

Riffs over chords

Book 1: Beginner



Seven short riffs over real chord progressions. Learn which notes fit, why they fit, and how to make up your own.

Play along with the band online: thehousethatrocks.com/learn/piano/riffs-over-chords/riffs-over-chords-book-1

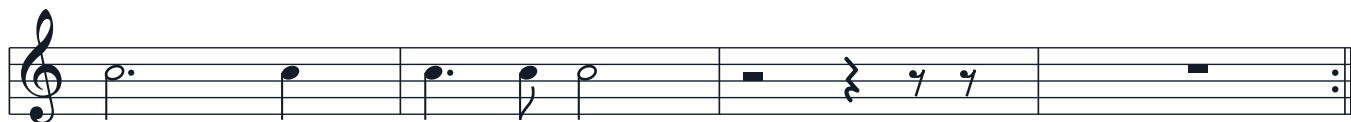
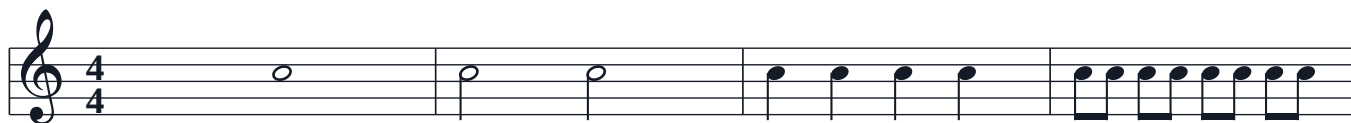
Before you start

How to use this book

Each lesson is one page. Work on one lesson for a week before you move on.

- Chord chart** The chords the band plays. One chord per bar, four beats per bar.
- The riff** What your right hand plays, written on the staff. The chord name sits above each bar.
- The keyboard** Dots show the notes that fit. ● In the scale. ● Lean on it: a strong note to land on. ● Pulls somewhere: play it, then let it move.
- Practice box** What you're allowed to play, what's off limits, how long, and what it will feel like.
- Play along** The online version has drums, bass, keys and a click with their own volumes. Hear the riff first, then switch to Your turn. Slow the tempo down until it feels easy.

Note values in this book



Whole note 4 beats

Half note 2 beats

Quarter note 1 beat

Eighth note half a beat. Count 1-and

Dotted half 3 beats

Dotted quarter 1½ beats

Rests half, quarter, eighth

Whole rest a full bar of silence

The sign at the end of each riff means repeat. The band keeps looping, so keep playing.

Lesson 1

Three notes is enough

Play a riff with only C, D and E over four chords. Suggested tempo: 80 bpm.

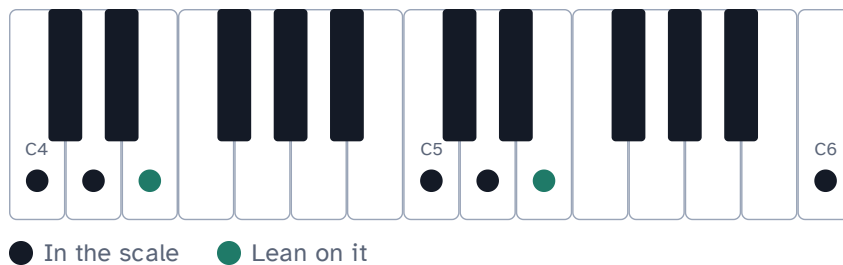
Chord chart

Bar 1 C 1 2 3 4	Bar 2 F 1 2 3 4	Bar 3 C 1 2 3 4	Bar 4 G 1 2 3 4
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The riff



C major pentatonic (first three notes): C D E



How it works

The same three notes sound different over each chord. The band does the work. Your job is to listen for the change.

Try these ideas

- Play the riff, then change one note in bar 3.
- Hold E for the whole first bar. Does it still fit?
- Say the chord names out loud while you play.

