

As printed in the [September 2008](#) issue of *Classical Singer Magazine*.

The Singer's Addiction

by Adria Firestone

Much like that wonderful line from *The Princess Bride*, “Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die,” I warn you. As we begin the discussion of retiring from professional singing, prepare to be wounded.

It is achingly difficult to think of giving up something in which so much of our love, so much of our passion, so much of our self-definition—and so much of our ego—is wrapped. What I write here are my subjective observations and feelings, of course, because the only singer with whom I have 100 percent experience is Adria Firestone.

You’ve heard of her haven’t you?

“Who is Adria Firestone?”

“Get me Adria Firestone.”

“Get me a young Adria Firestone.”

“Who is Adria Firestone?”

This series is about the last two lines of that progression: Do you recognize the signs? Is it time for a career change? How do you deal with the grief and the mourning when a career that has defined you is suddenly, or gradually, taken away? What else is there? How do you come to be at peace with saying goodbye to a part of your soul?

Have you ever felt that gong of truth go off in your body? Have directors been treating you differently? Have you been offered different types of roles? How has it felt?

Words from CJ Williamson, *Classical Singer’s* founding editor

Back in 2004, in Connecticut, at the first *Classical Singer* Convention, I met many singers: the starry-eyed novices; the practical working singers; the singers who were clinging to 20-year-old demos and headshots, still questing for the elusive break that would surely make their career; and finally, the group of singers who had made their mark and had a successful career in the past. It seemed even the latter were divided into two camps: those who spouted entertaining stories and peppered every sentence with important names, and those who knew who they had been and who they were at the time of that Convention, and sincerely wanted to find better ways to communicate their experience to young singers.

I didn’t fit comfortably into any of these categories. I felt such a deep sadness and couldn’t grasp the why of it. I needed to understand something, and I didn’t yet know what. Now, I know my own wound was too new. I didn’t have the perspective of distance and time. CJ Williamson, the founder and longtime editor of *Classical Singer*, saw it. Soon after, she sent me this e-mail.

“I was thinking about you the other day. Your face keeps coming to [my] mind—the time I ran into you as you were outside the hotel; you just had such a poignant look on your face. It has haunted me. . . . I thought I would ask you if you would ever care to explore in words the experiences of singers as they contemplate retiring from singing and finding new paths.

“The pain of that thought. The liberation of that thought. All the ramifications. Saying ‘no’ to a job offer for the first time. Having to watch as younger singers take the jobs you used to get, and gulping as you realize that it’s their turn. The rage of ‘But I wasn’t done! I’ve still got more to say!’

“Because it’s taboo, singers suffer in silence when it’s time [to retire]. . . . They don’t know how to do it. It’s like dying with no one telling you where the hospital is. I’ve been wondering if you could be the one to lead the crusade here.”

CJ expressed it so beautifully—and at last, dear, inspiring lady, I’m taking up the gauntlet.

Saying goodbye to an old friend

The first time the gong of truth went off in my body, I was backstage in Córdoba [Spain] doing yoga, as I always did before my first entrance as Carmen. I was aware of a quiet voice that said, “This is the last *Carmen* you’re ever going to do.”

I was stunned. I wondered whether I would be able to get through the performance without sobbing. Thankfully, the seasoned pro took over and I gave my performance, but part of me was an observer, and I knew I had experienced truth.

That was a tough realization. Carmen and I grew up together. She put food on my table and a roof over my head. Her strength protected my softness, but now I had become the woman of Act 4: “*Libre elle est née, et libre elle a mourra.*” At last, I belonged to myself—but what exactly did that mean? I had been on stage since I was 10, modeling from age 5—what else was there?

Heeding my own voice: body, mind, and spirit

Just two years prior to the CS Convention, I performed the role of Desirée in Sondheim’s *A Little Night Music* with Utah Opera. I found a deep kinship with this character, who was living “The Glamorous Life” (the only number in the show I disliked—I guess it was too close for comfort), dashing around the world, performing, receiving applause and critical accolades, returning to solitary hotel rooms, and briefly returning home, where not even a plant, or a pet, waited. Many of my colleagues sublet apartments in the city. They didn’t see the point of enduring the expense of keeping their own place.

