

CHAPTER 5

TOO LEGIT TO QUIT

From the bestselling book,
*Never Lose Your Voice Again:
The SECRET To Unlimited Vocal Health™
for Singers, Actors, and Speakers*
by Katti Power

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“We break a lot of rules. It’s unheard of to combine opera with a rock theme, my dear.”

– Freddie Mercury

I fell in love with singing around age four or five in the little front room of our house that had a stereo system and a record player. The three singers/bands I remember first were: Kenny Rogers, Queen, and Survivor. I knew several of Kenny Rogers’ songs by heart and completely fell in love with him. I liked the warmth of his voice and thought he seemed like a teddy bear. I didn’t have the best relationship with my dad and I remember wishing Kenny Rogers was my dad. I also loved Queen’s “Another One Bites the Dust” and Survivor’s “Eye of the Tiger.” I loved the beat of both of these songs and my young, literal mind was mystified by the meanings of the lyrics.

The first time I experienced *classical* music was as a piano player. I got my piano when I was five years old. At the time, all the neighbor kids had pianos and took lessons. I've never been one to follow the crowd, but the first time I heard my neighbor's piano, I fell in love and wanted to take lessons immediately. I wasn't a particularly good piano player, but I enjoyed playing. I just wanted to learn piano so I could accompany myself, because all I REALLY wanted to do was SING.

Classical music was beautiful to me, but it was a totally different world than the kinds of songs I wanted to sing. When I got to high school, I sang classical music in choir and in my private voice lessons, and I developed an appreciation for it.

One thing I noticed back then - that I just figured would change with time - was that when I sang the songs I loved from the radio, I didn't sound like the people I heard on the radio. Instead, the sound I made was more like when I sang in choir or in my private lessons. There was a "stiffness" about the choir music and my solo repertoire from my lessons that I didn't want to be there when I sang

songs by Debbie Gibson, Heart, or Whitney Houston. I was observant enough to recognize that they were two totally different sounds, but I was only trained to create the classical type of sound.

I developed a very strong classical singing voice and won several scholarships as a result. My college private voice teacher really wanted me to go into opera, but I had my sights set on Broadway. We worked on a lot of classical music together with an occasional musical theatre piece thrown in. The musical theatre pieces she assigned me, however, didn't really step outside of operetta. They were quite formal, which left me feeling unsatisfied since I longed to be singing all my favorite Broadway hits, like "Adelaide's Lament" from *Guys & Dolls*, or "At the Ballet" from *A Chorus Line*.

When I went to my acting conservatory in NYC, I learned that classical singing is referred to as "legit" in the musical theatre world. There were two other techniques called "belt" and "mix" that

I'd never heard of before that would help me achieve the sound I longed to sing.

In musical theatre, "legit" music was reserved for the classics, the ingenue roles, the classier leading lady roles. These were the kinds of roles I'd longed to work on in college, but instead had to work on the only musical theatre pieces that were reminiscent of opera – like "Vilia" from *The Merry Widow* and "Letter Song" from *Ballad of Baby Doe*. I later discovered that, technically, "legit" roles (like Julie Jordan from *Carousel*, Hodel from *Fiddler on the Roof*, or Marian from *The Music Man*) weren't even using a classical technique but rather a more formal version of the "mix" technique.

The other two techniques – belt & mix, which we'll cover in the next two chapters – sounded dramatically different than the classical sound I'd learned up to that point. While they didn't quite sound like the radio sound I aimed for in high school, they seemed a bit closer than the classical stuff I learned for years.

At first, I was extremely hesitant to learn belt & mix. Belt was very loud which made me concerned it must be dangerous. I sat in my vocal technique class with crossed arms and a visible scowl on my face, absolutely refusing to damage my voice in the ways my instructor was surely encouraging us to do. Stubbornly and completely devoid of trust, I decided I was only willing to work on legit technique because I wasn't interested in destroying my voice which I was convinced would happen. In retrospect, it seems I've always been concerned about protecting my voice.

