



Matthias Jabs (left) and Rudolf Schenker of the Scorpions

Mark Weiss/Angles

10 Riffs from Heavy Metal's Heyday

IN From the mid '70s through the mid '80s, heavy metal was at the pinnacle of its popularity. The guitar reigned supreme, as evidenced by the towering stacks of cranked Marshalls with their red power lights glowing upon darkened concert stages all around the world. The foreign invasion flourished as bands like Judas Priest, Iron Maiden, [Ozzy Osbourne](#), Accept, and AC/DC pushed the limits and laid down fresh, cutting-edge sounds.

In this genre, more than ever before, the riff—a term originally arising in blues music as a shortened and somewhat corrupted version of the word "refrain"—gained a new urgency and importance in song structuring. The palm-muted pedal tone technique became a mainstay in the heavy metal riff arsenal, as did Aeolian mode chord progressions. Meanwhile, the rhythm section generally featured straight, high-energy rock 'n' roll-style beats in the moderate- to up-tempo range.

All in all, the impact of heavy metal in its classic form cannot be denied in modern metal, rock, alternative, and even pop music. Let's take a look at 10 of the best riffs that helped to define the sound and set the standard.

"Ace of Spades" Motörhead

Motörhead's billing for many years was simple and to the point: "The loudest band in the world." Hailing from England, Motörhead was and still is fronted by bassist/vocalist Lemmy Kilminster, whose uniquely charming personality has gained him something of a cult antihero status over the years.

"[Ace of Spades](#)" is perhaps their best-known song and is based upon guitarist "Fast Eddie" Clarke's riff [**Fig. 1**]. Palm mutes first anchor the tonal center of E, followed by three two-note chords (dyads) with a chromatically descending leading tone (B-Bb-A). Pick the eighth notes in beat 1 with two downstrokes, and the 16ths in beat 2 with a down/up/down pattern. The chording portion is best played with a down, down/up, up/down picking pattern. Be sure to lightly touch and mute the low E string with the palm of your hand at the bridge saddles, then open the mute fully to allow each chord dyad to ring out.

"Balls to the Wall" Accept

Although this German band's debut release came in 1979, it was their fifth album, *Balls to the Wall*, in 1984 that truly established Accept as a major heavy metal act. Guitarist Wolf Hoffmann's powerhouse tone perfectly complemented and propelled vocalist Udo Dirkschneider's distinct vocal renderings. Over the years, Accept continued to fan the flames with a total of 14 albums before finally disbanding in 1997.

This riff [**Fig. 2**] remains emblazoned upon the minds of all who encounter it. Employing three power-chord dyads (G5/D-E5/B-D5/A) drawn from the E minor pentatonic scale and set against an interspersed, palm-muted E string, this is the classic pedal-tone idea. Make sure you mute each open low E note, yet allow each chord dyad to ring out. Also be careful to stop the various open strings so that they don't continue ringing over the palm mutes. The strongest hook of the riff occurs in measure 4 when the dyads rise chromatically (G5/D-G#5/D#-A5/E) in a staggered, quarter-note triplet rhythm that offsets the previously established motif.

"Electric Eye" Judas Priest

If one wanted to sum up classic heavy metal in just a single band, [Judas Priest](#) would likely be it. This two-guitar group (Glenn Tipton and K.K. Downing) formed in England in the early '70s and slowly rose to prominence, building each success upon the next in tour after tour and album after album. In

"Midnite Maniac" Krokus

Formed in Zurich, Switzerland in 1978, Krokus was another Euro-metal band stylistically drawing on groups like Judas Priest and the Scorpions. "Midnite Maniac" is from the band's 1984 Arista release, *The Blitz*.

This single-note riff [Fig. 6] outlines an E-A-D-A-E progression in arpeggios. This displays heavy metal's "major" side—certainly less common than the dark minor key approach, but by no means outside the scope of heavy metal. Actually, the tonality is Mixolydian and not truly major, due to the presence of the bVII (D) chord. Still, Mixolydian is certainly in the major camp and has a similarly bright quality.

Another unconventional aspect of this riff is its use of less-common time signatures—specifically 3/4 and 2/4. This was undoubtedly the result of the band's earlier, more progressive influences from artists such as Yes.

"Over the Mountain" Ozzy Osbourne

After getting kicked out of Black Sabbath, Ozzy Osbourne paired up with guitarist extraordinaire [Randy Rhoads](#) to form one of heavy metal's greatest acts. Although Rhoads died in a plane accident after only two studio albums and a handful of live recordings, his influence upon the direction of metal is undeniable. "Over the Mountain" is a track from the pair's second collaboration, *Diary of a Madman*.

Stark in its simplicity, the main riff that propels "Over the Mountain" [Fig. 7] is based in the unusual key of G# minor. The open E string then acts as the minor 6th tone, with the A5 power chord built upon the minor 2nd tone. This spells out the darker-than-minor Phrygian mode. Use straight alternate picking, with a downstroke on each downbeat, for the continuous 16th-note rhythm.

"Sweet Leaf" Black Sabbath

Black Sabbath predates every other band here by at least several years, and can lay claim to being the "original heavy metal band." In fact, they were the first to experiment with super low, slacked tunings—tunings that have become commonplace in today's metal. Formed in England in 1969, Black Sabbath remained a defining force in heavy metal throughout the entire decade of the '70s and into the early '80s, when vocalist Ozzy Osbourne was replaced by Ronnie James Dio. Throughout, however, guitarist Tony Iommi has been the band's focal point and driving force.