I never had the strength for the idea of “anywhere I hang my hat is home.” I needed one place on this planet in which I knew where everything was, a place where I could feel an “ahhh” of relief when I opened the door. I needed a place where I could dump out the suitcases, run out and get my hair cut, get a facial to remove the stage makeup, squeeze in my yearly physical (or not), fly by the dentist, and pick up my dry cleaning—a place where I could pack the suitcases again and

start my run to the airport. While I waited, in the same airport—after a while, they are all the same, I promise you—I tried to keep my friendships alive by calling all over the world, keeping track of time zones so I didn't wake my friends at 3 a.m., or by sending e-mails. All of us become experts in using downtime, don't we?

During that production of *A Little Night Music*, I was again possessed by a deep, bittersweet feeling that it was time to say goodbye to my beloved stage. I had seen the world. I was exhausted with travel. I had gained a lot of weight. I had lost my father, my mother was ravaged by Alzheimer's—and I had lost the lust to perform. The public adulation and the exotic locales no longer satisfied that nameless longing. I felt old, fat, tired, and world-weary. The refuge of the myriad of characters I portrayed was no longer enough. I needed to uncover the part of myself I was hiding from, and heal it. It was time for a change.

Less than a month later my operatic career came full circle. I had reluctantly agreed to sing Maddalena in *Rigoletto* with Maestro Anton Coppola. I told him I was too old to sing the role and his snappy reply was, "Oh, so you think I'm too old?" (The maestro is now 86 years old and still going strong.) "You were too busy to do my Amneris, so you're going to say yes to this." If you've worked with Maestro Coppola you know that this man is an irresistible force to whom you can't say no. On top of that, no matter how experienced you are, working with the maestro is a masterclass in phrasing.

About halfway through the rehearsal period, I was sitting next to him at break and I said, "I think this is my last opera." He protested, but in my heart I knew this was it. *Rigoletto* was my first opera, back in 1970, and now, full circle, it was my last.

As I sat in the green room until Act 4, I felt like someone from another planet who had landed in an unfamiliar world. My colleagues were gossiping about each other's singing prowess, their lazy agents, their heart-wrenching love affairs, the latest flavor of voice teacher—and for the third time I knew it was time to end my addiction, my 40-year love affair with the stage.

This is the beginning of a dialogue—talk to me

I've shared some of my realizations about the difficult decision to leave the stage. Now it's your turn. I look forward to hearing your comments and sharing them with our readers. E-mail them to editorial@classicalsinger.com. As we continue to explore this topic in this series of articles, we'll discuss how to deal with the grief and mourning, how to find a new definition of yourself, how to take action on your new discoveries, and how to find peace and fulfillment. See you next month.

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, Adria has given master classes throughout the world and is presently on the faculty at New Jersey City University. She is a speaker, writer and life coach focusing on the international performing arts community.

www.thefreedomcoach.com

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The Addiction of Singing, Part Two 'Rhett, Rhett... Where Will I Go, What Will I Do?'

by Adria Firestone

I asked the exquisite Cuban soprano Teresa Pons how she dealt with the pain of not singing anymore. Her reply was achingly honest.

“Singing is an addiction,” she said. “You cannot separate yourself from it. You do whatever you need to do to continue. The fact that I’m not singing now is like a hook in my chest. In your life you start surrounding that hook with strength, and you build the small things of life around it to deaden the pain. You say you accept it with your mouth, but inside the pain is still there. As time passes, you’re fine, until you hear something that you have sung, and then you start crying.”

“You see, you” Teresa continued, referring to me, “walked away from singing. It wasn’t taken away from you.” Teresa had a pending contract with the Liceo in Barcelona to cover and sing Donizetti’s *Anna Bolena*. Less than two months before she was due to report to the famed theater, a car rammed into her on the way to sing a song recital. Her jaw was broken and her bottom teeth broken and jammed into her palate. She had a wonderful surgeon who left her with nothing but a tiny scar on her chin, but the inner wound was far more serious. The surgeon told her not to sing for at least a year or she would dislocate all of the very careful reconstructive work he did on her jaw. Poof! Teatro Gran Liceo was out the window in an instant.

Teresa never had a moment like the Liceo again. The opportunity had come as a result of several costly trips for vocal study, top-level coaching, and auditions in Milan, Spain, and Salzburg. She was the mother of three children, and her family never understood or supported the magnitude of her talent. They had reached the end of their tolerance for this “foolish passion,” and she simply didn’t have any more money, time, or heart to do it all over again. She sang many wonderful recitals and performances and was well respected as a singer—but the level she reached with her instrument, her dramatic ability, and her musical preparation, belonged in the topmost ring of the operatic stratosphere.

