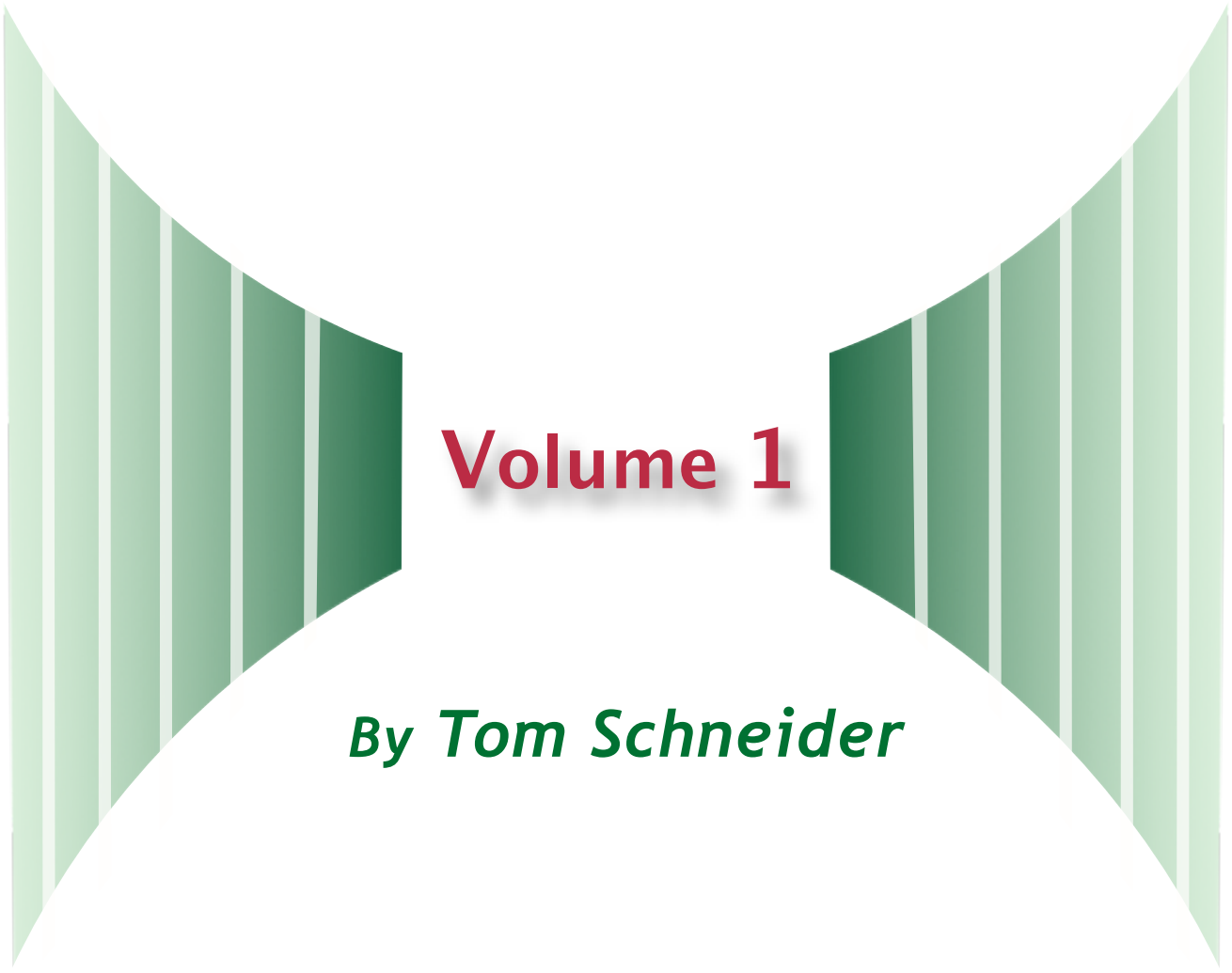
Spinning Gold

A Musical Analysis of Pop & Rock



Volume 1

By Tom Schneider

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PREFACE

This book is for music students of all levels who have been waiting for a theory textbook geared specifically for pop and rock. Here you will find the detailed analysis and terminology of traditional theory books, but each concept is illustrated exclusively with hits from the pop charts. There are no old folksongs, Broadway show tunes, or classical music examples, and no information regarding the rules of counterpoint for four-part fugues. This book simply presents the theory that is needed to understand, write, and arrange commercially successful pop and rock music.

As a college textbook, Spinning Gold will be of special interest to commercial music students, particularly majors in songwriting, arranging, and audio engineering / production. Volume 1 (Chapters One thru Eight) starts at a beginning level that requires no previous knowledge of music theory. However, some colleges may decide to require a basic musicianship or solfege ear training course as a prerequisite, since an optional ear training component is included. If the ear training is omitted, the book should even be accessible to non-majors.

Volume 1 highlights and features include:

- **Over 40 song examples per chapter with audio**
- **WRITTEN EXERCISES within the text (could be used as graded assignments, or just optional worksheets)**
- **Harmonic EAR TRAINING EXERCISES with audio**
- **Numerous SONG LISTS for "Additional Listening " (for further ear training & improv practice)**
- **8 PROJECT ASSIGNMENTS with student's choice of song (for further study and class discussion)**
- **Special sections on "Songwriting Focal Points"**
- **Chapter-ending QUIZZES**

Spinning Gold is the culmination of 20 years of personal research, based on an original database created from analysis of over 4,200 chart hits. Songs were equally sampled across seven decades of pop music history, including roughly 60 hits from each year 1955 to 2025. All songs made at least the top 40 of either the Billboard singles or album charts in a variety of genres. Thanks to this wealth of information, topics throughout the book are backed up with numerous playlists for additional listening. With its historic sweep, the book is also a musicological study of sorts, tracing the arc of many theoretical elements in pop music history, and some educators and students may end up using it as a reference work as well as a textbook. Despite its comprehensive nature, Spinning Gold does not get lost in endless statistics and data lists. It is written in a clear and engaging tutorial style — sequentially progressing through various levels of music theory instruction.

