Lo-fi hip-hop

David Guinane

Introduction

This resource attempts to describe a favourite unit of mine: lo-fi hip-hop. We'll look at the essentials of the subgenre, the potential for musical learning, and a suggested approach to delivering a unit.

You're recommended to consult the BandLab project that accompanies this resource: the music itself and how it is arranged in a DAW really helps to explain the approach taken here. Details on how to access the BandLab project follow in the resource.

Lo-fi hip-hop: history and musical characteristics

The term lo-fi (short for low fidelity) describes a production aesthetic that deliberately highlights imperfections in a recording, such as signal noise, tape hiss or vinyl crackle. Modern lo-fi will often add these elements artificially to create the desired effect.

Lo-fi hip-hop is a subgenre that came to prominence in the 2010s, primarily through YouTube. Constantly streaming videos such as 'lofi hip hop radio – beats to relax/study to' (**www.youtube.com/ watch?v=jfKfPfyJRdk**) by the user Lofi Girl (pictured right) feature a playlist of lo-fi beats that many find conducive to relaxing and/or study. The music is related to other forms of down-tempo or chill-out music by artists such as Japanese producer Nujabes (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=8iP3J8jFYdM**), as well as the hip-hop music of producers such as J Dilla and Madlib.

Musically, we can make the following broad-brushstroke claims:

▶ Drum beats are closely related to those found in hip-hop.
▶ Harmony is closely related to jazz – based on extended chords and repeated progressions.
▶ Melodies are often based on repeated cells, with a limited range that develops a motivic idea. There's also some improvisation.
▶ Instrumentation is often electronic drums and bass, keyboard/piano/guitar, and a range of melody instruments such as synthesizer or saxophone.
▶ Samples, as well as studio effects to create the lo-fi aesthetic, are very common.

Why lo-fi hip-hop? Learning aims

Composing in a subgenre such as lo-fi hip-hop can be tailor-made for the music classroom. Students can work within constraints, using them to aid composition, and playing with them to develop further and express their creativity. The musical understanding, gained through performance and composition, can be neatly transferred to other areas of a music curriculum. A unit like this can be seen as akin to an 'on-rails shooter' in a video game: we move along a pre-set path, but retain control of our character as we go.

There are many learning threads within this unit, and depending on the length of time you spend on lo-fi hip-hop, as well as your specific context, you will want to focus on each one to a different degree. The following learning aims, however, are important to bear in mind when planning a unit like this:

▶ Understanding beat creation: where to place bass and snare hits, and how to vary hi-hat patterns.
▶ How to form a chord progression using diatonic four-note chords (or more complex progressions using non-diatonic chords, other extensions and alterations).
▶ How to create a bassline that follows the chord tones of a simple progression.
▶ How to create and develop a motivic melody based on a chord progression.
▶ How to apply basic studio effects to tracks, and how to master a project in a DAW.

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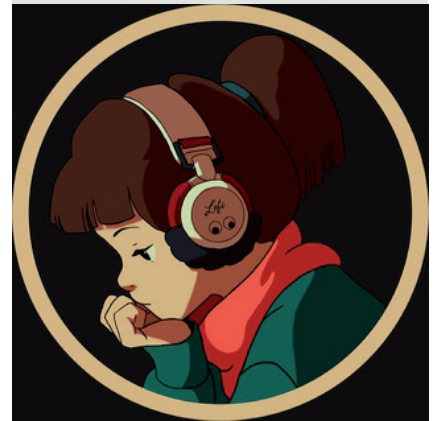
This potted history of lo-fi hip-hop is stripped back to the essentials. There's plenty more that can be researched online – perhaps in a cover lesson?

Use of technology – and alternatives

This unit works best if students have access to a DAW (digital audio workstation), and can work on a project over several weeks.

All DAWs will work, whether they are web-based (Soundtrap, BandLab) or software (GarageBand, Cubase). They will all have their own advantages and disadvantages, which are beyond the scope of this resource. As it's free and boasts a very usable education suite, I've used BandLab to demo some of the ideas suggested for the unit.

Depending on your context, and how you want to structure the unit, you can have students work on a single project, adding features/parts as you teach them, or you can start with several templates that require students to add or change a single element, before creating a final project that brings together the learning across the unit.

