

RockStudy Music

The Theory Behind Rock & Pop

Topic 3 Riffs, Hooks & Counter Melodies

By Lachlan Wilson

www.rockstudymusic.com

Riff's, Hooks & Counter Melodies

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Overview

Rock and roll music developed throughout America from the middle of the twentieth century onwards. Young adults, then known as teenagers, looked to identify their contemporary status by way of specific clothing fashion, young role models, who were often film actors such as James Dean and Marlon Brando, and most importantly, a new musical style that projected optimism, excitement, and rhythmic vitality.

The emerging rock and roll musician was inevitably young, enthusiastic, and musically untrained. However by varying and adapting much of the musical language of previous styles, particularly Rhythm and Blues and Country music, a new form of music evolved, one that spoke clearly to the young people of America and subsequently throughout the whole world. This evolution has continued to develop over several decades thereby influencing the many stylistically variations within the genre.

Furthermore, many rock musicians have developed considerable technical skills without any real understanding of music notation and how the theoretical aspect of musical language relates to performance. There can be little doubt that a thorough understanding of music theory can further enhance performance and compositional skills within the musician, which ultimately leads to a more overall proficient musical artist.

About the Author

Melbourne based musician Lachlan Wilson was drawn to Rock and Roll music from a very young age, and this involvement has since spanned many decades. Whilst also embracing many other musical styles, it was the initial impact of Rock music that has always remained a strong influence throughout his musical career.

As a performer Lachlan has played saxophone and flute in several groups and ensembles throughout Australia dating from the 1960's, through to more contemporary times.

The desire for a more comprehensive understanding of music theory saw him undertake further study where he completed a Bachelor of Music at the University of Melbourne, later leading to additional Post Graduate studies in both composition and education.

Lachlan has subsequently taught harmony and counterpoint at tertiary level for more than 20 years in contrasting musical genres ranging from the Renaissance era through to contemporary non-tonal theoretical practises.

During these educational sessions, the energy and authority of the musical language associated with Rock and Pop music has formed the basis of these instructive modules.

User's Guide

The headphone symbol lets you know that there is listening material available via the links provided.



The vinyl record symbol lets you know when a specific piece of music is being discussed. The title, artist and composer will be listed here.



Analysis and notation examples are indicated by the image of a treble clef.



Generally notation examples are designed to reinforce the audio examples and offer support for different levels of music theory knowledge. Examples include:

The chord symbol or name. Amaj, Dmin, etc.

The chord's functional name: Tonic, Dominant, Mediant, ect.

The chord's function, represented as a Roman Numeral: I, ii, iii, IV, V etc. It should be noted that in this style an upper case numeral indicates a major chord, and a lower case numeral indicates a minor chord. Additional symbols provide further information such as o denotes that the chord is a diminished triad and the + sign denotes that the chord is an augmented triad. The musical notes, key signature and time signatures will also be layed out across a musical stave.

Additionally each topic will also have its own playlist available on Spotify. These playlists include the original artist version of the songs examined as well as extra listening examples related to the topic. Click [Here](#) to listen to Spotify playlist for this book.

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Introduction

A great riff is a fingerprint. It immediately identifies the song and grabs the attention of the listener until the end of the music.

Similarly a catchy hook, whilst generally being longer, is one of the musical features that remain with the listener long after the song has finished.

Alternatively a well-composed countermelody adds additional melodic interest whilst at the same time reinforcing the harmonic basis of the song.

It may be helpful to think of Riffs as being short 1 or 2 bar phrases, mostly written using a minor type scale, whereas a hook often appears as a longer and more free flowing melodic figure. Finally a countermelody should have the capacity to outline and provide additional support to the chord progression

Inclusion of these musical devices, riffs in particular, have been part of the melodic language for many years across a variety of styles. For instance the jazz genre has long employed riffs within its' style, often as backing figures behind instrumental or vocal improvisation passages. Similarly an opening tuneful hook can act as an effective introduction to the main musical material to follow regardless of the style. Whereas employing a recognizable independent melodic line acting as a countermelody is an excellent method of enhancing the overall effect of the piece.

