

Funk It Up Like Nile Rodgers

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From Chic, Sister Sledge, Diana Ross, David Bowie, Duran Duran, Madonna, and INXS to Daft Punk, Pharrell Williams, Avicii, Disclosure, and Sam Smith, international superstar Nile Rodgers' list of credits as a producer, composer, arranger, and guitarist reads like a virtual Who's Who of four decades of dance music and funk.

Rodgers began his extraordinary career as a successful session guitarist in his hometown of New York City. Though not a jazz guitarist per se, working in the studios required a heightened awareness of harmony, which Rodgers embraced. His advanced knowledge of jazz chord inversions gave Rodgers a significant harmonic edge over many of his R&B counterparts, and he soon became one of the most in-demand rhythm guitar players and producers in pop music.

You can also count Rodgers among the handful of guitarists who rely on only a clean amp tone—no pedals (except for the occasional delay), boosters, or overdrives—with all tonal variants emanating from the guitar itself and, of course, the hands of a master funkateer. Join me as we investigate some of Earth's mightiest guitar grooves courtesy of the man and the instrument that created them.

“THE HITMAKER”

Many of Rodgers' chart-toppers were recorded with a well-worn, one-of-a-kind white 1980 Fender Stratocaster retrofitted with a 1959 maple neck. Appropriately nicknamed “The Hitmaker,” Rodgers acquired the guitar from a small shop in Miami, Florida, after Chic bassist and partner Bernard Edwards urged him to trade in his Gibson Barney Kessel at a time when Rodgers was transitioning genres. The guitar, which Rodgers claims sounds like no other Strat (though the Fender Custom Shop began offering a limited-edition Nile Rodgers Hitmaker Stratocaster in 2014), was pivotal in the almost overnight development of his now-signature funky style. Immediately after acquiring the Hitmaker, Rodgers immersed himself in the art of funk rhythm guitar, which he learned from Edwards, who called it “chucking.” Within a few days, he had the technique down pat. According to Rodgers, Edwards, who originally played

guitar, showed him how to keep a steady stream of alternate-picked sixteenth-notes flowing with his right hand while accenting single-notes or chords with his left hand. This is achieved by applying left-hand pressure to sound notes or chords, or by partially releasing pressure to create muted string “chucks.”

“LE FREAK”

Atlantic Records’ only triple-platinum single, “Le Freak” was the song that put Chic on the map, both as artists and as an organization. It’s also one of many textbook examples of fragmented “chucking” and a great example of how to create an infectious funk figure out of essentially one chord. **Ex. 1** illustrates Rodgers’ main two-bar intro and verse rhythm figure.

Ex. 1

♩ = ca. 120

Am(7) D/A Am

T A B

Dial in a sparkly-clean Strat tone, clamp into fifth position, and lock into the tempo by strumming four sixteenth-notes per beat on muted strings. This produces down-picked eighth-notes with up-picked sixteenths between each one, a strategy we’ll continue to employ (but not notate) throughout this lesson. The parenthesized pick notations in Ex. 1 are silent “follow through” strokes that allow you to maintain the sixteenth-note groove during eighth-notes and rests. We begin with an eighth-note pickup followed on beat one of bar 2 by an eighth and two sixteenths, all using a first-inversion Am voicing on the top three strings. (Note the staccato phrasing on those eighths.) Beat two begins with an eighth rest “played” silently and ends with a down-picked double-stop (C-over-G) and single-note, *b7*-to-root hammer-on. This Hendrix-y move functions as a Ex. 1 are silent “follow through” strokes that allow you to maintain the sixteenth-note groove during eighth-notes and rests. We begin with an eighth-note pickup

followed on beat one of bar 2 by an eighth and two sixteenths, all using a first-inversion Am voicing on the top three strings. (Note the staccato phrasing on those eighths.) Beat two begins with an eighth rest “played” silently and ends with a down-picked double-stop (C-over-G) and single-note, *b7*-to-root hammer-on. This Hendrix-y move functions as a pickup to the *b3*, root, and *b7* that make up the single-note lick during beats three and four. Rodgers suspends the *Am* chord and implies *D/A* in the first half of bar 2, and then completes the measure using the exact same rhythm motif to re-establish *Am*. Note the muted “chucks” on the end of beats one and three. Granted, all this jumping around between single notes and different string groups requires a lot more accuracy than simply playing full chords. Want something a little easier?

