

The Lonely Sardine

For the love

of a granny

THE RAIN STOPS

WHEN YOU SING

Plant a seed in me

The rabbit from mars

I Laugh when

I Cry

IT'S A LONG WAY
TO HEMEL HEMPSHEAD.

DUCK rap

PASSION IS MY NAME
TONIGHT

Your feet smell
of coriander

Your momma ~~eats~~ trash

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“Philosophical quote page”

SING IT!

By Joe Samuel and Heather Urquhart

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FOREWORD

Musical Improv is a funny thing. And not just funny-ha-ha. Funny-strange. For example, when MUSICAL! the musical (the United States' first full length, improvised Broadway style musical) opened in Music City – Nashville, Tennessee, it was panned by the Tennessean Theater Critic because he refused to believe the songs were made up on the spot. To his thinking we were pulling off some kind of fraud since the melodies were too polished and the harmonies too slick. Of course he was dead wrong. All the music was improvised on the spot, just done so expertly that to his trained ear, it could not possibly have been improvised. It was the nicest bad review we ever received. What was even more incredible was the fact that the vast majority of the cast had been trained by us in the art of improvisation only three months prior to performing.

Musical improv is one of the few art forms where the better you are, the more delighted, amazed, and yes, suspicious the audience is. After all, making up a song on the spur of the moment is incredibly hard! You need to come up with a melody, rhythm, lyrics, rhymes, a good hook, etc. etc. But on the Zen side of things, it's a joyous, freeing art form, where there is no right or wrong! As improvisers, we love musical improv, but as Zen teachers (Zenprov podcasts available on iTunes), we LOVE

musical improv. Joining in song with an accompanist and other singers is inherently festive. Joining in song while making it up can be just...joyous! You are plugged into the present moment, intensely listening to and responding to your fellow musicians. It's like making musical, Zen love to each other, if you can get out of your head and as Heather and Joe say, turn off your brain!

We first met Heather when a few members of The Maydays came over to Chicago and took a Master Class in Musical Improv taught by Nancy at Second City. The next summer, more Maydays visited and took a private coaching/workshop session, which led to Marshall and Nancy visiting Brighton the following spring to teach the entire group. (And finally met Joe, who played his heart out during the weekend long workshop!) Marshall even got to perform with Heather, (Joe accompanying) in London and the result was a magical crossing of the street. One of Marshall's most treasured musical improv memories.

Both Heather and Joe are masters of musical improv. The fact that you are reading this book means that you are about to take lessons from the very best available in the UK. These books contain valuable lessons that impart the skills needed to perform beautiful spontaneous songs. Work diligently at it and soon you may receive a scathing review that you're just too good to be believed too!

Nancy Howland Walker and Marshall C Stern July 2011

INTRODUCTION

SING IT! VOLUME 1

This is the first of three books designed to help all levels of improviser navigate their way through the exciting and mysterious world of musical comedy improvisation. Many established improvisation troupes use music in their shows to add that little bit of magic, and these pages reveal many of the tips and tricks that we have discovered over the last 10 years of working with music and improvisation. All of the books are co-written by Heather and Joe in such a way that they can be used by the improviser alone, the musical director or both and clearly laid out so that you can skip any sections that do not seem relevant to you. Book 1 will cater for the complete beginner, going through some basic exercises and some helpful techniques for keeping your voice healthy. However, we have not gone too easy on you, and some more complex and demanding exercises are also outlined in this book. We thought you might also like to know how Joe and Heather arrived at the point where we just had to put our experiences into a book! So there is a short autobiographical section at the beginning.

Books two/three take the improviser and musical director through more challenging exercises and performance pieces, taking in some teaching techniques and directing advice along the way. Book two focuses more on song structures which are

useful for long-form improvisers and can be used in many different types of song. Book three takes you right up to the most advanced exercises we have come across, and some ideas on developing new exercises that suit you.

Many of the exercises we describe can be used as polished pieces that are a great way to start or finish an improvised show. You may not be interested in using this book to help you in performance, but many of the techniques can be directly translated to improv in the wider sense and make great warm ups for rehearsals. We've had many different people take musical improv courses, from songwriters who want to be freer in their writing technique to businesses who use it as part of their training to boost confidence and encourage teamwork. However please approach this book with caution – Musical Improv is HIGHLY ADDICTIVE.

JOE'S IMPROV JOURNEY

JOE'S IMPROV JOURNEY

I trained as a classical musician on the piano and violin. I am also blessed with perfect pitch which is the ability to recognise notes by ear. The huge advantage this gives is that if there is a tune I know, I can immediately play it, without having to work anything out. So as a child, improvisation was normal, natural and unsurprising to me.

However, improvisation was not seen as normal and natural when I was first taught to play. Great emphasis was put on reading music, and playing the music of the masters as perfectly as possible, a skill that I derive huge joy from, but nonetheless one that is governed by objective judgements and unrealistic expectations. Nobody can play these pieces perfectly, nor should they. All of these great masterpieces were originally composed by someone sitting down and improvising. Bach, Mozart, Chopin, Liszt and numerous other piano giants were renowned for their improvisation skills, and the pieces that we have today, meticulously preserved and worshipped are a snapshot of their evolution. Many pieces were returned to and amended, entire sections left open for individual interpretation and passages cut and swapped around. So why then are musicians often so scared of playing without music?

The same can be said for actors. It struck me recently that we all improvise continuously in our everyday lives. We are natural, fluent, funny and tragic without the slightest conscious effort as we interact with others throughout the day. However, take two people and ask them to improvise a naturalistic scene, and all kinds of conscious processes suddenly interrupt the flow of dialogue and suddenly a scene can become stilted and unrealistic. If only we could be as uninhibited with singing as we are when we are using our voice normally. Imagine the sound of a piercing laugh, swooping through very high and loud registers with great ease. Now ask that same person to sing in a loud high voice, and they will often produce a nervous, self-conscious sound instead.

My teaching has now extended to improvisation. One of the most important themes of improvisation is commitment and when teaching improv, this theme comes back time and time again. If you are stuck in a scene or a song that does not seem to be working, then massive over-commitment will often mean you can fly out of trouble. Student shows or showcases inevitably have some moments when things are not going so well, and the times I have been most impressed are when someone steps up to the plate and wallops an improv home run by over-selling a song. I do remember in one performance there was a 'Hoedown'. A brave move for any improv troupe, but for

a first performance this was an act of sheer madness. However, it came off brilliantly, especially when one of the students froze on their line and so sung, 'Blah blah blah blah' very loudly. This admission of failure, accompanied by total unashamed commitment was one of the highlights of the evening for me and the audience.

THE MAYDAYS

Improvisation was never something I anticipated doing professionally. I was not aware that there was a comedy improv scene in Brighton until Heather and Katy Schutte performed in 'The Treason Show', a long running comedy sketch show that I am the musical director for. After a few months working together, Heather and Katy sidled up to me at my keyboard and asked if I would be interested in coming to a Maydays rehearsal. I admit I had not heard of The Maydays, but it sounded intriguing and so I said yes. I remember walking into the room and seeing 10 people sitting in a circle on chairs, and just thinking to myself, 'Let's just go for it'. I had no real idea of what previous musicians had done, and had no experience myself, but it all seemed to come pretty naturally, and before I knew it (and after the painful and embarrassing initiation ceremony), I was enrolled. Finally here was a constructive outlet for all the years of closet improvisation. From that moment I have begun to

appreciate the real power of improvising. There is no time to be critical of yourself, no time to worry about wrong notes or bad songs. They all come and go relentlessly, and I am learning not to judge them individually.

At the start I was concerned that I would not be able to come up with enough 'songs', or that I would not be able to think of a good chord sequence at the right time. In fact, for my first few gigs I had a sheet of paper with some pre-prepared chord patterns to fall back on in the event of a blank. I soon realised that this was a huge distraction from watching and listening to the action on stage. Now I prefer to rely on myself for inspiration. Many of the songs and tunes I play are similar to each other. How could they not be? After all, most of the tonal music we hear is based on a few simple rules, and there are only so many chords and progressions that we can use when performing songs, without going totally 'off piste' (which I also enjoy!).

I find it far more satisfying to leave the conscious musical part of my brain behind, and just play when the moment comes. A single note is enough to lead into a song. One chord is all that is needed to set a mood. One rhythm enough to set a tempo. Many of my songs have very repetitive motifs or patterns and I find that this helps to pin down the 'feel' of a piece of music. A good exercise in improvisation is to take just one set of notes,

not even a full scale, just two or three notes, and to explore how they interact with each other. Simplicity provides the framework around which more complex patterns can be added. Since starting to work with improvisers, actors and comedians there has been a sense that improvisation will have its day in the not too distant future. There are many persuasive arguments for this such as its popularity in America, the power of improv in business and improv as therapy. However, the dream of having improvisation centres, weekly shows and bulging audiences still seems a long way off. Improvisation still sits enviously behind stand-up and sketch comedy, waiting for the spotlight. I have no doubt that there is a growing tide of improvisation, and there are now a few shows that are touring and making careers outside of the comfortable world of *Whose Line is it Anyway*. Whatever the future, and whenever the tidal wave of improv hits the shores of comedy, I want to make sure that I am there. I hope you are too.

HEATHER'S IMPROV JOURNEY

HEATHER'S IMPROV JOURNEY

When I was training to be an actress I opted to study physical theatre as a Higher National Diploma. One day an outside teacher came in to take a workshop in something called improvisation. I had done lots of devised theatre by that point but this was the first time that I had been introduced to the idea that just 'making stuff up' could be used as a performance piece in itself. I remember vividly playing the game 'what happens next' with me as the puppet. It involved me being pimped to eat a hot dog which kept growing larger and larger which I dutifully did, not realising that it also appeared that I was engaged in a sex act. The whole class were in stitches (I totally accept that they may have been laughing at me rather than with me!) but I had suddenly found my true calling. I was put on this earth to play. The teacher was the very talented Kevin Tomlinson, who is a gifted improviser and has worked with Keith Johnstone and many others all over the world. After class, Kevin had been so impressed by my inability to be embarrassed and downright love for making myself look stupid that he invited me to come and work with him at Kepow! Theatre (a theatre sports based improv group).

When I first started teaching drama it was a way for me to make money when I wasn't acting. Enjoyable, but a substitute for what

I really wanted to be doing. Teaching improv however has never left me feeling like this. I am totally addicted to making people fall in love with improvisation. You heard it here first – I am a pusher of improvisation and I don't feel guilty. It feels like selling pure happiness. I love working with skilled singers and experienced improvisers, but nothing is more satisfying than watching someone sing badly and brilliantly with total commitment. That is somewhere between terror, excitement and disbelief. Lots of people I teach who previously thought that they couldn't sing are so liberated by the experience that they go on to do all kinds of things they thought they'd never be able to do. One of my ex students, the brilliant Lynne Thomas was tricked into doing a beginners improv course by her then lodger who also neglected to tell her that there was a show at the end of the course. 5 ten week courses later, Lynne is in an improv troupe of her own and last year sang at a local street party in front of loads of people, something she said she'd never do.

The Maydays are really lucky to have helped nurture an improv community in Brighton, where we are from and we're always trying to encourage people to just get out there and do it. One of the troupes we spawned, the Heehas, regularly put on shows for people in their own homes – 'Dial a comedy' – look them up and get them round to yours! The countless end of course showcases that happen and the atmosphere at those shows is

total magic. The Maydays have taught music weekends for some time now but when Joe and I were lucky enough to teach the first 10 week music course that resulted in a show, I thought the roof might actually come off the theatre. At one point, the whole audience, daughters, sons, partners, even grannies were singing along to the chorus of the improvised hit 'Let's Fist Again Like we did Last Summer.'

