

On the Voice

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Preparing for a Career as a Professional Session Singer: An Interview with Sally Stevens

by Micah Bland

The entertainment and recording industry was established during the early part of the twentieth century. This led to new professional opportunities for singers in film, television, radio, and recorded audio. These vocal professionals are commonly referred to as “session singers” who perform in recording studios as either featured or auxiliary musicians. As recorded audio opportunities continue to expand in the twenty-first century, aspiring professional choral singers should consider session singing as a viable career path. To help these aspiring musicians understand the responsibilities, opportunities, and challenges of session work, the following interview was conducted with professional singer Sally Stevens in September 2023.¹



As one of the preeminent session musicians of this generation, Stevens has worked in the recording industry for over sixty years as a session singer and vocal contractor. Throughout her career, Stevens has advocated for industry musicians while serving on the national board of the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA) for forty-five years and the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) board of directors for eighteen years.² As a professional singer, Stevens performed on

major recording projects throughout the 1960s and 70s as a member of the Ron Hicklin Singers, and performed with notable artists such as Neil Diamond, Ray Charles, Sonny and Cher, Dean Martin, Ray Conniff, Frank Sinatra, Johnny Cash, Plácido Domingo, Elvis Presley, Michael Jackson, and Burt Bacharach.

In the 1980s, Stevens found success as a vocal contractor for film and television, working closely with composers such as John Williams, Danny Elfman, Alan Silvestri, and James Newton Howard. Throughout her career, Stevens has performed or contracted vocals for hundreds of film and television productions, including *The Sound of Music* (1965), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and twenty-one seasons of *Family Guy* (1999–2022).³ Possibly Stevens’ most iconic credit includes the main theme from *The Simpsons*, which features Stevens; her daughter, Susie; and composer Danny Elfman (750 episodes to date).⁴ In 2022, Stevens published a detailed memoir of her life and professional experience titled, *I Sang That: A Memoir from Hollywood*.⁵

What are the musical skills a singer needs to be successful as a session singer?

To do any choral or ensemble work, you must have excellent sight-reading skills. You also need to have

good intonation, because the industry does not use auto-tune.⁶ Also important is an understanding that when you're in the studio, you're part of an entity. If you have a question about something, you can't contact the composer directly; you have to go through the choral contractor or the vocal contractor. You must arrive on time and be aware of the work rules. Union membership is also important. Based on my experience in the business, I didn't do anything that was not union employment. If I were going to hire a singer for a project, they had to be a current in-good-standing member of SAG-AFTRA [the Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists]. It is still important to have union work as your goal. I am not sure younger singers understand how important it is to have healthcare coverage and a pension that builds over time. Have rules that get you residuals when your work is reused.⁷ Session singers always have a slow period during the year where there's not much work, and if those residual checks aren't coming in, there's no way to pay the bills.

When hiring musicians as a vocal contractor, what qualities did you look for? What type of things made you want to hire or rehire a singer?

Well, you don't want someone in front of a microphone with six other people who are chatting, engaging in conversations, or creating a disturbance. Session singers need to have a professional attitude and a focus at all times. Each project also varies. As a vocal contractor, you have to shape the sound according to what the composer's work requires. Session singers who are successful in the business can easily adapt their sound to sing different styles. For example, I didn't want someone with a big vibrato in the soprano section of the choir. Instead, I would be drawn to people who could sing with a floatier tone. As you get to know the community, you learn about the skillsets of various singers; some excel with a more classical sound, some with a more contemporary or gospel sound, etc. You try to shape the group's sound through these personnel choices.

It sounds like it's beneficial for singers to be versatile in many different styles, but it also

sounds like you had some singers you used for more specific genres. Were most of the singers you hired skilled in multiple genres and styles?

Most of the singers I drew from were quite flexible and really good at adapting their sound or approach to the style. However, the size of the ensemble matters. With smaller groups, you have to be more selective in terms of who is skilled in a particular style. Often I would get a request for a solo (like a little squib in *The Simpsons*) that would be very clearly defined: "We [the producers] want an opera singer, or a fragment from this aria, or we want someone that sounds funky like a rock singer from the sixties," etc. As a contractor, you have to keep track of who does what on your roster of singers.

How would you suggest a new singer in the industry go about finding work?

If they are starting from scratch or don't know anyone in the community, I would suggest that they submit a demo no longer than three minutes of various styles to the main four or five vocal contractors in town. They can also send a link to their professional website. Connecting with other singers is really how we all evolved in the business. I suggest participating in a community or church choir, because you often meet people that can help you connect with professionals in the business. Also, those choral experiences put music in front of you at least once a week, helping you maintain your sight-singing skills.⁸

Can you describe more about the expectations of a session singer demo? Should the demo include an entire song?

No, maybe only about fifteen seconds of a song. Never a whole song, because the person listening will probably just skip through it and might miss something that was really important.

Demos should include something that shows your high octave range, super low range, or strongest solo style. Including something where you've layered multiple voices shows how you can harmonize. If you've

done a project from a commercial or something that you thought came out really well, take a little piece of that and put it in the demo. But the variety of what you do should probably be no more than five or six little samples. Include only what you do really well.

Considering the length of your career, how were you able to maintain the health of your voice?

I have this annoying habit of humming all the time. I don't even know what I'm humming unless I stop and think, "what are the lyrics for that song?" But I truly believe the humming has helped, because that's exercising the vocal folds in a healthy way. Also, in my career over the years, I've never had to belt; when I've performed as a soprano in a choir, it's always been a high floaty sound. If I've performed a solo, it's always been a breathy sound, so I never really had a risk of harming my voice.⁹ I try to make myself vocalize every day, especially when I know that I have a performance coming up. I've also tuned in with a couple of voice teachers over the last few years, just to get an update. I think you have to keep singing—whether anybody's listening or not!

