

LESSON PLAN

Arranging a Song

Synopsis

Lets take a look at how you can take a song and make it your own. Maybe you want to do a song and add your own flair, maybe a song is too difficult and you'd like to simplify it, or maybe you have a song that you've simplified, but you'd like to spice up the arrangement. You can even use these tricks with a song you or your students have written.

This lesson will cover:

1. Introductions
2. Modifying chords
3. Differentiating verse and chorus
4. Solo sections

Introductions

First decide if you want to start with a bang, or if you want to start slow and build up. If you've got a long song, it's probably better to start slow and get progressively more complex.

- All the instruments come in at once, and play once through the verse section with no vocals.
- Repeat the first chord of the verse for 4 to 8 measures until the singer comes in (ex. Ob La Di by The Beatles).
- Have the guitar player play the chord progression of the verse by themselves one time the the whole band and singer come in (ex. The Middle by Jimmy Eat World).
- Have the guitar player play the first 4 measures of the verse, the rest of the band join for the last 4, and then the singer come in.
- Mix and match, have drums and bass play, or guitar and bass. Boulevard of Broken Dreams by Green Day, has the electric guitar start, the acoustic join, then the singer, then the bass and drums.

Modifying Chords

Sometimes a song is too good not to play, but it's really hard or has chords your group doesn't know. Here's what you can do.

- Generally a chord lasting 2 beats or less can be left out.
- Substitute a power chord

LESSON PLAN

- Here's a general rule that works if you know what notes are in a chord: If two chords share 2 or more notes they can usually be substituted for each other for example: G (G,B,D) and Em (E,G,B) or F (F, A, C) and Am (A, C, E). This doesn't always work, but it works in a lot of situations and it's a great way to spice up your songwriting too.

Differentiating Verse and Chorus

You'll want your chorus to sound different than your verse, usually if the chorus has different chords than the verse that's enough, but you can do more. If your verse and chorus share the same chords (ex. The Middle by Jimmy Eat World, Time of Our Lives by Miley Cyrus) you'll need to do something to differentiate. Try these:

- Change the type of chords on the chorus, go from power chords to open chords or vice versa.
- Change your guitar sound, go from clean to distortion, go from palm mute to no palm mute, or change your pickup selector if playing electric. Strum closer to the neck, or closer to the bridge if using acoustic guitars (you can also palm mute on acoustic too...)
- Add another instrument on the chorus, if you've got acoustic guitar, add another acoustic, add electric, or add a piano. Think of the voice as another instrument - double a vocal line or add harmony. Add a percussion instrument like shaker or tambourine on the chorus
- Change the drum beat, if that's too complex or you only know one beat, then try same beat, different cymbal - have the drummer use the hi-hat on the verse then change to the ride cymbal on the chorus. Another cool one is to play the hi-hat part on the floor tom for the chorus

Solo Sections

Solos can really spice up a song, but sometime people think you've got to have amazing skills to pull it off. Of course amazing skill never hurt, but here's some things you can do that are easy and sound good.

- The 4 note solo (scale tones 5, 6, 1, 2 from a major scale) can add a lot to a song, try it! Throw in a couple of string bends to spice it up.
- Have an instrument play the vocal melody. You'll never go wrong using the melody as the solo. (ex. Smells Like Teen Spirit by Nirvana).
- Have an instrument (or group) play their part while the band drops out. For example the guitars play the verse while everybody else drops out for 4 measures. Or guitars play their part, and drums play just the hi-hat rhythm, or just a bass drum rhythm on all 4 beats. Let just the bass and drum play.
- Let the singer improvise a melody.

Hopefully some of these tips will give you some ideas for spicing up an arrangement. Mix and match whatever sounds good to you. It's all rock and roll