

Sing Your Story

How many directors, coaches or judges ask performers, “What is the story behind this song”? Obviously, they ask because the story is seldom told effectively. That’s odd because most of us are actually great story tellers in real life.

Our barbershop heritage started off as primarily a harmonic exploration. It didn’t really concern itself with the presentation of lyrical content but rather with the enjoyment of lock and ring. Even today we are so focused on musical precision that we can easily forget we are rendering lyrics.

As barbershoppers, we are blessed to perform music that has lyrics. The storylines provided by these lyrics can be a ballad of lost love or a rollicking up-tune that encourages us to see the parade or join in dancing. Every song has a story behind it.

To effectively tell this story requires both a collective and a personal understanding of what the song conveys. The process relies on you and the other singers agreeing on the emotion and context you want a song to have and then asks you to apply your own real life experience to make that message engaging to the audience. You don’t have to wait for leadership, start the conversation with your peers and prepare to really sing your story.

A. Getting To The Essence

In what direction does the music send you - lovely ballad or sharp & angry. Read the lyrics out loud, in a relaxed way, just to understand the sense of the lyrics. Don’t “act” - don’t express something you don’t yet feel.

Discuss with your quartet or chorus members what the song is about. What human experience does it deal with? Try to boil the lyrics down to a single phrase that expresses a human action using this formula: “This song is about a person _____” (Fill in the blank).

Examples:

Hey Jude This song is about a person reassuring someone.

When I Fall in Love This song is about a person imploring someone to love them.

Wind Beneath My Wings This song is about a person letting someone know what a difference they’ve made in their life.

Send in the Clowns This song is about a person a person letting someone know the anguish they’re in.

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B. Objective

Once you have agreed on a succinct way to state the song's central action, you will want to come to an agreement on these things:

- Why would I take the action described in the song?
- What result am I after?
- What do I hope will happen as a result of me expressing this lyric?

In short, decide what is wrong in your imaginary world that singing this song will hopefully make right.

C. The Obstacle

Now look for an imaginary situation that would cause the song to emerge. The situation must contain the element that is central to all drama: a conflict. There must be an obstacle in the way of you accomplishing your objective.

Discuss and finalize a scene in which you will need to sing your song in order to resolve the conflict. Set up your world so that the opposite of your objective exists before you sing the song.

When you "set up" it means:

- Who am I talking to?
- How do they feel about me?
- What do I want of them?
- What obstacle is in my way?
- Why does that obstacle exist?
- What happens if I don't achieve my goal?
- How does it end?
- How do they feel about my efforts throughout the song?
- Where are we?
- What time is it?

As you create this scene, picture yourself in the starring role. Don't describe the set up in the third person: "This is about someone trying _____." Embrace the first person: "This is about me _____."

Begin to craft a story that will bring the lyrics to life.

Different stories will effect the identical lyrics and music in subtle but very different ways. Sing *Heart of My Heart* to your newborn daughter. Sing it to your terminally ill grandmother. Sing it to your new fiancé. Each has a different delivery.

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In the “*Getting To The Essence*” section (above) you decided, as a group, what emotion you want to drive this music. Now you need to make that emotion personal. Every member of the quartet or chorus has some similar story, but certainly not the same story. If the song is about the loss of a spouse, not every member has experienced this loss, but recalling the death of a grandparent or favorite pet, while not the same, will conjure up the proper emotion.

D. Beginning the Performance

At this point either memorize the lyrics or gradually learn the lyrics as you rehearse. Speak the lyrics simply and truthfully within your story. Resist vocal “acting,” phony line reading or trying to put meaning into specific words. Just plain, honest talking to the ‘someone’ in your story, using the words of the text.

E. The Opening Beat

Once you are fully engaged in the song involving a situation that feels real to you, have applied elements from your own life experience, and used your imagination to center yourself in the story, you now have a very detailed picture about how you got to the beginning of the song.

It’s time to give yourself an opening beat, something that happens in your imaginary world immediately before you start to speak the lyrics. Maybe it’s a question asked by your imaginary partner. It could be someone walking away or a couple strolling hand in hand. You want your first line to be a reflexive response, a reaction to something.

F. Tactics

Even if you are engaged in your imaginary world, it is easy to lose focus as you continue to sing, causing everything to fall flat.

Alfred Hitchcock once said, “movies are life with the boring parts cut out.” That is true of songs as well. You have your partner, you have your objective, you have your obstacle. Now is the opportunity to add tactics: how to go about getting what you want?

You have a monologue that has one objective, but now it’s necessary to brainstorm many different tactics. Tactics will change throughout the song until the objective is reached. This will keep the audience engaged in your story, but it’s also realistic because that’s how we attempt to get what we want in real life. As an example, if your objective is to get someone to leave your apartment and the lyrics are “get out of

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here,” you could say it calmly and quietly . . . if that doesn’t work you could laugh and say, “Really? Get out of here.” If that fails, maybe whining like a baby or getting down on your knees and begging might be employed. Failing all of those, screaming might work. But to have a cohesive approach to the song, you must agree on the tactics to be used.

