



# Functional Chord Melody

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Functional chord melody is a term I use for the ability to make up arrangements on the fly, to use all of the musical information you know and blend it together into an expressive and cohesive musical statement. This technique is most commonly used in solo, duo with bass, and trio with bass and drum settings.

- Melody is the MOST important thing, chords should NEVER interfere with the phrasing and flow
- Just like your solos, the theme and the texture of the statement should develop
- While chord melody by definition sounds as if chords and lines are always simultaneous, it is actually a variety of techniques:

In its simplest fashion, functional chord melody is a mixture of melody, harmonized melody and chordal response to melody (which might be called comping or call and response).

In order to really *play* a functional chord melody you must be able to swing the tune in single line fashion. This is mandatory. If you cannot do this, it should be practiced first! Once you are comfortable with the melody and have an awareness of the basic harmony, you are ready to begin.

There are simple things you can do with the basic chords that create motion or the appearance of motion and assist in the rhythmic flow or swing of the performance in their basic forms:

- **Diatonic:** Playing scalar ideas or harmonized voicings (often referred to as modes)
- **Inner voice movement:** Moving tones (commonly called voice leading) inside a voicing is a great way to create movement and direction without a bunch of new harmonic data being thrust on the tune or listener. First try the 5th. Move it chromatically up to the 6th and back. I'm sure you'll recognize having heard this in many people's playing. If it is a dominant 7th chord, go up to that tone from the 5th and back down (maybe to the flatted 5th?). The major 7th +11? Minor major 7th etc. With a dominant 7th chord, another effective movement in use is the b9 to #9. You probably play it in blocks all of the time.
- **Parallel:** Chord voicings always work when moved in parallel fashion and are very easy on the guitar! Smooth resolution is affected if all of the notes resolve in a uniform way. While chromatic resolution is the smoothest and easiest, try other sequential groupings.
- **Harmonic:** This is a large group, one that consists of substitutions, chromatic (parallel and other) and superimposed progressions. For "function" it is important that you NEVER interrupt the flow or try to stuff so much in that you arrest the melodic and rhythmic flow. Harmony is color and should be your last consideration.

## Examples:

An Aminor chord: The first harmonic thing would be to create motion from and back to that chord. The most obvious is Aminor to E7 and back to Aminor. Or A minor to Bb7 to Aminor. In the last case, it contained what is often referred to as the tritone substitution. Regardless of its name, I'm sure you recognize its relativity to the parallel concept with only one different note. It is also contained in the moving voice section as the notes in the chord except the root is the same as the chord it is replacing and its 5th to 6th motion is the same as the b9 and #9 of E7 (the original chord)

You might also create progressions:

Aminor, F#m7b5, E7b9



Handwritten musical notation on a staff with guitar chord diagrams below. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and a sequence of notes with stems and flags. Above the staff, there are arrows indicating string bends or slides: a downward arrow, a vertical line with an upward arrow, and another upward arrow. The chord diagrams are labeled as follows:

- $E-4$
- $A^7$  (with "Optional Counterline" written above it)
- $D-7$
- $D-7$
- $G-7$
- $D^b7^11$  (Sobba)  $G-7$

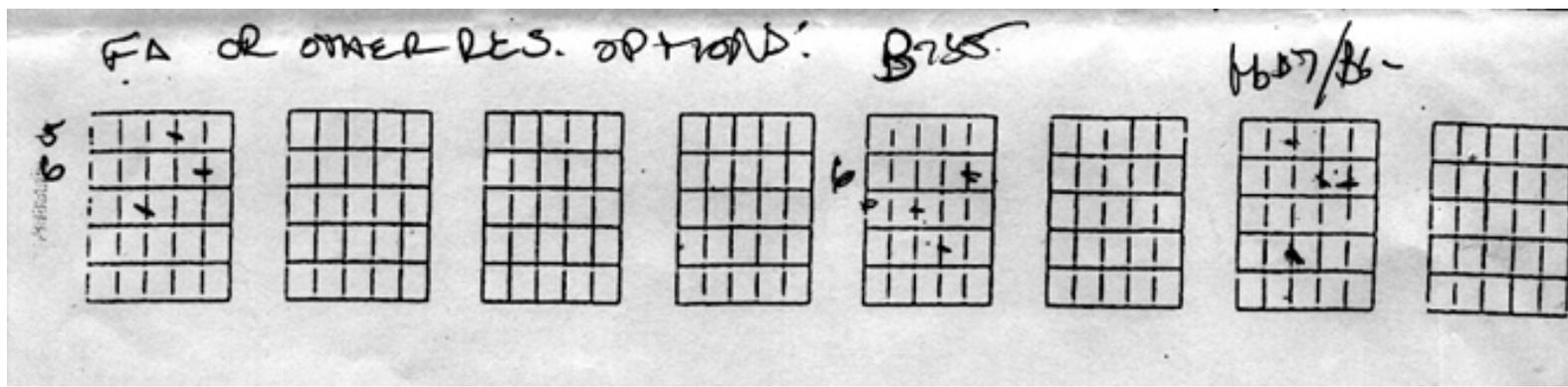
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- $C9$  (with "Passing chords C7, C9" written above it)
- $F2$
- $A9$
- $D-$
- $B^b11$
- $E9$

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- $F6$  or  $F^b7$
- $F6$
- $F^b7$

At the bottom right, there is a signature: "Pick ONE'S".



Play the note(s) written and then play the corresponding chord (above). When you see a note with an arrow pointing to a chord diagram, you may play the chord and melody simultaneously or the melody note first. When one or more chords are in succession without a melody tone below, play them as a progression, setting up the next part of the melody.

Chords may be played as blocks (with a full strum), or broken, (in finger style or picked fashion).



**About the author**

Bruce Forman, acclaimed a "prodigious talent" by Down Beat, has developed his dazzling guitar signature over 20-plus years as a professional musician. Embracing the spirit of musical freedom expressed by bebop wizards Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Wes Montgomery and others, Bruce has cultivated what Option Magazine calls "a truly original style." In JazzTimes, Barney Kessel "Bruce Forman is one of the great lights of our age". Leader, as well as sideman, with many of the greatest names in jazz, Bruce has performed at most major jazz festivals and clubs around the world. Luminaries such as Stanley Turrentine, Grover Washington, Bobby Hutcherson, Ray Brown, Eddie Jefferson and Richie Cole have featured him in their bands. Visit Bruce on the web at <http://www.bruceforman.com>



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