The opening chapter of Volume 1 starts with some basic elements of rhythm (meter, note values, backbeat, etc.) before moving on to beat subdivisions (8th, 16th, and triplet pulse in the mix), and concluding with swing 8ths, 16ths, and syncopation. This serves as an introduction for the beginner or a review for the more advanced student. It is recommended that even seasoned musicians should at least skim through the opening pages before settling in on the more advanced topics. The numerous listening examples in the opening pages can provide these musicians an ear-training tune up, an opportunity for extra improv practice, and perhaps fill in some gaps in their previous knowledge of rhythm basics.

Chapters Two and Three introduce the major and minor keys respectively, starting again with some fundamentals (pitches on the staff, scale and chord spelling) before moving on to diatonic triads, ear training (tension vs. resolution, recognizing chords and key notes), and common chord progressions and riffs.

Chapter Four discusses the blues as a unique mixture of major and minor. Topics include blue notes, dominant 7th chords, blues cover songs, the 12-bar blues form, and a word about blues scales and improvisation. Also covered are boogie bass patterns and signature riffs.

Chapters Five and Six further develop the major and minor keys, introducing diatonic 7ths, chord inversions, sus2 and sus4 chords, and drones. In the case of minor, the harmonic minor scale and use of the V (major triad) are also explained.

Chapters Seven and Eight present the mixolydian and dorian modes, two fairly common tonalities in pop and rock. Diatonic triads and 7th are given for each mode, as well as common chord progressions, drones, and signature riffs.

All chapters except the first have ear training exercises with accompanying audio. However, the ear training is **harmonic** only (using chords), rather than rhythmic or melodic. This may be too difficult for those who haven't previously studied melodic intervals with solfege singing. As mentioned earlier, some colleges may decide to require a basic musicianship or ear training course as a prerequisite for this reason, or teachers may want to consider the ear training as optional, assigning it to music majors only.

Each chapter also has numerous song lists for "Additional Listening," found throughout the chapters. These lists include the key and tonality of every song. By covering up this info and later using it as an answer check, the songs can be used for practicing ear training (finding the key and/or chords) and as mentioned earlier, can provide an opportunity to work on improvisation. (A workbook for guitarists is also being planned that will eventually supplement this text with various scales and patterns.)

As you progress through any book on music theory, it's possible to become overloaded with numbers — think of trying to memorize a maj7th chord as 1, 3, 5, 7, or a minor scale as 1, 2, b3, 4, 5, b6, b7, or the doowop progression as I - VIm - IV - V, etc., etc. In fact, music is often compared to mathematics. However, the crucial difference is that numbers in music are connected to emotions, thanks to the existence of musical tension vs. resolution. For example, the roman numeral V (dominant chord), or the 7th degree of the major scale (leading tone) usually represent a feeling of tension, and the number 1 represents a feeling of "home base" or resolution in both scales and chord progressions. Therefore, music theory should ultimately be experienced as a feeling, not just numbers.

Pop songwriters typically exploit this emotional quality, creating focal points or "hooks" that grab the listener's attention — the tension peaks at the end of one section (verse or pre-chorus) and resolves at the beginning of the next section (usually a chorus). To emphasize this point, there will be a brief section at the end of each chapter, titled "Songwriting Focal Points." In these sections one hit song with a strong musical hook will be analyzed, discussing the various tension devices that help create the focal point and make the song memorable. It is here that the numbers truly come alive.

Each chapter also contains written theory exercises, presenting opportunities to drill important skills like chord spelling and scale spelling that will become the foundation for more advanced topics in later chapters. Teachers may want to use these exercises as graded homework assignments or just optional worksheets.

There are also special “Projects for Further Study & Discussion” that accompany each chapter. In these projects, students may choose their own song to analyze, as long as it meets the criteria of the assignment. Teachers may want to use these projects to provide a greater opportunity for student input and discussion in the class.

Regarding the need for students to sight-read music scores, the concepts of music theory presented in this book do not require anything beyond a minimal knowledge of staff notation. Only rhythmic elements found in basic musicianship courses, such as note values and certain time signatures (4/4, 3/4, 2/4, 12/8, and 6/8) will be needed.

Pitch elements (note locations on the staff in treble and bass clef) will not have to be read fluently, or even memorized, thanks to a unique **graphic notation** system developed specifically for this book. In this alternative system, notes will always be labeled with their proper letter names. This alternative notation will also keep the book at an affordable price, since there are a large number of written examples (over 150 songs), and the expense of using copyrighted standard notation (5-line staff) on these excerpts would quickly become cost-prohibitive due to legal issues. Theory concepts like scale and chord construction will still be presented in standard notation, but notes will also be clearly labeled with letter names for non-staff readers.

The ability to read standard notation is not emphasized because written scores play a relatively small role in the composing and performance of pop music — unlike the tradition of Western art music (“classical” music). Pop and rock music comes primarily from an oral tradition, where musicians have learned their craft and exchanged songs and ideas by ear rather than reading sheet music. Adding to this is the value placed on the ability to improvise. Therefore, it is felt that ear training skills should be emphasized over sight reading ability.

One final note — please use good quality headphones or speakers to listen to the song examples. If you use a laptop with no headphones or added external speakers, you will not hear all the music, especially the important bass line and kick drum, which are the foundations of the harmony and rhythm.

Best wishes on your musical journey,

Tom Schneider