What I Did for Love

I, too, experienced a turning point. I was scheduled to sing *Carmen* in a Houston Grand Opera production with Plácido Domingo. I still have the letter from my agent at Columbia Artists Management saying, “Adria, this is it, what we’ve been working for.” At the last moment, tired of doing Spanish gypsies, Domingo withdrew to sing *Otello* instead. Somehow the irony didn’t register then. All the financial, vocal, and physical sacrifices seemed worth it. It didn’t matter to me that I was on thin ice wearing sharp skates.

A little-known composer, Charles Kingsford, leapt in like a saving angel and gave me a huge

sum to get out of debt, telling me I needed to keep going, that this was not the time to give up. He believed in me as a singer and a performer, but most of all he was investing in his last opportunity to realize his own dream. If I became famous, his music might, at last, be brought to the world.

But my anger was rising. I had sacrificed so much and had so little to show for it. I never stopped spending money or working on my technique. I cut everything out of my diet that harmed “the voice,” the demanding parasite that, like the plant in *Little Shop of Horrors*, bellowed “feed me!” at every turn. I did yoga every day so my body would stay strong and flexible. I allowed relationships to die. My career had always come first—but my heart just wasn’t in it anymore.

When my best friend said, as she walked into the Met, “Come on, this is where you want to be, yes?” it paralyzed me at the door. I literally froze and couldn’t walk in. How amazing that someone so physically attuned could feel that immobility and not rush for help and find out why. I wasn’t happy anymore. The world I created on stage was far more beautiful than the reality of my life, but it was no longer enough. I wanted real happiness. How was I to find it? Finally, after 35 years, the burnout far outweighed the reward. This trained monkey threw down her tasseled hat and said, “I don’t want to do this anymore, and you can’t make me.”

I thought I defined myself as a person first, then as a singer—baloney. I didn’t even have any simple, human clothes. I kept buying clothes for a life I didn’t live. I bought gossamer, brilliantly-colored, tropical things. I live in the Northeast. What’s wrong with that picture? I had dinnerware for 12, but I was never home to serve anybody dinner. The friends I love are scattered all over the world.

One day at an airport luggage carousel, a little girl asked her mother, “Why is that lady wearing a costume? It’s not Halloween.” Ah, the wisdom of children. The lady was wearing a costume, darling, because she didn’t know how to be simply herself. Reluctantly, I sold the dishes, popped the bubble of Lady Bountiful the hostess, and started giving away the dreams, I mean—the gowns. I donated pounds of music to a university, and then I started selling the jewelry.

Dealing with the Pain

How did I deal with the pain? I withdrew from acquaintances, I had no desire for chitchat about anything, and I started asking myself why I was on the planet. I realized that somewhere along the way, I had lost the joy. I stopped listening to music. I felt like Scarlet lost in the fog of her dream. I didn’t know what I wanted. I had lost my mooring and I was adrift in the unknown sea of myself.

I spent a lot of time in silence. I was depressed and had no desire for the physical activity that had been such an integral part of my life. I only knew I needed to explore who I was. I began studies in life coaching, and in the intense courses I found new keys and hidden doors. It was a sad realization that so often I had been loved because I sang, not because of who I was. But I suspect that I, too, valued myself only because I sang.

I remember my aunt telling me, “Oh no, you can’t stop singing. I want to go to Europe again.

What will I do?" Do? Get a life that isn't mine, that's what you can do! My mother told anyone who would listen, "I never wanted a child," but all that changed when she realized I had talent. I became a valuable commodity. She worshiped the singer and never really tried to know me. In retrospect, maybe that was best. Had she known how tender, soft, and needy for her love I was, I would have been destroyed. To defend myself, I've perfected the art of being a people pleaser, a supreme diplomat. The cost of all that pleasing? I lost me.

In my despair I stopped taking care of myself. It didn't matter how my hair looked or if I wore makeup. I became a slug. I had taken care of myself only because I was a singer, not because I felt I deserved it. It was only professional responsibility to look a certain way, to have certain discipline, and be the very best I could be. Once I removed the cloak of the performers' package, I ate everything that I was allergic to, stopped doing my yoga, and didn't utter a note for five years. When people asked me to sing I would say, with definite glee, "Not until I'm ready, if ever."

