

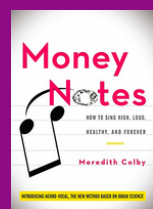


**YOU'VE
GOT
THIS!**

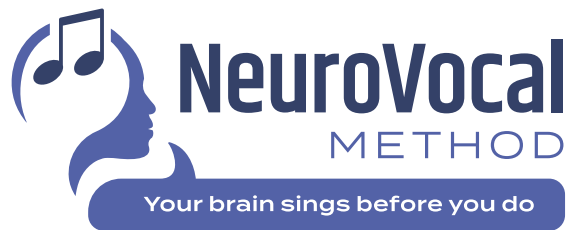
*A Voice Teacher's Guide to
Working With
Singers of Popular Styles*

by Meredith Colby

*author of
Money Notes: How to Sing High, Loud, Healthy, and Forever*



About the Author



Meredith Colby has coached singers in microphone genres for over 30 years. Meredith has a degree in Studio Music & Jazz from the University of Miami, over 25 years of experience as a busy freelance singer, a certificate of completion from the Neuroscience Academy, and has taken post-grad vocal pedagogical study as well as other continuing education.

The developer of NeuroVocal Method, an approach to vocal coaching based on neuroscience, Meredith is a vocal coach, professional educator, author, content creator, interview guest, and presenter.



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Contents



Introduction	1
To Be an Independent Voice Pro	2
You Can Do It!	3
I'm Like You,	4
Let's Do You	6
Start by Shifting Your Focus	7
Your 5 Power Tools	7
The Dish on Your PM Singer	12
You Again	15
Your New Client	16
What The PM Singer Needs	17
Solving the Problem	18
More from the author	<i>last page</i>

Introduction

You're reading this because you care about helping your clients who sing popular music; also known as popular styles, CCM, pop/rock, microphone styles, and more. You want to learn how to best serve them, which is proof of your awesomeness.

Because I know you're awesome, I won't waste your time. We're gonna talk turkey.

You've probably heard the advice:

"Try to learn from another's experience rather than your own."

This book is meant to let you learn from the experience of others so you can avoid things that could cost time, money, and maybe even good will.

In the following pages, you'll learn:

- What our landscape looks like.
- Why you should read what I'm sharing.
- 5 power tools for being the best teacher or coach possible for your PM students & clients.
- Who your microphone singer is, and what they want.
- Why teaching singers of popular styles can be a challenge.
- How to scare away your new client.
- The serious bottom line when it comes to singers of popular styles.

Different names
for
(pretty much)
the same thing:

- PM (Popular Music)
- Popular styles
- CCM (Contemporary Commercial Music)
- Pop/Rock
- PCM (Popular Culture Musics)
- Popular musics
- Microphone styles or genres

To Be An Indy Voice Pro

As an independent or adjunct voice teacher you want to know what each potential student is looking for.

They're coming to you because they want their voice to respond more accurately to their intentions. They want to sound better, have more control and choices with their singing, and enjoy more vocal stamina.

Being the helpful person you are, you want to empower every student regardless of the type of music they sing. You also need to know what is important to teach them, based on what they want to sing. You need to be an effective coach or teacher. Your livelihood depends on it.

For most voice professionals, the job of *singing teacher or coach* would be easier if student rosters were populated only by

people interested in Western Classical and classically-oriented musical theater styles of singing. But it might also be less interesting.

More importantly, you know that's not the world we live in.

Those numbers that are cited in the box at the bottom of this page indicate that Western Classical singing - the kind of singing you may have been told was the only right and correct way of singing - is actually a *very tiny niche*. Musical theater singing is a very small niche as well.

Let that sink in for a second.



One of the lists curated by the data collecting site Statista is for consumption of recorded music by genre in the USA in 2018. It puts classical music – including all instrumental and vocal - at 1%. The category “stage and screen,” which includes movie music, is 2.7%. Those stats are very consistent with numbers of past decades.

- If you have an independent studio, and have only trained and performed classically, and you may be in a tough spot.
- If you only understand Western classical singing - the aesthetic, the technique, the values - you're selling something almost nobody wants to buy.
- If you don't understand the culture and musical values of band singers, singer-songwriters, aspiring singers, and freelance singers, you're missing vital information could help them.

