

Melody: Where to Start?

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Writing a melody is one of the most important aspects of songwriting. It is usually the most memorable part of the song. Most guitar players and songwriters have little actual knowledge on how to build a great melody at will, and they often find themselves asking “where do I start?” This is an issue that many of my students have encountered, and by using the concepts discussed in this article I was able to help them to get on the path to creating great melodies. Unless you are lucky and a great melody happens to pop into your head, you can find yourself with no direction poking around at notes. The goal of this article is to provide you with that direction by helping you to develop a starting point. Knowing how your melody will begin can spark creativity, and result in you developing an entire melody quickly and effectively. The ideas discussed in this article can apply to all instruments capable of performing a melody even percussion. Let’s begin with note choice.

First off it is most important that you have decided upon what key your song will be in, or at least starts in. We will assume that you are already capable of deciding this. It is typical when song writing, although not necessary, that the chords will already have been decided on. Let’s use the classic key of C major for our example, and say that our first chord in the progression is a C major chord. The other chords that will be in the progression are not important at this time because we are concerning ourselves with where to start rather than where we are going. It is common to begin a melody on a note that is part of the chord being played at the time. Since we are starting our progression with a C chord we want to start with one of the three notes in that chord. Our options are the root, 3rd, or 5th. In this case the corresponding notes would be C, E, and G. It is important to recognize that each note has its own character when played with the chord. The root note “C” tends to be the strongest or most stable of the three notes. The 3rd “E” tends to be the weakest or least stable whereas the 5th “G” falls in between the root and the 3rd in terms of strength and stability. The root note is the most common note for a melody to start on followed by the 5th, and then the 3rd. I recommend you try all three until you find the one that seems to be the most effective for the feel you are going for. Some chords such as 7th & 9th will contain more than 3 notes in which case you can experiment starting you melody with any one of those additional notes. It is also possible to start on a non chord tone (a note that is not in the chord), but you will find that this may create unwanted dissonance and tension. However, if tension is what you find to be suitable for your melody than starting on a note that is not in the chord is something to be considered. For starters you should focus on using the root, 3rd, or 5th. Familiarize your ear with how each note sounds against the chord by playing the chord and singing or playing the different note options. Pay close attention to the different color and character each note produces. Think about the emotion you want your melody to embrace and that will greatly influence which note you will want to begin with. Just as important as what pitch to start with is when to play that note.

Now we will discuss some different options of when in the rhythm you can sound the first note. It is most expected by the human ear to have the melody begin on the beat. It is even more expected for it to begin on the first beat. For this reason starting on the first beat will create the least amount of tension. The later the beat the more tension there will be. Although, the tension will be relatively

minimal when you start on a beat no matter which beat it is, and your melody will sound relatively stable for that moment. Remember tension is created when we hear something that we aren't expecting even if we aren't consciously aware of it. The more the tension a moment has the more that moment sticks out to our ears. The beat or pulse of the music is what our ears lock onto. It's what we tap our foot or bob our head to. If the melody doesn't start on the first beat, subconsciously we expect it to start on the second beat. If it doesn't start on the second beat, subconsciously we expect it to start on the third beat and so on. The longer the wait the more suspense you build. But what creates more tension than anything is starting just before or just after a beat; in between the beats (also called the upbeat). It is very common to start just before or just after the **first** beat especially. This is very effective because as stated earlier the listener subconsciously expects the melody to begin on the first beat. By starting just before the first beat we can catch them off guard and take them by surprise. This element of surprise helps to create tension and to propel or drive the melody forward. To create even more tension start just after the first beat. Because the listener didn't hear anything on the first beat they would again, subconsciously expect the melody to begin on the second beat. But before the second beat arrives, WHAM, the melody kicks in once again taking the listener by surprise. Once you have chosen the note you want to begin with experiment with introducing that note at different points in the rhythm both on the beat and off the beat. Pay close attention to the different effects the different starting points have. When you start your melody can have a dramatic effect on how your melody will sound. Just like when choosing your note you want to choose your starting point based on what fits the overall feel of the song best. There are a few other things you can take into consideration when starting your melody such as dynamics (loudness or softness of the instrument), and pitch range (starting in a higher or lower register). But which note comes first and when it's played is the most significant factor. Don't forget that you can also try these ideas on existing melodies, and see how different way of starting can affect the melody.

One thing I can guarantee you is that every melody has a beginning. Listen to and pick apart the beginnings of your favorite melodies. Find out what makes them sound the way they sound. See if you can find out what note the melody starts on, and if it's the root, 3rd, or 5th, of the first chord. Think about the character and color of that note. Maybe it even starts on a non chord tone and has a very dissonant sound. Perhaps you will find that you are naturally attracted to dissonant melodies. Or perhaps you will find that you tend to prefer melodies with very little dissonance. Now you are going to really start learning about your musical taste. Listen for when in time the melody begins. Does it start on the beat or on the upbeat? How did the starting point affect your perception on the emotional quality of the melody? Remember to take and experiment trying out the different possibilities. Sure they will be some trial and error here, but that is an unavoidable truth with any aspect of songwriting. The hardest thing to do is to start doing, but you know as well as I do once the ball starts rolling it's a hell of a lot easier to keep it rolling. Please feel free to e-mail me with any questions pertaining to this article, and make sure to visit my website (www.alexbochia.com) for more great articles and videos on guitar and music. Also, keep an eye out for the upcoming supplementary video for this article!