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**Melody in Songwriting:  
Tools and Techniques for  
Writing Hit Songs**

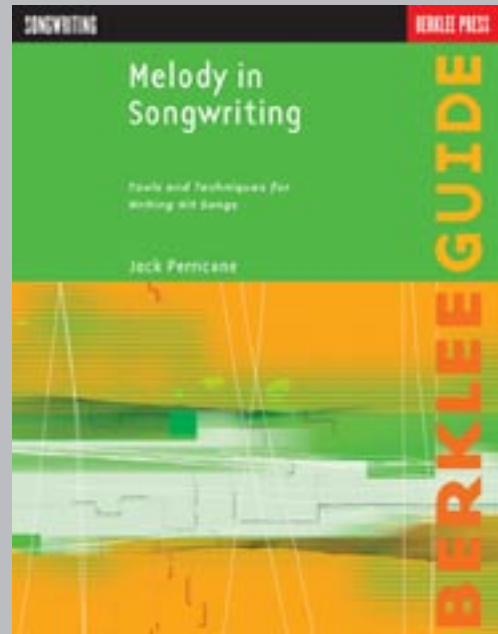
Jack Perricone

Chapter 1

Melody: Some Basics

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# Chapter 1

## Melody: Some Basics

**melody** The two basic elements of music that define melody are pitch and rhythm. Melody is a succession of pitches in rhythm. The melody is usually the most memorable aspect of a song, the one the listener remembers and is able to perform.

**melodic phrase** A melodic phrase, much like a sentence or clause in verbal language, usually encompasses a complete musical statement. A melodic phrase usually defines itself by resting or holding or coming to some point of resolution (rhythmically and/or tonally) and, especially in vocal music, is directly related to the natural areas to breathe. Short phrases usually group together to form a longer phrase.

In the following example, phrase 1 and phrase 2 group together to form a longer phrase; phrase 3 and phrase 4 group together to form a longer phrase.

Ex.11

### Moderate Rock

The musical notation for Ex.11, Moderate Rock, is presented in two staves. The key signature has two flats (Bb and Eb), and the time signature is 4/4. The melody is divided into four phrases: phrase 1 (measures 1-2), phrase 2 (measures 3-4), phrase 3 (measures 5-6), and phrase 4 (measures 7-8). The second staff continues the melody from measure 9 to 12, with phrase 4 spanning measures 7-8 and 9-12.

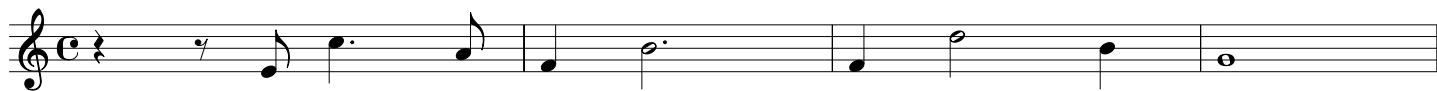
**conjunct/disjunct melodic motion** There are two types of melodic motion: conjunct motion, which proceeds by step from one scale degree to the next (i.e., by the interval of a second) and disjunct motion, which proceeds by leap (i.e., by intervals larger than a second).

A melody assumes character by a number of means: its rhythmic structure, its contour, its tonal makeup, and its intervallic content. Most vocal melodies consist of conjunct motion, which is the most natural and comfortable to sing. It is usually the intervallic leaps, however, that give a melody character and cause the melody to assume more of a memorable profile.

Ex.12 *Conjunct motion produces a smooth vocal line*

The musical notation for Ex.12, Conjunct motion produces a smooth vocal line, is presented in a single staff. The key signature has two flats (Bb and Eb), and the time signature is 4/4. The melody consists of a smooth, conjunct line of notes.

Ex.13 Disjunct motion is more difficult to sing.



Ex.14 Conjunct and disjunct motion, working together, usually produce a good result.