If you're going to have a prosperous teaching studio, you need to be able to attract, serve, and keep students who are interested in popular styles of music.



You Can Do It!

You may not be thrilled about the realities I just laid out. You may feel less-than-confident about teaching any of the microphone-based genres. You may feel some emotional resistance to this whole dang thing! And who could blame you?

As you've responded to inquiries by singers looking for voice instruction in popular styles, you may have struggled with those interactions. It's possible you

feel like a fake, you're embarrassed by your ignorance, or you intend to simply teach what you know to be "healthy" singing.

You've learned so much about singing already...you can always learn more! The same inquiry that may cause you to feel unsure can turn into a loyal student, a delighted client, and a big fan!

I'm Like You

There's no shortage of marketing experts who will tell you how to make a cool website, or get found on search engines. They may understand business. But they probably don't understand *our* business.

They don't know who our clients are, why those singers come to the first lesson, or what makes them stay.

I'm like you - I'm a voice coach and teacher. I've coached singers for over 30 years.

I was originally classically trained and have a bachelor's degree in vocal performance. Although I've maintained a healthy independent studio, I've had to figure out how to do that. I didn't get any business training in college. I know it can

be challenging to create and run a profitable voice studio.

I was also just like your clients.

I worked as a freelance singer. I've spent thousands of hours standing between a bass amp and a guitar amp, and 18 inches from a kick drum. I sang as a freelancer, in jazz ensembles and a cappella groups, live and in the studio, with big bands, really loud society bands, as half of a guitar duo, and more. All kinds of everything. But not classical. Not musical theater. Possibly not the kind of music you're probably comfortable teaching.

Before becoming a successful freelance singer, I was a broken singer.

A Broken Voice

I had taken eight years of lessons in Western classical voice. Not because I



wanted classical lessons. Not because I listened to or loved classical singing (as I do now) but because Western classical style was the only thing my teachers knew how to teach. They believed, and told me, that it was the only correct way to sing.

That style of singing didn't match up with my career plans, though. When I got out

of college and auditioned for bands I sounded weird. Inappropriate, strange, and clueless. I didn't know how to sing the music that I wanted to sing.

My first singing job out of college was with the Miami Opera Guild. It was fun, but not what I wanted. Luckily (and because one could do that kind of thing back then) I then got a job with a top-40 road band, sight unseen. That band played five to six nights a week, three or four hours a night in bars and clubs all over the Western United States.

I kept up that schedule for nine months – sounding wrong and trying to figure out how to sound better – until I was no longer able to make any sound at all. My voice was trashed. The training I had received was not appropriate to either the music I was singing or the conditions typical for touring singers.



Take 2!

Back to my parents' home I went. I spent a year applying various therapies to repair my voice. Then I moved to Chicago to try my hand at being a freelance singer. Overall it worked out pretty well. I was part of a generous community of musicians. I sang a lot, with a lot of different bands, in a lot of different situations, and for a lot of years.

I logged my 10,000 hours.

I was able to do that because my first order of business upon my arrival in Chicago was to find a voice teacher. After all I've been through, I knew it had to be the right person, and my college friend hooked me up with a coach who was from my world. He was a jingle singer, a concert singer, and a band performer.

I still remember, at a certain point in my study, feeling that I was finally singing. Actually singing. Making the music of my heart.

That experience turned me into a popular-styles evangelist. I took graduate-level vocal pedagogy for a year, continued my own lessons, observed other voice teacher's lessons, and read books and articles about vocal pedagogy. I wanted to know enough to “first do no harm.”

I also wanted to right the wrongs I felt had been done to me. I wanted to save pop singers from (what I thought of at the time as) clueless classical teachers; classical singers who would teach them the wrong technique; who would hurt their voices and/or their souls. I wanted to save them from what had happened to me. I was young and on a mission.



Let's Do You

So that's my story. Now let's do you.

You - the singer, the teacher, the person who idealistically agreed to tend to the artistic souls of other people. You - the artist who believes in the power of song so much that you've embarked on the formidable task of teaching it to others.

