

THE EASY GUIDE TO

# CHORD MELODY GUITAR



Step-by-step instructions with  
audio & guitar tabs



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# Table of Contents

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Acknowledgements .....	9
Introduction.....	10
How To Use This eBook .....	11
eBook Overview .....	12
 <b>PART 1 - BUILDING BLOCKS</b>	
 <b>Chapter 1 - Technique Fundamentals .....</b>	
<b>14</b>	<b>14</b>
Holding Your Guitar.....	16
Plucking Arm and Hand Placement.....	18
Plucking the Strings.....	24
Different Strokes .....	27
Walking Finger Exercises .....	31
Solid Fingerstyle Tone.....	35
String Crossing Exercises.....	39
Using the Thumb in Fingerstyle.....	43
Plucking Two Notes at Once .....	49

Exercises on Three Strings .....	53
Exercises on Four and More Strings .....	58
Alternating Between Thumb and Two Fingers .....	61
Alternating Between Thumb and Three Fingers .....	64
<b>Chapter 2 - Scales, Arpeggios and Licks .....</b>	<b>66</b>
Scale Exercises .....	67
Melodic Patterns.....	68
Slurring Exercises .....	70
Rhythmic Variations - Learning to Subdivide .....	74
Developing Speed With Scales .....	82
Picking Combination Alternatives .....	82
Alternative Fingerstyle Patterns For Speed.....	83
Speed Burst Exercises.....	83
Fingerstyle Arpeggio Exercises.....	89
20 Single Line Licks.....	94
Ed Bickert Licks .....	95
Joe Pass Licks .....	97

Lenny Breau Licks.....108

Autumn Leaves Solo Study.....115

**Chapter 3 – Chord Exercises ..... 118**

Three-Note Chord Exercises.....119

What’s a Three-Note Chord? .....119

Locating 3rds and 7ths on the Fretboard.....120

Rhythm Patterns.....128

Four-Note Chord Exercises.....134

What is a Drop Chord?.....134

Drop 2 Chords - Four Positions .....139

Drop 3 Chords .....154

Major ii V I Chord Phrases .....166

Minor ii V I Chord Phrases .....174

Summertime Chord Study.....181

<b>Chapter 4 – Comping Techniques.....</b>	<b>185</b>
Jazz Swing Comping - Freddie Green Style .....	186
Freddie Green Comping - Sweet Georgia Brown .....	191
Jazz Ballad Comping .....	194
Misty Jazz Ballad Comping Study.....	200
Walking Basslines With Comping .....	203
How to Play Walking Bass .....	203
Walking Bass Comping Study - Blues in Bb.....	212
Brazilian and Latin Style Comping.....	215
Bossa Nova Rhythms .....	215
Samba Rhythms.....	221
Blue Bossa Comping Study .....	225
Montuno Rhythms .....	229

## PART 2 - CHORD MELODY & CHORD SOLOING

<b>Chapter 5 – Arranging Chord Melodies.....</b>	<b>239</b>
Chord Melody Basics.....	240
Finding Suitable Chord Melody Tunes.....	241
Learn the Melody on the Top 2 Strings.....	243
Harmonizing the Melody with 3rds and 7ths.....	246
Melody Harmonizing with Closed and Drop 2 Chords .....	248
Basic Chord Melody Arrangement of After You’ve Gone.....	258
Adding Passing Chords .....	260
Octaves .....	261
Diads .....	262
Chromatic Approach Chords .....	264
More Complex Passing Chord Techniques .....	267
After You’ve Gone With Passing Chords.....	274
Jazzing Up the Melody.....	277
Listen To Recordings (Especially Jazz Singers) .....	278
Adding Licks to Chord Melodies .....	280

