

MasterClass



USHER

—

Teaches the Art of Performance





ABOUT **USHER**

Usher Raymond was born in 1978 and raised in the Southern United States. A devoted singer at an early age, Usher grew up performing with his church choir in Chattanooga, Tennessee. He scored his first record contract at the age of 14 with LaFace Records in Atlanta, and shortly after released his first album, *Usher*, in 1994. It wasn't until his follow-up record, *My Way* (1997), that Usher became a hit R&B singer. He stood out from the pack with his awe-striking live performances and smooth vocals. While continuing to build a musical empire, Usher also became an actor, performing in a Broadway production of *Chicago*, and acting in film and TV. To date, Usher has released eight studio albums and acted in over a dozen films.



1.

INTRODUCTION

CLASS WORKBOOK

Usher's Workbook supplements each lesson with Take It Further opportunities and Assignments. This printable PDF is filled with places for you to take notes as you go.

LESSON DISCUSSIONS

Share your works in progress and ask your peers for help and support if you've hit a road-block.

OFFICE HOURS

Submit your questions on the MasterClass site and keep your eyes peeled for Usher's personal responses.

WEBCAM OR SMARTPHONE

Record and upload questions, performances and assignments to the Office Hours page.

HOW TO USE USHER'S MASTERCLASS

Welcome to Usher's MasterClass! The exercises in this workbook are designed to help you build your confidence, make your own opportunities, and cultivate a fan base that wants to watch you perform. Use Usher's workbook to follow along with the video lessons, and share your assignments with the MasterClass online community to put his teachings and experiences into practice.

1.

NOTES

2.

GETTING STARTED

“The most important part in being fearless is being vulnerable. You have to allow yourself to remain open”

—Usher

SUBCHAPTERS

- Taking the First Step
- Always Be Performing
- Gaining Real World Experience
- Share Your Work

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Congratulations on taking the first step toward a more successful artistic performance. We are thrilled you’ve decided to join Usher on this journey.

ASSIGNMENTS

- When you’re just getting started it’s important to write and speak your goals and intentions. And forget the new car and house, for now! How do you want people to view you as an artist? Usher started his career with a few basic goals.

1. Have fans.
2. Be respected and compared to other great artists.
3. Start acting.

Make a list of goals using Usher’s suggestion to NOT focus on status symbols. This about creative goals first: A new vocal style, a new dance move, a new instrument, or maybe even a fine art like painting or sculpting. Use the printable chart on the following page to write down 3, 6, and 12 month goals along with steps you plan on taking to reach them.

2.

**GETTING
STARTED**



SET YOUR GOALS

ONE MONTH

THREE MONTHS

ONE YEAR

2.

NOTES

3.

GATHERING INSPIRATION

“Artists truly live in a delusional state. You have to live in this place that only you believe.”

—Usher

SUBCHAPTERS

- Identifying Your Heroes
- Identifying Their Heroes
- Looking Beyond Your Discipline

TAKE IT FURTHER

- The artists that came before you are meant to inspire. Here are some of Usher’s inspirations:
 - James Brown — Live On The T.A.M.I Show in 1964
 - Marvin Gaye — 1983 Nba All-Star Game American National Anthem
 - Sammy Davis Jr — Mr. Bojangles Live
 - Fred Astaire — 1970 Oscars Performance
 - Luther Vandross — Wembley Stadium 1989
 - Stevie Wonder — Live in London 1995
 - Michael Jackson And His Brothers — 1983 Motown 25Th Anniversary Special

ASSIGNMENT

- Many performers doubt their creative ability which, in turn, hinders their craft. You have to open yourself up to inspiration and record it as often as possible. Usher uses a journal to process ideas, thoughts, or inspiration for new songs and performances.
 - Gather a fresh journal or notebook for this exercise. This will be your dedicated space for your artistic inspiration.
 - Start by challenging yourself to write five interesting sources of inspiration each week. It can be a museum exhibit you visited, a conversation you heard at the coffee shop, or a new piece of choreography you saw. If it stuck out enough for you to remember it at the end of the day, write it down.
- After a few weeks of gathering what you’re attracted to, see if any trends are forming. Are half of your inspiring sources

3.

