

**Song writing techniques**  
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**MELODY**

1. **Notes in melody**

Be conscious of the notes you're using within your melodic ideas. By limiting the amount of repeated notes used, you will help to create a sense of continuation and flow. Covering a larger range of notes can also help to add depth and brilliance to your melody, like more colours in a painting. This alone won't make a great melody BUT it is something to consider.

You might notice in my music that I cover a lot of ground on the guitar, this is definitely a conscious decision in order to make my melodies cover a large range and hopefully gain more interest because of it. I will often repeat a melody but create a point of difference on the second repeat to help maintain interest and unexpectedness

- Try:**
- 1) Create a melody that uses no repeating notes
  - 2) Create a melody that covers a large range or area of the fretboard
  - 3) Create a melody and repeat it with a point of difference on the second repeat

2. **Stable and Unstable Notes**

Understand the effects of 'stable' and 'unstable' (Consonance and dissonance) notes in melody. Some notes are more fitting to land on, or complete a phrase with than others.

Stable notes in a Major key are notes like the Root, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> while unstable notes are notes like the 7<sup>th</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> 6<sup>th</sup> etc. You can use this knowledge to your advantage in your writing by controlling how you want the listener to feel. For example when transitioning into a new section that modulates in key, you might find a very unstable note to be a fitting transitional note that creates interest and alludes to the new key. Intervals created by these scale degrees will also have similar effects but you might find that the way an interval is phrased or played may also alter its effect. A dissonant interval can sound very pleasing and pretty if played in a different way (cluster chords can show this)

- Try:**
- 1) A conscious decision to land on an unstable note where a point of tension is required
  - 2) Where an unstable note has occurred, use a stable note to resolve the phrase or section
  - 3) Altering tone or technique to manipulate the effect of a tension based interval (Min 2<sup>nd</sup> / Maj 7<sup>th</sup>)

3. **Performance Techniques**

The way you play notes has a huge impact on its overall effect. There are many performance techniques and you should be aware of their effects on the sound of the notes you're playing.

For example, **Legato** playing is smooth and helps to contribute to 'flow' and 'forward momentum' and might be a fitting technique to use when playing a counter melody.

**Staccato** playing might suit a phrase that is prominent in the song and help draw focus to the idea. These two examples mentioned are the very basic ones, there are many different techniques and it is important to explore them and know their effects. One thing interesting to note is that even playing with Timbre can have a huge overall effect. You can hear the results of this directly by playing the same note on a different place on the guitar.

**Try:** 1) Explore techniques while playing a phrase of notes and listen to the difference in the expressive effect  
(Tapping/Sliding/Picking/Timbre/Vibrato/Bending/Harmonics/Accents...etc)

#### 4. Chromaticism

Chromatic notes are notes from outside of the key, they can give great contrast and help to generate 'outside' sounds to retain interest within a melody. I tend to use them very subtly for example, moving quickly through chromatic notes in preparation to landing on a Stable note, this can give a free falling effect and catch the ears as a point of interest.

**Try:** 1) Add a chromatic note into a phrase or solo

2) Add in a chromatic note before the first or last note of a phrase so as to land on a stable note

#### 5. Scalic and Intervallic playing

'Scalic' and 'Intervallic' playing is very useful to be aware of when creating melody. Both are great ways to construct melody. It is good to be aware of what you are using and to make a conscious effort to explore both ideas when creating.

Scalic playing can work well for fast and fluid runs, where intervallic playing gives emphasis to the phrasing and note variation. Scalic playing can lose interest easily when it sounds too much like you are playing scales forwards and backwards. It is easy to fall into this method of playing when you have been learning scales, I too am guilty of this. Intervallic playing includes arpeggios, rearranging scale note order and anything that is not forwards or backwards through scales. By utilising both methods within your melodies can help to keep the ideas fresh, interesting and contrasting.

**Try:** 1) Creating a melody that uses Scalic phrasing only

2) Creating a melody that uses intervallic phrasing only

3) Creating a melody that uses both Scalic and Intervallic phrasing

## 6. Dynamics in melody

Dynamics play an important role in stressing key notes and keeping interest in melodic playing. This is true especially in solo's. Dynamics help to build contrast and allow you the ability to hit a peak within a solo. **If every note is 'loud', then 'loud' no longer exists.** The emotional content can be elevated by making sure there is some sort of dynamic contrast within your melody.

