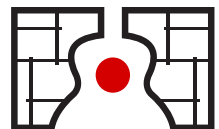


Jazz Guitar Chord Melody Basics

by Greg O'Rourke
fretdojo.com



About The Author

Award winning Australian guitarist Greg O'Rourke received his Bachelor Of Music Honours degree in 2006, and was a scholarship holder at the Australian National University School Of Music. Greg's main speciality is in fingerstyle jazz guitar, which he teaches about on his website www.FretDojo.com.

Greg's versatile ability on the guitar is credit to several teachers he has studied with over the years, including Tim Kain, one of Australia's leading classical guitar performers and teachers, as well as Mike Price and the late Don Andrews, well known performers and teachers in the Australian jazz guitar scene. Greg is currently studying advanced jazz improvisation and arranging with Canadian jazz guitarist Matt Warnock.



Greg has given prizewinning performances at the Australian National University Chamber Music Competition, and was awarded 1st prize in the Chamber Music division of the 2004 Australian International Guitar Competition. Greg currently enjoys a busy career, comprising of teaching online and offline, performing and collaborating with other Australian artists.

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Table of Contents

Preface	3
So what is Chord Melody Guitar anyway?	4
Step 1: Pick a suitable tune and learn it inside and out	6
Step 2: Transpose to an appropriate key if necessary	10
Step 3: Learn the melody on the top 2 strings	14
Step 4: Choose chord voicings	17
Arranging for Jazz Guitar Solo	36
Step 5: Practise and tweak your arrangement	38
Further Resources	41

Preface

In this eBook you are going to get a step-by-step breakdown on how to get started playing **chord melody style on jazz guitar** – in both a solo jazz guitar context, as well as in a band.

This is a huge topic of course, and just one short eBook couldn't possibly cover all the techniques and concepts of chord melody guitar. So, in the following pages you will learn the core essentials you need to quickly get you up and running playing jazz guitar, chord melody style. Let's get started!

With best wishes,

Greg O'Rourke

www.fretdojo.com

So what is Chord Melody Guitar anyway?

Generally, chord melody guitar refers to playing jazz guitar with single line melodies or solos and combining or accompanying with chords. This is opposed to just single line soloing or melody playing, or on the flipside only comping in a band with chords. You actually **combine the two at the same time**, on one guitar.

Getting into the nitty gritty, the term 'chord melody' can actually refer to **two similar, but nonetheless distinct styles** of jazz guitar playing.

On one hand, chord melody can refer to playing in a band setting, e.g a jazz trio of guitar, bass and drums.

In this setting, you need to take care in what chord voicings you apply to the melody and your solos. If you play too many low notes on the 5th and 6th strings it can interfere with the bass player.

On the other hand, chord melody guitar playing can also refer to playing jazz tunes arranged or improvised on solo guitar. This is kind of like playing as a one man band: soloist, comping and bass all in one.

To avoid confusion, let's refer to the setting in a trio or other lineup as a **band chord melody**, and playing chord melody on your own as **jazz guitar solo chord melody**.

Now, let's work through the 5 steps for an awesome chord melody guitar arrangement. As it is a bit easier on the left hand, let's start with a **band chord melody**. Then, I'm going to show you how to adapt this version just a little to make an effective **jazz guitar solo chord melody**.

Step 1: Pick a suitable tune and learn it inside and out

Although you can turn nearly any tune as a chord melody guitar arrangement, it is helpful to find a chart with a melody that isn't too fast moving. Bebop tunes in straight eighth notes will be difficult (though not impossible) to arrange. For beginners, ballads or swing/broadway standards should do the trick.

Here is a list of tunes that work well as chord melody guitar arrangements for solo jazz guitar as well as in a band:

- All the Things You Are
- On Green Dolphin Street
- Have You Met Miss Jones
- Alone Together
- Autumn Leaves
- Don't Get Around Much Anymore
- Fly Me To the Moon
- Georgia on My Mind
- Moon River
- My Funny Valentine
- Night and Day

Even non-jazz tunes can work well by substituting standard chords for jazzier alternatives – e.g. [check out this post by Matt Warnock](#) on chord melody guitar arrangements of well known Christmas tunes.

For this post, I'll be using a jazz tune called *Rochelle* I wrote recently for my darling wife (awwww). Over the page is the lead sheet to use as a starting point:

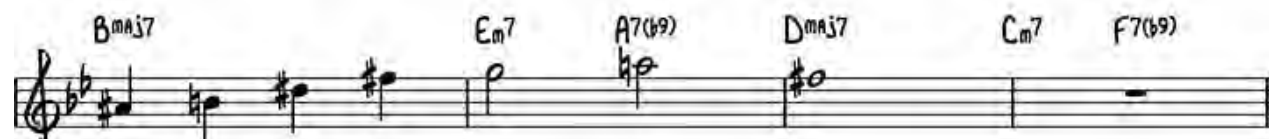
ROCHELLE

GREG O'ROURKE

A



B



C



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Now that we have found a suitable tune, it's time to learn it just like you would [learn any other jazz standard](#):

- Learn the melody both on your guitar and singing
- Try comping over the changes
- Improvise over the changes
- Memorize the melody and the chords

Also, listen to recordings and watch youtube videos of others playing the tune. This is a great way to get an ideas for your own arrangement.

