

Chapter 17

How to Approach a Song

In this chapter we'll walk through a few different approaches to learning the melody (or tune) of a song. The first approach is more analytical and will take you along step by step, using your understanding of the scale and the 1-3-5-8 note relationships to work with the song, "Row, Row, Row Your Boat." Once you've practiced these techniques with this song, you'll be able to apply them to other songs that you want to sing. If it's more than you can make sense of at this stage, just read through it and move on to the rest of the chapter. You'll be absorbing the information on a subconscious level and can return to it whenever you're ready.

The second approach is more intuitive and focuses on visualizing the shape of a song, feeling the relationship of the notes in your body, and learning by ear using lots of repetition.

Ideally, over time you will be able to use both of these approaches, moving back and forth between them in whatever way feels best to you.

The Analytic Approach: Your Song in Relation to the 1-3-5

Do you remember how in the last chapter I made a big deal about the 1, 3 and 5 of the scale? I mentioned that being able to sing those notes of the scale in any key would come in handy. We'll be working with this now.

This is also the time to bring in all the learning style tools you discovered in Chapter 6, pages 64-67. Refer to those pages for helpful ideas about working creatively with a variety of learning styles including kinetic (using your hands and your body), visual (charting or notating what you're singing), and cognitive (understanding concepts about what you're singing). When we approach a song, we want to use everything we have in our bag of tricks!

Row, Row, Row Your Boat in the Key of C

Our first song will be "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," because it's easy to analyze its relationship to the 1, 3 and 5 notes; we'll use the key of C so that when we refer to the keyboard, we can use all white notes.

*"Singing is like holding hands,
Voices are like fingers
intertwined,
Sometimes you give
a friendly squeeze,
Sometimes a caress,
Sometimes you
even pinch each other.
Singing is an act of faith,
Trusting one another
to be there
In moments of fear
When someone else's voice
becomes your net;
In moments of hope
When someone else's dreams
Reinforce yours
And give you courage,
In moments of emptiness
When comradeship
can make you full.
To have held to this faith
for 20 years is no small feat.
But such is love."*

*— Mary Travers, June 1, 1982,
from the jacket of the record
"Such is Love"
by Peter, Paul and Mary*



Because we'll be working in the key of C, the root note (the note that gives the song a feeling of resolution and the note that many songs end on, including this one) will be a ... that's right ... a C!

To review: Remember that the scale is made up of seven notes plus the 8 (which is also the 1 of the next octave up). We have several ways to refer to the notes in our C scale; all of the following are different ways of saying exactly the same thing:

Do Re Mi Fa So La Ti Do

1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8

C D E F G A B C (since we're in the key of C)

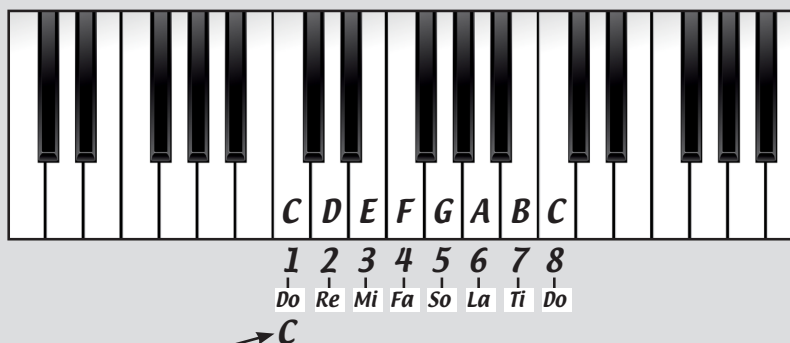
For the following exercise, listen to Track 38 and follow along using the illustration below; you can also refer to a real piano or online keyboard if you have one available. (The key of C only uses white notes, so while you're following along just stay on the white notes!)

This will help you conceptualize the ideas we're working with, and learning to work with a keyboard will be helpful if you ever want to use a piano while doing your singing exercises in the future.

Exercise 17.1: Learning to Sing Row, Row, Row Your Boat

Track 38 🎧) Note: After you've gone through Track 38 following along with the illustration, try listening and singing with Tracks 38b and/or 38c (male and female in the key of G), and see where your voice is most comfortable.

