



Creating Vocal Freedom (and more Tales of Trickery)

article by Michael Smolens ©2009

Have you ever found that sometimes it's easier to come back to an art form through a round-about fashion? In other words, not through the way you first learned it, or some other more predictable way of learning. This can be especially true if you've had a bad experience with that skill in the past. Even when you try to ignore that mode of expression, it still keeps poking its head up from time to time, waiting patiently for you to create the space for it to come out and play.

What was I thinking?

David came to my studio through a gift that his wife gave him – his first private vocal lesson. She was eager to see what was on the other side of her otherwise shy husband. He described himself as “vocally traumatized” from an incident 18 years ago in his late teens, and has been reluctant to sing since then. David recounts, “For some reason, I decided to tape myself playing guitar and singing one of my favorite pop tunes. When I heard myself on the playback I thought it was, well, terrible, waaay out-of-tune. I recall being shocked, literally, thrown back in my chair. *What was I thinking?*”

We began to talk about some of the mechanics of recording one's self to give David a sense of perspective. I asked, “Did you know that how we hear ourselves speak and sing versus what gets captured on a recording is very different? When we sing, our hearing is distorted because of all of the vibration going on in our skull and ears. Try this: cup your hands over the back of both of your ears without blocking your ears and speak. Sounds pretty different, right? Well, there's even more of a difference when we sing. Wouldn't that be confusing? I'm also curious to know if you had any vocal coaching before that recording, or if you sang in a band or chorus?”

“Never any coaching, or group singing; I always wanted to, but never did. I really got the difference just now when I tested my ears in that way. I'm now remembering that I couldn't hear myself all that well when I recorded. By the end it got better, but not by much.”

“Chances are you didn't have the advantage of studio-level equipment to hear yourself accurately and get the right balance in your headphones when you were tracking. I bet the microphone was on the less-expensive end, yes?”

“Yeah, I didn't have access to great gear back then.”

“OK, I'm going to take make two more predictions.”

“I'm all ears.”

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“You probably sang your song in the original key of the recording, without trying other keys. 9 times out of 10, a pop tune will be too high for a male student to sing comfortably. I bet you also recorded your voice and the guitar at the same time, which is much more difficult than laying them down separately. That’s what the vast majority of even experienced artists do in the studio.”

“Right on both counts. I remember how trying to get both the guitar and vocal parts at the same time was trickier than I thought it was going to be. Any more predictions?”

“Well, now that you asked, here’s the punch line – at the moment you heard yourself on the playback didn’t you immediately, yet unconsciously, compare yourself to the original artist?”

“Looking back, I see that *big time!* I figured that if I didn’t sing at all, it would be easier to forget that moment.”

“That’s a completely natural thing to do. Humans are preset to compare, wouldn’t you say? Beyond all of the technical variables that we just uncovered, there’s also the way in which a favorite tune can lodge itself in your emotional center at that age. Did you know I can still vividly remember the feelings I had when I heard certain tunes when I was in my teens? “

“Really?”

“And I often felt let down if I heard a version, even by the same artist, that was ‘unplugged’ or without all of their great studio production. It just didn’t elicit the same intense emotion as the version that I became so accustomed to. So if the original artist doesn’t live up to our expectations, what hope do we have in hearing ourselves compassionately?”

“It’s getting very clear for me now.”

“But let’s get back to you. You still want to sing, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I used to love it, and my wife really sees that in me. That’s why she set this session up for me.”

Singing In The Shower

After letting all those realizations settle in, I recommended to David that he consider singing in the shower as a way to safely re-enter singing.

I offered, “I don’t know about you, but I always have a blast singing in the shower. I can make up a completely silly song about what I’m going to have for breakfast, insert my own lyrics over a familiar tune, imitate different instruments, or just make up whacky sounds. The possibilities are endless...”

“Well, if no one’s around I’ll hum a bit in the shower. Privacy is a big one for me.”

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“For me as well. The background noise of the shower helps with privacy, too. Two other aspects make singing there easy – can you take a guess at what those might be?”

“Definitely the steam is one, it feels great, and the fact that sounds bounce around so easily is another.”

“Exactly. That’s why I’d like to you try out any of the techniques I just mentioned for singing in the shower as your first assignment.”

“Works for me, and I’m even OK if my cat can hear me.”

Out Of The Woods

Wanting to shift the attention away from voice, I asked David to play something on his beautiful steel-string guitar. He responds by playing one of his favorite pieces by a well-known rock guitarist/composer, Joe Satriani.

“Wow, that was really nice,” I said. “Is there a separate melody on top of that?”

“No, that’s the whole piece.”

“Can I try to make up a new melody on my alto flute and play it with you?”

He responds, “Sure,” and we play it again, and at the end he responded with a big smile.

And Into The Desert

Seeing his confidence rise, I asked David to play something different.

He mentioned, “You know, my wife loves Middle-Eastern music. It really takes her back to another time.”

“Well, wouldn’t that be cool if you could help transport her with your guitar playing? How about I pick up my Egyptian dumbek (a ceramic hand drum) and we jam, OK?”

After a couple of minutes of playing, he says, “This is fun, but I’d like to sound more, um, Middle-Eastern. What can I do?”

I responded with, “Your rhythm is very clear, and that’s a good start. Now here’s a scale that will put you into that Middle-Eastern space very quickly. Because my dumbek is pitched in B, let’s start by playing a plain major scale in that key so you’ll hear how different this scale is from the major.” Once he gets comfortable with the major scale in that key, I teach him a scale that uses a lowered (or flatted) 2nd and 6th degree and we improvise on that for a while.

