

Accept Imitations: A Beginner's Guide to Impressions

Chapter One: Who Do You Love

By Jim Meskimen

How tempting it is to start this eBook out with the phrase, "Since the dawn of spoken communication between members of the our species, celebrity impressions have had an undeniable impact on human relations."

I'm very proud of the fact I was nearly able to suppress the urge to write that.

But, having evoked that idea, it perhaps does have a little bit of relevance to the subject, if only that imitations of the sounds of other living creatures by mankind has long been a significant part of human existence, for example:

1) Hunters mastering the calls of birds and other wild beasts.

Okay, that's actually the only one that comes to mind.

But YOU are interested in it, and I am interested in it, so why don't we just cut to the chase, forget the probably very noble but entirely irrelevant historical, sociological and psychological background section, and really dig in and ACCEPT IMITATIONS.

Before we discuss the technical aspects of creating and performing impressions, it's a good idea to have a look at why to do them in the first place.

Of course, YOU already know why: because you WANT to.

That is actually reason enough, and is the way ANYBODY begins.

There is something inherently amusing about creating an impression of another person. It's like a magic trick: how can somebody sound like a completely different person? Isn't that against the law?

It IS against the law. But luckily, the law is hardly ever enforced, except in Yemen.

Intent is usually the deciding factor; are you imitating somebody so that another will believe you truly ARE them, and will then turn over valuable documents, sexual favors or some other

difficult to obtain item or service? Or are you just trying to make somebody laugh until milk comes out of their nose, provided they were drinking milk in the first place?

If I know YOU, (and I most likely don't) you are hardly the sort of person that would use the art of mimicry, and the intensely valuable information in this eBook, for such an ignoble, illegal and dangerous purpose. So let's just put that possibility as far from our minds as possible, shall we?

An imitation can be many things, a comment on the target personality, an homage, a criticism, or an attempt at an accurate and convincing portrayal for some artistic purpose.

Actually, the only thing demanded of an impressionist is that the target be IDENTIFIABLE. Technical precision is a means to an ends, and actually is not the most important, key factor in "selling" an impression.

What then is THE most important, key factor? WHAT?

Well, how about you be a little patient, huh? Would it kill you to let me go on a bit about this and build my argument? Huh?

In comedy clubs, variety shows and on construction sites, one sometimes observes what might be considered poor entertainers evoking celebrities by no more clever or sophisticated trick than pulling their hair back and smiling broadly, or squinting their eyes and gritting their teeth. This style of mimicry might best be labelled, "Caricature."

We have all seen and been very patient with fellows who, in presenting their imitation of, for example, Arnold Schwarzenegger, hoarsely blurt out some line from one of his classic roles in a passionate, but inaccurate rendition, which in the end evokes not much about the actor's actual sound, but DOES convey perfectly the concept, "I am now doing my imitation of an imitation of an imitation of Arnold. I am proud to report that I have invested the least possible effort, care and investigation in creating this performance for you. Please laugh uproariously and offer to buy me a beer."

This is the same sort of fellow who, as a little boy, made the grass in his classroom paintings green, the sky blue and the sun yellow, right out of the tube. He went on to marry a woman with enormous breasts, blonde hair, the waistline of a whippet and the mind of a bottle opener.

Compare the common paltry Schwarzenegger rendition, so prevalent today, with that of the great Arnold impersonator Josh Robert Thompson, who researched his subject exhaustively, practiced diligently, and, with his already similar pitch and vocal register, developed an impression that is world renowned.

I happen to know that Josh, (or JRT as he is referred to by his girlfriend and by people in the Internal Revenue Service) studied the personality, sound and viewpoint of Mr. Schwarzenegger by listening to the DVD commentary on Conan The Barbarian and other action films in his filmography, until he literally could inhabit the spirit and sound of the man. That's why he's the best.

But why did he choose Arnold? He was INTERESTED.

Why?

Who cares? Why are you asking so many questions? Don't you think I know my job, that you have to badger me to tell you things? Give me a break, will you? This is an eBook, not a game of "Tell Me Before I Explode."

