



A CLASS ACT: BARDS

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WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Would any other (class) smell as sweet?

WHAT IS A BARD?

- Traditionally, a hybrid class combining features from the cleric (divine spells), fighter (some weapon proficiencies), rogue (some skill proficiencies) and wizard (arcane spells).
- Strong historical and mythological leanings that encourage RP.
- In 5E, it remains a capable Jack-of-All-Trades class.
- Played well, it can contribute in virtually any role.



BARDS ARE ONE OF THE MOST VERSATILE CLASSES IN D&D

BARDIC MISCONCEPTIONS

- Bards DO NOT suck.
- They DO get better if played competently and if there is adequate build and magic item support.
- Knowing your class mechanics helps.
- Chaotic Stupid is a **player** problem.



BIGGEST MISCONCEPTION EVER

STRENGTHS/WEAKNESSES

STRENGTHS

- Overall, a Bard's class features allow it to excel in any given role and to fill in gaps in a party.
- Access to 9th level magic and the ability to cherry pick from the spell lists of other classes is its strongest feature.
- Bardic Inspiration is a mechanic that can turn failure into success and save lives.

WEAKNESSES

- Can be squishy.
- Limited number of spells known (maximum 22 at 20th level **including** Magical Secrets).
- Very technical class with a high skill ceiling to effectively master.



THERE IS NO DARKNESS BUT IGNORANCE

Bard players are the true master race

WHAT MAKES A BARD A BARD?

- Bards are often described as wandering minstrels and troubadours, but they are closer to the cunning hero or trickster archetype.
- Music does not make a Bard, though as a Bard you can choose to use instruments as a focus for your spells (typically, a Spell Component Pouch will do fine).
- **After all, you are not your class and shouldn't let it dictate the flavor of your RP.**



SPOONY IS JUST THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG.

DEFINING MECHANICS

- Decent Hit Points per level (5)
- Proficiency in a common save (Dex) and an uncommon save (Cha)
- Access to Light armor and some Martial weapons (more if you select specific Bard colleges)
- Pick ANY three skills at Character Creation (and **Expertise** later)
- Spellcasting (and Magical Secrets)
- Bardic Inspiration
- Jack of All Trades
- Some Situational abilities (Song of Rest & Countercharm)

SKILL PROFICIENCIES

- Bards can choose ANY skill at character creation.
- Expertise (gained at Level 3 and 10) also increase the effectiveness of your skills.



IS THAT AN ANIMAL HANDLING CHECK?

SPELLCASTING

- Bards can learn up to 9th level magic.
- They emphasize Buffs and Debuffs and can also master movement and utility spells.
- Bards can replace ONE spell known each time they level up with a new spell of the appropriate level (except for Magical Secrets).
- Magical Secrets (10th, 14th, 18th) allow Bards to pick spells from ANY spell list including class exclusives.



MAGIC, NOT MUSIC, IS A BARD'S BREAD AND BUTTER.

BARDIC INSPIRATION

- Usable a number of times = Cha mod (minimum 1) and refreshes during Long (T1) or Short (T2 and up) rest.
- Used on YOUR turn as a Bonus Action.
- Grants one scaling bonus die to a single ability check, Attack roll or saving throw made by an ally who can HEAR you (important).
- Inspiration lasts for 10 minutes until expended.



Is THAT a D6, D8, D10 OR D12?

JACK OF ALL TRADES

- Essentially Faux Proficiency, gained at 2nd level.
- Add half your proficiency bonus to any ability check you make that does not already include your proficiency bonus.
- Includes Initiative checks, Counterspell and Dispel Magic checks.
- Also includes Skill checks in which you are not already proficient.



*HEY, AT LEAST YOU CAN SAY YOU'RE PROFICIENT IN
MAKING A QUICK GETAWAY.*

OTHER ABILITIES

- Song of Rest (2nd) increases hit points restored by expending hit dice on Short Rests, scales like Inspiration dice.
- Countercharm (6th) is situationally helpful against Charm and Fear effects and grants advantage on saves to break free.



