It's Just Not The Right Time by Sheri Gould

Recently, I have gotten a few inquiries with regard to singers and timing. Timing can be a tricky thing. I used to joke about the fact the most of the folks that I knew that had trouble with timing decided to become drummers…ahem. Of course that's not exactly fair, but timing is something that has to be learned-and practiced in order to be perfected. We can't just take for granted that we'll naturally "get it". I liken it to singing harmony. Some people seem to be a complete "natural" at it, but are they really, or is it more likely the result of training and practice? I'd say that more of the latter and less of the former.

Believe it or not, way back in fifth grade when kids were choosing instruments to learn in school, I chose the drums. (I always wanted to march to my own beat I guess) Several years later in marching band I was continually being asked by my director to play the bass drum—while marching. I balked at this since I was the only girl and would have way preferred to play the cool little snare riffs. When I questioned the director he said simply, "I'm sorry Sheri, but you're the only one who can keep a steady beat". Hmmm, was that inborn or inbred? In finding the answer we have to step back even further in time…

My parents were dance instructors while I was growing up. They worked for Arthur Murray and often invited couples to our home for private training. I can remember my father always going through the same routine of sitting down with the couple and asking them to "feel" the beat in the music. He typically focused on the man because in ballroom dancing the man was supposed to lead. If the guy didn't get the beat, they would be lost as a couple. I can remember as child beginning to hear the beat easily and wondering how it could be troublesome for a few of these adults. Soon my brothers and I were also learning how to dance and keep that rhythm ourselves.

Additionally, my father played the organ. Night after night after dinner, while we cleaned the kitchen, I would hear my father play his familiar tunes. His left foot would keep time perfectly while he played out a nice bass line with the pedals. Later, when I was about 7, I also took organ lessons and learned how to play that rhythmic bass line throughout my songs. Then of course I started with the drumming lessons in fifth grade. So you can see how, by the time I reached marching band, I was just a "natural" at rhythm. In "Outliers", a book written by Malcolm Gladwell, he makes the assertion that it takes 10,000 hours to be an expert at anything. I don't know at what point I may have personally reached that level with regard to hearing rhythm, but I suspect that it may have been sooner than the average girl my age, making me appear more like a "natural".

This is not to say that raw ability never comes into play, but we tend to elevate that in lieu of simple hard work. So what can we do to develop timing skills? The first thing is to learn to focus on things OTHER than the vocals. So many singers are tuned into simply the melody and the words of a song because they tend to believe that those are the only things they need to learn. When I do vocal auditions, I believe it's important to have a singer audition three ways: a'cappella, with an instrument and with a track. The first way shows me how good their intonation is without relying on an instrument. The last way tells me whether or not they can hear rhythm and find their way through a song with no lyrics. Both are helpful for determining whether or not they are good listeners and independent singers.

If you are struggling with finding rhythm or staying on the beat, or if you have someone on your team that is, here are some ideas to help strengthen their ear.

Spend time listening for the beat of the music–NOT the melody. Try listening for each individual instrument especially those that are providing a rhythmic foundation for the song.

Learn how to count the music. One of the (many) downsides of not using music (and most teams today don't) is that we don't learn to count the music out. We don't understand the musical value of a rest and how to count it out. Try finding the proper timing for a song: does it feel like it has a 2beat, 3beat, 4beat, 6beat (etc) feel? Then count out the spaces in the music where there are no vocals. These simple exercises will help to train your ear.

Practice with a backing track. This will be the ultimate test for you since a backing track will not follow you. You will HAVE to learn to listen to the music, feel the beat and count the rests. Record yourself with a track to see how well you are doing. If you can't tell just yet, have someone else listen and tell you where you might be off the beat.

Try using a "click track" while singing live: this is sometime helpful—not always. If the problem is slight, it may be just enough to keep someone on the beat. However, if a person has never really tuned in to the beat for the beat's sake, then they may very well skip right over the click mentally and only listen for the other singers anyway. This can put a singer behind or at a serious disadvantage when there are no vocals going on. Sometimes a visual metronome can be more helpful for training purposes.
The bottom line is: **PRACTICE**. This is something you **CAN** learn, but you need to take the time and invest in your skills as a singer—especially when it just doesn't seem to come "naturally" to you.