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World Voice Day 2016, “Explore Your Voice”: Choosing a Crossover Coach and Teacher—Should You Consider Working with One?

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO “EXPLORE”?

“**E**XPLORE YOUR VOICE,” THE THEME for World Voice Day 2016, is celebrated this year on April 16. Webster’s dictionary defines the verb explore three ways: 1. a. to investigate, study, or analyze: look into, b. to become familiar with by testing or experimenting, 2. to travel over (new territory for adventure or discovery), or 3. to examine especially for diagnostic purposes. In short, explore means to look at something in a careful way to learn more about it, to study or analyze something, to talk or think about something in a thoughtful and detailed way, and to learn about something by trying it.¹

The Webster definition of “explore” translated into voice-speak language might be expressed something like this: “To explore your voice and teaching means to learn more about it in a careful way, to study and analyze the new techniques and approaches (there are many ways to go about this important task), to talk to others about their thoughts and experiences in a thoughtful and detailed way, and then try it out in your own singing and/or teaching.”

More than likely, independent voice teachers more than any other group of voice teachers, are asked to teach and sing repertoire outside their teaching and vocal comfort zone; perhaps you enjoyed the experience, perhaps not. These types of requests are part of what it means to “explore your voice.” To use words from the Merriam Webster definition, one needs to investigate, study, analyze, look into, test, experiment, and examine. Exploring your own voice is a great place to start, since by “doing” one is apt to teach that thing better.

Ron Browning

While working as Series Editor from 2013–2015 for the *So You Want to Sing* voice pedagogy book series, I was fortunate to meet and learn about extraordinary crossover coach and teacher Ron Browning. Ron lives in Nashville, Tennessee, and has had a career that spans over fifty years. I decided to profile Ron’s crossover work as an independent coach and teacher by examining

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how he works with the wide variety of singers who make their way to his studio, by speaking with some of the singers in his studio, and by asking him about his teaching techniques and experiences.

Ron holds a Bachelor of Music degree from the University of Kentucky in piano and voice, and certification from California State University at Northridge in K-12 education, as well as a Professional Designation in the Recording Arts and Sciences from the University of California at Los Angeles. Ron is on staff as a voice and performance coach for the Castleton Opera Festival under the leadership of the late Maestro Lorin Maazel. Maestro Maazel described him as follows, “Ron is simply a master! The singers love working with him!” He developed voice and performance curriculum for the Nashville Jazz Workshop where he is currently on staff. Ron is also an accomplished producer, jazz pianist, and successful songwriter, which earned him Artist in Residence for the city of Winnipeg, Canada, early in his music career. He maintains a private studio in Nashville, and travels widely to workshops and festivals throughout the United States.

In addition to working with classical singers and conductor Maazel at the Castleton Opera Fest held each summer in Castleton, Virginia, his other students include some of the leading country, pop, rock, and blues singers of today—Alison Krauss, Wynonna Judd, Pattie Labelle, Carrie Underwood, and many more. Recently, one of his students, Meghan Linsey, was selected as one of four finalists in the hit television program, *The Voice*, season 2015, and was chosen first runner-up in the final competition.

Ron has been working with voices since third grade where he was known for his “stride” piano style. Today, he is an accomplished jazz pianist. Growing up, he played piano for his home church in Kentucky and other churches in town. His experiences in church singing continue to influence his coaching and teaching today, especially his use of the “cry” technique, discussed later in this article. In the Pentecostal Church where Ron grew up, he described to me how he witnessed the congregation worship using a mix of crying and singing during services, and those sounds fascinated him as a young boy. When he began teaching, he would have young students imitate animal noises. Years later, out of desperation, he had Ron Block of Union Station Band get on his

hands and knees on the floor so he would relax his abs in order to get a low breath and create chest resonance. Ron made him crawl around for several minutes mooing like a cow until he collapsed on the floor in laughter. Ron used that technique because Block was being far too serious, and it was preventing him from relaxing into the easy, low breath.