I'd also like to mention the unsung heroes of The Maydays Thursday night drop in class. At the time of writing, the class has been going for seven years. Every week is a combination of people who may be there for the first time and are dipping their toe with trepidation into the improv water, and veterans of the class who have been attending on and off (sometimes with long gaps) for seven years. Some of these guys have never done a public show and have no interest in showing off to the wider world but if you want to see a great show, go to the drop in class, take part and you'll see some of the best improv there is to see.

Nancy and Marshall talked before about my time studying in Chicago. A few of us went to do the summer intensive at the 'IO' theatre there run by Charna Halpern, author of a brilliant book called Truth in Comedy and the partner of the late great Del Close whose ashes sit in the IO theatre itself. There I was lucky to see the best improv in the world and work with some

fantastic teachers. I was blown away by the long running Armando Diaz experience, and the incredible skill of the improvised Shakespeare. Like I said before, these improvisers made me realise the breadth of what was possible. So many styles and so many forms and I hope I'll keep pushing boundaries and help to invent stuff myself. Since then we've tried to get some of the teachers over to the UK to work with both us and our students over here. We've had Bill Arnett the master of the pinch-ouch, Jay Rhoderick 'Put your hands on it' and of course Nancy Howland-Walker and Marshall C. Stern who inspired this book's existence in the first place. My biggest influences though are the Maydays themselves who I am lucky enough to work closely with all the time. We are all passionate about learning and being the best we can be at what we do. It's always good to take the opportunity of working with people you feel slightly in awe of and whenever I am at a rehearsal I feel really lucky to work with such a wonderfully weird and talented bunch.

THE EXERCISES

THE EXERCISES

We have chosen the following exercises for those who are starting out on their comedy musical improvisation journey. They will warm you up, test your brain and your bravery, terrify and thrill you at the same time. Many of these exercises have evolved while we have been teaching and so have become our own, others are well known in the wider improv world.

We have structured the descriptions into:

- How – The fundamental rules and structure for the exercise, will tell you all the details for how to conduct the exercise either in a rehearsal, or for an audience.
- Why – Why this particular exercise is good for development. Which aspects of improvisation this exercise focuses on.
- Heather’s approach – The improviser’s point of view. Hints and tips, what to think about and how to keep your cool in a crisis!
- Joe’s approach – Information about the musical aspects of the exercise including specific instructions for musical directors. This is split into technical information relating to the music itself, and practical information on how best to accompany and support the improvisers.
- Advanced tips – Only the brave should go here!

We are always looking for new ways to stretch our improv muscles, so if you discover any variations or totally new exercises then let us know!

IMPROVISED SCALES

HOW

For this exercise, it is best if the improvisers stand in a semi-circle around the piano. This exercise uses 5 note scales going up and then down. The scale is then repeated on a higher note, usually a semitone up from the first. Traditionally this exercise would be sung to 'la' or 'mi', or any other syllable that uses different parts of the voice box and mouth for vocalisation. However, we have added a slight twist. Any word can be chosen for the scale to begin with. The word is announced and the group all have to sing the scale together using the suggested word. When the first scale is finished, the next person in the circle announces the next word, and the next scale is sung to that word. Ideally, the words announced should be associated, for example if the first word was dog, the next could be cat and so on.

After going round the group once, the exercise can be repeated, but this time with more emphasis on staying in time with a beat. Each scale has a pause at the end which should be just big enough for the next person to announce their word. If done correctly, a regular rhythm can be followed, and the whole exercise can be sung 'in time'. Here is a quick break down.

Person 1: 'Dog'

All: 'Dog dog dog dog dog dog dog dog dog'

Person 2: 'Cat'

All: 'Cat cat cat cat cat cat cat cat cat'

Person 3: 'Purr'

All: 'Purr purr purr purr purr purr purr purr purr'

Person 4: 'Tiger'

etc

Once the rhythm has been established, the exercise can be performed faster, until things start to break down! Often words of more than one syllable will be announced, in which case it is entirely up to each improviser, whether to try and fit the whole word onto each note, 'Tiger tiger tiger tiger tiger tiger tiger tiger tiger' or to scan the word across two or more notes, 'Ti-ger ti-ger ti-ger ti-ger ti'.

WHY

It is vital to your health and singing ability to warm up your voice. Rather than jump straight into full-on opera, it's

important to relax and stretch your vocal chords, as you would any muscle, to ease them into a workout. There are many ways of doing this such as singing scales and arpeggios but Joe and I are also in favour of warming up your brain at the same time. The key here is to relax, open up your mouth, open up your brain and not worry about what comes out. It is also important to stand firmly with both feet flat on the ground to support the whole body properly, and to feel like your breathing is natural and supported.

HEATHER'S APPROACH

When we do this exercise, being in tune or sounding like an incredible singer is almost the last thing to think about.

Breathing, staying in time with note changes and just making a noise is the top priority here. If you're new to singing, shy, or believe that you 'just can't sing,' it might take a while to get the concept of being in tune.

It might take a while to feel confident about hitting the right notes. Try humming now, and feel the vibrations travelling through your lips and your chest. When trying to pitch a note to match a note being played on a keyboard, it's a case of trying to match those vibrations so that you can't feel any discernable clash between what you're feeling or singing and the vibrations of the note you are hearing.

If you find it easy to do scales, concentrate on the smaller details. When and how often do you breathe? What is the sound quality of what comes out of your mouth? How loudly can you project the notes without feeling like it's a strain?

In terms of the brain warm-up for this exercise, just worry about getting your word out at the right time, so that everyone can hear, even if that word is just 'blah.'

There may well be a voice in your head saying 'That's not funny', 'That doesn't make sense' or 'That word's too difficult to say.' None of these things matter. Ultimately we are just gently trying to warm up our voices and have fun with the challenge of using word association. If you associate the word 'pineapple' with the word 'god,' that is absolutely fine by our standards. Better to say something than nothing. You will find that two or three syllable words can be a bit tricky as some of the group may sing half a word per note and the others might try to fit the whole word into one note. Whichever you choose, it is not wrong.

Experiment with both and with enunciating the words clearly so that they can be easily heard.

It is much easier to sing when you open your mouth wide and really exaggerate the shapes of the words you are singing. It might feel silly but it really helps. You might want to try doing what I call a '*musical theatre face*'. That is to imitate the actors in a west-end chorus line – the ones with really over the top

facial expressions and punch-able faces. Give yourself permission to be that annoying, it helps with this!

JOE'S APPROACH

TECHNICAL

I usually begin playing on the G below middle C, and play through the first scale as an introduction. I play a G chord when the scale is rising, switching to a D7 chord at the top and then back to a G chord for the last note as follows.

Singer/melody: G A B C D C B A G

Accompaniment: G D7 G.

Then I would play Eb7 to introduce the next scale in Ab. This is basically a perfect cadence (V-I) into the new key. Overall then, the harmony cycles through all 12 keys, rising a semitone at a time:

G-Eb7-Ab-E7-A-F7-Bb-F#7-B-G7-C-Ab7-Db-A7-D-Bb7-Eb-C7-F-C#7-F#-D7-G.

The example on our website continues the cycle, ending on a Bb. This means that the vocal range of the singers is tested as they will have to reach top F by the final scale.

PRACTICAL

Often when first doing this exercise, the improvisers will struggle to get their next word out in the gap at the end of each scale. It is important therefore to wait until this word has been said, and heard by the rest of the group. Once the exercise has been practised a couple of times, you can introduce the version that must stay in time. If the next word is not clearly announced in time, then the next scale should go ahead anyway! This encourages the commitment of the improvisers to say something, even if it is nonsense. I usually sing along as well so I am seen to be participating, and to encourage the improvisers who may well be staring at you with fear in their eyes!

ADVANCED TIP

*See how creative you can be with your word association.
Joe's favourite word is serendipity – maybe you could
crowbar that one in!*



SING YOUR THOUGHTS

HOW

This exercise involves walking or moving around a space while using the voice. There really are no rules for what the improvisers should be doing, as long as they are moving and making a noise.

This exercise can also be done using words. Everyone in the room will be singing/speaking at the same time which is fine. Each improviser should be exploring their own environment and not be too swayed by what other people are doing. The exercise should end loudly, both physically and vocally.

WHY

You bought an improvised music book, so let's improvise! This might be the first time you've ever allowed yourself to sing when it's not a song you already know and that might be scary. Here we are looking to take it a step further than the scales. This exercise is about finding your own notes and emoting. Be free.

HEATHER'S APPROACH

We quite often do this exercise near the beginning of a class and there is nothing that fills me with joy more than watching a group of people react to music, letting it physically move them and hearing what come out of their mouths.

For some people it can be a big ask to suddenly sing any old tune, one that does not exist AND to sing it out loud in front of a room full of people, all of whom are singing something completely different. I think the trick is (unlike 99.9% of improv exercises) to really allow yourself to be on your own, even if you are in a room full of people. Undoubtedly at some point you will catch each other's eye and this will probably lead to a bit of an embarrassed giggle, but the more you can look in on yourself the better. I suppose I like to think of this as the musical equivalent of chemical changes of state. Instead of water changing from ice into steam, I like to imagine that the music is going into my ear, I am altered in some way and what comes out of my mouth is the result of that conversion. Try to just feel the music and let it affect you.

As you walk around the space, you should try to express some thoughts that are in your mind as you move. It might be that you had a horrid journey, or are thinking about what you are

going to have for lunch. This is what is present in your mind, so you should express it in your voice.

Most songs are highly emotional, and when we do songs as part of a larger improvised piece, Joe and I always try to use music to express what words cannot. This exercise is a chance to do just that. The musician you are working with should hopefully manipulate the tone of the music to take you through a range of emotions, so just like any other improv, listen, say yes and commit.

If you do feel like using words, just let them come and try not to think about them too much. In fact if you find that you are losing emotion or tune at the expense of telling a funny story then dispense with words altogether and just go back to lalalas.

In terms of your physicality, again try not to think too much. As we mentioned earlier, groups can quite often end up wandering around aimlessly like a herd of sheep. If you can, try and find a balance between moving freely and subconsciously and also making deliberate choices. For example a sad passage of music might naturally slow you down and make your movements smaller – notice changes like this and do them even more.

Movement can also be silly, if you end up singing about making a cup of tea, feel free to act it out or create your own tea dance.

JOE'S APPROACH

TECHNICAL

This exercise has no predetermined structure. You are free to take the improvisers on any journey you wish. I usually begin quietly with a sound that is not too busy. This should then go through a few different styles such as dramatic, dark or romantic, before ending on a big major chord for the finale. The whole exercise is only a couple of minutes so there is no need to linger too long in each style. I use basic techniques for suggesting emotions, such as using Major keys for bright and happy, and minor keys or dark or sad. It is nice to slip into a jazzy style at some point and watch the effect this has on people's movement and singing style. The finale should be well flagged so that the improvisers have a chance to prepare their showstopping finale. A nice octave tremolo in the left hand usually gives a warning that the ending is approaching, then big major chords to finish.

PRACTICAL

The aim is to get people singing. It is important to allow people to feel that they can express themselves without being judged by others so I usually turn the volume to full on my keyboard so that people feel less inhibited. There is often a sense of group conformity in that the improvisers will be using their voice and

bodies in similar ways, resulting in everyone walking anti-clockwise around the room. (Please let me know if this is clockwise in the Southern hemisphere). It is useful to have eye-contact with whoever is leading the session, as they might be giving instructions to people, or want to change the mood in a particular direction. It is encouraging to give people a round of applause at the end for their efforts.