“GOOD TIMES”

This 1979 #1 hit for Chic is a much more straight-ahead affair that reveals Rodgers’ command of sophisticated chord voicings. His four-bar “Good Times” rhythm figure, transcribed in **Ex. 2a**, utilizes four full-chord shapes and identical rhythms in bars 1 and 3, and 2 and 4, respectively. Check it out: Bar 1 contains three staccato *Em7* hits on beats one, two, and three with a pair of muted sixteenth-note “chucks” starting on the *and* of each beat, followed by downbeat “chuck” and a fourth *Em7* hit syncopated on the second sixteenth (the “e”) of beat four. Bar 2 shifts to *Bm7/E* (a.k.a. *E7sus4*) for four beats of staccato eighths without any chucks until the last two sixteenths. The *A9sus4/E* in bar 3 utilizes the same rhythmic hits and misses as bar 1, while the jazzy *A13* in bar 4 shares its motif with bar 2. The grids in **Ex. 2b** offer ways to embellish the *Em7* and *Asus9/E* voicings with additional motion within each chord. Try hammering-on to or pulling-off from the notes in parenthetical dot markers. You can also substitute the *A7sus4* for *A9sus4/E*. (Fact: “Good Times” helped foment the hip hop movement in 1980 when bass and string parts sampled from it were interpolated on the first multi-platinum hip hop single, “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugarhill Gang.)

Ex. 2a

Em7 Bm7/E(E7sus4)

♩ = ca. 118

T
A
B

A9sus4/E A13

T
A
B

Ex. 2b

Em7 Bm7/E(E7sus4) A9sus4/E A13 A7sus4

Ex. 3

♩ = ca. 120 Em7 (A7sus4/E) A7

T
A
B

“CHIC CHEER”

The aptly-named “Chic Cheer” provides a perfect example of one of Rodgers’ infamous single-note funk figures. **Ex. 3** depicts the basic two-bar riff—a syncopated and arpeggiated *Em7* lick (root, *b3*, *b7*, *b3*, and *b7*) followed by a half-rest in bar 1, and the same lick with the last note lowered a half-step to *C#*, the 6, in bar 2 to imply *A7*, the IV chord. **Examples 4a** through **4d** show how Rodgers changes up beats three and four in bar 2 of the figure with various *A9*, *A7*, and *A6* voicings on the end of beat three and the second sixteenth of beat four. Another variation appears in **Ex. 5**, where Rodgers adds an extra sixteenth-note hit to the end of both bars of the original lick, and then fills every space around the same syncopated hits in beats three and four with muted string “chucks.”

Ex. 4a

♩ = ca. 120 Em7 A7 A9

T
A
B 7 5 7 5 6 5 5

Ex. 4b

♩ = ca. 120 Em7 A7 A7 A

T
A
B 7 5 7 5 6 6 6

Ex. 4c

♩ = ca. 120 Em7 A7 A9

T
A
B 7 5 7 5 6 7 5

Ex. 4d

♩ = ca. 120 Em7 A7 A A7

T
A
B 7 5 7 5 6 6 6

Ex. 5

♩ = ca. 120 Em7 Asus4 A7 A

T
A
B 7 5 7 5 7 7 X X 5 X X 5 X X 7 5 7 5 6 6 X X 5 X X 5 X X 6 X X

“LET’S DANCE”

This 1983 David Bowie hit was a win-win situation for everyone involved: Nile Rodgers produced and played on Bowie’s comeback album of the same name, which also introduced to the masses a budding Texas bluesman named Stevie Ray Vaughan, who peppered the track with fiery Albert King-style licks in contrast to Rodgers’ funky rhythms and Bowie’s stark vocals. **Examples 6a** and **6b** map out the song’s clever bass line (arranged 8va for guitar) in two parts, so you’ll have to construct the full eight-bar figure as follows: Play both examples as notated, and then tack on the first two bars of Ex. 6a, sans re peat.

Ex. 6a

♩ = ca. 116
Bass arr. 8va for gtr.

Musical notation for Ex. 6a. The top staff is a treble clef with a key signature of two flats (Bb, Eb) and a 4/4 time signature. It contains a melodic line with four measures of quarter notes: Bb2, Eb3, Gb3, and Bb3. The bottom staff is a bass clef with a key signature of two flats and a 4/4 time signature. It contains a bass line with four measures: a whole rest, a quarter note on the 4th fret, a quarter note on the 3rd fret, and a whole rest. The notation is repeated for a second measure.

Ex. 6b

♩ = ca. 116
Bass arr. 8va for gtr.

Musical notation for Ex. 6b. The top staff is a treble clef with a key signature of two flats and a 4/4 time signature. It contains a melodic line with four measures of quarter notes: Bb2, Eb3, Gb3, and Bb3. The bottom staff is a bass clef with a key signature of two flats and a 4/4 time signature. It contains a bass line with four measures: a whole rest, a quarter note on the 4th fret, a quarter note on the 3rd fret, and a whole rest. The notation is repeated for a second measure.

