

## The Road from Voice Teacher to Producer

by Ron Browning

Somewhere in the beginning of this last decade or two of my career as a voice teacher, I ventured down an exciting path. The journey has brought me up to my next level as a teacher, and I now find myself wearing two new hats—vocal producer and record producer. What allowed for this incredible transition was my decision to use a digital recording workstation (DAW) during voice lessons with my students.

I'm a professional jazz pianist and had been using Sonar to do my daily practice. I learned how to record myself, and how to re-do phrases and sections of my piano solos. With punching in and out I could try different things. I learned that the more I threw it away, the better it sounded! My harmonic senses and groove ability started to grow by leaps and bounds. One day a light bulb went off: Why don't I do this with my vocalists? So I began using recording as a tool in lessons of the students who were open to the idea.

Eventually I made the leap from Sonar to Pro Tools, after learning that Pro Tools is the favorite DAW used by Nashville recording studios. It is also extremely user friendly. Using it as a teaching tool has made it possible to get fast and spectacular results from singers, making them more radio-friendly. This experience has catapulted me onto the payroll of most of the major record labels. It has allowed the singer and me to scrub on phrasing until it becomes like "ear candy," which is my term for extremely catchy phrasing—the kind radio loves.



Producing vocals for Sports Channel superstar Andy Ross with Maximum Archery on Music Row.



Scrubbing on vocals with NBC The Voice star Meghan Linsey before her homecoming party aired on The Voice the last week of the season. Naomi Judd recommended that Meghan come to me for coaching for The Voice. She came in 1st runner-up.

Today, I am so fortunate to be working with many top-notch Grammy winners in all genres of music. Look on my website and see the stellar lineup! I never could have gotten here had it not been for my work with Pro Tools and other DAWs, which opened my ears and mind to embrace a whole new depth of vocal techniques and styles. Well, perhaps I could have, but it would have taken much longer! Recording has brought me to see the wonderful balance that is possible and necessary between conventional vocal pedagogy and the artistic demands of the commercial music business.

I knew I had taken the right path when, several years ago, the Late Maestro Lorin Maazel called me over to his table at the famous Little Inn of Washington during his Castleton Festival. He gave me a quote that made me levitate: "You're the buzz on campus. You are simply a master! The singers absolutely love working with you!" He was a fan of my conversational phrasing techniques.

It's been said that "necessity is the mother of invention," and in this case, it is true. At the time I started using Pro Tools in voice lessons, I was frustrated with myself because I could not solve some of the problems my singers continually displayed week after week. The singers I had at the time were all multi-talented and much too eager to be the next big star on the horizon. Like most singers, they were bringing entirely too much to the table. So I

would record them. They were always quite shocked to hear the playback. I had singers in every genre, from classical to rock.

After getting over the shock, they soon realized they were over preparing everything: breath, support, attack, articulation, placement, mood—especially mood! They heard instantly how emoting too much can cause the voice to fold up like a paper wad, and the passion becomes artificial. They began to see how true resonance leaves instantly when too much physical effort is brought into singing.

One of the biggest things they learned is that when they sang, they were not coming from a real state of being. They could hear that their presence was not honest. They were creating a character, more or less, and singing from some make-believe place while their eyes mugged out into dreamy space.

I would say, “while you’re singing, look at me and feel yourself in conversation with me....speak it....but on pitch....the same as you would in conversation....you....that person (I’d point to my studio door) who walked into my studio today....be accountable for what you’re saying. Be really present! Don’t act like you’re present.... be here with me. Now!” I would remind them of something Glen Campbell once said, “Just let the words have the pitch.”

Before they got the hang of this easy conversational technique, I always felt as if I were trapped in the middle of a humorous movie, a farce, like *Waiting for Guffman*--where all the singers are splitting a gut, trying to be the world’s biggest Diva! It’s a hoot! Nothing real. All put on!

I buried myself in this type of experimental work with any and all willing singers that came through my studio door. I felt much like a mad scientist and they were my guinea pigs! But my gut told me I was on to something big! I find my name in the Special Thanks in liner notes of many artists for vocal production and for album production. I’m so happy I ventured down this path!

After doing vocal production for Wynonna on her Classic Christmas CD, she gave me a Special Thanks on the album: “To my vocal coach, Ron Browning—I’ve heard that ‘When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.’ God sent you to me just in time! Thank you for encouraging me to take my vocal ability to the next level. You are truly an angel spirit!” Curb Records asked me to go to Norway with her. She performed for the 2006 Noble Peace Prize Concert, a stellar event I will never forget! I appeared on the Oprah Network with the Judds, and they send me phenomenal clients all the time. I also helped with her new CD that will be

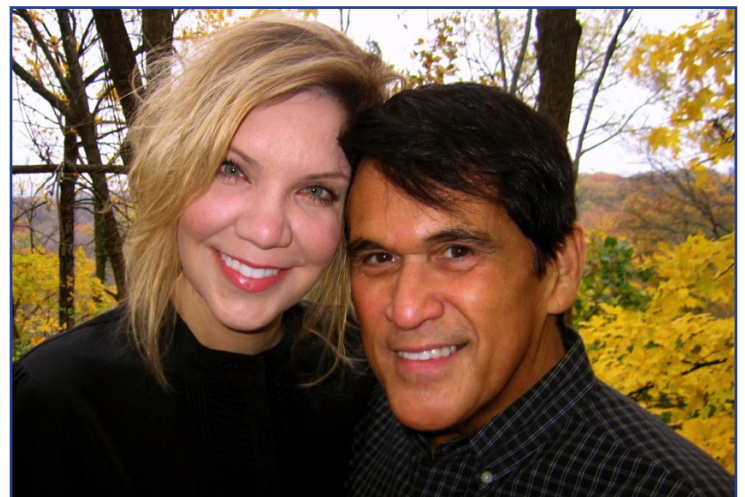
released this fall.

Alison Krauss had been hearing about me for the past 10 years and carried my phone number around for the last 2 years, trying to get up the nerve to call and make an appointment. She holds the record for the commercial recording artist winning the most Grammy awards, a staggering 27! We’ve worked intensely on her new CD since she first came to me this past October. I’ve also gotten her into several duets with other famous artists and got her in shape for her tour with Willie Nelson this summer. Alison’s quote is embedded in my heart forever: “Studying with Ron Browning has been the most exciting thing that could’ve happened to my life as a musician! I haven’t felt this happy and intrigued with singing since I was a kid. The joy I feel at the thought of what I might learn at the next lesson keeps me up at night. He is the highest note!”

Then there is the awesome Patti LaBelle--after I brought her back into good, clear, easy voice and kept her concert from being cancelled: “I never believed in voice coaches until today! You have made a believer out of me and I thank you for my voice! You are a miracle worker! You’re girl, Patti!”

Many artists have shouted out to me from the concert stage and dedicated songs to me for bringing them up to their next level. I’m eternally grateful to all the students who allowed me to use recording during their voice lessons!

*Ron Browning is an internationally sought voice teacher, performance and crossover coach/producer, who teaches privately in Nashville, TN. He teaches singers at every level and in all genres of music.*  
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Outside studio before recording. Scrubbing on vocals with 27-time Grammy winner Alison Krauss for her upcoming CD.