

THE LONDON A CAPPELLA FESTIVAL SPECIAL

ISSUE 15

# isino



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UNEXPECTED CAREER PATH

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# The gps girl

recalculates 



Australian singer songwriter Karen Jacobsen believes in making the most out of every opportunity that comes her way. When she moved to New York with her heart set on getting a record deal, things didn't turn out quite according to plan. So she refocused her efforts and kept reaching for her dreams. Through her voiceover work she landed a job as a "voice" on GPS systems and mobile phones. Now Karen gives directions on over 400 million satellite navigation systems and smartphones worldwide. She has used the recognition she receives for this work, to promote her music and deliver motivational advice. She spoke to Line Hilton.

**iSing:** Why do you sing?

**KAREN JACOBSEN:** There is no way I could not sing. Singing is such an innate part of who I am, and aside from that, I just love it. I love the physical and emotional experience of it. I love what it gives me, and it's so wonderful that it gives other people something too. I could sing selfishly just for myself; the fact that it brings joy or inspiration or healing or some

kind of reaction from others is such a bonus.

**iSing:** You were inspired to pursue a singing career from a very young age by Olivia Newton-John, another great Aussie singer. How did you set out to achieve this goal?

**KJ:** When I was seven years of age I was sitting in our family living room in Mackay in North Queensland, Australia, and Olivia Newton-John came on the television. To me, she was the most important and most influential person in the entire world. It was really clear to me that I wanted to become a professional singer and move to America - and I had no idea how I was going to do

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**moment’s**  
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**what you do**

that. I was living in a country town on the other side of the world with a family consisting of exactly zero professional musicians or people in the entertainment business. But somehow there was an innate part of me that said: “Well, somebody has to grow up and be a professional singer

and move to America. Why not me?”.

So I spent my entire childhood daydreaming about growing up and becoming a successful singer. I really believe we manifest what it is we want. I’m not saying you can sit and wish something to happen and it will happen, but I do believe if you identify something you want, you write it down, you think it through, and you take action toward it, it can happen.

I started piano and singing lessons when I was eight. I was writing songs from the age of seven and I also loved being in school musicals. I did my piano exams and ultimately got my MSA from the Australian Music Examination Board. I sang in local eisteddfods in every possible category I was qualified to sing in, anything to be singing and performing and on stage in front of people.

When I was 18 I went to Brisbane to study jazz at the Queensland Conservatory of Music. The biggest lessons of that time came from lecturers and fellow students who were professional musicians, who opened the doors, showed me how to begin a business in music, how to book gigs, be a band leader and sing recording sessions as a jingle singer. That was the true beginning of my business.

After university I worked in Brisbane for four and a half years, then I moved to Sydney, where I spent 10 years singing and playing piano in piano bars in hotels with my jazz trio, recording and working in television; all of the different things that a versatile Australian performer does.

**iSing:** At what point in your career did you move to New York?

**KJ:** I moved at the age of 31. I was

scared, but it was time to take that step. So, I started to tell everybody that I was going to move to America. Some people were bewildered by my decision. I couldn’t turn the radio or the TV on in the 1990s without hearing my speaking voice or my singing voice. I was also performing regularly on television. People couldn’t understand why I would give all that up for the uncertainty of New York. But I was drawn to the US. There is no logical explanation other than I knew it was right. I followed my inner GPS!

**iSing:** Tell us what the challenges were in moving to New York?

**KJ:** The biggest ones were emotional. It’s very easy to talk about being in a new country without your usual support network and how you need to start again in terms of contacts, finding somewhere to live, work visas and all of these usual tangibles. But the emotional component is the most challenging part. That first year in New York was a year of extreme highs and extreme lows. This is a city that really puts people through its paces. I find most people I know who come to New York have some kind of really extreme experience.

New York City is not the kind of place people come to just hang out - people generally come here with a purpose, they’re driven and are here to accomplish something. If somebody doesn’t come here with a clear reason and sense of purpose, they don’t stay. Which is fine, but it means that a lot of the people I know in New York have that driven quality.

