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## Nicole Hart: A Marvelous Instrument

By [David King](#)



The human voice is a marvelous instrument. It is sound made by the vocal folds in combination with the lips, the tongue, the lower jaw, and breath support. The physiology of this instrument is something a singer should be as keenly aware of as a guitarist is aware of the parts of a guitar. It is used for talking, crying, screaming, laughing and singing. If properly trained, it is limitless in its range of expression. In singing, it can be used to attain the high “Cs” in an Italian aria such as Luciano Pavarotti was noted for, or duplicate a wide range of musical instruments as have Bobby McFerrin, or “old school” hip-hop artists. Or it can be used in dynamic speaking such as politicians, clergy, or teachers do. If properly cared for it will last the owner a lifetime.

No one likely understands all this better than classically trained coloratura soprano Nicole Hart (of the NRG band). Singing since the doctor took her out of her mama and spanked her for air...”that was my first high note!” jokes

Hart. Her father was an opera singer and she was interested in singing and in music since she was a toddler.

Hart studied voice at the university level. This plus the subsequent training that she has received since completing school, and the innumerable vocalists with whom she has worked has made her that much more aware of how people sing. She was the first Caucasian Shirelle by *Rock and Roll Hall of Fame’s* Shirley Alston, with whom she toured for close to a year.. She recorded a live video with Billy Joel; shared the stage with Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley; has also worked with Harry Belafonte and Michael Monroe; and she worked on a soundtrack for director Jonathan Demme.

In the blues, too many vocalists, to imitate the blues with which they are familiar, affect a “blues growl” that risks permanently damaging the vocal chords by overloading the larynx and creating polyps, nodes and other conditions that could ultimately diminish an individual's ability to talk, let alone sing. .

Considering this risk, why do it? What alternatives are there to doing this? How do you properly care for your voice? For the answers to these questions, AAJ contributor and Cross Harp Chronicles website publisher David King spoke with Hart, who has done it all. Today, as well as

leading a top notch band, she teaches voice.

It would do you well, if you sing for any band, to heed the advice given. If you don't, the price you pay may be that marvelous instrument called your "voice."

**All About Jazz:** Here is one that may seem obvious, but for those on whom clever initials are missed, what do the initials for your band name NRG mean?

**Nicole Hart:** Actually, they are a pun, if you will...we were trying to decide an appropriate name for the band...my name was an obvious choice, but the fellas in the band are such stellar musicians that we also wanted to include the band as an entity. NRG is a play on the word, "energy," as that one word can really sum up our stage show. People are always asking me where I get all my energy...Clean Living and Red Bull, hence the name, "Nicole Hart and the NRG Band."

**AAJ:** You have had an interesting career. According to your bio you have performed with some real legends of the modern recording industry. In fact, you were a regular part of a group that many of us recognize. I am talking about the Shirelles. How did this come to be?

**NH:** I was hand-chosen to become the first Caucasian Shirelle by *Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's* Shirley Alston, the original lead singer who performed all the hits, such as "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow." I responded to an ad in the New York City paper, *The Village Voice*, for a black vocalist. I ran through my qualifications for the musical director over the phone. When he invited me to come down, "Just one thing," I said, "I'm not black." Pause. "Well, come down anyway," he said. I sang for Shirley and she hired me on the spot.

**AAJ:** How long did you perform with them?

**NH:** I gave it close to a year...we traveled all throughout America and Canada, visiting Tahoe, Vancouver, Montreal, and Quebec, as well as one hundred other cities in the US.

**AAJ:** Now an opportunity such as this is not one someone just falls out of bed one morning thinking, "I am going to apply for and be accepted as one of the Shirelles." You had prepared for this moment since you were quite young. How did you get started in music?