Whilst there are definite similarities between each of these elements, which often lead to the terms becoming interchangeable, it can be worthwhile to highlight some of the contrasting characteristics that define each device as a method to develop a clearer understanding of the role that these additional embellishments play within the overall structure of the music.

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Playlists

The Spotify playlist for this book can be found by clickin [here](#) or heading over to our website <https://www.rockstudymusic.com/ep-3-riffs-hooks-and-counter melodies>

Part 1 - The Riff

The Riff has possibly become far more prevalent in the Rock and Pop style than any other genre. The riff can best be described as a short phrase that readily distinguishes a particular song in much the same manner as a fingerprint identifies an individual person.

In Rock and Pop music the Riff is mostly played by an electric guitar and is almost always quite short, consisting mainly of a two bar figure and occasionally extended out to 4 bars, often using question and answer phrases.

Importantly a riff should have the capacity to link back onto itself and thereby sustain several repetitions without losing its musical impact.

Furthermore the interval span of the figure can at times be quite narrow. Consider the well-known riff played by Keith Richards in the Rolling Stones song “(I can’t get no) Satisfaction”.

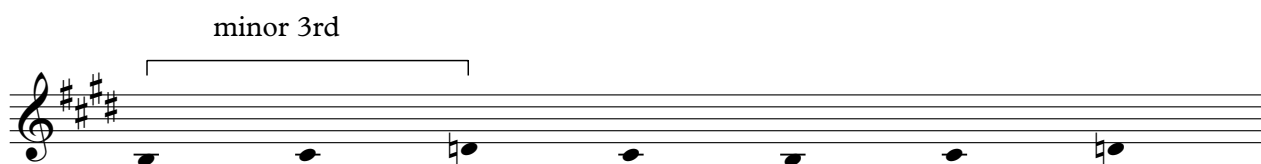


“(I can’t get no) Satisfaction”
Mick Jagger/Keith Richards

This iconic guitar riff only contains three separate pitches and simply spans three semitones, a minor 3rd, yet it is arguably the most important feature of the whole piece.



Click on your favourite etc
“(I can’t get no) Satisfaction” (0:00 – 0:16)



In this case the riff is actually in the key of E major however the lowered seventh scale degree of D natural, rather than the diatonic pitch of D#, which therefore provides a bluesy feel to the short melodic figure.

Extending the riff out further to four bars can be quite effective when it incorporates two similar complementary phrases, which as a result increases and doubles the duration of the complete riff.

Note the effect in the riff taken from the highly successful song “Money for Nothing” written by Mark Knopfler and Sting and recorded by Dire Straits in 1985.



"Money for Nothing" Mark Knopfler/Sting

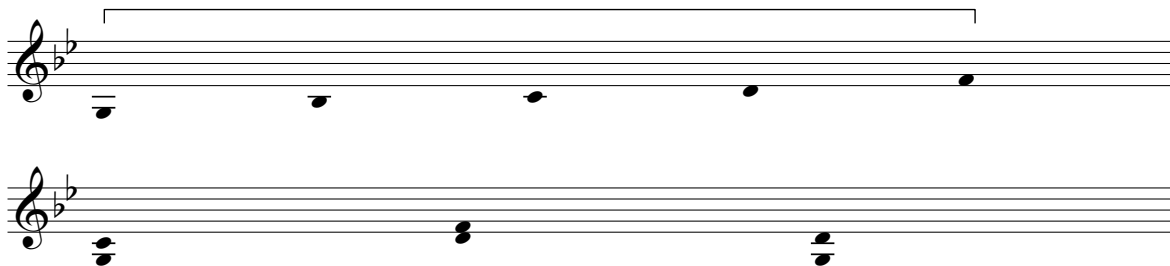
This riff makes use of the five note G minor pentatonic scale, with an interesting feature being the occasional use of two-note dyad chords, containing intervals of 3rds, 4ths, or 5ths.



Click on your favourite etc
(Money for Nothing. (0:36 - 1:05))



G minor pentatonic scale



Minor sounding scale forms generally appear the most ideal structure for Rock and Pop riffs regularly emphasising the interval of a minor 3rd, therefore it naturally follows that riffs constructed from notes contained within the blues scale would also be particularly effective.

