

“Make 'em Dance ... Make 'em Cry”: How to Sing Karaoke



Don't plunge into voice lessons without first seeing how much you can achieve with these simple tips:

What do I want to achieve? Do I want to stand out or blend in?

Blending In If you are a beginner, you might not want to stand out, so something popular and easy to sing like a middle of the road adult contemporary song might be a safe choice. The downside is that no-one will notice you. But at least it's good practice and you'll get some polite applause to encourage you to try something more daring next time.

The way to get noticed: Contrast On the other hand, if you want to impress, you need to be able to change the pace of the night. If the audience has been weeping to *Danny Boy* you will change pace with Eminem or vice-versa. The key ways to achieve contrast are:

- **Tempo** – changes of pace: fast versus slow; syncopated v ballad
- **Volume** – a quiet song can force attention just as easily as a loud one
- **New/old** – brand new hot hits or ancient favourites both stand out
- **Classiness/trashiness** – a pop star needs both raunchy & conservative
- **Language** – learn a popular Spanish or Italian number
- **Surprise** – something out of character –ie- youth doing an ancient song
- **Passion** – infect the audience with your great emotion & enthusiasm
- **Quality** – just doing a great version of whatever attracts attention

There is a tendency on karaoke nights for the volume and tempo to increase as the night goes on: younger, newer, faster, louder, raunchier Everyone wants to be remembered as the one who livened up the party rather than the one who put the damper on it. But, don't be sucked in - the pace will change, for better or worse, with the very next song. What stands out most is **quality**, so a quality song, even if it slows tempo, will get you noticed. There's no harm in slowing down the party – people need a breather to talk, go to the powder

room, order drinks ... so there's always a welcome for a good ballad, especially Italiano.

The surest way to fail Choose a song that you enjoy hearing, but don't know very well. It was made famous by a particularly distinctive, gifted megastar who has a completely different voice than yours. It's long & gloomy and has lots of high, loud, sustained notes well outside your range. Pay no attention to what the crowd has already heard. Get your mates up to back you. Hold the mike close at all times, listen to your inner voice, and just belt it out.

The surest way to guarantee applause Learn a traditional crowd-pleaser, a beat song, or a "When in doubt..." song you can do well and everybody likes.

Song Choice My personal "When in doubt ..." song is *Viva Las Vegas*, my beat song is *Old Time Rock & Roll* and traditional crowd-pleaser is *Friday on My Mind* (often voted Australia's greatest pop song). If I need something a bit newer and trashier, I do *Rock DJ*. If you're not much of a singer, do a talking song like *Duncan* or *Is That All There Is?*. There are plenty of novelty songs people fondly remember such as *Leader of the Pack* and *Rawhide* that are rarely heard nowadays but always welcome and easy to sing. They stick out in any crowd. A good Latin beat song like *Copacabana* can carry the performance with little input from the singer.

Make 'em dance ... Make 'em cry Its hard to top my late Mammy's advice: I so well remember when I announced "Maw, I ain't gonna be no docter. I'm gonna be a pop star!" She paused for the longest time and then smiled, holding back a tear, and said softly "Son – Make 'em dance then make 'em cry".

Singing The big problem is that you can't hear your own voice. What you actually hear is the acoustics of your head bones – it is not the same as what comes out of the speakers. Try and listen to the speakers, rather than your inner voice. The speakers are what the audience hears. You must listen to the speakers, rather what you think is coming out of your mouth, to know what the audience is hearing.

Your singing will be judged on your worst notes –ie- if you do the whole song well then scream flat on the high note on *Unchained Melody*, that will be what they will remember. One dud note will be the weak link that wrecks the chain. Better to pass or fake the dodgy notes than to abuse people's ears.

Range Comfortable range should be one of your main considerations in choosing a song. If you have access to a piano or electronic keyboard you can calculate your actual range: sing your very lowest and very highest notes, then work out how many octaves this covers. If a piano is impractical, try and find a famous singer who seems to cover the same range as yourself by singing along with their records.

Most people need falsetto or other tricks to go 3 full octaves. To sing beyond your range, try these tricks:

- **High Notes** – squeak the note quietly but purely, even if you have to use an “ee” or “oo” sound instead of the lyric, and hold the mike very close to compensate for the weak sound
- **Low Notes** – lean head forward so the throat is not stretched, but relaxed. Use an “mmm” sound instead of the lyric, and hold the mike very close to compensate for the weak sound

If these don't work, pass on the note or change octave.

