

approachable music

SOLO GUITAR FOR POPULAR MUSIC SONGS

A primer on how to play chord
melody on the low strings

by Joshua Espinosa

approachablemusic.com



introduction

Playing songs on guitar is largely a multi-instrument and even, a multi-person affair. When it's used to sing and play a song, two instruments are involved — the guitar and a voice. To jam out solos, usually another instrumentalist is brought in all together, and one person handles the solos while the other plays the song's chord progression and keeps up the rhythm.

The thing is, though, the guitar by itself can be used to handle all facets of song playing — you can use it to play the notes of the song's tune and at the same time, keep up the chords.

This style of playing is called **solo guitar**, and it's useful for players who want to mix in guitar solos to their songs without having to bring in someone else or even people who are uncomfortable singing. Here's how to get started with it.

what "solo guitar" means

The phrase "solo guitar" generally refers to playing a song's tune, called **the melody**, and its chord progression at the same time on the guitar without help from another instrument.

More formally, this style of play is known as **chord melody**. The chord melody style of playing is not specific to the guitar — it can be played on a variety of instruments, but it's probably most commonly associated with the piano, where it's typical that the right hand plays the song's melody, while the left hand plays its chords. Of course, when chord melody is played on the piano, people often colloquially refer to that type of playing as "solo piano."

Ultimately, you can consider the concepts of playing chord melody on the guitar and solo guitar style as interchangeable — they're the same thing, just with two different names.

Now, note that the concept of solo guitar playing is different than playing a guitar solo. The term, "guitar solo" typically applies to the action of stringing together scale notes during an instrumental break, while "solo guitar" is a reference to an actual style of playing.

The difference is subtle, but important — you can play guitar solos while you play solo guitar style, but you can also play them while someone else plays the chords and holds down the rhythm, and that's not solo guitar style.



two main types of guitar chord melody

On a basic level, **chord melody playing on the guitar requires you to manipulate the chords you're using in a song so that whatever note in the melody is being asked for stands out most.** For example, if the chord you're supposed to play is C and the melody note you need to play along with it is E, then you need to play the C chord in a way that features an E note most prominently. Of course, if the melody note changes to G, but the chord stays at C, then you need to play the C chord differently — in a way that makes the G note stand out most.

Now, there are many ways to play chord melody on the guitar, but there are two main approaches to be aware of — one that's played mostly in classical and jazz music, and another that's better suited for all the genres associated with popular music. Let's take a look at both guitar chord melody approaches.



high-string chord melody

In styles associated with classical and jazz music, guitar chord melody is typically achieved by playing chords that mostly have melody notes on the B and E strings.

This approach works because the notes on those strings are higher-pitched than those on other strings, so they come through more prominently than the other notes in the chord.

This version of chord melody is largely centered around knowing a chord shape for every chord and melody note combination you encounter. So, as you play it, you're constantly switching from one chord shape to another based on what the current melody note is, even if the chord itself never changes.

For example, if you're tasked with playing a C chord along with an E melody note, you'd play a C chord shape that has an E note on the B or E string. If the melody note changes to G, but the chord stays at C, then you'd switch to a different version of the C chord all together — to one that has a G note on the B or E string.

This way of playing guitar chord melody is pretty advanced, which makes sense as it's mostly associated with jazz and classical music.

But the real issue with this approach is that it doesn't really mesh with how people usually play songs — by strumming the basic chords. For that, you have to go another route.



why high-string chord melody and song playing don't mix well

The disconnect between high-string guitar chord melody and song playing starts with the fact that both are played in completely different ways. See, most people play songs by strumming the basic, open position chords as they sing. But there's an inherent limitation with using the basic chords during high-string chord melody playing — there are only so many melody notes on the B and E string that can be played along with them. As such, most of the chord shapes people play during high-string chord melody style are up the neck rather than down. Of course, strumming chords up the neck doesn't really sound as good as strumming open position chords, so during high string chord melody playing, most people pluck and fingerpick more than they strum.

All of this is problematic when you try to play an instrumental break using only the guitar during a song that you sing while strumming the open position chords — **it's not really intuitive to switch between singing and strumming basic chords to plucking and fingerpicking chord shapes up and down the neck.** In fact, it's not only difficult, but going from one way of playing to a completely different one can change the entire feel of a song midstream, which can be quite jarring for a listener if the transition doesn't happen smoothly — something that, in and of itself, is hard to achieve.

The thing is, though, the allure of playing songs with open position chords is that it's relatively easy to do even with just a little experience, so ideally, you only want to further complicate things to a certain point. Ultimately, it's simply too challenging to effectively mix high-string chord melody into songs that you sing.



low-string chord melody

It was **Maybelle Carter**, the guitar player for a musical group called the **Carter Family**, who revolutionized how to use basic, open position chords for not only a song's vocal parts, but also to play an instrumental break using only the guitar with a seamless, intuitive transition.

See, Maybelle was often the only instrumentalist playing while she and the other Carter Family singers sang. While singing, she'd simply strum along with the basic song chords, often just C, F and G. But during the instrumental breaks, rather than just keep strumming, as many rhythm guitar players might do, **she played a guitar solo that revolved around the song's melody and also had some strumming mixed in between each melody note.**

Her innovative approach essentially allowed her to play a guitar solo and keep up the song's rhythm at the same time, doing so by using open position major scales that allowed her to mostly put a song's melody notes on the guitar's low strings — E, A, D and G. From there, she'd simply strum whatever basic chord was called for in between melody notes.

Maybelle's **low-string guitar chord melody approach**, colloquially referred to as the **Carter Scratch**, is one of the most valuable building blocks for solo guitar within the context of popular music songs, and it's the style of chord melody that we'll focus on going forward.



low-string chord melody colloquialisms

As we study Maybelle Carter's low-string guitar chord melody approach, you should be aware of some of the ways people describe it. At its crux, **the term, "Carter Scratch," generally refers to the action of mostly playing melody notes on the lower-pitched guitar strings while playing whatever chord is called for in between them.** The Carter Scratch is also often called the **"boom-chuck" style** because first, the melody note is played on what's considered the guitar's bass strings, making a "boom" sound, and then the chord is played quickly enough to give you enough time to play the next melody note, which results in a short and choppy "chuck" sound. So, all throughout a song, the guitar basically works in a boom-chuck, boom-chuck pattern.

Closely related to the Carter Scratch is the **"flatpicking" style**, which also loosely includes the **"Travis picking" style** and **"crosspicking" style**. At its most basic, flatpicking simply means to play guitar with a pick rather than your fingers, but among the musicians who play it, it really has nothing to do with what you're using to play the instrument. In fact, many flatpickers use their fingers. Essentially, flatpicking is just a more evolved version of the Carter Scratch. Whereas Maybelle Carter mostly centered her instrumental breaks around a song's melody, flatpickers tend to start with the melody and then improvise beyond it. You can think of it as the Carter Scratch taken to the next level. But at the end of the day, even the best flatpicking is rooted in Maybelle's innovation — **virtually all low-string guitar chord melody techniques start with the Carter Scratch and build from there.**



the mindset chord melody requires

In general, most guitar chord melody resources you'll find are for jazz tunes or songs from other complex genres, as solo guitar playing is usually perceived as only being for advanced players.

In fact, it can be really difficult to find clear answers about getting started with low-string chord melody because outside of country music, it's somewhat of a lost art — most guitar players are perfectly content to let another player handle the solo during a song they sing.

But the truth is, even beginners can learn chord melody as long as they start with approachable songs that revolve around basic chord changes.

You should know, though, that by dipping your toes into chord melody, you're actually entering the world of real musicianship, and realistically, the best way to gain traction with the style and eventually get good at it, is to simply embrace learning the music concepts associated with it.

That might seem scary now, but if you start with baby steps and go incrementally from there, in time, you'll find that music is nothing to be afraid of — it's all notes, chords and rhythms, along with how they're all written out for future use.

Of course, you could go the route of skipping the "music" part of chord melody, but ultimately, all of the guitar's best secrets are kept at the crossroads of your own personal playing abilities, influences and yes, musical knowledge.



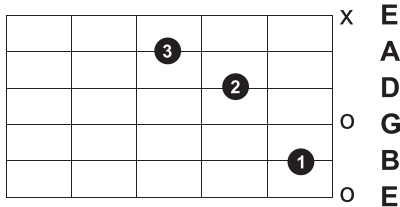
the starting point

Playing Maybelle Carter's low-string guitar chord melody style is a natural next step for a rhythm guitar player. In fact, to get started with it, all you really have to know is some basic chords, specifically C, F and G, as well as how to play a 16th note strum, which is counted as **1 e and a 2 e and a 3 e and a 4 e and a** while you play downstrokes on each number and "and" and upstrokes on each "e" and "a." Note that the "a" in the 16th note strum is pronounced as "uh."

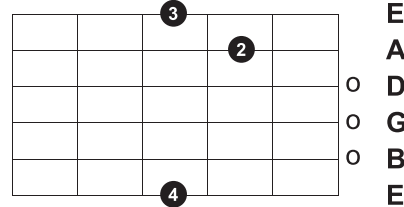
Of course, the more comfortable you are with both, the chords and the strum, the easier it will be to gain traction with the style. So, if you have any trouble switching through the chords, take the time to practice them. As far as the 16th note strum, you'll want to be able to play it pretty quickly — if you can set a metronome to 90 beats per minute (bpm) and land on a number for each click rather easily, then you're in decent shape. If not, then you've got work to do.

Foundational chords for low-string guitar chord melody style

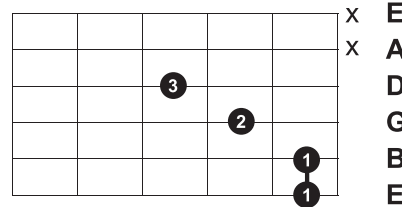
C



G



F



Note: the chord charts in this guide are rotated differently from other types of resources, so as to show how the chord will look in pictures and video tutorials. If this bothers you, rotate the charts counterclockwise. Also, eventually, you'll want to learn a version of the G chord that has the pinkie on the high E string, as it will make it easier to reach for any notes on fret 1.

The 16th note strum — work up to 90bpm

↓ = DOWNSTROKE ↑ = UPSTROKE

↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑

1 e and a 2 e and a 3 e and a 4 e and a

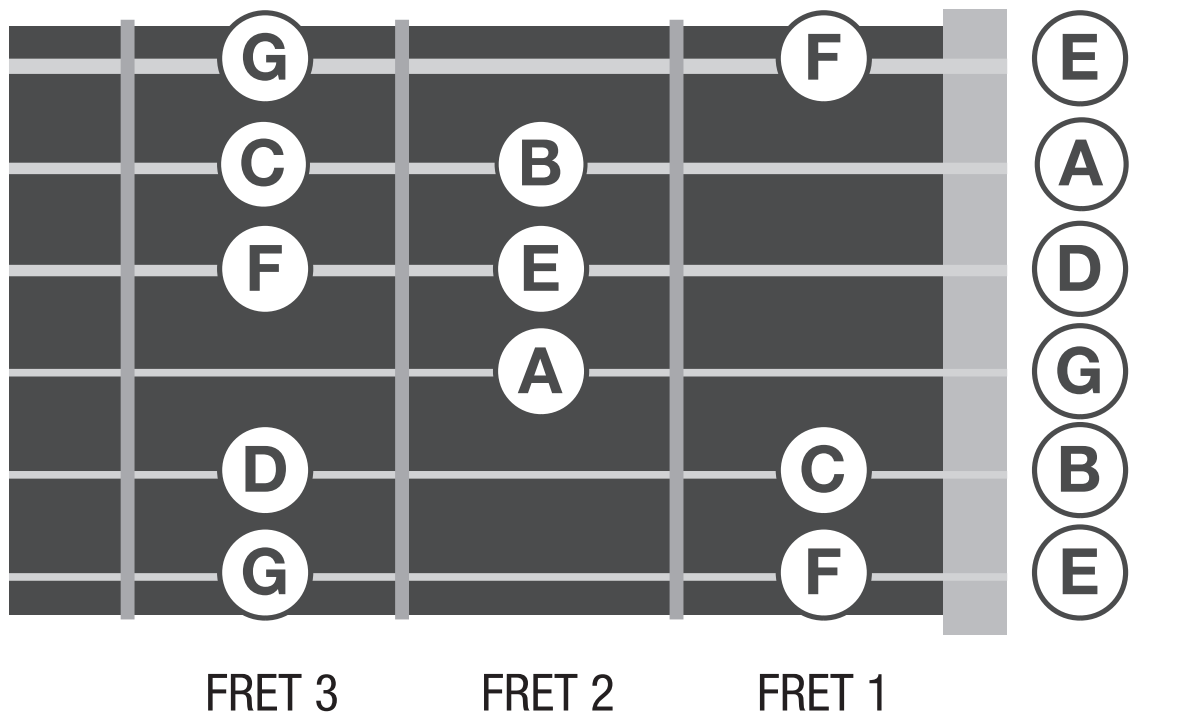
the open position C major scale

Low-string guitar chord melody style ultimately requires you to be a hybrid rhythm and lead guitar player, so in addition to the rhythm tools you need — the C, F and G chords as well as the 16th note strum — you'll also need the scale that goes along with those chords — **the C major scale** — which you'll leverage for your guitar solos.

Now, the C major scale can be played in many different places on the guitar, but for low-string chord melody, you use the version of it that's closest to the headstock and uses all of the guitar's open strings. This version of the scale is called **the C major scale in open position**.

Here's the scale with all the note names included. Note that all the open strings are part of the scale. To play it, start with the open low E string and work from there to the G note on the high E string. Also, use a one-finger-per-fret approach — play notes on fret 1 with your index finger, notes on fret 2 with your middle finger, and notes on fret 3 with your ring finger.

The C major scale in open position



How to efficiently learn the open position C major scale

To get the most out of playing low-string chord melody, you not only have to learn where to put your fingers for the open position C major scale, you also have to learn all the note names attached to it. However, it's probably more efficient to first learn all of the scale's finger positions. This way, you're not trying to learn both skills at once, which makes things more difficult. So, at first, starting with the open low E string, play the scale simply as **open E, fret 1, fret 3; open A, fret 2, fret 3; open D, fret 2; open G, fret 2; open B, fret 1, fret 3; and open E, fret 1, fret 3**. Then, once you're comfortable with actually playing the scale itself, start playing it with the note names in mind, until you've memorized them.

a closer look at the open C scale

For low-string chord melody playing on the guitar, **the open position C major scale — or open C scale, for short — is all you really need to handle any song melody in the key of C.** Plus, because it covers such a wide range of notes from low- to high-pitched, it's also pretty useful for improvising beyond the melody.

In order to maximize its use for these purposes, you should know that, for starters, **the C note on the third fret of the A string is the scale's home base and starting point** — all the other notes revolve around it, and you'll often begin and almost always, finish songs with it. It's known musically as **middle C**, and even though it technically doesn't sound exactly like middle C on the piano — the white key right in the middle of the keyboard — on the guitar, it functions in exactly the same way.

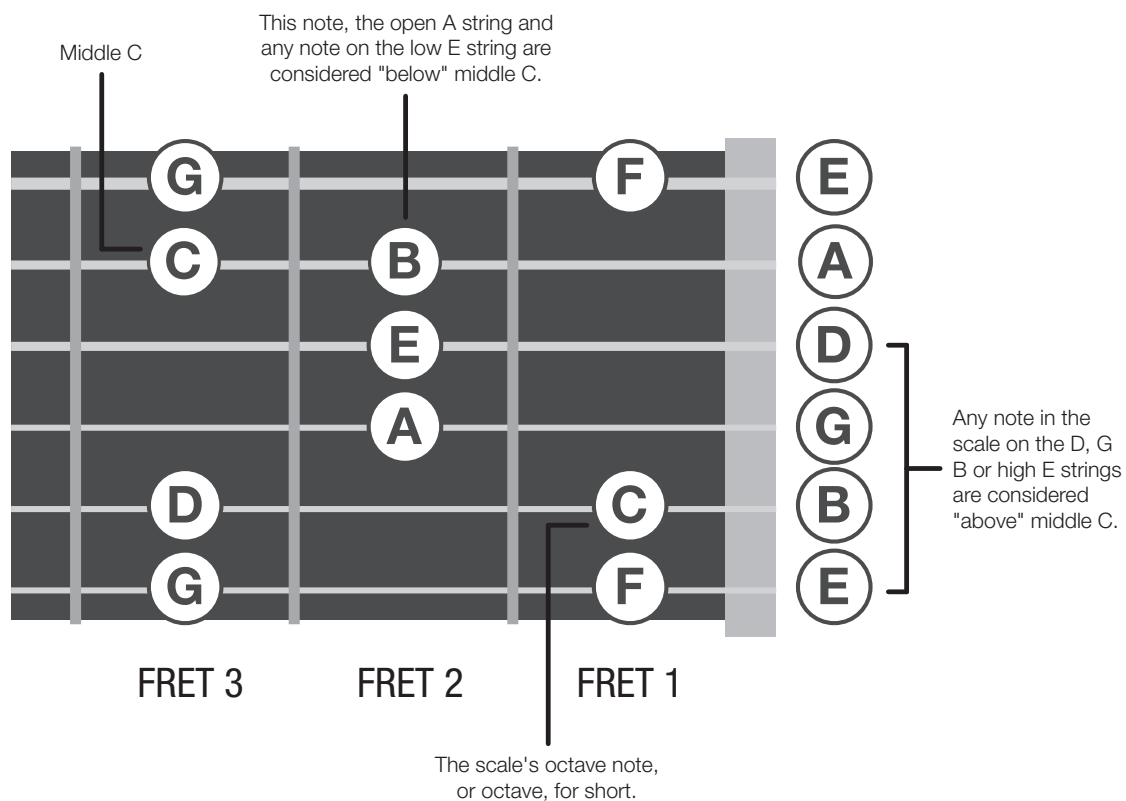
Also, all the scale notes sitting on the D, G, B and high E strings are higher in pitch than middle C and are **colloquially referred to as notes "above" middle C.**

On the other hand, the B on fret 2 of the A string, the open A string and all the notes on the low E string are lower in pitch than middle C and are considered **"below" it.**

Something else to note is how the scale loops — from the middle C starting point, you eventually reach another iteration of C on fret 1 of the B string.

Now, without getting too deep into the theory behind it, it's the nature of all musical scales to loop infinitely, and any iteration of a scale's starting note besides the first one is called an **octave note**, or **octave** for short. So, because the scale started with C, **the iteration of C on fret 1 of the B string is considered the open C scale's octave.**

The C major scale in open position



“When you strum a guitar **you have everything** — rhythm, bass, lead and melody.”

— David Gilmore

the roles of the chords, the scale and the strum pattern in low-string guitar chord melody style

In low-string guitar chord melody style, you use the open C scale, the C, F and G chords and the 16th note strum pattern each for their own distinct purposes. The scale gets used to hammer out a song's melody, which is often referred to as a **melody line**, while the chords help support it. See, melody lines are often played with single notes, and when too many single notes are played in a row, the song can sound too thin. Since chords feature multiple notes played simultaneously, they help beef up the sound, while also enhancing it with background noise that's meant to sound nice with the melody notes.

The 16th note strum pattern is the glue that holds it all together. It drives songs, taking you to and from melody notes and chords, and ultimately creates the illusion that you're playing both at the same time. Now, playing the 16th note strum pattern as is works fine, but you can not only get a really professional sound by modifying it slightly, you can also make learning the style more intuitive. So, let's make some adjustments to the 16th note strum pattern.



strum dynamics

In its basic form, the 16th note strum pattern sounds somewhat bland because it sounds so even — it's just upstrokes and downstrokes played over and over again without any real change of pace. On the other hand, the hallmark of a professional-sounding strum is how its volume subtly ebbs and flows as certain parts of the count are emphasized over others. In music terms, changes in volume and emphasis are called **dynamics**.

Now, truly mastering the art of dynamics simply takes experience, but you can make big strides toward a professional-sounding strum by making a few minor adjustments to how you play 16th notes. That starts with being aware of how loud you're strumming most of the time. So, as you play a basic 16th note strum, assess your volume from 1-10. Most of your strumming should realistically be at volume 5, if not closer to 4. If you're strumming any louder than that, then you need to dial it back, which may take some getting used to at first. Of course, if you're playing softer than that, then you need to play louder.

Ultimately, a professional strum starts with consciousness, and having a baseline strum volume that's fairly modest allows you room to get louder or softer without going too far either way. You'll also want to consider that strumming is largely meant to be in the background while the melody shines — at the end of the day, you want to find the perfect balance that at once, would make someone miss your strum if it wasn't there, but also unnoticeable when it is.



the "number and a" strum pattern

Aside from being aware of your basic volume, you can really breathe life into the 16th note strum pattern if you emphasize, or **accent**, certain parts of it over others. For popular music songs, it's perhaps most common to accent each "and" in the count, which you can do by simply playing them a bit louder than the rest of the strum pattern — so, if your baseline strum volume is around 4-5, then for each "and" you'd pop up to about 6-7, and then drop back down.

Now, an accent on each "and" is so widely used in popular music because it helps give songs that special feel that makes people want to tap their feet and bob their heads. Of course, musicians want to maximize that effect as much as possible, and one way they do it is by inserting a bit of silence before each "and" so as to more clearly define the accent. To do this, they simply play nothing for each "e" in the count — in music terms, they play a **rest** for each one. Something you'll want to keep in mind about this technique is that **the "e" still exists, you just essentially play a silent upstroke over it.**

Between the accents on each "and" and the rests during each "e," you end up with what's colloquially referred to as the **"number and a" strum pattern**, as you're always strumming on the numbers and the "and a" portion of the count, but leaving each "e" silent. Here's the full 16th note "number and a" pattern.

The "number and a" strum pattern

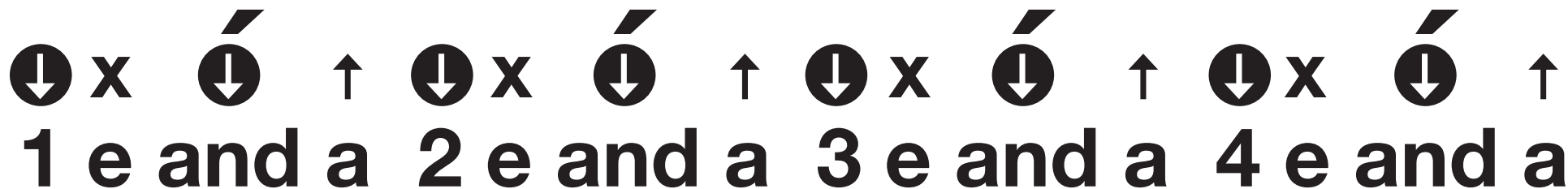


= DOWNSTROKE

↑ = UPSTROKE

X = REST

/ = ACCENT



How to learn the "number and a" strum pattern

At first, the "number and a" pattern can be a bit tricky because it's so awkward to focus on doing a silent upstroke on each "e" in the count. But it's actually more intuitive to do the silent upstroke with out thinking about it at all. So, start by placing a C chord and play a downstroke on the "1." Then, **while your hand is still down, simply say "e" out loud.** From there, play an accented downstroke for the word "and" and then, an upstroke for "a." Note how your hand had to come up naturally to play the downstroke on "and." Until you get the hang of it, try only using "1" as the number, so you don't have to add complexity to the strum technique by having to concentrate on where you are in the full count. Then, as you get comfortable, play the pattern more quickly and add in the rest of the numbers. Eventually, you want to be able to play the "number and a" pattern at about 90bpm.

the "note and a" strum pattern

The "number and a" strum pattern is essential for getting a professional rhythm guitar sound, but it's also crucial to low-string guitar chord melody style, where the rest on each "e" in the 16th note count not only further emphasizes each "and," it also serves as the bridge between playing single melody notes and strumming.

See, a song's melody notes are most often connected to the numbers of the 16th note count. So, since the basic idea of the style is that you strum between melody notes, that means that **in low-string guitar chord melody, it's most common to play single notes on the numbers of the "number and a" pattern and then, strum its "and a" portion**, with the rest on each "e" giving you just enough time to switch back and forth.

This variation of the "number and a" pattern is known as the **"note and a" strum pattern**, with the only difference being that instead of playing a fully strummed downstroke on each number of the 16th note count, you only play a single melody note all by itself.

The "note and a" strum pattern



= DOWNSTROKE

↑ = UPSTROKE

X = REST

/ = ACCENT

N↓ = MELODY NOTE

N↓ X / ↑ N↓ X / ↑ N↓ X / ↑ N↓ X / ↑
1 e and a 2 e and a 3 e and a 4 e and a

How to play the "note and a" strum pattern

To get started with the "note and a" pattern, **place a C chord, and with a downstroke motion, play the middle C note on fret 3 of the A string all by itself as you say "1."** Then, while your hand is still down, simply say "e" out loud. From there, strum a full, accented downstroke for "and" and finally, an upstroke for "a." Repeat the process for the rest of the 16th note count.

simplifying the "note and a" pattern

In practice, experienced musicians mostly rely on being able to feel the 16th note count rather than actually counting it, mostly because songs have so many moving parts that it's virtually impossible to fully focus on each one.

This is especially true while playing low-string guitar chord melody, so ultimately, you want to be able to play the "note and a" pattern as automatically as possible. This starts with simplifying the pattern to its crux, so you can focus more on the technique used and less on counting.

Now, if you think about it, the "note and a" pattern is really only one strum pattern that's duplicated four times across the 16th note count, with the only difference being that the numbers change.

So, if you take out the numbers and replace them with a single word, "note," you end up with **"note e and a"** — a short, catchy and repeatable phrase that represents the exact same concept without having to count.