Step 2: Transpose to an appropriate key if necessary

Changing the key may be necessary to suit the setting you are playing the arrangement in (i.e. as a solo or in a band), and also can give the arrangement a particular flavour. Some keys work better than others and it's helpful to consider open strings in the chord voicings if possible as using them can give some great effects.

As I was playing around with this tune in the original key of Bb Major, I noticed that the melody is getting a little bit low in places:

The image shows three staves of musical notation in Bb Major, illustrating a melody that becomes low in certain places. A red box labeled "a little too low" points to specific notes in the second and third staves.

Staff B: Chords: Ebmaj7, Ebm7, Ab7, Dbmaj7, C#m7, F#7(b9). The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes.

Staff B (repeated): Chords: Bmaj7, Em7, A7(b9), Dmaj7, Cm7, F7(b9). The first two notes of the Bmaj7 chord are circled in red.

Staff C: Chords: Bbmaj7, D7(b9), Gm7, Eo7. The last two notes of the Gm7 chord are circled in red.

This causes issues for a chord melody arrangement on guitar, as you may be unable to fit good sounding chord voicings underneath the melody. Voicings that low could start to sound muddy and will get in the way of the band's bass player.

A way to solve this might be to take the melody up an octave, however in this case the tune will be too high on the guitar neck for it to sound good:

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, key of B-flat major. The first staff contains a melody line with notes on the staff. Above the staff are chord symbols: Bbmaj7, D7(b9), and E07. A red box highlights a note on the staff, with a red arrow pointing to it and the text "Way too high!". The second staff shows a chord progression: Dm7, G7(b9), Cm7, F7, Bbmaj7, Cm7, F7(b9). A red box highlights the Cm7 and F7 chords, and a red arrow points from the "Way too high!" label to the Cm7 chord.

After transposing the lead sheet to F Major, it seems to sit in a much more suitable range for a chord melody guitar arrangement, so let's work on the tune in this key:

ROCHELLE

GREG O'ROURKE

A

Fmaj7 A7(b9) Dm7 Bb7

Am7 D7(b9) Gm7 C7 Fmaj7 Gm7 C7(b9)

2. Gm7 C7 Cm7 F7

B

Bbmaj7 Bbm7 Eb7 Abmaj7 Abm7 Db7(b9)

Gbmaj7 Bm7 E7(b9) Amaj7 Gm7 C7(b9)

C

Fmaj7 A7(b9) Dm7 Bb7

Am7 D7(b9) Gm7 C7(b9) Fmaj7 (Gm7 C7)

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Sometimes transposing the tune can also give the arrangement a **distinct sound or colour**, so even if a tune already seems to sit well on the guitar it is still worthwhile playing around and experimenting with different keys.

Step 3: Learn the melody on the Top Two Strings

Now that you have chosen the key for your arrangement, the next step is to **learn the melody on the top 2 strings**. This will give you an idea of what chord voicings to apply to the melody that we'll cover in the next step.

On the following page is an example of how you could play Rochelle on mainly the top 2 strings. Note that it's ok to occasionally go to the 3rd string for a passing melody note however make sure you don't do this too often, as it will start to become difficult to find workable chord voicings.

ROCHELLE

GREG O'ROURKE

A

4/4

Fmaj7 A7(b9) Dm7 Bø7

8 6 6 | 8 5 | 8 6 5 | 5 3 3 | 5 6 | 8

5

Am7 D7(b9) 1. Gm7 C7 Fmaj7 Gm7 C7(b9)

12 | 11 | 10 13 11 10 | 8 8

9

2. Gm7 C7 Cm7 F7

10 8 6 | 10 | 10 8 | 13

B

12

Bbmaj7 Bbm7 Eb7 Abmaj7 Abm7 Db7(b9)

10 8 | 11 10 6 8 9 | 9 | 8 6 9 8 8 | 6 7 | 7

16

Gbmaj7 Bm7 E7(b9) Amaj7 Gm7 C7(b9)

6 7 11 9 | 10 12 | 9

C

20 F^{maj7} $A7(b9)$ $Dm7$ B^o7

T
A
B

24 A^m7 $D7(b9)$ G^m7 $C7(b9)$ F^{maj7} (G^m7 $C7$)

T
A
B

Step 4: Choose chord voicings

You have come to the most important step in the process – applying chord voicings to the melody line that we have practiced on the top 2 strings, to create your very own chord melody guitar arrangement.

You may have been inspired by the genius of Joe Pass or Wes Montgomery and the creative and virtuosic twists and turns of their chord melody arrangements, but let's not get carried away here.

For now, **keep it simple!**

This step is a straightforward process of **applying a chord to the first melody note of each bar and/or each chord change** in the lead sheet.

