

## Say Yes to Multi-Hyphenate Living: Embracing an Expansive Creative Life

By Karen Michaels

I finally get it. It took me a while, no doubt. “No” to multitasking. “Yes” to multi-hyphenate. That small shift in mindset changed everything for me. I was diagnosed with “hyperactivity” as a kid. Many of my teachers would say:

*“Karen is so nice, but she needs to sit still and stop talking and trying to help everyone!”*

Today we call that ADHD — but back then, it was just:

*“Karen, you’re too much.”*

Thank goodness for supportive, loving parents — and an incredible 4th–6th grade teacher (Ms. Schwisow, I’ll NEVER forget you!) who allowed for my “idiosyncrasies.” Like singing an Elton John song as a book report. Or writing a book about horses and snow when the assignment was, well... just a bit different.



Karen Michaels

**“Leading a multi-hyphenate life allows me to have multiple creative outlets without chaos.”**

And admittedly — it’s true: Traditional multitasking doesn’t really work for me. Honestly, it doesn’t really work for anyone. Trying to do all the things at once? That’s messy, inconsistent, and TIRING. But realizing I’m a multi-hyphenate? Wait — that’s different. In fact, the first time I heard someone say that to me — my friend and colleague Nicole — it clicked. “Multi-hyphenate” made perfect sense.

### Why Multi-Hyphenate Living Works (Especially for Brains Like Mine)

Leading a multi-hyphenate life allows me to have multiple creative outlets without chaos.

It gives me structure and purpose. I get to work in different modes throughout the day:

- Teacher
- Performer
- Coach
- Content creator
- Writer
- Podcaster

And here’s the magic: each one fuels the others. It’s not about doing everything at once; it’s about building a life where passions fit together instead of competing. As an independent teacher and multi-business owner, this isn’t just a preference — it’s a survival strategy. It keeps me energized, and keeps my brain deeply engaged, focused, and, frankly, organized. When your career becomes your own creation, for independent teachers like me — those of us not tied to institutions — the work is personal. We create the studio we want. We choose the students we want to teach. We build the curriculum that feels right — for them and for us.

For a long time, I thought that meant sticking to one clear path: typical techniques, traditional repertoire — so-called tried-and-true methods many of us grew up learning. But over time, my students wanted more. And so did I. They wanted to:

- Sing pop
- Accompany themselves at parties
- Create audition videos for musical theater
- Post clips of their singing online — and get help doing it

At first, I wasn’t sure if that “counted” as teaching. *Spoiler alert: It absolutely does.* That’s when I leaned into something that’s now at the heart of my teaching: hybrid learning.

### My Hybrid Approach: How I Teach Voice and Piano Now

With the help of my own mentor — not just my music coach, but a life mentor — I worked through how to make it work. We had long conversations about how I taught myself to play pop music by ear mixed with music theory, how I arrange for my gigs, how I could bring all of that into lessons while still teaching solid technique. Now, my studio is built on a hybrid approach:

- Student-led learning (What excites them?)
- Pop and jazz piano by ear and patterns (The way I taught myself)
- Pedagogy and vocal health (Because technique does matter)

It’s not one or the other. It’s both. And it works.

## Teaching Social Media and Digital Content Strategy to Other Creatives

That openness to multi-hyphenate life led me to new creative paths, something else I never expected. It started small. I helped a local company with their “socials” (social media), guided students making performance videos and “self-tapes” for auditions, offered friends tips on Instagram captions and hashtags, and I showed teachers how to do social media without feeling (as the kids say) cringey. Then it snowballed. Other performers, educators, and creative entrepreneurs started asking for help. Before I knew it, I had another business.

When the pandemic lockdowns hit, that side of my work exploded. Singers, teachers, actors all had to be online, and fast! They needed help telling their stories digitally, building their brands, and learning how to connect in new ways. So I leaned in. I taught what I knew. And I learned even more along the way from all of those brave people. The surprise was that “side path” didn’t take away from my music life. It enhanced it. Helping others find their voice online has actually made me a better voice teacher in the studio, and a better performer, too.