GATHERING INSPIRATION

ASSIGNMENT (CONT'D)

dances you saw? Maybe it's time to take a dance class. Are you consistently writing about how inspiring a teacher, friend, or classmate is? Ask them to watch your next performance and provide you with feedback.

- Now that you know who Usher draws inspiration from, let's see if they can inspire you. Watch a performance by one of Usher's heroes listed below. When you've found one that resonates with you, dig deep to find out why. Write down what emotions you think they were trying to convey, and what artists or styles you think inspired them. If you watch the same performance without sound, is the same energy and emotion there? You'll use this research for next assignment.
 - Jackie Wilson — 'Lonely Teardrops' Live
 - Savion Glover — Tap Dance Improvisation Performance
 - Nicholas Brothers — 'Lucky Number' 1936
 - Bojangles — "Little Colonel" With Shirley Temple

3.

4.

APPLYING INSPIRATION

“Create something of substance, from substance.”
—Usher

SUBCHAPTERS

- Going From Imitation to Inspiration
- Let Trends Inspire You
- Getting Personal and Getting to Work

TAKE IT FURTHER

- A great example of how to evolve from imitation to inspiration is Usher’s “Singing In The Rain” tribute. Check out these performances:
 - Gene Kelly’s original performance of “Singing In The Rain” from the 1952 blockbuster musical.
 - Usher’s tribute to Gene at the 2008 Movies Rock Ceremony.
 - In “You Got It Bad”, Usher dances in the rain as a tribute to his idol.
- After you identify who you admire, it’s time to break down what makes them unique.

ASSIGNMENT

- You saw Usher’s tribute to Gene Kelly’s “Singing In The Rain”. Remember the performance you analyzed last chapter? Imitate the performance until it becomes second nature. And not just the dance moves. If you’re a singer, mimic the tone and inflections. If you’re an actor, use the same hand gestures and stage blocking. Once you’ve got it down, it’s time to take your favorite elements and adapt them to fit your style and audience. Take the elements that you like the most and apply them to your performance. Record your original performance inspired by your tribute. Upload it to the Rate and Review tool for your peers to watch and provide feedback.
 - Introduce yourself at the start of the video and share with us which performance or performer you’ve drawn your inspiration from. e.g. “My name is _____ and I was inspired by Bob Fosse’s cat-like choreography in Chicago.”

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SINGING

“You have two strips of muscle in your throat. These muscles are not like the rest of your body. Once you destroy these muscles, they don’t rejuvenate.”

—Usher

SUBCHAPTERS

- Finding Your Range
- Listening to Yourself
- Vocal Care
- What to Eat
- Building Endurance
- Warming Up and Warming Down

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Watch Usher’s moving acoustic tribute to Marvin Gaye. It’s not often musicians perform without the glitz and glam, and this medley highlights Usher’s incredible vocal capabilities.
 - Usher – “Mercy Mercy Me/What’s Going On Medley” (Acoustic Cover)
- When Usher was first starting out, his favorite vocalists to emulate were Boys II Men, Wanyay, Tedman Campbell, R. Kelly and Jodice, among others. By singing along to his favorite records he was able to define and expand his vocal range. In particular, Usher recommends looking into [Take 6](#), an A Capella music group that features six singers with unique vocal ranges. Usher would follow along with each line of harmony in a Take 6 song, helping him find his vocal sweet spot. Give it a try yourself.
- The muscles in your throat are sensitive and susceptible to damage if you overwork them. Just like a regular muscle, you can stretch and strengthen them; you can also destroy them beyond repair. Here are some of Usher’s tried and true methods for keeping his voice and vocal chords healthy.
 - Drink lots of water before and after performances to keep your vocal chords lubricated.
 - Usher warms up for at least 30–40 minutes before he performs. He runs scales and arpeggios to stretch his vocal chords.
- Warm down after a performance. Some singers are skeptical about the importance of warming down their voice, but Usher swears by it. Take 5–10 minutes to perform a few hushed scales in reverse. Slide down a five note scale using a lip-trill or softly singing Ah, Eh, or Oo.
 - Drink a cup of warm herbal tea after a performance. Warm tea helps reduce the inflammation that can happen when straining your muscles. You can add a slice of lemon, which helps break up any mucus buildup, or honey which coats and calms your throat.

