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Published by:
Success For Your Songs
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Module 3: Melodies

Now the pieces are starting to come together. We looked at ways to come up with a song idea, which will guide us through all the decisions we make for our song. We even have some chord progressions and a song structure. Now it’s time to lay down a melody on top of that.

All melodies are essentially made up of two parts: rhythm and pitch. Think of a melody in terms of a two-dimensional graph, where what happens up and down is the pitch, and what happens from side to side is the rhythm. Anything outside of rhythm and pitch is no longer melody, it’s vocal delivery. That includes, volume, emotion and energy. None of those elements are carried in the actual melody, they are contributed by the individual singer in his vocal delivery, not in the notes that are on a page of sheet music.

The melody will be the most defining element of our song. It’ll determine whether or not your listeners get your song stuck in their heads and want to hear it again and own it. Melody is the main ingredient of a song that can make it a hit, or prevent it from ever being one. Having said that, let’s take a look at how we can come up with some strong melodies.
The Find Inspiration Method

*Drawing Inspiration for Your Music from Other Songs*

**Disclaimer**

Unlike chords or song ideas, melodies are copyrightable. You can’t swipe someone else’s melody, or even a piece of it, and use it in your own music.

You can use other artists’ melodies as inspiration for your song, though. If you take this approach, you have to be very careful you thoroughly change the original artist’s melody, so you’re not plagiarizing. When talking about modifying someone else’s chords I recommended you use more than one of the techniques you learned to make the chords your own. In reference to melody, it’ll become a *requirement* to modify multiple aspects of an existing melody until it sounds nothing like the original. Again, melodies are copyrightable, and it’s imperative that you completely shake the sound of the original, if you’re referencing someone else’s song. You can keep some of its style, but you *have* to make it your own.

In fact, if you use an existing song as a starting point to write your own melodies, I’d recommend showing your melodies to a few friends who can give you some honest feedback. If your friends think these melodies still sound too much like the originals, you’ll want to go back to the drawing board, and make further tweaks. Additionally, if you’re referencing someone else’s melody when writing your own, it’ll best suit you to make sure you’re using different chords beneath that melody. If you do that, the melody most likely won’t be able to match the original as much.

With that being said, we’ll be looking at ways to manipulate the pitches and rhythms of current melodies to create our own. You’ll notice that some of these ideas will be similar to what we learned about changing chord progressions. The nice thing about referencing the melody from a hit song, is you know it has the elements of a hit melody built in, which can help out your own melody a lot.
Truncate the Original Melody and Lengthen the Notes

Let’s say you’re stuck on coming up with a melody, so you start listening to other music for inspiration and you hear a melody that inspires you. Let’s use the first line of the melody heard in “Deck the Halls” as an example.

Aligning the notes with the words, the notes in that part of the melody work out to be something like this:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Deck} & \quad \text{the} & \quad \text{halls} & \quad \text{with} & \quad \text{boughs of} & \quad \text{hol-ly} \\
C & \quad B^\flat & \quad A & \quad G & \quad F & \quad G & \quad A & \quad F
\end{align*}
\]

The song is in 4/4 time and almost all the notes are quarter notes, with one note per beat. Let’s focus on the first four notes, as they have a nice descending pattern. We’ll change the timing of each of the first four notes to give them a new sound. Try playing each of those four notes for two beats each, instead of how it’s currently played. It’ll sound much slower. Play the notes on your piano or guitar if it helps. You can keep the same words for now to make it easier to follow along. Play each of these notes for two beats:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Deck} & \quad \text{the} & \quad \text{halls} & \quad \text{with} \\
C & \quad B^\flat & \quad A & \quad G
\end{align*}
\]

We did two things here. We lengthened the notes and shortened the original melody by chopping off the “boughs of holly” part. We’re left with a new piece of melody we can now use, and repeat in our song. We’ll call this small chunk of melody a motif.
Motifs

Before I move on to another technique, I want to talk more about what melodic motifs are, since we’ll be discussing them a lot in this module.

The best melodies are kept simple, so they’re singable. The main ingredient of melodic simplicity is repetition. But the key is to be repetitious, without being overly repetitious. That’s where the idea of a melodic motif comes in.

A motif is a part of a melody that’s repeated throughout your song. It helps to shape the sound of your song. It’s what makes it memorable. A good motif is not a line of melody that’s repeated over and over again as-is, but it’s one that’s repeated and slightly modified. That makes for a melody that’s both memorable, and not overly repetitious.