After You've Gone Trio Chord Melody.....	282
<b>Chapter 6 - Arranging for Solo Guitar .....</b>	<b>284</b>
Solo Jazz Guitar Arranging Techniques .....	285
Harmonizing the Melody with Bass Notes Only .....	286
Using Shell Voicings .....	290
Drop 2 Voicings With Extra Root Notes in the Bass .....	291
After You've Gone - Beginner Solo Guitar Arrangement .....	293
Joe Pass Arranging Techniques.....	295
Secondary ii-V Triplet Comping .....	295
Arpeggiating Chords .....	297
Jazzing Up the Melody.....	298
Adding Cadenza Licks .....	298
After You've Gone - Advanced Solo Guitar Arrangement.....	300
<b>Chapter 7 - Chord Soloing.....</b>	<b>303</b>
What is a Chord Solo? .....	304
The Relationship Between Comping and Chord Soloing.....	306
Chord Solo Licktionary.....	313

Wes Montgomery Chord Licks.....	313
George Benson Chord Licks.....	318
Chord Solo Study - Jazz Blues .....	322
Soloing With Concepts Rather Than Licks.....	325
Joe Pass Chord Licks.....	328
Barney Kessel Chord Licks .....	332
Tune Up Chord Solo Study.....	334
Lenny Breau Chord Licks.....	338
Ted Greene Chord Licks .....	342
Kurt Rosenwinkel Chord Licks .....	345
On Green Dolphin Street Chord Solo Study.....	347
Conclusion .....	350
Where To Go From Here .....	351
Other eBooks in This Series.....	352
About Greg O'Rourke .....	354
About Matt Warnock .....	355



# The Easy Guide To Chord Melody Sample PDF

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Welcome to the *Easy Guide to Chord Melody* sample pdf! In this preview you'll look at an easy chord melody arrangement of **After You've Gone**, and the concepts used to build this version of the tune.

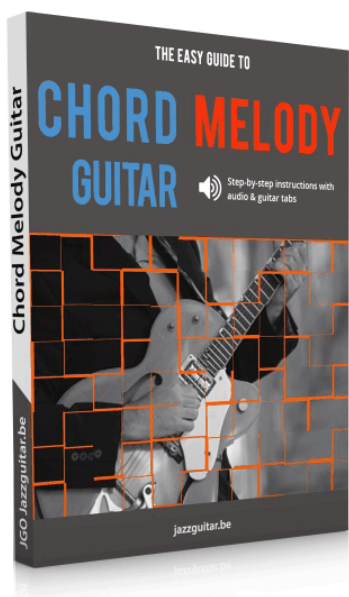
In the full eBook, you'll learn how to take this first arrangement further as you study chord melody concepts from Joe Pass, Ted Green, Lenny Breau, and others.

Then, you'll expand upon these concepts as you use them to build chord soloing phrases in your studies, giving you everything you need to play cool-sounding chord melodies and chord solos in real time.

Enjoy this preview, have fun with the arrangement, and don't forget to take your chord melody and soloing skills further with our new eBook.

- Greg O'Rourke

**This PDF is a small sample of our eBook *The Easy Guide to Chord Melody*, to get the full edition of the eBook, [click here...](#)**



## Chapter 5 – Arranging Chord Melodies

**Chapter Summary** - In this chapter you'll learn:

- The definition of chord melody.
- How to create trio chord melody arrangements.
- Melody line harmonization techniques.
- How to 'jazz up' and use licks in chord melodies.

This is the chapter you've been waiting for - a step-by-step approach to creating chord melody arrangements. Cool, right?

This chapter builds on the concepts you've learned in earlier chapters. So, if you come across terms and exercises that are unfamiliar, go back to part 1 of this eBook and polish up on those terms and exercises.

Part of the challenge when learning chord melody is that there are many approaches that you can take, making it hard to know where to start. This abundance of approaches can overwhelm even experienced players. To avoid overwhelming you, I'll show you only the most useful approaches to building chord melodies.

In order to hear how each arranging technique sounds, I'll stick to demonstrating them on one tune, **After You've Gone**. Keep in mind that you can apply all of these approaches to any jazz tune.

