

90-DAY PRACTICE PLAN

10–20 minutes a day to make the Emotional Map of Melody an instinctual part of your playing and composing.

90
DAYS

HOW THIS WORKS

The goal isn't to memorize facts — it's to build **automatic pattern recognition**. You want to hear a note over a chord and *instantly feel* its zone without thinking. That kind of internalization requires three things: daily repetition, ears-first learning (singing before analyzing), and composition output every single day, even if it's just one bar.

Every session follows the same 3-part structure. The content of Part 2 changes each week, but the container is always the same. That consistency is what builds the habit.

THE DAILY PRACTICE STRUCTURE (EVERY DAY, NO EXCEPTIONS)

2 min	The Ladder Warmup	Sing or hum DO–SO–MI–LA–RE–TI–FA over a single drone note. Forward once, backward once. This fires up the stability map in your ear before anything else.
12–15 min	Today's Drill	The weekly focus exercise. Changes every week. Described in detail on the following pages.
3 min	Song Moment	Apply today's concept to Sweet Home Chicago or a song you're currently working on. Even one phrase counts. This is what locks it in.

THE THREE PHASES

PHASE 1 · DAYS 1–30 INNER EAR 4 weeks Internalize the stability ladder and the four zones. You should be able to <i>sing</i> the stability order without thinking and label any note's zone over a static chord.	PHASE 2 · DAYS 31–60 CHORD CONTEXT 4 weeks Learn to hear chord tones vs. non-chord tones and track how a note's zone shifts as chords change underneath it. Context becomes automatic.	PHASE 3 · DAYS 61–90 COMPOSITION 4 weeks Use the full framework while writing. Plan tension arcs, balance sheets, and revise existing melodies using the checklist. Instinct at full speed.
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FIVE PRINCIPLES THAT MAKE IT STICK

Ears before eyes Always sing or hum a concept before you look at it on paper. The map is a description of what your ear already senses — not a rule to memorize.	One thing at a time Each week has one focus. Do not try to apply all 8 modules simultaneously until Phase 3. Depth beats breadth for internalization.
Compose every day Even one bar. The Song Moment at the end of each session is non-negotiable. Composition converts knowledge into reflex.	Spaced repetition From Week 5 onward, the Ladder Warmup expands to include a quick review of the previous week's concept. Old skills get re-tested constantly.
Slow down on confusion If a week feels unclear, repeat it. The plan is a guide, not a deadline. Two weeks on context shifting beats one rushed week every time.	

ANCHOR SONG

SWEET HOME CHICAGO — ROBERT JOHNSON / ERIC CLAPTON This is your reference song for the whole 90 days. Every Song Moment connects back to it (or a song you're currently working on). Sweet Home Chicago is ideal because it uses a simple I-IV-V blues form, has a singable vocal melody with clear phrase structure, and demonstrates almost every AMF concept naturally: stable landing notes, non-chord tone passing tones, zone 2 tension on the IV chord, resolution back to DO. You will know this melody's zone map from memory by Day 90.
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THE INNER EAR

Stability ladder → Zone identification. By Day 30 you should be able to label any note's zone over a static chord in under 3 seconds.

4
WEEKS

WEEK 1 · DAYS 1–7

THE STABILITY LADDER

Memorize DO–SO–MI–LA–RE–TI–FA as a physical, singable sequence

Day 1 **Learn the Order**

Sing DO–SO–MI–LA–RE–TI–FA over a root drone (any pitch). Say each name out loud. Repeat 10× forward, 5× backward. Don't rush — let each note ring in your ear.

EAR

Day 2 **Feel the Pull**

Play a root chord (C major works fine). Hold each note of the stability ladder one at a time, 5 seconds each. Notice: DO feels like landing. FA feels like falling off a cliff. That feeling is the data.

EAR

Day 3 **Rank Without Looking**

Blind drill: have someone (or a random number generator) call out a note name. Before looking at the sheet, say its stability rank (1–7). Check yourself. 20 rounds.

DRILL

Day 4 **Introduce the 4 Zones**

Read Sheet 1A slowly. Don't memorize — just feel the logic. Play a C chord. Place each scale degree into its zone: DO over C = Zone 1. FA over C = Zone 2. Then hum each note and feel which zone it belongs to.