Listen to the four lines of melody in the chorus of “Firework,” by Katy Perry, as an example. All four lines start with the same melody, but then each of those four melodic lines ends differently. Sing it out loud to see what I mean. It keeps the chorus familiar and singable, without being overly repetitious.

It’s important to note your song won’t be based on a single motif, but a couple of them. You may have two different motifs that appear in your verses, and a third that happens in your chorus. A good rule of thumb is not to have more than two melodic motifs in each section of your song. It’ll help keep it memorable, without it getting too complicated.

Now that you have a better understanding for what a motif is, let’s go back to the one we just came up with, and use some more techniques to make it our own.
Repeat and Add to the Motif

An example of adding to a motif can be heard in the Beatles song “She Loves You.” The song opens on a motif that happens in the melody when they sing “She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah.” That melodic motif gets repeated twice in the exact same way. The third time they sing it, that melodic motif is changed, slightly, by adding an extra “yeah” at the end of the original motif. Sing it to see what I mean.

For our example, let’s stick with the melody we came up with before as our melodic motif. We’ll change the words “Deck the halls with” to “la la la la” since we’re not going to be keeping those lyrics.

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{C} \quad \text{B}^\flat \quad \text{A} \quad \text{G} \\
&\text{C} \quad \text{B}^\flat \quad \text{A} \quad \text{G} \\
&\text{C} \quad \text{B}^\flat \quad \text{A} \quad \text{G} \quad \text{F}
\end{align*}
\]

Remember, in our melody, we’re playing each of these four notes for two beats, in 4/4 time. That’s our motif in this example, so now we can try adding to it, to make it our own. We’ll say this is part of a verse to our song. Assume all the notes listed below are half notes. You can play along on your guitar or piano, if it helps. So let’s try this:

Melody Line 1
\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{la} \quad \text{la} \quad \text{la} \quad \text{la} \\
&\text{C} \quad \text{B}^\flat \quad \text{A} \quad \text{G}
\end{align*}
\]

Melody Line 2
\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{la} \quad \text{la} \quad \text{la} \quad \text{la} \\
&\text{C} \quad \text{B}^\flat \quad \text{A} \quad \text{G}
\end{align*}
\]

Melody Line 3
\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{la} \quad \text{la} \quad \text{la} \quad \text{la} \quad \text{la} \\
&\text{C} \quad \text{B}^\flat \quad \text{A} \quad \text{G} \quad \text{F}
\end{align*}
\]
All we did was repeat our motif three times, but at the end of the third repetition, we added a half note F, which made the melody sound different and closed it off. That’s how adding to a motif works. You don’t have to keep the added portion as simple as we did here, but it easily lets you see how it works.

**Shorten the Motif and Add Spacing**

Another way we can change the current motif is by keeping the motif the same, but truncating it and adding space where the old melody continued. This is a cool trick for making a melody sound original pretty quickly and easily. Let’s go back to our original reference melody, where each note is two beats:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
la & la & la & la \\
C & B\flat & A & G \\
\end{array}
\]

Now let’s try subtracting from that melody. Again, do everything here on half notes:

**Melody Line 1**
\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
la & la & la & \text{(2 beat rest)} \\
C & B\flat & A & \\
\end{array}
\]

**Melody Line 2**
\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
la & la & la & \text{(2 beat rest)} \\
C & B\flat & A & \\
\end{array}
\]

**Melody Line 3**
\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
la & la & la & la \\
C & B\flat & A & G \\
\end{array}
\]
Here we truncated our reference melody the first two times around and then kept our original idea as a longer third melody line. You could also look at this one as having a lengthened third melody line.

We could apply the idea of shortening the motif and adding spacing in a different way too. We could make the last line the one that gets shortened. Like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Melody Line 1</th>
<th>\</th>
<th>\</th>
<th>\</th>
<th>\</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>\</td>
<td>\</td>
<td>\</td>
<td>\</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C</td>
<td>B♭</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Melody Line 2</th>
<th>\</th>
<th>\</th>
<th>\</th>
<th>\</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>\</td>
<td>\</td>
<td>\</td>
<td>\</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C</td>
<td>B♭</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Melody Line 3</th>
<th>\</th>
<th>\</th>
<th>\</th>
<th>\</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>\</td>
<td>\</td>
<td>\</td>
<td>(2 beat rest)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C</td>
<td>B♭</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Subtract from the Motif**

You’re probably starting to get the idea of how we can chop up our motifs to make memorable and somewhat repetitious melodies. If we decide to shorten a motif, we don’t necessarily have to subtract from the end of a motif, we can also subtract from the beginning of a motif.

