

A Look Inside Chord-Melody Playing

by Dennis Winge

Chord-melody playing is, just as the name implies, playing melody and chords at the same time. Obviously, this type of playing comes in handy when there is no other accompaniment available (no looper pedal, backing track, etc.). Playing songs in this self-sufficient manner is richly a rewarding experience.

So I'll make you a deal: we'll play first and talk later ok? Here is a relatively straightforward chord-melody to Stevie Wonder's "Isn't She Lovely." Play through it a few times, then read on.

Isn't She Lovely

Stevie Wonder

Standard tuning

$\text{♩} = 118$

cl.guit.

C#m7 **F#7** **B11**

E **C#m7** **F#7** **B11**

E **Ama7** **G#7** **C#m7**

F#7 **B11**

E

1. 2.

E fine

Now for the “talk.” I simply want to point out a few things that will make it easier for you to put together your own chord-melody arrangements in the future. To illustrate some of things I’ve done, I will contrast my arrangement with one that a student recently came in with (which was the inspiration for me writing this article). The student’s arrangement started out like this:

There is nothing “wrong” with this, and even though for the rest of the article I will be picking apart this arrangement (no pun intended), I am in no way trying to discredit the student or the creator of the Youtube video(s) that she got it from. I am simply offering some of the elements I think about when creating a chord melody.

The arrangement above, for my taste, has the following disadvantages:

1. In bar 1 (not the pickup bar, the one that has the C#m7) beat 3, since the melody note is already in the chord, there’s another note that’s higher than it still ringing out, which could potentially obscure the melody a little. I always like the melody to be the top note so that our ear is drawn to it.
2. The F#7 chord, (which is actually voiced as an F#9) has a note that’s higher than the melody note we heard in the last bar, so it could be perceived as a melody note, which we don’t want because it’s not in the song.
3. The B7sus4 chord is not as good of a choice as the one in my arrangement because:
 - a. The distance between the melody note (*f#*) and the next lowest note (*e*) is very small (the interval of a second), which means it could potentially get obscured. On my arrangement, the next lowest note is *c#* which is a fourth below the melody, giving it a lot more room to stand out. Perhaps this reason isn’t important enough on its own to make me choose the other voicing, and there will be plenty of times where your melody note is not head-and-shoulders above the others in the chord, but it’s a factor nonetheless. (And by the way, the same phenomenon happened for the melody note in bar 1, beat 1, where the next lowest note was sonically nearby.)
 - b. With the voicing of the B7sus at the 7th fret, you miss out on the very colorful 9th of the chord (the note *c#*) that is part of the B11 chord that is written in the tune. An 11th chord is 1, 3, 5, b7, 9, 11. Since this is 6 notes and it would be very difficult to play all of them, the most important ones (assuming you need to play the root

because you are playing solo guitar in this context) are 1, b7, 9 and 11. The melody note in the tune is *f#* which is the 5th, so that makes 5 notes. In my arrangement, bar 3, the voicing is, from bottom to top, 1-11-b7-9-5. It's got all the choice notes, and it's easy to play.

c. The use of the 7th position in bar 3 doesn't leave many options for the last note of the phrase in bar 4, the *b* note, in terms of giving a chord. Since it's on the 4th string, you could play an open sixth string *e* and a fifth string/ 7th fret *e*, but that wouldn't be much of a chord. It's so much nicer to give a full E chord in my arrangement, bar 4, especially because this is the tonic chord of the song and we want to make it sound full. Music is tension and release, and this chord is the 'release' of the tension that the other chords have created. So we don't want to deprive the listener of the temporary satisfaction that that chord brings.

To summarize the points we've made so far:

I. When determining a position to play a passage or section, look at all the elements within that section, and consider all possible positions and their advantages and disadvantages. In the end, **choose the position(s) whose chords are a) easy to play, b) give the melody the most room to breath, and c) whose melody notes are on the higher strings so you can get more supporting notes underneath them.**

And here are other a few other quick points before we go:

II. **Feel free to harmonize.** Notice in my arrangement, bar 9, there is a 13th in the chord (the *f#*, which is the 13th of the Amaj7 chord). I didn't notate the chord symbol as anything other than "Amaj7" in part to show that you can add harmony or extensions as you wish. In this case, this was an obvious note to add as it would allow me to play the *b* melody note on string 1 without having to skip a note on string 2 or somehow compromise my big voicing. Incidentally, I also added a 13th to the G#7 chord in the next bar, but that decision wasn't for practical reasons, it was just for fun.

III. **You don't always need a chord.** In bar 14, beat 3, there is no chord. The melody is *b*, the root of the chord, and there was no easy way to harmonize this. Plus, we've already heard the B11 chord for 6 beats up to that point and we don't need to keep beating it over people's heads, so to speak. The amount of harmonization can always be very heavy (lots of chords) or very light (a few choice supporting notes) depending on the tempo and your own taste.

Good luck and have fun playing this chord melody! If you want to hear my playing the tune instrumentally a trio setting, [click here](#).

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About the author: Dennis Winge runs [Guitar Lessons Newfield](#) and has released 6 instrumental albums as a leader, and played on dozens more as a sideman.