Plus, the "note e and a" phrase reinforces the technique of playing single notes in the first part of the count, on the word, "note," and fully strumming for the end of it — on the "and a" portion.

To start getting used to playing the "note and a" pattern without numbers, **place a C chord, and with a downstroke motion, play the middle C note on fret 3 of the A string all by itself as you say "note."**

Then, while your hand is still down, simply say "e" out loud. From there, strum a full, accented downstroke for "and" and finally, an upstroke for "a."

Repeat the process ad nauseam. When you're really comfortable with doing the pattern with the word, "note" instead of the numbers, **you can imply the "e" and skip saying it out loud.** Keep in mind that the "e" still exists, but implying it will make things feel less rushed, especially at faster tempos. Of course, this is how the pattern gets its name — "note and a."

The "note and a" technique



N↓ = MELODY NOTE

X = REST

⬇️ = ACCENTED DOWNSTROKE

↑ = UPSTROKE

How to learn to feel the 16th note count

Ironically, learning to feel the 16th note count as opposed to actually counting it comes from extensively working with a metronome while counting. This ingrains the count into your intuition. From there, when you have to strum but can't count because you're focusing on another aspect of a song you're playing, such as the melody, you simply have to trust your intuition to take over, which can be quite difficult to do at first. But the more you experience your instincts doing what you've trained them to do, the more confidence you'll build in the fact that your hard work is paying off, and eventually, you won't even notice that you're counting automatically.

refining the "note and a" technique

The first step in learning the "note and a" technique is simply getting used to switching between playing a single note and then, strumming. From there, you can refine the technique by being deliberate about the strings you strum in the "and a" part of the pattern.

This is important because in low-string guitar chord melody, melody notes should stand out as much as possible, and being specific about your strumming helps you avoid accidentally playing something that clashes with them.

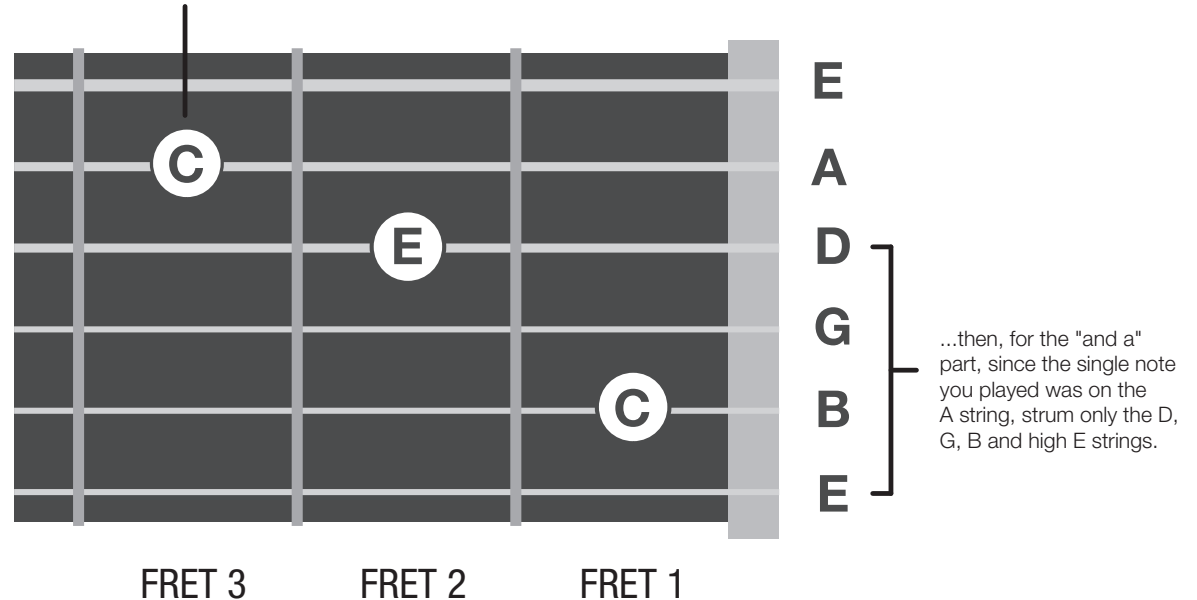
So, let's define the first general rule of strumming the "note and a" technique: **after playing any single note on the low E, A or D strings, only strum the strings underneath it.**

That means, for example, that if you play a melody note on the low E string for the "note" portion of the "note and a" pattern, then on the "and a" part, you'll only strum the A, D, G, B and high E strings. Likewise, if you play a melody note on the A string, then you'll only strum the D, G, B and high E strings, and after melody notes played on the D string, you'll only strum the G, B and high E strings.

To get started, place a C chord and play the middle C note on fret 3 of the A string for the "note" portion of the "note and a" pattern. Then, for the "and a" part, since the single note you played was on the A string, strum only the D, G, B and high E strings. Repeat as needed.

How to strum after playing a single note on the A string

Place a C chord and for the "note" portion of the "note and a" pattern, play the middle C note on fret 3 of the A string as a single note...



"note and a" with D string melody notes

To reinforce the concept of only strumming strings underneath the one you played the single note on in the "note and a" pattern, let's look at how to strum the "and a" part following a single note that's played on the D string.

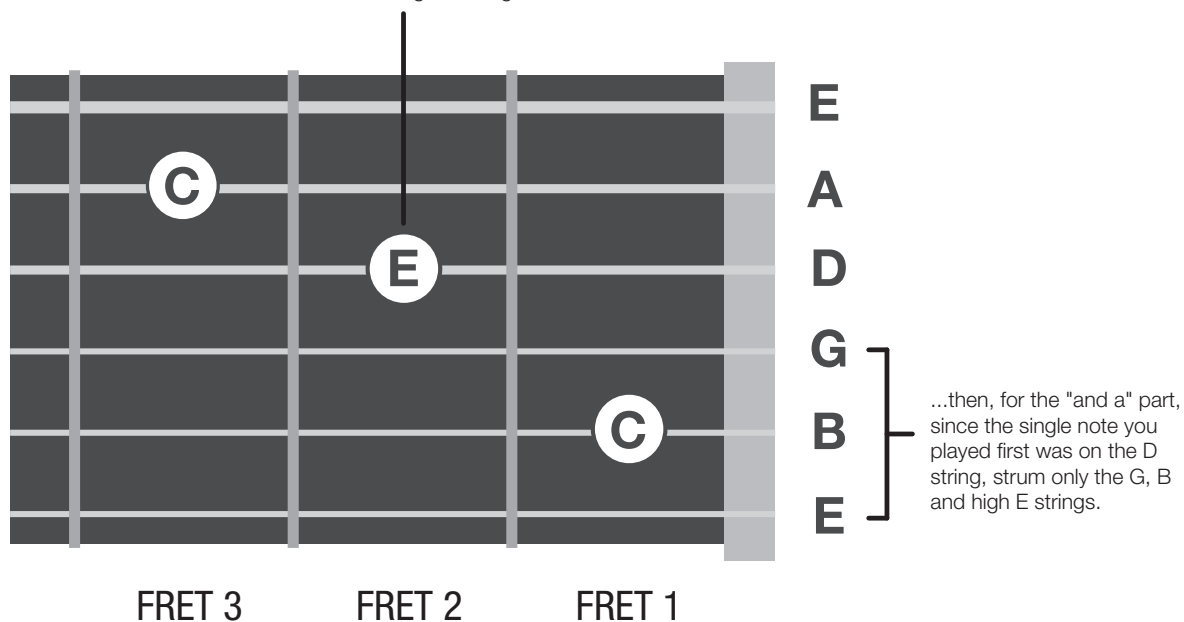
Place a C chord and play the E note on fret 2 of the D string for the "note" portion of the pattern. Then, for the "and a" part, since the single note you played was on the D string, strum only the G, B and high E strings. Repeat as needed.

From there, go back to playing the pattern with the middle C note on fret 2 of the A string, where after playing the single note, you strum the D, G, B and high E strings. Go back and forth between playing the pattern with either middle C or E as the single note, being mindful that after playing the middle C note, you strum the four strings that are underneath it, and following the E, you only strum three strings.

Ultimately, **low-string guitar chord melody style revolves around the action of alternating between playing melody notes on the low strings and strumming the ones underneath the one you played the single note on**, a technique that allows you to combine scale notes and chords while you hold down a consistent rhythmic pulse.

How to strum after playing a single note on the D string

Place a C chord, and for the "note" portion of the "note and a" pattern, play the E note on fret 2 of the D string as a single note...



"A good player can make any guitar sound good."

— Michael Bloomfield

"note and a" and high string melody notes

While most low-string guitar chord melody playing revolves around playing melody notes on the low strings, you'll also often have to play them on the G, B and high E strings.

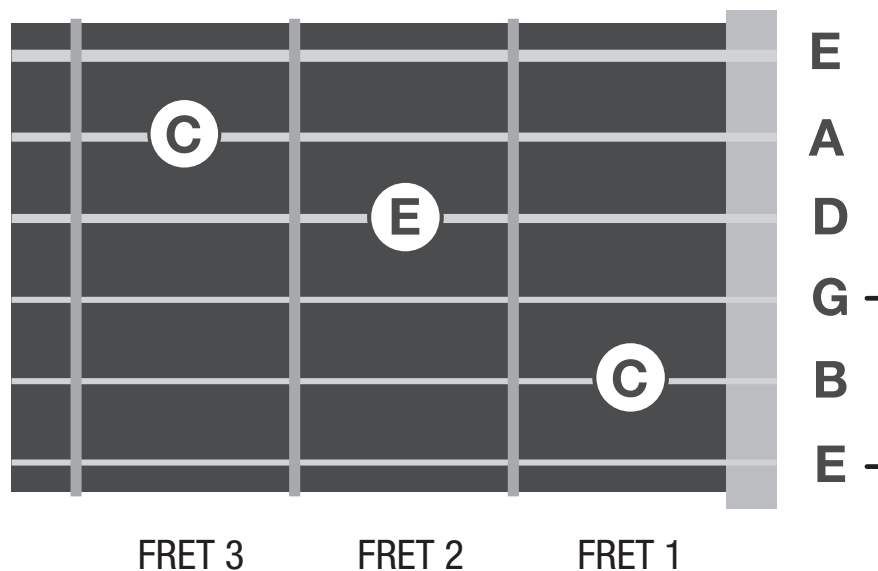
The thing is, playing melody notes on the high strings requires a different approach than playing them on the low strings mostly because the higher the string you play the single note on for the "note" portion of the "note and a" pattern, the fewer strings there are available to strum underneath it during the "and a" part.

For example, if the melody note happens be on the B string, using the low-string approach doesn't really work because the only string left to strum is the high E string, and it's simply not intuitive to think about strumming a single string.

Now, here's a good time to point out that it's much easier to strum something that clashes with single low-string notes because in general, they have a subdued sound. But, single high-string notes cut through pretty well, so after playing high-string melody notes, you have a lot more leeway with what strings you can strum.

With that being said, here's the second general rule of strumming the "note and a" technique: **after playing any melody note on the G, B or high E strings, strum all three high strings.**

Strumming after playing a single notes on the high strings



The second general rule of strumming the "note and a" technique: after playing any melody note on the G, B or high E strings, strum all three high strings.

Examples of playing "note and a" with high-string melody notes

To get started with playing the "note and a" pattern with high string melody notes, place a C chord and play the octave C note on fret 1 of the B string for the "note" portion of the "note and a" pattern. Then, for the "and a" part, since the single note you played was on one of the high strings, strum the G, B and high E strings.

You can also try this process out by playing the G note that comes from playing the open G string for the "note" portion of the pattern and then following it with all three high strings for the "and a" part. Likewise, after playing the E note that comes from playing the open high E string, again, play all three high strings.

fundamental chord concepts

At the end of the day, the "note and a" pattern is so valuable because it allows guitar players to methodically strum chords and mix in single melody notes in an organized and repeatable way. Now, it's at this point that we should dive deeper into what it actually means to "strum chords" because gaining traction in low-string guitar chord melody requires you to at least know how chords are looked at from a music theory perspective, and if you've never thought about it that way before, the terminology can be quite confusing. So, let's assume you know nothing about chords and study them from there.

For starters, when you set your fingers for a guitar "chord," you're actually using a **chord shape** to create a **chord sound**. In practice, musicians usually use the word "chord" to imply the fact that the shape creates the sound, but they're not technically the same thing, and in music theory, the word always refers to the sound.

The main thing you have to know about a chord — the sound — is what it is exactly. By definition, **a chord is simply a collection of notes that's played simultaneously**, and the notes that make up a chord are known as **chord tones** or, more colloquially, as **notes in the chord**.



how chord fundamentals relate to low-string guitar chord melody style

The difference between chord shapes and chord sounds may seem subtle, but it's important — in low-string guitar chord melody style, how you play chord shapes depends on whether or not the melody note you're supposed to play is a chord tone of the chord sound that goes along with it.

For instance, a C chord is made up of three notes — C, E and G. If the melody note you're supposed to play along with it is one of those three notes, then you'll end up playing the C chord in a fairly familiar fashion. But if the melody note is one that's not in the chord, known as a **non-chord tone**, then you'll play the C chord with a different approach.

Now, it may seem that this would require you to know all the notes in all the chords that you'll play in every song, but the fact is, the way the guitar is set up makes it so that as long as you know what melody note you need to play, the rest will take care of itself, and you don't really need to know what the notes are in each chord.

Of course, for getting started with low-string guitar chord melody, that means that you absolutely have to know all the note names in the C major scale because that's where the melody notes in each song will be pulled from.



playing "note and a" with chord tones

Playing chord shapes after chord tone melody notes really couldn't be more straightforward — **you'll simply strum the shapes just as you know them without any changes.**

See, the basic, open guitar chords that are typical to most songs and familiar to even beginners are shaped in a way that the only notes they contain are a chord's chord tones.

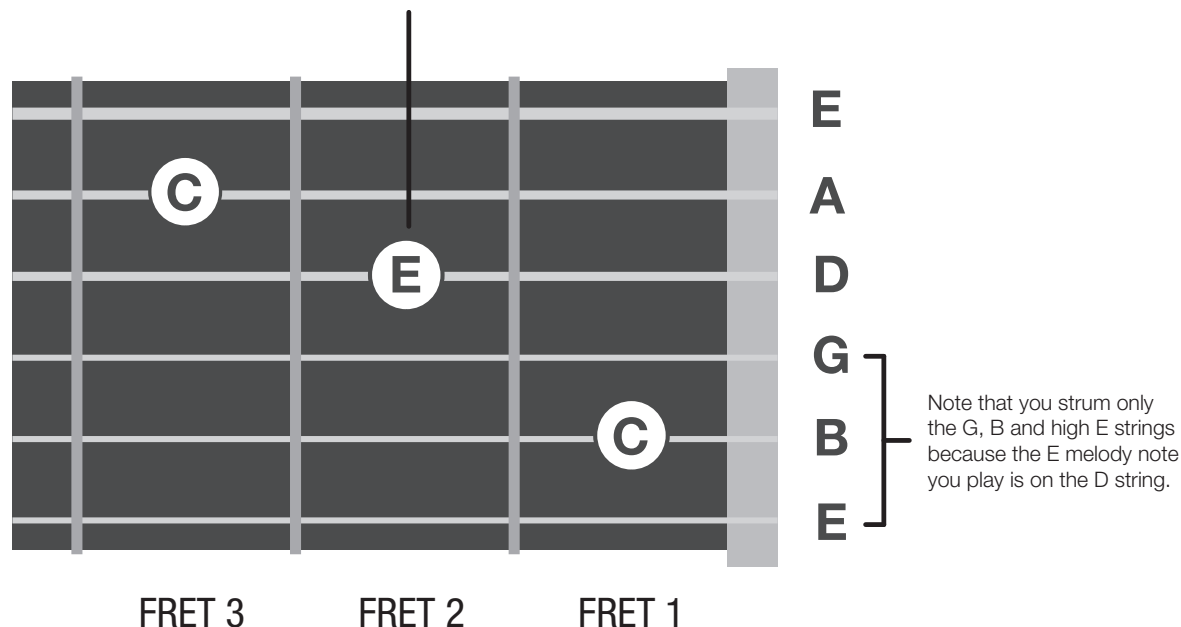
That means that **determining whether or not a melody note is a chord tone of the chord that goes along with it is rather obvious** — it'll almost always be a scale note that coincides with either a fingertip position or an open string that makes up the chord's chord shape. So, if you have to move any of your fingers from the chord shape you're tasked with playing along with a melody note, then that melody note is usually, a non-chord tone.

To see this in action, consider a scenario where you're supposed to play an E melody note along with a C chord. First, you'd place the C chord down and find the melody note, which happens to be on fret 2 of the D string. Then, play it on the "note" portion of the "note and a" pattern.

From there, since the E melody note coincides with a fingertip position in the C chord shape, during the "and a" part of the count, you simply strum the G, B and high E strings, without modifying how you play the C chord. Of course, the reason you only strum the three high strings is because you played a D string melody note.

An example of playing "note and a" for chord tone melody notes

In a scenario where you're tasked with playing an E melody note along with a C chord, first, place the C chord down and then play the E note on the "note" portion of the "note and a" pattern. Since the E melody note coincides with a fingertip position in the C chord shape, during the "and a" part of the count, you simply strum the three high strings, without modifying how you play the C chord.



The connection between melody notes and chord tones

The way most songs are written, **melody notes are usually — but not always — chord tones of the chord that's supposed to be played along with it.** For example, you can expect most of the melody notes that will be played along with a C chord to be either C, E or G — the C chord's chord tones. That means that during low-string guitar chord melody, **most of the time, you'll play the "note and a" technique with a chord tone approach** — you'll play a chord tone melody note and then strum the chord that goes along with it without modifying its shape.

the impact of non-chord tone melody notes

Playing chord shapes after chord tone melody notes should feel pretty familiar — you simply play them the way you learned them.

But **non-chord tone melody notes will always require you to play scale notes that do not coincide with either a fingertip position or open string in the chord's chord shape.**

That means that to accommodate a non-chord-tone melody note, you'll have to adjust how you play the chord that goes along with it.

Now, most guitar players would be inclined to learn new chord shapes that reflect the chord modifications that non-chord-tone melody notes require, but this is a pretty inefficient path.

Consider that the C major scale pattern you need to know for low-string guitar chord melody contains 16 total notes, and that eight of those are non-chord-tones of the C chord. If you go the route of learning new chord shapes for each non-chord-tone melody note possibility, then you'd have to learn at least eight new versions of the C chord. On top of that, there are six more common chord sounds in the key of C that work similarly, so with this approach, you'd have to learn over 50 new chord shapes just to handle non-chord-tone melody notes.

Of course, there is a better alternative — one that leverages the basic chords, and rarely makes you have to learn new chord shapes.



playing "note and a" with non-chord-tones

Efficiently playing the "note and a" technique for non-chord-tone melody notes starts with simply placing the basic chord shape that's supposed to be played along with the single note.

Then, you need to become aware of how the note relates to the chord shape you're playing.

From there, **you adjust your fingers to accommodate the non-chord-tone melody note while keeping as much of the original chord shape intact as possible.**

Finally, you play the non-chord-tone note on the "note" portion of the "note and a" pattern and then, while still using the modified shape, strum the appropriate strings on the "and a" part.

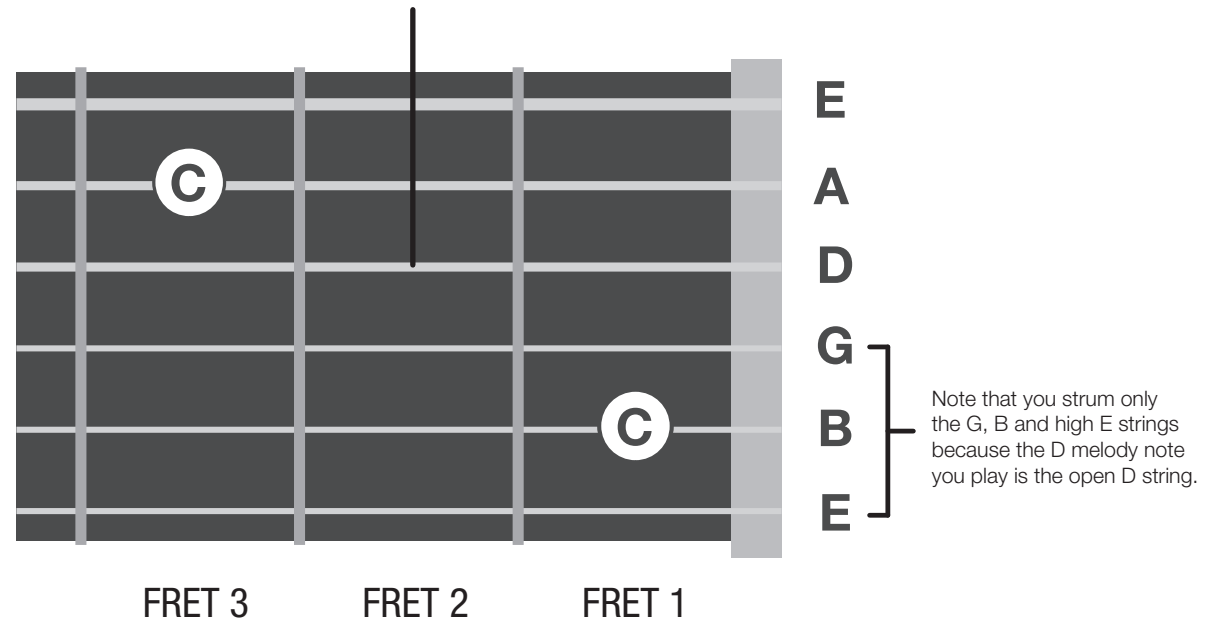
For example, consider a scenario where you're tasked with playing the D note that coincides with the open D string along with a C chord.

First, you'll place a basic C chord. Then, you need to figure out how the note you need to play relates to the chord. In a C chord, the open D string note is covered by your middle finger, which plays the E note on fret 2 of that string.

So, to accommodate the non-chord-tone melody note, you simply lift your middle finger while keeping the rest of the C chord intact. Then, you play the D note on the "note" portion of the "note and a" pattern and finally, while still using the modified chord shape, strum the high strings on the "and a" part, doing so because you played a D string melody note.

Modified C chord for a D melody note that coincides with the open D string

In a scenario where you're tasked with playing the D note that coincides with the open D string along with a C chord, first, place the C chord down. In a C chord, the open D string note is covered by your middle finger, which plays the E note on fret 2 of that string. So, to accommodate the non-chord-tone melody note, you simply lift your middle finger and keep the rest of the C chord intact. Then, you play the D note on the "note" portion of the "note and a" pattern and finally, while still using the modified chord shape, strum the high strings on the "and a" part.



“Don't use your brain to play it,
let your feelings guide your fingers.”

— Jimi Hendrix

non-chord-tone melody notes that coincide with fingertip positions

If you think about it, **playing a non-chord-tone melody note that coincides with an open string is pretty straightforward, as it will always only require you to simply lift up whatever finger is covering it in the basic chord.** For example, to play a C chord along with the non-chord-tone B note that coincides with the open B string, all you have to do is lift your index finger, which in the C chord, covers the open B string on fret 1.

But playing non-chord-tone melody notes that don't coincide with open strings, where you actually have to use a finger to play the note, is more involved. Sometimes, you can just use a free finger, but more often, you'll have to lift a finger from its original position in the chord and move it somewhere else entirely.

Ultimately, you'll determine on a case by case basis how to best handle non-chord-tone melody notes that coincide with a fingertip position, rather than an open string. But there is one general rule that should guide every decision: **make the most efficient, if not the easiest, move possible.** Let's see an example.



an example of a non-chord-tone note that coincides with a fingertip position

One of the more common situations that requires you to play a non-chord-tone melody note that coincides with a fingertip position, rather than an open string, is when you're tasked with playing the A note that sits on fret 2 of the G string along with a C chord.

To handle this scenario, first, you'd place a basic C chord. From there, you can see that the note you need to play sits directly underneath the note that your middle finger is on in the C chord — fret 2 of the D string.

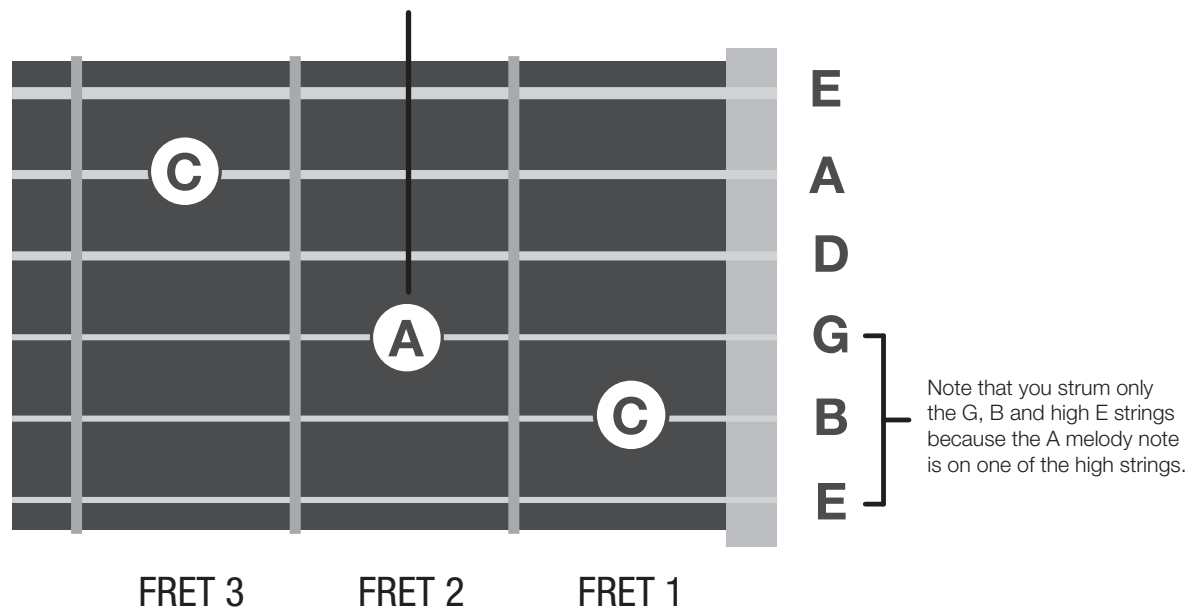
Now, keep in mind that **you want to make the easiest and most efficient move to play that A note, while also keeping as much of the original chord intact as possible.**

In this case, the best way to meet both criteria is to simply lift your middle finger off of fret 2 of the D string and move it to fret 2 of the G string.

