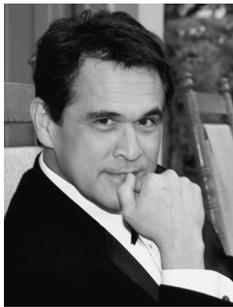


Karen Hall, Associate Editor

# Crossover Concerns and Techniques for the Classical Singer

Ron Browning



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**T**HIS ARTICLE IS WRITTEN as a follow-up to the article written by Associate Editor, Karen Hall, in the last issue (March/April 2016) of the *Journal of Singing*, “World Voice Day 2016: ‘Explore Your Voice.’” My purpose is to provide additional insight on what to expect in a crossover voice session, and to further answer the question she proposed: “Should you consider working with a crossover coach and teacher?” In addition, I hope to shed more light on my approach to teaching voice in general, and to elaborate, in more detail, on my use of the “cry” voice technique as it pertains to my crossover training work with all levels of students from beginners to Grammy Award winning artists.

Yes, I feel that every singer can greatly benefit from working with a crossover coach, and the reasons are many. Sometimes the distinction between genres is somewhat artificial, and there also can be overlap between genres. Singers do not always see where there is common ground until they understand the commonalities and distinctions. Additionally, there is a magic that happens when performers temporarily detach from their conventional methods and default approaches to singing. The pressure to be perfect or polished is suddenly lifted. The singer is challenged with a new set of rules in a game they know little or nothing about. They must fully surrender and follow every direction of the teacher or coach if they want to be successful with stylistic crossover. Although awkward at first, this new experience will lead to many new discoveries for singers regarding the singing voice and their creative and personal identity.

If singers are aware of current trends, they will want to be more flexible with singing other musical styles. According to soprano Renée Fleming, in her book, *The Inner Voice, the Making of a Singer*, crossover is not new, and she says it is “definitely finding an audience and an enormous audience at that.” She further writes,

Once sound came to the movies, singers were everywhere. Grace Moore, Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy, and Mario Lanza all could be considered crossover artists, as they were well trained performers who brought popular songs and light and core classics to a larger audience. And even though Deanna Durbin never had an opera career, she managed to sing (and sing well) at least one aria in each of the twenty-two musical films she made before retiring at the age of thirty. During the height of her fame in the 1930s and 1940s, she became the highest paid woman in America, and in some years the biggest selling female box

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office star. All while singing arias! Today, “crossover” has become the golden word of the age.<sup>1</sup>

### WHAT TO STUDY FOR TRANSITIONAL MASTERY

To have the ability to switch from genre to genre and do it well, the singer, ideally, will need to do intensive work with all the vocal modes—natural, cry, belt, and the “electric edge,” as I fondly call it. What determines each vocal mode is the amount of air the singer uses, and the physical effort involved to generate the vocal sound and expressive effects. The body will be in various states of relaxation using easy and natural support up to optimum support depending on the mode. The modes range from very relaxed voice (natural), to the longing, moaning, or whiny voice (cry), to the exited shout or yelling voice (belt), and finally the amped or revved “trumpeting up-and-over-the-heads-of-the-audience” voice (electric). Singers must listen to and study several great artists in each genre, and hone easy and tasteful “vocal licks” appropriate for each style. Vocal licks are very short ornamentations that include grace notes, mordents, trills, bluesy riffs, and longer melismatic patterns, like the ones popularized by Mariah Carey. The crossover singer must have an effortless transition through middle voice with a “sky is the limit” kind of vocal range, and this is where the cry voice technique will come in handy. Placement of the voice must be in line with commercial standards, and must have become second nature for the singer. For example, the big classical tone (sculpted tone) is not usually found in bluegrass music, and the middle voice mix is the norm for the R&B vocal, with occasionally interjected chest belt. Singers should master vocal exercises that include many different scales—pentatonic, blues, harmonic and melodic minor, bebop, and modal scales from the major scale. Singers must have mastered conversational singing, real presence, and have developed the ability to groove well. They must learn to be an exciting storyteller. The master crossover singer must know where the “diva notes” are in the phrases. I call them “money notes” or “bankable notes,” which students find to be an alluring prospect. Those are usually the higher pitched notes that are held out longer and loaded with personality and special effects. They must know how to create rhythmic and catchy “ear candy”

on a whim, and be able to let the true personality come to the front. They must be like putty in the hands of the teacher, coach, director, or producer. All of this is easy to accomplish with a solid plan of action and hard work on the student’s part. Anyone can do it.