Let's play the melody again now on the top 2 strings, but try to image where you would like the chords placed. Generally, placing them on the start of each bar or at chord change usually works well. Mark out these points on your lead sheet:

The image shows two systems of handwritten musical notation for guitar. The first system is in 4/4 time and features a melody with four chords highlighted in red boxes: Fmaj7, A7(b9), Dm7, and Bb7. The second system starts at measure 5 and features five chords highlighted in red boxes: Am7, D7(b9), Gm7, C7, and Fmaj7, followed by Gm7 and C7(b9). The notation includes a treble clef, a 4/4 time signature, and a guitar tablature below the staff.

How do you know which chord voicing to use? Well, Here is the simple trick for easy chord melody arranging:

Choose chord voicings that have the same interval of the melody note as the highest note in the chord shape,

OR

a voicing that can be slightly adapted to have the melody note as the highest note and still sound good.

That sounds great and makes sense, you might be thinking, but do we *know* the relevant chord shapes. Do we know what variations of the chord to use? How do we *remember* all the different shapes for the voicings?

The answer is to **build your own chord dictionary.**

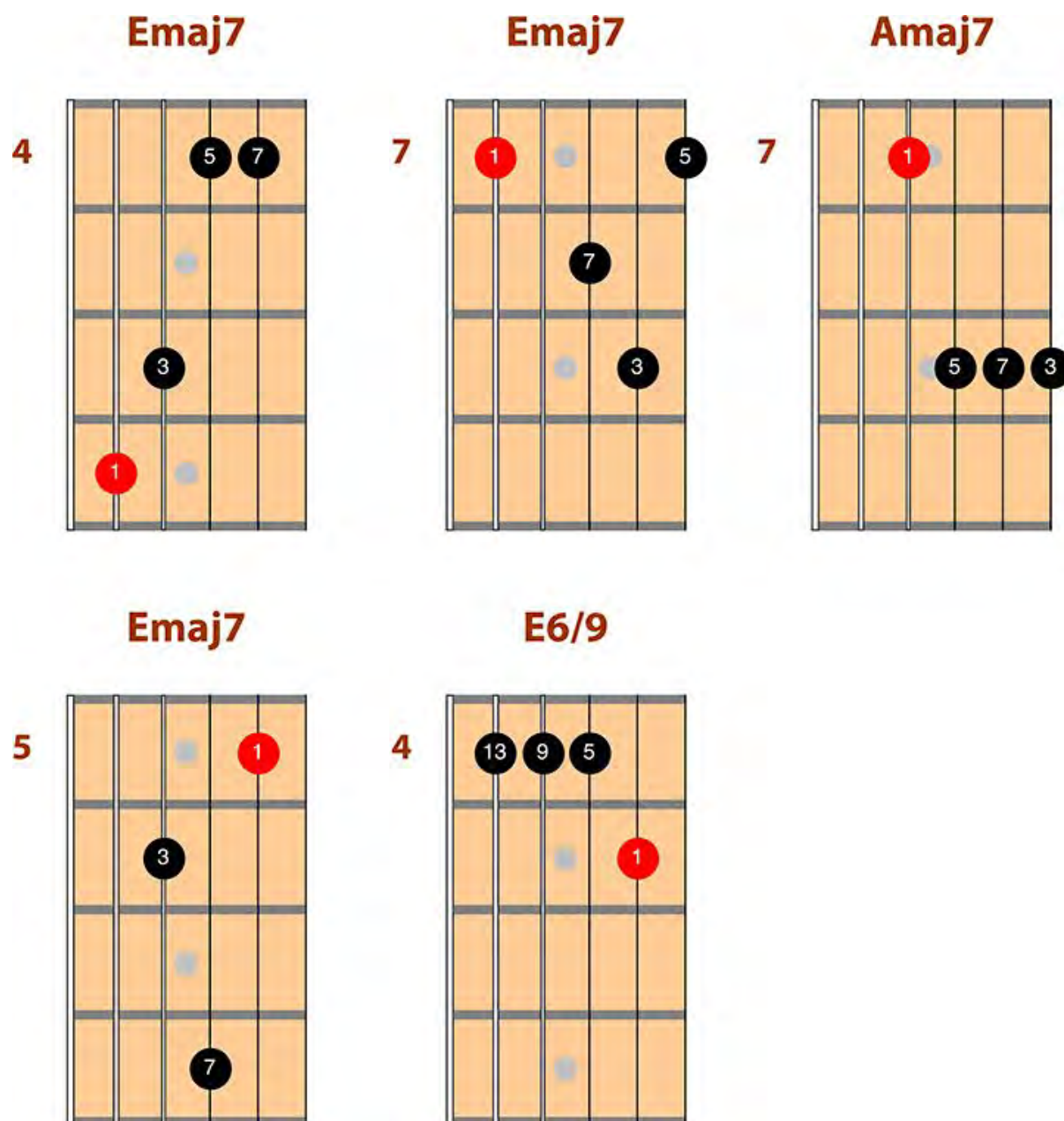
Creating a chord dictionary

A jazz chord melody guitar player is a **collector of chords**. Whenever you learn an existing chord melody arrangement, or transcribe a chord melody or chord solo, add any voicings you find in a dictionary grouped in main chord types. I group my dictionary according to major, minor, dominant, altered dominant, half-diminished (i.e. minor 7b5), and diminished.

