

IT'S YOUR CALL

Among all the decisions for the big day is one that will last long after the thank-you notes are sent: What will you do about last names?

By Miriam Axel-Lute

Close your eyes and imagine your ceremony. If you're following tradition, when you enter the reception, someone (please tell me you won't let it be the DJ. OK, never mind. It's your wedding) will introduce you as . . . As what? What are your new names? Have they even changed? If you can't answer these questions off the bat, or are uncomfortable with the answers you have, maybe it's time to review your options.

Take Your Spouse's

Still the most common approach, the time-honored step of a woman taking her new husband's last name is certainly easy in that it's expected, and the paperwork is set up for it. But it's also been several decades now since it was possible for most of us liberated women to blissfully go that route without thinking of its history: woman as possession, moving from father to husband, wearing a label of ownership that's never really hers. Even if that's not what it means now, it can be hard not to cringe.

But don't start the guilt-trip machine yet. Like any other questionable tradition, from housewifedom to monogamy, if taking your husband's name is a *choice*, made in an atmosphere where you know you have other choices and no one's going to stop you from picking them, then there's nothing wrong with it.

You may just not like the name you were born with—for its spelling or its sound or its meaning—and love his. You may feel distant from your birth family, or at least the part of it that gave you your name, or be very close to his. You could want a connection to an ethnic heritage you both share but is only represented in his name. There could be plenty of reasons out there—only you can decide what feels right for you. If that's what you choose, hold your head up high and don't let a single disapproving feminist cluck register.

Now, to veer from the most common approach to the least, listen carefully: That last paragraph can apply to you guys too. Why should you be stuck with a name you don't like if your wife-to-be's last name paired with your first makes you sound like movie star? Or why should you have to pass the name of your no-good father on to your kids?

It's not easy to do: As of 2002, only Georgia, Hawaii, Iowa, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New York, and North Dakota had a provision for it in the legal marriage process, as there is for women, as opposed to the monthslong (and far more expensive) generalized name change process. The feminist movement forgot to include men's right to change their names as they were fighting for the right to keep their own. And

while it's increasing in frequency, it's still not so common. But don't let any of this stop you. Haven't you always wanted to casually refer to "my *bachelor* name"?

For same-gender couples, of course, this decision comes less weighted in one direction or the other, unless you've got a heavy-duty



butch-femme thing goin' on. Taking one another's name is less common in queer couples, and does carry the risk that you will be mistaken for siblings, but for all the reasons above, don't rule it out!

Keep Your Own

If you're not planning on kids, this is definitely the path of least resistance. Legal name changes are a royal pain in the arse, especially if you're trying it outside the confines of a state-sanctioned marriage process. But the confusion, the administrivia, the "well, try under this name," the having to check the "Has your name changed?" box on forms for years . . . it's enough to make anyone want to stick with the name that your psyche and all your friends know you by.

As more and more people opt for this route, the problem of people not believing you're married because your names don't match is growing less likely every day. You still might have a bit of a hassle at fundamentalist-owned hotels that allow only married couples to share beds, but perhaps that's how it ought to be. On the upside, you can tell telemarketers who haven't gotten with the neutral "head of household" program and ask for Mrs./Mr. [your spouse's last name] that there's no such person here.

But if and when you start considering little bundles of joy, make sure you've clipped this article out and filed it away under "decisions we put off," because before you give those kids a last name, you're going to have to go through this list of options all over again.

Hyphenate

Hyphenation, the egalitarian joining of two names into one with a hyphen, has been around since at least the 1970s, but if you ask data-

base managers, you'd think it was a totally newfangled idea that was designed to offend them. As if a hyphen weren't an ASCII character like the rest of the alphabet. I grew up hyphenated, and for many years I had two credit records, one under Axel-Lute and one under Lute, with the amusing note on the bottom

of each, "Suspicious! Same SSN as another record!"

However, all the "Yes, it's one name," and apostrophes instead of hyphens aside, this is an option that works out pretty well—if you started out with the right names. My parents say they were often asked, somewhat belligerently, "Well, what if you'd had really long names?" Their response: We would've done something else. Of course not all potential hyphenators are that judicious—there are some truly, um, unwieldy creations out there. I know, because in elementary school there were many lengthy playground discussions about what would happen if I married each of them.

Which is, of course, the other thing about hyphenation. It's not something you can make a tradition of down the generations. But, hey, your kids are creative, right?

Choose a New One

Don't want to pick one of your given names, hyphenation's out of the question for some reason, but want a family name that you can put on a little sign in front yard? Then you've got some work to do.

The challenge of creating/picking a name from whole cloth is simple to outline: You want a name that is meaningful to you in some way, without screaming pretentiously, "I picked this *myself*, can't you tell?!" For those comfortable in the hippie cultural milieu, names like Treefrog and Wolfdancer will be perfectly acceptable. But for those who dislike appropriating Native American culture, don't have a totem animal, or just want a name that "sounds like a name" in whatever circles they move in, the quest is that much trickier.

There are some tricks out there. Some people blend their existing names—this has the feeling

of hyphenation without any of its administrative downsides. Leavitt and Rosenberg can become Rosenlev. Conner and O'Donnell becomes O'Connell. But much like hyphenation only more so, it's only going to work if your names are right for it.

For the historically minded, mining your family trees for names that resonate with you, especially ones that died out, can be a source of inspiration. If you find short ones, you can even hyphenate one from each of your families.

Common interests or concepts that hold meaning for both of you are perhaps the most common fertile ground. A minister once told me of a couple she married who were very into Zen meditation—they chose the name Bell. You can also combine word roots or use words from other languages if there are no English words that sound appropriate to what you want. If you feel a connection to the place you live, you can also consider terms from its history or associated with its geography—this was one of the original ways last names came in to being (William "from over by the stream," Mary "of the green field").

If you're particularly interested in names that are already names, skim genealogy Web sites or books—you may find a common name has a meaning that resonates with you. A neat addition is to seek out an older baby-names book—if you go back several decades, many of the boys' first names sound like last names to today's ears. (Well, at least to my ears.)

Run each possibility through a few tests: How does it sound with your first names? Is it easily misspelled? Does it have a less-pleasant meaning you haven't thought of? How will you feel explaining your choice to 50-gazillion people at your wedding reception? Will you have to explain it every time someone hears it, and will you care? If it has a meaning in a language or culture that isn't yours, how would you feel telling someone of that culture that you'd chosen it for your name? And, of course, the age old: Will your children hate you for it . . . and will you care?

Allow as much time as you possibly can for this process—you may settle on the perfect name immediately, but you probably won't, and you'll want to give yourselves the chance to stumble over something in daily life that you wouldn't have come up with with pen in hand and a brainstorm list in front of you.

In any case, don't leave this choice until a week before the wedding day. You're going to spend at least as much time with your name as with your spouse. Make sure you're comfortable with the company.