

Popular Music in the General Music Classroom



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Why teach popular music?

- culturally relevant/responsive to students' musical lives
 - potential to reach and engage more students in music
- opportunities for creative/critical thinking & musical problem-solving



Pedagogical Considerations

design musical experiences that are:

authentic to real-world popular music practices
educationally valuable and meaningful

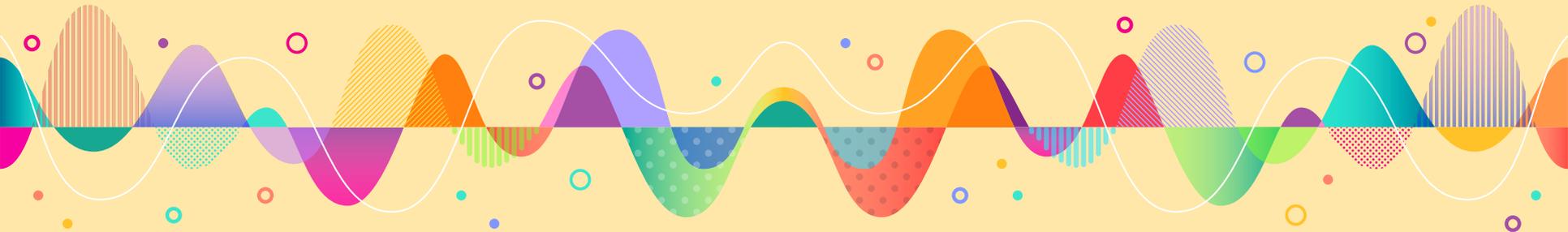
responsive to student interests and allow for student choice

Authenticity

how do popular musicians perform and create music?

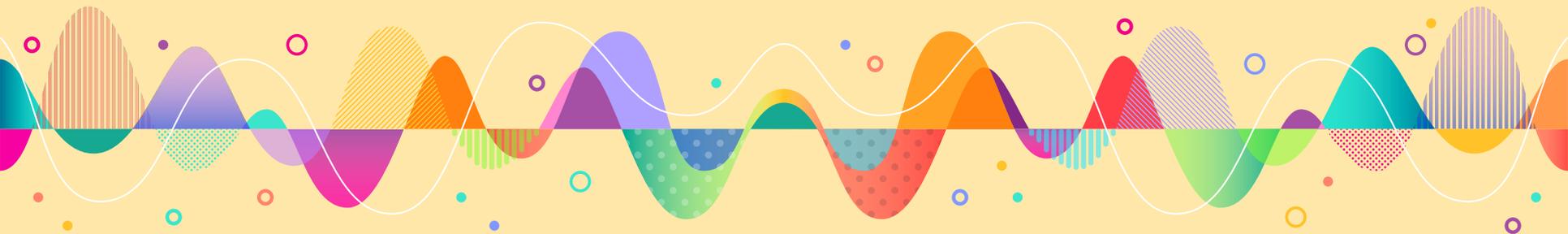
how do popular musicians understand and represent music?

- ▶ small ensembles/cooperative groups
- ▶ learning music by ear
- ▶ production, arranging, songwriting, beat-making
- ▶ lead-sheets, TABs, chord symbols, Nashville numbers/Roman numerals



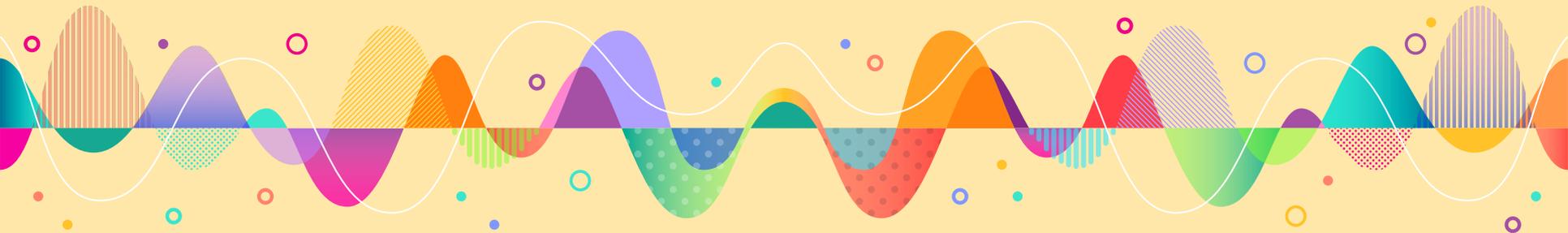
Educational Value

- ▶ recognize the artistry and craft of popular music
- ▶ use popular music to foster deep musical understanding
 - ▶ e.g. melody, harmony, song form, rhythm
 - ▶ not simply “just for fun” or entertainment
- ▶ engage students in creative/critical thinking & musical problem-solving



Responsivity

- ▶ affirm students' musical interests and taste
- ▶ use students' interests to guide curricular decisions and content
- ▶ design activities/projects that allow for student choice and voice
- ▶ use teaching styles that affirm plurality of cultural ways of knowing
 - ▶ i.e. oral-aural traditions and non-classical conceptions of music





How does it work in practice?