**NH:** Honestly, I have been singing since the doctor took me out of my mama and spanked me for air...that was my first high note! My father was an opera singer, and I was interested in singing and in music since I was a toddler. My mother was also an artist who worked with paint, charcoal and pencil. I had to be in second grade in elementary school to try out for the church choir, because that was the rule. I bit my nails the entire year I was in first grade sitting in church every Sunday; I couldn't *wait* to get into choir. I worked hard to memorize all the hymns before I got into second grade.

By the time I was in third grade, my father had become the choir director and, I hope it wasn't nepotism, but I was given my first solo. From there I went onto study madrigal and *a capella* singing in school, moving into all state, all region and national choir groups singing Handel and Copland in up to eight-part harmony. I loved it! It threw down in a different way from the popular music that I also loved.

**AAJ:** Were you not also classically trained as a singer?

**NH:** Yes, I went to university as a coloratura soprano.

**AAJ:** What are several of the key things you learn in such training? Can you share your learning experience, the techniques used to teach you to sing?

**NH:** Absolutely. I learned how to phonate properly, that is, to produce sound in a healthy way which has been serving me in good stead when I have many gigs in a row (which has been often lately!). It prepared me for presenting and communicating lyrics to the audience and, I'm sure, helped me to develop my stage presence. But I have also learned a lot by studying privately with more pop- and R&B- oriented teachers.

I have also learned a lot about how to care for the voice from study on my own, as well--I've done a lot of research and a lot of trial and error. I drink at least a gallon of water the day before and the day of a show (and usually, every day anyway--this keeps you lubricated from the inside out!), as well as incorporate a lot of herbs into my diet. The voice is a physical instrument, as well as being spiritual and cerebral. As such, it needs more care than, say, a guitar or keyboard or an amplifier, just by nature of its physiology and it being a part of the human body subject to everyday living. For instance, if I don't get a good night's rest, I think that shows up in the vocal chords faster than it does with an instrumentalist (i.e. it can limit range and flexibility, and make the voice hoarse much more quickly.)



**AAJ:** Did this experience make you any more aware as to how others sing?

**NH:** Of course. I would liken it to the way a movie director watches movies or an actor watches others act. I have such a deep appreciation for all kinds of vocalists in all genres...some I probably wouldn't know how to appreciate if I didn't understand the mechanics of vocalization. However, having said that, I think communication comes first...for instance, someone such as Bob Dylan or even [The Pretenders'] Chrissie Hynde may not be considered a great vocalist *per se*, but they understand implicitly how to use their voices to communicate the emotion behind their material. This is a real gift, the real "x" factor.

**AAJ:** What are some of the biggest mistakes others make in singing?

**NH:** Oh, God. Well, smoking I think is just a sin, and I know from personal experience because I used to do it years ago. When I finally snapped out of it, which was relatively quickly, thankfully, my voice went up two whole steps in range immediately. It has only gotten stronger from there.

Also, I learned never to drink when I sing. This is something I think a lot of singers learn the hard way. Classically trained vocalists know this, as their genre is very, very demanding and really, you can't get away with much as an opera singer. However, popular singers who make their living gigging in night clubs or on the road know that alcohol is inherent to the environment. I love singing too much to limit my ability at a performance by drinking alcohol. Technically, vocalists really shouldn't drink at all, but I don't see that happening among many of my peers. You know, you gotta live a little. I'm no saint, but when it comes to singing, I'm pretty well-behaved.

**AAJ:** Considering how so many vocalists torture their voices in the blues, understanding that you define your music as blues/funk/soul, what drew you to perform this kind of music?

**NH:** I made my living for many years being a chameleon. The more genres of music I could aptly perform, the more work that was potentially available to me as a professional vocalist. I was a singer for hire, both in live performance as well as in the studio. However, I made a decision about six years ago that if a song didn't mean something to me, I wouldn't perform it. For instance, I was contracted to record a disco song for a French label, and half way through the session I just said to the engineer, "I'm sorry, I can't do this," and walked out. I just couldn't get behind the song, or see myself living with having recorded it and it being played on radio. I didn't respect what I was singing.

