

CHORD

**How to create and perform*

*solo jazz guitar arrangements**

SECRETS

Chord-melody, as a style, seems simple enough: Play some chords, play some melodies—no problem. But wade into chord-melody a little farther and it doesn't take long to realize that this is deep,

deep water. * Playing chord-melody well requires that you develop a set of muscles

almost completely different from those used in most other guitar styles. After

B Y A D A M L E V Y



CHORD MELODY SECRETS

all, to keep two or three melodies going simultaneously, sustain chords while a melody floats freely on top, or walk a bass line beneath a melodic line and chords is much more than you're required to do on an average gig.

The physical side is only half of the game, however. The other half is design—learning to use contrasting harmonic colors and melodic devices to craft compelling arrangements. A good arrangement can even make the physical part easier, employing musical sleight-of-hand to make it sound like there are more parts in the music than you're actually playing.

Rather than presenting technical exercises for building chord-melody chops, I've written a solo-guitar adaptation of the spiritual "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen," using several key techniques you can apply to your own arrangements. Once you can play this arrangement smoothly—with the chords ringing clearly and the melody singing soulfully—your chord-melody chops will be in pretty good shape. Pay close attention to the tab and fingering indications, as they are key to playing the arrangement

with as little wasted energy as possible.

Although this arrangement launches right into the song with no introduction, intros are often used to set up chord-melody pieces. Intros can be based on part of the song—in this case, measures 13-15, plus the first three beats of measure 17, would set up the song quite nicely. A more concise introduction, consisting solely of the V7 chord of a song's key, is commonly used. *G13sus4* (borrowing the voicing used in measure 7) or *G9* (borrowing beats three and four from measure 23) will work just fine.

Another alternative is **Ex. 1**, a chordal idea employed regularly by the late chord-melody kingpin Joe Pass. (Pass' inspired solo-guitar recordings—particularly *Virtuoso*, *Virtuoso #2*, and *Virtuoso #3* [Pablo]—are required listening for chord-melody enthusiasts.) The descending chord sequence is basically an extended IIm7-V7 progression, with *A♭13* used as a half-step approach to *G13*, and *D♭7#9* used similarly to anticipate the arrangement's first chord, *C* major.

One of the first things to notice in the arrangement is the range of the melody. (The melody is written with upstemmed notes throughout.) The published sheet music for this song is in the key of *A♭*, but transposing it to *C* keeps the melody between second-line *G* and the *G* an octave above that—a nice, meaty range for chord-melody style. (Any lower makes it hard to fit chords under the melody without sounding muddy. The melody could certainly be placed higher—the high *E* above the staff is a practical upper limit.) The key of *C* also offers several opportunities to use open strings as bass notes (as in measure 3) and as voices within chords (as in measure 4).

The arrangement starts out with simple, three- and four-part chords. Starting with bare-bones harmony leaves us more to get to later—something to consider when building an arrangement. The first few chords set the tone for what is to come, so using dissonant chords in the beginning says, "Hey—this arrangement is about dissonance." If your ears need to hear juicier harmony right away, try swapping **Ex. 2's** *Fm/maj7* for the *Am7* in measure 2. The *Fm/maj7* can be played either with fretting-hand

Ex. 1

Ex. 1 shows a sequence of chords: Dm9, Dm11, Dm9, A♭13, G13, and D♭7#9. The notation includes a treble clef, a 4/4 time signature, and a melody line with upstemmed notes. Below the staff is guitar tablature with fingerings (1-3) and string numbers (1-6) for each chord.

Ex. 2

Ex. 2 shows the chord *Fm/maj7*. The notation includes a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. Below the staff is guitar tablature with fingerings (1-3) and string numbers (1-6).

