

## Three Suggestions for...

# Bards Who Don't Sing

The bard has been a part of fantasy roleplay games since almost their beginning. She is the jack of all trades, she can do anything and dare to try everything. In some systems, that means most of her abilities are just lessened versions of the abilities of other classes. However, there's always one ability which is exclusive to the bard: Performance.

Whether thanks to musical magic or an understanding of social psychology, the bard can encourage her friends and help them work better together. This ability isn't unique to fantasy settings; although modern or sci-fi settings don't usually have bards, there are still characters devoting themselves to increasing cooperation within the group.

Each of the following suggestions includes two sides of the same coin: How the performance can help **us**, improving our efforts, and how it harms **them**, weakening our rivals. When describing an action, you can easily emphasize one side over the other. For example, you can say the bonuses the party gained are a result of the confidence the bard instilled in them, or you can say it's not actually the party who gets better, but the enemies who get worse.

One can imagine a character who combines several elements from the suggestions below, using different approaches for different reasons.



## Humour, Satire and Shame

Humour is a powerful tool, and like any tool, it can be used to either heal or harm. A bard who uses humour must have a sharp and flexible mind, since he must be able to shape his words to suit the combatants on both sides, the specific circumstances around them, the occurrences of the past few hours, and more. All of these provide him with ammunition, which he must shape carefully and aim accurately.

- **I Come Prepared:** Ask any improv artist, and he'll tell you that in order to come up with a funny idea on the spot, you must first prepare yourself. A bard can do the same. During the evening, around the campfire, he writes amusing songs about the party's hardships, on the friction building between the friends, on the worries they have about the future; during the day he makes sure to notice interesting events and memorable quotes. Then, at the moment of truth, he

uses it all – using a funny quote at the right time, colouring the combat in rosy tints, or reminding the party about that funny mishap one of them had that morning, and how we got over it.

- **And Also Your Mother:** Satire can hurt, and this bard uses it as a weapon. He makes harsh remarks about his enemies' physical appearance, behaviour or actions. He insults them to make them lose their temper, distracting them with a taunt that strikes too close to home. When the enemy misses, the bard makes sure to make everyone aware of just how horrible that failure was; when the enemy succeeds, he makes sure to compare that weak and pale effort to the party's marvellous successes. He belittles his enemies' goals, unless they seem to be a group of simple goons, in which case he just say various nasty things about their mothers.

He could have been a marvellous stand-up artist, noticing everything that bothers a person and pressing until it bleeds. He keeps the party laughing, which is great, since not every enemy can understand the bard's words, but his friends can always appreciate the way in which he ridicules the opposition. Such a bard can use his impressive verbal ability outside of conflicts, in which case he tends to exploit his

interlocutor's weaknesses – which allows him to gain influence over them, but in a fashion that carries some consequences. The innkeeper will give the party a good rate because the bard mentions how pitiful this place looks compared to the *other* inn, after he noticed the owner is especially sensitive about his competition. But later on, the innkeeper isn't likely to treat the party fondly.

## Speech, Hope and Sorrow

One should say words, not sing them. Words have the power to change minds, but this bard isn't interested in that – she wants to *enthrall*. She truly believes in the things she says, lifting herself with her words and carrying everyone with her. Whether she's uplifting her friends or degrading her enemies, you can always hear this bard's voice in the background, like an omnipresent narrator.

- **Remember Why We Fight:** When we stand against the enemies of the realm, this bard will tell us about the legendary historic wars, the ancient heroes, and their amazing accomplishments. Anything to increase the patriotic pride of the warriors. When we fight against the overwhelming forces of evil, she'll move between us, reminding us that our family awaits us at home, and they need us to fight for them, protect them, and return to them safe and sound. Or maybe the bard talks about ideals, about the justice the Queen promised us, the utopia promised by the gods, or the equality the rebels swear by, and with her help we become part of something greater, something worth fighting for.
- **Drink and be Merry, for Tomorrow We Die:** This bard is the complete opposite of the previous one. We must laugh, because life is bitter; we must accept the never-ending punishment given to us by uncaring gods or cruel fate, and laugh in its face. Borderline nihilist, this bard encourages us to throw ourselves at the here and now, live with everything we've got, because tomorrow may never come, or because ideals are transient, soon to fade and disappear. And if we aren't convinced – maybe our enemies will be. He's more than happy to tell them all about their useless efforts, whether from half-drunk despair, or with the horrible gloom that never seem to leave him.

