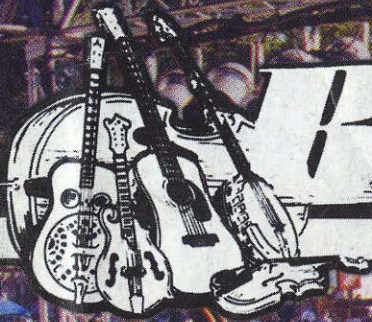


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SINGLE MIC PERFORMANCE: A HOW-TO

By Matt Dudman

Popularity

I have noticed more and more bands in the last couple of years trying the neo-traditional single mic approach. Some do so quite effectively, and some still need some work.

Conundrum

The issue of whether to use the single mic or multiple mic performance approach has been hotly debated ever since 1996 when Doyle Lawson brought back this old-fashioned performance style. There is no right answer or correct opinion. Personally, I have loved the look of the single mic performance since I first knew of it, and I've worked in several bands since 1996 to perfect the approach. My feeling is that a perfect mix is theoretically easier to get with multiple mics, but inconsistently achieved, due to unpredictably renegade sound persons or improper mic use by band members, while the single mic approach leaves the control with the band, allowing for a guaranteed good sound (assuming the band does what it is supposed to). If you side with the camp that wants to try using a single mic, this article will present one way that has worked out for me; there are others. I'm not knocking individual mics; I actually like and regularly use them when working with a group that has not choreographed the single mic. I just prefer the look and control of the single mic and have noticed that it can be really fun and often enhances audience response.

Variations

There are variations of the 'single mic' approach. These include adding a dedicated bass mic (e.g., the Karl Shiflett & Big Country Show), two equal single mics, set parallel to each other in the front of the band about four feet apart (e.g., Del McCoury Band and most bluegrass bands in the 1940s and '50s), single mic for vocals with a dedicated mic for each instrument, etc. This article will cover only the true single (i.e., one) mic approach.

No 58s

The microphone that you use for the single mic approach matters quite a bit. It should be a condenser such as the Audio Technica AT-4033 or AKG414, rather than a cheap dynamic mic. Dynamic mics, such as the Shure SM58, work well as multiple/individual mics, but most are not meant to pick up sounds further off-mic than the primary target. Condensers are much more sensitive to sounds off mic, further away from the front person.

Height

Make no mistake, bluegrass, especially traditional bluegrass, is about the singing. If you don't think so, ask your audience; they are listening to the singing. Yes, they'll be impressed by great instrumental work, but they are there for the singing. So put the mic up by your voices, just below the chins of the singers. It will pick up the voices well and still catch the instruments just fine. For their breaks, fiddle, mandolin, and guitar can be held up high where the mic is, and banjo is just plain loud enough already.

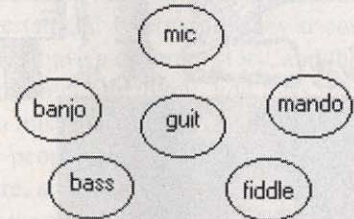
Don't wing it, please!

I've seen bands decide, on the spot, at a festival, to try it. That will not work. Your sound mix will be uneven and you may even provide some unintended entertainment in the form of crashing into one another! In all seriousness, the band's movement must be choreographed in advance. Working a single mic effectively is a difficult technique that takes practice.

U Shapes

I've read suggestions to, and seen bands that, form a semi-circle around the microphone, with each instrument and voice equidistant from the microphone. This will likely not allow for the ideal mix because certain voices/instruments should be more prominent (i.e., louder) than others, depending on the part of the song, and this will be difficult if everyone is the same distance from the microphone. Plus,

moving in, out, and around is part of the fun!



Brass Tax

The basic set-up follows common sense. The featured instrument or voice should be front and center. The backup and rhythm instruments should follow, staying in as tight as possible. The idea is for everyone to be as close as possible to the mic, while respecting this priority system. At all times, there should be a football '3-2 defense' in place, whereby three instruments are in the front, with the other two filling the holes behind and between the front three. See Figure A.



For example, in a band with guitar/lead vocalist, mandolin/tenor, banjo/baritone, fiddle, and string bass, during a verse sung by the guitarist, the guitarist should be front and center, about 1.5 to 2 feet from the microphone. Although front and center, he should not get too close to the mic, or he will eclipse others out of the mix. While the dynamic mics, such as the Shure SM58, are sung into at close range (0-2"), condenser mics such as the AT4033 used for the single mic performance should not be crowded. When doing backup, the banjo should fit in as close as possible to the side of the guitarist. The mandolin chop should be prominent, just to the

guitarist's other (non-banjo) side. The fiddle volume will suffer somewhat, but not unacceptably if he/she squeezes in between and behind the guitarist and mandolinist. The bass player should be in tight on the side where the fiddler is not. For this configuration, see Figure A and Photo A.



Figure "B" banjo break or trio

As the verse ends and the chorus trio approaches, the guitar/lead singer and banjo/baritone singer trade places (the baritone singer traditionally stands in the middle) and their voices, along with the mandolinist's voice, end up equidistant from the microphone, at approximately the same distance (1.5-2 feet). The fiddler again must fit behind and between the banjoist and mandolinist. See Figure B or Photo B.



Tom Tworek

During breaks in the vocal phrases of the chorus, the mandolinist can simply lean to the outside to allow the fiddle to lean in toward the mic to fill the non-vocal spots.



Mona Bennett

As a fiddle break approaches, the singer in the middle must move to the side, and the others also adjust, to make way for the incoming lead player, who should take the place of the lead singer on a verse (i.e., front and center, about 1.5-2 feet from the mic). Everyone else but the fiddler moves

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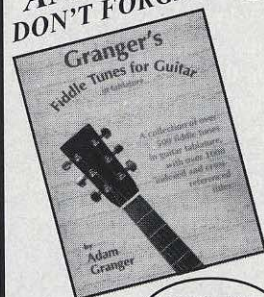
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to make way, and then moves part way back in as close as possible behind/to the side of the lead player. See Photo C.



Figure "C" duet (fiddle backup)

During a duet, the two singers can stay to each side of the mic, while whoever is doing backup can take the third slot in the middle. See Figure C or Photo D.



No Wandering

Some musicians (most often fiddle players) have a tendency to step too far away from the microphone when they are

not taking a lead break. This causes them to not be heard. There is no reason a backup player cannot stay in close to the mic, albeit further than the lead player, but up close, next in line. In fact, there is reason to do so—so that they will be heard. Every part in bluegrass music is important, including both lead and backup. Nothing is useless or unnecessary. Backup should be heard, so stay in tight!

Practice and Tape!

Plan and work out your choreography at rehearsal. Try it. See who bumps into whom and when. Figure out where to stand during an unusual song part, such as a bass solo. Then record it and listen. Can you hear everything you want to hear? Why not? Where was the unheard musician standing at the time? Move accordingly. Change. Adjust. Be sure you've gotten it down reasonably before you hit the road. You don't want to fall all over each other out there in front of your fans. I've done it, it's embarrassing!

Models

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Remember, this article covers one way of making it work. Your way will likely be at least somewhat different. For example, if your bass player is the lead singer, then you'll need to adjust accordingly. But the principles remain the same—primary voice or instrument in front, backup and rhythm follow nearby, behind and between, so that everyone has an unobstructed line to the mic. Good luck and I can't wait to see you at your next show!



Matt Dudman is a mandolinist and singer with the MacRae Brothers and Carolina Special, both of whom use the single mic live sound approach.

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