

SINGING CALL SESSION

PREPARED AND PRESENTED BY JEFF PRIEST

Good Morning:

After more than many decades of calling and having attended caller clinics and seminars conducted by some the best and most respected callers in our activity, I have developed some styles and opinions on the use and presentation of singing calls that I have been asked to share today.

- I am a very strong believer that ALL callers should do Singing Calls at ALL programs
- Singing Calls are, in my opinion the icing on the cake
- I believe the style and smoothness of the singing call has been lost to creative choreography. Choreography is important but so is timing and smoothness. We do call this Square Dancing not Square Puzzling.
- I could spend hours on this subject. But I have about half an hour today.
- I do a Singing Call within every tip at all programs I call from Basic to A-2. When I called C-1 (*When I was a full time caller and had the time to work on that program*) I used Singing Calls at least every other tip if not in each tip. My dancers came to expect an appropriate figure for the program they were dancing. I took the time to write those figures to include calls from the program being called at that dance.

For years I heard that Advanced and Challenge Dancers Don't like Singing Calls, certainly some do not, however I discovered that when they were able to dance singing calls with appropriate choreography many rather enjoy them.

This is not going to be a singing lesson or a choreography lesson. But rather some idea's on how to present singing calls using the music, your own special talents & techniques and some smooth choreographic delivery.

So lets begin;

First: The voice: Everybody has their own method of presenting anything they do vocally. Each caller has three voices to choose from.

- The Talking Voice (your everyday voice can be effective in a singing call)
- The Soft Voice – This is a higher pitch and softer tone than your normal singing voice
- The Hard Voice – or Singing voice, the most commonly used for this purpose
- Some people are even able to control and utilize a falsetto voice. This is not particularly common in our activity. But can be effective if used properly.

I would suggest that we should try to use a combination of the three major voices to perform a singing call. If you listened to a professional singer and they sang in a monotone or just one voice with little or no inflection how many records of that individual would you buy? Not many! Also It is important to know your music and use it to your advantage with your voices.

Microphone technique - when I was taught to call, I was taught to hold the mic on my chin and talk over it. That's O.K. for talking - Have you ever seen a professional singer do that. NO! and you never will. I have cultivated my own special technique that works for me. Microphone technique is a very personal thing just like picking a microphone. The microphone should be close enough to the sound source to pick it up and effectively send it through the amplification equipment. You will see what I mean as we go through some of the examples. When I sing I don't always hold the mic close to my chin it – I would deafen people. Don't be afraid of the sound of your own voice. A number of people are and they tend not to project because of that.

On the technique of delivery and voice utilization I found a perfect example.

Here is a singing call that came out many years ago and was popular and used by a lot of callers. The same music has been re-released recently by the same label, only they have used a different artist. The result, the sound is different. The words are the same but the sound is unique. This demonstrates very clearly the personality you are allowed to display when you perform. This tune is Chaparral - C-202 Rockin' in Rosalie's Boat

Original by Jerry Haag - Redone by Dee Dee Dougherty

Why not Yodel to that tune. It's not something that I never thought of, but it certainly sounds good and is very effective in her presentation. The point is YOU can do what ever YOU want with a singing call. When I pick my music, I try to pick music that is very full. I am not one to use a lot of records where the melody is not clearly defined. I like to pick music that the dancers can tap to or sing along with. I also pick music that is danceable and that fits my abilities. I don't pick music just because it is popular. There is no value in trying to do a song you can't sing or work with. If it's out of your capabilities, stay away from it. There are so many good tunes to pick.

There is also little value in doing a song that can't be danced comfortably. There are a few out there. I like to pick a piece of music that "speaks" to me in some fasion. If I don't "feel" it I can't perform it.

- I always work with a singing call until I am absolutely comfortable with it before I ever take it out of my basement. Phrasing is critical – Often times the artist on the flip side does not use the right phrasing. If possible, I go to the original hit song to get the correct phrasing if I am unsure.
- How many of you actually practice your singing calls prior to calling them each week? I practice my singing call program every week!
- I pick out the music I am going to use and set up my program.
- I prepare my workshop material
- I make sure that I have a singing call figure from the workshop
- I also make sure the figure is not too tough for the first time out
- Then I practice the singing calls until I am comfortable with them

Can I do a singing call without practice? Sure I can! Will it be as good as I would like it to be... Maybe! Does practice help me? You bet it does.

That is where I get to play with the tones of the song, review the musical additives and see if I can use different inflection in my voice to enhance the presentation.

