

Woodshedding

Woodshedding is three individual voices (tenor, bari, and bass) creating barbershop harmonies by ear to a lead's melody, without any written arrangement. The melody is introduced by the lead so all can become familiar with it, but should not have a well-known arrangement. This art harkens back to over a century ago, to the origins of barbershop quartet singing, where four men would gather (frequently at the local barber shop) and harmonize to the familiar tunes of the day.

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TIPS ON WOODSHEDDING TENOR

Authentic Woodshedding is defined as a Bass, Bari, and Tenor “discovering harmonies by ear” around a Lead’s sung melody without reference to a familiar or written Barbershop arrangement. As with most other skills, effective woodshedding is learned. Barbershoppers who have sung more than one voice part in their chorus or in quartets have an initial leg up.

The very first thing to remember is that Woodshedding is different from any other kind of singing that Barbershoppers do. In authentic woodshedding, there are no wrong notes, only “good,” “better,” and “best” notes. A “good” note is anything that comes out of your mouth, which means that you’re trying woodshedding, which is good. A “better” note belongs in the chord being sung. A “best” note causes all four of you to smile at one another because you like the chord you’ve rung, and you can go on to the next chord.

Describing how woodshedding works is difficult, because it’s an auditory experience, not a written one. There are things you do easily but would have a tough time writing out directions for. Just think what it would involve to write out the description of tying your shoelaces. But you could show someone how to do it in a few minutes. Here are some hints about woodshedding Tenor. Some of it gets a little technical. Don’t let that bother or intimidate you, you don’t NEED any of it to woodshed. If your eyes glaze over when you start to hear things like “dominant 7th chords,” “interval leaps” and “weak beat and strong beats”, then skip that and just look at the end of section to know what to “take away” from this information

If you are reading this section first, you more than likely currently sing Tenor. Keep in mind that you are encouraged to be able to woodshed a part other than what you normally sing...any of the other three parts. So please take a look at the tips for the other parts as well.

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 riding high, the Tenor generally has dibs on the lowest note above the melody that makes sense. The Tenor may sing a note below the melody, but this is very infrequent.

The Tenor rarely has to make large jumps from one note to the next. 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 mainly thirds and sevenths of chords — and whichever of these the Bari is not singing, in most such cases.

Tenor Take Away: Don’t sing as high as you think you have to. Stick close to the lead. Try to irritate the baritone by stealing the 7th every once in a while. He’ll figure something out.

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TIPS ON WOODSHEDDING LEAD

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If you are reading this section first, you more than likely currently sing Lead. Keep in mind that you are encouraged to be able to woodshed a part other than what you normally sing...any of the other three parts. So please take a look at the tips for the other parts as well.

Can you really woodshed Lead? You bet you can. Singing “woodshed Lead” requires a special set of skills beyond what’s required to sing “performance Lead.” Awareness is probably the most important additional thing. In “performance” singing, the Lead “leads” — using proper vocal technique, maintaining the tonal center, adding dynamics, and completing the song. The harmonizers follow the Lead. The Lead can get into trouble in a performance environment by listening too much, his singing will sound tentative or hesitant, and this will obviously not please many audiences! During woodshedding, all four participants must listen, listen, listen. The Lead is more accurately described as a “melody-singer.” He needs the following skills: Awareness that the

purpose of woodshedding is to ring chords rather than to sing songs. The aware Woodshed Lead will sing more slowly than in a performance environment. He will be consciously aware of where harmony-part swipes should or may occur, especially at ends of phrases or where the harmony of the song is changing. Awareness that chords falling on “weak beats” in a measure of music (beats #2 & #4 in 4/4 “foxtrot” meter, and beat #3 in 3/4 “waltz” meter) are equally as important to tune, lock, and ring as are the chords that fall on strong beats. The same goes for eighth-notes, etc.

Awareness that one note belongs to the melody, and the other notes are up for grabs. Thus, some notes of the melody should be held for as long as it takes for one or more of the harmonizers to locate a feasible note. Woodshedding is “discovery singing,” and all four woodsheddors are equally involved in creating a satisfying arrangement together.

Awareness that songs should be pitched wherever the singing is most comfortable for the participants, especially if someone is off his natural part (e.g., a Bass woodshedding the Bari part).

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This means that a melody “written” in, say, Bb could be pitched anywhere from Ab (or even G) up to C. This flexibility enhances the chance that the singing will be vocally free rather than tense, and that more chords ought to ring as a result.

The courteous Woodshed Lead will sing a melody straight through “solo” before anything else happens. This is especially critical when one or more of the harmonizers is unfamiliar with the melody to be sung. It’s important when one or more of the harmonizers is newer to the art of woodshedding, because of the “reaction time” required to locate and lock notes. It’s even a good idea when one or more of the harmonizers is an experienced woodshedder with quick reaction time, as several popular melodies have “woodshed variations” that differ from what the songwriters originally wrote.

The Woodshed Lead does not start the song until the “key” (tune-up) chord is locked and rung; and the first four-part chord of the song to be woodshedded is locked and rung, with everyone sure of his own starting note. This keeps one or more of the woodshedders from being lost for several notes or measures before finally getting a harmonic bearing.

Woodshedding is best done at moderate or soft volumes. This allows the singers to hear themselves and what’s going on.

