

# The Riff from Mandalay: Unraveling the Roots of Burmese Traditional Music

In the heart of Southeast Asia, where the Ayeyarwady River meanders through lush landscapes and ancient cities, there lies a musical tradition that has captivated hearts for centuries. The riff from Mandalay, a haunting and evocative melody, has become synonymous with Burmese culture and is an integral part of the country's rich musical heritage.

The origins of the riff can be traced back to the 19th century, when British colonialists were stationed in Burma (then known as Myanmar). Inspired by the local music, Rudyard Kipling penned his iconic poem 'Mandalay' in 1890, incorporating the distinctive melody into the refrain.



## Burma, Kipling and Western Music: The Riff from Mandalay (Routledge Research in Music) by Alicja Urbanowicz

★★★★★ 5 out of 5

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The riff from Mandalay played on a Burmese harp (Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

### **The Burmese Harp: The Heart of the Riff**

The riff from Mandalay is most commonly associated with the Burmese harp, known as the *saung gauk*. This ancient instrument, with its elongated body and intricate carvings, has been a vital part of Burmese music for centuries. The saung gauk is played by plucking the strings with a plectrum, producing a rich and resonant sound that is both haunting and uplifting.

The riff from Mandalay is a testament to the versatility of the saung gauk. The melody, with its distinctive use of syncopated rhythms and pentatonic

scales, showcases the instrument's unique capabilities and its ability to convey a wide range of emotions.

## **Other Traditional Burmese Instruments**

While the riff from Mandalay is most closely associated with the saung gauk, it is also played on other traditional Burmese instruments. These include:

- *Hsaing waing*: A set of tuned gongs that are played with mallets.
- *Kyeezee*: A bamboo xylophone.
- *Pat waing*: A set of drums that are played with sticks.

## **The Riff in Modern Burmese Music**

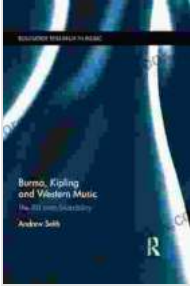
The riff from Mandalay has not only endured as a traditional melody but has also found its way into modern Burmese music. Contemporary Burmese artists have reinterpreted the riff, incorporating it into popular songs, film scores, and other musical genres.



The riff from Mandalay in modern Burmese music (Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

This adaptability highlights the enduring power of the riff, which continues to resonate with Burmese people and beyond. It serves as a bridge between traditional and modern music, connecting the rich cultural heritage of Burma with the vibrant sounds of the present.

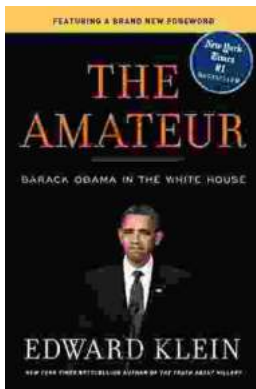
The riff from Mandalay is more than just a melody; it is a symbol of Burmese cultural identity. Its haunting beauty and historical significance have made it an enduring part of the country's musical landscape. From the traditional saung gauk to modern adaptations, the riff continues to captivate hearts and inspire musicians, showcasing the richness and diversity of Burmese music.



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