

# MULTIPLY YOUR RIFFS

## HOW TO GET MORE IDEAS FROM YOUR LICKS AND LINES

BY JOSH FOSSGREEN

Good news. You can take the riffs and bass lines you already know and juice a ton more ideas out of them!

**Riff multiplication** (which is a term I invented just for these lessons) is something I found myself doing intuitively as I learned the bass. Over the years teaching I've noticed a lot of students don't do this stuff, so I'm hoping this booklet and lesson series will help get you to start thinking this way.

Not only will applying these concepts give you more ideas you can play, it will also help you make things your own, and really get them in your vocabulary instead of only being able to mimic or use them in one way.

To keep these lessons simple, we're going to use the same bass fill/lick and see how many different ways we can tweak it. Here's the lick, which is a version of a classic lick you can hear all over the place in a variety of genres:

G 8va

19 17 16 17 17 15 14 17

Sound familiar at all? Either way, now you know it, you lucky dog. Time to multiply it into many many ideas!

The tools we'll use to do riff multiplication are:

- **Lesson 1:** Transposing to a new scale
- **Lesson 2:** Note tweaking
- **Lesson 3:** Note sequencing
- **Lesson 4:** Fingering/articulation tweaks + different keys
- **Lesson 5:** Rhythm sequencing + tweaking
- **Lesson 6:** Half/Double time + changing time signatures

## LESSON 1 – TRANSPOSING TO A NEW SCALE

The first way we'll pull some variations from this lick is to change our scale type. If you haven't been a naughty student and neglected your music theory, you'll already know that our starting lick uses the **G major scale**. Right?

To easily get this into another scale, first we should analyze which scale degrees we're playing.

5th 4th 3rd root 5th 4th 3rd root

Now all we need to do is pick another scale - let's try **G minor** (aeolian) - and plug in the same scale degrees (in the same octave arrangement):

Gm

Ta da! We've already turned one lick into two. Let's try it with the **G locrian** scale (you could also think of this as using the **G blues** scale and tweaking the 5ths to flat 5ths)

You can do this with lots more scales and get even more licks. Keep in mind that depending on the lick you're using, changing scale might not do anything. For example, if we played this lick thinking of **G mixolydian**, nothing would happen because the lick doesn't include the flat 7th that distinguishes mixolydian from major.

## LESSON 2 - NOTE TWEAKING

Our next method of multiplying is to stay in the same scale but actually changing which notes are in the lick. This could be anywhere from changing one note to most of the notes - the point is that the original lick gives you the inspiration to try more ideas. Here are some of the many ways you could do these "tweaks":

### Tweak 1

Screw with octave placement

### Tweak 2

Add a note to the beginning

### Tweak 3

Flip note order  
(of first 3 notes in this case)

**Tweak 4a**

Change a random note  
(I changed the 2nd note here)

**Tweak 4b**

Changing the ending note is even more impactful since it resolves differently

There are so many possibilities in this direction, especially if you combine some of those tweaking methods. Don't neglect the time it will take to explore these! The point of these lessons is to take on a new way of thinking and become a riff multiplier yourself, not just to parrot the examples I give you. Dig?

## LESSON 3 - NOTE SEQUENCING

"Sequencing" is a specific way of tweaking the notes of a lick where we scoot every note up or down one scale degree, gliding the whole lick through the scale so that we start it on every possible scale note (and maintained the diatonic interval relationships within the lick). Here's how this would look in G major:

If that's at all confusing, run a scale degree analysis on those notes. Notice how each number goes up one every time we sequence (until they loop around from 7 to 1). You can also notice how the general shape of the sheet music remains constant, it just gradually climbs up.

So that turns one riff into seven riffs, and then imagine if you combine it with the scale swaps and note tweaks from the previous lessons. Mega riffage.

## LESSON 4 - FINGERING/ARTICULATION TWEAKS + DIFFERENT KEYS

Are you in the habit of learning one fingering shape for a riff or bass line, and then leaving it at that for eternity?

I hope I can break you of that habit in this lesson. Taking a riff, keeping the same notes and rhythm, but changing where you place them on the fretboard, can make some cool stuff happen.

First of all, you'll improve your knowledge of the neck by being able to recognize patterns from different angles (for example, making sure you know what a major 2nd looks like spread across two strings, rather than only on the same string).

Secondly, and most pertinent to this lesson, you'll find different shapes lend themselves to different timbre and articulations. This should all make more sense if you give it a try: *(notice the sheet music doesn't change here, just the tablature)*

Same notes, same rhythm, but sounds different right? Each of your strings has a slightly different tone since they're different thicknesses, so the way you place your notes affects your phrasing in a subtle but noticeable way.

I often hear intermediate bassists playing bass lines where they are *technically* playing the right notes, but they aren't putting them on the same strings that the original bassist did, so the timbre and phrasing isn't quite right. Tweaking fingerings on the riffs you know like we're doing here will open up your ear to hearing this type of subtlety more.