Then, you play the A note on the "note" portion of the "note and a" pattern and finally, while still using the modified chord shape, strum the high strings on the "and a" part, doing so because you played a high string melody note.

Modified C chord for an A melody note on fret 2 of the G string

In a scenario where you're tasked with playing the A note that sits on fret 2 of the G string along with a C chord, first, place the C chord down. In relation to the C chord fingertip positions, the note you need to play sits directly underneath the note that your middle finger is on in the C chord — fret 2 of the D string. So, to make the easiest and most efficient move to play that A note while keeping as much of the original chord intact as possible, simply lift your middle finger off of fret 2 of the D string and move it to fret 2 of the G string. Then, play the A note on the "note" portion of the "note and a" pattern and finally, while still using the modified chord shape, strum the high strings on the "and a" part.



how non-chord-tone notes impact the integrity of the chord sound

Here's a good time to point out that with the modified chord shapes you'll use to handle non-chord-tone melody notes during low-string guitar chord melody playing, **not only do you want to keep as much of the original chord shape intact, you also want to preserve as much of the original chord sound as possible.** This is where accuracy with your strumming on the "and a" part of the "note and a" pattern becomes crucial.

Consider that to play a C chord along with the non-chord-tone A note that sits on fret 2 of the D string, you have lift your middle finger from its original position in the C chord — fret 2 of the D string — and move it to fret 2 of the G string. The ramification of this move is that the open D string, which coincides with a non-chord-tone of the C chord — the D note — is left exposed, and if you accidentally hit this note during the strumming part of the "note and a" technique, you'll be adding a second, uncalled for non-chord-tone note. The problem here is that, the more non-chord-tone notes that are added to the original chord tones, the more dissonant the chord will sound. Essentially, by being sloppy with your strumming, you run the risk of sounding bad.

Of course, with accurate strumming, the exposure of the open D string note doesn't matter at all and is simply a means to an end — since the A note you're supposed to play here sits on a high string, you're only supposed to strum the G, B and high E strings anyway. Now, something else to note here is that in this case, that non-chord-tone A note is strummed as part of the chord, and does sound somewhat dissonant in and of itself. But it works here because not only is it the note that was called for, it's also completely unavoidable due to the basic strumming rules of low-string guitar chord melody.



playing non-chord tones with a G chord

Naturally, you'll play the "note and a" technique with a variety of chords in any given song, so let's study it through the lens of the G chord, which is the next most common chord you'll use in the key of C after the C chord.

For starters, playing the G chord along with chord tone melody notes is fairly straightforward, as you'll just use the chord in its original form and won't have to move any of your fingers.

Even playing it with non-chord-tone notes that coincide with an open string is pretty intuitive — you simply lift whatever finger in the original chord shape is covering the open string.

Of course, handling non-chord-tone melody notes that coincide with a fingertip position is more involved. Take, for example, a situation that requires you to play the G chord along with the E note that sits on fret 2 of the D string.

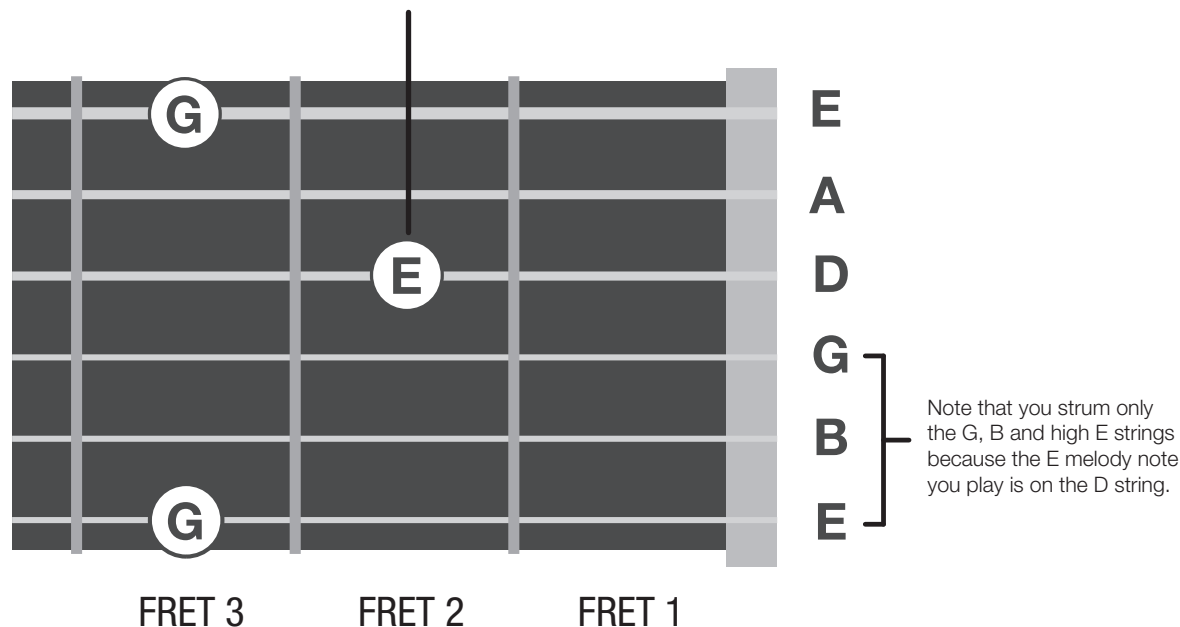
To handle this scenario, first, you'd place a basic G chord. From there, you can see that the note you need to play sits directly underneath the note that your middle finger is on in the chord — fret 2 of the A string.

So, to make the easiest and most efficient move to play that E note while keeping as much of the original G chord shape intact as possible, you simply lift your middle finger off of fret 2 of the A string and move it to fret 2 of the D string.

Then, you play the "note and a" pattern accordingly, making sure to strum accurately.

Modified G chord for an E melody note on fret 2 of the D string

In a scenario where you're tasked with playing the E note that sits on fret 2 of the D string along with a G chord, first, place the G chord down. In relation to the G chord fingertip positions, the note you need to play sits directly underneath the note that your middle finger is on in the chord — fret 2 of the A string. So, to make the easiest and most efficient move to play that E note while keeping as much of the original chord shape intact as possible, simply lift your middle finger off of fret 2 of the A string and move it to fret 2 of the D string. Then, play the E note on the "note" portion of the "note and a" pattern and finally, while still using the modified chord shape, strum the high strings on the "and a" part.



“My guitar is not a thing. **It is an extension of myself.** It is who I am.”

— Joan Jett

the case for the modified chord approach

Overall, using **the modified chord approach** to accommodate non-chord-tone melody notes, as opposed to simply learning new chord shapes, is likely to be an unfamiliar concept to a lot of guitar players, especially those who tend to shy away from anything that even looks music theory related.

The thing is, though, the modified chord approach is so useful because it reduces all the moving parts of low-string guitar chord melody to its core elements — basic chords and melody notes — which ultimately, helps simplify your thinking while playing. Consider a situation that calls for you to play an Em chord along with the A melody note that sits on fret 2 of the G string. Using the modified chord approach, you simply start with the basic Em chord, find the A note, and then figure out how to play the combination in the most efficient way. Really, it's more like adding chord embellishments to the basic chords than playing new ones all together, and at the end of the day, can turn the chords that you first learned into the driving force behind some next-level playing.



visualizing everything in a lead sheet

Now's a good time to take inventory of all the moving parts in low-string guitar chord melody playing. For starters, **you need to know what the current melody note is at any given time as well as whether it's above, below or exactly middle C**. You also need to know **what basic chord gets played along with it**. From there, for each melody note and chord combination, you'll determine how to best apply the "note and a" technique.

Ultimately, it's a lot of stuff to keep track of off the top of your head, so it's highly beneficial to use some kind of reference. Realistically, **the best one for the job is a lead sheet, which is a form of sheet music that highlights only the song's melody line, chords and, if applicable, lyrics**.

Now, using a lead sheet for low-string guitar chord melody is less like reading music in the traditional sense and more like decoding a song's cheat sheet. Sure, you'll have to identify the melody note symbols, but there really aren't that many that you have to know, and they can usually be memorized quickly. Also, chords are treated the same way they would be in a basic song chart with lyrics — they're simply written out above the notes as chord symbols. Plus, if you know the song's tune well — and especially if there are lyrics — it's pretty intuitive to use the lead sheet only as a reference for the melody notes and chord changes while you do everything else by ear. Of course, if you already know how to read music, then using a lead sheet will feel pretty familiar.

Lead sheet for the first half of "Mary Had a Little Lamb"

C — Chord symbol

The lead sheet is written on a single staff in 4/4 time. It features a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The melody is represented by quarter and half notes. Chord symbols (C, G) are placed above the staff at specific measures. Lyrics are written below the staff, aligned with the notes. A legend indicates that the note symbols represent melody notes. A small '5' is placed at the beginning of the second line of music.

Ma - ry had a lit - tle lamb, lit - tle lamb, lit - tle lamb.

5 Ma - ry had a lit - tle lamb whose fleece was white as snow.

Song lyrics

basic lead sheet terminology

Let's take a quick tour of the lead sheet. For starters, all the symbols in a lead sheet are collectively called **music notation**. The five horizontal lines that everything is written on is called **the staff**. The lines themselves are called **staff lines**. The circle-type symbols with lines extending from them are called **note symbols**. Note symbols can sit on, between, above or below the staff lines, and there are different types with slightly varying characteristics.

The staff can be extended either way with short lines, called **ledger lines**, that are just wide enough for a note symbol. Each iteration of the staff, along with the lyrics and chord symbols that go with it, is called a **system**, which is more colloquially known as **a line of music**. The note names that are associated with note symbols are determined by the **treble clef** symbol — the first thing you see on the staff. There are actually two clefs in music — the other is called the **bass clef**, and when that one is present, notes are named differently. Lead sheets, though, almost always have notes that are defined by the treble clef.

The symbol with two stacked numbers is called the **time signature**. It gives us a number to count to repeatedly throughout a song. After each completed count, there's a horizontal line called a **measure line** that breaks the staff up into small sections of note symbols. Each section contains a full turn of the count and is called a **measure** or a **bar**, terms that are used interchangeably. Measures are usually referred to by a number — measure 1, 2 and so on — and sometimes, measure numbers are shown above the starting measure of each system after the first one, which helps make things easier to navigate.

Basic lead sheet elements in a line of music

the most common music note names

While identifying music notes might seem like a scary task, **for low-string guitar chord melody playing in the key of C, you really only have to be able to recognize the 11 C major scale notes that you'll use most often.** Here's a chart that shows them all, along with where they can be found on the guitar.

Most importantly, note that middle C sits on the first ledger line below the staff. As you can visually deduce from there, **any other note that makes use of a ledger line would be considered below middle C** and **any note that does not make use of a ledger line would be considered above middle C.**

Also, now's a good time to point out that any note symbol below the middle staff line has its flag pointing upwards, while those above the middle staff line have their flag pointing downwards. This is purely for readability purposes and doesn't matter much otherwise.

The 11 most common note names for low-string guitar chord melody

Notes above the middle line have their flag pointing downward, purely for readability. Notes below the middle line have their flag pointing upward.

Note	Fret Position	Position Relative to Middle C
G	Fret 3 on the low E string	Below
A	Open A string	Below
B	Fret 2 on the A string	Below
Middle C	Fret 3 on the A string	Below
D	Open D string	Above
E	Fret 2 on the D string	Above
F	Fret 3 on the D string	Above
G	Open G string	Above
A	Fret 2 on the G string	Above
B	Open B string	Above
C	Fret 1 on the B string	Above

These notes are all below middle C

These notes are all above middle C

How to learn the note names

While there are a lot of tricks to learning music notes, ultimately, the best way to learn them for low-string guitar chord melody playing is to actually use a lead sheet for songs while keeping this reference handy. Do it often enough and eventually, you'll have them memorized.

identifying notes in a song's lead sheet

In low-string guitar chord melody style, how you play chord shapes is based on the constantly changing melody notes. So, **to decode a lead sheet for low-string guitar chord melody, the first thing you have to do is go through and identify all the notes.** These are your melody notes. You'll also need to determine whether the note is above, below or exactly middle C, which can be conveyed through a basic arrow system.

If a note is **above middle C**, following its name, it'll have an arrow pointing upwards. If it's **below middle C**, it'll have an arrow pointing downwards. If the note is **exactly middle C**, it'll have no arrow at all. Let's identify all the notes in the first line of "The Wheels on the Bus."

Notes in the first line of "The Wheels on the Bus"

The wheels on the bus go 'round and 'round, 'round and 'round,

G↓ C C C C E↑ G↑ E↑ C D↑ B↓ G↓

Note name with an arrow pointing downward denotes that the note is below middle C.

Note name with no arrow denotes that the note is middle C.

Note name with an arrow pointing upward denotes that the note is above middle C.

Why a lead sheet and not tablature?

While tablature — tab, for short — is a popular song reference among guitar players, it's an inherently limited resource. For almost every song that's written, there's a lead sheet for it, but not usually guitar tab. So by learning to decode a lead sheet, you simply have more access to more songs.

an overview of note symbol types

At its core, a note symbol tells you two things simultaneously. It conveys the name of the note to actually play on the guitar and also has a timing aspect that tells you how long it should last for. Now, for low-string guitar chord melody playing, you don't really need to know all the details behind note symbol timing. But you do use a different rhythm technique for each of the common note symbol types, which means you at least need to be able to identify them. Of course, some basic information about them is also useful, so let's take a moment to discuss them within the context of low-string guitar chord melody.



the most common note symbol types

The most common type of note symbol is a **quarter note**. It has a closed oval shape with a line coming out of it called a **stem**. When it comes to the concept of time in music, the quarter note is the basic unit of measurement, in the same way the dollar is when it comes to money. Now, **despite its fractional name, you can think of a quarter note as equaling 1 and not 1/4** because in practice, **everything we do in music mostly revolves around how we use and manipulate quarter notes**. For all intents and purposes, the quarter note is your default note symbol.

After the quarter note, perhaps the next most common note symbol is the **eighth note**, which looks just like a quarter note except it has an ornament on its stem called a **flag**. An eighth note is equal to half a quarter note — **two eighth notes add up to one quarter note**.

Next up, is the **half note**, which looks like a quarter note, except it has a hole in the middle of its oval. A **half note consists of two quarter notes**. Finally, there's the **whole note**, which looks like a half note without the stem. A **whole note equals four quarter notes**.

Basic note symbols and what they equal in music



Eighth note =
1/2 quarter note.
Two eighth notes equal
one quarter note.



Quarter note = 1, not 1/4.
The most common note
symbol, and the basic unit of
measurement of time in music.



Half note =
Two quarter notes



Whole note =
Four quarter notes

Note

Even though the system is centered around quarter notes, there is in fact a fractional relationship between notes. A quarter note is in fact 1/4 of a whole note, and you can get a half note by combining four eighth notes. But the problem with the fractional names is that they imply that everything works in relation to the number 4, which isn't always the case. Sometimes, you work in relation to 2 or 3, and then you get situations where, for example, a quarter note seems to equal 1/3 or even, 1/2, which doesn't make much sense. So, stick with the idea that everything relates back to a quarter note, which equals 1, and things will always make logical sense.

connected eighth notes and rests

When it comes to note symbol types, you'll use the information about how they relate to quarter notes most often, but there are other things to note.

For starters, while a standalone eighth note has an ornamental flag attached to its stem, when two, three or four eighth notes appear next to each other, their flags become a single bar that connects them. This is mostly done because it helps make things more readable.

Also, in music, what you don't play is just as important as what you do play, and **each note symbol has a counterpart that indicates how long to not play for, called a rest symbol**. Now, as you get started with low-string guitar chord melody, you'll mostly ignore rest symbols, but you should at least be aware of them, as you'll come across them often.

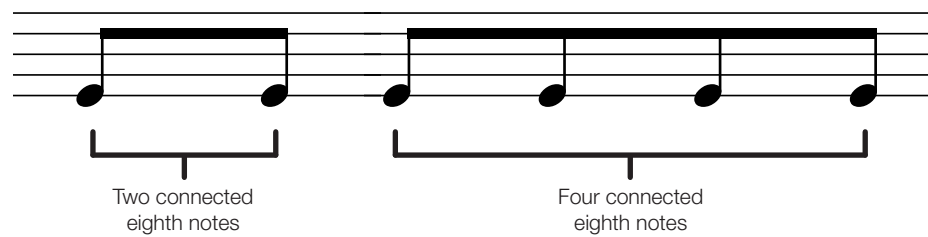
In general, rest symbols function very similarly to note symbols — the main difference between the two is the fact that there is no note name attached to a rest symbol. But from a rhythm standpoint, they're virtually identical.

Take for instance, the **quarter rest**, which looks like a vertical, squiggly line. Like a quarter note, a quarter rest equals 1 and not 1/4. Of course, in music, it's more intuitive to relate everything back to the quarter note, so it's best to think of a quarter rest simply as equaling 1 quarter note.

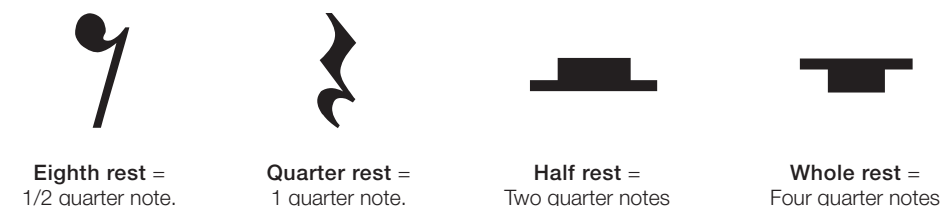
Naturally, there's also an **eighth rest**, which looks like a backwards, ornamented lowercase letter "r." It equals 1/2 of a quarter note.

There's also a **half rest**, which looks like a thick line right on top of a thin one. It equals two quarter notes. Finally, there's the **whole rest**, which looks like an upside down half rest and equals four quarter notes.

Connected eighth notes



Basic rest symbols and their rest values



“That’s the cool thing about the guitar
— there’s always more to learn.”

— The Reverend Horton Heat

an overview of rhythm techniques used for each of the common note symbols

Ultimately, a music note symbol asks you to fill a specific amount of time. But since each one represents a different length of time, you can't fill them all the same way. Now, in low-string guitar chord melody style, you'll mostly fill a note symbol's timeframe by either strumming or playing a standalone note, and any techniques used will be connected to the "note and a" pattern. With that in mind, let's learn how to handle each of the common music note symbols.



handling quarter and eighth notes

Quarter notes are far and away the most common type of note symbol you'll encounter while playing low-string guitar chord melody style. Handling them is pretty straightforward — **for each quarter note, play one iteration of the "note and a" pattern.**

You'll also come across a lot of eighth notes, but since they're only half of a quarter note, you don't have enough time to fit in the entire "note and a" pattern. So, **for each eighth note, use a downstroke motion and simply play the melody note as a standalone note.**



first steps in playing half note rhythm: the unaltered "number and a" pattern

A half note in low-string guitar chord melody style requires you to fill the same amount of time as two quarter notes.

More specifically, **a half note asks you to play one note for the space of two** — you play the melody note that it conveys for the first quarter note's timeframe, and then, simply let it ring over the second quarter note's timeframe.

That means that while you can play the "note and a" pattern for the first part of the half note, you can't also use it for the second because then, you'd be playing two notes instead of only one.

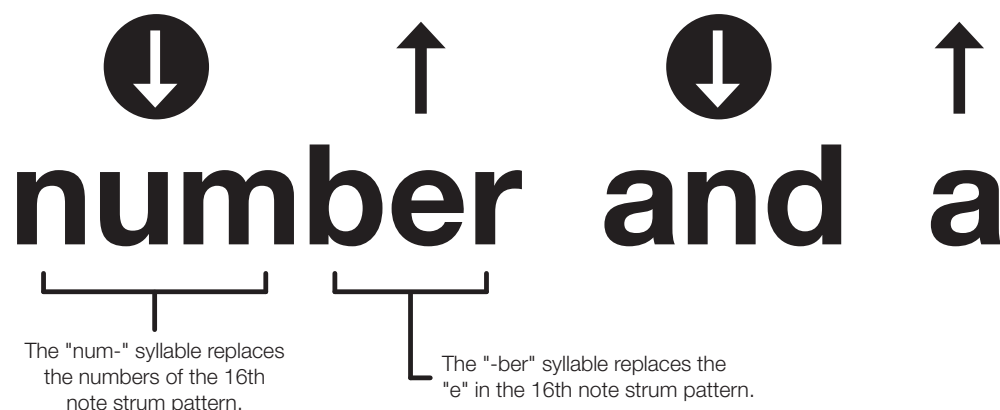
So, for the second part, you need to use a different technique — one that fills the timeframe in a way that allows the melody note played in the first part of the half note to ring out over it.

Now, among other options, it's perhaps best here to make use of the **unaltered "number and a" pattern**, which is just the basic 16th note pattern that's duplicated four times to create the full 16th note strum. When used in this context, you **play the pattern straight, with no accents or rests**.

The unaltered "number and a" pattern not only allows the melody note that's played in the first part of the half note to ring out, it also naturally breaks up any building monotony that can come from playing the "note and a" pattern so much, which will help keep your strumming from sounding one-dimensional.

The unaltered "number and a" pattern

⬇ = DOWNSTROKE ⬆ = UPSTROKE

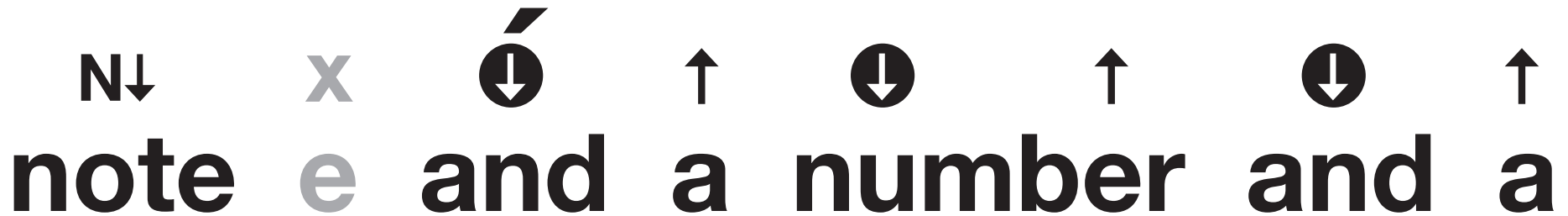


playing the half note rhythm technique

To handle a half note in low-string guitar chord melody, **first you play one iteration of the "note and a" pattern and then, follow it with one iteration of the unaltered "number and a" pattern.** To keep things consistent, while strumming the unaltered "number and a" pattern in this context, **only strum the strings that were played in the "and a" portion of the "note and a" pattern** used in the first part of the half note — basically, any strumming you do while handling a half note should be limited to the strings that are beneath the one that you played the melody note on.

The half note rhythm technique

↓ = DOWNSTROKE ↑ = UPSTROKE X = REST / = ACCENT N↓ = MELODY NOTE



When comfortable with the "note and a" pattern, you can imply the "e," keeping in mind that it still exists.

The unaltered "number and a" pattern. To keep things consistent, while strumming this part of the half note, only strum the strings that were played in the "and a" portion of the "note and a" pattern played in the first part of the half note.

“Your sound is **in your hands as much as anything**. It’s the way you pick, and the way you hold the guitar, more than it is the amp or the guitar you use.”

— Stevie Ray Vaughan

the whole note rhythm technique

In low-string guitar chord melody, whole notes work similarly to half notes. The main difference is that a whole note requires you to fill the same amount of time as four quarter notes, instead of only two. Essentially, **a whole note asks you to play one note for the space of four**, and instructs you to play the melody note that it conveys for the first quarter note's timeframe, and then, simply let it ring over the second, third and fourth quarter notes' timeframe.

To handle the first half of a whole note, you start by playing the half note rhythm technique — the "note and a" pattern followed by the unaltered "number and a" pattern. Now, for the second half, you could just play two more iterations of the unaltered "number and a" pattern, and it would work okay, but making use of the version of the "number and a" pattern that contains a rest on the "-ber" syllable of the word, "number," and has an accent on the "and" would not only break things up a bit, it would also sound much less one-dimensional. So, **for the second part of the whole note, play the "number and a" pattern with the rest and accent, followed another iteration of the unaltered "number and a" pattern**. Of course, also keep in mind that any strumming you do while handling a whole note should be limited to the strings that are beneath the one that you played the melody note on.

