



FILL IN YOUR GAPS AS A PIANO PLAYER

*What you need to know to take
the next steps as a musician*

Peter Thompson
OurWorshipSound

FILL IN YOUR GAPS AS A PIANO PLAYER

©2014 OURWORSHIPSOUND
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



*Feel free to email, tweet, blog, and share this guide around the web...
but please don't alter any of its contents when you do.
Thanks!*

OURWORSHIPSOUND.COM

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
SECTION 1 - RE-CHECK YOUR FOUNDATION	5
FOUR BASIC CHORDS	6
USING CHORD INVERSIONS	7
HOW TO BUILD SCALES	8
KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH YOUR LEFT HAND	9
SECTION 2 - BEYOND THE BASICS	10
INTERPRETING CHORD SYMBOLS	11
CHORDS THAT GO OUTSIDE THE KEY	12
ALTERING YOUR CHORDS	13
SECTION 3 - TRANSITIONS	14
CHANGING KEYS EFFECTIVELY	15
IN-BETWEEN CHORDS	16
USING TRITONE SUBSTITUTIONS	17
SECTION 4 - PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER	18
EXPRESS YOURSELF BY PLAYING MELODICALLY	19
PLAYING IN THE BACKGROUND	20
LESSONS FROM A PRO RECORDING	21
WIDENING YOUR SOUND PALETTE	22

INTRODUCTION

For some time, I've struggled to come up with new topics for keyboard tutorials. I feel like I've pretty well covered the basics - the core principles anyone would need to play the way I play.

While there is room to go in-depth with some of these topics, the missing ingredient was a systematic presentation of what I've already taught.

This guide is meant to help you discover what you may not have realized you were missing.

We all have gaps in our knowledge or technique. Perhaps the thought of learning scale theory makes you cringe. Or maybe you feel like you have the basics, but your style lacks the sophistication of the musician on the record or down the street.

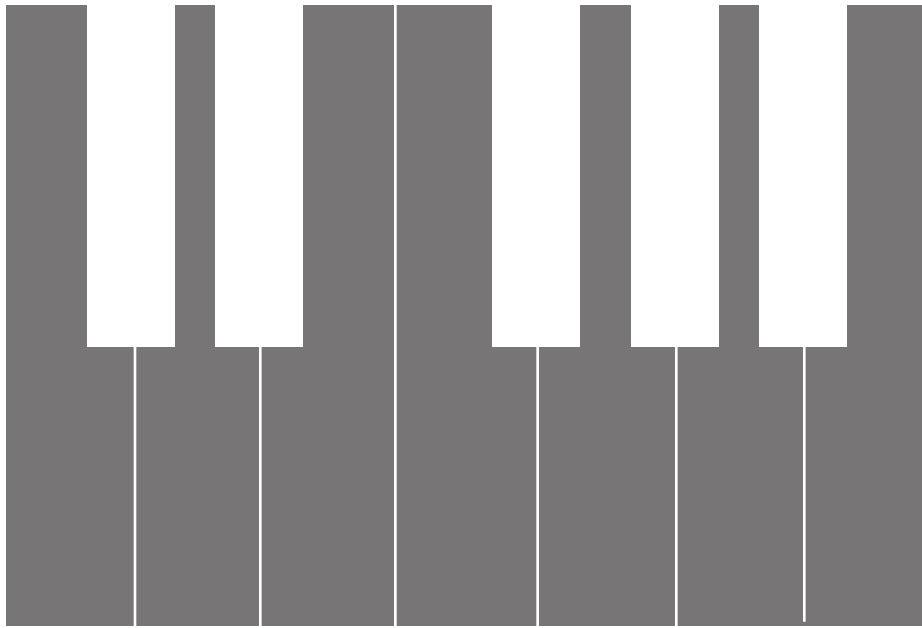
My hope is that this guide will help you discover one or two things to help you step forward confidently as a musician. Many of these topics can stand alone, so feel free to jump around. Some of them require skills covered in a previous topic, so whatever your level, don't overlook the basics entirely.

Feel free to share this guide with other piano players. And let me know what I can do to help you reach your musical goals.

Thanks for reading!

Peter





SECTION 1: RE-CHECK YOUR **FOUNDATION**

Congratulations! Whether you are just starting with keyboard or you have been playing for a while, the diligence to focus on your foundation will pay off.