The Beatles song “Can’t Buy Me Love” is a good example of that. Look at the first three lines of lyrics:
The melody that happens on the first line, “Can’t buy me love” established the motif for this section of the song. The Beatles didn’t wait until the third time to change the melody. They did it on the second line. They omitted the melody on the words “Can’t buy me…” and only included the melody on the word “love.” By clipping the first part of the original motif, we’re hearing something familiar without hearing the whole motif again. Then, the full motif is repeated on the third line when they go back to the line “Can’t buy me love” again. You can see how memorable that makes the melody.

Keep the Notes and Change the Rhythm

We looked at a similar concept when we were talking about chord progressions in the last module. We can apply this same idea to melodies.

This is also similar to what we talking about in the melody section on lengthening the notes. But here, we’re changing the *entire* rhythm, so some notes may get longer while others can get shorter. The idea is to keep the current song’s notes, while completely changing the rhythm. If you recall, the notes in “Deck the Halls” were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deck</th>
<th>the</th>
<th>halls</th>
<th>with</th>
<th>boughs of</th>
<th>hol-ly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>B♭</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Let’s look at those notes aligned to the beat. The numbers on top represent the beats of the measures:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>laaaa</td>
<td>la</td>
<td>la</td>
<td>la</td>
<td>la</td>
<td>la</td>
<td>la</td>
<td>la</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>B♭</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Let’s try keeping those same notes while changing the rhythm to come up with our own altered melody:

\[
\begin{array}{ccccccc}
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 \\
\text{Laaaaa} & \text{la} & \text{la} & \text{la} & \text{la} & \text{laaaaa} \\
\text{C} & \text{B} & \text{A} & \text{G} & \text{F} & \text{G} \\
\end{array}
\]

If you play these notes on your piano or guitar to the new beats I’ve assigned to them, you’ll see the melody takes on a completely different feel. As I’ve shown, play the first C as a half note for two beats, the next four notes will be eight notes spanning two beats, and the final G will be a half note. So we’ve either shortened or lengthened all of the original notes to give them an entirely new rhythm. As you can hear, if you played along, it doesn’t resemble the melody to “Deck the Halls” at all.

You’ll also notice I deleted the last two notes from the original melody in “Deck the Halls” (the A and the F), which also helped change up the sound of the original melody a bit.

There are endless ways in which I can keep the same notes as an existing melody, while modifying the rhythm, to come up with something new. You can experiment with some other rhythms to see what works best for you.

**Reverse the Order of the Notes**

What we’ve looked at so far were ways of changing the rhythm of an existing melody. As I mentioned at the beginning of this module, melodies are composed of both rhythm and pitch, so now we’ll look at how to change the *notes* of an existing melody to make it your own.

A cool trick to try for changing the notes of a melody is to keep the rhythm exactly the same, but invert the notes. So you’ll play all the exact same notes, but they’ll be in reverse order. Let’s take a look at the rhythm and notes of “Deck the Halls” again:
Now let’s invert the melody to create a new one:

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccc}
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 \\
\text{laaaaa} & \text{la} & \text{la} & \text{la} & \text{la} & \text{la} & \text{la} & \text{la} \\
\text{C} & \text{Bb} & \text{A} & \text{G} & \text{F} & \text{G} & \text{A} & \text{F} \\
\end{array}
\]

If you played along with that, you’ll see that the melody sounds pretty different from that of “Deck the Halls,” even though the rhythm is the same. All I did was reverse the order of the notes. Of course, this idea won’t work with a song that has a single note melody.

You can also try scrambling the notes in a random order, as opposed to just reversing them, while keeping the same rhythm, to see what possibilities it will present. You can even experiment with changing both the notes and the rhythm to really get a melody that’s completely original. I recommend trying that as well.
The Do It Yourself Method

Finding Your Own Inspiration for Your Music

Use the Notes in Your Chords

If you’re stuck on coming up with a melody and you don’t want to reference someone else’s, an easy place to get started is to experiment with using the notes in your chords as a basis for your melody.

For example, let’s say you have a verse that switches back and forth between a C chord and a G chord. Knowing that a C chord is composed of the notes C, E and G, you can use those three notes as a basis for your melody when you’re playing the C chord. A G chord has the notes G, B and D, so when you switch to the G, you can use those three notes in your melody.

