Imagine having a hit song on the radio, and people lining up to see you everywhere you go. You're getting all the publicity you could ever want and album sales are booming. Life could not be going better. Just as your rocket is about to deliver you to the stars, you open your mouth one night to sing – and nothing comes out.

That is what happened to Johnny Bush in 1972. His song “Whiskey River” was all over the radio, a national top-10. He was playing big venues now, not just honky-tonsks. The club was packed, standing room only. “I went to sing and my throat just closed off.” It was really frightening... at first because speaking was fine, but singing – especially the high notes – would just choke off.” A devout Christian, he thought maybe God was punishing him for his less-than-virtuous ‘drinkin’-cheatin’-honky-tonkin’ life…” The truth was a little more down to earth.

Bush, who grew up “poor as mud” in Houston, recently returned from a tour of northern Europe (where he had no idea he had so many loyal fans) and sat down to talk about his affliction and the man he credits with saving his career -- Dr. Blake Simpson, MD, Professor in the Department of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery and Director of The University of Texas Voice Center.

“He did save my career,” Bush says of Simpson. “He gave it back to me.”

Bush was already had quite a few songs on the charts, including two top 10 hits– one being “Whiskey River (Take My Mind)” which has become world famous thanks to a recording by Bush’s life-long friend Willie Nelson. Nelson still opens every concert with it.

Bush was an accomplished singer – often referred to as the “Caruso of Country.” In the late 1960s and early 1970s, his vocal abilities as a tenor with a strong range, as well as the depth of his vibrato, were the talk of the music reviewers of the time.

As Simpson tells it, Bush went to a variety of doctors and got a lot of explanations that did not fit. It was the mid to late 1970s and it usually took a decade or more to diagnose this rare condition. There are a lot of things that can weaken and affect the voice, including infections, allergies, deformities, psychological conditions, and damage to the throat and vocal cords.

The search for answers became more frantic. He had to find a cure for what was strangling him.
communicate is just devastating. There is no other way to say it. I couldn’t read to my grandchildren couldn’t hardly talk to them. But they didn’t think I was strange,” Bush says, crediting them for not treating him differently and for not shunning him as most other people did. “They just thought that is how I talked,” he says, smiling as he proudly points out pictures of grandchildren on his walls.

Simpson says Bush’s story is not unique. In those days little was known about SD, and a diagnosis easily took 10 years or more.

Through the 1970s to the 80s, Bush continued to lose his speaking voice, but was able to keep singing, even if just barely. His voice would give out after only a few songs. He even learned to play violin just so he could do something else on stage that did not use his voice. Playing “fiddle” gave his voice a chance to rest between songs.

Things continually got worse and soon the prednisone, vaporizers and various other substances (most of them prescribed) were not helping. His speaking voice became unintelligible.

“I got stuck in an airport once. My flight was cancelled and this was before cell phones. I’m trying to call my wife collect to get a flight. I couldn’t hardly talk, and the operator just hung up on me. It affects your whole life. You can’t imagine.”

“The only thing that really kept me going was I figured if it came on suddenly, it could probably go away just as suddenly. I now know that’s not true. I’ve got it forever. But that is why I never gave up.”

A real turning point came in the late 1980s when vocal coach Gary Catona heard about Bush’s plight and contacted him. Catona, who was living in Austin at the time, asked Bush if he could talk when he yawned. “It was a strange, but I told him yes, and he said, ‘I can help you.’” Because speaking was so difficult, Bush talked as little as possible. In fact, he had become a recluse. Catona told him his vocal muscles had become very weak from lack of use. Bush saw serious improvement as Catona used what he called “isokinetic exercises” to strengthen Bush’s voice.

It was around this same time that Bush tried his first Botox injection. It was at another school of medicine in the midwest. Desperate, he had the procedure as soon as he heard it might help. The technique was very experimental and they injected the “true” vocal cords. He was able to talk, albeit very quietly, but he lost the ability to control pitch. The effects lasted 90 days. This was three months of near-silence and complete unemployment for him. He swore he would never let anyone touch him with Botox again. Luckily “Whiskey River” became a national anthem in country music and Willie Nelson’s success with it meant royalties that helped Bush through the hard years. (According to Broadcast Music Inc. (BMI), “Whiskey River” has well over 1 million radio plays to its credit.)

By the mid-1990s Bush’s life had become a roller coaster of treatments, successes and failures. He continued to gain strength and control through Catona’s exercises, and though it was not the same voice before the symptoms, he was happy to be able to record and perform again. Talking was still nearly impossible, but as long as he could do a few songs before his voice gave out, he was happy to keep singing. He would go through waves of improvement and deterioration. If he had an especially good week, he would rush into the recording studio to lay tracks before it got worse. By the late 1990s, he had found a happy middle-ground as a singer who couldn’t talk. He continued working hard on his exercises and in 1998 he released his album “Talk to My Heart” to critical acclaim. “The ‘Country Caruso’ is back,” one reviewer penned.