The following example, "Smoke on the Water" by Deep Purple, clearly spells out this scale form over a 4 bar question and answer type phrase pattern that includes the lowered 5th scale tone. Also referred to as the tri-tone pitch.



"Smoke on the Water" Ritchie Blackmore/Ian Gillan/Roger Glover/Jon Lord/ Ian Paice

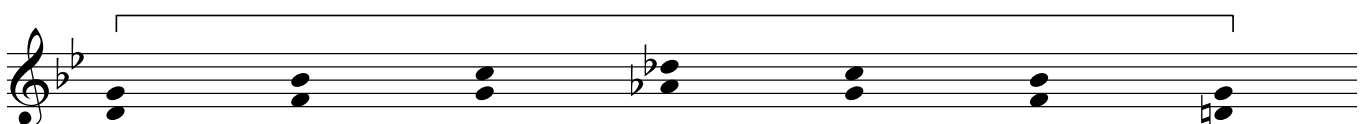
Interestingly this riff is heard using consistent perfect fourth intervals; thereby creating two versions of the scale based on tonic notes a perfect 4th apart.



Click on your favourite etc
(Smoke on the Water. (0:00 - 0:52))



Pitches taken from both G and D blues scales



Note intervals seperated by a perfect 4th

Open intervals such as perfect 4ths and perfect 5ths, in effect creating power chords, are ideal for strong powerful riffs. Especially when used in conjunction with guitar distortion. The previous example made use of perfect 4ths as the predominant vertical intervals, whereas the following example makes use of perfect 5ths as the principal vertical intervals. Note the similarity of sheer musical authority in the opening riff taken from “Smells like Teen Spirit” by Nirvana, released in 1991.



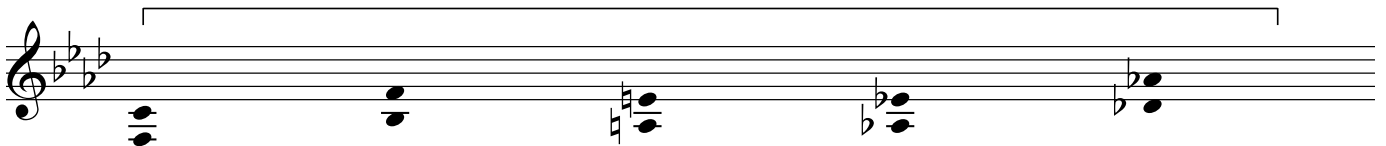
“Smells like Teen Spirit”
Kurt Cobain/Krist Novoselic/Dave Grohl



Click on your favourite etc
(Smells like Teen Spirit. (0:00 – 0:26 F minor)



Note intervals seperated by a perfect 5th



In the case of this riff from “Smells like Teen Spirit”, rather than returning again solely as an instrumental figure, as is normally the case, the riff is heard as accompaniment below the vocal line in each Chorus.

Not all riffs however are based upon a minor scale form, nor do they appear in a straight repetitive fashion. A variation of this device can be heard in a sequential configuration as found in the Beatles 1964 song “I Feel fine”.



“I feel fine”
John Lennon/Paul McCartney

In this case the riff makes use of the major sounding Mixolydian mode. The Mixolydian mode being an altered major scale form to include the lowered 7th degree rather than the regular diatonic note. Each of the 2 bar phrase begin on a different scale degree before resolving into the main body of the tune. This sequential introduction also appears as a V – IV – I cadence-like entry into the vocal section, resolving to the tonic chord in the home key of G major.

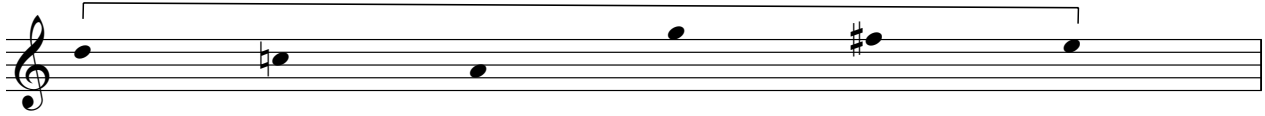


Click on your favourite etc
(I feel fine. (0:06 – 0:16))



Sequential pattern

D Mixolydian



C Mixolydian



G Mixolydian



Exercises and Activities.
The Riff.



