

It's Been A Long Time Coming for Muni Long

National Standards: 7-8, 10-11

Muni Long's journey from behind-the-scenes songwriter to R&B sensation is a tale of perseverance and self-discovery. Under her given name Priscilla Renea, she crafted hits for stars like Rihanna and Kelly Clarkson but found the songwriter's path paved with hardships. Long hours in the studio, and battles for fair credit and compensation were constant. Setting her sights on the spotlight, she adopted the moniker Muni Long and began reclaiming her voice and narrative. Her platinum single "Hrs & Hrs" ignited her solo career and inspired a viral TikTok challenge, pushing her profile to new heights. Even though she has established herself as a solo artist, Long continues to push for songwriters' rights, advocating for fair treatment and recognition.

Prepare

Ask students if any of them are familiar with Muni Long's music, and if so, how they first learned of her. Though her songs are in heavy rotation on R&B radio and Spotify/Apple Music playlists, younger listeners are perhaps most likely to have encountered her music through the viral TikTok "Hrs & Hrs" challenge. Find a notable entry to the challenge (try Peter Collins and Halle Bailey for two great examples) and play it for the class, and then play the original version of the song. Why do students think this song provided such a popular platform for vocalists to showcase their skills? What makes Muni Long's performance of the song so captivating?

Key points in the article:

- Priscilla Renea, now known as Muni Long, transitioned from writing hits for stars like Rihanna to pursuing her own career as a solo artist. Despite facing hardships like financial struggles and lack of recognition, she emerged as a Grammy-winning artist, reclaiming her identity and voice.
- Because she is so intimately familiar with their challenges and often unfair working conditions, Long has become an outspoken advocate for working songwriters. She actively lobbies for legislative changes to ensure fair compensation and recognition for songwriters in the industry.
- Committed to her own musical authenticity, Long is highly selective when it comes to collaboration. Although she is open to working with other artists, she refuses to simply feature on any famous artist's song, prioritizing artistic and personal chemistry over career advancement.

Begin

Review Vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Ether:** the clear sky; the upper regions of space; the heavens.
- **Lobbying:** seeking to influence legislators or other public officials on a particular issue.
- **Moniker:** a name or nickname.
- **Resurgence:** an increase or revival after a period of little activity, popularity, or occurrence.
- **Authenticity:** the quality of being genuine or true; the state of being real or legitimate.

Discuss

After reading the article individually or as a class, play a few songs that Priscilla Renea wrote for other artists, like “California King Bed” by Rihanna, “Who Says” by Selena Gomez, and “Thumbs” by Sabrina Carpenter. Note what year the songs came out. How do those songs compare to each other stylistically? And how do they compare to Renea’s output under the Muni Long moniker? If students didn’t know Renea wrote them, would they have guessed these songs were all written by the same person? What does it say about her as a songwriter that she can have success in so many subgenres of pop music?

Q&A

1. What moniker did Priscilla Renea briefly adopt for her country career?
2. What was the title of the double platinum single written by Priscilla Renea for Rihanna?
3. Which Muni Long single went platinum and sparked a viral TikTok challenge?
4. What label did Muni Long establish to release her music?
5. Long has expressed interest in collaborating with which fellow R&B stars?

Answers

1. Melrose
2. "California King Bed"
3. "Hrs & Hrs"
4. Supergiant Records
5. SZA, Summer Walker, Teyana Taylor

Expand

Though Muni Long’s transition from behind-the-scenes songwriter to Grammy-winning, platinum artist is remarkable, she is far from the first to do it. For a research assignment, have students select one of the following topics:

- A songwriter with credits on major hits who went on to a successful career as a solo artist

- A successful artist who retired from the spotlight and began writing songs for other artists

Students' research can take the form of an essay, in-class presentation with visual aids, or both. The project can be given to students individually or as randomly assigned groups. Students should include a timeline of their selected artist/songwriter's career, their major accomplishments, any recognizable songs, and a comparison to Muni Long's career trajectory.