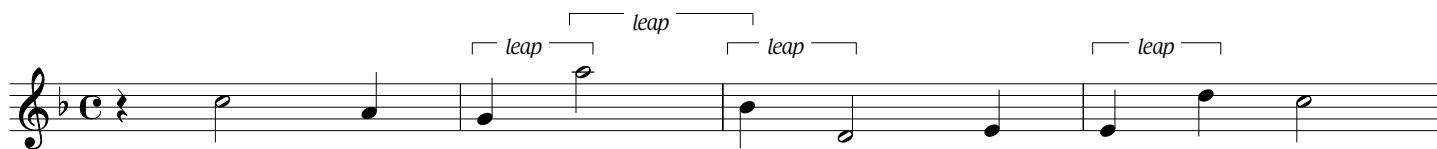


**writing for the voice**

It is absolutely essential to the craft of songwriting that the writer sing the melody, feel it in the voice, reach for the high notes, and focus on experiencing the relationship between the lyric and the melody. Much of melody writing done for instruments, especially for the piano, is difficult or impossible to sing. The following are to be considered when writing for the voice:

1. How disjunct is the melody? Too many intervallic leaps can cause the melody to be difficult or impossible to sing.

Ex.15



2. Does the vocalist have time to breathe between phrases? Is the phrase so long that it doesn't allow the singer to breathe?

Ex.16



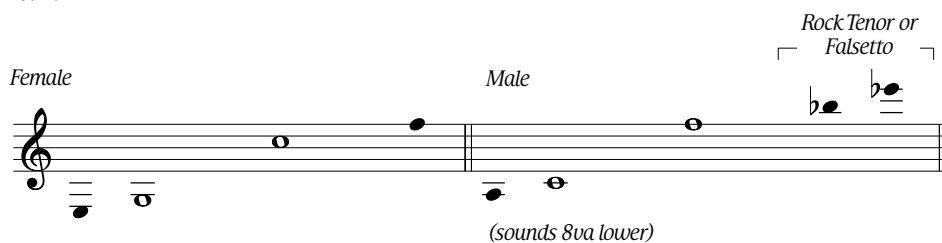
3. Is the vocal range of the song too great? Does the range within a section of the song change too quickly?

Ex.17



The range of the average pop vocalist is as follows:

Ex.18



## the lead sheet

The lead sheet format reflects the importance of the melody. Harmonic voicings, texture, and orchestration are not found in lead sheets. The lead sheet solely contains the melody, the lyric, and the harmony notated with chord symbols.

## guidelines for lead sheet writing

The following guidelines for leadsheet writing are given to help eliminate the usual errors.

1. The melody should be notated in a clear-cut but accurate fashion in the treble clef. Notes and rhythms that are purely embellishments need not appear on the lead sheet.
2. If a section of a song is repeated and some melodic rhythms and pitches are slightly altered (as often happens in verse sections), cue notes should be written for these deviations.

Ex.19

I'll al - ways re - mem - ber you —  
There's no rea - son to doubt your word; why should I?

3. Chord symbols should appear directly over the beat or part of the beat on which they are played. It may be necessary to approximate this if a melody note is not sung on the exact rhythm.

Ex.110

B $\flat$  F/E $\flat$  E $\flat$  Em7 $\flat$ 5 A7/C $\sharp$  Cm7 F7  
*approximate 4th beat*

One of the most common errors is placing a chord in the middle of the bar when the chord is intended to be sounded for the entire measure. This is confusing to a player who must play the chord on the first beat.

Ex.111

*incorrect* C F C *correct* F

4. Each syllable of the lyric should be placed directly under the note or notes to which it is sung. Spacing of the music is determined by the length of words and syllables. Improper alignment of lyric to melody is a common mistake that should be avoided, as shown here:

Ex.112

Won-der why I feel so lone-ly ev - 'ry time I hear your name

Use seven- or eight-stave paper to allow for two or three sets of lyrics to be placed under each staff.

Ex.13

An - y - thing's pos - si - ble \_\_\_\_\_

5. Lyrics may include lowercase and uppercase letters or consist entirely of uppercase letters. Lyrics are always printed.
6. Hyphens are used to separate syllables.

Ex.14

Where's he gone? \_\_\_\_\_ Heav - en. \_\_\_\_\_

7. "Extended" lines are used for a one-syllable word or for the last syllable of a polysyllabic word that occurs with tied or slurred notes.

Ex.15

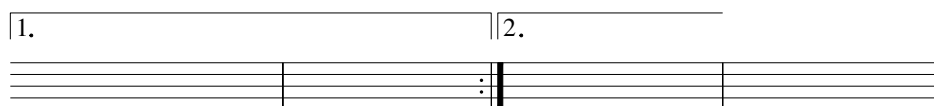
He'll nev - er, ev - er \_\_\_\_\_ leave.