EAR

Day 5 **Zone 1 Phrase**

Compose a 4-note melody using only Zone 1 notes over C chord (DO, MI, SO). It will sound safe and resolved. That's the point — feel what "sweet and grounded" is made of.

COMPOSE

Day 6 **Tiny Tension Arc**

Compose a 4-note phrase: Zone 1 → Zone 1 → Zone 2 → Zone 1. Land home. Feel the one moment of yearning and the release. This is the engine of melody — almost all hooks use this structure.

COMPOSE

Day 7 **Week 1 Review**

Sing the full stability ladder from memory without looking. Play yesterday's phrase and label each note's zone out loud. If any zone assignment takes more than 3 seconds, spend 5 more minutes on that note.

REVIEW

WEEK 2 · DAYS 8–14

ZONE FLUENCY

Label, substitute, and target zones in real melodies

Day 8 **Analyze a Known Melody**

Pick a melody you know by heart (Happy Birthday, a pop hook, anything). Sing it over a static chord. Label each note's zone. Don't worry about chord changes yet — just pick one chord.

ANALYSIS

Day 9 **Zone Substitution**

Take a 4-note phrase from Day 5 or 6. Swap one note for a different note in a different zone. Sing both versions. Hear the emotional shift. The map is working when you can predict the change before you play it.

EAR

Day 10 **Visit All 4 Zones**

Compose an 8-note phrase that touches all 4 zones at least once over a C chord. The order is up to you. Afterward, identify: which zone felt most uncomfortable? That's your growth edge.

COMPOSE

Day 11 **Sweet Home Chicago: First Pass**

Sing the first verse melody of Sweet Home Chicago over a C chord drone. Label each note's zone. Just zone 1 vs. "not zone 1" for now. Mark where the tension lives.

ANALYSIS

Day 12 **Zone Targeting**

Three mini-phrases: one that ends in Zone 1 (resolved), one that ends in Zone 2 (questioning), one that ends in Zone 4 (dark/tense). Same starting note for all three. Hear how the landing changes the whole phrase's meaning.

COMPOSE

Day 13 **Lightning Round**

Speed drill: set a 60-second timer. Call out random scale degree names (or have a partner do it). Name the zone over a C chord as fast as possible. Goal: zero hesitation by the end.

DRILL

Day 14 **Draw the Map From Memory**

Put away all sheets. On blank paper, draw the 2×2 zone map with axis labels, fill in the zone names and their emotional keywords. Then check against Sheet 1A. Fix any gaps.

REVIEW

WEEK 3 · DAYS 15–21

SCALE DEGREE KEYWORDS

One note per day — build the emotional vocabulary for each degree

D15 **DO Day — HOME**

Play DO in every octave you have. Sing it. Compose a 4-note phrase that uses DO as the primary note. Experience: settled, grounded, complete. Stability rank: 1.

EAR

D16 **SO Day — OPEN**

SO (the 5th) is the second most stable note — it feels open and bright, not quite home but nearby. Compose a phrase that alternates DO and SO. Hear the difference between "home" and "the view from home."

EAR

D17 **MI Day — SWEET**

MI is the 3rd — it gives the chord its major/happy quality. Compose a phrase that leads into MI as the final note. Hear how it feels warm and complete, slightly softer than DO.

EAR

D18 **LA Day — LONGING**

LA (the 6th) is the first "interesting" note — stable but not a chord tone on most chords. It has warmth and a slight nostalgic ache. Compose a blues phrase where LA is the peak note.

EAR

D19 **RE Day — YEARNING**

RE (the 2nd/9th) always wants to move — up to MI or down to DO. Compose a phrase where RE is held longer than feels comfortable. Hear the forward pull. This is tension with direction.

EAR

D20 **TI Day — LEADING**

TI (the 7th / leading tone) screams to resolve up to DO. It's the most directional note in the scale. Compose a phrase that ends on TI and DON'T resolve it. Hear the listener lean forward.

EAR

D21 **FA Day — THE EDGE**

FA (the 4th) forms the tritone with TI — the most dissonant interval in Western music. Play FA and TI simultaneously. That's the sound of maximum tension. Compose a phrase where FA resolves down to MI. Feel the release.

EAR

WEEK 4 · DAYS 22–30

PHASE 1 INTEGRATION

Combine stability + zones + keywords into fluid real-time analysis

D22 **Full Map Recall**

Draw the 4-zone map AND the stability ladder from memory in under 60 seconds. Write each note in its zone. Check against the sheets. This is your Phase 1 benchmark.