1. classroom instrument cover (upper elementary)
2. 4-chord song remix (middle school)
3. a cappella mash-up (high school)

yes, I have done all of these with K-12 students!

1.

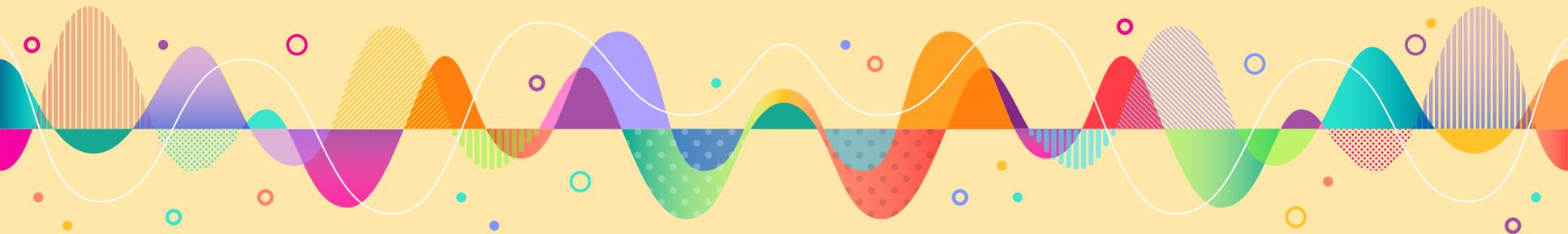
Classroom Instrument Cover





“Cover” Process

- ▶ select a pop song that has “loop-able” rhythmic/melodic patterns (ostinati) and simple harmonic structure (playable on Orff instruments)
 - ▶ examples: “Roar” (Katy Perry) “Brave” (Sara Bareilles) “Old Town Road” (Lil Nas X) “Uptown Funk” (Bruno Mars) “Shut Up and Dance” (Walk the Moon) “Hello” (Adele) “Titanium” (Sia)
- ▶ extract ostinato parts from the song (modify as needed):
 - ▶ 4 layers: groove foundation (beat), bass line, melodic/harmonic ostinato, “color” part
 - ▶ students choose which unpitched and pitched instruments to use for each part
 - ▶ students choose which instruments they want to play for performance



“Uptown Funk” parts

“color” Alto Glock.

harmonic
ostinato

Alto Xyl.

Tamb.

rhythmic groove

B. D.

bass line

Bass Xyl.

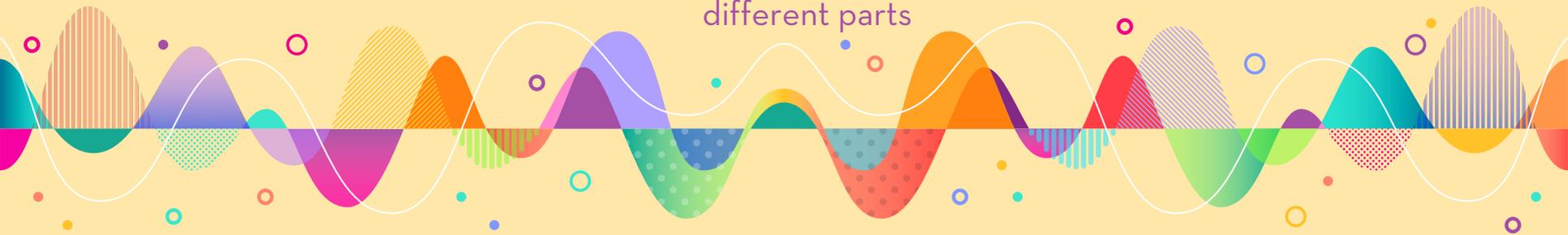
A musical score for the percussion section of "Uptown Funk". The score is written for five parts: Alto Glockenspiel, Alto Xylophone, Tambourine, Bongos, and Bass Xylophone. The music is in 4/4 time and consists of two measures. The Alto Glockenspiel part features a melodic line with eighth notes and rests, marked with a '7' indicating a seven-note scale. The Alto Xylophone part plays a harmonic ostinato of eighth notes. The Tambourine and Bongos parts provide a rhythmic groove with eighth notes and rests. The Bass Xylophone part plays a bass line with eighth notes and rests. The score is marked with repeat signs at the beginning and end of each measure.

