

Performing in the Chord-Melody Style

by Charles H. Chapman

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The Drop 2 Concept for Guitar
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Through all my years of teaching I've noticed one technique that everyone from beginners to advanced players has misconceptions about-- the chord-melody approach to soloing. Chord-melody is the simultaneous playing of chords plus melody, a technique generally employed by only the most advanced players. Hopefully, the drop-2 concept will demystify this elusive technique so that guitarists at all levels can play in this very satisfying style.

As a beginner, I asked my guitar teacher how to play chord-melody style. He gave me a stack of records and told me to go home and figure it out. Granted, this is the way most of the great players did it, but how many beginning or intermediate students have this ability or fortitude? As a freshman at Berklee College of Music I asked my guitar teacher about chord-melody, and once again I was given such a massive amount of information that I pushed it aside in bewilderment. This was a natural reaction, since there are many ways to approach this subject, and the choice of chord voicings is unlimited.

Chord-melody playing can be regarded as an extremely difficult technique, but it doesn't have to be. The first step is to limit your choice of chord voicings and learn them thoroughly. You immediately need to learn the drop-2 chords, which consist of only four notes on four adjacent strings. With this knowledge, you will be well armed to attack this style of guitar playing.

The basic procedure is as follows:

I. LEADSHEET

Familiarize yourself with the single note melody line with chord symbols which is commonly referred to as a lead sheet.

Leadsheet

Easy Swing

Gm7

Am7

Gm7

Am7

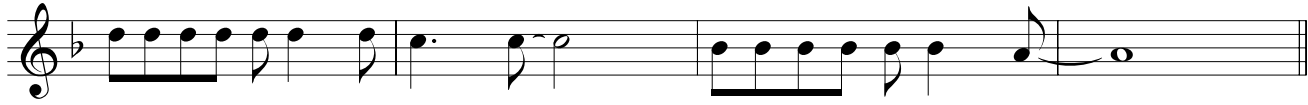


Gm7

Am7

Gm7

Am7

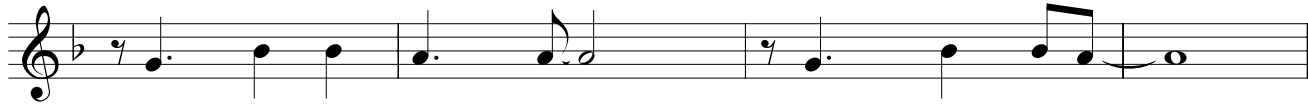


Cm7

Gm7

Cm7

Gm7



Cm7

Gm7

Cm7

Dm7



Gm7

Am7

Gm7

Am7



Gm7

Cm7

Dm7

Gm7



II. PRACTICE UP AN OCTAVE

Transpose the melody up an octave to enable the chords to fit properly beneath it. All melodies (unless specifically written for the guitar) must be transposed up an octave with the melody as the uppermost voice.

Melody Transposed Up an Octave (8va)

The score is written in 4/4 time and consists of five systems of music. Each system contains a treble clef staff with a melody and a guitar tablature staff below it. The melody is transposed up an octave, as indicated by the '8va' in the title. The chords are Gm7, Am7, Cm7, and Dm7. The tablature includes various fret numbers and techniques such as bends, slides, and triplets. The score ends with a double bar line.

System 1: Chords: Gm7, Am7, Gm7, Am7, Gm7. Tab: 3 5 3 5 6 6 8 8 10 10 10 10 10 10 10.

System 2: Chords: Am7, Gm7, Am7, Cm7, Gm7. Tab: 8 8 8 6 6 6 6 6 6 5 5 3 6 6 5 5 5.

System 3: Chords: Cm7, Gm7, Cm7, Gm7, Cm7, Dm7. Tab: 3 6 6 5 5 3 6 6 5 5 5 6 6 6 6 6 8 8.

System 4: Chords: Gm7, Am7, Gm7, Am7. Tab: 3 5 3 5 6 10 10 8.

System 5: Chords: Gm7, Cm7, Dm7, Gm7. Tab: 6 6 6 6 6 6 5 5 5 5 6 8 3 3.

Learning the melody where the Tab is notated will set the melody in a favorable position for chord-melody playing.

III. Putting It All Together

The basic premise of playing in chord-melody style is to place chord structures on chord tones or notes that fall on strong beats. If you prefer to voice, or play a melody note that is a non-chord tone, eliminate the chord tone directly beneath that note and then construct the chord in the drop-2 manner. The root or 5th can be eliminated at any time to provide an available extension (such as a 9th) or to make the chord easier to finger. The 3rd and 7th of any chord should, however, never be eliminated.

