



Much is written about the solo singer or lead singer experience, but what about the special requirements of those singers not in the limelight—the lowly but oh-so-important backup singer? Whether you’re a hired hand or a band musician doing double-duty as a singer, get ready to learn how to be an integral and welcome part of the overall vocal sound.

1. LEARN TO HARMONIZE

You don’t have to be a great singer to be a good backup singer, but you do need to be able to create harmony parts and hold firm no matter which other vocal parts surround you.

Make sure you know the melody well before you attempt to find harmony parts. Practice singing along to recordings with complex harmonies like Queen, Dan Fogelberg or the Beatles. Listen carefully to the existing harmonies, then sing along. Do research online for CDs or videos specifically created to improve your skills in “vocal harmony.”

If you have trouble maintaining your pitch amid of various harmony parts, plug your ear that is near the singer who is closest to you. Or practice singing with other vocal parts from a distance, gradually moving closer to the other singers. Or don’t stand in the middle of a threesome; position yourself on the outside. You must be able to maintain your pitch in sometimes challenging sonic situations, which leads us to...

2. LISTEN CLOSELY

Monitors are key. Whether you use floor monitors or in-ears, this may be the most important ingredient in your backup singing ability. If even one of the singers can’t hear himself, the result is a sonic blood bath. Top Los Angeles session singer Scottie Haskell suggests that you should “Control the reverb in the monitor mix—too much and you’ll be swimming and not able to hear anything clearly.”

Don't be afraid to ask the sound guy to adjust your monitor level and of course make sure you can hear every singer so you all can nicely stack the vocal parts.

3. FIND THE PROPER MODULATION

Now that you can hear what the other singers are doing, try to match their vowel sounds. That means if they sing the "oo" vowel with fishy lips, do the same. Or if the lead singer is pronouncing the vowel in the word "love" like "ah" instead of "uh," match their vowel.

Add or reduce nasality to match and support the group sound.

Control your loudness when singing backup. Try to balance your volume so you're neither too loud OR too soft when singing in harmony.

Watch that your vibrato isn't too wobbly (slow and big) or jittery (fast and shallow).

Neither type of vibrato blends well with others. If you can't control your vibrato speed, I recommend that you aim to sing with straight tone.

4. NEVER STICK OUT

Backup singers basically help create a fuller overall vocal sound, so never let your voice stick out. There are several ways to accomplish this. First: begin and end each phrase exactly along with the other backup singers. Don't come in early or leave late! Second: minimize the clarity of your consonants. Soften your final T's or P's or leave them off altogether. S's are the most dangerous and can be almost eliminated. Final S's can easily sound like a bunch of snakes hissing. Practice singing "Sally sells seashells by the seashore" as "...ally...ellz..ea..ellz...by...the...ea..ore". Extreme example, yes, but it'll give you an idea of how to sing on your vowels while minimizing your S sounds.

Watch your breathing sounds. Audible gasping can mar a good group sound, particularly during a quiet ballad. If a phrase is really long, stagger your breathing among the group to give the illusion of one long phrase.

5. ACHIEVE ENDURANCE

Grammy-winning pro singer Angie Jarée says, "Anyone embarking on a tour should already have taken enough voice lessons to know the mechanics of singing and, more importantly, their own instrument; if not, they need to do so pronto." She likens singing to running: "The [tour] thing is more like long distance running and the studio thing is more like sprinting. The key points to achieving 'endurance' are adequate prep such as

physical stretching, vocal warmups and cool-downs; 7-8 hours of sleep; eating healthy; strong discipline (minimal drinking and partying); and the right attitude.”

When preparing for the road, find harmony parts you can sing comfortably when exhausted, sick, or when just not in the mood to sing that night. Live shows while traveling will test your vocal technique even if you’re not in the spotlight.

6. GET YOUR HEAD STRAIGHT

Put your ego aside when singing backup vocals. Or as Scottie Haskell advises, “Remember, backup singing is not a contest—it’s a team effort. Think of the old adage, ‘There is no I in team.’”

Backup singing is not easy—it takes real chops. Not everyone can do it well. Come ready with your “A” game, a positive attitude and a willingness to take personal growth steps to be in a good head space as part of that team.

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