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Part 2 - The Hook.

As previously mentioned, the terminology of riffs and hooks are often used as interchangeable descriptors.

However, clearly some musical hooks would be quite difficult to label as a riff, as most hooks are more melodically based, and are regularly composed with longer duration and can often be considered as a separate stand-alone section within the overall form.

Furthermore the use of a hook during a song also allows other types of instrumentation to become the feature sonority rather than the generally dominating use of the electric guitar as seen in the riff.



"Baker Street" Gerry Rafferty

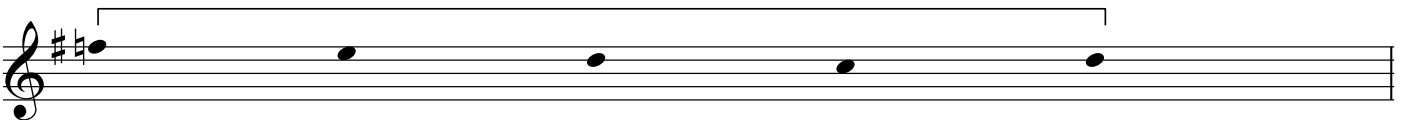
Consider the following question and answer type hook used in Gerry Raffertys' hugely popular "Baker Street". The alto saxophone performs an immediately unforgettable hook after a free and ambient instrumental opening.



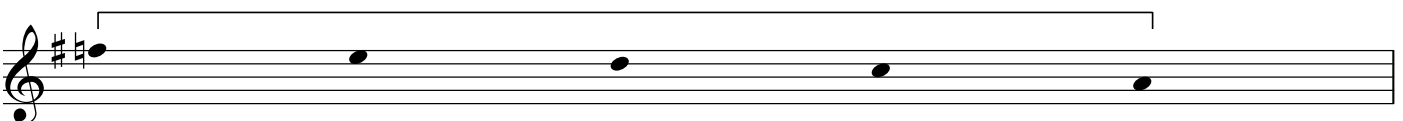
Click on your favourite etc
(Baker Street Fade from. (0:16 - 1:00.)



2 bar question phrase



2 bar answer phrase



This 8 bar hook is a defining part of the piece and has contributed substantially to the success of the song. When requested, most, if not all, listeners would instantly hum or sing this hook when asked to identify the tune.



"Bridge over troubled Water" Paul Simon

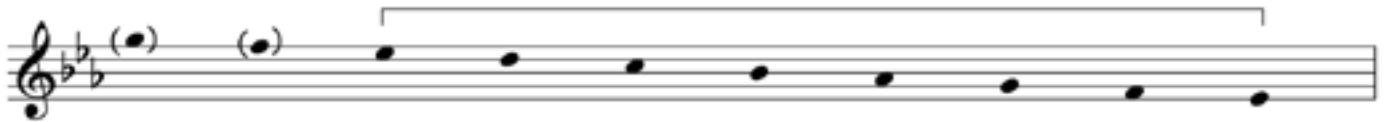
An opening instrumental hook can also hint at the following melody line whilst at the same time retaining its independence as an individual entity. The instantly recognizable piano introduction to "Bridge over troubled Water" recorded by Simon and Garfunkel returns in part throughout the piece maintaining the hook-like feature as the music gradually builds tension towards the final climax.



Click on your favourite etc
(Bridge over troubled Water from. (0:00 – 0:23)



Descending major scale passage



“A Whiter Shade of Pale”
Keith Reid/Garry Brooker/Matthew Fisher

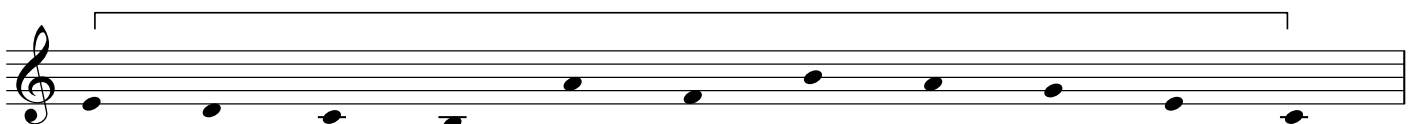
Alternative keyboard instrumental hooks also include the electric organ, in particular the Hammond organ, which has emerged as an extremely effective instrument in Rock and Pop music. The 8 bar contrapuntal hook used in “A Whiter Shade of Pale” recorded by Procol Harum in 1967, has become one of the classic hooks found throughout the history of the genre.