“Cover” Process

- ▶ teach parts **by rote**: students listen & copy by ear (w/o notation)
 - ▶ students think musically in real-time to figure out how to play parts on instruments
 - ▶ students learn how to play by watching each other
- ▶ work in small cooperative groups to rehearse parts
- ▶ whole group rehearses and performs the song with all parts
- ▶ students give each other feedback and make suggestions for other parts to add or change
- ▶ whole group films a music video to document performance (à la Tonight Show)

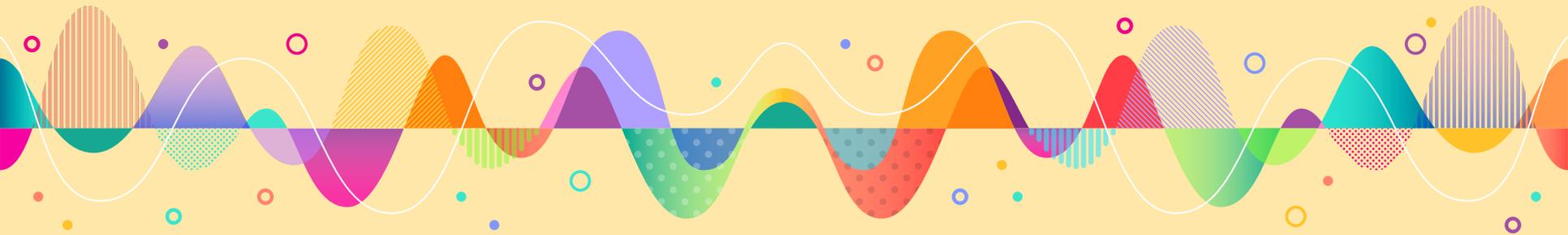
possible extensions:

pair 2 cooperative groups together to teach each other their parts, perform song playing different parts



Creative Music-Making Connections

- ▶ students invent new loop-based compositions
- ▶ begin with guided improvisation
 - ▶ take ostinato parts from "Uptown Funk" and have students change one thing while playing (use different notes, alter the rhythm)
 - ▶ repeat this process several times until new ostinato patterns develop
- ▶ in small groups (3-4), students compose new pieces with 4 layers of "looped" patterns
 - ▶ students compose with instruments and sound rather than notation
 - ▶ having open parameters (no prescribed length of patterns or measures) can aid students' creativity
- ▶ students share and/or teach their compositions to the class



2.

4-Chord Song Remix





YouTube

axis of awesome 4 chords

THE
AXIS OF AWESOME

4 Chords
(2011)

I V vi IV



4 Chords | Music Videos | The Axis Of Awesome

43,806,736 views • Jul 20, 2011

558K

8.4K

SHARE

SAVE

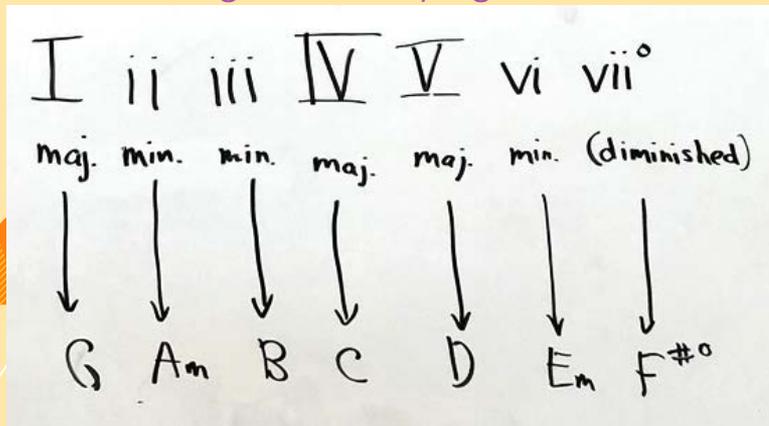


“Remix” Process

requires using **harmonizing instruments**: guitar, ukulele, keyboard, or digital instrument (iPad)

