



# The Voice and Beyond



Lurking sharks, armed offenders, earthquakes and singing to an audience! Three fears for my survival, and one for the survival of others! I mean, singing, it's just for those who can do it, right? Wrong! I recently attended a weekend workshop by Mikal Nielsen, alternative voice, singing and music teacher, who passionately believes that everybody can sing.

Danish born Mikal Nielsen is on a mission to bring singing back into our lives. Why? Because he intimately knows what it means to suffer a crippling lack of vocal confidence. "As a teenager I wanted to be a rock star, but I was too shy to go to a teacher and not having an ear for music, I couldn't hear that I was singing out of tune. So when people told me to shut up, I did. I got very hurt and I spent 20 years in that state. What changed that for me was a deep desire to sing."

When Mikal asked the group of mainly reluctant singers, "How many of you think you can sing?" Only a few hands went up. But when he asked, "How many WANT to sing?", the show was unanimous. Singing, it seems, is a desire that runs deep in all. Mikal explains singing is inherent to our being and is in fact older than spoken language. It is a part of our development and essential to our health on all levels.

Since overcoming his own fears of singing through the help of internationally renowned voice teacher Chris James, Mikal has developed his own Piped Piper recipe for success. "I honour that music works on all levels, I also honour that the blockages people have to singing and performing lies in the emotional and mental, not so much

in the physical. Most conventional singing teachers are just focusing on the physical. On what you sound like and whether you are out of tune."

Mikal has a gift of gently guiding a group at an appropriate pace, while all the time setting obtainable challenges. He does this by creating a supportive environment where reluctant and experienced singers alike work not only with breath and sound shaping, but also with overcoming the fear of singing and releasing emotional tension.

"The side-effect of my courses is that people become better singers, but that is just a side-effect. My aim is personal growth, confidence building, self-esteem and opening the heart and emotions. Singing is a fantastic tool for that!"

People are encouraged to be expressive on Mikal's courses, whether it's laughing or sobbing. "An emotion is often held inside us because it hasn't been given a voice; it hasn't been given away to be expressed. And a way of doing that is to hand that emotion over to the voice, and sit back. It may be expressed in words, or it may be a tone, chant, soft sounds. So people feel it, express it, then after that, the whole feeling has transcended." In an era where 'too much' emotional expression is frowned upon, this approach gives many people just what they need to start their own healing - permission.

"The healing effect of the singing and making sounds also has an enormous impact on our physical health. Closing down the singing has a definite impact on our voices for a start, our vocal health. Most adult speech is stuck, and when they sing, the voice is catching in their throat and they are hurting their vocal cords. A big part of my course is

about opening up the voice and the throat so that the natural beautiful voice we are all born with, can be released."

Mikal explains that the voice is vibration, which is able to penetrate matter and, unlike 'noise', can have a profound healing effect. A part of Mikal's course included a session using toning to heal. This is done by having a partner sound an appropriate tone over each of the chakras. The best I can do to describe the effect, is to say it was like being massaged in sound, where my mind and ears seemed to merge as one, both feeling and hearing the tones simultaneously. It leaves a butterfly-like sensation throughout the body. Healing with voice, Mikal says, is used throughout many cultures. For example, when you go to a Shaman they will often give you a chant to go home and do, not a prescription for a pill. For some this may sound a little far-fetched, however, there is plenty of research on this same phenomenon, but with the deleterious effects of noise. The high pitched 'whine' of a jet engine, for example, has been shown to damage the organs of ground crew working nearby. For this reason, specially woven jump suits that contain a cross-weave pattern and decibel absorption material are worn to break up the sound waves before they penetrate the body.

Singing is also an essential part of community nourishment, but sadly it is an activity that we spend less and less time doing. "If we look into all other cultures, music making is a part of their daily life. In our culture we don't do that anymore, we pay people to do it for us - so you go to a concert, where there are five people on stage and 5000 people in the audience. In other

cultures the ratio is turned the other way around, so everybody is a part of making music, singing together.

“In NZ you can’t go to a Marae without having to sing - all ceremonies and celebrations include singing. So therefore, when Maori come to my courses, they can all sing. They have got this beautiful listening ability, beautiful voices, harmony, but they come because they lack the confidence to do it.”

