



# My Career Choice: Stephanie Rooker - Healing Through Sound

by Woman Around Town



*A Zimbabwean proverb says, "If you can talk, you can sing; if you can walk, you can dance." Whether we believe we "can't carry a tune" or we identify as experienced singers – many of us (sometimes secretly) dream of expanding our vocal abilities, freeing ourselves from the fears surrounding creative expression, and allowing our voices to become resounding instruments of our truth.*

Stephanie Rooker is a composer, vocalist, cross-cultural music educator, and sound healing practitioner. Over the past six years, she has distinguished herself as a force of soul on the New York music scene and beyond. She is now launching a new business, offering what –to Rooker– is the essence of singing, for all people.

Voice Journey Sound Center presents a diverse array of vocal sound healing workshops, private lessons, training programs, community gatherings and sound healing services for the furthering of musical paths and enrichment of the holistic sonic experience.

Voice Journey Sound Center's website launch party will take place on Saturday, August 31st from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. at The Village @ Gureje (886 Pacific Street in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn). This free event will feature live performances, workshop demos, light hors d'oeuvres & beverages. Visit [www.voicejourney.net](http://www.voicejourney.net) on Aug 31st for specials on upcoming workshops and webinars!

## **Can you point to one event that triggered your interest in your career?**

Music –and specifically singing– has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. My first memory of \*knowing\* that I was to be a singer was seeing Whitney Houston on TV in the 80's. I remember, as a small child, thinking and feeling, "That. That is what I want to be." My career took a distinct turn toward sound healing when I was asked to participate in and assist with a Sound Healing Practitioner Training Program through the Sound and Music Institute (SMI), hosted at the NY Open Center in 2010. At the time, I already felt strongly about music's ability to promote healing and thought that participating in the program would be interesting and at least provide me with more healing context for my composing and performing. Little did I know that it would open up a whole new path for me, one that amplified my passion for music and social change and extended the reach of my work.

## **What about this career choice did you find most appealing??**

The accessibility of this work for all people. Having been working as a professional musician and voice teacher, I was exposed to so many limits (i.e. who is capable of doing what), so much competition, and other behaviors that seemed adverse to what I felt was the true nature of music. When I began studying sound healing, an amazing opening occurred. I was so inspired by the inherent power of the voice –any voice– as well as the concept that vocal sound healing comes from within and begins its work with you wherever you are. It was so appealing to me that I could guide people to go beyond the fears and opinions they hold on to about their voices and to connect with the intrinsic magic that every voice holds.

The other appealing piece was the cross-cultural and transpersonal aspects of music in this pedagogical context. While in college at Oberlin, I tried to declare an independent major called "Music as Abstract Communication." This proposal was declined at the time,

but the concept re-surfaced for me when I began to delve into the fundamental elements of sound healing. By focusing on these elements within music of various cultures, there is a certain experiential, non-verbal understanding that emerges and allows people to relate to each other on a deeper level.

### What steps did you take to begin your education or training?

My official introduction to sound healing, as I said, was the Sound and Music Institute's Sound Healing Practitioner Training, held at the NY Open Center. It was through this program that I found my teacher – Silvia Nakkach. I began studying her work and entered into the certificate training for her method, entitled Yoga of the Voice, which draws from Classical Indian singing, Tibetan chant, Afro-Brazilian orixa songs, and Peruvian shamanism, among other indigenous traditions as well as contemporary extended vocal technique and improvisational forms. This cross-cultural approach resonated well with my undergraduate studies in Ethnomusicology at Oberlin College. In being drawn back to my undergraduate work, I began to realize that I had actually been studying sound healing all along –for almost 10 years! It was a very auspicious connecting of dots for me. I have since continued to study with Silvia Nakkach and am guided by many other great teachers, including Pat Moffitt Cook – who studies indigenous sound healing all over the world, and John Beaulieu – who designs and works with tuning forks.

### Along the way, were people encouraging or discouraging?

After graduating from the SMI program, I was asked to work as faculty liaison and as an assistant to the program coordinator, Wendy Young. This gave me the opportunity to work more closely with the program faculty and very intimately Wendy Young, which has been truly invaluable to me. I have received so much guidance and encouragement in my own work from Wendy as well as members of the program faculty.

In the beginning, my parents were baffled by the shift in my career focus. It was difficult for them to understand why, after 6 years of building a career as a musician, I would want to switch tracks. When I facilitated a few workshops in my home state of Virginia and they got the opportunity sit in, they changed their tune. They loved what I was doing as saw it –as I do– as an extension of my work as a musician, as opposed to a substitute for it.

