



dear john

# Q A

## I'm touring and working constantly as a singer – I can't afford to turn down work, but how can I take care of my voice while I'm doing it?

While most of us who make a living from performing know the 'can't turn down work' feeling, sometimes doing just that, whether for artistic, commercial or health reasons, is the choice that will move your career forward in the long run. That's certainly the case if you are already having vocal problems – whatever time or money you 'lose' while getting your voice sorted out will be minimal compared to the long-term loss of income and work capacity which can result from leaving such matters unattended to. Of course,

it's also important to get the right kind of help. The British Voice Association, a charity which champions the importance of achieving and maintaining vocal health, is running an event on September 27 in London, where many experts will be presenting on different aspects of pop/rock singing and its specific needs. Here are two people connected with the event on why finding out more about how your voice works and how to take care of it is so important to singers, whether touring or not.

what the experts say...



### Kim Chandler

Kim is one of the UK's leading pop vocal specialists, with a busy private studio in West London, teaching professional singers and artists. She is also a senior lecturer in contemporary singing at the London College of Music and last year became a director of the British Voice Association. Kim features in various media as a vocal coach – TV (BBC, MTV, ITV), radio and magazines – and presents regularly at international voice conferences.

"I have been a professional singer for 20 years and I also teach a lot of jobbing singers, so this particular topic is dear to the hearts of all of us who live off our singing voices. The vast majority of singers are self-employed, which means that when you get sick or blow your voice out from over-singing, you simply don't get paid. There is a strong economic incentive to not turn down work, ever, even when we're sick or vocally injured, but this situation does need to be well-managed, as I learned the hard way myself and have seen many times in the working lives of my clients.

"Singing is an athletic activity, requiring sufficient levels of physical and vocal fitness in order to

have the stamina to last through all the performing work we have. This is relatively easy to maintain when the work is regular, but it's not so easy when the work is more sporadic. Heavy work periods make singers prone to vocal fatigue, injury and illness, due to being run-down and, conversely, prone to loss of peak vocal condition during down time, unless it is kept up through a rigorous vocal exercise regime.

"When a professional singer finds themselves in vocal trouble (a problem I deal with regularly as a coach), they need to get help, accurate advice and effective treatment straight away. Knowing where to find this advice is key, as inaccurate diagnoses, which are surprisingly common, can waste valuable time and money."

### Katy Setterfield

Performing as the legendary Dusty Springfield, Katy was crowned the UK's ultimate tribute artist after winning BBC1's *The One and Only*. She has been a professional singer for more than 20 years, performing throughout the USA, Europe and Japan. In 2000, she joined the successful touring show *That'll Be the Day*, where she performed more than 210 theatre shows a year. Since winning the TV competition, Katy has completed three-month residencies in Las Vegas and Berlin and a 52-date UK tour of her own one-woman show.

"I can't emphasise enough the need for good technique through proper vocal coaching. When you are busy, there will always be times when the most diligent and professional preparation will be upset by unforeseen problems – don't panic. Go straight to a BVA-approved laryngologist.



"I first noticed a problem with my voice back in May, when I was working in Berlin. The symptoms were gaps in my vocal range and a severe deterioration in my head voice. Arriving back in the UK in mid-June, my GP referred me to a local ear, nose and throat consultant. He examined me with a nasal endoscope and said I had vocal nodules through "poor singing technique", and prescribed three weeks' rest and speech therapy as the cure.

"I cancelled the next month's work, rested and had regular speech therapy. After all this, my

next singing opportunity showed there had been a further deterioration with my voice. Feeling traumatised and sure I had damaged my voice irrevocably, I called Kim Chandler, who insisted I get a second opinion from a BVA-recommended laryngologist. Examination orally by videostrobaryngoscope clearly showed a large polyp (probably due to an allergic reaction) on one vocal cord and a sulcus (possibly there since birth) on the other – neither being the result of poor technique and no amount of rest ever being the cure.

"Specialist but routine surgery was the only solution and after five silent days, rapid recovery followed. My regret is that I didn't go to the BVA consultant in the first place. The initial misdiagnosis led to a period of pain and anxiety, during which I lost work and income, along with incurring expenses for unnecessary treatment.

"The operation was a complete success and just one month after surgery, I'm back on tour with my own theatre show, *Here Come the Girls!*"

dear john sums up...

Not every vocal problem is going to require surgery and, as Kim points out, learning to look after your voice properly, both when you are working and when you are resting, will help prevent problems arising in the first place. However, Katy's experience does demonstrate that when specialist help is needed for your voice, the more you know about how your vocal equipment works yourself and the more familiar you are with organisations like the BVA which are there to offer guidance, the easier it will be to find the right kind of medical help if it ever is needed. You certainly won't need to be a medical expert to attend the BVA event – I'm assured by Kim that simply being a singer with a desire to find out more about how to make the most of your voice and take care of it is ample qualification.

John Byrne is an entertainment industry career advisor and the author of several career guides for performers. *The Right Agent Right Now* ebook is currently available for download from [www.showbusiness-success.com](http://www.showbusiness-success.com). Feedback and Dear John queries are always welcome via the above site or [dearjohn@thestage.co.uk](mailto:dearjohn@thestage.co.uk). Kim's website is [www.kimchandler.com](http://www.kimchandler.com) and details about the *Interactive Rock and Pop day* are at [www.british-voice-association.com/event\\_interactive-rock-and-pop-day-2009.htm](http://www.british-voice-association.com/event_interactive-rock-and-pop-day-2009.htm). Katy's website is [www.katyssetterfield.com](http://www.katyssetterfield.com)