

# EVERY BREATH YOU TAKE: LITTLE KIDS ROCK VOCALS

by Chuck Speicher

Singing gives our students an opportunity to use their voices to hear tuning, note relationships, and rhythms. It is considered such a fundamental aspect of musicianship that everyone attending college for music has to spend time in singing in vocal groups. Singing is also something that turns a lot of “would be” musicians away from studying music because of the way they judge themselves or have been judged. Because our voices come directly from us it is the instrument associated with the most personal feelings. We have the opportunity to help our students enjoy singing, to find their OWN voices, and to have fun in the process!

## 1) VOCAL WARM UPS

- a) Getting students to use their voices while having fun with each other during a warm up exercise is a great way to get them all singing and experimenting without taking themselves too seriously.
  - i) Be sensitive to do all of this as a group without singling any one student out—this can do irreparable damage to their self concept and willingness to participate.
  - ii) In general people fear public speaking more than death, and the idea of being singled out to sing in front of our peers is on par with that!

## 2) UP AND DOWN STORY

- a) Use this “story” as a way to warm up the voice and encourage creative participation. Students love participating in the fun that this encourages. Imitate a little man walking on your hand using your fingers (let your fingers do the walking) while having everyone make vocal walking noises or background music (do da do da do, etc).
  - i) The man gets to an elevator and goes up to the top floor—everyone makes a vocal sweep sliding from the lowest note in their register to the highest. When he reaches the top floor the man jumps out the window with a parachute on his back—everyone makes a vocal sweep sound from the highest note in their register to the lowest. Then as the class “What can we add to this story? Give me something that happens to the man and a sound to go along with it!” Maybe a student says “He steps on a rotten tomato on his way to the elevator—splat!” Then you retell the same story again with the same vocal sounds intact adding the new element and it’s sound effect. Continue adding until you’ve got five or six new sounds.

## 3) CREATING WARM UPS FROM SONGS

- a) A good idea for a vocal warm up is to take a fragment of melody from a song you’re working on in class or a favorite from a student suggestion (see lesson plan “Rock and Roll Vocal Warm Ups”).
  - i) Think of “Diamonds” by Rhianna. While she sings “Shine bright like a diamond” she is singing up and down the interval of a 5th, making an excellent vocal warm up out of material our students identify with. Or the first couple notes of Adele’s “Rolling in the Deep” while she’s singing “There’s a fire”. This is a great blues scale based warm up that once again

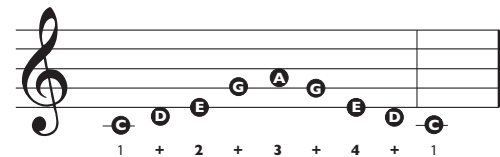
comes directly out of music the students are listening to.

- ii) On different days you can ask for suggestions from the class and listen together for something to use as a warm up, taking whatever fragment of melody you decide and moving it up chromatically through the range of your singers.

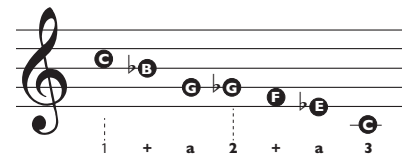
## 4) MORE TRADITIONAL WARM UPS

- a) There is an episode of “The Osbournes” where Ozzy Osbourne is warming up for a concert with a vocal coach like he’s about to sing in an opera. The warm up is very traditional, like would be used for any choir. These warm ups are great because of the way they train the ear while exercising the voice and giving us an opportunity to focus on our breathing habits.
  - i) We can capitalize further with the traditional warm up idea by using notes from pitch collections we would use to improvise with on an instrument, or harmonizing triads together.

