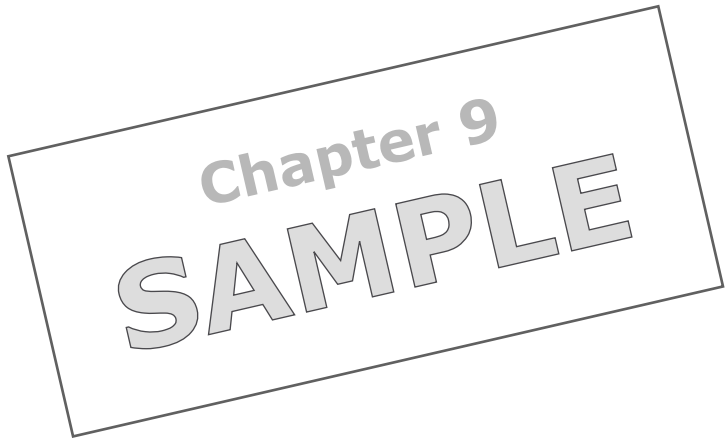


PLEASE NOTE -

The audio player for this book sample (see lower right sidebar) is the embed player provided by Spotify. By default, it will only play a 30 second preview of each song, taken randomly from the middle of the song track. To hear the full tracks from the beginning, you must log in with a free Spotify account, then come back and refresh this page. This is important, because most of the musical elements being discussed occur at or near the start of each song.

Unfortunately, Spotify does not provide full tracks when you use their embed player with iPads or Safari. For this reason, you will need to use a laptop or desktop with either a Firefox, Chrome, or Edge browser to hear the full songs in the player.

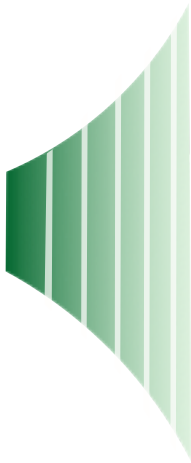
If you prefer, you can bypass the player completely and go directly to the playlist page on the Spotify website. Just use the “Alternate Link” button at the bottom, which will open Spotify in either a new tab or a new window. You will then have to resize (shrink) the new Spotify window so it fits on the right side of the chapter text.

The audio player provided in the paid version of Spinning Gold is a much-improved CUSTOM AUDIO PLAYER, built exclusively for this website. It will always play the full song on any laptop, desktop, or tablet with all major browsers.

CHAPTER 9
MELODIC ID

Why do some melodies stick in your head — easy to remember and instantly recognizable — while others don't? This opening chapter of Spinning Gold, Volume 2 will give an answer, discussing various musical elements that help define a "weak" vs. "strong" pop / rock melody.

Essential Concepts / Skills
covered in chapter 9



Recognizing weak vs. strong "melodic ID" in pop & rock melodies, as determined by the following melodic elements –

- **range and variety of pitches**
- **contour, interval size (step-wise motion vs. leaps)**
- **use of sequences**
- **note and phrase lengths**
- **melody / lyric connection**
- **songwriting: creating focal points with melodic devices**

Weak Melodic ID

Some pop & rock songs have a melody with a "strong ID" meaning that the tune is memorable and recognizable just by whistling or humming it. In these songs the melody has enough interest and character to stand on its own, without background instruments or the original recording.

However, there are probably more pop & rock hits with a "weak melodic ID" — ie. if you took the vocal melody and played it on a piano or a flute, it would be nearly impossible to identify the song from the melody alone. In fact, if only the melody line is played without

words, it would be hard for most listeners to distinguish the difference between many famous pop & rock songs, such as Led Zeppelin's "When the Levee Breaks," Elvis's "Jailhouse Rock," Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama," or Tim McGraw's "Down on the Farm."

In Chapter Four (Volume 1), we mentioned that in these pieces the artistic interest lies in other musical elements besides melody, such as a driving, syncopated rhythm or a unique timbre on the guitar or synthesizer. This is why some songs that sounded great on the original recording just don't translate well to marching band or string quartet, no matter how good the musicians are.

The weak melodic character of many rock songs should come as no surprise, since so much of pop & rock music over the last 70 years has been influenced by American blues, a music with a generally weak melodic ID. Of course blues has obvious power and strength in other musical elements like rhythm, lyrics, or vocal timbre. But the basic melodic outline — aside from improvised vocal embellishments — is rather simple, often alternating between only two or three notes. Blues-based pop & rock melodies usually have the following characteristics -

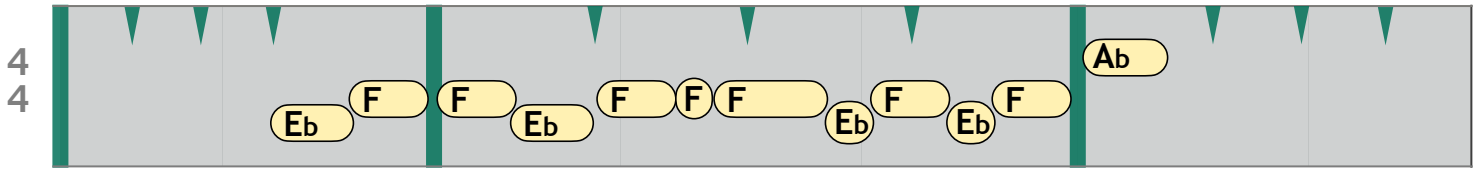
Characteristics of a Weak Melody

- ★ ***FEW PITCHES*** (often only 2 or 3 different notes)
- ★ ***NARROW RANGE*** (often only half an octave)
- ★ ***BASICALLY FLAT CONTOUR***
- ★ ***DEPENDENT ON OTHER ELEMENTS TO CREATE ARTISTIC INTEREST*** (rhythm, harmony, timbre, lyrics)

Def Leppard's 1992 song "Let's Get Rocked" offers a good example of weak melodic ID. As you can see below, the melody has **only 3 pitches** (Eb, F and Ab), with the Eb and Ab revolving around the home pitch of F. The **contour is basically flat** and the **range is very narrow**. START LISTENING AT **0:23**.