5.

SINGING

TAKE IT FURTHER (CONT'D)

- Protect your voice before a performance by reducing how much you talk. You can take it even further by lowering your vocal register or whispering.
- Avoid acidic foods or anything that gives you acid reflux. Common foods that can cause acid reflux include alcohol, spicy foods, chocolate, and caffeinated drinks. Citrus fruits are very acidic; Usher avoids fruit and dairy before hitting the stage.
- Once you start performing regularly, find an Ear, Nose, and Throat doctor to help you keep an eye on the health of your vocal chords.

ASSIGNMENT

- It's important to take every opportunity to perform when you're starting out. If you're not getting opportunities, start making your own! Plan your next party at a karaoke bar. If you have a family barbecue coming up, croon for your family. Audition to sing the National Anthem for your local sports team. Make sure you're connecting with your audience, and record your performance so you can critique yourself.
- Build endurance and expand your lungs to confidently get through longer performances. Whenever Usher does cardio, he's singing. So when you're running or biking start singing your lyrics. If you're not a singer, you can still use this technique to build your on-stage stamina. Don't worry about being pitch perfect, just focus on singing the entire song.

5.



6.

DANCING

TAKE IT FURTHER

“You really dictate who you are through your individuality. You don’t have to dance like me.”

—Usher

SUBCHAPTERS

- Finding Your Style
- Watching and Learning
- Practicing

- Usher says he wasn’t a great dancer when he began. Through dedication, practice, and work with talented choreographers, he was able to become one of the best dancers performing today. Check out some of his most iconic performances:
 - Usher dances with his personal idol Michael Jackson at Madison Square Garden.
 - Usher’s 2014 performance of “Good Kisser” on the voice.

ASSIGNMENT

- Lots of choreographers break down their signature dance moves on websites like YouTube. Take advantage of this incredible access and resource, and study how great performers hone their craft. Consider searching for Mark Ronson’s “Uptown Funk”, and Usher’s “Good Kisser”.
- If you want to take it a step further, choreograph your own dance, record yourself teaching the steps, and share it with your classmates. Use the language and techniques you’ve learned from your favorite video tutorials, and take this opportunity to connect with new fans and friends.

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7.

ACTING

"I never went to acting school . . . I tried to find the connection between what was relevant to me and was relevant to this character."
—Usher

SUBCHAPTERS

- Usher's Road to Acting
- Researching Your Character
- Becoming Your Character
- Improvisation

TAKE IT FURTHER

- In 2006, Usher took a turn performing as lawyer Billy Flynn in the Broadway production of Chicago.
 - [Watch](#) this sneak peek of him on stage and a brief interview about his Broadway experience.
- Usher credits his personal mentor Ben Vereen with introducing him to Broadway. In 1972 Vereen was a part of the original cast of the hit musical Pippin. Bob Fosse, another personal hero of Usher's, choreographed the incredible show.

ASSIGNMENT

- Don't be afraid to open yourself up to new, different, or uncomfortable opportunities. You may not consider yourself an actor, but Usher found acting on Broadway to be incredibly beneficial to his stage performances. Choose one of your favorite songs to perform. It can be a song you sing, play, or dance to. Using the outline below, come up with a character who performs this song. Once you know your character's background, perform the song again as the character. Try to channel someone other than yourself. You might end up liking your new persona, and add some of their courage, boldness, or vulnerability to your next performance.
 - What's your character's name?
 - Where is your character from?
 - What do they do for a living?
 - Are they introverted or extroverted?
 - What kind of clothing does your character wear?