- (1) For example, the notes in a pentatonic warm up might look like this:

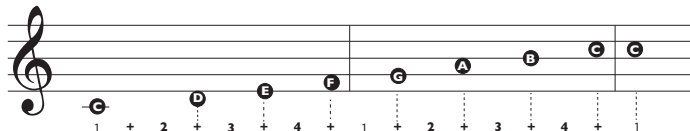


- (2) While the notes in a blues scale warm up might look like this:



- b) Using voices to build the triad is a great idea too. Simply divide your class into three sections having one group sing the root, the second group sing the 3rd and the last group sing the 5th (see lesson plan “Vocal Chords”).
  - i) Be sure to step up to each chord tone using your guitar or keyboard as you lead this warm up to train the ear to hear the relationships. This type of warm up can help make singers aware of which note a melody begins on when they hear the bass or chord.

ii) A “traditional” warm up with a twist is outlined in the Berklee Press vocal book called “Vocal Workouts for the Contemporary Singer”. In it they take a typical major scale pattern and sing it with syncopations.



(a) This type of warm up helps our singers become aware of beat position as they sing. Using good warm ups that heighten musical awareness will soon make the old singers joke obsolete: How do you know when there is a singer at your door? They can’t find the key and have no idea when to come in!

### 5) SINGING WITHOUT DAMAGING THE VOICE

- a) In “The Rock and Roll Singers Survival Manual” the author talks about the difference between the muscles we use to swallow and the muscles we use to yawn.
- i) If we pay attention to where our adam’s apple is while doing these two things we notice a drastically different use of muscles.
  - ii) Swallowing imitates the kind of muscular tension that happens when we sing high notes, tightening up to have more control over the voice. The fact is we want to do the opposite, remaining relaxed in our throat muscles while reaching higher pitches. This is greatly helped along by understanding how to use the effortless power involved in good breathing techniques.

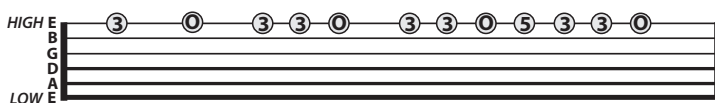
### 6) LINKING VOCALS TO GUITAR

- a) Call and Response Using New Chords
- i) Lynette Edwards in New York City is one of our teachers who uses an outstanding in teaching new chords and associating them with the voice. When her class is learning the A chord, she has everyone get used to playing that chord as a group while keeping time with each other using a strum pattern. Then she does the “call” singing something like “I am playing a A, A A A all day”. She improvises a bluesy sounding melody while she sings whatever words she makes up. Then she motions to one of the students in her group to do the “response”. They sing back to her using their own improvised melody “This is how I play, A today all day” or whatever words they make up. Each time she praises each improvisation while everyone continues keeping time with the strum pattern before

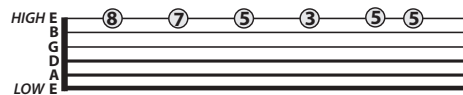
moving on to the next student. Eventually students are invited to lead the call and response. This exercise is fun, encourages silliness, and meanwhile encourages focused listening and timing.

### 7) VOCAL TABLATURE

- a) Mark Hale in Nashville uses a technique with his kids that links reading guitar TAB with vocalizing melodies. For younger children a song like in the style of “Rain Rain Go Away” may be a great starting point



- i) First have the kids sing the melody as a group. Then introduce the tablature, having them sing as they play.
- ii) Another melody that works great for this but uses more of the fret board is in the style of “We Will Rock You” by Queen



- iii) Singing and playing this melody while other students are strumming the A chord quickly trains the ear to hear the “blues notes” that make it work.

### 8) ONGOING ENCOURAGEMENT

- a) Our students (and ourselves) thrive from the faith others have in us. No one or nothing exists in isolation, and many an incredible success story came on the heels of knowing someone had faith in their ability.
- i) John Flora, a Little Kids Rock teacher in Jersey City, New Jersey says that one of the most important things he gives his singers as a teacher is his encouragement. He especially focuses his positive attention on a student who is finding “their own” voice, as each one of us is different and beautiful in our own individual way. He also points out as mentioned earlier never to single students out but instead to have them sing in groups. People who want to sing solos will let us know as they become more comfortable in the group.