Step 1: Go to Track 38 and listen to the C note I'm singing and playing there. Find the C note in the illustration below.



Sing this C note for a minute. Get to know it. This is your new home while we are working on this song.

Step 2: Next, sing along with me. We will sing the C scale. Sing it saying the names of the notes: C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C. Sing it saying 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8. Sing it saying do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti-do. Point to the notes that you are singing on the illustration (previous page) as you sing them. Refer back to audio tracks as much as you need to.

Step 3: Now sing “1-2-3-4-5” and “5-4-3-2-1” pointing to the notes while you sing them.

Step 4: Next, sing “1-3-5” and “5-3-1.” Repeat ad nauseam. Point to the notes while you sing them.

Step 5: Now listen to and sing along with me. On the pitch of the 1 (the C, since we’re in the key of C), sing the word “Row” along with the recording. Sing it three times on that exact same note in groups of three. Do it a bunch of times:

“Row, Row, Row. Row, Row, Row. Row, Row, Row.” Sing it until you’re confident that you’re singing the same note each time.

Step 6: Next, sing just the first three notes of the C scale using the words, “one, two three.” “1-2-3. 1-2-3. 1-2-3.”

Step 7: Now sing: “One, One, One Two Three” and then, on the same notes, sing “Row, Row, Row Your Boat.” Get it? As you sing the words to the song, visualize the notes in the scale. See how they relate to each other like steps in a staircase.

Step 8: Check this out: If we mark out all the notes in the song this way, it looks like this:

1-1-1-2-3

3-2-3-4-5

8-8-8-5-5-5-3-3-1-1-1

5-4-3-2-1

Here are the numbers of the notes, along with the words of the song:

(Try singing along!)

1 1 1 2 3

row row row your boat

3 2 3 4 5

gent-ly down the stream

8 8 8 5 5 5 3 3 3 1 1 1

mer - ri - ly, mer - ri - ly, mer - ri - ly, mer - ri - ly

5 4 3 2 1

life is but a dream

So you're singing a song, and you're understanding how the notes relate to each other, right?! Congratulations!

Notice how you can use observations about this song to create "markers" to help you learn it:

- The 1, 3, 5 and 8 notes of the scale occur frequently in this song. Because we have practiced singing these intervals before (in Chapter 16) we have developed some understanding and muscle memory around them, so we may be able to find these notes more easily now.
- The phrases in this song all start and end on the 1, 3 or 5 (remember, the 8 is also a 1, just an octave higher). See if knowing this makes it easier to find these notes with your voice.
- The reason the song sounds finished at the end is because it ends on the 1 (in this case the C, which is the root note of the C scale). Because this song also *starts* on the 1, it is easy to find your starting place if you want to sing the song again — just start on the same note you finished on.
- The highest note in the whole song is on the first occasion of the word "merrily." All three syllables of the word "mer-ri-ly" are sung on the 8, which is an octave above the 1, where the song started.

Now you have some concepts to better understand the structure of this song. Rather than having "merrily" be just some mysterious distant high note you're trying to throw a dart at, you now have a logical target. You know that it's the high C (the 8) and an octave above the first note of the song. Because you've been practicing singing the 1-3-5-8 in Chapter 16, you are familiar with the feeling and sound of the jump from the 5 to the 8, so that leap from "stream" to "merrily" is a familiar interval.

What do you notice about the third line of this song? It's moving down steadily, isn't it? In four sets of three notes. "8-8-8, 5-5-5, 3-3-3, 1-1-1". Each "merrily" is made up of three syllables, each sung on exactly the same note. And there's a real pattern in how they descend from that first high merrily to the last one that's sung on the root note. If you've gotten comfortable singing the 1, 3, 5, 8, then you won't have too hard

Tip

This is a perfect time to use your learning style techniques!

They will help you make cognitive, visual and kinetic connections.

- Move your hands up and down to mark the steps out in the air.
- Draw a picture of the ups and downs and patterns in this song.
- Tune into the feeling of the movement in your throat and the vibrations in your chest.

Tune into whatever clues and methods help you the most. It's not cheating — this is how it's done!