How many of you have ever gone to the live theatre?

Do you have any idea how much those people practice and rehearse for the show - day after day?

You are no different. You are putting on a performance for your dancers – They are paying to hear you perform - you must be prepared to do the best job you are capable of!

Another aspect of a singing call is the phrasing of the words to the song. This includes the choreography not just the lyrics of the song. You need to be sure **not** to have your singing call:

- "Rushed" (Too Fast)
 - "Jerky" (Stop & Go)
 - or "Clipped" (Not giving sufficient time for the call execution). 99% of all singing calls have a 64 beat figure don't try to put 72 beats worth of calls into them. If you don't have a CALLERLAB timing list – GET ONE!
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I mentioned a moment ago about little value in music that can't be danced. There are some pretty bad ones on the market. I don't have any to show you because I don't buy those ones. However here are some music samples to be careful of. Understand, I USE all of these in my program at some time or another. The dancers like them and they can have fun with them. They are good tunes - they just don't meet your usual musical dance phrase.

1. I Don't Know Why - Sagebrush - SBP-1002 Too fast! (134) Slow it down to 43.5 or 126
2. On and On - Royal - RYL-307 Calypso Type Tune Hard To SQ Dance To
3. I'll Follow The Sun - Shakedown - SD-246 Prominent Rhythm is Not an even tempo

My dancers enjoy these tunes but you need to be careful of the way you call them and the choreography you use.

These next ones are quite the contrary. These are a few examples of different styles of music the dancers enjoy. They are great dance tunes and here are some ideas on how to use them. Also, as I mentioned earlier note the microphone technique. It doesn't always sit on my chin.

1. I Found A New Baby - Blue Star - BS-2263 Great Music Good Instrumentation-(124)
2. A Kind of Hush - Global Music - GMP-207 Mellow – Can Be Talked or Chanted
3. Who's Your Lady Friend - Hi Hat - HH-433 Ham this one up! Use the accent it's fun
4. Cherokee Maiden - Chaparral - C-803 My presentation is a bit silly but the dancers have fun with it

Most of us have seen Norm Wilcox do his “Polka Dot Bikini” or Lloyd Priest and “Raise the Shades”. In their clubs these songs became so well known they made badges and sold them for memorabilia or how about Aaron Goodman and his version of “If I were a Rich Man” or Tim Marriner and his Scat through “Pink Cadillac”. All these callers have added their own personality to a record done by hundreds. You can too!

I also believe in the use of the music volume control. You should **NEVER** turn the music so low the dancers can't hear it. But you should use the volume to emphasize musical chasers or other effects. This goes with knowing your music. Practice, Practice, Practice.

We, as callers, should take the time to write down the words to the song to be used when appropriate. I know of callers that will not order specific records because there are too many words. They are missing some great opportunities. You should take the time to write them out and read them or memorize them if you can. I can't memorize all the words so I take the time to type them and read them as required. I also note the tag if there is one or any musical change.

I have over 800 active singing calls. They are all catalogued in a data base and I have the ability to sort them 8 different ways. Each of my records is associated with at least two themes. I am a believer of theme and party nights using the appropriate music. Your dancers come to be entertained this is one great way of giving them something to look forward to. For those of you coming to the dance tonight you will hear mostly Christmas music but it will all be winter related music of some fashion and it will be entertaining.

In our clubs we have theme nights each year - for example:

- In January we have a night at the beach. We tell our dancers to come dressed for the beach and we have a great time. All the singing calls are summer related songs.
- In February I do an evening of love songs for Valentines.
- In October we have a Halloween party and appropriate songs for the night.
- And in December of course we do a Christmas party. With appropriate songs.

Take the time to build your night take your dancers up and bring them back slightly, then take them up again and go for a grand finale. Why not end a singing call with a grand yellow rock or an 8 to the middle with a hoot and a holler. Sometimes, I tell them on a weave the ring to wink at everyone they pass - then I say if you are using both eyes that is a blink. They all laugh and have some fun with it. Occasionally I put a weave the ring in the last singing call and have the dancers say goodnight to everyone they pass. All these things work - Use them! They are neat little things to enhance your performance.

