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2000

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Leigh Carriage
Southern Cross University

Publication details

Post-print of Carriage, L 2000, 'The experience of contemporary Australian female vocalists: an exploratory study', *Australian Voice*, vol. 6, pp. 31-36.

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The Experience of Contemporary Australian Female Vocalists: An Exploratory Study

Leigh Carriage

This paper discusses the findings of an exploratory and qualitative study of the experience of contemporary female vocalists in Australia. The study consisted of a small sample of fifteen contemporary female vocalists, who were interviewed during 1999-2000.

The aim of the study was to chart the nature of these vocalists' practice, identify possible barriers to their participation in the music industry, and suggest directions for teaching and development of contemporary voice.

There is a distinct lack of research and resources - historical and theoretical - specifically dealing with contemporary voice, but particularly in the Australian context. This gap is even more pronounced in the area of female vocal performance, which is not well understood nor documented. It is unclear how female vocalists learn their craft, how they work with technique, what their needs are in terms of formal musical education and skills to cope with workplace environment.

I have tried to gain an understanding of the specificity, and diversity, of practice of contemporary female vocalists. I sought to make a preliminary identification of possible barriers to participation in different areas of the music industry, and to consider the implications of this for pedagogy.

The perspective taken in this study is one very much informed by recent musical scholarship which looks at contemporary music and voice in social and cultural context (see the handy overview represented in the work of Shuker 1995, as well as the many excellent examples to be found in the research of a number of different scholars, among them: Cohen 1991 & 1993; Frith 1988 & 1996; Hayward 1998; Hooks 1994; Martin 1995; Middleton 1990). This body of popular music scholarship seeks to take seriously the study of popular music, including contemporary voice, and to look at innovative ways to understand the nature of such music - which has not been well understood in the available traditions to date, based on classical and art music forms.

In addition, I draw on the small but growing literature on music and gender (such as the pioneering work of Gitron 1993; Cooper 1995; Q'Brien 1995; Johnson 2000; Macarthur & Poynton 1999; McClary 1991; Whiteley 1997 & 2000). Especially helpful is the first book-length study of music, gender, and education (Green 1997). My interest in this study is the important role that education plays in the formation of all contemporary musicians, but particularly how it shapes the deeply gendered aspects of contemporary voice we find today.

I have chosen a qualitative method here appropriate to an exploratory study. However, I also feel the qualitative method is helpful for the nature of the issues. I am investigating. It is worth noting here Denzin and Lincoln's characterisation of qualitative research as 'multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter' (p.2). Like them, I read the qualitative research act as a 'multicultural, gendered process' (p.1), and view the 'qualitative researcher-as bricoleur uses the tools of his or her methodological

trade, deploying whatever strategies, methods, or empirical materials as are at hand' (p.2).

Methodology

The focus of the research was on documenting and analysing the experiences of contemporary vocalists as they perceived and reported it. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen contemporary female vocalists. Interviewees were carefully chosen to give some sense of the diversity of practitioners, with a broad cross-section in terms of: genre of music (rock, country, jazz, hip hop); sector of industry (theatre, television, venue-based); type of practitioner (performer, session vocalist, teacher); years in industry; ethnic and cultural background.

Those interviewed were: Lily Dior, Christine Sullivan, Chrissy Amphlett, Jeanie Lewis, Grace Knight, Inga Liljestrom, M'chele Morgan, Lisa Ryan McLaughlin, Jo Jo Smith, Karen Jacobsen, Elizabeth Lord, Megan Albany, Justine Bradley, Margret RoadKnight and Nina Harris.

I was fortunate in the sample to interview a mix of established well-known artists (such as Chrissie Amphlett, Grace Knight, Jeanie Lewis, Christine Sullivan, and Lily Dior) and of emerging artists (such as Karen Jacobsen, M'chele Morgan, and Inga Liljestrom).

As well as being performers, composers, and recording artists, the majority of those interviewed are also voice teachers (mostly in a private capacity, though some have also taught in schools and TAPE, and two respondents have taught for short stints in tertiary institutions). As this is an exploratory qualitative study, the aim of the interviews was to identify issues, and to document experiences. Hence I chose only a small but diverse sample of contemporary female vocalists. Roughly half of the interviews were conducted face to face, but in some circumstances participants interviewed via e-mail and by phone. A common set of questions was used, covering a range of topics: career development; supports in developing career; main influences and role models; barriers experienced; discrimination and effects experienced; role of music education for contemporary vocalists; vocal health problems; education on vocal preservation; educational needs of contemporary vocalists.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed. Common and differing features of practitioners' experience were considered, and some of the salient findings are discussed below.