7.

NOTES

PREPARING FOR LIVE PERFORMANCES

"I also think that a really great thing to do to build your confidence up in performing is to sing live, all the time. I mean, everywhere I was, every opportunity that I got, I was singing."

—Usher

SUBCHAPTERS

- Performance Visualizations
- Powering Through Mistakes
- Taking Advantage of Every Opportunity
- Creating Pre-Show Rituals

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Usher has employed the power of visualization from a very young age. Visualizing a successful performance before you step out onto the stage is a great technique for working through your pre-show jitters. If you're not sure where to start, here are some helpful tips:
 - Start small — If you're unfamiliar with the practice of visualization, start with familiar objects and places. Close your eyes and lay down or sit in a comfortable spot. Start to picture your bedroom or living room. What color are the walls? Where is the bed or desk? Is there sunshine streaming in the windows? Walk around the room and touch the fabrics and furniture. Experience the sights, smells, and sounds of the space until it feels like you're actually there. After you've done this exercise with two familiar spaces, it's time to start visualizing your performance.
 - Get specific — It's important to think about the specific parts of your performance that you'd like to improve. If you're having trouble with anxiety before you hit the stage, visualize yourself backstage, relaxed, warming up and enjoying the sound of the audience taking their seats. If you're worried about hitting that high note you've been working on, visualize yourself singing that portion of the song flawlessly.

ASSIGNMENTS

- It's so important to power through your entire performance during a rehearsal. Whether your voice cracks, or someone starts talking, you gotta get through it. Try this: Tap two friends who think they're good pranksters. Have them come up with two or three ways to interrupt or generally disrupt your next rehearsal. Make sure they don't tell you what they'll be getting into.

8.

PREPARING FOR LIVE PERFORMANCES

ASSIGNMENTS (CONT'D)

- See if you can get through your performance without skipping a beat or busting up. Better yet, record the performance and share with your fans. They'll see your dedication and get a good laugh out of it. Remember, the more you run it, the better you'll get.
- With the provided schedule on the next page, practice the assignments from Usher's lessons on Singing, Dancing, and Acting. Film your performances at the start of the week and again after a week of training. Review and discuss your progress with your classmates.

PRACTICE SCHEDULE

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MORNING AFTERNOON EVENING

8.

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9.

CAPTIVATING AN AUDIENCE

TAKE IT FURTHER

“Being able to read the room is one of the things that I think makes you a great performer.”

—Usher

SUBCHAPTERS

- Reading The Room
 - Trusting Your Instincts
 - Listening to the Moment
- Trust Your Instincts — When Usher was starting out, he didn’t have all the bells and whistles at his disposal now. He only had conviction and instincts. When he was signed after performing at the Atlanta Talent search, Usher recognized that his audience needed a more immediate connection to him. He walked off the stage and started performing directly to ladies in the audience. Understand that you need to make daring displays in order to make a meaningful impact on potential fans.
 - Usher talks about three particular audiences that you can be performing for at any given time. Jot down ideas to captivate an audience in the following situations:
 - You’ve prepared for a full stage production but you show up at the venue and they say the sound isn’t working. You must perform an acoustic set.
 - Your friend’s birthday party is in a noisy public park. She’s asked you to perform her favorite song, but your microphone isn’t that loud, and people are busy eating cake.
 - Your office is throwing a holiday party and they’ve asked you to sing “Winter Wonderland.” By the time you take the stage, your co-workers have had a few drinks.

ASSIGNMENTS

- Whatever size the audience, it’s important to know and speak to their sensibilities. Pretend you’re getting ready for your best friend’s birthday party. You’ve been asked to toast the guest of honor in front of all of their friends and family. Write a 1-2 minute speech about your friend and make sure it’s a crowd pleaser. When you’re done, share it with your friend and ask them to critique your work. Better yet, host a real party and deliver it in front of a room full of people. The more you stand up and test yourself, the better you’ll get.