Once you've worked on a few arrangements using these techniques, you'll be ready to come up with arrangements on the spot. But first, the basics...

## Chord Melody Basics

---

The term chord melody refers to incorporating chords along with a melody line.

Note, that it doesn't necessarily mean that chords are placed on every melody note. This is a valid chord melody approach, however it's quite advanced and needs to be done skillfully; otherwise, it can miss the mark. You run the risk of the melody being 'crowded' by too many chords - which I refer to as over-harmonization.

Thinking that chords need to be placed on every melody note is the **main** reason why students struggle with learning chord melody.

But, chord melody can be easier than this and still be effective, as you'll see in the following exercises. **Don't sweat** - you'll learn how to harmonize every note in a melody later in the chapter if you want to give that a try.

### Chord Melody vs. Solo Guitar

The term 'chord melody' is confusing for another reason - it can refer to two different playing situations. First, chord melody can refer to mixing chords and melody in a trio setting, e.g. drums, bass and guitar. Second, chord melody can refer to a solo guitar situation. This chapter covers 'trio chord melody' and the next chapter will get into solo guitar.

## Finding Suitable Chord Melody Tunes

Before you start arranging, make sure you choose a tune that's **playable** as a chord melody, because not all tunes will be playable. For your first chord melodies, stick to ballads, rather than fast moving bebop numbers. Ballads are easier to play compared to bebop tunes due to their slower tempos.

Here are 10 tunes that work well as chord melodies to get you started.

- Summertime
- My Funny Valentine (Ballad)
- I Could Write a Book (Ballad)
- I Can't Get Started (Ballad)
- Satin Doll
- Autumn Leaves
- On Green Dolphin Street
- Fly Me To the Moon
- Georgia on My Mind (Ballad)
- Moon River (Ballad)

