

# WOODSHEDDING “LEAD” — IS THIS POSSIBLE?

(26 May 2000; third revision 2 June 2005)

First, what is woodshedding? Authentic woodshedding is three harmony parts (Bass, Bari, and Tenor) discovering appropriate Barbershop harmonies to a sung melody. The melody is preferably initially unfamiliar to the harmonizers, and the harmony is experimented with and “discovered” without reference to existing or familiar Barbershop arrangements.

Singing “woodshed Lead” requires a special set of skills beyond what’s required to sing “performance Lead.” **Awareness** is probably the most important additional thing.

In “performance” singing, the Lead “leads” — using proper vocal technique, maintaining the tonal center, adding dynamics, and completing the song. The harmonizers follow the Lead. The Lead can get into trouble in a performance environment by listening too much — the singing will sound tentative or hesitant, and this will obviously not please many audiences!

During woodshedding, **all four participants must listen, listen, listen.** The Lead is more accurately described as a “melody-singer.” He needs these skills:

1. Awareness that the purpose of woodshedding is to *ring chords* rather than to sing songs. The aware Woodshed Lead will sing more slowly than he might opt to sing in a performance environment. He will be consciously aware of where harmony-part swipes should or may occur, especially at ends of phrases or where the harmony of the song is changing.

2. Awareness that chords falling on “weak beats” in a measure of music (beats #2 & #4 in 4/4 “foxtrot” meter, and beat #3 in 3/4 “waltz” meter) are equally as important to tune, lock, and ring as are the chords that fall on strong beats. The same goes for eighth-notes, etc.

3. Awareness that one note belongs to the melody, and the other notes are up for grabs. Thus, some notes of the melody should be held for as long as it takes for one or more of the harmonizers to locate a feasible note. Woodshedding is “discovery singing,” and all four woodsheddors are equally involved in creating a satisfying arrangement together.

4. Awareness that songs should be pitched wherever the singing is most comfortable for the participants, especially if someone is off his natural part (e.g., a Bass woodshedding the Bari part). This means that a melody “written” in, say, B<sup>b</sup> could be pitched anywhere from A<sup>b</sup> (or even G) up to C. This flexibility enhances the chance that the singing will be vocally free rather than tense, and that more chords ought to ring as a result.

5. The courteous Woodshed Lead will sing a melody straight through “solo” before anything else happens. This is especially critical when one or more of the harmonizers is unfamiliar with the melody to be sung. It’s important when one or more of the harmonizers is newer to the art of woodshedding, because of the “reaction time” required to locate and lock notes. It’s even a good idea when one or more of the harmonizers is an experienced woodshedder with quick reaction time, as several popular melodies have “woodshed variations” that differ from what the songwriters originally wrote. See below for a related two-part rule for the harmony-singers.

6. The Woodshed Lead gains credibility and authority when he refrains from singing until:

- a. The “key” (tune-up) chord is locked and rung; and
- b. The first four-part chord of the song to be woodshedded is locked and rung, with everyone sure of his own starting note.

This keeps one or more of the woodsheddors from being lost for several notes or measures before finally getting a harmonic bearing.

7. Woodshedding is best done at moderate or soft volumes. For one thing, this allows the singers to hear themselves and what's going on.

8. Every aspiring woodshedder should learn as many melodies and lyrics as possible. With several notable exceptions, the best melodies for woodshedding were written between approx. 1895 and 1925, with the optimal ones written largely between 1903 and 1919. The best source for these? Long-time Barbershoppers, who should be only too happy to teach them to you.

k There has been intense popular demand for more publications and material on woodshedding.

From AHSOW, you should certainly order the excellent "*Discovery Singing*" folio of melodies (\$3 for AHSOW members, \$5 others). This pocket-sized folio contains 41 highly woodsheddable melodies, including several original compositions graciously provided by Joe Liles himself. Go to [www.ahsow.org](http://www.ahsow.org) to order. Lady Barbershoppers can benefit similarly from this product. The "Discovery Singing" folio makes a great birthday and holiday gift, too.

A fabulous tool for group work or your own benefit is the *Ear-rangement #1* package. A CD or cassette, supplemented by a fascinating folio of lyrics and histories, gives you 14 "new" old melodies that you can benefit from, whether you're a beginning woodshedder or a "pro." The melodies are sung by a District-champ Lead. Play the melodies over and over until they're burned into your brain. During this time, your ear will be working on harmonies whether you realize it or not! Then, practice adding the harmony part(s) of your choice. Invite some friends over to harmonize with you for some great fun!

Just two of the many benefits: [1] Your "performance" singing *will* improve after you consistently mimic the high quality of the melody-singer, and after your ear begins refining your intuition for tuning harmonies. [2] Even if you've been a lifelong Lead and prefer to sing that part only, you'll be welcome in AHSOW rooms anytime if you can sing these melodies! Come hear the similar and different harmonies that other ear-singers can come up with. You'll add to your enjoyment of Barbershopping in all of these ways. See [www.ahsow.org](http://www.ahsow.org) for how to order the *Ear-rangement #1* package.

9. Perhaps most important — and most different from "performance" Lead-singing — is a conscious awareness that **there is never any need to woodshed a song *without* stopping.**

The purpose of woodshedding is to discover pleasing chords and ring them. Merely motoring through a whole song with inattention to the elements integral to good, fulfilling woodshedding will only result in some of the worst singing that the four of you have ever experienced... and, worse, the louisiest singing that passers-by have ever heard. This has given woodshedding a bad rap in the past. AHSOW administration believes and stands by the reality that **woodshedding MUST be the best singing that Barbershoppers ever do.**

Trust this: Working just one or two phrases of a melody, getting it to the satisfaction of the four of you, can be the biggest Barbershop thrill that you've experienced all year.

Now — what's the intriguing mutual responsibility referred to in (5.)? It's the Primary Rule for Harmony-Singers:

- A. The melody-singer is always right. He may not be correct, but he is always **right**.
- B. When the melody-singer is wrong, see Rule "A".

This means that if a Woodshed Lead changes a melody, the harmonizers should follow what he sings... but the Lead should change the melody just the one time he first introduces it!

In summary, the Woodshed Lead has responsibilities beyond what he may have learned in chorus rehearsal or in a performing quartet. Woodshedding can help you, as a Lead, develop an **ear** for music and make it as important as the mouth emitting the tones.

See *Tips on Woodshedding the Harmony Parts* for even more about woodshedding.  
ANCIENT HARMONIOUS SOCIETY OF WOODSHEDDERS, INC. — [www.ahsow.org](http://www.ahsow.org)