How To Play The Romantics' "What I Like About You"

National Standards: 1-9

Picture this: your band has played an incredible set, the energy is electric, and the fans are screaming for an encore. That's exactly when you need a tune like The Romantics' hit "What I Like About You." Despite not reaching the very top of the charts when it dropped in 1980, this tune has had serious staying power. Its infectious beat and relatable lyrics make it a crowd favorite even today leading to countless placements in movies, tv shows, and covers by other bands. So, what makes it tick? It's all about that catchy guitar riff, the driving drumbeat, and simple-yet-powerful vocals. It's a fantastic, high-energy cover for young bands to have in their repertoire. So crank up the volume, feel the rhythm, and let the music do the talking!

Prepare

Play "What I Like About You" for the class in its entirety. Ask students if they are familiar with the song. Then, play the song again and have students take notes on what they hear, including instruments in the arrangement, tempo, dynamics, and anything else they think is important to note about the song. Why do students think the song has such enduring popularity, and why do they think it might be a perfect encore song?

Key points in the article:

- Although the drummer sings lead in the original version of the song, any member of your ensemble can sing it. There are plenty of important backing vocal parts in "What I Like About You" as well, and students don't need to be accomplished vocalists to perform them. Encourage the whole ensemble to join in the "Hey!" and hand claps in the intro for maximum energy.
- As is the case in many rock and pop songs, simplicity in the drum and bass parts is key. Though students might be tempted to deviate from the repetitive pattern, assure them that the real fun comes from creating a driving, consistent backbeat that suits the song. If the parts are changed, the energy of the song suffers.
- The song's breakdown (and audience participation that it facilitates) are crucial for live performances. The band should follow the dynamics set by the lead singer's call-and-response interactions with the crowd, getting very quiet in the whisper sections and growing in volume to match the vocals. With an engaged audience, this tactic can drive the energy levels through the roof.

Begin

Review Vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Encore:** An additional performance or piece of music demanded by an audience after the conclusion of a concert
- **Infectious:** Capable of spreading quickly and easily from one person to another, typically referring to emotions or behavior
- **Unrelenting:** Not yielding or slackening in severity, intensity, or strength; persistent
- **Vamp:** A simple, repetitive musical figure played for an indefinite amount of time, usually as accompaniment for some type of improvisation
- **Deliberate:** Done consciously and intentionally; carefully considered

Discuss

After reading the article, have students write out the form of the song (verse, chorus, bridge, etc) and note the chord progression in each section in addition to the dynamic level of each part. Since there are no vocals in the bridge or solo section, band members will have to keep track of how many measures they play instead of relying on vocal cues. This type of song map will come in handy for memorizing those sections.

Next, discuss how they would like to treat the whispered breakdown section. The article lists two potential approaches: bringing the volume way down to accommodate the whispered vocal (which can be challenging in a live setting), or ignoring the whisper and using the section as a chance to get the crowd singing along to the background vocals (which requires good stage presence and a willing crowd). Either will be an exciting challenge for a young ensemble.

Q&A

1. What is the tempo of "What I Like About You"?
2. What are two other notable examples of drummers singing lead?
3. What is the only section of the song that deviates from the main chord progression?
4. According to the article, what kind of feel should the bass and drums create when playing "What I Like About You?"
5. The verses and choruses of the song use the same progression. What helps differentiate between the sections?

Answers

1. 160 bpm
2. Don Henley (The Eagles), Levon Helm (The Band)
3. The Bridge
4. Unrelenting (like a freight train barreling down the tracks)
5. The background vocals

Expand

After deciding how to handle the breakdown section, have students learn their parts individually and come to the next class meeting ready to play the song. Depending on the level of the students, it might be necessary to provide chord charts or links to instructional videos, in addition to the song maps created in the previous section.

During the first rehearsal, focus on the fundamental elements of the song. It's okay if the background vocals, hand claps, and breakdown section aren't ready yet,. If the groove of the song is steady, the lead vocals sound good, and the band knows the changes, the rest can be added later.

Once those foundations are locked in, use the following rehearsals to tune up the finer points. If the band has chosen to do the whisper bridge, spend plenty of time practicing playing at the lowest possible volume without letting the tempo sag. If the band has chosen to do the crowd call-and-response, have the singer plan out exactly how they will address the crowd and practice it the same way every time. That might not sound very rock n' roll, but when the stage nerves kick in, students will be glad to have a pre-rehearsed script to fall back on.

