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Preparing a song to sing with an accompanist or band

Jazz is an interactive and spontaneous art form. It requires that the musicians have finely tuned listening skills so that they can react to one another and the music “in the moment.” Each musician brings his or her own distinctive experiences and skills into the mix. Jazz performances are expressions of your own unique thoughts and feelings and when it’s said that you make a performance of a song “your own” we are referring to your interpretation of a song. Great jazz singers make you feel that they are telling you the story from their own experiences and that they are truthful. Even if the experiences are not theirs personally there is still an honest portrayal of the emotion behind the story. All the musicians on the bandstand are there to support the musical vision of the song. The singer is the leader but all members of the band contribute to and create the ultimate performance. This interaction on the bandstand is also a defining feature of a jazz performance. The musical experience begins with the song.

1. Choose a song you want to sing. Look carefully at the lyrics and choose something that you would like to say, something that interests you, or evokes a strong emotion in you.
2. Decide on a key that best suits your voice. You may find that you will change the key later when you know the song well but for now just ascertain a comfortable range for yourself.
3. Prepare lead sheet with the melody and no lyric so you can refer to it while you’re working on your tune.
4. Learn melody
 - a. Note the repeating patterns and the shape of the melody.
 - b. Note the form of the tune: A,A,B,A; A1,A2,tag;etc.
 - c. Sing melody with just bass notes.
 - d. Listen to the chords as you sing the melody
 - e. Sing the melody with no accompaniment
 - f. Listen to the accompaniment and think the melody
 - g. Dance the melody
 - h. Be able to start the song from any point, such as starting at the bridge.
 - i. Think about the dynamics of the melody, where does it want to get louder, where softer, where harder, where softer.

5. Learn the lyric
 - a. Write out the lyric on a sheet of paper in big print
 - b. Say the lyric without singing as if it were a story or poem
 - c. Note where the words run together and where the natural pauses are so you can sing in complete sentences. What words are stressed and what words are unstressed?
 - d. Note the different kinds of phrases there are, such as descriptions, questions, and declarations.
 - e. Tell the story of the song in your own words.
 - f. Paraphrase each line of the song and notice how your emotions and thoughts change
 - g. Prepare a subtext for the song including who is singing, to whom are you singing, where are you, what happened directly before you started singing this song.
 - h. Think about the overall mood that you want to convey. A song might be a ‘happy’ song but there are many kinds of happiness, i.e. carefree, delirious, overjoyed, contented, amused, charmed. (List of emotions.)
 - i. Try saying the song in rhythm.
 - j. Think of each line of the song as a question you’re answering or as a response to someone.
6. Sing the song a capella (without music) to establish for yourself the groove and the tempo you want to sing in.
7. Now sing the melody of the song without the lyric and convey the emotions with just the sound of your voice. Consider how you use tone and dynamics to get your meaning across. When is vibrato appropriate and when do you want to use a straight tone? Where do you want to vary the melody? Usually just small changes in the melody can add to the interest. You don’t need to reinvent the entire song.
8. Now sing the song with the lyric with all your intention and planning that has come before. Try to sing in complete sentences and leave space between thoughts. Breathing in the appropriate places will start to become evident now. When do you need big breaths, when just small breathes? Where is it natural to breath? If you don’t take a breath when you are saying a line you probably wont want one when you are singing the line either.
9. Now you are ready to begin the arrangement for your song that will include deciding on the instrumentation, the introduction, the tempo and feel and the form.
10. See Creating an Arrangement.