- Career Development and Early Influences
- Role of Music and Education
- Vocal Problems and Vocal Preservation
- Possible Barriers
- Discrimination: Effects and Strategies

Career Development and Early Influences

Three questions in the interview aimed to explore career development and early influences of the respondents. There were a range of different answers to these questions, as would be expected.

Nearly every interviewee nominated listening and live performance experience as key factors in career development. General health and 'stamina' were mentioned by most respondents. Confidence and self-motivation were also important - 'Gall! Hutzpah! Cheek!' said one interviewee. The role of a musical family was very important also, cited a number of times as a critical factor in providing support.

A solid musical grounding was quite important to most, including a background in an instrument (typically piano, and guitar also - only in two cases did respondents not play an instrument). One-to-one tuition emerged as important for half the respondents in their musical development.

Musical influences were very diverse across the sample. However, two interesting findings emerged on the question of influences. Firstly, only two of the respondents cited classical music as a direct influence, and in both case, cited instrumental classical music, not classical vocalists. Secondly, it was quite striking that Australian cabaret and jazz vocalist and educator Kerrie Biddell was mentioned by over half the respondents as a direct influence more mentions than any other overseas or Australian artist.

Role of Music and Education

Respondents offered some very interesting responses to a series of questions about what they saw as the key elements in vocal education for contemporary vocalists, and what would they have liked to have known before they went into the music business:

> ‘Contemporary singing has more hazards and there is a need for singers to understand them including knowledge of sound systems.
>
> ‘How to read people. How to read music. How to read contracts’.
>
> ‘One of the things I had to learn was to become a recording artist. I mean I was a performer and I .., but there are so many different aspects that you know, [but] to be a recording artist, [you have to]… learn to function in the studio’.
>
> ‘I would have liked to have training in music legals, not to have been star struck. Had I known then what I do now, I would have almost definitely have earned a decent living for the ten years that I was the lead singer in [name of group].’
>
> ‘I would have liked to have been better prepared for the financial hardships and knock-backs. I would have like to have known that's its very competitive and you're a small fish in a big sea. That talent alone is not enough. That performing is addictive’.

A few wished that they had been encouraged to do their own material earlier in their career:

> '...not to be self-conscious about performing. Just to really own what I do and follow that. Not to try to be all things to all people...I have skills in a broad range of areas because I was too frightened to just concentrate on my original songs from the start'.

> 'I would have liked to somehow have been encouraged into original music earlier and known that covers actually aren't a long-term career path.

At least one respondent felt that the nature of teaching institution needed to improve:

> 'I would love to see an atmosphere of encouragement and support introduced into our learning establishments, replacing the hierarchical attitudes of competitiveness and emotionally disconnected over-critical aloofness that seems rampant and does little to produce marvelous music'.

A number suggested that education was not everything, and (ironically in some cases) said that they may have been discouraged by knowing too much about the difficult aspects of the music industry:

> 'The old saying about the less you know the better really applies here. I honestly don't think there would be entertainers if we knew what a strange and sometimes frightening business this is. So, maybe a little knowledge in this case is *not* a good thing. But as an educator, I feel it is my duty to warn the inexperienced about the pitfalls and dangers of this industry'.

Vocal Problems and Vocal Preservation

All except one of the respondents were aware of and reported personal vocal problems:

> 'A very tired and raspy voice'.

> 'Laryngitis and had no voice for a while scary'.

> 'Repeatedly tired and sore throat'

> 'Touring for almost ten years non stop...I suffered a raspy throat and pushed myself so hard that I would lose my voice completely'.

> 'Mainly when I was young, eighteen or so working with dance bands and always absolutely always to this day as a result of disgusting fold back... The singer not seen as an important element of the band, the band being way too loud and the singer overcompensating'.

Most had taught themselves the vocal hygiene and other voice preservation skills, or sought professional advice and care from an ear, nose and throat specialist:

> ‘Knowledge you build up slowly through experience and bits of advice, I educated myself, rest when necessary. I regularly go to an ear nose and throat specialist’.

> ‘I have gone to see ear, nose, and throat specialists - I used to go quite often because I was quite paranoid about the whole thing, but I was singing in a loud group and I'd sort of really belt it out and that was [name of band] - it was like almost a heavy metal chick band - you know - not heavy metal more avant garde rock but it was awfully loud and just my voice would hurt afterwards - I realise now that maybe that wasn't the right way for me to actually sing’.

