



by Troy Stetina

Heavier Than

HELL

The task in this issue's Riff Box is clear: to root through some of the deepest, darkest, and heaviest riffs ever to fill a CD's sample-bits. With the abundance of sonic mayhem on record-store shelves today, heavy riffs can be found lurking just about anywhere across the modern metal/post-grunge/ thrash/death/grindcore spectrum, where drive and intensity just keep pushing the limit to new, ever-more-crushing levels. So what makes for a heavy riff? Key ingredients may include low tunings, a dark tonality, dissonant or surprising melodic turns, a tempo in the moderate range (not too fast), some good rhythmic punches (usually juxtaposed against a palm-muted pedal tone), and of course, the guitar tone—preferably a raging, full-tilt distortion. Bind all these ingredients together with a little creative brilliance, and you most likely have a contender. Or, to put it in plain terms, these are the riffs that reach out of your stereo and grab you by the throat—demanding to be learned and learned now! And if they're really good, they just might keep squeezing until your lifeless body crumples to the ground, only to raise you up from the dead to walk the earth forevermore as a rotting, zombie-corpse. Now that you've been forewarned of the danger, let's get down to it!

"Symphony of Destruction"

MEGADETH

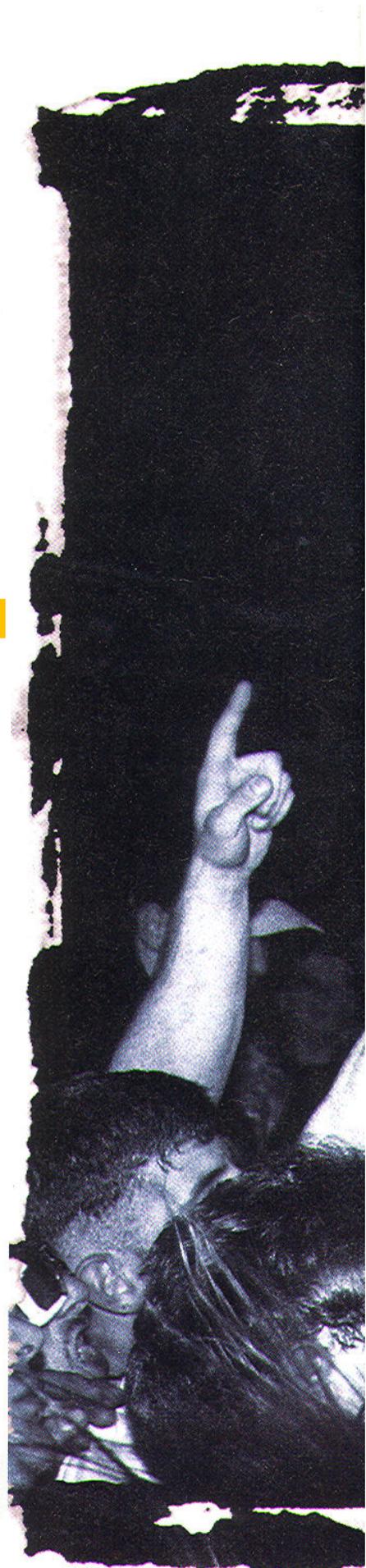
[Megadeth](#) is one of the few successful heavy metal bands of the previous decade to survive the grunge epidemic and make the transition into the '90s, becoming more popular than ever. Their uncompromising style has produced a number of gems, but perhaps the band's heaviest offering is "Symphony of Destruction" [Fig. 1]. from their 1992 release, *Countdown to Extinction*. The riff is masterful in its simplicity. A wall-of-sound guitar tone is counterbalanced with effective use of space and silence. Make sure you stop all the strings appropriately during the rests. Note the e-

haracteristic half-step melodic pull exerted by the F5-to-E5 move, suggesting an E Phrygian tonality. Economical fingering is the way to go here. Use your 1st and 3rd fingers to play the F5 chord, then use your 2nd finger to play the fretted portion of the E5 chord. The tuning is down a half step.

"Postmortem"

SLAYER

One of the progenitors of '80s thrash and death metal, [Slayer](#) offer their share of ultra-heavy moments interspersed sporadically between high-speed, double time thrash grooves. Witness the intro riff of "Postmortem" [Fig. 2]. Here, sliding power chords punch against a palm-



FRANK WHITE

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muted open E string in a moderately-fast, triplet-based rhythm. While the F5-E5 slide seems to again suggest E Phrygian, the riff progresses into an ever-more twisted tonality—spinning out a half-whole diminished scale in measures 2 and 3 (Ab and G, harmonized in 5ths)—and ultimately delivers a complete diatonic meltdown in measure 4 with the sick and unnatural presence of D#5. Clearly a joy to behold. The tuning is down a half step.