ADVANCED TIP

As this is still part of the warming up part of your class, this is also a good time to explore your range. How low or high are the notes that you can reach and what do they help you to express emotionally?

GIBBERISH DUETS

HOW

The performers stand in a circle for this exercise. When the music begins, person 1 turns to person 2 and sings without using words. The word gibberish describes exactly the style of singing. Words are strictly forbidden. Then, person 2 'answers' with their own gibberish. Both improvisers will then sing at the same time to each other in a gibberish duet. At a suitable point in the music this duet will finish, and person 2 will turn to person 3 and begin again. This process continues around the circle until the last person duets with the first as the finale. Anything goes really in terms of what each improviser should be doing, but there are a few pointers that can help.

It is natural for the duets to be complimentary in style. This really helps to enhance the 'story' by giving it a firm musical setting. This can also be established by the musician so it is important to keep an ear on what is being suggested. However, vocally it can be nice to try and sing in a different range to the first (high or low) or use a different rhythmic pattern (short staccato notes as opposed to long notes). Each leads to its own magic moments when both voices come together.

The performers should be focussing on relating a story or strong emotion that can be picked up on and played with by their partner. Strong choices and a lack of inhibition are required to

bring these duets to life. When they work, they can be one of the funniest and satisfying of all exercises, even without the use of a single word.

WHY

Right, so let's take the lesson of the last exercise and now stick some interaction in. Gibberish duets are exactly that, there should be no words and this is all about connecting and reacting with your singing partner. Done well, these duets are hilarious but they work best when the improvisers are truly in the moment and bouncing off the signals that they are getting from their partner. This is all about non-verbal communication. The aim is to see how much you can express in a song without words, and how much of that you can convey to another person. When you are singing complete songs it is good to remember how funny and detailed gibberish duets can be.

HEATHER'S APPROACH

Ideally each duet should be a miniature scene, telling a clear story of a relationship between two people. We tend to encourage each pair of improvisers to sing a little bit of back and forth in order to hear each other and get a feel for each other's characters before building to a crescendo and finishing the duet by singing together.

It really is more important to be expressive and connect to your partner than to sing well. In fact some of the funniest gibberish duets I have seen are when person A initiates with a beautifully sung angelic sounding aria and person B replies with a grunt. I'm sure I've heard some sort of statistic about how only 10% of our communication comes through the actual words we say and the rest is non verbal communication, so it's amazing how much of a story you can actually tell when you're singing without words. It becomes more powerful when you are building this with someone else as the reply to the first phrase will affect the response and so forth.

When I do this exercise myself I tend to approach it in the same way that I would a normal improv scene. If I'm initiating the duet, I'll try and make a strong character or emotional choice at the top of the song. This makes it easier for me to have a solid voice to work from and gives my partner something really clear to react to. Also with musical improv you're never on your own, as you have already got the musician to work with. You can get a lot of inspiration by just listening to what the music is giving you. They should be called gibberish trios really as with the musician there are really three people in the scene.

If you're the second person to sing in the duet, there are two approaches that you may find useful. First of all, you can mirror whatever your partner is doing vocally and try to compliment

the sounds they are giving you. For example a ballad-like melody might inspire a soulful love duet. The first person singing passionately and the second matching their ardour with their vocal part. You can mirror in many ways but a few ways might be emotionally, energetically, by mimicking the tune or even copying the tone of voice – the Louis Armstrong style duet?

The second approach you can use for responding is basically a reverse of the first. Whatever your partner gives, you try to do the complete opposite. If your partner is angry, be really sorry and meek. If your partner is being seductive, sing back as unattractively as you can!

The last thing to mention with Gibberish duets is inspired by Mick Napier and the annoyance style of improv – ‘Don’t drop your shit!’ While it is extremely important to react and respond musically to what your partner is giving you, it can also be rewarding to stick to your original choice. I’m always left cold by a duet if one half loses the commitment to what they are singing. If you start off singing like a sad old lady, you might end up a happy old lady but you’ll still be an old lady, so keep hold of your proverbial walking stick.

JOE'S APPROACH

TECHNICAL

I tend to use simple rhythms and verse-like structures as the settings for these duets. Repeated chords in the right hand can easily support a couple of lines of singing, and simple key changes are all that is required. This is very much an accompanying role, with the emphasis always on the performers. If you are not confident enough to freely improvise, this would be a good opportunity to try out some predetermined chord sequences such as C-am-dm-G7 as a basic structure.

I tend to change the style abruptly for each pair of singers, but equally, the same riff could be used for the entire exercise, providing a stable musical environment. The advantage of changing styles is that the performers must react immediately to your musical offers, and you can often steer the mood of a duet directly by the style of playing. A simple tango or blues accompaniment is enough to inspire a performer to sing in a certain way.

PRACTICAL

Themes of love and rejection seem to strangely crop up repeatedly, so I will often start with a delicate tinkly love feel, and then oppose this when the second singer comes in. Of

course the performers might totally ignore what I am doing, but it is always nice to see who is responding to what they are hearing. Likewise, it is really important to really listen to what is being sung so you can react accordingly. Less confident singers will inevitably sing quietly, so the accompaniment should lower accordingly. Over-confident singers can also be reined in by a soft accompaniment, allowing them to express subtler moods. The overall feel is one of simplicity. Give the performers enough musical space to find their own voice. Accompaniments should not have overly complex rhythms as this can scare off a less confident performer. Let the performer lead the mood if they are confident enough, but if they are struggling it is nice to offer an emotion musically to support them

ADVANCED TIP

- Contrasting the style from one duet to another can really help develop an overall story to the whole exercise. This can be very satisfying and unexpected for the performers. The story can be led by the ambitious musician, going from love through rejection, jealousy, anger and final reconciliation.
- In the drop-in session we did just last night, we attempted 'Gibberish – The Musical'. This began with each person defining their character with a gibberish solo, then everyone stepping in when the urge takes, and creating a musical with no words. It was crazy and amazing with plot lines flying in all directions. Give it a go.
- As well as varying your energy when singing to a partner, see how contrasting you can make your two duets.

SING WHAT YOU SEE

HOW

Performers move freely around a space to a musical accompaniment. The aim of this exercise is for the performer to find an object in the room for inspiration and to represent the object by singing. The simplest way to do this is simply to find a shape and represent it with pitch. For example, a walking stick might simply be sung as a rising note. A flat table top could be a single held note. More complex patterns can be drawn from objects that have curves or angular shapes. The performer should spend time looking at each object and explore a few different ways of singing it, before moving on to another object. All performers are doing this simultaneously so each is in their own personal space. After a couple of minutes it is nice for people to pick some of their favourite objects and sing them to the group.

WHY

There is a constant battle going on with musical improvisers between the lyrics and the melody. Too often it seems like it has to be a choice between the two, with genius and poetic lyrics being spontaneously spewed forth but all on the same note or alternatively a musical composition of epic proportions sung with the words la-la-la (not that there is anything wrong with

that sometimes.) Singing what you see is a great technique to keep your tunes fresh; this exercise is very simple but if you can carry the essence of it into larger musical improvised structures, you'll find it will really help with your songs later down the line. We often have songwriters on our courses and exercises like this help to write great songs improvised or not.

HEATHER'S APPROACH

As this exercise is quite abstract, you might find it helpful to think about it in reverse before you do it by thinking of some hooks from famous songs and thinking of a shape or an object they might represent. We've just thought of the following examples:

Eastenders – a small stepladder

The sound of music – rolling hills

Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet – stalactites and stalagmites

As always try not to judge what whether you are doing is any good before you've done it. Literally look at the object, pick a starting note and trace around the object with your voice. Up and down notes for lines, pitch bends for curves, hard staccato notes for dots or sharp edges.

This exercise is obviously helped by being in an interesting environment but if a class is being held in a psychiatric hospital with white walls and no sharp objects then you're going to have to use your imagination – you could sing the tune of the shape of someone's nose or the pattern on your jumper.

JOE'S APPROACH

All that is required from the musician is to provide a general sound that can be filled in by the performers. A simple chord sequence can be repeated throughout, but there should be no overriding emotional content or specific reference to style. The music is providing a key for the singers to work in, and a basic rhythmic framework to fit their ideas around. When the performers are demonstrating their individual tunes, it can be nice to try and weave them into a little verse-like piece to show how this could be used in a 'real' example.

ADVANCED TIP

Once each member of the group has a strong melody that they are happy with, try fitting words into the exact musical phrasing. The EastEnders theme tune is of course also known as the top pop hit 'anyone can fall in love,' try singing it now.

RHYME BALL

HOW

Performers should stand in a complete circle. One person holds an imaginary ball that will then be thrown around the circle. On throwing the ball, the thrower says a word. It should be obvious who they are throwing the ball to by establishing eye contact and 'throwing' in their direction. When catching the ball, the catcher should say a word that rhymes with the word they were given. When this person then throws the ball again, they say a word that 'associates' with their rhyming word. Here is an example:

Person 1 (Throws ball to person 2): 'Door'

Person 2 (Catches ball): 'Floor' (Rhyming)

(Throws ball): 'Rug' (Associating)

Person 3 (Catches ball): 'Mug' (Rhyming)

(Throws ball): 'Cup' (Associating)

Person 4 (Catches ball): 'Pup' (Rhyming)

(Throws ball): 'Dog' (Associating)

Etc.

To summarise, each person rhymes when they catch and associates when they throw. It is important to keep the throwing and catching gestures as obvious and real as possible, and also to time these to when you say your words. It should be as if you really are throwing a word to someone, and as they catch it, they rhyme with it.

As with other associating games, the link between the two words does not have to be apparent to everyone. It might be that on catching the ball you rhyme 'dog' with 'frog', and when you throw it you suddenly think of 'ferry'. It is not important what the association was, but it is nice to keep a steady rhythm going if possible. It is the same with the rhyme, some words are virtually impossible to rhyme with so you can approximate, or even make up a word to keep the game going.

WHY

This game embodies the fundamental skill of associating and rhyming which is what you do every time you improvise a song. Most songs will have a subject, and it is your job to be clever, witty and to rhyme on that subject. That well concealed look you will often see on an improviser's face as they await their turn to sing is a cover for the well practised skill of association and rhyme. This skill will create smooth blues, a seamless ballad with name rhymes thrown in, a hoedown or just a simple verse.

Associating is the ability to come up with a list of relevant words on the subject. Rhyme, the ability to pick one of those words that you can find a good rhyme for. Rhyme ball is that process boiled down to its bare essentials.

HEATHER'S APPROACH

'Rhyme, associate, rhyme, associate, rhyme, associate'

Try and aim for a state of Zen in the game, being mindful, in the moment and letting each turn at passing the ball be a smooth transition from one person to the next. It's good to have that simple mantra in your head for this game as this should keep the momentum of the game flowing. Maintaining the illusion that you're throwing a real 'ball' as you go really helps this along and keeps the improvisers physically grounded to the game.

As with improvised scales, as the group gets better at this, you can speed up and concentrate on keeping within the rhythm that's been set up. This one can get tricky if players truly are free associating with the word they rhyme, as in the moment there is no way of ensuring that the associated word will be one that is easy for the next person to rhyme with e.g.