Click on your favourite etc
(A Whiter Shade of Pale from. (0:00 – 0:29)



Major scale outline



Vocal hooks are also successfully used; where a single voice, or combination of voices provides a melodic choral line introducing a song and reappearing throughout the piece maintaining the hook-line presence.



“Dancing Queen”
Benny Andersson/Bjorn Alvaeus/Stig Anderson

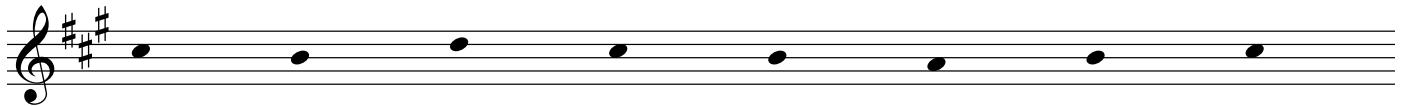
The following wordless text hook taken from “Dancing Queen” by ABBA is so infectious that it almost always demands a physical response from the listener.



Click on your favourite etc
(Dancing Queen from. (0:00 - 0:20))



Wordless hook



Whilst the electric guitar is generally the favoured instrument where the rock inclined riff is used, it can also be ideal in the case of the more melodic hook.



“Born to Run”
Bruce Springsteen.

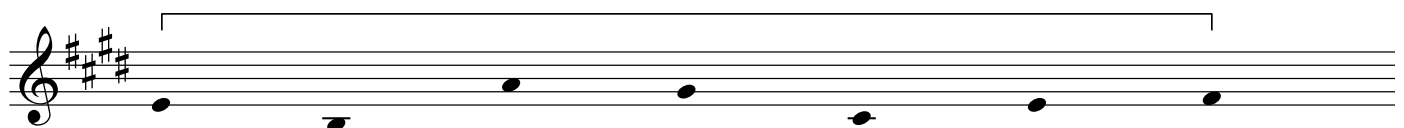
Bruce Springsteen chose to employ a 1950’s influenced guitar sound as the introductory hook in his 1974 hit song “Born to Run”. This unforgettable line featuring the guitar, and later joined by other band members, provides not only an excellent introduction but also one of the most notable hooks in the Rock music repertoire.



Click on your favourite etc
(Born to Run from. (0:00 - 0:15))



E major scale implied



Part 3 - The Countermelody.

Countermelodies have been placed into a separate category here, as unlike most riffs and hooks, the melodic material continues repeating on after the tune begins providing a harmonic backdrop for the main body of the song.

Although it should also be stated that many riffs also continue throughout much of the form of the song however not always serving a harmonic role.

Countermelodies are generally short, mostly 1 to 2 bar patterns, although a successful countermelody must have the capacity to sustain continual repetition without becoming tedious to the listener.



“Superstition” Stevie Wonder.

The following Stevie Wonder example highlights the important elements required by an effective countermelody.

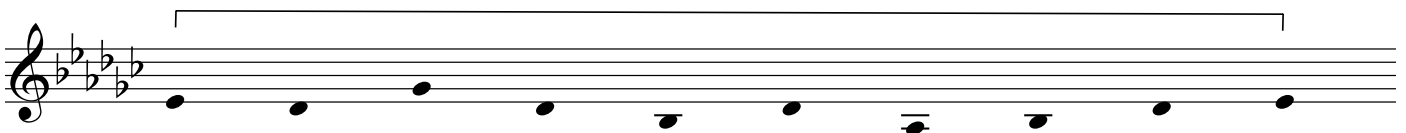
The arrangement of his song “Superstition” released in 1972, features a five-note Eb minor pentatonic countermelody performed by an electric keyboard. This two bar pattern serves both as an introduction and continues underpinning a static harmonic base of the Eb minor chord throughout each of the verses.