REVIEW

D23–24 **Analyze Two Songs**

Pick two songs with clear vocal melodies. Sing the first phrase of each and label every note: name, stability rank (1–7), zone (1–4). Write it out. This is your first full analysis drill.

ANALYSIS

D25–26 **Zone Arc Composition**

Compose a 2-bar melody with a deliberate zone arc: start Zone 1, rise to Zone 2 or 4, resolve to Zone 1. This is a complete micro-song structure. Write 3 different versions. Pick the one that moves you most.

COMPOSE

D27–28 **Sweet Home Chicago: Full Verse Map**

Map the entire first verse of Sweet Home Chicago note by note over a static drone. Identify: first note zone, highest note zone, last note zone. Note where FA or TI appear — those are the tension moments.

ANALYSIS

D29–30 **Phase 1 Checkpoint**

Can you (1) sing the stability ladder cold in under 5 sec? (2) name any note's zone over a C chord in under 3 sec? (3) explain the FA-TI tritone without notes? If yes to all three: Phase 1 complete. If no: repeat Week 1 drills for 3 days.

REVIEW

CHORD CONTEXT

Chord tones vs. non-chord tones. Zones shifting as chords move. Context becomes automatic — the same note feels different, and you hear why.

4
WEEKS

PHASE 2 SHIFT: FROM STATIC TO DYNAMIC

In Phase 1 you always analyzed notes over a single held chord. Phase 2 introduces **movement**. The chord changes, and the same melody note suddenly lives in a different zone. Your job is to track that shift in real time. Start slowly — one chord change at a time — and build speed over 4 weeks.

WEEK 5 · DAYS 31–37

CHORD TONE EAR TRAINING

Instantly identify whether a note belongs to the chord or not

D31

The Four Common Chords

In C major: C (DO-MI-SO), F (FA-LA-DO), G7 (SO-TI-RE-FA), Am (LA-DO-MI). Memorize which notes are in each. Sing the chord tones for each chord over the drone. This is your chord tone vocabulary for Phase 2.

DRILL

D32–33

Chord Tone Test

Play a chord. Sing a scale degree. Before looking: is it a chord tone? Answer, then verify. 20 rounds per day across all 4 chords. Track your accuracy — you're aiming for 90%+ by Day 33.

EAR

D34–35

Non-Chord Tones as Color

Play C chord. Sing DO-MI-SO (chord tones — sweet). Now add RE between MI and SO. Hear how RE adds color without breaking the phrase. That's a passing tone. Repeat with the other 3 chords, adding one non-chord tone each time.

EAR

D36–37

Chord Tone Targeting

Compose a 4-bar melody over C-F-G-C (simple I-IV-V-I). Choose your landing note for each chord to always be a chord tone. Hear the solidity. Then swap one landing to a non-chord tone. Hear what shifts.

COMPOSE

WEEK 6 · DAYS 38–44

CONTEXT SHIFTING

The same note over different chords = different zones

D38–39

RE in Four Contexts

Hold RE (D in C major) over: C chord → zone? F chord → zone? G7 chord → zone? Dm chord → zone? Write down the zone and chord-tone status for each. Sing RE over each chord in turn without stopping. Hear it shift.

EAR

D40–41

Pick Your Own Note

Choose any note. Run it through the same 4-chord test. Write down each zone. Notice which chords "accept" it (chord tone) and which "resist" it (non-chord tone). Do this with 3 different notes over 2 days.

DRILL

D42–43

Sustained Note, Moving Chords

Compose a melody where you hold one note for 2 bars while the chord changes underneath. Hear the zone shift happen without touching the melody. This is a pro technique — it creates drama from harmony alone.

COMPOSE

D44

Sweet Home Chicago: Chord Context Pass

Sing the verse melody with the actual chord changes (I7-IV7-V7 blues form). For each note, ask: is this a chord tone now? How does the zone change compared to your Phase 1 static analysis? Write down the differences.

ANALYSIS

WEEK 7 · DAYS 45–51

NON-CHORD TONE TYPES

Pass, Neighbor, Anticipation, Suspension — use each intentionally

D45

Passing Tone

A passing tone moves by step between two chord tones. DO → RE → MI over C chord: RE is the passing tone. Compose 3 phrases using passing tones. Rule: keep them short (one beat max), always moving in one direction.