Person 1: 'Log'

Person 2: 'Dog' (rhyme)

Person 2: 'Dachshund' (associate)

Person 3: 'Tax – fund?' (rhyme)

Whatever comes out is completely fine as long as you just keep going. If you really draw a blank on any word that would rhyme with the one you are thrown there are two choices:

1. Make any sound that rhymes with what you have just heard, even if it's just the last part of the word:

Word 'Cactus'

RHYME 'mactus' (nonsense word)

Or

Word 'Consternation'

RHYME 'Wation' (also complete nonsense but it rhymes.)

2. Attempt a Nashville rhyme. This is a rhyme that technically does not rhyme but you use a word with a similar length and vowel sound:

Word 'Porridge'

RHYME 'orange'

In other words, cheating.

JOE'S APPROACH

Obviously there is nothing for the musician to do here except jump in and show how versatile you are and how you can get down and dirty with the best of them. Try not to show off your rhyming skills too much as this might make the performers feel inadequate and inferior. It can be very annoying for people to see the musician excelling at improv when they are supposed to be only good at one thing. I tend to try and keep what I am doing very simple, and not to throw in too many difficult words to rhyme with. It is also nice to set an example of keeping things flowing, maybe even establishing a rhythm to the exercise.

Seriously, this exercise is difficult, but gets loads easier with practice. So practice.

ADVANCED TIP

- *If you get really good at this, see if you can actually maintain the speed and rhythm of the game while also setting up the next player with a word that is easier for them to rhyme – or the evil version – purposely make it hard for them.*
- *This game can be played to music with the words falling on every other beat, or roughly one a second. It can also be competitive, with performers being eliminated if they cannot think of a word in time.*

HOTSPOT

HOW

The performers stand in a complete circle. Someone kicks off by stepping into the middle of the circle and singing part of an existing song such as 'Good day, sunshine'. They keep singing until someone else is inspired by their song and steps in to sing a different song. When the next person steps in they can 'tap out' the person singing by touching them on the shoulder or just butt in and take over. The songs should be inspired by the previous one, so the next person in this example might sing 'The sun has got his hat on'. However, the actual link does not need to be obvious; it could just be that a song comes out because it was floating around in the ether and you sucked it into your head.

It is also not important that the songs are sung accurately or with the right words. Commitment is the name of the game so performers should just throw themselves in and go for it. It is in the spirit of the game that the person singing should be 'rescued' by someone coming in and taking over, so there is never one person in the middle for too long.

WHY

Hotspot is a game which might be familiar to you as an improviser already since it embodies all that is fundamental about being part of a group of people improvising on stage.

Commitment is a huge factor. Listening to the other players and diving in very quickly with ideas is also key but most importantly saving and supporting the others in the group.

HEATHER'S APPROACH

The way improvisers play this game can be very reflective of how they are generally in class. I would encourage anyone playing this game to try and look at how they play objectively, notice it and try to break any patterns you see forming.

Here are some classic patterns:

- Jumping in at every available opportunity.
- Hanging on the sidelines in the hope that no-one will notice you haven't had a turn until the game is finished.
- Always playing the fool, never just singing the song purely.
- Always trying to show off your amazing singing voice and never allowing yourself to be silly.
- Only singing songs you know very well so you can remain 'safe'.
- Only singing songs you like to make sure the rest of the group knows you have good taste.
- Having loads of ideas and not jumping in because your ideas aren't clever or funny enough.
- Having loads of ideas but not being 'quick' enough.

- Trying to make each song a punch line to the last.
- Singing one style of songs.
- Singing quietly and quickly with your eyes closed willing the next person to jump in.

Everyone I have ever worked with and work with to this day falls into one or more of the above categories (including me and Joe – guess which if you can!) It's so important for recognising stuff about yourself and your style of improvising.

When you've played it a few times, you might even build up a collection of the same songs that you sing time and time again. Notice even this, as it's the same as going into an improv scene with the same clichéd ideas – 'I'm having an affair', 'I want to kill you', 'I love you' blah blah blah. There is no excuse, think how many songs there are in the world, it is the same as always going to a default character when improvising scenes.

Last of all don't be afraid to jolly well sing. Even if you howl like a banshee, hotspot is about stepping joyfully into the void.

JOE'S APPROACH

Again there is no point trying to accompany the wild range of songs and keys that will appear in this game (I have tried and failed spectacularly). No choice but to join in, or conveniently need to make an urgent phone call for a good 5 minutes. I used

to find this game terrifying as I think a lot of people do, but over time have managed to overcome fear and just step in and sing. I think it puts people at ease to see the musician getting stuck in there and getting involved. No tips really, but it is strange how there is nearly always a section of Christmas songs somewhere in this game, even in mid-summer.

ADVANCED TIP

The turbo version of Hotspot: See if you can come in without tapping people out but by coming in with a new song on the same word e.g

*Person 1: You're once, twice, three times a **Lady**...*

*Person 2: **Lady** in Red, is dancing with me etc.*



BAND

HOW

Performers are asked to think of an instrument in their heads, and then to imitate the instrument along to some accompanying music. Generally everyone will sing along together and then be picked out for some solos. The instruments can be anything at all including percussion instruments, kazoos or didgeridoos. Once everyone has had a go at doing a solo, the piece can be brought to a big finish. It is quite fun to guess who was playing what afterwards, especially if it was quite obscure.

WHY

Band is the first step in creating ensemble songs that are improvised by a large group. Finding space to improvise songs effectively on stage when there's more than two of you needs careful navigation to ensure that it doesn't turn into a complete mess. Every instrument in the orchestra has an integral part and every improviser in band equally important.

- Also the first step to thinking about counterpoint.

HEATHER'S APPROACH

Really try and *be* your instrument. Similarly to Gibberish duets, you want to be thinking about vocalising in a way that compliments what has already been set up, both rhythmically and tunefully. In band it's actually slightly easier to do this as it's obvious what kind of instruments have been and what are missing. However this does mean that you may have to be prepared to drop your idea. If the guy before you is an ace beat-boxer and so are you, you'll have to think on your feet and quickly become a triangle or something else. Don't be afraid to be physical either, how would a trumpet stand?

ADVANCED TIP

Try and give the band what it needs rather than the instrument you want to do or are good at. This is particularly relevant if you are one of the later instruments to join in.

JOE'S APPROACH

TECHNICAL

I tend to stick to a fairly rigid structure for this exercise so that the solos can be fitted in the same place in the piece. This would be a typical example:

C-F-dm-G7

C-F-dm-G7

C-C7-F-D7

C/G - solos-

The accompaniment can drop out completely for solos and last for three beats before bringing everyone else in, or for as long as you want. I will usually put in a descending bass line of F-E-D-C to bring the group back in together. If the solos are going to last for quite a while, it can be helpful to click the beat to keep things together. Hopefully everyone will join in the clicking too.

It can be tricky indicating who is next for their solo while playing so it can be helpful just to do solos around the circle to avoid excessive nodding and trying to point while playing. Once everyone has had a go at solos, you can get two or three people to fill in the gaps. If you choose a bass and a higher instrument sound, the solos can be amazing and I will often leave them running for ages. If this is happening, you can cut the accompaniment completely and just bring people in and out by pointing. If you are lucky, they will stay in tune and you can come back in at any point with the accompaniment again. At the end, try to bring everyone in for a big finish on the tonic (C in the above case).

PRACTICAL

Try to encourage the performers to experiment with range and style. It is far too easy just to bob along as a double bass, or just to 'do-be-do' a generic instrument. Encourage specific characteristics of the instruments to come out such as the slide of a trombone or the reediness of a saxophone. Performers should also be encouraged to be physical, embodying their instrument while singing.

When picking people to do solos, it is great to put combinations of instruments together, especially if that means someone who is less confident can be supported by a fellow improviser.

Drums and bass, bass and a melody instrument, or simple the two people being most outrageous are good combinations to focus on.

If you are working with a large group it can be helpful to put people in categories, such as guitars, or vocals. It might even be necessary to suggest tunes for them to sing if they are not confident enough to do this themselves.

ADVANCED TIP

This exercise can be done with a class of children or a large group with NO accompaniment from the musician at all. You will need to give them ideas for their melodies and try to keep everyone in tune, but the results can be especially satisfying when the whole room comes together and makes a unified sound.

HUSH LITTLE BABY

HOW

This exercise is based on the traditional lullaby, see our website, 'Hush little baby, don't you cry'. Here are some of the original words:

Hush, little baby, don't say a word,

Mama's gonna buy you a mockingbird.

If that mockingbird don't sing,

Mama's gonna buy you a diamond ring.

If that diamond ring turns brass,

Mama's gonna buy you a looking glass.

If that looking glass gets broke,

Mama's gonna buy you a billy goat.

In the improvised version, the performers stand in a circle, taking turns to complete two lines. This pattern is continued by each performer until everyone has had a go, or the whole thing descends into unbearable crudity.

This exercise uses the classic combination of rhyming and associating that we saw in Rhyme Ball but reversed. If I was next in line to continue the above extract I might sing:

‘If that billy goat won’t bleat

Mama’s gonna buy you a cotton sheet’

‘Wont bleat’ is the associated phrase and ‘Cotton sheet’ is the rhyme.

The next person might sing:

‘If that cotton sheet don’t fit

Daddy’s gonna buy you a model kit’

Daddy and Mama can be interchanged subject to individual sensitivities.

WHY

With this exercise we’re taking the skills used in ‘rhyme ball’ and ramping it up to the next level. You will be holding a tune, rhyming, associating words and all within a specific time frame. This can be quite challenging for the improviser but very funny when taken with a pinch of salt. It’s very good practice for improvised songs with a pre-ordained structure, the type of songs more often found in a shortform improv setting. Like the classic Hoedown made famous in the television programme ‘Whose line is it anyway.’

HEATHER'S APPROACH

I can only describe my approach to this song as Kamikaze. There is no time to think, only to 'jump and justify.' In some ways, this is the compliment to rhyme ball as the association comes before the rhyme. The good news is that there's no time to be clever so you don't even have to attempt that. Being completely logical is probably your best friend.

To break it down completely, the improviser has two tasks:

1. To quickly and within the right phrasing find something that is wrong/doesn't work to do with the offer.
2. To immediately find something that rhymes with the problem.

E.g.

Person one: Hush little baby don't you cry, Daddy's going to buy you a fish to fry.

Person two: And if that fish to fry is too salty, Daddy's going to buy you a chicken balti.

So the problem with the fish is that it's too salty. In this example I quickly scanned for rhymes with salty, and luckily the food folder in my head presented me with Chicken Balti. However I could just as easily settled on faulty, Nick Nolte or even a Nashville rhyme like poultry.

In a way, there really is no time to be creative more to let the floodgates of your mind open and see what comes out. If you're able to do that (it gets easier with practice) then this can be a hilarious exercise to do, as there just is no time to censor yourself. In the writing of this section Joe and I did go on to improvise quite a long version of Hush little baby for an example but it was too inappropriate to appear in print. If you buy us a pint sometime, we'll re-create it in person.

Generally view this exercise like the rollercoaster at Alton towers – you have no control over the ride so you might as well try and enjoy yourself.

JOE'S APPROACH

From a musician's point of view, the only job is to follow the chord pattern as follows

C A7 D7 G C (Ab7-Db
for a key change)

'If that billy goat won't bleat. Mama's gonna buy you a cotton sheet'

However, due to the difficulty of this exercise, there will be times when you just have to wait patiently for the improviser to find their words. A key change can be put in at the end of the

line in the same way as the scales to keep this a bit more interactive.

ADVANCED TIP

Have a go at making your line make complete sense, consistently. It's harder than it sounds!



