



ASME

Like a Frog in a Sock: The challenges and opportunities of Australian heavy metal vocalists learning to growl

Elizabeth Blackwood, Excelsia College, Macquarie Park NSW

Abstract

The academic study of harsh vocals has been gaining traction of late, as the physiology (Eckers et al., 2009), creative attributes (Di Lorenzo & Trantino, 2016) and socio-political ramifications (Heesch, 2019) of usage have been covered in some depth by existing literature. However, formalised pedagogical study around the technique is somewhat lacking, as each vocalist has a unique path to the style and it is highly unlikely to be the result of formal training. In Australia this situation is exacerbated by the relative isolation of the individuals learning due to its small population, large geographic size and relative lack of popularity of heavy metal. This research involved interviewing five active harsh vocalists about their journey to learning and revealed that individuals were unlikely to engage in formal training and were more likely to experiment, seek access to information online and engage with strategies from other vocal styles in order to develop their own sound.

Key Words: Harsh, Vocal, Pedagogy

Introduction

The academic study of harsh vocals has been gaining traction of late, as the physiology (Eckers et al., 2009), creative attributes (Di Lorenzo & Trantino, 2016) and socio-political ramifications (Heesch, 2019) of usage have been covered in some depth by existing literature. However, formalized pedagogical study around the technique is somewhat lacking, as each vocalist has a unique path to the style and it is highly unlikely to be the result of formal training. Preliminary field-based conversations throughout my own practice have highlighted a distinct range of strategies, although there is a concentration on personal experimentation and online tutorial-based learning. Australia presents an atypical set of challenges for those wishing to participate in harsh vocal learning, as its relative geographic isolation, both between its major cities and from the rest of the world, and the relatively small industry as a western nation (Dempsey, 2021), have posed

something of a challenge to those wishing to learn the technique in traditional studio settings such as those presented by Melissa Cross in the USA. Adelaide's Australian Rock and Heavy Metal Academy (ARMI, 2023) has been developing harsh vocal programs since its beginnings in 2013, but the question is posed of how did performers prior to this inception, or those in another city, learn their technique? Given the particular potential dangers associated with harsh vocals by the vocal community (Tatro, 2014) the prospect of experimenting without a mentor can be daunting, but these challenges allow insight into alternative learning strategies outside the traditional studio vocal lesson style. The implication of this research is to not only explore alternative learning styles for vocalists, but also develop an understanding of which learning strategies were most popular with successful performers which can inform any design of harsh vocal training.

Literature Review

Heavy metal as a genre of music has enjoyed a significant popularity since its inception in the 1960s. In the past ten years, heavy metal is having something of a renaissance, with research conducted by Spotify revealing that heavy metal is the most popular musical genre on its platform by play count (Kelly, 2015). This could be the result of heavy metal being such a broad and heavily populated genre, high playing habits of the fans or a general worldwide taste trend towards the genre, however whatever the case, it establishes heavy metal as a significant contributor to the world's musical landscape. Conversely, research into heavy metal is still emerging, with publications around heavy metal becoming more popular in alignment with the genre with codification of the unique qualities, sub cultures and techniques coming to light.

Within the genre of heavy metal, one of the most distinctive components of the musical genre is the use of harsh vocals as an extended vocal technique by its vocalists. General consensus has the first recorded growl produced by The Who in 1966 with their song "Boris the Spider" (Kennelty, 2014). Nieto (2008) describes these vocal artefacts as 'Extreme Vocal Effects' or EVEs and they are produced by modifying the length and shape of the vocal tract (Nieto, 2013). Kalbag & Lerch (2022) categorise these artefacts into three main categories; growls, fry screams and rough vocals and whilst all three types of harsh vocals are addressed in this paper and discussed by the research participants, the overarching term "harsh vocals" will be employed.

