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Tennessee

A Special Section for Our Tennessee Readers

LIVING

people
and
places

Applauding The Vanderbilt Voice Center

inside

HALT: Humans
And Animals
Learning Together

Raji Reigns Over
Fusion Cuisine

Hats Off to These
Tennesseans

Turtle Talk
In Chattanooga



Country
Music Star
Patty
Loveless

Southern Living

INSET: With his background in classical music, Dr. Tom Cleveland helps Patty Loveless and others retrain their singing voices.



The Unsung Heroes

When singers squawk and talkers balk, this Nashville medical center team heals the tiny vocal cords that grant song and speech.

at Vanderbilt Voice Center

Her glistening eyes rival her shimmering dress as she accepts the Country Music Association's Female Vocalist of the Year award. That unforgettable voice—haunting in such songs as "How Can I Help You Say Goodbye?," teasing in playful tunes like "Blame It on Your Heart"—quavers with unshed tears. Then it rises triumphantly: "I want to thank my

husband, Emory Gordy, and my brother Roger."
Patty Loveless also credits the Vanderbilt Voice Center, which discovered an aneurysm on her vocal cord. The ticking bomb in her throat threatened to silence the career begun when Patty arrived in Nashville at age 14 with her older brother. Now, years later, Dr. Robert Ossoff advised her to quit

PHOTOGRAPH: NATE McDERMOTT/GETTY IMAGES

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF COUNTRY MUSIC ASSOCIATION



ABOVE: Dr. Robert Ossoff (left) and Dr. Mark Courey worked with Patty Loveless, as they have thousands of other singers and nonperformers. "We'd like to do vocal training to prevent problems," says Dr. Ossoff about the center's next goal.

recording and get off the road for three months. She needed surgery. Immediately.

"I wasn't listening to him," Patty recalls. "I kept saying, 'Maybe I can just try it and see how it goes.' They looked at me like, 'You don't know how serious this is.'" Emory, Patty's producer, concurred.

"Patty is responsible to a fault," her husband explains. Thousands of dollars were at stake, but so were her vocal cords.

Patty's reaction typifies the paralyzing denial many singers go through when faced with losing their careers. Entrusting their voices comes easier when they learn of the clinic's sterling reputation.

Voted one of America's 100 best doctors by colleagues in his field, Dr. Ossoff is chairman of the Department of Ear, Nose, and Throat, executive director of the Voice Center, associate vice chancellor of Vanderbilt University Medical Center, and chief of staff at the hospital. Ten years ago he created the best team in the country dedicated to healing vocal cords. Speech pathologists, voice scientists, and vocal

training coaches housed under one roof bridge the gap between ear, nose, and throat doctors who specialize in the larynx and the singing world. They also heal those with speaking problems.

"I don't usually do interviews, but I made an exception for these guys because I have a lot of faith in

"I had a lot of faith in Dr. Ossoff, and I had a lot of faith, period."

—Patty Loveless, country music artist

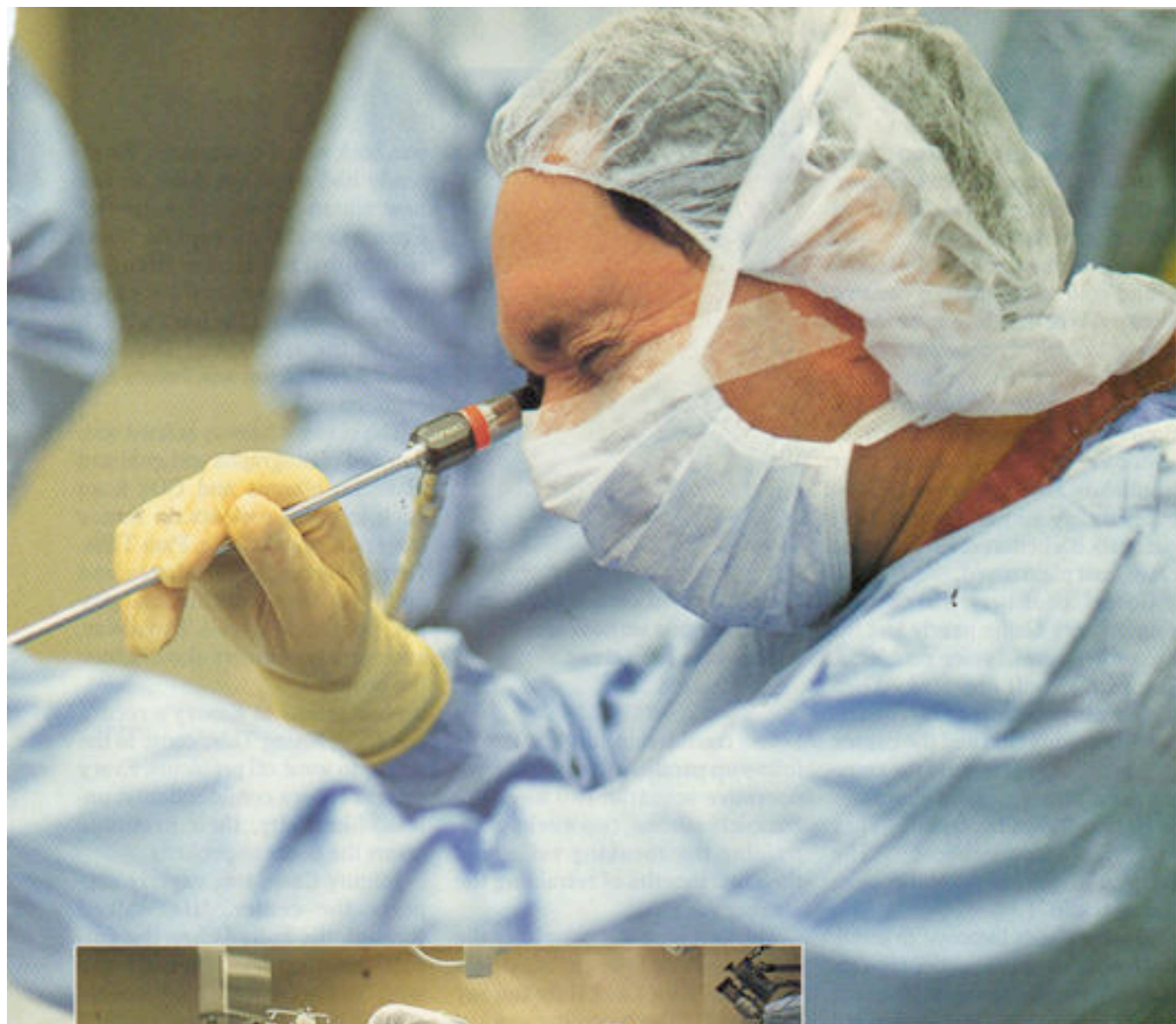
what they're doing," says Emory.