Just as you can't build a ten-story building on a foundation meant for three stories, you can't progress as a piano player any further than what your basic technique will allow. Any cracks in your technical foundation will limit your musical progress.

On the other hand, a strong foundation will unlock the next levels of musicianship, such as **playing songs by ear** and playing **improvised melodies**.

Be sure to pay attention to the scale lessons. Scales can be tedious, but understanding how they are built will pay big dividends.

RE-CHECK YOUR FOUNDATION

Fill in Your Gaps as a Piano Player

Building chords on just four scale notes will enable you to play the vast majority of pop songs. (Go ahead and click on any of the video images to open them in your web browser!)



These FOUR BASIC CHORDS will get you through most songs

In the late '90's, the chart-topping band Third Eye Blind sang this lyric: "The four right chords can make me cry."

The chords they were referring to are the backbone of popular music, commonly known as the I, IV, V, and vi (1, 4, 5, and 6) chords.

In harmonic theory, chords are expressed as Roman numerals. Their number corresponds to the scale note upon which they are built. **The I-chord is built on the first note of the scale, the IV-chord is built on the fourth note, and so on.**

The Roman numeral system uses UPPER CASE V's and I's to indicate *major* chords, and lower case letters for

minor chords. You'll notice that the I, IV, and V chords are major and the vi chord is minor.

Let's use the key of C major as an example. The notes of the scale are C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C. With this information, we can tell that the I, IV, V, and iv chords will be C major, F major, G major, and A minor.

Once you begin to understand how these chords work together, you will begin to hear what each chord sounds like in context. This jumpstarts **your ability to play a song by ear**. It also **makes it easy to transpose** songs once you learn what these chords are in different keys.

Watch in the video to see how each chord *triad* is built upon the scale notes.

RE-CHECK YOUR FOUNDATION



Changing the order of notes in a chord can help you play more smoothly and provide a melody in the right hand.

Fill in Your Gaps as a Piano Player

Use **INVERSIONS** to move smoothly between chords

In the first video, I explained how each basic chord is a triad, made up of three notes. I played each chord with its root note on the bottom, known as root position.

This makes for a jumpy and awkward way of playing piano. That's where inversions come in. Moving the root note to the top creates a chord in 1st inversion. Having the root in between the other two notes is 2nd inversion.

(If that's confusing, don't worry - the terms are not that important.)

Just remember that to play smoother chord progressions, look for notes that chords have in common,

keep those notes in the same place and move your other fingers around them.

Smoothness isn't always what we're after, though. The top notes of our chords create melodic movement. **Listen to the top notes of your chords and see if you can create interest by choosing different chord inversions.**

Using inversions can be one of the biggest challenges in learning keyboard. If this is the step you're on, be patient. Your fingers will build muscle memory, and you will be able to effortlessly play inversions before long!

RE-CHECK YOUR FOUNDATION

Fill in Your Gaps as a Piano Player

Building scales in sharp keys



Building scales in flat keys



From playing by ear, to transitioning keys, to improvising, scales are the keys that unlock countless musical doors.

How to BUILD SCALES

You can understand scales! I will make it easy for you.

Start on C, and play all the naturals up to the next C. Don't worry about fingering patterns. Play it again, this time saying the note names. Notice how the notes go up according to the musical alphabet.

- once you get to G, you continue up with A

- there is only one kind of each note letter (only one kind of B, one kind of F, etc.)

Now, go to a G. Play up to the next G. Only one change to make: instead of playing F-natural, play an F-sharp (still only one kind of F in this scale).

Scales are simply about 1) knowing your starting note, 2) playing up the musical alphabet, and 3) knowing and applying the key signature.

In this video, I explain how to find key signatures and build scales using the order of flats and the order of sharps.

Knowing how scales are built will unlock countless musical doors! I'm not saying you need to practice the technique of scales for hours (although there is certainly value in that). Just knowing the scales inside and out is enough.

I'll say it again: **make sure you are solid on this information - don't skip over it!**

RE-CHECK YOUR FOUNDATION



Using a really simple left hand technique can create lots of rhythmic options in your playing.