In general, people have been extremely encouraging. However, I really can't claim all the credit. I believe in this work and try to remain open, listening, and guided by my sense of it. I am often surprised with how overwhelmingly positive people's reactions are, but it is only a reminder to me of how powerful sound and music are.



### Did you ever doubt your decision and attempt a career change?

I doubt it almost every day. It is so demanding to follow your heart, to take the high road, to make what's most important to you your life's work. There are plenty of days when I daydream about having "a normal job" (which so often involves an image of a postal worker – don't ask me why). But there is something deeper that drives me, that reminds me that this work is a great gift and to do it is an honor.

### When did your career reach a tipping point?

Everything changed when I earnestly started developing my own workshop concepts, my own approaches, my own business. My teacher – Silvia Nakkach – was instrumental in guiding me in this way. She would say, "No one can do what YOU do." So, I had to go about figuring out and developing what that is. Once I started down that road, the scenery changed. What started off looking like a hazy dream of "how it could be" began to take on clear form, solid structure, and a forward momentum that seemed to be propelling me as much as I was I driving it. Synchronicities became frequent. I stopped saying, "this is crazy," when I'd meet the perfect person at the exact right time, because it wasn't crazy anymore; it was reality.

### Can you describe a challenge you had to overcome?

When I first starting thinking about going in the direction of sound healing, I had a pretty serious stutter-step. I knew that was where I

was being called, but my identity was so wrapped up in being a performer that it was painful to even think about doing something else. It felt like I was going through a “break up” with myself. I then spoke to one of my friends and mentors, jazz singer and composer Rene Marie. (Rene started singing professionally when she was 50 and has since built a very successful career as a composer and performer. She is also one of the “baddest” musicians I know.) She framed my situation like this: When you have children, you have to focus more immediately on the youngest. An 8-year-old can surely take better care of itself than a newborn. Just because you’re spending more time attending to the survival of the newborn, doesn’t mean that you have abandoned the 8-year-old. Making that shift in my focus was so difficult – as many life changes are. It took some serious processing and a big leap of faith. I believe now that it was one of the most important moves for me to make – as a performer and a sound healing facilitator.

### **What single skill has proven to be most useful?**

Listening. Not to be confused with the passive “hearing,” listening deeply opens us up to receive and understand on greater levels. Listening to different layers of sound in music expands our consciousness and experience of that music. Listening to different aspects of communication with people enhances your understanding of what they are communicating. Taking a moment to listen before acting in a situation often leads to more harmonious action in that situation. It helps us to get out of the way – to not always be ready with an answer, but to dwell in questioning and connect to intuition. The continuous and infinite practice of listening has taught me so much and led me to very deep and meaningful work with people.

### **What accomplishment are you most proud of?**

When I first moved to NYC, I was very present on the hip-hop activism scene, all the time attending events, fundraisers, marches, concerts – you name it! I was so inspired by all the amazing work people were doing. So, I got it in my head to produce a community empowerment celebration to bring together organizations, performers, educators, and community leaders; to promote service, activism, community building, and social progress in Brooklyn. It was a day-long event, called Party for the People. With an amazing team of 20 other volunteer organizers, I worked for a whole year on this project. We did some serious footwork, reaching out to community boards, local businesses, and cultural groups throughout the borough of Brooklyn. When the day of Party for the People finally came –on October 6,2007– we celebrated with over 400 attendees, 15 organizations (including domestic violence organizations, economic advocacy groups, environmental groups, and more), 3 community action workshops, local community leaders, city council members, and a slammin’ line-up of 15 performers – including M-1 of Dead Prez, Blitz the Ambassador, and Stephanie McKay, among many others. It was quite a mission; its process was incredibly challenging and humbling, but its manifestation was truly blissful.

### **Any advice for others entering your profession?**

Don’t compete – collaborate and/or celebrate. My teacher, Silvia Nakkach, always says, “creativity is not an individual process.” Sometimes we trick ourselves into believing that it can be an individual thing, but when we open the process to others it blossoms exponentially. There is far too much competition in this (capitalist) world and it is a tough conditioning to shake off. However, the truth is that there is room for all of us. The real gift that each person brings forth is something that can never be imitated, infiltrated, or appropriated. In sound healing work, we are all tapping into the same beautiful stuff. We receive, perceive, and offer it differently and that is infinitely cool.