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Do You Go Overboard With Emotional Interpretation?



Ron Browning with David Howley

Both beginner and professional singers struggle with finding an appropriate emotional balance to bring to their music – says Ron Browning.

There is a fine line that, if the singer crosses it, they appear self-absorbed.

Singers must learn the whereabouts of this fine line and bring only the *appropriate* level of emotion so the natural voice is free to sing.

Singing smothered in fake emotion

Recently, I taught [We Banjo 3](#)'s David Howley, whose recent album, [String Theory](#), is at #1 on the Billboard Music Charts for World Music.

When I first heard David sing, his voice seemed muffled and trapped. His music did not groove because the vowels were too prominent. The consonants lacked shimmer and percussiveness. They were barely

audible.

He was so full of emotion when he sang that it took over his voice entirely, choking the resonance and interfering with the intelligibility of the text.

I said, *“these words have to come from you, David, the same guy who greeted me when he walked into my studio a few minutes ago. Let THAT guy have these words.”*

His response was comical. *“Oh! Really? That guy?”* His face seemed to say, *“but that’s so nothing, so ordinary.”*

I would say, *“do not conjure up a character. The more you don’t do, the more inspiration does. Don’t worry about being boring because the result will be just the opposite. Your true heart and soul will ride out on the words.”*

This type of detachment from “fake emotions” (Alison Krauss’s term for this concept) frees the voice, the personality, the soul, and the *real* musician inside.

Let the lyrics do the talking

He soon began just telling the story, one detail at a time, stressing key words. He started sounding much more passionate and doing it with phrasing, instead of surrendering the music to the actor inside.



David performing in Ron’s studio

David’s singing quickly became very intimate and honest. The more he surrendered his desire for artistic styling and just sang as if he were talking to me, his performance started to move me on an emotional level.

His body became relaxed and his voice had the same resonance as his speaking voice. He was coming from a real state of being.

After his first epiphany, David exclaimed, *“I see. The more you try to impress, the worse your singing gets. You just need to open the mouth and let the words out.”*

David was a completely different singer by the end of the week. He had discovered the real music within his soul, instead of finding himself lost in the music.

Once the singer sets the words free, all things will be brought into alignment—breath, tone, pitch, resonance, rhythm, and the most important thing, the story.

Expose yourself with minimal acting

Glen Campbell said, *“let the words have the pitch.”* This allows the voice and the song to be alive with honest presence and passion. The singer will feel naked and exposed – that is good. They will not be

hiding behind stylistic effects.

For the singer who seems hell-bent on the teary-eyed delivery, I show them the wonderful video by Robert De Niro called [One Minute of Brilliant Acting Device](#) . De Niro agrees that performers usually feel they must gather up more emotion to bring through the script but this is simply not needed.

If a singer can grasp the concept of 'being a singer' versus 'acting like a singer' they will make fast progress. The more they let go of the fake moods and stop trying to convince the audience of their deep-seated passion, they will have a more resonant and free voice as well as a true interpretation.

You are not required to stand on the stage and go through three minutes of agonizing, personal therapy in front of the audience. Just tell the story!

A few weeks later, David sent me an insightful email:

What you did for me was break the emotional singing loop I was stuck in for years. My job is to deliver the song and allow the listener to taste the emotions for themselves. I am not an actor reliving the story each time, rather an old soul telling tales of the past. I had no idea that I was singing so inwardly. Getting back on stage after working with you was a completely different experience.

My Reaction to This Week's Singing Competition Entry



[Willy Vranovsky](#) - Everybody's Talking

You have nice resonance in your middle voice with easy edge, and you do a fine job on the guitar. However, the dramatic emotional interpretation is causing you to tense up. I hear tightness in those back muscles as you brace into the tone. Do not work so hard to project your voice. You don't do that in conversation, do you? Just relax. Try singing on a little less air and you won't feel the need to over support. Eliminate the guttural attacks ("I'm going...") as well as the vibrato on "clothes" and elsewhere. Keep the lips relaxed and avoid squeezing on the "ee" vowel when it appears on sustained notes. You're a little pitchy sometimes, especially on the vocal licks. Drop the emotional breath and tone and this song should play out like a charm for you. I encourage you to find your own phrasing with this tune and forget about Harry Nilsson. Pretend you wrote it. Put your eyes on one point of focus and that will help ground you. This is a great tune to show off your voice though. Keep up the good work!



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. [Website](#) | [CD Baby](#)

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