All said and done, **the entire whole note rhythm technique starts with the "note and a" pattern and is followed by the unaltered "number and a" pattern, the "number and a" pattern with the rest and accent, and finally, another iteration of the unaltered "number and a" pattern.**

The whole note rhythm technique



= DOWNSTROKE

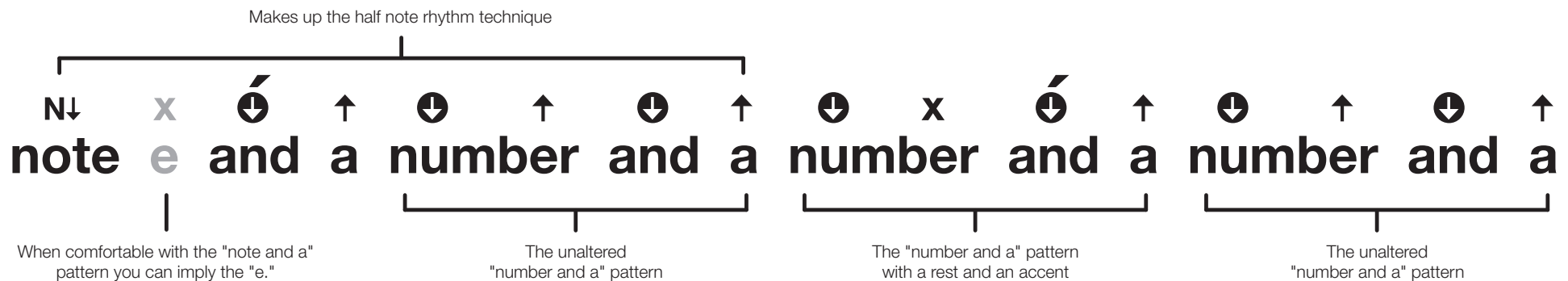


= UPSTROKE

X = REST

/ = ACCENT

N↓ = MELODY NOTE



gaining traction with the right songs

For some guitar players, learning to read music might seem like a daunting task.

The thing is, though, one of the best ways to get started with music notation is to use songs you know well, so that you can complement your reading with playing by ear, which is much more familiar territory for most guitarists.

In fact, the more you know a song, the less you have to rely on actually reading it, and if you think about it, there are almost no other songs that you know better than childrens songs, such as "Mary Had a Little Lamb," "The Alphabet Song" and all the others like it.

Of course, it may seem silly at first to think of playing a bunch of kids songs, but the reality is, they're the perfect vehicles for gaining traction with low-string guitar chord melody style.

See, since you know these melodies so well, you'll almost always know when you make mistakes, as basically, it'll be pretty obvious when you mess up your ABCs.

From there, you'll naturally begin to fix things by ear, which in turn, renders the lead sheet into merely, a cheat sheet that contains the formula for how to play a song in the style.

When done right, you're hardly reading music at all — you're mostly just looking at instructions.



the two-step process for playing songs in low-string guitar chord melody style

Once you're aware of all the tools and techniques that are used most often in low-string guitar chord melody style, actually using them for songs is pretty straightforward — **first, you decode the song's lead sheet for all of the style's moving parts, and then, you apply the appropriate techniques accordingly.** Let's go through this two-step process to play your first song measure in low-string guitar chord melody style.



decoding your first song measure

Decoding a song's lead sheet is all about identifying all the moving parts of low-string guitar chord melody. Ultimately, **for each song, you need to know four pieces of information:**

1. The melody note names
2. Where the melody notes lie on the guitar
3. What chord or chords are supposed to be played along with each melody note
4. Each melody note's note symbol type, which will determine the rhythm technique that you'll use for each one

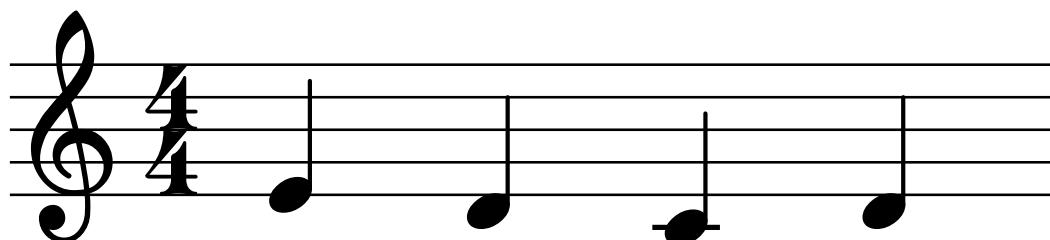
As an example, let's decode the first measure of the song, "Mary Had a Little Lamb."

This measure has four melody notes, which are all supposed to be played along with a C chord. The first is an E above middle C. On the guitar, you'll find that note on fret 2 of the D string. Next, is a D above middle C, which coincides with the open D string. Then, there's middle C, found on fret 3 of the A string, and finally, another iteration of the D above middle C, which again, coincides with the open D string.

All four melody notes, in this case, are quarter notes, which means that you'll need to play one iteration of the "note and a" pattern for each one.

Decoded lead sheet for the first measure of "Mary Had a Little Lamb"

C — All of the melody notes in this measure are supposed to be played with a C chord.



Ma - ry had a

E↑ Fret 2 on the D string D↑ Open D string C Fret 3 on the A string D↑ Open D string



All of the melody notes in this measure are quarter notes, which means that you'll need to play one iteration of the "note and a" pattern for each one.

"I believe every guitar player inherently has something **unique** about their playing."

— Jimmy Page

playing your first song measure

Once a song's lead sheet is decoded for low-string guitar chord melody style, you simply **follow its instructions by forming the chords it calls for and applying the appropriate rhythm technique to each melody note.**

As an example, let's play the first bar of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" using a decoded lead sheet. Since all of the melody notes in this measure are supposed to be played along with a C chord, start by placing the basic C chord shape on the guitar. Then, work through the melody notes, keeping in mind that all the notes in the measure are quarter notes, so you'll apply the "note and a" technique to each one.

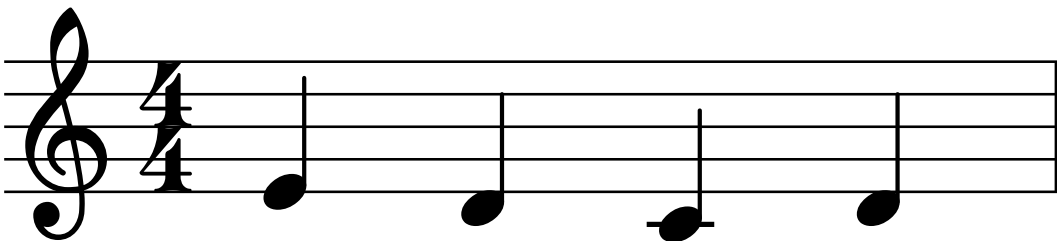
To play the first melody note, E above middle C on fret 2 of the D string, apply the "note and a" pattern accordingly — play the note by itself first, and then strum the appropriate strings.

Note that to play this E note, you don't have to shift your fingers from the original C chord shape, which means that it's a chord tone. Keeping track of this information will help lead to you processing all of the moving parts more quickly, which in turn, will help you play the style more intuitively and smoothly.

Repeat the process for the rest of the melody notes, and be sure to pick up on the fact that the D above middle C is not a chord tone because you had to move your fingers to play it, while the middle C note is a chord tone, as your ring finger plays it in the original C chord shape.

Decoded lead sheet for the first measure of "Mary Had a Little Lamb"

C — All of the melody notes in this measure are supposed to be played with a C chord.



Ma - ry had a

E↑
Fret 2 on
the D string

D↑
Open
D string

C
Fret 3 on
the A string

D↑
Open
D string

All of the melody notes in this measure are quarter notes, which means that you'll need to play one iteration of the "note and a" pattern for each one.

The two-step process for playing songs in low-string guitar chord melody style

1. **Decode the song's lead sheet.** Figure out all the melody note names, as well as where you can find them on the guitar. Then, determine which chord or chords are supposed to be played along with them. Finally, identify each note symbol type, as this will tell you which rhythm technique you need to play for each melody note.
2. **Follow the instructions of the decoded lead sheet** by forming the chords it calls for and applying the appropriate rhythm technique to each melody note.

measure 2 of "mary had a little lamb"

To get more practice with decoding a lead sheet and then following its instructions, let's work through measure 2 of "Mary Had a Little Lamb." Now, the first thing you'll notice about this measure is that it doesn't have a chord above it. Here's the thing — as a general rule, **once you're instructed to play a chord, you use it until it changes to another one.** So in this case, **even though there's no chord specified for this measure, you're supposed to play a C chord along with the melody notes because that's the chord you were instructed to play last, and it hasn't changed to a different one.**

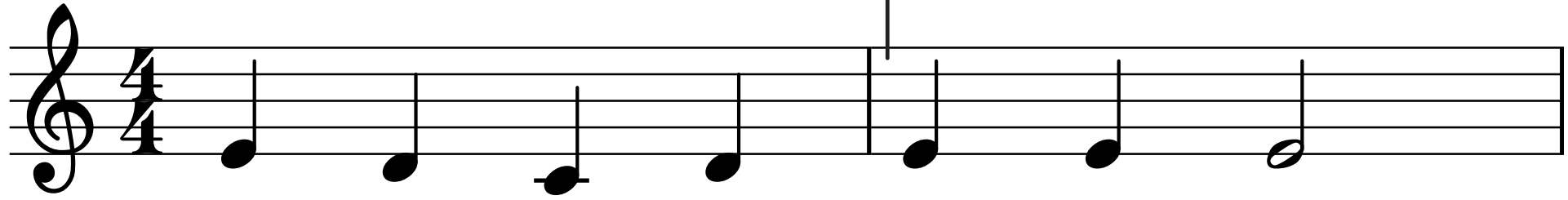
From there, each of the three notes in measure 2 is an E above middle C, which lies on fret 2 of the D string. The first two are quarter notes, so you'll apply one iteration of the "note and a" pattern to each one. The last one, though, is a half note, so there, you'll need to play the half note rhythm technique — one iteration of the "note and a" pattern followed by one iteration of the unaltered "number and a" pattern.

Ultimately, for the first two bars of "Mary Had a Little Lamb," using a C chord, you play the "note and a" pattern once for each of the first six melody notes and then use the half note rhythm technique for the last one, all while modifying the C chord shape as needed based on where each note lies on the guitar.

Decoded lead sheet for the first two bars of "Mary Had a Little Lamb"

C — All of the melody notes in this measure are supposed to be played with a C chord.

Even though this measure doesn't have a chord, it's still C because that's the chord you were instructed to play last, and it hasn't changed to a different one.



Ma - ry had a lit - tle lamb,

E↑ Fret 2 on the D string D↑ Open D string C Fret 3 on the A string D↑ Open D string E↑ Fret 2 on the D string E↑ Fret 2 on the D string E↑ Fret 2 on the D string

All of these melody notes are quarter notes, which means that you'll need to play one iteration of the "note and a" pattern for each one.

This is a half note, so you'll need to play the half note rhythm technique here.

changing chords in "mary had a little lamb"

As you finish out the first line of "Mary Had a Little Lamb," you're tasked with handling **the last major undertaking of getting started with low-string guitar chord melody style — changing chords during a song**. In measure 3, the chord changes to G, so at that point, you'll switch from the C chord shape that you played in measures 1 and 2 to the G chord shape and work through the melody notes from there.

Each of the three notes in measure 3 is a D above middle C, which coincides with the open D string. The first two are quarter notes, so you'll use the "note and a" pattern for each one. The last one, though, is a half note, which will require you to play the half note rhythm technique. Also, note that though the D above middle C is not a chord tone of the C chord, it is a chord tone of the G chord because the open D string is part of the G chord shape.

For measure 4, you'll switch back to the C chord and play the melody notes from there. The first two are an E above middle C and a G above middle C. Both are quarter notes, and take the "note and a" pattern. The last one is also a G above middle C, but it's a half note and calls for the half note rhythm technique.

Decoded lead sheet for the first line of "Mary Had a Little Lamb"

The lead sheet is presented on a single staff in 4/4 time. The melody consists of quarter notes in measures 1-2, followed by a half note in measure 3, and then quarter and half notes in measure 4. Chord changes are indicated by brackets above the staff: C for measures 1-2, G for measure 3, and C for measure 4. Fingering is indicated by 'E↑' for fretted notes and 'D↑' for open strings. The lyrics are: 'Ma - ry had a lit - tle lamb, lit - tle lamb, lit - tle lamb.'

Measure 1: Chord C. Notes: E4 (Fret 2, D string), D4 (Open D string), C4 (Fret 3, A string), D4 (Open D string). Rhythm: Quarter notes. Technique: "note and a".

Measure 2: Chord C. Notes: E4 (Fret 2, D string), E4 (Fret 2, D string), E4 (Fret 2, D string). Rhythm: Half note. Technique: Half note rhythm.

Measure 3: Chord G. Notes: D4 (Open D string), D4 (Open D string), D4 (Open D string). Rhythm: Quarter notes, then Half note. Technique: "note and a" for quarter notes, half note rhythm for half note.

Measure 4: Chord C. Notes: E4 (Fret 2 on the D string), G4 (Open G string), G4 (Open G string). Rhythm: Quarter notes, then Half note. Technique: "note and a" for quarter notes, half note rhythm for half note.

Annotations:

- Stay on C here because that's the chord you were instructed to play last and nothing has changed.
- Change to a G chord here. Note that in this case, the D↑ is a chord tone because the open D string is part of the G chord shape.
- Go back to a C chord here. Note that the G↑ is a chord tone because the open G string is part of the C chord shape.

looking at "mary had a little lamb" in full

The first line of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" pretty much encompasses how to play low-string guitar chord melody style in a nutshell, and the rest of the song works similarly. It's also mostly made up of quarter notes, so you'll play a lot of single iterations of the "note and a" pattern.

Of course, there some half notes mixed in too, which will take the half note rhythm technique. At the very end, there's a whole note, which calls for the whole note rhythm technique.

A couple of other things to note here is the double line between measures 8 and 9, which is called a **section marker**. It simply separates the two distinct sections of this song. Also, you'll see that the C chord is called for in both measures 8 and 9. In measure 9, since the chord hasn't changed, this iteration of the C chord symbol is unnecessary, but it's repeated here as a courtesy because this measure also represents the start of a new section.

The only thing that should really give you pause is the half note with a dot in measure 8. The fact is though, this is just one of the many intricacies of playing the style, and handling it simply requires you to extend the big-picture skills that got you through the first line.

Let's learn more about this note and also study some of the other ins and outs of playing low-string guitar chord melody style.

Full version of "Mary Had a Little Lamb"

Use the quarter note rhythm technique for any quarter note.

Use the half note rhythm technique for any half note.

C

Ma - ry had a lit - tle lamb, lit - tle lamb, lit - tle lamb.

5

G

Ma - ry had a lit - tle lamb whose fleece was white as

8

C

Half note with a dot

snov.

And

ev - ery where that Ma - ry went,

This iteration of the C chord symbol is unnecessary, because the chord hasn't changed from measure 8, but it's repeated here as a courtesy since this measure represents the start of a new song section.

Section marker

11

G

C

Ma - ry went, Ma - ry went, ev - ery where that

14

G

C

Ma - ry went the lamb was sure to go.

Use the whole note rhythm technique for any whole note.

dotted notes

Note symbols that have dots next them are called **dotted notes**, and it's most common to encounter either a **dotted half note** or a **dotted quarter note**. In a nutshell, a dotted note basically means to let the melody note ring out for a specific length of time that's longer than the original note's timeframe.

For instance, to cover a basic half note, you'd let the melody note it conveys ring out for the span of two quarter notes, but **a dotted half note has you hold the melody note for the span of three quarter notes**. Dotted quarter notes work similarly. Consider that a basic quarter note actually covers the span of two eighth notes, since one eighth note equals half of a quarter note. But **a dotted quarter note covers the span of three eighth notes instead of two**.

Now, for the purposes of low-string guitar chord melody style, there are options for handling dotted notes based on your experience level. If you're a guitar player with rock-solid timing, it's probably more intuitive and efficient to "feel" how the basic rhythm techniques apply to dotted notes rather than learn more patterns. See, ultimately, any new patterns are just extensions of the core rhythm techniques, and if you already strum confidently, your rhythmic intuition will probably automatically accommodate for the extra time that dotted notes require. If you're less experienced, note that there are many ways to handle dotted notes in this style, but you can rely on a couple of patterns. Let's learn more about handling dotted notes in low-string guitar chord melody style.



dotted half note rhythm technique

As you consider dotted notes within the context of low-string guitar chord melody style, you'll first want to note that **any version of the "number and a" pattern, including the "note and a" technique, covers the span of one quarter note**. From there, figuring out how to handle a dotted half note, which covers the span of three quarter notes, is mostly about finding the right combination of the various versions of the "number and a" pattern.

Of course, to cover a dotted half note's first quarter note timeframe, you'd use the "note and a" version because it's the one that allows you to play the melody note that the note symbol conveys. After that, you have options — to cover each of the final two quarter note timeframes in a dotted half note, you can plug in any combination of either the unaltered "number and a" pattern or the one with the rest and the accent. That means that you could, for example, follow the "note and a" pattern with two iterations of the unaltered "number and a" pattern, and it would work just fine.

But among all the options, **the dotted half note rhythm pattern that probably works best starts with the "note and a" pattern and is followed by first, the "number and a" version with a rest and the accent and then, the unaltered version**. This option works well because it keeps the driving nature of the unaltered "number and a" version at the end of the pattern, which helps give a sense of propelling motion toward the next melody note.

The dotted half note rhythm technique



= DOWNSTROKE

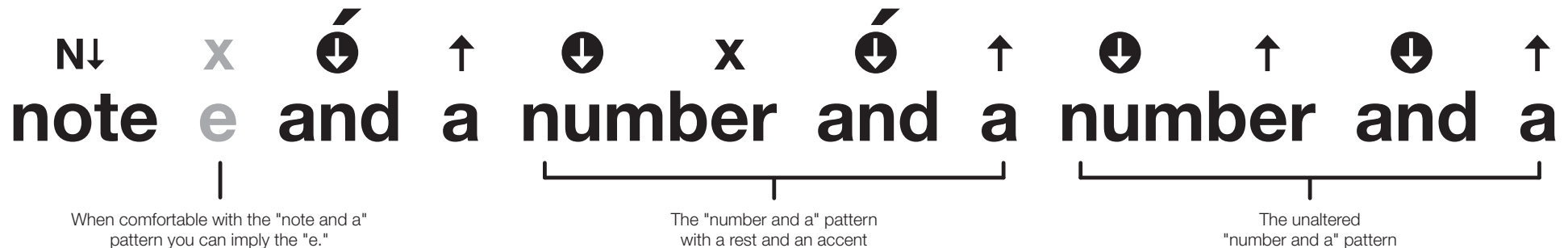


= UPSTROKE

X = REST

/ = ACCENT

N↓ = MELODY NOTE



the dotted quarter note rhythm technique

Just as there are many ways to handle dotted half notes in low-string guitar chord melody style, you also have options when it comes to playing dotted quarter notes.

But because a dotted quarter note covers the span of three eighth notes, to play one, it makes most sense to use rhythm techniques related to eighth notes rather than quarter notes.

Of course, a basic eighth note in the style calls for you to use a downstroke motion to play the melody note it conveys as a standalone note.

Now, **since the eighth note rhythm technique revolves around the concept that you use a downstroke motion to play something**, it would stand to reason that if needed, **you could also cover the span of one eighth note with a basic downstroke strum**.

So with that in mind, probably the best way to handle a dotted quarter note is to cover its first eighth note timeframe simply by playing the melody note it conveys as a standalone note with a downstroke motion followed by one downstroke strum for each of the symbol's other two eighth note timeframes, making sure to only strum the strings that are beneath the one that the melody note was played on.

All said and done, **to play a dotted quarter note, you do three downstroke motions — first, to play the melody note all by itself and then, to strum two downstrokes**.

The dotted quarter note rhythm technique



First, use a downstroke motion to play the melody note that the dotted quarter note conveys...



...then, strum two downstrokes using only the strings that are beneath the one that the melody note was played on.

Note that each of the three downstroke motions in the dotted quarter note rhythm technique should take half as long as it takes to complete one iteration of the "note and a" pattern in the song that you're playing. If you're mostly playing by ear, you'll want to play the three downstroke motions rather quickly, as it'll feel natural — and be correct — to want to play the next melody note right away.



finishing out "mary had a little lamb"

To complete your first song in low-string guitar chord melody style, let's handle the dotted half note that appears in "Mary Had a Little Lamb."

It's the first note of measure 8 and conveys a middle C note that goes along with a C chord.

To play it, place a C chord shape on the guitar and play the dotted half note rhythm technique — start by handling the melody note with the "note and a" pattern, and then, play the "number and a" version with the rest and the accent followed by the unaltered version.

Make sure that any strumming done during the pattern is kept only to the D, G, B and E strings, as the melody note is on the A string.

To finish out the measure, there's another quarter note that also conveys a middle C note. To handle it, stay on the C chord and play one iteration of the "note and a" pattern.

Once you're comfortable with measure 8, work through the whole song, which at this point should be pretty straightforward — everything else simply makes use of all the most common low-string guitar chord melody style techniques.

Full version of "Mary Had a Little Lamb"

The musical score is written in 4/4 time and consists of 14 measures. It uses a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). Chord symbols (C and G) are placed above the staff to indicate the guitar chords. The lyrics are written below the staff, with hyphens indicating syllables that span multiple notes or measures. Measure 8 includes a dotted half note, which is highlighted with a vertical line and a bracket, and a text annotation: "Use the dotted half note rhythm technique for any dotted half note." The score ends with a double bar line in measure 14.

Measures 1-4: C chord. Lyrics: Ma - ry had a lit - tle lamb, lit - tle lamb, lit - tle lamb.

Measures 5-7: G chord. Lyrics: Ma - ry had a lit - tle lamb whose fleece was white as

Measure 8: C chord. Lyrics: snow. And ev - ery where that Ma - ry went,

Measures 9-10: C chord. Lyrics: Ma - ry went, Ma - ry went, ev - ery where that

Measures 11-14: G chord. Lyrics: Ma - ry went the lamb was sure to go.

handling eighth notes in a song

Far and away, the most common rhythm technique you'll play in low-string guitar chord melody style is the "note and a" pattern because quarter notes represent the vast majority of the note symbols you'll encounter.

But, you'll also see a lot of eighth notes, so let's take a look at a song that makes use of them.

In "The Alphabet Song," as would be expected, quarter notes make up most of the song, and there are some half notes mixed in, as well.

Measure 4, though, starts with four eighth notes in a row, over the "L M N O" lyrics. Now, before working through this measure, note that **even though you play eighth notes in this style as standalone notes, you'll still place the chord shape that goes with the melody notes**, mostly because it'll make shifting to the other rhythm techniques more intuitive and efficient.

With that in mind, each of the four eighth notes represent a D note above middle C, which coincides with the open D string. Since the chord that goes along with them is G, to play them, you'd place a G chord shape on the guitar and simply play the open D string four times with a downstroke motion.

The bar ends with a half note that conveys the middle C note on fret 3 of the A string. Notably, the chord changes to C for this note, so to play it, you'd switch to the C chord shape and then apply the half note rhythm technique accordingly.

Full version of "The Alphabet Song"

Use the eighth note rhythm technique for any eighth note.

C F C F C G C

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P

5 F C G C F C G

Q R S T U V Dou - ble yoo X Y and Z.

9 C F C F C G C

Now I know my A B Cs, next time won't you sing with me?

More practice with the eighth note rhythm technique

Measure 7 also starts with eighth notes — one for each of the two syllables of the "Double" lyric. Each of the two eighth notes in this case represent a G note above middle C, which coincides with the open G string. Since the chord that goes along with these notes is C, to play them, you'd place a C chord shape and simply play the open G string two times with a downstroke motion.

From there, the next note in the measure is also a G note above middle C that's supposed to be played along with a C chord, but it's a quarter note, so it gets the "note and a" pattern. The bar ends with an F melody note above middle C that goes along with an F chord. It's a half note, so to play it, switch to an F chord shape and apply the half note rhythm technique accordingly.

non-chord shape chord tones

As you work through songs in low-string guitar chord melody style, something to keep in mind is that the basic rules that help you gain traction are only a starting point — they're ultimately, meant to be built upon.

Consider that in general, the modified chord approach revolves around the concept that if you have to move your fingers from the original chord shape to play a melody note, then that melody note is likely a non-chord tone.

But, with any chord you play, there are usually other chord tones in the scale that's used for melody notes that don't coincide with either a fingertip position or an open string that makes up the chord shape, and handling any of those notes will require you to modify the original chord shape, just as if it were a non-chord tone.