Take All the Time You Need

It took me a long time to recover from my addiction, but I did. In the process, I discovered who I really am. So if you want, or need, to leave the stage, take time. Take all the time you need. Do any job you have to do to survive, but give yourself time to grieve. You need to take the time to mourn. Write it down, keep a journal, and don't edit yourself as you write. Pour out all the anger, all the hurt, all the sorrow, and finally when you can write no more, burn it all, and let the past go up in smoke.

You must walk through your pain at your own pace. You may find it in cave-like silence or screaming from the top of a mountain. Whatever it is that you must do, do it—on your own or with help—but honor this passage of your life. Singing is an ancient, transformative rite and it holds enormous power to heal, to open, and to inspire not only the listener, but the singer. A gift like that is not something you set down lightly.

Discover what it is in you that is calling out to be heard. Read books, watch movies, take walks, and talk with those you love. Explore other aspects of yourself. Yes, a singer is an artist, but higher still, you are the creator of a far greater work—your life.

Next month we'll explore tools and techniques to finding new pathways and a new definition of you. After all, you need to find your bliss before you can follow it.

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, Adria has given master classes throughout the world and is presently on the faculty at New Jersey City University. She is a speaker, writer and life coach focusing on the international performing arts community.

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The Addiction of Singing Pt. 3 I Will Never Be Hungry Again

by Adria Firestone

So here we are, not able to fit, for a variety of reasons, into the only vision of ourselves that seems perfect. You sacrifice everything on the altar of art, and still no one hires you.

Have you forgotten the roles caprice and luck play? Think about the velvet-voiced baritone whose face and body are suited only for character roles. Think about the soprano with great high notes, about the bass with easy E-flats—and still no one hires them.

No matter how loveable you are, you can't make someone love you. You can fascinate them for a few minutes but you can't make anyone love you or your voice.

So why do we try so hard? Why is it a failure, in our own eyes and in others', if we leave singing? When a corporate vice president leaves a company after 25 years, he gets a bonus package, and at his retirement dinner everyone tells him how wonderful he is. For a singer, however, they say, "Whew, those high notes are gone," just as for a major league pitcher they say, "His fastball sure isn't what it used to be," and for an actress they say, "How sad—she looks so old."

We need to reassess our true worth. It doesn't mean we need to give up. Instead, we must change how we do what we love, and most importantly, why we do it.

This business is horrifically cruel. In the movie *Sunset Boulevard*, we have the privilege of seeing Gloria Swanson play a courageous actress, delivering painful, true material. What we offer as singers is not a skill that happens outside of our bodies. It comes from inside of us. We are giving our very breath, and to have that offering, that breath—our life itself—ripped apart is more painfully personal. As singers, the needier we are, the more we set ourselves up for abuse.

For me, I needed to turn inward to discover why I ran to the safety of the stage in the first place. Some people need solitude. Some need the support of their friends and family. I had a hard time just being and felt more comfortable doing, so I explored other means of making a living. I began to study life-coaching. I founded, and still manage, a construction company. I have an organizing company. I took real estate investment courses, remodeled three homes, and moved four times in five years. I wasn't at peace, and I certainly wasn't content, but I was sufficiently exhausted, with no time to feel.

Other Pathways, New Inspiration

During my studies, a colleague kept pushing me to teach. Finally, after much protest on my part, four years ago I began teaching university students to navigate the acting and vocal waters. In the process I discovered I am a natural teacher and always have been. I just never knew it.

Ironically, my teaching brought back the joy of performance. As I watched my students get excited about voice or get rid of stage fright, tiny bubbles of fun came to the surface. I hadn't felt that in ages. Finally, one day I decided to perform in a faculty recital. When I finished "Send in the Clowns," there was silence in the hall, until someone yelled "Brava!" Then the whole place erupted. I sat in silence and quietly realized I was going to sing again, but only on my terms. I felt once again my love of the stage and relished my level of skill. It didn't matter whether someone else got it or loved it—this was fun!

Returning to singing was a choice, no longer a need. I've created and performed a new cabaret, but whether I sing again or not, matters little. Ironically, my communication with my audience is much more powerful when I am thoroughly enjoying myself, in the moment.

"Where there is a way, a path, it is someone else's footsteps. Each of us has to find his own way." —Joseph Campbell

When I left singing, I felt like a trained monkey whose organ grinder unhooked his chain and said, "You're on your own, baby." Now I had to create my own tune. I was stymied. I explored many wonderful books and found fragments of truth that offered me comfort, but still the picture was not yet clear. (I've put together a list of the books most helpful to me, on my website, www.thefreedomcoach.com.)