Years later Ron purchased voice scientist and pedagogue Oren Brown’s book, *Discover Your Voice*. Reading what Brown wrote was a milestone moment of validation for Ron because he knew what he witnessed during his youth at church, and had been using in his own studio were being described in Brown’s writing. He was excited and thrilled to learn that a scholar like Oren Brown was encouraging teaching and sound making in a similar fashion to what Ron was using and teaching in his studio.

Ron’s Teaching and Coaching

“I look for what is already free and for what isn’t. I work with and from that,” says Ron. When I spoke with Ron about his work with singers, he explained that he calls himself both a coach and a teacher, and he looks and listens to singers and categorizes them two ways. The first type of singer Ron described is a “nearly finished sculpture,” and he only needs “to clean up some debris.” In those instances, he is more of a coach. Record companies often send him singers that need debris cleaned off their sculpture. The other type of singer has no sculpture in place, so they are learning how to put the clay together. In these instances, he is a teacher.

He elaborated, in more detail, what he has often experienced when working with classical singers.

Most classical singers overbreathe and support and think that’s it. They think their job is to interpret, so they become overtaken by emotions rather than telling the story in a way so that the listener will easily empathize from his or her emotional memory. They bring far too much emotional interpretation to a song. When it isn’t working because they are over emoting, the teacher starts to target other areas such as breath more, support more.

So, the first thing he asks classical singers to do, no matter how well they sing, is to sing the melody on a couple of syllables and “throw it away.” Or, he has them

go to the bookshelf, find a humorous book, and sing the melody with those humorous words. He finds it keeps them present, honest, and real, and results in simplifying everything. Singers then notice that something has happened—the voice is lighter, and the voice is “out front.” Next, he has them sing the actual words of the piece, but he points to the book to remind them of that approach. He believes singers “overdo” because they think more is better when it is not.

He is “on board” with high/low voice concepts and terminology, and then there is a middle voice. The middle is not a mystery to him. He describes the middle voice as the “cry” voice; the sound leans toward a cry in order to create a seamless voice. The first thing he does is work with the natural voice chest to head, and he uses “baby voice” in middle. Next, he works a song to get a “true state of being with a conversational volume.” Classical singers need more resonance, but their singing is still based on conversation. The next step is phrasing or story telling as he calls it.

When I teach, I always pretend I don't know one thing about music or about the voice—and I move out from there as a normal person, merely listening. I try to come from a place of knowing nothing! I then just listen and watch and become a detective. I seem to always have the idea of the chakra system in the back of my mind as a guide—looking and listening for tension in any of the seven levels of the energy bodies. The student never knows I'm doing that. I don't flash pedagogical vocal terminology in the beginning, instead I use the language of the student whatever and wherever it is, and bend it in the direction that will free the tensions and get the job done—whatever that job might be at the time. Sometimes we will invent a whole new word for the student's new discovery. I could give a rat's behind about pedagogical terminology at that point in time, even though I know it well. Later on, I might or might not introduce the real terminology—but only after they are free and the voice is working well—if, and only if—they'd care to know! I tease them with pedagogical terms at that point, and make them want to know more about it. It's a bit like a strip tease act! If I get their attention, I might give them a voice book from my shelf to take home

to read certain chapters, etc. After that, I use the correct terminology. But I'm not officious about it from the beginning. Most singers, especially those from the record labels, just want their engines fixed. They don't want to know how to take the motor apart and put it back together! And they could give a flip about what the rest of the world might call this or that as long as their singing techniques and anatomical parts are working well! Isn't that the way we all are about our cars?