Does the following description apply to you? Maybe just a little?

You went to college to study music or voice. Your bachelor's degree is in music. The music you learned about - execution, history, repertoire – was overwhelmingly classical with (perhaps) a bit of musical theater thrown in. You are now a teacher who feels confident teaching a Western classical style. You probably also feel pretty good about teaching most musical theater techniques. However, a student who wants to learn how to improve their singing of microphone-based genres? Well...that idea tends to make your bicycle a little wobbly.

If that (more or less) describes you, you've come to the right place.

This little-bitty book is about your PM (popular music) students, and about what they want and need from you. My hope is that it will give you, their teacher and coach, some tools to help them realize their goals. What follows will inform – and maybe surprise – you!

Start By Shifting Your Focus

In college you and your voice-major-friends all spent time dishing about what was wrong with various singers' technique, which singers were going to wreck their voices, and who should be singing a different fach. Since you want to help your singers of PM genres, it's time to let all that go.

Google

Meredith Colby

#1 Secret to

Hitting Your

Money Notes.

It's a 3-minute

time investment

that can really

help people

change their

minds about what

popular styles

sound like.



Your 5 Power Tools

1. Start with a new assumption

Listen to an established artist sing a few songs. Assume that the singer you're listening to is making their singing work. Their singing is sustainable. They've made a career of it. They tour. They sing 90 to 160 minute shows. The evidence shows that their technique is working for them. Instead of thinking "what is this singer doing wrong?" think like a pedagogue. Ask "what

is this singer *doing*"?

Learn to listen for what is actually going on vocally when you listen to a singer. Learn to parse it out, so that you can put that together both *for* your students, and *with* your students.

Learn to “tune your ears” to the music. You may already do this when it comes to to opera versus musical theater. For instance, in an opera when somebody is dying or their heart is breaking, their singing is still beautiful. But in musical theater when someone is dying or their heart is breaking, they are not required to sing beautifully about it. They can scream, gasp, grow, use guttural scrapes or Sprechstimme. Different music, different sounds.

With popular styles, you're going to throw your net even wider; learn to be more sensitive to the different sounds that define different genres.

2. Throw out the rules

Popular musics don't have any musical rules, per se. The only rules are those that are important to the individual singer. Really. You could name any musical value – even something as basic as singing in tune - and I guarantee you there's a

famous artist (or five) who doesn't abide by that value and still has a prosperous career.



The *artist* gets to decide what is important and what is not, so when you're teaching students of microphones styles, it's important to keep checking with them about their musical values.

Here's a “for instance” that's so typical that I can almost guarantee that you will see it in your studio (if you haven't already):

Gerry writes songs. Gerry plays sitting down and bends over his guitar, which inhibits his breathing. He writes in keys that are too high for him, cranes for the high notes, and is really pitchy. He also has poor diction, so you have a hard time understanding his lyrics. You're able to discern all of this in short order, and your inclination will probably be to start fixing Gerry's singing.

But don't. Not yet.

Bear in mind that Gerry probably doesn't know he's writing in keys that don't flatter his voice. He may not even have much of a concept of keys at all, never mind keys in relation to his voice (more on that later.) He probably doesn't know where in his body the sound of his voice is generated. He doesn't know how his posture is affecting his breath and tone. He also *knows* the words he's singing, so he probably thinks his diction is just fine.

- If you start fixing Gerry without giving him agency in how he's presenting his songs, he'll probably quit lessons.
- If you talk to Gerry in a way that leads him to think that he's the only one having these issues, he'll probably quit lessons.
- If you point out Gerry's issues using language you learned in college (music theory), he may have feelings about that. He may inwardly confirm that he should not try to learn from a trained musician. And he'll probably quit lessons.

(Also, and not-for-nothing, Gerry doesn't really need music theory, *per se*, to do what he does.)

Approach Gerry in a way that says, *"You and I are both musicians, and I know a lot about singing. I can share some information with you that will give you more choices about how you are presenting your songs"*. And then do that. Take it one step at a time.



3. Use other artists as examples

It's helpful and respectful to use examples of other artists when you're addressing a singer's issues.