### A Crossover Success Story of a Professional Opera Singer

I asked one of my students to write a few words for *Journal of Singing* readers regarding her recent experience with crossover study. Prior to studying with me, she had only pursued opera and has been a professional opera singer for several years. Here is what she had to say.

*My name is Sheila Houlahan, and I’m a young mezzo soprano from Seattle, Washington. I received my Bachelor’s Degree in Vocal Performance from the Manhattan School of Music, and have since sung professionally in the Seattle area.*

*Some of the best singers I have ever known have been able to flawlessly and effortlessly transition from genre to genre; I’ve also found that singers who can sing crossover have a better head voice/chest voice mix and more bite in the sound. Seeing as both of those qualities can really enhance one’s operatic voice, I’ve been searching for a fabulous crossover coach for years.*

*I’d first heard of Ron through soprano, Kim Brown, who couldn’t stop raving about his method after a few sessions of crossover work. Needless to say, I called him up the same day, and set up our first Skype coaching appointment. After that first coaching, I was hooked. Ron has an eloquent way of describing his vast knowledge of the voice that is immediately understandable; I’ve never felt such total ease in incorporating new techniques into my singing. I noticed my voice began to change after several sessions. The chest to head voice transition was easier, my low and middle voice had gained immense power and depth, and I’d gained a third on the top end of my range. After results like these, I knew I wanted to do an intensive with him.*

*Intensives are magical; you get to be surrounded in a bubble of knowledge, sequestered away from the world, and really hone your craft so that at the end of the intensive you feel like a brand new singer.*

*That environment makes singers much more comfortable with surrendering their old technique and playing with new ways of singing. Ron and I worked six to seven hours a day over the course of three days; when your schedule is structured as such, you don't have time or energy to put up a mental fight! And, thanks to that, my voice transformed. Ron is all about finding the "natural, free voice" first, so we started off with some folk tunes and hymns. We worked on a multitude of genres, from pop to jazz, to blues, to more folk, to music theater, and finally to opera. I couldn't believe how different my approach was towards singing by the end of the three days!*

*Ron's focus on natural voice, phrasing, and real, heartfelt music-making reawakened the artist in me. All too often we classical singers put aside creativity and autonomy to fit with "industry trends" so we can get a job. This takes the focus off of actual, spontaneous music-making and stresses out the singer. Many singers, both aspiring and professional, are more concerned with being loud than with being of service to the music. Ron changed that for me completely, and I will never approach my arias the same way again because of it.*

*Once you study crossover techniques, auditioning becomes a different game. No longer are you concerned with "self-absorbed" interests such as: Am I loud enough? Do they like me? If they don't pick me, then I must be a bad singer. Instead, you enter the audition room being of service to the music and the audition panel. Putting that focus outside of the self allows the singer to be autonomous and carefree in their music making. It breathes new life into old favorites, and gets audition panels excited about your work. Crossover work completely expanded my outlook on what it means to be a singer. We classical singers tend to limit ourselves and eschew other genres, citing that it will somehow "harm" our instrument. This couldn't be further from the truth. Singing other genres strengthens the core of the voice and increases flexibility and dynamic capability. Now, I'm just as comfortable walking into an opera audition as I am auditioning for music theater and pop. I'm slated to sing my first ever show in Vegas, which would have never happened if I hadn't met Ron.*

