

How to Sing Harmony the Natural Way Part 1: Getting Started—Harmony Above the Melody

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Have you ever noticed how some singers can add harmony to a song, even the first time they hear it, without needing anyone to teach them their part and without stopping to analyze the music? For them, harmony seems to come naturally. But viewed from the outside, it can seem like a mystery—how do these people know what notes to sing when they’ve never even heard the song before? Singing harmony like this, on-the-fly—improvising our part as we go along—is the one of most exciting and fun things to do in vocal music. So it’s worthwhile trying to unravel the mystery.

I’ve recently released a two-part course called *How to Sing Harmony the Natural Way*, recorded with Don Share of the Downtown Mountain Boys and Keith Little, one of the finest harmony singers in bluegrass and country music, who toured and recorded with Ricky Skaggs and Dolly Parton. Our approach is to show you how to develop the essential ear and voice skills that intuitive harmony singers use. In this article, I’ll share some of those skills with you.

Three Notes Every Harmony Singer Should Know

To become a natural harmony singer, we need to be able to intuitively sing the three notes of the major chord. The good news is that you probably already know these notes. Play a G chord on your guitar (or banjo, mandolin, piano, etc.) and sing the first line of the Star Spangled Banner. “Oh say can you see…” For folks who like to read music, this is shown in example A.

Example A

O--oh say can you see

Your notes on the words, “say, can, you” are the three notes of the major chord. Now play the G chord again, but just sing “say, can, you.” Sing this a few times, and memorize the notes. Next, sing the same notes again, but this time, sing the syllable “la” instead of the words. Example B shows these three important notes.

Example B

say can you
(La) (La) (La)

Now, play an A chord and do this same thing in the key of A. Sing the three chord notes in this new key. Next, play major chords in a variety of different keys and sing the three chord notes in each key. This exercise will help train your ear and voice to find these three essential notes quickly and easily.

Why is this so important? It’s because when we sing harmony, we’re adding notes above and below the melody of a song. And in many styles of music including folk, bluegrass, country, rock and pop, 90% of the time or more, *our harmony note is one of the three notes of the major chord*. So the better you can hear and sing these chord notes, the easier it will be to find your harmony part to any song. These three major chord notes are essential building blocks of harmony. Sometimes intuitive harmony singers don’t realize how often their harmony note is one of the three chord notes. They may just say, “I’m singing the note that sounds right.” But whether or not they realize it, most of the time they’re singing one of the three chord notes.

Bumping Up to find High Harmony Notes

So let's start figuring out harmony above the melody. We're going to learn to sing close, or tight, harmony, so we'll choose notes as close as possible to the melody. And since our harmony note is usually one of the three chord notes, our technique is pretty straightforward. We'll learn to intuitively sing the nearest chord note above the melody note. Here's an exercise that will teach you how:

We'll need two voices, so get together with a singing buddy. Play a G chord on your guitar, piano or other instrument and keep playing that chord, over and over. One person sing any one of the three chord notes of that chord, just like you learned to do earlier. Just sing the word "La" or choose any word you like.

Now, second person join in and sing the *exact same note*. This will be our melody note. And, here's the fun part: Second person—*while first person keeps holding that melody note*—you move your note up until you're on the *nearest chord note above* the first person. The two of you will now be singing two different notes of the G chord, and you'll hear how it makes the harmony. We call it "bumping up" to the harmony note.

Next, strum your G chord some more, but choose one of the other chord notes for your melody note (remember each major chord has three chord notes). Person two start on this new melody note and bump up to the next chord note above it. And then do the same with the third chord note. After you practice this in G, try it in as many different keys as you can. Don't forget to take turns, so you can both practice bumping up to the nearest chord note above the melody note. Example C shows this exercise in written form.

3/4

Example C

Mel harmony above mel

Mel harmony above mel

Mel harmony above mel

La - a - a - a La - a - a - a La - a - a - a

Being able to bump up and sing the nearest chord note above the melody is the secret to finding high harmony in folk, country and bluegrass music because most of the time, our high harmony note is the *next higher note above the melody that's in the chord that's being played at that point in the song*.

Using Keywords To Jump Start Your Harmony

Here is a technique that natural, intuitive harmony singers use all the time, often without realizing it. In any song, certain words, and the notes that we sing on those words, are more important than others. These are usually the words and notes that we hold out the longest and often they come on a downbeat. In our course, *How to Sing Harmony the Natural Way*, we call these important words our "keywords."

Let's look at an example. Here are the first two lines of the traditional folk classic, All the Good Times Are Past and Gone

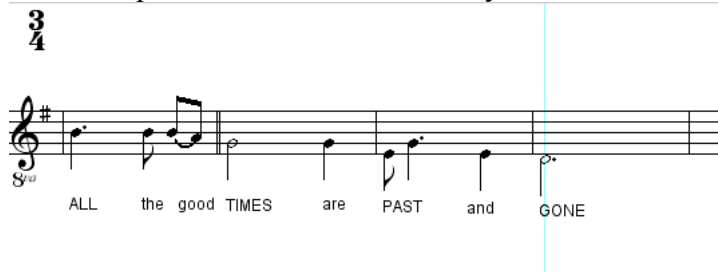
All the good times are past and gone
All the good times are o'er

Here are those lines with the *keywords* CAPITALIZED

ALL the good TIMES are PAST and GONE
ALL the good TIMES are O'ER

The example below shows the melody of the first line of the song, with the *keywords* in UPPER CASE.

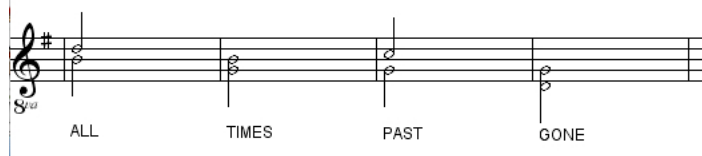
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ALL the good TIMES are PAST and GONE

Finding High Harmony to a Song

When we figure out our harmony to a song, especially when we're doing it on the fly, the first thing we do is to find our harmony notes for these *keywords*. Example E shows the melody and harmony for the *keywords* for the first line of our song.



ALL TIMES PAST GONE

Once we've got the harmony for our *keywords*, it's easy to fill in the rest of the words and then put it all together. Much of the time on these fill-in notes, we can stay on the note we chose for the previous keyword.

So next time you listen to some ace harmony singers working out a new song, notice how they start by getting the harmony notes on the keywords. Then each time the chorus comes around, they fill in the more of the fill-in words until they've got harmony for the whole song worked out.

In part two of this article series, I'll explain how to find harmony *below* the melody of a song.