Fill in Your Gaps as a Piano Player

Know what to do with your LEFT HAND

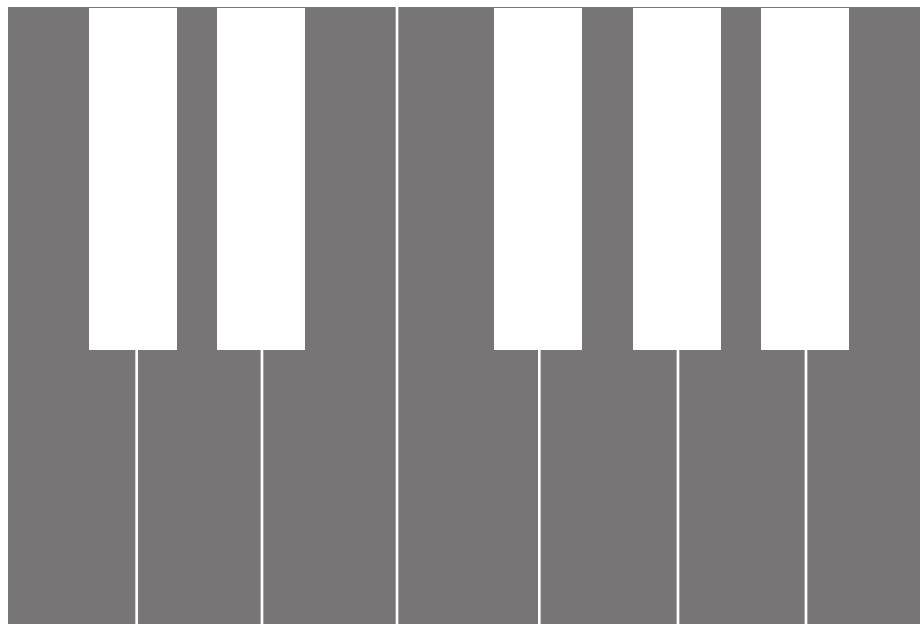
For all the complexities of right hand techniques, what I play with my left hand is pretty basic. I call it the Pinky Bass Technique®. (No, have not actually registered the trademark.)

Most of the time, I will play the bass note - the root note (or the second note of a slash chord) - with my pinky. The primary advantage is that it puts my left hand in a position to easily add up to two more notes. First, I will often double the root an octave up with my left

thumb. Second, I typically add the fifth of the chord with my index finger.

I usually use these three notes to create rhythmic movement in the left hand. **This frees my right hand to play less rhythmic ideas, like long notes or melodies.** Or, the right hand can play off the left hand's rhythms, creating patterns as complex as you can conceive.

If you're interested, you can watch Left hand piano technique, part 2 by [clicking here](#).



SECTION 2: BEYOND THE BASICS

Once your foundation is secure, you're ready to go beyond chords and techniques. In Section 2, we'll cover how to play chords with alternate bass notes, chords built on non-scale notes, and even how to improve the basic chords in your band chart.

Filling the gaps in this section will put you much closer to **that sophisticated sound you're after**. You'll play chords progressions with a sense of movement in the bass and play more colorful, thoughtful chord voicings. Let's do it.



Understanding chord symbol notation is vital for knowing which notes to play and which to leave out.

Fill in Your Gaps as a Piano Player

Interpreting CHORD SYMBOLS (the right way)

Do you know the differences between the C², C^{add2}, and C⁹ chords? If you do, you're in rare company!

Understanding the nuances of chord notation can help you in two ways. One, it helps you **interpret a song chart properly**. Two, it helps you **communicate more effectively** with other musicians when you can use the proper terms and symbols.

This video gives an overview of almost every chord symbol type you could

encounter. (I inadvertently left out the augmented chord, which is notated by the chord note, followed by a + symbol.)

One of the big concepts is **knowing when a chord symbol number means not only that you include a different note, but that you also exclude a regular note**.

Another big concept involves **upper extension chords** - 9's, 11's, and 13's - and their implications. This video moves quickly, so listen close!

BEYOND THE BASICS

Fill in Your Gaps as a Piano Player

This lesson can greatly expand your chord and harmonic repertoire.



Grab attention with chords that go OUTSIDE THE KEY or SCALE

This concept is exciting.

Truly, you *can* do a lot with the four basic chords, but if you're ready to go further, the chords in this video will get you there. Chords outside the key will **add a lot of flavor to your progressions** and create interest.

