

Land of the Lost - After The Gig

Lots of articles and books discuss warming up before gigs or rehearsals and caring for your voice during the performance. That, however, is not all there is to the process. Now comes the hard part -warming down after the gig is over.

It is common knowledge that singers warm up their voices. Even if you don't know exactly what to do, you know that singers usually do *something*. Warming down, however, is not often mentioned.

Strangely enough, warming down is one of the key factors at maintaining your vocal health. In most instances I have found it to be the key agent to returning a damaged voice back to a state of health and strength. Most of the time - if not always - all the good work that you have done before and during the gig suffers if you don't warm down your voice. It is quite often a large contributory factor towards the state of your speaking voice the morning after the night before. Without warming down, you are at the mercy of chance the next day.

The first two questions we have to answer are: Why does it have so much influence over the state of your voice and what can you do about it?

When you sing for any length of time your muscles become stretched and filled with blood and oxygen. Singing is a very complex activity for the muscles of phonation that they are normally not called upon to perform. Professional singing puts demands on those muscles that are equally as demanding as the complex muscular functions a professional athlete must perform. If you consider that muscles react to vigorous activity the same way regardless of the name of the sport, then it stands to reason that they need the same kind of care when the activity is over. Runners stretch before they run. If they don't stretch after, their muscles cramp the next day.

When singers warm up they are stretching their vocal chords bringing blood to the area and preparing those muscles by heating them through activity. Since you cannot see what is going on inside, you are likely to assume that it's not such a big deal. The simple phonation of one or two vocals is quite complex and intricate. Vocally warming up sends an even greater concentration of blood to the area and changes the natural state of the larynx. On top of that, a full performance extends that natural state through an extreme amount of activity. But here's the catch - when the gig is over and you are done singing, those muscles in there are in a highly charged state. Unless you do something to bring everything back to normal -or as close to normal as possible- when you fall asleep the muscles will lock in that position.

Picture if you will, muscles aligned and in order. Now picture everything scrambled. Unless you do something to realign your voice, your muscles will stay in that cramped stage until they are worked out. Usually your voice is husky, thick and hoarse in the morning. After you have eaten, had something to drink and talked a little bit, your voice starts to come around again - later in the day it begins to feel normal. When you woke up you really couldn't talk and you may have had a lot more mucous than usual -but somehow it seems to clear up in time for the next gig.

With this kind of routine you might pull it off in the short term, especially if you aren't performing that much, but if you actually had demands put on your voice during the day, you might not do so well. If you're successful and had to give interviews all day or if your work demands that you talk frequently during the day, your voice might not recover in time for your performance. I think you're beginning to see the picture!

By warming down you can alleviate all this stress. Your muscles get handled when they need to be handled and the stressful cycle is broken. By working on your voice to restore it before you go to sleep, you are minimizing the problems you normally face the next day. Work to restore your muscles to their natural state and try to get your speaking voice back to normal. If the swelling is down and the muscles are relaxed before sleep, then when you wake up you'll already be ahead of yourself. At first you may find that the husky sound and hoarseness, while lessened, is still not completely gone. Give it a chance. Do this for a while and you will soon find your voice improving, even when you're not singing.

You can do, for your warm down, anything you may have done as a warm up. Begin at approximately the same volume that you left off at and gradually work it back down to a more relaxed, normal level. You should also remember to warm down your body. Your lungs have taken an unusual amount of breath which has stretched your rib cage, so your muscles are likely to be sore. Yoga or Tai Chi is wonderful to do before you go to sleep because it is not too strenuous and, since it will probably be early in the morning, you won't wake anyone up. A hot shower or even a hot bath is a big help as it will calm your body and help to center you.

As you do in between sets, always check your tongue. It usually gets stuck and needs to be stretched, too. Get a gauze pad or some other clean material with which to grip your tongue, gently stretch it and say "gee", "gee hee hee", "ee yah gee", "gee gee gee", etc. Anything with a hard 'G' or 'K' sound and the 'ee' vowel sound will be beneficial for the larynx. This exercise will help the larynx get thinner and assist it to close again in the center more efficiently.

If you begin this process as you are getting off the stage by gently saying 'gee' etc., you can increase your warm down period. Do some chewing and swallowing and make a humming sound as you chew with your mouth closed. This can be done while you are packing up or in the car on the way home. If you prefer you can warm up in bits and pieces and save most of the work for when you get home. Just make sure you do this before you go to sleep -that is what is crucial. Once you are asleep it is too late. Of course if you miss one night, don't worry. Tomorrow is another day. You've survived this long so one more day isn't going to kill you. BUT the sooner you start the better. I know rock singers don't expect to be able to talk the next morning, but I also know that it doesn't have to be that way. In fact, your voice and your career will last much longer once you have made this a part of your regular vocal routine.