dream” featuring Swae Lee from 2021’s *Wildest Dreams*. Compare these early examples of their style with the new single “Violet.” How has their sound changed over the last three albums? Are there any elements that have stayed consistent? Ask students whether they can hear any parallels between the sound and lyrical content of these songs and the lifestyles Majid Jordan were living at the time of recording. Can students hear the globe-trotting ambition in “Dancing on a Dream?” Is their recently simplified lifestyle audible in Violet?” Ask students if they think an artist’s life choices and mindset are always discernable in their music.

## **O&A**

1. What was Majid Jordan’s original moniker?
2. From the time they released their first song on Soundcloud, how long did it take before the duo were producing for Drake?
3. Where did the members of Majid Jordan meet?
4. Who is the only guest artist on Majid Jordan’s latest album *Good People*?
5. Where did Al Maskati set up a mobile studio to record Swae Lee’s “Dancing on a Dream” feature?

## **Answers**

1. Good People
2. Two years
3. University of Toronto
4. Naomi Sharon
5. 2007

## **Expand**

Assign a research project for students, culminating in either a written report or presentation, about other famous producer/songwriters who went on to a career as a spotlight artist. Producer-

turned-rappers like Pharrell and Dr. Dre are prominent examples, but there are many cases from different genres and time periods. In the process of researching their selected artist, compare their career trajectory and creative philosophy to that of Majid Jordan. How did they move from their position behind the scenes out into the spotlight?

## **Obbligato**

National Standards: 1-9

A great melody is the focal point of a song, but adding “counterlines,” or obbligato parts, can support and even elevate those melodies. Obbligato is a technique carried over from Western classical music and adapted to fit a wide array of styles. As the accepted definition of the term obbligato grew, so did its uses in popular music. Providing parts with ear-catching contrast to the melody can add a whole new dimension to a song.

## **Prepare**

To introduce the concept of obbligato, listen to an excerpt of “Laudamus Te” from J.S. Bach’s *Mass in B Minor*. Point out the interplay between the mezzo-soprano melody and the violin as they weave together intricately but never truly harmonize. Note that each of these parts are beautiful and could stand alone on their own merit, but when combined, produce something even better. Emphasize the idea of contrast in composition.

*Key points in the article:*

- Although it was developed as a compositional tool for Western classical music, obbligato has taken on a new meaning as an umbrella term for counterlines in any number of musical styles. In its original form, obbligato parts were meant to be played exactly as written, often on one specified instrument. This allowed the composer a greater deal of control over the performance of their music.
- The modern definition of obbligato is looser and more inclusive. It can be used to refer to any part that stands out on its own but is not the melody, whether played by an instrument, section of instruments, or sung by a vocalist. Obbligato can now refer to improvised parts, as well. Obbligato are more rhythmically independent than harmonies, which happen in rhythmic unison with the melody.
- While obbligato parts were originally intended to support the melody of a song, modern obbligato techniques can carry so much musical weight that they actually overwhelm the melody, making the original focal point of the song a secondary feature. An example of this is the descant present at the end of many traditional marches when a flurry of exciting notes is introduced and used to propel the song to a thrilling climax.

## **Begin**

*Review Vocabulary words from the article below:*

- **Scaffold:** a temporary support structure
- **Mandatory:** required by law or rules; compulsory
- **Counterlines:** segments of music clearly noticeable as independent, dynamic parts but not the primary melody
- **Compelling:** evoking interest, attention, or admiration in a powerfully irresistible way
- **Simultaneous:** occurring, operating, or done at the same time

### Discuss

Create a group discussion about the more modern understanding of obbligato (not necessarily composed, not as strict in terms of which instrument plays it, etc.) and play the two examples from the article. Ask students about how the bassline from “Something” and vocal counterline from “End of the World” support and elevate the melody, or even surpass the melody in terms of importance. Would the songs have the same energy without them? Ask students if they can think of any similar examples of obbligato from their favorite music.

### Q&A

1. In its original form dating back to the 1700s, how was an obbligato meant to be played?
2. Which element of music underlies all successful counterlines?
3. Which form of music often ends with a descant?
4. If a counterline exists to support the melody, it should be \_\_\_\_\_rhythmic than that melody.
5. Which part of The Beatles’ “Something” is a good example of an obbligato?