Click on your favourite etc
(Superstition from. (0:00 – 1:28))



Eb minor pentatonic scale outline



At times the countermelody can take on a more subtle role during the song. Initially appearing during the introduction and maintaining a harmonic basis for much of the following tune, the countermelody can outline the harmony in a manner similar to common arpeggios.

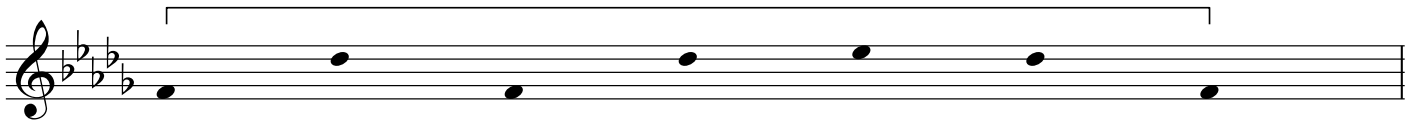
With some slight chordal variations, a successful melodic and harmonic hook can be created that establishes an immediate feature of the piece that continues on as an accompanying countermelody.



“Mr Brightside”
Brandon Flowers/Dave Keuning.

The following excerpt taken from the Killers song “Mr Brightside” implies a Db major triad with an added 9th of the chord above a descending bass line as the basis for the countermelody which then continues on throughout the verses.

3 note repeating figure



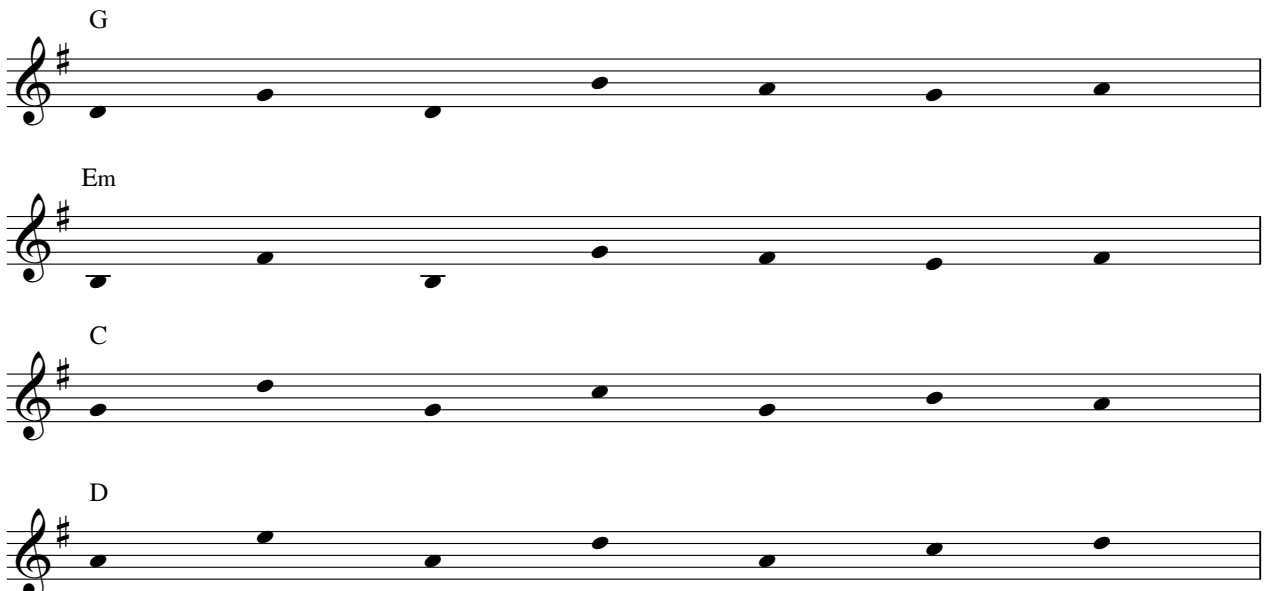
Click on your favourite etc
(Mr Brightside from. (0:00 – 0:32)



“Every Breath you Take ”
Sting

The band The Police in their very popular song “Every Breath you Take”, recorded two decades earlier, had also effectively used a similar style harmonic countermelody including an added 9th of the major chord.

