

THE SINGER'S ADDICTION

PART SIX: IT'S ALL ABOUT YOU

by Adria Firestone

In this final installment of Firestone's series on retiring from singing, Adria Firestone shares readers' thoughts on this somewhat frightening prospect that looms in the future of every singer. Read what your fellow singers have to say on everything from retiring, to transitioning to new careers, to the joy, heartache, and hard knocks of this career.

*"Dreams, dreams, always
dreams with you, never
common sense." —Scarlett to
Ashley, Gone with the Wind*

This series of articles has addressed the imbalance of defining yourself by the elusive chimera of operatic stardom. I hope I have offered different points of view, glimpses of other paths, and tools for insight and healing. We can incorporate the singing we love into our lives and the lives of others in so many ways. The secret to fulfillment is in service to an art form that we love with such passion.

Now I offer your comments so that you have the opportunity to hear each other's voices and share each other's thoughts. Virginia Woolf said artists are the antenna of the race. That is both a privilege and a curse. Honor your passion, but know that our lives have many paths and many mansions. Read on, McDuff.



Love and Money: Don't throw yourself under a bus for your career

"Many singers in my younger generation (ages 25-35) are struggling in the business, increasingly depressed at the heart of it, not happy at all about their lives. I've sat through many tearful sessions with friends and acquaintances in the business who 'put on a happy face' while auditioning, networking, etc., but are an absolute wreck behind closed doors. Debt is a huge issue that is not addressed in an open fashion, either, and I hear anecdotally of singers who have upwards of \$100,000 in debt coming out of schools, performance programs, Young Artist Programs, etc. If no one is happy in the business and actual singing itself is becoming less and less

a priority, why should I stick around? I understand that singing professionally at a high level requires quite a lot of discipline and sacrifice, but no one should have to throw themselves under a bus for their career."

—Laura Amos

"I do not have as much fun performing now as I once did. I have been trying to figure out the reason behind this for quite some time, with hardly any results. The one thing that always comes to mind is the money. I make a decent living, but when I was a kid I thought I would have made it by the time I was 30 years old. I only have 10 months to go before that clock strikes, and at the moment I can barely afford to fill up my gas tank."

—John from Missouri

"My biggest fear in this career is facing constant judgment and rejection as well as dealing with living my life paycheck to paycheck. I will never know where my next job will be and I never know if I'll even have another paycheck coming in soon. That's extremely nerve-wracking to me because I have been fortunate enough to grow up in a stable home where money was never a dire concern. I have struggled recently with the idea that my fear of the lifestyle may outweigh my desire to perform."

—Chelsea Chisholm

Family and Friends: A lonely, solitary existence

"I have already missed out on so much for 'The Career.' Family reunions, graduations, weddings, births of nieces, and the funerals of grandparents. Where was I? Off singing somewhere, or in rehearsal. Was it worth it? Perhaps. But in the grand scheme of things, not so much. It's a lonely, solitary and self-centered existence, the life of an opera singer.

"I didn't want to do it anymore. The thrill of impressing others with my talent was gone. The joy of making people cry at my performances or jump up with a standing ovation was lost on me. My priorities shifted. I changed. Text messages and e-mail were no longer good enough for me to connect with those I love most. I wanted to sit at the dinner table and talk about the day. Get together with loved ones on the spur of the moment. Stay out late and not worry about 'the voice.'"

—Name withheld

"To be honest, I wasn't sad when I left singing. I was relieved. The hardest part was telling people who had encouraged me through the years (especially family). I am very happy with my choice and I still perform in church plus nonprofit theater. As long as I get on a stage once a year, I'm good."

—Name withheld



Youth and Age: When your feet hurt

"When should a singer retire? When the voice

does not respond naturally. When physical health affects the singing voice. When people tell you to retire. When your feet hurt."

—Marc Innes

"If the question were rather 'Does *vocal maturity* (instead of *age*) make a difference?' the answer would be yes. But the actual age of a human being is entirely separate from vocal maturity, because the physical body ages and progresses at different speeds. Many people achieve vocal maturity in their 30s, but not *all* people. Some do not achieve vocal maturity until their 40s, while other singers are retiring in their 40s. Therefore, I believe age is a terrible indicator of a singer's ability, whereas vocal maturity would be a more accurate indicator. How old a singer sounds would be the best measure as to their vocal development and maturity."

