How to Harmonize a Melody, part 3

by Dennis Winge

Learning to harmonize a melody can help you understand harmony in a much deeper way than only learning chords and chord symbols. This is because it gets you into the individual notes that make up chords, and takes into account things like tension and resolution of the phrasing that the harmony helps define. I have two other articles related to this subject: Harmonizing Melodic Content and How to Harmonize a Melody.

This article harmonizes the melody from Hotel California. While I wouldn't have chosen such a played-out song from scratch, we happened to be doing it in a lesson when I thought of the idea to harmonize it. I found a popular Guitar Pro file of the song, stripped it down to its basic melody, and harmonized it to taste.

Unlike the Eagles' version which has a voice below and a voice above the main melody, I put both harmony parts below the main melody because a) this is the way it's generally done in classical music, where the melody is on top, and b) if one were to put all 3 parts together for solo guitar, it would make sense also that the melody would be on top, as it almost always is in chord-melody playing.

First, listen to the harmonized melody of the verse and chorus in the YouTube video. Then, if you want to get the most out of this article, play each part separately and consider its completeness as a part unto itself. All the tab parts are at the end of this article.

The main things to notice are

1. The harmony parts follow the **contour** of the main melody.

If the main melody goes up, the harmony parts tend to go up and vice versa. Occasionally, they might stay the same as in bar 10 below where harmony 1 stays the same while the melody descends. It's a question of tension and resolution, which is addressed in point 3.

2. The parts mostly **begin with chord tones**. As a general guide, if the melody is a 1 of the chord, then the other 2 parts would likely be a 3 and a 5. In the case of bar 1, the melody, f#, is the 5th of Bm, and the other two parts are the root and 3rd. If the melody is not a chord tone, however, it's possible that one or more of the harmonizing parts will be. The contour doesn't have to be followed religiously, and some compromises may have to be made, as described in point 4.

3. The harmony parts **resolve to chord tones**.

You want each part or 'voice' to resolve to a chord tone generally. In bar 2 the main melody is the 7th of the F#7, and the other 2 parts are the 5th and the 3rd. Notice the resolution in this bar was delayed, as the first beat's notes are f#, d, and b respectively, which is a Bm chord, the chord we had already been on in bar 1. The sound of the F#7 chord doesn't come until midway through beat 2 in my arrangement.

Ever see a chart that has so many chord symbols it's difficult to decipher? It just means that the person who notated is attempting to accurately describe all the harmonic subtleties in the parts via chord symbols, which is not always easy. For example if my chord symbols were to be more accurate, I would have put the F#7 chord not at beat 1 of that second bar but on the 2nd triplet of beat 2.

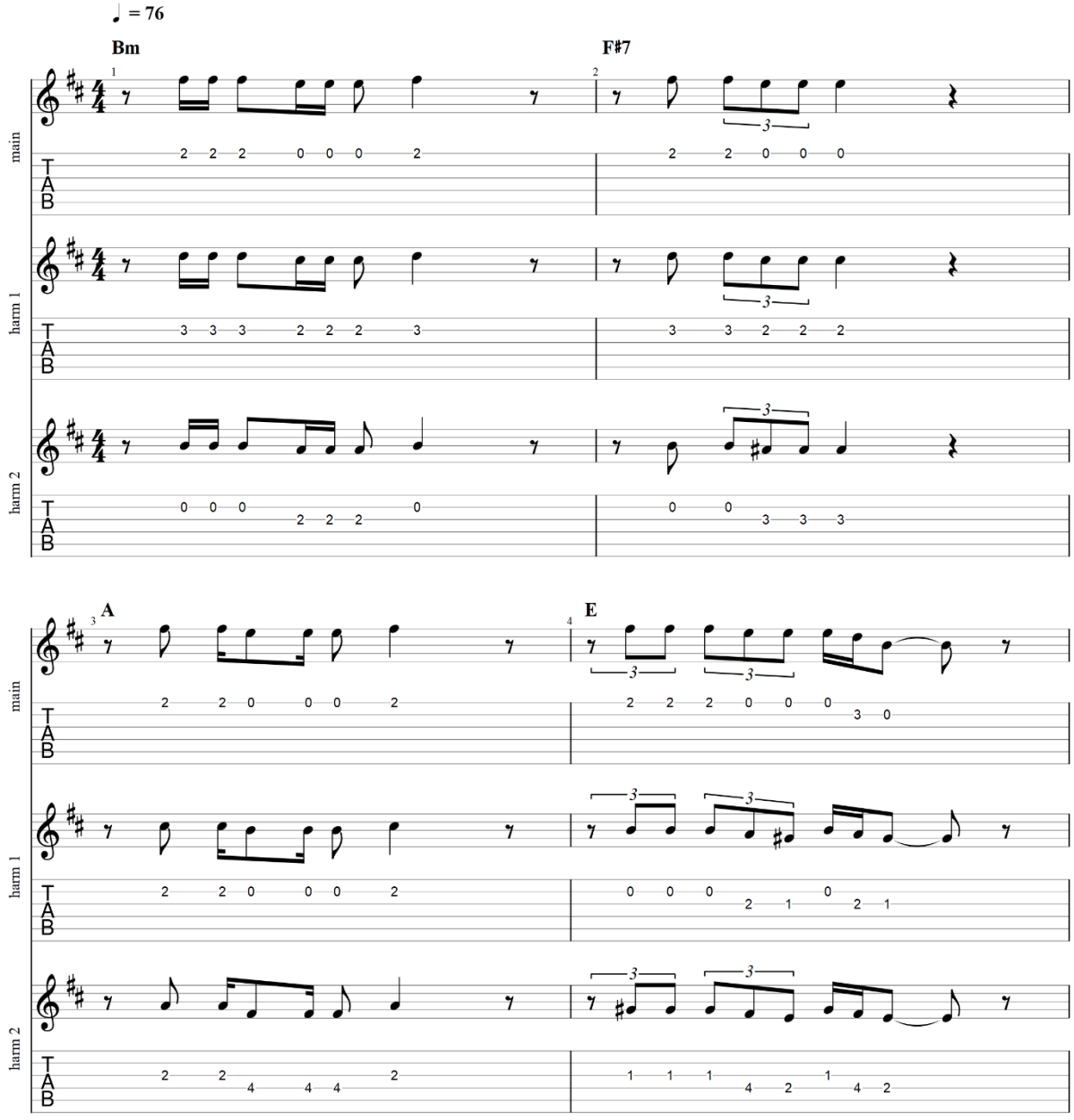
Digging deeper like this into harmonizing a melody can help you appreciate a lot more nuances of tension and release than regular chord symbols can.