8. A slur should be written above or below the note heads for two or more notes assigned to a single syllable.
9. The title should be capitalized and centered on the first page. Indicate "words by" or "lyric by" followed by the lyricist's name and "music by" followed by the composer's name in the upper right section of the first page. It is wise to number the additional pages and to print the song title in the upper right-hand corner of each page.
10. A tempo or groove indication at the upper left of the first page should be included.
11. A copyright notice should be written at the bottom of the first page: Copyright © (year) by (copyright owner).
12. The lead sheet for the song is not an arrangement. In rare cases, however, it may contain music that is not sung, such as an introduction/interlude figure that the composer deems intrinsic to the song. The lead sheet may contain a bass figure that is used throughout the song and that is identifiably characteristic of the song. The figure would be written once in the bass clef at the beginning of the lead sheet with an indication to "play throughout song" or "play on every chorus."

**writing tip** Try to keep such indications to an absolute minimum. The lead sheet should represent the most essential ingredients of the song. These ingredients can then be embellished by the vocalist(s), the accompanist, the arranger, or the producer. Do not clutter the lead sheet with arranging ideas or instrumental sections that are optional.

**repeat signs** Since a lead sheet presents the song in a complete but concise way, the use of first and second endings and other repeat signs should be employed.

Ex.116



There is no need to use a repeat sign at the beginning of a piece since the first ending automatically refers back to the beginning. If, however, the repeat does not refer to the beginning of the piece, a repeat sign must be installed at the beginning of the appropriate measure.

Other common and useful repeat signs are as follows:

*D.C.* (*Da Capo* means “go back to the beginning”)

*D.S.* (*Dal Segno* means “go back to the  $\text{\textcircled{S}}$  sign”)

In vocal music, it is best to place these signs above the staff and as close to the end of the measure as possible.

Another useful symbol is  $\text{\textcircled{C}}$ , the coda sign. This symbol is used in the last part of a piece where new material has been added to form the ending or the “fade” ending. (Fade endings are often found in recording situations but are seldom used in live performances.)

Often repeat symbols are combined. For example, *D.S. al Coda* means “go to the sign  $\text{\textcircled{S}}$ , continue until you reach *To Coda*  $\text{\textcircled{C}}$ , and then jump to the place in the manuscript where the coda sign  $\text{\textcircled{C}}$  appears.”

Occasionally a  $\text{\textcircled{S}\text{\textcircled{S}}}$ , double sign, is needed. This symbol is only used after the direction *D.S.*  $\text{\textcircled{S}}$  has been used and an additional repeat is necessary.

Written directions such as “*To Next Strain*” or “*Repeat and Fade*” are often used to save space. “To next strain” simply means to go on to the next section of the piece. Some of these shortcuts are somewhat confusing. They should be used only in lead sheets and are not recommended when writing parts for players.

**writing tip** When actually composing the song, such shortcuts as putting in a repeat sign after four measures in a verse section may discourage creative possibilities and choices that might have existed if you had allowed yourself the space to realize them. (These could be as simple as changing one pitch or rhythm or may entail adding a couple of measures of new music.)

Study the architecture of the sample lead sheet found below, and then read the explanation of the format to confirm that you fully understand the meaning of the repeat symbols and directions.

Ex.117

**Introduction**



**Verse**



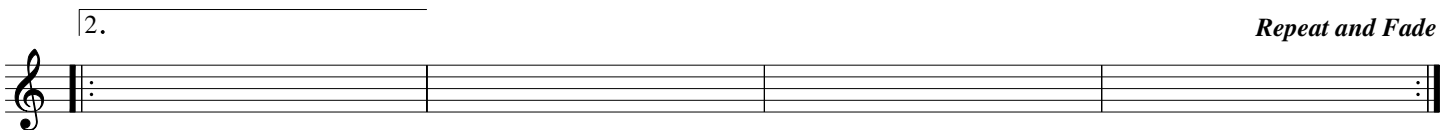
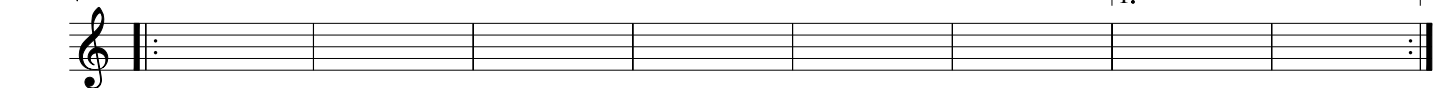
**Chorus**



**Bridge**



**Coda**



**format**

- Introduction
- Verse 1
- Chorus (take the 1st ending and D.S.)
- Verse 2
- Chorus (take 2nd ending, go to the next strain)
- Bridge (D.S.S. to the chorus)
- Chorus (take 3rd ending and go to the coda)
- Coda (take the 1st ending)
- Repeat the 2nd ending (four bars) ad infinitum.

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