

by Jim Testa / For The Jersey Journal
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Hoboken's Barbara Simon guides young singers to careers and self-discovery

Not everyone can have a career as a professional singer, but everyone can and should experience the joy of singing. That's one of the messages that Hoboken voice teacher Barbara Simon expresses in her new book *Singing - Body and Soul: A Medley of Fresh Ideas about Musical Theater*.

A Mile Square City resident since 1982, Simon has helped shape the nascent careers of young singers who have gone on to everything from successful rock bands to Broadway. But she said her most important goal has been to encourage people to find themselves in song.

"I have a much more holistic approach to singing than a lot of other voice teachers," Simon said. Her book discusses expected topics like pitch and tempo, intonation and breathing, but it also quotes psychologists and medical experts on subjects like the difference between right-brain and left-brain thinking. "The most important thing is to connect the whole person," she said. "The greatest joy is I get is watching a young person discover who they really are inside through singing."

Simon teaches both at her home studio in Hoboken and at the Art of Motion Studio in Ridgewood, and proudly mentioned several of her students who have upcoming events of note. For instance, Nick Fargo's hard rock band Mother is releasing a new EP in March and has a record release show coming up at Manhattan's prestigious Mercury Lounge on March 14. Another student, Daniel Purcell, sings and solos with Ithaca College's renowned a cappella group Ithacappella. (You can download Mother's new single "Dying Day" at motheranewlife.com and find out more about Ithacappella at ithacappella.com.)

Simon said that of the raft of television shows that fixate on finding new singing talent, her favorite remains *American Idol*, which is currently in the process of winnowing contestants down to the top ten for this season. "I think it's better produced than any of the other singing competition shows," she said. "I think the talent they have backstage, the training that the contestants get between the episodes, the focus of it, and the channels that they then have to get the winners into the music industry afterwards are all the best. I've never seen anything like this before."

American Idol does focus on one niche of the entertainment world, Simon conceded. "For instance, there are a lot of great folk singers out there, but you don't often see a folk singer on *American Idol*," she said. "Idol has its own pocket and venue, but it really has that one down."

The proof of *Idol*'s supremacy, Simon noted, comes not from the initial rush of celebrity or success that contestants enjoy, but what they go on to accomplish years after they were on the show. "These people make hits outside of the *American Idol* machine and that's what you don't see anywhere else," she added. "Yes, they make their first CD inside that machine and there's all this hysteria from the TV exposure. But then they leave and they win Oscars and they star on Broadway, and it's really been impressive. They'll put out a third or fourth CD totally outside that *American Idol* envelope and win Grammys and have big hit records. So I think the training that *Idol* gives to young people is legitimate, I think it's good for music overall."



photo by Jason Homa

Simon said she has two favorites from this season, long-haired rock singer Caleb Johnson and gritty song stylist Jess Meuse (the girl with the purple streaks in her hair.)

"Caleb has a really nice ring inside his voice, a sound which I find more sophisticated than what I usually hear in a rock singer," Simon said. "And he also pays so much attention to the exit of each note. Most singers focus on the entrance of a phrase or a run or a note. But he stays focused all the way through and then adds a little extra phrase or note when finishes a phrase, which I find quite intelligent. I really want to watch as he develops this season."

"And I also like Jess Meuse, she's got all the right pressures on her vocal cords for a rock singer, but she also has the option of being light and flexible, and that's kind of unusual," Simon commented. "So I'm watching both of them. But I really think the most fun part of the show is watching the contestants as they grow and change through the season. A lot of times someone who doesn't look like they have a chance in the first week or two will find something in themselves and really come out shining by the end. Clay Aiken was a perfect example of that. He didn't look like he'd last five minutes when he came on the show, and you laughed at what he looked like. And he became such a perfectly polished performer by the end of it. He just had an ability to unfold, and he stayed humble and responsible through the whole thing. And now look at him, he's done Broadway and then he went back and finished his college degree, now he's running for public office. What an amazing role model!"

"That's a real example of music helping a person transform from the inside," Simon concluded. "If they're able to make use of the experience, and get themselves in the right place at the right time, your whole life can change."

Barbara Simon's book *Singing - Body & Soul* is available from Amazon.com and other online retailers. For more information, visit her website at www.bjsimon.com.