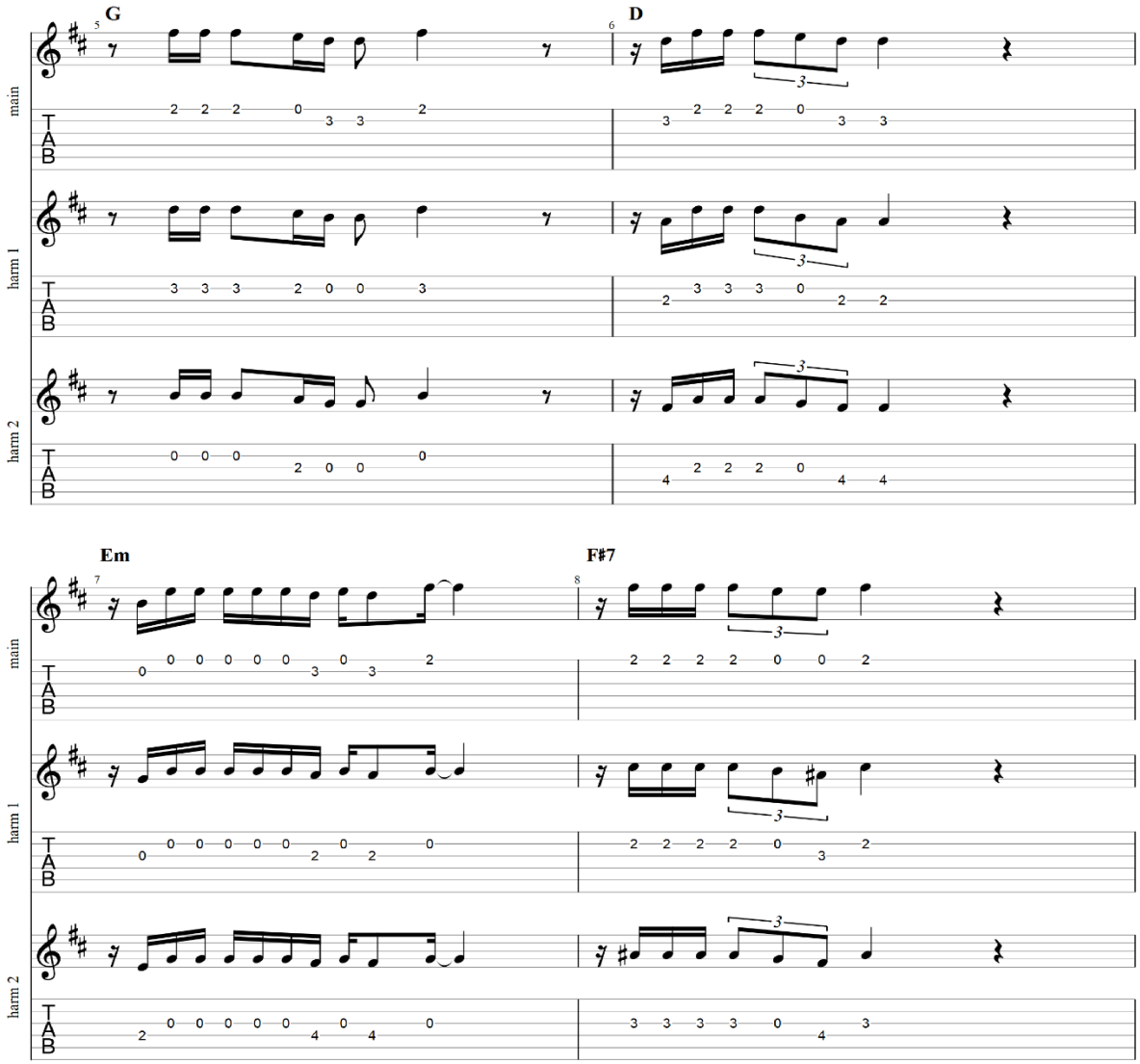
3. Some **aesthetic choices** were made. For example in bar 12, I wanted harmony 1 to go c# b but then part 3 sounded funny either going back to b, only a whole step away from c# and a change of direction, or I could have kept it as a a# for a Bm(maj7) type sound. In the end, I kept the c# in harmony part 1 and chose to use an a note, which is the 7th of the Bm chord. I like it because goes from a# in the previous bar down a half step there, and because that voice moves at that moment whereas the other two voices remain the same.