HOPEFULLY YOU'RE NOT THE ONLY ONE FRIGHTENED.



AND ONE MAN IN HIS TIME PLAYS MANY PARTS

So better read the goddamned script!

BARD ROLES

- Attacker (whether melee or ranged)
- Buffer
- Debuffer
- Skill Monkey
- Tank



DOES THAT GUITAR DO BLUDGEONING DAMAGE?

COLLEGES (PHB)

LORE

- Additional skill proficiencies.
- Cutting Words (Reaction ability, reduce an enemy's Attack roll, Ability check or Damage using Inspiration). Also, cut an enemy's Initiative at the start of combat!
- Additional Magical Secrets (6th) that do not count against your total spells known.
- Inspire yourself when making Ability checks (14th).

VALOR

- Gain medium armor, shield and martial weapon proficiencies.
- Inspired ally can expend it to add damage to a weapon attack, or as a Reaction to increase AC.
- Extra Attack (6th).
- Use Bonus Action to make a weapon attack after casting a Bard spell (14th).

COLLEGES (XGE)

GLAMOR

- Bonus action, grant THP to allies up to Cha mod, they use Reaction to move to you).
- Perform 1 minute to charm an audience/rest.
- Bonus action, cast Command on targets 1/round for 1 minute (6th).
- Bonus action, Sanctuary equivalent (14th).

SWORDS

- Gain medium armor and scimitar proficiencies. You may use weapons as a spellcasting focus.
- Gain Dueling or TWF style and Flourishes (expend Bardic Inspiration for extra damage and effects, procs on hit)
- Extra Attack (6th)
- Roll d6 instead of expending Bardic Inspiration for Flourishes (14th)

COLLEGES (XGE)

WHISPERS

- “Psychic Sneak Attack” (1/round, expend Bardic Inspiration, scales).
- Frighten a target after conversing for 1 minute (situational, /rest).
- Steal surface thoughts and persona of a dead victim by capturing its shadow (situational, /rest).
- Charm a target for 8 hours 1/long rest (14th).



THAT'S CLEARLY THE FACE OF A HEARTBREAKER.

COLLEGE RANKINGS

LORE

- Suitable for bards who want to focus on spellcasting and utility.

SWORDS/VALOR

- Central to many gish (hybrid) builds, especially those who want to emphasize weapon attacks rather than spellcasting.
- Very viable for multiclassing.

GLAMOR

- Suitable for some battlefield control and spellcasting builds, though some abilities are highly situational.

WHISPERS

- Big burst damage potential with Psychic Blades in gish builds.
- Other abilities are great for social intrigue/mystery adventures, but otherwise terrible in AL since there are few such modules.

MULTICLASSING OPTIONS

FIGHTER

- A 2 dip for Action Surge, 3 dip for subclass, and 4 dip for the ASI.

HEXBLADE

- A 1 dip for Hex Warrior and Hexblade's Curse will instantly increase your combat effectiveness. Additional levels is a bonus.

SORCERER

- Dip for Metamagic and Sorcery Points if you want to blast. Divine Soul is great.

PALADIN

- Viable if you intend to get up close and personal in melee. More effective with College of Swords, less so with other specs as both Smite and Flourish can proc off hits. 2 of, 4 of, or 6 of for Aura.

ROGUE

- Possible for certain specs that are more combat damage focused (typically with the Assassin or Swashbuckler).
- Viable for Skill Monkey builds for added Skill proficiencies and Expertise.



ACTION IS ELOQUENCE

Now go battle in style

COMMON TACTICS

- It is likely that you will move before most of your allies (and some enemies) in combat, so plan ahead.
- Use spells that will be of greatest benefit to your allies or of greatest detriment to your enemies. e.g. Faerie Fire to grant advantage, Silence to disrupt enemy spellcasters, and so on.
- Use your Bonus action effectively and in a proactive manner, be it to grant Bardic Inspiration, make extra attacks, or command your minions.
- Healing is overrated. Do it only with Healing Word, and then sparingly.