*We classical singers are charged with the impossible task of preserving opera whilst somehow simultaneously making it "relevant" for modern day audiences. Studying with coaches like Ron is the key to this; we can embrace opera and classical music in such a way that we are also able to retain our individual methods of musical expression. I encourage singers to be fearless and curious in exploring new techniques and interpretations of classical music making.<sup>2</sup>*

### **A Classical Singer's List of Fears and Assumptions**

Currently, I am helping Staci Gulino transition from classical to jazz. Her classical teacher noticed that the work Staci and I are doing together is having a positive impact on her classical singing. Staci feels at home with my "conversational" approach to singing, since her classical teacher endorses it. She is in the midst of making a jazz CD and wants to have a legit jazz sound. From time to time, I have to help her out of the "can I really do this?" quagmire. Staci writes:

*From childhood through adolescence and early adulthood, I explored a wide variety of music. But the desire for exquisite sacred and classical music ultimately became my focus, and in 1996 became my chosen area of professional study and performance. After my first CD project three years ago, I discovered a love for recording and production process. With the encouragement of my recording engineer, I embarked upon a jazz CD project, thinking that this would be an easier project than the first.*

*I had awesome arrangements, awesome musicians, awesome studio professionals, but I did not have awesome vocals. I did not like what was happening, but could not figure out the technical changes that needed to be made to successfully make the vocal transition to the jazz sound that I had in my head. I did not realize what a tremendous crossover challenge it would be from classic/sacred to jazz. After doing some extensive research on crossover techniques, I realized I needed some help.*

*With the project on hold, I began to search for the right vocal coach. What that meant to me was someone properly credentialed who could "speak a*

familiar language” so that I could understand and employ the necessary techniques for a successful classical to jazz crossover—and, most importantly, someone to guide me in doing so without hurting my vocal folds or my voice in any way. As my vocal demands are high due to radio and media work in addition to music, I’ve already been through treatment for injured vocal folds once and most certainly did not want to have that issue again.

I contacted Ron. Familiarity with his [conversational singing] technique has helped me to pick up quickly on many of the stylistic concepts and instructions that Ron has provided specific to each jazz/standard selection for my recording project. However, certain unforeseen realizations have come to my awareness—embedded fears and assumptions that I did not fully anticipate. As I’ve been working in “crossover mode” through each song over the past weeks and months, dutifully attempting to employ the techniques and guidance that Ron has offered, I’ve battled these fears and assumptions that have led me to really question my decision to pursue “crossing over,” as well as hampered my work due to a fear of injury. Perhaps others who are attempting a crossover from one genre to another have feared similarly.

Some of the most prominent of those fears and assumptions are:

- Singing in any genre other than classical will damage my vocal folds.
- It is virtually impossible for a classically trained vocalist to sing meaningfully in the intended style of other genres without damaging the vocal folds.
- A classically trained singer will regress in singing ability, or otherwise damage the classical techniques that have taken years to achieve (possibly in a permanent way) while learning and performing other genres.
- A classically trained singer can’t really make a crossover to jazz (or any other genre) in a believable way. Therefore, I should just focus exclusively on the genre that I know, love, and feel so comfortable with.
- My best effort in this crossover endeavor will likely not result in a good enough style or end product worthy of the music and the jazz greats.

- Classically trained singers should not sing other genres—period.

In our sessions, Ron has addressed each of these kindly and carefully, sharing his expertise and illustrative experiences that have convinced me of the fallacy of these fears and assumptions. I’m learning in a fresh, new way that is complementary to my classical work that, through faithful use of the speech to singing technique, one can avoid vocal fold damage while freeing the vocal mechanism (and heart and mind), which presents new possibilities for healthy singing in other genres. Consistency and perseverance in utilizing speech to singing technique will be the key, I believe, to success in broadening my horizons as an artist singing in different genres.<sup>3</sup>

I am in agreement with James C. McKinney regarding the speaking and singing voice. He says, “The basic mechanism for speaking and singing is the same, and the physical processes involved are essentially the same. Speaking and singing share the same breathing apparatus, the same larynx, the same resonators, and the same articulators.”<sup>4</sup> My goal is to get the singer to be comfortable and stay true to all of that. This can prevent many of the vocal problems that stem from overly produced vocals. Speaking well should easily lead to singing well.

