



How to become the “ideal” floor-singer

These are notes from a workshop which Sarah Morgan gave at the Folk South West Easter School in 2007.

Preparation

Choosing songs to learn

What do you enjoy singing?

To my mind this is the most important factor. If you sing what you love singing, you'll be motivated to practice, and you'll enjoy what you do. If you don't enjoy it, the audience certainly won't.

What kind of song suits you?

Take into account your skill as a singer, your vocal range and your natural style. Some songs are best suited to a strong robust voice, while others are more tender and lyrical. Play to your natural strengths especially when you are starting out.

New material or old standards?

If you sing something with a well known chorus, the audience will more easily join in. On the other hand, some songs have been done to death, and new material can be a welcome change. However, don't assume that an audience will necessarily join in quickly with a chorus they've not heard before. If you are going to a new club to sing, it is worth noting that some places can be a bit possessive or territorial about songs. If you sing one of “their songs” you may find that the audience will take it over, and may even sing a different version to you. It isn't polite, but it does happen! Always have some alternatives ready in case someone who is on before you decides to sing a song you were planning to sing. The ideal floor-singer has a variety of songs. Ask yourself - do you have songs for these occasions?

- A good “warming up song” for the times you are asked to start the evening.
- A good finishing song for the times when you are asked to finish the evening.
- Some lively songs or good choruses for times when it is feeling a bit flat
- Something quiet and reflective to make a change from all those rousing choruses.

Finding material

There is now any amount of material available – on CDs and tapes and on the internet. If you want to go beyond this, you might consider learning to play a “melody line” on some kind of instrument, or finding a friend who can, as this means that you have access to the wide range of songs which are written down rather than recorded.

Learning songs

There are a number of different aspects to learning a song. You need to know the words and the tune, and you also need to know how to put the song across. Because many folk songs are about feeling and emotions, you need to think about them. What is the song about? Is there a story? What are the high and low points? Are there different “speakers”, is it in the first person, or is there a “narrator”. Does it make sense (some ver-

sions end up with quite confused sets of words!)? Does it scan easily – do the words fit the tune and vice versa? One of the best ways to learn (actors do this when learning lines) is to learn a “chunk”, then test yourself, and build the song up in bits.

Once you know the tune, you will almost certainly find that you will have to sing it slightly differently in each verse to accommodate the words. If you are learning from a recording, you could just copy what the singer does, and that is often a good place to start. It can be a good discipline to study exactly how some singers produce their particular form of impact! If you are learning from music, you have to become flexible about things like bar lines and length of notes. If in doubt, make tune and timing fit the words rather than the other way round.

Do you need to learn the words?

Many people worry about forgetting the words and like to sing with a crib-sheet in front of them. My view (many will disagree with me) is that if you are singing songs that are mainly about feelings, you can't easily sing with real expression while you are reading from a set of words. Also, looking down at words affects your breathing and posture, as well as your ability to communicate with your listeners. However, I don't think there is anything wrong with having a set of words with you as a safety net, not to read from but in case you suddenly dry up. One tip – print the words out larger than you think you need them – folk club lighting is often not very bright, and in times of stress you don't want to have to peer at tiny printing.

Getting the pitch right

This is very important especially if the song has a wide range. When you are nervous, it is easy to misjudge the pitch of a song, and if you start in the wrong pitch, you then have to decide whether to restart to continue too high or too low. Work out whereabouts in your vocal range the song fits best. A penny whistle, recorder or pitch-pipe can be very useful as a reminder of where you want to start a song.

If I learn from a recording, how can I make the song my own?

In some ways, this is harder to do if you have learned from a recording. Give the version you have learned time to “settle in” and you'll probably find that in time your version starts to have its own identity, rather than being a carbon copy of the original. Here are some of the ways in which people “customise” their songs.

- Variations in timing and phrasing
- Variations to the tune
- Altering the words to clarify or supplement the story
- Adding words to fit the song to your own location
- Updating the song to reflect social and political change
- Changing the gender to make the song more appropriate to you

With all of the above, some people will say it shouldn't happen, the songs should be left intact, and other people will feel happy to alter the song beyond recognition. In the end, it comes down to your own sensitivity and respect for the material and its originator.

Phrasing and timing

Good phrasing depends on a) your interpretation of the song and b) your level of breath control. It is all too easy to break up the sense of a song by breathing at the end of each line, or worse, in the middle of each line. This isn't necessarily wrong, but it can become boring! Look at the words and try to think in “whole phrases”. Often, you need to carry on

from one line to the next without breathing. If you can't do that, work on improving your breath control!

Think of a steady pulse continuing through the song, like a heartbeat. However, that doesn't mean to say that you should always sing on the beat! Timing in folk music tends to be very flexible, with lines lengthened or shortened to fit the words and meaning. If you know something about music and are learning a song from a book, my best advice is, regard the time signature and bar-lines as suggestions rather than commands.

"Once more with feeling"

You may know all the words and the notes, but still not be able to sing the song. Once you have learned the basics, focus on singing as if you mean it, letting the feelings of the song come through. Without meaning, it is not a song, just a technical exercise. Experiment (in the privacy of your home) with ways of letting emotions "colour" your voice. Listen to yourself on a tape recorder, and sing the same line or verse several times while a) smiling or b) thinking of something very sad. Play it back – can you hear a difference? If not, try again!