"Sweet Leaf" [Fig. 8] is from the band's 1971 release, *Master of Reality*. This hypnotic one-measure riff reverberates through-out the pro-drug song almost without interruption! Played using simple, two-

Fig. 4 "For Those About to Rock (We Salute You)"

Intro
Moderately ♩ = 95
N.C.
Riff A

Gtr. 1 (slight dist.)
mf hybrid picking

*w/pick & fingers

End Riff A
Gtr. 1: w/Riff A
B5 A6
Gtr. 2 (dist.)
mf

G5 D/F# E5

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Fig. 5 à la "Holy Diver"

Intro
Moderately Slow ♩ = 85

Gtr. 1 (dist.) C#5 D#5 E5 C#5 D#5 E5 B5

f P.M:--4 P.M:--4 P.M:--4

C#5 D#5 E5 B5 C#5 B5 A5

P.M:--4

Fig. 6 à la "Midnite Maniac"

Intro
Moderate Rock ♩ = 152

Gtr. 1 (dist.) N.C.(E) (A) (D) (A) (E)

f

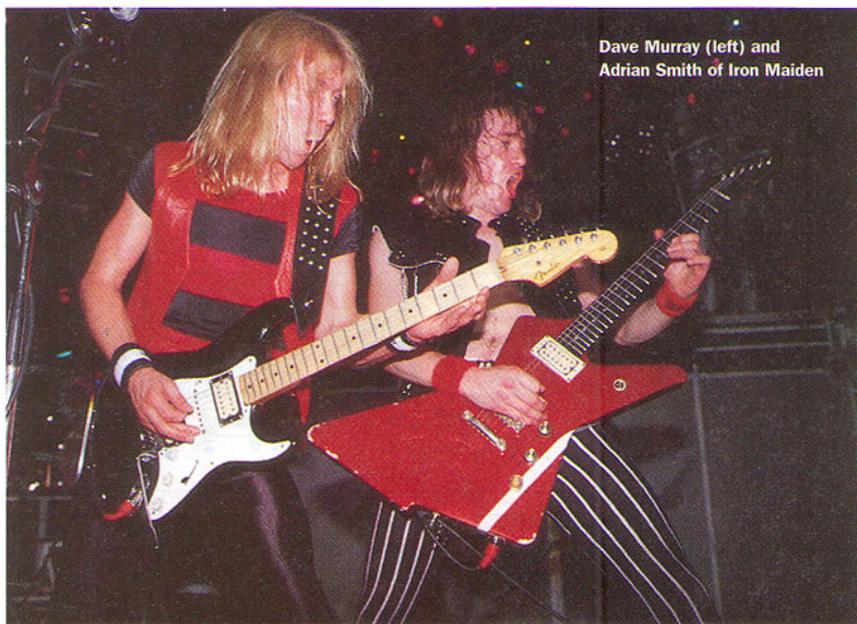
Fig. 7 "Over the Mountain"

(Tune Down 1/2 Step)
Intro
Moderate Rock ♩ = 140

Gtr. 1 (dist.) N.C. A5 G#5 N.C. A5

f P.M:-----4

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Dave Murray (left) and Adrian Smith of Iron Maiden

Fig. 8 "Sweet Leaf"

Intro
Heavy Rock ♩ = 75

Gtr. 1 (fuzz) A5 D5 D:5 C5 D5 A5 D5 D:5 C5 D5

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Fig. 9 à la "Wrathchild"

Intro
Moderately Fast ♩ = 155

Gtr. 1 (dist.) N.C.(E5)

Fig. 10 à la "The Zoo"

Main Riff
Moderately Slow ♩ = 106 (♩ = ♩♩)

Gtr. 1 (dist.) N.C.(E5)

string power chords, we see the root movement A-D-Db-C, followed by a final move back up to D. This implies the key of A minor; as the riff is drawn from the A minor pentatonic scale with the addition of the chromatic passing tone Db.

"Wrathchild"
Iron Maiden

[Iron Maiden](#), another British heavyweight heavy metal band that draws a great deal upon dark imagery and Aeolian progressions, came onto the scene in the late '70s and released their debut album in 1980. Since then the group has sold nearly 50 million records worldwide. The two-guitar onslaught that is such an integral part of the band's sound is brought to bear by Dave Murray and Adrian Smith. "Wrath child" is a fan favorite and trademark riff from the band's second album, *Killers*.

A simple, repeating, one-measure vamp kicked off by a D (b7th) followed by octave Es on the 5th and 6th strings forms the basis of the E minor riff [Fig. 9]. Measure 4 wraps up the phrase with a diatonic, Aeolian contour. Speed is the main issue here, as it is played at the energetic pace of 155 bpm.

"The Zoo"
Scorpions

The Scorpions are the definitive Eurometal band. Hailing from Hanover, Germany, the Teutonic tunesmiths fused powerful Aeolian guitar progressions with memorable, catchy vocal melodies resulting in plenty of crossover pop-metal appeal. Lyrically, they are somewhat different from their darker heavy metal counterparts, in that their main themes were most often those of love and sex. Throughout the late '70s and most of the '80s, the Scorpions sold out arena after arena as their albums went platinum one after another. "The Zoo" is from their 1980 release, *Animal Magnetism*.

The main riff [Fig. 10] is in a shuffle rhythm—unusual for heavy metal. Another twist is that here, power chords are abandoned in favor of third intervals. The key, however, is standard fare—E natural minor (Aeolian)—as is the use of the low E string as a palm-muted pedal tone.

For the minor 3rd intervals, such as the first dyad in the riff, use your index and ring fingers. For the major 3rds, use your index and middle fingers. Notice that the root movement of these 3rds simply walks down and back up the E natural minor scale.

[Troy Stetina](#) is a freelance writer and guitarist. His new instrumental CD, *Exottica*, is now available (see page 181). Visit him online at <http://www.stetina.com/>