### THE MESSY TRANSITIONAL PERIOD OF CROSSOVER STUDY

Much of what I see on the face of a singer new to crossover work is a look of terror. That is the main reason I employ a fun, child-like approach, if at all possible. The singer must be like a kid who is not afraid to explore. It seems the sillier the play, the faster the breakthrough, and the quicker the progress with crossover studies. Singers must grant themselves permission to make noises they are not accustomed to producing or there will be little or no progress. For example, I have helped many commercial music singers find their classical/opera voices by getting them to clown around, pretending to be the “world’s most famous opera diva.” Once students give in to this, they are always surprised to hear a free flowing voice with much more resonance than they have ever used before, with wonderful breath and support. They are proud that they were able to make such a robust sound so easily. If they are really intrigued, I might give

them an Italian art song with hopes of whetting their appetite further with classical music; “Caro mio ben” will usually do the trick. Also, the thought of singing in a foreign language can be an inspirational goal for them. Teachers need ways to get the students to free themselves from the constant stricture of being overly rational. Through a looser, more playful attitude, singers are more easily able to explore and successfully stumble upon new sounds for artistry.

I used this type of play with Wynonna Judd when I produced vocals for her *Classic Christmas* CD cut, “Ave Maria.” She wanted to incorporate a little bit of classical tone for that recording. She is and always will be the perfect child when exploring her voice. She is not afraid. She trusts me entirely and does not judge how it sounds when she is following my direction. She gives herself permission to experiment and is willing to make “messy” sounds. There is no place for the critic during this period of exploration. The singer cannot be in a hurry to make polished or recordable sounds. The singer must also be patient and creative enough to make music using the newly discovered technique once they have had some success with this new approach. I have also had Alison Krauss pretend to be an opera singer, which always does wonders for her upper register. It opens up her throat (she originally came to me having been diagnosed with dysphonia), frees up her breathing and support, and allows full resonance to return. The spirit of play and the voice are both released as a result. Like Wynonna, Alison is a big kid at heart, and not afraid to experiment, so it has been easy for her to grasp this type of silly play as something useful for better singing. Alison has twenty-seven Grammy Awards! If this type of silly play leads to better vocals for an artist such as Alison, then perhaps any new striving artists might want to consider giving it a try.

Needless to say, crossover will force singers to color outside the lines. But once they do, they realize how much fun and how freeing it is. They will not want to go back into their tightly controlled box of techniques again. They will prefer to venture outside the lines a bit and dangle from a more fun and dauntless edge. A more spontaneous performance will be the result. Singers will stop trying to recreate the exact performance they achieved in yesterday’s rehearsal. Performers must live and create in the present moment—the *now*.

## THE ART OF SPONTANEITY

Every singer wants to have a beautiful and expressive voice that works effortlessly. Technically, those are the main goals, but learning how to sound spontaneous should also be one of the main goals for singers (and actors) seeking an advanced or professional level. This is true whether the student journeys out into the world of crossover or not. The text must dance out of the mouth with an alertness and enthusiasm as if it is the first time the singer has said those words in that particular order. The mind, body, and eye must be attached to the words. Singers must be responsible and accountable for the words they sing. That connection between mind and word is crucial, and it is the fine line that separates a good singer from a potentially dynamic performer that keeps the audience in the palm of their hand. Spontaneity is a playful thing, and it has the sound of being unprompted. Recreating this “first time” moment is truly an art, and only seems to come to those singers who seek a more professional status, or to those who have sung in a large number and variety of venues. However, there is no reason for a singer to wait so long for this art of spontaneity to begin to develop. Performers who sing merely from autopilot must be awakened and held liable for the text. Teachers must wake them from their trance. There should be no look of “retrieving the words from memory” in the eyes. Encourage them not to stare off into that “dreamy poetic distance,” the one that overly passionate singers love so well. Singers must sing from a true state of being instead of merely acting. They must be the text.

