

Ep #20: Should I Copy Someone Else's Voice?

Can't
wait
to hear
you

with
Michèle Voillequé

Full Episode Transcript

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Your voice is unique to you. It grows as you grow. It changes as you change. If you're curious about the relationship between your voice and your body, your heart and your mind, welcome. My name is Michèle Voillequé and I can't wait to hear you.

Should I listen to other voices to try to sound better? Should I model my speaking or singing after somebody else's? Should I try to copy other people? Should I try to copy the voices that I like, and will that help me sound better, faster?

Like my answer to most things, my answer to this one, too, is “yes and no.” So make yourself comfortable.

The fact is that we learn how to use our voice at all by mimicking other people. We're born, we cry out – that's an automatic response, automatic use of the voice because we're cold, we're tired, we're wondering what's happened.

And if we're comforted – most of us are – we calm down, and then we cry again. And crying is the main way we make our presence and our needs known in the world until we kind of wake up enough and notice that the grown ups around us are talking.

And then we started babbling, maybe ba ba ba ba ma ma ma ma ma, and we start trying to imitate what they're saying and we get our first words, and then sentences. And then, you know, then we're off to the races.

And all of this is happening in a language. We're babbling in, with the cadence of the language we're surrounded by. We're picking up the word parts: ba of ball, and ma of mama, and ka of cat, maybe, or kiy, for kitty,

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you know, those are language specific. And we're also picking up the accents of the people who are speaking.

So, the end result is that we can tell where people are from and people can tell where we're from in the world by the language that we're speaking and by the accent that we're speaking it with.

Now, not everybody is a master at identifying accents, but we know that they are there. You might not know where somebody is from, but you can know, you will know that they're not from where you're from.

And we did all of that, you know, pretty automatically. It might be when you were a teenager. You know, really starting to care about what other people thought and really becoming aware of gender and power dynamics in the world, you might have started making conscious choices about how you said things and the kinds of vocabulary you used because you were trying to make a certain kind of impression.

You were trying to be maybe more like your friends or sound like that cool person in that movie or on that TV show, or whatever, trying to figure out who you are and trying on different voices, different ways of saying things, different sounds – you know, exploring what was possible for you.

And you might've gotten good feedback about that from your family. You might've gotten negative feedback about that from your family, and it might've gone utterly unnoticed by your family that you were trying something different.

And then you enter the work world. Maybe you go to college, university, maybe you go straight to a job, but you enter the wider world, and then

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you're surrounded by another kind of culture, and that culture has other speech habits, other intonations, other vocabularies that you can pick up on. And maybe you also move across the country, or to a different country entirely, and that will change how you're speaking.

All of this is part of a normal human process of wanting to belong, wanting to feel part of a community, wanting to be understood, get our needs met, not die alone under a bridge.

So, it wouldn't be fair of me to say, “no, you shouldn't copy anybody else if you want to improve your voice,” because you've been copying other people your entire life. And you will continue copying other people. That's unavoidable.

The question, though, is how to do that intentionally, how to do that in a way that doesn't introduce additional tension into your voice, into your body? How to do that in a way that feels authentic to you? Because although how your voice sounds counts for a lot, your presence as a human also counts for a lot.

If you think about your favorite voices, the people who have been your vocal models already, the people who you save their messages when they leave you a message ... what's coming through in their voice is not, it's not just sound, right? It's not just how they're saying something. It's also the love and the care and the compassion and the intellect and the joy and the concern.

It's a whole bunch of stuff that's wrapped up in that voice together with how that person is in the world. Because when we hear somebody's voice, it's pretty common to also be able to see their body. to imagine their body language as they're speaking.

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So the voice is carrying all kinds of information and it's useful to identify when you're thinking about who you want to sound like, to think about how you feel when you hear them. How does their voice resonate with you, in your body?

And I mean that literally. When I say "feel," I mean the emotions, but I also mean the physical sensations. Do your shoulders drop? does your chest open? What's happening in your physical body when you hear that voice? How do you know your body likes it?

Because one of the steps in changing how your own voice sounds is changing how you feel in your body. How do you physically hold your body while you're speaking or singing?

So you can ask yourself, this voice that I love, how do I feel when I hear it? And notice what those physical sensations are in your own body. And you can also ask, how do I want the people who hear me to feel when I'm speaking or singing? And notice what that feels like in your body.

Because you're going to need some of those conditions in order to sound like that. If you want to create a particular result in someone else, you need to have at least a bit of it going on in you in order for it to feel that way to the other person.

This is why tone matters so much. You know, we've all been around the block with email, right, and texting. And the problem with emailing and texting is that tone can be difficult to distinguish.

Part of liking your voice is liking the tone. And the tone doesn't exist without your body. It's not something that you can just think about and

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create. Tone comes from a feeling that is generated through the whole body, through the whole person.