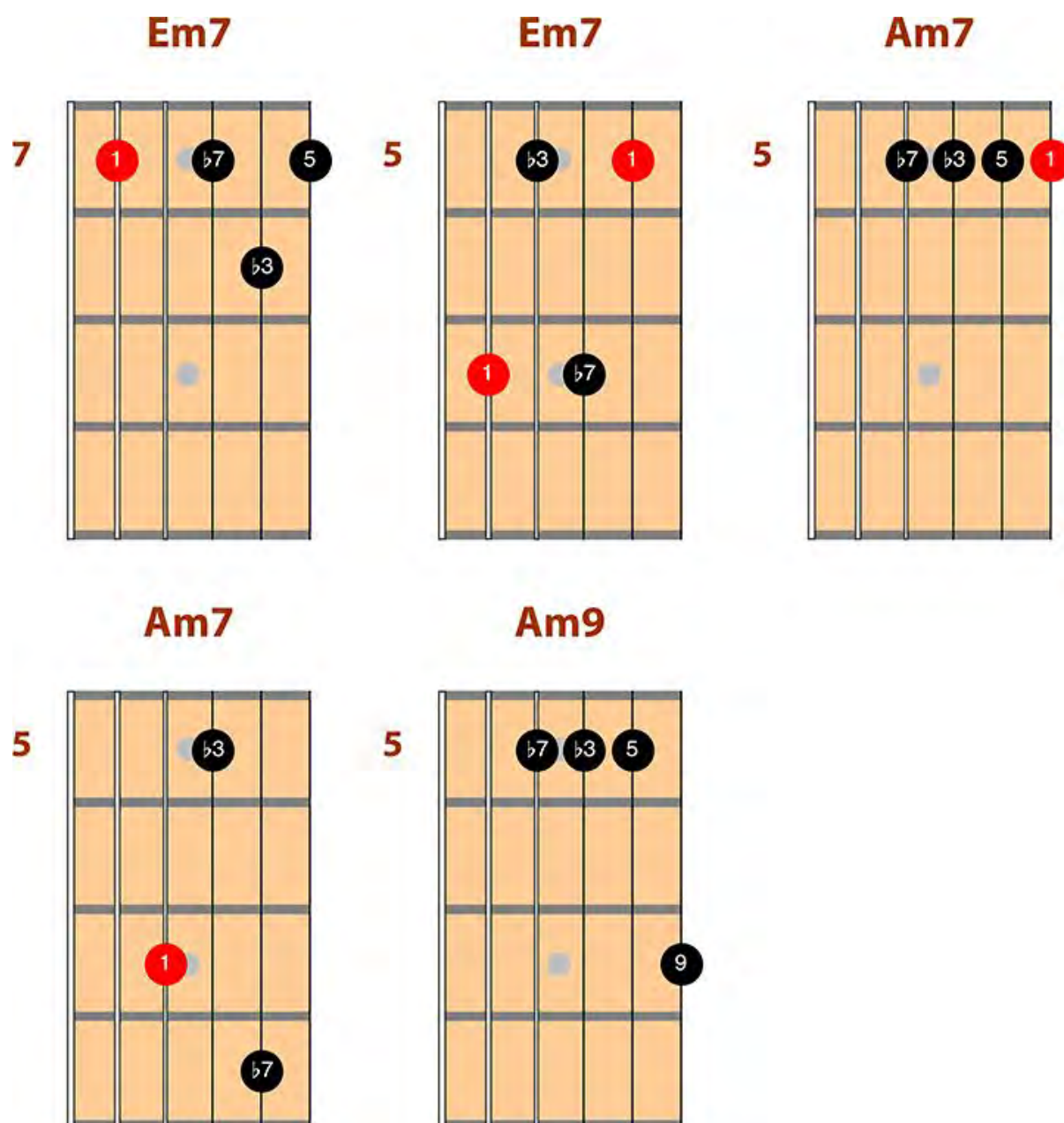
If you are new to jazz chord theory or unsure how to construct chords, [check out this great guide from Jazz Guitar Online](#) (go to the 'Jazz Guitar Chord Theory' heading).

