

# SEATTLE WEEKLY

August 6, 2008

## How to Sing Like Alice in Chains

A new DVD from a vocal coach to the stars promises to unleash the metalhead in us all.



Hardly Art: Screaming is a skill.

I'm cawing like a crow, quietly at first, and with my eye on the front door. "Caawwww?" I try a little louder. Then I'm imitating a car. "Pirrrratessss are waaaaiting!" I finally yell, the r's rolling and gurgling somewhere in the space around my soft palate. Peeking through my blinds for a second, I make sure nobody is near the front door to my apartment before I continue to issue the warning, trying to see if I can feel a flapping coming from around my uvula...or something.

I'm deep into *The Art of Screaming*, an instructional DVD with a tagline that promises "Total Training for Vocalists on the Edge." You can scoff a little. I did at first. Screaming has always come naturally to me, of course—at least in short bursts. But if it's difficult even to sing along full-tilt to your favorite hard-rocking albums, how in hell do people keep it up on tour?

The answer recently has become more and more apparent: vocal coaching, especially from a handful of coaches to the stars. The best-known is probably New York-based Melissa Cross. She has released her own *Zen of Screaming* DVDs and boasts on her client list bands such as Sick of It All, Unearth, and Thursday. All of them have exorcism-strength yells.

Her West Coast counterpart is Susan M. Carr, based in L.A. but previously from Seattle. Her famous clients sound a little less extreme, but she claims to have helped shape the voices of some of the Pacific Northwest's greats—Alice in Chains and Sunny Day Real Estate among them. More recently she's worked with the likes of Alien Ant Farm (maybe it's better not to advertise





**August 6, 2008**

that one), Minus the Bear, and Mastodon, and her own new DVD is *The Art of Screaming*. The appearance of Mastodon's awesomely bearded front man, Troy Saunders, is what convinced me to pop in the DVD. That and the special screaming section for women.

I click the DVD menu option that says "Live Scream with Jeff." In it, a large bearded man from a band called Killing Roots enthusiastically demonstrates a three-part yell rising from the belly to the mouth. It sounds like "hooooooooo-gaaaaa" and sends my cats crouching to the floor, ears pricked in distress.

Then it's time for the meat of the DVD, a 30-minute series of warmups and exercises. (It also comes with an audio CD; play it in the car to scare fellow commuters.) I start with the women's section, which stars Carr in her cozy-looking home studio. The demo student is a petite girl named Serena Thomson, who we are told is the singer of a band named Pieces, and who, with her Egyptian eye makeup and dozens of silver rings, looks like a prettier version of the typical A Perfect Circle fan.

Patience is a virtue here. Carr's approach is gradual (as it should be)—focused on warmup and proper support, placement, and flow. Anyone who has taken basic vocal lessons will recognize these first components: breathing from the diaphragm, singing various phonic sounds in scales, hanging upside down to feel the palate rise on the high notes.

The fun stuff happens when, following the exercises, I begin singing the German words *nicht* and *nacht*, because, Carr tells us, this "guttural language" is good for finding that raspy noise on which to base a scream. So is cawing like a crow or saying "Vrooooo" like a car. Imitating a pirate is the most fun (even though pirates are *so* trendy). The point of it is to locate the part of your soft palate from which the sound comes, not your vocal cords.

So we get Thomson demonstrating, rolling around all the consonants from her lyrics, which honestly are kind of sucky, about some crappy day she's having ("What do I do in the morning/When I don't want to get up/And everything sucks?/I don't want to get out of bed"). Instead, I decide to growl out an old article of mine. (Note to self: For these purposes, write using more words with guttural consonants.)

Great. After all of this, I click on the men's section. I'll be honest, ladies—this side is a bit more fun. First of all, there are way more testimonial segments from Troy Saunders, who is interviewed with wet hair, lounging in a white bathrobe. (I am also reminded here of my old



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crush on Davey Ingersoll from Gosling, formerly known as Loudermilk. Thanks, *Art of Screaming!*)

Also, the cast is a little more fun. We get to watch Wolf Carr (Susan's son), of a Seattle band called Wesafari, who has an endearingly bespectacled redheaded look that must have invited middle-school swirlies. We also get a tired-but-serious-looking fellow named Robert Roth, of a band called Truly.

When it comes to the sort of growling yell, Wolf's lyrics are way more fun than Thomson's. "Raaaat face! Enemyyyy!" he shrieks. "Coming to hunt you downwwwwwn!"

In her encouraging Zenlike manner, Susan gently coaxes Wolf: "So what is this rat-face person like?" I run with it, imagining a rat face from my own life. I stick with the lyrics through the "high scream" exercise, in which I alternately bellow the prescribed phrase "he did it" and, um, "rat face" while drawing an imaginary circle above my head. When it comes to the chapter about the "witchy sound," there's a bansheelike screech.

By the end, I'm doing my best King Diamond impression. "Raaaat faaaace!" I'm now wailing operatically, neighbors be damned. And then I realize I'm a girl alone in her house, shrieking her head off with only the company of her cats. And that is as scary a persona as any metal dude can conjure up. Somebody put me in a band.

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