- Try:**
- 1) Emphasising an important note by Picking or playing it louder using a specific technique
  - 2) Create a melody that has dynamics in it (loud and soft)
  - 3) Create a melody with a dynamic shape, building up or building down or both (in volume)

## 7. Space and note intensity

It can be easy to miss this point when constructing melodies and solo's, but I believe it to be a very important thing to be aware of. Allowing space within your playing is of huge benefit to your effectiveness of emotive expression.

You don't always have to be playing notes, resting is just as valid and can add more significance to notes played by way of contrast.

Sometimes when I hear a million notes flying around constantly, I no longer gain any emotive experience from the sound and begin to tune out.

It is a difficult thing to balance but it will benefit your ability to create great melodies by being aware.

In contrast to 'space' is 'Note Intensity' in which you give a melody or solo a peak point for the listener and a pay off of where the song has been building up too. LESS is MORE in my opinion, its better to pick specific parts of the song to use intense playing so as to give it impact when it comes in.

- Try:**
- 1) Adding a point of rest within a solo or phrase
  - 2) Changing the rhythm of the melody in order to allow space to occur
  - 3) Allow space to occur before a moment of intensity

# **HARMONY**

## 1. **Chords**

Chords that use a large range of notes within them can generate more flavour and interest to the listener in my opinion. It is extremely valuable to learn your chord types and know their harmonic effect. As a very basic example and one you will already know is that Generally 'Major' chords sound 'happy' and 'Minor' chords sound 'Sad'. All chords bring new flavours with them and you should begin to explore new chord types and their emotive effect. You will begin to become familiar with what chord types will suit certain progressions / riffs etc. There are endless possibilities for chord types that give new effects.

### **Try:**

- 1) Using chords that cover a large range of notes (melody can be created from using chord tones too)
- 2) Using chords without Major or Minor depicting notes to move through transitions, or to suit different musical ideas (riffs etc)
- 3) Try using different voicing's of the same chord type to generate a new perspective of the chord
- 4) Being concious of chord types and their emotive effect
- 5) Learn new chord types and explore them it may spark a point of interest for a new creative idea
- 6) Explore shapes on your fretboard to create a unique voicing or a new chord type, you can work out what the chord is by writing out the notes, assigning them with scale degree numbers.

## 2. **Diatonic and Non Diatonic**

Diatonic progressions are what you get when you use notes from the key to construct your chords. For example in the key of C, if you were to build chords from the notes of the key you will get:

C major – C E G  
D minor – D F A  
E minor – E G B  
F major – F A C  
G major – G B D  
A minor – A C E  
B diminished – B D F  
C major – C E G

This is a great basis for a song, as these chords work well together as they share the notes of a single key. Pop music is most often Diatonic, the more intricate styles of music tend to deviate away from Diatonic movement. (Metal, Jazz, Punk, Rock etc)

**Try:**

- 1) Deviate away from Diatonic movement, start by building a chord progression around 2 chords that are non diatonic to each other
- 2) Be concious of your chord progressions and where your chords are coming from, a great idea might be a simple manipulation of a progression to be non diatonic OR diatonic or something else.

### **3. Neutral chords**

Neutral Chords are chords that don't use notes that depict Major or Minor tonality. For example Power Chords (1-5-8) and Octaves. These chords are really effective way to use in order to help keep a smooth transition between Diatonic and Non Diatonic movement.

Sometimes these chords can be great in some circumstances in creating heavy riffs without the distraction or intrusion of too much harmonic content.

Using single notes also has this effect and may often be a good contrast and help to keep definition in your riffs.

### **4. Harmonic Movement**

Harmonic Movement (Chords progressions) is one area of music that I tend to keep simple. In my mind, there are 3 key elements of music **Rhythm ,Harmony and Melody**. I tend to focus more so on the other two elements in my writing specifically. I do this to draw focus to melody in my music.

An example of this is my song 'Mammatus' which when you break down the harmonic movement it is very simple and generic, but its the placement of the chords and the melodic content that generate the interest.