—StacyLyn Bennett

"In the best of worlds a voice should only improve with age because of the experience, and repetition, and practice a singer goes through. At a certain point singers will tend to lose their extreme high notes and/or the ability to produce these notes and ranges of volume or expression with ease. This does not, however, necessitate the end of a singing career, only a readjustment of priorities or roles."

—Cynthia Lawrence Calkins

"Unfortunately, image is everything and your voice, no matter how brilliant it is, is just not good enough on its own. Opera houses, agents, and the general public want the whole package. Age has now become relevant. It's amazing how the public accept an older man on stage but won't accept an older woman.

"I would like to retire before my voice does, and when I stop enjoying what I'm doing. I guess when you stop getting bookings you know it's 'Time to Say Goodbye.'"

—Kathleen Procter-Moore

"As someone who last year watched the indescribable, inimitable Barbara Cook

take on a stage and have the audience eating out of her hand, I do not believe that music is something that should ever be 'retired.' Perhaps making your living from it can indeed be something that is retired, but I can't imagine not performing, playing, practicing, or learning music until the day I die. . . . Also, since I love teaching and the human voice . . . the transition could provide me with additional insights to pass on to my students about their own life passages and vocal changes."

—Name withheld

"What I don't understand is the need to keep doing it [singing] in public if you're no longer on your game. Better to keep what reputation you've achieved and become a teacher, or transition to something where your experience is valuable . . . But with the opera world more youth-obsessed than ever, it's a foregone conclusion that one must move on. Even Renée Fleming is transitioning to being a Beverly Sills-type announcer-host for PBS, though she's far from done singing."

—Name withheld



Joy and Sorrow: Until then, I sing!

"Singing gives joy beyond measure and an opportunity to touch people on an extraordinary level . . . When the time comes, I will surely mourn the time I spent under the lights, but I will never feel anything but blessed for having a special gift to share with those who would listen."

—Kristin Chabot-Gauld

"Right now, even though there are times that are rough, I wouldn't have it any other way. When I can no longer feel any joy or fulfillment in singing, then I will stop . . . the extreme sacrifices we make are not worth it if your heart and soul are not in what you're doing."

—Johanna Shriver

"I have planned, and already anticipate the difficulty associated with retiring from singing. It is of the utmost importance to me to retire before things 'fall' or wane—I

highly respect Sills' decision to leave them wanting more. I would hope to retire, and then teach more, before 60."

—Beth Horst

"I've recently told my agent that I'm not going out of my way (out of state or buying an airline ticket) to audition for opera engagements anymore. But I plan to keep singing as long as I can do it well and enjoy it. If there is more stress than joy, what's the point?"

—Name withheld

"The universe is always very clear. When it tells you to stop, you just have to listen. The simple fact is you need to stop when no one wants to hear you. It is one thing that you have to fight and claw your way into your first gigs, but if you meet closed door after closed door, as a rule, it isn't because no one can see your hidden potential. It's because no one wants to hire you.

"Most of us that aren't talented or lucky enough to be in the top tier of operatic performers have to support our 'opera habit' with side gigs. Sometimes I think to myself, 'I could sustain myself on these side gigs alone!'

"We don't have to stop performing altogether when we end our careers as operatic leads. When I go a whole year with no professional singing engagements of any kind, I will move on to something else. Until then, I sing!"

—Adam Flowers

"I will stop singing when either my age or lack of work forces me to do so, or when I no longer find fulfillment from it. I do think, however, that singers can count on other things like family or faith to bring them fulfillment, even when singing alone cannot."

—Julie Wyma

The Gift of Singing

"What singing gives me is a very similar feeling to the breathing of yoga. It is like a feeling of life force entering my body when

I inhale and that I share a part of my spirit with the world when I begin to put forth sound. It is almost meditative after a while. It fulfills me. Nothing else makes me feel the way singing does."

—Gayle Morton

"[Singing gives me] the exhilaration of being able to express, through my voice, the exquisite music written by composers who knew the voice and what it could and can do. The joy of working on my voice and body and keeping them supple and disciplined. The wonder of being able to overcome all the vocal challenges that a composer has written for my Fach."