Picking-Hand Technique

There is not a "proper" way to play chord-melody. Many players use a classical-style technique, playing with fastidiously maintained nails; others prefer to use the fleshy tips of their picking-hand fingers. (This second technique is less articu-

late but offers a warmer, more lush tone.) Another approach combines a flatpick, held as usual, and the three remaining fingers. (The masterful Lenny Breau preferred a thumbpick-and-fingers approach.)

If you're new to chord-melody and

aren't sure what to do with your picking hand, just experiment until you find an approach that feels comfortable and sounds good. You also might want to check out a few players you admire to study their approach.

—AL

"Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen"

Freely, with spirit

1

C F/C C Am7 C G/B Am7 C/E Dm/F G7(no3rd) C F/C

6

E7/B Em7b5/Bb A7b9 Ab7#5 G13sus4 D7 G13 N.C Ab7/Gb C/G C Cmaj7 C6 C

11

Cmaj7 Fmaj7sus2 G9sus4 G7b9 C/G G#dim7 Am7 D9 G13sus4 G9sus4

16

C Cmaj7 Am7 Fmaj9 Dm9 Bb6/9#11 Am7 G9sus4 Fmaj7 Dm7 G7 Em7 G9sus4

* Play Bb w/ L.H. thumb in front of fretboard.

21

C G/B F/A F/Ab C/G F#m7b5 Fm6/maj7 C/G G9 Abmaj7 C

CHORD MELODY SECRETS

fingers 2, 3, 1, 4 (low to high) or 2, 2, 1, 4, with a 2nd-finger double-stop holding down the *C* and *F*. The latter is difficult, but worth the effort. To get both *C* and *F* with your 2nd finger, place the tip of your finger above both notes, then try to touch your fretboard. That's right: Ignore the fourth and fifth strings and just go for the wood. Done right, this trick will let you nail both notes with relative ease, leaving your 3rd finger free to perform other harmonic or melodic duties.

The harmony heats up in measure 6, thanks to a descending bass line beneath the melody's repeating *E*s and a reharmonization based on the new bass line. Why use these particular chords? With the bass and melody lines in place, these chords simply fit and sound agreeable. *Bm11-Bb7b5-Am7-Ab6#5* is another possible harmonization. Experiment with other chords and see what you can come up with.

In measure 8, plant a half-barre across strings 2, 3, and 4 *before* sounding beat one's *C*. This will let the *C* ring over beat two's chord. (A similar move is required to execute measure 24.) Plotting your fretting-hand fingering carefully is extremely important in chord-melody—fingering can make the difference between “unplayable” and “playable.”

Measures 9-12 again utilize a descending line beneath a fairly static melody (similar to measure 6), but this time the line is in a higher octave, making it heard not so much as a bass line but as a moving line that changes the basic *C* major chord sound to *Cmaj7*, *C6*, then back to *C*—a useful move whenever you have a major chord that lasts for two measures.

Beginning with the quarter-note pickup at the end of measure 16, I've bumped the melody

up an octave for measures 17-20. Why? Variety. As measures 17-24 are basically a repeat of the song's first eight measures, changing octaves (and tweaking the harmonization subtly) keeps the arrangement fresh. Keep in mind, though, this is a condensed arrangement designed to demonstrate a variety of techniques in a small amount of time. On a solo-guitar gig, a song can stretch out over five or six minutes, so you could wait longer before changing the song's melodic range.

Measure 19 contains the arrangement's hardest move: a *Bb6/9#11* that requires you to bring your thumb around to the *front* of the fretboard (a grip gleaned from fingerstyle wiz Tuck Andress). If this chord proves too difficult, try holding your fretting hand out in front of you—palm towards your body—then spread your thumb and fingers as far apart as you can and visualize your thumb playing *Bb* on the sixth string and your pinky playing the high *E* on the first string at the 12th fret. If you can wrap your mind around that, you can probably wrap your hand around the chord. If it still seems hopeless, try plugging **Ex. 3** into measure 19. The *Cmaj9* is still a stretch, but most hands will find it playable.