One way to derive chords from outside the key you're playing is to build a chord on an altered scale note. For example, take the 7th note of a scale, lower it half a step, and build a major chord on that note. The $\flat VII$ chord results, and it is very common. You can use the same technique to get the $\flat III$ or a $\flat VI$ chords

Another way to end with a chord outside the context of your key is to take a major chord and make it minor. My favorite example here to to change the major IV chord to a minor iv chord.

This video also gives a quick intro to secondary dominants. If I had known about these before college, I would have saved myself an extra semester of piano class! Secondary dominants make a chord other than the I chord temporarily sound like home.

Have fun expanding your chord options!

BEYOND THE BASICS



Playing full-sounding chords is not necessarily about playing more notes as much as it's about choosing the right notes.

Fill in Your Gaps as a Piano Player

Sophisticate your sound by **ALTERING** your chords

I was once approached by another piano player who asked me, “How do you get your chords to sound so full?”

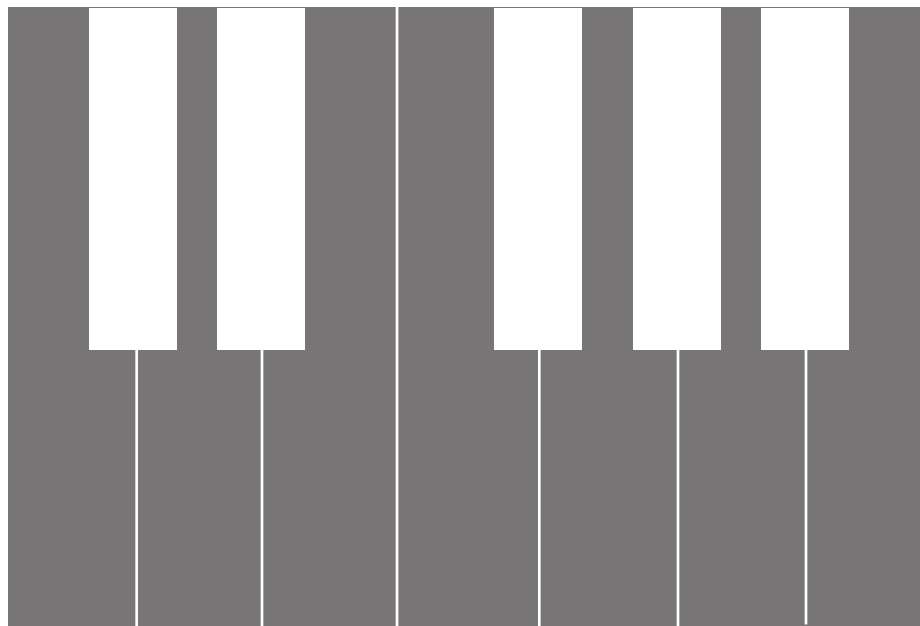
The answer is not necessarily to play more notes. Usually, the answer is to make good note choices. And when choosing chord notes, I often think in terms of scale notes.

Each scale note has its own character, ranging from the ultra-stable 5th scale degree to the unstable and

conflicting but potentially colorful 4th and 7th scale degrees.

With that in mind, I typically add color to my chords by adding and subtracting scale degrees. For example, the 1st, 2nd, and 5th scale notes will sound good in most chords. To get a more colorful or forward-moving sound, though, employ 3rd, 6th, 4th, or 7th scale notes.

Check the video - you will see and hear what I mean!



SECTION 3: MAKING MUSIC IN **TRANSITION**

One of my favorite albums in recent years is *Church Music* from David Crowder Band. It has some really great electronic elements, which indulges my geeky side. But the thing that I really love is that it's a continuous album with no gaps from song to song. Each track changes rhythm, tempo, and key to seamlessly flow into the next. **Some of the most interesting and musical moments** on the album **are the transitions** themselves.

As keyboard players, we often have the responsibility and freedom to create transitions, whether between chords or between songs. This section will give some ideas on **how to make those moments shine**, bringing us closer to being that kind of musician-artist who brings everything together.

MAKING MUSIC IN TRANSITION



The complete piano player has multiple techniques for switching keys.

Fill in Your Gaps as a Piano Player

CHANGING KEYS effectively

Silence is golden, except when it's just awkward.