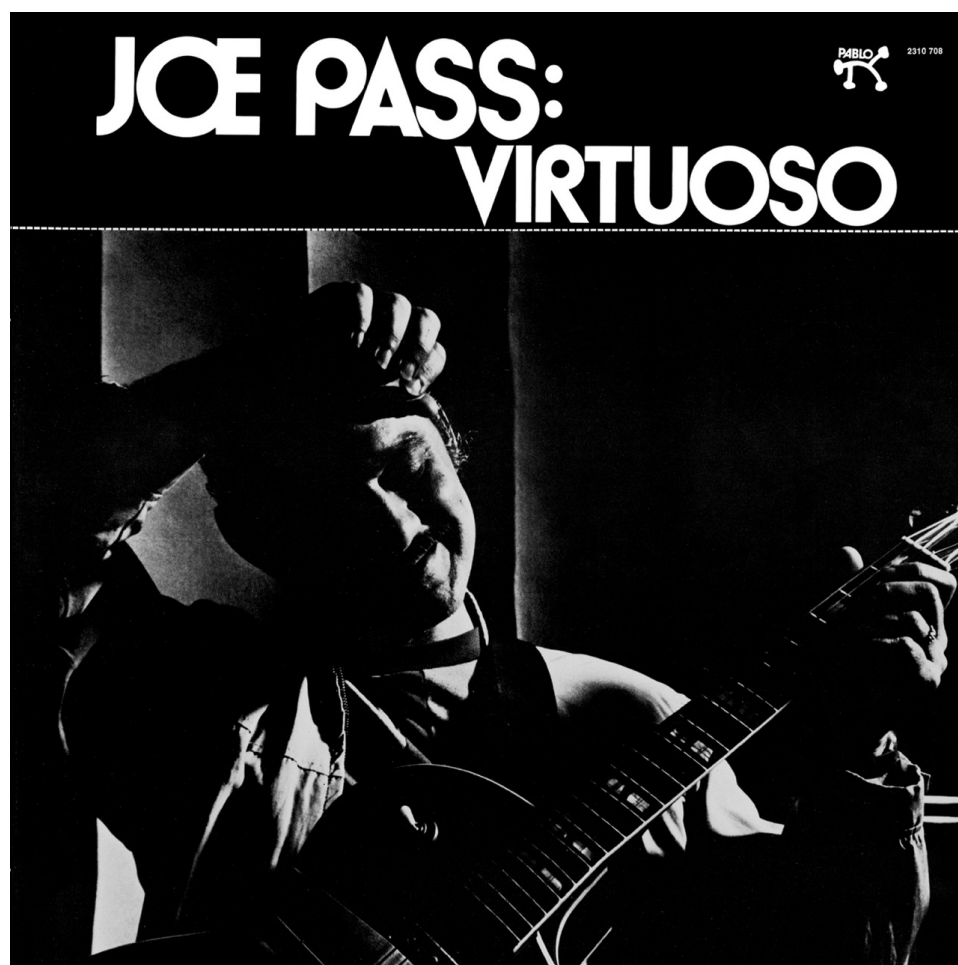
### Listen To Recordings

It's difficult to learn a jazz tune from only the lead sheet. This is the case with After You've Gone, as the melody in the chart is pretty straight. But, when you listen to singers like Dinah Washington, it's an entirely different tune in terms of the rhythms and pitches in the performance. Therefore, you won't build a satisfying arrangement just by looking at the lead sheet.

Listen to a few recordings of this tune to get the general context and style of the tune. If you're spent the time listening at first, you'll develop a much better chord melody arrangement in the end.

### Transpose If Necessary

Once you find a suitable tune, check to see if you should transpose it to another key, as the melody needs to be high enough (but not too high), to place chords underneath. As the melody of After You've Gone is already in a playable register for chord melody, no transposition is needed.



## Learn the Melody on the Top 2 Strings

---

Once you've chosen a tune and decided on the key, it's time to get to work. Rather than learn the tune in a fixed position on the fretboard, you'll need to learn the melody on the **top-two strings only**, if possible.

This is because you need the lower strings free to add chords under the melody line. If you look at the tab in the following chart of After You've Gone, you'll see one way to play this tune on the top 2 strings. Feel free to come up with your own version of this top-two string melody as well.

Backing Track 9

[Click to hear backing track 9](#)

Audio Example 204

[Click here to play audio example 204](#)

**E $\flat$ maj7**      **A $\flat$ 7**      **B $\flat$ maj7**      **G7**

T  
A  
B

8-11    8-10            8-10-8-10-8            3-6    3-5            3-5-3-5-3

**C7**      **F7**      **B $\flat$ maj7**      **B $\flat$ 7**

T  
A  
B

8-10-10            8-8-8            6-8-6    5-6-8-6            6-3-6

**E $\flat$ maj7**      **A $\flat$ 7**      **B $\flat$ maj7**      **G7**

T  
A  
B

8-11    8-10            8-10-8-10-8            3-6    3-5            3-5-3-5-3

**Cm7** **G7(b9)** **Cm7** **A $\flat$ 7** **B $\flat$ maj7** **D7** **Gm7** **A7<sub>ALT.</sub>**

11 10 8 7 8 10 8 9 10 6 8 7 8 5 6 2 3 5 3

**B $\flat$ maj7** **G7** **Cm7** **F7** **B $\flat$ maj7** **B $\flat$ 7**

6 8 6 10 4 6 5 8 10 10 6

Now that you have the melody under your fingers, here comes the exciting part - adding chords to the melody line...



## Harmonizing the Melody with 3rds and 7ths

---

As I mentioned earlier, a lot of guitarists fall into **the trap of harmonizing every note** in a melody with chords, and then give up in frustration. However, with this first approach you hardly need to do that at all.

In this section you'll use the Lenny Breau approach you learned about in chapter 3, using 3-7 voicings to comp with a melody line, only now applied to a chord melody arrangement. Lenny's aim was to **play the guitar like a piano**. So, think of the melody being the 'right hand' and the 3-7 chords being the 'left hand'.