This week's practice

Allowed	C, D and E. Right hand only.
Forbidden	Every other key.
How long	5 minutes a day, 5 days.
What it feels like	Too simple at first. By day 3 the band makes your three notes sound like a real song.

Days practiced ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Tempo I can play it at _____ bpm

Lesson 2

Add G and A

Five safe notes over C, Am, F and G. Suggested tempo: 84 bpm.

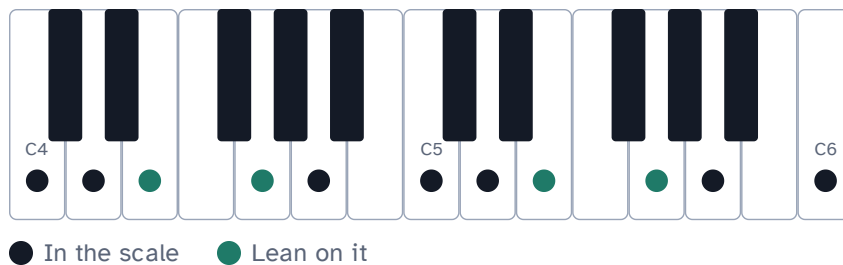
Chord chart

Bar 1 C 1 2 3 4	Bar 2 Am 1 2 3 4	Bar 3 F 1 2 3 4	Bar 4 G 1 2 3 4
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The riff



C major pentatonic: C D E G A



How it works

C, D, E, G and A never clash with these four chords. There's no F and no B, so there's nothing to rub. You can't play a wrong note.

Try these ideas

- Play the whole riff one octave higher.
- Keep bars 1 to 3 and make up your own bar 4.
- Play only the long notes. Leave space everywhere else.

This week's practice

Allowed	C D E G A.
Forbidden	F and B.
How long	5 minutes a day, 5 days.
What it feels like	Freeing. When nothing can go wrong, you start trying things.

Days practiced ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Tempo I can play it at _____ bpm

Lesson 3

Call and answer

A four-bar riff over the most common worship and pop progression. Suggested tempo: 72 bpm.

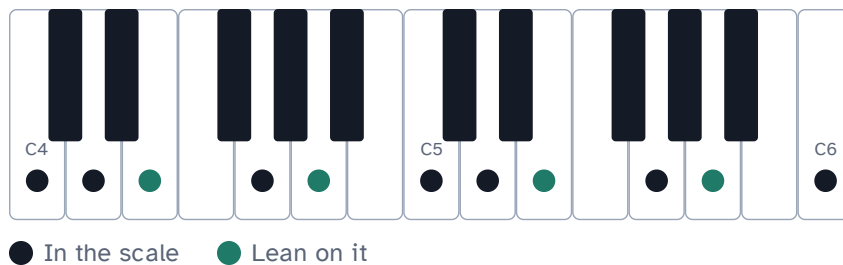
Chord chart

Bar 1 C 1 2 3 4	Bar 2 G 1 2 3 4	Bar 3 Am 1 2 3 4	Bar 4 F 1 2 3 4
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The riff



C major pentatonic: C D E G A



How it works

Bars 1 and 2 ask a question. Bars 3 and 4 answer it. The dotted quarter lasts one and a half beats. Count it as 1, 2-and, then the eighth note lands on the and.

Try these ideas

- Sing the riff before you play it.
- Answer bars 1 and 2 with your own bars 3 and 4.
- Move the whole riff up to start on G.

This week's practice

Allowed

C D E G A, with a long note at the end of every bar.

Forbidden

Filling the long notes with extra notes.

How long

5 minutes a day, 7 days.

What it feels like

The long notes feel empty at first. Then they start to sound like breathing.

Days practiced ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Tempo I can play it at _____ bpm

Lesson 4

Minor pentatonic groove

Same idea, darker sound, with eighth notes. Suggested tempo: 90 bpm.