Again, this is the reason that silly, off the wall types of exercises and techniques work so well with students. They must be jarred out of the rigid box of practiced techniques and their manufactured states of being. I might have the student sing each line of the lyric as if it is a punch line to a joke, while pretending to hold back the laughter. This works perfectly every time, especially on a sad tune, and it is a useful tool when introducing the student to the use of the cry voice technique, which the crossover singer needs. The forward cry and the forward laugh will both produce a bright nasal resonance that records well, and sounds great on the radio. Timid students can usually find frontal resonance easier through laughing, but I have quicker success when the

student imitates someone crying and will take the time to explore it. When we cry the larynx tilts slightly, and, in turn, places the voice more into the “nose horn,” adding a beautiful golden edge to the voice. This is natural, and it is easy to do. Oren Brown in *Discover Your Voice* says, “The quality you feel as nasal resonance is very desirable.” He also says, “As you begin to sense a ring in your voice, give attention to ‘riding’ it, much as violinists learn to ride the overtones of their instrument by the way they manage their bowing.”<sup>5</sup>

To get pensive singers into a playful moment, I will have them sing their memorized song or aria while watching something loony on the computer with the sound muted. Any of *The Three Stooges Funniest Moments* videos on YouTube will suffice. Cartoons will always do the trick. I record them singing while watching, and I play back the recording so they can listen to the difference. They are always flabbergasted. On playback, they hear that the voice has come to the front of the face with beautiful, warm tone and sincerity. They hear that the voice is also better in focus, and that the pitches and the rhythms are superb. Immediately, they notice how honest the whole performance is, how exposed the personality seems to be, and how thrown away and carefree the song is as if they are improvising. It is this sudden shift into a playful mode that makes spontaneity possible, and gets rid of the sound of mere memorization. There is a beautiful relaxed quality about it, and the “self critic” is left outside the creative instant. Exercises like this will help them to stop tweaking their techniques so the voice can sing. As off the wall as this little exercise sounds, give it a try! It will be astonishing what great benefits are in store for both student and teacher.

Another one of my favorite techniques is to have the singer make a voice like an obnoxious looking hand puppet (witch or monster, for example), or learn to imitate cartoon voices, or television personalities, such as Jean Stapleton as Edith Bunker (*All in the Family*), or Fran Drescher (*The Nanny*). Bugs Bunny should be at the top of the list! All of these will usually direct the voice more onto the hard palate, resulting in better resonance and easier projection. The unique and soulful sound of the personality takes center stage in this brilliant spot. If singers have trouble finding this, I might have them pretend that we are both having a meltdown, and we are crying our eyes out. If I do it with them, then they

will participate. We might explore the frontal mask area through crying for several minutes, throughout the student’s entire vocal range, and at different volumes, until they find easy cry. This can often turn into real laughter, which the teacher can also use for this technique. I use crying as a warm-up sometimes when a singer walks into my studio with a tired voice or a gummed-up voice. The forward cry, if done correctly, frees everything up—voice, placement, breath, pitch, diction, rhythm, emotion, and most importantly, the spirit of play. In the midst of acting goofy, the singer bumps into a much freer resonance and a more frontal placement for the voice. Students comment on the effortlessness of the new found technique, saying, “There is nothing to it . . . My voice is so free and up front . . . You mean that’s all there is to it?” Very often students comment on how singers tend to overanalyze everything, making it more complicated than need be. At that moment, they are hooked and cure begins. They begin to let go of the muscled up and over supported voice that Richard Miller refers to in his book, *The Structure of Singing*.