**iSing:** How did you earn a living in the beginning?

**KJ:** One of the huge challenges of

coming to a new place is making a living, and the entertainment business is not always the easiest industry to work in. I was meeting people and taking every opportunity I could to sing and to perform on other people's shows as a guest, or with my own concerts. I felt like I had to make up for lost time and build those connections. I talked to the people doing what I wanted to do and asked them how they did it. Inevitably, people are pretty kind and said "Let me keep my ears and eyes open". A lot of that happened for me. Soon after arriving in NY, I was connected by Ben Butler, who is one of Australia's top musicians and a guitarist based in the States. He tours the world with Chris Botti and has played with artists like Sting and George Michael.

Ben said: "Why don't you come down to the Bitter End? There are some singer songwriters that I play with, and they have a gig tonight,

and I would like to introduce you around." I went down and one of the performers on the bill that night didn't show and they asked if I would be able to get up and do a song. It's my second week in New York City, and I'm at the Bitter End on stage performing to a full house, it was extraordinary. That is how it's done. You need to be ready. You've got to be performance ready at a moment's notice to get in there and do what you do and give what you've got to give.

Fast forward quite a bit of time to when I was really starting to find my feet. I started to do what I had done in other places - get on the phone. Now, I know these days getting on the phone is not as popular. People like to send a text to say "Is it okay to talk?". But I called every voiceover agency in town, even when they specifically said "do not call". You know what? I was a foreigner with a foreign accent with many years of

high-level experience, and I knew that I had something to offer.

I'm a big proponent of identifying how you can offer the person you are calling a solution. So, I got on the phone. I could talk hours about this aspect of building a business; it's one of the ways that I got started. I ultimately worked freelance for a number of agents before being approached by one of the top agents in the country and signing with them a couple of years later. I stepped into that part of the bread and butter work from getting on the phone.

**iSing: Did that support your singer songwriter ambitions?**

**KJ:** It absolutely did. I had a business in Australia where I did a considerable amount of studio work and live work, and both of those were profit centres, and the same happened here.

**iSing: Why New York?**

**KJ:** New York really called me. When the time came to move to America, there was just no question, it was going to be New York. I just felt drawn to the city.

I think there are two distinctions when it comes to singers: one is a singer who is also an entrepreneur and able to be a bandleader, for example; the other is a singer who sings, and does not necessarily want to work that business side. I don't think too many people in the second category do really well. I think singers who have an entrepreneurial style, or skills developed from being a bandleader, and the person who books the jobs, do much better. If they don't do it themselves, they have somebody very close to them



who is on their team, doing that and creating that for them. In my experience somebody who does not either do that themselves or have somebody close to them doing that is not going to find it easy in New York. I see, meet and know a lot of singers, singer songwriters and performers, and they all have that drive.

**iSing:** You play the piano, you're a singer, you're a songwriter. You've been on stage in musical theatre, and worked as a session singer and voiceover artist. Do you see having these multiple skills as an advantage or a disadvantage, especially with your earlier goal of wanting to be a signed artist?

**KJ:** It's an advantage and a disadvantage at times. I embrace it as an advantage now, but I do know in business, if you want to have success with velocity, you pick one very clear lane and you ride that lane until you have that profit centre working. Then, you add another one in. If you're trying to do six things at once, it's going to take longer potentially.

Initially when I came to New York my goal was to partner with a record label and really build my career out of that. That was in the early 2000s when basically the industry imploded. The industry changed so much; the game seemed to change under my feet right at that time.

I was in a great situation on September 10, 2001. I was in the final weeks of working on a song that the writers, the producer and I were very excited about. We were at this swanky industry party on the Upper West Side celebrating because we'd just finally had the mix of this song and there was talk of this development deal.

The next day the world fell apart,

and New York was in mourning, and my deal fell apart. That's just the way that that went. I picked myself up and continued to make my own records. I've now released nine albums on my own label. I did a Christmas album last year which I'm really proud of and excited about. I continue to write and record and do it my way, which in many ways doesn't happen when you have certain other partners. Would I still like that opportunity? I would. I think it's still on the cards but it's going to come around in a different way. I'm now well known for something completely different. So, you just never know.