After some of that, I said, “Isn’t that a colorful scale? Now what I’m noticing is that your playing is not as focused as the Joe Satriani piece, probably because the style and the

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scale are so very different. After all, it's one thing to hear an exotic music and another to play it convincingly. Let's try playing this scale in smaller, three-note groups to let your fingers and ears work together effectively. My experience is that if you sing along with your playing, you'll internalize this new scale much more quickly. Want to give it a try?"

As I accompany him on the dumbek, he plays and sings the new scale with remarkable ease and lack of self-consciousness. His voice is simply an extension of his guitar.

"You realize that you sang this unusual scale completely in-tune. What do you make of that?"

"Well, it seemed pretty natural – I just focused on my guitar and followed it with my voice."

"So, maybe your voice works just fine."

"Appears that way..."

Singing To Art

Noticing David's ease with his voice, I suggested that we sing in a more resonant space – the empty hall next to my studio where various artworks were on display from some artist friends. After he gave the expected nod, I grabbed a pair of shakers on the way out. He said, "I'm glad that you brought your shakers along. Rhythm seems to help my voice feel like it's part of something bigger."

As soon as we entered the hallway, I set up a groove with the shakers and asked David to imitate a slow, repeating two-note idea that I sang. Once he sang that idea reliably, I created my own complementary, interlocking two-note phrase to up the ante. No problem so far. Then I asked him to walk around and observe the art on the wall while we both sang our respective parts.

I then asked, "What do you think of our little Walking Art Duet?"

"Fun. I didn't think at first that I could sing and look at art at the same time, but here I am doing it."

"Great! Sounds like you're ready for a four-note phrase. Want to try?"

"Sure, though I won't know if I can walk, look at the paintings *and* get all those four notes right."

"Don't worry, I'll monitor that. You just keep singing."

As our duet expanded into a longer interlocking phrase, I did notice that some of his intervals began to slip, especially the downward leaps. After determining just which intervals were drifting, I suggested that he shifted his visual attention from the paintings to picturing his guitar fretboard to help navigate his more challenging intervals.

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“How is that working for you? Can you sense when the fretboard is needed and when the paintings are more useful?”

“Yes. The fretboard image helps to get my notes more accurate, while the paintings calm me down to be able to better hear your vocal and shaker parts. Going back and forth between both of these is pretty wild, and helpful!”

Back At The Ranch

When we return to my studio I remark, “Well David, for someone who described themselves as ‘vocally traumatized’ I’m not seeing or hearing any actual problems here. You’re able to sing accurately and in-tune with your guitar, letting the instrument be a sonic springboard for your voice. You’re also capable of singing your own part while a different vocal part was dancing around you. Let’s not forget that you were walking and looking at very interesting paintings at the same time! Finally, you were also able to monitor problem spots that you were having while singing more complex melodies, all with minimal distraction.”

“I’m surprised to admit that you’re right! I had no idea that I had all of these tools at my disposal. Maybe my ‘trauma’ from years back was just a bad movie.”

“I think you’re absolutely dead-on. If you recall, I didn’t make any technical suggestions about how you actually sang, which is what I could have done as a starting point to help you be more comfortable with your voice. Rather, I wanted you to see, that despite your self-described history, that you were completely capable of singing just fine. I thought it was important to uncover all of the variables that go into recording so that you would have a more balanced view of what you were up against. And as useful as all of that was, I just wanted to get you singing as a natural extension of your guitar playing. *So often it’s the actual singing that can tell your body and mind that it’s safe to do this in the present moment.* I’ve seen many students’ relationship to their singing change within just one lesson. I can see that the next step would be to begin working with some technical aspects of your singing, to really bring out your expression and power. How does that sound to you?”

“Can’t wait!”

POSTSCRIPT – the next two lessons

When David returned for the next two lessons, he reported that his practicing felt completely different – more comfortable, more in-tune, and more expressive. The results could also be seen in the attitude he brought to those lessons. Truly enthusiastic, and focused enough to be able to monitor more aspects of his tone production at the same time – a key ingredient for making major progress.

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FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

- Sometimes it's easier to come back to an art form through a roundabout fashion, especially if you've had a bad experience with that skill in the past.
- It's very natural to compare a home recording with that of a highly-produced commercial one. We are often much less experienced recording and performing, plus we rarely have the advantage of a large budget to make our recording sound "larger than life." This gets compounded when we're recording a favorite piece that we've heard many times in its original version.

THINGS TO TRY

- Sing the piece that you want to record in a variety of keys to discover the best one for you.
- Record the vocal track separate from the accompaniment for more ease.
- Sing in the shower to re-enter singing.

Advantages: privacy, noise distraction from the water, hard surfaces carry the sound easily, and steam is great for your voice.

Activities: make up a silly song about some activity or current event, insert your own lyrics over a familiar tune, imitate different instruments, make up wacky sounds, etc.

- If you play a chordal instrument like a guitar, keyboard, or harmonium, sing along and double the melody to help you re-enter singing. Also use a play-along recording or computer generated accompaniment program for fun.
- Visualize the keys or fretboard of your instrument to help secure challenging intervals.
- Sing in an unfamiliar scale or tonality to experience your singing in a new way.
- Sing in new environments (nature, gallery, tunnel) to broaden your sonic awareness.
- Allow a skilled vocal coach to help your re-entry into voice feel more spacious and rewarding!