

Out of the WOODWORK and Into the WOODSHED

Authentic woodshedding can be the most fun that Barbershoppers could have. When understood and *properly* undertaken, authentic woodshedding can **enhance your chapter's musical growth** in more ways than any other single Barbershop activity might. Your chapter's members — old or young, experienced in Barbershop or new — can grow and gain musical confidence through “discovery singing.” Your public and Contest performances can reflect the improvements that harmonizing by ear can confer. All it takes to begin is one activity, properly and consistently done.

Activity: Group Woodshedding.

When: Weekly — during warm-ups or break, as part of chapter meeting, or after the meeting.

Who: One leader (to sing melodies), and all chapter members who love to sing. The more, the more fun! All voice-parts should be represented by at least one man. Men who normally sing Lead should sing a harmony part of their choice, for now.

Steps: One man sings through a woodsheddable melody*, at a reasonable tempo, so that all participants can hear where the harmonies might go. Everyone else listens without making a sound. No one may use written music, except the melody-singer.

Next, the one melody-singer blows the pitch for the same song he just sang. He ensures that all singers take (and ring) the tonic tune-up chord. He *carefully* ensures that every man knows what his note in the starting chord of the singing will be, and he explains *why* each starting-note is where it is.

Example: *Till We Meet Again* is pitched where comfortable, usually in A^b — with the first melody-note (“Smile...”) on the C a third above the tune-up A^b. The melody-singer says, “The Lead sang this note (A^b) in the tune-up chord. Since the first melody-note is here” (he sings the C), “that pushes the Tenors from this same note” (he sings the C again) “to here” (he sings the E^b above the C). “Now, since the Lead and Tenor had to move higher, the Baritone's note is better when it goes from their tune-up-chord note” (he sings the Bari E^b) “to here instead” (he sings the A^b where the Lead originally tuned up). The leader then makes sure that this starting chord locks and rings.

Next, the melody-singer and the harmonizers begin singing — **at a tempo slower** than the one at which one would sing the song in a performance, but fast enough to impart harmonic rhythm. ***If you fail to heed this vital point, this activity will prove of very little use to you.*** The slower tempo allows the woodshedder (especially the novice) to locate, tune, and adjust his own note in the chord. This situation arises either when a harmonizer is simply way off, or if another voice-part has first latched onto a note that obliges another singer to switch to another note in the chord. The slower tempo also illuminates the importance of harmonizing “weak-beat” (often nonstructural) chords.

The leader (melody-singer) should avoid “correcting” anyone. This level of woodshedding is “discovery” for the participants, who will learn the most by finding their own way. If several men woodshedding the same part repeatedly have trouble finding a note, the leader may recommend, “Some of the [voice-part] singers might consider a [higher, lower] note in this chord — listen to where the melody is at this point! Is it better for you to be [above, below, closer to] the melody note? Let's try it again!” The phrase is then repeated at the same slower-than-performance speed.

The leader should be aware that some melody-notes will need to be held longer than others (sometimes for several seconds) so that participants can settle on their notes. Also, it's great — and recommended — that **plenty** of time be spent on any single woodsheddable phrase so that the harmonizers will feel more comfortable. There is no hurry! The purpose is not to “sing songs,” but for men to expand their musical capabilities — and their confidence — by discovering chords.

Repeat this activity every week to reap the eventual benefits! Participants will find their confidence and improved abilities carrying over into “performance” areas of Barbershopping.

*Woodshedding is **not** the singing of “Barberpole Cat” songs, tags, or familiar or existing arrangements. Lesser-known “chestnut-type” melodies, especially those *written* in the keys of B^b, A^b or C, are most appropriate and easiest to woodshed. (For now, avoid songs *written* in E^b and F.)

Sources of melodies: Order from www.ahsow.org the AHSOW “Ear-rangement #1” package. See the web site for details. You'll be pleased!