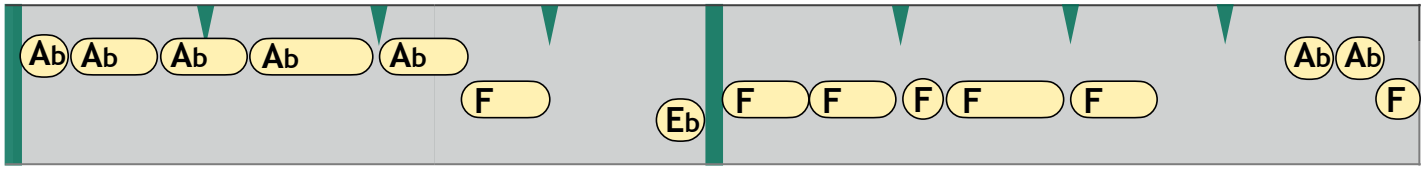
For AUDIO, see the "Song Examples" playlist in the right sidebar, and click on track 1 song title. To navigate within the audio track, slide the progress bar forward to the desired starting point.

"Let's Get Rocked" — Def Leppard — 1992 | **F blues** | 1

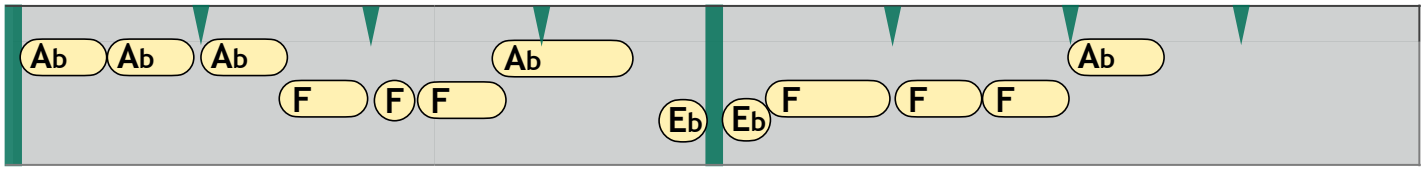


0:23 VERSE

I'm your aver-age or - din-ar - y . . . . . .



. . . . . what I ___ did. I got a



mil - lion . . . . . don't a - gree

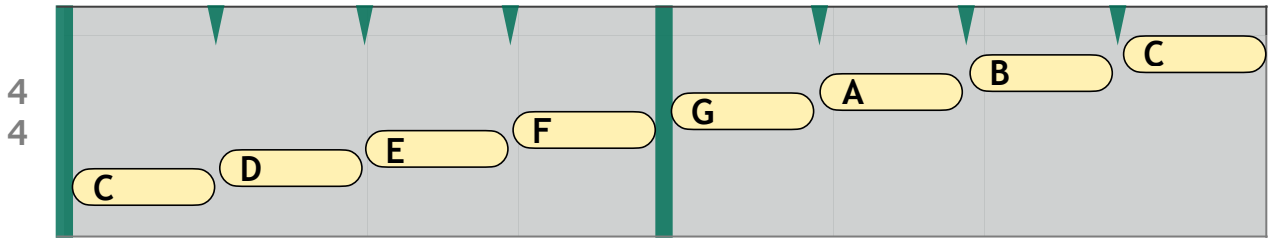
A Word About Music Notation

If you have not completed Chapters One through Eight (Volume 1) of Spinning Gold, then you will not be familiar with the **graphic notation system** shown above for "Let's Get Rocked." As mentioned in the Preface of this book, using copyrighted standard notation (five-line staff) to illustrate song elements like melodies and riffs would quickly become cost-prohibitive. In order to keep this textbook available at a reasonable price without sacrificing significant content, Spinning Gold will present these song excerpts using the alternative graphic notation system shown above. (If you need to see the standard notation for any song in this book, visit one of the many websites offering sheet music online, such as Sheet Music Plus or Sheet Music Direct.)

The new notation system will not feature a five-line staff. Instead, there will be a single horizontal banner (shown in gray above). Barlines are written as thick green lines that extend from top to bottom, and each barline represents the beginning of beat one. Moving left to right, beats 2, 3, and 4 are marked along the top with short green arrows.

Individual notes appear as yellow horizontal shapes with rounded corners. The **horizontal length** of the shapes will be proportionate to the number of beats for each note, defining the difference between whole, half, quarter, 8th, and 16th notes. Rests do not need individual symbols, since periods of silence are simply indicated by the amount of horizontal space between the yellow notes.

As with standard notation, changes in pitch will be reflected in the vertical dimension, so an ascending step-wise scale of all quarter notes would look like the following:



In the new system, there is no indication of clef or pitch register. However, keep in mind that the new notation is not meant for sight reading an unfamiliar piece. All examples in the new notation will be excerpts from familiar pop songs and are meant to be studied while listening to the accompanying audio file. It will be obvious from the audio whether the example is illustrating low bass notes or high treble notes. In fact, understanding the overall register of these examples is not the important issue. Rather, the excerpts are notated to illustrate other elements such as melodic contour, range, pitch variety, phrase and note length, or the type of scale or harmony being used.

(Pages 5 – 8 omitted from this sample)

Strong Melodic ID

Let's now check out a few pop & rock melodies with a strong ID. As mentioned, a strong melody has enough interest and character to stand on its own, without background instruments or the original recording. In fact, these tunes are often successfully re-recorded by later singers as cover versions. (There are dozens of Beatles songs that fit this description, but the ultimate example is the Beatles' tune "Yesterday," with the most cover versions of any song in pop history.) Below is a list of possible traits for a strong melodic ID. They do not all have to be present in the same song, but generally the more traits used, the more memorable the tune.

