

Voice Qualities & Ideals

There are innumerable voice qualities and ideals. An ideal in itself is often a combination of several other ideals. When an ideal appears it is analysed by singing teachers and vocal coaches who define and describe how to reproduce it. As previously mentioned the best way to achieve a particular sound is by imitation. Singing along with singers whose sound you like will help you work out what to do. If this doesn't work you can always consult a teacher who will map out how to create the sound and a method for learning it. The range of ideals and techniques is enormous and the terms used for them are usually fairly descriptive, for example growling and crooning. However, as vocal pedagogy in the rock, pop and souls genres is relatively new, there is much discussion as to which terms and methods should be used. For example this book is an attempt to consolidate my subjective experience into a body of theory. However, we have a long way to go before we have arrived at a universally accepted and homogenous nomenclature for vocal expression. Below is a list of some of the most common expressions and vocal ideals. I would like to point out that the artists mentioned often, but not *always*, use the named techniques.

Belting

Belting is often used in rock, pop and soul as well as in musical theatre. Belting is really an expression for *energetic singing*. The technique is characterised by high lung pressure, high pitch and an elevated larynx. The name stems from the expression to "belt out", which means singing loudly. Belting occurs in the upper part of the chest register.

Exercise – Test belt “uh-oh”

- Inhale a little air.
- Hold your neck straight and look up and to the side.
- Close your vocal folds.
- Shout “uh-oh” quite loudly, as if something bad was about to happen.

Artists who use this technique:

Alanis Morissette; Björk, Celine Dion, Michael Bolton, Dave Grohl (Foo Fighters); Freddie Mercury (Queen)

Twang

Twang is a technique that colours your sound through the liberal production of overtones. The classic American accent is a good example of “twang” and this sound is used by singers in a wide variety of styles. Twang sounds like kids teasing each other by saying “na,na,na,na,na,na”. Singing with a lot of twang can easily tire out your voice so it is not to be recommended for tired or injured voices. Some voice professionals believe that twang is the result of the contraction of the aryepiglottic sphincter.

Artists:

Anastacia, Shania Twain, Joss Stone, Chris Robinson (Black Crowes), Usher

Growl & Distortion

“Growling” is exactly that - growling. Growling is mostly restricted to certain types of hard rock although a “lighter” version can be found in other genres. Growling uses high lung pressure, a constricted larynx and low pitch.

Distortion is used in both rock and hard rock either as temporary effect or throughout a song. In contrast to growling, distortion almost always occurs at high pitch, with high lung pressure and that leads to vibration in the parts of the larynx above the vocal folds.

Artists:

Growl: *Lou Koller (Sick of it); Peter Dolving (The Haunted)*

Distortion: *Bonnie Tyler, Janis Joplin; Anouk; Brian Johnson (AC/DC), Bryan Adams, Udo Dirkschneider (Accept; U.D.O)*

Exercise – Distortion

Some singers, particularly women, have trouble producing a distorted tone and others get a sore throat when trying. If this happens you should stop, rest your voice and try again later. It is important that your body language and attitude is energetic.

- Place the tip of your tongue behind your lower front teeth and smile!
- Place the sides of the rear of your tongue against your upper canine teeth.
- Using high lung pressure, make a prolonged “ey”, “mEE” or “ahOO” sound.
- Now your tone should be distorted.

If you don't produce a distorted sound, try again until you find the right combination of “settings”. Remember that it requires a lot of lung pressure and energy to sound distorted. If you produced a good sound but your throat hurt you will need to make small adjustments with your tongue and soft palate. Train for short periods of time and stop as soon as you feel discomfort.

If the above methods don't work try tuning in to an extreme emotional state such as rage.

Making generalisations and mapping how a rock, pop or soul singer sings is difficult and the exceptions are many. Nevertheless I will now try to briefly describe the most common types of voices in their respective genres.

Rock

Rock singers usually sing at high pitches, with high lung pressure, using their chest register with little or no vibrato and distortion as an effect.

Artists:

Ann Wilson (Heart), Avril Lavigne, Gwen Stefani, Bruce Springsteen, Chris Cornell (Soundgarden, Audioslave), Bono (U2)

Pop

Pop is usually sung at a comfortable pitch, with moderate lung pressure and often with a light and breathy tone. Vibrato is used sparingly and creaky onsets and glottal stops are common phrasing devices.

Artists:

Madonna, Britney Spears, Nina Persson (Cardigans), Ronan Keating, Chris Martin (Coldplay), Beck.

Soul

The soul singer chooses key with a view to being able to use the whole of their vocal range. Once again we have moderate lung pressure, switching from twangy to breathy and a wide vibrato. The soul singer can at times be perceived as nasal. Glottal stops, prolonged nasal offsets and improvised riffing are all important ingredients.

Artists:

Mary J. Blige, Lauryn Hill, Brandy, Stevie Wonder, Brian McKnight, John Legend.