When these elements come together, your ensemble will have a high energy crowd pleaser, (and a great encore in their back pocket) in their repertoire suitable for a variety of events and functions!

Altered Pentatonics

National Standards: 1-9

The pentatonic scale is one of the most useful and universally applicable scales in Western music and beyond. Many musicians first learn to improvise through pentatonics due to their ease and versatility, but it can be easy to get stuck in a rut with just five notes. But what if we could take the familiar pentatonic scale and give it a twist, altering just one note to unlock a whole new realm of musical magic? Welcome to Altered Pentatonics, a useful concept for beginners and virtuosos alike. These tweaks create fresh patterns and melodies, expanding your musical toolbox and breathing new life into the tried-and-true pentatonic scale. The following lesson works well for music theory classes, piano labs, or jazz ensembles.

Prepare

To prepare for this lesson, review the necessary fundamental harmonic concepts with the class, including basic scale and mode construction. Ask students how many of them feel comfortable improvising on their instrument. For those who are, what scales do they tend to rely on? Young improvisers on most instruments will likely already be fans of the pentatonic scale. Guitarists are particularly reliant on it, to the point that many find themselves struggling to break out of “the pentatonic box.” Ask students why they find pentatonics useful and why they think the scale is used so widely in world music. After establishing students’ knowledge and comfort level with pentatonic scales, read the article individually or as a class.

Key points in the article:

- Because the pentatonic scale has two forms (major and relative minor), each alteration presented in the three examples in the story can be applied regardless of the tonality of the song. Be sure to emphasize the applicability and encourage students to practice each example in both major and minor.
- The power of this concept lies in its relative simplicity. In each example, brand new sounds are created by altering just one note of this common scale. From bluesy inflections to Lydian sweetness and mysterious unsettlement, each alteration creates distinct sonic textures, inspiring musicians to delve into new musical territories and experiment with different harmonies and melodies.
- Although the alterations outlined in the article are some of the more common applications of altered pentatonics, there are plenty of other options. Once these concepts are internalized, students can explore their own alterations and discover entire new harmonic worlds. These examples should be used as a springboard into further exploration.

Begin

Review Vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Pentatonic:** a musical scale consisting of five notes within an octave
- **Array:** A large or impressive display or range of a particular type of thing
- **Intonation:** the pitch accuracy of a musician or musical instrument
- **Scale Degrees:** The individual steps or degrees within a musical scale, typically numbered from the tonic
- **Tritone:** An interval consisting of three whole tones, often known for its dissonant and unstable sound

Discuss

After reading the article, explore the sounds offered in each example. This can be done by demonstrating each example for the class or by assigning pairs or groups to work through the examples together. After playing through all three examples, bring the class back together for discussion.

Which altered pentatonic scale did they enjoy the most? Which one has the widest range of potential applications, and which has the least? How is it possible for the harmonic flavor of the scale to change so much after altering just one note? Where might students implement these scales in their own music?

Q&A

1. Which musical styles first began experimenting with altered pentatonic scales?
2. Which scale degree is the "blue note" commonly found in altered pentatonic scales?
3. Which mode is described as having a "yearning" quality?
4. In example 3, why does the minor version of this altered pentatonic scale feel so unsettled?
5. When altering the 5th (major)/7th (minor) to create a Lydian sound, which fun interval is introduced to the scale?

Answers

1. Jazz and harmonically adventurous rock
2. The flattened 3rd degree in the major pentatonic or the flattened 5th degree in the minor pentatonic
3. Lydian mode
4. It leaves out the root note (tonic)
5. A tritone

Expand

Encourage students to expand on this concept as a homework assignment by exploring other altered pentatonic variations, as well as searching for songs or chord progressions that suit their preferred variations of the scale. Other possibilities for the scale include flat 1st (major)/3rd (minor) for a slightly more ambiguous sound and flat 2nd (major)/ 4th (minor) for a mixolydian twist.

