

The Art of Solo Guitar

by Dennis Winge

Unlike a piano where one hand is free to play the accompaniment part while the other plays the melody, playing melody and accompaniment on guitar sometimes requires careful forethought, technique and practice. It doesn't have to be "difficult," however. Here are some suggestions to make the process easier.

1. **Learn the melody** – This may sound obvious, but what I mean is to learn the melody in intervals. Learn the melody by 'numbers.' Jingle Bells, for example, starts with 333, 333, 35123. Each number refers to the scale degree in whatever key the piece is in. Jingle Bells is typically played in G whose 3rd note is *b*. Since this is the first note of the tune played 3 times, that is why we write 333. (Ask your teacher or see my article called "Music by Numbers" if you need more explanation on this.) Understanding a melody this way allows you to take it to a different key that might be much easier to play on solo guitar (more on that in a bit).

2. **Learn the harmony** – Similarly, when you learn the chord changes, it should be in Roman Numerals. If the tune is Happy Birthday (don't laugh, it can be a nice gift to play that solo for someone you care about and it's not hard), the chords go (in the key of F. 3/4 time)

| F | C | C | F | F | Bb | F / C | F |

Then you should understand that as: | I | V | V | I | I | IV | I / V | I | because if you need to take it to a different key you can easily transpose this. (Again, ask your teacher or see my article called "Harmonizing a Scale".)

3. **Combine bass notes with melody only** – As a place to start, play the melody with the roots of the chords only just to see how it feels in that key, and familiarize yourself with the tune. If you have trouble with this step it's going to be even harder to do it in a different key. You might even make a composite interval graph that might look something like this for "America the Beautiful." (I have tried to vertically line up melody and chords as close as possible.)

Melody: 5 5, 33 5 5, 2 2 3 45 67 5
Chords: | I / / #ldim | II V | II V | I |

4. **Choose the key** – This can be subject to personal preferences, but many players do these things:

- a. look for keys that are 'guitar friendly' such as E, A, D, and G. Notice that in these keys the player has access to open strings which can come in very handy.
- b. choose a key where the melody is not too low. The melody should be the highest note, or else the other notes can distract the listener away from the melody, so if the melody goes below the 3rd string, for example, you can't get many supporting notes underneath

it (meaning if the melody is on the 4th string, the only choices you have for supporting notes are on the 5th or 6th string).

- c. choose a key where the melody is not too high. Let's say your melody covers one octave from one root to the next in the key of F. The melody would be played all the way from fret 1 to fret 13 on the top string. This not only requires a lot of moving around position-wise, but it take you way up the neck. If the key were B, by contrast, you would only have to move as far as the 7th fret, and you would not have to move around so much because you would employ the 2nd string as well for some of it.

5. Choose chord voicings –

- a. keep it simple at first. Once the key is chosen and you can play the melody with bass notes only, choosing the chords can be a relatively straightforward. You can embellish or alter the chords in the next step, but for now, keep it simple and simply play the melody and chords at the same time. Where do you have to change positions? Is everything relatively accessible? Are there chords that you can leave out (in other words, only play the melody and no chord in certain places) if certain places are too challenging?
- b. embellish or alter the chords. If you're arrangement does not thrill you, you can:
 1. provide inner voice movement. This refers to the notes between the melody and the bass note. For an easy example if you have an open A chord whose melody is e on the top string, then you can move the 2nd string (which normally plays c# at fret 2) to d or b (at frets 3 or 0, respectively). Alternately, you could move the 3rd string (which normally plays a at fret 2) to b at fret 4 or g# at fret 1.
 2. move the bass line. The bass voice is the next most important one after the melody in terms of what the ears notice so moving the bass line can give your arrangement a good deal of flow. If you're connecting a C and a G chord, for example, then you can play b and a on the way to G.
 3. change the chord. For extra spice or color, alter certain chords to something more exotic. These work especially well in places where you want to create tension or animate the emotion. For example if you are in the key of C and your melody note is also c, what about A minor, Ab major, F maj, F minor, D7 or Dbmaj7 for example? As long as the melody note is the root, third fifth, or seventh of the substituted chord, it can work, as long as your voicing keeps that melody note on top.

6. Choose a stylistic approach/technique – A stylistic approach is one that should help convey the emotion you want the song to convey. If it's fast and fun, for example, then Travis Picking might be the way to go. If it's solemn and regal, you might arpeggiate the chords in 8th notes underneath the melody. Driving songs might be better strummed. In other instances, you can even keep the chords and melody separate if the melody has enough space where you can fill in with chords in between the phrases. Or even another possibility is that you

simply harmonize the melody with only one other supporting note, producing a 'diad' (2 notes at the same time) so no chords are actually played (because a chord is 3 or more notes.)

7. Keep melody prominent and take liberties with the rhythm – The melody should be the loudest note, so don't obscure it with the supporting notes. Can you pick or pluck the melody slightly louder than the others? It's something to be aware of. The melody is the most important, but there are times when you don't have to play the rhythm of the melody exactly as originally written if it throws off the flow you have with whatever technique you are using to deliver the piece. Small adjustments are fine as long as the overall character of the melody stays intact.