Sequential pattern outlining the chord progression





Click on your favourite etc
(Every breath you take from. (0:00 – 0:34))



It is worth noting that in the original recording the instruments tuning have been altered resulting in the tonality heard is actually A flat. However the song has been regularly performed and considered to be in the key of G major.



“Eagle Rock ”
Ross Wilson

In some instances the countermelody may be so significant that it overshadows much of the songs tune. This appears to be the case in “Eagle Rock” written by Ross Wilson and recorded by the Australian band Daddy Cool in 1971.



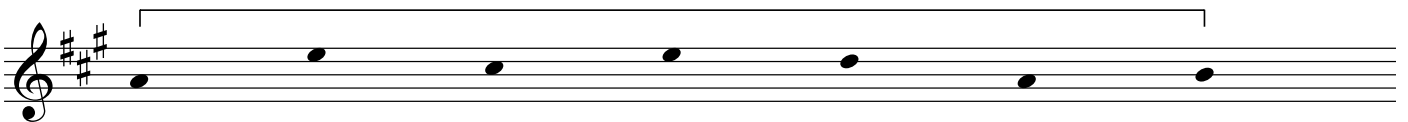
Click on your favourite etc
(Eagle Rock from. (0:00 – 1:01))



The introductory guitar countermelody dominates the verses to the extent that the vocal line is heard almost as a response to the arpeggio-like harmonically driven melodic phrases, which incidentally also features the added 9th of the chord.

“Eagle rock” has since become one of the most perennial of Australian rock classics.

A major chord implied



Exercises and Activities.
The Countermelody.



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Conclusion.

When analysing a given song, or composing a Rock or Pop piece, consideration should be given to the inclusion of additional material in the form of a riff, hook, or countermelody.

Regardless of which of the above categories is employed the overarching requirement is that the material must be melodically very strong and also have the ability to withstand constant repetition.

The use of a clever riff, an engaging hook, or an impressionable countermelody within the structure of a Rock or Pop song can be a crucial element that will often make the difference between a successful hit tune or otherwise.

RockStudy. Riffs, Hooks, and Countermelodies.

Listening examples.

Title.	"(I can't get no) Satisfaction"
Songwriter.	Mick Jagger/Keith Richards
Recording artist.	The Rolling Stones
Title.	"Money for Nothing"
Songwriter.	Mark Knopfler/Sting
Recording artist.	Dire Straits
Title.	"Smoke on the Water"
Songwriter.	Rithie Blackmore/Ian Gillan/Roger Glover/ Jon Lord/Ian Paice
Recording artist.	Deep Purple
Title.	"Smells like Teen Spirit"
Songwriter.	Kurt Cobain/Krist Novoselic/Dave Grohl
Recording artist.	Nirvana
Title.	"I Feel Fine"
Songwriter.	John Lennon/Paul McCartney
Recording artist.	The Beatles
Title.	"Baker Street"
Songwriter.	Gerry Rafferty
Recording artist.	Gerry Rafferty
Title.	"Bridge over Troubled Water"
Songwriter.	Paul Simon
Recording artist.	Simon and Garfunkel
Title.	"A Whiter Shade of Pale"
Songwriter.	Keith Reid/Garry Brooker/Matthew Fisher
Recording artist.	Procol Harum

RockStudy. Riffs, Hooks and Countermelodies.

Listening examples.

Title. "Dancing Queen"
Songwriter. Benny Andersson/Bjorn Alvaeus/Stig Anderson
Recording artist. ABBA

Title. "Born to Run"
Songwriter. Bruce Springsteen
Recording artist. Bruce Springsteen

Title. "Superstition"
Songwriter. Stevie Wonder
Recording artist. Stevie Wonder

Title. "Mr Brightside"
Songwriter. Brandon Flowers/Dave Keuning
Recording artist. The Beatles

Title. "Every Breath you Take"
Songwriter. Sting
Recording artist. The Police

Title. "Eagle Rock"
Songwriter. Ross Wilson
Recording artist. Daddy Cool