*ALWAYS MAXIMIZE YOUR TURN.
NEVER DO NOTHING.*

A BARD'S COMBAT/ACTION ECONOMY CHECKLIST

MOVE

- Am I making use of my Move to get into a better position?
- Am I positioning myself in a way that grants my other party members some benefit?
- Am I NOT standing in fire?



STANDING IN FIRE IS BAD, 'MMKAY?

A BARD'S COMBAT/ACTION ECONOMY CHECKLIST

ACTION

- Am I casting a Buff or Debuff spell to change the tempo of combat?
- Am I attacking or casting a spell each turn?

BONUS ACTION

- Am I inspiring an ally using Bardic Inspiration?
- Am I using my Bonus Action to control Animate Objects, Bigby's, Spiritual Weapon or similar?
- Am I taking an offhand attack if I am in melee and there are no better offensive options?



"I'M A BARD. I'M HELPING."

A BARD'S COMBAT/ACTION ECONOMY CHECKLIST

REACTION

- Am I using Counterspell to shut down a hostile magic user?
- Am I using my Reaction to defend myself with a Shield (if available)?

OTHER TIPS

- Always maximize your turn for combat effectiveness.
- If you are not contributing by changing the tempo of the battle or the board state, you are not helping your allies.
- Use the Help action if you are out of options so you can still be useful rather than running away.



PLAN TACTICALLY, PLAY EFFECTIVELY.

BARD SPELL CHOICES

CANTRIPS

- Vicious Mockery (default filler)
- Mage Hand (general utility)
- Minor Illusion (general utility)

1ST

- Dissonant Whispers (Bard exclusive)
- Faerie Fire

2ND

- Enhance Ability (advantage is great)
- Heat Metal (also gives you a filler Bonus action)
- Hold Person
- Phantasmal Force
- Silence

BARD SPELL CHOICES

3RD

- Bestow Curse (situational, upcast)
- Dispel Magic
- Hypnotic Pattern (great CC)

4TH

- Dimension Door (movement ability)
- Greater Invisibility
- Polymorph

5TH

- Animate Objects (also gives you a filler Bonus action)
- Synaptic Static (XGE)

6TH

- Otto's Irresistible Dance

7TH

- Forcecage
- Teleport

BARD SPELL CHOICES

8TH

- Dominate Monster
- Feeblemind
- Power Word Stun

9TH

- Foresight (great whole day bonus)
- True Polymorph

RITUAL CASTING (FEAT-BASED)

- A Bard intending to fill a more utility role may wish to pick up the Ritual Caster (Wizard) feat.
- The feat allows the Bard to scribe Wizard spells with the Ritual tag into a special book and to utilize those rituals as needed e.g. Leomund's Tiny Hut, Rary's Telepathic Bond.
- This option also expands the Bard's repertoire to increase their viability in a party set-up.

A NOTE ON MAGICAL SECRETS

- What Magical Secrets you pick will be dependent on your personal playstyle.
- Typically, your Magical Secrets will include at least Counterspell and one other party buff such as Haste.
- Wish (9th) is also a great end game spell to pick up with Magical Secrets at 18th.
- It is strongly suggested that you keep in mind all you've learnt about bard roles in this masterclass when making your choice.

SOME USEFUL MAGICAL SECRETS

- Banishment
- Blade Barrier
- Counterspell
- Evard's Black Tentacles
- Find Greater Steed (XGE, flying mount)
- Fly
- Globe of Invulnerability
- Haste
- Holy Weapon (XGE, gish builds)
- Sickening Radiance (XGE)
- Swift Quiver (archery builds)
- Wish

Q&A



OUR REMEDIES OFT IN OURSELVES DO LIE

This is the part where optimizers clap their hands and sing along

RACES & FEAT CHOICES

- A Bard benefits from high Charisma, Dexterity and Constitution (in that order) and races that grant Charisma and Dexterity are all suitable choices.
- Half-Elf & Variant Human are always mechanically superior choices.
- Dragonborn, Lightfoot Halflings and Tieflings are somewhat okay.
- Aasimar and Tabaxi are acceptable if you want to lock yourself to Volo's (but why would you?)