Now, take a look at the eighth-note chord sequence at the end of measure 20. (Because this passage is a “fill” and not part of the song's melody, it should be played quietly to set it apart.) This passage differs from the rest of the arrangement in that it is in “block chord” style (each melody note is supported by a chord), whereas most of this arrangement is in “free lead” or “free melody” style (the melody moves independently above the chords). Block-chord voicings can be a very useful arranging tool. **Ex. 4** illustrates the first two measures of “Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen” arranged in block chords.

The arrangement's final note is rendered by way of an artificial harmonic. To accomplish this, fret *F* at the 1st fret, then place the tip of your picking-hand index finger directly above the 20th fret—the fret itself, not the wood. Touching the string very lightly with your extended index finger, pluck the string with your thumb. Take care to hit the harmonic spot on—if the fingered *F*sounds, it will ruin the *C* major arpeggio.

A few final tips:

- Make sure to play the melody louder than

the chordal accompaniment. Though the style is called “chord-melody,” it's better to think of it as “melody-chord” to remind yourself that melody is job #1.

- Keeping the above in mind, feel free to interpret the melody. Imagine how a great soul singer would perform this song, and try to get your melodic phrasing into that zone, letting the chords—in contrast—fall squarely on the beat.

- Legendary 7-string guitarist George Van Eps refers to his solo-guitar style as “lap piano,” reminding us that chord-melody is in many ways a pianistic conception. Lenny Breau was hip to this, citing pianist Bill Evans as one of his chief influences. For inspiration, check out some solo recordings by jazz piano greats, such as Evans, Art Tatum, and Thelonious Monk.

- You can take the lap piano concept one step further by actually adapting piano music to the guitar. Seek out the sheet music to one of your favorite songs and try to play the piano part. (Remember to transpose everything up one octave, because the guitar sounds an octave lower than it's written.) At first, concentrate solely on the treble-clef part, then the bass. Before putting the parts together, take one final step: Play the song's melody line and the bass line (the bass clef's lowest line) together—just the two parts, *without* all the notes that go in between. (This step gives you a better sense of how the bass- and treble-clef parts will ultimately fit together.) Once you can accomplish this last step, put all the pieces together. If necessary, you can take liberties—such as leaving out notes that are doubled within a chord or editing out decorative musical embellishments.

After all that hard work, you may find that only some passages are physically possible on the guitar, but the parts that *are* playable will give you a fresh, non-guitaristic perspective on how music can be arranged. ■

Ex. 3

Cmaj9 *Am7*

let ring -----!

T	12	12	10	8	8
A	12	12			
B	12		5		
	8		5		

Ex. 4

Cmaj7 *C6* *Fmaj7* *F6* *Cmaj7* *Am7*

T	12	12	5	8	10	12	12	12	12
A	12	12	5	6	10	12	12	12	10
B	10	7	5	7	10	10			10

Reckless Persistence

Nearly any song has potential as a chord-melody piece. Songs from the jazz canon, folk tunes, and old and new pop songs can all work well in this format. When choosing songs to arrange, don't worry too much about what's playable. If you want to play a piece of music badly enough, you'll find a way to render it on the guitar—even if it means employing guerrilla tactics such as tapping, harmonics, and non-standard tunings.

Tuck Andress' cover of Stevie Wonder's "I Wish" (a solo-guitar track from the Tuck & Patti album *Dream*) is a great example of this. At a guitar clinic, Andress said he worked on the arrangement for more than ten years before recording it. Andress' arrangement includes all the elements of Wonder's original—the bass line, keyboard parts, horn parts, and the vocal line! Most guitarists wouldn't have gone to such trouble, but something about the song turned Andress on so much that he kept after it until he could play it. (For an in-depth look at Andress' unique, multi-layered style, check out "A Private Lesson with the Amazing Tuck Andress" in the April '88 *GP* and "The Reckless Precision of Tuck Andress" in the Feb. '91 issue.)

—AL