Don’t Stop Believin’ Chord-Melody

Don’t Stop Believin’ You Can Do It

One of my students and I were talking about the importance of having a “party piece.” This is something you can play on demand in front of friends or family when the subject of your being a guitarist comes up. If you don’t sing, this can be challenging because if you just play chords with no melody, your audience may not recognize the tune. On the other hand, if you play only a melody, you miss out on the fullness of having multiple strings ring together and the listener may find such a thin texture unimpressive. In that scenario, you could do a famous riff, but the shortcoming of that is addressed below.

Learning to play chords and melody at the same time can be challenging on guitar and I have written other articles on the subject of how to get started on it. Instead we will jump straight into playing both melody and chords to “Don’t Stop Believin’.” When my student chose the well-known sing-along song by Journey as his party piece, I thought that it would be an easy arrangement because of the standard I – VI -IV – V progression in the key of E as the central progression. However, there are plenty of nuances and pitfalls to be aware of in playing the arrangement below.

Please note that I did not bother to match the form of the original recording on the arrangement below; I only provided the sections themselves. In other words, I only presented how to play each section of the song without indicating the order of the sections to be played to match the original. In a solo instrumental context such as the one we are assuming this arrangement would be played in (that is, until your friends are all singing along so that you only have to accompany them with chords), the arrangement of the different sections is up to you.

** The arrangement is printed below, and here it is a reference performance**

https://youtu.be/aj82SXxsw6c

Choosing the Key

The one thing in our favor in playing chords and melody to “Don’t Stop Believing” at the same time is that it’s in the key of E, which allows us to use open strings, which is especially useful in the pre-chorus. Choosing a guitar-friendly key can be one of the most important steps to making a successful chord-melody. Luckily, there was no transposing necessary in this instance.

Notating the Chords

Also note that the chord symbols provided are broad and do not necessarily reflect every melodic nuance. For example, bar 4 begins with a *b* melody note which is the 9th of the A chord, followed by a *g#* which is the 7th. We did not rewrite the chords as "Aadd9" or "Amaj7" respectively.

Muting the Right Strings

As convenient as it is to use open strings for certain voicings, you have to be aware of what strings not to play as well. In bar 15, for instance, we see a B/E chord where the 5th string is muted. Achieve this by resting the tip of your index finger (which is presumably playing the 3 notes on fret 4) against the 5th string so it doesn't ring.

Including Riffs and Bass Lines

There's a difference between a chord-melody and a riff. A song's riff is (typically) a guitar part that is a hook unto itself independent of a vocal melody. You all know famous riffs that make the song instantly recognizable. The trouble with only playing a riff for a party piece is that unless you then proceed to play or sing the vocal melody that follows, your performance of the tune isn't complete without your audience singing the melody, and you can't control whether they will or not.

Oftentimes riffs are so catchy that they are an integral part of the song. In the case of "Don't Stop Believin'" we labelled the bass line that develops between verses as the "interlude" because of this type of scenario. Even though there is no melody in it, it's useful and relevant to the song, so we kept it.

Keeping the Melody on Top

Traditional classical harmony keeps the melody as the highest voice. In a four-part vocal choir such as was used in the Middle Ages during which traditional harmony was developed, this was the soprano voice. The bass voice, on the opposite extreme, carried mostly the roots of the chords, and the tenor and alto voices highlighted the inner voices of the chords.

The word 'chords' itself is not entirely accurate since composers up until the time of Bach did not think in chord names or use chord symbols, but the term will be sufficient for our purposes of summarizing how harmony and melody interacted: the melody was on top. This is because our ear is drawn to the highest note we hear, and even though modern composition often obscures this traditional paradigm, playing notes higher than the melody in a chord-melody arrangement is a sure way to obscure the melody to the listener, which of course we don't want.

There are plenty of instances where not hitting the strings above the one that is playing the melody is important in "Don't Stop Believin'." I think even in my demonstration of the arrangement in the video, I played the top string of the B7 chord in bar 33, to my chagrin. The melody is on string 2, so playing string 1, as I inadvertently did there, is distracting and useless. Sometimes it's useful not to play the string that is going to carry the melody at all. In

bar 1, for example, we chose not to play the 2nd string at all until beat 4 when it's used to play the melody just to help make it stand out more.

