

## Interview with Rollin Rachele

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*Rollin Rachele is an overtone singer who performs and teaches in The United States, Great Britain and Europe. He is the author of the "Overtone Singing Study Guide" and has produced three albums. This interview was conducted as part of the preparation for a series of articles published in Caduceus Journal on Overtone singing.*

Brian Lee:

Obviously you've got a musical background. Is your overtone singing self-taught?

Rollin Rachele:

I first got in contact with it was through my choral conductor in America, Ron Jeffers. He was very much into all sorts of things and he had one of the ethnomusicological records of overtone singing. He played it for the choir. I was in High School then but I was singing with the men's "Glee Club". Now the men's music is particularly interesting because you're getting such a rich fabric of overtones when you're singing, it's like a choir of angels. I'd heard this before I sang in the choir, "It's like there are women singing in this," but I don't see them." Overtones are always there in the voice. Anyway he played this record for us and said well "There's more than just the note you're singing. So then things started clicking because I'd heard this already in the choir's sounds. It was a technical university so everyone there is pretty much well-versed in sciences, so I understood the physics of sound. So that made sense. I was studying music, so I knew my intervals, and I was mostly interested in singing. So all together, just that knowledge gave the understanding.

BL: And when did you realise that that's what it was about for you?

RR: It took me a couple of months of practising pretty much every day before I even heard my own voice. I knew it was there because other people said "Oh, yeah. I heard it." Other people in the choir that had heard that record. I just went out into the stairwell and they heard it.

BL: How long have you been doing it?

RR: Since 1979. It took a couple of months. I was in High School still so I was trying to educate my High School music teacher. Nobody knew about it then. Most of the people started in the early 70s, Jill Purce, Stockhausen, Michael Vetter. People who were really innovators in the beginning of Western overtone singing would be Tran Quang Hai, David Hykes, Jill Purce in her own limited way, Michael Vetter, Danny Becher, Robert Laneri from Italy.

BL: How would you describe your technique?

RR: Since I was self-taught, my technique was totally different, but because I'd understood the theory behind it so I knew what was going on with the overtone series and I knew my intervals so I finally latched on in my hearing to what I was doing and so I could just go from there. And some things actually I get into the book, I don't think anyone else is using this kind of method. I've worked out a formula where you can actually calculate out what notes will come out when you go where and it's a very basic sort of formula.

What I'm doing is far away from this traditional ethnomusicological thing, so I make no claims to the ethno side. This is something that Michael Ormiston is doing for Mongolian and Mark van Tongeren is doing for the Tuvan music. I quite like what he can do, I find it quite impressive. but he was more interested in the ethno side and that's just not my thing. There is a division: there are ethnos, the healers and then the westerners.

B: So where would you put yourself in those three categories?

RR: What I try to do and I think I've done successfully is to make a classical form out of overtone singing. So I've brought in my western understanding and the sets of exercises and

taken what would have been known as a folk tradition in Mongolia and Tuva and created a school of overtone singing. So it's very much "Western".

B: Is there a difference in voice quality?

RR: Yes definitely. There's a difference in the tongue technique. For example with Mongolian they usually have contact with the tongue and the palette and it's a whole different shape inside.

B: What about the healing side of it?

RR: I don't try to heal. But one of the reasons that I'm in this music as opposed to anything else is that this music makes me feel better. For me the word "healing" already has connotations for people so I don't even want to use it. What you've really got with overtone singing and it doesn't matter if it's ethno or whatever, you're dealing with the basic fundamentals of sound itself. It's even further from that. It's only manifested as that. What you're really dealing with is sets of proportions in architectural terms, just pure mathematics. You've got one string that is a certain distance and if you cut that in half you get twice the frequency. If you cut it in thirds you get three times the frequency and in these relationships in musical terms are 2:1 which is an octave, 3:2 which is a perfect fifth, 4:3 which is a perfect fourth etc. These things are fundamental to life itself, to physical laws.

B: So you're saying that by consciously making music based on these proportions, there is an effect.

RR: Yes, but the effect you don't have to know about it. I think that our bodies will recognise it or something here recognises. There's something about that it's not just the novelty part of it.

Jude Rachele: It's a universal principle. And in answer to your question "What do you think about the healing side of it" There's no way you can produce that sound and not heal because it's based on universality.

RR: Well there's a whole-ness first of all because it is based on these fundamental mathematical ratios. They are the simplest ratios that exist. 2:1, 2:3, 3:4... so they're at the core of something. And I guess that one of the things to build on in life you build with the foundation. It's the basis. The fundamentals of sound, of motion, of movement itself. So base your life around these core elements. Then you're tapping in on something. I'm not going to pretend to know what you're tapping in on but you're tapping in on something.

B: In relation to the harmonic series, the higher you go does it change for you?

RR: If you think of it in circular form then over a function you get a spiral and if you look at your beginning point as #1, then you make a full circle to #2, because that's an octave. So each new octave, you're getting into a whole new layer. So numerically, for people who latch on to the powers of 2, there's 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64 etc. These represent the octaves, because it's a doubling of the frequency. Every time you take half of a string, half of what you had, half of that again and again, you're always going to get a higher octave. Every new octave there are more tones that come into play. So it follows western music almost to a T. First thing you're getting into is organum, parallel fifths, and then you get purer intervals but going a little bit away from that - you're getting the thirds and the minor thirds, and the seconds, and then the minor seconds which is the twelve tone stuff. But if you get beyond #16, so between the octave 16 and 32, then you're starting to get into these weird intervals. As I go up you get hints of it going away from western music. Those hints are at #7, #11, #13. These are also prime numbers. Then almost every interval is weird and then you start orienting toward the ones that sound right again. I can hear up to #48. I can't tell you the difference between 46 and 47. But I can tell you when it's 48 because it's pure again.