Tip

Most popular songs in Western music end on the “1,” which gives them a resolved, finished feeling. A clue that a song does *not* end on the “1” is that it tends to leave you with a less resolved feeling. “The Song that Never Ends,” for example, feels so unfinished that you want to circle back and sing it again.

a time finding these descending merrilys — it’s just the 1-3-5-8 backwards. 888-555-333-111, life is but a dream! Yes! We’re ready for the last line, life is but a dream. 5-4-3-2-1. Hurray!

Do you see that you can use your knowledge of the scale, and particularly of the 1-3-5-8 relationships, to help you understand any song?

Here are questions you can ask as you approach any new song:

1. What note does the song END on, and is it the “1,” or root note, of my song?

Listen to the song and hum along with the very last note; that will often be the “1” of the scale that your song is in — very handy! Knowing which note is the 1 gives you a baseline with which to compare all the other notes in the song.

If the last note is *not* the 1, the big question is, where *does* the 1 note show up?

Learning how to find and sing the 1 of a song will definitely hone both your listening and pitch-matching skills, and at first you may need someone to help you with this. Once you’ve identified that note, it’s helpful to play it on a keyboard or make a recording of it so you can keep listening to just that note as you continue to work on the song. Return to it often and/or sustain it long enough to compare it to some of the other notes in the song.

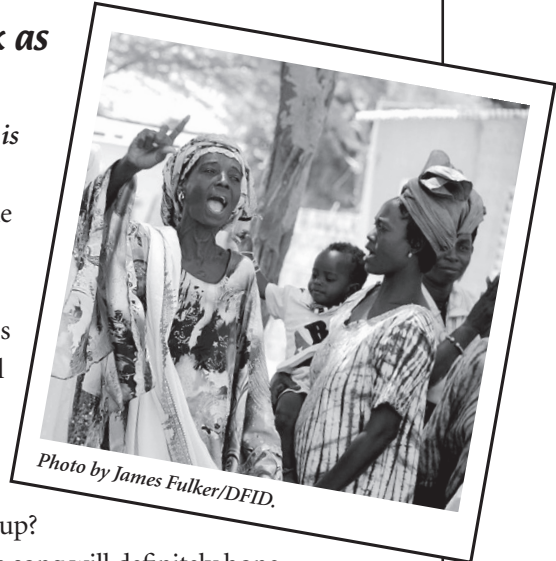


Photo by James Fulker/DFID.

2. What note does the song START on? (And what are the next few notes after that?)

This will put you onto the on-ramp of your song. Sometimes songs start on the 1, but often they don’t. Now that you’ve identified the 1, you can figure out how the first note of the song compares to it. Play and listen to the 1 (using your recording or a keyboard) as often as you need to as you answer the following questions: Does the song start right on the 1, or is the first note of the song higher or lower than the 1? If it’s higher or lower, how many steps above or below the 1 is it? (For example, is the first note the 5 below the 1? The 3 above the 1?) Then figure this out for the next few notes of the song. Write down the scale number of each note in relation to the 1, the way we did with “Row, Row, Row Your Boat.”

Here’s an example of how I’ve used this technique: I used to repeatedly mix up the tune of “This Land is Your Land,” by Woody Guthrie, with the tune of “You Are My Sunshine,”

(folkie that I am). I'd start to sing "This Land is Your Land," only to find that I was lost in the middle. Something just wasn't right — I could tell that I was singing the wrong notes. So I sat down and analyzed the situation using this method, and saw my mistake. I realized that the first four notes of "This Land is Your Land" are 1-2-3-4. This gave me a sure-fire way to grab on to the tune. I realized that "You Are My Sunshine" starts on the low 5 (the 5 below the 1), and that my mistake had been to start singing "This Land is Your Land" on that low 5 — that was why I was getting lost — my first few notes were wrong. Using the fact that I was getting confused as a signal to myself to stop and do a little analysis helped me clear up my confusion. Now, because I understand how the first line of each tune works, and how they're different from each other, I don't have trouble with them anymore. I have a little mental note about each song that helps me remember the beginning, and once I'm in, I'm all set to go. You can do this, too!