Josh was interested, I believe in engaging in a little contest, a contest with other voice artists, the physical barriers of his own natural voice and with the perceptions and acceptance levels of other people. You could say "contest: or you could say "game"; same thing.

He wanted to play the game of "Who can sound MOST like Arnold", and he thought he could WIN. I maintain that he did.

Well, obviously, once people start paying you money, tell you you are incredible, laugh at the things you want them to laugh at, gasp with amazement when you really pull out the stops and, best of all, if you FOOL them into thinking they are actually talking to the REAL Arnold, then you have WON.

At least for the time being. At least, in that voice.

But it all starts with being interested, and choosing some character voice that you feel you COULD pull off, given your age, sex and the general pitch and quality of your naturally given equipment.

So, at this point you can ask yourself, "Which of my favorite celebrity voices do I think I have a chance at duplicating, given my own voice as it is?"

Go on, ask yourself.

And for God's sake, pay ATTENTION to the ANSWER! It's rude not to listen to the other person, and it's rude not to listen to YOURSELF when you are trying to answer your own question. Don't start off your career as an impressionist by being rude to your main partner in this endeavor! Do you think Edgar Bergen was snippy and critical with Charlie McCarthy? Heavens, no. They were thick as thieves.

Who IS Edgar Bergen? Jesus, who the hell are you, anyway?

It probably is the case, if I know you, (and again, I do NOT) that you already have the barest shadow of an impression in your nascent –which is to say undeveloped–repertoire, somebody that you attempt to perform on extremely rare occasions, such as when you are among close friends or while under hypnosis.

There is, perhaps, some memory of a voice from childhood entertainment that is banging around inside your head and which you wouldn't mind being able to do for other person, say, a close friend or co-worker.

Is there?

As an example from my own life, (not that I'm putting this forth as something right or wrong, mind you, just as an example of something perfect) one of my first impressions was of the actor Bert Lahr, in his role as the Cowardly Lion from The Wizard of Oz.

After viewing that classic movie at age four, I knew two things, that if flying monkeys existed, I would have to obtain a shotgun, and that I LOVED the Cowardly Lion.

NOTO BENE: (Latin, I think, for, "pay attention, Benny!") It is easier to imitate something that one wouldn't mind BEING. it is easier to BE that which one LIKES.

So, in my case, it became very easy for me to absorb and BE the Cowardly Lion, because he was so doggone cute and funny, and imitating him became a logical extension of my being able to BE him.

You've seen little kids do this. It's wonderful. The only time it isn't wonderful is when they are imitating something that YOU don't like or want them to be, such as a ninja, or a zombie/ninja, or a vampire/ninja/zombie/alien. Or a telemarketer.

Going back to the question asked earlier, "Which of my favorite celebrity voices do I think I have a chance at duplicating?" do include, therefore, any voice from childhood entertainment that might pop up.

But don't do Bert Lahr; that's MINE.

No, I'm just kidding, go ahead and do Bert Lahr. If you want.

It's rude, but go ahead. Factually, I don't care.

I really don't.

I'm so OVER the whole thing, to be honest. You... you just Do what you have to Do.

By the way, CAN you actually hear The Cowardly Lion in your mind?

You probably have a vast number of recordings in your mental iPod... can you kind of "hear" them?

If you can't hear the Cowardly Lion, and can't recall how it felt to kind of "Be" him when you were a little kid watching that amazing movie, then pick one you CAN hear in your mind's "ear."

And if you can't do that, then you have another route, and that is to become a barber.

NO! Not a barber! No, NO! What did you think I said? Omigod– I would NEVER disparage barbers or practitioners of the barbering arts!

NO, what I was SAYING was that if you can't hear the desired character in your head, you can still get ahold of a physical universe recording, by going on YouTube or a DVD. THAT'S all I meant. See, you were all upset over nothing!

By listening to the sound recording, you can study the sound and begin to become familiar with its characteristics, enabling you to make your own version of it with your own voice.

But the first step is, WHO do you WANT to imitate?

That will be a lot easier than attempting someone that you dislike, or can't understand, or are only trying to do because someone told you if you didn't do it they would key your car, or make you sit and watch the remake of *The Poseidon Adventure*.

The End