

The Singer's Way: Sustainability and the Pop Vocalist, by Pat Kane

When it comes to a career in pop music, particularly the singer's role, "sustainability" is a very rich topic to explore. Break the word down, play around with it, and so many issues open up.

"Sustaining" your "ability" is one thing - the personal regimes needed to maintain some decent level of vocal quality, in an industry which places ever more demands on performance and promotion. But the "ability to sustain" yourself - that is, to be resilient and steadfast, as you face the shocks and bumps of the average music "career" (often well named, in the way it staggers all over the place)... That's also vital.

I have been singing commercially with Hue And Cry for over 30 years, since 1985 (it's a bit startling to realise how long!). I've certainly moved from a state of ignorance about how to be a sustainable singer, to perhaps formulating a few solid life-rules that I can rely on.

These may not just be of interest to singers. I'd suggest anyone whose work and life is all about maintaining a level of passionate performance, under irregular and dynamic conditions, could maybe learn a thing or two. I've started to call this "The Singer's Way".

For the first two decades of my music career, I can honestly say that I could never guarantee what state my voice would be in before I went on stage, or into a recording booth. Short of a cold or flu settling in your throat - that's obvious - I couldn't figure why one day it would be like an angels' choir, and the next like Tom Waits gargling iron filings.

The only thing I knew worked was solitude. I became the classic "leave me alone" flaky frontman, which many mistook for aloofness and arrogance - but was actually a self-protective panic. The less you use it (the voice), the less you'll lose it, was my instinctive response.

I now know - from the last decade or so of taking proper voice lessons and reading into the singer's literature - that it's just about the opposite way around. The more regularly you use it - though in a proper, methodical and appropriate way - the *less* likely you are to lose it.

But you have to become aware of all the factors that bear upon a voice - those fragile, vibrating cords of tissue in your larynx. The thunderclap realisation is that a sustainable voice depends on attending properly to your physical, emotional and mental needs - but all at the same time, and in an integrated fashion.

Other singers (perhaps with more robust constitutions than mine) could tell you a different story. But when I'm on a major tour, where the gig schedule is three-on-and-one-off for weeks, I literally have to "live like a monk" until the moment of showtime between 8 or 9pm. All to serve the cords.

Physically, this means: being well-hydrated, taking no caffeine, alcohol and only herbal teas (roobois or peppermint), and no spicy foods. When you eat on the road, your substantial meal is lunchtime. This means that by showtime in the evening, the food is releasing its energy into your body, and your singing cavities aren't pressured by any stodge.

Fitness-wise, your levels don't need to be crazy-high (and abs-work is a nightmare, putting strain on your neck and throat). But you do need to programme in some aerobic work every day - long walks through unfamiliar towns do it for me.

For quite a few years I laid out this plan, and often executed it diligently - yet I still found myself toiling and struggling with my voice, with a degree of unpredictability that still perplexed me. Why as rough as sandpaper, today? What wasn't I getting right?

It was the realisation that my emotions and thoughts weren't contributing their part to serving the voice that really clicked it for me. The link between psychological stress and vocal performance is vital. When anxiety levels are high, it's the vocal cords that often tellingly give out (note Teresa May's blow-out midway through her major conference speech a few weeks ago).

So I began to explore various modes of de-stressing, all related to forms of daily practice. After years of regarding them as a necessary chore, I reframed my singing lessons as a kind of self-honouring. In these maddening scales and repeated swoops and drones, I imagined I was involved in a private ritual that confirmed my identity as a singer.

I know how strange these exercises sound to the outside world - enough musicians have told me, as I warm-up before a gig! But lessons and exercises add one more battlement to the defensive zone that singers do, and must, put up around themselves in the midst of the music biz. My daughter Eleanor - who I'm singing with on the new album *Pocketful of Stones*, on the track 'Let Her Go' - shares this interest in the importance of singing technique with me (though she's been much better trained from the get-go than I).

However, the most powerful destressor I've yet come across is meditative practice (I'm working from Mark Williams' *Mindfulness: Finding Peace in a Frantic World*). And it's peculiarly useful for the music business. Because for all the moves towards balance and detoxification mentioned previously, the truth is that you are making music because you are an emotional creature.

No-one would be on that stage, soaking it all in and being larger than life, if they just wanted to live the perfectly contemplative life. Art expresses some kind of dissatisfaction or misalignment with the world - a wound you keep trying to heal and bind. Or at least it does for me.

So what meditation does for me (and this is valuable in my songwriting, as well as a vocalist seeking calm conditions) is that it enables you to be non-reactive to your surging emotional life.

It acknowledges that your drives - fear, care, lust, anger, curiosity, play - are pulling you this way and that. But meditation can find a higher mental state from which to observe this tumult - the practice of letting moods enter and leave your mind. For myself, I now much prefer the experience of playing with my own emotions when singing, than being in the grip on one or another of them. It may be an age and maturity thing - but it is, in any case, far less toxic an experience.

My own meditative practice involves breath work - a rich appreciation of the primal nature of breathing. I find this fits amazingly well with the singer's awareness of how the body generates a voice.

The dream experience in singing live is when you feel you're drawing your voice in from the air, rather than pushing it out - which of course you physically are. But this mental image keeps the voice produced low in the body, where it should be (rather than on the tender throat and its cords).

It also meshes with meditative breath practice, which makes you think deeply about breathing as itself a psychological resource: you're literally paying attention to the wellspring of everything you are, and your (again literally) vital connection with the material universe.

That last phrase is perhaps a clue as to why I am so interested in the techniques and practices that sustain a music career. I am not a spiritual person, in the sense that I believe there is any existence before or beyond the material. This is IT! If so, I should make this complexity that I am operate as richly as it can do - and I'll reach for anything which makes that possible.

I hope to be singing and performing for many years yet. Our best song has not yet been written, nor has our best gig been done either. If sustainability means anything, it means being ready for that amazing possibility.

Pat Kane is one half of Hue And Cry (www.hueandcry.co.uk) whose new album Pocketful of Stones, is out now.