Let's use Gerry for an example. If you show him a John Mayer video and talk about how John is holding his guitar and what that does to his posture, and then why that body alignment - in relation to his guitar - may make it easier for John to sing five shows a week, then you'll have Gerry in your corner. You've given him tools, and a context in which to understand them.

4. Be aware of context

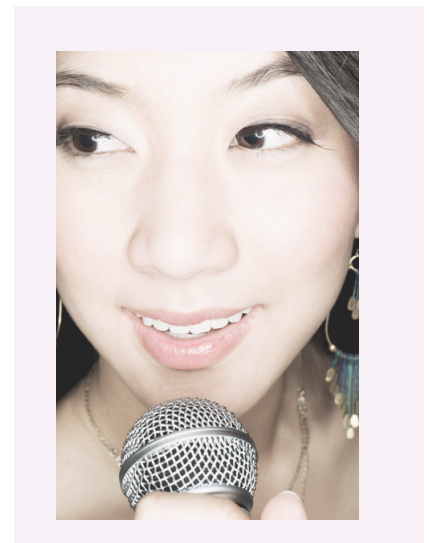
Let's say you teach Gerry about how his breathing works, and how his breathing works with his voice, and how his posture aids or inhibits vocal ease. Let's say that, based on your brilliant teaching, Gerry decides he's going to stand instead of sit when he sings, and adjust his guitar strap in a way that allows him to play his guitar without draping his body over it.

Gerry is feeling good. His singing feels easier, and the high notes don't feel so high. But you noticed that he's still "craning" a bit on his high notes. Not as much as before, but enough to make your little voice-teacher-heart worry for his voice. So you start addressing this issue.

Before you become a dog that won't let go of a bone, think about what Gerry does.



- Is Gerry in a band that plays out several times a week? If so, let him know that his alignment is something he should be aware of. Let him consider whether he's getting vocally tired after a gig. If he is, you and he will want to address that habit to see if it's the source of his fatigue.
- Is Gerry playing short sets in a songwriters group, or at open mics? If so, that habit is not urgent. It's not going to hurt him. Let it go for now.
- Is Gerry bringing you recordings of his songs wherein you can hear that his high notes are consistently flat? Time to talk to him about the power of keys for a singer, as well as how reaching for high notes with your head can affect both pitch acuity and timbre.



Context matters in popular styles!

Something to think about:

We're often taught to speak and think in terms of "vocal health."

For popular styles, we can think in terms of "sustainability."

Is this vocal behavior something the singer can reproduce when they want to use it?

5. Get some training

Singing habits should support sustainable singing. What sounds good in a given genre might sound really inappropriate in another. "Good" singing is not necessarily good singing.

I'd suggest one or both of these:

- Get a voice teacher who specializes, and consider aiming to perform in public.

You don't have to start wailing

like Kelly Clarkson, but getting control of your vibrato and learning to sing some-flavor-of-pop/rock/jazz in an aesthetically appropriate style would be both fun and educational. Also, working on your singing with someone who's an expert in a different kind of singing will definitely inform your teaching in a positive way!

- Take a class, or get certified, in a technique specific to PM (popular musics). While NeuroVocal is applicable to all kinds of singing, the approach was developed with singers of popular styles in mind.

Take some time to learn more about NeuroVocal Method for popular styles! Teachers & coaches get excited and empowered when they learn how to use this in their teaching!
(It's also delightfully science-y, if you like that sort of thing. :)

The Dish On Your Microphone Singer

Your new client, the microphone singer, may not be like the singers you're used to. That singer inhabits a different world with different values, cultures, skills, and beliefs.

Here I'll offer a bullet point description of your microphone singer. Please bear in mind that these are generalizations, so they assumed exceptions.