**Try:**

- 1) Create a section of music based around 1 or 2 chords only, put your focus into the melody and or rhythm
- 2) Do the same as above but with emphasis on a different two elements of music Rhythm and Harmony or Melody and Rhythm. Altering this idea is a great way to generate contrasting sections of music when create a song.

### **5. Extended Length Progressions**

By extending the length of a chord progression (or melody) you can create an unexpected section or phrase that can be interesting, it gives more substance to the riff and stops it from becoming stale too quickly. I do this by making my repeat's happen after 8 bars or even more. It can be as simple as changing the ending of the riff so that it is different.

- Try:**
- 1) Be concious of the length of your repeated sections. If its 4 bars, you can make it 8 bars by altering something on the second repeat.
  - 2) Creating an 8 bar loop that isn't just an altered 4 bar phrase back to back

## **6. Creating Melody with Chord tones**

A great way to construct melody is by using the notes within the chord. You can begin this by playing a chord shape and playing and manipulating the notes in the chord.

**Try:**

- 1) Using a chord shape that covers a large range of notes and creating a melody by playing around with the notes within the chord
- 2) Altering notes within a chord shape to create a melody or phrase

## **7. Static Chord progression**

By using one chord and focusing on the melodic and rhythmic elements, you can generate ideas for a section of music. This idea can be used as a way to bridge into a new section or create contrast from an existing one. This is also a good strategy to help generate ideas for Rhythm and melody in which you can elaborate on the harmonic movement once these ideas have been established.

**Try:**

- 1) Write a section of music using 1 chord, focus on creating interest in the Rhythm and Melodic content
- 2) Take the same section you have written (as above) and create harmonic movement or progression while retaining the same melodic and rhythmic structure

## **Rhythm**

Rhythm is a huge part of the puzzle in songwriting, the more familiar and confident you are with rhythmic elements and devices, the more power you have in songwriting. Sometimes the Rhythm is the key focus of the riff or section of music, for example; Meshuggah's 'Bleed' uses very little in the way of melodic and harmonic content, BUT the end result is an incredible piece of music.

### **1. Rhythm Basics**

In order to become confident to explore complex rhythmic ideas, you have to have a solid sense of pulse/time. Build your internal clock by playing with metronomes or programmed instruments. Further to this, you should aim to build your understanding of 16<sup>th</sup> notes and be confident to displace them around the pulse, you can practice this by accenting different 16<sup>th</sup> notes around a pulse. The ability to change between different even and odd notes, triplets and dotted notes all contribute to developing rhythmic complexity.

**Try:**

- 1) Build your ability to accent any 16<sup>th</sup> note over a 4 bar phrase
- 2) Create a phrase using syncopation where you combine 'On' and 'Off' beats
- 3) Accenting a beat that is a 16<sup>th</sup> note before or after a strong beat
- 4) Aim to build your 'internal clock' by spending time with a metronome

## 2. Chord Placement

An interesting idea when creating chord progressions is to place the chords in un-expected places within the bar. This can build some rhythmic complexity for a section of music. For example 'Mammatus' first section is a simple progression, but the addition of rhythmic displacement changes it up to generate some more interest.

- Try:**
- 1) Placing the chords of a progression on unexpected places of the bar
  - 2) Alter where chords fall against the beat within a progression

## 3. Time Signatures

Time signatures have a large impact of the feel of a song, you should aim to be familiar with the feels generated by using odd and even time signatures and how they effect a song overall. I personally enjoy 4/4 time as it gives a great foundation for me to focus on rhythmic interest.

- Try:**
- 1) Starting off your writing session using a different time signature
  - 2) Use a different time signature within a song

## 4. Extended Phrases

This is one thing I enjoy playing with, Wether its with the melodic phrasing finishing into the following bar of music, OR in things like drum fills and drum ideas. It is usually unexpected and a unique way to keep things fresh

## 5. Polyrhythms

This is what happens when 2 different pulses are formed at the same time. It can happen with 2 different instruments or with the same instrument. Using repeating dotted notes is a simple way to see this in action. Polyrhythms are very common in music and the most used ones are 2/3, 3/4. They can be used as a way to build a hypnotic and interesting ideas in your compositions

## 6. Triplets

Triplets are very useful in creating contrast in rhythmic ideas as they alter the pulse within the phrase. When using them in drum fills, it can give a push effect and help build momentum leading into a new section of music. Adding triplets to melodic phrases will add depth and interest and help keep a point of difference

- Try:**
- 1) Adding triplets to a melodic phrase, where a point of contrast might be needed
  - 2) Try using triplets in order to create a push effect, in the riff or rhythm section

## **MORE CONCEPTS**

### **Writing a section of music**

By manipulating and expanding on an idea (Rhythmically / Harmonically / Melodically) you can develop new sections or sections of music.

