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## The 25 Most Rockin' Guitar Riffs

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I'm told that the good folks over at Rolling Stone.com have launched a list of the 100 Greatest Guitar Songs as a feature at their site to coincide with their Guitar Gods Issue that--like most great things in this world--is FOR SALE.

[Click here to check it out.](#)

As I write this, I haven't seen it, but I'm sure it's going to include a few listings that make me think "Oops, I left that one out." Because that's what this list business is all about. I write it up and then YOU remind me of the obvious ones I SHOULD'VE included. And I thank you for pointing out my stupid omissions. It won't improve my grade, but it makes me a better person and that's what this is all about.

According to the calendar hanging in my room, Keith Richards, the semi-living guitarist of Rolling Stones, Ltd., came up with the guitar riff for "Satisfaction" in a hotel room on May 6, 1965 and then fell back asleep. How Keith Richards could actually remember the exact date is a little suspect. If he hadn't played the riff into a tape recorder in the first place, it might've been lost forever.

But to celebrate, List of the Day undertook the task of picking out 25 infamous guitar riffs that depending on your era were among the ones you mangled when you joined your first band. I often got stuck on the organ, so I was always pushing for a little "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida" action. Because, believe me, "Kick Out the Jams" sounds lame on the organ.

Some picks were for variety's sake. I could've picked 10 Hendrix tunes without pause. Or 10 Zeppelin. And the Ramones played mostly chords, so that sent them to the back of the line.

I haven't yet seen what RS.com picked. And I'd really like to see what your lists would be like. So feel free to throw your faves in the comments!



25) "Enter Sandman"--Metallica: "Master Of Puppets" or "For Whom The Bells Tolls" or even "Fight Fire With Fire" might make for better overall riffs, but "Enter Sandman" has a presence that everyone in the room feels and I've seen some pretty bad bar bands tackle this one and still come out sounding as if they knew something about music.

24) "Sweet Child O' Mine"--Guns n' Roses: This is one of those Pavlovian riffs. You hear it start up and the entire song starts to play in your head. Whether you want it to or not. It's the equivalent of someone yelling the song's title and then 1-2-3-4, except it sounds better.



23) "Black Dog"--Led Zeppelin: Jimmy Page figured out the 1970s before anyone. As a guitar player he wasn't about to let a lead singer score all the girls, so he made sure that his band based their tunes not on quaint little pop hooks, but guitar riffs that would send every teenager in America back to their bedrooms to woodshed and to scrutinize how it was done. Then he gave the songs titles that no one could figure out.

22) "Freebird"--Lynyrd Skynyrd: There's a reason people still call out for this song and it goes beyond just because everyone always does. There was a time when this lonesome, whiny riff actually could make the hairs on the back of your neck stand up. That year was sometime in the 1970s and ever since it's become a cliché, but there's a reason certain riffs become a cliché. They're as natural as breathing.



21) "Jumping Jack Flash"--The Rolling Stones: Less a riff than a conglomeration of chords, but the Stones mastered the art of the chunky riff. Some would take "Brown Sugar." I'd prefer "Gimme Shelter" by a hair. But of this old beast's catalog, this still sounds fresh to me, while many others have grown tired thanks to the conspiracy of classic rock radio.

20) "Roadhouse Blues"--The Doors: The Doors were never known for their guitar riffs. "Five To One" is a great two-note buzzsaw, the rewrite of the Kinks for "Hello, I Love You" was nice, but this is the one sliding riff that every bar band in America has done to death usually at the request of a very inebriated audience member who refuses to shut up until it is played.



19) "Johnny B. Goode"--Chuck Berry: Considering how many songs have been written based on the "Chuck Berry" school of guitar and considering how many songs Chuck himself wrote based on this riff, tells me this is one immortal, undying riff. I've played it wrong for years.

18) "Kick Out The Jams"--MC5: Whether or not these revolutionaries actually had the catalog to be the great American wunderkinds of the '70s is debatable. Album productions, flawed concepts, inter-band squabbles, politics all rendered them a mess. But their signature tune and its signature riff never lost an ounce of momentum.



7) "Pipeline"--The Chantays: Surf Rock goes in and out of style, depending on the whims of fate. But this tune has been covered by enough punk bands and people of taste to ensure that even if you've never heard the Chantays version, you've heard someone do a good approximation.

16) "I Feel Fine"--The Beatles: All said, I'd take "She Said, She Said" or "And Your Bird Can Sing," but we'll stick with the tunes that the band and their record company pushed on the public as hit singles. This one with its use of (gasp) feedback (were people conservative and corny back then or what?) and its string mangling complexity make you wonder why they bothered. I guess they wanted a challenge. This could've been a hit even without the difficult riff.