The Beginning Singer:

- They don't read music
- They're embarrassed about the fact that they don't read music.
- They don't consider themselves "real musicians" because they don't read music. Or, paradoxically...
- Only people like them, who have learned by ear, are "real" musicians.
- They may play an instrument (probably by ear). Or...
- They don't play an instrument.
- They have a lot of songs memorized, and they sing along with the artist(s).
- They may or may not practice with karaoke tracks at home.
- There are between one and three artists to whom they are very attached, and they would like to sing like that/those artist(s).
- They've taken a stab at writing some lyrics, but may not have told anyone (and won't tell you unless you ask).
- They may be concerned about being judged by you, a trained musician.
- They believe that they're not singing "correctly" but also fear changing the way they sing.
- The way they sing is their trademark, intimately linked to identity. They're not looking to change it. But also... they are.
- If you play five classical sopranos for them, back-to-back, they won't be able to tell you the difference between them. Their ear is focused on things your ear is not.
- They play an instrument by ear, have learned to play with chord charts, or...
- They don't play an instrument.
- They may or may not practice with karaoke tracks at home.
- They don't take care of their voice in a traditional sense (e.g., they warm up by singing songs in the car at full volume, they don't take vocal rest unless suffering acute laryngitis, etc.)

The Experienced Singer:

- They probably don't read music.
- They are probably a little embarrassed about the fact that they don't read music.
- They may not consider themselves "a musician" based on their inability to read written music.
- At rehearsals or gigs they can probably hear themselves enough to hear their pitch but not enough to get any information about the timbre.
- They likely sport a "one of the guys" attitude, and don't want to complain or ask for special treatment from the band.

The reality of the microphone singer's world, and the thing that should inform everything you do to help them is this:
when performing on microphones in amplified situations, they generally cannot hear themselves well, or at all.

In rehearsal or performance, they may be able to make out their voice and their pitch in the monitor. Maybe. It's possible they can hear virtually nothing of what they're singing. If they have really nice, in-ear monitors they'll be able to hear their pitch and some of their timbre. But even with in-ear monitors they cannot hear all the nuances that an acoustic singer can hear.

These singers are contacting you because they want or need to express themselves. They need that expression to reflect their intentions. But something is in the way.

Specifically, you'll probably be able to break down your initial assessment to:

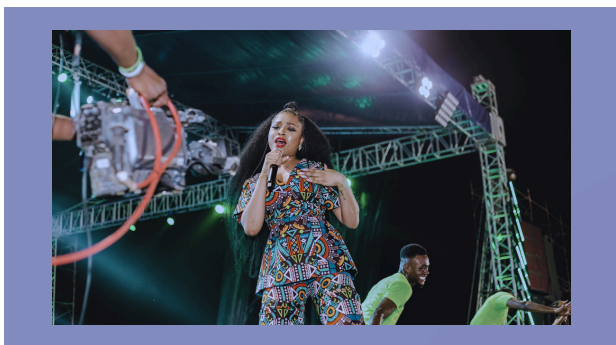
- They can't put their finger on it: they just want to improve their singing skills and confidence.
- They are suffering from their lack of technique and knowledge, i.e., they want to conquer their break, or they're suffering from some manifestation of inflammation of the vocal folds.
- They have moved from occasional singing to regular singing, or have a new goal for their singing, and are aware that they need to invest in sustainable singing.

To use a painting analogy, what a singer can typically hear in an acoustic situation is Van Gogh's *The Starry Night*. What a band singer can typically hear is a pencil drawing of a star.



Another typical reason would be that they are going to tour (or have somehow otherwise upped their game) and are worried about losing their voice. In this case, though, it's more typical that their manager or label will be contacting you, and in that case you have to know how to talk to a manager or label, not a singer. We're going to stick with singers for now.

It benefits both you and your new client to be cognizant of these three basic reasons. Your new client is not signing on with you to learn how to sing the way *you think* they should be singing.



You Again

I'm going to continue to assume that you were classically trained. In Western classical voice, as Princess Fiona sang, "there are rules and there are strictures." This is not a bad thing. It's true of all classical art. It defines the genre. In fact, from the beginning of your study, your end game is to both follow those rules

and sing musically. When you studied voice, your teacher was trying to teach you how to sing classical music with the right technique for genres like opera, lieder, and oratorio. If they were willing to teach you musical theater, it was classically oriented musical theater. It wasn't *Legally Blonde*.

In teaching you the correct technique for classical music, they didn't keep telling you that it was for classical music. They just told you this was proper technique.

It's even possible you had a voice teacher who told you that the technique used in classical voice was the only correct way to sing, and that singing in any other manner would do damage to your voice.