How to sing on key Sharp and flat notes are the same for voice as for any instrument – tune the string too loosely and the note drops – flat. Tune the string too tightly and the note goes up – sharp. It's as simple as that.

The voice is a wind/reed instrument like a trombone or sax. More air pressure makes sound go up. Pressure means more air and tighter throat. To stop flattening out sing more forcefully – not louder, but tighter, like Louis Armstrong sweating as he hits a high note on a trumpet. If your problem is the opposite, hitting sharp notes, this will be even more deadly to the audience's ears. A little less enthusiasm reduces the air pressure and flattens the note back on-key. Reducing the force and tightness of the vocal cords drops the notes, like when Armstrong puts down the trumpet and says “Whoah Yeah”.

A bit more listening to what's coming out of the speaker is what's needed to drop a sharp note. Try and find at least one or two long notes where your singing actually matches the instruments on the sound track and make your pitch go up & down a tiny fraction until you can hear that you are matching that note, even if you have to warble a bit. When you think you're slightly off – try and work out if you're up (sharp) or down (flat). It's not obvious or easy and takes concentration, particularly as there is a delay in hearing yourself through the speaker and the rebound off the wall.

In fact, the worst sound comes when you are only slightly out of tune. If you're way off-key, you might be singing a harmony note, which is actually more likely to sound more on-key than a sharp or flat.

The Modern “Ornate” style Special tricks are a singer's trademarks so, naturally, they aren't meant to be easily copied. Some, however, have become so widespread that they are now an essential part of the repertoire. Yodelling, abruptly changing octave, is essential for country. Starting flat and sliding up on the note is the core of blues.

The “Ornate” multi-syllabic style is now mandatory for pop. This refers to taking each vowel and dissecting it into as many components as possible to fit in a syllable. For example, in *Unchained Melody* “Whoah, my love, my darlin” is stretched out to “Whoah, m-a-a-a-ey-ey-lo-o-o-ove, my da-a-arli-i-in”. Singing without this embellishment these days actually sounds odd and unmusical. Almost every pop syllable has a slur or slide in it. The last time anyone sang without it was the days of Dick Haymes and Eddie Fisher. I assume you get my point.

Microphone This is the single quickest route to improvement. The microphone and speaker produce the sound the audience hears. Because the mike is a magnetic device, the distance from the mike dramatically affects how your vocal air pressure makes it behave. At very close range, nearly touching your lip, you will get an artificial, booming bass sound (called “proximity effect”) produced by the wind currents you are creating. This may be great if you’re doing a bass range like *Old Man River*, but not good for clear, loud notes.

Holding the mike too far away is equally problematic. You have to scream to be heard. Perfect if you want that distant, cavern sound like Tina Turner in a stadium, but what will you do when the quiet part of the song comes around? There will be no contrast. Hold the mike close in the quiet parts but away for the loud ones.

Perfect mike technique Hold the mike at the distance where your voice is most relaxed for the particular note to be loud enough to match the backing track –ie- a low, sexy note needs to be low pressure, low volume, almost whispered, with the mike nearly touching your lip. A belting, head-banging crescendo requires the opposite - the mike held quite far away, so that you don’t blow the ears off the audience and overpower the backing track.

Mike technique requires listening to how your voice mixes in with the backing track, not how it sounds to you –ie- try and hear what is coming out of the speakers. You’ll find that the backing track rarely increases in actual total volume. Often the music is compressed, meaning that the loud parts have been “equalized” as in supermarket or elevator Muzak.

Loud is not big The big, full sound in the backing track comes not from more volume but from filling out the sound with more instruments - a “wall of sound”, as in the finale to *You’ve Lost that Lovin’ Feelin’*, where the big sound comes from additional instruments, Grand Canyon Reverb, and a vocal chorus. You don’t need to actually sing louder. In fact, you need to sound farther away to blend in, not necessarily louder. To sound big, you only need to match the volume and distance of that big reverb sound. In fact you’ll drown it out and actually kill the big sound effect by singing too close to the mike. Picture listening to the finale of *...Lovin’ Feelin’* on an airplane headphones

- then the captain interrupts at 99db with **“We are about to land...”**

Even though the captain’s voice is louder and overpowers the recording, it sounds tinny and up-close. At Karaoke, you don’t want to sound like a Bingo caller.

