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LESSON NOTES

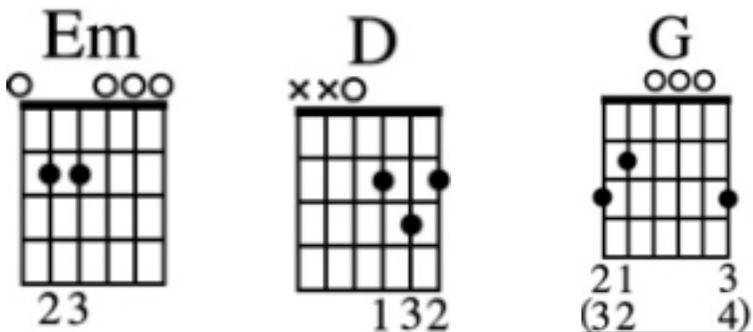
How to Write a Song Like Tom Petty (Part 1 of 3)

“Chord Riffs”

Our first technique is a musical device. Many of Petty's guitar parts, although comprised mostly of simple first position chords (i.e. chords that are within the first three frets of the guitar, a.k.a. cowboy chords), sound more like actual riffs than just chord progressions. These "chord riffs" are extremely characteristic of his music and worth analyzing. Here we break them down into three components (1) uneven rhythmic subdivisions, (2) choice hammer-ons, and (3) inter-chordal melodies.

Uneven Rhythmic Subdivisions

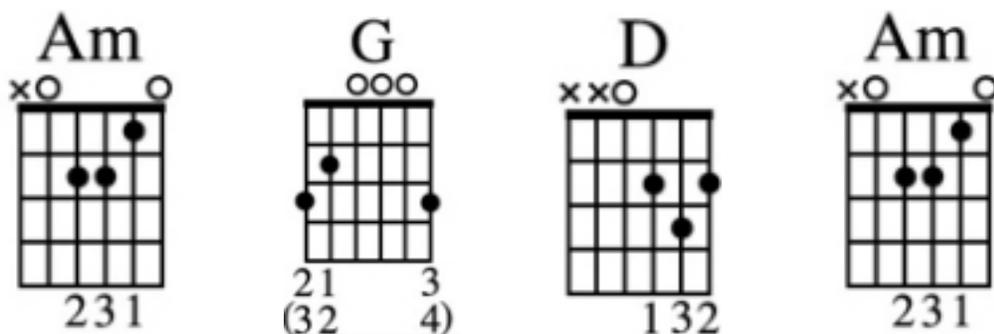
First, Petty often used uneven rhythms moving from one chord to the next (uneven rhythmic subdivisions). For example, in *I Won't Back Down*, the first chord progression is very simple: Em - D - G - G over 4 bars of 4/4 time.



This is a pretty typical chord progression in the key of G, with the minor vi chord moving to a V chord and back to the I chord. Most people, however, would strum the chords very evenly. Perhaps 4 eighth note strums per chord: like this Em(4) - D(4) - G(4) - G(4). However, Petty plays it more like this Em(4) - D(3) - G(5) - G(4), with an odd grouping of rhythms allocated between the D chord and the first G chord. This results in a feel that sounds like grouping of 4, 3, and 9 (5+4). Though very simple in design, it creates a nuance that catches the ear and makes it very easy to tell even just from the opening chord progression what song is being played. Very slick indeed. Please see the video for a demo. Similar techniques happen in *Learning to Fly* (F(3)-C(5)-Am(3)-G(5)), and *Free Fallin'* (D(3)-G(5)-G(1)-D(2)-A(5)).

Choice Hammer-Ons

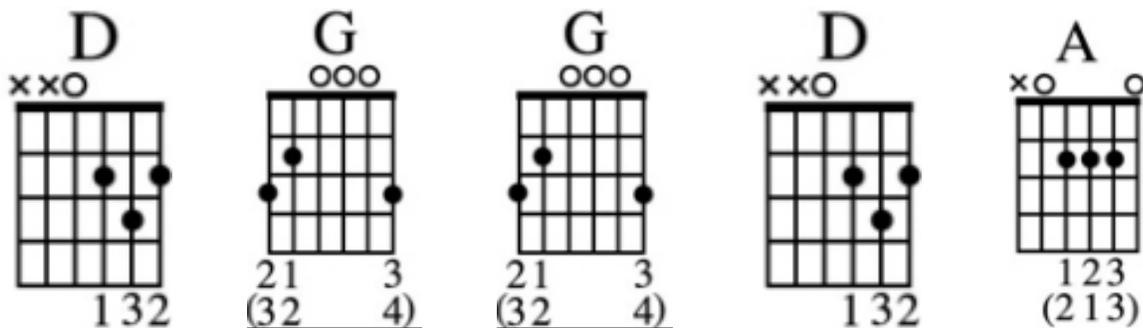
Second, Petty's use of choice hammer-ons really gives character to some of his best chord riffs. For instance, in *Last Dance with Mary Jane*, in addition to an uneven rhythmic subdivision between the chords, he also hammers onto the initial Am chord and the D chord (third chord in the pattern: Am-G-D-Am).



This is a simple trick you can add into your chord playing to give your sound more character. Similar hammer-on techniques can be heard in *Learning to Fly* as well on the initial F chord as it passes to the C chord, and also on *Wildflowers* (capo 5) moving from an F shape to a C shape and then also as he moves to a G shape and back.

Inter-Chordal Melodies

Finally, Petty's chordal riffs tend to have a melodic aspect built within them (inter-chordal melodies). That is to say, you can almost sing/hum the chord progression's implicit melody, where he emphasizes certain notes from the chords he plays. As he moves from one chord to the next, a melody emerges from within the harmony. The best example is *Free Fallin'*, where you can hear that high melody built into the chords. Without the capo on the guitar, those notes are f#-g-g-f#-e. That pattern is heard over and over and is easy to remember and identify because it's so sing-able. The way Petty achieves this device is by adding a g to his initial D chord (which makes it a D sus chord). By including this simple trick, a little built-in melody pops out from the chord progression: D-G-G-D-A (note: in the intro the G is a Dsus4).



He's also careful to strum the chords so that specific set of notes sticks out of the guitar part (emphasis on the melody notes). Many of his songs have a similar component, like *Wreck Me*, *Learning to Fly*, *Running Down a Dream*, *Last Dance with Mary Jane*. Please see the video for demos of these.

In sum, the next time you sit down to write a chord progression, maybe see if you can use some of these tips to transform simple first position chord progressions into more memorable chord riffs. Maybe make the rhythmic change from one chord to the next something less than predictable. Or, maybe add in some hammer-ons over simple chords. Finally, see if you can position the chords so little melodies stick out from the chords. You can apply many of these ideas on piano or ukulele as well.

Recap/Exercise:

Step 1: Write your chord progression

Step 2: Displace the rhythm/strumming so the timing is uneven between chords

Step 3: Find ways to bring out an inter-chordal melody (hammer-ons, inter-chordal melody, strumming specific strings only)

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Best of luck!

-Mike