Research into this vocal technique currently is still developing. This could be due to a general aversion to the technique by the vocal community. Aaen et al. (2022) note that the style "may sound straining or harming to an unfamiliar ear in comparison to "purer" sounding western operatic voice use" and assert therefore that this rougher sound has traditionally been labelled as vocal abuse rather than technique which could have limited its progression as a technique. Contrary to this

widely held belief of vocal damage, their research found that "entrenched vocal pedagogy [claims] that rough-sounding noises are unhealthier than other types of singing" which is not supported by literature and restricts development of these sounds in traditional pedagogy. The study found no detriment to vocal health arising from singing using rough vocal effects in 20 singers when trained in the technique, with study participants representing a below-mean SVHI average for singers. This latest study could be indicative of the important role of formally training in this style if one intends to use it and could indicate that those who are unable or unwilling to formally train are likely to experience vocal damage which could account for the perception of danger associated with learning.

This potential distinction between trained and untrained harsh vocalists presents an issue within the Australian context. Whilst heavy metal popularity is on the rise in Australia, a variety of factors are inhibiting those producing this type of music including the physical size of the country making touring expensive, venues shutting down due to regulation and financial issues, and the major record labels being based in Europe and the USA cited by local bands (Gao, 2017). As a result, the industry is still small and the likelihood of professional teachers learning and teaching the techniques associated is relatively slim. Heavy metal vocalists in Australia have a few options for establishing and growing their harsh vocal technique including experimentation, online tutorials and engaging with foreign programs if they are unable to find a teacher accessible to them.

This research attempts to address this issue and begin to learn how the current performing crop of harsh vocalists in Australia learnt their technique in order both to understand this process, but also to open up options for developing further research in this field to further build the pedagogical understanding of extended vocal techniques such as harsh vocals. There are three primary research questions associated with this project:

- How do heavy metal growl vocalists in Australia learn their technique?
- What are the challenges presented when learning to growl in Australia?
- What are the opportunities presented when learning to growl in Australia?

Through this lens, the research gives a broad narrative picture of what learning to be a harsh vocalist is like in Australia.

Methodology

The research method for this project was a series of semi-structured interviews (specific questions are below in appendix 1.1). Candidates were engaged in a 30-90 minute interview process, asked questions about their professional background, learning experience, training received and future endeavours for their voice. An ethics clearance for this study was approved by Excelsia College.

The interviews were transcribed by the researcher and analysed using inductive narrative analysis techniques in order to obtain a whole person view of the individuals' development. Narratives were then compared and contrasted to obtain key themes and issues within the collective experience of the participants.

Research Participants

Research participants were recruited through the researcher's professional network within the Australian heavy metal industry and social media posting in groups with either a musician or heavy metal focus in Australia, with the intention of a snowball recruitment technique becoming implemented as necessary.

Participants were selected by the following criteria:

1. Over the age of 18.
2. Currently involved in the Australian heavy metal/hard rock music scene.
3. Have recorded examples of themselves performing heavy metal harsh vocal technique.
4. Are willing and able to consent to participate in a semi-structured interview to complete the study
5. Do not feel that their participation or response

has been or will be influenced by their relationship to any of the researchers or supervisors.

The study's goal was to obtain interviews 3-5 participants, with five eventually being interviewed. This relatively small number was partially due to the small population of harsh heavy metal vocalists in Australia and partially due to the desire to do longer, deeper interviews in the process.

Results

Interviewee One

Interviewee one was a female harsh vocalist named Mariko Gray*. She has released music with the bands *A.D.Destroyer*, *Rainbow Death Ray* and in her own solo projects. She has also worked as a scare actor at Luna Park's *Halloscream* where she also used her harsh vocal technique.

Mariko described her vocal technique as 'growling' and 'false cord', noting that "the vocal terminology is all over the place at the moment". Her journey with growling began when she started to emulate the vocal styles from bands such as Disturbed and Arch Enemy. She conducted significant experimentation and was able to produce the sound as a result of an online Angela Gossow tutorial in which she was directed to pretend that she was a dog, which she found far more useful than the 'grudge sound' (a reference to the 2004 Takashu Shimizu film *The Grudge*) tutorials she had watched previously. She also found formal tutorials such as that of Melissa Cross unhelpful as she stated that she found it difficult to make the sound in the first place, rather than needing to make an existing sound more robust which those tutorials typically cater for. She found the false vocal cord sound the easiest to produce and cited being inspired by Mongolian throat singers, saying that the process was about finding a sound that worked for the individual, particularly as she has a more petite body type where some of the other techniques rely on size.