So if you're looking to change the way your voice sounds, if you're looking for a new vocal model, it's worth your time to consider who have been your influences already.

Who are the important people in your life? Whose voices do you hear the most? What do you like about them? What do you love about them? And also, what do you not like about them?

So that you can understand something about how you've already done this. You have already managed to sound like other people, in your life. And so this is a skill you've already used. It was mostly unconscious, but you have done this already. So who are those influences?

And then also consider what have been your influences?

I know for myself that my speaking voice has been affected by obviously, my parents, where I grew up, you know, the community I was raised in, but also the fact that I learned foreign languages and I lived abroad for a time and was living in a language that wasn't English for a long time, and I raised, helped raise, two bilingual children.

And also I gave birth to those children, and um, for me, didn't have any anesthetic or, you know, there were no, no painkillers, and I had a significant amount of language loss after I gave birth.

I attribute this to the natural trauma that is childbirth. I had a horrible time. I could not find words. I could describe the thing, I could see the thing in my head, but I couldn't come up with the vocabulary for it. And

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that lasted for quite a long time, and I feel like it still happens today. The children are in their 20s, I'm not sure if I can still blame their birth on the fact that I can't always come up with the right word.

But I do, it did, my speech was already slow, coming from a rural part of the country, but it, I think it slowed down my speech even more, and there are even more pauses in my speaking than there were before I had kids.

So, assessing where you're from, always good if you're trying to go somewhere else. Figure out where you're starting.

The other thing to think about is if, if you can look back at your life and notice a point where you actively changed how you said things, or, you know, you tried on different voices. If you have that, if that happened with you, what were you trying to accomplish at that moment, or over that time?

Were you trying to belong? Were you trying to sound more authoritative? Were you trying to rebel? Were you trying to disappear? Were you trying to be somebody?

What were you trying to do? And you might have been trying to do a bunch of different things. You could have tried a bunch of things on. I'm not, there isn't necessarily just one answer to this question.

Just so that you can be an observer of your own instrument. Because again, in the end, you are really only gonna sound like you. Other voices show you how you can do things, how you can try things, things you can try on.

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But ultimately, All of that is going to be processed through your own body, through your own heart, your own mind. And in the end, it's still going to be just you. So, in a very real way, you are your own best textbook for how to get to where you want to go.

I've been speaking mostly about speaking, but all of this applies as well to a singing voice. And thinking back to, and this was actually the con-, I think more of the context in which the question was asked, is it okay, is it desirable to listen and try to copy other people?

So in the same vein, who, who were your influences there? Who were the first voices you heard singing to you? Were they coming out of the radio? Were they coming off a record player, out of a CD player? Was it digitized? Live? Analog? Who did you hear?

Whose singing sounds like home to you? You don't even need to aspire to sound like that, but just ask yourself, what's the background soundtrack of your life sound like?

It might not be vocal at all. It might be mostly instrumental. This is also useful. Just figure out, do a little inventory, and see, "What voices have I heard in my life?" And again, "What do I like about them? What do I love about them? What do I not like about them?"

And then notice where in your life you have been singing. Did you sing with your family? Did you sing with your siblings? Did you sing in church? Did you sing in a chorus at school?

Where have you been using your voice as a singer and what were those voices around you like?

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Also, when you were singing, what were you trying to accomplish? Were you trying to blend in? Were you trying to stick out? Were you trying to be the soloist? Were you trying to completely disappear and not be heard at all so you wouldn't be criticized?

Think back, how you were using your voice and what were you using it for? And as you were trying to accomplish that thing, who were you modeling yourself after? What did that voice sound like?

That powerful voice that was singing the solo or the person next to you, you didn't want to be louder than, or that voice that never got a solo, but was just the person standing behind you – it was just so sweet. It just sounded so good.

What were those vocal models? How did you feel in your body when you heard them? And how did it feel in your body when you tried to copy them?

For many, many people, when we try to sound like somebody else, everything gets really tense right away.

For other people, when we try to copy somebody else, There may be some physical tension, but there's also this great freedom, this great sense of relief and release because we're no longer, quote unquote, "ourselves."

We're pretending to be somebody else and then we're so much freer. So, copying another voice can give you a lot of freedom, psychological freedom, because, you know, who can judge you now? You're just trying to sound like so and so.

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So if that is true for you, I want to say please do lean into that and don't lose track of how you feel in your own body because we want that psychological freedom and we also want physiological ease.

A couple of great examples of people who make a career of sounding like other people – the comedic impressions of Jimmy Fallon and Maya Rudolph.

What I love about them, whether they're speaking or singing, they do both, you can find them on YouTube – I want you to notice their necks. There is no extra tension in their neck when they're doing their impressions.

There is as much physiological ease in their throat as I think there can be and that is just, that's what we want. That is the gold standard.