Let's start your chord dictionary with some of my favourite voicings I use for chord melody arranging. Here is a sample of chords from my own dictionary:

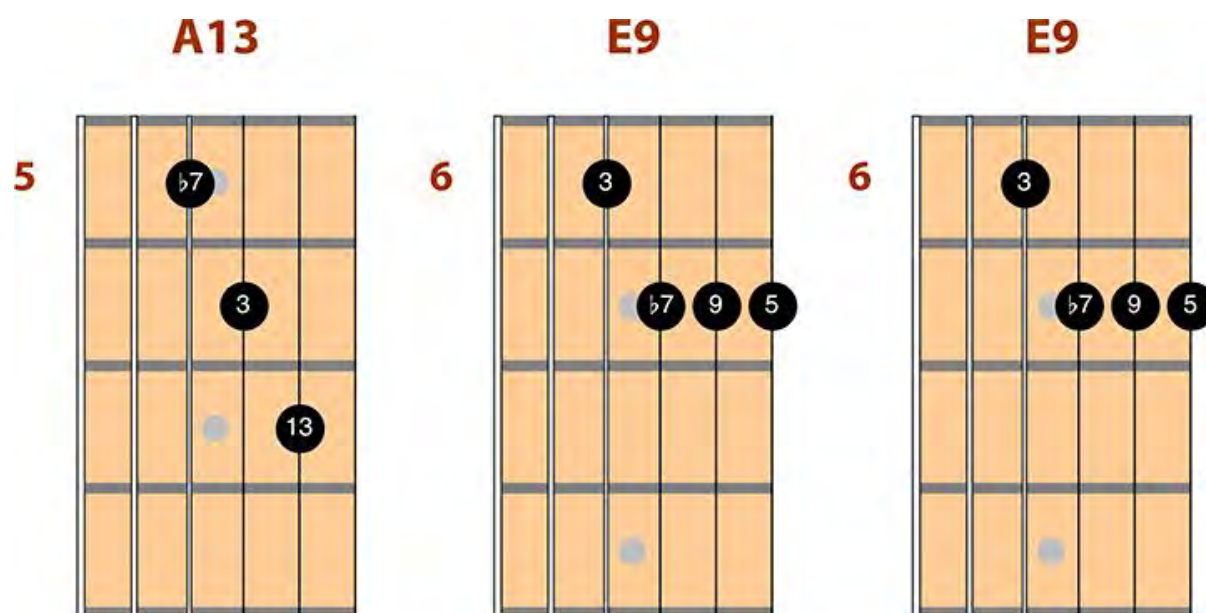
Major – e.g. Amaj7



Minor – e.g. Amin7



Dominant – e.g. A7



Altered Dominant – eg A7b9

<p>E7#9</p>	<p>A7(b9)</p>	<p>Bdim7 = E7b9/B</p>
<p>A7(b13b9)</p>	<p>A7(b13#9)</p>	<p>E11b9</p>
<p>E13b9</p>		

Here's a few important rules to keep in mind:

- In most cases, you can substitute any chord for another as long as they belong to the same chord type. Eg, if you see Am7 on a lead sheet, you could play an Am7, Am6, Am9, Am11 and it would still sound fine.
- Be careful with dominants and altered dominants – an altered dominant includes altered tensions (eg #9, b13, b9, etc), whilst a dominant excludes any altered tensions and has only natural tensions (eg 9, 13, 11, etc).
- When you see an altered dominant chord on a lead sheet (eg. A7b9) you should only play an altered dominant chord type.
- However – this is where it gets a bit confusing – when you see a dominant chord (e.g. A7) on a lead sheet, often you can play either a dominant chord type OR an altered dominant chord type, depending on the situation.

You might ask: How many chord voicings do you need to know to make a chord melody guitar arrangement?

A lot of people get stuck at this point, for example, here is a recent comment from one of my email subscribers:

“I’m trying to learn and remember all the chord variations for use in chord melodies. In rock you had 6 to 8 chords in a 12 bar set. Now in jazz there are 30 to 40. I’m freaking out trying to remember them all!”

Don’t fret! The truth is you don’t need to know every possible chord shape to make a great sounding chord melody. As we go through the process below, you’ll see why.

How to apply the chord shapes on the melody

Note that the chords I've provided above are mainly on string sets 4 3 2 1 and 5 4 3 2 – hence why we only wanted to keep the melody on the top two strings as the **melody note will now become the top note of each chord**. The numbers on the dots indicate what interval of the chord each note is.

Now that we have our chord shapes, let's look at the first 2 bars and see how we could harmonize the melody with the chords.

We'll start by analysing the melody, relating each melody note to the interval of the chord written above it on the lead sheet:

The image shows a musical staff in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat (Bb). The melody consists of the following notes: F4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter). Above the staff, two chord shapes are indicated: Fmaj7 (under the first two notes) and A7(b9) (under the last four notes). Blue numbers are placed above the notes to indicate their interval from the root of the chord: 5 (above F), 1 (above G), 1 (above A), 9 (above Bb), 3 (above C), #9 (above Bb), b9 (above A), and 1 (above G).