**iSing:** Tell us how getting the GPS and Siri voiceover gig has changed your life and your work.

**KJ:** I never expected that my speaking voice would end up on a billion devices around the world. I recorded for three weeks, four hours a day for a text-to-speech voice system. I then came back to my life as a singer songwriter in New York and didn't give it any further thought. Then it popped up in GPS devices and people started saying: "You're the voice in my car. We go on lots of wonderful trips together. You're like a member of my family." They would tell me their GPS stories and apologise for yelling at me. It was really bizarre. This started to happen more and more frequently. People related to me; we had an immediate rapport and I knew there was something to be created. It took me a while and ultimately I created an empowerment brand called The GPS Girl with the principle of recalculating in life and in business, a process of being able to keep going even when things don't go as planned.

GET SOCIAL  
with Karen



The GPS Girl got a lot of attention and a lot of interest. I now find myself as a keynote speaker at conferences and international events. I have written two books and do media appearances and speak to people about recalculating and how to keep going no matter what. The music, which of course is the true me, has also been incorporated into the brand. I feel really fortunate to have a vehicle for my music; in a way I didn't expect or know it was possible. I speak to hundreds of thousands of people and share my story, my journey of how I navigated my way from the Great Barrier Reef to the Big Apple. I will sometimes be asked to sing at a gala or do a concert. Back here in New York, I still deliver my concerts. When I travel, I still do concerts or special appearances and sing the national anthem and sporting events or big holiday concerts.

So it's changed my life by getting me to zoom out to a satellite view, to see a bigger purpose for myself than I initially had as just a singer. I get the opportunity to have an impact in ways I didn't ever realise I could. The music is core, but not the only part of it. That's the big surprise.

**iSing: How do you prepare for a singing or speaking gig?**

**KJ:** Preparing to go onstage is less dramatic for me than it used to be, because I have that mindset of always being performance ready. I do a few vocal exercises at the sound check but the majority of the preparation takes place when I am doing makeup and hair. I do mental preparation while getting ready. I know that when I have thought through every aspect of my performance, I give



a better performance. I'm a huge proponent of mirror work, where I actually perform to my reflection in a mirror - which is one of the most disgusting things you ever have to do. But I know from experience that it is a really powerful tool. It means when I'm out on stage, I'm not wondering about whether or not I look a certain way or what people might think, because I've resolved for myself that I know how it is for me. I've got to a point where I'm okay with it.

**iSing: Have you ever experienced performance anxiety?**

**KJ:** One day, I might write an entire book on performance anxiety. From the age of about six or seven I would have extreme abdominal pains when I had a big performance coming up. If I had a singing or piano performance at school or an eisteddfod the abdominal pains would be so bad that I would be home from school for up to a week at a time. They sent me for tests to try and see what was wrong with me. After every round of tests, the



