

11. Playing Chord Melody (Lead)

When I first heard Earl Collins play his banjo I was astonished as to how he could play the melody and his own accompaniment on the banjo at the same time and it sounded so great. I had thought when listening to recordings with banjos in various bands it is a rhythm instrument and that's all it could do. Well, to make a long story short once Earl told me how to play chord melody I was hooked. This article provides some playing tips, basic chord melody methods and is based solely on my own experiences over many years of playing the banjo. I advise asking a chord melody player that uses the same tuning as you use for playing tips.

Chord melody is the style of playing the melody note of the song on the first string, which is the highest pitched string and playing the “rhythm” chord on the rest of the strings at the same time. To learn this it's very helpful to have a plan and I kinda developed one that worked for me. Playing chord melody (lead) is fairly easy and helps to develop an ear to play harmony using the same chords because you will learn the various chord positions all up and down the neck. There's three advantages in learning to play chord melody. You learn the chord positions for rhythm, harmony and melody.

You will need:

- a) A chord chart reference book.
- b) Some sheet music of very simple songs.
- c) Patience and lots of practice time.

Incidentally, once I learned to play chord melody practicing became so cool and fun!

I play plectrum tuning but if you are playing tenor or guitar tuning you can use the related chord charts for those tunings. Note that because of the crispness of the tenor banjo most tenor players develop single string picking techniques for playing melody and play chords when playing rhythm.

As silly as it may seem I decided to start with “Bicycle Built For Two” because it has just a few different chords and the melody kinda jumps out even when strummed “erratically”. Learning the notes on the first string and then finding the accompanying chord with it is a slow process at first and therefore erratic but there is satisfaction of hearing the melody notes with the chords.

Learning a song in the key of “C” or “G” with just a few chord changes is best for a start. The idea is to locate the melody note on the first string and form the chord on the other strings. A simple song could have just three chords C – F7 – G7. You will probably need a chord book to look up chord fingering that can accompany the melody note. I also recommend playing softly and use chords that let you keep your little finger on the 1st string as much as possible.

A way to practice “melody chords” is to start with the “C” chord beginning with the 1st string open and find a configuration of a “C” chord for the rest of the strings. Then move up the neck a fret at a time and find a “C” chord for each move. You will only find three “C” tonic chords but you can play some sort of “C” based chord at each fret. Once you have this worked out you can apply the same fingering at different positions to play in other keys. If you have questions or need help you can ask a lead player.