

The Basics of Playing Chord Melody

by Steve Caddick

Chord Melody is when you play the melody notes of a song with as much of the chords as you can play at the same time. The chord harmony is always lower in pitch than the melody note. This is because the higher pitched notes are always the dominate sound in multiple note playing.

When we as Banjo players think about playing Chord Melody, most of us invariably think of it as something that only the best players can do. In fact, that thought is not correct. My point of view is that it is something that is relatively simple to do, and anyone can do it with some of the ideas that I'll discuss here in this article.

First things first, There are a couple of pre-requisites to playing Chord Melody.

1. You need to be able to read single notes with some facility.

You don't have much time to think about the note you are playing. You need to be able to recognize and execute the musical note you see on your sheet music very quickly, and most importantly, accurately. Your time will be spent thinking about the chord first and how to add in the melody note second. Staying in time!

When you are playing a song from the sheet music, several things are happening at the same time. You have tempo to contend with. The correct way to practice playing single notes from music is to start slowly. You should use a metronome or some other mechanical devise (drum machine) to set an audible tempo for you to work from. If you have trouble keeping up with the beat, then slow your tempo down to a point that you can keep up with.

Slowly increase the tempo each time you work on the song until you get the tempo up to the speed that the band plays the song at. Once you can consistently play the song at band speed, and play it accurately, then you are ready for the next step in playing Chord Melody.

2. The second pre-requisite is to know how to play the chords from the sheet music for the songs you are working on.

(HINT) Record the melody and use this to practice your chords with. Play the tape and follow along by playing the chords in the first position. The first position chords are the most important ones for playing Chord Melody. Then play the song again and practice using the chords from the next position. These chords are also important for use in Chord Melody.

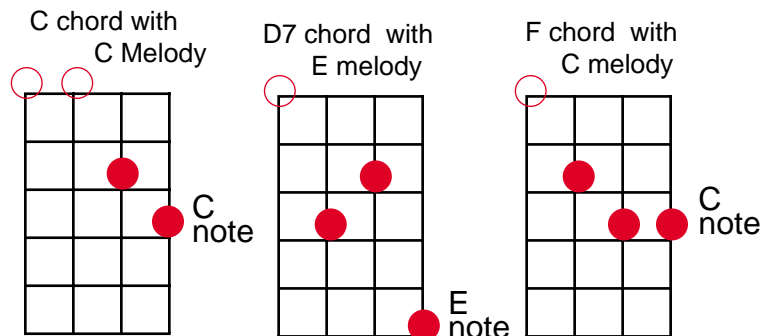
Now, once you have accomplished these two things, 1. Single string note reading and 2. Chord playing, You are ready to start putting the two together to play Chord Melody.

Start out by going slowly. Remember to keep the melody note on top, in other words keep the melody note as the highest pitched tone at all times. All of the other notes you play in Chord Melody have to be from the chord being used at that point in the melody. and they have to be lower in pitch than the melody note is. Keep this one single rule in mind at all times and you can't go wrong.

The first note of a song on beat number one can be a full chord (all four strings) Example: "Four Leaf Clover" The first note is a "C" Look at the chord and you will see that the chord is also a "C". Play a first position "C" chord instead of the single note "C" and there you have the start of playing Chord Melody. (see Example)

At first, play only notes of long duration with as much of the chord under it. This will allow you to develop the thinking processes needed to play Chord Melody. By using the longer notes, for now, you give yourself time to think about what part of the chord you need to use at any particular note in the song. If the chord is a D7 and the melody is "E" which is also a four beat note, You can play the "E" on the "A" string at the 7th fret and you can use as much of the D7 chord as you can get on the d, g and c strings. The notes will be F# on the "D" string, the "C" note on the "G" string and either the "F#" or the open "C" on the "C" string. Try this now so you can see what I mean.

EXAMPLES :



(HINT) Think of the chord first and then add in the melody note!

Try this , the chord is "F" the melody note is "C". Try to work it out now and here is the explanation. BUT try it first!

Play a first position “F” chord and now play the “C” note on the third fret on the “A” string. BINGO you got it!

This is starting to look a lot easier than you thought isn't it.

The second note in “Four Leaf Clover” is a “G” you are still on the “C” chord. How would you execute it in Chord Melody? Ah-HA you quickly found out that a first position “C” chord doesn't work very well! Try the second position “C” chord instead. (E on C, C on G, G on the D and E on the A string). You only play up to the G note on the D string. You are only using 3 notes! You will find that it is necessary to eliminate some notes as your melody drops onto the lower strings. You will never drop the melody note! It must always be played!