For many years you served on the SAG-AFTRA board. Can you share who this union represents and the advantages of joining as a session singer?

My history with unions goes back to about 1967 when I served on the Los Angeles local board of AFTRA. Back then there were two separate unions. (They merged in 2012.) AFTRA was the more democratic of the unions because it represented singers, actors, stunt people, dancers, news people, announcers, voice-over actors, and puppeteers. All those categories had representation on the board, and everybody had representation on the wages and working conditions committee. I served on the local board for a few years before I was elected to the national board.

Around 1983 I was appointed to the AFTRA board of trustees for the health and retirement fund. I am still a trustee today. SAG at that time was primarily an actor's union, although it covered session singers if we

worked on theatrical features, prime-time television, or television commercials. AFTRA handled radio commercials and radio programming. Now the unions have merged and represent all categories: theatrical, prime-time television, variety television, dancers, reality TV, radio and television commercials, and sound recording. In my opinion, it's very important that singers be part of the union. Your residuals, salaries, and contributions that employers make go into the fund, which provides pension payments and health coverage. It also guarantees that the terms of your contracts are upheld. In other words, if you don't believe you're getting paid properly, you can file a claim and the union will step in and investigate your situation.

I think most people in the business (including myself) start out doing nonunion sessions. When you're nineteen years old, that's how you learn to stand in front of a microphone. But at some point—when you realize that you've broken through and are doing more union projects—then you need to set the nonunion work aside. If too many people don't, it chips away at the integrity of union employment. If a producer knows that they can get as good an artist for a nonunion gig as they can for a union gig, they're not going to want to pay the union benefits or the required union salary, which pulls money out of those funds and weakens the pension and healthcare of union members. And that harms everybody, even the folks who are being faithful to the contracts. So I encourage young singers to get involved with their union. We have a very active singers committee at the union, and there are branches across the nation in places like New York, Los Angeles, Nashville, and Chicago. There is also the national committee, which is a great resource for finding and solving problems.¹⁰


You mentioned several benefits the union offers, such as a standardized pay scale, residuals, health coverage, and pension. Is there anything else a singer should know about nonunion work? For example, is there a set hour limit?

There's no hour limit, nor is there safety protection. There's also no guarantee that you'll get paid correctly. It's difficult to learn all this stuff when you're first

getting into the business, but you can always reach out to the union and inquire about rates and other things. I don't mean this to sound inconsiderate, but I think there's a little bit of a stigma attached to someone who is well known as being both a nonunion and union singer. For certain projects, having a reputation for doing both types of work can be a check mark against you.

However, there may be more people who are doing that than I realize. The union has made efforts to reach out and get singers involved with the SAG-AFTRA singers committee. We encourage them to attend events and share information with them about their union and what it offers. For example, the SAG conservatory regularly has workshops and events that are useful to singers.¹¹ There's also a lab where you learn how to submit and put together your own voice-over demos. For a while they were doing meet-the-composer events. There are a lot of activities like this that have started up again now that the pandemic is over.

Do you have any other thoughts or insights you want to share with a prospective session singer?

It's important to have a professional-sounding demo, but I also think it's essential to understand that this profession is a community and group of colleagues. Unlike actors who compete against each other for roles, session singing is mostly ensemble work; you get to know the community by being around and working alongside each other. Networking is important. In a church or community choir, you might find yourself standing next to someone who is a working session singer and impressed by your ensemble singing. They may pass your name along to a vocal contractor. In my own career and the careers of people I know, I have grown so much through networking. There's always a certain amount of schmoozing and politicking; basically, it's about getting to know individual singers and learning what each person does well. That's what helped me when I had the opportunity to begin contracting. It's important to find ways to get connected to the community, no matter how small or unimportant they might seem. 

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NOTES

- ¹ University of Toledo IRB approval was acquired for this research. The interview was conducted via Zoom on September 6, 2023.
- ² The Screen Actors Guild and American Federation of Television and Radio Artists merged in 2012 to form SAG-AFTRA.
- ³ Additional notable appearances as singer or vocal contractor include *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *Grease* (1978), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Home Alone* (1990), *Last of the Mohicans* (1992), *Sister Act 2: Back in the Habit* (1993), *Forrest Gump* (1994), *Apollo 13* (1995), *Mulan* (1998), *Elf* (2003), *The Polar Express* (2004), *The Avengers* (2012), *Star Wars: Episode VII—The Force Awakens* (2015), and twenty Academy Award ceremonies (Oscars).
- ⁴ Sally Stevens, *I Sang That: A Memoir from Hollywood* (Atmosphere Press, 2022).
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Author's note: Auto-tune cannot be utilized during choral recording sessions due to the simultaneous sounding of multiple pitches. Auto-tune can be utilized when each vocalist is recorded individually.
- ⁷ Residuals are payments made to performers when the work is used beyond the initial compensation agreement.
- ⁸ Author's note: Most American metropolitan cities offer union and nonunion employment opportunities for session singers. Nonunion session work can also be found internationally.
- ⁹ These words are the interviewee's. The editor acknowledges that it is possible to belt in a healthy way and that a breathy sound in and of itself is not a reliable indicator of vocal health.
- ¹⁰ For more information about the SAG-AFTRA National Code of Fair Practice for Sound Recordings, visit <https://www.sagaftra.org/production-center/contract/806/rate-sheet/document>.
- ¹¹ For more information about SAG-AFTRA conservatories, visit <https://www.sagaftra.org/sag-aftra-conservatories>.