* all names have been included with the permission of the interviewees

Mariko noted that she had a strong desire to work with a teacher to mirror her other instrument training, however her experience with this was that the teacher was not particularly well versed in the technique.

"His idea about how to scream was just to get angry and go for it...he didn't know you can actually hurt yourself doing some of this stuff because a lot of people (if you just use your regular voice and just try to get louder) can end up with vocal damage like polyps or whatever."

By contrast, Mariko herself was very careful about her vocal health.

"I was very careful about it...I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't take anything that would mess up my voice"

As a result, she did not experience any major damage to her voice but was very aware that others who had also gone an experimental route, had done so. She also noted that one of the difficulties of people learning to use harsh vocals was the lack of knowledge around what sounds are actually possible in a live setting.

"The difference between studio and live is something that maybe beginners aren't focussing on. They think they're going to sound like this [the studio sound] but it's actually something that's maybe not even possible without the studio adding [layers] to it."

Overall, Mariko was aware that her journey to becoming a harsh vocalist could have been easier with a teacher as she had wanted to do. However, she noted that using experimentation allowed her to access a sound that worked well specifically for her and has allowed her greater knowledge about the technique itself through her research.

Interviewee Two

Interviewee two was a male harsh vocalist named Timothy Goldsmith*, who currently creates his own work under the stage name "Timmy the Goldsmith" with a close producer friend with releases scheduled soon.

Timothy described his harsh vocal techniques as a "high scream" and a "deep guttural scream",

noting that different techniques and sounds were usually given different terminology. Timothy started learning harsh vocals at 13 years old, and he described it as an emotional release for himself.

"Putting all that teenage angst and anxiety and everything like that into it, and just putting you know all that effort into it...I find it would help [my] mental health a lot"

Timothy described finding performers that he connected to and then starting to sing along to those performers, particularly noting Ollie Sykes from Bring Me the Horizon as an inspiration in this regard. Timothy noted that it took him three years to develop a harsh vocal sound and then he moved onto a process of trying to develop his own vocal sound. Timothy used experimentation to achieve his results, however noted that he lost his voice three times through this process for period between three days to a week.

"You can damage your throat, you've got to keep it lubricated...you can sort of tear your voice."

Throughout the experimentation process, Timothy learnt that it is better to get the sound right than trying to be loud, that you need to do it at least once a week but preferably daily to maintain the sound and that there was a need to build up the "muscles" of the sound, as he started being able to do 10 minutes and eventually progressed incrementally to an hour or so. Correct technique was also key, and he stated that he started with the sound from 'The Grudge' (Shimizu, 2004) as an inspiration.

"When I started out I was...mostly from the throat, not so much from my chest...I've learned how to sort of build that pressure up and project my voice a lot louder and a lot more clearly"

Timothy noted that he would have liked to have a teacher to take him through the process of learning and prevent potential vocal damage. However, he also stated that this experimentation was a part of the journey for heavy metal vocalists, and that it allowed for the "rawness" and "emotion" to come through into a sound that he liked. He also discussed the role of his peers in this process,

discussing the supportive heavy metal community and peer review of the harsh vocal sound as a key component of his development.

Interviewee Three

Interviewee three was a female all-rounder vocalist named Milica* who usually performs in rock cover bands as her full time employment. She sings in multiple languages including Serbian, Macedonian, Arabic, and Indian and includes performing jazz, pop, rock and blues in her repertoire. Milica describes her style as broadly “rock vocals” and stated that her journey with a harsh vocal technique started as a result of trying to emulate the original performers of the songs she was singing as well as enjoying the effect and meaning of using the technique.

“It is a combination of invoking emotion, I love doing it and a nod to the singer that’s done it before you... It’s never for the sake of it, it’s always because there’s something in there and I wanna say something with my growl”

Milica’s journey was characterised by a lot of vocal damage. She noted that she was able to mimic sounds quite easily and sang with emotion more than technique which resulted in extensive vocal fatigue through her sets. She pressed on with the fatigue, choosing to place the harsher vocal songs towards the end of the set to keep her clean voice as long as possible.