Characteristics of a Strong Melody

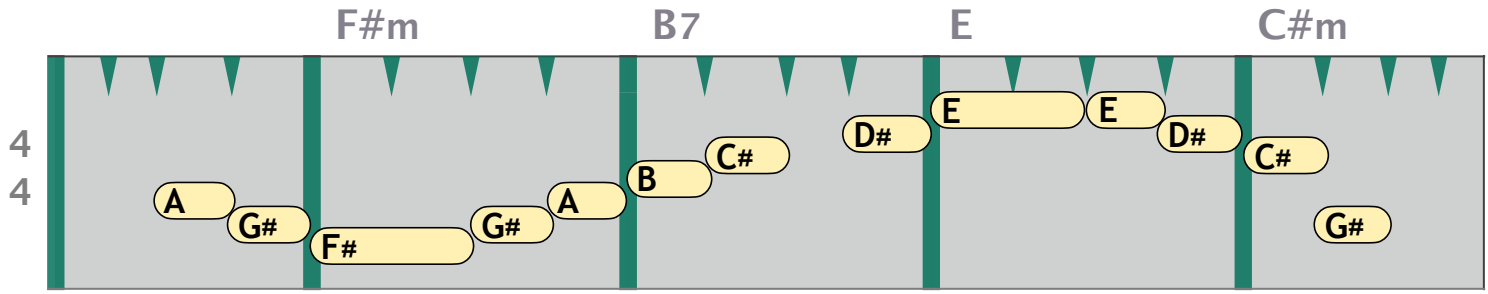
- ★ ***WIDE VARIETY of PITCHES*** (often over 8 different notes)
- ★ ***WIDE RANGE*** (usually over an octave)
- ★ ***LOW-PITCHED VERSE, HIGHER CHORUS*** (adds drama)
- ★ ***VARIED CONTOUR, DRAMATIC LEAPS***
- ★ ***USE of SEQUENCES***
- ★ ***CONTRASTING NOTE LENGTHS***
- ★ ***CONTRASTING PHRASE LENGTHS***
- ★ ***MELODY STANDS ON ITS OWN*** (independent of other elements)

(Pages 10 – 16 omitted from this sample)

VARIED CONTOUR, DRAMATIC LEAPS

As a melody moves forward, the distance in pitch from one note to another can vary considerably. Some melodies move predominantly in **stepwise** motion, meaning small intervals of only a half or whole step. The opening phrase of The Beatles "All My Loving" is a good example, descending briefly to F#, then gradually climbing to high E before falling off again at the end. The step-wise motion creates a **smooth, rounded contour** not unlike going up and down rolling hills on a country drive.

"All My Loving" — The Beatles — 1964 **E major** 2

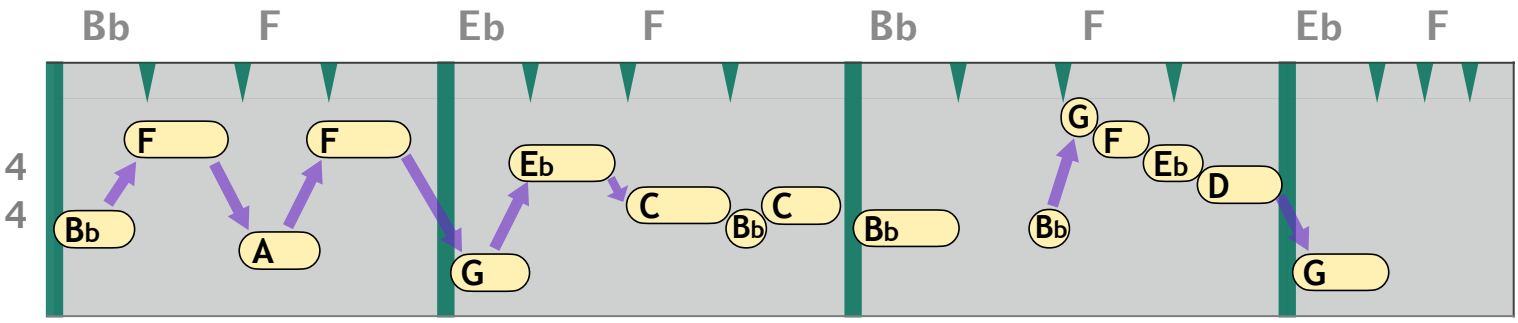


Close your eyes . . . . . miss you

0:00 VERSE

Other phrases may move in small leaps of 3 or 4 half steps, or even large leaps of over an octave. Usually the leaps are spaced out a bit, with some stepwise motion inbe-tween, but let's go for a dramatic example. The following Sophie B. Hawkins tune has **several big leaps** in a row to start the chorus (highlighted in purple below), creating an arresting, **jagged contour** that calls attention to the song's title. START LISTENING AT **0:25**

"As I Lay Me Down to Sleep" - Sophie B. Hawkins - 1995 **Bb major** 3



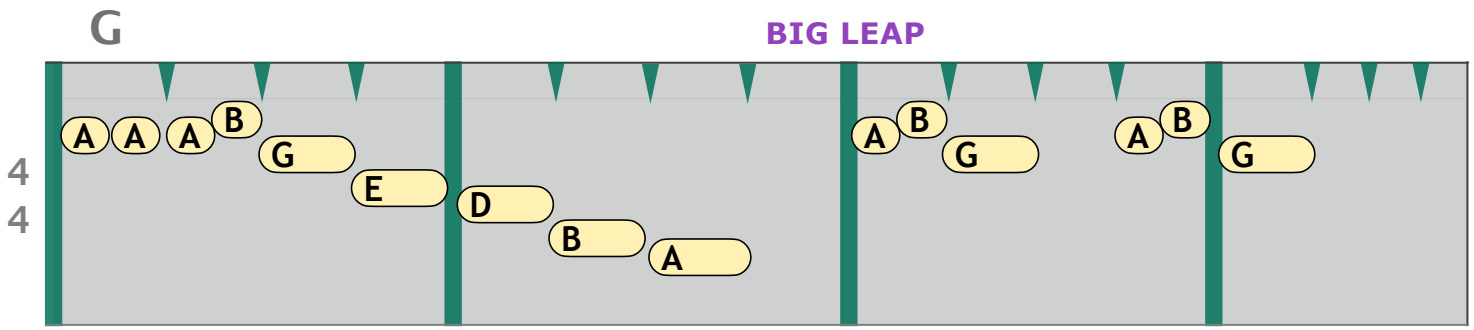
As I lay me down to sleep . . . . . me dear

0:25 CHORUS

(Pages 18 and 19 omitted from this sample)

On this next Taylor Swift song, the melody nicely compliments the sentiment of the lyrics. Just as we are feeling low, having descended over an octave to hit rock bottom on the low G, the melody springs back up with a **huge leap,** highlighting the optimistic title words "shake it off." START LISTENING AT **0:47**