The other fun thing that happens is that new fingerings may lend themselves to new articulations. Here's another possible fingering for our riff that gives us the opportunity to scoop up into the low B:

Last tidbit for this lesson: Play all your riffs in all 12 keys! You'll find you sometimes need to make shape changes to accommodate the different positions on the neck, which again can lead to fun changes in timbre and new possible articulations.

You'll also benefit from better neck knowledge, more comfort in unfamiliar keys, and of course you'll get your Chromatic Mastery Scout Badge.

## LESSON 5 - RHYTHM SEQUENCING + TWEAKING

So far we've got hundreds of possible riffs out of our one starting riff, and we've barely touched the rhythm! See how important this is? You don't even need to be particularly "creative" to do this (I think everybody is creative, but I'll spare you the philosophical monologue (for now)).

The first way I suggest you change the riff rhythm is with **rhythm sequencing**. This is just like the note sequencing we did earlier, where we scoot the riff through each note of the scale. Now we're scooting the riff around in time, to start at different spots in the measure. Here's what happens if I play everything one 16th note earlier by starting on the "a" of beat 2:

Musical notation showing a riff starting on the "a" of beat 2. The staff shows a bass line in G major with notes 19, 17, 16, 17, 17, 15, 14, 17. The fretboard below shows the corresponding fret numbers.

For practical purposes, I might take a transposition and then slightly tweak the resolution (end) so it feels better. Here I've just moved the last note back to its original position on the "a" of beat 4.

Musical notation showing a riff starting on the "a" of beat 2, with the last note moved back to its original position on the "a" of beat 4. The staff shows a bass line in G major with notes 19, 17, 16, 17, 17, 15, 14, 17. The fretboard below shows the corresponding fret numbers.

Rhythm sequencing is a really powerful tool. Don't skip this part! Try starting the riff on every 16th note position of the bar - some of the ideas will work better than others, but it's all good practice. And of course it'll help you get nice and cozy with those "e"'s and "a"'s you've been avoiding...

Besides sequencing, you can also make more whimsical, less structured rhythmic changes, still keeping the same notes intact. Here are a couple ideas I had:

Musical notation showing two whimsical rhythmic variations of the riff. The first variation starts on the "a" of beat 2 and ends on the "a" of beat 4. The second variation starts on the "a" of beat 2 and ends on the "a" of beat 4. The staff shows a bass line in G major with notes 19, 17, 16, 17, 17, 15, 14, 17. The fretboard below shows the corresponding fret numbers.

If less structure and more whimsy is intimidating, try starting with some kind of concept like "what if I play every note on an offbeat" or "what if I make every other note an eighth note instead of a 16th."

## LESSON 6 - HALF/DOUBLE TIME + TIME SIGNATURES

Let's look at a couple more simple ways to tweak our riff rhythm.

What if we took all the rhythmic values of our riff, and then either halved or doubled the speed?

**Half Time (16ths to 8ths)**                      **Double Time (16ths to 32nds)**

The image shows three musical staves. The first staff is the original riff in 4/4 time, consisting of a sequence of eighth notes: G2 (19), F2 (17), E2 (16), D2 (17), C2 (17), B1 (15), A1 (14), G1 (17). The second staff shows the riff halved in speed (16ths to 8ths) in 4/4 time, with the same sequence of notes but each note held for twice as long. The third staff shows the riff doubled in speed (16ths to 32nds) in 4/4 time, with the same sequence of notes but each note held for half as long. Below the staves are fretboard diagrams for the original riff, the half-time version, and the double-time version.

Not only will this give you yet more riff multiplications, I hope it will give you a better reflex to be able to take existing melodic ideas and integrate them into your bass playing. For example, if you're playing a walking line behind a saxophone solo in a jazz context, you might hear a fast horn lick that you can then cleverly work into your walking line as quarter notes.

You can also play with putting your riffs in different time signatures. Here are a couple possibilities for this riff:

The image shows two musical staves. The first staff is the riff in 3/4 time, with a sequence of eighth notes: G2 (19), F2 (17), E2 (16), D2 (17), C2 (17), B1 (15), A1 (14), G1 (17). The second staff shows the riff in 7/8 time, with a sequence of eighth notes: G2 (19), F2 (17), E2 (16), D2 (17), C2 (17), B1 (15), A1 (14), G1 (17). Below the staves are fretboard diagrams for the 3/4 and 7/8 versions.

You've reached the end! What I want you to do now is:

- **Play with combining multiple strategies on the same riff**
- **Go forth and do this stuff with all the riffs you know and love**

Being able to create new melodic vocabulary from existing material is such a useful and fun skill to have. I really hope that you'll take the time and initiative to develop this skill, and not just learn the examples I wrote for you.

If you've enjoyed this free lesson series, please consider becoming one of my patrons! It's the best way to support me in continuing to put out awesome free bass lessons, and you'll get cool rewards for your pledge. Check out the details by clicking the image below.



Thanks so much, rock on bassketeers!

Josh