No DAW?

If you don't have access to a DAW, there are alternatives.

Chords, basslines and melodies can be worked on using classroom keyboards, particularly if you have a split voice function. Even if you don't, an electric piano sound will work well for all of these elements.

Simple multi-tracking can be done on smartphone DAWs, using the in-built phone microphone (you just won't be able to edit the parts afterwards).

There's a section dedicated to whole-class/small-group workshopping of lo-fi hip-hop later in the resource.

Okay, let's start composing lo-fi hip-hop.

Lesson approach

Here are a few possible approaches for teaching each element of lo-fi hip-hop, in the order I'd probably do it myself for my classes. Feel free to swap these around if you feel it would work better for your cohort.

A sample project

I have created and annotated a sample project, which I would use as part of my teaching in this unit. It contains simple versions of each part I would expect students to create, plus a few annotations.

You could share this project with students, and ask them to remix the piece (maybe changing a few notes or sounds, or adding effects) as an initial exploration of what they might produce. You could remove parts and ask students to add basslines and/or melodies in order to scaffold the final project. BandLab allows you to create templates that you can push to your students.

The link below will allow you to 'fork' the project, i.e. create a new version in your own BandLab account. You can then adapt it for your own classes. You will need a BandLab account to fork this project, but these are free.

Here (**www.bandlab.com/daveguinaneteacher/lo-fi-hip-hop-sample-project-efafc938?revId=8c409623-4222-ee11-a9bb-000d3a41e8b8**) is the sample project.

Drums

The tempo of the project should be around 60 to 80 bpm, in common time, and the drums should contain a kick on beats one and three, and a snare on beats two and four. The hi-hat pattern should be simple and understated. Fills are rare, and subtle when they occur. You can start with drums as it can be the most accessible part, or you can add these later. A steady beat may help students record pitched parts rather than a metronome, which can be difficult to follow.

You could use a loop, perhaps as a starting point, or as a scaffold for students. Transcribing the loop on a drum matrix can be a really useful exercise to develop aural skills. Play both simultaneously and edit your matrix until they match.

Electronic drumkits are common, and the rim of the snare can be more effective than a full snare hit. Encourage students to add slight variations, particularly to the bass drum part, as a piece progresses. The drums in particular will benefit from some FX processing, but we'll consider that later.

Harmony

Harmony is the core of the unit. If students can create a four-bar progression, using extended chords, they will have gained some really important musical knowledge. It's a smaller step than you might imagine to go from playing I – V – vi – IV (the 'four chords song') in triads to more complex diatonic progressions with just one more note in each chord.

The 'play a note, miss a note' approach to forming chords has its flaws, and needs unpacking at a later point in a student's musical education, but it can nonetheless quickly create usable chords that can be plugged into different progressions.

A possible completed instruction sheet is included as an appendix to this resource. I'd suggest modelling the creation of a ii – V – I – I progression (in C major, Dm7 – G7 – Cmaj7 – Cmaj7). It's perfectly acceptable to have these as held chords, with the odd repeated note to add some more texture. The beauty of a DAW is that each chord can be recorded separately, lowering the technical entry point for your classes.

Ways of encouraging more able students to work with harmony could include:

▶ additional chord progressions.
▶ variations of the harmonic rhythm and/or passing chords.
▶ more extensions and alterations to the chords.
▶ use of chords that are not diatonic to the key.

A note on voicings

As we're using four-note chords, the timeless right-hand claw espoused by many music teachers to help students play root position triads on keyboards is less usable here. Instead, you might consider telling students to arrange the notes of a chord in any order they wish. The root is not as important since the bassline is about to be added, which will define the inversion of the chord used. They may discover some ways of voicing chords that create musical interest, simply through problem-solving how to move efficiently from one set of four notes to the next.

As a final tip, the Rhodes or electric piano *always* sounds good when playing four-note jazz chords. Spread the chord a little as you play it for that extra hint of pizzazz.

Bass

Here's one way of explaining the process of writing an effective bassline to students for this task:

▶ Play as long notes the root of each chord for a whole bar (in our case, D – G – C – C).
▶ Play one extra note, immediately above or below the next note, on the last crotchet or quaver before you change notes (something like D, F->G, B->C, B->C – this is clearer in the BandLab project).
▶ Congratulations: you have created a musically appropriate bassline.