WORKING WITH CLASSICAL SINGERS

The majority of teachers reading the *Journal of Singing* are classically trained, and that is why I decided to profile Ron's work with classically trained singers first. I found what soprano Stephanie Hahn Nolan had to say about working with Ron especially meaningful. Much of what she described is what I experienced and sensed upon meeting and speaking with Ron. In a similar vein, while I was working toward my doctoral degree in education at Teachers College, Columbia University, I was exposed to a wide assortment of teaching styles and techniques; my teachers encouraged me to consider all forms of teachers and teaching. From those experiences, I learned that excellent pedagogy comes in as many shapes and forms as there are human beings. It widened my horizons and viewpoints, and gave me the freedom “to explore.” Ron Browning is, in my opinion, a quintessential example of an “original,” and someone who explores and asks his students to do the same.

Soprano, Stephanie Hahn Nolan

Ron describes classical student Stephanie Hahn Nolan as follows, “Stephanie is a classical voice teacher who has been a weekly student of mine for a few years. She comes to me privately and attends the weekly voice technique classes I teach for the Nashville Jazz Workshop. She has an amazing classical soprano voice, and her sister is an amazing mezzo. She came to me for crossover technique, while trying to figure out the ‘radio thing!’” By “radio thing,” Ron is referring to a more conversational approach to singing, singing that he describes as friendlier to the ear. The vocal phrases are purposefully loaded with what he calls “ear candy,” a phrase he calls his own, and that keeps the listener hanging on. It includes all the

little intriguing rhythmic motives that a small group of words can have that stick in the ear—the flash in the consonants, for example. Ron says to singers all the time, “Quick, spit out the consonants.” That creates a shimmer or a percussive sound much like a drummer playing a high hat cymbal with their brush, etc., and Motown made it famous. And, you can take the most boring song, load it up with ear candy, and tighten up the fanfare rhythms. All of a sudden it sounds like a hit.

Stephanie has worked very hard to step out of the big, sculpted classical voice so the natural voice could sing various styles, mostly jazz. She has seen me work with so many different singers in class, and she has heard the quick successes. She also picked up some of my techniques to use in her own class when she saw how effortless they allowed the singer to be.

I spoke with Stephanie about her experiences working with Ron. Stephanie is the director of choral music at St. Cecilia Academy and the Overbrook School, both located in Nashville, on the Dominican Campus of Aquinas College. She is also the choir director at St. Patrick’s Church in Nashville, and an independent voice teacher with thirty-five years teaching experience. Stephanie obtained a Bachelor’s Degree in Music Education with a voice emphasis from the University of Vermont and a Master’s degree in Theology from Saint Michael’s College in Colchester, Vermont. She describes her training as classical from birth since her mother was “an Italian opera singer that sang constantly, even while attending to cleaning and cooking.”

I wondered how she came to study with Ron, and she told me she learned about him when she moved to Nashville six years ago. Stephanie wanted to find a way to “belong” vocally in a place like Nashville with its reputation for contemporary music forms, especially country. When she first moved to Nashville, she sang with local choral groups, but felt like her music life was no longer going to center around classical music. She realized that classical music, at least for her, had become too much about perfection. Stephanie was ready to learn more about jazz singing and music. When she called the Jazz Workshop to inquire about lessons and classes, she was given Ron’s name. The Jazz Workshop described him as the best coach and teacher for crossover artists. When she contacted Ron, he asked her if she was willing to make the necessary vocal adjustments needed in order

to sing jazz. Of course, she said yes. She began taking Vocal Technique, the Art of Phrasing, Special Effects, and Recording Techniques classes at the Jazz Workshop where Ron was on faculty. Stephanie describes Ron as an “extremely original teacher and a remarkably playful and intuitive teacher. He was very clear that you don’t put aside one thing for another.” Ron played one of her classical recordings in class so the other students could hear the vocal and stylistic changes she was making. “I had to chisel the voice way down.”