SET - UPS

HOW

The performers stand in a circle or a line. The first performer sings the first line of a two line phrase. The second person completes this phrase, but magically manages to end their line with a rhyming word that the first person was thinking of. Seems impossible, but actually this comes down to basic rhyming and associating skills. The magic is in the work done by the first person, or the 'set-up'.

Try to get a general suggestion from someone such as money or D.I.Y. The more expansive the topic, the better. Your job then is to associate words with the subject, pick one word, and then rhyme with it. For example, if the topic was fish, your thought process might go:

Subject: Fish

Associations: Trout, plaice, salmon,

Rhyme: Gammon rhymes with salmon.

Now you have two words, gammon and salmon. The aim is to set up the line in such a way that the next person can guess what word you were thinking of to do with fish. Here is a line that might do the job:

Person 1: 'I like pink fish but I don't like gammon...'

Now person 2 has to think of a fish that rhymes with gammon.
Hopefully they will think of salmon and so finish the phrase:

Person 2: 'So next time I will ask for salmon.'

However, completing the phrase is more important than
correctly guessing the word, so if person 2 has a mind blank,
they may sing:

Person 2: 'But I'll eat anything in a famine.'

Then person 2 starts the next phrase with their set-up and so on.
Here is another example:

Subject: Cars

Association: Volvo, Ford, Mini, Rolls Royce

Rhyme: Rolls Royce rhymes with James Joyce.

Person 1: 'I want that car driven by James Joyce...'

Person 2: 'I think it's a beautiful Rolls Royce'.

Here is one more example, this time without the thought
process spelled out. This is what the audience hears...

Subject: Books

Person 1: 'I wish there were wizards in Tarka the Otter.'

Person 2: 'But there aren't so I'm going to read Harry Potter'

WHY

We've put set-ups in the first book, mainly because it's great fun but in a way it's skipping ahead. This takes a huge amount of word association, rhyming, pure improvisation in the moment and large amounts of communication with your singing partner. We have since invented song structures that require this technique but in most improvised songs, you'll only ever have to rhyme with yourself. Set-ups involve a certain amount of telepathy within the group. Don't have any? Maybe think about a change of career!

HEATHER'S APPROACH

I've broken my explanation into four sections; coming up with rhymes, answering rhymes, substitute rhymes and clues.

1. Coming up with rhymes

The first thing you need to do is come up with as many different words to do with your topic as possible. This is called rollerdexing, a useful skill for a lot of improv. My mental process is to immediately discard any words that are too short or simple. I'm going to use the example of fruit. If I've thought of pear, I'll discard it. Right know the most unusual sounding fruit I can think

of is pomegranate but I can't think of a rhyme. Next on my list is apple – simple but specific and plenty to rhyme with-dapple, grapple etc. However, there are still a few people before me so let's go back to pomegranate for a moment. If I choose to rhyme by using the word 'Janet' it is extremely likely that my partner won't get this (however it would work if I was rhyming with myself.) For pomegranate to work I'd have to rhyme the WHOLE WORD. If it's silly, even better. So now I've got the phrase 'Commie Janet'. Based on this, here is my set up:

Person A: I have a Russian friend, who I call Commie Janet

Person B: blah blah blah blah blah blah blah Pomegranite!
(Hopefully)

This is the only way you'll get complex rhymes to work for this exercise. A word on simple rhymes – if I was one of the first people and my subject was fruit – this would be the time to opt for pear or lime for example.

2. Answering rhymes

Simply put, you'll either know what your fellow improviser is trying to communicate or you won't. Either way is completely fine as long as you answer with something that rhymes and is in time with the music. It is guaranteed that you will have guessed everyone else's word, but for some reason, you go blank when it is your turn. The same principles apply right back from

improvised scales, better to sing something than nothing. If you do know the word then your job is to come up with an answering sentence that slots that word neatly in at the end. It is very satisfying if you can make your sentence answer the first grammatically. If you are really sneaky, you can double bluff by pretending not to know the 'correct' rhyme and instead swooping in with an even more impressive alternative rhyme. If you do this, you get a big gold star from me. Try and relax and just listen to what you are given in the moment. This is difficult to do when you are frantically trying to think of the next rhyme but it's a good rule of thumb for scene work in general.

3. Substitute rhymes

When I am teaching set-ups to a class we normally stand in a circle. If you are one of the first people to go you have less time to think of something amazing but a wealth of rhymes to choose from. If you are in the latter half of the group you have aeons to think of an amazing rhyme but there is also a very good chance that someone might use the rhyme you have thought up. This is why it's always good to have a substitute rhyme or two up your sleeve. When people first do this exercise this can seem like an impossible task but with practice it gets easier. Personally I always try and have my ideal rhyme, a secondary rhyme and an easy one just for good measure incase both my first options get

taken just before my go. So for example, say our subject is cars,
can you guess what I'm going for ?

Ideal - SOUL'S CHOICE to rhyme with

Secondary – DOVER to rhyme with.....

Easy – BORED to rhyme with.....*

*Answers on page ? Having substitute rhymes like this is
extremely useful for exercises like the Blues which we'll come to
next.

4. Clues

When you get super good at this exercise and are not consumed
with terror you can be super nice to your partner by giving them
clues in your set up as to what their answering rhyme should be.
Let's say the subject is cars again so following on from before
there is an example:

“This extremely expensive car would be my Soul's choice...”

Giving a bit of information about the object or word you are
trying to set the next person up with should help them to guess
correctly. If the subject happened to be wizards here is another
example which has just popped into my head:

PERSON A: He wears round glasses and seems harmless but
could turn you into an otter,

PERSON B: So never underestimate the power of Harry Potter.

JOE'S APPROACH

This is another exercise where a fairly bland, repeating chord pattern is required. There should be an underlying rhythmic feel so that the lines are given structure, but there should not be anything too exotic or distracting for the performers. They are having to do an incredible amount of mental agility in this exercise and do not want to be thinking about where the music is taking them.

Like 'Hush little baby', there may be long pauses, and moments where you will have to vamp or just wait until inspiration strikes. There are no choruses here, so I tend to keep the same chord sequence all the way through the exercise with no key changes. Once the sequence has been established it can give the improvisers a nice sense of security, so I don't tend to change it too much.

ADVANCED TIP

Too often when the brain is working hard on the words, the tune can suffer so:

Don't forget to sing!

THE BLUES

HOW

An audience member gives a small anecdote about something negative that has happened to them. A performer then suggests that they have ‘the ----- blues’ relating to that story. The performers then sing the blues relating to that subject. An example would be a story about a nightmare journey through London could result in the ‘transport blues’, or a story about breaking up from your partner could result in the ‘heartbreak blues’.

Once the blues has been titled, the performers should come up with two rhyming lines that associate with the subject. The third line will be, ‘I got the *subject* blues’. Let's take the example of the ‘transport blues’. As soon as the title has been mentioned, the performer should try to think of a relevant word and a rhyme for that word. For example:

Subject: Transport

Association: Train

Rhyme: Pain.

These words can then be fitted around a couple of lines as follows:

‘I tried to get to London but it was a real pain.’

‘Instead of seeing Big Ben, I spent 4 hours on a train.’

‘Oh yeah, I got the transport blues’.

It can be a really nice effect if the other performers support the singer by creating a stage picture, or simply by occupying different spaces around the singer. Bluesy comments such as ‘Oh yeah’ or ‘Tell it like it is’ can be thrown in for added effect. Each performer sings their own verse ending in the title. As the last person sings their last line, it is nice to repeat it as a group to provide a solid ending.

‘Oh yeah, we got the transport blues’.

WHY

So finally we come to our first complete song structure in the book. The structure, rhythm and tune of the blues is both very easy and flexible. It’s a satisfying way of singing an entire ensemble piece by taking a really simple suggestion from the audience i.e. something that has recently been giving them the blues. The blues can be accompanied by piano, guitar or even sung without backing. This is a no frills and low risk performance song exercise but like a lot of things in musical improv can get better and better the more you practice. It takes the skills of associating and rhyming and puts them into a nice

accessible format. Done well, the Blues can be extremely impressive.

HEATHER'S APPROACH

Broken down simply all you're really having to do with this exercise is come up with a word loosely based on the subject and rhyme with yourself using a blues tune. Ideally you should keep to time, we normally use a 12 bar structure but if you've got a good musician with you, they can even follow if you get your timing slightly off. Normally one line and one rhyme is enough from each company member but in the times where we've done shows with three people or less we'll do a couple of verses each.

We spent a long time in rehearsal recently working out what makes a blues a good blues and there seemed to be five key elements which I will now let you in on:

- Extremely specific rhyming – Unlike set-ups, in the Blues you are rhyming with yourself so the crazier rhymes you can come up with the better. Make sure you leave the subject word as the second line as that's the pay off for the audience. Recently in a world cup themed Blues someone had a genius rhyme for vuvuzela, perfect. (In this example Vuvuzela is the subject word i.e. that is the word specific to the world cup).

- Puns – If you can think of a pun on the subject and then rhyme it you will get a great reaction from the audience e.g. the plumbing blues might drive you round the u-bend.
- Innuendo – I am ashamed to say that this is totally the Heather school of blues. If you can take something and make it just a little bit rude without being explicit it normally gets a good old laugh (hey, I never said I wasn't cheap.)
- Information specific to the story teller – We'll take a person's story and boil it down to one thing making it easy for the improvisers to sing about a more general subject however there is nothing to stop you weaving that person's information back into your verse. For instance, a 'break up' blues that we did recently rhymed the offending dumpers name and the audience went crazy.
- An actual joke.

As I mentioned briefly early, having substitute rhymes for the blues is really important as if someone takes your line just before you, you're screwed.

JOE'S APPROACH

A basic 12-bar blues pattern is needed here. The traditional chord sequence is:

C-C-C-C-

F-F-C-C-

G-F-C-G7.

There are many variations on this sequence, too many to go into detail here, but there are some useful tips for keeping the whole structure going. I usually play the blues in E, but this is purely a personal preference as I find it suits most people's vocal range.

Introduction and Ending

The last four bars of the blues serve as a good introduction:

G-F-C-G7.

It may be that at this point, the performer is not ready to start singing, in which case it can simply be repeated until they are ready.

Similarly, this same chord sequence can be used for the ending, but with two C chords at the end, rather than the 'turnaround' G7 chord:

G-F-C-C.

I usually put in a little chord sequence on the last note to really finish with a bang. I am a creature of habit and I think this helps the performers feel at home as well so I nearly always use:

C-C7-F-Ab7-

C/G-G7-C.

It may well be that some of the verses do not stick to the 12-bar blues structure. It is vital that you listen to when the performer wanders off course, so that you can catch up. It is always your job to accompany the singer and they should never have to try to sing along to what you are doing. A simple vamp on C or C7 will cover most awkward moments. I find the most common error is for singers to slip into a 16-bar blues, sometimes even by singing four lines. This is no problem as the last four bars of the 12-bar blues –

G-F-C-C

Can be extended to:

G-F-G-F

G-F-C-C.

On the final final chord, much messing about and glissandi are of course the order of the day.

ADVANCED TIP

Taking the blues as a whole and telling a story like the real blues artists do can be really fun but takes a lot of practice. This involves being really in the moment and building on what others have done in the song so far.



SHOWSTOPPER

HOW

This is a performance exercise that can be put into a musical improvised show set list. A scene is started, usually with three or four improvisers. The scene should be fairly mundane, and often is helped by being in a specific location like a laundrette. The scene runs for a while so the characters can define themselves. When the urge comes, one of the performers repeats the last line of their dialogue as their song title. For example:

Character 1: cuppa?