But even if your teacher was accepting of other ways of singing, they were charged with teaching you classical voice. So they taught you the rules of classical voice. That teacher taught you how to reproduce the aesthetically acceptable sound of classical singing. No small feat on either their part or yours.

In a typical college music school or department, there's an assumption that good singing is the type of singing that the voice faculty would recognize and approve of, and that people who sing "incorrectly" or with "bad technique" are in danger of "ruining their voices."

An aside...

If you had a voice teacher who loved the Backstreet Boys and Jennifer Hudson, then this college-y stuff probably doesn't apply to you.

If you went to a college with a progressive and more diverse music department, then this stuff only marginally applies to you.

If these descriptions match your experience in any way, though, look for the seed of what can help you. Look for the thing you didn't know.

So there you were, a college senior, singing as well as you ever had, feeling sure about what constituted good singing, and what bad singing sounded like, and you got your diploma, and you were free to fly.

And now you're in the real world, teaching voice lessons. The people who contact you for lessons are decidedly *not* the same kind of people you left behind in college.

They're primarily musical theater singers, exploring beginners, people who want to sing popular music styles, or gigging musicians who need help.



Your New Client

Here's some stuff you may, or may not, know about this client:

- If you tell those band singers that the way they sing is wrong, or incorrect, they won't come back.
- If you're not aware that their lack of formal music training may result in an internal message about being dumb or inferior, you may inadvertently insult or put them down, and they won't come back.

- If they take between two and six lessons and then disappear, it probably means that they were giving you a chance, but realized that you don't understand their music, and/or don't understand what they need.
- If, when talking to those band singers initially, you use your college words like "technique," "correct tone," or "classical" they won't schedule Lesson No.1 with you. (Or they'll schedule it and blow you off.)
- If you profess, in the copy on your site, that you're equally good at teaching any and all kinds of singing, those people might feel suspicious and won't call you in the first place.

What the Microphone Singer Needs from Lessons



In the real world of the independent voice teacher, you are very seldom in the role of "technique developer," as your college voice teacher was. You're in the role of "problem solver," as are most freelancers in any specialty.

Your new client has come to you to solve a problem. They may also be in the process of trying to reach a goal. In fact, they may even use the language of goal-setting. (This frees you to use the language of goal-setting as well!) Initially, though, your goal should be to communicate that you can help them solve their problem, not to "fix" their singing.

Nearly always, your new client will consider their problem to be one of the following three things:

- Their voice gets tired or hoarse from speaking or singing.
- They don't have the range they feel they want or could have.
- They can't coordinate their entire range in the manner they'd like to.

From your perspective, their problems are one or both of the following two:

- Inefficient phonation leading to vocal strain.
- Inability to sing with efficient register coordination.

This straightforward approach to meeting a client where they are can sometimes feel challenging for the classically trained voice teacher. Some challenges might be:

- The things that sound good to you will (very likely) not sound good to them.
- The values of the music styles they want to emulate do not adhere to the values you have learned .
- Your voice training was almost certainly a model based on client retention. They aren't assuming that's the deal. They want help addressing their issues, and then they want to move on.
- You probably don't sing in a high chest mix (unless you're a tenor), don't know what it feels like, and therefore don't feel confident teaching it.
- You may or may not be familiar with the artists or songs they listen to.
- You may have a strong dislike or distrust of popular singing. You may have been told - or even believe - that singing in a high chest mix will hurt your student's voice.

Solving the Problem

If you looked at my exhaustive list of the two things your microphone singer needs from you, you might feel at a bit of a loss. Solving those problems may not be the way you've ever thought about vocal training or development. If so, you're in good company.

That's why *NeuroVocal* professional training & certification exists. Since I was a band singer, I knew that world. Because my college experience was based on Western classical, I got that, too. And because I am always improving and streamlining *how* all of us big-hearted voice pros can use neuroscience to help our clients, I knew that sharing *NeuroVocal Method* could make a positive difference to voice teachers and coaches, and to their clients.

I hope this book has helped you create some context and strategies. I hope you feel (at least a bit) more confident. Because, friend...

...you got this!

More from the author:

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