Ex. 7a

♩ = ca. 116
Play four times

Musical notation for Ex. 7a. The top staff is a treble clef with a key signature of two flats and a 4/4 time signature. It contains a melodic line with four measures of quarter notes: Bb2, Eb3, Gb3, and Bb3. The bottom staff is a bass clef with a key signature of two flats and a 4/4 time signature. It contains a bass line with four measures: a whole rest, a quarter note on the 4th fret, a quarter note on the 3rd fret, and a whole rest. The notation is repeated for a second measure.

Ex. 7b

B \flat 7sus4 B \flat m6 G \flat 6(E \flat m7) B \flat m7

Four guitar chord diagrams are shown. The first is B \flat 7sus4 (VI) with fingerings 1 3 2 4. The second is B \flat m6 (VI) with fingerings 1 3 1 2. The third is G \flat 6(E \flat m7) (XI) with fingerings 3 3 3 3. The fourth is B \flat m7 (VI) with fingerings 1 4 2 3.

Ex. 8

♩ = ca. 116
*Echo:
Play four times

Musical notation for Ex. 8. The top staff is a treble clef with a key signature of two flats and a 4/4 time signature. It contains a melodic line with four measures of quarter notes: Bb2, Eb3, Gb3, and Bb3. The bottom staff is a bass clef with a key signature of two flats and a 4/4 time signature. It contains a bass line with four measures: a whole rest, a quarter note on the 4th fret, a quarter note on the 3rd fret, and a whole rest. The notation is repeated for a second measure.

*Echo repeats: ♩ = ♩ (single repeat)

Rodgers' rhythm guitar part is actually much simpler than it sounds, and consists of just three accents per bar— staccato eighth-note on beats one and three, separated by a hit on the fourth sixteenth of beat one—followed by a full bar of rest, as depicted in **Ex. 7a**. Graft each of the four chord voicings shown in **Ex. 7b** one at a time to four rounds of this rhythm to form the full eight-bar verse progression. But why when you listen to the original recording does it appear that Rodgers is hitting each chord more than three times per measure? The trickery lies in the use of a delayed echo timed to play a single eighth-note repeat. **Ex. 8** shows how each hit from Ex. 7a is echoed a half beat later to produce the illusion of six hits per bar, and thus, a more complex rhythm. Cool, huh?

Though he's primarily known for his rhythm work, Rodgers can certainly throw down a mean solo or whip out tasty fills with the best of them. Search the web and you can hear his recent live performances of "Let's Dance" where, in addition to his original rhythm part, Rodgers assumes SRV's role and drops *Bb* minorbased blues licks similar to the ones in **Examples 9a** through **9d** into every other bar of the verse progression (i.e., the bars of rest). They're presented here in order of appearance (Ex. 9a for *Bb7sus4*; Ex. 9b for *Bbm6*; Ex. 9c for *Gb6[Ebm7]*; and Ex. 9d for *Bbm7*), but these licks are all interchangeable and can be reordered at will.

Ex. 9a

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 116$ (B \flat 7sus4)
N.C.

T 9 8 (9) 8 6 6 8 8
A 9 8 (9) 8 6 8 8 6
B

Ex. 9b

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 116$ (B \flat m6)
N.C.

T 8 6 8
A 8 6 8
B

Ex. 9c

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 116$ (G \flat 6[E \flat m7])
N.C.

T 6 8 8 (10) 8 6 8 6
A 6 8 8 (10) 8 6 8 6
B

Ex. 9d

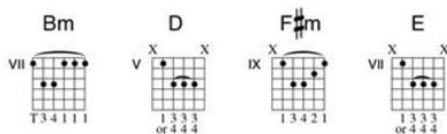
$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 116$ (B \flat m7)
N.C.

T 8 6 8 10 10 8 8 6 6 8
A 8 6 8 10 10 8 8 6 6 8
B

FEELING LUCKY, PUNK?

Our last excerpt, based on one of Rodgers' more recent collaborations, is a D.I.Y. deal that requires some assembly. You'll first need to get familiar with the *Bm*, *D*, *F#m*, and *E* chords in **Ex. 10a**. Played in this order for one bar each, these four chords form one of those cool harmonic progressions that imply perpetual forward motion without ever resolving. The next step is to graft these grips to the slash rhythm figure notated in **Ex. 10b**. Like "Good Times," this four-bar rhythm figure features the same motif in bars 1 and 3 (Do you sense a formula at work here?), but here bars 2 and 4 are not rhythmically identical. Finally, to further approximate Rodgers' actual performance, you can alternate chord tones with the parenthesized dot markers on the grids in **Ex. 10c** to add movement to the otherwise static chord shapes. Play it right and you're bound to get lucky!

Ex. 10a



Ex. 10b



Ex. 10c