Every aspiring woodshedder should 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 1903 and 1919. The best source for these? Long-time Barbershoppers will be only too happy to teach them to you. You’ll be welcome in AHSOW rooms anytime if you can sing these melodies! Many good woodsheddable songs can also be found here: <http://jackbaird.spebsqsa.org/>

Perhaps most important, and most different from “performance” Lead-singing, is a conscious awareness that there is never any need to woodshed a song without stopping. The purpose of woodshedding is to discover pleasing chords and ring them. Merely motoring through a whole song with inattention to the elements integral to good, fulfilling woodshedding will only result in some of the worst singing that the four of you have ever experienced and worse than that, the loudest singing that passers-by have ever heard. This has given woodshedding a bad rap in the past. AHSOW believes that woodshedding **MUST** be the best singing that Barbershoppers ever do.

Trust this: Working just one or two phrases of a melody, getting it to the satisfaction of the four of you, can be the biggest Barbershop thrill that you’ve experienced.

A. The melody-singer is always right. He may not be correct, but he is always right.

B. When the melody-singer is wrong, see Rule “A”. This means that if a Woodshed Lead changes a melody, the harmonizers should follow what he sings... but if a Lead changes the melody he should let people know when first introduces it!

In summary, the Woodshed Lead has responsibilities beyond what he may have learned in chorus rehearsal or in a performing quartet. Woodshedding can help you, as a Lead, develop an ear for music.

Lead Take Away: SLOW DOWN.

Don’t ever sing a song that all the singers haven’t heard at least once. Make sure everyone has a starting pitch. Hold notes long enough to let people find their harmonies. And.....SLOW DOWN

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TIPS ON WOODSHEDDING BARITONE

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If you are reading this section first, you more than likely currently sing Baritone. Keep in mind that you are encouraged to be able to woodshed a part other than what you normally sing...any of the other three parts. So please take a look at the tips for the other parts as well.

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The Bari, known in the early days of woodshedding as “fill-in,” will sing either below or above the melody. Many beginning Bari woodsheddors tend to sing too high, or almost always above the melody. This forces the Tenor to shoot for a note considerably higher than the note that the Tenor might naturally opt to sing. The Bari should be unafraid to sing below the melody as well as above it. The Bari rarely has to make large jumps from one note to the next and should seek an internal note in the chord that avoids doubling the melody note and avoids doubling 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 likely going to go down, and vice-versa. When the Bass moves up, the Bari is likely to be pushed up. When otherwise in doubt, the Bari’s salvation can be to sing the seventh of a chord.

Bari Take Away: Make sure the bass knows what he’s doing. If he doesn’t, you’re cooked before you start. Aside from that, if you’ve got the guts to woodshed Bari, you probably know what you’re doing anyhow and understood everything in the preceding paragraphs.

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Tips on Woodshedding Bass

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BASS

If you are reading this section first, you more than likely currently sing Bass. Keep in mind that you are encouraged to be able to woodshed a part other than what you normally sing...any of the other three parts. So please take a look at the tips for the other parts as well.

The Barbershop Bass part is not always as low as someone new to the part 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 sensible note that’s under the melody and is also still the lowest note in the chord.

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. When singing a Barbershop-7th chord, the Bass is entitled to the highest possible Bass note that will not create an incomplete chord and which will not lock the Bari out of a note that the Bari should be singing. When the Bass sings a “strong note” (root or fifth) and is not doubling the Lead, the Bari will usually have a reasonable note left to sing.

The Bass often jumps the farthest of all the parts. 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). He may also sing intervals as large as 4, 4.5, or 5 steps (either up or down) or by 6 or 7 steps (usually up).

In a “triad” chord (where only three of the four notes have different names), the Bass and one other part will be singing the fourth note (with the same name), an octave apart. Examples: In a “triad” chord with the notes Bb – F – Bb – D, the Bass will have the lower Bb and the Bari or Lead will have the higher one. In a “triad” chord with the notes Eb – G – Bb – Eb, the Bass and Tenor will sing the respective Eb notes.

Bass Take Away: Stay on a note until you are FORCED to move. Most of the time, all you have to do is sing the root note (“do”....the key the song is in) and the fifth note of the scale (do-re-me-fa-SO). That will get you by 90% of the time. The other 10% is usually going to be the 4th note (do-re-me-FA). Most important rule is: Don’t change notes unless the melody MAKES you move.

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ALL PARTS

The dedicated woodshedder (or anyone who wants more chances to sing with a wider range of harmonizers) will seek out and learn as many ear-harmonizable melodies and lyrics as possible. Knowing woodshed melodies will make you a very popular guy in AHSOW rooms.

The first rule of woodshedding is to listen, listen, listen. The second rule is to stay on the note you're on until your ear strongly suggests that you must move to another. 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." Resist the temptation to "get fancy" for its own sake, and avoid second-guessing yourself. Trust your ear! Every woodshedder should be able to sing melodies when called upon. Pitch them where the singing is comfortable. Depending on the vocal ranges in your woodshed quartet, melodies "written" in Bb might be sung in any key from Ab (or even G) up to C.

Woodshedders should be able to feel and create basic chords. Avoid sweating the chord names or types; inform your ear and brain about them once, then trust your ear to handle everything afterwards.

All Parts Take Away: The only bad woodshedding is no woodshedding at all. Don't be afraid. We live in a barbershop world where your Directors and Section Leaders insist that every note is perfect. Balderdash! We don't care about that. Sometimes the "wrong" notes make the coolest chords. This is FUN, not work. Sing em and ring em!