Not having enough tactics to complete the song is most often what makes a performer run out of emotional gas half way through. Each and every line of the song gives you an opportunity to try new ways to accomplish your goals. Most importantly: speak the line as if you expect your tactic within the song to work for you. When you “realize” you haven’t won yet, you need to move to the next line and the next tactic. In most cases you won’t achieve your goal until the end of the song. Write the agreed upon tactics on your sheet music: like “tease . . . plead . . . seduce . . . demand”. Choose specific tactics for specific lines, but always work with an improvisational feel.

G. The Rhythm

The next step is adding the rhythm.

Play the learning track while following along on the sheet music. Begin speaking the lyrics in rhythm. The melody is not yet a concern - just extend your natural speech to fit the rhythms as written. Don’t speak at your normal pace and then wait for the music to “catch up” before you speak the next line. Speak . . . in . . . the . . . pace . . . of . . . the . . . song’s . . . tempo. Any words that are set on notes of extended duration, must be held out now, as in “I could have da-a-a-a-anced all ni-i-i-ight.

You will probably feel ridiculous. But here’s the point: when our real life circumstance becomes extraordinary, we use our voice in extraordinary ways. Let the imaginary circumstances you’ve set up for your song be so important that they force you to speak the lyrics in the super-expressive rhythms laid out by the composer.

Another element comes into play in this part of the process: the spaces in the song when you aren’t singing.

Whenever that situation arises, it’s your job to fill that time with life. The last thing you want to do is stand there like Bambi in the headlights waiting for the next line. Set the “rests” up so they are an asset not a liability.

You can use the time between phrases to appear to search inside yourself for your next tactic or you can use it to put nonverbal closure on what you’ve just said. You can imagine that your partner speaks, or looks away, or throws you a dirty look - any of which you respond to in your next line.

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One additional point: what happens before you sing? Your “life” must start before the first note. Don’t stand uninvolved then suddenly come to life when you sing. Any and all music is a reflection of your imaginary world and it’s your job to justify it.

H. The Melody

Now the final step: adding the singing. If you listen to someone in a highly-charged, emotional conversation you’ll probably hear pitches much higher or lower than normal.

The object of this melody-step is to justify speaking the lyrics at these emotion-driven high and low pitches, many outside of your normal speaking range.

You may find that the character you are portraying in your imaginary scenario is very different than you are. If you are going to really live in this material you have to be willing to behave in a way you would not act in daily life.

As you sing songs - placing the words on the prescribed pitches - use the pitches to make your points. It needs to feel like you are creating as you go. There are no “high notes” you have to belt, instead there are important things you need to communicate.

Allow the music to move you, to get inside you. As an exercise, sing the song strictly as a sensory experience: Drop the words - you might want to close your eyes - and sing it on “la, la, la” or hum it. Let your body move to it. Don’t think about the lyrics, just make the music as if you were the lead instrument in an orchestra. See what it feels like just as a piece of music.

I. Gestures and Focus

In general, preplanning your gestures is counter-productive. It tends to send you right into your head and inhibits spontaneity. In real life, you don’t worry about your “gestures” when you’re talking to someone.

Ideally, your performance of a song is natural: it’s real living in imaginary circumstances. If you find yourself feeling awkward and physically self-conscious when you sing . . . if you don’t know what to do with your hands, allow yourself to really care about the state your imaginary partner is in. Work one beat at a time, finding tremendous variety in your tactics, and you will instinctively use your body to help you make your points.

Again, if you feel physically self-conscious you are not engaged in your imaginary world. Tell yourself a story that demands you to take action to remedy something. Then use the song, your language, your voice and your body to accomplish your objective.

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Sometimes in rehearsal you'll find yourself gesturing or moving in ways that help you express certain ideas. You may choose to repeat those in later performances. That's great as long as they don't become empty movements that lose their emotional connection with your story.

It is also helpful if you decide on the predominant theme you believe the song manifests. Is this a primarily a rhythmically-driven song? Perhaps it's the melody that is the hallmark. Maybe it's the harmonics that are to be featured. While the lyrics are important in all themes, is this song carried by the lyrics. And, of course, any song can rely on comedy as a base that will likely call for exaggeration. If you understand the basic theme of the music, it gives you a place to begin much of your physical expression.

Regardless of which movements your story inspires in you, remember to keep them believable, effective, appropriate and natural.

As far as where to focus your attention, it is best to picture your imaginary partner just above the heads of the audience. The point is to have a slightly elevated face so that the audience has a good look at you.

Looking directly at someone in the audience is not advised because they will likely not give you the feedback you need to be emotionally involved with your imaginary partner.

No one can tell you what your heart feels about the song. They can, however, tell you that you have not communicated what your heart feels. Be brave enough to put your heart into a song and accept the responsibility to let the audience see your heart.