I do look at the numbers. If every tone has a number, which it does with this system, then you can look at what is it peculiar about these numbers. We're dealing with proportions. And if two

things are going at the same time, they can be going in relative harmony to one another or they can be in relative dissonance. "Hey baby, we're on the same wavelength" to put it in Californian terminology. But it's really true that the reason that we perceive the octave as being the same tone, is that it virtually is the same tone.

B. So what would people get out of coming to your workshops?

RR. It depends on who it is. If it's a musician they would get a much more specific representation of what this "timbre" is.

B. Are you talking about singers or instrumentalists?

RR. Either one because you're dealing with a space that's created. And with instrumentalists you're using a different space on the outside which changes the overtone structure. That is an effect in itself. But it can also help the blend of whatever instruments you're playing with. That's for instrumentalists. For singers of course, the actual overtone singing itself. You become much more familiar with what makes the vowels. Vowels and overtones have nothing to do with each other and they have everything to do with each other. People will confuse and in the teaching of overtones they will try to use the vowels, where it should really be the other way round.

B. I'm interested in what you say about vowels because a lot of people in a lot of the books relate vowels to overtones and also vowel sound to the chakras. What's your feeling about that?

RR. My feeling is that there is more to know about that, I don't really know. I tend to very practical in these matters. You may have a name for whatever it is and you call it a wheel of light or a circle or a spiral or whatever. If you're singing a note and you have some tissue or cell that has some resonant frequency it would simply vibrate with it because that's what it would do! So if you know specifically what those tones are, then you can get that.

B. Is that something you work with yourself?

RR. I don't work with it as a specific thing. But other people whom I sing for, they will say, "That opened up my 5th chakra" OK that's fine. That's their experience and you can't touch it.

B. But people have reported experiences and describe them in those terms.

RR. People "see" colours when they hear my singing. They just get carried someplace, scenes of mountains. They talk about shifting into a different consciousness. Now this I relate to more strongly because I recognise the shift. Here we are in London, we're buzzing, we're talking about the subject but then you sit and sing a minute and it changes the whole perception. If I do that, personally when I stop singing, my ears are just open to sounds that are much further out, and I get a much larger sense of self. Then it fades back into my normal way of existing after maybe 20 or 30 seconds. Then I'm my "normal" self again. Other people have reported opening their chakras, seeing colours, seeing light, floating, "The most sacred sound I've ever heard..."

B. I imagine by "sacred" she means something that connects her.

RR. It's connecting but it's also beyond words. I mean how else can she describe it. But you get other things. I've been called the "Human synthesiser", which is a whole different dimension.

B. So in a workshop what will people learn?

RR. The first thing, I try to give people an understanding of an instrument really is, and once they understand that, I give them the number system and I do some demonstrating, then I say OK, mouth positions. You isolate your movements. The lip movements first, then tongue movements, then you combine them, this is all on one fundamental tone. Then what happens

when you change your fundamental tone. Then other things are in play. What I want to achieve is an ultimate flexibility within the system. Once that's done, then you can do whatever you like with it.

B. What's the best way for people who want to learn overtone singing?

RR. The best way is to go to a workshop first, keep practising in your own way. You'll get all the basics in one day. Then depending on their background, how far you can take that, and what time it takes to do that, that's entirely up to the individual. If you've got a good musical background you should be able to get all the numbers on one fundamental, hear them all, be able to do a basic fundamental change, and get certain overtones that you're trying to give in a few weeks. But you can get very far in a two day workshop. You can do it, but I have to be there, to say "No, you have to open your mouth a little bit more," or, "You have to push your tongue a bit further. Then, there it just came out. Did you hear it? Did you hear what he just did?" etc. So you need some feedback. But if you're the type of person who can just put on a tape recorder then that's OK. I mean I learned it on my own so obviously other people can too. But you have to have a working knowledge of music intervals. You have to know your intervals. For example if I say "Sing a major 3rd." The more you know about music, the more you experience the music, the further you can get.

B. Do you find people go through emotional stuff in your sessions?

RR. Definitely. But I'm not there as a therapist so I'm certainly not going to get into territory that's not my job. But it can come up and I can see it coming up. There is the awareness. But people are usually so grateful that they were allowed to sing. They actually sang for the first time in front of other people and they didn't do badly in fact they did better sometimes than the professional singer sitting next to them because they don't have pre-conceived notions of how to do it.

B. It's interesting that untutored voices often get it better.

RR. It's one of those paradoxical things. If you haven't been through it you would think contrarily.

B. So I think that's an important point to make. You don't need to be a trained voice or a trained singer in order to learn the production of overtones.

RR. Absolutely, we all have basically the same structures and as you would know a Japanese person born in America is not going to speak Japanese, he's going to speak American and he'll have an American accent because we're all basically structured the same way. We all have about the same volume in our mouths. Basically anyone can do it (with the exception of the small percentage of those who have physical damage.)

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