

Melodic Patterns

by Dennis Winge

Patterns are easy and fun to play on guitar because oftentimes you can simply visualize them and move them around to fit different chords, making great riffs or songs in the process. A pattern, in this context, is a set of intervals as it relates a particular chord. This is as opposed to a sequence, which is a grouping that can be moved up or down to different starting points within a scale (cf. my article “The Power of Simple Sequences.”)

An example of a common pattern that could be used in a blues progression is:

The musical score shows a blues progression in G major. It consists of four measures, each with a treble staff and a bass staff. The chords are G7, C7, G7, and D7. The melody is written in the treble staff, and the bass line is written in the bass staff. The pattern is 1-1-8-8-b7-b7-5-5.

The pattern above is 1-1-8-8-b7-b7-5-5. These are the intervals as they relate to each chord. They are easy to play because you simply move the fingering around. Note that on the C and D chords, instead of changing to the next set of strings, you could have kept the pattern on the lowest 3 strings and simply moved it up to frets 8 and 10 to fit the chords as in:

The musical score shows a blues progression in G major. It consists of two measures, each with a treble staff and a bass staff. The chords are D7 and C7. The melody is written in the treble staff, and the bass line is written in the bass staff. The pattern is 1-1-8-8-b7-b7-5-5.

As long as the pattern does not involve the b-string, the fingering will remain intact. But if you go to the next set of strings of a pattern and b-string is involved, you must bring that note up 1 fret to compensate for the fact that it's tuned a half-step lower (in relation to the other strings) than the other strings, as in:

The first system shows a melodic line for Gm in 4/4 time. The fretboard diagram below it shows the following fingerings: Treble (3, 3, 5), Bass (5, 3, 5) for the first measure, and similar patterns for the subsequent measures.

The second system shows a melodic line for Cm and Gm. The fretboard diagram shows fingerings: Treble (4, 3, 5), Bass (5, 3, 5) for Cm, and Treble (3, 3, 5), Bass (5, 3, 5) for Gm.

The third system shows a melodic line for Dm, Cm, Gm, and Dm. The fretboard diagram shows fingerings: Treble (6, 5, 7), Bass (7, 5, 7) for Dm; Treble (4, 3, 5), Bass (5, 3, 5) for Cm; Treble (3, 3, 5), Bass (5, 3, 5) for Gm; and Treble (6, 5, 7), Bass (7, 5, 7) for Dm.

Notice also that the above pattern does not start on the root of the chord. Its intervals are: 5-b3-b7-1. You have to know your music theory and fretboard theory to take a pattern through a series of chords this way.

In fact, the plot thickens quickly when you move to common chord progressions apart from the blues. Suppose you took the above pattern to a standard pop progression, a I – V – VI – IV in the key of G. The chords would be G-D-Em-C. Since the above pattern has a b3 and a b7, it would only fit the Em chord. For the major chords, it would have to be altered to 5-3-7-1 or 5-3-6-1, for example.

Here we will use 5-3-6-1 for G, C & D and 5-b3-b7-1 for Em. [Side note for more advanced students: the pattern 5-3-7-1 would require you to alter the 7th based on the way the above chords harmonize out include the 7ths. Try it.]

The diagram shows a melodic line and fretboard for G, D, Em, and C in 4/4 time. The fretboard fingerings are: Treble (4, 2, 5), Bass (5, 4, 2) for G; Treble (7, 4, 7), Bass (7, 4, 7) for D; Treble (8, 7, 9), Bass (9, 7, 9) for Em; and Treble (9, 7, 10), Bass (10, 7, 10) for C.

Notice that I chose to play the pattern over the C chord between the 7th and 10th frets, which is the same fingering as that of the G chord, moved up 5 frets. That was an arbitrary choice. You could just as easily have taken the pattern on the D chord down 2 frets and played the C chord pattern between frets 2 and 5.

This pattern might serve as a backdrop to the melody on piano or guitar, or it might serve as the basis for a composed melody or improvised line. If it's in the forefront, it might be best to mix the pattern with other elements, so it doesn't sound one-

dimensional. Suppose we speed up the pattern to give space for other melodic elements, and we only used it every other bar. Now you might have something like this:



Now you are beginning to see the songwriting and improvisational power that patterns have. The pattern ties together a 2-bar sequence of “pattern/no pattern” and is more musical than a 1-bar pattern repeated over and over.

Note that in the above example, the pattern in bars 1 and 3 have the same rhythm, but a pattern does not necessarily have to be repeated rhythmically in order to keep its character. Try taking the pattern we’ve been using through the chords G-D-Em-C using different rhythms. For those of you who don’t read music, we won’t represent the next example in standard notation:

| Chord | notes of pattern | Rhythm |
|-------|------------------|-----------------|
| G | 5-3-6-1 | 1 2 & (3) & (4) |
| D | 5-3-6-1 | 1 (2) 3 & 4 |
| Em | 5-b3-b7-1 | 1 & (2) & (3) 4 |
| C | 5-3-6-1 | 1 (2) (3) & 4 & |

Notice that above examples are all hitting beat 1; try also some that don’t hit the first beat. Notice that the pattern keeps its character despite it being altered rhythmically. This concept can open up your thinking to the many possibilities of patterns.

Try to come up with patterns of your own and make them fit various chord progressions. Remember that you have to know how to spell the chord in question and know how it relates to the overall key in order to use patterns most effectively. The theory required to explain all the permutations is more than what is practical for this article, so get a good teacher to help you.