"Shake It Off" — Taylor Swift — 2014 **G major** 4

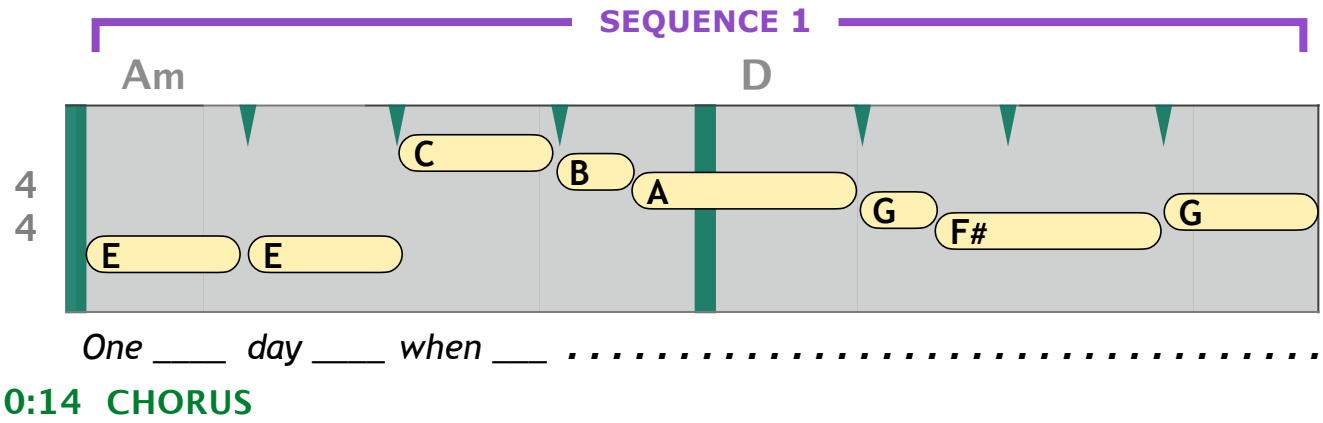


USE of SEQUENCES

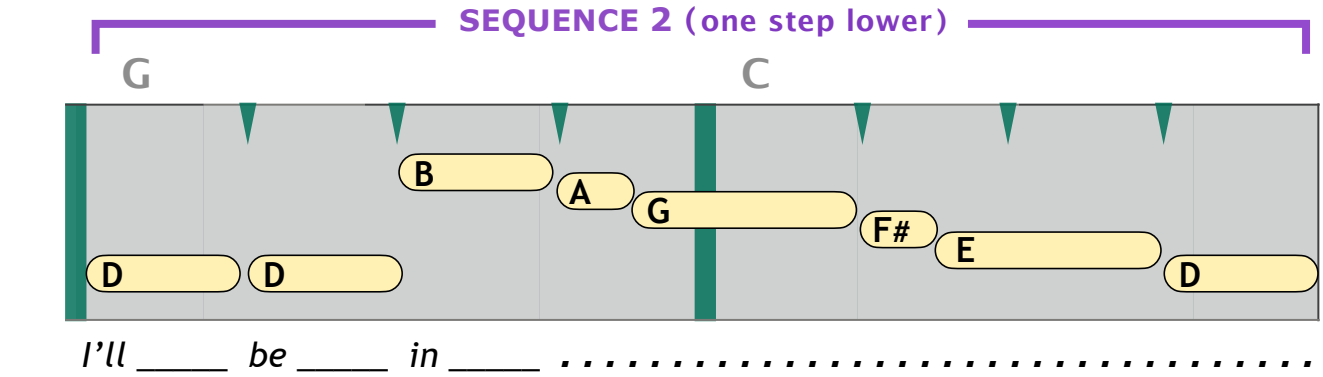
Sometimes a melodic phrase is repeated with the same note values (identical rhythm pattern), and the same series of intervals (identical contour), but at a different pitch level (higher or lower). These repeated patterns are called **melodic sequences.** If the patterns are repeated several times, it is likely that one or more may be modified slightly. Sequences help organize the melody, making it memorable and easier to sing, by giving the listener something familiar and predictable. However, it is more than just exact repetition, since the different pitch levels provide variety as well.

Our opening example of sequences is the Pitbull / Christina Aquilera hit “Feel This Moment.” The song begins with an **eight-note sequence** shown below on the first line. On the second line, the sequence is repeated one step lower. Notice the ending notes are different on each line. START LISTENING AT **0:14**