IS IT ANY SURPRISE THAT HALF-ELVES AND HUMANS MAKE GREAT BARDS?

RACES & FEAT CHOICES

- **Alert** will allow you to go even earlier in combat.
- **Crossbow Expert** (+ **Sharpshooter**) is mandatory in any hand crossbow build. Sharpshooter is mandatory for ALL ranged builds.
- **Great Weapon Master** (+ **Polearm Master**) is useful for a 2H weapon wielding Valor bard.
- **Inspiring Leader** increases party survivability tremendously.
- **Lucky** is always fantastic.
- **Mage Slayer** benefits gish builds, especially if you're also highly mobile or took movement spells.
- **Magic Initiate (Wizard)** will allow you to pick up Find Familiar and a second attack Cantrip e.g. Create Bonfire or Ray of Frost early on. You can consider retraining out of this when you hit Level 4 and/or multiclass.

RACES & FEAT CHOICES

- **Resilient (Con, Wis)** will shore up your saves significantly
- **War Caster** improves Concentration and allows you to Vicious Mockery anyone who provokes an OA. Situational.
- **Elven Accuracy (XGE, Elf or Half-Elf)** is race locked, but grants “super” advantage and allows you to fish for crits more effectively.
- **Prodigy (XGE, Human)** is race locked, but allows you to become even more proficient in Skills and grants one Expertise.
- **Second Chance (XGE, Halfling)** is race locked, and gives you what is essentially an extra chance for monsters to miss you in combat 1/rest.

TYPICAL BUILDS

- Archer
- Melee (2H, TWF)
- Caster (Blaster, Controller, Enabler)
- Bards are versatile enough that they can fill any of the above roles, while still functioning in the capacity of a partial Skill Monkey thanks to Jack of All Trades, the correct Colleges and Expertise.
- Hexblade makes everything better.



The Archer class really is made up of archers!

... ACTUALLY, IT'S MADE UP OF BARDS.

ARCHER BUILD

- Typically Valor/Swords Bard with Hexblade and Fighter dip. A Lore Bard is viable, but you will need to unlock extra attacks via multiclassing.
- Typical distribution is Bard 10/Hexblade 1/Fighter 2 > more Hexblade levels
- Grabbing Hexblade 1 early complements Bard and allows you to use Charisma on Attack rolls. Hexblade's Curse also benefits damaging spells cast at low levels (including Vicious Mockery).



*WE'RE REALLY ON A ROLL HERE WITH THE
WHOLE ARCHER THING.*

ARCHER BUILD (CONT'D)

- Grab Sharpshooter early (and Crossbow Expert if you wish to use a Hand Crossbow).
- In Tier 1, rely on Sharpshooter and other damaging riders to push up your static damage while shooting a bow.
- Cast Heat Metal on your target and trigger the spell with your Bonus action each turn to ramp things up in T1.
- Maintain a more damaging Control spell e.g. Evard's in T2.
- Get Swift Quiver with Magical Secrets as soon as you can. With Swift Quiver and Action Surge, fire up to six arrows in a nova round.
- Take more Hexblade levels to abuse Darkness/Devil's Sight and Elven Accuracy, and gain the Eldritch Smite invocation, usable at range.
- Maybe dip Rogue for Assassin.
- Possible End Goal: Bard 10/Hexblade 5/Fighter 2/Assassin 3

ARCHER BUILD (SUMMARY)

- Swords/Valor Bard 10
 - Magical Secrets (Swift Quiver + any other, typically Counterspell)
- Hexblade 5
 - Invocations include Devil's Sight, Improved Pact Weapon, Eldritch Smite
- Fighter 2
 - Action Surge
- Assassin 3
 - Auto-crit on Surprise, Sneak Attack
- Feats and ASIs
 - Elven Accuracy
 - Sharpshooter
 - Charisma to 20
- Useful Equipment
 - Oathbow or Bow socketed with Opal of the Ild Rune
 - Bracers of Archery

MELEE BUILDS

- Typically a Swords or Valor Bard, dipping Paladin, Fighter or Rogue. Hexblade is also always viable.
- Bard 6/Paladin 2 is a great foundation.
- At least two Paladin levels is a must for Smite. Swords (TWF) and Valor (Dueling or Great Weapon) will benefit from the on hit Smite proc.
- Dip at least 1 level in Hexblade for Charisma to Attack rolls, Hex Warrior and Hexblade's Curse.



