

Metal For The Millennium

Ten Subsonic Riffs from Today's Heaviest Bands

by Troy Stetina

The '90s have witnessed some radical changes in metal. With landmark releases like [Pantera's](#) *Cowboys From Hell* in 1990 and [Korn's](#) self-titled debut in 1994, heavy music began to reinvent itself. Gone were the established forms; in their place was a free-form composite of metal tone, dissonant textures, volatile rhythms, and in-your-face attitude. As 2000 approaches, bands like Tool, [Limp Bizkit](#), and Korn are certified platinum, and the summer's heaviest tour, Ozzfest, is consistently selling out stadiums, three years and counting.

Effectively capturing the drive and energy of previous metal, this new incarnation is far more stylistically diverse, adding elements of industrial, hip-hop, funk, punk, and more. On the guitar, low tunings rule. Tempos are in the moderate range, allowing for extra-phat grooves you can really sink your teeth into. Vocals lurch from whispers to screams to sometimes even soulful singing, with melodic content covering the gamut from straight-up hooks to rapped phrases.

Yet even with the added elements, heavy guitar remains front and center as the primary driving force. And deep at the core of the madness endures the essential irreducible element—the riff. Here are 10 of the meanest, darkest, heaviest riffs from metal's new age of aggression.

Tool

Here, guitarist Adam Jones breaks from the typical use of the low open string as the tonal center. Instead, the low D5 acts as a temporary move below the E5 tonic chord. The higher G5/D dyad is also formed from open strings—in this case, strings 3 and 4. This clever use of open-string chords allows for quick and easy changes.

Deftones

The opening D major chord consists of the major 3rd (F#) played in octaves over a droning low D string. Fret the low F# with your index finger and the high F# with your 4th finger (not the 3rd finger, the reason for which you will see shortly). Also, be sure to mute string 4 with the side of your index finger to deaden it, and let the chord ring freely throughout the measure. Then, to form the Bsus2 chord, simply bring your 3rd finger down on string 4, fret 11, and move your 1st finger to barre across strings 5 and 6 at fret 9. Pull slightly with your 1st finger to achieve the bends on beats 2 and 4.

Soulfly

The main riff of "Bleed" [Fig. 3] draws heavily on four chromatic half steps, achieved by blending the natural minor scale and Phrygian mode. In this single-note riff, Cavalera remains in the guitar's lowest tonal register, giving a dark, heavy quality to the sound.

Coal Chamber

Fig. 1 à la "Aenema"

Drop D Tuning:

- ①=E ④=D
②=B ⑤=A
③=G ⑥=D

Moderate Rock \downarrow = 60

Gtr. 1 (dist.)

E5 D5 E5 G5/D E5 D5 E5 E5 D5 E5 G5/D E5 D5 E5 D5 E5

play 4 times

f

TAB

. 2 0 2 . 0 2 0 2 0 2 . 0 2 0 2 0 2 . 0 2 0 2 0 2 .

Fig. 2 "Be Quiet and Drive (Far Away)"

Drop D Tuning, Tune Down 1/2 Step:

- ① = E, ④ = D,
② = B, ⑤ = A,
③ = G, ⑥ = D.

Moderately Slow Rock ♩ = 94

Mod. Slow Rock 1-2-3-4

D **Bsus2** *play 14 times*

Gtr. 1 (dist.)

f let ring throughout

1/2 1/2

TAB

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Fig. 3 "Bleed"

Tune Down 2 1/2 Steps:

- ① = * ④ = A
② = † ⑤ = E
③ = D ⑥ = B

Moderate Rock ♩ = 116

Gtr. 1 (dist.) N.C.(Em) *play 5 times*

f

TAB

1 2 3 4 5 4 3 2 1 0 2 3 4 5 4 3 2 1 0 2 3 4 5 4 3 2 1 0 2 3 4 5 4 3 2 1 0

*Max Cavalera removes the top two strings on his guitar.