“Feel This Moment” - Pitbull w. Christina Aguilera - 2012 | **G major** | 5

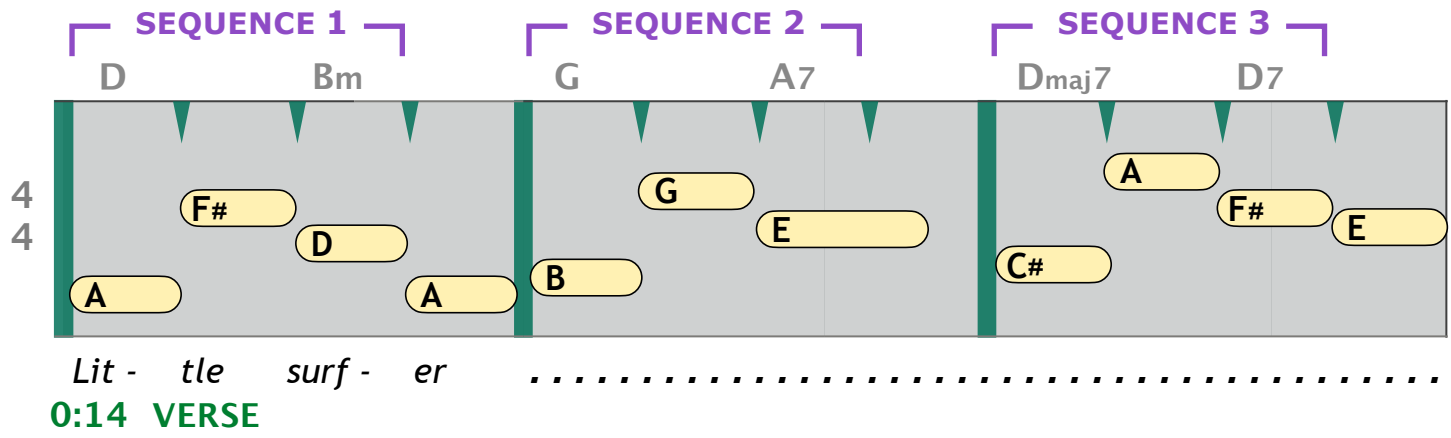


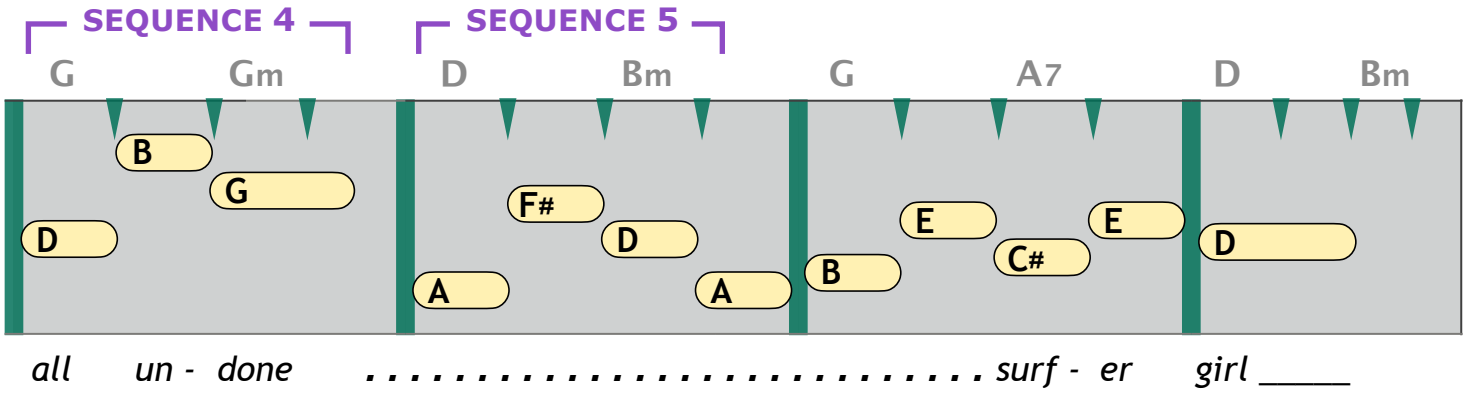
0:14 CHORUS



Here’s another good example of sequence, this time by The Beach Boys. A **three-note pattern** starts with a big leap upward, followed by a smaller leap downward. Notice that the pitches gradually get higher with each repetition before returning to the original notes for the last sequence.

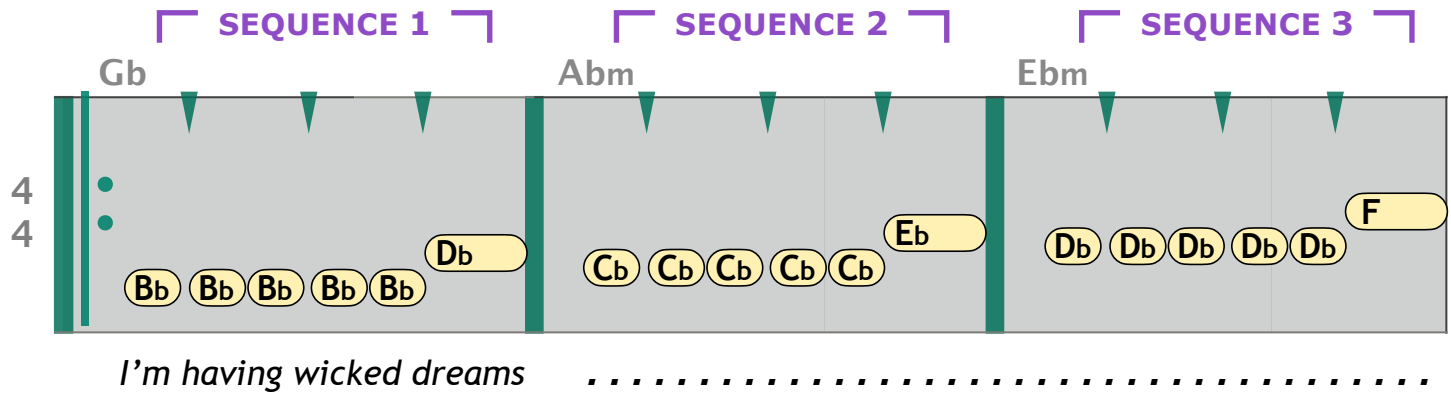
“Surfer Girl” — The Beach Boys — 1963 | **D major** | 6

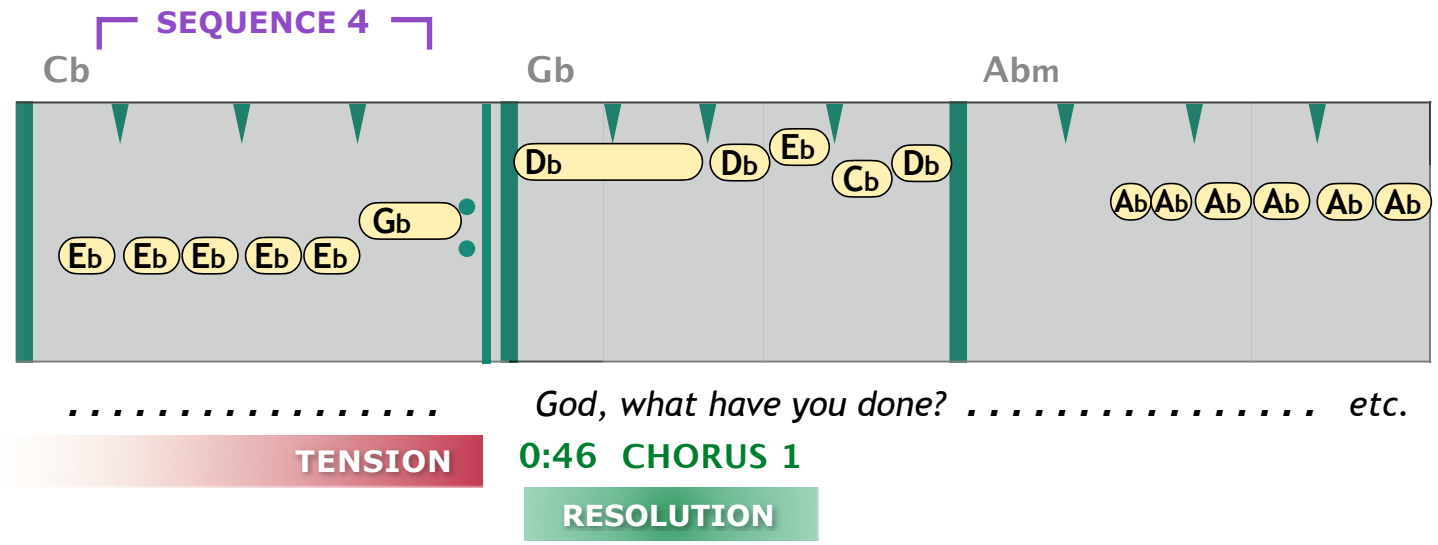




The pre-chorus of Chappell Roan's "Pink Pony Club" also has a series of sequences that **gradually ascend**, creating tension that helps highlight the dramatic chorus entrance that follows. Once again, the **highest note** of the melody starts the chorus, adding extra energy. This is the same dynamic heard earlier on songs by Meghan Trainor or Katy Perry, where the pitch range rose from verse to pre-chorus to chorus. START LISTENING AT **0:27**

