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Vocal Pedagogy

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Twist and Shout: A Case Study of Vocal Damage in Rock Music

The voice is a beautiful, yet precarious instrument that is extremely fragile and cannot be separated from the singer. Not many vocalists are aware that their voice is a muscle and can be damaged, which is a similar concept to denting a brass instrument or dropping a violin. There are many singers who take good care of their voice as they have been taught the dangers of improper technique and vocal abuse; however, many untrained singers abuse their voice even when they experience extreme pain. This is a tragic and unfortunately common occurrence in popular music because the aesthetics call for a sound that is not safe for vocalists. The question becomes: do you sacrifice safety for aesthetics? In the case of rock artists, aesthetics are the most important aspects of their style, so they tend to disregard the risk of vocal damage. Countless rock shows have been cancelled due to vocal issues with the lead singer. And some vocalists continue performing even with known vocal damage. How long will we be able to listen to our favorite singers if they continue to treat their instruments with such neglect? This paper will bring forth four case studies of rock singers from different genres who have put strain on their voice and may have caused vocal damage, as well as possible causes and a discussion on how vocal production in rock singing can be improved.

Before going into any case studies, the discussion of aesthetics and values in the history of rock music must be addressed. Rock music began as a new type of music that challenged the musical traditions put forth by prior generations. The genre had an air of rebellion; it was apparent in not only the culture, but also the sound of the music. As rock music progressed in the 60’s and 70’s, the sound of rebellion was used through distortion and techniques to change the quality of tone either on an instrument or voice. Belting and screaming became new techniques that were implemented to express intensity. Loudness was becoming a staple in the rock genre. As subcultures arose, new aesthetics were preferred. The Punk genre, prevalent in the 1980s, called for singers with poor vocal quality because the genre focused more on subject matter than music. Grunge, which was very popular in the early ‘90s, required raspy voices for screaming and, in turn, the constant screaming caused voices to become raspy. Currently, rock music has a multitude of genres that have distinct styles and their own sub-genres as well. Metal for instance is a genre of rock music that has sub-genres with many different aesthetics and styles including death metal, trash metal, and black metal (just to name a few). Unfortunately for the vocalists in rock music, the preferred taste of listeners involves screaming, belting, or even growling, in the case of metal. Doing these techniques incorrectly can lead to vocal damage.

Vocal damage is caused by many different circumstances and can take various forms. Many people who overuse their voice cause damage to their vocal folds and singers with poor technique tend to have vocal damage as well. Increased subglottic pressure and elevated vertical laryngeal position are other causes of vocal damage; when singing, the larynx should be in a low position with a balanced amount of air pressure. Two reasons that vocal damage occurs is that the singer may be chest voice dominant and use the bottom-up approach. Good vocal technique involves using a mix of head and chest voice. A top-down approach is important to not bring the chest voice up therefore causing tension, but rather bring the head voice down so that a mix can be achieved. Unfortunately, vocal damage like muscular tension dysphonia can also be hereditary, so singers who are prone to MTD must take extra precautions. Those with more medical issues, need to really focus on technique.

There are various other causes of vocal damage that will be discussed in context of the four rock singers presented, but the different types of damage that can be done to a singer’s vocals are vast. What often happens to singers is that they cause swelling in their vocal folds and if they continue to damage their chords, they can develop nodules. Nodules are small tissues that form on the vocal fold- essentially, calluses of the vocal folds. Polyps and cysts may also appear on the vocal folds and they are fluid filled sacs on the vocal folds. Nodules, polyps, and cysts are the most common vocal fold damages, but there are other types of vocal damage as well. Varix and sulcus are two types of vocal damage which can be inherited genetically. Varix is diagnosed as varicose veins on the vocal folds, whereas sulcus is a bowing of one of the folds. Bowing of the vocal folds are more common in older people and occurs when the folds become thin. Lastly, paralysis is a scary occurrence when the vocal folds are paralyzed and cannot be used. All of these disorders seem terrifying, but some can be avoided if singers use proper technique; if not, singers can be retrained to sing with proper technique. The singers that will be discussed either had mild vocal damage or nodules on their folds.