Getting the Key It is not always easy to work out what key the song is in when the first notes are struck. This is particularly common when the actual key is much higher than you are anticipating. Most songs have a lead in but some only give a tiny hint. If things aren't sounding right, pause for a word or phrase to see if you can actually hear the key. Sometimes only the bass line is audible and it's hard to transpose from that up to the notes you are actually supposed to be singing. It's common to sing a harmony instead of the actual lead line when you can't work out the proper lead. A harmony (notes within the same key and mode) will usually sound better than being flat.

Timing While being off-key is the most irritating sound to the audience, being out of synchronism ('sync') is not far behind. Unfortunately, some Karaoke tracks put the words up too slowly, with the result that you are expected to be singing the word before it even appears on the screen. For those sorts of songs, you would need to be very familiar with the lyrics, perhaps even have them memorized. In any case, you should be on your toes, anticipating the words and following the music, rather than just relying on the screen. Rap songs are particularly difficult as they are written so there is no pause for a breath. Only if you are familiar with the song can you time it so that you breathe properly while singing it.

If you ever get lost totally, it's best to stop and look ahead on the lyrics, skip a phrase or two and come in where you know what you're doing. Trying to catch up by singing words quickly is very difficult and usually a disaster.

Performing It's hard to dance around and look cool while reading lyrics on a TV screen. Either you must know the lyrics by heart or your dancing & movements have to be second nature so that you don't have to be conscious of them. Movement has visual impact if it tells the story or the rhythm of the song. A good figure skater or Tango dancer knows when there will be an abrupt stop in the song and will be preparing in advance to make some sort of flourish like a spin that is timed to end precisely at the points when the music stops. A singer can do the same.

The best way to rehearse your gestures is to mime along with the song, without singing, using hands and hip movements, in particular, to show the beat and the story. Keeping silent while expressing the song through gesture forces you to think about the build-up of pace and volume in the track and to think ahead about stops, pauses, and what to do in the guitar solo sections. Then, when you sing live, your movements have already become second nature.

The most common mistake get your mates up on stage and assume they will help either your performance or volume. The opposite happens – everyone stands so far away from the mike that no-one is heard. – the stage is so crowded nobody can move. One sharp and one flat does not make on-key. Leave group performances to the experts.

Practice Buy a \$10 radio mike from any electronic or toy store. Tune it to the FM on your Walkman (usually station 100FM). Put your records or karaoke CD or whatever you sing along with on in the background and adjust

the Walkman so you can listen to yourself singing through headphones at about the same volume as the background. If you use the small earplugs with the Walkman you can actually put a pair of larger headphones on over the top of them to play the backing track, so you effectively have a multi-channel system. You can tune the voice and backing track separately until they blend.

This low-cost system is much more like what your audience will be hearing at the karaoke gig. Rehearsing in the shower will only give you false feedback because of the reverb off the porcelain walls. Headphones take some getting used to but are very good at showing where you are going on or off key.

If you're still keen, buy a domestic DVD with karaoke capability and a few DVDs. Listen through headphones as well as live through the speakers to get a feel for the sound coming through the mike. Keener still? – tape the performance.

In fact, they are so accurate that some people find the experience of hearing themselves on a tape or through headphones so devastating that they want to give up. Well, I have no sympathy: that's what you've been inflicting on the audience – just like bad breath: don't wait for your friends to tell you ... better to learn it at practice.

Singing is like any sport. If you practice doing difficult things, it'll be all so much easier on the night, with an easy song, a supportive crowd, a spotlight, a great backing track ... have fun!

Simple steps to improving your karaoke performance

- A repertoire of safe, well-rehearsed, crowd-pleasing songs and beat songs
- Contrast with what others are doing – faster/slower, older/newer ..etc.
- Listen to the sound coming out of the speakers and make your voice match the backing track
- Hold the mike close near your lips for quiet notes, away from you on big notes
- If you are singing flat, use more air pressure;
- If sharp - back off on volume and relax throat
- Learn the “ornate” and yodelling styles essential to many songs
- If you are lost in key or timing, stop, listen, and come back in later
- Practice dancing/miming the song so your feet and hand movements come naturally
- listen to yourself singing through headphones and on tape