Any error in vocal technique, or any accomplishment of technical skill in singing, usually can be traced to techniques of breath management; control of the breath is synonymous with control of the singing instrument. Perhaps this explains why the most frequent expression in vocal pedagogy seems to be “more support.” To the poor voice student, such advice must appear a catchall nostrum that automatically surfaces when the teacher’s ingenuity fails.<sup>6</sup>

Overbreathing and oversupporting simply cannot make beautiful music, and both create much physical stress, which can lead to serious vocal problems if not corrected.

Crossover requires a freer use of voice, which means the singer must deliver the vocal with more spontaneity. Singers that can transition from genre to genre must adapt to stylistic demands quickly. They do not have to master the new genre they have chosen to study, and yet a newer sense of technical freedom will be noticed when they return to their native genre. As my opera student, Sheila Houlahan declared in a recent message to me, “I have become better friends with my genre!”

## **CROSSOVER CAN BE A QUICK REMEDY FOR VOCAL ISSUES**

Experimenting with crossover can be a simple way to cure many voice weaknesses, from the classical singer to the rapper. It is certainly a way of getting singers out of their technical head. Here are some the ways I use crossover study with singers.

For overprotective singers who are slaves to notation, there is nothing like a little jazz tune like “Night and Day” to loosen them up. After learning the melody, have them play with scatting on the melody like a “lounge lizard.” Then have them scat around, or play with the rhythms of their classical piece as an exercise before singing it. This will get laughs, but more importantly, this will simplify and free up every part of their technique, from the first breath to interpretation, and put them on the musical playground better equipped to create fine music.

Country music is great for the singer with muddy tone that is placed too far back onto the soft palate. When *ng* exercises are not bringing the voice forward enough, try old-fashioned country twang. Tunes like “Harper Valley P.T.A.” and “D.I.V.O.R.C.E.” are great examples to use. Have them mimic the artist for fun. This will coax them out of the mud. Then have them sing the aria from this “honky-tonk” placement. It is mind boggling how well this works.

Jazz can also be a foolproof remedy for classical singers who struggle with long sixteenth note or triplet passages in oratorios and operas. Give them an upbeat bebop tune so they can get the feel of easy swing. Have them put the stresses on beats two and four so they can begin to feel the groove. Pull the volume back a little and notice how the vocal line will suddenly have more momentum. This “chitchat” volume (I call it “free volume”) puts quick rhythmic flash in the consonant, resulting in a sound bite that is fun and easy to swing. It will happen naturally. Then work with individual passages of the aria until they swing. Encourage the singer to manage the stresses instead of the individual notes. For long passages, place an accent or stress on the first sixteenth note of every group of four, unless the melodic line dictates otherwise. The unstressed notes will fall into line without management. This results in less physical work and more swing.

Most teachers have that one singer with the breathy voice that no exercise seems to fix. There is nothing like a little timeout to have some fun with a rock or pop tune, or even a Broadway song for belters. I will sometimes have them pretend to be a cheerleader, and we will make up a funny yell. I will have them sing with that voice. With the breathy (or shy) singer, I always include a lot of physical movement. Sometimes I have them toss a pillow back and forth with me while they are singing, or I might have them pretend to be a belly dancer or a ballerina, which always gets a big laugh. But this also keeps them on the playground where musical magic happens.

For singers who seem to lack passion, a blues tune will work wonders. There is nothing like getting them to use long, slow slurs and a lot of “moan” tone, and milking the sustained notes so they are really long. I call them “diva” notes or “bankable” notes. Students love the sound of that. I record them while they are taking great liberties, holding out notes as long as they can, and it always sounds so passionate that they have renewed love for singing as soon as they hear it. I say to them, “Milk the highest pitch in every phrase for as long as the groove and dramatic moment permits, and do not leave it until you have to—and that will add a more passionate sound.” After all, those are the notes that make singers want to be singers! Streisand has definitely mastered this.

