

Party mouth: Master of vocal effects Fred Newman shares his secrets

By [CECELIA GOODNOW](#)

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER



Fred Newman demonstrates how to produce the Hawaiian Nose Hum, a mildly percussive, nasal guitar sound. It's just one of the more than 200 vocal effects described in his new book and CD, "MouthSounds."

As a sound-effects guru on public radio's "A Prairie Home Companion," Fred Newman is the ultimate party animal.

He can quack with aplomb, do several kinds of elephant trumpets, and cricket-chirp so convincingly he almost conjures the sway of a porch swing on a sultry Georgia

night.

Now you can, too -- just in time to embarrass yourself at holiday parties.

Newman's new book and CD, "MouthSounds" (Workman Publishing, 245 pages, \$13.95), explains how to do more than 200 vocal effects, from water drips and beat boxes to a timely champagne pop. It's a greatly expanded version of a book he wrote in 1980.

"The way people think about sound is so fundamentally different than in 1980," said the folksy, fast-talking Newman, 51. "Sound wasn't portable yet. The Walkman hadn't come in yet. (Now) we've got surround sound. People are so much hipper to sound."

We chatted with the country-fried master of mouth, who also does sound effects for movies, commercials and the PBS reading show "Between the Lions." Also on his resumé: He hosted "The Mickey Mouse Club" when Britney, Justin and Christina were knee-high to Donald Duck.

So, Fred, enlighten us:

P-I: Will duck-quacking your way through "Purple Haze" make you the life of the party?

Newman: Well, it won't hurt you. It depends on your personality type, but I've found that people are pretty much fascinated. I learned from storytellers in Georgia, and when I heard these old guys do sounds, I was just blown away.

What good does it do to know how to imitate a tugboat blast?

It's really funny at parties. The serious answer -- and I don't want to get too heavy -- is that most of us don't even listen to our voice. We'll spend all our money on clothes and shoes and the right this-and-that to wear, but it's our voice that says who we are, more than anything else.

Want to wax philosophical about the role of sound in our lives?

Now, *that* I get misty-eyed on. Growing up in the '50s, sounds were opportunities, as opposed to the intrusion that they are today. The sound level has gone up so much, and as a consequence we've really pulled back. We really don't listen very much. I remember my grandfather in Georgia. I was talking about something and he put his finger on my lips and said (*Newman's voice drops to a whisper*), "Just listen."

How does listening apply to making mouth sounds?

You have to really listen and get the sound inside first. It's almost like the way painters talk about when they paint a scene, they'll never forget that scene -- they look at the light differently. It's sort of like ear yoga.

Speaking of intrusive sound, do you resent cell phones?

Yeah, yeah. They just add so much to the general noise level. In addition, the sound is not as good as a regular phone -- there's a timing delay. You can't hear anything of the subtlety of the voice. A cell phone is vocal e-mail: 'I'll be there at 6.' 'Fine.' Nothing subtle.

What's the hardest sound in your book?

The hardest is a double whistle. It's two whistles from the corners of your mouth, and you can do harmony, like -- would you like to hear 'Nutcracker Suite' or 'It's Crying Time Again?'

Oh, "Crying Time Again."

(*He whistles a few bars.*) That's the hardest one. It took me three or four weeks just messing around with it.

How do you decide what sounds go into your repertoire?

More than a few of these sounds came from working with Garrison Keillor. He would say (*imitating Keillor's deep, languid voice*), 'Oh, let's do a loon tonight.' I don't know what a loon sounds like -- I grew up in Georgia. So I go on a Canadian Web site and I get the sounds of loons.

It's interesting that you're still learning new sounds.

Absolutely. I go around with a recorder, and when I hear something -- 'Oh, that car door is great' -- I'll record those. And people always show me stuff. There's so many sound makers -- old-timers who loved radio. Just today, I was in a car and

we're talking about sound. And the cab driver says, 'Oh! My niece does sounds.' And he calls her up, and she's in Brooklyn asleep, and he wakes her up, and she does the most phenomenal chicken I've ever heard.

Anyone, including Garrison Keillor, could lay his hands on a recording of a live chicken. Why are made-up sounds better?

When I do sound for movies, the information is on the screen but the emotion is in the soundtrack. And in doing sounds, you can actually change how people feel about a character. The power of it has been amazing.

My bread and butter is where a sound-effects guy used real sounds but it doesn't really match (what the story is trying to convey). So I will come in and do the sound, and you won't know that it's not the animal.

I did that in 'Far and Away' -- I do Tom Cruise's horse all the way through that movie. I can make the dolphin in 'Cocoon' sound sad, when the dolphin doesn't sound sad, really.

What's Garrison Keillor like?

He is very generous, but he's a big nerd. I say this with huge amounts of respect. He is a restless, brilliant man. He is always creating.

