



THE MODERATELY
Tortured
ARTIST

Your permission slip to start making epic,
whole-hearted music



KIMBERLEY SMITH

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PRELUDE

The tortured artist. The musician toiling with life's big existential questions. Feeling misunderstood and under pressure to find the Muse to create something beautiful and of value.

You know how legitimate books have definitions from the top dictionaries like Oxford and Merriam-Webster? Well I'm going to show you how much of a grown up I am and instead use the Urban Dictionary definition of "tortured artist" which will perhaps help set the tone for this book.

"Over-emotional, 'artistic' individuals. Can be characterized by wearing a lot of black, having an online blog and being obsessed with poetry. Often have unattended psychological disorders."

Nice. Thanks Urban Dictionary for labelling us as self-absorbed, morbid douche bags with a side of crazy.

This book had to be written. I've had too many important conversations with fellow singers, musicians and artists that need to be shared.

Far too many talented musos give up on their craft because their fears get louder and their passion becomes silent.

We need to stand up and own the tortured, curious parts of ourselves and learn to perform side by side with our demons, self-doubt and our ever-delightful baggage from childhood.

But who wants to read a book about all the grimy stuff hiding behind our music without some humour? Hence the Urban Dictionary reference. (By the way, don't look up that site on the Internet unless you want to be appalled by filthy misuse of the English language.)

Bottom line? There are far too many musicians who are giving up, who are frustrated, who feel unsupported and who may not be backing themselves 100% in their art.

I want this book to spark something in you. Whether that be a slow burn, combining gentle nods of your head and the sense of calm that comes from knowing you're not alone, or a fiery rage that erupts because I've touched on some of those uncomfortable triggers that cause you to throw this book across the room.

Option 1 is my preference but hey, I'm not the boss of you.

My hope is that reading this book inspires you to dig deeper and to give more thought to who you are as a musician and as a person. To ponder some of the questions you may have been avoiding (we all have) and to start to rumble with what really matters to you.

Deep huh? Don't worry; I'll be holding your hand (even when it gets slightly clammy). We'll do this together.

WHY SO SERIOUS?

Have you ever seen a child play music? They light up, they let loose, they are caught up in the discovery of each note. Quite different from the way we adults make music. We analyse everything, over think each phrase, crave perfection and forget that the word *play* even enters into it.

I want to unravel the bits and pieces that cause us to get so damn serious about our art. The emotions that destroy the joy, sap the life from our melodies and encourage us to simply grow up and potentially give up.

What sets us apart from the way a child attacks the drums with such gusto? We've seen too much, been humiliated too often, know what happens if we fail. We know that in order to create, you need to be excellent at something.

Well, that's what we believe to be the truth anyway.

Do you remember the moment that music became serious for you? Do you remember the exact performance where the weight of expectation crept in? I think perhaps for me it was auditioning for the 'elite choir' when I just started high school at 13.

I don't recall much about the audition, but I can tell you about the choir director. He was a stern, bearded man in his late hundreds (in my eyes, but in reality he was probably in his sixties). He was no-nonsense and very rarely smiled.

I can imagine that audition would have been very uncomfortable, very unlike the ones I had been used to in primary school.

The music we sang in this choir was all much older (no Céline Dion here much to my disappointment) with intense four part harmonies. The choir was called *The Twelve* and I was the thirteenth member.

Singing in this choir was the first time that I saw music differently, more seriously. After that I started taking singing exams, auditioning for performance groups and eventually participating in the horrifying world of competitions.

The whole way I felt about music started to twist into something darker, heavier, something warped. I didn't know why it felt so different. Surely I still loved music?

It wasn't that the music had changed, it's that I was introduced to the thought that it was conditional. You can only play music if you're talented. You can share your voice but only if it sounds pleasant. Otherwise get the fuck out of the game.

DON'T PLAY UNLESS YOU'RE FABULOUS

This whole philosophy became even more glaringly obvious when I started teaching. The enormous amount of baggage people tend to carry around attached to their voices can be suffocating.

I've seen students in their fifties and sixties with red faces quietly tell me that their music teacher or choir director told them to stop singing or kicked them out because they weren't good enough.

I've seen people in tears because their family made them feel embarrassed for joining in the carols that one time at Christmas.

I've had more people than I can count tell me that they're tone deaf, that they can't sing in tune, that their voices sounds like a dog coughing up a hairball. And almost all of them can hold a tune just fine.

This whole shame culture around not giving things a go unless you're naturally talented is complete BS.

I have no idea what level of talent you possess in whatever instrument (or *instruments* for all you impressive over-achievers out there) you choose to play, but it doesn't matter in the slightest.

Beginners have just as much of a right to learn, make and perform music as anyone else and yet they get put down constantly. Most of us sucked when we first picked up our guitar/trombone/violin.