COMPOSE

D46

Neighbor Tone

A neighbor tone steps away from a chord tone and returns. SO → LA → SO over C: LA is the neighbor tone — it adds shimmer. Compose 3 phrases with neighbor tones. This is one of the most-used ornaments in blues and jazz.

COMPOSE

D47

Anticipation

An anticipation arrives one beat early — the melody hints at the next chord before it lands. Compose a 2-chord phrase where the melody note for chord 2 arrives on the last beat of chord 1. Hear the forward lean.

COMPOSE

D48

Suspension

A suspension is held over from the previous chord and resolves downward. Classic: FA holds from F chord into C chord, then resolves down to MI. Compose one phrase with a suspension. This is one of the most emotional moves in melody writing.

COMPOSE

D49–51

NCT Identification in Real Songs

Pick 3 melodies (different genres). Analyze one phrase from each: identify all non-chord tones and label their type (Passing / Neighbor / Anticipation / Suspension). Sweet Home Chicago has passing tones in the turnaround — find them.

ANALYSIS

WEEK 8 · DAYS 52–60

CHORD CHANGE BEHAVIORS

Track what happens to your melody note when the chord moves

D52–53

Stay Sweet

Compose a melody that holds the same note through 2 chord changes and stays a chord tone both times (e.g. SO through C → G). Hear the stability. This is the "backbone note" technique — SO is the strongest backbone note in C major.

COMPOSE

D54–55

Turn Tense / Float Free

Compose a phrase where the melody holds while the chord changes — once making it "turn tense" (was chord tone, now isn't), once "float free" (was non-chord, now the chord adopts it). Hear both directions of the shift.

COMPOSE

D56–57

Pillar Notes

Compose a 4-chord progression. Choose one deliberate "landing note" for each chord — your pillar note. Make them chord tones. Then connect them with any passing tones you like. Hear how the pillars give the phrase a solid skeleton.

COMPOSE

D58–60

Phase 2 Checkpoint + Full Verse Analysis

Sing the full verse of Sweet Home Chicago with chord changes. Label every note: name, chord-tone status (yes/no), zone. Identify: all 4 NCT types present. All 4 chord-change behaviors present. Zone arc of the phrase. If you can do this fluidly, Phase 2 is done.

REVIEW

COMPOSITION FLUENCY

Plan zones before writing. Revise existing melodies. Compose complete multi-section songs using the full AMF framework at full speed.

4
WEEKS

PHASE 3: THE FRAMEWORK DISAPPEARS

The goal of Phase 3 is for the framework to become invisible. By Day 90, you shouldn't be thinking "what zone is this note?" — you should be *hearing* the zone before you even name it. The drills in this phase push you to use all 8 modules together in real composition time, so the instinct gets reinforced under the pressure of actually writing music.

WEEK 9 · DAYS 61-67

SWEET VS BITTER BALANCE

Score your phrases — aim for section-appropriate zone ratios

D61-62 Score Your Own Phrases

Take 3 phrases you've composed in Phases 1-2. Count how many notes are in each zone. Compute the percentage: Zone 1 / Zone 2 / Zone 3 / Zone 4. Compare to the Reference Ratios on Sheet 6A. Is your verse-level phrase verse-appropriate?

ANALYSIS

D63-64 Section Targeting

Compose 3 phrases to hit specific zone ratios: one "verse" phrase (50% Sweet), one "chorus" phrase (60% Sweet + big peak), one "bridge" phrase (heavy Zone 3 and 4 = floating + bitter). Don't just count after — plan the zones before you write the notes.

COMPOSE

D65-67 Contrast Two Sections

Write a verse AND a chorus for the same song concept. The chorus should have a noticeably higher Zone 1 ratio and the highest note should be a chord tone. Make them feel like they belong together but serve different emotional purposes.

COMPOSE

WEEK 10 · DAYS 68-74

TENSION ARC PLANNING

Map the emotional arc before writing a note

D68-69 Fill the Section Planner

Use Sheet 7A to plan a 4-section song: Intro / Verse / Chorus / Bridge. For each section: target zone, target pillar note, zone distribution goal. Write the plan BEFORE composing. Then spend 5 min writing just the verse melody from the plan.