As contemporary musicians, we have to be intentional about how we use silence. Intentional silence can create a contemplative moment, allowing the previous moment to sink in or build anticipation for what's coming next.

Unintentional silence, such as when the pianist is switching charts, the drummer

is waiting on the click, or the guitarist is retuning, **creates an uneasy feeling.**

One of our goals as piano players should be to help create **effective transitions in between songs.** This often means having **multiple techniques for changing keys.**

Using your knowledge of chord notes and scales (I told you it would come in handy!) will help you change keys in a way that feels right.

MAKING MUSIC IN TRANSITION

Fill in Your Gaps as a Piano Player

This simple technique can add flavor and a sense of movement to generic, common chord progressions.



IN-BETWEEN CHORDS

Keyboard players are an adventurous bunch.

I'm not sure I've ever met a piano player who wasn't interested in adding flavor to a chord or a progression. Let's face it - there are only so many times you can play a I- to IV-chord progression without getting bored.

This lesson covers an easy to apply **technique that creates movement and flavor** when moving from the I to the IV chord, or the V to the I-Chord.

By adding two slash chords in between, you can create a step-wise bass movement and tension that resolves nicely at the destination chord.

As I mention in the video, there are two things to be careful about when using this technique. First, make sure you communicate with the rest of your band to be sure you're not creating clashing bass notes. Second, **listen for how the song's melody works with these chords**. Not every melody note will sound good here, so keep your ears open.

MAKING MUSIC IN TRANSITION



Tritone is a super interesting way to create movement in your progressions and it's easier than you think.

Fill in Your Gaps as a Piano Player

Using Tritone SUBSTITUTIONS

Tritones are the most dissonant interval, so much so that they were essentially banned from music during medieval times.

These days, it's **a great way to create a lot of interesting tension that can be resolved**, lending a lot of forward movement to a progression.

The music theory behind it is **actually not that complicated**. Most harmonies move by intervals of a fourth, for example, the I chord to the IV chord, or the ii chord to the vi chord.

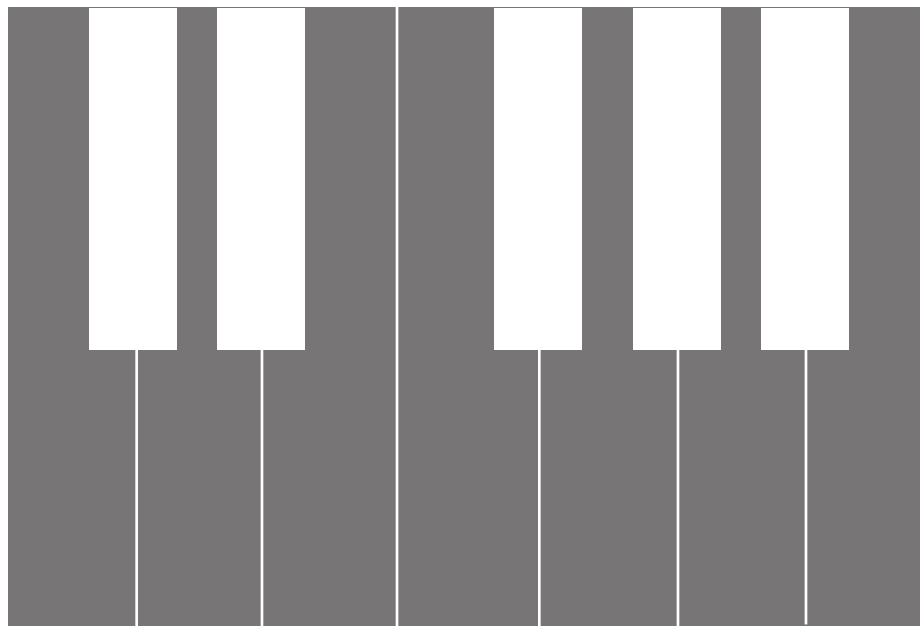
Adding the minor 7th to a chord (e.g. B-flat to a C chord) gives a chord a dominant sound, creating the anticipation of half-step movement.

By substituting the chord a tritone away, extra half-step movements are created, bringing about the classic tritone tension.

However, by moving only the bass note to a half-step above the destination chord.....

actually, **this is a lot easier to demonstrate** than to write about.