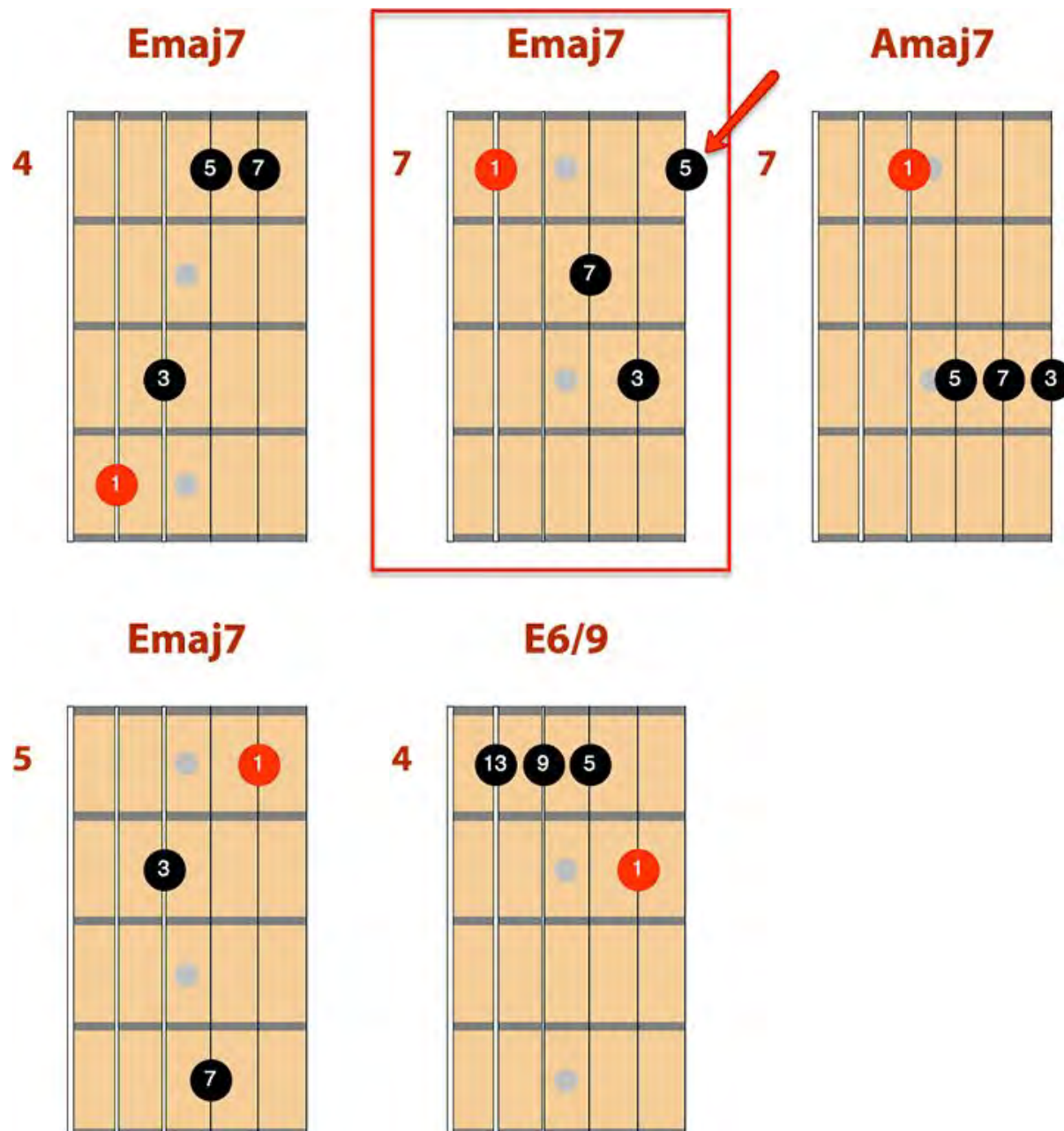
(By the way, if you are lost at this point and are unsure what the numbers I've used mean, check out this [great series of articles on chords and](#)

[intervals](#) – especially [lesson two](#) which explains what numbers like ‘9’ mean)

The first note of the melody is a C, which is a 5th of the chord Fmaj7. As we covered above, the Maj7 chord type belongs to the **Major** chord family, so...

We need to find a **major** chord shape with a **5th as the highest note in the chord**.

If we look at our chord dictionary, you’ll see that this chord shape has a 5th interval as the highest note:



Perfect! Let's use that chord, but remember to move the shape to the 8th fret, to make it an Fmaj7 (instead of Emaj7 like what's in the diagram):

In the second bar, we have an A7b9 written on the lead sheet. This chord belongs to the **altered dominant** chord type, and it looks like the interval is a #9 on top.

Here we go, this pattern has a #9 as the highest interval, so let's use that one:

E7#9 **A7(b9)** **Bdim7 = E7b9/B**

A7(b13b9) **A7(b13#9)** **E11b9**

E13b9

The image displays a musical score for guitar in 4/4 time. The top staff is in treble clef. The first measure features an Fmaj7 chord with a fretboard diagram and a '5' above the first string. The second measure contains a melodic line with fingerings '1 1', '9 3', and '9 1'. The third measure shows an A7(b9) chord with a fretboard diagram and a '5' above the first string, highlighted with a red box and a red arrow. The bottom staff shows fretboard diagrams for the T, A, and B strings with fingerings: T (8, 10, 9), A (6, 6, 8, 5), and B (8, 6, 5).