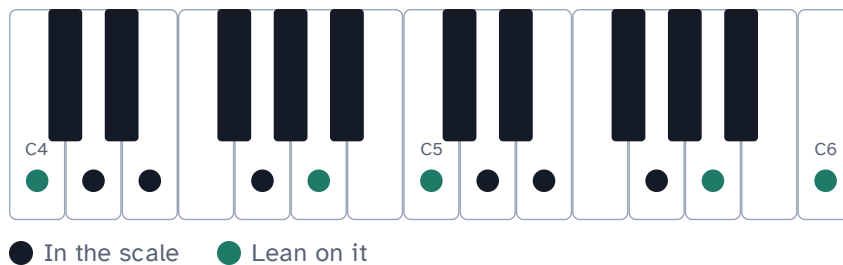
Chord chart

Bar 1 Am 1 2 3 4	Bar 2 Dm 1 2 3 4	Bar 3 Am 1 2 3 4	Bar 4 Em 1 2 3 4
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The riff



A minor pentatonic: A C D E G



How it works

Two eighth notes fit in one beat. Count 1-and, 2-and. A, C, D, E and G are the five safe notes for these minor chords.

Try these ideas

- Play bar 1 four times in a row.
- Swap the last two notes of bar 4.
- Play the eighth notes short and bouncy, then smooth. Hear the difference.

This week's practice

Allowed	A C D E G.
Forbidden	B and F.
How long	5 minutes a day, 7 days.
What it feels like	The eighth notes feel rushed. Slow the tempo down until they feel easy, then speed up 5 at a time.

Days practiced ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Tempo I can play it at _____ bpm

Lesson 5

Rests are notes too

A funky riff over G7 that leaves space on purpose. Suggested tempo: 92 bpm.

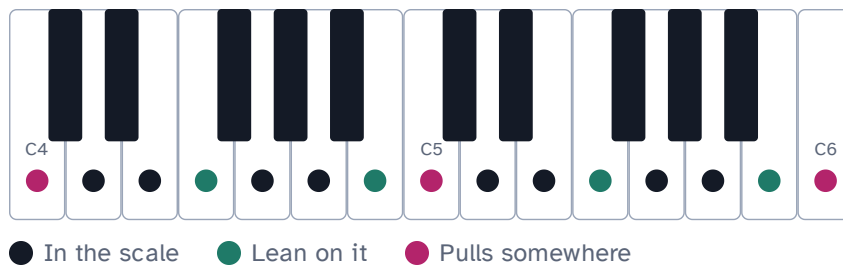
Chord chart

Bar 1 G7 1 2 3 4	Bar 2 G7 1 2 3 4	Bar 3 C 1 2 3 4	Bar 4 G7 1 2 3 4
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The riff



G Mixolydian: G A B C D E F



How it works

The rest on beat 1 is what makes it funky. Don't fill it. Over G7, the note C rubs against the chord and wants to fall to B. Bars 2 and 4 do exactly that.

Try these ideas

- Clap the rhythm before you play it.
- Play C, then wait a beat before you fall to B.
- Make up a riff that starts on the and of 1.

This week's practice

- | | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Allowed | White keys only. Start bars 1 and 3 after beat 1. |
| Forbidden | Filling the rests. |
| How long | 5 minutes a day, 7 days. |
| What it feels like | Strange. Your hand will want to play on beat 1 of bars 1 and 3. Hold it back. |

Days practiced ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Tempo I can play it at _____ bpm

Lesson 6

Dorian vamp

Two chords, back and forth, with the note that makes minor sound cool. Suggested tempo: 88 bpm.