Practicing

Do it! Sing your songs till you know them back to front and inside out. Can you stop in the middle of a verse and start again without going wrong? Rehearse in context – if you know that you'll be standing up to sing, practice while standing up, and so on. Imagine that you have an audience in your living room. – practice walking out to the front and singing to them. It feels quite different from just going through the song in your head. If you are going to sing a chorus song, practice telling people the words of the chorus (often quite difficult to do this in isolation). One of the most important aspects of a singer's memory is muscle memory. If you practice your songs out loud, you will remember both words and tune more effectively.

At the club

If you play an instrument, get there early so that your instrument can adjust to the temperature. If you haven't been to the club before, find out how the system works. Is there a list at the door, or do you have to ask the MC? Do you have to ring up beforehand? Some clubs only have pre-booked spots. The ideal floor-singer will observe the "protocol" of the club, e.g. do you come out to the front or sing from where you are, are introductions frowned on or welcomed etc. Take notice of your surroundings.

Planning your spot

For a three song floor spot consider starting with your second best song and finishing with the best song, putting the other one in the middle. That way, you start by letting your audience know that you are a competent performer and that you are going to take care of them, and you finish on a really good note. Try not to do songs that are in the same key, or are the same pace, one after the other. Plan how to introduce the songs as well. If you only get one or two songs, make sure that you have enough material ready so that you can provide a reasonable contrast with the performer who has sung or played before you. The time to sing your long ballad (even if you had set your heart on singing it) is probably not just after someone else's long ballad. You'll get a better response by giving the audience a

bit of light and shade, and probably score a brownie point or two with the MC. And keep your sets short. Leave your audience wanting more (so have one up your sleeve in case the MC says “That was great – can you do one more?”)

Nerves and stage fright

Choose a song which is easy and familiar to start with. Once you have settled down, you can go on to more complex stuff.

Well beforehand: Visualise yourself performing successfully, in as much rich detail as your imagination will allow. Repeat this exercise as often as possible, so that your brain begins to accept the reality of public performance as a positive and enjoyable experience, rather than as a frightening experience. Teach yourself breathing and relaxation techniques.

At the event : use breathing and relaxation techniques to steady yourself. Remind yourself of your positive visualisation. Regard the traditional signs of nerves as just the “pre-flight checklist” – just a sign of increased alertness, and nothing to worry about.

The audience

Try not to think of them as a hostile group who are there to judge you – they won't be. It is often easier to think about sharing your pleasure in the song with others who will enjoy it, rather than as “performing to an audience” If you've done your relaxation and visualisation, this will help you to look confident. Relax, smile, take your time – confident performers don't rush. Make eye contact with the audience. Sit or stand tall, with relaxed arms and shoulders, smile, and don't forget to breathe! Take a moment to make yourself comfortable before you begin – there's no need to rush. Confident performers aren't in a hurry. And treat the audience as a friend; after all, you are all there because of a shared interest. Above all, enjoy the song – if you do, the chances are that others will too.

Introductions

Plan what you are going to say about your songs. When you are introducing songs, you are taking up the audience's time, so you need to speak with a purpose. Be amusing or be informative, or both if you are a real clever-clogs! If in doubt, be brief and to the point.

Some people like to give/hear information about a song's background, others don't! Tired jokes and one-liners can be a real turn-off for an audience, so if in doubt, cut to the song! However, it is polite to credit the author/composer of a song if you know who it is – and if you don't know, go and find out. If you are singing a traditional song, and you know something about its background, you may want to tell the audience (though few audiences want masses of detail – they want to hear the song). Unless you know that you can be interesting and entertaining, it is best to err on the side of brevity.

During your spot you might want to make some comment about the venue or the location - be careful about making adverse comments about the place where the club is held. You may find them funny, but you risk offending the audience. If in doubt, leave it out.

What if I make a mistake?

Everyone does, so this just means that you are normal! If you have got the pitch badly wrong, you'll know pretty soon – probably better to stop and re-pitch rather than struggle on (though this shouldn't happen if you've used a pitch-pipe). All singers, like all actors, sometimes forget their words. If they don't return quickly, see if you can move on to the next verse. If that doesn't work, and if time and circumstance allow, you may do better to sing something different.

Once you have finished

Once you have finished your set, get off stage as quickly and quietly as you can and be ready to support the next performer who comes on. Before you leave, thank the organisers or the MC; running a club is hard work and a bit of appreciation goes a long way!

Here's a list of my personal do's and don'ts – you'll soon develop your own!

Do	Don't
Be polite and friendly	Be a prima donna
Arrive in good time	Take longer than your allotted time
Learn the "unwritten rules"	Put yourself down
Have a respect for your material	Talk too much
Respect and support other performers	Talk during someone else's performance
Make the most of the opportunity	Make a fuss if the organiser can't fit you in
Be well prepared	Picture yourself getting it wrong
Look as if you are enjoying yourself	Forget to breathe!
Know where your songs come from	
Give credit to authors, composers	
Prepare a varied set of songs	
Visualise yourself getting it right	
Rehearse well	

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