This is effective for getting used to chord melody, as you put **chord stabs in between** phrases and occasionally on a melody note. 3-7 voicings are a clever approach if you're playing in a trio as they have the illusion of sounding much fatter than what you would think.

To be able to do both the 3-7 comping and melody line, you may need to change the fingerings of the melody on the top 2 strings. I've written fingerings in the following example to help you with this approach.

Also, be aware that sometimes it's too awkward to let a melody note ring for its full duration when adding chords. Don't let this stop you - playability is more important than being 'textbook correct' with the rhythms.

When it came to harmonizing After You've Gone with this technique, I found that sometimes the 3rd was already in the melody, so I put the 7th beneath it only (or vice versa if the 7th is in the melody).

Audio Example 205

[Click here to play audio example 205](#)

**E $\flat$ maj7**      **A $\flat$ 7**      **B $\flat$ maj7**      **G7**

TAB: 8-11 8-10 12-11 8-10-8-10-8 3-6 3-5 5-4 3-5-3-5-3 4-3

**C7**      **F7**      **B $\flat$ maj7**      **B $\flat$ 7**

TAB: 8-10-10 8-8 8-8 7-6-8-6-5-6-8-6 6-7-7-6 6-6

## Melody Harmonizing with Closed and Drop 2 Chords

---

Joe Pass and Ed Bickert loved this harmonization technique, and it's what jazz guitarists typically think of when approaching a trio chord melody.

This is where it starts to get a bit trickier than Lenny's approach.

For this approach, the first step is to determine what chord voicings you need to place underneath the melody line.

An easy way to do this is to do a **chord tone analysis of the melody...**

## Step 1 - Chord Tone Analysis Of Melody

This is where you label each melody note as a **chord tone**, such as placing the number "1" next to a Bb note played under a Bbmaj7 chord.

You'll notice that the numbers used below are 1-3-5-7-9-11-13, but 2-4-6 aren't being used. This is because intervals are stacked in thirds to build chords, so when analyzing melodies, 9-11-13 are more appropriate than 2-4-6, even though they're the same notes.

The image displays a musical score for a melody in 4/4 time, with chord tone analysis and guitar fingerings. The melody is written on a treble clef staff, and guitar fingerings are shown on a six-string staff below. Chords are labeled above the staff:  $E_b$ maj7,  $A_b7$ ,  $B_b$ maj7,  $G7$ ,  $C7$ ,  $F7$ ,  $B_b$ maj7, and  $B_b7$ . Blue numbers above the notes indicate the chord tone analysis.

**Chord Tone Analysis:**

- $E_b$ maj7: 3 5 13 7
- $A_b7$ : 3 11 3 11 3
- $B_b$ maj7: 3 5 13 7
- $G7$ : 1 9 1 9 1
- $C7$ : 5 9 9
- $F7$ : 9 5 5
- $B_b$ maj7: 5 13 5 7 5 13 5
- $B_b7$ : 1 3 5

**Guitar Fingerings (TAB):**

- Measure 1: 8-11, 8-10
- Measure 2: 8-10, 8-10, 8
- Measure 3: 3-6, 3-5
- Measure 4: 3-5, 3-5, 3
- Measure 5: 8, 10-10
- Measure 6: 8, 8, 8
- Measure 7: 6-8, 6-5, 6-8, 6
- Measure 8: 6, 3, 6

## Step 2 - Choose Which Notes in the Melody to Harmonize

As you initially aren't going to harmonize every melody note, you only need to **pick a few places to add chords**, filling out the arrangement just enough to give the audience an impression of the harmony.

There are no right or wrong places to put chords, but good places to begin with are:

- Where either a 1, b3, 3,5, b7, or 7 is in the melody line.
- At the start of each new chord change on the lead sheet.
- On a sustained chord where a chord that is held for a long time.