In chord-melody style, it is acceptable to alter the phrasing from the original leadsheet in any manner your ear dictates, as long as you do not lose the continuity of the piece. This style is not meant to be written, but should be performed from looking only at a melody line and chord symbols.

You will find drop-2 chords to be the most practical to use, but in many situations there will be other voicings that will function just as well. When unsure of what voicings to choose, let your ear make the final decision. Your ear is the best judge of what sounds good, so do not disregard it. If you find yourself in a situation where nothing seems to work it is always acceptable to play the melody by itself.

It is imperative that you try to work out a chord-melody arrangement from the leadsheet before consulting a written chord-melody sketch. It will be counterproductive for you to learn the written chord-melody example as is, since I would never play a chord-melody lead sheet exactly as it is written. Rather, I would anticipate beats and rhythmically embellish phrases. Instead of sustaining a whole note I will often throw in a favorite "lick" to fill in the space. The chord-melody sketch provides insight as to what can be done, not what should be performed. Chord-melody playing is very intuitive and should never be played the same way twice. Developing your ear will dictate what you play. This all will come in time if you have patience and practice in the prescribed manner.

Written Chord-Melody Sketch with Bassline

The musical score is written for guitar in 4/4 time, featuring a chord-melody style with a separate bassline. The score is organized into three systems, each consisting of a treble staff and a bass staff.

System 1:

- Treble Staff:** Chords are labeled Gm7, Am7, Gm7, and Am7. The melody consists of quarter notes and half notes.
- Bass Staff:** Fret numbers are indicated below the staff: 5, 3, 2, 2, 5, 7, 5, 7.

System 2:

- Treble Staff:** Chords are labeled Gm7, Am7, Gm7, and Am7. The melody includes eighth notes and quarter notes.
- Bass Staff:** Fret numbers are indicated: 10, 10, 10, 10, 10, 10, 10, 8, 8, 8, 8, 8, 6, 6, 6, 6, 6, 6, 5, 5, 5, 5.

System 3:

- Treble Staff:** Chords are labeled Cm7, Gm7, Cm7, and Gm7. The melody includes quarter notes and half notes.
- Bass Staff:** Fret numbers are indicated: 1, 3, 5, 6, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5.

The musical score is written in C minor and consists of four systems. Each system has a treble staff and a bass staff. The chords are Cm7, Gm7, and Dm7. The fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5 on the bass staff and 6-10 on the treble staff.

System 1: Treble staff has Cm7, Gm7, Cm7, and Dm7. Bass staff has fingerings: 3 1 3 1, 6 5 4 5, 6, 5 3 3 3 3 3, 6 6 6 6 6 6 6, 8 6 7 8 8 7 7.

System 2: Treble staff has Gm7, Am7, Gm7, and Am7. Bass staff has fingerings: 3 3 3 3 3 3, 5, 3 2 2, 6 10 8 10 10 8 8, 8 7 7 7 7 7.

System 3: Treble staff has Gm7, Cm7, Dm7, and Gm7. Bass staff has fingerings: 6 6 6 6 6 6 6, 5 3 3 3 3 3, 5 3 3 3 3 3, 6 4 5 7 3 3 3, 8 7 3 3 3 3 3.

System 4: Treble staff has Gm7, Cm7, Dm7, and Gm7. Bass staff has fingerings: 6 6 6 6 6 6 6, 5 3 3 3 3 3, 5 3 3 3 3 3, 6 4 5 7 3 3 3, 8 7 3 3 3 3 3.

When a group of eighth notes occurs, it is better to sustain the chord and play the melody over the harmonic structure. This approach will not only be easier to execute, but also result in a smooth, uncluttered sound.

Drop 2 chords sound best when used in conjunction with a rhythm section (bass and drums). If you are using this concept with a keyboard player or another guitarist be careful that your voicings do not clash. Usually when other chordal instruments are present you will want to keep your chords small and use them in a sparse manner.

If you use this technique in a solo guitar context, I recommend that you play rubato and enlarge your chords by adding roots and 5ths in the lower octave when possible.

In my twenty-five plus years of teaching, the drop-2 family of chords has been my main harmonic focus with students. This is the one area in which former students have consistently acknowledged my guidance, both personally and in print. Many have gone as far as to attribute much of their success as performing artists to knowing this chord family in all keys. Try not to get frustrated when certain keys and areas of the guitar neck seem elusive or hard to retain and execute. Once you overcome the initial cumbersome task of learning these chords, I can guarantee it will open up a new direction in music for you.

Above all else, it's fun.