"Pink Pony Club" — Chappell Roan — 2024 | **Gb major** | 7



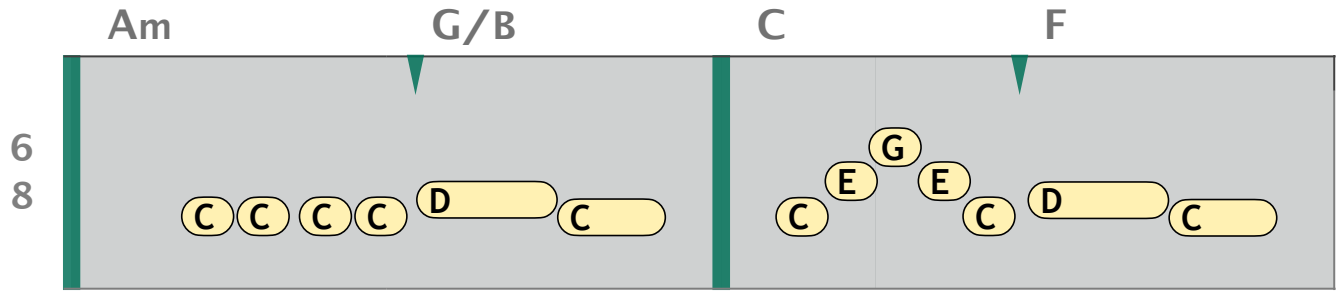


(Pages 24 – 27 omitted from this sample)

Kelly Clarkson's 2004 hit "Breakaway," offers a similar contrast in note lengths. Near the end of verse two, the melodic rhythm slows from busy 8ths and 16ths to longer notes (only two per measure). Then right before the chorus, the notes get even longer (one per measure), like the slowing melodic rhythm is going to freeze up and come to a halt. This creates a moment of great tension and anticipation. In the lyrics, the singer is praying that she can become unstuck and "break away." Then right on cue, the chorus makes its dramatic entrance. The melody takes off in a series of high quarter notes, gliding along as Kelly breaks free, "spreading her wings" and "touching the sky."

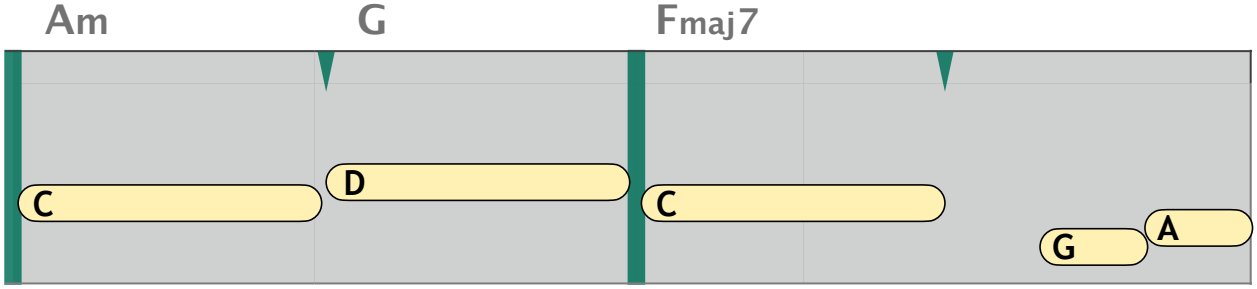
Like the previous song "Why Can't I," this example also has other elements that are helping to strengthen the entrance of the chorus. After relatively **low notes in the verse**, the **chorus starts on the highest note** of the song, reinforcing the idea of flying. You will also notice the **V to I resolution** in the harmony, as the tension V chord (**G**) resolves to the tonic I chord (**C**) at the chorus entrance. START LISTENING AT **0:45.**

0:45 last half of VERSE 2 – SHORTER NOTES



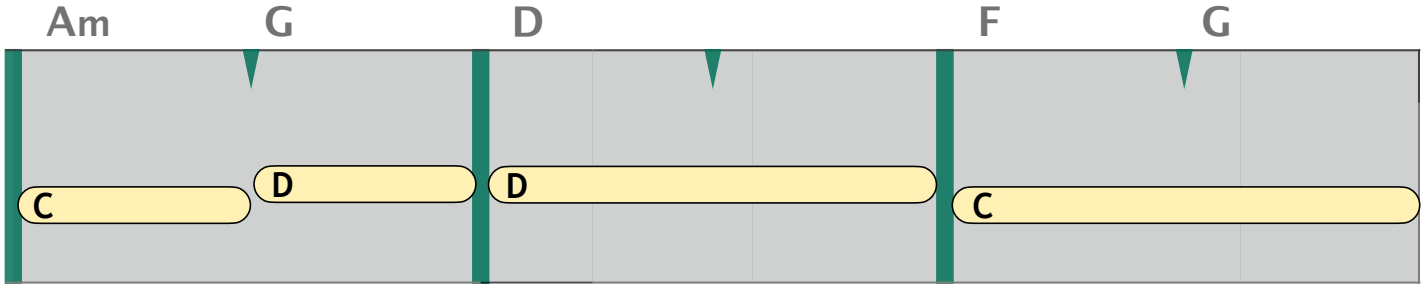
Want-ed to . . . . . wrong here

LONGER NOTES (slows melodic rhythm)



So _____ I _____ . . . . . .

