

# SINGING RIFFS, RUNS & EMBELLISHMENTS

BY JEANNIE DEVA

**Definition** - Embellishments: Instrumental and vocal ornamentations that are added to the main melody and in modern singing are frequently added as an ad lib. Embellishments decorate the melody and usually consist of three- or four-note phrases that are added onto certain notes within the sung phrase. At times they can also be added as passing notes that connect the main notes of the melody.

**Definition** - Riffing / Runs: These are longer embellishments and are often given more prominent rolls within a song (examples: Mariah Carey, R Kelly and Christina Aguilera).

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Extensive vocal riffing stepped into the limelight with the popularization of new R&B. Singers such as Mariah Carey, Christina Aguilera, Yolanda Adams, Justin Timberlake and Luther Vandross are just a few of the peacocks of the style who can really strut their stuff. Even if you think some of it overdone, there can be no denying their melodic creativity as well as amazing ease of execution.

But vocal embellishments have been in vogue – though usually much simpler – for a long time and in a variety of different styles of music. Artists such as Bonnie Raitt (Album: “Give it Up or Let it Go”), Howlin’ Wolf, Etta James, Aretha Franklin (check out her Gospel double album with the Cleveland Tabernacle Choir)

You will be skilled in singing riffs, runs and embellishments when you can sing every note with precision and ease (no strain or muscle tension), regardless of tempo. This is the hallmark of a professional singer.

**1. *Learn the notes first.*** Most riffs are short, three or four note patterns. Longer riffs are usually several short riffs strung together. Listen to the melody carefully and at first don't worry about the vowels or words used. To learn a riff, concentrate on learning the melody first.

**2. *Break down the melody into small sections.*** As you learn the first few notes, you can then add on the next few and so on until you know the entire riff melody. Start off slowly and sing each section without the track. Check yourself against the track frequently to make sure you are actually singing the right notes.

Once you know you are singing the correct notes slowly, speed them up gradually until you can sing the entire melody note by note at the correct tempo with the track. Remember, if you can't sing it slowly, chances are you will not be able to sing it with precision when you speed up.

**3. *Next learn the vowels used.*** Often, switching vowel sounds (Ah to Ee for example) at a particular point in the riff helps enhance the sound of the phrase and makes it easier to sing. Some riffs use the vowel of a specific word you are singing. In this case you can think of it as an extension of the word with an embellished melody. Other riffs employ vowel sounds only (no words) and are used for emotional emphasis.

**4. *Now learn the rhythm.*** It can sometimes be difficult to sing a precise rhythm if you haven't learned the notes and what words or vowels to sing with it. That is why I have listed this one last in your sequence of learning a riff. Listen to the pulse or rhythm of the music and how the riff fits in with the beat. Notice if there are any notes which are given emphasis.

**5. *Learn your musical cues.*** With each riff, there is a note in the musical accompaniment that gives you your starting note. Learn to hear that musical cue. There is also a specific rhythmic pattern that occurs just before you begin to sing. Once you have learned the complete riff, pay attention to the musical and rhythmic cues so you can start singing on the right note at the correct time.

My video examples and lessons in the Section “Singing Embellishments” will help make this clearer to you and provide you with the exercises to raise your vocal skills to sing excellent riffs, runs and embellishments.

Have fun!

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