



Jazz Mandology: Chord Melody

Scratching the Surface of Chord Melody Playing on the Mandolin

by Ted Eschliman

Introduction

The wonderfully expressive potential of **Chord Melody** playing on the mandolin-seems like a whole other universe to many players, but what we want to do this issue is introduce a way to get on the path without completely loading the bus. Sure, a heaping handful of chord theory will take you much farther on the journey, but you don't need it to get started. Perhaps the music theory lessons will come later for you, but for now, let's just try some simple tricks to get your fingers, ears, and brain thinking...

it's possible!

Chord + Melody = Chord Melody...

Mandolinists seem to be genuinely intimidated by the whole concept of the **Chord Melody** style playing. It's a bit ironic in that most can do **chords**, most can do **melody**, but what's missing is that mental bridge between the two. We want to try to remove the intimidation factor and introduce some very simple principles of chord economics (okay, that's music theory, but just a little), voicing, and uncover a bit about the tactile mechanics of combining the two efficiently.

If you're unfamiliar with the concept, it won't do you much good to read any farther, so first listen to some of the great **Chord Melody** playing of today's current artists such as [Don Stiernberg](#), his mentor, Jethro Burns, [Will Patton](#), and [Paul Glasse](#). Certainly, these gentlemen play well in ensemble settings, but listen closely and you'll find much of their improvisation could stand alone, completely devoid of any harmonic-defining accompaniment. They successfully communicate the vertical background (chord progression) through the blending of melody, harmonized melody, and intermittent chording. Obviously, this effectively transitions well into solo performance, but improvisation itself can be vastly richer with Chord Melody even in a band context.

Line 'em up...

First let's break down some inhibition by combining what you already know (chord and line) into a simple exercise.

Melody only: Dm7 G7 C

Notice the above lines have chords designated, but you aren't actually playing the chords, just a simple line. Even if you didn't see the chord symbols, you could still probably infer them if you closed your eyes and listened while playing. (They pretty well spell out the inherent harmonic structure.)

Let Don "comp" you one.

We are going to introduce some comping chords from the "library" of none other than the great Chicago jazz master himself, **Don Stiernberg**. One of Mandodom's foremost musicians, Don is out there in the streets proving that "Jazz Mandolin" isn't an oxymoronic term, like "Defending Champion Cubs." In true jazz musician form we are going to steal these from him and turn them into our own signature voicings. (*Solomon said it himself, "nothing new under the sun..."*) These are great for their small, simple movement. Don't let the **C 6/9** stump you, the added extensions are pretty inert, but add a nice harmonic flavor, a little Stiernberg charm:

Chord only: Dm7 G7 C⁶/₉

A little strategy

This is the method we want to introduce to get you *thinking* about chord melody stylings. You don't necessarily have to play a whole chord for every note, one way is to alternate between **linear** and **vertical**. The example below demonstrates this by alternating the line we used with the first example, integrating the chords from the second.

Chord + Melody Measure

Notice we suggest using the 7th fret **D** and **A** instead of the open string. Not that the open string won't work, but if you start using closed position fingerings (and your pinky) you add the benefit of movability or transposability. Want to play this very basic '**ii V7 I**' in the key of **Eb**? Simply move everything up a fret. Want to play it up a fifth in the key of **G**, move it up a string. Heck, run wild and move a fret and a string and even play in the key of **Gb**. Really impress your Bluegrass/Folk friends, and look Ma, no capo!

Also a word about **3-note** chords: you probably learned all your very first chords on all four courses, and it may be wired into your playing to always use four notes. This isn't necessary as you can communicate the harmonic guts of **3rd**, **7th**, and **tonic** (or juicy chord extension) with this kind of voicing. It also prevents the "limiting" forces of 4 note voices as you move around the fingerboard. (Even two notes played at the same time can be considered a chord!)

A good clue to developing your own **chord melody** vocabulary is to be looking for notes that are in common, leaving your fingers hovering over them in position and ready to play. As you conceptualize the chords, especially the **chord function** (*dominant, dominant preparation, tonic*), you will begin to find yourself adapting passages or licks into other keys.

Double or nothing

Next we want to speed up the transition. Instead of alternating melody one measure, chord the next, let's double it up by moving between chord and melody in half measures. Again a good hint is to try to anticipate upcoming fingerings, and have your digits "at the ready." Keep them close to the frets so you don't waste motion.

Chord + Melody Half Measure

The first system shows a Dm7 chord (ii7) and a G7 chord (V7). The second system shows a C chord (I). Fingerings are indicated with numbers 1-5 on the strings.

Chord tricks

Here's a quick trick while improvising. If you ever get lost in your melody, you can always throw the chord in there somewhere. What you might lack in smooth voice leading, you can cover with harmonic "intent." It will also serve as a harmonic reference for the rest of the ensemble, and if you don't do it too much, nobody will ever know the difference. Who says your improvisation need *only* be melody?

Lighten it up

Next, let's grab some of the chord notes on the page and plant them into your melody. Again, you don't **always** have to chord, and it frees you up so you may more or less tastefully "outline" the harmony by grabbing strategic notes from a chord you already know:

The first system shows a Dm7 chord (ii) and a G7 chord (V7). Red arrows point to specific notes in the melody, labeled "Borrowing the F". The second system shows a C⁹ chord (I). A red arrow points to a specific note in the melody, labeled "Borrowing the E".

This is a fairly simple trick. Try doing the same with members of the chord that aren't voice, like the G in the G7 on the 3rd measure.

It doesn't have to be rocket science. Sure, there is a much bigger world of cerebral chord theory out there, but don't let this scare you right now. Take what you already know, the ability to create *lines*, and combine this with your already established chord library, and you'll be amazed that you actually start developing some new chord fingerings and logical voicing out of these efforts.

It's a bit ironic in that most can do **chords**, most can do **melody**, but what's missing is that mental bridge between the two.

If you are interested in deeper theory, visit the JazzMando.com website in the "Chord Economics" page: http://jazzmando.com/mandolin_chord_economics.shtml. Use **three-note** chords; you'll even find that as in the above example, you can do **two-note** chords and still have enough of an outline to aurally define the chord.

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