15) "Walk This Way"--Aerosmith: That this riff worked so well in a hip-hop context just goes to show you don't know what you have even when you have it. I'm sure Joe Perry and Brad Whitford knew they had a decent riff to work off of when they played it back in the mid-'70s, but I'm also pretty sure that they didn't hear it as being revolutionary or probably that much better than many of their other riffs. At this point, you wonder if they ever want to play it again. That is, until the money rolls in and then it probably seems like a good idea.

14) "Day Tripper"--The Beatles: Another one from the Fab Four where the riff is more important than the rest of the tune. And it's a nice tune. But everyone tries to play this for the joy of the riff and who gets around to the rest of the song? Nobody.



13) "Heartbreaker"--Led Zeppelin: Just another great Jimmy Page riff. The only problem with listing any Led Zep riff is you're immediately reminded of all the ones you're leaving behind...so, yes, "The Ocean," "The Immigrant Song," "Living Loving Maid," "In the Evening," "Kashmir," the list goes on...

12) "Smells Like Teen Spirit"--Nirvana: I don't know whether I'm voting for the four chords that run throughout the song or the two notes that ring out when the chords fall away. Either way, it's impossible to explain how weird, unusual and right this sounded the very first time I heard it. And how everyone argued over whether it was too easy to be for real. As a simpleton, I like simple.



11) "Crazy Train"--Ozzy Osbourne: This almost sounds like an Indian music scale if you play it a certain way. Ozzy says Randy saved his career and remembers the man with great reverence and if I met someone who gave me a riff that delivered a career comeback like "Crazy Train" did for Ozzy, well, yeah, I'd be pretty thankful as well. And name a couple of kids after him.

10) "Voodoo Child"--Jimi Hendrix: Another great riff remembered as much for how many other people screw it up. Stevie Ray Vaughan could pull it off note for note, but the guys who show up to woodshed at the local open mics need to stop murdering this legendary lick. It's like a game of "Are You Serious?"



"Another One Bites The Dust"--Queen: I didn't include any bass guitar riffs because I didn't want to make things more confusing but I had to include this one. It gave bass players a reason to live. And as readers of this fine column know, I'm well aware that bass players frequently suffer from low self-esteem and feelings that the other people in the band don't think very highly of them. This isn't paranoia. This is usually dead on.

8) "Born To Run"--Bruce Springsteen: I don't usually associate Bruce Springsteen with great guitar licks. He has a few decent ones here and there, but for a guy with a band that now features FOUR guitar players, it's a wonder why. Then again, he also carries two keyboardists (RIP Danny Federici) and sticks Clarence with a tambourine when he doesn't have a sax solo lined up. In all that racket, can anyone actually hear the tambourine?



7) "Back In Black"--AC/DC: It's a tad sad and ironic that AC/DC are considered to be a legendary band with their singer Bon Scott. Yet, the album for which they are most noted is the one made in tribute to him after he died. So, in a sense, most people are more familiar with the less legendary edition of the group, the one that went on to become massively more successful and has lasted many times longer than the original incarnation. Me? I like Brian Johnson as a singer just fine. He sounds like my cat when you step on his tail. What's not to like?

6) "Layla"--Derek and the Dominoes: Eric Clapton has made many regrettable albums and it's easy to forget that he was once a fiery player who could reach true dynamic heights. Duane Allman, on the other hand, died before he could do any damage to his legacy. For practical reasons, I'll always choose living over dying, but immortality is better than anything Clapton's done in years.



5) "Iron Man"--Black Sabbath: Black Sabbath are another band chock full of great riffs for aspiring guitar players. Guys who can't sing love to play Sabbath tunes because they know as the guitar player they get to be the real focal point of the band. So whether it's "War Pigs," "Paranoid," "Sweet Leaf," "Children Of The Grave," "Hole In The Sky" or "Iron Man," the guy holding the guitar controls the destiny of the band. Such power!

4) "Whole Lotta Love"--Led Zeppelin: Just had to sneak one last Jimmy Page riff in here. His tone alone is shivering. The tension of the little snap-back you hear weirds me out. How many notes are actually happening here? It counts out as two, but feels like five.



3) "Purple Haze"--Jimi Hendrix: I've heard hundreds of people play this lick. No one sounds like Hendrix. And it isn't just a matter of tone. It's a matter of feel. The word genius gets thrown around pretty carelessly. "Oh, look, Jim parallel parked the car today. He's a genius." No, that's luck. This is genius.

2) "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction"--The Rolling Stones: Here's the proof that sometimes what is simplest is best. Occam's Razor as it applies to music. The extra fuzztone helped, but really writing this lick must now feel like discovering water or having written "Happy Birthday." It's that obvious.



1) "Smoke On The Water"--Deep Purple: I was never in a band that actually played this song. I've never known anyone who's been in a band that's played this song. But I've never met a guitar player who didn't play the opening lick for hours upon receiving their first electric guitar. It's so prevalent, it's more like a catchphrase than a riff.