



She's got **BIG EARS**

Learning a song

There are many reasons why when you hear a tune you may say to yourself "I just HAVE to sing that song." As a result, we often start right in singing without really learning the tune first. When one musician compliments another they often say "she's got big ears." Here's a method I use for learning a new tune. In a surprisingly short time you'll find you have a good command of your new song and you'll be developing "big ears."

Step one:

To learn a new song, LISTEN. That may sound really obvious to you, but I mean really listen without singing along, and listen no fewer than 10 times. By that time you'll have the tune in your inner ear.

Step two:

Write out the lyrics. Put them aside for now.

Step three:

If you have a lead sheet or sheet music to the tune begin singing along very softly while you are watching the melody go by. Don't sing the lyric but just some gentle humming or la-la. You are just paying attention to where the melody is going and listening to the chords at the same time. Don't worry about how great or "ungreat" you may be sounding. You are also setting up a "map" in your inner ear and for the muscles that you will be using to accurately reproduce the pitches you are hearing. Pay attention to and note any peculiarities of the song. Is there a half-step in the melody that you didn't hear before? Look for anything that might surprise you, or particularly delight you.

*Music should go right
through you, leave some of itself
inside you, and
take some of you with it when it
leaves.*

-----Henry Threadgill
Zen Guitar

Step four:

Start singing along a little louder now. You're still not singing the lyrics but just some combination of scat or la-ti-dah that is comfortable for you. You'll notice that you have a pretty good command of how the music is working and where you have "trouble spots." These are places where you are unsure of how the melody goes, or you have technical challenges like range breaks. You can work on these sections individually. It's important to not learn things "wrong" so that an incorrect melody or an interval becomes a habit for you. It will be hard to "unlearn" later. Take the time now to figure out if you know the melody cold, and if the tune is in the proper key for your voice. You may find you will change the key again after you add the lyrics, but now is a good time to just listen to the sound of your voice. See if you can sing the melody without any accompaniment. See if you can sing it in your head. Have fun with the melody until you feel that you know it really well.

Step five:

Sing quietly so you can listen to yourself as you sing. Are there any words that are difficult for you to sing? Take a moment to see if you are pronouncing the vowel correctly. Pay attention to the "little" words like 'of', 'and', 'the' and 'a'. Are there any words that need special attention such as "quiet" which you don't want to sing loudly, or "strong" which you don't want to sing weakly? How about a word like "caress" which you want to caress when you sing it. Experiment with singing these special words until they sound like you want them too. Something I find is a lot of fun on a new tune, or even one I've sung over and over, is to emphasize certain words randomly just so I can hear the line in a new way. Often I'm surprised by what I hear and it refreshes a song for me. If I'm having trouble making something sound natural, I stop and say the line (like I MEAN IT) and then try to sing it like I say it. Sometimes, I tape the lyric while I'm speaking it and see if I can sing to my spoken lyric. Remember we are playing music, with 'play' being the operative word, so just experimenting or 'playing around' will help you discover new things about the song, and will also go a long way into helping you develop that "individual style" that we are all looking for.

Step six:

Masterful singers are artful storytellers. Go back to your written lyric sheet and say the words out loud. Read it as if you're speaking the words to someone else. Speak as conversationally as you can. Pay attention to how the words fit in your mouth. Are there any ideas or words that are difficult for you to say? Does the lyric make sense to you? Next write out the lines of the tune in your own words. Think about the overall emotion that you wish to express and state it in words that are alive and vibrant. Rather than just say "I'm sad," say "I'm crushed," or "it cut like a knife." Instead of "I'm happy," how about "I'm walking on air," "I'm glowing with love." Choose words that describe vividly the overall feeling of your song.

Step seven:

Now, take some time imagining a story that is described in this tune. Master singers are artful storytellers who make us feel that they are sharing some personal bit of themselves with us. Remember in every story there is a beginning a middle and an end. In even the saddest song there is a moment of lightness, in the lightest song some moment of reflection. To engage an audience and keep them following the story with you you want to "pass through" an experience.

Step eight :TROUBLE SHOOTING!!!

TROUBLE SHOOTING!!! Its easy for all of us to want to give up, get frustrated and blame ourselves. You'll hear from yourself "I just can't do this," "I'll NEVER be able to do this," or my personal favorite "Maybe I should take up dental hygiene as a career and forget singing." Before you give up however, here are some tips gleaned some other singers and years of experience.

Problem #1001

I can't hear this. I keep singing the wrong note in the same place every time yet when I'm singing a capella I know the notes with no problem.

Possible solutions...

Maybe the chord that is being played for you is the wrong chord. (Believe me this happens.) Maybe the band is playing a Cm7b5 and your melody note is a 5, right next door. So you keep hearing something wonky when you try to sing. It's worth looking into what is being played when you sing, particularly if you keep singing the wrong thing time after time, even after you practice. The point here is the problem is not always you, so look around your musical environment to get some help. If the musical environment is fine and the problem is you then try the next hint for problem #5006.

Problem #5006

I never hit this note right. The whole song is in the right key except this note.

Possible solutions...

Look at what's happening right before the note that is giving you problems. Is there a little word like 'the' or 'a' that you are swallowing and not singing., leaving you not 'set-up' for the next note? Are you unclear of the melody leading to the note that is giving you problems? Are you opening your mouth and letting the word out, or are you afraid and tightening your jaw or pulling back on air because you think you might make a baaaad sound? Frequently the problem you are struggling with is not 'the note' but what leads up to it.

Problem #7033

I have NO air, I can't breathe, it's a wonder that I'm alive.

Possible solutions...

Amazingly, often the problem is that the singer is not emptying the lungs before taking another breath. This leaves you with a lot of "dead" air in the lungs and so you feel "out of breath." Different length lines need different amounts of breath. Before you can take a good "in breath," you need to be empty. So use what you've got, don't take more than you need, and don't hold your breath and then gulp a big one before the line. If you're not breathing out you should be breathing in.

Spend some of your practice time every day in working on your "BIG EARS."