Avoid placing chords in these situations.

- Where it's hard to play the melody smoothly.
- Where it results in too many chords in a row.

Remember - you don't have to harmonize every melody note. In fact, it often sounds better if you don't do this, as the melody won't be overcrowded and will be easier on your hands.

One of my master classical guitar teachers, Tim Kain, always used to make the point to me that:

“If it's easier on your hands, it'll be easier on the audience's ears.”

This translates to:

“Play within your level of technique, and the music will flow much better.”

The **boxes in red** on the following diagram indicate places where I think it works to add chords based on the guidelines set out above. Where would you add chords to this melody line?

The image shows two systems of guitar tablature. Each system consists of a treble clef staff with a 4/4 time signature and a corresponding guitar tablature staff. Red boxes are drawn around specific fret positions on the strings to indicate where chords should be added.

**System 1:**

- Chord 1:** Ebmaj7. Fret positions: 3 (G), 5 (Ab), 13 (Eb), 7 (F). Tab: 8-11-8-10.
- Chord 2:** Ab7. Fret positions: 3 (G), 11 (Ab), 3 (Bb), 11 (Cb), 3 (Db). Tab: 8-10-8-10-8.
- Chord 3:** Bbmaj7. Fret positions: 3 (Bb), 5 (Cb), 13 (F), 7 (G). Tab: 3-6-3-5.
- Chord 4:** G7. Fret positions: 1 (G), 9 (Ab), 1 (Bb), 9 (Cb), 1 (Db). Tab: 3-5-3-5-3.

**System 2:**

- Chord 1:** C7. Fret positions: 5 (G), 9 (Ab), 9 (Bb). Tab: 8-10-10.
- Chord 2:** F7. Fret positions: 9 (G), 5 (Ab), 5 (Bb). Tab: 8-8-8.
- Chord 3:** Bbmaj7. Fret positions: 5 (Bb), 13 (F), 5 (G), 7 (Ab), 5 (Bb), 13 (Cb), 5 (Db). Tab: 6-8-6-5-6-8-6.
- Chord 4:** Bb7. Fret positions: 1 (Bb), 3 (Cb), 5 (Db). Tab: 6-3-6.

The next step you'll study is a chord melody 'golden rule'...

### Step 3 - Use Chords With the Melody Note as the Highest Note

For now, it's best to keep things **simple**. Rather than using complex voicings, stick to maj7, min7, and 7 chords. It's best if you're familiar with at least the drop 2 voicings that were covered in chapter 3. Go back and check that chapter out if those shapes are a bit rusty.

Just like when you harmonized using 3-7 voicings, the fingering of the melody often needs to change from what you initially worked out. This is fine, and to be expected with this approach.

At this point, it's important to bring up a few issues you're going to face when using the 'textbook' drop 2 chords. Listen to, and then try to play the following audio example, and you'll see what I mean.

Audio Example 206

[Click here to play audio example 206](#)

The musical score is written in 4/4 time and consists of two systems of four measures each. The first system features the following chords and fingerings:

- Measure 1:  $E\flat$ maj7. Treble clef: 3 5 13 7. Bass clef: 3 6 8 10.
- Measure 2:  $A\flat$ 7. Treble clef: 3 11 3 11 3. Bass clef: 8 10 8 10.
- Measure 3:  $B\flat$ maj7. Treble clef: 3 5 13 7. Bass clef: 3 6 8 5.
- Measure 4:  $G$ 7. Treble clef: 1 9 1 9 1. Bass clef: 3 5 3 5 3.

The second system features the following chords and fingerings:

- Measure 5:  $C$ 7. Treble clef: 5 9 9. Bass clef: 10 10.
- Measure 6:  $F$ 7. Treble clef: 9 5 5. Bass clef: 8 8.
- Measure 7:  $B\flat$ maj7. Treble clef: 5 13 5 7 5 13 5. Bass clef: 6 3 6 5 6 8 6.
- Measure 8:  $B\flat$ 7. Treble clef: 1 3 5. Bass clef: 6 7 6.