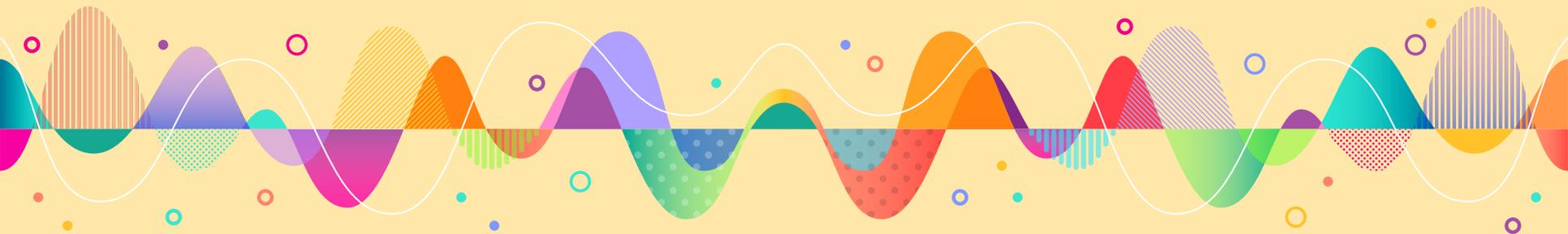
- ▶ once students understand basic chord shapes and qualities (maj./min.) on their instruments, introduce the “4-chord song” (I - V - vi - IV, 3 major chords and 1 minor chord)
 - ▶ understanding of all the theoretical features & notation of chords is not necessary here
 - ▶ they only need to **hear** how chords work together like a scale in patterns of major and minor (omit dim. chords for now)

(whiteboard diagram from my high school classroom)



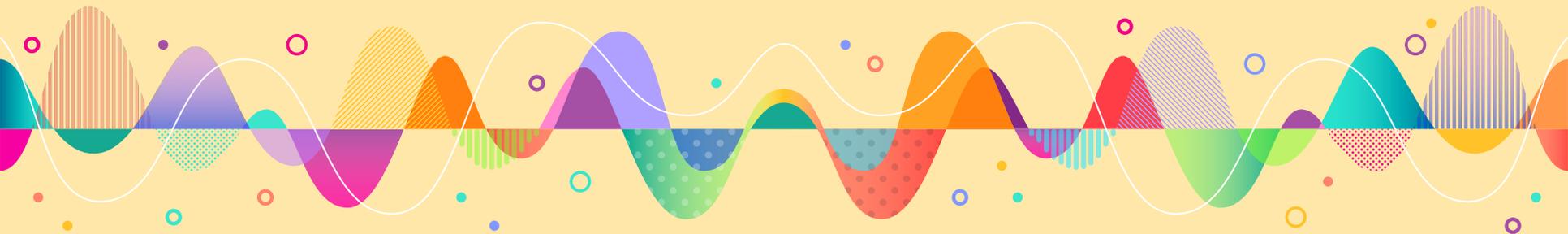
“Remix” Process

- ▶ students play many songs/excerpts from lead sheets that use the same **I - V - vi - IV** chord structure, transposed to the same key
 - ▶ examples: “Country Roads” “Don’t Stop Believin’” “When I Come Around” “Take On Me” “I’m Yours”
- ▶ students play songs from lead sheets that use the same 4 chords in a different order (e.g. **vi - IV - I - V**)
 - ▶ examples: “Zombie” “Let Her Go” “Let it Go” “Save Tonight”



“Remix” Process

- ▶ in small cooperative groups, students select several songs that use **I - V - vi - IV** chords and combine them in a “remix”
 - ▶ students work together to figure out how the songs can weave in and out of each other to create an interesting remix/mash-up/medley
 - ▶ rewrite lyrics (where to sing/play what) and indicate chord changes on a lead sheet
- ▶ teacher and students work together to establish parameters for the project
 - ▶ how long should the finished remix be? how many songs should it include? do you have to sing the songs?