“SD does seem to affect the speaking voice and the singing voice separately in some people,” Simpson explains, “but it is the same in some cases, and there is not enough research to pinpoint exactly what is going on.”

In 1998, Bush had a coronary bypass – and his singing voice got worse after that. No singing. No talking. “It was like I went back to zero,” Bush says, in a tone that tells you he was devastated, yet again.

Bush went to his private ENT in San Antonio, Dr. Richard Newman, who referred him to Simpson at the School of Medicine. Simpson credits Newman as a “great doctor” and a key player in Bush’s healthcare. Simpson’s first choice was the Botox treatment and of course Bush flatly refused. They discussed other therapies, but Simpson was insistent on
giving Botox another try. Based on some anatomical and physical studies Simpson had done, he thought injecting the false cords might provide some relief without hindering the ability to control pitch. Simpson was honest with Bush – injecting the false cords was untested.

“It took almost two years to talk him into it,” Simpson says, “And Johnny’s voice was not really getting better, so I finally got him to give it a try.”

It takes about five days to take affect – but the affect was nearly miraculous. It is Simpson’s theory that injecting the false cords allows the Botox to be diffused through the tissues so the affect is more subtle. When talking about it, Simpson is humble and very matter-of-fact. He’s just truly glad he was able to help this patient. This is in stark contrast to Bush’s take on it – who says meeting Simpson was divine intervention. He makes a good case for it in his autobiography.

It’s been five years now. Botox has been cleared by the FDA for addressing adductor spasmodic dysphonia. Bush goes back for injections about every eight weeks. He says he likes being a baritone instead of the tenor he used to be. He lowered the keys to his songs a bit, and he’s working a lot more now that a younger crowd has discovered “real Texas country music.”

“I’d say I’m singing at 100% now. And it’s all Blake’s fault.,” Bush jokes.

Listening to Bush’s latest album, you wouldn’t think there ever was a problem. He has a deep, rich tone and the crowds are coming back to hear him – and to dance to the classic Texas rhythms his band is known for. Bush released an autobiography and a new album last year. He also just finished producing an album he recorded with Willie Nelson and their other good friend, the legendary Ray Price – all fellow members of the Texas Country Music Hall of Fame. “We take country classics and do them up big band style,” Bush says. The album will be released next year.

Bush and Simpson are now a dynamic duo of vocal disorders – helping singers, trial attorneys, a prison guard, and others who depend on their voices. Bush and Simpson talk weekly and the men have become good friends. Bush recalls one of his favorite lines when he asked Simpson a question about cardiology. “Don’t ask me, I’m not a doctor,” Simpson replied.

Bush openly advertises his offer to help people with vocal disorders, and he means it when he says “Anyone. Anywhere.”

All they have to do is contact him. “I don’t send patients to Blake,” Bush says, “I drive them to him.” Simpson verifies this with a big nod of the head.

One example was about two years ago when Simpson got a call from Willie Nelson. Nelson was in Hawaii and an old friend was starting to talk like Bush in the early days of his condition. Nelson knew that “strangled” voice so well, he was certain the man had adductor spasmodic dysphonia. “And he did,” Simpson says. Nelson flew the man from Hawaii to San Antonio two days later. Simpson evaluated him, and treated him with excellent results. Simpson has been to see Bush and Nelson in concert, but it now seems they are bigger fans of “Our Hero, Dr. Blake,” as Bush refers to him.

Bush insists this article include a note to anyone interested in help with a vocal disorder. They can contact him through his website, www.johnnybush.com, where you can also find his new album Kashmere Gardens Mud which was released last year along with his autobiography, aptly named Whiskey River (Take My Mind). Bush’s autobiography is a raw, honest account of his life, and the rise, fall and rebirth of not just his career, but real Texas country music over the last 50 years. And the forward by Nelson is entertaining.

Simpson is a board-certified head and neck surgeon, with research interests in laryngotracheal stenosis and office-based treatments for laryngeal disorders, including pulsed-KTP lasers. His research has been published in numerous journals including the American Journal of Otolaryngology and Ear Nose Throat Journal. He practices in the medical center. For appointments call the ENT clinic at (210) 450-1500.

Simpson also has co-authored a book coming out this fall entitled Operative Techniques in Laryngology which he wrote with Clark A. Rosen, M.D., of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. Shipping is free if you pre-order it on Amazon now.