I have been a happier human being and artist since that day. It is a fascinating and never-ending journey to get to know myself as an artist; much more satisfying than just making a buck by singing. Now I make a buck and it means something to me. And I just find myself always drawn to anything that is really soulful, be it blues, fnk, R&B or soul music. It's what moves me.

**AAJ:** Are there any vocalists in the blues today whose style you admire? If you were to point out what they are doing correctly, what would that be?

**NH:** I think Janiva Magness has an impeccable singing style. She really uses her voice beautifully, and sings with so much character and soul. See, I think she is what's new in blues music; she is a hybrid. Absolutely, she mixes soul with the blues and rhythm and blues, and she has a beautiful technique. I know the blues purists would shoot me on sight for saying this but, as much as I respect them, the fact that she is the number one female blues artist as voted by the BMAs [*Blues Music Awards*] two years in a row just says what time it is, if you know what I mean.

Also, I truly do appreciate Susan Tedeschi. Another hybrid, taking the best in blues and rhythm & blues and singing with a funky soul sensibility. She is a very fine vocalist. Bette LaVette, another totally terrific artist who, again, comes with a soul and R&B background. Marcia Ball...I love her! Now you are just asking me about contemporary blues vocalists, and I have just touched on a very few. I could go on but then I would just be opining for hours over here.

**AAJ:** As well as performing with the Shirelles, you have also performed with other big names in the recording industry. Who?

**NH:** I recorded a live video with Billy Joel. I was booked for the session at Sony Studios in New York City. It turned out to be a live shoot for a music video at the same time for his *River of Dreams* (Columbia, 1993) CD. While we were between takes, Billy wandered over to the piano and started playing classical music that I happened to be familiar with. I started naming, one-by-one, the tunes he was playing by the composers--Bach, Chopin, Debussy, Satie, etc. He never spoke a word, just smiled at me, and then would play another tune until I named that one, too. It was a pretty fun game.

Singing backup for Michael Bolton at the famous Red Ball at Trump Plaza in New York City was a great experience. That man has a tremendous amount of soul...much more so than you hear in his records.

Sharing the stages with Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry were both absolutely incredible experiences. Bo Diddley is a pretty frisky guy...he hit on me. And, of course, there's only one Chuck Berry. I have also worked with Harry Belafonte and Michael Monroe. I did work on a soundtrack for

director Jonathan Demme. Those are some of the big names, as you put it. They were all great experiences for me.



Nicole Hart with NRG

**AAJ:** Outside of the blues, what other vocalists do it for you?

**NH:** I have very eclectic tastes: I range from listening to everything from Aretha--big time, most especially *Aretha Sings the Blues* (Columbia, 1980)--to Chaka Kahn--unbelievably funky, soulful phrasing and range--to growing up listening to Linda Ronstadt--great tone, great tunes--and Bonnie Raitt, of course.

I discovered Janis Joplin only recently in the last five years, as many people have compared me to her and are always asking me to cover her and sing her tunes in my set, which I take as quite a compliment. She is truly great, but I am definitely not trying to sound like her. Ella Fitzgerald has to be, right next to Aretha, one of my all time favorite vocalists. She had attitude and love for life with a great sense of humor, and great depth, plus great technique and she was an innovator. Between Aretha and Ella, there you have it. Desert Island Discs, along with Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* (Columbia/Legacy, 1959).

Of course, I will always love Etta James. What a stylist. She slays me. I respect Sheryl Crow a lot, for her diversity and her songwriting and producing, and also for her technique vocally. She is always interesting. Shawn Colvin, a very expressive singer who uses many colors in her voice, and has deadly technique besides. Koko Taylor, though I sound nothing like her. Again, great attitude. Eva Cassidy is one of the greats, too. Do you know her? Just an unbelievably gifted artist who sang folk to gospel in a heartbeat, and I don't mean namby-pamby gospel, I mean get down, throw down, on your knees gospel.