If we add chords to the whole arrangement in this way, using the chord shapes from my dictionary, we'll get something like this (*note that some of the chord shapes have been slightly adapted or have had notes omitted so that it has the melody note as the top note*):

ROCHELLE

GREG O'ROURKE

A

Fmaj7 Fmaj7 A7(^b13) A7(^b9) Dm7 Dm7 B07

5

1. Am7 D7(^b13) Gm7 C13 Fmaj7 Gm7 C7(^b9)

2. Gm7 C13 Cm7 F9

B

Bbmaj7 Bbm7 Eb7 Abmaj7 Abm7 Db7(^b9)

16

G♭maj7 (6fr) Bm7 (7fr) E11(b9) (9fr) Amaj7 (7fr) Gm7 C7(b9)

TAB: 6 7 11 9 | 10 12 | 10 9 | 3 2

20

Fmaj7 (8fr) Fmaj7 (6fr) A7(b13) (5fr) A7(b9) (2fr) Dm7 (5fr) Dm7 (3fr) B♭7 (6fr)

TAB: 8 10 6 6 | 8 5 | 6 | 3 | 5 6 | 8 6 7

24

Am7 (12fr) D7(b13) (10fr) Gm7 (10fr) C13 (8fr) F♯9 (5fr) (Gm7 C7)

TAB: 12 11 | 10 13 11 10 | 8 6 |

Don't be fooled by how complicated the music notation looks. If you look at the TAB and the chord charts, it's easy to see all I've done is added chord voicings from our chord dictionary to the melody line.

As you can see, **it's not necessary** to learn very many chord shapes to make a great sounding chord melody arrangement.

Several of the voicings have simply been slid up or down to different places on the fretboard:

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system, labeled 'A', shows a melody line in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat. Chord voicings are indicated above the staff: Fmaj7 (8 fret), Fmaj7 (6 fret), A7(b13) (5 fret), A7(b9) (2 fret), Dm7 (5 fret), Dm7 (3 fret), and Bb7 (6 fret). The guitar tablature below shows fret numbers for each chord. A red box highlights the Dm7 chord shape at the 5th fret, and a red arrow points to it with the text 'All the same shape!'. The second system shows a continuation of the melody starting at the 5th fret. Chord voicings include Am7 (12 fret), D7(b13) (10 fret), Gm7 (10 fret), C13 (8 fret), Fmaj7 (8 fret), Gm7, and C7(b9). The tablature shows fret numbers for these chords, with a red box highlighting the Gm7 chord shape at the 10th fret, which is the same shape as the Dm7 chord in the first system.

If you are just getting started with chord melody, I would recommend that you start with just **stock standard chord voicings**. Don't try to be too clever with the harmony just yet.

Once you learn the arrangement with standard voicings you can then break out of that and do more interesting chord forms and substitutions.

Having said that though, the standard voicings can still sound great – Joe Pass was a master of using standard voicings in very creative ways. To quote martial artist Bruce Lee:

“I fear not the man who has practiced 10,000 kicks once, but I fear the man who has practiced one kick 10,000 times.” – Bruce Lee

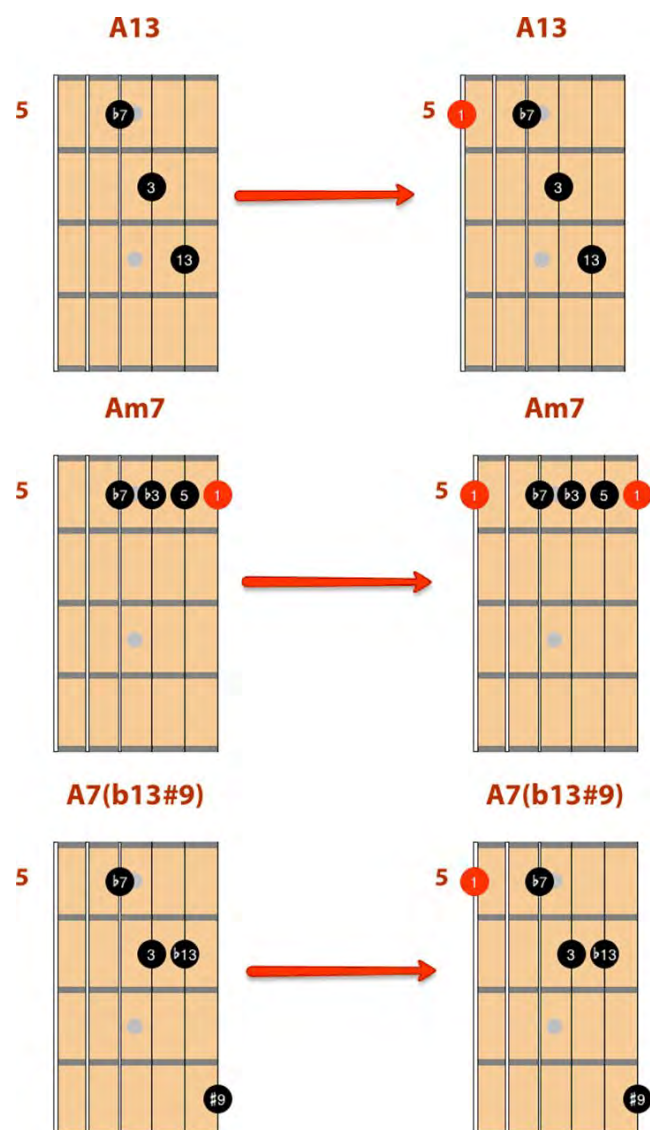
Any new chord voicings you learn from transcriptions or other arrangements, remember to take the time to record them in your own chord dictionary so you won't forget them.