All strongly believed that more emphasis was needed in educating contemporary vocalists, and therefore educating contemporary vocal teachers; more specifically for the contemporary vocalist's hygiene, environment, acoustics, and the nature of their professional work:

> ‘In the last 5 years since I've been doing more band work my voice has become very trashed, mainly from the environments where I make my living - loud sound systems, draughts, smoke from cigarettes and machines and noise levels... we need to know how to protect ourselves from the inside using the microphone and preserving the voice has to be a starting point some teachers over the years who never mention anything but scales practice...consequently I began to self educate in order to save my voice and have longevity

> ‘Contemporary singing has more hazards and there is a need for singers to understand them. This includes, I think, knowledge of sound systems and how important they are, to have adequate foldback at the gig. One should always be able to hear themselves above the band onstage...acknowledge of acoustics of rooms. Not nearly enough [emphasis on how to preserve/protect voice], but I observe this to be a society where self-destructive practices flourish & where people value experiences where things are "hard'; or painful. People become addicted to their own damage, proud of it... warm-ups should .be part of music from childhood for everyone’.

> ‘We need much more informed advice on how to protect our voices and what precautions may be followed to avoid damage or remedial procedures taken when damage has occurred’.

> ‘If [budding vocalists] are introduced to vocal health at an early stage, they will always be aware and take the correct precautions. It is so important to have a physical handle on the vocal area, in the same way an instrumentalist knows about the construction of their chosen instrument’.

A number of respondents raised issues pertaining to contemporary music vocal technique, styles and environment, which they felt were not sufficiently addressed by pedagogy historically based in classical methods:

> ‘Well, [voice preservation] was always discussed in a classical sense when I studied singing so no, I don't think enough is offered. Using the microphone and

> preserving the voice has to be a starting point'.
>
> 'A broad range of learning from stylistically diverse material can be made available to the diligent student of voice'.

Some respondents qualified their support for teaching voice preservation and technique, by suggesting that it needed to be approached appropriately:

> Yes, I've had "problems" with my voice, but to quote my late friend Prof. Alex Bradford (the stunning Black American gospel singer): "Sure I'm hoarse - I'm supposed to be hoarse - I'm a singer". I'm bored by people who are constantly ' taking care of' their voice apart from not actually abusing it &for expected it to be as robust when you have a virus or infection...All the health/dietary etc. tips should be taught, but in such an atmosphere so as to avoid singers giving them undue emphasis... The most inspiring & intriguing singers of all (to me, anyway) - Black Gospel singers and Bulgarian village women - are not usually schooled in, or precious about, the voice'.
>
> 'I do believe that some vocal coaches deserve a very pointy stick up the butt, and unless they have actual professional experience in touring, they often can teach the pupil to un-learn their most natural and gifted part of themselves'.

Possible Barriers

One important part of the interviews was to discover what possible barriers to practising their craft contemporary vocalists faced. Most respondents felt that one of the main barriers was the common perception of vocalists as not being legitimate musicians.

One musically well educated respondent noted surprise when she played piano:

> 'I do recall the acts 1 had backed being amazed that a girl could play piano OK'. Another said: 'Singers were considered the thing that draws the crowds but were thought of with a little contempt seeing it all seemed so easy for us.'

Two other barriers were the low wages and the conditions in the industry:

> 'The main barrier has got to be earning a living while trying to stay true to being a singer'.

Physical stereotypes and appearance were mentioned as a barrier by most respondents. One respondent stated that:

> 'Discrimination has mainly affected me in regard to my personal appearance. Another put it more succinctly: 'Being a shortish person with smallish bosoms didn't help.'

Personal attitudes, including lack of confidence, anxiety, and fear, were mentioned by quite

of number of the respondents as a barrier:

> ‘My inexperience. My shyness. My lack of confidence.'

Lack of education for vocalists was one of the most common replies.

Discrimination: Effects and Strategies

Nearly all respondents mentioned that they had experienced discrimination on the basis of gender:

> ‘Oh boy, where do you want me to start!!! There were obvious discriminations, of gender, of style, of age. The industry when I started out was so completely run by the olds boys club (still is). . . The old casting couch syndrome. Also I found they were very narrow as to my ability, for once you had performed certain styles, you were heaped into that pile, never to surface as anything else’.