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The opening riff of "Bradley" [Fig. 4] is based on the thrash/deathmetal tonality of the straight Locrian mode, which is a natural minor with a b2nd and b5th. Here, we see it played at a moderate tempo in straight eighths, with the A (b7), B (1), and C (b2) placed over a low B pedal tone. The two-measure riff culminates with a quick melodic dissonance to the b5, in octaves. If you would like to play this using the more common B tuning of standard down 2 1/2 steps, the upper note of the final octave will need to be fingered one fret higher.

"Drag the Waters" Pantera

Pantera continues to be one of the trendsetters of modern metal, after helping to shape the current state of sheer aggression perhaps more than any other single band of the '90s. The band's 1996 release, *The Great Southern Trendkill*, was no exception and continued with the fine

Fig. 4 "Bradley"

Tuning:

- ①=B ④=A
②=G ⑤=E
③=D ⑥=B

Moderate Rock $\text{♩} = 130$

Gtr. 1 (dist.) N.C.(Bm) *play 12 times*

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Fig. 5 "Drag the Waters"

Drop D Tuning, Tune Down 1/2 Step:

- ①=E \flat ④=D \flat
②=B \flat ⑤=A \flat
③=G \flat ⑥=D \flat

Moderate Rock $\text{♩} = 124$

Gtr. 1 (dist.) E \flat 5 D5 E \flat 5 D5 N.C. *grad. bend*

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Fig. 6 "Pollution"

Drop D Tuning, Tune Down 1/2 Step:

- ①=E \flat ④=D \flat
②=B \flat ⑤=A \flat
③=G \flat ⑥=D \flat

Moderate Rock $\text{♩} = 106$

Gtr. 1 (dist.) E5 N.C.(D5) F5 N.C.(D5) F5 E5 N.C.(D5) E5 N.C.(D5) F5 N.C.(D5) E5 *play 4 times*

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Fig. 7 "Reclaim My Place"

7-string Gtr., Tune Down 1 Step:

- ①=D ⑤=G
②=A ⑥=D
③=F ⑦=A
④=C

Moderate Rock $\text{♩} = 110$

Gtr. 1 (dist.) N.C.(Bm) *play 7 times*

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tradition of disrespect.

"Drag the Waters" [Fig. 5] is also in Drop D tuning, down 1/2 step. Here, we see a hybrid Locrian/minor pentatonic scale at work in the riff. A one-finger E \flat 5 power chord leans strongly on and resolves to D5, followed by a tripping, rhythmic lead fill with notes drawn out of the D minor pentatonic scale. This is peppered with the smooth, gradual bends

that have become a trademark of so many [Dimebag Darrell](#) riffs.

"Pollution" Limp Bizkit

Limp Bizkit's high-energy, metal/hiphop style is making waves and punching up the charts. "Pollution," the second track off the band's 1997 Flip/Interscope release, *Three Dollar Bill, Yall\$*, makes no apologies and takes no prisoners.

The riff [Fig. 6] is played in Drop D tuning, down 1/2 step, with power chords executed using a one-finger barre. Over a D pedal tone, the E (2nd) and F (3rd) power



chords spell out a D minor tonality. The overriding quality here is clearly rhythmic in nature, with prominent 16th-note syncopations. Play this groove with all downstrokes while maintaining a strong feel of the rhythm's underlying quarter-note pulse.

"Reclaim My Place" Korn

With three platinum albums to date, Korn is one of the biggest-selling acts of the new metal genre, and the band shows no signs of slowing down. Korn's sound is largely a result of its seven-string-down-a-wholestep tuning, which reaches a full 3 1/2 steps below the standard guitar's low E string. But rather than dwell exclusively in the depths, Korn employs a much wider tonal range, from the super-low to the super-high, with an abundance of distinctly odd, secondary melodies used to color the songs' mellower sections.

"Reclaim My Place" [Fig. 7] offers a trademark riff from the band's most recent album, *Follow the Leader*. Note the funk syncopations on beats 1 and 4. Pick with a down/up/up picking pattern for the notes within each of these beats. Sandwiched between these rhythmic moments is a chromatically descending line in octaves. Play the octaves with fingers 1 and 3, using the side of your 1st finger to lightly touch and mute the intervening string.