You still want to write with motifs, as we discussed earlier, so you can compose a motif that will span both of these chords. Maybe the notes of your melody become C – E – G, over the C chord and then G – B – G over the G chord. So your motif will be composed of the notes C – E – G – G – B – G, over the C and G chords. You can experiment with different rhythms for the notes to see what works best, but this can be a good place to start. You can use some of the techniques we looked at in the Find Inspiration Method as a basis for tweaking the rhythm of the notes you come up with.

Modes

When coming up with melodies, it’s important to talk about different modes (Ionian, Dorian, Lydian, etc.), as they’ll generally be the basis for your melodic motifs. In the last module, we talked about the different modes and how you can use their chords to come up with chord progressions for your songs. Here, we’ll look at how you can put their scales on top of those chords to write your melodies.
Whichever mode your song is in, you can use that mode to create melodies. In the previous module on chord progressions, we learned your song can be in the key of C Ionian, D Aeolian, G Mixolydian, or any other possible combination of notes and modes based on the chords you’re playing.

If your song uses C Ionian chords, you can use any of the seven notes of the C major scale over your chords to come up with a melody. Once you’ve established a melodic motif, you can modify it by using any of the techniques we’ve already discussed as part of the Find Inspiration Method.

I won’t go through every mode here, since the concept is the same for each one, and we already discussed all the different modes in the last module. However, I will be providing you with charts in The Chord and Melody Writing Cheat Sheet for the modes we’ve looked at, in each key. This way you’ll be able to use them as a reference when you’re coming up with a new melody over any chords. You’ll know exactly what notes will work for the mode you’re in, and you can mess around with them accordingly.

With that being said, we’ll look at an example of what I’m talking about in the key of D Aeolian. Let’s say the chords in our song are Dm – Gm – Am. We know this is D Aeolian, because when referencing the chord charts with all the different modes, D Aeolian is the only one that has all three of these chords, when Dm is the root chord, or the I chord. Therefore, we can use the D Aeolian scale to come up with a melody on top of these chords. If you remember back to our earlier discussion on modes, the Aeolian mode relates back to the Ionian mode by having a flatted third, sixth and seventh notes. So in relation to Ionian, it is:

1 2 3♭ 4 5 6♭ 7♭ 1

Since we’re working in D Aeolian here, the notes will be:

D E F G A B♭ C D
Since our chords are in D Aeolian, we can use the notes of the D Aeolian mode to come up with melodies over our chords. Record a chord progression of Dm – Gm – Am with any rhythm you’d like. Then play around with the notes of the D Aeolian scale over that progression to see if you can come up with a melodic motif you like. Remember, you’re not soloing here. Instead you’re looking for a short catchy piece of melody you can use and modify to become the basis for your melody. I’ve included guitar tabs for the different modes in *The Chord and Melody Writing Cheat Sheet*, so you can easily use it as a reference when writing melodies if you play the guitar. You can develop the melody on your guitar or piano, and then sing it once you’ve found the notes and a rhythm you’re happy with.

This concept applies to each mode. You don’t have to memorize all the notes in all the modes (although it wouldn’t hurt). As I said, I’ve provided charts for you with all of the chords of the major and minor modes, along with the scales and tabs that go along with them in a separate document that came with this book. As long as you know what mode your song is in, you can use the charts to come up with a melody for your chords. If you’re not sure what key your song is in, just assume the first chord is the key. Then go to the charts and see which of your chords are in the appropriate mode.

For example, if I didn’t know the track we just played was in D Aeolian, I could assume we’re in a minor D key, just because the first chord of our song is a Dmin. Because of that our song is likely to be in either D Dorian, D Aeolian, or D Phrygian. I’d then go to the leftmost column of those three chord charts in *The Chord and Melody Writing Cheat Sheet* and find the “D.” That’s the key. Now we need to figure out the mode. So far, we only know it’s minor a key.

Look at the rest of the chords in our progression. We have: Dm, Gm and Am. If I look at the key of D Dorian, it has a Dm and Am, but it has a G major chord, instead of a Gmin. So we’re not in Dorian. If we look at the chart for the key of D Phrygian, we’ll see it has a Dm and a Gm, but it’s A chord is diminished, so we’re not in D Phrygian either. When we look at the chart for D Aeolian, we’ll see that all three of our chords are there: Dm, Am and Gm. So we’re in D Aeolian and we can use the D Aeolian scale as a basis for our melodies.
Pentatonic & Blues Scales

You’re not limited to using the scale of your song’s mode to come up with melodies. You have other options too. The pentatonic and blues scales are also great melody writing tools.