His trust is well founded. When country singer Wynonna Judd lost her voice just before The Judds' final performance, Dr. Ossoff and colleagues Dr. Ed Stone and Dr. Tom Cleveland coaxed the singer's cords through the crisis. Even after learning his son had broken his collarbone, Dr. Ossoff didn't leave.



"My son told me he didn't need me," explains the surgeon, his voice as soft as down. Wynonna did. Many of the staff have traveled with singers to track down clues to voice problems. They discover the glamorous life ain't so glamorous.

"Let's say the performers have just finished a concert," Emory says. "They wait around until the equipment is packed. Then they wait until the concessions are accounted for. Then they drive to the hotel, wake up the bus drivers, and get on the road to the next gig. They stay on the buses to sleep. When they wake up, they go to their hotel rooms, shower, make phone calls, then over to the venue for sound check. For singers, there are probably phone interviews, and then there are 'meet and greets' (with fans and radio personalities)



both before and after the concert."

The road is tough, Patty agrees. "There are some artists that are as crazy as I used to be who travel 200 to 250 days a year." Since surgery, she's cut that figure to 180. The award-winning vocalist also limits interviews, warms up before performances, and drinks lots of water. Although Patty wasn't guilty, many

other artists must give up abusive lifestyles to heal their voices.

"What we do is we send them to Oral Roberts first," deadpans speech pathologist Dr. Ed Stone, director of speaking arts and sciences, about the straight-laced suggestions the clinic prescribes. Among them: no drinking, no smoking, and no whooping it up af-

ter performances. Limit those cacophonous cries like, "Are you having a good time?"

"How ready are they to listen to what we have to say?" asks Dr. Tom Cleveland, director of singing arts and sciences. "I had a singer in today who said, 'I was here two years ago for a checkup.'" At that point, the performer was given some voice problem prevention pointers. "He said, 'I listened, but it didn't mean very much.

Today, I'm ready to listen because *now* I'm experiencing difficulties.'"

"Some patients come in with multimillion dollar careers, and I've had them tell me there is no way that a

ABOVE and LEFT: Voted one of America's 100 best doctors by his colleagues, Dr. Robert Ossoff excels at the microscopic surgery the tiny vocal cords require. This precision makes surgery on the vocal cords intense.

shot of liquor isn't the proper way to warm up," says Dr. Mark Courey, medical director. But alcohol dries the cords. "That's a no-no."

However, the smoke-and-whiskey sound epitomizes many a country twanger. Will they lose their ability to sing "somebody-done-somebody-wrong" songs if the center does its job too well? No, assures Dr. Courey. "Because you learn to speak French doesn't mean your English is any less effective," he explains. A singer's voice isn't changed, it's bettered. And in some cases, just plain saved.

Gospel, Broadway, and country singer Larry Gatlin nearly lost his career because of voice problems. Then Dr. Ossoff operated. When the singer performs today, he frequently credits God and the center.

"My colleagues around the country are a little sarcastic about our work here," says Dr. Ossoff. "They ask, 'Who's your publicist?'" The surgeon laughs and says, "I answer, 'Larry Gatlin.'"