—Maria Kastellitz

"Singing allows me to show the part of myself that is special. It also allows me to be viewed as a colleague at my profession, as opposed to a day job as an administrative assistant. I'm ashamed that I've failed at my life's dream. This has come to define me."

—Name withheld

"I once heard a woman in a retirement home who led the caroling because she used to be an opera singer. I worry sometimes that I will sound like her someday, that my vibrato will eat my voice. When I start worrying, I just remind myself that I have to enjoy the time I have with my voice. Some people don't even have the ability to express the music inside them and I am lucky.

"When it comes time to retire, I may find solace in a loving church choir somewhere that is proud of having a former opera singer and hang on a few more years."

—Chelsea Chisholm

"When I resume singing, it will be on my own terms, singing repertoire that I like . . . I believe that being true to yourself is the only way to be successful."

—Osa Oyegun

"Sing because you love to sing. Do whatever you can on your end to better

yourself (your 'product') so that it is marketable and the best it can be, but keep in mind that whatever else happens after that point is not in your control."

—Maryann Mootos



The Business: 'There's no business like show business'

"There are only a very few in the bunch to make it to superstar status. It is very hard to live off this career choice if you are not one of the top of the top. Also, you consider the sacrifices you have to make in order to live as a solo artist. Constant travel, limited social life, limited time with family, etc. It is a very lonely career and is not for everyone. With that said, any experience is good experience, and you could take all your experience to the other side of the business one day should you decide to. Working through administration or through a college is not a way of giving up on your dream, it is just another aspect of this business should you decide to stay in it. Granted you can leave the music world if you want to, but I do not know many singers that desire this. Along our way we pick up many tools to share with others that follow behind us, and it is our duty to share this and help the art that we love so much continue to grow."

—Carissa Castaldo

"I am so burned out . . . I barely sing in the shower or around the house anymore. I was literally at a point where the thought of singing made me feel sick to my stomach. That's when I knew I needed to get out. After giving nearly 80 performances a year, I have only performed in public twice in the past year.

"What I can no longer tolerate is this 'business' of singing. It's too volatile and I have seen my colleagues in their 40s get fired from gigs that they had booked for years just because the stage director didn't like their look. What I was willing to put up with in my 20s doesn't cut it anymore.

"Work is love made visible." —The Prophet, Khalil Gibran

“You make a living with what you get. You make a life with what you give.” —Quincy Jones

“The dream I had at 17 of becoming the greatest opera singer I could be is no longer my dream. Now I dream of owning a home, having babies, making a difference in my community, and being valued at work for my brains and ideas not just my beauty, youth, or the power of my voice. Luckily, I have transitioned into a position that culminates perfectly for me. I am the director of education for an international and well-established women’s vocal music organization, and I am making more money than I ever have in my life. And I have health benefits with low copays, including dental and vision, and paid leave, and paid vacation days, and a 100 percent matching 401K., and two days off, in a row, every week. And I appreciate it all immensely, because I have never had these things in my life. So, I am walking away.”

—Name withheld

“I feel that I do have the ability to have a career, maybe not a star or international career, but I could sing for a living. However, for me, the responsibilities of family, and the security of a steady paycheck, and not having to always be in the hot seat and auditioning is very important right now.”

—Jeff Maggs

“The business has changed for the worse, but that is not an excuse to abandon the art form. One must love the art within oneself, not love oneself within the art!”

—Caterina Secchi

I think you, dear troubadours, have said it all. What more is there to say? You have broken my heart with your pain and honesty and raised my spirits with your joy. “Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding,” wrote Khalil Gibran in *The Prophet*. We are not failures because one dream hasn’t materialized. Many dreams and many visions are possible for each life. Choose what makes you happy. Sing to *give* love, not to *get* love, and you will find your own unique path to fulfillment.

Adria Firestone is an award-winning singer and actress whose credits range from Carmen to Family Guy. After an international singing career, she withdrew from the spotlight to explore a deeper calling. For the past 15 years, she has given masterclasses throughout the world and is currently on the faculty at New Jersey City University. Firestone is a speaker, writer, and life coach focusing on the international performing arts community. Visit her website at www.thefreedomcoach.com.



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