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## How Her Voice Was Saved – Alison Krauss's Dysphonia



**Alison Krauss** *feared that her career might come to an end due to vocal issues – says Ron Browning.*

The strong need to finish her album ‘[Windy City](#)’ had created so much stress that Alison was diagnosed with dysphonia.

**Dysphonia** is a vocal dysfunction that hinders the quality, pitch, loudness and flexibility of the voice. It has been used as a catch-all phrase for the hoarse voice, and it can be brought on from high stress (muscular dysphonia), or left over from laryngitis and other health problems.

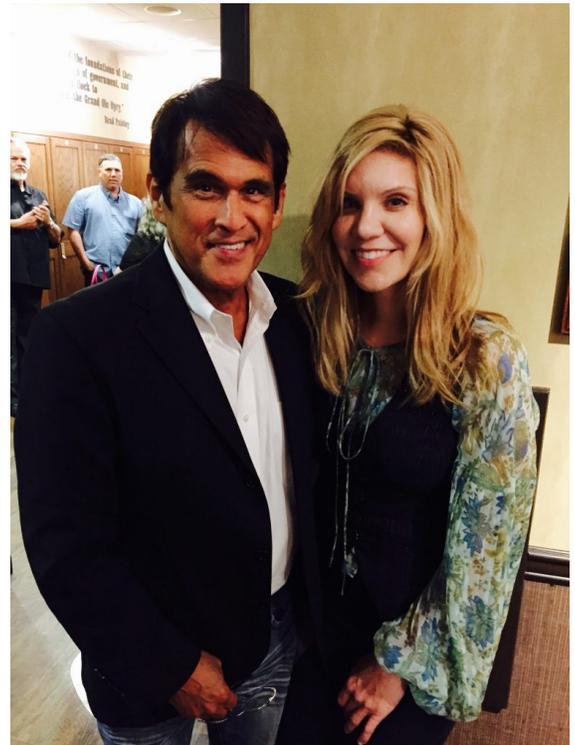
### Seeking help from a singing teacher

She was emotional and afraid to come for lessons, but we set out on a plan and worked extensively over the next several months.

When a singer develops dysphonia, fear dominates everything. The voice becomes small and tight with much pain and tension in the throat, neck and shoulders. The singer becomes doubtful about their talent.

We applied therapies such as progressive breathing patterns; exercises to bring the vocal folds into better alignment; semi-occluded exercises which allow the vocal folds to vibrate with less effort; exercises to smooth out vocal registers; as well as flexibility and range extension exercises.

'Rag doll' exercises combined with 'moan-tone' exercises were also a main part of the daily regime.



*Ron with Alison Krauss backstage at the Grand Ole Opry*

*Alison: It's been really wonderful to be able to recognize the tension in my throat and how to loosen it up through an exercise.*

We also included a long list of things not to do during the day, which can be harmful for the voice: clearing the throat, long phone conversations, shouting, poor sleeping and eating habits, and dehydration.

## **Integrating the body with the voice**

The singer's point of focus tends to be on the vocal folds only and nowhere else, so it is necessary to engage the entire body once again in the sound making process.

One of her early breakthroughs happened when I made her act silly and dance around while doing voice exercises, which made her laugh and relax for the first time. This freed her entire body up and connected the lower part of the instrument to the larynx.

Our voices work fine when there is a sense of urgency by providing frontal placement of voice, getting it up and out of the throat. Boredom, urgency, laughter will all do the same thing, each bringing a different edge to the voice.

Also, doing things so 'off the wall' got her quickly out of her technical mind and brought her into a fun playground where the inner child (the real musician) could take over just before going on stage. It worked like a charm!

***Alison:** We were at a show and out of the blue my throat shut down. I called Ron and said, "My voice is dead. Is there anything I can do?" He said, "I want you to use an angry tone, and you can't be fake about it, say NO and disagree like you're having an argument." So, I went out in the field and found a tree and argued with it until it looked too weird so I pretended to be on the phone. I argued with my fiddle case while we got our ear monitors hooked up for the show, about another 2 minutes. The show was a breeze. No problems whatsoever! Our bass player came up to me and said, "What was THAT?" It was bizarre to me too but I do it all the time now.*

## **Changing the mood to free the voice**

Alison did not like the way her voice sounded on a sad tune that she had to record as a duet. She was over-interpreting, which caused the voice to fold up and be small and thin. So, I rewrote the lyric. The new words were hilarious, but I did not let her see it until the introduction played.

When she sang the new lyric, her voice was brilliant with a golden ring. Her connection to the word was honest and in the moment with much more real presence. This technique kept her from over-emoting.

Alison was totally enthralled with this process, at how it freed her up vocally, and how present she felt while singing.

**Alison:** *Ron taught me that when a singer doesn't feel something, they can overcompensate by trying to add false emotion to make up for what they don't naturally feel. That can lead to throat tightness and other bad habits.*

## **Working to maintain efficient vocal habits**

Once the singer stumbles upon the “magic spot” where sound is produced freely and singing is achieved without effort, they want to stay there and create. They do not want to go back to old habits.

For instance, once a singer understands the concept of using less air and less energy as they pass from chest up through the middle voice (while keeping the mouth the same as in conversation), they realize the sky is the limit with vocal range.

**Alison:** *The first day I went to see Ron I told him the highest note I could sing. He said, “Oh please!” He got me up an octave higher. It was a good laugh.*

Changes should be obvious from the very start if smart techniques are used. If there are bad habits that need to be eradicated, it might take a little longer, but the singer should be able to notice freedom with any new technique at the first lesson.

Patience is needed, along with daily exercises, to break bad habits.

Be it technical, psychological, or organic, my job is to help solve artists' problems so their show can get on the road and be the best it can be.

## **My Reaction to This Week's Singing Competition Entry**



## Michael Jantzen - In the Cool of the Night

You have a good natural voice, but tension holds it captive from time to time. I like the straightforward delivery of the text, however the phrasing locks into the same pattern and becomes predictable and the listener could become restless without some variety in phrasing. I am concerned about the muscular tension in your jaw and neck, particularly on the high notes. Open the mouth more and take in less air as you approach them. Also, you tend to sing out of the corner of your mouth, which distorts your natural voice. Sing to the front and keep the lips relaxed as you would in daily conversation. All of this will allow your true personality to come to the front so you're not just hiding behind a creative sound. With a relaxed vocal instrument, all you'd need to do is deliver the details. I do like your voice and think you have real potential. So keep at it!



## Why I chose Michael Jantzen as a Finalist

I have chosen Michael Jantzen to move on as a semi-finalist because he has a radio-friendly sound that's easy to listen to and memorable. He has wonderful musicianship, and his arrangement is brilliant and hooky. I also feel that with a little bit of technical work Michael will be a top-notch performer!



**Ron Browning** is internationally known as the "Voice Coach to the Stars." Alison Krauss, the most celebrated Grammy Award winner (27 wins), recently praised him in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *BBC News*, *the Tennessean*, and *The Sun in London*, where she called him "a genius." Ron has been seen and heard on *Entertainment Tonight*, *The Voice*, *Oprah Network*, and *BBC's Simply Classics*, to name a few. His clients include all levels of singers from beginners to award-winning celebrities in all genres of music. Ron works with major record labels

producing vocals and preparing artists for radio, concert tours, and special television appearances. He is a voting member of the Grammy Foundation and the CMA Awards. He is a successful songwriter, jazz pianist, painter, and is currently writing a series of voice and performance manuals, which will include interviews with many of his students and celebrated clientele. His solo jazz piano CD, *In a Sentimental Mood*, is available on iTunes and CD Baby.

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