One of my most helpful maps on this journey to myself has been life coaching. I thought becoming a life coach might be a pathway to develop my passion, as a positive catalyst for others. Instead the transformation had to happen within me first. I learned I had so many unmet needs. These needs controlled my life because they were unacknowledged and belittled, so I ran to the embrace of the stage to fill the hollow void in my soul.

Instead I found that there is no love on stage except your own love for serving the music, and the love you create with the team around you. What you get from an audience is adulation for a character you've created or for the façade you show them. They don't know you. They don't know what you look like in your p.j.'s, or when you're sick, dripping sweat, and performing anyway. They can't smell the ancient, moldy costumes (thank goodness) or know that you are choking on the dust of your own death scene.

Our needs lurk until we acknowledge them, until we drag them out into the sunshine and give them some air and attention. (Check out the "Needless Program" on my website and see what it reveals for you.)

Remember, needs and wants are two different things. Often, when a need seems ridiculous to us, or we think, "That's not me," we must pay special attention. And yes, as you meet your needs they evolve and lessen, and you become whole.

If you're stuck trying to determine what your real needs are, instead of asking what you truly want or need, ask yourself, "What don't I want?" "What don't I need?" and making the list gets easier. Take that list and transform it into a list of positives. Take, for example, "I'll never be

hungry again” (of course, you must be framed against a flaming sunset sky and lift Tara’s red earth to the heavens for this to work). Turn it into, “I enjoy a prosperous and abundant life.” Now you have the groundwork of your own mission statement, of a truer vision for yourself, a vision that doesn’t depend on a business, or a high note, to affirm your worth.

“The only cure for singing is more singing.” —Ella Fitzgerald

The miracle of your new vision is that singing may still play a vital role, but its color may have to change. It may evolve into a passion to serve, to transform others, to heal, to open hearts. Don’t let a heartless business rob you of your joy. Sing to children. Sing for yourself, for love.

Don’t let the process of study, auditioning, or rejections, shape your self-worth. I have seen countless singers robbed of spontaneity and happiness when they come to a university and are taught that classical song is sacred and unreachable. The unspoken message is, “You’ll never be good enough.” How sad. If you come to this business to fulfill needs (I certainly did) they’ve got you by the throat and you’re set up for heartbreak.

Instead, sing because you can. *Sing because you love to sing, not to get love.* Sing to please yourself. Pleasing others is a habit we develop when we are very young, so we learn to give away our power to get love. Uncover your deepest needs and make sure they are satisfied. If your heart cries, “But singing is my deepest need,” I ask you, “What do you get out of the singing?” That, and not the song, is your need revealed. When we don’t put ourselves first on the list, we resent those around us who are unable to fulfill us. In our pain, we forget that it’s not their responsibility to make us happy, it’s ours.

Your replies to our survey are enlightening and your honesty touches my heart. We are a special breed, those of us who sing, whether at La Scala or in the shower. We are the troubadours who translate our world, in all its pain and in all its beauty. We are shining, beautiful beings. Let no one dim the radiance of our souls. Talk with you next month.

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The Singer's Addiction

Part Four: Finding a New Elixir of Love

by Adria Firestone

So here we are, back at the question I asked in my first article, “After singing, what else is there?” A friend and colleague told me that all she could do in this life was sing lead roles or teach singing. That may be true, and indeed she is teaching very successfully, but I suspect all of us have untapped means of expression we are afraid to try, until we’re ready.

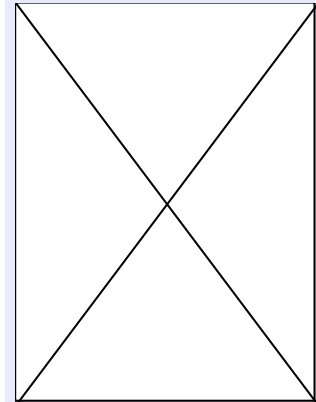
The Face of Opera Has Changed

A colleague’s manager said to him, “[There are] too many young and very cheap singers, arriving on the market every day, and less and less work. I don’t want to depress you, but I am not at all optimistic for your future in the business.” Like it or not, things change. Let’s be real—opera has changed. Now, not only do you have to sound like the character, you also have to be believable enough to bear the scrutiny of the camera. Think about it, your image is going to be blown up on a screen in a movie theater! We would like to say that doesn’t change the art form, but it does. Opera needed to evolve. This evolution is not necessarily healthy for the purely vocal aspects of opera, but it ensures that more people are exposed to our magical universe, where an Olympic level of singing rules, where the scenery and lighting evoke new worlds, and where quality acting transports us into another realm in the same way as a fine movie, but aflame with the intensity of live performance.