## **A LAST WORD ABOUT THE CRY VOICE TECHNIQUE AND COMMERCIAL MUSIC**

The reader has probably learned by now that I tend to favor the cry voice technique as a panacea for many vocal and stylistic issues. The reasons are many, but my favorite is this: It was the very first voice we used when we came into this world, and we used it with no instruction. Oren Brown has written much about this.<sup>7</sup> It is the core, the heart, of your unique sound. Those born with a true singer’s mind are bound to stumble across how useful the cry voice is for expressive singing. I also believe it is the key to easy transition from low voice to high voice. The sound of the soulful cry has become prominent in all genres of radio music as it allows for the personality to come to the front of the sound stage with the story. The cry mode demands instant attention from the listener. To compete in today’s music market, it is a necessity that singers have this technique

in their singer's tool kit. What follows is a small part of an unpublished paper I wrote in 2010 called, "Tools for Singers in Commercial Music—Mastering the Cry Vocal Technique (Part Two)."

For decades, Top 40 Radio has favored singers that have distinctive and unique voices overflowing with personality. A successful recording artist simply must be a one-of-a-kind storyteller who knows how to seduce his or her listening audience with clever interpretations of three minute (more or less) original tunes. If they are lucky to get enough airplay, singers will build an intimate connection with their listening audience and record sales will soar.

The success of an artist depends on the solidity of the total package: an exciting storyteller (phrasing), an intriguing or beautiful voice, an image that mirrors the music, excellent record sales, and a personality that the public loves. The artist may be very flashy, and even "over-the-top" like Lady Gaga, but underneath it all there is something very real that the audience can identify with and wants to get to know. Lyrics must come across as personal messages from the artist to each and every member of the audience. This feeling of real connection to the artist has the power to turn an average singer into a superstar almost overnight.

This type of exciting storyteller will always reign supreme when it comes to radio, record labels, and selling tickets for superstars. Honest presence is what fans want. They do not want trained, sophisticated voices trying to sound like a rock artist or a country singer. They want everyday people singing songs that they can relate to, yet they want action packed entertainment, too. So the singer, regardless of genre, must phrase the story in such an exciting way so that every line is catchy and rhythmically interesting.

Catchy rhythms on small groups of words (sometimes combined with impromptu vocal utterances like Michael Jackson's famous grunts) create what is called a "hook" in the music business. I call it "ear candy." Big artists learn early that creating hooky "ear candy" within the vocal line is what sells records and gets immediate radio airplay. Hooks are what make songs instantly memorable. Commercial music is about the rhythmic hooks in the phrasing much more than it is about the fine tuned, cultured voice. One could almost say that groove, hooks, and swagger are the backbones of commercial music.

This has been the norm since the early 50s, after rock 'n' roll hit radio. We suddenly heard the folks next door telling stories on the radio using their "chitchat" everyday voices—just a bunch of guys and gals with no special music training. They sang and strummed out of tune guitars—just simple voices from simple people. This is the backbone for commercial music, as we know it today. Of course, it has grown in different directions since then.

To the classically trained ear, the voice of such a singer is considered unrefined, or reduced to its simplest form. Yet the vocal techniques required to produce a mega hit record are just as difficult to master as all the vocal and performance techniques of the classical singer. I teach both classical and all genres of commercial music, and I have to say that the time spent by singers to master each is about the same.

The artist's true conversational voice (the voice used during the day, at work, at home, at play, unadorned) is the instrument used to create the mega hits of the music industry. Any crooner or classical tone will appear on long sustained notes that are showcased at the ends of phrases, with or without vibrato. Also, commercial singers generally employ special effects on colorful words in the lyric that point up the drama, showing the artist's interpretation—effects such as country creak, growl, or hammered vibrato, to name a few. These special effects, along with clever phrasing devices, provide commentary or extra plot that is not there in the actual lyric. The powerhouse diva singer will usually be multimodal—shifting through all four vocal modes during a song as well as adding many special effects and "hot" catchy phrasing. Sometimes artists will feel at home in one or two of the vocal modes—natural, cry, belt, or electric edge.