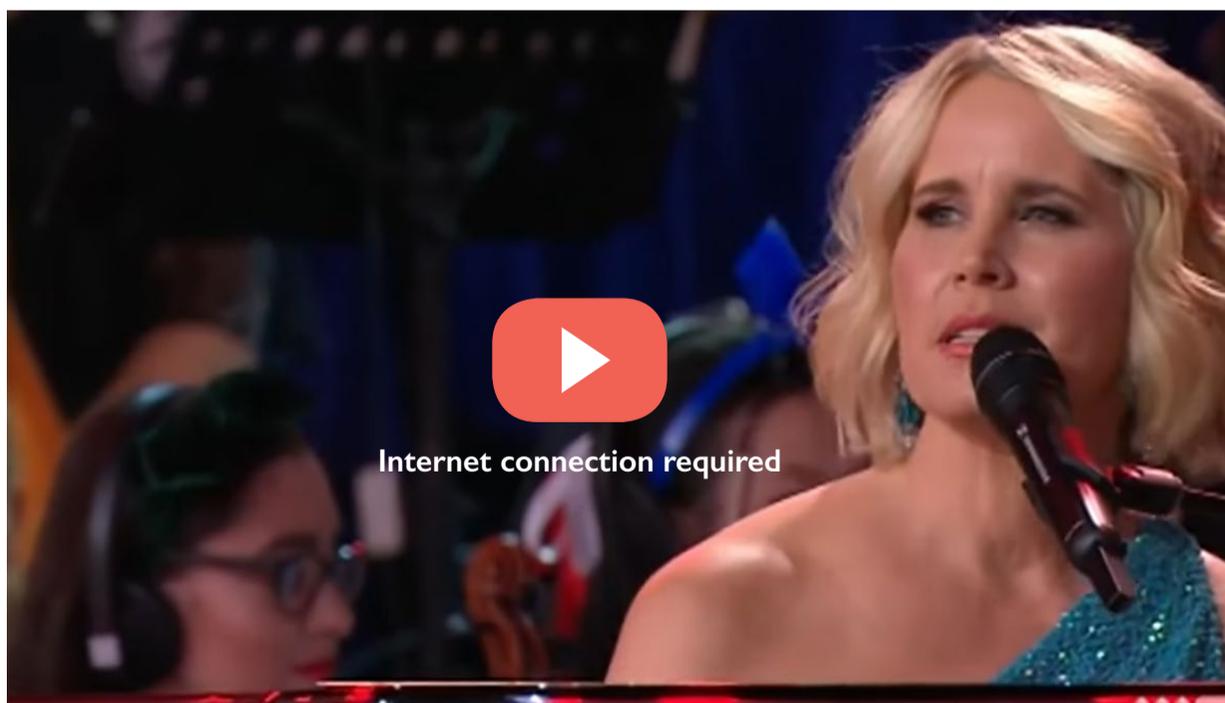
NOBODY DOES IT BETTER - KAREN JACOBSEN AT THE PRESIDENT'S BALL IN VANCOUVER, CANADA, 2013

doctors would tell my parents there was absolutely nothing wrong. It was just nerves, and it was a very confusing — it was horrible, because I knew I loved to sing. I knew I loved to be on stage, but my body was sending me all these very confusing signals. Over time, I developed tools to handle it. I was probably in my 30s before I had any level of control of my emotional and physical experience before, during and after a performance. Before that I would get

through the performance but come off stage and crash; I just totally tore myself to pieces about what I had done. I found it really hard to see any positivity in my performance. It wasn't healthy.

I have a passion for personal development, which has really been my saviour and helped me develop into a confident performer. Earlier this year, I sang the national anthem at a very big sporting event in Australia called the State of Origin. I sang live in a stadium for 52,000 people and for many more on television. I've had many high stakes performances in recent years, but this one was memorable to me because I made the decision to enjoy it, and I did. Now, was my adrenaline running? Absolutely. Was I nervous? Yes, but it was an excited nervous. Did I know I was going to nail it no matter what? You bet I did.

When I went out there, I was focused on delivering to the people in the audience. My focus wasn't on how do I sound? How do I look? What is it going to be like? Instead I



HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SING - KAREN JACOBSEN AT CAROLS BY CANDLELIGHT MELBOURNE 2015

was thinking “I’m here to represent my country”. It’s only taken 47 years to get to that point. I want to encourage young singers to realise that it can get better. It’s normal for it to be extremely anxiety-provoking, and it’s going to be okay. It’s really possible to keep working on that side of things.

I am also conscious of self talk. If I notice any negative self talk, it means my focus isn’t on the right place. My job and my focus is to be out there in the eyes and hearts and minds of the people in the audience. And practising that is a game changer.

**iSing: How do you practice that then?**

**KJ:** You need to be mindful of it, and just keep doing it. I make eye-to-eye contact, and you let go of those thoughts. For me meditation is a huge piece of it. I have a regular meditation practice. I haven’t missed a day in over five years. I meditate for 15 minutes every single day, and it makes a massive difference and helps to put my focus somewhere specific.

**iSing: What advice do you have for singers who are trying to build a career?**

**KJ:** Develop yourself as a business person as soon as possible - or have somebody extremely close to you who will do it for you. It would be a wonderful world if all any singer had to do was sing. The music business has the word “business” in it for a reason. Maybe hire a business coach. If I could go back in time I would tell my 22-year-old self to hire a business coach. I didn’t have a business coach until five years ago, but it has totally changed my life and my world in the most positive of ways.