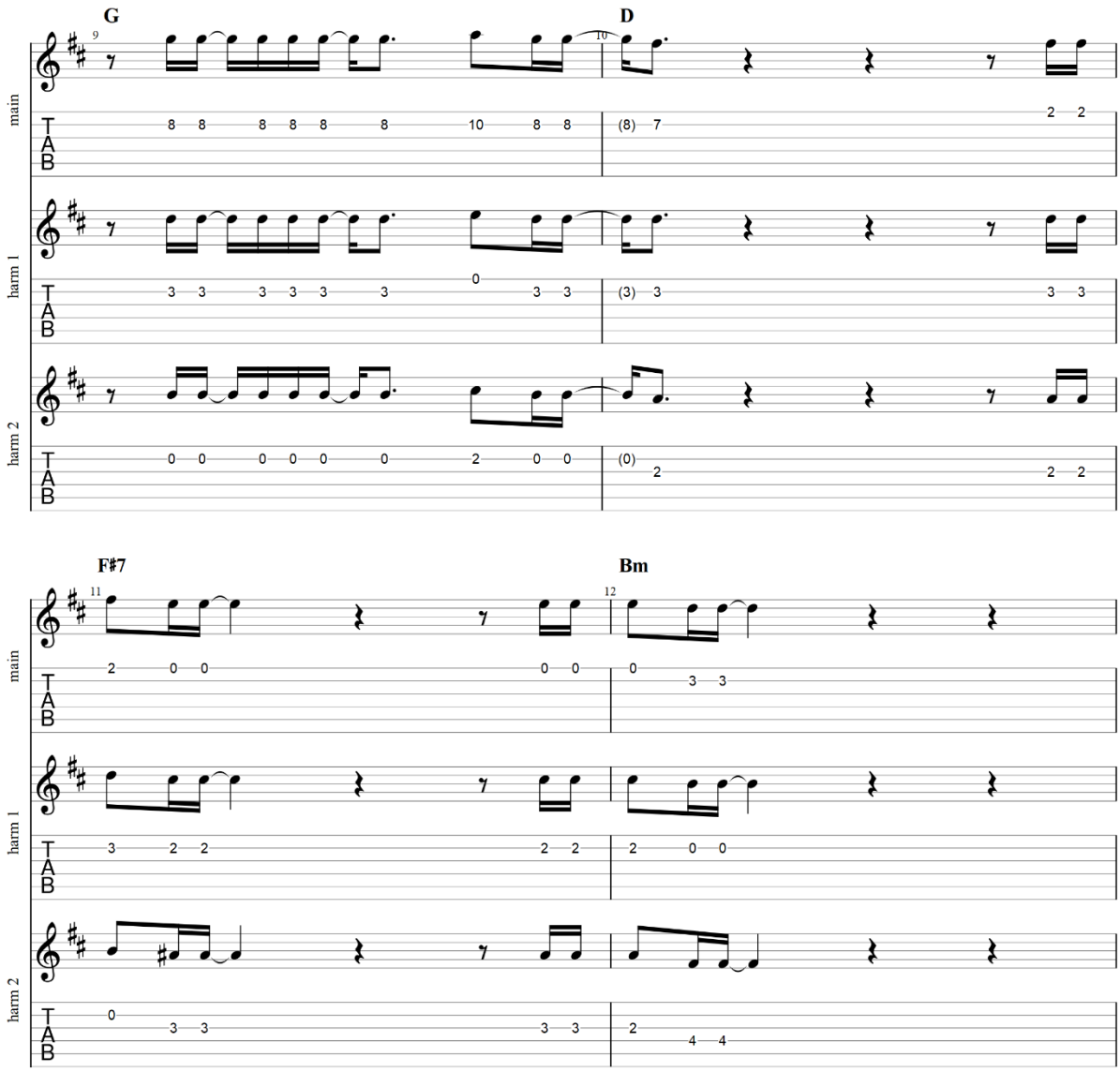
Good luck and have fun!