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"Resurrection" Fear Factory

Of all the bands included here, Fear Factory perhaps remains the closest to previous deathmetal styles, with its super-thick guitars (courtesy of Dino Cazares' seven-string Ibanez) and occasional fast, progressive thrash rhythms. Eerie keyboards, powerful vocal melodies, and often-moderate tempos populate the *Obsolete* disc, bringing this band out of the past and solidly into the forefront of modern metal.

"Resurrection" [Fig. 8] is based on a $\frac{3}{4}$ groove—rare in the heavier styles of metal—and incorporates an overall tonality of G Mixolydian, which is even stranger. Yet the riff manages to draw out the darker quality of B Locrian in measures 3 and 4, true to heavy form.

"Sugar" System of a Down

L.A.-based rockers [System of a Down](#) formed in 1995, signed to American Recordings in late 1997, and released their debut shortly thereafter. The four members—all of Armenian descent—have fashioned their own stylistically diverse sound, calling upon elements as wide-ranging as metal, jazz, punk, Armenian folk songs, and Middle Eastern flavors.

"Sugar" [Fig. 9], the third cut off the band's self-titled CD, features a simple, four-chord vamp that cleverly jumps from punk-metal rage (when played with guitars) to an easy jazz feel (when the guitars drop out, and bass and drums carry the line). Played in Drop D tuning, down $\frac{1}{2}$ step, the riff's root movement D-Ab-G-F# draws upon the major blues scale. Play with all downstrokes of the pick.

"Too Close to Hate" Sevendust

Blasting onto the metal scene in 1997, [Sevendust](#) has relentlessly laid waste to concert halls and clubs across the continent. The chorus riff of "Too Close to Hate," the fourth cut from the band's debut, is a quin-

Fig. 8 "Resurrection"

Moderate Rock $\text{♩} = 126$

*Gtr. 1 (dist.) G5 Gsus2 F5 Fsus2 N.C. *play 4 times*

T
A
B

*7-string

**Key signature denotes G Mixolydian.

Fig. 9 "Sugar"

Drop D Tuning, Tune Down $\frac{1}{2}$ Step:

① = E \flat ④ = D \flat
② = B \flat ⑤ = A \flat
③ = G \flat ⑥ = D \flat

Moderate Rock $\text{♩} = 134$

Gtr. 1 (dist.) D5 A \flat 5 G5 F \sharp 5 D5 A \flat 5 G5 F \sharp 5 D5 A \flat 5 G5 F \sharp 5 D5 A \flat 5 G5 F \sharp 5 *play 4 times*

T
A
B

Fig. 10 "Too Close to Hate"

Drop D Tuning, Tune Down $\frac{1}{2}$ Step:

① = C \sharp ④ = B
② = G \sharp ⑤ = F \sharp
③ = E ⑥ = B

Moderately Slow Rock $\text{♩} = 92$

Gtr. 1 (dist.) D5 A \flat 5

T
A
B

F D5 F5 D5 N.C. *play 3 times* F5 D5 F5 D5 N.C.

P.M. P.M. P.M. P.M. $\frac{1}{2}$ $\frac{1}{2}$ $\frac{1}{2}$

—tessential example of absolute heaviness at its best. Played in Drop D tuning, down $\frac{1}{2}$ steps, this makes the true pitch of the low 6th string a low B. But unlike the previous B tunings we have seen, this offers the convenient one-finger power chords. As is standard practice, the low string in any Drop D tuning is still notated as D (not its true slackened pitch).

Fig. 10 begins in stark tonal simplicity with syncopated rhythmic punches on an open D5 power chord. Downstroke picking

on all offbeat chords against a strong quarter-note pulse brings out the full rhythmic meat. The end of the two-measure riff lurches up to the tritone power chord, Ab5. This initial riff is then followed by a souped-up variation, which cuts the length to one measure and fills in with F5 power chord pull-offs and more low D5 palm-muted chunking. Notice also the dissonant halfstep bends in the riff's final measure.