

FIVE STEPS TO IMPROVE SINGING FOR YOUR GIGS

by Rowen Bridler

The great thing about live performance, in the moment live recordings and generally singing around the house a cappella is the opportunity for random and unexpected moments of genius. Or even mistakes. But one woman's mistake is another man's moment of inspired revelation.

If you want to improve your singing for live gigs, the trick to dealing with unpredictable circumstances is being able to improvise, concentrate and still have fun. Here's a technique I use, involving singing along to my favourite song, to improve my singing for gigs.

1) Boost your power

Play your favourite song through speakers (not headphones) and sing along with it, but turn it up a bit louder than usual so that you have to compete a little with the volume of the track in order to hear yourself over the top. Breathing as much as possible as though into your lower tummy area and standing in a sturdy position as if in an attempt to resist someone trying to push you over, you should be able to generate a more sustainable, higher volume. (If this doesn't work for you, try leaning with your hands against a wall or door and your feet further away, so that you actually transfer your weight to your hands, and sing as though trying to "aim" your notes into the lower middle end of the wall.)

Even a little bit of competing in volume with the track can help remind you to use more sustainable ways of singing louder so that you don't strain your voice. This is useful in a gig situation when you find yourself having to sing over the sound of other instruments (which may temporarily have been turned up louder in your monitor than you) or singing over general banter and drinks-clatter.

2) Learn the damned song!

If you are singing a new song and you aren't 100% sure of the lyrics or get confused about which verse goes into the middle 8, singing along with a recording of it, over and over, may well be the best way of drumming it into your head so it becomes automatic. (That and listening to it everywhere you go, e.g. on headphones while travelling on the tube...)

If you need to spend more time learning the lyrics, you'll know from singing along to the song and noticing the parts where you come in late because you've forgotten the words. In that case, it's often a good idea to also write out and re-write the lyrics, first just copying and then from memory, over and over so that you learn those intensively too. (This is super useful for those last minute gigs, where you've got very little pre-gig practice time.) Don't stop for breaks or cups of tea until you've done five run-throughs of the song with no major errors or hesitations.

3) Improvise, improvise, improvise

Not only do you need to know the song well to perform it, but you need to know how to change it in the moment or add new parts to it. This is because you not only need to be able to be flexible about your performance to interact better with the audience, but also because if you do lose your way and make a mistake or someone in the audience distracts you, you can easily work around a mis-timed note or phrase and be creative with it. Creativity is your gift, so use it as often as possible! Having sung along to your track to learn it well and boost your strength in singing it, you're ready to try the a cappella test.

Sing the song on your own, giving yourself the starting note and see if you can get through the whole thing without losing your way. (Check you're still in the same key by the end and maybe even record yourself to listen back to how you may have varied the tempo in places – were those choices or little mistakes?) Once you're clear that you can stay on track with it, purposely try to

change the very beginning and very end of the phrases in the song. Go up at the end of the line instead of down, or speed up a little at the beginning of the line but slow it down by the end. Play around with volume, tempo and even lyrics. Where could you add an extra line or change the lyric in some way to reference your audience? Where could you add in a line of another song in the same key that fits in with your genre of music? (If you're a solo performer, this is how you show that playing solo can be an advantage over playing in a band because you are in control and you can adapt and change things as the mood takes you!) The further you can take the song away from the original but stay true to the feel, mood and start and end of the song, the more flexible you'll feel as a singer, and therefore, the more confidence you'll have that you can deal with anything.

4) Improve your concentration

Gigs are generally full of distractions, from the noise at the bar, to the other instrumentalists or sound engineer fiddling around with levels or even audience member "participation"... Your job is to be adaptable, but to stay on your game and sing your song! Try seeing if you can get through singing along with your song while having the TV or radio on in the background. Can you stay focussed on what you're doing despite the distraction? If so, you're on the money!

5) Have fun with it!

Yes, fun. Remember that part? That's what music of all forms should be, whether the fun is derived from getting through that tricky high-note bit and totally nailing it with a wide smile on your face or flouncing about in a Gaga-esque outfit while singing, it should still be fun.

Make sure every practice session, whether singing along to a track or not, ends with a run-through (or two) purely to 'have fun with it'. That could mean just trying to improvise some new ideas, sounds or embellishments into the song, or to put a bit of dancing into the performance or to sing it as loudly and confidently as you can.

I often tell my clients to have a final go through to 'play around with the song' (improvise bits) and give themselves 'permission' to make mistakes. Trying new things often does lead to mistakes. But mistakes lead to learning, growing and improving, so it's great to let yourself off the hook of being 'perfect' sometimes and see what happen.

Rowen Bridler is a singer-songwriter, actress and voice coach. She currently lives in South West England, but coaches clients all over the world via Skype. She specialises in coaching singers and actors to build their confidence, take risks in their performances and quickly fix any song or speech problem areas using simple and systematic techniques.

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