

As told to C. Spencer Yeh



I discovered singing as an activity when I was very little, as a child. I sang and my father played the piano, mostly sheet music for children. And then I started playing the flute, which was when I discovered I had more musical talents. I continued with the flute for many years, and joined choirs. It was when I started high school—I went to a music high school—that I chose voice to be my instrument—my main instrument—and the flute as my second instrument. You have to choose your main thing and then a second instrument, and then piano.

In that high school I met Anders Hana. He's a guitarist who used to play in Ultralyd and MoHa! and he used to run Sting Jazz-club in Stavanger. He booked musicians I didn't know at that time, like Maja Ratkje. The first time I met her, she played at the Sting

with Fe-Mail, her project with Hild Sofje Tafjord. So Anders Hana invited me to come to these concerts, and I discovered music that I never heard before, and from there I started to explore ways of doing that music with my voice.

I applied to school in Oslo, at the Norwegian Academy of Music, because they had a teacher there, Sidsel Endresen, who I really admired. She's a pioneer in experimental voice for Norway. The program was called Jazz/Improvised Music, but I didn't really want to study jazz. Unless you have some pop-ish school, the schools in Norway usually have jazz studies. I didn't get into the school in Oslo, so I ended up in the conservatory in Stavanger, my hometown.

The good thing was that I actually studied with Endresen anyway. I was the first vocalist in jazz studies there, and they didn't

have a vocal teacher, so I got to decide who my teacher was. Sidsel Endresen, she's the pioneer of this kind of voice practice, and at some point in your training, I think every singer in Norway is sounding like her, and for a long time I was always compared with her. When I listen to old recordings, I can totally hear that I sound like her, but at that time I thought, "no way, I'm so unique." She's the most available source of knowledge in Norway in this field.

I wouldn't call it noise, not what I was doing at the time. All I knew was that I didn't want to play jazz music, I wanted to do something else. I started collaborating with Ståle Liavik Solberg and we created the duo MotSol, which I guess was a free-improvising duo, but sort of grounded in jazz because we were at this jazz school. At the time what I thought I was doing was free improvisation. I thought that I was singing, but I definitely felt like I took a step in another direction. I stepped away from the jazz standards. I spent a lot of time discovering what I was able to do with different techniques, and practicing that. Of course I had to follow the schedule of the school, but my teachers were very open. They encouraged me to do the things I wanted to.

I chose voice over flute because I thought the flute was very limited. I could do so much more with the voice, and I'm very happy with my decision even now. I don't necessarily feel there's an advantage to the voice over other instruments, though it's one less channel. If you have an instrument, your idea has to travel through your body and then through another instrument and then it comes out. The voice is more direct, I think, and more personal, and that's why it becomes more emotional also. People cry in voice lessons—that's a common thing. The vibration in your chest and neck and throat—your body starts resonating and touches points and releases muscle tension, and for many people this is like a trigger. It triggers your emotions and makes you cry. Not because you're feeling sad, but just because it's an intense experience, of releasing tension and feeling.

What I found difficult was that the voice is always loaded with so much emotion. If you're in a band and you're the only vocalist and you're doing this free improvisation thing, from my experience, the audience is very focused on the vocalist, because that's where they usually get the narrative. And I've always tried to avoid putting too much emotion into my singing because I don't want to throw feelings at people. I'm trying to make it as clean as possible—free from emotional associations, so it's not open for the audience to interpret in that way. It's more like producing sound rather than producing stories.

Before I discovered I wanted to remove the emotional layer, I was working very physically with the voice. I wanted something to be physical rather than emotional. So my physical features were deciding more what my material would sound like: my breath and my strength, my whole body, and also the presence of my body. I deliberately try to avoid any types of coloring of the sounds with my body, including making gestures. I always close my eyes when improvising, but when I do solo, I usually have my eyes open and focused.

I said something once in an interview about how long you can actually sing one note and when you run out of breath, what happens then. There's a sensation of the body taking care of itself, the body knowing what to do when you run out of air—the body leading the way. It sounds hippie-ish, but the point is that I'm more fascinated by this physical aspect. Maybe that's also something that I'm still trying to do, escaping this human voice and maybe getting closer to a mechanical voice, trying to make the voice sound like something else. That's fragility in a good way. Like when the human comes out as an analog failure, in a nonmechanical way. I like that. I've also had periods where I've really gotten into voice sounds, like clear yelling or other clearly vocal sounds.

I am aware of the attempt at escaping the emotional element while improvising, and this awareness is important for me to have, I think. I have a more mechanical approach to it. I try to be very disciplined and play with time and timing instead of playing with the sound itself. I spent my first year of college investigating the voice, finding new sounds and exploring, but by my second or third year I decided to stop and just focus on making music. This was when I also decided to use more clear voice. Singing and presenting notes

and working with what I could make from one note instead of putting out a lot of effects and playing with the sound itself.

I tried to use electronics with my voice. At one point I really wanted to, but I didn't have the patience to learn that stuff, so I focused on the acoustic voice. It felt like learning a totally new instrument and was too much to get into at the time. I wanted to do it well. I didn't want to be just another singer with a loop station, looping myself, layer by layer. It was suddenly a trend that became the thing to do.

The whole idea of being free is not so important. It used to be so important to me, but I always found it difficult to accept that we called it free improvisation. It's never actually free because somehow all the musicians know how to improvise in this free setting. It's a kind of language even if you claim it not to be.

Your experience and your knowledge is always with you and it grows with you, so in terms of being free—what does freedom mean? To me, an ideal situation for free improvisation would be just blank, and you just start making sounds or noise. But I don't think this is interesting at all. I think the knowledge and experience from the different musicians is what's interesting. What they offer, from their material. I think it's sad, if you think someone's a genius or someone's doing great stuff, and they say, "It just happens." It's not true. I would feel disappointed if someone said that to me.

A friend of mine, an actress, always gave me feedback about my concerts, about the way I looked, my face, and my physical presence. This was a big help for me because she made me realize that this was actually an important part of my performance. Sometimes my hand moves when I'm singing. I can't help it and I don't know how that happens. If I were to make dramatic facial expressions, then my solo performance would be a very different experience for the audience. It would become something theatrical. So I definitely think that it's an important thing to be aware of your presence and the way you present yourself, as a musician. Which is a bit taboo in the scene I've been in. That scene is more about dressing down, and being almost anonymous—acting like you don't care, but you actually do care. It's very complicated. So why not just embrace the fact that it matters? I'm curious about what would happen, about the possibilities of actually making this character I've always tried to escape into a bigger part of my expression.