We need to be realistic about whether we fit into this evolving art form. Many may not be able to give as much innuendo and fun and sexiness to Carmen’s first line, “When will I love one of you? I don’t know,” as I have—but do you want to see a 50-year-old face singing a 20-year-old character? I don’t.

We are in an era obsessed with age, beauty, and fame. Is that fair? Probably not, but it is reality. And maybe it is fair. Perhaps it’s time we step aside and let younger singers have their moment. Perhaps it’s time for us to explore other pathways.

Let me quote one of our readers, “I would like to think that I would be gracious and modest enough to realize when my 15 minutes in the spotlight are over, when a newer, fresher singer has evolved into



someone who is more qualified . . . and more fit for the part than I am. I would like to think that I will be so thankful for the time I've had on stage and the directors, musicians, and teachers who have influenced me that I will be happy with what I have accomplished and be able to step down and take my position as a leader in a smaller capacity, such as a voice teacher."

Another reader when asked if age makes a difference in a singer's vocal ability explained it this way: "Age gives wisdom and depth to performance that can't be taught. I've heard performances by voices that were, to put it nicely, past their prime. . . . In those instances, the enjoyment was not simply the beauty of the voice, but the profundity of the human experience that translated itself in[to] a mature performance."

How true.

Exploring Your Options

I heard a retired Italian soprano at a masterclass four years ago float a perfectly beautiful high C, much to the amazement of everyone in the room. It was truly astounding. Her technique was beautifully intact, and she was able to indicate, and show, how she produced a sound like that. That technical knowledge was still in place, but she was over 70 years old, and the support of that sound was simply not there.

Mind you, this was a very wise and elegant singer who had no illusions about running out that evening and singing Violetta. She was a singer who was valued and respected for her teaching and for the career she had, as well as a very supportive teacher to her students. She felt no jealousy. Now it was time for her to share, and she did so graciously and generously.

I was moved and touched by how many of you have been inspired by your teachers. What a privilege and responsibility it is to teach, but we can't all be, nor want to be, teachers. What other pathways are there to travel that will bring you joy?

One way to explore new avenues is to uncover your true values, values that are at the very core of who you are. Let me give you an example. How far is remodeling homes and managing a construction company from being an opera singer? It requires a leap, a huge one—and I didn't "know nothin' 'bout birthin' babies." But believe it or not, there is a connection. I realized that beauty and making things more beautiful is a core value in my life.



There it is—the connection.

I have great organizational skills; I love to learn new things. My partner is a skilled carpenter and remodeler. He liked the idea of his own business, so we were off and running. I learned about drywall, about cement backer board, about the difference between laying marble and ceramic tile. I learned about designing an estimate—and I learned about coping with interminable building permits.

Remodeling our own homes was even more rewarding. No, it is not fun to live in a home while you're remodeling, but the results were stunning, and they inspired me to take real-estate investment courses.

I knew absolutely nothing about construction when I started. I was scared and out of my league. Sound familiar? I was scared and out of my league when I came to New York City to sing. I was a big fish in Palm Beach and Miami. I was a minnow in Manhattan, the Mecca of opera. Try something you have a feeling about—no, not in your brain, in your gut, your gut feeling. When you try your first new venture use the same guts you had to have to sing your first Pamina. Harness your love, your joy, your trust.

Yes, you may fail. Thomas Edison failed a thousand times before he developed a useful light bulb. Newman's Own, Inc., founded on a lark by Paul Newman and his buddy A.E. Hotchner in 1982, is now a leading food company, and the late Paul Newman and the Newman's Own Foundation have given more than \$250 million to thousands of charities worldwide. Anything is possible.

'L'elisir d'amore'

Does fulfilling contracts for satisfied clients and closing the spreadsheet with a zero balance give me as much excitement as my Amneris uttering the last word at the end of *Aida* to thunderous applause? No. It's different, and I think this is the very reason it is so hard for us singers to give up the song. The feedback you get for laying in perfect crown molding may only garner a positive comment and perhaps a recommendation—but the intensely fulfilling feedback we get as performers gets us hooked. That kind of intoxicating acceptance is as heady and addicting as any of the most powerful drugs on the black market.