You will see some people doing impressions and it can look like their whole being is contorted. And sometimes there's a physical impression too, it's not just a vocal impression. So they're, you know, like they're assuming the physical shape of the other person.

Sometimes that can look tortured and difficult, and sometimes that can look just seamless and easy, like Kaiser Sose from the movie *The Usual Suspects*, where the actor's body, at the end of the film, you see this person who's been pretending to be somebody else.

It's been years since I saw the film, but the picture in my head is they're walking away from the camera, walking down the street, and their body is going from the form of the person they were pretending to be, the posture changes, and they become the form of maybe themselves or maybe a new different kind of character that's going to go, you know,

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defraud somebody else now. It's really a remarkable clip just to see that physical transformation of the actor's body.

So, yes, as we're listening to other voices and trying to copy other voices, we want to be aware of how we feel in our body and where we're taking on extra tension, because you will at first take on extra tension, and then see, can I release that tension and still have the sound that I want?

Another element that I want to add in here, especially about singing voices, is that there's a very big difference between a voice that has been digitally recorded and a voice that you're hearing live.

And this question, “What about this voice is moving for me?” or “What do I love about it? How do I feel when I hear this voice?”

If you're listening to a song that's been produced, like, you know, it's a radio, top 40, whatever, you know, been sound engineered. How you feel when you hear it might have absolutely nothing to do with the voice. It gets harder to separate out what's the voice and what's the post-production.

What's the voice and what's the harmony of the song? What's the voice and what's the special effect?

There are lots of special effects on voices now in pop music, in recordings, and those are not human sounds. Those are not sounds that a human body can make. That's distortion that's added by an engineer to achieve a particular effect.

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And it's important that you try to not copy that digital distortion. That will definitely introduce tension into your body and you will not get the results you want.

So if you can, when you're thinking about voices you want to copy, to the greatest extent, if they can be real people in your own life, that would be the best because then you're comparing what one human body is doing to what another, your human body wants to do.

And that's really the best learning model rather than trying to sound like a recording, which the artist, if they were in your living room, they won't sound like that, because that recording is, is no longer just their body, right? It's it's been engineered.

So this is where I want you to be careful, or I want you to be particularly discerning, discriminating about what vocal habits you pick up because you want to sound like somebody or other.

The other thing is if you, there's an artist that you like, they have a song, you have the album, you love it, go digging around on YouTube, look for a live version of it. See if you can find an acoustic version of it. Go hear the singer live. Notice what they're doing with their body. Notice how they are in themselves.

All of that will give you a much more complete picture of what it took for them to sound like that, how they got there. It won't tell you everything of course I'm not sure that's even knowable.

I mean I do my best to explain to my students what I'm doing physically with my body to sound the way that I sound. Not everybody in the world is that geeky. A lot of people are, you know, probably 100,000, at least

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100,000 people in the world are that geeky, but there's also something just ineffable that happens. There's also something that is about how I'm feeling, what's going on in my heart that I wouldn't be able to explain to you.

I could talk to you for hours about vocal mechanics and imagery but I'm not sure in the end all of that will help you.

But there's an awful lot that can be gained by simply echoing back with another person whose voice you like, just playing an echo game as simple as, “ah,” and then you try to “ah” back, and listening for the timbre, the tone, and seeing what that's like for you and your body when you try to sound like somebody else.

This brings up another question. Do you have to like the voice of your voice teacher in order to learn from them?

You know, we're all irritated by different things. So if you're looking for a voice teacher and you find somebody, but their voice is really irritating to you, like really irritating, even if they're brilliant, you're probably not going to learn as much from them as you'd like to because you're distracted by how irritating their voice is.

But on the other hand, do you have to want to sound exactly like your voice teacher in order for them to be a good teacher for you? The answer is no. A good voice teacher should be able to explain to you the mechanics of how to get to the sound you want to get to.

Of course, the more specifically you can describe the sound or describe the feeling that you want to have, the easier that will be, which is why all of these preceding questions, these research questions – Who are

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your vocal models? What do you like, love, not like about their voices. How do you feel when you hear them? – that's really important data for you to take to a voice teacher if you want to change your voice.

And it may be just as simple as, "I just want to sound like so and so. Why can't it be that simple?" Like, "I just want to sound like Bonnie Raitt? Can we just leave it at that?"

The answer is no, because you have your own body. You are always only gonna sound like you. I'm repeating myself, I know, but this is really important.

It's not just the sound waves that you're loving. It's everything else that's coming with the sound waves. It's the singer's or the speaker's feeling. It's their intention. It's their intellect. It's their message. It's the context in which you hear it. It's so much stuff.

So, it really is worth your time to sort out for yourself what it is that you really love and who, who it is that you really want to be.

And it's my belief that, that you can get there. It will take effort. It will take trial and error. It will mean making mistakes. It will mean getting too tense and then trying to figure out how to relax. It will mean some dead ends. You can get there.

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