

TIPS ON WOODSHEDDING

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Barbershoppers have asked: Is woodshedding an art one has to be born with, or can it be learned?

As with most other skills, effective woodshedding is — and can indeed be — learned. A basic ability to hear Circle-of-Fifths (Barbershop) chord-progressions is necessary. Barbershoppers can gain this sense in several ways. Folks with jazz or piano backgrounds have a beginning advantage, as should anyone with a year or two of college-level Music Theory. Barbershoppers who have sung more than one voice part in their chorus or quartet — or when experimenting with Polecat songs — also have an initial leg up.

Barbershoppers who don't read music, or whose first or only musical experience began when they entered Barbershopping, can also most definitely learn to woodshed. The prerequisite is an understanding of scales and intervals (the space between one note and the next). AHSOW strongly recommends that prospective woodsheddors invest in the voice-part-predominant Polecat tapes produced by SPEBSQSA. The Polecat songs are especially strong and pure Barbershop. Listening to them intently and repeatedly will impart a strong sense of the *patterns* typical of each of the Barbershop voice-parts.

Here are some realizations and hints about how to undertake woodshedding:

>>The Barbershop **Bass** part is not always as low as someone new to the part might be tempted to sing it, and the Barbershop **Tenor** part is not always as high as one might be tempted to sing it. Barbershop is “close harmony.” When the melody is on a lower note, the Bass usually has dibs on the highest note below the melody that makes sense. When the melody is riding high, the Tenor generally has dibs on the lowest note above the melody that makes sense. There are infrequent exceptions. Trust your ear on this.

>>The **Tenor** and **Bari** rarely have to make *large* jumps from one note to the next. Depending on what the melody does, the Bass will be obliged to move in intervals as small as a half- or whole-step (either up or down) or in intervals as large as 4, 4.5, or 5 notes (either up or down) or by 6 or 7 notes (usually up).

>>The **Bass** can do the most for any chord, and for the Tenor and Bari, when he can sense when to sing a root or fifth (a “strong-feeling” note) of a chord and adjust to sing whichever one of those that the Lead *isn't* singing, when the Lead is on one or the other. The Bass is entitled to the highest possible Bass note that will not create an incomplete chord (per whatever note the Lead is on) and which will not lock the Bari out of a note that the Bari should be singing. Trust your ear on this.

>>Very generally speaking, the **Tenor** will usually have success when harmonizing in thirds above the melody. (If only one other singer were harmonizing along with a melody, this would be what would naturally happen.) The Tenor will generally be singing a preponderance of thirds and sevenths of chords — and whichever of these the Bari is not singing, in most of these cases. Trust your ear on this.

>>The **Bari** will sing either below or above the melody. Many brand-new Bari woodsheddors tend to sing too high, or almost always above the melody, which obliges the Tenor to shoot for a note considerably higher than the note the Tenor might naturally opt to sing. When otherwise in doubt, the Bari's salvation can be to sing the seventh of a chord. The Bari should seek to sing an internal note in the chord that neither doubles the melody-note nor doubles the Tenor note an octave down. The Bari should listen to the direction of the melody-line — if the melody is going upward, and especially if it *skips* upward, the Bari is most likely going to go *down*, and vice-versa. Trust your ear on this.

>>Harmony-part singers: A good general guideline is to stay on the note you're on until your ear strongly suggests that you must move to another. Especially if you have little formal musical experience, and when you're newer to woodshedding, this sense will be more “intuitive” than anything else. That's fine! Resist the temptation to “get fancy” for its own sake, and avoid unduly second-guessing yourself. Just relax, listen, and move when required — either when you sense that the chord must change (has changed) from the one you were

on, or when someone else is taking your most recent note, or when you sense otherwise that the chord being sung is somehow incomplete, or not fulfilling or “ringing.” Trust your ear on this!

>>The Woodshed **Lead** needs a certain set of skills beyond what he may have learned in chorus rehearsal or for quartet performance. The purpose of woodshedding is to ring chords rather than to sing songs. Thus, the Woodshed Lead who wishes to find himself most in demand will sing more slowly than he might opt to sing in a performance environment. He will be aware of where harmony-part swipes may or should occur, especially at phrase-endings or where the harmony of the song is changing. He will realize that chords falling on “weak beats” in a measure of music (beats #2 & #4 in 4/4 foxtrot meter, beat #3 in 3/4 waltz meter) are equally as important to tune, loc>>and ring as are chords falling on stronger beats. He will be constantly alert to melody-notes he should “hold” for as long as it takes for one or more harmony-voices to locate a good note. He should ensure that songs are pitched wherever the singing is most comfortable for the participants, especially if someone is off his natural voice-part (e.g., a Bass ‘shedding the Bari part).

>>The Woodshed **Lead** gains credibility and authority when he refrains from singing until the first four-part chord of the song to be woodshedded is locked and rung, with everyone sure of his starting note. This keeps one or more ‘sheddors from being lost for several notes or measures before finally getting a harmonic bearing. The Woodshed Lead needs to listen just as much as the other singers do!