“I thought, well if I’m gonna ruin my voice, it’s gonna be ruined at the end anyway”

Eventually Milica developed vocal damage and nodes on her vocal cords. She also underwent surgery to fix her breathing and went to a speech pathologist. Throughout this process, she also sought help from a significant number of vocal coaches, however found that the many vocal teachers she tried did not understand the harsh vocal technique and she noted that finding a rock vocal teacher is rare. She stated that her teachers did not notice that she was doing anything wrong, merely told her to use the technique less. Eventually Milica found a teacher willing to work

on her other areas of vocals and try to help her with the rock technique. This teacher provided harsh but fair criticism, stating.

“You’re just relying on your talent, there’s no technique there, that’s why you’re fatiguing after a three minute song.”

Whilst this feedback was confronting for Milica, she was able to recover her vocals and develop a more sustainable harsh vocal technique, by building on classical technique around breathing and resonance.

Interviewee Four

Interviewee four was a male harsh vocalist named Jordan Von Grae*. Jordan is the current vocalist of metal bands Carmeria and Bad Moon Born, and has been performing for more than 10 years in the Sydney heavy metal scene. Jordan described his vocal technique in multiple ways, codifying the different sounds into “distorted”, “clean”, “rocky”, “growls”, “mid screams” and “pitched scream” depending on what particular technique he was using.

Jordan’s journey with harsh vocals began 12 years ago, using a combination of emulating other vocalists’ styles and experimenting with his voice, building on techniques from his classical/ contemporary vocal training.

“I found that I could extend my notes and then harshen them through belting the crap out of it... thrashing my voice until I achieved the sound that I wanted.”

However, throughout this experience, Jordan found that vocal health became an issue, with his voice being painful for days afterwards with it often resulting in loss of voice. He ascribed these issues to the general danger to vocals of the style, his lack of training and the lifestyle associated with the metal scene which included excessive alcohol abuse.

“I didn’t have any notion of vocal health and the fact that the voice is an extension of your body and your physical health as well.”

Jordan expressed a serious desire to have had a vocal teacher and mentor to guide him through

this process, both educationally but also as a way to have a more interactive learning experience which he valued. He strongly suggested that anyone trying to learn find themselves a vocal coach to prevent the potential damage associated. Jordan did eventually undertake two years of classical training and was able to use the technique to support his harsh vocal sound. He attributes his vocal strengths to:

"Patience, practice and perseverance. It's never going to happen overnight and you need to be forgiving of yourself for not getting it immediately."

Interviewee Five

Interviewee five was a male heavy metal vocalist and bassist named Charlie Curnow*. Charlie currently records and tours with Melbourne band Victoria K as their harsh vocalist and bassist.

Charlie described his vocal technique as "false cord scream" and started using this technique at 15. The process of learning for him involved tapping into his emotions, finding something he was angry about and yelling about it.

"Why I started screaming was it just was something primal, something innate, something that has to be expressed...just straight up anger."

However, this technique resulted in many years of trial and error where he experienced his glands swelling up, the top of his larynx and side of his oesophagus feeling raw and rubbed and recurrent illness when he was performing. He described his technique as using all head projection and forced up through the throat with no foundation.

Charlie continued to experiment and eventually discovered the "linchpin" of his current technique in learning how to throat sing. He used the throat singing technique in order to unlock his screaming technique in a safe way. Charlie also discovered multiple online resources such as the *Zen of Screaming* by Melissa Cross, David Bonitas of Extreme Vocal Institute and Mark Garrett of the Kardavox Academy as individuals who have begun trying to create a pedagogy of harsh vocal technique. Through all of these influences

and further experimentation, Charlie was able to develop a sustainable, reliable technique, looking back at his previous technique as very unestablished.

"[my new technique is] not a frog in a sock anymore where it was just kicking off and so misguided and wasn't having a purpose".

Whilst Charlie appreciated the online resources, he noted that he would not have wanted formal training in growls, stating that his formal education in the tertiary sector had resulted in him "falling out of love with music" whereas learning how to scream was based on feeling and sensation as an "effortless fun thing".

Discussion

There are several common themes and issues that presented across these interviewees and they had remarkably similar comments to make given that they came from quite different musical sub cultures.