*NO ARGUING FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS IN
THIS INSTANCE.*

MELEE BUILDS (CONT'D)

- Take Great Weapon Fighting feat if Valor and wielding a two-handed weapon. Consider Dual Wielder if Swords and crit-fishing.
- Taking Hexblade up to 3 for Pact of the Blade can benefit you if you are a Valor Bard with a Polearm, or if you are a dual wielding Swords Bard and want to use Charisma on Attack rolls with two weapons.
- Hexblade also opens up the Darkness/Devil's Sight combo, Hex etc.
- Aim to get as much abuse out of Smite and even Eldritch Smite at higher levels.
- Gain Holy Weapon using your Magical Secrets to add a static 2d8 damage rider on each hit.
- Possible End Goal: Swords or Valor Bard 10/Hexblade 4/Paladin of Vengeance 6

MELEE BUILD (SUMMARY)

- Sword or Valor Bard 10
 - Magical Secrets (Holy Weapon + any other, typically Counterspell)
- Hexblade 4
 - Invocations include Devil's Sight, Improved Pact Weapon
 - ASI
- Paladin of Vengeance 6
 - Fighting Style
 - Smite
 - Oath powers
 - Aura
- Feats and ASIs
 - Great Weapon Master + Polearm Master or Dual Wielder
 - Charisma to 20
- Useful Equipment
 - Weapon with damage rider expressed in dice e.g. Flametongue and/or weapon socketed with Opal of the Ild Rune
 - Items that provided extra movement modes like Winged Boots

CHARISMA-BASED CASTER BUILD

- Focuses on the use of Bard Spells and your Magical Secrets. Typically a Lore Bard since you get two more Magical Secrets and get them earlier than every other College.
- Push your Charisma to 20 as soon as you can to make your spells harder to resist.
- Dip Warlock (a maximum of 3 levels) if you want more options and go Tome pact for the free Ritual Casting. Sorcerer is also viable if you take it to 3 for Metamagic.



*IS IT ANY SURPRISE THAT HALF-ELVES AND
HUMANS MAKE GREAT BARDS?*

CHARISMA-BASED CASTER BUILDS (CONT'D)

- Spell picks make all the difference.
- You will likely rely on Debuff spells and make your biggest plays in the first two rounds of combat.
- Remember to make effective use of filler spells (e.g. Vicious Mockery) and spells that use only 1 Action to cast so you don't drop your Control effects.
- Take Ritual Caster (Wizard) to give you more versatility outside of combat. Some rituals like Leomund's Tiny Hut and Rary's Telepathic Bond are great for all situations.
- Warlock 2 (Eldritch Blast with Agonizing Blast and Repelling Blast) will give you a stronger damage option.
- Possible End Goal: Lore Bard 18/Warlock 2 or Lore Bard 17/Sorcerer 3

CHARISMA-BASED CASTER BUILD (SUMMARY)

- Lore Bard 17 or 18
 - Magical Secrets (multiple quality options from the Wizard list, including a Wish)
- Warlock 2 or 3
 - Open choice of Patron though Hexblade with Tome Pact is lovely
 - Invocations include Agonizing Blast and Repelling Blast
- or Sorcerer 3
 - Heighten Spell as one Metamagic option
- Feats and ASIs
 - Inspiring Leader
 - Ritual Caster (or gained from Tome Pact)
 - Charisma to 20
- Useful Equipment
 - Items that provided extra spells like Instrument of the Bards and Ring of Spell Storing
 - Items that offer extra movement modes like Winged Boots

JASON'S UTILITY BUILD 1

- You're Lore Bard primary, with a focus on control/debuff spells. Hot picks include *Slow* and other similar options. *Synaptic Static* is great at higher levels.
- You can still lob reasonably strong *Magic Missiles* for raw damage in a pinch when paired with Hexblade's Curse.
- Ritual spells to help in most situations (personally I like casting *Forbiddance* as a ritual).