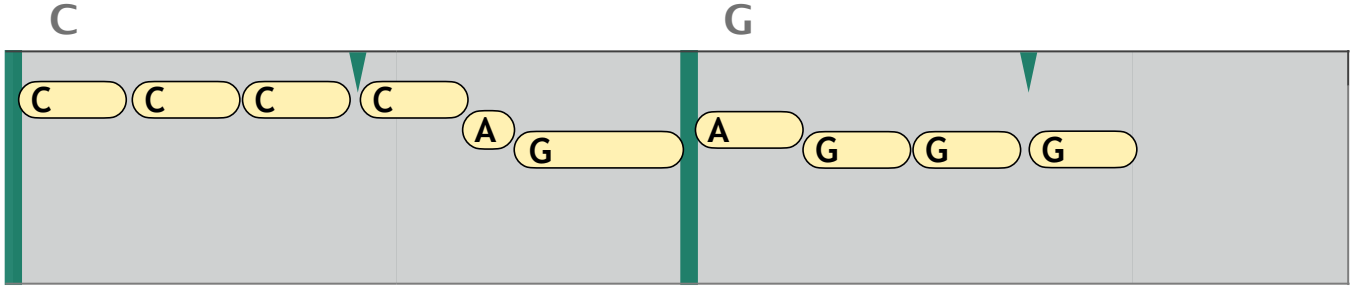
(mel. rhythm almost suspended)



break _____ a - _____ way _____

TENSION

1:01 CHORUS – MEDIUM NOTES (mel. rhythm begins "moving" again)



I'll spread my wings . . . . . to fly

RESOLUTION

(Pages 29 – 31 omitted from this sample)

Melody / Lyric Connection

Although we have been talking about listening to a melody without the lyrics, we can't ignore the important connection between melody and words. In fact, books on pop song-writing usually focus more on lyrics, and less on musical elements. As mentioned earlier, there are dozens of well-written volumes on the subject. We will, therefore, be very brief in our discussion of lyrics in this book, and leave the rest for other authors. Our focus will be on how melodies illustrate with musical sound the literal meaning of the words. We heard this earlier on "Breakaway," where lyrics about flying matched the highest note of the melody.

The idea of "high" and "low" is perhaps the most common melody / lyric connection in pop and rock. When Garth Brooks sang "I got friends in low places" in 1992, he dipped to the bottom of his vocal range on the word "low." On the 1983 hit "Dirty Laundry," Don Henley sings "kick em' when they're up, kick em' when they're down," with the pitch rising on "up" and falling on "down." The title phrase of the 5th Dimension's 1967 hit "Up Up and Away" rises in pitch just like a balloon. Likewise, the title phrase of Weezer's recent recording "I've Had It Up to Here" climbs to the song's highest note on the word "here." In other songs, the connection may be purely rhythmic, as on the 1987 hit "Jacob's Ladder," when Huey Lewis sings the lyrics "step _ by _ step _, wrung _ by _ wrung" in deliberate, incremental fashion.

In the following Beatles song "Fool on the Hill" (shown below), there are several melody / lyric connections, all involving pitch in some way. Listen for these phrases:

"day after day" **-** repeats **same note** like repeating days

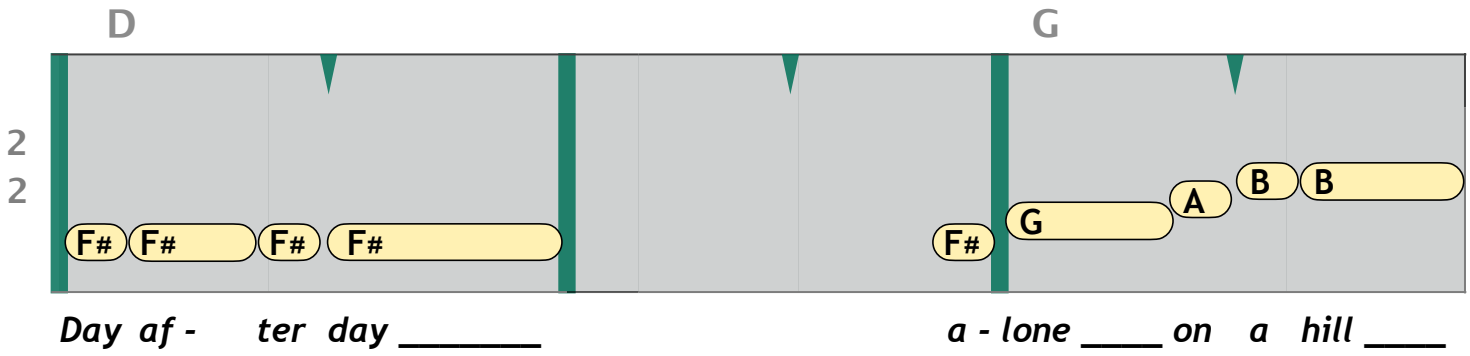
"alone on a hill" - **notes gradually rise** stepwise like climbing a hill

"perfectly still" - notes repeat (no movement up or down), then the **melody is stationary** ("still")

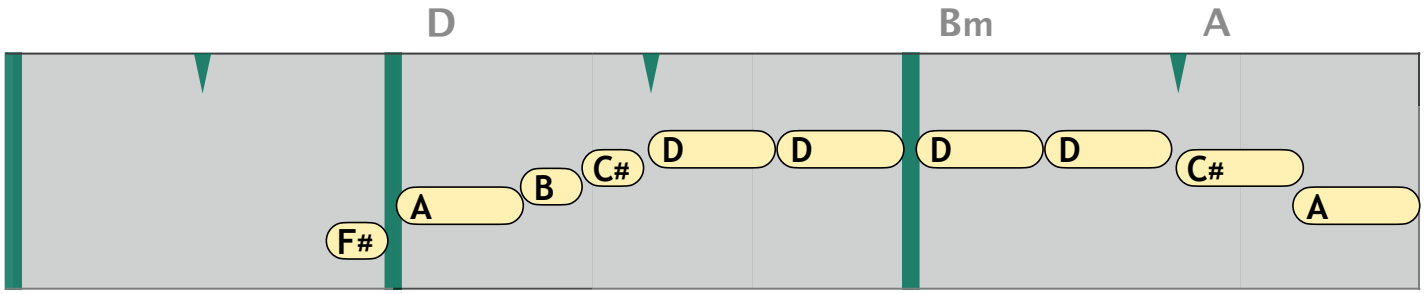
"just a fool" - **3 leaps in a row** (compared to the rest of the melody, this is the most active sequence, with crazy jumps like a fool)