Robert Plant of Led Zeppelin is known as one of the greatest rock singers, but unfortunately he was very reckless with his natural talent. It is rumored that Plant had surgery to remove vocal nodes either 1973 or 1974, however, there is no official statement about it. Between February and March 1977, twelve shows were cancelled (and rescheduled) due to Plant’s voice problems. There were many reasons that caused vocal damage for Robert Plant, but one that not many people consider is the fact that amplification technology was still in its genesis. This meant that Plant had to sing over the guitarist, Jimmy Page, drummer John Bonham, and bassist, John Paul Jones. Singing over such loud instruments would cause any vocalist a great deal of tension. The most obvious reason Plant had vocal damage was the excessive amount of smoking he did over the years. Unfortunately, Plant continued to smoke up until the 1980s, even after his surgery and cancelled tours. Smoking is a well known cause of vocal damage, yet it is extremely prevalent in the rock and roll lifestyle that Plant was a part of. As a vocalist, there were many things that Robert Plant did not incorporate into his lifestyle. First of all, he never warmed up before singing which was a really bad idea for his style of belting. In addition to not warming up, he performed constantly between the years of 1968 and 1971. This was great for Led Zeppelin fans, but not in the long run because Plant would not be able to sing the same way for much longer. Lastly, Plant caught the flu often and did not rest before performances. On January 2nd, 1973, drummer John Bonham and Robert Plant were driving to their performance in Sheffield, England when Bonham’s car broke down. They both hitchhiked to the show in the rain and subsequently Plant caught a cold. They still performed that day, however, and the next two shows were cancelled so that Plant could rest. The show on the 2nd should have been cancelled as well, but Plant sang with a cold instead. As dedicated to his fans as Plant was, he was not as dedicated to his voice. Sadly, his voice has not sounded as it used to for years and it is very apparent in his later performances.

In the 1990s, the grunge genre emerged and with it came the band Nirvana and the voice of a generation: Kurt Cobain. But the voice of a generation had apparent vocal damage for so many reasons. The grunge scene was all about the angst and apathy that many felt at the time and the music reflected that through distortion techniques for the guitars and the angry, intense vocals that accompanied it. Grunge was completely opposite of the glamorous and fashy 1980s in that those involved were apathetic and bleak about their life and future. Kurt Cobain’s lyrics spoke to those who were hopeless and depressed and his raspy voice reflected that angst. Of course, most of his raspy vocals were from the screaming he did in his performances. The song *Territorial Pissing* is the perfect example of how much screaming he did for a performance: in it, there is at least one minute of continuous screaming after 2 minutes of occasional singing. Cobain did not believe in recording more than one take for his vocal tracks, which may seem like a positive; however, it was because after one take of screaming so intensely, his voice would be completely destroyed. Another problem was the fact that he smoked and did many other drugs for a long time. He first began smoking marijuana at the age of 13 and continued to take a variety of drugs until his death in 1994. He eventually became addicted to heroin and was on it at the time of his death. Drug use is very bad for any singer’s voice, but the reason he took the drugs was far worse vocally: he had chronic bronchitis and horribly painful, undiagnosed gastric problems. He has said on many occasions that the only way he could find relief was to do heroin. Gastric problems like gastroesophageal reflux disease can cause damage to the vocal folds, so he may have had a severe type of acid reflux. If this is not the case, having any kind of stomach pain would make it difficult to use the diaphragm for proper vocal technique. If his pain was so awful that he had to take heroin to suppress it, there would be no way he could use his abdominals to sing well. Not only did Kurt Cobain scream excessively, he did not support his screams with nearly enough air from his abdominals. Add this to his use of drugs and that creates very damaged voice of a generation.