Better watch the video!



SECTION 4: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

With the knowledge of sections 1-3 in hand, we begin the lifelong pursuit of *artistry* on the keyboard. Putting it all together as an artist requires **more than simply playing the right notes at the right time** and playing things that are interesting. It means analyzing the current situation and playing something that is tasteful - maximizing our ability to **create music that inspires**.

In this section, we'll take steps toward communicating melodic ideas with fluency, effectively playing "second fiddle," thoughtful preparation, and having just the right sound for the moment.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Fill in Your Gaps as a Piano Player

Learning to play with melodies requires developing your ear and technique to where music is like a second language.



Express yourself by PLAYING MELODICALLY

Knowing which color notes to add to your chords is a big step toward playing with a sophisticated sound. However, what really marks the good players is the ability to **embellish their chords with melodic ideas**.

This concept can be intimidating at first, but this video breaks it down into some manageable steps.

First, play a song with just one note in each hand: the bass note in the left hand and the melody in the right. This develops your ear to find melodic figures and your left hand to carry the harmonic progression.

Second, add another note in with the right hand melody, either the 1st or 5th

scale note. For example, if the melody is around the 3rd, 4th, and 5th notes, of the scale, play the 1st note with those others to round out your sound.

In the next steps, replace the song's melody with your own ideas. I find that melodies based around the half-steps in the scale are most interesting - they have an inherent momentum.

When you fully develop your ear and technique around these concepts, music becomes like a fluid second language. You'll be able to express whatever musical thoughts come to mind.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER



When playing in the background, you can play beautiful and inspiring music without stealing the spotlight.

Fill in Your Gaps as a Piano Player

Playing in the BACKGROUND

If you're reading this, chances are very good that you have seen this video - it's the most viewed video on my youtube channel. The concepts are simple but important.

Many times, the keyboard part isn't meant to be prominent. We often have to tuck in behind a singer, guitar part, or someone speaking. In these times, it's tempting to get bored with playing simple

parts. However, what we play (or consciously don't play) can inspire the people in the spotlight to execute their roles better. It's highly needed and very much appreciated.

In this video, I give some ideas on how to avoid stealing the show, and how to effectively **play beautiful supporting music with just a few well-chosen notes.**

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Fill in Your Gaps as a Piano Player

Learning how to provide thoughtful musical ideas and chord voicings is a huge lesson for piano players.



Lessons from a PRO RECORDING

Kari Jobe's studio recording of "Revelation Song" provides a good vehicle for not only applying previously taught concepts, but sharing some new ones.

In this video, we analyze the professional studio musician's ideas and performance.

One lesson learned has to do with chord voicings. In one section of the song, **the pianist goes to a lower range in order to stay out of the vocalist's way.** When playing lower, he simplifies and spreads out his chord voicings to maintain clarity.

From this recording, we can also get some ideas for rhythms. Specifically, the pianist makes very **good use of space as well as syncopation** (rhythms that emphasize a weak part of the measure).

Finally, there is a great lesson at the end of the recording about preparation. Instead of playing spontaneous "noodling," **we hear a carefully crafted melodic figure that fits perfectly.** This is an especially important gap to fill in our playing: knowing how to prepare so we as musicians can fulfill our roles with excellence.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER



Software applications like Apple Mainstage have increased piano players' access to great sounds.

Fill in Your Gaps as a Piano Player

Widening your SOUND PALETTE

No piano player is complete without an ability to **dial up the right sound for a given moment**. Filling this gap requires artistic taste, technical know-how, and having the right equipment. The last part can get expensive but doesn't have to be.

Computers applications like Apple's Mainstage have greatly increased the modern musician's access to an excellent and flexible sound palette.

Since I started using Mainstage, I have greatly increased my range of sounds. From adding pads and delays to piano sounds, to creating unique and dynamic synth patches, **this software has greatly enriched my playing.**

I created this video as an introduction to Mainstage, showing step-by-step how I created a four-layer setup with piano, electric piano, synth pad, and string sounds.

While Mainstage is specifically effective for live playing, there are many other music applications that can yield similar results. The main point is to dig in and start incorporating new sounds!

Thanks for reading - I hope you've found something useful!

For more, be sure to [sign up for free email updates](#) if you haven't already. Thanks again!