During private lessons, Ron would ask her to sing a classical selection, move around the room, and fling her hands in the air while singing to release the hold from oversupporting. The playful movement allowed the voice to “jump to the front of the face and land in the sweet spot.” Then he would have her sing the jazz song they were preparing and her voice would “be there.” She describes that experience as follows:

I went out to the edge and came back. Ron knows what is needed in the moment. Serious play, that’s what his classes are. He talked about different modes of singing in a way I was not use to. He brings your singing into a realm that is straightforward, without “loftiness,” practical, and truthful. For example, phrasing—how do you carve up a phrase in a way that communicates the meaning and intention? He had a game we played in his group classes. We would all hold phrasing flash cards that Ron had developed. Each card depicted a different way to approach a line. While a student was singing, other students would hold up their card with that change. The singer then had to adjust their singing accordingly. It was all spontaneous and so much fun.

Stephanie described it as: “You have to try not to try. He invites you out to play. He wants you to stop trying and stop taking yourself so seriously.” She explained that Ron would get to the child in his students, the creativity, and if singers became emotional, he would stop them right away and explain that they must connect the listeners to story. If a singer became too involved, he would stop and ask her/him sing the song to the words of “Three Little Pigs,” or to sing the song by writing out a grocery list. Stephanie added that Ron often uses the word “slippery” to describe his work. She would leave class thinking she finally had it, and then it would slip

away for a short time, to be found and lost, so one needs patience with oneself and the cycles of the process.

When working with Ron, arrival and success is when you can just “throw it away,” and by that I think Ron means you have stopped investing in it so much, and have found a way to “stand in the song,” where you realize you have to feel entirely free for the message to come through. It is a feeling of being detached from the outcome.

There was never any pressure from him as he worked with you to make a different musical language that resulted in an unhooking from expectations of conventional words. Stephanie added that the theme for World Voice Day 2016, “Explore Your Voice,” is an amazing thought, and added that any sound you can make is part of your voice. Ron was constantly having me explore my voice by trying anything and everything—sing like a child, sing like Elvis Presley. If you can make the sound, it is part of your voice, and that gives a singer great access to choices.

Working with Ron is a path to freedom. Ron is on a spiritual level. When you are truly creative, you are fearless. There are more dimensions to singing than just sound. It makes singing into something more whole. I think we often, especially in classical arts, are trying to impress with our perfection. We are happiest when we are speaking something to the world that we believe, and that crosses into any genre. When we really have our say instead of, “I hope that high note is great, I hope I hold that note long enough,” this is who he is and what he teaches. Ron possesses a tremendous well of humility. When he meets someone, he honors that person whether big name or small name—he respects his students. His students delight him. Every little thing thrills him. Everything is real and true. He is truly thrilled that you are writing this.

Stephanie ended our conversation by saying how thankful she is that she met him and described meeting Ron as “providential.” She added, “Attending Ron’s classes feels a lot like going to a church group or a spiritual study, and we always become very close because of the small size of the classes and all the dimensions we were exploring.”

WORKING WITH CONTEMPORARY SINGERS

Alison Krauss

Before her recent tour, twenty-seven time Grammy winner, Alison Krauss, worked with Ron almost every morning for one to two hours. He describes his approach:

I was able to pull Alison Krauss out of recording sessions to take a dance lesson with me—just to help her loosen up the entire body. She had been diagnosed with dysphonia, but I find the more “physical” type of play and movement that I can bring into her lessons [then] there are no symptoms of dysphonia! We laughed all the way through the dance lesson and are going back for more. Awareness of the lower body is crucial to anyone with dysphonia. Deep tissue massage, breathing exercises, and dancing are what I use, along with plenty of free moaning through five-note scales and octave glissandos. I happen to be a massage therapist too, so that really comes in handy. I recommend that type of study to any performance coach. A stiff back, shoulders, neck, jaw, a locked pelvis—all a killer of ringing tone! We are overhauling her voice, and adding to what she already has. We have added much to the top end of her vocal range.