YOU KNOW, BECAUSE BEING A SMARMY
TACTICIAN TYPE IS COOL.

JASON'S UTILITY BUILD 1 (SUMMARY)

- Lore Bard 14
 - Magical Secrets (multiple quality options from Cleric/Wizard list, up to 7th level)
- Hexblade Warlock 4
 - Hexblade's Curse and some damage options.
 - Chain or Tome Pact (your choice)
- Divination Wizard 2
 - Portents are lovely.
 - Can cast *Magic Missile*
- Feats and ASIs
 - Ritual Caster (Cleric) or (Wizard)
 - Inspiring Leader
 - Some increases to Cha
- Useful Equipment
 - Staff of Power
 - Robe of the Archmagi
 - Amulet of Health

JASON'S UTILITY BUILD 2

- Still a Lore Bard primary, with a focus on buff/debuff spells. Honestly, nobody cares about healing. :P
- Multiple options to manipulate dice at the table, including Bend Luck, Portents, Lucky, and so on.
- Grave Cleric's Path to the Grave is an Action, but that's never an issue if you can Quicken something that benefits yourself or your group or cast something useful as a Bonus Action (e.g. Holy Weapon).



*YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE GREAT AT
MAGECRAFT. YOU JUST HAVE TO BE GREAT
AT WHAT YOU DO.*

JASON'S UTILITY BUILD 2 (SUMMARY)

- Lore Bard 10
 - Magical Secrets (multiple quality options from various lists, up to 5th level)
- Grave Cleric 2
 - For that sweet Path
- Divination Wizard 2
 - Portents are great.
- Wild Magic Sorcerer 6
 - Sorcery points
 - Subtle and Quicken Spell
 - Bend Luck
- Feats and ASIs
 - Bump up that Cha
 - Lucky please.
- Useful Equipment
 - Staff of Power
 - Robe of the Archmagi
 - Amulet of Health

MAGIC ITEM PICKS

WEAPONS

- Melee Bards can consider weapons with a damage rider expressed in dice e.g. Flametongue, Frostbrand or weapons with a plus modifier and no attunement.
- Ranged Bards can consider an Oathbow or a bow/hand crossbow socketed with the Ild Rune.
- If you have Improved Pact Weapon as a Hexblade, wielding a weapon that has no plus modifier gets potentially better.



A SONGBOW COULD BE A THING.

MAGIC ITEM PICKS

ARMOR & SHIELDS

- Adamantine Breastplate (if proficient), or Studded Leather Armor with a plus modifier
- Shields with a plus modifier, Sentinel Shield or Spellguard Shield (if proficient)

CLASS SPECIFIC

- Instrument of the Bards (like duh)

AMULETS, RINGS & JEWELRY

- Amulet of Health
- Necklace of Adaptation
- Periapt of Proof Against Poison
- Ring of Free Action
- Ring of Protection
- Ring of Spell Storing

MAGIC ITEM PICKS

BELTS AND CAPES

- Belt of Giant Strength (above 21)
- Belt of Dwarvenkind
- Cape of the Mountebank
- Cloak of Displacement (better for melee)
- Cloak of Protection
- Mantle of Spell Resistance
- Robe of Scintillating Colors

HEADGEAR & FOOTGEAR

- Dragon Masks (add Cha to AC among other things)
- Goggles of Night (if no Darkvision)
- Headband of Intellect (high Int is good)
- Helm of Brilliance (better for melee)
- Helm of Teleportation
- Winged Boots (because most Bards can't fly)

MAGIC ITEM PICKS

MISCELLANY

- Bag of Holding/Handy Haversack
- Broom/Carpet of Flying (no attunement, excellent fly speed)
- Bowl of Commanding Water Elementals and related (four types, gives you a 1/day summon)
- Daern's Instant Fortress
- Horn of Valhalla
- Pearl of Power (recovering spell slots is great)
- Rod of Absorption
- Rod of Security
- Selected Staves & Wands (check attunement requirements)