**“Dusted”
SEPTULTURA**

Septultura takes the diminished approach of Slayer one step further in "Dusted" [Fig. 3], from the band's 1996 release, *Roots*, by dropping the tuning all the way down a full 2 1/2 steps (a perfect 4th) for all strings across the board. This turns the 6th string into a super-low B. As with all "across the board" tunings, however, we continue to refer to the notes using the original names assigned in standard tuning—we simply add the caveat that the strings are tuned lower. In this extreme tuning, the strings rattle so deeply that the pitches are somewhat hard to discern until you grow accustomed to it. (If you're going to play a lot in this tuning, it's a good idea to put on a heavier-gauge set of strings.) For the riff, Septultura utilizes the first four notes of the half-whole diminished scale starting on E (E-F-G-Ab) and harmonizes them as power chords—just like "Postmortem," but without a pedal tone and in an entirely new rhythmic context. This part is written in 8th notes with a tempo marking of 216 bpm, but the half-time feel of the drums makes those 8th notes sound like 16th notes with a perceived pulse of 108 bpm (a moderate tempo).

**“A.D.I.D.A.S.”
KORN**

Korn have taken the concept of low tuning and plunged even further, into uncharted depths, on both their 1994 debut release and their popular follow-up effort, *Life is Peachy*. Guitarists Shaffer and Welch play Ibanez seven-string instruments, which include a low B string (B-E-A-D-G-B-E), then tune all seven strings down one whole step (A-D-G-C-F-A-D)! Since most of you don't happen to have a seven-string guitar lying around, this presents a bit of a problem. The most convenient and workable option is to simply tune all six strings down one whole step (D-G-C-F-A-D) and alter the riffs when necessary by transposing the lowest notes on the B string up an octave. At least the general essence of the riff is main—



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Dimebag Darrell: Straight Out of Hell

Fig. 1 “Symphony of Destruction”

Tune Down 1/2 Step:
 ①=E ♭ ②=D ♭
 ③=B ♭ ④=A ♭
 ⑤=G ♭ ⑥=E ♭

Intro/Verse
Moderately Fast ♩ = 142

F5 E5 F5 E5 N.C. F5 E5

*Key signature denotes E Phrygian.
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Fig. 2 “Postmortem”

Tune Down 1/2 Step:
 ①=E ♭ ②=D ♭
 ③=B ♭ ④=A ♭
 ⑤=G ♭ ⑥=E ♭

Intro
Moderately Fast ♩ = 140

N.C. F5 E5 F5 A♭5 G5 N.C. F5 E5 F5

A♭5 G5 N.C. F5 E5 F5 D#5 N.C.

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tained. Check out the pre-chorus section in "A.D.I.D.A.S." [Fig. 4], which incorporates rhythmic displacement and ear-tweaking chromatic movement. The **power chords** appear as 4th dyads since the lowroot notes falling on the lower B string have been omitted for six-string playability.

"For Whom the Bell Tolls"

METALLICA

Where would heavy guitar be today if not for Metallica? Yeah, I know, I know. . . Their newer style isn't as heavy as in the good ol' days. So we'll just have to step back a few years to 1986 and take a retro look at "For Whom the Bell Tolls" [Fig. 5]. This masterful sonic embodiment of doom contains numerous riff highlights, but none are more compelling than the song's central riff, shown here. Notice the driving triplet-based palm mutes, power-chord jabs, and odd melodic leap from B₅ (W) to F₅ (II). It should be in every rock guitarist's riff vocabulary. Enough said.

"Spiritual Healing"

DEATH

Death is among the handful of bands who came to define the style we know as "death metal." Closely allied with thrash, death metal often employs hyper-speed, double-kick and double-time grooves, and is rife with such themes as death by knife, death by suicide, death by rotting, death by nuclear war, mutilation, corpses in all manner and form, and other charming themes. Ultra-heavy grooves also show up from time to time—one killer example is "Spiritual Healing" [Fig. 6]. It opens with a four-chord progression centering on A, but the unusual sequence defies easy key-categorization and gives an odd, nearly atonal sound. (It could also be described as the second mode of G# Phrygian-dominant, if that helps at all.) Over this progression, Gtr. 1 engages us with a two-handed tapping phrase that moves in parallel with the chords, further reinforcing the atonal aspect. Then the main riff kicks into a super-heavy, death-metal dirge. Notice the E diminished scale, in power-chord form, with textbook pedal-tone palm-mutes and upbeat chord attacks. Also consider how the six-beat-per-measure timing keeps you slightly off balance and makes the riff sound just a little harder to grasp. The tuning is down one whole step.