But by the same token, he has only one foot on this planet. He has many, many eccentricities. You can be talking to him and he'll drift away and you know he's gone someplace else.

Garrison and I now -- especially when we're doing these non-broadcast tours where we do several shows in a row -- we just go out there without scripts. I know his timing.

How has scientific understanding of sound grown since your 1980 book?

There's so much more understanding of how the voice works, the musculature and particularly the way it's controlled by the brain.

There's recordings now of plants where, during a drought, the actual cells on the inside start collapsing. And the sound is like (*here he does a series of rapid click-putts*).

Well, the insects hear that and they go in (and damage the tree). It's the sound that attracts the insects. (Researchers have) done things where they've overridden the sound -- playing a low-frequency sound where the insects are confused and can't hear the cells collapsing -- and they've kept the trees from being infected with insects during droughts.

On to specific sounds. Why do some people have so much difficulty learning to whistle?

You're really talking about a pucker whistle. The secret is keeping the hole in the center round and dropping your tongue to the floor of your mouth. It really takes that roundness to create what is called the bell-tone effect. It sets up these little vibrations of the air.

Is everyone capable of rolling R's?

My wife has never been able to roll an R. You know what? Just stiffen the back part of your tongue and put it on the little ledge at the front (of your mouth) and blow air.

How do these vocal gymnastics affect the health of the voice?

These are aerobics for the voice. Most people (as they) get older their vocal cords get brittle. If you know any people who sing in choirs, their voices are so much younger. So (by making funny sounds), you really make your voice more flexible and it stays younger and more expressive.

Are there a couple of sounds people could master in time for holiday parties?

Well, you know a good one (is), take a set of car keys, so you got your bells there. And then I do the clip-clop -- just let your tongue flop down there. You can hum with that, too. *(Newman hums 'Sleigh Ride' as his tongue mimics the horse's clop-clop and his jangling keys imitate sleigh bells. The technique also works with 'Jingle Bells'.)*

OK, give me a New Year's sound.

New Year's. Well. *(He impersonates a raucous, holiday noisemaker.)* The air horn -- that's a good one. That'll get attention.

Any other party tips?

Here's a really good tip: If you're at a party and the sound level starts getting louder and louder and everyone's talking up like this *(his voice rises an octave)* and you find you're really shouting? What you do -- you won't believe how well it works -- is talk under the crowd. Talk down low. You can actually whisper in a really loud room, because everybody else is up high. It's all about you competing in the same frequency.

One more thing. You hosted 'The Mickey Mouse Club'?

Yes, ma'am; yes, ma'am.

So you knew Britney?

Very well.

Are there any sounds you think would be especially appropriate for Britney, Justin and Christina?

(*Newman laughs.*) Oh, let me see. Umm, well they do their own sound effects pretty well. Justin's got a great falsetto voice.

(*Switching gears*) I used to pick up Britney in a fireman's carry. She was tiny -- she was all of 13 or 14. And I'd spin her around. And on her cue, when she was supposed to go out during the opening of the show, I'd push her out the door and she'd be totally dizzy.

If you ever see pictures of the opening of the show, about half the time Britney is, like, holding onto chairs -- and she never squealed on me. She thought that was the funniest thing. They were just kids. Really good kids, actually.

TIPS ON PARTY NOISES

Ready to hone your party noises? Try these, courtesy of Fred Newman's "MouthSounds":

Hawaiian Nose Hum

1. Keeping your mouth shut, press the tip of an index finger against one nostril, closing it.
2. In a high, falsetto voice, hum your favorite Hawaiian melody. With your other index finger, stroke down gently on the open nostril, closing it briefly as you begin each note of the tune. The result should be a mildly percussive, nasal guitar sound.

Chicken flutters

1. Tuck your lips in so they cover the upper and lower teeth.
2. Close your mouth most of the way, leaving a small opening between your tucked lips.
3. Draw air through the little opening as you rapidly run the tip of your tongue up and down across the inward-protruding edges of your lips to produce the "flutter" of wings.

The Basic Honk

1. Open your mouth and throat wide ... No. Even wider.
2. With a burst of exhaled air, produce a low-pitched, breathy "hhhaa." (The "a" should be harsh and sound like the "a" in the work *back*.) The honk should be loud, aggressive and full.

Variations:

- To sound like an 18-wheeler, do the basic honk but extend it. Make it loud, deep and long.

- The squeeze-bulb bicycle horn: Do the Basic Honk in a high, falsetto voice. Make it high, nasal, strong and sharp. This is the first part of the sound. After you "squeeze" the honk, "release the bulb" by inhaling a bit of air back in your open mouth. Add a slight touch of falsetto on the inhale. Thursday, December 23, 2004

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