Major Pentatonic

The major pentatonic scale is based on the Ionian mode, but it only has five notes in it, hence the “penta-“ prefix. The major pentatonic scale can be thought of as the root, second, third, fifth and sixth notes of the Ionian mode. In other words, it looks like this:

1 2 3 5 6 1

So the C Major Pentatonic scale would be:

C D E G A C

Play it to hear what it sounds like. If you’re a guitar player, the first position of the C major pentatonic will play out like this on your fretboard:

-------------------------------------
-------------------------------------
-------------------------------------
-------------------------------------
-------------------------------------
7----10---
7----10---
8----10---

The cool thing about the major pentatonic scale is that it can be played over any chord progression in a major key. That includes the Ionian, Lydian and Mixolydian modes. You can use the notes in the C major pentatonic scale (C, D, E, G, A) to come up with a melody for a song in C Ionian, C Lydian or C Mixolydian. It’ll work with all three major modes, so it’s fairly universal in that sense. Experiment with this scale to find out what works best with your style.
Most importantly, trust your ears. They'll tell you whether or not something's working for your song.

As long as you stick to those five notes, your melody will be based on the C Major Pentatonic scale. You can riff around on those notes and see what you come up with. You can play them in any order, in any octave, with any note lengths. Just stick to those five notes. It may be helpful for you to play the notes on a guitar or piano, so you can clearly hear where they are. Then you can hum or sing them as a melody.

**Major Blues**

Just like the major pentatonic scale, the major blues scale can also be played over any chord progression in a major key. If you add one little note to the major pentatonic scale, it becomes the major blues scale. That note is a flatted third. So in relation to the major scale, the major blues scale is defined as:

```
1  2  3♭  3  5  6  1
```

The C Major Blues scale would be:

```
C  D  E♭  E  G  A  C
```

It'll look like this on the fretboard:

```
-----------------------------------------
-----------------------------------------
-----------------------------------------
-----------------------------------------
-----------------------------------------
-----------------------7----10---
-----------------------7----10---
---8----10---11------------------------
```
Play it. Do you hear that bluesy texture the extra flatted third note adds? It’s a bluesy, rock kind of feel. As long as we stick to those six notes in our melody, our melody will be based on the C major blues scale. So riff around on those notes and see what you come up with.

**Minor Pentatonic**

In the same way the major pentatonic scale uses only five of the notes of the major (Ionian) scale, the minor pentatonic uses only five notes of the natural minor (Aeolian) scale. It uses only the first, third, fourth, fifth and seventh notes of the natural minor scale.

So relating back to the *natural minor scale* (not the major scale), the minor pentatonic uses these notes:

\[
1 \quad 3 \quad 4 \quad 5 \quad 7 \quad 1
\]

The C minor pentatonic scale would be:

\[
\text{C} \quad \text{E}^\flat \quad \text{F} \quad \text{G} \quad \text{B}^\flat \quad \text{C}
\]

It’ll look like this on the fretboard:

```
--------------------------------------------------
--------------------------------------------------
--------------------------------------------------
--------------------------------------------------
--------------------------------------------------
8----10-----
--------------------------------------------------
8----10-----
8----11-----
```

Play it to hear what it sounds like.
As long as we stick to those five notes, our melody will be based on the C minor pentatonic scale. The cool thing about the minor pentatonic scale is that it can be played over *any* chord progression in *any* key, major or minor. That includes the Ionian, Lydian, Mixolydian, Dorian, Aeolian and Phrygian modes. You can use the notes in the C minor pentatonic scale (C, E♭, F, G, B♭) to come up with a melody for a song in the major keys of C Ionian, C Lydian or C Mixolydian, and you can also use the scale to come up with melodies for the minor keys of C Dorian, C Aeolian, or C Phrygian. It'll work with all six of those modes, so it’s very universal.

Now you may be saying “But this is a minor scale! How come I can play it over a chord progression in a major key?” *That’s* the power of the minor pentatonic scale. Unlike the other scales, it can be played over practically any chord progression, major or minor, and it will sound good. It’s sort of a shortcut to coming up with melodies, if you don’t know whether a song is in a major or minor key. But again, I encourage you to experiment with this scale to find out what works best with your style, and to get a feel for the sounds it creates.

Try taking the chords from one of your songs, and see if you could come up with a new melody for it, based on the minor pentatonic scale. It’ll help give you a feel for the sounds that scale has to offer. Then try it over another one of your songs to see how it varies over a different chord progression.