>>The savvy Woodshed **Lead** will *always* choose melodies to which written or familiar Barbershop arrangements do not commonly exist. This lessens the risk of replicating existing repertoire and enhances the experience and value of authentic woodshedding. The Woodshed Lead will ideally sing a melody through, solo, at least once, before the harmonizers join in. This acclimates everybody’s ears in advance.

>>There is never a need to woodshed “in a hurry.” Thus, it’s valuable for all four singers to sing the melody in unison until they are familiar with it. As there should absolutely never be any pressure to “finish a song and move to the next one,” it is also highly advisable to spend plenty of relaxed time harmonizing just the first phrase or two of the selected melody. Go over and over each phrase until all participants are satisfied and comfortable. Enjoy the absence of time-limits. It’s far better to sing one phrase perfectly than it is to sing an entire song poorly.

>>Woodshedding is best done at moderate or soft volumes. For one thing, this allows the singers to hear themselves and what’s going on.

>>Every woodshedder should be able to sing melodies when called upon. When we remember that melodies are pitched where they’re comfortable to sing, more woodshedders with natural Bass range can have the chance to sing melodies. This permits more fellows to swap voice-parts with each other.

>>For beginning woodshedders especially, the best melodies to undertake are those originally written in B^b, A^b, or C. Beginning woodshedders are advised to initially avoid melodies *written* in E^b or F.

>>The serious woodshedder (or anyone who merely wants more chances to sing with a wider range of harmonizers) will seek and learn as many melodies and lyrics as possible. With several notable exceptions, the best melodies for woodshedding were written between approx. 1895 and 1925, with the optimal ones written largely between 1905 and 1919. In the U.S. at least, one can find compatible old songs at garage sales, antique-shops or auctions (don’t pay more than about \$5 per song, even for a gem!), in the piano-benches of grandparents or similarly seasoned citizens, and especially in the heads of long-time SPEBSQSA members! The latter should be exceptionally pleased to oblige. Too often, we overlook the incredible knowledge and experience of our longest-tenured Society mates; many such guys have a largely untapped musical wealth that can be ours if we only ask.

>>Woodshedders should be able to create, hear, and recognize these primary chords:

1. Major Triad: “My *wild* I-rish *rose*” (as in Polecat version)
2. Barbershop 7th: “*My wild I-rish ro-ose*”
3. Diminished 7th: “The swee-test flow’r that gro-*o*-ows; *you may*”
4. Minor Triad: “Shine *on* me, in the eev-ning” (= the second time through).

These chords make up the vast percentage of the chords employed during woodshedding. And avoid sweating the chord names or types; they’re mentioned here only so you can consciously inform your ear about the chords to “sense.” Inform yourself once, then trust your ear to handle the rest.

>>If authentic woodshedding is to be its most rewarding and fulfilling, it must be *the best singing that we ever do*. Continuous sound, matched and sustained vowel targets, supported breathing, precise intonation, and taking proper tune-up/initial chords are all crucial to the ringing of chords and the natural satisfaction that we get from it. If we don’t bother to do what it takes to make the chords ring, then why bother to woodshed at all? If one or more woodsheddors fails to apply any of these fundamentals to his efforts, the likelihood increases that one or more others in his woodshed quartet will excuse himself to “go to the men’s room” after a song or two. After all, one of the true joys of woodshedding is to stand with the same three other guys from midnight till 4 a.m., switching parts and extemporaneously arranging an inexhaustible supply of melodies — with no one getting tired of any of it!

>>There has been intense popular demand for more publications and material on woodshedding.

From AHSOW, you should certainly order the excellent “*Discovery Singing*” folio of melodies (\$3 for AHSOW members, \$5 others). This pocket-sized folio contains 41 highly woodsheddable melodies, including several original compositions graciously provided by Joe Liles himself. Go to www.ahsow.org to order. Lady Barbershoppers can benefit similarly from this product. The “Discovery Singing” folio makes a great birthday and holiday gift, too.

A fabulous tool for group work or your own benefit is the *Ear-rangement #1* package. A CD or cassette, supplemented by a fascinating folio of lyrics and histories, gives you 14 “new” old melodies that you can benefit from, whether you’re a beginning woodshedder or a “pro.” The melodies are sung by a District-champ Lead. Play the melodies over and over until they’re burned into your brain. During this time, your ear will be working on harmonies whether you realize it or not! Then, practice adding the harmony part(s) of your choice. Invite some Barberfriends over to harmonize with you for some great fun!

Just two of the many benefits: [1] Your “performance” singing *will* improve after you consistently mimic the high quality of the melody-singer, and after your ear begins refining your intuition for tuning harmonies. [2] Even if you’ve been a lifelong Lead and prefer to sing that part only, you’ll be welcome in AHSOW rooms anytime if you can sing these melodies! Come hear the similar and different harmonies that other ear-singers can come up with. You’ll add to your enjoyment of Barbershopping in all of these ways.

See www.ahsow.org for how to order the *Ear-rangement #1* package — and for much more about AHSOW and woodshedding.

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