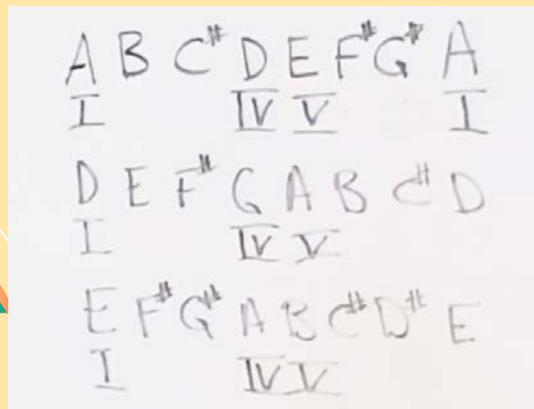


“Remix” Process

- ▶ project culminates in whole group play-along
- ▶ cooperative groups distribute lead sheets to the class and lead peers in playing their remixes

possible extensions:

teacher guides students in transposing their remixes to other keys
explore other common chord progressions (with **ii** and **iii**)
play the chord progression of one song with the melody of another



Creative Music-Making Connections

- ▶ 4-chord based songwriting
- ▶ practice composing 4-chord progressions with the whole class first
 - ▶ decide on a key (C, G, D) and then have students suggest possible progressions
 - ▶ play and write down many different patterns using Roman numerals and chord symbols
 - ▶ use a “verse” and “chorus” form: one progression for the verse, another for the chorus
e.g. “Take On Me” verse: **ii - V - I - IV** chorus: **I - V - vi - IV**
- ▶ in pairs or individually, students compose verse/chorus songs with 2 different chord progressions
 - ▶ set parameters about which chords can be used in a given key (**I, ii, iii, IV, V, vi**)
 - ▶ keep other parameters (length, measures, rhythm, etc.) open to aid creativity



3.

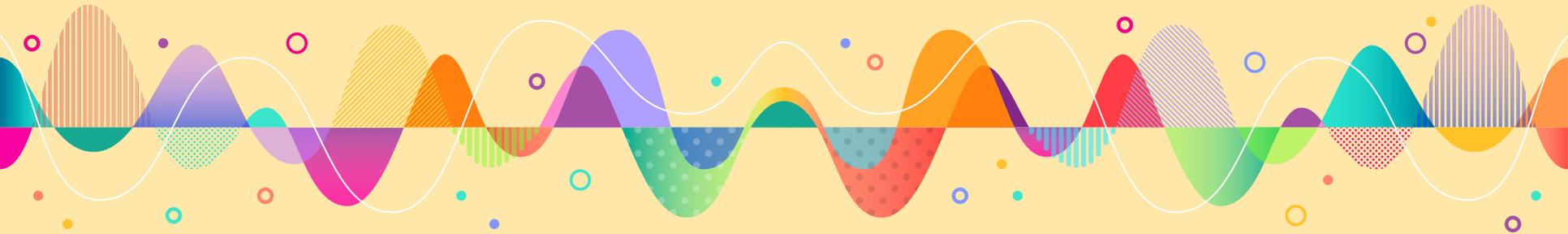
A-Cappella Mash-Up



“Mash-Up” Process*

*works best with a singing-oriented class, but can be made to fit many grade levels

- ▶ explore the plethora of interesting pop song mash-ups on YouTube, ask students to share ones they like
 - ▶ standout examples:
 - “Never Gonna Give You Up” (Rick Astley) / “Smells Like Teen Spirit” (Nirvana)
 - “Another Brick in the Wall” (Pink Floyd) / “Stayin’ Alive” (Bee Gees)
 - “Crazy Train” (Ozzy Osbourne) / “September” (Earth, Wind, & Fire)
 - “Sorry” (Justin Bieber) / “Single Ladies” (Beyoncé)
- ▶ Discuss and experiment with what makes songs mash-up well together. Explore how songs are modified or transformed to make the mash-up work.



♩ = 80

"No One" no - one no -

"Secrets" tell me what you want to hear some-thing that will

"You Say" you say I am loved_____ when I can't feel a thing

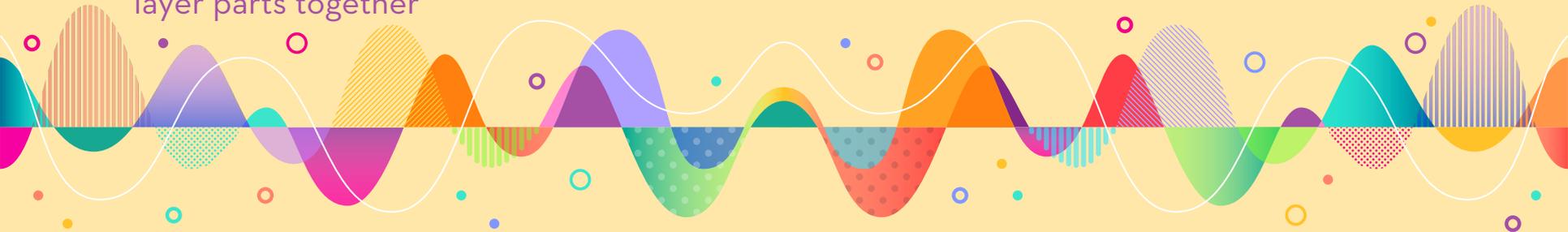
3 one no- one - - - - can get in the way___ of what I feel___ for you

light those ears sick of all the in-sin cere I'm gon-na give all my se-crets a- way_