Now the second part of this presentation is smooth choreography. That doesn't mean calls that fit sequentially together, although that is the idea, that is another topic. Today it means using the beat of the music and lead time to deliver the call and allow the dancers to dance on the # 1 beat - to be able to dance smoothly. Too often callers call on beat # 1 and the dancers must then dance on beat # 3 or 5. This gets to be difficult for the dancer after a while. If a round dance Cuer gave the command on the beat the dancer was supposed to dance on, they simply couldn't do the dance. They would be fighting the music all the way. The same is true with Square dancing. Singing calls that start with a Grand Square or Circle left are great! The dancer gets the # 1 beat all the time, because the caller wants to sing in time with the musical phrase. But what about the figure - do you pre-cue the figure? If you don't allow your dancers to dance on the # 1 beat they will get tired very quickly and most won't even realize why. It's because they're dancing "Up Stream". Having said that there are some times where they simply can't have the # 1 beat. For example: each phrase is 8 beats and a Square thru is 10 beats the next call must start on # 3 beat. However, if you do a swing thru you can now pick up the # 1 beat again. The point is if you pre-cue and let the dancer use the # 1 beat, **most** of the time, your dancers will be dancing much more smoothly and will be much happier.

Another component of smoothness is tempo. I have followed callers on festivals and was shocked to see the turn table running at 46 or 47 rpm. For the majority of our songs that is way too fast. CALLERLAB has determined the most comfortable beats per minute to dance are: any guesses? In the range of 124 – 130. If your turntable is set at 46 or 47 rpm for most records you will be running your dancers at 136 – 144 beats per minute. Running is the key word here. If you are unsure what the beats per minute are, this is how you measure it. Play the record at 45rpm use a stop watch and count the beats for 15 seconds. Multiply by four and that is the number of beats per minute. You need to slow or speed the record to fit the comfort range of 124 -130. Hence the variable speed on your equipment. Your dancers will love you for it. Again being careful of records like “I don’t know why” when you slow it down to make the tempo danceable you do distort the sound of the song slightly.

What do you do with new dancers or dancers learning a new call?

- Do you give them more beats than the call requires for execution to make up for their inability. Or, Do you force them to catch up to you by calling the way you would with experienced dancers?

If you do either of these - you shouldn't, in my opinion. The preferred and, I believe, the best method is to slow down the tempo slightly, give the correct number of beats for execution, but give them a slower pace to move to, say 116 – 124 bpm, until they are comfortable with the move. They will learn to dance the correct timing and when the tempo is put back to normal they will be successful. All your dancers on the floor will appreciate this approach. It gives them all equal chance to dance to the beat.

Callers have three means of choreographic delivery.

- Pre-cue - give the dancer the # 1 beat to dance on
- Cue on the # 1 beat - Have the dancers use # 3 or # 5
- Cue early or late - and hope they can figure out when their feet are supposed to move
- Pre-cueing to give the dancer the # 1 beat is preferred

The other aspect is call execution - again there are three options:

- Give the correct number of beats to execute the call - this is preferred for smoothness.
 - Rush the dancers, give the correct number of beats but change the tempo and deliver the calls early and keep them running. This can be an effective gimmick used sparingly.
 - Clip your calls – Don't give sufficient time to execute the call - too many calls for the music. Not recommended ever!
 - **Always** give the correct number of beats - Get a timing list if you don't have one.
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O.K. What have we covered?

➤ The voice: you have three to choose from:

- Your talking voice,
- Your soft voice,
- Your hard or Singing voice.
- Also a falsetto voice if you have that ability.

➤ Use all of these to you best advantage, including Yodeling or Scat or Chanting if they work

➤ Microphone Technique.

- Use it so it is comfortable. Get the sound source to the dancers.
- Don't be afraid of the sound of your own voice. Let the dancers hear what you have to say.

- Musical Choices:
 - Pick music YOU can work with
 - Pick music your dancers will enjoy
- Phrasing & Timing:
 - Make sure that your lyrics and choreography fit the musical phrase
 - Give proper lead time for each call so the dancers CAN move smoothly
 - Use your Tempo to ensure dancer success
- Theme Nights:
 - Use your singing calls to build an evening of entertainment. Have fun with them
- Delivery:
 - Make sure you let the dancers win. Deliver your call so they can dance on the number 1 beat most of the time.
- Practice:
 - Practice, Practice, Practice
- Last and Most Importantly:
 - Be You! You as a Square Dance Caller have much to offer. If we were all the same it would be a very boring activity. We need to follow the same guidelines to ensure consistency and comfort in our dance. But we need to put our own personality into our presentation.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to offer my opinion on the use and presentation of singing calls and smooth dancing. I hope that something I have shared will be of benefit to you.