Keeping the Melody Louder

Speaking of making the melody stand out more, it's best to try to play the melody a bit louder than the other notes, if you can. This can require quite a bit of pick control and might take some work, but the results are well worth it. This suggestion is a nuance, though, so if controlling the volume of the supporting notes so they don't overpower the melody is not something you're used to, don't worry too much at this point, but it's just something to be mindful of if you have the bandwidth to think about it as you play.

Playing Certain Melody Notes Before the Chord

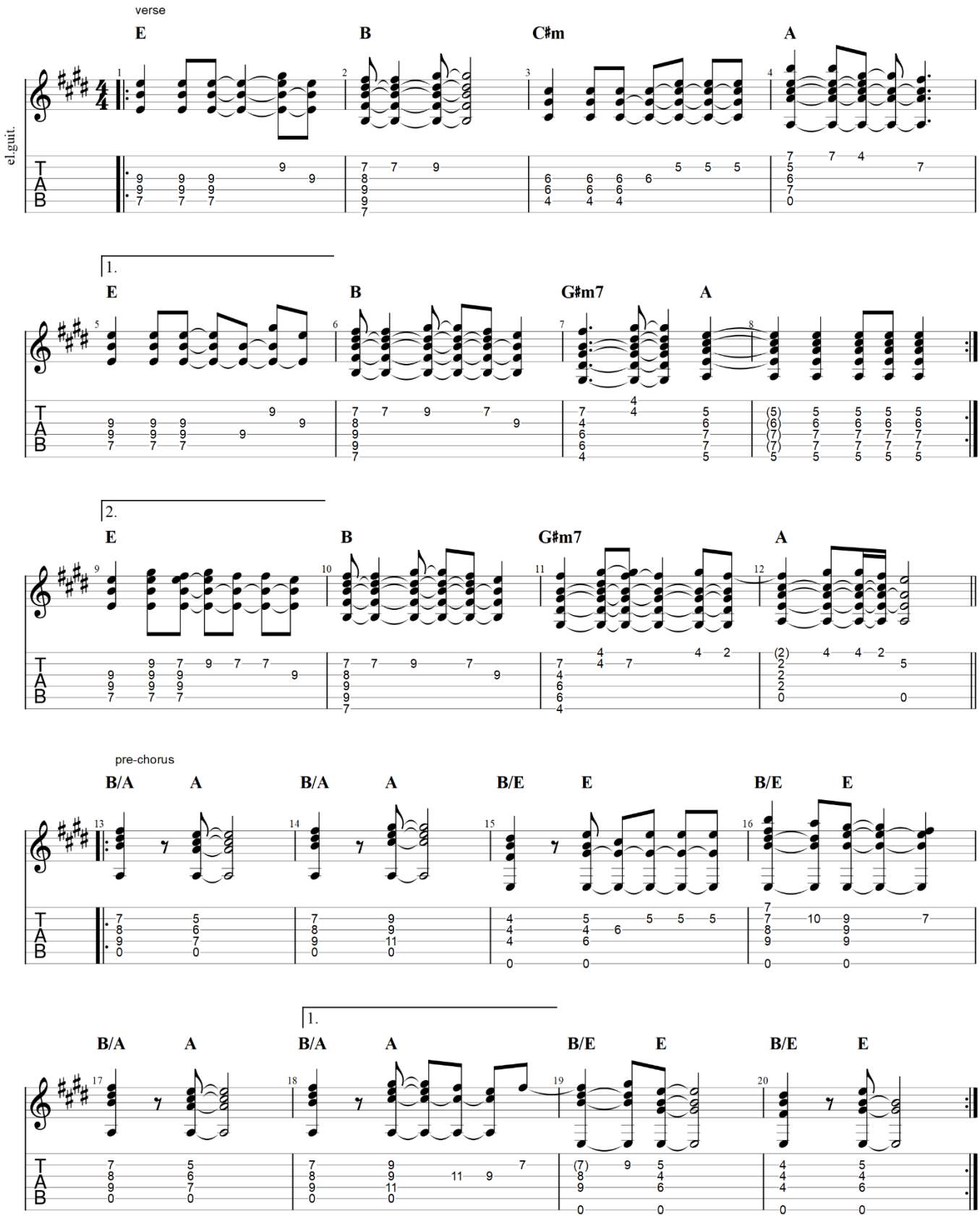
In bar 12 we have an *f#* melody note over an A chord. That note is anticipated on the "& of 4" of bar 11, yet we decided that the chord should not be anticipated like the melody is, so in this case you are expected to slide your hand down to fret 2 on the end of bar 11, then as that note rings, play the A chord in bar 12. Nuances like these are optional, but making rhythmic choices for the melody and the harmony separately can sometimes enhance the feel of a chord-melody. If the melody and chords are always played at the exact same time, it might sound a little stiff or robotic.