9.

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SHOW TIME

“From the moment you walk on that stage to the moment you have walked back stage until the light can no longer see you, you have to be committed.”

—Usher

SUBCHAPTERS

- Leave Room For Magic
- Working Through on Stage Injuries and Mistakes

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Leaving room for magic and improvisation lead Usher to execute one of his favorite performances to date. At the 2005 Grammy Awards, Usher performed “Caught Up” with the venerable James Brown. He left the tail end of the performance for a few moments of improvisation with James, connecting with the audience and giving them a performance of a lifetime. Find a recording of their 2005 Grammy performance and study it.
- Usher mentions a BET Awards Show performance where his mic cut out. Find the moment online and study how Usher powers through technical difficulties.

ASSIGNMENT

- It’s time to put yourself out there and perform. If you have an agent or manager, push them to find you a gig in the next 30 days. If you’re just starting out, make your own opportunities. Plan a block party, plan a high school talent show. Invite your family over for dinner and a show. Record your performance and post it to the Rate and Review interactive assignment.

10.

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11.

PERFORMANCE REVIEW

TAKE IT FURTHER

“Sometimes the most potent part of your performance can be silent. It’s your energy.”
—Usher

- In this unprecedented look into Usher’s mind when he performs live, gain insight as he critiques his own performances and breaks down his decisions on stage.

SUBCHAPTERS

- Stage Presence
- Costume and Wardrobe
- Using Silence Effectively

11.

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COLLABORATION

TAKE IT FURTHER

“Ego getting in your way can definitely stop what could be the most incredible moment of your career . . . Don’t allow your ego to lead you away from great collaboration.”
—Usher

SUBCHAPTERS

- Rules of Collaboration
- How to Choose a Collaborator
- How to Stay Connected and Flexible During a Collaboration
- Adding a Feature Artist

- Usher mentions some of his most successful collaborations to date. Here’s a short list:
 - Usher’s critically acclaimed single “Climax” was a 2012 collaboration with producer Diplo.
 - “Confessions” is Usher’s most successful album to date, a song-writing collaboration with Jermaine Dupri.
 - “Without You” is Usher’s collaboration with celebrated DJ and producer David Guetta.
 - One of Usher’s best-selling records, “OK!”, was a collaboration with Lil John and Ludacris.
- Producing, writing, fashion. Collaboration is all about bringing people together who think creatively and challenge you to do your best work. Here are two resources for preparing yourself for a successful collaboration:
 - [A Brief Introduction On Successful Collaboration Style](#)
 - [Successful Creative Collaboration](#)

ASSIGNMENT

- It’s time for you to make your own history. Dive into the MasterClass online community and find a partner to collaborate with.
 - Make sure you do your research! When you receive a request for collaboration, or reach out to a potential partner, ask them for links to previous work or performances. See if they have something that sparks your interest, and write down what it is you’d like to accomplish with them.
- When you’re ready to join forces, organize your thoughts, goals, and process with the help of these collaborative tools:
 - [Google Docs](#) let’s collaborators collect and share ideas with their creative partners.
 - Share larger music and video files with the help of a free [Dropbox](#) account.

12.

NOTES

CREATING A PERSONAL BRAND

TAKE IT FURTHER

“If you want be an artist, you have to find a way to market and sell what you’ve created. Create your commodity.”

—Usher

SUBCHAPTERS

- Usher’s Brand Evolution
- Identifying Your Personal Brand
- Letting Your Fans Get to Know You
- Sex Appeal
- Engaging and Maintaining a Fan Base

- Social media is a necessity for building a personal brand. Sharing who you are and what you’re doing with prospective fans lets them see a side of you that they might connect with. You may already have a personal Twitter or Instagram, but think about expanding your reach with these tips:
 - Make an Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook account for your public persona. Your fans don’t need to see your messages to relatives and close friends. Keep the information relevant to who you are as a performer. Be purposeful in what you share, as it’s a direct reflection of how you want your brand to appear.
 - Start following artists and performers you love. What type of content are they creating? Gather ideas of what you’d like to share and what you want to keep private.
 - Start a personal website. If you’re serious about booking gigs and establishing a name for yourself, give your fans and prospective employer a place to land. You can easily register a domain name for an affordable cost.
- If you’re still having difficulty wrapping your head around where to start, check out [The Complete Guide to Building Your Personal Brand](#). This eight chapter series will guide you through a workshop-like experience to help you create your own story and share it with the world. While it’s not completely aimed at performers, a lot of the resources and exercises can be easily adapted to help grow your artistic career.