Oh, man, and while I'm at it...Dusty Springfield. When I hear Mary J. Blige sing, my soul just gets her. Though I am not ordinarily drawn to her genre of music, there is no denying that she is truly a great female vocalist who sings from her soul and who just absolutely moves me.

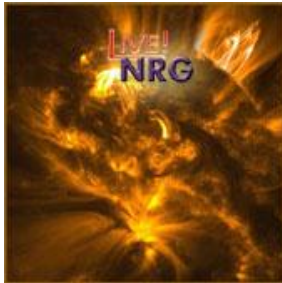
As for men, it is definitely Donny Hathaway, Stevie Wonder and James Taylor. I don't think people realize what great vocal technique James Taylor has, as well as being a consummate vocal story teller. What a way to put a song across. And Donny makes me cry. He combines so much feeling with yet unbelievably perfect technique. I also *love* Lowell George, a big influence, James Brown, Otis [Redding], Sam Cooke, and David Ruffin...and Al Green. And, of course, Howlin' Wolf. Again, these are just a few of my favorites. Once I get going on this topic it's hard for me

to stop, but for the sake of your readers, I will now!

**AAJ:** So, to shift gears, your keyboardist, now your fiancé, Lance Ong has also been a musical director. Why not introduce him?

**NH:** Lance is one of the deepest musical cats I have had the pleasure to work with, and we write together, produce together, and love performing together. He plays an instrument onstage known as a Lync, which is a keyboard midi-controller he wears with a strap so that it hangs like a guitar from his neck. Jan Hammer and Donald Fagen of Steely Dan both use it, and Chick Corea and Edgar Winter used something similar. It enables Lance to move all over the room when he solos, and has a pitch wheel which he uses in a way so that it often sounds like a guitar. He also uses a Nord Electro module, which he has tweaked to emulate a [Hammond] B-3 [organ] so well that if you close your eyes, you'll think there is a Leslie in the room. He's a great songwriter and just a great musician all around.

**AAJ:** Also, while we are at it, introduce the other members of your band.



**NH:** Lance and I had been together in a band called The Shades. When that disbanded, Lance and our very talented bassist, Vonnie Hudson, and I decided we wanted to keep making music together. We held auditions and heard many fine players, but there was something outstanding about drummer, Joe Piteo, and guitarist, Rich Cohen. It was musical synergy that got the band off to a great start. We worked six months straight with that configuration, doing as many shows as I could book to get the band as tight as possible. However, Rich had told us from the beginning that he had his own project, and I was booking so many gigs he wasn't able to devote the time he wanted to his own thing. He was great for us for that first six months, but then we decided it was best to part ways, and I called up a guy I have known for over thirteen years, a fantastic guitarist named Gil Parris, who actually has a *Grammy* nomination under his belt, as well as five national releases.

Gil is one of the most amazing musicians I have ever had the pleasure to work with, and he happened to be a good friend of our drummer, Joe, as well. We worked him in, but he also has his own career and I knew right from the start we would need another great guitarist just in case, so I called Dave Gross. Dave just won a nomination for the 2007 *Blues Foundation Awards* (formerly the *W.C. Handy Awards*) in the category of Best New Artist. Dave is an excellent musician, performer and songwriter, and one of the nicest fellows you'd ever want to meet.

What is interesting for us is that Gil and Dave bring two completely different approaches to our music, so it can be pretty darn intriguing what comes out in the mix night after night. Gil is more jazz and fusion influenced, and has a country blues influence as well--he has listened to a lot of Hank Garland, one of my favorites--whereas Dave is deeply influenced by Hubert Sumlin and Django Reinhardt, and has a more traditional blues sound. It is very rewarding working with both of them, and we toggle back and forth between the two.

