

## LIFT EVERY VOICE

## How anyone—and we mean anyone—can learn to sing more sweetly

Artists as stylistically and generationally diverse as Bille Holiday, Sam Cooke, Roger Daltrey and Lady Gaga have proven again and again that the right vocal performance can touch the listener's deepest emotions—while the wrong one can abuse the eardrums of innocent bystanders. Learning to channel your own inner songbird can be a challenge, but there are steps even the most monotone singer among us can take to sound a little sweeter.

To discover how to find, develop and preserve your voice, we sought the advice of experts Dave Stroud and Ruth Gerson. Stroud is a renowned coach who has worked with Ben Folds, Jamie Cullum and others. As an *American Idol* consultant, he has also polished the voices of artists like Adam Lambert and David Cook. Stroud recently launched VocalizeU, an interactive app designed for singers and musicians.

Gerson founded the San Francisco Vocal Coaching school, served as a vocal instructor at Princeton University and invented the Singingbelt System, a device that helps singers develop breath support. She is also a noted artist in her own right whose latest album is called *Deceived*.

**What's the key to singing well?**

GERSON: First, there's breath support. If I squeeze the neck of an inflated balloon, only a tiny bit of air is needed to vibrate the lip—it's all the air underneath that supplies the pressure to make the sound. The vocal cords work the same way, so learning to control that pressure in your lungs is important. Next is breath placement. You want the air to focus on one place in your mouth—I have people press lightly on the roofs of their mouth to feel where they're aiming the air, but singers can adjust placement based on

what gives them the most beautiful tone. Next is positioning. You want your jaw to drop open to about the width of two fingers for most notes, with the tongue curved like a Pringle and the tip resting behind the bottom teeth, but not pushing. The palate should be open in back, like you're about to yawn. Finally, there's ear training. I've never met anyone who is truly tone-deaf and can't learn to sing on key.

**How important is technique?**

STROUD: If you push the vocal cords too hard, they can start to swell and stop vibrating as they should. They produce less sound, so the singer starts pushing more air to compensate and the process starts to feed on itself. The more air you push, the more the cords swell and eventually they can develop calluses. As we get older, vocal cords naturally stop being as plump and agile—and the more abuse a

singer puts on them, the faster that happens. There are ways to rehab, though. GERSON: If singers just scream their heads off every night, they can also end up with polyps and even paralysis of the vocal cords—so it's very important not to push yourself too hard until you know what you're doing. If it hurts, stop.

**How do you build strength?**

STROUD: When I work with the *American Idol* winners as they're going on tour, they're surprised by how much work it is to do a whole concert rather than a couple of songs. Make sure you warm up for 20 minutes before a show, like stretching for a marathon. Focus on exercises that take you up and down the scale, lip trills and such. Adam Lambert, for example, has very rangy material. He's very aware of the nuances and subtleties of his voice, and warms up thoroughly before he sings. When you practice between shows, focus on sustaining notes right in the bridge areas where your voice transitions from lower to higher. Justin Timberlake is very aware of his bridges—I gave him one lesson and was impressed by how well he knew the nuances of transitioning to different parts of his voice.

**What about getting a grittier sound?**

STROUD: What you're hearing is overdrive, similar to the effect on a guitar. You're blasting too much air between the cords, and typically pulling the vocal cords a little tighter than they should be. I've worked with Chester Bennington from Linkin Park and Scott Stapp of Creed, and both sing with a lot of grit. It's

almost more crucial for singers like them to find balance. When singers make the transition from singing low notes to high notes, the larynx can go up and down physically, chasing the pitch. It's unhealthy and causes a lack of release on high notes, among other things. My job with singers like Chester and Scott is to help them stabilize the larynx and feel that release. Even if it's not aesthetically what they're going for onstage, it helps them prevent inflammation of their vocal cords.

GERSON: If you are going to sing with grit, as I often do, pacing yourself is very important. Eddie Vedder definitely does that. You want to learn singing technique to protect your voice—and with experience, you can go beyond and still smoothly recover.

**'I've never met anyone who is truly tone-deaf and can't learn to sing on key.'**

—Ruth Gerson

**What are the differences among the head voice, chest voice and falsetto?**

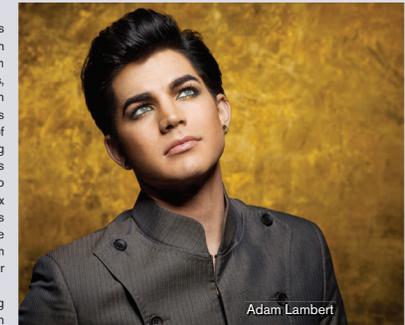
GERSON: I think of chest voice as my speaking voice, which sits in the register of a cello or viola, and my head voice as the classical sound I create in a higher register, sounding more like a flute. For men to sing in a head voice—or a mask voice, as it's sometimes called—they have to aim air into the nasal-pharynx area. If you find the right position and air pressure, you can comfortably blend your head and chest voices to hit certain notes. STROUD: A lot of people confuse falsetto with head voice. Singers should be able to sing from chest voice up to head voice without flipping into falsetto, which means they need to bring their vocal cords closer together when they go through bridge areas.

GERSON: It's important for male singers to develop falsetto regardless of whether they plan to use it, since it opens up resonance and strengthens breath control.

**How does singing for stage and studio differ?**

GERSON: It's similar to film versus live theater. Stage microphones are much less sensitive than studio mics, so in a studio singers may have to adjust to do a lot less. That being said, there are singers like Bono who use stage mics like the Shure SM58 when he records. I assume he does that in order to bring the way he sings onstage into the studio. STROUD: In the studio it's easy to get the right EQ on the headphones, but you have less sound control onstage. I highly recommend in-ear monitors and learning what works as far as EQing goes. If the mid and upper-mid frequencies in the vocal mix are pulled back, a singer might not feel like he or she is cutting through and therefore over-sing. If those frequencies are boosted, though, it's easier not to feel like you need to push too hard to get a good performance.

—Michael Gallant



Adam Lambert

**Can sprays and lozenges help?**

GERSON: Anything that keeps you lubricated is great. Mostly, just sip water. If you have a problem with inflammation, the old Frank Sinatra trick is to chew a couple of aspirin and swallow them slowly without water, then start to sip temperate water about 15 minutes later.

STROUD: There are layers of mucous on the vocal cords. You want to keep the mucous thin and the vocal cords agile, so sipping water consistently for hours is the best way to keep the whole system healthy. I also like a throat spray made by Thayers. It's all-natural—you breathe in the mist and it goes into the throat.



Eddie Vedder

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— Dave Stroud

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