Alison described her work with Ron this way: “Studying with Ron Browning has been the most exciting thing that could’ve happened to my life as a musician! I haven’t felt this happy and intrigued with singing since I was a kid. The joy I feel at the thought of what I might learn at the next lesson keeps me up at night. He is the highest note!”

Even Alison Krauss’s engineer for the past twenty-eight years, Neil Cappellino, is fascinated with how Ron gives directions to singers. He accompanied Alison to a two hour lesson to observe Ron and pick up some tips, and sent Ron several new students. When he sat in on one of Alison’s lessons, he realized that he was using the wrong directions with singers in an attempt to get the music to have a more passionate sound. Observing Alison’s session helped him realize his comments to Alison and others seemed to encourage the voice to “fold up and go inside,” rather than open up and come out into the room—the way she sings when she is working with Ron.

Meghan Linsey

Meghan Linsey, another student of Ron's, was first runner-up during season eight of the NBC hit television show, *The Voice*. Meghan has had several tunes jump to number one on the blues, pop, country, and Christian charts, only hours after she performed. She is the only contestant that received major crossover attention, and has her pick of record labels. "I worked her butt off the last several weeks before and during the show trying to kill some bad performance habits and to get the voice up out of the muddy, moody throat into a more frontal ring-a-ding so she can still use her special effects safely. She has some Janis Joplin effects, but she is her own unique self."

Carrie Underwood

Ron prepared the vocals for Carrie Underwood's appearance in *The Sound of Music* on the NBC live television special. The arranger for the production was thrilled at Ron's vocal coaching with Carrie. He told Ron that the whole success of her singing in that production was due to his work with her.

Wynonna Judd

In the liner notes of her *Classic Christmas CD*, Wynonna Judd gives Ron special thanks, "I've heard that when the student is ready, the teacher appears. God sent you [Ron] to me just in time. Thank you for encouraging me to take my vocal ability to the next level. You are truly an angelic spirit!" Ron produced Wynonna's vocals and traveled to Norway with her to perform with other major artists at the Nobel Peace Prize Ceremony Concert in 2006. After raving about Ron from the Schermerhorn Concert Hall concert stage in Nashville, Wynonna dedicated "Ave Maria" to him, and told the audience that, "Working with Ron was like training for the Olympics. He has taken me to the next level of performance—finally, after all these years. He is an angelic spirit, and anyone interested in singing needs to study with this man." The other famous Judd, Wynonna's mother, Naomi had this to say about Ron when he was on the road with The Judds during the Last Encore tour on the *Oprah Network*: "Ron de-mystifies vocal techniques, and when it comes to voice coaches Ron is the King!" At the end of September 2015, the *Entertainment Tonight* television

show crew showed up at Ron's front door to film The Judds and Ron for their upcoming Las Vegas residency, *Girls Night Out*, at the Venetian.

Patti LaBelle

After repairing Patti LaBelle's voice completely so her concert would not be cancelled, Patti says, "Ron is a miracle worker. He is phenomenal, and I thank him for my voice. I never believed in vocal coaches until today. Ron has made a believer out of me!" Patti raved about Ron from the stage at Divas Nash Vegas and on national television.

CRY VOCAL TECHNIQUE OVERVIEW

The brief description of some of the ideas and techniques Ron using in his studio is far from inclusive, but is included to "whet your appetite" for learning more, and to give singers and teachers an idea of what to expect when working with a crossover coach and teacher like Ron Browning.

Nothing attracts attention quicker than the sound of someone crying. We hear it and we must stop to figure out what is going on. The cry puts us "in the moment." It brings us quickly to a real place within ourselves. Our senses are sharpened. We attempt to connect immediately. It is the sound of pain that comes from deep within one's core being. It is honest, and it communicates the severity of our needs. It maintains attention until the crying is over.