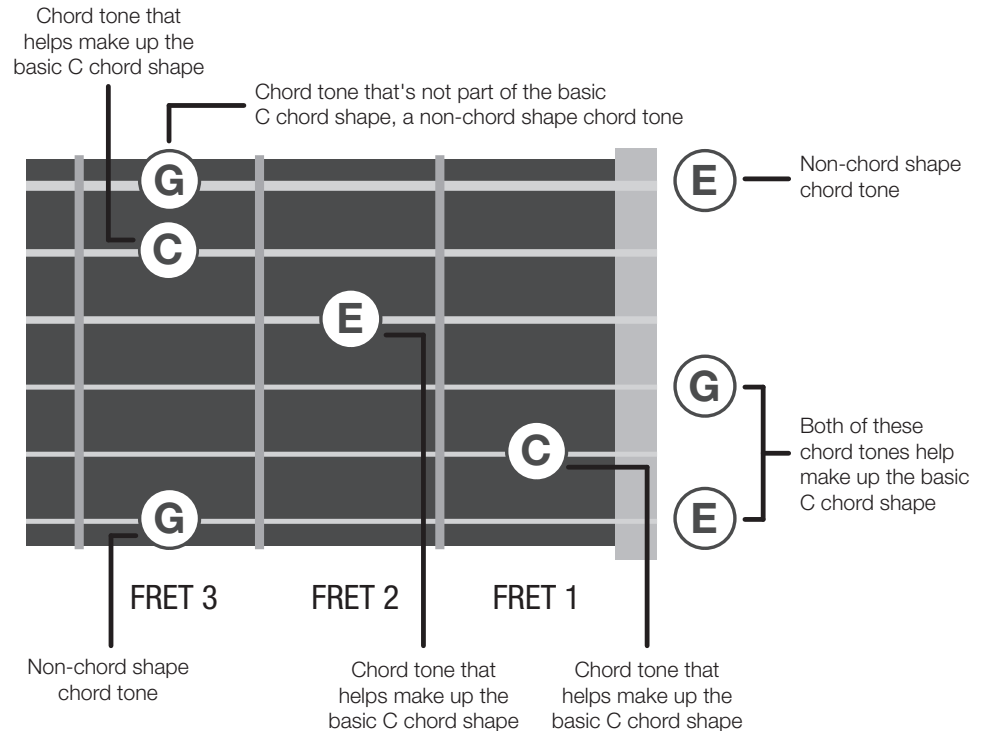
For instance, a C chord has three chord tones — C, E and G. On the guitar, the basic C chord shape is built with the C note on fret 3 of the A string, the E note on fret 2 of the D string, the G note from the open G string, another iteration of the C note on fret 1 of the B string, and another iteration of the E note from the open high E string.

Besides those notes, **the C major scale also contains three other chord tones of the C chord that aren't part of the basic chord shape** — the E note from the open low E string, the G note on fret 3 of the low E string and another iteration of the G note on fret 3 of the high E string.

The thing is, any one of these three **non-chord shape chord tones** could be used as a melody note, and in a situation where you're tasked with playing one along with a C chord, you'd have to modify the original shape to do it, just as if you were playing a non-chord tone.

Now, there are a couple different ways to handle non-chord shape chord tones, so let's take a closer look at what you need to consider.

Every chord tone of a C chord in the C major scale



“Success is falling nine times
and **getting up ten times.**”

— Jon Bon Jovi

handling non-chord shape chord tones

One of the most common situations that calls for you to handle a non-chord shape chord tone is when you're tasked with playing **a C chord along with a G melody note below middle C**, which can be found on fret 3 of the low E string.

For the most part, you'd handle this scenario similarly to how you would a non-chord tone — first, you'd place the C chord and then, because the note is not part of the chord shape, you'd move your fingers in the most efficient way that keeps as much of the chord shape intact as possible.

In this case, the G note you're targeting on fret 3 of the low E string sits right above the note in the C chord that gets played with your ring finger — the C note on fret 3 of the A string. So **to play that G note, the most intuitive move would be to simply shift your ring finger from fret 3 of the A string to fret 3 of the low E string.**

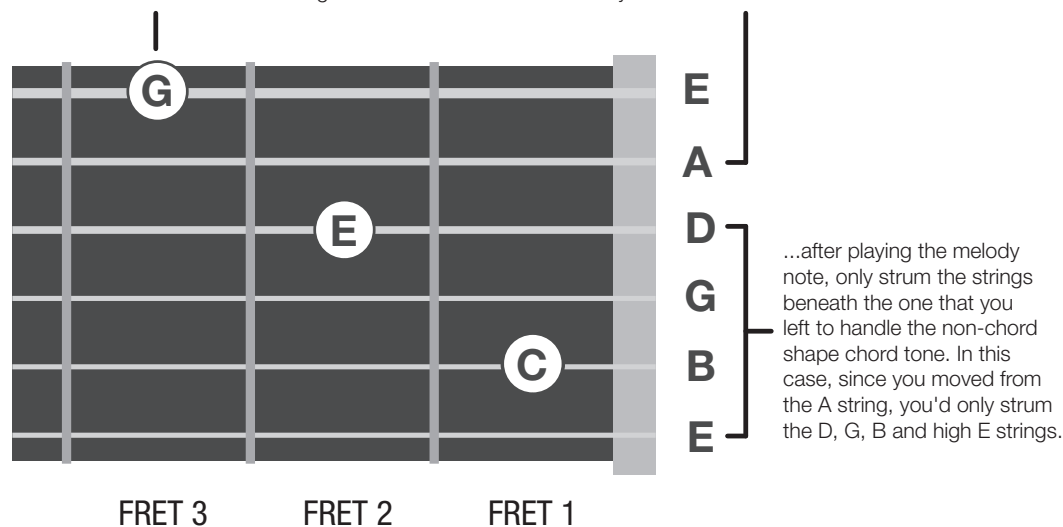
But there's a consequence to this action that you have to account for — moving your finger from the fret 3 of the A string leaves the A string open and exposes the non-chord tone A note. To avoid any dissonance that this could create, **any strumming done after playing the non-chord shape chord tone in this manner should be kept to the strings that are beneath the one you left to handle it.**

That means that after modifying the C chord to play this particular G note, any strumming done afterward should be kept to the D, G, B and high E strings, because you left the A string to accommodate the non-chord shape chord tone.

Playing a G melody note below middle C with a C chord

To play a G melody note below middle C with a C chord, place the C chord and then, move your ring finger from the C note on fret 3 of the A string to the G note on fret 3 of the low E string.

The consequence of moving your ring finger from fret 3 of the A string to fret 3 of the low E string, though, is that it leaves the A string open and exposes the non-chord tone A note. To avoid any dissonance that this could create...



“Music can cheer you up, pass the time, inspire you, and **help you have fun with others.**”

— Anna Claybourne

non-chord shape chord tones in action

Let's look at a situation that would require you to handle a non-chord shape chord tone.

The first note of "Hush Little Baby" calls for you to play a G melody note below middle C with a C chord. It's a quarter note and will ultimately take one iteration of the "note and a" pattern.

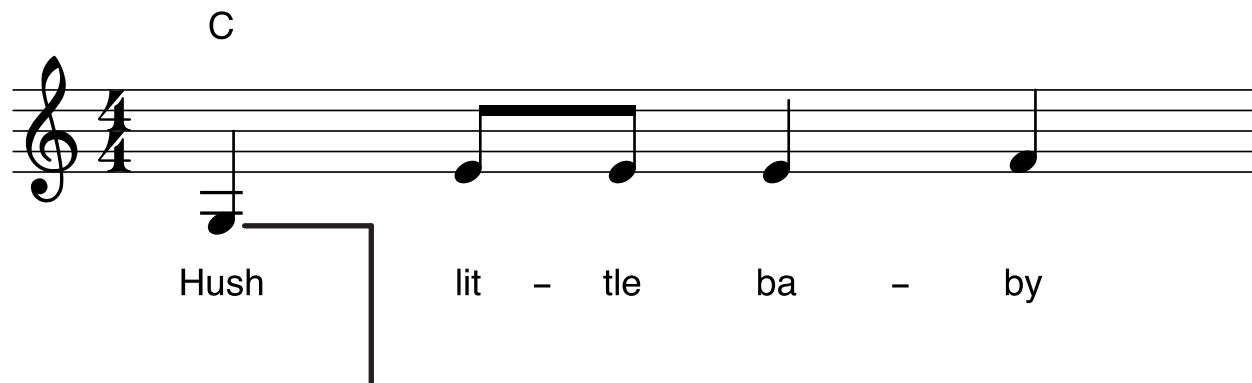
To handle it, first, place the C chord. From there, the G note you're targeting here is on fret 3 of the low E string, which sits right above the note in the C chord that gets played with your ring finger — the C note on fret 3 of the A string.

Since this G note is not in the original chord shape, you have to move your fingers to accommodate it, and the most efficient way to do it is to simply move your ring finger from fret 3 of the A string to fret 3 of the low E string.

Of course, this action leaves the A string open and exposes the non-chord tone A note. To avoid any dissonance that this could create, any strumming you do after playing the non-chord shape chord tone should be kept to the strings that are beneath the one you left to handle it.

So, after modifying the C chord and playing the G note below middle C on the "note" portion of the "note and a" pattern, you'd only strum the D, G, B and high E strings on the "and a" part because in this case, you left the A string to accommodate the non-chord shape chord tone.

The first measure of "Hush Little Baby"



This melody note calls for you to play a G melody note below middle C with a C chord. To play it, place the C chord and then, move your ring finger from the C note on fret 3 of the A string to the G note on fret 3 of the low E string. Then, since it's a quarter note, apply the "note and a" pattern to it, making sure to only strum the D, G, B and high E strings, because you left the A string to accommodate the non-chord shape chord tone.



non-chord shape chord tones that require added fingertip positions

While, you'll mostly handle non-chord shape chord tones by shifting a finger from one place to another, **in some cases, you can do the job by simply using a free finger to add a fingertip position to the original chord shape.**

Consider the fairly rare situation that calls for you to play a C chord along with a G melody note above the octave C note.

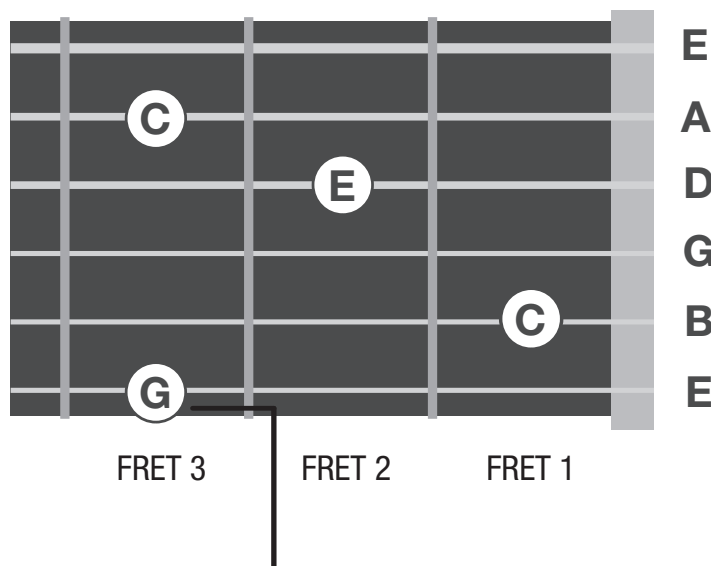
This note can be found on fret 3 of the high E string, and ultimately, the most efficient way to play it after placing a C chord is to put your pinky finger there without moving any of your other fingers. This works, of course, because your pinky is otherwise free while playing the original C chord shape.

Now, note that even though you don't move any fingers, by adding a fingertip position to the basic chord shape, it does change the chord from its original form, so handling non-chord shape chord tone through this method would still fall under the umbrella of the modified chord approach.

Also, **handling non-chord shape chord tones in this manner doesn't typically expose any non-chord tones, so only the basic low-string guitar chord melody style strumming rules apply** — since this particular note is on a high string, you'd only strum the G, B and high E strings.

All said and done, when playing non-chord shape chord tones with the modified chord approach, always make the most efficient move that keeps as much of the original chord shape intact as possible, and if in the process, you expose a non-chord tone, make sure to avoid that note in any strumming you do after playing the melody note.

Playing a G melody note above the octave C note with a C chord



Playing the G melody note above the octave C note doesn't expose any non-chord tones, so only the basic low-string guitar chord melody style strumming rules apply — since this particular note is on a high string, you'd only strum the G, B and high E strings.

When tasked with playing a G melody note above the octave C note, first, place the C chord and then, add your free pinky finger to fret 3 of the high E string.

“As long as you’re excited about what you’re playing, and **as long as it comes from your heart**, it’s going to be great.”

— John Frusciante

the C/G chord

In general, you can handle almost any non-chord shape chord tone by modifying the basic, open position chord that goes along with it, but in some cases, it's more practical to use a different chord shape altogether.

For example, when you're tasked with playing a C chord along with the G note on fret 3 of the low E string — a non-chord shape chord tone — **it's often more efficient to use a version of the C chord shape that already has that G note as one of its fingertip positions**, instead of starting with and then modifying the basic, open position C chord shape.

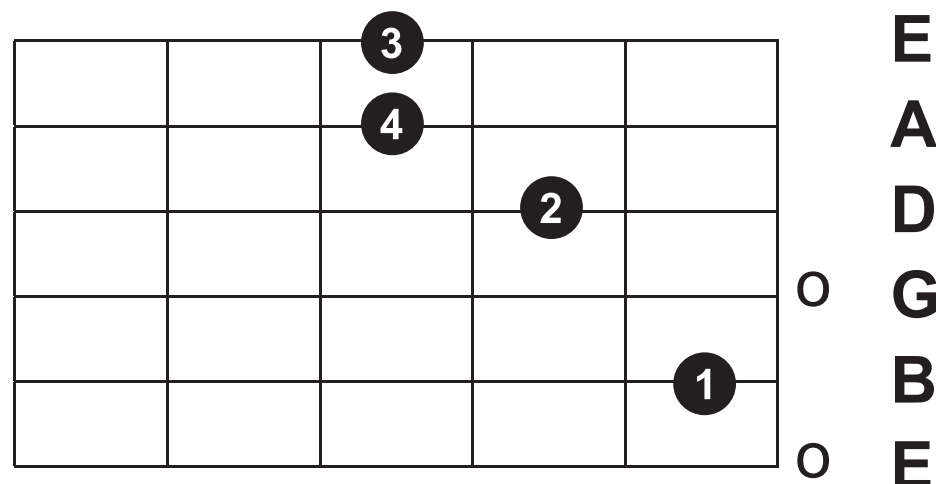
This alternate version of the C chord shape is **symbolized as C/G**, which translates to "a C chord with a G bass note" — the bass note reference coming from the fact that the added G note it includes lies on a low string.

The C/G chord is also commonly called "a C chord with a G in the bass" or a "C over G" and is really **just an extended version of the basic C chord**.

To play it, place the basic C chord shape and then, move your ring finger from fret 3 of the A string to fret 3 of the low E string. From there, put your pinky finger where your ring finger was — on fret 3 of the A string.

The C/G chord

C/G



“There are **secrets hiding inside this six-string** just waiting for somebody to find them and turn them into music.”

— Brenda Sutton Rose

the C/G chord versus the basic C chord

The main advantage of the C/G chord is that it **has all of the C chord's most commonly used chord tones all in one shape**, whereas the basic C chord shape lacks one — the G note below middle C that lies on fret 3 of the A string.

The fact that the basic C chord shape doesn't contain that note is problematic mostly because when you modify it to accommodate that chord tone, the resulting shape is rather awkward, and this ultimately makes it more difficult to move between that G note and other melody notes.

Plus, modifying the basic C chord to play that note requires you to expose the non-chord tone A note from the open A string, and that makes using it in this situation even less intuitive.

But, by using the C/G chord whenever you're tasked with playing that G note with a C chord, you avoid both issues — there's nothing really tricky about the C/G chord shape, so it's pretty straightforward to learn, and you won't expose any non-chord tones in the process.

That means that **when played with a C/G chord, that G note on fret 3 of the A string gets treated just like any other chord tone would**, and only the basic strumming rules apply — since the note is on the low E string, you'd strum the A, D, G, B and high E strings.



When to learn new chords for difficult melody note and chord shape combinations

In general, learning a new chord shape for every melody note and chord shape combination that are difficult to play is not usually the most efficient solution, as learning a new chord takes up its own share of time and practice. But learning the C/G chord so that you can handle playing the G note on fret 3 of the A string with a C chord makes the most sense because not only is it the most intuitive option, but you're also so often tasked with playing that combination that making it as easy to play as possible is worth the extra effort. Ultimately, some combinations will be awkward no matter how you try to play them, but whenever it doesn't take too much extra work to make something easier to play, do it.

choosing between the two C chord versions

Since the C/G chord has all of the C chord's most commonly used chord tones all in one shape, **some guitar players who are experienced with low-string guitar chord melody style simply use that version of the C chord at all times and rarely use the basic C chord shape at all.**

The thing is, though, while it's common to play the G note on fret 3 of the A string along with a C chord, you don't really play it often enough to change the fact that **the basic C chord shape still works in most situations.** So, rather than abandon the basic C chord shape altogether, **it's actually more intuitive to use that as your default version and only use the C/G chord when it's absolutely necessary.**

Now, as you work through songs, choosing between the two C chord versions is an ongoing process, as every iteration of the C chord in a song's lead sheet requires you to make a decision.

While that might seem like it'd be a lot of work, in practice, it's a pretty painless operation — **as you follow a song's lead sheet, whenever you encounter a C chord, you need to first, identify all of the melody notes that go with it until the chord changes. If any one of them is a G note below middle C, you'll use the C/G chord for all of them. If none of them are that G note, you'll use the basic C chord for all of them.**

For example, when you're looking at a lead sheet and come across a C chord that goes with four melody notes before a chord change, you'd only use the C/G chord if any one of them is a G note below middle C. But, if none of them are that G note, then you'd simply use the basic C chord.

From there, you'd switch to whatever the next chord is, and when you come to another C chord, you'll go through the process all over again.

Ultimately, you'll face this decision so often that eventually, you'll make it without thinking about it too much, and you'll also find that most of the time, you end up choosing the basic C chord shape, rather than C/G.



the C chord decision in action

To see the process of choosing between C chord versions in action, let's study an example.

The song "Hush Little Baby" starts off with a C chord, so right away, you're faced with your first decision. Of the five melody notes that go with it before the chord change to G, the first is a G note below middle C. So here, you'd place the C/G chord and use it to handle all five melody notes. Then, you'd make the chord change.

In measure 4, there's another iteration of the C chord. This time, eight notes go with it, spanning both, measures 4 and 5. Since the fifth note — the one that starts measure 5 — is a G note below middle C, to cover all eight notes across both measures, you'll once again use C/G, and then make the chord change.

In measure 8, you reach the final iteration of the C chord in the song. It goes with three notes, and since none of them are a G note below middle C, you'll use the basic C chord shape.

Now, here's a good time to try playing measures 1, 5 and 6 with a modified basic C chord shape instead of C/G, just so you can really experience the difference between the two. Also, try using C/G for measure 8 — you'll see that it works fine, it's just unnecessary.

Full lead sheet for "Hush Little Baby"

This iteration of the C chord goes with all five notes in measure 1. Since the first note is a G note below middle C, you'd use the C/G chord to handle all five notes.

C

G

Hush lit - tle ba - by don't say a word,

G note below middle C, found on fret 3 of the A string

This iteration of the C chord goes with all eight notes in measures 4 and 5. Since the first note of measure 5 is a G note below middle C, you'd use the C/G chord to handle all eighth notes across both measures.

C

3

Pa - pa's gon - na buy you a mock - ing - bird. And, if that mock - ing -

G note below middle C

This iteration of the C chord goes with all three notes in measure 8. Since none of them are a G note below middle C, you'd use the basic C chord shape for all three notes.

G

C

6

bird don't sing, Pa - pa's gon - na buy you a dia - mond ring.

the F/C chord

For almost the exact same reasons that you'd use a C/G chord when tasked with playing the G note below middle C along with a C chord, you'd use an alternative to the open position F chord — **the F/C chord** — to play **the middle C note on fret 3 of the A string along with an F chord**.

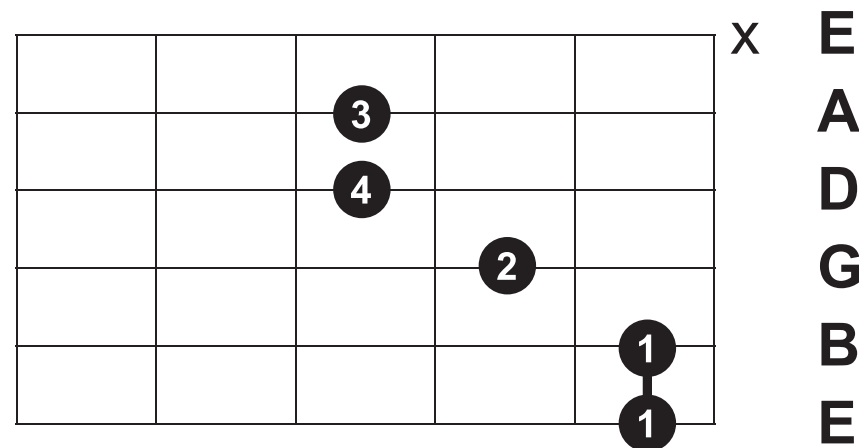
In general, the F/C chord works similarly to C/G. It translates to "an F chord with a C bass note" and is commonly called "an F chord with a C in the bass" or an "F over C." It's really just an extended version of the basic F chord that includes a non-chord shape chord tone — the C note — that would be difficult to handle by simply modifying the open position shape.

Plus, while you're more likely to need C/G than F/C, the F chord and middle C melody note combination comes up often enough that learning a new chord to make it as easy to play as possible is worth the extra effort.

To play the F/C chord, place the basic F chord shape and then, move your ring finger from fret 3 of the D string to fret 3 of the A string. From there, put your pinky finger where your ring finger was — on fret 3 of the D string.

The F/C chord

F/C



Choosing between the basic F chord and the F/C chord

Overall, it's perhaps best to still consider the basic F chord shape as your default version of the F chord and only use F/C when necessary. Basically, the process for choosing between the two F chord versions is just like choosing between the two C chord versions — as you follow a song's lead sheet, whenever you encounter a F chord, first, identify all of the melody notes that go with it until the chord changes. If any one of them is a middle C note, you'll use F/C for all of them. If none of them are middle C, you'll use the basic F chord for all of them. From there, you'd switch to whatever the next chord is, and when you reach another iteration of the F chord in the lead sheet, you'll go through the process all over again.

the "most efficient move" rule

When playing songs in low-string guitar chord melody style, you're bound to come across situations that fall into the gray areas of the general guidelines. It's here that you can fall back on perhaps the most important rule of the style: **make the most efficient move possible.**

In general, **the "most efficient move" rule** is present in one way or another in all of the style's basic techniques — it's the driving force behind the modified chord approach, it helps provide consistency between all the different rhythm techniques and is even the reason why you'd choose to learn a new chord shape that can be used in place of an open position chord.

The main advantage of the "most efficient move" rule is that **it gives you license to bend the rules of the style to make something more intuitive to play on the guitar.**

Plus, it can also help you make decisions when you come across unfamiliar territory — **usually the best solution is the one that's the easiest and most logical, no matter what the general guidelines dictate.**

Ultimately, the "most efficient move" rule can be used for any aspect of the style, but it's probably **most useful for helping you navigate how to physically move your fingers from one melody note to another in the most natural way possible.** Let's see it in action.



applying the "most efficient move" rule: decoding the example measure

The first bar of "London Bridge is Falling Down," represents a classic example of when it makes sense to leverage the "most efficient move" rule.

Of course, the first step of doing just about anything in low-string guitar chord melody style is identifying all of the moving parts, so **let's take a minute here to decode the measure.**

Overall, the bar has seven notes that all go with a C chord, and **each one is above middle C.**

The first, third and seventh notes are G notes that coincide with the open G string, while the second note is the A that lies on fret 2 of the G string. The fourth and sixth notes are both, the F that sits on fret 3 of the D string, and the fifth note is the E from fret 2 of the D string.

In terms of rhythm techniques, the first six notes are all eighth notes that get played as standalone notes, while the last note is a quarter note that takes the "note and a" pattern.

With all that in mind, let's look at why you might use the "most efficient move" rule in this situation, and then, learn how to apply it.

The decoded first measure of "London Bridge is Falling Down"

C

Lon - don Bridge is fal - ling down,

G↑ Open G string A↑ Fret 2 G string G↑ Open G string F↑ Fret 3 D string E↑ Fret 2 D string F↑ Fret 3 D string G↑ Open G string

All of these are eighth notes, so they get played as standalone notes.

This is a quarter note, so it takes the "note and a" pattern.



playing the measure's first three notes by closely following the basic rules

Once the first measure of "London Bridge is Falling Down" is decoded, you can begin working through its melody notes.

Now, if you closely follow the basic rules of low-string guitar chord melody style and keep all of the moving parts in mind, here's how you'd play the first three notes:

1. For the first note — a G — you'd place the basic C chord shape and play the open G string as a standalone note.
2. The next note is an A, a non-chord tone in this case. To handle it, you'd modify the C chord by moving your middle finger from fret 2 of the D string to fret 2 of the G string. It's also played as a standalone note.
3. The third note is another G, so, you'd basically repeat step one — again, place the basic C chord shape and then, play the open G string as a standalone note.

In general, this process does get the job done, but there does happen to be a cleaner way to handle these three notes. Let's see how.

**"You don't find a style,
a style finds you."**

— Keith Richards

The decoded first measure of "London Bridge is Falling Down"

C

Lon - don Bridge is fal - ling down,

G↑ Open G string A↑ Fret 2 G string G↑ Open G string F↑ Fret 3 D string E↑ Fret 2 D string F↑ Fret 3 D string G↑ Open G string

All of these are eighth notes, so they get played as standalone notes. This is a quarter note, so it takes the "note and a" pattern.

Chord shapes for the first three notes of measure 1 in "London Bridge is Falling Down"

The first note in the bar is a G. In a C chord, it coincides with the open G string.

The second note in the bar is the non-chord tone A note. To play it, you'd modify the C chord by moving your middle finger from fret 2 of the D string to fret 2 of the G string.