The first one you go to may not be the “one”, but find somebody who coaches people in the arena you want to get to. You need someone who can give you that kind of insight and experience and help you develop a real business framework and plan tangible goals. Go talk to those people who have done what you want to do. And look for pathways, because the pathways are sometimes

very unclear in the music business, but there are lots of people who have created their own.

**iSing: What’s next for Karen Jacobsen?**

**KJ:** I am very happy when I have a creative project. I just released my second book, and I am now working on a memoir style business book, which is a big project I’ve been putting off for a while. I am also working on a recalculating television show and a musical show From Mackay to Manhattan, which is really a one-woman show about my journey, which will have all the music threading through the storyline. So, I have some really fun, exciting, creative projects in the pipeline; and another six on the back burner ■

View the full interview on the iSing YouTube Channel.



## LINE HILTON



**WHO IS SHE?** iSing founder, Line Hilton helps pro and semipro singers, artists and voice teachers with their voice, performance, mindset and training. Her speciality areas include Performing Arts Medicine, anatomy, health, technique and mindset. She pulls on a wide range of qualifications, experiences and interests to assist her clients to build and develop the knowledge and skills they require for their craft. She is an Advisor to Vocology In Practice, a voice teacher network and a BAST singing teacher trainer.



[linehilton.com](http://linehilton.com)

# Karen Jacobsen's

## TOP 10 TIPS

### TO PROTECT YOUR VOICE

#### 1. Be rested

To maintain a healthy voice it is vital to get enough rest. I make sure I get a good eight hours of sleep each night to keep my voice in great shape. Put sleep in your calendar like an important appointment (because it is) and prevent being run down.

#### 3. Honey is my secret weapon

Honey has amazing healing properties, is pleasant to taste and is very soothing. If I feel a little tickle in my throat or I am vocally tired, I will have a spoonful of honey. I fight off potential problems, by having a teaspoon of honey every hour or half hour, especially before bed.

#### 5. Oil pulling

I recently learned about an ancient Ayurveda treatment called oil pulling. This is amazing for overall health, and involves swishing cold-pressed organic sesame oil in the mouth for between seven and 20 minutes first thing each morning. I learned this from top New York vocal coach, Joan Baker, and a great side effect is a vast improvement in dental health. There is a lot of excellent information online about oil pulling.

#### 7. If it hurts, don't do it

This may sound obvious, but we've all been in a situation where we are a little too exuberant with our voice and it starts to hurt. You may be giving a presentation and the microphone isn't working properly, or you are trying to be heard over loud music or conversation. If it hurts in any way, it is hurting your vocal cords and could lead to major problems.

#### 8. Beware of dairy

If you have to use your voice more than usual, whether it be at a conference, trade show or a series of meetings, watch how much dairy is in your diet. It can create more mucus which means the vocal passages are not as clear.

#### 9. Skip the ice

In the US cold drinks are routinely served with ice. Ice can tighten or numb your vocal cords and lead to big problems. I find it irritates my throat and leaves me more susceptible to a sore throat. Always ask for water with no ice and wean yourself off ice in all beverages.

#### 2. Drink a crazy amount of water

This is essential. I drink six to ten glasses of water throughout the day (did you know that 80% of Americans are dehydrated?) and I also drink tea. I prefer almost tannin-free tea and make sure I am drinking water and tea all day long. If you need to, set an alarm several times a day as a reminder.

#### 4. Carry a scarf

I carry a scarf with me year round as I am often in some kind of artificially heated or cooled environment. Even in the height of summer a restaurant or convention room can be icy. The scarf helps protect my throat and control my body temperature. If I find my throat or neck is exposed and it is unusually cool I can catch a chill and it can be downhill from there, potentially leading to a vocal problem.

#### 6. Yelling is telling

If you are in a loud environment and straining to be heard over music, talking or cheering, do not yell. Do not scream. Do not cheer super loudly. Protect your voice.

#### 10. Clearing your throat can cause injury

Do not "clear your throat" under any circumstances. This can actually injure your vocal cords. Instead, take a sip of water, cough gently or swallow to clear the throat.