

Transitions: Wendy Jones — A Pandemic Shift to Creative Freedom

In 2021, NATS member Wendy Jones had a sudden revelation that she wasn't living the life she wanted at all. She traded academia for a quiet desk in the corner — a day job in a medical office that gives her evenings and weekends free for performing, composing, recording (and, yes, also some teaching!). Inter Nos Associate Editor Cynthia Vaughn recently interviewed Wendy about this life changing transition.



Wendy Jones

What was the “aha moment” or the circumstances that made you step back and go in a different direction? Did the pandemic have any influence in your decision?

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The pandemic absolutely gave me insight and moved the needle for me. For years, I had been chasing the dream of a full-time position at a university. But as we moved online and I participated more in workshops as an attendee and presenter, labored over my ensemble, graded papers, taught lessons, attended faculty meetings, etc. I really grew dissatisfied with how much time I was putting into work and how little I was getting back. It's never been about money for me but at some point, I realized I was sitting at the computer for 12-14 hours a day, and for what? I was missing time with my partner, who was home, missing time with my pooch who waited patiently under my desk for hours each day waiting for me to play with him, and I had no great paycheck or benefits to show for all my hours spent working. I realized if I was ever to become full-time faculty, I might be compensated better, but I would probably have even less time for myself as I would be expected to continue these types of pursuits along with attending student recitals and advising. And that prospect filled me with dread. I quite suddenly realized that wasn't the life I wanted at all. It took a pandemic to discover who I really was and what I wanted. I realized that time spent with people that I love, and neighbors (who I had

never had the time to meet and interact with until we were stuck at home) filled me more than these endless hours of teaching, grading, rehearsing, etc. Once it was announced that school would go back to in-person lessons and classes, I realized I didn't really want to go back because of the aforementioned reasons, and I no longer wanted to spend three hours a day on the road commuting. One school I taught at could only offer me two students this past fall instead of

12 plus the jazz ensemble I had directed, and I took it as a sign. The universe was telling me to move on and I did. I've done it before, and it's always been good for me to change things up.

What are you doing now? How is this fulfilling your goals and improving your life?

I am now working in a medical office doing scheduling and learning billing and coding. Honestly, it's not exciting in the way that music and theatre are, but I do have a desk in a private corner where I can quietly complete tasks and do my part to make patients welcome and safe in our practice and that fills something in me. I also have dreamy hours and benefits, and I work for a company that cares for its employees and their health and wellness. I truly feel as if this is the right thing for me right now and am filled with gratitude. I work half-days on Fridays (except for the Fridays when I am off) and have evenings and weekends free which leaves plenty of time for gigging, composing, and arranging — which is what I really feel drawn to these days. I no longer want a job that I have to think about during the evenings and weekends. I want a job that allows me to clear my mind completely when I am home for my creative pursuits . . . and I have that now.

What doors are open to you now that you have shifted away from academia as your primary teaching focus?

I have time to focus on *my* music. I have much to learn as a composer, arranger, and have plenty of room to grow as a commercial music singer. Now that I have my evenings and weekends back, I can develop these skills. I recently published my first a capella jazz vocal chart and have been writing and arranging for a jazz recording project of my own. I'm also gigging

more, and I can finally focus on what Wendy truly wants and needs to survive *and* to live with joy.

NATS had been such an important part of my development, and it was important to me to give back.

Tell us about yourself and your history with NATS

I was active in NATS as a student. NATS was great for me as I am a goal-oriented person and getting ready for those auditions each year kept me working hard. I took part in the NC NATS Chapter and Region Auditions through undergraduate and graduate school (they didn't have a national level when I was a student). Then, a few years after I finished graduate school, I was first-runner up in the NC NATSAA competition. NATS had been such an important part of my development and it was important to me to give back, so five years ago I threw my hat into the ring to serve on our board. I'm finishing up my final term as President of NC NATS right now having served a year as secretary, two years as VP/Auditions Chair, and two years as President.

How do you see yourself serving NATS with your new focus?

I'm still highly motivated to see commercial music taught in academia. I've taught at a couple of schools where I basically served as the "pop" teacher in a classical program, and I want to see academia have the courage to look at their commercial voice programs and recognize what that program needs to truly serve students. Over the years, when I was getting hired at different universities to teach commercial music, I was told by full-time faculty that they could teach the commercial students but "I just don't know the rep" (which is basically the ONLY reason they needed me I was told) and that jazz is "basically musical theatre." Both of those statements infuriate me and insult the music because there is so much more to it than that. But the statements *also motivate* me to do what I can to teach teachers the difference. Those of us of a certain age weren't taught commercial styles when we were in school so I can't blame university teachers for their lack of knowledge. I want to help educate our teachers on commercial music and in particular, jazz. I am hoping that I can do that through my continued involvement with NATS. I've also been a mentor teacher with the NATS Mentored Teaching program for the last two years and have **ADORED** my time with those young teachers. I hope I can continue that work with NATS too.

You mentioned that you are taking fewer 1-1 private students. Do you see yourself teaching group classes in jazz or commercial music? Do you see yourself serving as a clinician or master class teacher?

I have recently given some clinics/master classes at universities on singing commercial music and would like to continue doing that. I have retained a couple of students who are focusing on jazz vocal studies — mostly online so it's perfect. I would love to do an online class for jazz. I have been thinking about that for a couple of months. I just need to think about just how I might do that and what the content would be. Now that we can do things online, I could open it up to interested persons outside of my town.

There is no shame in changing direction and if you do go back, you go back with a new set of skills and knowledge.

What would you say to someone else who is considering a shift like this?

Don't be afraid to change it up! Honestly, what if I decide I hate what I'm doing in a year or five years and want to teach again? Are there voice police out there that are going to tell me I can't change direction again? Of course not! When I was first getting ready to move to NYC I worriedly asked a friend, "What if I don't like it, and it's not for me? What will I do?" She said, "Well, you can always move back." That stays in my head: You can always move back. There is no shame in changing direction and if you do go back, you go back with a new set of skills and knowledge. As far as I'm concerned, that's a win-win no matter how it turns out.

Wendy Jones is a vocalist, composer, arranger, and producer, and has appeared on stages from New York to Tokyo performing with artists such as NEA Jazz Master Jamey Aebersold, legendary jazz guitarist Howard Alden, jazz violinist Christian Howes, the Page Brothers, and Crystal Gayle. In addition to singing with her own jazz quartet, she is a frequent featured vocalist with big bands and jazz orchestras. As a professional actor, Jones has appeared in leading roles on the stages of many prominent theatres throughout the U.S. Jones also has appeared as a soloist with symphonies. She received bachelor's degree and master's degree in voice performance from Appalachian State University, and in 2015, she participated in the NATS Mentored Teaching Project with Matthew Edwards as her mentor teacher. She is a member of the National Association of Teachers of Singing, The Recording Academy, the Jazz Education Network, ASCAP, and Actors' Equity.