## The Butterfly Effect of Creativity

One of my core beliefs is something I call the butterfly effect. In scientific and mathematical chaos theory, the butterfly effect is “the sensitive dependence on initial conditions in which a small change in one state of a deterministic nonlinear system can result in large differences in a later state.” In my simple creative application of the theory, it’s the idea that showing up in different ways — even in small ways — creates ripples that can change your life, your work, and the lives of others.

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Here’s what I’ve noticed. Writing blogs and newsletters made me a sharper communicator in lessons. Learning to make short videos improved how I explain concepts to students. Helping people build their online presence reminded me how to refine my own. I didn’t expect writing to become so important to me. And honestly, I didn’t think anyone would read what I wrote. But they do. And it matters. I’m so grateful I could cry.



Karen as a social media expert.



Karen as a presenter.



Karen as a video producer.



Karen at the piano.



Karen in the recording studio.



Karen performing cabaret.

That's the power of saying yes to new creative outlets. Sometimes you discover skills you didn't even know you had. Sometimes you help others in ways you never planned. The world needs more creative professionals who aren't afraid to cross-pollinate their skills. If you do want to build a multi-hyphenate career?

Do it.

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### NATS and the Power of Staying Open

One of the reasons I've been able to grow this way is because of National Association of Teachers of Singing and the work I do as the official Social Media Manager for NATS.

Being part of this community has kept me learning and connected, up to date with voice science and new teaching strategies. It has also given me an opportunity to listen to other teachers' experiences. For me, NATS has been a place to grow — not just as a teacher, but as a performer, a business owner, and a creative person. That's the beauty of this organization. There's room for all of us.

- The university professor
- The private studio teacher
- The musical theater coach
- The pop singer
- The crossover artist
- The classical singer
- The multi-hyphenate

Through NATS, I've been able to learn from the best — and also share what I've learned in return.

That kind of exchange is exactly what helps independent teachers like me build careers that are flexible, modern, and real.

### Worktirement: The Life I'm Building Now

I'm in the Worktirement phase of my life. It's not about quitting work. (That's a LONG way off.)

It's about building a creative life I love: working with clients and students I care about, performing gigs that make me happy, and choosing projects that align with my values AND my time with family and friends. Truthfully, I don't have plans

to retire in the traditional sense. (As you can tell, there's not much "traditional" about me.) Can you imagine this brain without assignments?! Yikes! But I am working on living a life that feels free. My goal is to work because I want to work, not because I have to work. And when I need to shift or rest, I will. Worktirement, for me, is creative freedom, meaningful work, and time for the people and experiences that matter the most. Creative freedom.

### BTW, You Don't Have to Monetize Everything

One thing I always tell my students and clients is that you don't have to turn every hobby into a side hustle for it to be valuable. It's okay to write because you love it. It's okay to make videos because it's fun. It's okay to create content, sing, play, teach, mentor — or do all of the above — because it makes your life richer.

### Final Thoughts: Say Yes to the Hyphens, Friends

If you're reading this and you've been wondering if it's okay to have more than one passion, here's my answer: Yes. Please do. All the permissions given. Say yes to those hyphens. Say yes to building a life that's uniquely yours. Whether you're teaching, playing gigs, writing, coaching, creating content, mentoring or more.

Know this:

You're not "all over the place."

You're expanding.

The world doesn't need more people stuck in one lane. It needs more artists and educators who are willing to evolve, try new things, and show up fully as themselves. Say no to multitasking. Say yes to multi-hyphenate. Say yes to a creative life that's flexible, meaningful, and joyful.

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**Karen Michaels** (she/her) is a multi-hyphenate creative professional based in Las Vegas. She's a voice and piano teacher, social media strategist for creatives, professional singer-pianist, talent agent with FSE Talent Agency, CEE (Chief Executive Everything) of Social Butterfly Group and a writer on Substack with hundreds of subscribers @socialbutterflygroup. As the Social Media Manager for NATS, Karen helps independent teachers and performers share their voices both on stage and online. Her teaching philosophy blends student-led learning, pop and jazz piano by ear, and solid vocal technique. Karen's Worktirement approach includes working with joy, purpose, and flexibility while building a life that thrives creatively and personally.