Character 2: Ooh yes please

Character 1: Milk?

Character 2: No, I can't stand milk. <Turns to audience> **'I can't stand milk'**

The repeated line should be delivered in the most obvious and cheesy way possible to flag it up as the song title and to kick-start the hilarity to come.

At this point the music begins which will be in some kind of massively overdone Broadway style. The improviser then has to sell themselves in as big and ridiculous way as possible. High kicks, floor slides, huge dance moves and of course outrageous

singing. Each 'song' lasts for about 30 seconds and concludes with a big finale. The 'songs' need not have any structure or rhyme. They can be the same phrase repeated, or no words at all. One I remember consisted purely of barking, and was one of the best I've ever seen. Once each character has performed their showstopping moment, it is nice if all the performers come together for the final big finish.

WHY

This is your moment. The moment where everything that is inside you that is worth something is going to bubble up and overflow into a cascade of riotous, passionate, uninhibited joy and laughter. Showstopper will lift the improviser out of their rehearsal room and put them centre stage of the closing number of a Broadway show about them. It is a great way to release inhibitions, get the voice working at full strength, practise some moving and singing, and just to let rip!

HEATHER'S APPROACH

I always feel that this exercise works well when you take the following magic equation:

MUNDANE ACTIVITY + HIGH EMOTIONAL STAKES = COMEDY

In this exercise there is no set time or format as to what you should be doing. This can seem intimidating at first but I prefer to see it as the gift of freedom. I always point out to students that it is highly unlikely that any of us will end up as the lead in a Broadway musical but this is our chance to do just that. When I started writing this section I had planned on saying that the key to making this work is silliness but it occurs to me that taking it very very seriously would produce the same effect. The trick is to commit, commit commit. As you are given a location, it's nice to find yourself singing about something related to that environment but it really doesn't matter. As long as your character finds something that they can care about and express to the world that is the most important thing. A Hairdresser singing passionately about peroxide for example or lamenting all the hair they have to sweep up every day.

Being physical is a huge part of this as well, no high kicks or jazz hands are too much in this and singing ability a bonus not a necessity.

JOE'S APPROACH

TECHNICAL

If you are lucky enough to have a keyboard with styles or rhythms on board, now is definitely the time to fire them up. This is as much a show-stopping moment for the musician as it is for the improviser. Fast tempo and off beat chords is a good way to set the feel for this. There is no need to use any complex chord progressions. A couple of basic chords will be fine. If you are using a piano/guitar or other more acoustic instrument, you will need to fill the space with music.

When providing accompaniment for 3 or 4 performers it is nice to change it up a little. Although each song should have a big finish, it can work to start one of them a little quieter and then build to the finale. A show stopping moment has to be exaggerated, but can be a range of emotions within this.

PRACTICAL

The main difficulty of accompanying a performer who is not using any structure will be keeping pace with them. It might be that they start singing a verse-like section, but then break into a chorus half way through. It might be that they sing a few lines and then have a dance break. The most important quality that

the song should have is that it builds to a big finish, and it is spotting when this is going to happen that can be tricky. The finish can either be dictated by the performer, or by the musician. Either way, it needs to be obvious enough that both come together at the same time. I have done this enough times when I provide a big musical finish, only to realise that they are still thumping up and down the stage, their eyes glazed, imagining a huge west-end audience in raptures.

I find it easier to dictate the end of the song musically, rather than from the performer. I will often give a long loud and low note to mark this, and then lots of big chords to signify the end. However, the performer can just as easily take a big breath, strike a pose and go for their final note. As long as the commitment continues right up to the last note, all will be fine. No Quitting.

ADVANCED TIP

*Have a look at some Gene Kelly for inspiration, the dance break in *Singing in the rain* is classic.*

SING YOUR DAY

HOW

This is a great warm up exercise that allows you to get some things off your chest at the same time. The improvisers stand around the musician who will start to play a nice easy predictable backing. Person one then sings a short verse about their day. This can be a structured rhyming four line verse, or a more freeform verse. When that person is done, the next person in the circle sings two lines of a chorus that should sum up the verse we just heard, or highlight some aspect of it. Those two chorus lines are then repeated by the whole group. Then person 2 sings a short verse about their day, person 3 sings the chorus for them and so on. Here is an example:

<Music starts>

Person 1: I woke up with a hangover, guess I overdid the
punch

By the time I got to work, everyone else was at lunch

Then at five we went to the pub, I guess that's pretty slack

If I keep going like this, I'm gonna get the sack

Person 2: Lose your job, but get a life

Lose your job, but get a life

All: Lose your job, but get a life

Lose your job, but get a life.

Person 2: I was up at 6, checking my emails...etc

WHY

This is the first of the exercises that is going to utilise all of the skills you should have learned up to this point. This is about being honest and expressive. If you are titling the song, it's about listening and pinpointing the specifics of what someone has been singing about. When improvising full songs, you'll be doing everything that happens in this exercise and more, but it's good place to start because the subject matter applies to you. I'm sure other improv troupes the world over do this as an exercise and it may be called something else somewhere else but it's an exercise we just sort of found ourselves doing one day and have continued to do as a warm up finding a structure along the way. I think it's great particularly when you're working regularly with the same people as it kind of gets having a bit of a catch up and check in out of the way while warming up your voice at the same time. We wouldn't use this as a performance game but the skills are really transferable for when you get to be

doing audience inspired songs. It trains you listen to material based on real life experience and turn it into a song that means something to everyone. Perfect for tagline songs – but that’s another book!

HEATHER’S APPROACH

The same rule applies to this as applies to all songs; Make it emotional, ‘Sing it with feeling.’ In way it’s a stream of consciousness, but if possible it’s good to hit on an aspect or theme within that stream.

In many ways this should be easy because what you will be singing about should be real and tangible and personal to you. The more comfortable you feel about really singing what is on your mind, the better your song will be. The same applies to full songs improvised on stage, sing from the heart of the character. If you don’t care about what you’re singing about then it’s unlikely anyone else will.

Don’t worry about it being the world’s most memorable song but do explore how you can use melody to express your feelings. Similarly, don’t box yourself into rhyming one line with next but if it happens naturally or even helps you to tell the story then do

it. You might not even have lines; this should be totally expressive and free form.

There will probably be an inner critic telling you that your day hasn't been interesting and thinking that no one else could possibly want to hear about it. Just be honest. If your morning was spent changing your car tyre, how did it make you feel? Triumphant or frustrated? When the Maydays improvise songs on stage, we will often start a song with absolutely nothing. Start small if you need to but get to the heart of it. It's also a chance to be self-indulgent, finally you can be the star of your own musical.

A hectic day might result in a fast paced song, a sad event might lead to a song that is slow and quiet. The more I do this exercise, the more I realise that rhyming really isn't that important. If it happens great, if it doesn't that is also fine. Getting to the core of what you really want to express is the key and this has subsequently helped me in shows to emote well as different characters, and not to worry too much about rhyme or structure.

In the role of the chorus maker the job is to listen, and listen intently. Your job is to pinpoint what the previous person has really been singing about and encapsulate that in a single line. The line you sing for your chorus should be specific to that person's day, but also universal to everyone. All my favourite

songwriters have the ability to take the personal and make it relevant for all of humanity.

For the improviser supporting the subject of the song it's important to really listen. The first person might sing about several aspects of their day and the many things that happened to them. It's the job of the second improviser to pull out the theme or meaning of the song and put it into a clear title.

With titles is best to keep them as simple as possible and quite general, so summing up an emotional state rather than a physical activity. So for changing a car tyre you might go with 'I'm so tired' or 'I'm changing for you' Both of these are personal and allude to the subject, but also could be related to more than one person's specific situation. Remember that the rest of the group will have to repeat what you have sung, so making it complex in any way will throw everybody off (including yourself). When you get further into improvising songs, this exercise is excellent practice for the skill of creating a killer song title.

If you're repeating the chorus, see how accurate you can be, both in tune and in rhythm.

JOE'S APPROACH

This is a basic accompanying job with this exercise. It is possible to play the same chord sequence throughout and it will sound absolutely fine. The main job is to support the improvisers musically so they can express themselves freely. It is nice to play a little build up prior to the chorus. I will often finish the verse on the tonic (the same chord it started with), let's say C in this case. Then a C7 chord will lead to a chorus in F (C7-F is a perfect cadence and will usually suggest a change of key). The whole song might go like this:

Verse

C-am-G7-C

C-am-F-C

F-C-E7-am

F-C-G7-C7

Chorus

F-C-F-C

F-C-D7-G-

F-C-F-C

D-D7-G-G7.

Although the same accompaniment can be used all around the circle for this exercise, I find it more interesting to abruptly change the style after each chorus. This adds a little extra unexpected spice to each verse as the improviser will be affected by the style of the music. Sometimes my ideas and their verses will clash, but usually a harmonious middle ground can be found. So I might start off with a fairly generic, jaunty little backing, but then go into a slow reflective mood for the next person's verse. The third might be dark and so on. This means that the improvisers can practise singing in different styles, and can practise adjusting to the mood of the music. I generally start playing confidently and quite loudly to allow people to start singing without self-consciousness. Once all the participants are singing to themselves then the music can start to change mood. I try to ensure that there is a range of emotional styles for the participants to work with. The exercise usually lasts for 2-3 minutes so I will usually play 4 or 5 different styles. Quiet, jazzy, dark, and usually finishing on a big piano sound, playing grand chords. This builds the exercise to a climax, and usually has the assembled crowd singing loudly with their arms held open.

ADVANCED TIP

In the group you can experiment with providing vocal support with oohs, aahs or echoes but it can be a fine line before you step on someone's story and stop listening to them. Again I think a valuable skill to practice for improvising songs in general.

BEASTIE BOYS

HOW

This is a rhyming exercise that involves some quick thinking and rhythmic singing. A name can be taken from the audience to get things going, or the person starting can use their own name.

Let's say the name was Dave, the first line goes like this:

I like 90's dance I like to rave...

Put my money in the bank cos I like to save...

Then there is a bar of Beastie Boys style filling that usually goes something like:

PAAR-TAY!

Then the next person sings a rhyming line:

Put money in my bank cos I like to save

Then:

PAAR-TAY!

The game continues like this around the circle with each new person providing a rhyming line until the first person has also sung a rhyming line. Once this is done you can sing a short break

Sound off, sound off

One Two Three Four

One two three four, Huh!

Then the next person then starts a new rhyme with:

I like to sing and my name is Sue

And so on.

This exercise can be performed as part of a set. One variation that works particularly well is when you split the improvisers into two teams and rap at each other. If a member of one of the teams cannot think of a rhyme then they are out and the game continues until there is a winner. Team members must then try to predict what the last word of the line will be, and all come in on that word in true hip-hop style. This means that clues can be given to make this easier. Let's take the previous example:

My Name is Dave and I play football.

I'm not that short and I'm not that _____

When there's no one around I play against the _____

The rest of the team fill in the last word on the spur of the moment.

WHY

This exercise really hammers home the ability to rhyme in time. With enough people it also helps to practise finding many different rhymes for the same word, and also having a spare rhyme in case yours is taken. As well as rhyming, the sentence has to make some kind of sense. When playing the game in teams, or trying to get everyone to join in on the last word of the line, some kind of clue should be given as to what that last word should be. This is great practise for set-ups, either for you or for another improviser. For example, the line ending in 'Tall' would be hopeless if it went:

I really am not very_____

There is no clue as to what that word is. That is why the line is much more predictable like this:

I'm not that short and I'm not that_____

This exercise can also give some insight into what it is like to rap. Rapping is a very powerful improv skill, and when done properly can bring the house down. The rhythm of this exercise should not be broken as it is a crucial part of the feel of the song. This is a good chance to practise scanning of lines (fitting in the words

to the music) and line length. The song can be sung over a repetitive beat to keep everyone together.