**Minor Blues**

The minor blues scale is the same as the minor pentatonic, with the addition of the blue note. This time the blue note is the addition of a flatted fifth, in reference to the natural minor (Aeolian) scale. So the minor blues scale uses the first, third, fourth, flatted fifth, fifth and seventh notes of the natural minor scale. The cool part is, the same deal applies for the minor blues scale as applies to the minor pentatonic scale. You can use it over *both* major or minor keys.
Relating back to the natural minor scale (not the major scale), the minor blues scale uses only these notes:

1 3 4 5♭ 5 7 1

The C minor blues scale would be:

C E♭ F G♭ G B♭ C

Again, if you’re a guitar player, it’ll look like this on the fretboard:

--------------------------------------------------  
--------------------------------------------------  
--------------------------------------------------  
--------------------------------------------------8----10----  
--------------8----9----10---------------  
--8----11-------------------------------

If our melody holds to those six notes it’ll be based on the C minor pentatonic scale. Try jamming around on those notes over a chord progression in C that’s major, or minor. You can do it with your guitar or piano and then translate that to a vocal later. Try to come up with a short catchy motif.

If you’re hard-pressed for melodies and you don’t know (or care) if your song is in a major or minor key, the minor pentatonic and minor blues scales are a cool place to start. Just play a recording of your song’s chord progression, and head on over to your keyboard or guitar and start tooling around on those scales. See what you come up with. There’s usually some cool stuff hiding out in those five or six little notes. Have fun experimenting with them.
These scales will sound better over certain chord progressions and musical styles than others, but they're worth trying out if you're in a rut with coming up with a melody. You're bound to be able to get something from them.

These scales may not be something you want use every single time you write a melody, as your melodies could potentially start to sound similar, but it’s nice to have them in your back pocket, if you need them.

**Pentatonic and Blues Scales Summary**

You can see we’ve got some flexibility when we use the major and minor pentatonic and blues scales as a basis for our melodies. As long as you’re in any major key (whether it’s Lydian, Ionian or Mixolydian) you can use the major blues or pentatonic scales to write melodies. What’s even cooler is you can use the minor pentatonic and blues scales to write melodies in any key, major or minor. It’s pretty powerful stuff for coming up with melodies.

The pentatonic and blues scales are great “shortcut” scales for coming up with great melodies, because they sound good because of the reduced number of notes. Remember, those scales are simply based on some of our other scales, with some notes omitted (and then adding a blue note in the case of the blues scales).

I’ve provided a chart of the major and minor pentatonic and blues scales in each key in *The Chord and Melody Writing Cheat Sheet* for your reference as you come up with melodies. It includes guitar tabs for them as well.
Organize Your Pitches Into Patterns

Now that we know the scales, we have a basis for our melodies. It’s always worth experimenting with just jamming on the scale in your key, over a recording of your chord progression. If you do this on a piano or guitar, it can be a great way to come up with some cool ideas for melodic motifs.

But if just knowing the scales and hoping you can stumble upon a melody isn’t enough for you, we can also look at some ways to specifically modify the scales to come up with melodies. Let’s look at a few ways to force out a melodic motif.

Simple repetition

This one’s easy. You just repeat the same note over and over. It’s actually a great way to experiment with different rhythms to use in your melody, because if you only have one note in your melody, the only variable becomes the rhythm.

If you use this approach, it usually works best to make a slight note change at the end. Katy Perry’s “Part of Me” is a good example of this. The first few lines of melody in the song are all sung on one note, until the very last note of the line. Then there’s a change.

An Ascending Pattern

Using an ascending scale pattern can be an easy way to come up with a melodic motif. You can experiment with different ascending patterns in addition to different rhythms. For example, you can try using the first, second, third and fifth notes of your scale. I’ll denote that like this: 1 – 2 – 3 – 5. Or you can try the 1 – 3 – 5 notes of your scale. You can even try repeating notes on your way up your motif. Maybe the notes of your melody will do something like this: 1 – 1 – 2 – 2 – 3. Try out each ascending pattern with different rhythms to present yourself with a bunch of potential motif ideas.
A Descending Pattern
If we can have an ascending pattern as our motif, then we could also use a descending pattern in the same way. You can use the notes of your scale to create patterns like: $5 - 5 - 1$, or $3 - 2 - 1$. There are a ton of opportunities here too.

A Zig Zagging Pattern
Zig zagging the notes of a scale is another way to come up with “shapes” for the pitches in your melodic motif. To create a pattern like this, you would simply jump up and then back down, and then back up again. Something like: $1 - 5 - 3 - 8$ would be an example of a zig zagging melodic pattern.

