

Chord melody lap-steel guitar playing:

What is it? The supplementation of melody with chords; not in the accompaniment sense but in the sense that some or all of the melody notes are harmonised to 'fatten' the sound. This harmonisation is not to be confused with the primary harmony that underscores the piece. The primary harmony is the deciding factor regards whether a given melody note is a 'target note' (chord tone or tension) or an approach note. The principle here is that target notes are harmonised with chord sound (the sound of the primary harmony) whilst approach notes are harmonised away from the chord sound. However, no discord is heard because approach notes and their consequent chords last only a short time en route to a target note. There are a number of options regards the harmonisation of approach notes as follows:

- **Parallel harmonisation:** irrespective of key, each chord voice moves by the same amount and in the same direction. Chromatic harmonisation is an example but specifically, it is where the movement is by only a semitone either way.
- **Diatonic harmonisation:** choice of chord is influenced by the key that provides the setting.
- **Dominant harmonisation:** the dominant 7th of the consequent target note and chord - in a V to I relationship - is used. Said approach note must be either a chord tone or tension note of said dominant 7th.

Note: as suggested, a chord melody approach does not mean that everyone melody note, regardless of its status, must be harmonised. It may go from one extreme, where only the first note in a phrase is harmonised to state the chord sound and as a kind of punctuation to a scenario where every note is harmonised in a block chord way.

Chord melody is obviously associated with chordal instruments such as keyboards and guitars and I may be correct in saying that it is an approach to melody playing that was influenced by big band writing; where different sections play harmonised melodies. In any case, it is an approach that is particularly useful where there is no other chordal instrument present and perhaps a certain sparsity in the line up of players. Basically, it helps to fatten the sound whilst playing a melody or improvised solo in such a context..and also serves to state the underlying harmony. It is equally good in the solo context where a chordal instrument is playing entirely solo and self contained.

And so this brings us to a consideration of how this approach may relate to building a solo arrangement for lap steel guitar; where everything is played with a bar.

Rather than looking at improvised solos, which requires its own study, here we will only look at melodies that already exist.

So an established melody is the start point for this. Incidentally, I think that solo arrangements work best for ballads and tunes with strong melodies. So, that's what we will look at.

Format: aural – visual or both?

How is the melody and the song presented to us? That is the question!!!

Arguably, we should be prepared for every possible source of information...but we need to start somewhere. So...I'd say that start point should be the lead sheet, where the essence of the song is provided: the melody, the chords and the form.

Does this require the ability to interpret written notation? Well, yes!!! But not so much in terms of knowing where to play a given note on the fretboard; rather the ability to translate the written pitched note into a letter note. That is all we need to get started. Of course, there is the notated rhythm and time values to consider too; but that can be overlooked provided the arranger already knows how the tune goes or has access to an aural version of said tune. That way they will know how it goes!

So...the written notation is translated into a series of letter notes. Either by having a good knowledge of the lap steel tuning or by having a fretboard diagram at hand, we are then able to translate said letter notes to the fretboard. It must be said at this point that it may turn out to be the case that the original key of said tune is not the best key for translating to the lap steel. I won't go into details about this just now; except to say that you will learn something about this by taking a case by case and seeing what works best. Now...there is a suggestion here that TRANSPOSITION may have to take place in order to find the best key. More on that...later!

Let's just say that the original key works well. We then need to decide where to play the notes on the fretboard for maximum effect and convenience. These are the two big considerations as there are different possibilities on the fretboard. I will say here that arguably we try to fit as many melody notes under the bar without movement as we can. The more strings there are on a lap steel, the more this can happen. Pedal steel provides even greater facility by offering knee levers and foot pedals; so that the bar can practically stay in one position.

Mind, all of the above is giving only consideration to the melody; whereas we are aiming to create a chord melody version. So..the plot thickens. However, I would say that it is a pretty good exercise to begin by looking at all of the ways the actual melody itself can be played without reference to chords.

Next step: harmonisation of the melody.

A typical lead sheet will provide the primary harmony also; so that is our start point. I don't want to talk about how to primarily harmonise a melody at this point because that requires a separate chapter! I will say it again:

Our start point is a lead sheet providing the melody AND the primary chords.

So...now we are going to go through ALL of the melody notes and DECIDE which notes are TARGET TONES and which are APPROACH NOTES. This does require some basic knowledge:

- Be able to translate a chord symbol into a bunch of notes
- Be aware of what available tensions there are for each chord. These are notes NOT in the chord symbol provided but can be added to the chord in a complimentary way; such as 6ths, 7ths, 9ths, 11th, 13ths...and altered chords.
- Know about diatonic harmony: chords in the key
- Know about chord inversions: how the notes of a chord can be re-arranged (so that the melody note in question can sit at the top of the chord)
- Know V7 to I for every possible chord root.

Exercise: take a lead sheet and go through every melody note to decide which are target notes and which are approach notes. You will also notice that approach notes never last very long compared with target notes that obviously sound good against the chord in question.

NEXT: Decide which of the melody notes requires its own chord for support (as in chord melody). I would not recommend beginning this exercise by attempting to harmonise every note in the melody. Instead, focus upon a few choice notes – especially where a change of primary harmony occurs as this is a good form of punctuation and a way to state the change of chord.

SO START with the melody notes where a change of primary chord happens!

Now...the chances are that all of these selected melody notes are target notes as that would seem to make sense! Good! So, we need to choose a version of the primary chord that has the melody note AT THE TOP of the chord; so we can hear it – for that is the whole point!

With bar in hand – and with knowledge of the chord notes on offer – see if a solution can be found on the fretboard. The greatest scope lies with double stops as the bar can be straight, forward or reverse slanted to achieve this. Open strings also provides a possibility here. Sometimes we can use three or four notes though these are likely to require a straight bar, if not open strings. Often, we are in the business of suggesting chords by carefully selecting what notes to play. Guide tones are the most important notes in any chord; namely the 3rd and 7th. However, sometimes we may choose to harmonise target notes

not with chord sound but another diatonic chord that belongs to the same key.
Certainly where double stops are concerned – harmonising in thirds or sixths.