Mikal has noticed that this same lack of confidence is occurring at a younger age and believes this is in part due to the loss of singing and music making in family life, compounded by the fact that it is not a priority in our education system.

“Fifty years ago a lot of families had a piano at home and there would be music and singing happening. But we have television now, where we are

being entertained a lot. So instead of sitting at home at night and playing a game with the kids, we put a video on. Instead of making music together, we put a tape on. At school and at kindergarten we even put a tape on instead of making music together.”

This is perpetuating a problem for younger generation’s vocal health. Within the first four years of life, 50 per cent of how our brain is going to work has been set up, and 80 per cent by the time we hit our eighth birthday. “If music hasn’t been a part of that, then our brain hasn’t been accustomed to listen to music, to play music or to sing. The same if we hadn’t been exposed to colour, mathematics or a second language in those years, it is more difficult for us later on. So if your parents are playing live music, performing; if you have it at kindergarten; if you have it at school,

your brain, your ears, your whole being is set up for that.”

Mikal’s vision is to create a nationwide network of teachers and holistic music centres for all age groups throughout New Zealand. These teachers will be different to traditional music teachers, they will also be therapists that can work with various blocks to singing. “These will be places where people who are shy, but who really want to sing or play instruments, can come and explore that.”

Mikal has certainly helped this once shy voice gain confidence. From once not even feeling comfortable with singing in the shower to fully enjoying performing a group singing skit, I went home from his weekend workshop a lot prouder for the experience. Why don’t you give it a go, you have nothing to loose and everything to gain.

## GIVEAWAY!

Win a WEEKEND WORKSHOP celebrating your voice, compliments of Mikal Nielsen. To be in the draw simply fill out the official entry form on page 64 and send to *Healthy Options* by 1 October 2001.

For more information on Mikal Nielsen’s nationwide courses contact: ‘Sounds Easy’, (06) 870 7272, email: [sounds.easy@clear.net.nz](mailto:sounds.easy@clear.net.nz)

## A Lesson in Releasing the Voice

1. Shake your body and make sure you are as relaxed as possible.
2. Sit or stand in an upright posture, put your hands on your stomach and draw your breath down into the diaphragm. Feel your stomach expand as you do this. Do this for a couple of minutes, focusing on your breath.
3. Now start making sounds to ‘warm up’ your voice, don’t worry about making beautiful sounds, just make sounds - groan, sigh, yawn out loud. Wait until you are home alone if you feel self-conscious at first.
4. Toning: pick one vowel sound - UH, AH or EE and just make that sound for as long and soft as you can with the same breath. Then sigh at the end of it.

The keys to making a rich tone is to shape the sound with your lips, jaw and tongue and to let the sound come from the depths of your belly. To prevent your voice from getting stuck in the throat allow the throat to open (you can get a feel for this by yawning). Your lips should be puckered for the UH, wide open for the AH and smiling ear to ear for the EE. The tip of the tongue should be touching the back of your bottom teeth.

Play with this, then try progressing between vowel sounds in one breath. UH ... AH ... EE transforms into the sound of ‘WHY’!

With just 10 minutes of practice each day you will notice an improvement in breathing. (Great for overcoming shallow breathing.) The transition between vowel sounds will become smooth and the tones in tune. Best of all, you will become more confident with your voice, allowing your mind to experience the joy of singing, alone or with company!

## Your First Language Lesson

The ear is the only part of the physical body that is fully developed before you are born. In the womb, the fetus is continually picking up sound, particularly singing as it has a richer frequency range than speech. If the mother sings throughout pregnancy she helps to prepare her baby’s ear and brain to be able to listen, integrate and produce sounds after birth. It is also nourishing and stimulating to the emotions, intellect and the developing sense of beauty. Mikal explains that fathers can also be a part of this process, by gently toning (see inset) over the womb. “This is a wonderful experience for the mother because she can actually feel the response of the baby. We know now that the baby will subconsciously remember such communication. The classical example is when a particular piece of piano music is played throughout pregnancy by the mother. After the birth it is very clear that the baby responds instantaneously to that same piece of music and can easily learn to play or sing it many years later, even if they haven’t heard it since birth.”

The famous British violinist Yehudi Menuhin believes that his own musical talent was partly due to the fact that his parents were always singing and playing music before he was born.