Marilyn Pratt expressed it perfectly in our survey. "Singing is a socially acceptable venue for expressing extreme emotion." Where else could you possibly earn an award for expressing enraged depravity, and get paid for it? Where else can you howl like a banshee in front of hundreds

of people because your love has left you, and be applauded for it? Yes, it is true that loving your job is a wonderful thing, but if your work becomes a replacement for your life, you're venturing into very dangerous waters, indeed.

A valuable compass on these waters is a fun and enjoyable tool called the Tru-Values Program (go to www.thefreedomcoach.com and look under "Gifts & Resources"). Knowing which values drive you is a first step toward self-knowledge and key to uncovering a new means of self-expression. You can experience many levels of love for your work. You may find a job that is intellectually stimulating, or one that's physically difficult but gets you into shape. Your job may simply be a means to an end, a financial benefit so you can have outside interests that fulfill your spirit.

With all my heart I say experiment, experiment, experiment. Letting go of old definitions of ourselves isn't easy. The unlearning is very difficult indeed. We mustn't define ourselves narrowly. We have so many ways to fill our lives with music. Don't stay stuck in the mourning. Cry your tears, but walk out into a new day and a new definition of yourself.

Next month we'll discuss "a return to love," returning full circle to the joy of singing but with a very different intent and a surprisingly different outcome. Please continue to share your thoughts, and I am happy to answer your questions.

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, Adria has given master classes throughout the world and is presently on the faculty at New Jersey City University. She is a speaker, writer and life coach focusing on the international performing arts community.

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The Singer's Addiction Part Five: Learn to Forgive Yourself

by Adria Firestone

I'm in the dressing room of my mind, and I'm trying on phrases: "I stopped singing five years ago." "I used to be an opera singer." "Oh yes, I still sing, just not opera anymore."

Why all the waffling? I'm a retired opera singer. Ouch, that sounds so final. Well, it is. It's a fact, plain and simple. I am no longer an opera singer. Instead of pride, I used to feel shame. Why? I come back to this question again because there is a stigma attached to leaving a performance profession.

If you are a retiring CEO you get a huge severance package, several dinners honoring your accomplishments, and maybe an oil painting featuring your steely gaze, hanging on the wall of the company's hallowed halls. Instead, just yesterday I heard a physical therapist say, "Oh yeah, I have all her old videos, but have you seen Jane Fonda lately? She looks horrible!" No, she looks great, and she's 71.

One of our readers told *CS* how he felt when he met other singers still in the business. "It is often awkward to run into former colleagues who are visibly uncomfortable to hear that I am no longer singing, as though they fear coming in contact with a communicable disease," wrote Pedro Porro. "Yet according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 11 percent of persons who filed as singers or musicians in 2006 were employed by performing arts institutions."

Porro quotes from the 2008-09 edition of the Bureau of Labor Statistics' *Occupational Outlook Handbook*:

"Competition for jobs as musicians, singers, and related workers is expected to be keen, especially for full-time jobs. The vast number of people with the desire to perform will continue to greatly exceed the number of openings . . . talent alone is no guarantee of success: many people start out to become musicians or singers but leave the profession because they find the work difficult, the discipline demanding, and the long periods of intermittent unemployment a hardship."



“I have great respect for people who continue to persevere and even find joy in the face of such unfavorable odds,” continued Porro, “but I was ultimately overwhelmed by the ‘hardship’ of life in the performing arts. My focus is now on physical and emotional healing.”

No Virginia, there is no Santa Claus who will bestow eternal youth or guarantee contracts as a reward for genuine talent—and retirement isn’t contagious.

So where is our pride in accomplishment? If we are unable to support ourselves solely as singers or we don’t rise to the highest ring of the A houses does that make us a failure? No. It simply means we tried something, and tried it again, maybe for a long time, and it just didn’t work out. Better to have taken the risk than to have never attempted to fulfill the dream. The key to our happiness at that point lies in our flexibility, in being able to change the vision and release one thing so we can embrace another.

Back to the Future

Sometimes you have to go back before you can go forward. I certainly did. As I told you, I stopped singing in 2002 and didn’t utter a note until 2007. My silence began healing my burnout and allowed me to follow my process to the joy I had lost. I began studying for a new career even though I had no guarantees this alternate path was appropriate for me. I started new businesses and plumbed the depths of my soul to uncover what made me tick.