HEATHER'S APPROACH

So Beasty boys being essentially a fun rap and rhyme game that's all you can do really. Since the aim is to keep the same rhyming sound going round for as long as possible you're going to need to be coming up with as many rhymes as you can in your head while still listening to what's going on. The more you can actually improvise this one the better – that is to say try not plan anything more than the word your line is going to rhyme with. I have seen so many improvisers try and rehearse the line perfectly in their head then completely bungle it when it comes to their turn. High stakes timed games like this can feel pressured but try and keep the sense of fun, be as 'street' as you can and cheat if necessary.

JOE'S APPROACH

Not a lot to do here. Just choose a nasty beat from your monster keyboard, and even better join in, it's much more fun.

BAD RAP

HOW

Performers stand in a circle. A subject for the bad rap is taken from a suggestion. The first person starts by rapping a set up rhyme. This will be two lines that rhyme with each other. For example if the subject is crime, the first person might sing.

I got mugged yesterday, could it get any worse

They took my money that was in my _____.

This is then set up for the next person to fill in the gap.

However, this is bad rap. Rather than filling in the word we all expect, the next person must replace this with something either similar, or ridiculously inappropriate. Some examples for the above could be

They took my money that was in my WALLET/SHOE/ELEPHANT.

The key is NOT to use the word that will spring to mind (assuming the set up is good enough). Once this has been done, the group sings

Bad rap, bad rap, bad rap bad rap bad rap.

Then the next person sets the next up and so on around the circle.

WHY

This exercise is a perfect example of the comedy misdirection. The result is always funny as our expectations have been dashed. One of the skills being practised here is the ability to think very quickly. A classic gag in a song goes like this:

My best friend is a merchant banker

He's a lovely guy but a total saint.

This draws on exactly this skill, being able to lead the audience down one path and then hit them with the comedy twist at the end.

In bad rap, the job of the punchline is left to the next person, meaning that they have no time at all to think. This is great practise for just jumping in with whatever your brain comes up with without review.

The other skill here is that of the setup. This game is not at all funny if nobody knows what the word should have been. We have covered set-ups already, but bad rap does this in a nice concise format, making it even punchier. A rap beat, or just clapping in time can help improve timing.

HEATHER'S APPROACH

I could not tell you why this game is so hilarious but it really is. Skill-wise, you still have to come up with two rhyming lines in the same way as you would for a blues or the completion of a set-up but you are turning the expected on its head. For the completion, I go one of two ways. The first is to replace the expected word with a word that is different but means exactly the same thing so purse for wallet as above. The second is to pick something much more random but still specific and making sense. Joe and I just improvised this:

Subject – Winter

ME: When I'm wrapped up warm it's really nice

To stay away from the snow and the....

JOE: Frogs

Joe made me laugh just then as I was not expecting frogs. However it did still make sense which is key. Frogs being something I might want to stay away from. However if he had said something like 'lovely' instead of frogs it would have been meaningless. There isn't a huge deal of time to make your decision but ideally however silly it should make sense, otherwise the audience don't get the pay off and after a while they just won't care what you say.

JOE'S APPROACH

Same as Beastie Boys, join in!

ADVANCED TIP

If the person completing the rhyme accidentally completes it correctly then everyone should sing Good rap instead! Try clapping along at faster speeds for some serious action. You can also play this as a knockout, with performers out if they cannot think of something in time.



HEADLINES IN HARMONY

HOW

This exercise requires four participants, each selecting a headline from the day's news. It looks particularly good if each improviser holds the newspaper up in front of them as they are doing it. It's good to choose contrasting news items too so, for example, these are today's headlines:

ENGLAND ROCKED BY BIRTHDAY BOY PETER SIDDLE HATRICK

POLICE HEAD OFF ANOTHER RIOT DISASTER

BIG CHILL AS EARLY SNOW ARRIVES

GILLIAN MCKEITH SMUGGLES FOOD INTO JUNGLE IN UNDIES

It helps to pick one sports item, a celebrity item and two dramatic and topical items.

The musician plays a repetitive refrain which the improvisers sing over. Improviser one sings their headline twice, improviser 2 sings their headline twice and so on until each person has had a turn. When everyone has sung, the four improvisers then sing their headline together over the top of each other.

The music continues in the same way and the four improvisers start again, retaining their original tune except this time mixing up each of the headlines.

e.g. 'Police smuggle birthday food into Riot'

This process is repeated twice until each improviser has sung two mixed up headlines (twice each time). When the last Improviser sings their last mixed up headline, the other three join them, singing the same line and tune twice to end.

WHY

This is a very simple song exercise that can be used effectively to create a very silly song. In the past we have used newspaper headlines and that is the example we'll use here but really you can use anything at all the audience give you, an opening line or a subject for example. This exercise is very good for putting into practice the musical things we've looked at (particularly in gibberish duets and band) like varying the pitch, rhythm and sound of what you're singing in contrast to the rest of the group. However this also requires wordplay so there is a lot to think about.

HEATHER'S APPROACH

This exercise requires a lot of listening and negotiating a troupe in order for it to work well.

It helps to pick one sports item, a celebrity item and two dramatic and topical items. Sometimes even two celebrity items are acceptable but at the very least you need the names of two well known figures i.e. if not gossip column type celebrities then perhaps a political leader from a broadsheet front page headline or a well known sports personality from a back page headline. With these ingredients there's a lot of fun to be had with mixing up trashy celebs name with serious action e.g.

GILLIAN MCKEITH HEADS OFF ANOTHER RIOT DISASTER

Or vice versa e.g.

PETER SIDDLE SMUGGLES FOOD INTO JUNGLE IN UNDIES

(Although come to think of it, that's actually quite feasible.)

While wordplay is extremely important for this exercise, musicality and presentation is perhaps even more so. You can pull off a terrible mixture of words if they are sung well and confidently.

We can look at the same skills we explored with gibberish duets by seeing just how different each vocal line can be. This style of song lends itself well to operatic singing but even within that

there can be a huge variation. Perhaps a bass line with slow elongated words, a high pitched staccato line and it's always fun to have a Placido Domingo style bellow. Mix it up and see what you can create.

There is also the issue of listening and memory in this song, it takes some getting used but it's good to remember that the kind of memory games that we sometimes play in rehearsal can be translated into exercises like this.

JOE'S APPROACH

A simple chord pattern should be used here. The music should be a slow four bar repeated phrase that will give the performers enough time to fit in their headline. This exercise is sometimes known as madrigal and this describes the music required perfectly. There is some structure in that the music should build to a big finish, but this really is pure accompaniment, and the audience's attention will be on the interweaving of the headlines and the performers themselves.

ADVANCED TIP

Try to retain your tune and style of singing as exactly as you can even though you are mixing up your words – this exercise all too often can be funny in its wording at the expense of the tune but you can have both.

POINTING SONG

HOW

Performers do not stand in a circle. They should arrange themselves so they are close together, all looking towards the audience, and so they can all be seen. This often involves some kneeling/sitting and some standing. The exercise is directed by someone who stands facing the performers. A suggestion is taken and the backing music begins. The director will then point to one person performing and they start singing a repeated phrase to the music. It really does not matter what the phrase is, it might be a rhyming couplet, a few words, some noises, anything really. The director will then point at a different performer who will sing their phrase. Only the performer being pointed to should sing.

As the song continues, the director will start to point at pairs of people, or groups. They can bring people in or get them to stop by conducting gestures. It is a freeform song that can be made into anything as the director wishes. The song should build, with more people coming in until the point where all the performers are singing. At this point, it is up to the performers to try and 'agree' on what to sing. This should happen organically, and usually happens by groups of people singing the same lines. Sometimes it could be that everyone sings the same thing, or that there are two or three predominant strains by the end. The

song is brought to a close by the director and amazed applause follows.

WHY

This is an empowering exercise or performance. It removes the responsibility from the individual and gives it to the group as a whole. Each performer only has to concentrate on their part, and to come in when pointed to. This is very good training for singing with a group as the sounds should fit together with each other. There is no song structure to this, so it is important that each performer tries to find their own space in the song. This might mean singing high or low, with a sharp rhythm or long sustained notes. Anything distinctive should work.

The culmination of the exercise is also great listening practise. There should be no predetermined rules, so the idea is that if you feel the urge, you should join in on someone else's line. It continually surprises us that this works at all, and that we don't end up with confusion and noise, but somehow, with some improv magic, things seem to come together, and the strong or funny lines tend to emerge and fit together.

There is a great sense of having created something impressive when all the voices come together at the end and it is a very

good way of creating an impact for the audience, and creating a sense of group membership within the performers.

HEATHER'S APPROACH

We have left this exercise until last because it is without a doubt the most satisfying of all the beginner level exercises and requires very little input for a huge impact finished piece.

As a group it's good to remember all the previous lessons in this book about varying your tone, your subject matter, your tunes and rhythm.

So if you have a very funny line planned about the subject matter and several funny lines have gone before you, you need to be prepared to drop your idea and maybe sing something more straight.

When I teach this exercise I always tell students to sing their phrase to fit one of the following:

Be personal

Be observational

Be Philosophical

Be tuneful

Be rhythmic

Be characterful

In general if the group can improvise their way through to have a good combination of all these factors then you're guaranteed a killer closing number.

A note about directing this; If you know the group well then it's always best to start with the most confident singer and end with the second most confident – this gives a nice opening and climax to the opening section of the song and also creates trust for those less confident in what they're doing.

Likewise when bringing in the duos, trios and sometimes group of six or more at a time, it can be great great fun to mix and contrast the tunes and also the concepts that people are singing about. We've seen some great examples of this recently, for example an angelic female voice singing about being overdrawn contrasted with a gruff male voice singing about greedy bankers in a song where the subject was Money.

Finally, it is magical to let the group feel their way to a natural ending and shared end line and always strive for this. However there are some situations when you may need to mouth the words to ensure a group finish. If this ever happens it is always best to pick the most general and philosophical of the phrases being sung as this will get people leaving the show and singing the song on their way home – that's a promise!

JOE'S APPROACH

This exercise is not really about the music so much, as about the magic of group singing. I will usually provide a fairly quiet backing at the start so that each of the lines can be heard. It is important to give a repeating pattern that is easy to hear. This makes it easier for the performers to fit their lines in, and also helps to homogenise the group when many people are singing together. Once the pattern is established, there is no going back. I tend to find that the rhythm can be built up to a more jazzy style as the exercise continues, driving the exercise along. As the exercise builds, the music should too, but always with the same length of phrase and in the same key. There may be times when the director brings the mood down and goes back to solo lines, in which case the music should follow this too. The end will nearly always be a big crescendo and a long last note, so again important to give the appropriate backing for this.

**SOME ADVICE ON VOCAL HEALTH
FROM CHARLOTTE**

SOME ADVICE ON VOCAL HEALTH FROM CHARLOTTE

Muscle power....

We are in essence talking about a complex set of muscular movements when we talk about 'THE VOICE'. It is helpful to think of it in the same way as we think about sports. The more you train, the better you get. However, you can't train continuously without rest periods and if you have a technical weakness you are vulnerable to injury. All voices, however robust, have their limits.