## Dance, Movement and Leading by Example

This bard doesn't sing or talk – he acts. He's always moving, always confident, and this confidence serves as the stout pillar that supports the rest of the party. He fights with inspiring grace, or maybe impressive decisiveness, or maybe he just always seems to be in the right place at the right time. He makes a spectacle of the fight, and his friends find themselves swept up with the rhythm, working together and cooperating as part of one great dance.

- **Lethal Grace:** With a scimitar flowing along with her smooth movements, or a dagger that seem to appear and disappear as if by magic, or maybe just with his arms and legs dancing Capoeira style (a type of martial art invented specially to appear dance-like), this bard excites his friends by his mere presence. If someone so graceful is fighting on our side, they think to themselves, we must be doing something right. His unerring, never-ending swiftness reminds them that everything can be overcome if you just go with the flow.

He's probably not a very talkative person. His charisma is a result of his presence, his stature, his gaze. When he enters a room, people turn to look. The cleric will speak to the prince, the fighter will have a chat with the innkeeper, and both of them will do so with this bard standing next to them, radiating power, confidence. Making it clear that he can't be stopped, an image so strong that his friends come to believe in it, and in themselves.

- **Need a Healing Potion?:** This bard is always there when you need him. Need someone to help you flank? I'll flank with you. Are you hurt? I'm already casting a healing spell. Need a toothpick? Here, I had one in my pocket. He is always prepared, and his friends have come to count on him in every situation. Thanks to him, they don't need to care about the little details; he'll be there when needed, with the right spell, the clever advice or the required item.

Thanks to this bard's ability to divide his attention between the members of the party, and his quick and efficient reactions, his friends are comfortable trying things they would otherwise never dare, since, hey, the bard will be there to help them do it (and take care of them if something goes wrong). This bard proves her loyalty again and again, using actions, not words – and knowing someone is there to take care of you is like a rising tide carrying the entire party.

## Variant Bard Moves

### I've Got Just the Thing (replaces Arcane Art)

When you **rush to the aid of an ally**, you dig in your pockets for the right piece of equipment. Choose one:

- Heal 1d8 damage
- Give them +bond forward (minimum 1)
- You help them out of physical restraints

Then roll+Cha. On a 10+, the ally gets the selected effect. On a 7-9, lose one Gear, and your aid comes at a price: you draw unwanted attention, or lose one additional Gear. If you have no Gear to lose, you have to improvise or use your *body*, in a dangerous manner – take 1d4 damage.

You start with 5 Gear, and can never have more. You replenish 2 Gear whenever you have some time to rummage through loot, and after you Make Camp, Undertake a Perilous Journey, Supply or Bolster.

You can use this move instead of Aid or Interfere, when coming to an ally's aid.

### Blunt and Annoying (New Advanced Move)

You can always use harsh and demeaning words as leverage in Parley against a friendly NPC. Afterward, they're no longer friendly.



**Three Suggestions for bards who don't sing** is by Eran Aviram. Eran is the writer for Up to Four Players; the Lead Hebrew Translator for D&D and other games; produces the weekly podcast On the Shoulders of Dwarves, the main RPG podcast in Hebrew; and used to own a gaming store, it was awesome.

Drawing of a lovely elven bard: Aviv Or ([www.avivor.com](http://www.avivor.com))

**Up to Four Players** is a webcomic about tabletop gamers and games, by Aviv Or and Eran Aviram. Check it out: [www.uptofourplayers.com](http://www.uptofourplayers.com)

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