You say I am strong when I think I am weak___ And you say I am

“Mash-Up” Process

- ▶ in small cooperative groups, students choose 2 or more songs to mash up using **voices** and **body percussion**
 - ▶ can use existing mash-up as a starting point or invent new one
- ▶ teacher and students work together to establish parameters for the project
 - ▶ how long should the finished mash-up be? how many songs should it include? how many different parts/layers should the mash-up have? how much time to complete?
 - ▶ ex. mash-ups should have rhythmic groove, melody, 1 harmony part, and 1 other part; the melodies of the 2 songs should overlap in some way during the mash-up
- ▶ in groups, students learn parts **by ear**, listen to recordings and replicate what they hear
- ▶ students make decisions about how the songs will connect with each other and how they will layer parts together

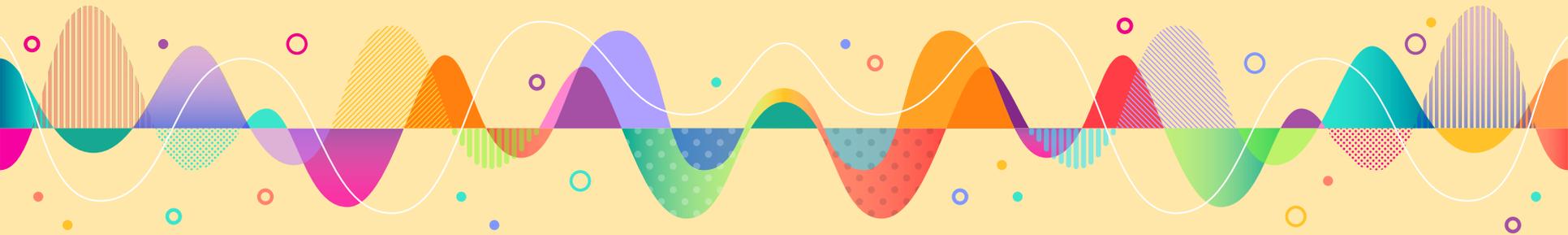


“Mash-Up” Process

- ▶ project culminates with small group performances or videos of their mash-ups
- ▶ students give each other feedback on their finished mash-ups

possible extensions:

each group teaches their mash-up to the whole class
the whole class collaborates on a new mash-up together

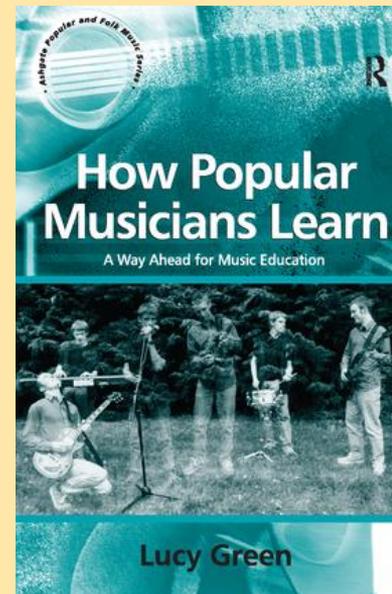
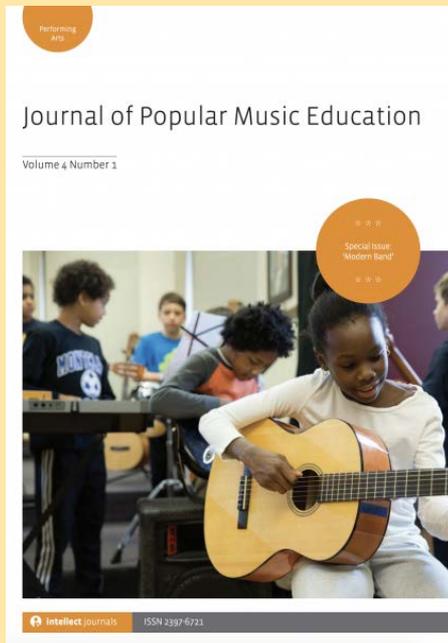




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Resources & Further Reading



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