The third note in the bar is also the G that coincides with the open G string.

the concept of playing the minimum of what's required by the rhythm technique

Applying the "most efficient move" rule to the first three notes of "London Bridge is Falling Down" starts with understanding that **for any melody note and chord combination, you really only need to place the parts of the chord shape that allows you to carry out the rhythm technique.**

Consider that for the first note, the G from the open G string, you don't technically need the C chord that goes along with it — **as an eighth note, its rhythm technique only requires you to play it as a standalone note.**

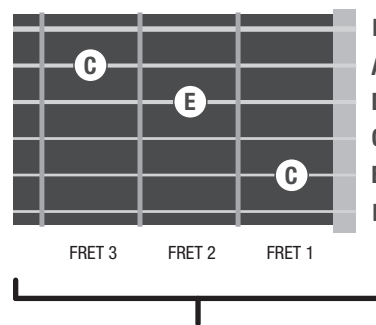
So theoretically, you could handle this melody note and chord combination with only the open G string, and it would work because you don't need any other parts of the C chord shape to perform the rhythm technique.

Now, if you're only thinking about this one particular melody note and chord combination, going this route makes a lot of sense — it's much easier to simply play an open string as opposed to first, placing a chord that you don't technically need and then, playing the open string.

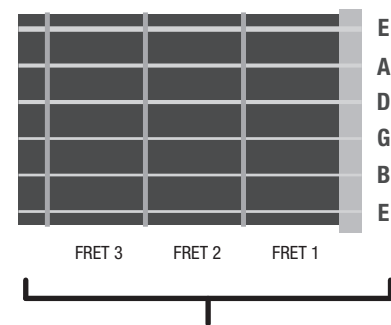
The thing is, though, **the way you play one melody note and chord combination impacts the difficulty level of the ones that follow it**, so rather than just doing what's easiest for one combination, it's best to do whatever makes the ones that come after it easy to play as well.

That said, the fact that **you only need to play the bare minimum of what's required by the rhythm technique** frees you from having to use full chord shapes in every situation, especially when only placing the part of the chord that you actually need is clearly the most efficient move.

Chord shape options for an open G string melody note and a C chord



The most conventional way to handle an open G string melody note with a C chord is to first, place a C chord and then, play the open G string...



...but as the first note in "London Bridge is Falling Down," it's an eighth note, so you could technically just play the open G string as a standalone note because that satisfies the rhythm technique requirement in this case.



applying the "most efficient move" rule

With the concepts that **you only need to play the minimum of what's required by the rhythm technique** and that **how you play one melody note and chord combination impacts the ones that follow it** in mind, let's apply the "most efficient move" rule to the first measure of "London Bridge is Falling Down."

Perhaps the most notable feature of this measure is that the first six notes are eighth notes, which means that technically, they can all be played as standalone melody notes without placing the basic C chord because you don't need to strum any other parts of the shape to carry out the rhythm technique.

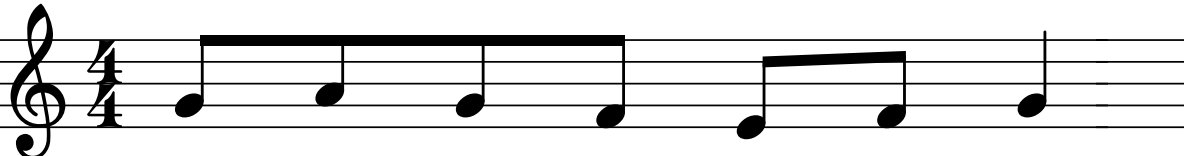
So, **one way to handle this bar** is to first, play each of the first six notes by themselves without the C chord, and then, use it for the last note, a quarter note that takes the "note and a" pattern.

Now, while going this route does get the job done, in practice, using so many standalone notes in a row without placing a chord has its limitations. See, **simply handling melody notes while strumming chords really only scratches the surface of playing low-string guitar chord melody style**. From there, you'd layer in all the different embellishment techniques that are common to the guitar, which can take your playing to the next level.

The thing is, **when it comes to embellishment, playing melody notes from the position of a placed chord as much as possible gives you the most amount of options**, so let's discuss other ways to handle this measure.

One option for handling the first measure of "London Bridge is Falling Down"

C



Lon - don Bridge is fal - ling down,

G↑	A↑	G↑	F↑	E↑	F↑	G↑
Open	Fret 2	Open	Fret 3	Fret 2	Fret 3	Open
G string	G string	G string	D string	D string	D string	G string

All of these are eighth notes, so you could play them all as standalone notes without placing the C chord, and it would still satisfy the requirements of the rhythm technique...

...then, you could place the C chord here to handle the quarter note with the "note and a" pattern.



first steps in applying the "most efficient move" rule with embellishment in mind

As you consider how to apply the "most efficient move" rule in a way that leaves you plenty of options for embellishment, here's a good rule of thumb that can help you get off on the right foot: **at any starting point within a song, use a full chord for the first melody note and chord combination and then, if needed, modify the shape for the notes that follow it as efficiently as possible.**

Now, typically, there are many starting points within a song — sure, there's the first note of the whole piece, but the first note of each verse and iteration of the chorus also qualifies. In fact, even the first note of each lyrical phrase should be considered starting points, as well.

The thing is, the way most music works out, you can't really be wrong about whether something is considered a starting point or not. In general, any time you're unsure, use your best judgment — if a melody note and chord combination seems like it's a starting point, use a full chord to handle it. This will set you up to work from the position of a placed chord as much as possible, while also streamlining your approach.

That said, **as the starting point of the entire song, the best way to handle the first note in measure 1 of "London Bridge is Falling Down," is to place a C chord and play the open G string as a standalone note.**

The best way to handle the first note in measure 1 of "London Bridge is Falling Down"

C

Lon - don Bridge is fal - ling down,

G↑	A↑	G↑	F↑	E↑	F↑	G↑
Open	Fret 2	Open	Fret 3	Fret 2	Fret 3	Open
G string	G string	G string	D string	D string	D string	G string

As the starting point of the entire song, the best way to handle the first note in this measure, is to place a C chord and play the open G string as a standalone note.



playing the measure's second note from the position of a placed C chord

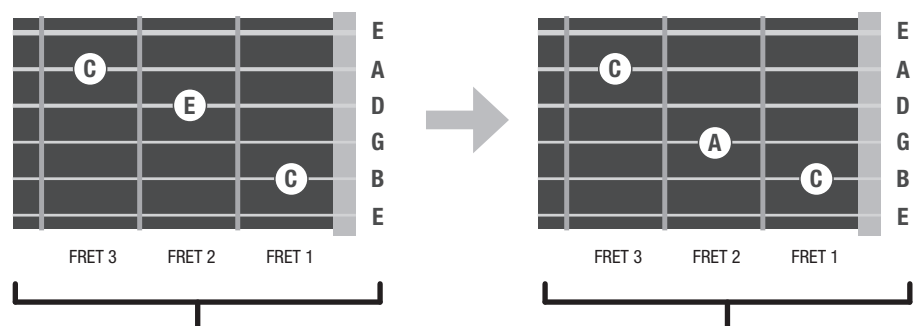
As the starting point of the entire song, playing the first note of "London Bridge is Falling Down" from the position of a placed C chord makes deciding how to play the notes that follow it fairly straightforward — **you simply make the most efficient move possible.**

So to play the second note, the non-chord tone A from fret 2 of the G string, the most efficient move among other options is to first, modify the C chord by moving your middle finger from fret 2 of the D string to fret 2 of the G string and then, play that note on the G string all by itself.

This is most efficient move here because from the position of the placed C chord, it involves only two steps — you lift the middle finger and move it to another place — whereas other options, even ones that seem easier, would require either more steps, more fingers or both.

This move also gives you an opportunity to make use of a common embellishment technique — hammering onto fret 2 of the G string in this case is a pretty classic trick that can help you sound more authentic to the low-string guitar chord melody style.

Chord shapes for the first two notes of "London Bridge is Falling Down"



As the starting point of the entire song, the best way to handle the first note of measure 1 of "London Bridge is Falling Down" is to place a C chord and play the open G string as a standalone note...

...then, since you're already in the position of a placed C chord after playing the first note, the best way to handle the second note, the A from fret 2 of the G string, is to first, modify the C chord by moving your middle finger from fret 2 of the D string to fret 2 of the G string, and then, play it as a standalone note. You could also embellish this note by hammering onto it.

The overlap between the "most efficient move" rule and the basic rules of the style

You might notice that the best way to handle the first two notes of "London Bridge is Falling Down" is the same whether you simply follow the basic rules of low-string guitar chord melody style or apply the "most efficient move" rule. The thing is, **the "most efficient move" rule simply takes the basic rules a step further.** See, the basic rules are actually rooted in the idea of making efficient moves — that's why there's overlap — but they only cover a bird's eye view of the situations that you're likely to encounter while playing songs. The "most efficient move" rule, on the other hand, can help you finetune your playing down to the slightest detail, which when done right, can help you achieve the most polished sound possible.

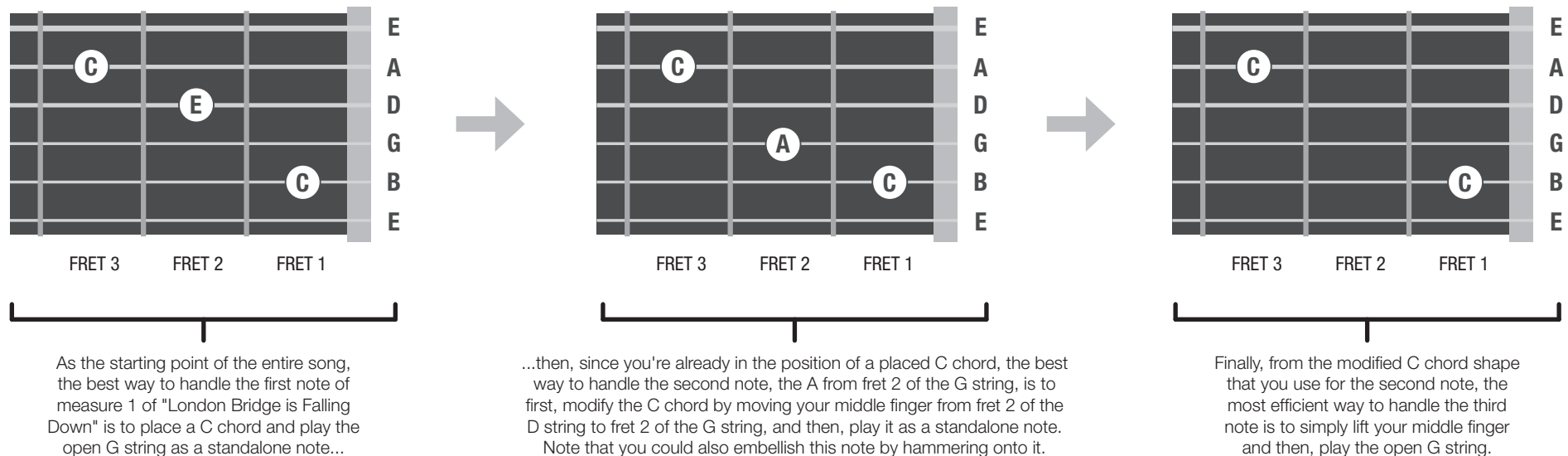
finishing out the three-note sequence

It's at the third note of "London Bridge is Falling Down" where the "most efficient move" rule begins to diverge from the basic rules of low-string guitar chord melody style. See, from the modified C chord that you use for the second note, **if you were only following the basic rules, you'd handle the third note, the G from the open G string, by first, resetting the C chord and then, playing the open G string as a standalone note.** But going this route costs you three moves — you have to lift your middle finger from fret 2 of the D string, put it on fret 2 of the G string, and then, play the note.

The thing is, though, just by lifting your middle finger from fret 2 of the G string, you expose the open G string that you need to play, and since that note only gets played by itself, you don't need to do anything else. So, **from the modified C chord shape that you use for the second note, the most efficient way to handle the third note is to simply lift your middle finger and then, play the open G string** — two steps instead of three.

Now, it might seem odd to go beyond the style's basic rules just to save yourself one move, but the more moves you save over the course of an entire song, the more intuitive it is to execute all of the style's techniques at moderate and fast tempos — the speeds at which most songs are played. **So in general, you want to save as many moves as possible and reserve any non-essential moves for adding in the embellishments that you see fit.**

Chord shapes for the first three notes of measure 1 in "London Bridge is Falling Down" using the "most efficient move" rule



playing the rest of the bar's eighth notes

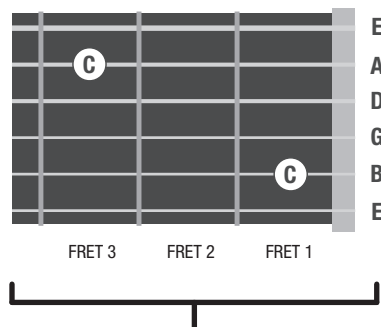
To get more practice applying the "most efficient move" rule, let's look at the rest of the eighth notes in measure 1 of "London Bridge is Falling Down." Now, note that as eighth notes, the fourth, fifth and sixth notes in this bar each get played as standalone notes and that for the third note, you use a modified C chord that has your middle finger free instead of in its usual place on fret 2 of the D string. From there, the best way to handle the fourth note, the F on fret 3 of the D string, is to move your ring finger from fret 3 of the A string to fret 3 of the D string. From that resulting chord shape, to play the fifth note, the E on fret 2 of the D string, all you have to do is remove your ring finger from fret 3 of the D string and put your middle finger on fret 2 of the same string.

Then, from the shape you use to play the fifth note, the most efficient way to handle the sixth note, another iteration of the F on fret 2 of the D string, is to put your ring finger back on fret 3 of the D string while leaving your middle finger on fret 2 of the same string — you don't need to move your middle finger in this case because **the guitar works in a way that if you're playing multiple notes on the same string, you'll only hear the one on the highest fret.** So, here, since you're playing notes on both, frets 2 and 3 of the D string, only the note on fret 3 will come through because it lies on the higher fret.

Also, at this point, you might notice that you handle the fourth and sixth notes differently even though they're identical notes. This basically happens because you approach each iteration of the note from different versions of the modified C chord, and that produces varied results.

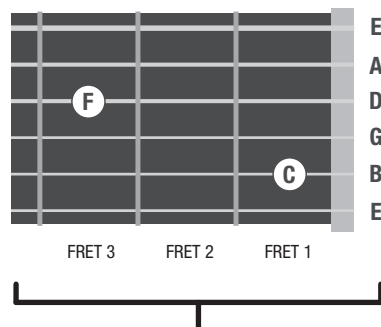
Chord shapes for notes 3-6 in measure 1 in "London Bridge is Falling Down," using the "most efficient move" rule

Note 3: G↑ — Open G string



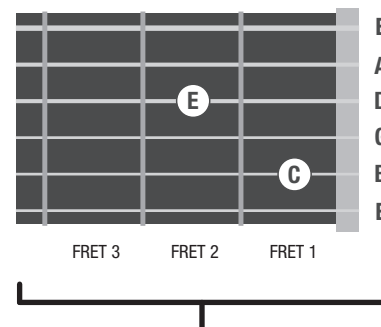
Handling the third note results in a modified C chord that has your middle finger free instead of in its usual place on fret 2 of the D string...

Note 4: F↑ — Fret 3, D string



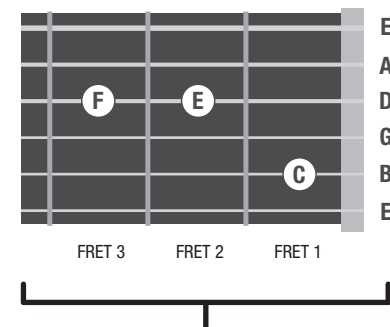
...so from that shape, the best way to handle the fourth note is to move your ring finger from fret 3 of the A string to fret 3 of the D string...

Note 5: E↑ — Fret 2, D string



...from that shape, to play the fifth note, the E on fret 2 of the D string, all you have to do is remove your ring finger from fret 3 of the D string and put your middle finger on fret 2 of the D string...

Note 6: F↑ — Fret 3, D string



...finally, to play the sixth note, put your ring finger back on fret 3 of the D string while leaving your middle finger on fret 2 of the D string. Since you're playing notes on both, frets 2 and 3 of the D string, only the note on fret 3 will come through because it lies on the higher fret.

the last note of the measure

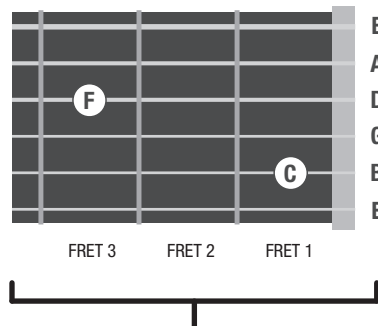
The first bar of "London Bridge is Falling Down" ends with a quarter note that takes the "note and a" pattern. Now, not only does this note finish off the measure, it's also the last note of the song's first lyrical phrase — if you sing the song out loud, there's a little pause after you say the word, "down."

This is notable because **song pauses usually happen after some type of ending**, and since endings often lead into beginnings, in low-string guitar chord melody style, it's best to treat them similarly. That means that **just as you would for a note that signals a beginning, you'd also use a full chord for any melody note and chord combination that indicates an ending**. Of course, in the same way that there is more than one beginning note within a song, there are multiple ending notes, too — you'll find one at the end of each lyrical phrase, verse, chorus iteration and naturally, at the very end of the song.

All said and done, since the seventh and final note in measure 1 of "London Bridge is Falling Down," the G note from the open G string, marks the end of a lyrical phrase, to handle this note, you'd place a full C chord shape and then, apply the "note and a" pattern accordingly. To do this from the chord shape that you use to handle the sixth note, all you have to do is move your ring finger from fret 3 of the D string to fret 3 of the A string.

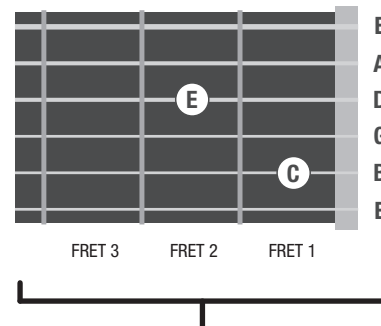
Chord shapes for notes 4-7 in measure 1 in "London Bridge is Falling Down," using the "most efficient move" rule

Note 4: F[↑] — Fret 3, D string



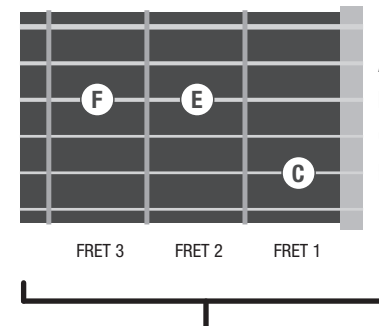
Handling the fourth note results in a modified C chord that has your middle finger free and your ring finger on fret 3 of the D string...

Note 5: E[↑] — Fret 2, D string



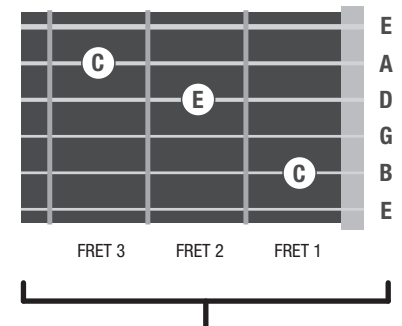
...from that shape, to play the fifth note, the E on fret 2 of the D string, all you have to do is remove your ring finger from fret 3 of the D string and put your middle finger on fret 2 of the D string...

Note 6: F[↑] — Fret 3, D string



...then, to play the sixth note, put your ring finger back on fret 3 of the D string while leaving your middle finger on fret 2 of the D string.

Note 7: G[↑] — Open G string



Finally, since the seventh note, a quarter note, marks the end of the lyrical phrase, place a full C chord shape and then, apply the "note and a" pattern accordingly. To do this from the chord shape that you use to handle the sixth note, move your ring finger from fret 3 of the D string to fret 3 of the A string.

the entire seven-note sequence

Here's how you'd play the entire seven-note sequence in measure 1 of "London Bridge is Falling Down" with the "most efficient move" rule driving your decisions.

Note how the C chord gets manipulated throughout the sequence — **you start with its original shape, modify it as needed and then, come back to it.**

At the end of the day, it's this process that's at the heart of playing low-string guitar chord melody style efficiently, and it's the one that usually works best for each chord called for in any lead sheet that you'll play.

Measure 1 of "London Bridge is Falling Down," decoded

C

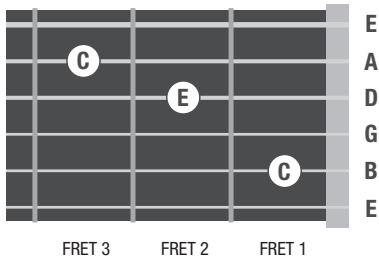


Lon - don Bridge is fal - ling down,

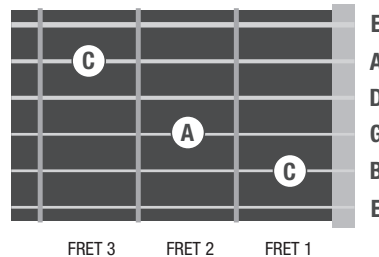
G↑	A↑	G↑	F↑	E↑	F↑	G↑
Open	Fret 2	Open	Fret 3	Fret 2	Fret 3	Open
G string	G string	G string	D string	D string	D string	G string

Chord shapes each note in measure 1 of "London Bridge is Falling Down," using the "most efficient move" rule

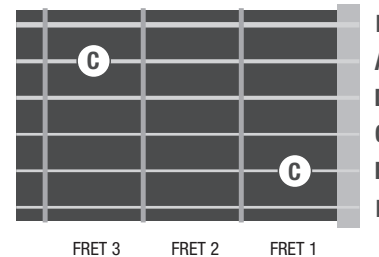
Note 1: G↑ — Open G string



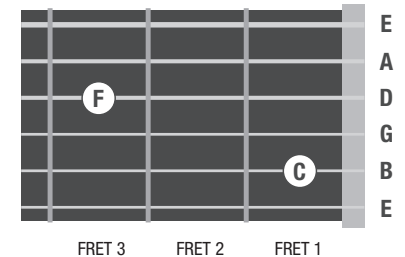
Note 2: A↑ — Fret 2, G string



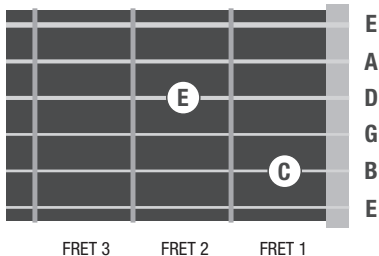
Note 3: G↑ — Open G string



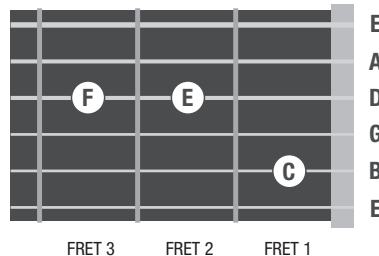
Note 4: F↑ — Fret 3, D string



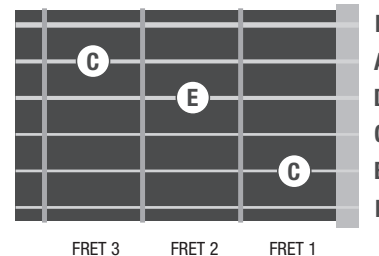
Note 5: E↑ — Fret 2, D string



Note 6: F↑ — Fret 3, D string



Note 7: G↑ — Open G string



Note: One benefit of using full chord shapes for beginning and ending notes is that it'll make switching the chords that the lead sheet calls for most intuitive — since you're probably most familiar with them, it'll almost always feel more natural to switch between full, open position chords rather than modified versions of them.

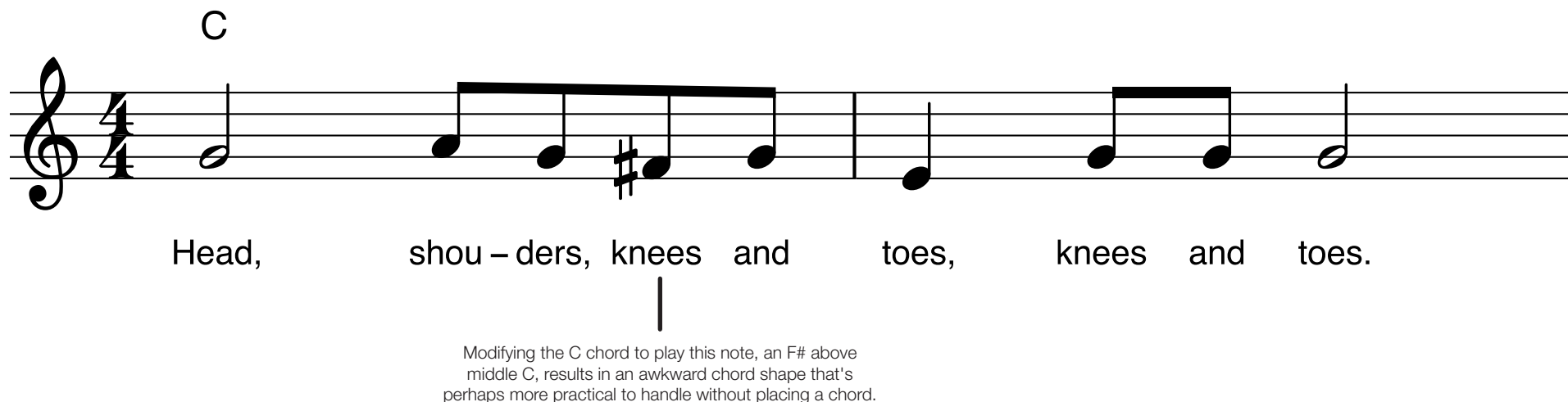
when melody notes are too difficult to play with a chord shape: an overview

In general, the most efficient way to handle melody notes in low-string guitar chord melody style is from the position of a placed chord because it's from there that it's most intuitive to first, play a standalone melody note and then, strum a chord.