What strikes me about this arrangement is how **unplayable** it is. Remember how you need to make things easy on your hands for it to sound good? This version definitely doesn't fit the bill.

This is a point that trips up many aspiring chord melody guitarists. They faithfully harmonize the melody with 'textbook' drop 2 shapes. The result? It often doesn't sound nice or feel good to play. But, don't worry - I have a few tricks up my sleeve that you can use to improve this arrangement.



## Step 4 - Improving The Arrangement

**Too many 4-note chords** can be technically difficult and sound clunky. Also, some of the drop 2 chords in this arrangement are actually unplayable, e.g. the Bbmaj7 voicing at the start of bar 7, and I'm not a huge fan of the one on the **C7** in bar 5 either.

### Removing The Root Notes

As this is a 'trio chord melody', to be played with bass and drums, it's fine to remove the **lowest notes** of some of the chords. After all, the bass player is covering that side of things for you.

So, a good strategy is to **remove root notes** if they're the lowest notes, or play 3-7 voicings if the chord shape is too difficult to nail.

I also find the **Bbmaj7 chord** in bar 7 too difficult to play, so I removed that chord entirely. With the above points in mind, here's an adapted version of the arrangement. This version is easier to play, and it sounds better too.

Audio Example 207

[Click here to play audio example 207](#)

The musical score is written in 4/4 time and consists of two systems. The first system contains four measures with the following chords and fret numbers:

- Measure 1: **E $\flat$ maj7** (3 5 13 7)
- Measure 2: **A $\flat$ 7** (3 11 3 11 3)
- Measure 3: **B $\flat$ maj7** (3 5 13 7)
- Measure 4: **G7** (1 9 1 9 1)

The second system contains four measures with the following chords and fret numbers:

- Measure 5: **C7** (5 9 9)
- Measure 6: **F7** (9 5 5)
- Measure 7: **B $\flat$ maj7** (5 13 5 7 5 13 5)
- Measure 8: **B $\flat$ 7** (1 3 5)

The guitar tablature (T, A, B strings) is as follows:

- Measure 1: T (8), A (6), B (8, 10)
- Measure 2: T (8), A (10), B (8, 10, 8)
- Measure 3: T (3), A (6), B (3, 5)
- Measure 4: T (3), A (5), B (3, 5, 3)
- Measure 5: T (10), A (10)
- Measure 6: T (8), A (8)
- Measure 7: T (6), A (8), B (6, 5, 6, 8, 6)
- Measure 8: T (6), A (7), B (6)

## Adding Tensions to the Chords

Another item I'd improve with this arrangement is the plain sound of the drop 2 chords by **adding tensions** to some of these chords.

For the second voicing on the F7 in bar 6, I've replaced it with an **Adim7 shape**, which sounds an F7b9. Playing a dim7 chord off the b9, 3rd, 5th or b7th of a 7th chord will sound a 7b9 (in this case, A is the 3rd of the F7).

I've also added a G13 moving to G7b13 in bar 4, giving it a more **chromatic** sound. As a rule, 7th chords should have tensions added most of the time; otherwise, you'll sound like you're playing country music rather than jazz.

Audio Example 208

[Click here to play audio example 208](#)

The musical notation for Audio Example 208 is as follows:

**Measure 1:** Ebmaj7 (fretting: 3, 5, 13, 7)

**Measure 2:** Ab7 (fretting: 3, 11, 3, 11, 3)

**Measure 3:** Bbmaj7 (fretting: 3, 5, 13, 7)

**Measure 4:** G7 (fretting: 1, 9, 1, 9, 1). Includes G13 and G7b13 voicings.

**Measure 5:** C7 (fretting: 5, 9, 9)

**Measure 6:** F7 (fretting: 9, 5, 5). Includes F9 and F7b9 voicings.

**Measure 7:** Bbmaj7 (fretting: 5, 13, 5, 7, 5, 13, 5)

**Measure 8:** Bb7 (fretting: 1, 3, 5)

The guitar tablature shows the following fret numbers for the top (T) and bottom (B) strings:

- Measure 1: T (8, 6, 8, 10), B (8, 8)
- Measure 2: T (8, 10, 8, 10, 8), B (8, 8)
- Measure 3: T (3, 6, 3, 5), B (3, 8)
- Measure 4: T (3, 5, 3, 5, 3), B (3, 4, 4, 3)
- Measure 5: T (10, 10), B (8, 8)
- Measure 6: T (8, 8), B (7, 7)
- Measure 7: T (6, 8, 6, 5, 6, 8, 6), B (7, 7)
- Measure 8: T (6, 7, 6), B (6, 7, 6)

## Varying the Placement of Chords

It can quickly get **boring** only placing chords beneath melody notes. So, let's experiment with the placing chords before the melody line starts.

Audio Example 209

[Click here to play audio example 209](#)

The musical score for Audio Example 209 is presented in two systems. Each system consists of a treble clef staff with a 4/4 time signature and a guitar tablature staff below it. The chords and their corresponding fingerings are as follows:

**System 1:**

- Chord 1:**  $E\flat$ maj7. Tablature: 8 6 8 10 (T: 8, B: 8).
- Chord 2:**  $A\flat$ 7. Tablature: 7 8 10 8 10 8 (T: 7, B: 8).
- Chord 3:**  $B\flat$ maj7. Tablature: 3 6 3 5 (T: 3, B: 3).
- Chord 4:**  $G$ 7. Tablature: 5 3 5 3 5 3 (T: 5, B: 3).

**System 2:**

- Chord 1:**  $C$ 7. Tablature: 10 10 (T: 10, B: 10).
- Chord 2:**  $F$ 7. Tablature: 8 8 (T: 8, B: 8).
- Chord 3:**  $B\flat$ maj7. Tablature: 7 6 8 6 5 6 8 6 (T: 7, B: 7).
- Chord 4:**  $B\flat$ 7. Tablature: 6 7 6 (T: 6, B: 6).

## Basic Chord Melody Arrangement of After You've Gone

---

The following arrangement uses **4-note voicings**, with the lowest note removed if necessary for playability, and 3-7 chords. I also experimented with chord placement as per the previous example.

Later on you'll learn **more interesting** chord voicings and how to fill out the melody line with chords, but let's keep things simple for now.

Backing Track 10

[Click to hear backing track 10](#)

Audio Example 210

[Click here to play audio example 210](#)

**E<sup>b</sup>maj7**                      **A<sup>b</sup>7**                      **B<sup>b</sup>maj7**                      **G7**

TAB: 8 6 8 10 / 7 8-10 8-10 8 / 3 6 3 5 / 5 3 5 3 5 3

**C7**                      **F7**                      **B<sup>b</sup>maj7**                      **B<sup>b</sup>7**                      **E<sup>b</sup>maj7**

TAB: 10 10 / 8 8 / 7 6 8 6 5 6 8 6 / 6 7 6 / 8 6 8 10

**A<sup>b</sup>7**                      **B<sup>b</sup>maj7**                      **G7**                      **Cm7**                      **G7(b9)**

TAB: 8 10 8 10 8 / 3 6 3 5 / 3 5 3 5 3 / 11 10 / 9 9

**Cm7**      **Ab7**      **Bbmaj7**      **D7**      **Gm7**      **A7<sup>ALT.</sup>**      **Bbmaj7**      **G7**

7 8 10 8 9 10 6 8 7 8 5 6 5 7 6 7 6 8 6 8 6 10 7 7 7 8 7 7 7 9

**Cm7**      **F7**      **Bbmaj7**      **Bb7**

6 5 8 10 10 6 8 7

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