When I became quiet enough to hear the voice of my heart, what I heard was quite different than I expected. Guess what. I love being home. I’m learning to ask for what I need.

I discovered I have a huge need for solitude and silence. I also learned it’s much more important for me to be authentic than to be liked. In short, I discovered the core values that fuel my life choices. I learned my priorities are quite different than I thought. Best of all, I found I like myself as a human.

Two life-changing qualities arose out of all these realizations: forgiveness and gratitude.

“The deepest craving of human nature is the need to be appreciated.”
—William James

For those of us who feel show business has treated us unfairly, who feel we deserve more recognition and fame, the anger that comes from



not being accepted and acknowledged on the level we desire can become a prison for our hearts, minds, and energy.

“Before retiring, I came to equate the sound of my singing voice with the sound of rejection, unemployment, and financial debt,” Porro wrote. “I look forward to a day when I might unselfconsciously hum an aria in the shower with a sense of unfettered pleasure. This is how I sang before all the voice lessons, before all the coachings, before all the auditions and the rejections, before I became a ‘professional.’”

“I hope to one day sing this way again—not as a retired also-ran, but as someone who is joyous and free. That would be enough.”

In 1996 while in Santander, Spain, I wrote the following in a letter: “As for singing, I love it perhaps more than ever, but I have also become totally detached from any career expectations. I only know I will not continue the same nomadic existence without immense rewards. I think my past struggle goes much deeper than testing my mettle. . . . Singing may only be a shining key to something much larger.”

When we feel unappreciated, our lives close down and we are filled with resentment. “Dis-ease” sets in, and the burnout begins.

Given all my dedication and sacrifice, I felt that I should have had at least financial ease. From the time I was a child, others used my talent to garner attention and favors, so I too came to believe my talent was the best part of me. Eventually I stopped perpetuating the pain and began the long journey to forgiveness. I had to forgive an impersonal business that didn’t care about me or my colleagues, a business that considered us disposable commodities. I had to forgive the people who used my neediness for their own ends. Crowning it all, I needed to forgive myself. For me, that was the greatest challenge.

In their book, *The HeartMath Solution*, Doc Lew Childre and Howard Martin define this situation wonderfully.

“The incoherence that results from holding on to resentments and unforgiving attitudes keeps you from being aligned with your true self. It can block you from your next level of quality life experience. Metaphorically, it’s the curtain standing between the room you’re living in now and a new room, much larger and full of beautiful objects. The act of forgiveness removes the curtain. Clearing up your old accounts can free up so much energy that you jump right into a whole new house. Forgiving releases you from the punishment of a self-made prison where you are both the inmate and the jailer.”

“If you want to turn your life around, try thankfulness. It will change your life mightily.” —Gerald Good

When I realized I had forgiven myself and was grateful for every experience in my life, the positive and the negative, gratitude crept up on little cat feet. Remember I told you how moved I was seeing my students at the university discover their joy in performance? I was inspired to create a cabaret, “Return to Love.” Its purpose was not to show off my singing prowess but rather to tell of my journey, with its ups and downs, a journey that led back to the love I had for performance and for song. I shared things that were funny, poignant, and uncomfortable.

The purpose of it all was to use the stage that I loved so much to educate, inspire, and enrich. In the process I realized how far I had traveled and how much I had grown.

The results were not at all what I expected. I had a positive reaction from my audiences, but the need to sell myself or to garner admiration was absent. I was, simply and directly, sharing what I had learned.

The power of stillness that I felt on that stage was astounding. There was no anxiety, no proving of my gifts, but simply a desire to share. Strangest of all, after I performed the cabaret a couple of times, the need to perform again is simply not there anymore. It’s gone. I don’t know where it has gone, but it has vanished without a trace. I don’t understand that yet. Maybe I never will.

Each of us has our own journey, and each journey has a myriad of destinations. I hope that sharing a portion of my struggle has opened the windows and let the sunlight into the dark night of our souls so healing may begin. We can weave the richness of music into our lives in so many ways, but whatever way we choose, let it be based on *giving* love.

Next month we wrap up this series with many more of your comments. We all have the same fears and pain. In sharing them they lessen, and the ten-headed monster in the closet turns out to be just smoke and mirrors.

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The Singer's Addiction **Part Six: It's All About You**

by Adria Firestone

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

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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.

“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.

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