But **sometimes, it's more practical to handle a melody note without placing a chord, especially when modifying the chord that goes with it results in a chord shape that's difficult to play.** For example, in "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes," modifying the C chord to play the fourth note, an F# above middle C, results in a chord shape that even experienced guitar players might find challenging. Let's take a closer look.

The first two measures of "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes"

C



Head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes.

Modifying the C chord to play this note, an F# above middle C, results in an awkward chord shape that's perhaps more practical to handle without placing a chord.

decoding the example phrase

As a first step toward learning how to handle melody notes that are too difficult to play with a chord shape, let's decode the first two measures of "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes" for low-string guitar chord melody style.

Now, **for the purposes of this example, we only need to look at the song's first lyrical phrase**, which covers all of measure 1, as well as the first note of measure 2. As they're not part of this particular phrase, you can ignore the last three notes of measure 2.

Also note that all of the phrase's notes are above middle C, and each gets played with a C chord.

From there, the phrase's first note is the G that comes from the open G string. It's a half note that takes the half note rhythm pattern.

Then, to finish out measure 1, there's four eighth notes in a row that all get played as standalone notes — the A from fret 2 of the G string, another iteration of the G from the open G string, the F# from fret 4 of the D string, and once more, the G from the open G string.

The phrase's last note is the quarter note that kicks off measure 2. It's the E from fret 2 of the D string and takes the "note and a" pattern.

The first two measures of "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes," decoded

The diagram illustrates the first two measures of the song "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes" in 4/4 time, using a C chord melody style. The notation is on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first measure contains a half note G (open G string) and four eighth notes: A (fret 2, G string), G (open G string), F# (fret 4, D string), and G (open G string). The second measure contains a quarter note E (fret 2, D string) and three eighth notes: A (fret 2, G string), G (open G string), and F# (fret 4, D string). The lyrics "Head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes." are written below the staff. Brackets and labels identify the notes and their rhythmic patterns: the first note is a half note taking the half note rhythm pattern; the next four notes are eighth notes played as standalone notes; the final note is a quarter note taking the "note and a" pattern. A bracket indicates that these six notes make up the song's first lyrical phrase. A note is also made that the last three notes of measure 2 are not part of the musical phrase in this example and can be ignored.

C

Head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes.

G↑
Open
G string

A↑
Fret 2
G string

G↑
Open
G string

F#↑
Fret 4
D string

G↑
Open
G string

E↑
Fret 2
D string

A half note that takes the half note rhythm pattern.

Eighth notes that get played as standalone notes.

A quarter note that takes the "note and a" pattern.

These six notes make up the song's first lyrical phrase.

These notes are not part of the musical phrase in this example, so you can ignore them.

“Sometimes you stumble upon a few chords that put you in a **reflective place.**”

— David Bowie

playing the phrase's first three notes

With the first phrase of "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes" decoded, let's leverage the "most efficient move" rule to play each of its melody notes, starting with the first three, as they're fairly straightforward to handle.

The first note, the G from the open G string, starts the phrase and ultimately gets the half note rhythm technique. Since it's a starting point, the best way to handle it is to place the C chord and play the open G string — as a chord tone, there's no modification needed.

From the position of the placed C chord that you use to handle the first note, to play the second, the A from fret 2 of the G string, all you need to do is move your middle finger from fret 2 of the D string to fret 2 of the G string, while leaving everything else in place. As an eighth note, it gets played as a standalone note.

Then, from the modified C chord shape used for the second note, to play the third, another iteration of the G from the open G string, you'd simply lift your middle finger to expose the open G string and play it as a standalone note.

The first phrase of "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes," decoded

C

Head, shou – ders, knees and toes, knees and toes.

G↑
Open
G string

A↑ Fret 2
G string

G↑
Open
G string

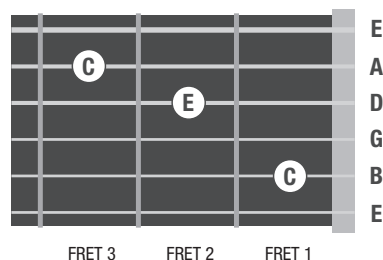
F#↑ Fret 4
D string

G↑
Open
G string

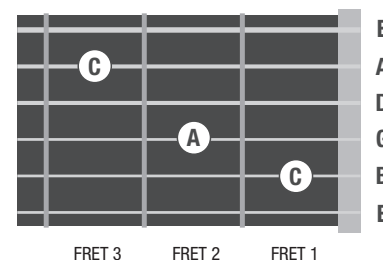
E↑
Fret 2
D string

Chord shapes for the phrase's first three notes

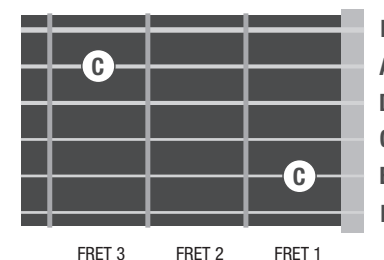
Note 1: G↑ — Open G string



Note 2: A↑ — Fret 2, G string



Note 3: G↑ — Open G string



finishing out the rest of the phrase, purely using the "most efficient" move rule

While playing the first three notes in measure 1 of "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes" is fairly cut and dried, things get rather tricky at the fourth note, the F# from fret 4 of the D string.

To see some of the issues that this note presents, let's finish out the phrase using the "most efficient" move rule in its purest sense.

For starters, note that a modified C chord that has your middle finger free instead of in its usual place on fret 2 of the D string is used for the third note. **From there, it's most efficient to handle the fourth note, which gets played by itself, by leaving everything else in place and adding your pinky to fret 4 of the D string.**

However, this move requires quite a stretch and results in a chord shape that's pretty difficult to play. Plus, **since this shape has the G string exposed, it's also most efficient to use it for the fifth note, another G from the open G string** — just keep the shape intact and play that string as a standalone note.

That means, though, that not only is the chord shape tough to reach for, you need to have the hand strength to hold it for a bit, too.

Finally, at the start of measure 2, there's the sixth note, the E from fret 2 of the D string. As the phrase's ending note, it goes with an unmodified C chord. To get there after playing the fifth note, you'd remove your pinky from fret 4 of the D string, add your middle finger to fret 2 of the D string and then, apply the "note and a" pattern.

Now, going this route works, but the chord shape used for the fourth note ultimately makes the whole sequence challenging.

So, as a first step toward finding a more intuitive way to play it, let's take a minute to look at things through a different lens.

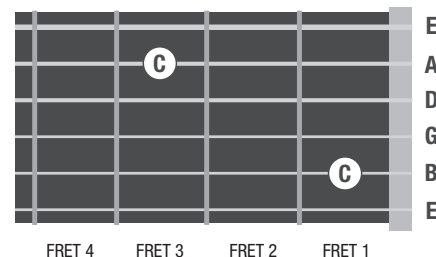
The first phrase of "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes," decoded

Head, shou – ders, knees and toes,

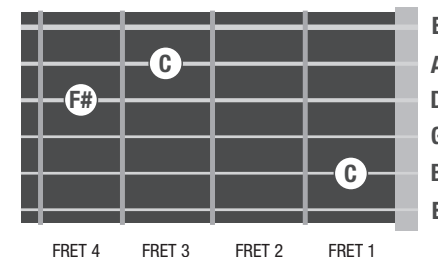
G↑ A↑ G↑ F#↑ G↑ E↑
Open Fret 2 Open Fret 4 Open Fret 2
G string G string G string D string G string D string

Chord shapes for the phrase's final four notes

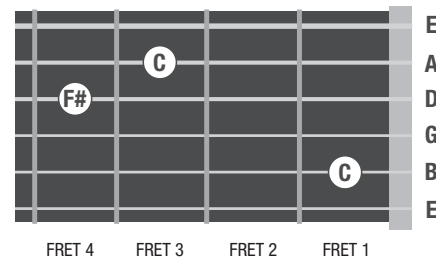
Note 3: G↑ — Open G string



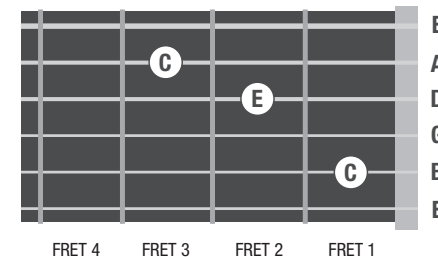
Note 4: F#↑ — Fret 4, D string



Note 5: G↑ — Open G string



Note 6: E↑ — Fret 2, D string



the license to find an easier way

There's little question that the awkward chord shape that results from handling the fourth note of measure 1 in "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes" makes playing the song's entire first phrase difficult to play. The thing is, though, **you have complete freedom to find an easier way to do it.**

See, as you gain experience with low-string guitar chord melody style, you're bound to come across note sequences that are hard to play, but as long as you can keep the rhythm consistent enough over the course of the whole song, you can handle melody notes any way you see fit.

Ultimately, the style only has two real rules: don't lose the rhythm and play a semblance of a melody line. That leaves a lot of gray area, but it's there that people can find their own unique and creative approaches to each and every song they play. In general, any solution that works and is easy to play is probably the best one. With that in mind, let's look at one way to make the first phrase of "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes" easier to play.



playing standalone melody notes while abandoning the chord shape

When playing a melody note with a chord shape is too difficult, **you're usually okay to drop the shape altogether and play the melody note by itself.** From there, you can get back to playing from the position of placed chords whenever it makes the most sense.

In "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes," **the chord shape that results from handling the fourth note is so awkward that it's probably best to just forget about it and play the melody note by itself.**

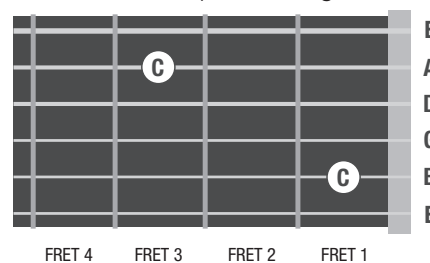
So, from the chord shape used for the third note, the modified C chord that has your middle finger free instead of in its usual place on fret 2 of the D string, you'd handle the fourth by removing all your fingers from the fretboard and using one of them — whichever makes sense — to play fret 4 of the D string. Then, you'd continue on with the rest of the phrase with an eye toward getting back to the position of a placed chord as naturally as possible.

Now, something to note here is that it's at this point that things are largely left to your own discretion — you'll have to decide for yourself if abandoning the chord shape is the right move for the melody note at hand, and it's also up to you to figure out the best way to get back to playing from the position of placed chords.

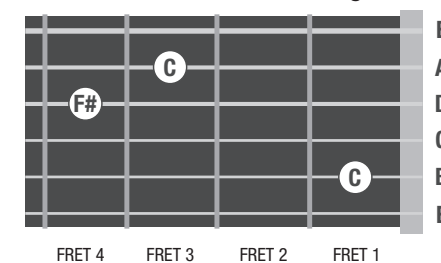
In general, there are many ways to handle difficult melody note and chord combinations, but **done prudently, there's really no easier solution than simply playing the melody note by itself without using the chord shape that's supposed to go along with it.**

Playing the phrase's fourth note with the modified C chord shape

Note 3: G↑ — Open G string

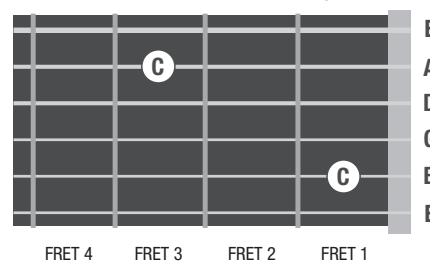


Note 4: F#↑ — Fret 4, D string

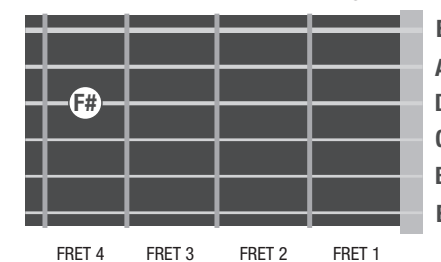


Playing the phrase's fourth note without the modified C chord shape

Note 3: G↑ — Open G string



Note 4: F#↑ — Fret 4, D string



finishing out the phrase in a basic way

While playing a melody note without a chord shape is a viable option for handling difficult melody note and chord combinations, it's also a solution that requires caution.

See, any time you play a melody note without a chord in low-string guitar chord melody style, you run the risk of losing the rhythm, so after doing so, **getting back to the position of a placed chord becomes a top priority.**

So, in the first phrase of "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes," after playing the fourth note by itself without a chord, you can get back on track right away by using an unmodified C chord to handle the fifth note, the G chord tone from the open G string that gets played as a standalone note.

From there, you're back to playing from the position of placed chords and can play the phrase's last note, the E chord tone from fret 2 of the D string, without changing anything. As a quarter note, it gets played with the "note and a" pattern.

Now, going this route works fine, but **you don't necessarily need to rush to get back to playing from the position of placed chords as long as you are working toward it with some degree of urgency.** So, let's look at a more efficient, if not more polished way to handle the end of the phrase.

"I'm only **myself** when I
have a guitar in my hands."

— George Harrison

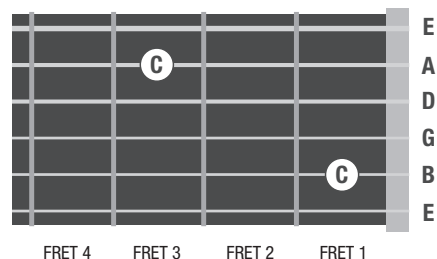
The first phrase of "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes," decoded

Head, shou – ders, knees and toes,

G↑ A↑ G↑ F#↑ G↑ E↑
Open Fret 2 Open Fret 4 Open Fret 2
G string G string G string D string G string D string

Chord shapes for handling the phrase's final four notes in a basic way

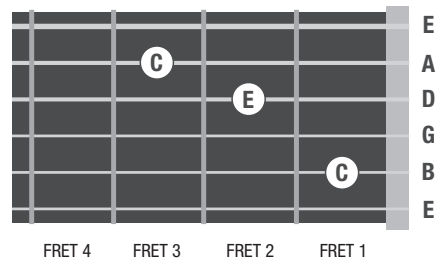
Note 3: G↑ — Open G string



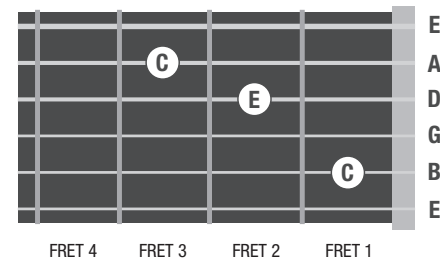
Note 4: F#↑ — Fret 4, D string



Note 5: G↑ — Open G string



Note 6: E↑ — Fret 2, D string



finishing the phrase in an advanced way

After playing a melody note without a chord in low-string guitar chord melody style, **you want to get back to playing from placed chords quickly mostly, so that you're ready to strum.**

See, strumming is the biggest factor in keeping consistent rhythm — the less you strum in favor of playing notes by themselves, the more you risk losing the pulse that listeners would tap their feet to.

Now, there's a fine line between keeping and losing the rhythm, and in practice, the best guitar players toe it gracefully. That means that in general, after playing a melody note without a chord, if you work deliberately toward getting back to the position of playing from a placed chord, you don't need to do so at the first chance you get. In fact, **as long as you don't break the pulse, you can play as many single notes as you want before getting back on track.**

For example, after playing the fourth note of "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes" by itself without a chord, an experienced guitarist player might also play the fifth note, the G from the open G string, by itself to make it seem as though the fourth was played that way for a creative purpose rather than as a fix for a shortcoming.

More subtly, an advanced approach to this move would be to take your finger off of fret 4 of the D string after playing the fourth note in anticipation of getting back to playing from placed chords for the sixth note, the E from fret 2 of the D string, where you have to play a full C chord anyway, as it's the phrase's final note, and simply play the open G string by itself for the fifth note along the way.

Ultimately, there are tons of ways to handle melody note and chord combinations, and **if you're intentional about keeping consistent rhythm above all else, you're free to push the boundaries of what's possible with single notes played without a chord** — you can throw in licks, scale runs, turnarounds and all the other fun soloing elements that can make your approach to the style unique.

The first phrase of "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes," decoded

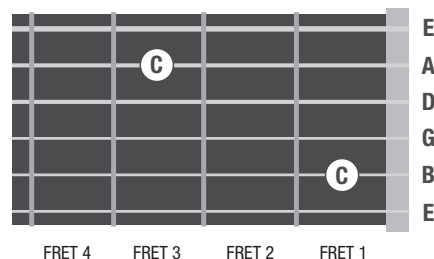
C

Head, shou - ders, knees and toes,

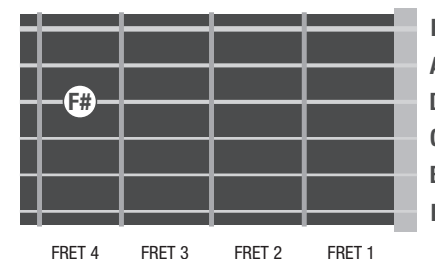
G↑ Open G string A↑ Fret 2 G string G↑ Open G string F#↑ Fret 4 D string G↑ Open G string E↑ Fret 2 D string

Chord shapes for handling the phrase's final four notes in an advanced way

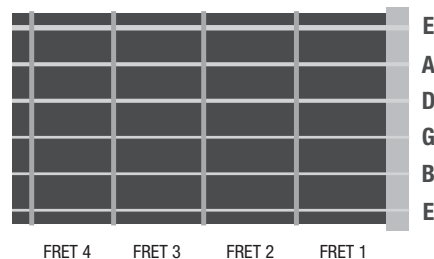
Note 3: G↑ — Open G string



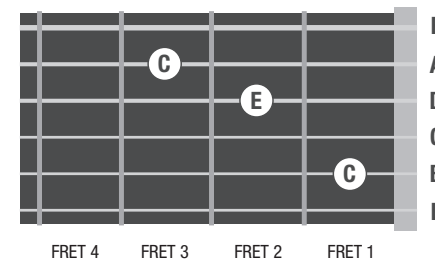
Note 4: F#↑ — Fret 4, D string



Note 5: G↑ — Open G string



Note 6: E↑ — Fret 2, D string



chord extensions

In low-string guitar chord melody style, you'll mostly play melody notes with a basic chord.

But sometimes, you'll be tasked with playing a basic chord that has a number, abbreviation or symbol attached to it, and in fact, it can even contain more than one of those three elements.

For example, many songs you'll come across in the key of C will include a G7 chord, either along with or instead of, the basic G chord.

In general, this type of chord is called a **chord extension** because it includes notes in addition to a basic chord's original chord tones.

So, in a nutshell, **a G7 chord is considered a chord extension of the basic G chord because it's made up of the basic G chord's chord tones and at least one other note.**

Now, chord extensions are one of the most misused concepts in music, as most people would see one in a lead sheet and simply play it without thinking too much about it.

However, this approach tends to be overly complex and usually, doesn't sound very good.

So, let's discuss chord extensions further and learn to play them deliberately and efficiently.



why chord extensions are generally used

Handling chord extensions in low-string guitar chord melody style starts with understanding why a lead sheet would call for one to be played in the first place.

In general, perhaps **the most common reason you'd encounter a chord extension is simply because the person who made the lead sheet thought that in their educated opinion, it sounded best** — sometimes, someone just makes a creative choice to use a chord extension over a basic chord.

The other main reason you'll come across a chord extension is because **it reflects the fact that one or more of the melody notes it goes with is one of the notes that extend a basic chord beyond its original chord tones.**

For example, because a G7 chord contains the three G chord chord tones — G, B and D — and one additional note — F, **whenever a measure that would typically be played with a basic G chord has an F melody note, you'll usually be called to play a G7 chord instead of the basic G.**

Now, on a basic level, working with a chord extension in low-string guitar chord melody style is not much different whether it's being used as a creative choice or because it directly correlates with the melody line, but being aware of why one is being used in a given situation can help you avoid the all too common practice of overusing them — usually unintentionally — and really, just makes playing them more intuitive. Let's learn how to handle any chord extension.

“Where words fail, **music speaks.**”

— Hans Christian Andersen

A measure in "Hush Little Baby" that calls for a G7 chord

G7

A musical staff with four notes: a quarter note on the second line (F), a quarter note on the second space (G), a quarter note on the second line (F), and a half note on the second space (G). Below the staff, the lyrics are: don't, say, a, word,. Under each word, the fretting is indicated: E↑ Fret 2 D string for 'don't'; D↑ Open D string for 'say'; D↑ Open D string for 'a'; and D↑ Open D string for 'word,'. A bracket spans the first three words, and a vertical line is placed under the fourth word.

A G7 chord is made up of the three basic G chord chord tones, G, B and D, and one additional note, F. Since none of the melody notes in this measure is the note that turns a basic G chord into a G7 chord — F — you can assume that the G7 chord is being used here purely as a creative choice.

A measure in "This Old Man" that calls for a G7 chord

7 G7

A musical staff with four notes: a quarter note on the second line (F), a quarter note on the second space (G), a quarter note on the second line (F), and a quarter note on the second space (G). Below the staff, the lyrics are: This, old, man, comes. Under each word, the fretting is indicated: G↑ Open G string for 'This'; D↑ Open D string for 'old'; D↑ Open D string for 'man'; and F↑ Fret 3 D string for 'comes'. A bracket spans the first three words, and a vertical line is placed under the fourth word.

In this measure, the last note is the one that turns a basic G chord into a G7 chord — F — so in this case, G7 is being used because it directly correlates with the melody line.

handling chord extensions on a basic level

While chord extensions can be a very complex music theory topic, in low-string guitar chord melody style, handling them on a basic level is pretty straightforward — **you simply substitute any chord extension with the basic chord that it extends and then, based on the melody notes it goes with, make any chord shape modifications as needed.**

That means that **whenever you come across a measure that calls for a G7 chord, just use a basic G chord. From there, you'll go through the melody notes as normal and modify the G chord when necessary.**

This approach works for any chord extension because in practice, you really only need to play one when the melody line requires you to do so — when it's used purely as a creative choice, it's mostly optional.

By substituting a chord extension with the basic chord that it extends, if one of the melody notes is one of the chord extension's added notes, you'll encounter it as a non-chord tone, and just by using the modified chord approach to handle it, you'll end up playing the chord extension automatically, perhaps without even knowing it.

But if none of the bar's melody notes is one of the chord extension's added notes, then the extension is likely being used only for creative purposes, making it not only optional, but probably, unnecessary, too.

Ultimately, **going this route takes any decision-making about chord extensions out of your hands altogether** and lets the relationship between the basic chords and the melody notes — the foundation of the entire style — do all the work. That makes playing them purposefully and efficiently practically effortless. Let's check out some examples.



handling a chord extension that's used purely as a creative choice

To get some practice working with chord extensions, let's look at a measure that uses one purely as a creative choice.

In measure 2 of "Hush Little Baby," you're tasked with using a G7 chord, which is the most common chord extension you'll see while playing low-string guitar chord melody style in the key of C.

To handle this bar, **first substitute G7 with the basic G chord.** From there, since none of the melody notes in this measure is F, the note that turns G into G7, playing the G7 here isn't really necessary, so you can just play the basic G chord with each note.

Using chord extensions as an embellishment

Though chord extensions that are used purely as a creative choice are largely unnecessary, when a measure calls for one, you can still try to fit it in as an embellishment, which can add a nice flavor to your playing.

Usually, **using a chord extension as an embellishment works best when you switch to one during longer stretches of strumming**, as it helps break things up while providing a sense of movement toward the next chord.

For example, in measure 2 of "Hush Little Baby," after playing all of the melody notes with the basic G chord, you could mix things up by going to a G7 chord about halfway through the half note rhythm pattern that you play at the end. That's a prime place to use the G7 chord as an embellishment because not only does it break up a longer stretch of strumming, but you also have plenty of time to switch to it comfortably.

In general, you can always throw in a chord extension if it sounds good. But like any other embellishment, adding one is secondary to the main idea of playing the melody while keeping up the rhythm.

So, don't force it — if you can't fit it in or it doesn't sound right, then it's probably better to just stick with the basic chord for the entire process.

Decoded measure 2 of "Hush Little Baby," which calls for a G7 chord

G7

The diagram shows a musical staff with four notes. The first note is a half note on the D string (Fret 2). The second note is a half note on the D string (Open). The third note is a half note on the D string (Open). The fourth note is a half note on the D string (Open). A bracket under the first three notes indicates they are played with the basic G chord. A bracket under the last note indicates it is played with the G7 chord. The lyrics "don't say a word," are written below the notes.

don't	say	a	word,
E↑ Fret 2 D string	D↑ Open D string	D↑ Open D string	D↑ Open D string

To handle this measure, first substitute G7 with the basic G chord. From there, since none of the melody notes in this measure is F, the note that turns G into G7, playing G7 here isn't really necessary, so you can just play the basic G chord with each note.

To mix things up, you could go to G7 about halfway through the half note rhythm pattern that you play here. Using G7 as an embellishment works well in this case because it breaks up a longer stretch of strumming, and you also have plenty of time to switch to it comfortably.



handling a chord extension that directly correlates with the melody line

To round out our study of chord extensions, let's look at an example of one that's used because it directly correlates with the melody line.