### Answers

1. Exactly as written
2. Contrast
3. Traditional marches
4. less
5. McCartney’s bassline

### Expand

Choose a recognizable melody - it could be something as simple as “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” or it could be a famous pop song students know by heart. Divide students into groups and have them collaborate to create an obbligato part for the melody. Depending on the class and the abilities of the students, it could be sung or played on their instruments of choice.

Choose example 1, 2, or 3 from the article as a guide for what type of obbligato students should compose (or allow them to choose). Students can be given the time to compose their parts in class, or for older students, it can be given as a homework assignment to be completed outside of class. On the due date, each group will perform their composed obbligato part. Discuss with the class whether each group’s part achieved the goal, whether it is to support the melody, grab the listener’s ear in the gaps of the melody, or to overshadow the melody.

## **How To Play John Mayer's "Gravity"**

National Standards: 1-9

In a career full of hit singles and influential albums, "Gravity" stands as one of John Mayer's most culturally and musically impactful statements. A testament to minimalism and simplicity, the track features just enough instrumentation to support the intimate, soulful vocal and earworm lead guitar line. But don't mistake "simple" for "easy" when it comes to covering this iconic single; in fact, its slow tempo, sparse arrangement, and unconventional song form make it a challenge to recreate.

### **Prepare**

Play Mayer's studio version of the song and have students note the arrangement and the instruments they hear. Then, play the two live versions linked to the article and have students take notes on the differences in each version. Does the band play the arrangement exactly like the record? Are the solos the same length? Are there any additional instruments? Do they play with more or less energy than the original track? Keep these differences in mind and assign the article to read.

*Key points in the article:*

- Although music is a standalone art form in itself, playing music to support dancing adds an entirely new dimension (and a new set of skills necessary to execute it). Pacing the set, reading the crowd, and keeping a room engaged are all challenges inherent to a dance-friendly performance. When it's time to slow things down and encourage a different set of dancers, songs like "Gravity" are indispensable.
- Although the arrangement is simple and sparse, nailing the feel of this song is no small feat. In fact, playing slowly with steady tempo as the dynamics of a song rise and fall is one of the most deceptively difficult tasks in music. With so little happening on each instrument, it makes every note count.
- Such a simple, repetitive instrumental might sound like a recipe for a boring song, but "Gravity" uses all that open space, and its unique  $\frac{3}{4}$  time meter, to highlight Mayer's emotional vocal delivery and impactful lyrics. With the exception of a few lead guitar breaks, the band plays a strictly supporting role in this song.

### **Begin**

*Review Vocabulary words from the article below:*

- **Summon:** authoritatively or urgently call on (someone) to be present
- **Economy:** careful management of available resources
- **Soulful:** expressing or appearing to express deep feeling
- **Arpeggios:** the notes of a chord played in succession, either ascending or descending
- **Monotonous:** dull, tedious, and repetitious; lacking in variety and interest

### **Discuss**

The simplicity and repetitive nature of “Gravity” are discussed at length in the article. Ask students if they agree with the assertion that the sparse nature of the arrangement is key to letting the emotive melody shine. Would the song be as impactful with busier instruments in the background? Could any of the instruments on the track be replaced with another? Discuss how Mayer’s band treats the live version of the song in the two linked videos and students’ reaction to those performances. Finally, why do students think this song made such an impact on both pop music fans and musicians (particularly guitarists).

### **O&A**

1. What year was John Mayer’s debut album *Room for Squares* released?
2. Which time signature is “Gravity” in?
3. Why is the sparse, almost monotonous arrangement of “Gravity” so effective?
4. Why is playing slowly at a steady tempo such a difficult musical task?
5. What is unusual about the form of this song?

### **Answers**

1. 2001
2.  $\frac{3}{4}$ ,  $\frac{6}{8}$ , or  $\frac{12}{8}$  are all acceptable answers
3. The simplicity provides a setting for the emotion in the singer’s voice
4. Our excitement naturally makes us want to pick up the tempo
5. It features alternating 8-bar A and B sections, with the first line of the A being the hook (as opposed to traditional verse/chorus form)

### **Expand**

To play the song as an ensemble, a certain amount of individual practice is key. As mentioned in the article, steady tempo is absolutely essential. Have your ensemble’s drummer practice with a metronome to ensure a relaxed, consistent tempo, even while the dynamics of the song ebb and flow. For other instrumentalists, particularly guitar and bass, understanding the use of space in the song is a must. Although it might be tempting to add fills and licks in all that open space, doing so would clutter up the song and make the atmosphere less inviting. Encourage your vocalists to embrace the openness of the arrangement, as well. Having a restrained arrangement

like this might leave singers feeling exposed, but with practice and confidence, it can be a perfect showcase for the emotional range of their voices.