Kurt Cobain was not the only singer whose music was characterized by a raspy voice and screaming: Brody Dalle of the punk band The Distillers was known for her abrasive voice. Personally, for a long time I believed the lead singer in the band to be a male because of the low raspy voice. Punk music is generally known for its lack of skilled musicians and poor technique, and The Distillers are no exception. Brody Dalle knew of the vocal nodules on her voice and used them to form her vocal style for the band. Continuing to sing with poor technique and vocal nodes is very bad for a singer’s voice. However, punk rock is known for its reckless lifestyle; Dalle has said that when she was in the band, she “could scream for two hours a night, smoke a pack of cigarettes and drink a bottle of vodka” while still being able to sing the next day. All three aspects of her lifestyle at the time were doing great damage to her vocal folds, especially if the nodules were already formed- It is surprising that she can still talk. Another thing that can be observed by analyzing videos of Dalle’s performances is her poor breathing technique: she constantly employs clavicular breathing. Singing without a good support of air causes vocal damage, and screaming without good abdominal support is even worse on the vocal folds. Brody Dalle is currently taking better care of her voice in her new band The Spinnerettes, but the damage done while she was in The Distillers has now made her voice a very dangerous instrument to use.

Screaming in the genre of rock has always been prevalent, but in recent years screaming has evolved into something more. Death metal has adapted screaming into a mix of growling and shouting. This growling type of scream is called death metal vocals so as to distinguish itself from clean vocals, singing with proper technique. The interesting thing about death metal is that many vocalists in these bands know the kinds of damage that can be done by singing with poor technique. Therefore, singers in death metal tend to do their research about vocal production as it relates to death metal singing. The interesting thing about death metal growling is that the ventricular (false vocal) folds and aryepiglottic folds are used in vocal production of death metal vocals. The vocal folds also vibrate, but only at half the ratio of the ventricular folds, and one third or fourth of the the aryepiglottic folds. The only problem I see with this type of vocal production is the possibility of hyperadduction of false vocal folds which causes vocal damage. However, proper air support from the abdominal muscles will prevent too much damage from occurring.

Most death metal singers are well-versed in vocal pedagogy so as not to ruin their vocal tracts, but there are other vocalists who have damaged their voice due to improper vocal production in death metal singing. Mikael Akerfeldt of the death metal band Opeth realized that his death metal vocals were ruining his voice, although he expressed this with more expletives. He stated in an interview in 2011, “I just can’t develop any more as a singer if I keep on screaming.” Poor technique as well as poor air support were more than likely the two reasons that his death metal vocals caused him pain. In his latest album *Heritage*, Akerfeldt only included proper vocal singing and completely cut out screaming so as to save his voice. Vocalists in death metal bands should use Akerfeldt as both an example and a warning. Instead of only using death metal vocals, they should incorporate singing with proper technique in their pieces. There are also precautions that death metal vocalists, as well as all rock vocalists, should take.

In order to avoid extreme vocal damage, singers must take many preventative measures and make a habit out of them. The first and probably hardest is to change their rockstar lifestyle which means very little to no drinking, no smoking or drug use, and getting an adequate amount of rest. This may be difficult because of pressure from fans, other musicians, and the general culture of the genre, but to maintain a long vocal life, these changes are a necessity. Another universal problem for vocalists in bands on the road is the different temperatures,humidity, and air environment of buses and hotels; these contribute in small part to vocal damages as they may irritate the vocal tract. In addition to the different environments provided by traveling and hotels, noise levels may be elevated causing vocalists to shout or speak with more tension than they should. Vocal rest is also very important for singers- prolonged vocal rest is not good, but limited talking in between performances and time to heal from any sickness. As shown by the discussion on Robert Plant’s voice problems, he would have benefitted greatly from taking breaks in between performances or sickness. An extremely important protection method against vocal damage is drinking lots of water; keeping the vocal chords hydrated is crucial for vocalists. Once the vocal tract is hydrated, healthy, and safe, singers must do a warm up before performances. Without a warm up, vocalists may not sing with proper technique or support from their abdominals; a vocal warm up is necessary before a performance to prepare the singer properly. Had the four singers previously mentioned taken the necessary and indispensable preventative measures, their voices would have been healthy and safe from further damage. Hopefully rockers in the future will understand the seriousness of vocal damage and take care of their voices accordingly.

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