In measure 2 of "This Old Man," you're tasked with using a G7 chord, which you'd simply substitute here with the basic G chord.

Then, to handle the notes in the measure, you'd play the first three with the basic, unmodified G chord, as they're all chord tones.

The fourth and final note, though, is F, a non-chord tone of the basic G chord. So, to play it, you'd modify the basic G chord in the same way you would any other non-chord tone.

But, since this note is the one that turns G into G7 — F — just by making this modification, you're actually playing a G7 chord by default.

Now, take note of the G7 chord you end up playing here — from the unmodified G chord that you use for the third note, the D chord tone, the most efficient way to handle the F is by moving your ring finger from fret 3 of the low E string to fret 3 of the D string, which results in a **version of the G7 chord that's quite different than the one that most guitar players use on a general basis.**

In fact, **in low-string guitar chord melody style, you'll mostly use some variation of this version of the G7 chord** because while playing songs in the key of C, it's the one that covers the oft-used combination of the G chord and the F note from fret 3 of the D string.

At the end of the day, because any chord extension is rooted in a basic chord, when you see one, it's almost always best to start with the basic chord that it extends and modify it from there, an approach that can help lead you to the most functional, intuitive and best-sounding version of any chord extension you need to play.

Decoded measure 2 of "This Old Man," which calls for a G7 chord

7 G7

This old man comes

G↑ Open G string D↑ Open D string D↑ Open D string F↑ Fret 3 D string

To handle this measure, first substitute G7 with the basic G chord. Then, play the first three notes with the basic, unmodified G chord, as all three are chord tones. The last note is F, the note that turns G to G7, so by modifying the basic G chord to handle it, you'll end up playing a G7 chord automatically.

Chord shapes for last two notes in measure 2 of "This Old Man"

Note 3: D↑ — Open D string

Note 4: F↑ — Fret 3, D string

From the unmodified G chord used for the third note, the D chord tone, to play the fourth, the F non-chord tone, move your ring finger from fret 3 of the low E string to fret 3 of the D string. This results in a version of G7 that's probably unfamiliar, but some variation of this version is most common in low-string guitar chord melody style because it covers the oft-used combination of the G chord and the F note from fret 3 of the D string.

wrapping up play in the key of C

At this point, we've pretty much covered all of the big-picture principles of low-string guitar chord melody style. Basically, for any song, first, you decode its lead sheet. From there, you apply the appropriate rhythm technique to each melody note and chord combination you're tasked with playing, making sure to modify the chords according to the melody note as efficiently as possible. You'll also substitute any chord extension with the basic chord that it extends, and when possible, make anything that you can easier on yourself to play. You can even add in any embellishments that you see fit.

Now, so far, we've only looked at the style through the lens of the key of C, and while it alone can keep you busy for quite a long time — especially once you really start having to work with chords beyond C, F and G — it's also valuable to be able to work through songs that are in key of G. Let's learn how.



lead sheets in the key of C versus G

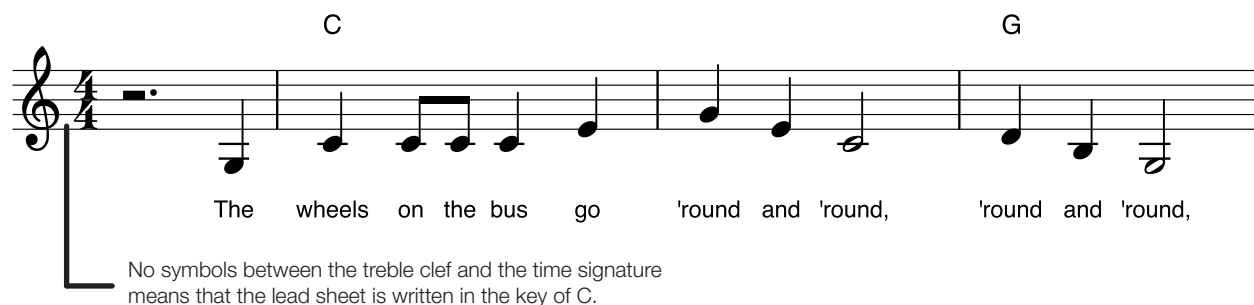
To play low-string guitar chord melody style in the key of G, you'll need a lead sheet that's written in that key. Now, as you begin searching for one, note that in a lead sheet written in the key of C, the treble clef and the time signature appear right next to each other in the song's first measure with nothing in-between.

But, in the first bar of lead sheets written in the key of G, there's always a sharp sign — which looks like a number, hash or pound symbol — between the treble clef and the time signature. The sharp sign basically means that any F note in the music should be read as F# instead of just a basic F.

This is different than with lead sheets written in the key of C — since they lack that sharp sign, in that key, any F note just reads as a basic F.

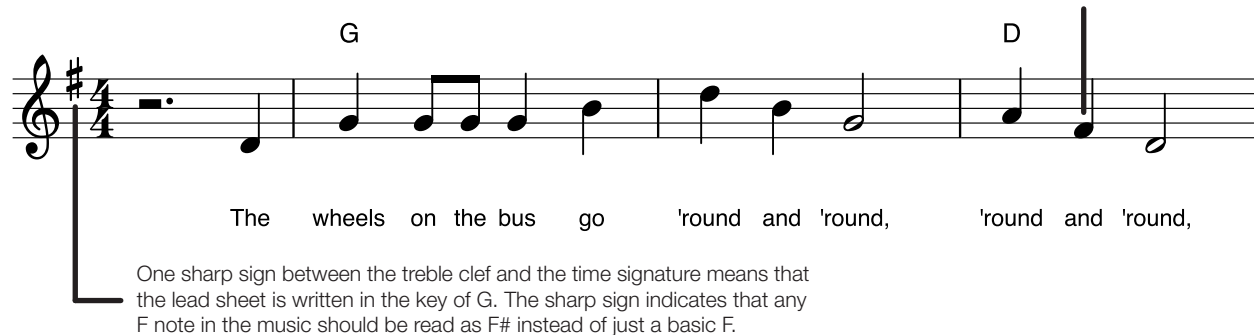
With that in mind, as a first step toward playing songs in the key of G, simply pick a song and find a lead sheet of it that has one sharp sign between the treble clef and the time signature in the first measure.

The first line of "The Wheels on the Bus," written in the key of C



The musical notation shows the first line of "The Wheels on the Bus" in the key of C. It is written in 4/4 time. The first measure contains a whole rest, followed by a dotted quarter note G4. The second measure contains a quarter note F4, a quarter note E4, and a quarter note D4. The third measure contains a quarter note C4, a quarter note B3, and a quarter note A3. The fourth measure contains a quarter note G3, a quarter note F3, and a quarter note E3. The fifth measure contains a quarter note D3, a quarter note C3, and a quarter note B2. The sixth measure contains a quarter note A2, a quarter note G2, and a quarter note F2. The seventh measure contains a quarter note E2, a quarter note D2, and a quarter note C2. The eighth measure contains a quarter note B1, a quarter note A1, and a quarter note G1. The lyrics "The wheels on the bus go 'round and 'round, 'round and 'round," are written below the notes. Above the first measure is a "C" indicating the key signature. Above the eighth measure is a "G" indicating the final note. A bracket points to the first measure with the text: "No symbols between the treble clef and the time signature means that the lead sheet is written in the key of C."

The first line of "The Wheels on the Bus," written in the key of G



The musical notation shows the first line of "The Wheels on the Bus" in the key of G. It is written in 4/4 time. The first measure contains a whole rest, followed by a dotted quarter note G4. The second measure contains a quarter note F#4, a quarter note E4, and a quarter note D4. The third measure contains a quarter note C#4, a quarter note B3, and a quarter note A3. The fourth measure contains a quarter note G3, a quarter note F#3, and a quarter note E3. The fifth measure contains a quarter note D3, a quarter note C#3, and a quarter note B2. The sixth measure contains a quarter note A2, a quarter note G#2, and a quarter note F#2. The seventh measure contains a quarter note E2, a quarter note D2, and a quarter note C2. The eighth measure contains a quarter note B1, a quarter note A1, and a quarter note G1. The lyrics "The wheels on the bus go 'round and 'round, 'round and 'round," are written below the notes. Above the first measure is a "G" indicating the key signature. Above the eighth measure is a "D" indicating the final note. A bracket points to the first measure with the text: "One sharp sign between the treble clef and the time signature means that the lead sheet is written in the key of G. The sharp sign indicates that any F note in the music should be read as F# instead of just a basic F."

Due to the sharp sign in measure 1, this F note — and any other F note in the music — reads as F#, not F.

“The guitar is a **small orchestra**...every string is a different color, a different voice.”

— Andrés Segovia

In general, in low-string guitar chord melody style, you handle songs in the key of G just as you would songs in the key of C, but the scale and the main chords are different.

As far as the scale is concerned, you'll need to know the **G major scale in open position**.

Here it is with all the note names included — keep in mind that each open string is part of the scale.

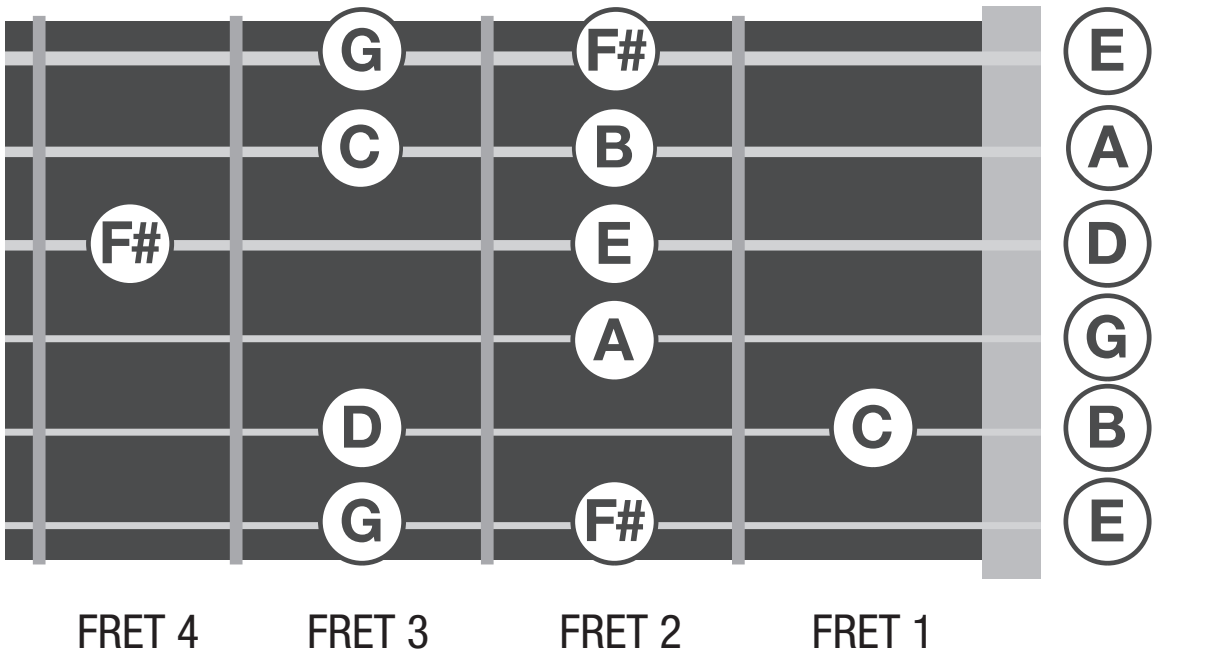
To learn it, it's perhaps best to first get down all of the fingertip positions — starting with the open low E string, play the scale simply as **open E, fret 2, fret 3; open A, fret 2, fret 3; open D, fret 2, fret 4; open G, fret 2; open B, fret 1, fret 3; and open E, fret 2, fret 3.**

Once you're comfortable with the finger placements, start playing the scale with the note names in mind, until you've memorized them.

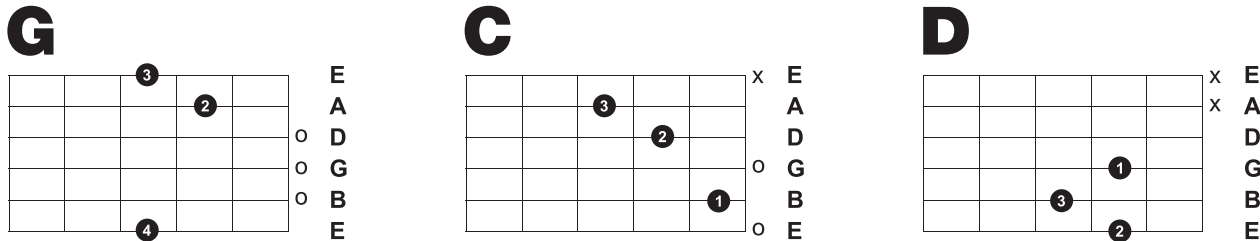
When it comes to the chords, **most songs in the key of G revolve around G, C and D.**

Now, without getting too deep into it, note that even though C and G are also common to the key of C, playing them in the key of G sounds completely different, but the overlap means that **to begin playing low-string guitar chord melody style in the key of G, all you need to do is swap out the F chord for the D chord and learn the new scale, which itself, is fairly similar to the one you use for the key of C.**

The G major scale in open position



The main chords used in the key of G



the reconfigured G chord

When playing low-string guitar chord melody style in the key of G, the two most common notes that go with a G chord are the open B string note and the D note from fret 3 of the B string.

Now, the open B string note is included in the original G chord shape, but the D from fret 3 of the B string is not, and while you could handle each one by using two different versions of the G chord — the original for the B note, and one that has that D note as a fingertip position — you play these notes back to back so often that it'd be ideal to have any movement between them be as effortless as possible.

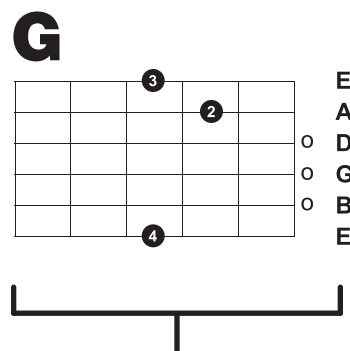
So, among other options, **as you play in the key of G, it's perhaps best to reconfigure your fingers for the basic G chord shape altogether, so that you can toggle between both notes with one intuitive motion.**

To play this reconfigured G chord, **put your middle finger on fret 3 of the low E string, your index finger on fret 2 of the A string and your pinky on fret 3 of the high E string.**

From there, **to play the D note from fret 3 of the B string, all you have to do is put your ring finger on fret 3 of the B string. To go back to the B, just lift your ring finger.**

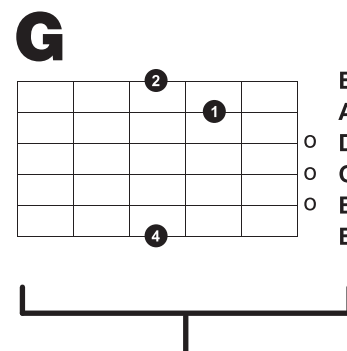
Ultimately, **the reconfigured G chord should become your default version of G when playing in the key of G** because it puts you in the best position to efficiently handle two of the key's crucial melody note and chord combinations.

Original G chord



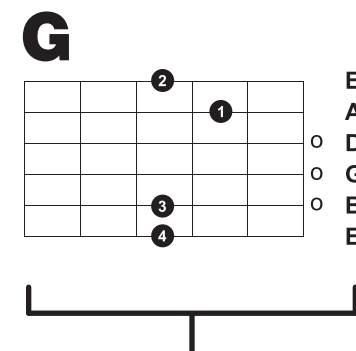
This version of the G chord is inefficient for playing in the key of G. It works when you have to play a G chord with the open B string note, but not when you have to play it with the D note from fret 3 of the B string. You play those two notes together a lot, so you want any movement between them be as effortless as possible.

Default, reconfigured G chord



This reconfigured version of G is better for the key of G because when you need to play the open B string note and the D from fret 3 back to back with a G chord, you can toggle between the two notes with one intuitive motion. Plus, you can also play the exact same notes you can with the original chord shape.

Modified, reconfigured G chord



From the reconfigured G chord shape, when you have to play a G chord with the D note from fret 3 of the B string, all you have to do is add your ring finger to fret 3 of the B string. To go back to the open B string note, simply lift your ring finger.



the reconfigured G chord in action

To see how the reconfigured G chord would be applied in a song, let's look at an example.

This version of "The Wheels on the Bus" is written in the key of G, so **as a starting point, any time you're tasked with playing a G chord in this song, simply use the default, reconfigured G chord instead of the original G chord shape and modify from there.**

So, using the default, reconfigured G chord, the first six notes in the song's first phrase require no modifications to handle because each one is a chord tone that comes from an open string that's included in the chord shape.

The seventh note, though, at the start of measure 3, is the D note from fret 3 of the B string. To play it, from the default, reconfigured G chord, drop your ring finger onto fret 3 of the B string. Then, for the eighth note, the B from the open B string, just lift your ring finger back up. To finish out the phrase, play the ninth and final note by hitting the open G string.

Now, something to keep in mind is that you don't always go to the D note from fret 3 of the B string from the open B string note. In these cases, you'll have to switch straight to the modified, reconfigured G chord, so in some ways, you do have to learn two different chord shapes to handle these two notes.

But the fact is, as you play low-string guitar chord melody style in the key of G, you'll soon find that there's really, no more efficient solution.

The first line of "The Wheels on the Bus," written in the key of G and decoded

G

The wheels on the bus go 'round and 'round,

D↑ G↑ G↑ G↑ G↑ B↑ D↑ B↑ G↑
Open Open Open Open Open Open Fret 3, Open Open
D string G string G string G string G string B string B string G string

Default, reconfigured G chord

G

E
A
D
G
B
E

In the key of G, use this version of G instead of the original G chord shape...

Modified, reconfigured G chord

G

E
A
D
G
B
E

...and use this version of G when you need to play the G chord with the D note from fret 3 of the B string. Note that sometimes, you'll also have to switch straight to this version.

Note

You don't necessarily have to completely abandon the original G chord shape in the key of G. In fact, in this example of "The Wheels on the Bus," you could use it to get through the first six notes, and then for the seventh note, switch directly to the modified, reconfigured G chord.

For the eighth note, you could even go back to the original G chord if you wanted. Sure, it's a less efficient way to do it, but it's also absolutely valid.

"I wanted to **connect my guitar to human emotions.**"

— B.B. King

the D/F# chord

Along with the chords needed to play a G chord with either the open B string note or the D note from fret 3 of the B string, **you'll also have to have a way to play the F# note from fret 4 of the D string with a D chord** and for pretty much the exact same reasons— though the F# note is a D chord chord tone, this iteration of it is not included in the original D chord shape.

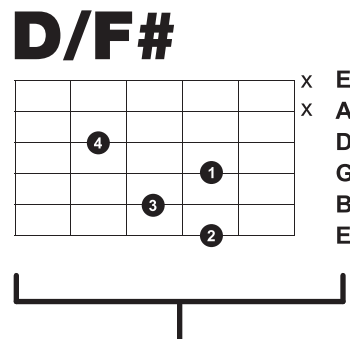
In general, to handle this combination, start with the original D chord shape and then, add your pinky to fret 4 of the D string. The resulting chord shape is called D/F#.

Now, note that you can also set your fingers for D/F# in a couple of other ways. For instance, you could do it by barring the three high strings on fret 2 with your index finger, while putting your middle finger on fret 3 of the B string and having your ring finger on fret 4 of the D string.

This barre chord version of D/F# takes the pinky out of the equation, a finger that can often be a point of weakness for guitar players.

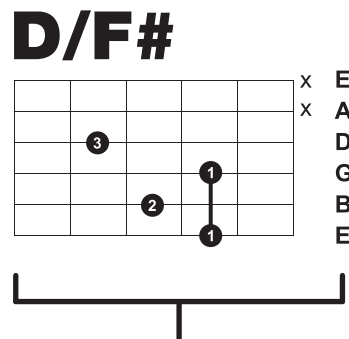
You could also just use a Bm7 chord, which is basically a D/F# chord with the B note from fret 2 of the A string included. If you're already familiar with it, the Bm7 shape can make playing D/F# practically effortless, but you'll have to be accurate with your strumming — **to avoid playing the B note from fret 2 of the A string, which will make the chord sound like Bm7, make double sure that when you strum, you only strum the D, G, B and high E strings.**

Basic D/F# chord



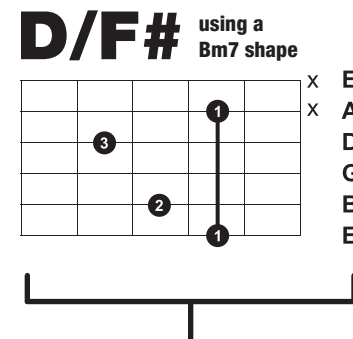
Most basic way to play the F# note from fret 4 of the D string with a D chord.

D/F#, as a barre chord



This barre chord version of D/F# takes the pinky out of the equation, a finger that can often be a point of weakness for guitar players.

D/F#, played with a Bm7 shape



A Bm7 chord is basically just a D/F# chord with the B note from fret 2 of the A string included. When playing this shape as a D/F# chord, only strum the D, G, B and high E strings, so as to avoid playing that B note, which will make the chord sound like Bm7.



tips for playing without a lead sheet

While using a lead sheet ultimately provides you with the most complete roadmap for playing a song in low-string guitar chord melody style, the fact is, you can also use a lyric and chord sheet or even play completely by ear.

Now, in general, **the better you are with the basic guitar fundamentals, the more intuitive it'll be to play songs in the style without using a lead sheet**, simply because doing so requires you to rely on your own experience to know which melody notes are being played, what rhythm technique to use, as well as when to strum and for how long you need to do it.

So, if you have any blind spots when it comes to switching between the basic chords seamlessly, playing in near-perfect time and picking accurately, then you should really work to improve those aspects of your musicianship.

With that in mind, **here's what you need to consider when playing the style either with a lyric and chord sheet or completely by ear:**

1. Every lyrical syllable in a song is a melody note.
2. For each syllable, default to the "note and a" pattern. Note that you'll probably have to play the pattern at a faster tempo than you think.
3. Whenever possible, strum in-between melody notes, and do so for as long as you need to — essentially, you'll just have to rely on "feel" to get the right timing for half notes, whole notes, dotted notes and all the rest.
4. Play any notes that you can't fit the "note and a" pattern in-between as standalone notes, and then get back to the pattern as soon as you can.
5. On the fingerboard, always modify chords as efficiently as possible, and when you have to make something easier to play, do it and then, prioritize getting back to playing from the position of a placed chord. Add in any embellishments that you see fit, but never force them.

Overall, as you get started with playing without a lead sheet, start with songs that are fairly basic in nature, such as kids or old country songs, and take it slow — the strongest foundations are built brick by brick.

Lyric and chord sheet example

Mary Had a Little Lamb

C

Mary had a little lamb,

G

C

Little lamb, little lamb.

Mary had a little lamb

G

C

Whose fleece was white as snow.

And everywhere that Mary went,

G

C

Mary went, Mary went

Everywhere that Mary went

G

C

The lamb was sure to go.

using a capo to play in other keys

Eventually, you'll want to play low-string guitar chord melody style in keys other than C and G, and among other options, perhaps the most intuitive way to do this is with a guitar capo.

Now, to get the most out of the capo, you really need to know how to use one properly, which by extension, requires you to know how to transpose chords. But the basic idea here is that **as long as you put your capo in the right place, you can use the tools of either the key of C or G to hear any key you want.** Here's a chart that outlines how to do it.

To Hear the Key of...	Add the Capo to Fret...	Use Tools from the Key of...
A	2	G
A# or Bb	3	G
B	4	G
C	play chords from key of C	
C# or Db	1	C
D	2	C
D# or Eb	3	C
E	4	C
F	5	C
F# or Gb	6	C
G	play chords from key of G	
G# or Ab	1	G



building on this foundation

When it comes to low-string guitar chord melody style, using the main tools from the keys of C and G to play melody lines while keeping consistent rhythm is really only a starting point.

From there, if you're so inclined, you can work to figure out how to bring in other related scales and licks and even try experimenting with using tools from other keys, particularly D and F, as after C and G, they're probably the two most intuitive keys to play the style in next.

As far as general approach is concerned, you can also do more improvising. See, **though low-string guitar chord melody style has its roots in the idea that you play a song's melody while strumming its chords, you actually don't have to play the melody at all** — as long as you change the chords as the song dictates, you can play whatever you want note-wise. That means that you can go with something similar to the melody, such as a harmony line, but you can also get creative and go in a completely different direction.

At that point, **you're only tied to the fact that whatever you play instead of the melody, you still can't lose the rhythm and you still have to switch the chords at the right time.**

At the end of the day, low-string guitar chord melody style is about combining single-note lines with strumming, and someone who does it well can rip off an impressive guitar solo while keeping a listener's foot tapping — even when the guitar is the only instrument being played.



next steps

Ultimately, your success with low-string guitar chord melody style depends on the strength of your fundamental guitar skills.

Having blind spots when it comes to the basic chords, how to strum or how to transpose will simply make gaining traction with the style more challenging. If you need guidance on improving in any of these areas, [click here for more PDF guides](#).

Approachable Music is on a mission to make learning music more accessible. We use accelerated learning ideals to teach the most important real-world music skills, so people can learn an instrument or improve on the one they're already playing as quickly as possible.

For more information about music lessons, or private workshops and classes specific to your organization, contact us at: **info@approachablemusic.com**

Find us on Facebook or Instagram: **[@approachablemusic](#)**