Randy Travis gets his voice back in a new Warner AI music experiment

For the first time since a 2013 stroke left country singer Randy Travis unable to speak or sing properly, he has released a new song. He didn't sing it, though; instead, the vocals were created with AI software and a surrogate singer.

The song, called "Where That Came From," is every bit the kind of folksy, sentimental tune I came to love as a kid when Travis was at the height of his fame. The producers created it by training an unnamed AI model, starting with 42 of his vocal-isolated recordings. Then, under the supervision of Travis and his career-long producer Kyle Lehning, fellow country singer James DuPre laid down the vocals to be transformed into Travis' by AI.

Besides being on YouTube, the song is on other streaming platforms like Apple Music and Spotify.

The result of Warner's experiment is a gentle tune that captures Travis' relaxed style, which rarely wavered far from its baritone foundation. It sounds like one of those singles that would've hung around the charts long enough for me to nervously sway to once after working up the gumption to ask a girl to dance at a middle school social. I wouldn't say it's a *great* Randy Travis song, but it's certainly not the worst — I'd even say I like it.

Dustin Ballard, who runs the various incarnations of the There I Ruined It social media account, creates his AI voice parodies in much the same way as Travis' team, giving birth to

goofy mash-ups like AI Elvis Presley singing “Baby Got Back” or synthetic Johnny Cash singing “Barbie Girl.”

It would be easy to sound the alarm over this song or Ballard’s creations, declaring the death of human-made music as we know it. But I’d say it does quite the opposite, reinforcing what tools like an AI voice clone can do in the right hands. Whether you like the song or not, you have to admit that you can’t get something like this from casual prompting.

Cris Lacy, Co-president of Warner Music Nashville, told *CBS Sunday Morning* that AI voice cloning sites produce approximations of artists like Travis that don’t “sound real, because it’s not.” She called the label’s use of AI to clone Travis’ voice “AI for good.”

Right now, Warner can’t really do much about AI clones that it feels don’t fall under the heading of “AI for good.” But Tennessee’s recently-passed ELVIS Act, which goes into effect on July 1st, would allow labels to take legal action against those using software to recreate an artists’ voice without permission.

Travis’ song is a good edge-case example of AI being used to make music that actually feels legitimate. But on the other hand, it also may open a new path for Warner, which owns the rights to vast catalogs of music from famous, dead artists that are ripe for digital resurrection and, if they want to go there, potential profit. As heartwarming as this story is, it makes me wonder what lessons Warner Music Nashville — and the record industry as a whole — will take away from this song.

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