Sometimes this is all you need. You can go on to explain how additional chord tones and passing tones could be used to further develop the bassline, while insisting that, as so often in music, *less is more*.

Melody

There are countless ways to compose a melody, and indeed countless ways to teach students how to compose a melody. The particular approach below can be taken, adapted and/or ignored as you see fit. If you're following the suggested order, we currently have a simple lo-fi hip-hop 'backing track', based around the chord progression Dm7 – G7 – Cmaj7 – Cmaj7, with bass, keyboard and drums.

Ask students to identify one note in each chord, around which to build a melody. Encourage them to create a smooth (or stepwise) line here. So, for our ii – V – I – I progression, A – G – G – G would work, as would D – D – C – C, and other similar variations. Then ask students to record these long notes as a guide track.

From this point, ask students to add additional notes, guided by their ears. For melodies, it's probably best if they avoid over-thinking chord tones and appoggiaturas, as these tend to develop with attentive listening and lots of playing before making a recording. The loop function on most DAWs is a key tool here (you can set it to constantly repeat one section of a project). Encourage students to hold off on recording, and to play with their melody over multiple loops of their four-bar progression first.

You'll probably need to give students a significant amount of time to work on their melodies, since it's a very individual process. You might also like to share this article (**www.bbc.co.uk/news/ entertainment-arts-41886475**) on Taylor Swift's 'one-note' melody approach, or this 'static melody' tutorial (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=VHQq2h79WJA**), which translate well to this unit.

How much harmonic language you introduce will depend on your students' prior learning and musical understanding: feel free to simplify or omit as needed.

Another approach would be to generate chord progressions in advance, and then record them into your DAW, using online tools such as the One Motion Chord Player **(www.onemotion.com/chord- player/)**.

Studio effects

Studio effects are difficult to explain in detail, as the FX available to you in your context will vary widely, depending on your DAW, your plug-ins and your comfort level with music technology. YouTube tutorials will provide valuable insights here. When mastering their pieces, students should consider (and research themselves if they can) the following:

▶ It's worth spending time on FX and mastering: they shouldn't be simply a bonus if students finish their piece. Students gain a huge amount of musical knowledge from repeated, focused listening to their pieces, making small adjustments to really refine their work.
▶ Add tape saturation, vinyl crackle or similar noise to students' piece (or individual tracks) to hammer home the lo-fi aesthetic.
▶ Add a low pass filter and/or compression to the drums and bass.
▶ Add samples (many royalty-free samples are available online). One personal favourite is a freely available set of classic film lines to create a nostalgic aesthetic, as these can be added (and subsequently processed) without worrying to much about how they fit with the chords/melody present.
▶ Don't forget more standard effects such as reverb, panning and volume automation (fade ins and fade outs).

This article (**www.productionmusiclive.com/blogs/news/lofi-effect-explained**) goes into a little more detail about classic lo-fi effects, and should be accessible to many of your students.

Classroom performance ideas

Though this unit is focused on music technology, there's still scope to use classroom instruments to help students gain knowledge of the musical language of lo-fi hip-hop.

Work with the chords

Though we might take it for granted, hearing harmonic change doesn't come naturally to many students, but it unlocks so much musical understanding. The slow, one-chord-per-bar harmonic rhythm of lots of lo-fi hip-hop provides a great opportunity to workshop this. Using any set of melody instruments, follow these steps:

▶ Take a four-bar progression, Cmaj – Fmaj7 – Fmaj7 – Cmaj7 (this progression is particularly effective because the first and the fourth bar are the same, so when it loops it can challenge students).
▶ Give the students the notes in each chord (CEGB/FACE).
▶ Ask them to choose a minimum of one note from each chord, and to play it as a long note for one bar (a student may play C-F-F-C, or E-E-E-E, or C-A-C-B, etc).
▶ Playing one note allows students to open their ears to the harmonic change, and playing with different notes can show them the potential of different voicings.

The next stage could be to ask students to play two (of four) notes in a bar, or to give students different tessitura, and listen to the effect of different bass notes (chord inversions) on the progression.