Hotel California

melody harmonized for 3 guitars




G
D
Em
F♯7
main
harm 1
harm 2
T
A
B


G
D
F#7
Bm
main
harm 1
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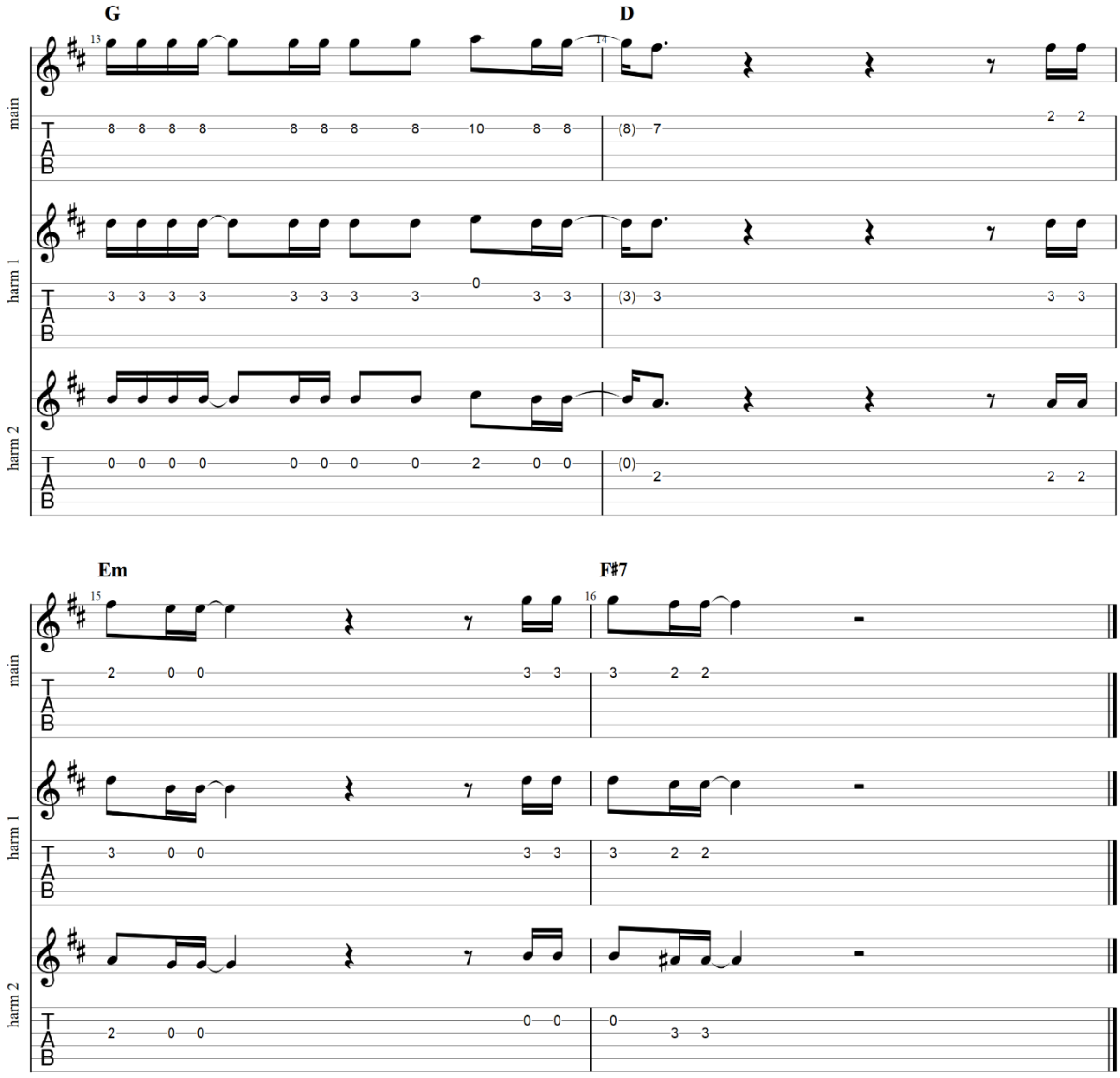
TAB


G
D
13
14
main
harm 1
harm 2
T
A
B
Em
F#7
15
16