Raise the Pitches
Once you have a pattern established, you can modify that motif, by keeping the rhythm the same while raising its pitch the next time you hear it. For example, if the notes you’ve established in your motif are $E - F - G$, you can change them to $F - G - A$ the second time they’re sung. If you do this, you can keep the rhythm the same as it was in your original motif, but now you’re modifying your motif based solely on the pitches being presented.

When you’re experimenting with any of these different ways to organize the pitches of a scale to create a melody, you should also experiment with the rhythm of your notes. You can try playing all the notes as eight notes, then holding out the last note as a half note. Then try reversing that order. As you saw in the Find Inspiration Method of this module, keeping the same notes, but changing the rhythm can give you a wide variety of sounds to come up with.

In the Find Inspiration Method, we also looked at some ways to modify a motif to keep it interesting throughout your sections. Once you’ve established your motif by organizing the pitches of a scale in a pattern, you can modify it in the same ways you saw earlier.
Contrast Your Sections

Earlier in this book, we talked about the different sections of a song and how each section functions. What primarily sets the different sections of a song apart from each other, is contrast between each section. In the last module, we looked at some ways for creating contrast from section to section by using your chord progressions. Here we’ll look at some ways to create contrast in your songs by using your melodies. Of course if you contrast both your chord progressions and your melodies together, you’re likely to find the best results of all.

Vocal Range

This is a big one, because it’s so effective. It’s pretty common in many popular songs to have the verses sung in a lower register, and then the choruses sung close to the top of the singer’s vocal range. It’s a great way to let you know when one section has ended and another is beginning. Also, when the chorus is sung higher than the verses and bridge, it’s a great way to make your chorus stand out, which is what it’s supposed to do.

Another way to incorporate vocal range as a way to distinguish one section from another is to keep a very tight vocal range in your verses, but then use a much wider vocal range in your choruses. A good example of this can be heard in the song “Brighter Than the Sun,” by Colbie Caillat. In her verses, she keeps her vocals in a pretty tight knit range, staying mainly between a G and a D the entire time. But once she hits the chorus, she jumps up an octave to a higher G, and hops around within a full octave to get her catchy hook across.

The Rhythm of the Notes

As we discussed earlier, a melody is composed of rhythm and pitch. While changing your vocal range from section to section is a way to achieve contrast with your pitch, you can also change the rhythm of your melody from verse to chorus to bridge to achieve contrast.
If you have short choppy notes in your verses, you can use longer, more drawn out notes in your choruses. If you have a lot of space between the phrases in your verses, you can use almost no space between the phrases in your choruses.

In other words, if you establish one rhythmic idea in your verses, by simply changing it to its opposite in the choruses, you’ll be creating a nice contrast for your melody. A great example of changing the rhythm of each section happens in the song “It’s the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)” by R.E.M. The melody in the verses is very quick, and choppy, while the chorus melody is much more drawn out.

This same idea is used in the song “Over the Rainbow” by Judy Garland. The verses have very drawn out melodies, while the bridge has much shorter choppier notes, starting on the line “Someday I wish upon a star.” It makes for a very effective contrast.

**Start the Melody on a Different Beat**

This is a good one, that’s often not considered. The beat you start your melody on can affect the mood of your song. A lot of times songwriters write their melodies starting on the downbeat (or the first beat) of a measure, because it tends to come more naturally to do so. If you do that all the time, it can become tedious. That’s why if your chorus starts every melodic line on a downbeat, it can be an effective strategy to start your verse’s melodic lines on a beat other than the downbeat.

It’s also important to note that whatever word lands on the downbeat will tend to be the most highlighted in your phrase. That’s why if the title of your song is one word, and it falls on the first beat of a measure, it can be an effective move for highlighting the title. We’ll talk a lot more about that in the next module on lyric writing.
Tips & Tricks
Here are some additional tips and tricks to help open your melodic flood gates.

Practice Makes Perfect
Obviously, the more you do something, the better you'll get at it. For that reason you should be writing melodies every day. If you don’t have the time for that, that’s okay. A great tip I learned from hit songwriter Clay Drayton, is to constantly be putting melodies to phrases, sayings and signs you come across in your everyday life. If you see a street sign that says “Mulberry Road,” sing a melody to that.

A lot of what you come up might not be that good, but that’s okay. Writing melodies is a skill to be developed. The more you do it, the better you’ll get.