3. What is the highest note of the song?

What word (or words, or parts of words) in the song are the highest? Knowing this is handy because it helps you to visualize the "shape" of the song.

If you are having trouble singing that highest note accurately, it can help to identify that high note in relation to the root note (the 1) of the song. One way to do this is to listen to the song and wait for the highest note to come around, and then catch it! Match it with your own voice and then count up to that note from the 1, to figure out exactly what that highest note is. Using a piano keyboard can be really helpful with this.

4. What is the lowest note?

Do the same thing as above, but with the lowest note of the song.

5. Where do the 1, 3 and 5 notes show up?

If you are having trouble gaining mastery of your song it can help to identify other landmarks in addition to the highest and lowest notes. Figuring out if and where the 1, 3 and 5 notes occur can be a great way of getting to know your song better and getting a solid sense of how the notes relate to each other. Find the root note, sing (or play on a keyboard) the 3, and then hold on to it while you're listening to the song and see if you can tell when the singer is singing your note. Do the same thing with the 1 and the 5. *Just a heads up that this can be a little tricky — if this feels too difficult don't be discouraged. This might be something you'll do further down the line.*

6. Are there patterns, or bits of the song that repeat themselves?

Perhaps the first line of a song has the exact same tune as the third line, or maybe the last three lines of the chorus has the same tune as the verses. This is a wonderful thing to recognize because if so, there's that much less to learn — you've already learned it!

These are the kinds of observations and notes you can make about any song you want to learn. Using this analytic approach is the best way for some people to approach a song.

The More Intuitive Method

Another way of approaching a song involves less thinking and more feeling and visualizing. As you do the activities that follow, think about this: Each song, and even each phrase of a song, has a shape. A song might have places where it peaks on high notes and dips on low notes, flat spots where it stays on the same note for a while, parts where the notes step up or down steadily, or places where there is a steep plunge from high to low or a steep jump from low to high. It might have sections that repeat in both melody and words, such as a chorus, or sections where the melody repeats but the words are different. You may discover your own ways of thinking about the shapes of songs.

Understand the shape of your song.

Visualize the shape of your song as you listen to it. Start by simply closing your eyes as you listen to the song to get a visceral sense of the shape of it.

Try drawing your impression of the shape of your song on a piece of paper. Listen again and make circles around all the parts that seem to repeat. If there are parts that seem to repeat but include little exceptions, put an asterisk or a mark at about the place in the circle where the exceptions occur. Go back again later and notice what's happening in those exceptions.

Print out the lyrics of your song and make notes all over them.

Create your own code to help you understand the shape of the song in the ways we discussed above; make marks (dashes, arrows, wiggles, slopes, etc.) to show where there are chunks that repeat, where it's trending up or down, staying on the same note for a bunch of syllables, and exclamation points to show if there are parts of the song that surprise you! This is your language to use as an aid in learning the song; don't worry about whether it will make sense to other people or not — just do what works best for you. If you read music, you have a head start here, since sheet music is essentially an illustration showing where the notes of a song go up and down as it moves through time. Feel free to mark up your sheet music in ways that help you.

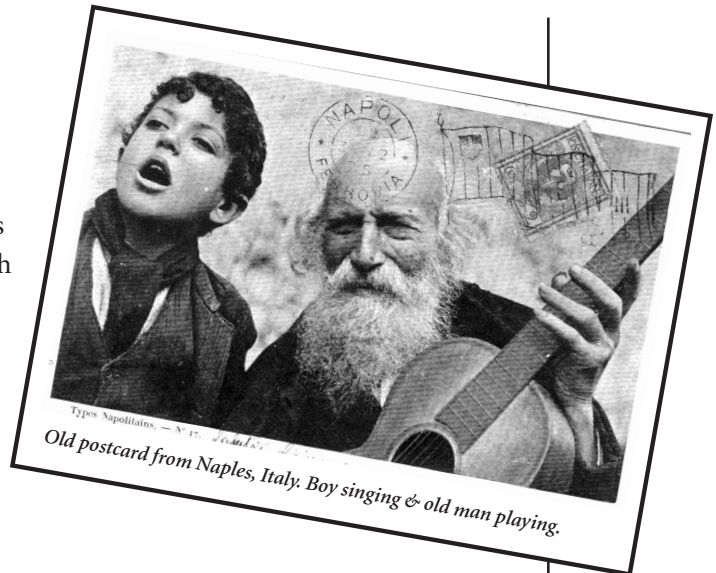


Photo, Ewan Shiels.

