

Linking Your Vocals and Guitar Through Parallel Melodies

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Songwriting, at a fundamental level, involves the uniting of melody and harmony: the singing of a melody, and its union with a supporting harmony. For soloist singer/songwriter/guitarists, this accompanying harmony is created and played on guitar. For many bands, too, the guitar is the main conveyor of harmony. In cases such as these, one very simple way of adding interest to a song is by paralleling a melody that's sung with a melody that's played on guitar.

In the simplest approach to this, a melody played on guitar replicates the vocal melody (or a portion of it), duplicating it note for note, sometimes in a higher octave.

A somewhat more subtle approach involves having a guitar melody parallel the

vocal melody—not pitch for pitch or in the octave, but at an intervallic distance. Here, consonant (that is, “smooth-sounding”) intervals can be used to establish a relationship between the two melodies.

In the example below, the vocal melody is the sung line, “I love you.” Below it, a simple, fingerpicked guitar part is shown. Notice that the guitar part's upper notes parallel the vocal melody in thirds (that is, its uppermost notes follow the same rhythmic pattern and melodic contour as the vocal melody, but at a set distance from it: three pitches higher). This links the guitar to the vocals in a way that reinforces both. To get a feel for it, try the example below (which continues on the next page):

The musical score is set in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The vocal melody is written in a soprano clef and consists of the lyrics "I love you," with notes corresponding to the syllables. The guitar accompaniment is written in a treble clef and features a fingerpicked pattern. The guitar part's upper notes parallel the vocal melody in thirds. The score includes four guitar chord diagrams: G (x000x), Am (x0231), G (x00x), and G (x000x). The guitar part is also accompanied by a bass line with fingerings for the thumb (T), index (A), and middle (B) fingers.

T	0	1	3	0
A	0	2	0	0
B	0	2	0	0
	3	0	3	3

The image shows a musical score for the song "I love you." in 4/4 time, key of G major. The vocal melody is written in a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The lyrics "I love you." are written below the vocal line. The guitar accompaniment is written in a treble clef, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The guitar part consists of a series of chords: G, D7/F#, G, and G. The guitar chord diagrams are shown above the guitar staff. The guitar staff shows a series of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F#5, G5. The guitar chord diagrams are: G (3 000), D7/F# (2 031), G (3 000), and G (3 4). The guitar staff shows a series of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F#5, G5. The guitar chord diagrams are: G (3 000), D7/F# (2 031), G (3 000), and G (3 4). The guitar staff shows a series of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F#5, G5. The guitar chord diagrams are: G (3 000), D7/F# (2 031), G (3 000), and G (3 4).

You can get even more intricate by having the guitar play a melody that parallels the vocal melody rhythmically, but does not follow the same melodic contour. You would still use intervals to establish a relationship between the two melodies, but in this case the interval used would change from note to note, and the two melodies wouldn't remain a fixed distance apart.

Whichever of these approaches you adopt, the question arises: How do you know which intervals to use in creating parallel melodies? Though this is not without its subtleties, there are some general guidelines you can follow. Here are a few:

- **Thirds** and **sixths** tend to be safe to use.
- **Fourths**, when used in moderation, tend to be relatively safe.
- **Fifths** occurring occasionally between voice

and guitar are okay, but are generally considered to weaken the harmony if overused, or if used in succession (two or more fifths in a row).

- The same holds true, even more so, for **octaves** and **unisons**, as for fifths.
- **Seconds** and **sevenths** are dissonant ("harsh-sounding") intervals that are best used only when certain conditions are met with regard to their introduction and resolution—a fairly involved topic. Unless you have a grasp of it, you may, for the time being, want to sidestep use of these intervals, or learn more about them through methods such as counterpoint and harmony.
- The same holds true, even more so, for **unnaturally sharpened or flatted intervals** (flatted seconds, sharpened fifths, etc.), as for seconds and sevenths. □

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About the Author: Jon Anthony Collins is a performing singer/songwriter/guitarist from New York City, and a teacher of music and guitar. He's the founder of Tanager Press (<http://www.tanagerpress.com>), which publishes books and ebooks for singer/songwriters, guitarists, composers, and others involved in the music field. He's the author of *Impressionistic Guitar*, *Counterpoint: A Step-By-Step eCourse*, and several *Crash Courses* in areas of music pertaining to guitar playing, songwriting, and composition.