Plus, this exercise will fine tune your mind to be more melody conscious. When it’s time to write a song, writing a melody will come more easily to you. If you’re carrying around something to record your ideas, you can easily capture something you like, and use it in a song when it’s time to write.

Using Nonsense Syllables
Great melodies are memorable and singable. As a result, they’re usually fairly simple. Our minds like simple. In terms of music and melody writing, simple means easy to remember, repetitious and easy to sing along to. As songwriters, a lot of times we like to overcomplicate our melodies. One of the ways we do this is by writing lyrics that are too wordy. Wordy lyrics can get in the way of your melody and overcomplicate it enough so that it’s barely even melodic anymore.

Think about how much easier it would be if you didn’t have to focus on lyrics, but just on the melody. That’s actually an approach used in a lot of hit songs. What if you could use simple one-syllable sounds instead of words? Then your wordy lyric problem would go away, and
you’d find yourself focusing only on a melody. Plus if your words are just simple sounds, your melodies become simple too, because simple melodies plus simple words/sounds go hand in hand.

For that reason, if you write a simple melody where there are no words, but just vocal sounds, it can make your song more marketable. Let’s look at a few examples of when this has been done.

• In the first few measures of Pink’s song, “So What” she sings the whole intro by repeating “nah.”

• In the first 45 seconds of Lady Gaga’s “Bad Romance,” the intro is all vocal sounds, with the exception of the phrase “caught in a bad romance.”

• In the first ten seconds of “King of Anything” by Sara Bareilles, the melody is sung entirely on the sound “oh.”

• Aerosmith’s “Love in an Elevator” starts its memorable melody entirely on hums.

• In Alice in Chains’ classic rock hit, “Man in a Box,” the vocal intro has no real words at all.

• In Cream’s “I Feel Free,” there are multiple layers of non-words happening in the intro (with the exception of the phrase “I feel free” that keeps popping in).

• The first few bars of “From Me to You” by the Beatles makes use of nonsense syllables to support its melody. And don’t forget they also wrote “Oh-Bla-Di, Oh-Bla-Da.” Simple sounds are even in the title on that one.
If you’re not familiar with any of these songs, I recommend you check them out to see how catchy their melodies are without any actual lyrics. These examples come from pop songs and rock songs alike.

Obviously, you can’t just have silly sounds repeat throughout your entire song if you want to keep it marketable. You’ll need some real lyrics. But if you start a song this way, it can rope in your listeners from the very beginning, the same way all of the examples above did. Then you can repeat that melody throughout your song. If you do that, you’re establishing a melodic motif that you can work from when you write the rest of your melody (which will have lyrics). If you write the nonsense lyric part first, the rest of your melody will be easier to write, because you’ll already have a piece of your melody established. Once you have that, the rest will flow.

You can use this concept, even if you don’t keep the nonsense syllables in your song. You might simply find it more freeing to just write an easy melody with simple vocal sounds, without having to think of any words. Then you can put words to it later, if you want. It’s certainly worth trying, if you’re stuck in a melody writing rut. And if the nonsense syllables work, you can keep them. It certainly worked for all the songs you saw above.

**Making Your Listeners Want to Hear Your Song… One More Time**

One technique which I think is a great little trick to keep your listeners coming back to your songs is to establish a catchy melody throughout your song, and then at the very end of the song, cut that melodic motif short and leave them wanting more.

The best example I can think of this happens in the song, “We Are the Champions,” by Queen. The chorus repeats three times in the song. The first two times we hear the chorus, it ends on Freddie Mercury singing the phrase “… Of the world,” after singing the line “We are the champions.” In the last chorus, at the very end of the song, that phrase “of the world” is omitted and the song ends on “We are the champions.” By simply omitting the line “Of the World,” they make you want to hear that song over and over again.
It’s important to note that had Queen simply omitted the line “Of the world” from the song entirely, we wouldn’t be craving it at the end. Instead, they established a standard with that line during the song, and then they deleted it at the very end of the song. That’s what makes us want to hear it again. We were given something and then it was taken away.
Last Note

We can modify the pitches and lengths of an existing melody to make it our own, or we can use chords and scales as a basis to come up with new melodies. Of course, just popping out a melody off the top of our heads is always an option too, but we’re trying to look at some more concrete songwriting approaches in this book.

Whichever approach you use, now you’ve got some options for writing melodies. If you just use a handful of the techniques learned in this module, you should never have melodic writer’s block again. Plus you’ll be writing melodies people will actually be excited to hear.