Once students are well-versed in these variations, assign a composition project. Students may select their favorite altered pentatonic scale and use it to write an eight bar melody. Depending on the age and skill level of the class, you can add an accompaniment requirement. You can give them a chord progression over which to compose their melodies, allow them to choose their own from a song they like, or require them to write their own accompaniment using chords inherent to the scale they choose. On the due date, have students perform their composed melodies and give a short presentation about which scale variation they chose, why they chose it, and why it works with the accompaniment.

The Advent of Music Notation Software

National Standards: 7-8, 10-11

Music notation software has undergone a remarkable journey, evolving from simple tools into indispensable assets in today's music landscape. Originally designed to streamline notation, these software products now serve as vital tools for musicians, educators, and students alike, facilitating creativity, collaboration, and innovation. Their impact extends beyond individual users, transforming music education and production. As technology advances, with the promise of AI and VR integration, the future of music notation software holds even greater possibilities. It's not just a story of technological progress, but a testament to humanity's unyielding pursuit of expressing the ineffable through music. By embracing these tools, students and teachers alike can experience significant benefits to their workflow and creative output.

Prepare

Ask students if they have used any digital notation software before. They may be familiar with one or more of the platforms mentioned in the article, or even with the built-in notation capabilities of DAWs like Garageband or Bandlab. For those that have used them, ask about their experience with it and how they used it (to compose their own music, to transcribe a part they recorded with a midi instrument, etc). How do students think this process would have been different if they did not have a digital tool to complete it. For a fun thought experiment, ask students how they think scores, lead sheets, or other forms of notation were created and distributed before notation software existed!

Key points in the article:

- While notation software was originally conceived as a means to an end, namely a quicker way to write scores, its capabilities quickly outgrew that purpose. An ever-growing array of uses and integrations have emerged to make notation software like Finale, Sibelius, Notion, and others an indispensable part of composition, recording, and education.
- Advances in AI and VR promise to further revolutionize music notation software, offering new possibilities for composition, learning, and interaction with musical scores. The journey of music notation software reflects human creativity and technological progress in the pursuit of musical expression.
- Like learning an instrument, it takes time to become fluent with different notation programs. The end goal, however, is the same - to be able to execute musical ideas effortlessly and on demand with your tool of choice. To get to this level of uninterrupted creativity, regular practice sessions and conscious attempts to seek out new information are recommended.

Begin

Review vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Pioneering:** Involving new ideas or methods that have never been used before
- **Democratization:** The process of making something accessible to everyone or a larger group of people
- **Integration:** The act or process of combining different things in order to work together effectively
- **Immersion:** The state of being deeply engaged or involved in something
- **Seamless:** Smooth and continuous, with no apparent gaps or interruptions

Discuss

After reading the article, discuss the fact that getting proficient in notation software should be approached like learning an instrument, with scheduled sessions and clear learning objectives. Were there any uses for notation software mentioned in the article that students were not aware of, such as DAW integration or AI accompaniment?

Q&A

1. What year was Finale released?
2. Which software does the article claim “marked a new chapter in the democratization of music composition” in the 2000s?
3. What are a few potential uses for AI in the composition process?
4. Sibelius First has advanced integration capabilities with Pro Tools, since both companies are owned by _____.
5. Which was the first notation software product to offer DAW integration?

Answers

1. 1988
2. MuseScore
3. Suggesting harmonization, generating accompaniment patterns, or even creating entire compositions
4. Avid
5. Notion

Expand

Begin or end each class period with a brief 10-minute notation software practice session (or assign the 10-minute session as homework). This exercise idea works best if your class has access to a computer lab with notation software, but in the absence of a school computer lab, there are free online notation programs that students can use on their personal computers.

To start, notate a short melody on a whiteboard and challenge students to recreate it in their notation software in the 10 minutes provided. This might be difficult at first, but after a few class

periods, students should be able to recreate your notated melody quickly and accurately. Once the class is reasonably proficient, increase the difficulty by extending the length of the melody or giving them accompaniment to notate as well.

When students are comfortable with these tasks, add some of the more advanced functions, like importing their score into a DAW or using AI features (if these are available in your school's software). This can eventually evolve into composition assignments. Over the course of weeks or months, this simple exercise at the beginning of every class will begin to yield impressive results. Through consistent, structured practice, students will become fluent with notation software and be able to incorporate it into their own future musical pursuits.