One of the most obvious was the difficulty in defining the harsh vocal style due to the lack of codification in the area. This would fall in line with the current lack of extensive research on the practice, but it also reflected that the community itself didn't have a cohesive idea of what the techniques should be called, with some ascribing genre related, others tonal and others technique related titles. All agreed, however, that there were many different types of harsh vocal technique and that they needed to be treated individually rather than as just one extended technique. Research that aims to codify and give organisation to the multitude of techniques would be beneficial for both the research and practicing communities.

Another key theme across the interviews was the awareness or experience of vocal damage as a result of this technique. Some of the interviewees experienced extreme vocal damage as a result of this technique whilst others held themselves back cautiously from their experimentation as a result of fear of vocal damage. This suggests that vocal damage is a common enough occurrence to

have entered the psyche of the community and is something that could also be further researched both in terms of the cause (although it can be assumed that this would fall along the lines of current belt damage research) and in terms of the recovery.

Another key theme was the desire for vocal instruction amongst most of the interviewees. Many felt that they would have appreciated greater willingness on the part of their teachers to engage with the technique, rather than caution against it as those interviewed felt that they were going to practice the technique either way and could have used the insight. Others also noted that those who did engage were often under educated about the technique. This suggests that there is an awareness of the harsh vocal technique amongst teachers, however there is not enough information about it and how to approach it to help educators feel comfortable enough to engage with their students about the technique.

In lieu of formal teaching, many of the interviewees cited two sources for their development; experimentation and indirect learning. The experimentation of the interviewees generally included mimicking their favourite artists and then slowly developing their own sustainable sounds over significant periods of time (usually years). This experimentation often resulted in vocal damage, however it also usually resulted in a strong sense of empowerment of the individual that they had learned and claimed their own vocal identity through the process.

The second source of development was in related and indirect sources. Interviewees cited online resources such as Angela Gossow tutorials, Melisa Cross tutorials, Dave Bonitas' Institute and Mark Garrett's Academy for direct harsh vocal instruction. Less directly was information sourced from existing pedagogy information about related vocal techniques that the interviewees applied to harsh vocals. Many of the interviewees cited classical vocal training as key in developing sustainability, and two of the individuals cited learning to throat

sing as a key way in which they were able to access the harsh vocal sound safely. More research could systematically review these pedagogical information sources to establish patterns in the vocal information and codify a formal process for instruction.

Overall, the interviewees were positive about their vocal experience. They acknowledged that it could have been easier if there was a more substantial form of learning available to them and that they did not enjoy the vocal damage associated with learning the technique. However, the interviewees were empowered by their experience, citing their ability to connect to the emotions and styles that they were attracted to and all spoke about their journeys in a way to suggest that they had taken an active ownership of this process and their vocals in general. All interviewees were continuing to practice vocally at the time of the interviews, and all discussed were able to articulate their future ambitions for their voices, with more extended techniques discussed by all. This suggests that the process of learning harsh vocals has been a positive one for the interviewees despite the difficulties and therefore the potential for researchers to continue to expand knowledge around this technique continues to stand.

Conclusion

Therefore, through going into depth with the five participants of this research, we can see that the role of experimentation and online information has played a large role in the development of harsh vocal talent in Australia. Learning this way has proven empowering and affirming for the interviewees, however it does come with some risk associated with vocal damage. Further research into the harsh vocal technique could provide a more solid pedagogical framework to assist future harsh vocalists on their journey to performing this technique in the relative isolation of the Australian heavy metal scene.

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APPENDIX 1.1

Background Questions

What do you call your vocal style?

Do you use more than one technique?

Why do you use this technique/s?

When did you begin using the growling/screaming/ interviewees term technique?

Learning the harsh vocal style

How long have you been using this technique?

How did you learn to perform this way?

Where there any particularly good or bad thing about learning your technique this way?

In an ideal situation, how would you have liked to learn your technique?

Has the way that you use this technique changed over time?

Other training received

Did you train in any other vocal or instrumental skills?

How did you learn these?

How did these processes compare, were they similar or different and how so?

Looking to the future

Do you have any other learning ambitions with your vocal style?

How will you approach learning next time?

Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience of learning to growl/scream?

Demonstration

Would you be willing to demonstrate the technique/s you currently use?

Elizabeth Blackwood is a Creative and Performing Arts Associate Lecturer at Excelsia College, Macquarie Park NSW.