Somehow we sensed that when we were babies. The doctor spanked our behind, and we drew our first breath, nice and deep, and just enough. We sensed our need for attention. We were helpless and scared. We needed caressing. We needed love. We needed to express ourselves. So we sang our first song. We wailed. We moaned. The phrasing was perfect and just right. It was our first successful attempt at communicating. We improvised, and without any practice. Our breathing and support were natural. The tone and placement—natural. No bigger than a loaf of bread, we could be heard throughout the entire maternity ward—without a microphone. Without practice.

Our performance was successful, and our needs were met quickly by our loving mother, and by the doctors and nurses standing around the delivery room. We had

our audience in the palm of our hand. Our first hit tune. Nature simply took over, and made us a star.

Can we cash in on that dynamic gift that came with us when we were born? There was no vocal technique book to study. And what style. We used straight tone, building tension, followed by little wavy lines of vibrato for release. We used the dramatic slurs and bent pitches like a blues singer. We used perfect frontal placement of voice with just the right amount of breath support, and the right amount of air. We used great improvised melodies and intriguing rhythms. The ability to capture attention immediately with the sound of voice was in our hands. The freedom to express was ours, and it was honest presence, communication straight from the soul. All are excellent singing tools. All are prevalent in commercial music today!

So, the answer is “yes indeed!” Singers must learn to cash in on this. In fact, this same soulful cry is largely the sound that record companies sign and that television music reality shows seek out. As stated above, it’s no secret that the soulful vocal has become the standard in today’s music, and it doesn’t matter which genre. The cry is natural. It is our original and God-given voice.²

Easy Ways to Find Your Cry Voice

Hold your breath. At the same time use a lot of support. Notice the pressure inside of the body. See how it places a “hold” on the voice box. The box is tilted slightly, and it stays in one position the entire time. Leave it there while you release a little bit of air. When you release the air, make a crying sound. Maintain the hold on the larynx.

Cry like a little baby. Do it freely, moving the voice up and down in range. Cry at different volumes.

Imitate a loud siren. Explore the extremes of your vocal range.

Notice a tilt on the larynx when you cough. Now sing a vocal lick while pretending to sneeze, or as if you are cracking up while delivering a funny punch line to a joke.

Listen for the cry in blues and rhythm and blues singers. Imitate them. Borrow a phrase or two. Aretha Franklin and B.B. King are great artists to listen to and copy.

Meow like an angry cat. Make long meows and lean on the volume. Don’t force the volume but lean out on it a little bit. Pretend your owner forgot to feed you, and you are good and mad. You want milk and you want it right now! Get your owner’s attention!

Lift something heavy and notice the hold on the larynx just before lifting the object. Do it again, this time making a crying sound while you lift.

Make a pitiful sound as if you feel so sorry for yourself. Cry out on this statement, “I can’t believe this is happening to me-e-e-e-e-e!” Whine!

Explore all the different ways you can cry. Try sobbing. Sob backward onto the soft palate. Sob forward into the teeth.

Listen to actors cry in movies. Imitate them when they cry or laugh. This will loosen the larynx and prepare you for easy tilt.

Sing as though you have had too many cocktails. Whine through the slurs. Have fun.

Do the vocal exercises on my CD labeled *Mastering the Cry Voice*. Do them daily after your regular warm-ups.

Good luck, and have a good old-fashioned crying fit. Have fun and explore!³

NOTES

1. www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/explore (accessed October 19, 2015).
2. Ron Browning, “Mastering the Cry Vocal Technique” (unpublished paper).
3. Ibid.

Over the land is April,
Over my heart a rose;
Over the high, brown mountain
The sound of singing goes.
Say, love, do you hear me,
Hear my sonnets ring?
Over the high, brown mountain,
Love, do you hear me sing?

By highway, love, and byway
The snows succeed the rose.
Over the high, brown mountain
The wind of winter blows.
Say, love, do you hear me,
Hear my sonnets ring?
I sound the song of spring,
I throw the flowers of spring.
Do you hear the song of spring?
Hear you the songs of spring?

Robert Louis Stevenson