- Try:**
- 1) Take a pattern or phrase and alter its position on the fret board
  - 2) Take the rhythm of a section and use the same rhythm over a different progression or idea
  - 3) Take a section of music and alter the underlying Harmony to change the whole feel of the section
  - 4) Use deception, Set up a harmonic progression by alluding to it in the melody or bass and then do something different when you bring in the harmony

### **Layering**

This is something that plays an important part of my compositions. By adding a counter melody to my main riffs it helps to give forward momentum as well as fill out the section sonically. Layering is a very important part of the riff writing process, as riffs mostly sound empty without them.

The key to creating good layers to your riffs is making them simple melodically and rhythmically. Keep them as a way to accent the pulse of the music as this will help with 'flow' while your riff may dance around the pulse all you like...a steady layer that contains the pulse helps 'glue' everything together.

- Try:**
- 1) Create a 2 note counter melody that generates a steady pulse to layer under a riff or progression (keep it simple)

### **Retaining the pulse**

The ability to maintain the groove within a song can be attributed to the pulse of the song. The cymbals and guitar layers are usually what provide the pulse in my music. Keep those points of pulse going as this helps keep the general 'flow' in a song. Songs are always about capturing good flow, Irrespective of the complexity of the rhythms/melody/harmony. If it doesn't make you want to nod your head along, you have lost the 'flow' effect.

### **Using Contrast**

Want your heavy bit to sound heavier? Put a soft/quiet section in before it and vice versa. The Nirvana Principal is to have the verses Soft and the chorus Heavy, Listen again to their songs and you will notice it straight away. Using contrast in a very deliberate way will really allow you to make the most of feel changes in your music

To take the listener on a journey you should try to include contrasting sections to help maintain momentum and interest. That might be a change in tone (Dirty to Clean) or

technique (Legato to Staccato) Palm mute to Long drawn out notes, Complexity to Simplicity etc.

### **Techniques for Inspired writing**

Its very easy to get stuck, frustrated or lost when writing music. Some suggestions to help inspire composition is to create an altered circumstance.

This often gives me great results

#### **Try:**

- Using a different tuning
- Using a different tone
- Using a different instrument
- Start the composition from a different point of view (Drum beat or bass riff)
- Different Style of music
- Different Key Signature or Time Signature or feel
- Start from a new chord shape
- Use a different tonality (Harmonic Minor scale / Melodic Minor / Modes etc)
- Different Scale shapes / chord voicing's etc
- A different environment (outside, away from computer etc)
- Give your self time away from playing, when you come back you may find that you feel refreshed and feel more inclined to create
- Put a limitation on an some aspect of the composition (Only use clean channel, only use distortion channel, only use 6 string guitars etc)

### **Form**

This is always an interesting one to explore, Personally I don't consciously think too hard about the form i'm working with while creating. One form I do know I tend to gravitate towards is 'Through Composed' which means, no sections repeat. This is fun because the piece keeps on moving and building without returning to something thats already happened, and it can be a fun challenge to make the song cohesive without repeated sections.

### **Listening**

Listen to music !!!!

Its got to be at least 50% of the creative process. Its where seeds get planted and ideas stem from. We all want to be original but that can only come from the manipulation of what we already know. Its worth pointing out that no one is truly original, everything stems from something else If this weren't true the concept of 'Genre' would not exist. There would be one 'Rock' band, one 'Rap' artist one 'Beat Box' artist and so on.

You need to know whats out there and whats possible. Listen to lots of different genres, musicians, artists etc. Don't just listen to guitarists, listen to electronic music, sax players, drummers... hearing a new musician may open a new door to you and your playing/creating...I still learn of new possibilities through listening to new music. Your music will inevitably be created based on what you have heard and what you listen to, so take it as a very important part of the process.