"Hammer Smashed Face"

CANNIBAL CORPSE

This over-the-top death metal group has a penchant for exploring thoroughly violent subject matter, including murder in full, gory detail. Nevertheless, some of the riffs are right there. "Hammer Smashed Face"

Fig. 3 "Dusted"

Tune Down 2 1/4 Steps:

- ①=B ④=A
- ②=F# ⑤=E
- ③=D ⑥=B

Intro
Half-Time Feel ♩ = 216

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Fig. 4 à la Korn

*Tune Down 1 Step:

- ①=D ⑤=C
- ②=A ⑥=G
- ③=F ⑦=D

Pre-chorus
Moderate Rock ♩ = 114

*Seven-string gtr. arr. for six-string

Fig. 5 "For Whom the Bell Tolls"

Tune Down 1/2 Step:

- ①=E♭ ④=D♭
- ②=B♭ ⑤=A♭
- ③=G♭ ⑥=E♭

Moderately ♩ = 120

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Sepultura's Andreas Kisser Pretty Much Sums Up the Vibe

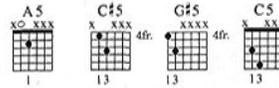
Fig. 6 à la Death

Tune Down 1 Step:

- ①=D ④=C
- ②=A ⑤=B
- ③=F ⑥=D

Intro

♩ = 102
A5



Gr. 2 //

Gr. 1

Chords: A5, C#5, G#5, C5 (play 4 times)

fingering: 1 3 4 1 3 4 1 3 1 3 4 1 3 4 1 2

T A B

5 12 7 12 8 12 5 12 7 12 8 12 5 12 7 12 9 16 11 16 12 16 4 11 6 11 7 10 4 10 5

*Sound 1st note by pulling off with right-hand finger.

♩ = 114

Chords: E5, F5, E5, F5, G5, A♭5, E5, F5, E5, A♭5, G5, F5 (play 6 times)

P.M.4 P.M.4 P.M. P.M. P.M.4 P.M.4 P.M. P.M.

T A B

2 6 6 6 7 2 6 6 6 6 3 0 5 0 6 2 2 2 2 3 2 6 6 6 6 4 0 3 0 3

Fig. 7 "Hammer Smashed Face"

Tune Down 1/2 Step:

- ①=E♭ ④=D♭
- ②=B♭ ⑤=A♭
- ③=G♭ ⑥=E♭

Intro

Fast ♩ = 194

Chords: E5, B♭5, N.C.

T A B

2 6 6 6 12 2 6 6 6 0 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 5 5 5 5 4 4 4 4

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[Fig. 7], which appeared in both the movie and soundtrack *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, is up-tempo and perhaps more aggressive than "heavy" in the conventional sense, but the strong tonal center welded to E and unabashed, repetitive rhythms help drive it home—and right into a spot in our Top 10. The intro begins with this four-measure phrase, which is then more-or-less repeated in various altered states. Notice how "on-off" chord punches and rests dominate these measures. The second and third times through, "down-up-down" picking gallops on the E5 chord build momentum, and then the last phrase strips away all elegance—straight down and mean—with high-speed, single-note picking on the low E string.

The tuning is down a half step.

"I'm Broken"
PANTERA

Exploring a unique mix of ultra-high-energy riffing, complex syncopated grooves, and an in-your-face vocal style, Pantera exploded onto the music scene in 1990 with their debut release, *Cowboys from Hell*. "I'm Broken" [Fig. 8], from 1994's *Far Beyond Driven*, takes that legacy a step further, incorporating a tastefully heavy Zeppelinesque blues riff in the intro as well as mean syncopations bordering on progressive metal throughout the verse. If you attempt to play the verse

riff with the half-time pulse that is established in the intro and suggested by the drums, each repetition will likely catch you by surprise and you'll lose the correct rhythm. Therefore, try to feel the pulse at double the written speed (double-time) right from the start, so you'll have the right pulse in place when you hit the 7/8 verse riff. The correct double-time count is written below that phrase, showing that you should count to seven for one full measure. Within that measure, the basic motive is actually played twice, employing a powerful rhythmic displacement—the first time, all three chords are played on downbeats, then they are repeated, but all fall on upbeats. The tuning is actually down 1 1/4 steps -- making