13.

CREATING A PERSONAL BRAND

ASSIGNMENTS

- When you're just starting to build your career, it's important to focus on your artistry. What makes you an individual? What makes you stand out in the crowd of other performers? Define your personal brand with the help of the following questions:
 - What do you hope people walk away from your performances feeling?
 - If you were to ask a fan to describe your performance style in three words, what would they be?
- An important aspect of building your brand is working with other established artists and brands to expand your audience and reach. For this assignment, identify brands that you would like to partner with. For example, Usher has partnered with Pepsi, Yoobi, Tidal, and Samsung in a variety of different ways. Create a pitch for the chosen partner highlighting why your brands align, what you'd like to collaborate on, and who the target audience would be. Dream big! This is your time to visualize a big life for yourself.

13.

NOTES

MENTAL TOUGHNESS

“Any artist who tells you they haven’t failed, they’re lying. You are greeted with many, many No’s before you get a Yes. Everybody starts from a perspective of having to prove something.”

—Usher

SUBCHAPTERS

- Persistence
- Getting Past Failures and Obstacles
- Dealing With Haters
- Working Through Stage Fright
- Meditation

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Usher practices Transcendental Meditation (TM), which grew in popularity in the United States in the '60s and '70's. If you're interested in studying meditation here are some ways to get started:
 - [Headspace](#)
 - [Transcendental Meditation](#)

ASSIGNMENT

- Usher dedicated an entire segment to meditation. Try this practice and see if it helps calm your nerves and focus your performance:
 - Find a comfortable, quiet spot to sit or lay down. Set a timer for 5 minutes and close your eyes. Start to visualize your ideal performance space. What does it sound like? What color are the walls and stadium seats? Watch your fans slowly fill up the space. Picture yourself backstage preparing for your show. Once you've set the scene, stay in that moment until your timer goes off. That's all it takes. Try it a couple more times this week.

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15.

USHER'S CAREER JOURNEY

TAKE IT FURTHER

"I was always the kid who was performing no matter where I was. I just had this energy to get people's attention."

—Usher

- Usher is a prolific philanthropist and has used his success to advance the awareness of various worthy causes.
- Usher launched his non-profit [New Look](#) with his mother Jonetta Patto in 1999. It provides positive role models and resources to under served school-age youth in the United States.

SUBCHAPTERS

- Usher's Early Goals
- How Usher Was Discovered
- Debut Album
- My Way
- Here I Stand
- Raymond vs. Raymond
- What's Next
- How Usher is Making a Legacy

15.

NOTES

FINAL THOUGHTS

“I want you to apply everything that I’ve told you. I want you to try it. Find the things that are significant to you, and then nurture those things.”
—Usher

SUBCHAPTERS

- Setting Goals
- Measuring Your Success
- How to Keep Fighting

CONGRATULATIONS!

- You’ve finished your MasterClass with Usher! We hope you feel inspired to share your art with the world. We want to make sure that your experience with Usher and your peers doesn’t end when you finish watching the video chapters. Here are a few ways to stay in touch:

MASTERCLASS ONLINE COMMUNITY

- Stay active in lesson discussions and assignments, and be sure to provide feedback to your classmates!

OFFICE HOURS

- Submit your questions on the Office Hours page of the MasterClass site. Keep your eyes peeled for Usher’s personal responses.

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MASTERCLASS

USHER TEACHES THE ART OF PERFORMANCE