> ‘As I am no longer young and gorgeous (was I ever?), I find I am fighting the "you're too old to be hip" attitude chick singer cuI de sac I think I am through the whole chick singer thing!...I walked into [it] initially as a willing participant & it took a long time to dawn what was happening in the course of struggling for my own voice. I also found I was struggling for respect from other musicians, even to the extent of it being a struggle to accept myself & be accepted as musician myself. As for audiences, it's largely as Frank Zappa says of the music industry - titties & beer’.

One respondent, who felt she had not experienced much gender-based discrimination, phrased it in this way:

> 'I tend not to notice that stuff, but I do recall the acts I had backed being amazed that a girl could play piano OK’.

Another felt she was discriminated because of the content of her songs (too political) rather than just because she was a woman:

> 'Oh, for me I feel the doors that were closed to me they have been more to do with what I sing about, than the fact that I am a woman.' Even this respondent, however, then went on to say: 'I don't, I haven't even fitted, fitted some sort of pretty image, so I've not fitted the physical image, so, I think that's quite a men episode sort of rejection.'

One respondent suggested that genre of music is an important factor in interaction with gender:

> ‘I'm unaware of being discriminated against on the basis of gender (genre, yes, but you can't legislate for taste)’.

Other sorts of discrimination were also mentioned:

> ‘In my experience, gender-related discrimination and drug related discrimination are rife in the music industry, closely followed by religious and cult inspired discrimination. I doubt there is a musician in the world that has not felt discriminated [against], in the areas of finance, housing and employment. It's the nature of the beast. Any profession that has an artistic bent, the normal people don't trust. We must be flaky etc’.

Respondents spoke of a range of different strategies for coping with discrimination:

> ‘It affects me enough to speak out if I see it going on. When I first participated in "the industry" historically, it was definitely male dominated. Once [my band] started to gain some recognition, I learned...how to use my 'femaleness' and let me make this clear, femaleness in the 'wily wolf' sense and not sexually. We often played good cop - bad cop with the record industry’.

Conclusion

Care needs to be taken with analysing the findings of this study, as the sample is small. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify some common patterns which pose some important questions for practitioners and educators of contemporary female (and male) vocalists.

In terms of career development and influences, popular music plays a significant role, especially in terms of role models and exemplars. While respondents had a wide variety of educational backgrounds and paths into music industries, listening, live performance, a solid musical background, health and well-being were all identified as important issues.

Not unexpectedly, the vocalists interviewed identified a range of barriers to their musical practice. As well as low wages and 'condition, negative perceptions of vocalists as musicians was a commonly experienced barrier. Physical and appearance-based stereotypes were also cited as a barrier.

One barrier which emerged very clear in the interviews was discrimination specific to female vocalists. This was discrimination on the basis of gender, something experienced more acutely because of the negative perception that vocalists are not proper musicians. While older respondents felt that the industry had been more discriminatory in the past, a high degree of discrimination is still being experienced. Respondents used a range of strategies to deal with gender-based discrimination.

Vocal education in the practice of styles, techniques and knowledge of popular music was seen by most as important - even for those who themselves had had limited formal musical education. As well as personal skills (confidence and motivation), a majority of respondents felt vocal education needed to do a better job of imparting an understanding of the nature of contemporary vocal practice and its industry settings. Some still felt there were definite limits to education, and that actual experience, performance and listening was always going to be of crucial importance.

The feelings of respondents in regard to vocal education emerged most clearly when they were asked about vocal problems and preventative education. Most said they had experienced vocal problems, and nearly all were in favour of better education on voice preservation and protection specifically targeted to popular, contemporary vocalists.

Overall, then, this study has identified important issues about, firstly, barriers and discrimination faced by contemporary vocalists, and, secondly, perceived priorities for vocal education. While I intend to follow up this preliminary study by interviewing a much larger sample of contemporary vocalists, the study has identified serious issues of discrimination faced by contemporary female vocalists, identifiable mainly as incorrect perceptions of vocalists as musicians. In addition, I believe that the study's findings underline the need for formal and informal vocal education which:

- understands and addresses the specific nature of the diversity of popular contemporary vocal styles;

- gives contemporary vocalists a better grounding in issues they will face in a career in the music industry (such as amplification and acoustics in venues; business aspects of the industry; motivation and career development);

- provides vocalists with a solid foundation in voice preservation and protection.

Leigh Carriage is Lecturer in Vocal Studies, Contemporary Music Program, School of Contemporary Arts, Southern Cross University, Lismore. An accomplished and versatile vocalist in her own right, Leigh's present projects include work on improvisation and also a jazz album, as well as continuing her career as a performer.

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