I ended up caving and learning belt & mix, but they didn't come easy for me at all. I went home and sat at the piano in my apartment with all my notes, trying to make sense of what my instructor taught us about these two, seemingly dangerous techniques. The one clear difference I noticed between classical technique and belt & mix techniques was that belt & mix were the opposite of classical in just about every way.

With my clients, I still teach classical technique, but I now refer to it as the “basic” technique. I can already see, hear, and feel all your feathers ruffling because I’m referring to something quite difficult to do as “basic”, but let me explain. Because I primarily work with contemporary singers who have no intention of ever singing classical music, I consider classical technique to be the first step of many. I use classical technique primarily as a ground zero or a base on which to build their contemporary singing. For a contemporary singer with no intention of ever singing classical music, the classical technique offers a concrete way to develop body awareness of what NOT to do in contemporary singing. For these reasons, I call classical the “basic technique”.

Contemporary singing requires getting back to what your body was designed to do organically in order to make sound AND stay healthy. Classical singing (not unlike classical dance) demands that singers approach the voice in a way that is not at all organic, natural, or second

nature. The classical sound isn't like speaking at all, nor is it like the voice that comes out by default from a singer with no vocal training. Similarly, ballet isn't at all like walking or like the default way our bodies move without any formal instruction. Classical singing and classical dancing are styles that requires the body to step out of its comfort zone and try something completely different.

Ready to try it out?

I'd like you to yawn the biggest, most spacious yawn you can yawn.

Are you yawning yet? I can say the word "yawn" a few more times if it'll help.

While you are yawning, notice the huge space that is created by stretching into that yawn. Do you feel the stretch in your mouth and throat that goes up and back as you yawn? Notice also if you hear a deeper sounding breath with a yawn space in the back. If you struggle to understand what I'm asking, think for a moment about impersonating Darth Vader by inhaling and then

exhaling on a whispered “kaw.” Do you feel that big, cavernous space back at the back of your mouth?

When you make that space, the soft palate, which is the squishy part of the roof of your mouth (not the hard palate which is where the peanut butter gets stuck), lifts and creates more space in the back of the throat while simultaneously blocking off the passageway into the nose. When the soft palate blocks off the passageway into the nose, it means no sound can escape there.

This is important to know because in the classical technique (and ONLY in the classical technique), you have a chest register and a head register with breaks in between. These classical terms are based on where the sound resonates in your body. With a raised soft palate (like a yawn), if you make a loud, booming sound in a low place in your range, you will be singing in your chest register, or chest voice. If you place your hand on your chest as you do this, you'll feel the sound vibrating in your chest.

If you then, with a raised soft palate, make a loudish, high-pitched sound like you would if you were cheering for your favorite team, like, “woo-hoo!!”, you should feel that sound sort of spinning around in your head. That happens because the sound is resonating in your sinus cavities, bouncing off your skull. The only place you can feel your skull on the outside is your teeth. So, place your thumb underneath your top front teeth and make that sound again. Do you feel the vibration in your teeth? This is your head register, or head voice.

Your raised soft palate blocks off the passageway into your nose, so let's do a simple exercise to test that. If you raise your soft palate and make that high sound like you are cheering at a sporting event or are imitating an owl's hoot, you are in your head voice. If you repeat that exact same action but you plug your nose, you should sound the same as when your nose was not plugged. That is because your raised soft palate blocks off the passageway into your nose.

If, however, you say in your regular voice, “Hello, my name is _____,” then repeat the phrase while plugging your nose, you will notice a dramatic difference. In this example, because the soft palate is not raised, the sound comes out of the nasal passageway. Therefore, this exercise is a fantastic way to check if your soft palate is raised or neutral.

The reason it’s important to know if your palate is raised or neutral is because it determines whether or not you are in a safe zone when singing.

*To read the entire book, get your copy at
neverloseyourvoice.com*