Arranging for Jazz Guitar Solo

In a jazz guitar solo setting we no longer have the band behind us. We'll need to work a little more on the accompaniment as it sounds a bit too sparse for a solo version.

One way we can do this is by using voicings that **includes more strings**.

Let's try extending some of our chord voicings by adding lower notes:



If you now use ‘thicker’ versions of the chords, and put in a bit of filler comping into the empty bars, you’ll now have a solo guitar version!

The image displays two systems of guitar sheet music. The first system, labeled 'A', is in 4/4 time and features a treble clef. It includes a bass staff with fret numbers. The chords are: Fmaj7, Fmaj7, A7(b13 #9), Dm7, Dm7, and Bb7. The second system, starting at measure 5, includes chords: Am9, D7(b13), Gm7, C13, Fmaj7, Gm7, and C7(#9). Both systems include guitar-specific notation such as triplets and fingerings.

You could also do this process in **reverse**. If you are more familiar with the thicker voicings, try cutting out 1 or two notes in the bottom of the chord to make the inversions thinner for a band setting – so you don’t get in the way of that pesky bass player...

Step 5: Practise and tweak your arrangement

Taking the time to practise your arrangement will internalise the music in your mind and body, and serves as a good foundation for spontaneously varying your arrangement in a performance.

As you practise, look at ways you can tweak your arrangement to make it easier to play. This is an important step as your arrangement can sound clunky if you are trying to do too much with chords. Remember – less is more.

Through small changes to voicings, omitting unnecessary notes or even complete voicings, you can take a nearly unplayable chord melody guitar arrangement to one that flows and sings really well.

You should arrange for your own technical limitations in mind. If something is easier to play, it will be easier for the audience to listen to as well. You want a chord **melody**, not a chord **malady**!

Here are some ways that you can make a chord melody easier on your hands:

- **Try different voicings** – Lenny Breau's chord melodies sound thick and full in the accompaniment, but if you listen closely he uses

mostly only a 3rd and a 7th out of each chord. Eliminate unessential notes from the chord, sometimes not only does this make it easier but can also sound much more effective, especially in a band setting.

- **Omit difficult notes** – even if they are the ‘essential’ notes.

Sometimes even if you drop a 3rd or 7th out of a chord, if it’s in a fast moving chord progression the audience will understand the intent of the chord

- **Avoid over harmonizing the melody**, unless you are going for a chord scale type effect in a phrase. Sometimes just some bass notes under the melody sounds effective. Try to play just the melody occasionally as it not only is easier but also provides contrast.

You're all done! Now share your chord melody arrangement with the world...

Now that you have your arrangement under your fingers, you need some way to perform it!

I invite you to [join my Facebook group](#) and post a video of your arrangement, and get some tips and feedback from myself as well as other community members.

[Request to join the Facebook group by clicking here>>](#)

Further Resources

Obviously if I was include every aspect of chord melody playing in this post it would go for many more pages than this, however for more resources check out these great websites and books:

- [Matt Warnock's Complete Guide to Chord Melody](#) – a great article that goes into more advanced chord melody arranging techniques.
- [Chord Chemistry](#) – a fantastic go-to resource on chord melody guitar playing by the late great guitarist Ted Greene
- Speaking of Ted Greene, [check out this tribute site](#) featuring many chord many arrangements you can download in PDF format.

Chord melody guitar playing is an excellent way to play jazz on guitar, either in a jazz guitar solo context or in a band, and can open up a whole world of possibilities for you as a guitarist.

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To book a lesson send Greg an email at greg@fretdojo.com and mention the discount code 'DOJOJAZZ' in the subject line.

Thanks For Reading!

Thanks for reading! I'll be posting more articles and lessons on this topic in the future on my website at www.fretdojo.com, however for now this should be enough to get your teeth stuck into.

If you haven't already, request to join the [Fret Dojo Facebook Group here](#) or [follow me on Twitter](#) and say hello, I would love to hear from you. I'll also let you know when my latest posts and videos come out so keep your eye out for those.

I'll see you in the Dojo!

Greg :-)