COMPOSE

D70-71 The Bridge Challenge

The bridge is where most writers fail — it either feels too similar to the verse or sounds random. Compose a bridge that is predominantly Zone 3 (Floating) and Zone 4 (Bitter). It should feel like it comes from a different emotional place, then lead back to the final chorus.

COMPOSE

D72-74 Analyze a Complete Song

Choose a song with verse, chorus, and bridge. Map the zone arc for each section's opening phrase. Does the composer follow or break the Classic Rise-Fall arc? Write one paragraph on what makes the tension arc work in this song.

ANALYSIS

WEEK 11 · DAYS 75-81

THE REVISION CHECKLIST

Run the 8-step audit on real melodies — yours and others'

D75-76 Audit a Melody You've Written

Take a melody you've written (from any point in this plan) and run it through all 8 steps of the Melody Revision Checklist (Sheet 8A). Identify: at least one thing to fix. Make the fix. Sing both versions. Hear the improvement.

ANALYSIS

D77-78 Find the Red Flags

Using the red-flag checklist from Sheet 8A, check your last 5 composed phrases for: 3+ consecutive Zone 4 notes, chorus ending on TI or FA, zero Zone 3/4 notes (too safe). Fix any that have a red flag. One fix per session.

DRILL

D79-81 Peer Melody Audit

Find a melody from a published song and run the full 8-step audit as if you were giving the writer feedback. Identify 2 things that are deliberate and effective (explain why using AMF language). Identify 1 thing you would change.

ANALYSIS

WEEK 12 · DAYS 82-90

FULL SONG + FINAL ASSESSMENT

Compose a complete song using the full framework — then prove you don't need it

D82-85 The 90-Day Song

Compose a complete original song: Intro / Verse / Pre-Chorus / Chorus / Bridge / Final Chorus. Use the Section Planner. Plan your zone arcs, pillar notes, and zone distribution for each section first. Then write. This is your capstone piece.

COMPOSE

D86-87 Audit Your Own Song

Run the full 8-step Melody Revision Checklist on your 90-Day Song. Fix at least 2 things. Specifically check: does the chorus really feel more resolved than the verse? Does the bridge have enough zone contrast?

REVIEW

D88 Speed Drill: Full Framework

90-second timed drill. Call out 20 random scenarios: "RE over G7 — chord tone? Zone?" Answer before thinking. If any answer takes more than 2 seconds, you've found your last weak spot. Spend the remaining session time on it.

DRILL

D89 Sweet Home Chicago: Final Full Analysis

Complete top-to-bottom analysis of Sweet Home Chicago using all 8 modules: zone map, NCT types identified, chord change behaviors labeled, tension arc plotted, balance sheet scored. Write a one-paragraph summary of what makes this melody work. Compare to Day 11's basic analysis.

ANALYSIS

D90 The Instinct Test

Put away all sheets. Sit at your instrument. Improvise a 30-second melody over a I-IV-V-I chord progression. Afterward — without playing it back — describe what zones you visited, what your highest note was, how you handled each chord change. If you can describe it, you've internalized it.

REVIEW

MILESTONES — HOW YOU KNOW IT'S WORKING



Day 7 — Sing the ladder cold in < 5 seconds

DO-SO-MI-LA-RE-TI-FA forward and backward without hesitation. This is your first real checkpoint.



Day 14 — Draw the zone map from memory

All 4 zones, both axis labels, all 7 notes placed correctly. Under 90 seconds.



Day 30 — Label any note's zone over a static chord in < 3 seconds

The Phase 1 goal. Automatic zone assignment with no conscious calculation.



Day 45 — Hear a chord change and predict the zone shift

Before looking at the sheet, you can say: "if the chord moves from C to F and I'm holding RE, I go from Zone 3 to Zone 1."



Day 60 — Full verse analysis in real time while singing

Sing Sweet Home Chicago and internally track zones and chord tones simultaneously — no pausing to think.



Day 90 — The Instinct Test passes

You improvise a melody and can describe it using AMF language without playing it back. The framework has become the ear.

THE THREE QUESTIONS TO ASK EVERY TIME YOU WRITE A MELODY

Where is the tension in this phrase — and is it where I want it?

Does the landing note resolve, or does it leave the listener reaching for more?

If I described this phrase's zone arc out loud, would it match what the song needs emotionally?