How To Be An Effective Background Vocalist by Sheri Gould



In this article I would like to address a few key elements to becoming a truly effective background vocalist. An effective background vocalist is a real asset, as well as a blessing, to not only the upfront singer/worship leader but to the audience/congregation as well.

Less Talented?

Oftentimes we think that a background vocalist is typically "less talented". This could not be farther from the truth! Many of the most celebrated singers of our time have found themselves in the position of singing backing vocals, from Whitney Houston, Carly Simon and Mariah Carey to Elton John, James Taylor and Michael McDonald! Truly singing background vocals is not (necessarily) an indicator of mediocre talent. In fact, it takes a good deal of skill to be good at singing in the background without upstaging and demanding focus. A good background singer also needs to have the ability to blend in and be able to sing harmony parts. So let's look at some of the aspects of what contributes to an effective background singer.

Essential Skills

There are a few really essential tools that every singer needs to have in their "toolbox". Here is a suggested list (not exhaustive) of goals that every background singer might want to work toward:

Good Intonation
Flexible Tone Quality
Natural Vibrato
Sight-reading Skills
Ability to sing and Create Multiple Harmonies (and ability to switch parts if necessary)
Humble/Approachable Attitude
Commitment
Let's have a look at each of these and assess their value to the platform while giving you some tips as to how to achieve them.

Intonation–is the ability to sing notes in tune at will. This may seem obvious, but many singers lack this important skill. Good intonation must be *consistent*. I train singers to be able to sing simple half-steps and whole-steps without the aid of an instrument. This helps to tune up their ears. Singing a'cappella can also help to improve intonation by forcing singers to rely on their own internal sense of tonality rather than depending on an instrument. If you need more help, try some training software like Sing & See (http://www.singandsee.com/).

Flexible Tone Quality– is imperative for being able to blend with other singers. You do not have only one specific tone quality as a singer. This tool is invaluable as you need to be able to shade and color your tone to meet any need. If you have never learned how to affect your tone quality through different resonance then I suggest you buy my DVD called "Developing Style" (http://sherigould.bigcartel.com/) Please don't resort to the unhealthy practice of adding air to your tone to be able to blend with others, there are so many other, healthy ways to blend with other singers.

Natural Vibrato–is a *naturally* occurring vibrato that is healthy and not over powering–it is *air* (volume) generated and not *pitch* generated. There are times while blending that even a natural vibrato may need to be curbed, but overall a natural vibrato is an asset. It is only the mechanically imposed vibratos that cause problems. These vibratos are too prominent, overwhelming the singer's voice and every other singer's voice as well. For a complete treatment on the subject of vibrato, please refer to the May/June issue of Worship Musician! Magazine (http://www.scribd.com/doc/92863896/Worship-Musician-Magazine-MayJun-2012) or write to me at sherigould1@aol.com and request your own personal copy.

Sight-reading Skills–are generally extinct in most church environments with today's highly technological world of both large and small screen generated lyrics (sans music). I will likely go to my grave still extolling the virtues of learning and being proficient at this long lost (and seemingly dying) art. The ability to read and understand (at least a rudimentary knowledge of) music should be an obvious requirement of any person who aligns him/herself as a musician. Sadly, most singers do NOT consider themselves musicians. This is likely because in the strictest sense of the word—they aren't. But they *should* be and they *need* to be!

There were very good reasons that the original "writers" of the Gregorian Chant found it useful to write down the notes of the famous tune—none the least of which was so that they could remember it correctly in the future! How much time is wasted in our rehearsals today because our singers lack this skill? Reading music is not a difficult thing to learn, try a little bit of reading each week as a team. Building this skill will improve multiple aspects of your team. Sadly, I find it more and more common that "musicians" are proud of the fact that they cannot read music. To me this is like living in a country for years and being proud of never having learned the language.

The Ability to sing and create Multiple Harmonies–although it may not be essential to being a background vocalist in the truest form of the word, is nonetheless a wonderful asset. I require ALL my background vocalists to be able to sing harmony, and not only ONE specific area of harmony, but to be flexible enough to be able to switch parts if necessary. Anyone who can sing and hold a tune can learn to sing harmony. Next month I will devote my entire column to ways you can learn how to sing harmony. For now, start listening for the harmonies on the songs you currently enjoy listening to. They are there. Start to tune into them and try to sing along with them. Stop yourself from only singing along with the melody, this will start you on the road to singing harmony yourself.

A Humble/Approachable Attitude and Commitment–are perhaps the two most important things a background singer can possess. With these two things in place, I can do miracles–even if some of the other skills are lacking. Being a background singer is all about supporting the lead singer and the team. This means *not* drawing attention to yourself or your own voice, but making the leader and the team "look good". No leader can function with a team that is inconsistent; therefore being confident that all the

team members are on board and will be there for rehearsals/performances will allow a team leader to plan and move the team forward in every way. Humility in all the team members also allows the leader to do what's best for the tam without worrying that one of the members will be offended. All egos need to be checked at the door.

With these aspects in place, you'll be well on your way to being an *Effective* Background Vocalist. God bless you and keep on singing for Him!