Artist (painter, magician, musician) Tony Shiels & Friends.

Move your hands in the air, or move your whole body, to show the shape of the song.

Play the song and as you listen, illustrate the ups and downs of the notes with movements that feel like they match what you're hearing. Don't worry too much about whether you're right or wrong because the more you do this the better you'll get at it. Just do your best to connect physically with the shape of the melody of your song.



Start with your favorite part.

Instead of starting at the beginning of the song, zero in on the part that attracts you the most and work on that part first. Then expand outward from there. When you like what you're working on it helps you to get a strong foothold, and that's a good way to start!

Use call and response.

Create a call and response experience for yourself using short phrases of your song. Play a recording and listen to the whole song. Then, listen to it again, but pause the recording after just a short phrase. Now sing just that short phrase. Listen again, sing it again; listen, sing; listen, sing. Compare; contrast. Once you've mastered that phrase, move on to the next. Once you've got that one, try putting the two together. Keep referring back to the recording to be sure you've got it right. Continue this way, phrase by phrase, until you've mastered the whole song.

Use audiation.

Pause a recording of your song mid-phrase and try finishing the phrase yourself using audiation (just *thinking* the music instead of actually singing — see page 151 for details). Then listen to the second part of the phrase and see if it matches up with what you just audiated. Now replay the phrase, and again pause it in the middle, but this time actually sing the second part of the phrase. Compare what you sang, to what you heard in the recording. Repeat, continually fine-tuning. Audiating helps train your brain to process what you're hearing so that you can sing it more accurately.

What is apparent from this chapter is that learning a song requires a lot of repetition and focus! This is true for experienced musicians and singers, but even more so for

new singers. This is because not only are you learning the particular song that you're working on, you are also *learning how to learn a song*. You are engaging your ear and your voice in very new ways, and this process requires a lot of practice and patience.

Take breaks whenever you feel the need, and don't let yourself get too frustrated. Sometimes it helps to sleep on it and come back to it the next day. Always build on your successes; when something works, do more of it and use it as a core to come back to. Then try adding other techniques to continually expand on your successes.

A Few Additional Pieces of Advice

Choose songs that are fairly simple.

While you're starting out, avoid songs that have great big interval jumps, or have a lot of notes that feel unpredictable or confusing. Focus on songs that make sense to you, so that you can understand the relationships between the notes on various levels (cognitive, kinetic, visual, auditory). However, there are exceptions to every rule: If you're drawn towards a more complicated song — and it comes easily to you — go for it anyway. Make it yours!

Sing your song in a key that is comfortable for you.

Use trial and error to be sure that whatever note you start on doesn't put you in a position where the high notes are too high or the low notes are too low.

Choose songs that don't have too wide a range for your voice.

Some songs have a wide range, meaning that the lowest note is far away from the highest note. If the notes are too far apart you may feel physically uncomfortable singing the highest or lowest notes. As a beginner it's better to choose songs that have a range that is comfortable for you; you'll become better at choosing after some trial and error. Later on you can work on expanding your vocal range, if you want to.

Choose songs that touch you.

Learning a new song can be a lot of work. Most of the time, it shouldn't feel like an exercise. It should feel like a joy. Working with songs you like, that speak to you and feel good will make the work feel worth it.

Or, choose songs that motivate you for some other worthwhile reason.

Perhaps you don't love a song, but still want to learn it for a specific occasion (you know that your sister will be asking everyone to sing it at her wedding, or you want to learn it for a sing-along at your kid's school). Even if you don't love the song, stay in touch with why you want to learn it, and picture yourself succeeding. Keep your excitement about the end game in your mind and let that keep you connected with the love!



Photo by Angela Sevin.

In African music, singing and dancing are often considered inseparable – two parts of the same activity. In fact, in some places they are described with the same terminology; a dance and the music used to accompany it often have the same name.