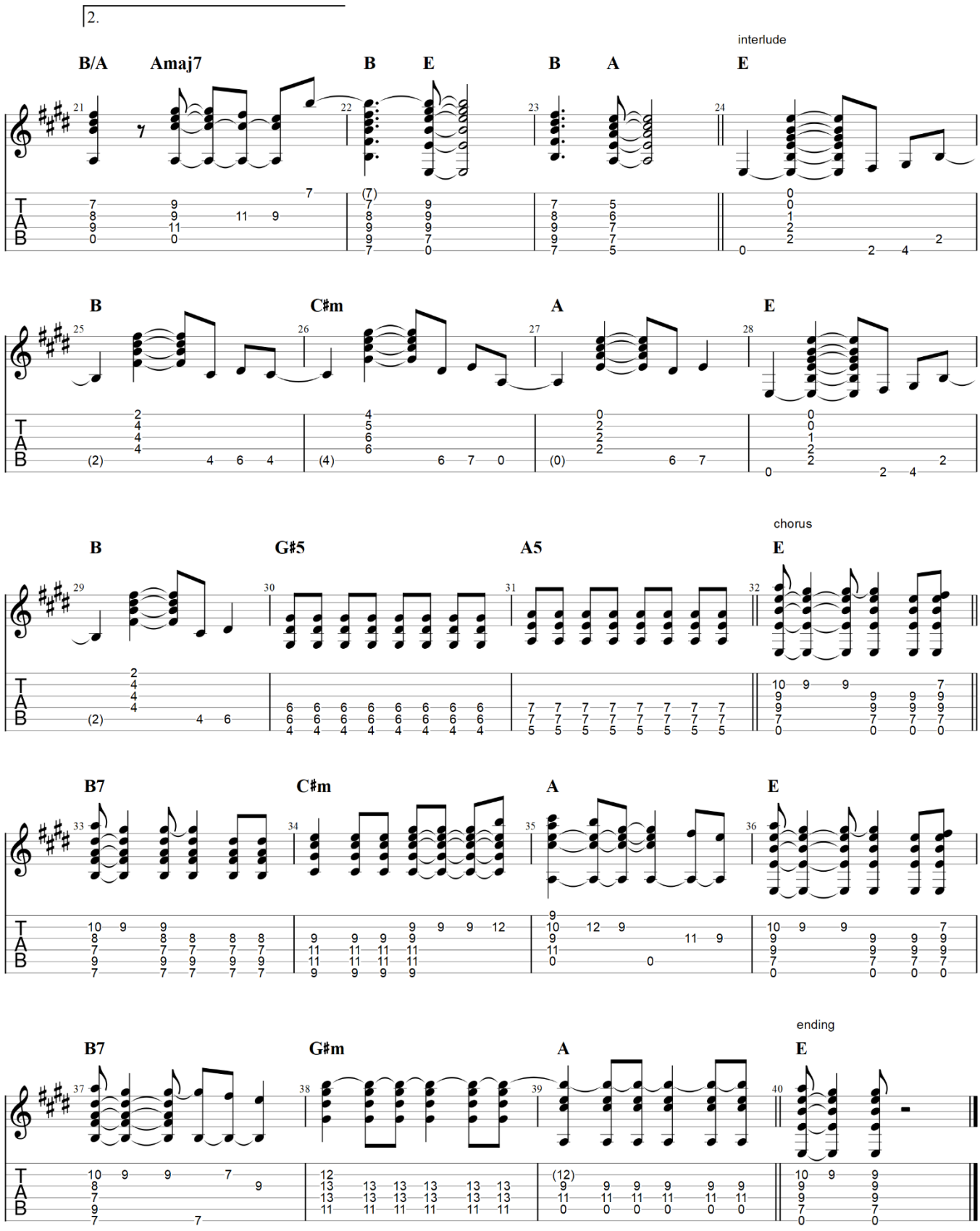
Good luck and have fun; let me know how the party went. :)

Don't Stop Believin'

Journey - arrangement by Dennis Winge

♩ = 118




2.
interlude
chorus
ending
B/A
Amaj7
B
E
B
A
E
B
C♯m
A
E
B
G♯5
A5
E
B7
C♯m
A
E
B7
G♯m
A
E