



Guitarist Songwriter
ACADEMY™

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MODULE 1 Phase 3 Songwriting

Writing Melody

A good melody is not just a long string of pitches. An instrumental solo may be impressive, but it might not be a melody you can sing. Four general rules to make musical phrases sound like melodies:

- 1) Short Phrases
- 2) Few notes (3-12 more or less)
- 3) Limited number of leaps in pitch (1 or 2 at most)
- 4) Stay within a certain pitch range (usually within 1 ½ octaves)

Memorable melodies will be relatively easy to sing by most people, and will be easy to remember.

Pitch Material

Two principal sources of pitch material are arpeggios and scales. Arpeggios involve using the notes of the chord in sequence, meaning jumps of a third or fourth, while scale-wise melodic sequences move in half and whole steps following the chord progression.

Arpeggios: In songwriting, arpeggios are used in the melody by singing up or down the notes in the chord, skipping over other scale tones. The most stable melody tones will be the tones in the chord.

Example: First phrase of **El Paso by Marty Robbins** (on You Tube Playlist) outlines the tonic chord followed by the ii chord followed by the V⁷ chord: (see <https://youtu.be/7UVVS5-9HvA>)

Harmonic Function	Tonic (I)	Supertonic (ii)	Dominant (V)	Tonic
Scale Tones in Melody	1 1 3 5 3 1	2 2 4 6 4 2	5 7 2 4 (3) 2 4 (3) 2	1

When creating melodies over the chord progression of your song, you can always use chord tone arpeggios as a possible source of melodic material. It is helpful to know which **scale** tones comprise each of the **chords** (triads) we have studied. For the chords in the key, start each chord on the next tone and spell in thirds (skipping over a number). For example, the diatonic seventh chords have these pitches:

Chord	Chord Name	Scale Tones	Mode Name
I ^{Maj7}	Tonic	1 3 5 7	Ionian
ii ^{m7}	Supertonic	2 4 6 1	Dorian
iii ^{m7}	Mediant	3 5 7 2	Phrygian
IV ^{Maj7}	Sub Dominant	4 6 1 3	Lydian
V ⁷	Dominant	5 7 2 4	Mixolydian
vi ^{m7}	Sub Mediant	6 4 1 5	Aeolian
Vii ^{m7b5}	Leading Tone	7 2 4 6	Locrian

Scales: In addition to chord arpeggios, you can use various scales over the different chords to create melodies. The most common scales to use are:

Major scale	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Modes are built on each degree of the major scale
Major pentatonic scale	1 2 3 5 6	
Major Blues scale	1 2 ^b 3 3 5 6	
Natural Minor	1 2 ^b 3 4 5 ^b 6 ^b 7	
Harmonic Minor	1 2 ^b 3 4 5 ^b 6 7	
Jazz Melodic Minor	1 2 ^b 3 4 5 6 7	
Minor Pentatonic	1 ^b 3 4 5 ^b 7	
Minor Blues	1 ^b 3 4 ^b 5 5 ^b 7	
Diminished	1 ^b 3 ^b 5 ^b 7	

Modes: Don't forget that the modes are the same arrangement of pitches as the major scale, just starting on a different scale degree. So for example, D Dorian mode starts on the second scale degree and has the same pitches as the C scale: D E F G A B C This means D Dorian is different from D minor or D major (D minor has one flat and D major has two sharps). Mode names corresponding to each of the scale degrees are shown in the chart above.

Composing Melodies over Changes

One way to work on composing melodies before you have lyrics is to make a backing track with the basic chord progression of one section of your song – say a verse or chorus, then improvise melodic phrases using nonsense syllables over the chord changes. If you have a section on a loop, you can try out many different ideas as the progression cycles. When you find something you like, stop and get that recorded any way you can so that you will remember it.

An easy way to practice this is to use one of the pre-recorded backing tracks from the You Tube Playlist for this class. For example, this blues pattern: https://youtu.be/pmwQ_WNTwXE

Rhythm Considerations

The other important component of your melody (after the pitch choices) is the rhythm. What is the overall pulse or beat of the music? How many subdivisions of the beat do you need to get in all the lyrics? Is the rhythm relatively steady, with long sections of the same values (e.g. eight notes) or are there variations in the rhythm such as dotted notes or longer held notes? There should be natural breaks or cadences in the rhythm to punctuate the thoughts in the lyrics. Are there rhythmic motifs that recur? The lyrics must have a rhyme scheme that works with the rhythm to place important words or phrases on accented beats. Use compound meters such as 6/8 or odd time signatures such as 5/4 for added interest. Phrasing is part of the rhythm of the song. Be aware of phrase length and building a story piece by piece.

Applying Lyrics

Music and lyrics must fit together and support each other in a well-constructed song. What comes first – lyrics or music? The answer is yes! Songs can start with a lyrical idea that then acquires a melodic component and becomes a song. Or it may start with a beat and a chord progression with nonsense syllables that eventually turn into lyrics. There is no one way that all songs are written. Most important is to have a process you can apply to both lyric creation and music creation – chord progression and melody.