

Backing up

Backing vocalist Kim Chandler tells the tale of the backing singer

'Sweet Caroline, good times never seemed so good...' It is the sound-check of a guest appearance by Neil Diamond at a gig in Dublin. He turns to me and says, 'Girl, you sound like a whole backing choir!' It's moments of recognition like this that we professional backing vocalists live for; especially uttered by people who are 'in the know'. The vast majority of popular music has used backing singers over the years. The public is accustomed to seeing those nameless smiling guys and girls with their trendy outfits and slick choreography singing behind some of the greatest stars of all time.

In the past, some backing groups became established entities in their own right, such as The Mel Tones singing behind Mel Tormé, The Pied Pipers singing behind Frank Sinatra or Elvis' all male group The Jordanaires. Then there were the 'and the...' groups of the Motown era such as Gladys Knight and The Pips, Martha Reeves and The Vandellas or Diana Ross and The Supremes. Some artists like Aretha Franklin or even Britain's own Cliff Richard have used the same people for many years. Yet others book freelance singers for one particular event or tour – there is no set protocol.

As someone who has also been teaching pop vocal harmonies at tertiary level for many years, I realise how little is known and understood about what it entails. It seems to be sorely undervalued by many who have never experienced it and is usually seen as an inferior role to lead vocals (deemed to be the 'real' singing!). Lead and backing vocals are both important and complementary to each other. It's the interaction between them that makes the music interesting vocally. So what do backing vocals involve exactly? How challenging can it be?

Firstly, you need to have a great set of ears. Backing arrangements are mostly learned by ear from recordings and then pieced together at rehearsal. You've got to be able to learn parts, lyrics and song formats very quickly as rehearsal time is precious. I had an experience not long ago while doing backing vocals for Natalie Cole that illustrates this point. It's the first rehearsal for an upcoming live

concert and at the last minute I'm told by the MD that she wishes me to sing the harmony of a song that we haven't done before and I've never heard. There's no written music so I have literally minutes to listen to the song and learn the part before singing it in front of everyone. This sort of pressure is not unusual – it's what you are expected to be able to do.

Related to having good ears and memory is having accurate intonation. You have to find the starting note yourself from the chordal context and sometimes the harmony parts can be much more complex than just standard triadic patterns. This is especially the case in jazz arrangements where starting notes can often be a nightmare to find and the lines angular and difficult to pitch.

Backing vocals often require a greater amount of musical skill, understanding and discipline than lead vocals – controversial as this may seem

You've also got to deal with the distraction of the other singers singing different notes from you. It's not so bad when it's straightforward thirds and fifths, but when you're talking about intervals such as semitones and tritones then that's a different story!

Being able to read music and having theoretical knowledge, though not essential, is another bonus in the backing vocalist's arsenal. You never know whether you're going to be asked to learn the parts by ear or by eye (or even both within the same gig) so it's best to have all bases covered. Reading music certainly has its advantages in cutting down rehearsal time (which is often paid

for in the bigger gigs and 'time is money') and saves having to memorise huge swathes of material, which is always a little risky. On the other hand, if there are no set arrangements, the backing team is also expected to be musically creative enough to come up with their own parts.

You need to be versatile stylistically and have mastery over a wide pitch and tonal range from a very breathy, sultry sound through to a belty gospel, soul or raunchy rock sound. In my own career I've had to sing everything from very sweet jazz backing arrangements for the BBC Big Band through to the other extreme of being a 'rock chick', backing British hard rock veteran Uriah Heep. This makes for a great amount of variety in one's performing life.

Aside from the pitching and tonal issues already discussed, backing vocalists need to match each other's phrasing, timing, dynamics and diction – all essential ingredients in what is known as 'blend'. This ability to blend is arguably the most essential ingredient in good backing vocals – what I like to call the 'glove' factor. It becomes all the more challenging when there is less than adequate stage monitoring and when performing alongside very loud instruments.

Flexibility is vital because things can change unexpectedly at any time. A fine example occurred while I was backing American white soul legend Michael McDonald last year at the Royal Albert Hall. He decided during the show to do some songs we hadn't rehearsed, which he apparently does when he's 'in the flow'. We backing vocalists just looked at each other trying to decide by telepathy and hand signals who was going to do what and away we went! No one was any the wiser and that's how it's supposed to be – we were just doing our job. If you are working with competent, confident people it usually works out in the end and having to take risks makes things fun and exciting.

Sometimes there can be other aspects to the job than just singing the harmonies. For example, a friend of mine who toured with Diana Ross for years was often responsible for sound-checking Ms Ross' lead vocals because he was able to sound so like her. In addition, intensive touring schedules mean that sometimes the main artist's voice gets very tired and one hears rumours of live backing vocalists 'bailing' them out on particularly difficult notes when the occasion demands.

The team-work aspect cannot be overstated. It requires a 'team' mental-

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ty for people to blend together as one voice and not sound like a group of solo singers singing simultaneously (as people who are accustomed to singing only lead vocals have a tendency to do). The 'team' mentality is necessary for the backing vocalists to not upstage the lead vocalist but be happy in the support role that the vocal harmonies provide. Backing vocalists also have to perform appropriate dance movements as a team and not just 'do their own thing', so therefore musical and visual teamwork are key factors.

Some artists want such a 'matched set' in their backing vocalists that height, build, colour, gender and age more often than not play a large part in determining which singers get booked for a particular gig. At 5'10" myself, I have lost and gained work due to my height alone. In fact, the visual side is deemed to be so important that there are many 'live' shows where the backing vocals have been pre-recorded with real singers and then mimed by non-singers who have the right look. Then there is the anomaly of seeing only a couple of singers wailing away to a veritable 'wall' of harmony parts while hoping that the audience doesn't notice. These are some of the more depressing trends of the business.

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Last but not least, it's vital to mention the character traits evident in the people who are booked over and over again: punctuality, reliability, being well prepared, pleasant, diplomatic etc... Arranger and musical director Richard Niles, who has booked backing vocalists for many famous acts over the years, gives the following piece of advice to aspiring backing vocalists: 'Be polite, and charming and even amusing, but don't fool around too much because it slows down the work'. One is always aware that it is one's reputation that largely determines how regularly the work flows. As the old adage goes, 'You're only as good as your last gig'.

Many professional vocalists sing both lead and backing vocals, but in my experience it is a rare person who is equally skilled in both. Exceptions to this are artists such as Donna Summer, Deniece Williams and Luther Vandross who started out their careers as backing vocalists before having their immense lead vocal abilities recognised. However, having sung both lead and backing interchangeably over the years, it is my opinion (and that of many others) that backing vocals often require a greater amount of musical skill, understanding and discipline – controversial as this may seem.

This has just been a quick glimpse into the professional backing vocal world – that specialised use of the ears, eyes, voice, body, brain and personality. Many artists, managers and musical directors know all too well the impact and value that good backing vocals can add to any live show and that is why it continues to thrive. There is great satisfaction in a job well done and those rare magic moments make it all worthwhile. It's certainly not for the faint-hearted or conversely for those seeking fame, fortune and glory, but if you're into it and good at it then it's definitely one of the best jobs around!

KIM CHANDLER is a senior vocal tutor at VOCALTECH in West London. She has backed artists such as Björk, Michael McDonald, Natalie Cole, Michael Bolton, Neil Diamond, Puff Daddy, Uriah Heep, Thelma Houston, Barry Manilow and the BBC Big Band. Kim can be seen on Natalie Cole's latest DVD 'Ask a Woman Who Knows' (Universal, 2003)