"Fool on the Hill" - The Beatles - 1967 | **D major** | 9

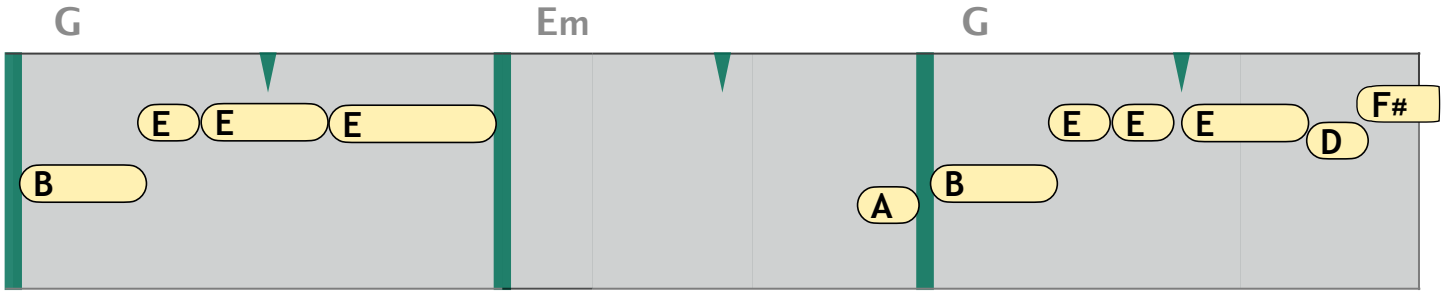
0:04 VERSE



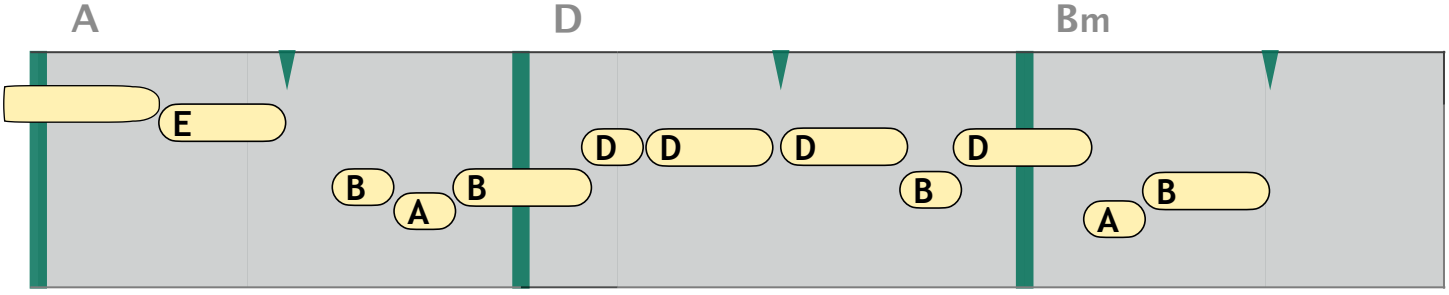
Day af - ter day _____ a - lone ____ on a hill ____



. . . . . .



per - fect- ly still ____ . . . . . .



. . . . . just a fool _____

In the following hit by Tommy James and the Shondells, the lyric connection is with the **harmony instruments**, rather than the vocal melody:

"I Think We're Alone Now" - Tommy James - 1967	A major	10

0:23 ***"running just as fast . . . . . ."*** — guitar strum speeds up, followed by rapid bass notes

0:38 ***"I think we're alone now . . . ."*** — volume drops and texture thins (all instruments pause, except for bass and minimal drum)

0:49 ***"the beating of our hearts . . . . . ."*** — soft drum imitates a heartbeat

Additional songs with STRONG MUSIC / LYRIC CONNECTION

1966	***Yellow Submarine***	**The Beatles**	**F major**
1967	***Up, Up, and Away***	**5th Dimension**	**F, Ab, B, and G mixo**
1983	***Dirty Laundry***	**Don Henley**	**F dorian**
1987	***Jacob's Ladder***	**Huey Lewis & The News**	**F major, F blues**
1992	***Friends in Low Places***	**Garth Brooks**	**A major**
2014	***I've Had It Up to Here***	**Weezer**	**C major**

Songwriting Focal Points

Following the format established in Spinning Gold, Volume 1, there will be a section at the end of each chapter in Volume 2 discussing songwriting and the creation of focal points in pop music. For Chapter Nine, we will look at how four melodic elements discussed throughout the chapter (pitch range, contour, phrase lengths, and note lengths) are specifically used as focal point devices in two songs – Tim McGraw's "It's Your World" and the Turtles' "Happy Together."

The 2013 hit "It's Your World" by Tim McGraw (composers: Shane McAnally, Josh Osborne, and Scott B. Stepakoff) employs the following three melodic devices:

(The rest of page 35, and pages 36 – 39 are omitted from this sample)

Project for Further Study & Discussion

Pick any song of your choosing and listen closely to the melody several times. You do not need to transcribe the melody in full score for this assignment. However, you will need to find all the pitches and get the general contour and outline of the melody in order to answer the questions below. If you feel you cannot do this by ear (either using your voice or your instrument), you may have to consult a sheet music website like Sheet

Music Direct or Sheet Music Plus. These websites usually have one or two pages available for free as a preview - enough to cover most of the music and get you started in the right direction.

Songs previously discussed in Chapter Nine or included in the chapter's "Additional Listening" lists are not allowed. If you do not have a song in mind you may pick one from the following list -

(List of songs is omitted from this sample)

Answer the following questions about the melody of your song:

— In terms of pitches, does the melody have a wide range (an octave or more) and a wide variety of notes (7 or more), or is the range narrow with few pitches ?

— Is there a contrast between the range of the verse and the range of the chorus ?

— Describe the contour of the melody. Does it move stepwise, in dramatic leaps, mainly flat, or some combination of these ? Is there a contrast between the contour of the verse and chorus ?

— Are there some dramatic contrasts in note lengths or phrase lengths ?

— Overall, would you characterize this melody as strong in terms of Melodic ID ? (If you played this melody alone on a piano with no lyrics or chords, would it sound interesting and would you recognize the song ?) If the melody is generally weak, what other musical elements in the song are distinctive and creative, helping to make this a great recording?