Take a break....

So once you have run the London Marathon, you are going to feel tired, and need that rest. It's the same for the voice. If you have been working your vocal muscles hard, they will need a break. Your life is busy, you are performing, and in the bar afterwards drinking and talking over background noise, this can all add to vocal fatigue. Mix in lack of sleep and poor hydration and you can wake up the next day with a sore voice.

The good news is the vocal folds (chords) have a fantastic ability to repair themselves and respond really well to a little rest and hydration. However, if you don't feel back to normal after 2-3 weeks have passed and your voice hurts, is rougher, breathier or you have lost some of your range, its time to see your GP and get a referral to see a voice specialist.

Get some technique....

Some people appear to have more 'natural' voices than others. Whatever your starting point, you can improve on what you have naturally with technical development. So, how do you know if your technique is ok? The rule is 'feel' harder than you 'listen'. If your voice feels fine, that's great. If you feel a scratch, tickle, or cough sensation in your throat, when you are singing or speaking, that is an indication that your function is not as good as it could be. You are not going about things in the most efficient way. It may get worse when you put your voice under pressure, i.e.: you are in a performing situation, are trying to sing or speak louder, higher or lower than you normally do. If you persist, when you feel 'scratch, tickle, cough' and don't modify the way you use your voice; you may damage your vocal folds. If you are thinking 'things are not quite right', visit a voice coach or singing teacher for some advice. You can read a great deal but there is no substitute for some one on one help when it comes to the voice. Remember - whatever the voice you have been born with, you can improve on it (probably way more than you can imagine) with good training.

Hydration, hydration, hydration...

Much like an engine needs oil to work efficiently, the vocal folds need mucus to function smoothly. Yes, mucus is a good thing! When the vocal folds vibrate to create tone, they come together and apart many times a second, so they need lubrication. Ideally mucus should be thin and plentiful. Each time you swallow, mucus secreting glands deposit a moisturising layer on the vocal folds. So, sipping fluid is a good idea.

Also, the cells of the vocal folds themselves need to be hydrated. This depends on a good general level of hydration. Make sure you drink plenty of water (6-8 glasses a day) and be aware how much tea, coffee, cola and alcohol you drink as they are diuretics. Are you a little dehydrated? Do you notice an improvement in your voice when you drink more water?

As with everything, the water issue has its flip side. Drinking too much, too quickly can put the bladder under pressure. So, increase your water intake gradually and bear in mind that it will take a week for the increase to have an effect at a cellular level.

An easy indicator for hydration: 'pee clear, sing clear'.

Coughs and sneezes....

Having a cold can thicken the mucus so it can't lubricate the vocal mechanism as well. Lots of cold remedies dry up the mucus, which doesn't help the voice. If the vocal folds

themselves become swollen due to an infection they may not be able to vibrate as efficiently or as fast. If this is the case, take it easy; reduce the demand on your voice. Drink more, inhale steam and take rest.

Coughing, particularly persistent coughing can really tire the vocal folds. As silly as it sounds, try 'huffing' instead, you will avoid slamming the vocal folds together and you may clear some phlegm. Some people cough and throat clear as a habit. It is one worth breaking to save strain on the vocal folds

Allergies....

Some allergies can affect vocal function. If you are a sufferer try to breath through your nose as much as possible. When you do, the air you take into your body is 100% filtered, is100% warmed and 100% hydrated. Use a spacer with inhaled medication and rinse your mouth out afterwards.

Taking the strain....

There is a complex link between the emotions and the voice. Emotional health can affect you voice as much as physical health does. If you are locked up inside or feeling stressed, seek help from a talking therapy or spiritual guide.

Food glorious food...

Some people find that spicy foods or dairy products affect their voice. This is very much an individual thing. Eating late, large

meals, sleeping posture, smoke and alcohol can cause Reflux in some people. Reflux is caused by stomach acid escaping and irritating the larynx. Some people notice symptoms including the feeling of a lump in the throat, but some are symptom-less. If you are concerned, talk to your GP.

It's a Girl thing...

Hormonal changes can affect the vocal folds. They can bulk up before a period which can have an effect on quality and range. The voice can change during pregnancy and during the menopause. Some people notice changes, others don't. Seek further advice if you are concerned.

Guys, you're not off the hook. We all have to work harder as we age to maintain vocal fitness.

In summary...

Positives Affects

Hydration

Warm up, don't wear out

Know your own voice

Balanced effort – good technique

Steaming

Positive stress

Negative Affects

Drying agents

Air Conditioning, tobacco, cannabis (burns at higher temperature and is much more damaging)

Inappropriate effort – bad technique

Coughing & throat clearing

Medications - drying

Diuretics – tea, coffee, coco cola, alcohol, can dry you out

Too hot/too cold gives the throat a shock – excites capillaries

Negative stress

It's common sense....

If you are fit and healthy this will reflect in how well your voice works. If you are well rested and well nourished and have a good level of hydration, you will give your voice the best chance. That being said, we all have a different bio physiologies. Some are more robust and some more delicate. We all know people who can 'get away' with a more decedent lifestyle and not notice adverse effects. Others are more sensitive. The rule is, 'know thyself'. Pay attention to your own voice and it will serve you well.

For more information on vocal coaching see

www.charlotteshorthouse.com

BIOGRAPHIES

JOE SAMUEL

Joe Samuel is a classically trained pianist and violinist having studied music at Royal Holloway University of London. He has been a professional musician for 15 years, playing in a variety of successful bands on both his electric violin and on keyboard. He teaches piano, theory, harmony, composition and music technology 'A' level as well as teaching musical improvisation and comedy. Joe Samuel has been the musical director of the long running sketch comedy show, 'The Treason Show' in Brighton for 6 years. He is also the musical director of 'The Maydays' improvisation group as well as being guest musical director for a number of other improvisation projects in Brighton and London. Joe's interest in harmony and analysis has also led him to discovering a new way of teaching and understanding chords and harmony, and he now runs a project called SeeChord which helps students, teachers and songwriters hone their skills. SeeChord.com is the hub of this project.

HEATHER URQUHART

Heather started acting at a young age with the National Youth Theatre and went on to train in physical theatre.

Her first brush with Improvisation came in 2003 working with Kevin Tomlinson's Kapow Theatre.

She has since spent the last ten years acting in all its forms , including: TIE, Site Specific, street theatre, classical theatre and film, but can most often be found treading the boards and making people laugh with The Maydays in Brighton and in 2009 they made the pilgrimage to study at I.O Chicargo. In the last four years she has also been a regular performer and contributor with BAFTA nominated sketch show, The Treason Show. She is also the lead vocalist in Bluegrass band, The Whisky Whores, as well as a regular backing vocalist with Thomas White (Electric Soft Parade, Brakes). However, her first love is improvisation and she is director, performer, teacher and trainer with The Maydays. The Maydays have a monthly residency in London and Brighton as well as offering performances and training across the UK.

CHARLOTTE SHORTHOUSE

Charlotte is a freelance singer and teacher of singing and spoken voice. She is a Certified Master Teacher and Course Instructor of the world-renowned Estill Voice Training System. She has taught this model in the UK, Spain and USA. Charlotte currently runs a private studio as well as designing courses and workshops in Performance, Education and for the Business world. Clients include; CPL Productions (for Sky 1), Native/19 Entertainment, Map Entertainment, Jimmy Hogarth/Kid Gloves, Royal Bank of Scotland, GlaxoSmithKline, Goldsmiths College, London, You can read more at www.charlotteshorthouse.com

RECOMMENDED READING

Musical Improv Comedy: Creating songs in the moment –
Michael Pollock

Improv – John Cremer

Truth in Comedy – Charna Halpern, Del Close, Kim Johnson

Improvise: Scene from the inside out – Mick Napier

Improv for Storytellers – Keith Johnstone

Art by Committee – Charna Halpern

Useful Links

www.themaydays.co.uk

www.musicalimprovcomedy.co.uk

www.chicagoinprovassociates.com/zenprov.htm

www.thecrunchyfrogcollective.com

www.babywantscandy.com

www.joesamuel.co.uk

SHOWS AND TRAINING

We offer musical improvised comedy workshops to people of any age or ability. Taking people up to their own line of fear, and then allowing them to gently step over it is our main aim. We aim to provide a supportive, joyous and safe environment for anyone to explore their own creativity and skills, but also to be aware of working as a group, listening and responding to other people's offers and supporting other people on their own journey.

We believe that musical improvised comedy provides a springboard for people to improve their self confidence, communication skills, leadership and teamwork skills. We have facilitated many workshops for business and corporate teams to help them work together more effectively and learn to trust and support each other in a business environment.

We offer 10 week courses, weekend workshops and single sessions and are happy to tailor our workshop to your needs. If you are interested in finding out more, please get in touch using any of the contact details below.

Our website, www.musicalimprovcomedy.co.uk contains more information, blogs and podcasts relating to the work we do, and

you can add your own comments or tell us about what you are doing on the site.

We would love to hear your feedback or answer any questions you may have about musical improvised comedy so do please get in touch.

openyourmouthandsing@gmail.com

www.musicalimprovcomedy.co.uk

www.joesamuel.co.uk

www.themaydays.co.uk



The Maydays - Brighton's masterful, maverick, award-winning improvised comedy company.

We offer brilliant, acclaimed performances and life-changing tuition in improvised comedy - the creation of scenes and songs in the moment with the power to make people laugh.

The Maydays can provide anything from a 30 minute intimate 'unplugged' performance up to a 90 minute extravaganza including an improvised musical and onstage appearances by audience members. Every show is geared to the needs of the client; taking into account such variables as levels of interaction, purpose of the event, age range of the audience, appropriate content etc.

We also offer training sessions in improvisation skills, which are designed to unlock the creativity of a team and have huge amounts of fun in the process. Anyone can have a go and the laughter is highly infectious.

Corporate Training and Entertainment

Interested in a totally improvised and utterly hilarious show where scenes are created on the spot from audience suggestions? Each show is custom made to fit the audience and occasion. We also offer training using the games and lessons of improvised comedy to facilitate increased confidence, team building, management skills, adaptability and creative thinking.

Private Functions

Want something different for your party, wedding, or private event? Why not have a bespoke show with award winning improvisers, The Maydays? We can tailor you a show of any length from a fifteen minute set with a few songs from your suggestions to a full-length, improvised sketch show based on stories from your guests

Bespoke Workshops

The Maydays complete believe in sharing our knowledge of improv to the wider community. Do you have an improv company that want to expand their skills or range of performance games? Do you have a group of friends interested in Improv but don't know how to move forward. Maybe you're an established company that just needs a little tweaking to maximise your impact. We can help!

Schools and Education

The Maydays use the natural inclination to play to create fun comedy scenes and games with children. The workshops are often followed by a showcase where parents and friends can enjoy improvised comedy as an audience. The Maydays have extensive experience including teaching with BBC Blast

"The Maydays are England's vanguard of long-form improvisation"

*Jason Chin, Former Associate Artistic Director & Director,
Training Centre, iO, Chicago*

"A truly Magical experience...powerful its simplicity. Hundreds of applications to how we work with each other and our clients...never thought it would be so relevant"

Susanna Mitterer, Managing Director of TMI

www.themaydays.co.uk

I'm just a
bipolar girl in
a bipolar world
Higher than I've ever
been

bobble hat Boggie

Love me, Hate me
Just say you care

Update my status

Come into my temple

G A Y FAIRY
Jamboree

Dairy is scary but
Soy brings me Joy