You will find that if you only play Chord Melody on the longer notes (half notes and longer) and use single string notes for the shorter ones, this will give you an excellent start on Chord Melody. As your skill at recognition and execution increases, so will your ability to execute shorter length notes in Chord Melody.

Remember that it is more important to work at it a little every day than a lot on only one day a week. The more you do it the more you will recognize that there are similarities from chord to chord. and the easier it will get for you to do.

(HINT) Start off by trying it only on the “C” chord and get used to playing the melody note only after you have fingered the chord first. Then add a new chord. After you are comfortable with the “C” chord, try an “F” chord and then a “D7” and then an “A7” and so on. Keep adding in a new chord as you accomplish Chord Melody with the previous ones.

When you can't find the right position for the chord and get the melody right, try spelling out the chord first and then get the melody note. Look for the alternative way to get as much of the chord as possible with the melody, even if you have to drop the melody note off the string you are used to playing it on. Try the note on the next string down but don't drop it an octave use the same note but in the higher position on the lower string. Then use the chord from the next position up the neck. This will sometimes solve a problem for you.

Always play the chord first and then add in the melody note. If you do it this way, the harmony will be easier to get.

The best way to learn to do this is to constantly work on it. Use songs you already know or the music from the bands book It really is not that difficult to do and it is a lot of fun. After you have worked out your first song in Chord Melody, I guarantee that you will have a feeling of accomplishment the likes of which you have never felt before!

Good Luck and keep at it!

Steve Caddick

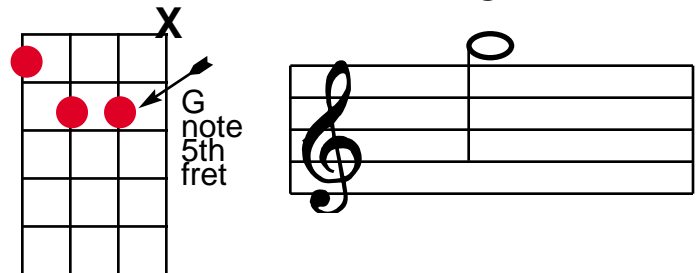
If you have questions, Contact me.

Steve Caddick

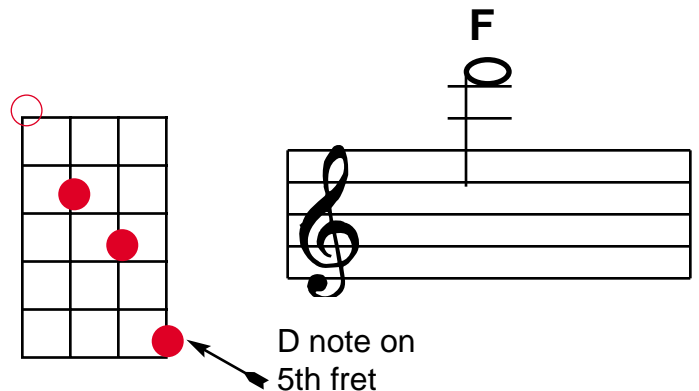
banjopa1@yahoo.com

Here are a few examples to help get you started.

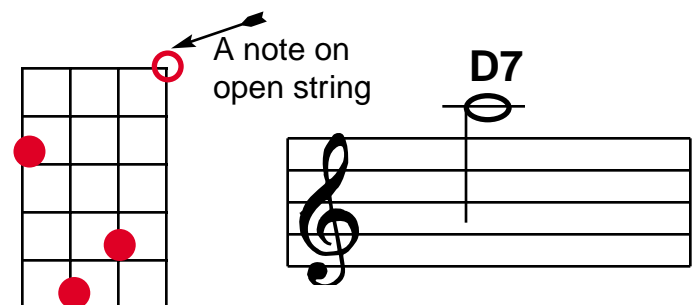
Don't play X string



Example: “G” melody with a “C” chord.
This is how it looks in music and how it is played on the tenor banjo.



Example: “D” melody with an “F” chord.
This is how it looks in music and how it is played on the tenor banjo.



Example: “A” melody with a “D7” chord.
This is how it looks in music and how it is played on the tenor banjo.