Some of us are told as kids that we can achieve anything we put our minds to. Some of us are convinced that we're simply not cut out to be creative. Some of us are encouraged to try something but then our families can't handle us screwing up '*Ode to Joy*' one more time and pull the pin.

I was truly lucky in that as far as I can remember I was always encouraged to sing. My musicality was often mentioned in positive ways and I never felt as though I was embarrassing myself by expressing it (not that the whole put-up-on-a-pedestal thing doesn't come with its own issues).

But I know that level of support isn't always what musicians receive.

Many of you probably don't have encouraging notes from your teachers or can't distinctly remember your family and friends supporting you when you began to discover music.

Some of you might have even been *discouraged*, told that you had no natural talent or that dreaming of being a performer was silly or unrealistic. Unfortunately we soak up what we're told when we're young like a sponge and it's a tricky thing to shake off.

I've had students who avoided singing for decades because one of their siblings convinced them that they couldn't hold a tune to save themselves.

I have friends whose parents scolded them for making too much noise and who now struggle to project their voices even when they speak.

I know people who gave up learning an instrument because they were told they didn't have natural talent so they shouldn't bother.

All of it is heartbreaking. What is even more shocking is that often the people who are throwing the barbs at these beginners don't have any musical knowledge themselves.

Isn't that often the way with trolls though? Making judgements on the ability of others when they haven't really got the credentials. We'll get back to that in a later chapter.

People always ask me whether or not singing can be learned. They heard insert-famous-songstress-here never had singing lessons and was gifted with the voice of an angel from birth, so surely you pop out that way?

It's assumed that you need to have some level of natural talent already before you start to learn to sing. Funnily enough people don't tend to ask the same question around playing the trumpet.

Society generally seems to be a little more open-minded when it comes to learning an instrument because they don't assume that you're born being able to play the flute. Why is it that they then assume babies come out of the womb with a voice like

Etta James?

This little section is for you if you're a muso who was convinced your singing voice sucked and for the singers out there who had to work damn hard to get their voice to sound even close to melodic.

Let's get real. Yes, everyone will have a slightly different vocal tract, different sized mouth, unique lung capacity etc, but that doesn't mean they can't learn to develop an outstanding voice.

Most of what I do as a coach is train people out of the bad habits that shame has drilled into them.

You hold back your voice by tightening your throat. You keep the opening of your mouth as closed as humanly possible in case someone hears you. You shut down your energy and shrink inside yourself so nobody will notice you're singing.

I do admit that there are people out there who are beautifully gifted and haven't had formal training to get them there. Often their background explains some of why that is.

There are some cultures and groups in which singing and making music together is not only encouraged but it's a huge part of the way that the community comes together.

These groups don't encourage people to contribute their voices to the music because they're talented, it goes beyond that. They sing to connect. It's an in-built part of their culture.

I was in Vietnam recently and noticed the same attitude.

The whole crew on the boat I was on performed a song for us without the slightest hint of a blush. Singing to a group of people as a way to show their gratitude seemed completely normal to them and I loved it.

I wish that mentality would flow into communities of all nationalities and cultures because it allows people to be much more open and free with their voices and not solely judge them on being “in tune.” You can find this in small pockets and groups, but wouldn’t it be nice if it were more widespread?

This way of including music in a culture acknowledges that self-expression is a key ingredient and reason for creating music. It doesn’t matter if someone is singing the wrong pitch, it matters that they’re *there*. That they show up and use their voice to solidify their place in the community.

Please don’t let anyone convince you that you are a lost cause, whether it be vocally or otherwise. Sometimes it feels as though music is programmed into us and we’re encouraged to express it when we’re young, and sometimes it takes a bit more time, concentration and practice.

Just don’t let someone choose for you. If you don’t want to learn or get better at an instrument, that’s on you. But if you’re shutting the door on a part of your creativity because too many people have told you that you simply don’t have the chops or talent for it, tell them to shove it... you know, in a more polite way.

Isn’t music about adventure? About getting lost and finding pieces of yourself that you didn’t know were there? About digging up old memories or feelings and expressing them

without uttering a word?

If you're reading this book, there's a relatively high possibility that you haven't thought about music in that way for a while. Maybe it's only been a few months or perhaps your guitar has been decaying slowly but surely for years in the back corner of your bedroom.

So how and why does music lose its magic? At one point in your life it would've hit you like lightning, fuelling you, revving you up like a V8 engine. But for most musicians I know, there are times when it falls flat.

In the next few chapters we're going to be crawling through a fair few miles of mud to find out what dulls our excitement and what encourages us to hide ourselves.

But the best part? Coming out the other side with clarity around why you're holding yourself back and a game plan for how to get back some of that child-like wonder and the spark you've been missing.