In addition, sing the root notes of the bassline. This is easy to do. If you're using a melodic outline to help students compose their tune, this can also be sung (for example, G-F-E-E, one note per bar in a ii – V – I – I progression).

Use a backing track – try out melodic ideas

The approach to writing melodies outlined above can be used as part of a whole-class activity. The progression, with chords, bass and drums, can be played out loud on a loop, while students play the melodic outline as a class. Students could then have a few rounds of the chords to create their own variation, which can be performed, copied and discussed in a whole-class workshop.

A variation could be as simple as performing the four-note outline with a slightly more complex rhythm. More able students can improvise countermelodies using chord tones, or perform a more complex accompaniment figure over another student's melody. Trying these approaches in a whole-class setting before moving to a DAW can really help demonstrate the process of composing a melody to students.

Body percussion, tempo and subdivision

Lo-fi is *slow*, and students may find it hard to not to speed up. When you're looking at patterns such as the snare on beats two and four, teaching this with slow tempos, encouraging students to count out loud '1 & **2** & 3 & **4** &', is a really valuable whole-class activity. Accenting different 8th notes with hi-hat sounds can also help students understand that they can create interest in simple drum beats by altering the velocity of certain notes, as an alternative to adding (unnecessary) complexity.

Beyond the music

Cross-curricular links and related projects

There are countless lo-fi hip-hop study videos on YouTube, and there is a specific design language in each one: a character studying, on a short loop, in an animé visual style (Lofi Girl is the original example). You'll find endless variations on this theme, including a loop of Darth Vader studying while *Star Wars*-themed lo-fi hip-hop plays on an endless loop.

There is a fun potential collaboration with digital design: create your own lo-fi video! There are several tutorials online. Adding student work to a student-made lo-fi-style video would really help bring this unit to life.

There is a link, too, with AI music, and generative music designed to help people study, focus or concentrate. In PSHE, form/mentor time, or however it's organised in your school, simply ask students: 'Does music help you study?' I've always had mixed responses, and it usually generates an interesting discussion. There is even the possibility for a small experiment – listening to different types of music (or none) while doing homework, noting and comparing the results.

If you have success with this discussion on broader study habits, the lo-fi streams also have a connection to teenage mental health. The constantly streaming videos attract large numbers of young people in the chat box under the video, and some streams become places for listeners to discuss their mental health. Small, often supportive communities have grown from these videos, prompting some mental health charities to use the videos to reach out to young people: see this article (**www.lbbonline.com/news/lofi-beats-suicide-turns-up-the-volume-around-student-suicide-prevention**). Though this may be beyond the scope of a KS3 music lesson, it does provide a link to some of the wider issues facing our students.

Finally, you might like to create class-specific lo-fi playlists and share them with the wider school community.

Taking it further

To close, let's think about how this unit could fit into a broader music curriculum.

Before lo-fi, I'm likely to have given students some understanding of chord progressions involving diatonic triads, usually through common pop songs. This unit – focusing on similar progressions, but adding chord extensions, as well as single lines such as basslines and melody – feels like a logical next step.

At A level, we would look at jazz harmony in more detail, going deeper into the specific use and function of the chords we're introduced to here. As a huge fan of Swanwick and Tillman's 'spiral of musical development', I feel it's important to keep coming back to musical concepts like this, adding more depth each time. This allows students to make meaningful musical progression in our subject.

The plethora of lo-fi streams on YouTube means you'll never be short of videos with which to being and/or end your music lessons during this unit!

Create a lo-fi chord progression…

…in C major (for now)

Lo-fi music often uses **four-note chords**, influenced by jazz.

The scale of C major is made up of the notes C D E F G A B.
(all the white notes on the piano)

To create a **four-note chord**, pick your root, and select *alternate notes*.

For example:

…A B C D E F G A B C D E…

Add your chords to the grid below (the chord names or just the notes)…

If you need, the names and numbers of the chords are as follows:

I	Cmaj7	- C E G B
ii	Dm7	- D F A C
iii	Em7	- E G B D
IV	Fmaj7	- F A C E
V	G7	- G B D F
vi	Am7	- A C E G
vii	Bm7b5	- B D F A (you can try and use this one instead of chord V)

Can you create additional chord progressions for different sections of your piece?