In my opinion, it seems that when singers incorporate some soulful edge into their vocal, no matter which genre of music it happens to be, their chances of having the song jump to a number one hit are much higher. Study the Grammy winners for the last several decades, and the importance of soulful cry becomes obvious. Singers like Aretha Franklin, Celine Dion, Adele, Stevie Wonder, Alison Krauss, Whitney Houston, Sam Smith, Amy Winehouse, Michael Jackson, Carrie Underwood, Lady Gaga, and Alicia Keys, to name only a few, have a strong influence on singers in commercial music today.

It should be a comfort to singers new to crossover techniques to know that they do not have to pretend to be soulful. In fact, they were born with a soul tool kit loaded with easy to use vocal techniques. Singers come into this world well equipped. Their vocal instrument is a soul instrument.

**NOTES**

1. Renée Fleming, *The Inner Voice* (London: Viking Penguin, 2004), 127.
2. Sheila Houlahan, email message to author (November 19, 2015).
3. Staci Gulino, email message to author (November 29, 2015).
4. James C. McKinney, *The Diagnosis and Correction of Vocal Faults*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Genevox Music Group, 1994), 166.
5. Oren Brown, *Discover Your Voice* (London: Singular Publishing Group, Inc., 1999), 83.
6. Richard Miller, *The Structure of Singing* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1986), 37.
7. Brown, 8.

Coach and teacher **Ron Browning** is internationally known as a “Voice Coach to the Stars.” His clients include all levels of singers from beginners to Grammy-winning celebrities in all genres of music. He teaches privately in his music studio in Nashville, Tennessee, and 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. Ron has been seen and heard on NBC’s television shows, *Entertainment Tonight*, and *The Voice*, as well as the Oprah Winfrey Network, and the British Broadcasting Corporation. He holds a Bachelor of Music degree, K-12 teaching credentials from the University of Kentucky, and an education degree from California State University, Northridge. The University of California at Los Angeles awarded him full NARIS, ASCAP, and BMI scholarships for studies in the Professional Designation of Recording Arts and Sciences program. Ron is on staff at the Castleton Festival in Virginia, founded by the late, world renowned conductor, Maestro Lorin Maazel. He is also on staff at the Studio G Performing Arts Center in Kentucky, the Nashville Jazz Workshop in Tennessee, and the Planet Bluegrass Song School in Colorado. Ron is a successful songwriter, jazz pianist, and painter, and is currently writing a series of voice and performance manuals, which will include interviews with many of his students and celebrated clientele. [www.ronbrowningmusic.com](http://www.ronbrowningmusic.com).

**PUBLICATION DEADLINES**

<b>Vol. 73 No. 2</b> Nov/Dec 2016	<b>Vol. 73 No. 3</b> Jan/Feb 2017	<b>Vol. 73 No. 4</b> Mar/Apr 2017	<b>Vol. 73 No. 5</b> May/June 2017	<b>Vol. 74 No. 1</b> Sept/Oct 2017
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*Article manuscripts should be submitted directly to the Editor-in-Chief. All manuscripts are evaluated by the Editorial Board. Decision to publish rests with the Editor-in-Chief. The deadlines published here refer to articles that have already been accepted for publication.*

**Features and Reviews by Continuing Contributors**

01 July 2016	01 Sept 2016	01 Nov 2016	01 Jan 2017	01 May 2017
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**Submission of Advertisements**

02 Sept 2016	01 Nov 2016	05 Jan 2017	04 Mar 2017	08 July 2017
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**Issue to be placed in mail approximately**

21 Oct 2016	28 Dec 2016	24 Feb 2017	22 April 2017	24 Aug 2017
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**Issue to be received by subscribers approximately**

5 Nov 2016	13 Jan 2017	6 Mar 2017	7 May 2017	4 Sept 2017
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*(Dates of delivery may vary depending upon local office policies.)*