

VOCAL BLENDING

BY JEANNIE DEVA

Back-up singing can be considered an art unto itself. Backing vocals help fill out the entire sound of a group. They add excitement while supporting and enriching the sound of the lead singer. The musical arrangement of the back-up parts is essential to this.

But regardless of the simplicity or sophistication of the musical arrangement, the execution and coordination of the vocal sounds are extremely important.

Producers and music industry people often complain that the backing vocals are given the least amount of attention in new groups shopping their bands. Sloppy backing vocals make a band appear unfocused and amateur.

The key to good sounding back-up vocals is "blend". It's important to know what blend is, how to assign parts and then how to practice to achieve unified sound that is also stylistically appropriate.

Elements of a Good Blend

Blend means to mix elements such as *tone, pronunciation, phrasing, volume, rhythm, dynamics, pitch* and *intonation*.

Tone refers to the timbre or characteristic sound of your voice. For the best blend, work on matching your tone to one another. That means matching qualities such as brightness or deepness of sound, nasality, and vibrato.

Ragged *phrasing* is one of the biggest reasons back-ups can sound un-polished. Phrasing choices should sound natural and make emotional sense, and work rhythmically with the instrumental parts and lead vocalist. For the optimum back-up blend, each singer's rhythmic phrasing should be identical. Listen

for and decide on mutual rhythms for each word and syllable so that they synchronize.

Pronunciation can vary from one person to the next causing clashing intonation and sloppy rhythms. A good vocal blend includes matching the way you pronounce your words. Be sure to cut off your words at the same time. Any words that have to be sustained, should as a rule, be sustained on the vowel, *not* the ending consonant. Many singers close off on the consonant too soon. If this occurs while still sustaining the pitch, chances are you will sound strained and/or go off pitch.

Volume should be balanced behind that of the lead singer. Crescendos and diminuendos on given words or phrases should happen simultaneously and smoothly. Practice by sustaining an "Ah" while slowly increasing then decreasing the volume. Do this with your other back-up singers in unison and with harmonies, as well as each person separately.

Poor *intonation* in the back-up vocals can be devastating to the entire sound of the band. Each singer needs to sing with complete pitch accuracy. It can be difficult sometimes to hear what your pitch is when singing harmony. If you are singing with other instruments, your note is often being played by either the guitar or piano.

When you practice your parts, listen for your note within the instrumentation. Use it as a guideline. Listening to all the other voices at once can be confusing and can throw you off. Pick one part with which to blend. Thinking of your part as a melody in its own right can be a big help.

Assigning Parts

Too often a band member is assigned a part only because he or she can "hit" the note. Voice lessons can help each singer improve vocal quality and control. But nonetheless, it's important to assign parts based on appropriate tonality for the most professional blend.

Evaluate each singer's voice. Notice who has a deeper sound (more mid-range resonance) and who's is thinner (more treble resonance). Which voices are most similar? Assign parts based on the voices that are most similar and will blend best.

For a tighter, fuller sound, put the voice that has a deeper, darker quality on top parts. Assign brighter or thinner voices to the bottom and/or middle parts.

For a group that has a female vocalist but is going *for an "all male" sound*, put the female on a part *below* one or two of the male vocalists.

For an "all female" sound with some male voices, use as many male voices as possible, singing with a "falsetto" sound (high, light and breathy). Put the female vocalist on or near the top.

To open the overall sound, use a high harmony or double the melody one or two octaves higher and/or lower. Upper harmonies are usually appropriate to sing breathy rather than shoutingly shrill. The importance of this part is "coloration" and enhancement of the sound spectrum.

On the other hand, doubling the melody or one of the harmonies from below can open the sound further. This last assignment can be appropriate for a band member who not only has trouble singing higher, but has difficulty staying on their own part and is a chronic "drifter."

How to Practice

If you're not gigging, you may find rehearsal time can become a bit of a substitute for performing. I used to do that as a kid when practicing piano. So badly did I want just to play, that I found it difficult to concentrate on the detail work. Of course, that method never paid off. I continued practicing mistakes and poor habits, until I forced myself to realize the difference between practice and performance time, and how to use it accordingly.

It can be difficult to be sure of what's the right thing to do to get your vocals sounding good. I've seen some stunning arguments break out over who sang what wrong note or other problems

amongst the backing vocal parts. As a team of musicians putting your trust in each other, you want more than just your music to harmonize.

Agreements have much to do with how smoothly you all work together, how far you go together, and how long you stay together. Here are some things you can do to causatively enhance your vocal blends, rehearsals, and group relations.

Vocals Only Rehearsals

Trying to practice everything at once, as you may already know, is confusing and results in slower progress. The time to put everything together is during actual Performances and performance prep rehearsals (like dress rehearsals for theatrical productions).

Schedule Vocal Rehearsals

Get someone who is not singing to play guitar or keyboard for this rehearsal. Or pre-record the group playing the songs without vocals, and use this tape. During this rehearsal, it is important for all the singers to be free from playing any instruments. Any music used should be low in volume so you can concentrate on listening to each other's voices.

Use Vocal Blending Exercises

Singing through your material is very important. Similarly important are using methods to raise your vocal potential as individuals and as a group. To achieve unity within the backing vocals, a sensitivity and awareness of each other's voices must be developed. Spending time on this in the setting of your vocal rehearsals will help you to carry it into your songs when you add the rest of the instruments.

1) Pick a basic chord that is in an easy range for all of you. Assign a different pitch of the chord to each singer. Sing with an **Ah** (as in "wand") and hold the note for 4 beats. You can also use other vowels; **Ooo** (as in "soon") is also a usual back-up sound.

Sing this chord over and over. Work on everyone beginning and ending at exactly the same time. Trying to blend by listening to all the other voices at once can be overwhelming and throw you off. Blend your voice to the part closest in pitch to your own, or to the melody line. As well, apply any relevant tips previously covered in last month's article.

2) Now change parts. Get to know the sound combinations with each of you singing each of the parts. Take notes on any differences of quality and any you like better than others.

3) Have the voice on the top harmony part be a bit breathier than the other voices, as suggested last month, and decide if this supports the overall sound you're looking for.

4) As you become proficient with these exercises, use actual words instead of open vowels. Choose key words used in any of your own material. Also use the following words: *You, Try, Please, Soon, Why, Stay, Long.*

Hold each word on pitch for 4 beats. While doing so, ensure you are holding out the vowel rather than closing your mouth on the consonant(s). The ending consonant(s) should occur *after* the 4 beats, *not* during.

Notice that the sound of the vowel you are sustaining may have a different pronunciation than how it's spelled. For example, *long, why,* and *try* are held on an *Ah*. *You* and *soon* are sustained on a *U* like the pronunciation of "could." *Stay* is sustained on an *Eh* sound.

Correct use of these "Shadow Vowels" (see video lesson Working with Style: "Working with Shadow Vowels") should help to open the quality of your sound, relax your throat, and assist your group vocal blend.

Record Your Rehearsals

It's true. It's much easier to be objective about your overall sound after listening to a recording of yourselves. In this way, you can focus on exactly what needs work. If your recording equipment is not of excellent quality, you'll need to keep in mind

that the recording won't sound *exactly* like you. But you will still be able to hear if anyone is off pitch or otherwise blending poorly.

Sometimes it's difficult to hear where the mistakes are being made in the back-ups. In order to spot which singers need work, it can be very helpful to raise the mic volume of one singer for each recorded run-through of a song. Re-record the song (saving the earlier recording) until you have copies with each singer's mic volume boosted.

Is it practice time yet?

Wishing you fun and success!

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