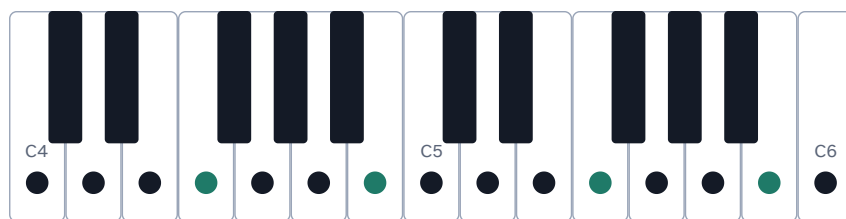
Chord chart

Bar 1 Dm7 1 2 3 4	Bar 2 G7 1 2 3 4	Bar 3 Dm7 1 2 3 4	Bar 4 G7 1 2 3 4
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The riff



D Dorian: D E F G A B C



● In the scale ● Lean on it

How it works

B is the natural 6th of Dm7. It's the flavor note. Play it and the minor chord sounds soulful instead of sad.

Try these ideas

- Play D F A B as a slow climb, then a fast one.
- End bar 4 on B and let it ring.
- Make a riff using only D, F and B.

This week's practice

Allowed

White keys only. Land on B once every two bars.

Forbidden

Black keys.

How long

5 minutes a day, 7 days.

What it feels like

B sounds odd at first. After a few days, minor without it will sound plain.

Days practiced ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Tempo I can play it at _____ bpm

Lesson 7

Twelve-bar blues

One small riff that works over all three blues chords. Suggested tempo: 96 bpm.

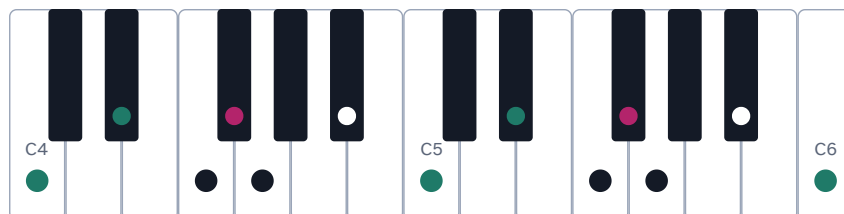
Chord chart

Bar 1 C7 1 2 3 4	Bar 2 C7 1 2 3 4	Bar 3 C7 1 2 3 4	Bar 4 C7 1 2 3 4
Bar 5 F7 1 2 3 4	Bar 6 F7 1 2 3 4	Bar 7 C7 1 2 3 4	Bar 8 C7 1 2 3 4
Bar 9 G7 1 2 3 4	Bar 10 F7 1 2 3 4	Bar 11 C7 1 2 3 4	Bar 12 G7 1 2 3 4

The riff



C blues scale: C E $\flat$ F G $\flat$ G B $\flat$



● In the scale ● Lean on it ● Pulls somewhere

Twelve-bar blues

How it works

The same riff fits C7 and F7. E flat rubs against the E in the C7 chord, and that rub is the blue sound. G flat is a passing note. Slide it up to G.

Try these ideas

- Play the bar 1 riff in every bar. Hear how it changes.
- Play E flat, then E, quickly. That's the blues slide.
- Leave bars 4, 8 and 12 empty and let the band breathe.

This week's practice

Allowed	C E $\flat$ F G $\flat$ G B $\flat$.
Forbidden	Any other key. No left hand yet.
How long	10 minutes a day, 7 days.
What it feels like	Twelve bars feels long. Count the bars out loud until you know when the F7 is coming.

Days practiced ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Tempo I can play it at _____ bpm

The end of Book 1

Book 1 checklist

Check off each lesson when you can play the riff with the band, then make up one riff of your own over the same chords.

Lesson	Goal tempo	My tempo	Riff with the band	My own riff
1. Three notes is enough	80 bpm	_____	☐	☐
2. Add G and A	84 bpm	_____	☐	☐
3. Call and answer	72 bpm	_____	☐	☐
4. Minor pentatonic groove	90 bpm	_____	☐	☐
5. Rests are notes too	92 bpm	_____	☐	☐
6. Dorian vamp	88 bpm	_____	☐	☐
7. Twelve-bar blues	96 bpm	_____	☐	☐

Teacher sign-off _____ Date _____

Next up: Book 2.