Most patients improve dramatically, while a small percentage remain unchanged. Even so, possible negative outcomes are spelled out before any treatment. Despite their big-money clients, Dr. Courey says, "I've never felt the threat of a lawsuit." The team explores medicine, lifestyle changes, and voice therapy



A voice analysis tool, similar to what police use, helps diagnose and follow voice problems over a period of time.

before considering surgery. Patty's follow-up parallels the typical post-operative scenario: two weeks of complete silence, two weeks of retraining the speaking voice, and then two months of retraining the singing voice.

The first time she sang after the surgery, Patty brought music for the song, "How Can I Help You Say Goodbye?" "The recording was just two weeks away, but when I tried to sing, it was weak," Patty recalls. "Dr. Cleveland was very gentle. He said, 'Give yourself time.'"

On studio D day, Patty's voice

was back with a vengeance. "We already had six songs done on her new album before the surgery," Emory says. "But I went back and re-recorded her on everything afterward. She stretched her range by a note on both the low and high end of the spectrum." The *Only What I Feel* album was Patty's first platinum seller.

The center's hallway is lined with donated photographs and gold and platinum albums and CDs from such grateful patients as Kenny Rogers, Crystal Gayle, Pam Tillis, Lorrie Morgan, Kathy Mattea, and Faith Hill. Gifts from thankful gospel, pop, rock 'n' roll, Broadway, and opera performers also brighten the center.

New artists at Emory's record company, Rising Tide, come to the center to ward off problems. Every patient enjoys confidentiality; unless, like Patty, their gratitude opens the doors to publicity.

Johnny Cash, too, eagerly supports the center. "He walked through the halls [when the current building was opened] and said, 'You need some gold records around here. I'll give you some,'" recalls Dr. Stone, pointing to three original gold records, including "I Walk the Line."

What's it like to work with such famous folks? "I've worked here several years, so I guess I've adjusted to it by this time," says speech pathologist Kim Chachere. Her newer colleague Jackie Gartner admits: "I'm still in the cart-wheel stage myself."

Dr. Stone laughs and adds, "It is an honor to work with them—or their mother, grandmother, or an uncle who is a garage mechanic. Uncle Joe's vocal cords are just as important to him, although he may not make any money with them." Teachers, preachers, politicians, salespeople, telephone operators, broadcasters, auctioneers, cheerleaders—all have been treated at the center.

"We had a 74-year-old gentleman



Speech pathologist Dr. Ed Stone checks Nashville up-and-coming singer Brooke Stuart using a stroboscope, a tiny lighted instrument that allows up close inspection of the vocal cords.



ABOVE: Grateful patients donate photographs and albums. Speech pathologists (from left) Kim Chachere, Jackie Gartner, and Melissa Portell hear one joke from nonperformers: When I leave here will I sound like Faith Hill, Vince Gill, etc.? "I tell them, if I could do that, I wouldn't be here myself," says Kim.

with laryngeal cancer," says Dr. Courey. His health returned after surgery. "We exchange Christmas gifts," the surgeon says.

"I have patients who come in saying, 'I don't go out of the house anymore,'" says Dr. Stone, because of debilitating problems such as spasmodic dysphonia, a nasty disorder that involuntarily slaps together the vocal cords and cuts off speech mid sentence. "We treat them and they come out of the woodwork."

Helping people is the center's mission. Nowhere is that more evident than in the operating room, a sea of blue scrubs where the only sounds that break the pristine stillness are a gurgling machine and an unruly beeper. When Dr. Ossoff enters, a masked voice immediately begins reporting the patient's status. The surgeon positions himself and probes down the patient's throat.

On the sidelines, Dr. Courey explains: "The patient has a compromised airway. It's a pretty intense procedure." Unspoken but under-



CENTER: Patty Loveless, 1996 Country Music Association's Female Vocalist of the Year, credits Vanderbilt with saving her career.

BOTTOM: Country, gospel, pop, rock 'n' roll, Broadway, and opera performers have signed the clinic's bulletin board.

stood: The problem could cost the patient's life. When Dr. Ossoff arises, the room seems to breathe again.

Back in his office, Dr. Ossoff admits: "There is stress because of the degree of precision involved. Most vocal fold nodules, polyps, cysts, etc., exist in a space approximately $\frac{2}{10}$ to $\frac{3}{10}$ of a millimeter deep within the vocal fold. Operation below this depth can cause scarring that interferes with voice production. Applying laser or cold steel to that smidgen of flesh requires conviction and steady hands."

But the rewards are great. "With a singer, it's really gratifying to remove a vocal lesion and then hear the next album," Dr. Courey says. "You can think, 'I am partly responsible for that.'"

As Dr. Ossoff considers the essence of his profession, his voice softens. "I tell my son, who is thinking about medicine as a career, 'Jake, you have to go into it because you're willing to work hard and you want to help people.'"

Maybe doctor-to-be Jake Ossoff should talk to grateful couple Patty Loveless and Emory Gordy, Jr.

"Thanks to these guys, she's still able to work hard at her career," praises Emory. "There was a time when we almost lost that."

Nancy Dorman-Hickson