I have to stop here and let you know that Vonnie, who plays five string bass, Joe and Lance have a special chemistry with each other, and singing with those guys backing me up is quite a thrill. Each of them is a terrific musician in his own right, and they all solo beautifully. There are a lot of solos in this band, because we feature each musician. Many bassists we have worked with over the years have refused to solo, but Vonnie eats bass solos for breakfast. I call him our secret weapon, because it is mesmerizing to our audience when he steps up and lays one down. Our drummer, Joe, is also just an outstanding soloist, and I love to call certain tunes at certain times

just because he has a drum solo in it--he blows the audience's mind and really gets them excited. The band is just wonderful, and there is great deal of synergy between us.

**AAJ:** You have just released a new CD. This is a live performance, which as many musicians know can be a real risk in its self. Tell us about this release. Were you pleased with the results?

**NH:** Yes, we had originally planned to release a studio effort first, but found we really needed a recording quickly just so we could get some airplay and bring attention to the project right away. The band is so tight in live performance; it was a logical first step to record live for release. Originally this was just a demo EP, but it sold well and has picked up a lot of airplay all across America and into Europe and Australia as well.

**AAJ:** What big things have you and the band got planned for the future?

**NH:** We are planning to release a studio record, and Lance and I have written many new tunes that we haven't even brought into the live show yet. You know, there's always so much to do. These days you have to be a booker, manager, producer, publicist, sales person, and marketer, all while writing, performing and recording, too. I am also beginning to work with another booking agent and we are looking to tour down South and out to the Midwest and beyond.

Basically, what we have in mind is controlled expansion. To be successful in music, it's a 24/7 job, and sometimes life demands attention as well, but that's where all the good songwriting comes from. We're juggling all these things but, yes, we are putting the pieces together for the next release which will be a studio project and we will begin laying down tracks in October. We have a lot of special guests lined up to help us out in cameo appearances, too, so that is going to be fun!

**AAJ:** Do you have any advice for aspiring vocalists?

**NH:** Yes. Get to a vocal coach who specializes in contemporary music styles. First, learn to breathe properly and support your voice while singing. This is "Singing 101," supporting your voice with breath control. Don't be lazy, get that together because it will keep you strong and it permeates all things in your life; after all, you need to breathe just to live. Breathing correctly will enhance your whole life.

Make sure the coach helps you to understand the physiological makeup of the vocal chords, because that understanding will help you see into your instrument the way a guitarist can see his strings or a pianist can see her keyboard. I try to help my students use as many of their six senses as they can to understand the instrument that is inside their body. Practice in front of a mirror so you can see your face and jaw work while you sing. Notice whether you are tightening up or are relaxed.



Also, don't push your voice hard. Be gentle as you develop your range. You can step it up here and there to push the excitement level when you sing a song, but learn to use all the colors of your voice. This will help you to express more artistically, as well as save your vocal health in the

long run, and it is more aurally interesting for your audience, as well.

Also, I would have to say that good pitch is vital. In my humble experience, the only musician who can get away with being pitchy is John Coltrane on “My Favorite Things,” and that’s only because he is one of the heaviest musicians who ever lived; he communicated despite the pitch. In other words, we can hear his soul regardless of his being sharp on that recording. This is a rare gift.

I don’t care what anyone says. Make sure your pitch is deadly. Work with a vocal instructor to help you with ear training and your intonation. As soon as I hear any instrument out of tune, I just wonder what the heck that musician can be thinking if they don’t hear themselves as being out of tune. Do yourself and your audience a favor as a vocalist and get that together right away. It’s as with a drummer who plays with tons of fills, but who can’t keep a simple groove on two and four. Your first job as a drummer is keeping the groove. Your first job as a vocalist: communicate on pitch.

A Tip: This “blues growl” is a vocal technique, not a style of singing. It should be used sparingly. When used most effectively, it should be used when you go for the lowest notes in your singing and used to sound as though you are straining to move the weight of the world.

### Selected Discography

Gina Sicilia, *Allow Me to Confess* (Swingnation, 2007)

NRG Band, *Live!* (ONG, 2006)

Various Artists, *The Wedding Singer (OST)* (Sony, 2006)

### Photo Credit

Courtesy of [The NRG Band](#)