Once the band is comfortable with the song and understands how to make the simple, repetitive arrangement really groove, your ensemble can begin to experiment. Depending on the vibe of the crowd and the energy of the performance, solo sections can be as long or short as the band would like. Encourage soloists, whether guitar or keys, to improvise and try to guide the dynamics of the band with their playing. Make sure the rest of the band is listening and making eye contact so they know when to raise the energy, calm things down, or transition to the next section of the song. (Unspoken) communication is key!

## **ICON: Stanley Turrentine**

National Standards: 7-8, 10-11

A truly underrated (yet highly influential) tenor saxophonist, Stanley Turrentine's musical career stretched over four decades. Originally coming to prominence alongside Ray Charles and John Coltrane, this sax titan cut his teeth as a sideman for some of the hottest acts of his era before starting a career as a bandleader. He would go on to release dozens of recordings as a headline artist for legendary labels Blue Note Records and CTI. Although he reached his commercial peak in the early 70s, Turrentine's instantly identifiable playing kept him steadily recording and performing through the end of his life. His legacy is one to be revisited and celebrated.

Prepare

Conduct a critical listening session for "Sugar," and/or "Don't Mess With Mr. T". Have students take notes on the tracks, including which instruments they hear, which instruments take solos, how the instruments interact, and their overall impression of the performance. After the listening session is complete, focus in on the tenor saxophone played by Turrentine. What makes his tone and playing style distinctive? Why was he such an influential player?

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

- Although not as widely acclaimed as some of his peers, Turrentine recorded and performed with many of the most celebrated jazz musicians of his time and recorded for acclaimed record labels including Blue Note. He recorded over 100 albums as a bandleader or sideman, and his distinctive tone and playing has influenced generations of saxophonists.
- Turrentine grew up in a musical family. His father was a professional saxophonist, his mother played piano, and his older brother played trumpet. His family members provided his early musical education, and he found himself gigging by the age of 16. Soon after graduation, Turrentine began playing with a number of professional artists, including an up-and-coming Ray Charles.
- His solo career peaked in the early 70s with the release of his most successful album, *Sugar*, which featured many of the greatest players of the day.

### **Begin**

*Review Vocabulary words from the article below:*

- **Distinctive:** characteristic of one person or thing, and so serving to distinguish it from others
- **Acclaimed:** publicly praised; celebrated

- **Tenure:** the holding of an office or position
- **Formal:** done in accordance with rules of convention or etiquette
- **Quintessential:** representing the most perfect or typical example of a quality or cla

## Discuss

Although many artists Turrentine collaborated with had greater fame, Turrentine remains an under-the-radar favorite for jazz enthusiasts. Conduct a classroom discussion about what factors determine the success and career trajectory of a musician. After reading the article and listening to his music, what do students believe led to the difference in fame between Turrentine and artists like John Coltrane? Are there any modern musicians students can point to that might deserve more recognition than they currently receive, or have an influence more widespread than their public profile might suggest?

## Q&A

1. Which famous tenor saxophonist did Turrentine replace in Earl Bostic's band in 1953?
2. How many Grammy nominations did Turrentine earn in his career?
3. In which ensemble did Turrentine receive his only formal musical training?
4. What was Turrentine's nickname?
5. Released on Creed Taylor's CTI jazz record label, what was the title of Turrentine's most successful recording?

## Answers

1. John Coltrane
2. Three
3. The 158th Army Band known as "Uncle Sam's All Stars"
4. "The Sugar Man"
5. Sugar

## Expand

Assign students a written report about one of Turrentine's contemporaries. Students may select one of the artists mentioned in the article that Turrentine played with as a sideman, one of the musicians who accompanied him on "Sugar," or a significant jazz musician from the 60s or 70s when Turrentine was at the height of his career. Analyze their career trajectory and musical style and compare/contrast it with Turrentine's. Written reports can also be the basis of oral reports/classroom presentations with visual aids, depending on the desired format of the assignment.