

Susan M. Carr: She's a Scream

By PETER MONAGHAN

The jazz-vocals world has plenty of belters, few screamers.

Susan M. Carr is neither. But the singer of jazz and popular song, and of many other styles, can lay claim to a most unusual skill and line of work. A seasoned performer of stage and screen, she uses her unusual expertise in vocal techniques to help singers of rock, grunge, thrash, and metal to produce ungodly output from the far reaches of the capabilities of vocal cords and larynx.

Want to learn to roar, bellow, or moan (to achieve those subtleties of voicing and meaning to which only 120 decibels of amped power can do justice)? Would you like, in addition, to be able to keep that up during a month of touring, and yet return home with a still-functioning epiglottis?

Then Susan Carr, coach in the extreme reaches of the expressive vocal arts, is the person to consult. Start by signing up for lessons, or by buying her DVD package, *The Art of Screaming*. That is what many singers well-known in worlds that jazz rarely intersects have done.

Many singers with large followings have come to Carr, either under their own steam, or encouraged by record-label managers for whom Carr has become a key component of keeping rockers and their throats on the road: the likes of the late Layne Staley of Alice in Chains, Sunny Day Real Estate's Jeremy Enigk, Chris Ballew of The Presidents of the United States of America, Troy Sanders of Mastodon, and Jake Snider of Minus the Bear.

Carr has taught them all how to achieve power, range, tone, and endurance, as she has instructed members of



other bands that may be among your favorites: Head Like A Kite, Point One, Droid, Vendetta Red...

Grunge-rockers, punkers, country singers, blues belters, more recently even the more dulcet likes of Jesse Sykes of the Sweet Hereafter. Carr has worked with all kinds.

But that's not her only claim to fame. There is Carr the jazz and cabaret singer—we'll get to that—but Carr packs many other arrows in her artistic quiver, all of which make her a more compelling singer.

She is a very successful vocal instructor who ran her studio in Seattle from 1978 to 1996 before spending a year in New York and seven in Los Angeles. In LA, she pursued her career in film, television, and stage acting. She won parts in a variety of television shows,

some of which you may never have heard of, but at least two of which, you likely have. Carr has been in *The Practice*, and she has been in—even sung in—*Gilmore Girls*.

For a few years, she has been back in Seattle, but still has students in LA, and travels there every six weeks or so to audition for casting directors, in quest of the fabled big break. In her mid-50s, she continues to believe that her chances are good. "I feel that, as I get older, the thing I have going for me is I'm very natural. In LA most of the women are not natural. And there have been many articles in the LA Reporter and other publications saying women who look natural, without all the surgery and that kind of thing, are harder and harder to find."

You can remind yourself of whether you recall her from her TV appearances by watching samples on her website, www.susanmcarr.com. Her versatility as

an actor—her arresting presence, which is intense, distinctive, and brought to a fine finish by years in the trade—carries over to her bearing on stage, where she has had vast experience beyond jazz singing.

She has, for example, sung in many operas and musicals. She began her career with classical training, and received a solid grounding with renowned Spokane instructor, Sister Marietta Coyle, while earning a bachelor's degree in fine arts in vocal performance and pedagogy. She became a lead vocalist and soloist with the Spokane Symphony Orchestra before moving to Seattle to work with the Seattle Opera Company. Here, she took private advanced vocal training from Maryanne Weltmann of the University of Washington.

Early on, she acquired an appetite for performing modern compositions that required some contortions of her voice, or at least distortions of tradition.

Of course, all this took Carr some way from the classical-music world, and perhaps that was just as well. There, avant-garde singing was considered outré. But if traditionalists viewed Carr askance, for that, the response was far more skeptical when it came to what she did on many a Friday and Saturday night: She sang the rock and the blues, oh my!

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That, despite the prevailing thinking in opera circles 25 years ago: Don't wreck your voice singing any of that popular garbage.

Undaunted, Carr sang at all the usual Seattle haunts of the day. She also performed in a country rock band.

"I really liked working with people more into rock-and-roll material, so I just started taking classically based techniques and maneuvering them so they were more suited to the rock world," she says.

Meanwhile, she also earned a professional-acting degree at Cornish College of the Arts, a fortuitous choice for an innovative singer because the institution was well-known for its embrace of avant-garde composition.

While at an underground concert and dance party, she noticed how many rock bands had singers who screamed. She says she came away from that evening, and later shows, thinking, "'This is cool.' I'd go home and experiment with ideas of what they were doing."

At Seattle grunge venues, she realized that, "Wow, something is really happening here."

In the 1980s, Seattle was, of course, the epicenter of the grunge movement, and she fell in with performers in it. "I was going to lots of clubs, helping singers to work out how to get these screams going," she recalls. It was clear to her that those full-throttle effects could quickly damage the voices of performers who were going about things without the benefits of schooling in vocal technique.

She reasoned that a market must exist for training grunge singers in how to shriek, holler, and wail safely.

With publicity like her newspaper ad that asked "Sore throat? Small range?" Carr began to attract screamers to her teaching practice. Soon, she was making a good deal of her income from that. As the bands of some of the singers she worked with began to do well, word got out, and several labels started sending their bands' singers to her.

"I was working with people in the thick of it, of screaming," she says. "I would say, OK, I want you to think of it not in your vocal cords, your voice box, but as higher, in the soft-palate area. I would get people to trigger a fluttering with their words, and to get with the strength involved, to get the growl happening higher. And that worked!"

Her technique, which adapts exercises she learned long ago in her classical voice training, also entails much strengthening of the abdomen and the diaphragm.

A few years ago, she encapsulated her method in an instructional DVD, *The Art of Screaming! Total Training for Vocalists on the Edge*. There, Carr preaches the wisdom of taking care with how you scream. Think about where you are screaming from, she says. You don't

want to scream from the throat. "I try to get people to create the sound from higher in their mouth," she says. The DVD explains what this means, aided by illustrations of the anatomy, and then tips on how to activate the parts that generate the best and safest scream.

Carr gets help on the DVD from the likes of Mastodon's Troy Saunders, Killing Roots' Jeff Reynolds, Davey Ingersoll of Loudermilk, and Alien Ant Farm's Dryden Mitchell.

Who could then claim that singing lessons are only for losers?

As the cognoscenti of in-your-face rock can relate, grunge gave way to other bellowed styles, with their own variants on the Mach 3, loin-loosening scream, but Carr found that her techniques could work just as well as fashions changed. So, for example, when Mastodon came along, she worked with Troy Sanders and Brent Hinds, and their screaming, she says, "was still triggered in the same way. It proved to be the right way."

The two metal stars credited Carr with enriching their band's sound. All a result of Carr's practicing techniques such as singing opera arias, and occasionally changing things up with vocal effects a little less bloodcurdling.

Labels continued to send her up-and-coming rock singers after she moved to New York, where she went to see whether her training in singing and acting could bring her success, there. Then, it was on to Los Angeles, to concentrate even more on acting. Her singing helped her land roles. She studied with another prominent instructor, the actress Dorothy Lyman, at the Beverly Hills Playhouse, and soon was working in film and television, too.

It was in Seattle, in the 1980s, however, that she started to sing jazz and related forms of music.

First, in fact, she performed an eclectic variety of cabaret. While working in musical comedy, she decided she would like to perform a one-woman show. "I

just got on a kick about Carmen Miranda,” the Brazilian cabaret artiste, Carr says. So, in the late 1980s, she began to perform her tribute show—tropical dresses, puffy blouses, big fruit-basket headdresses...

She gathered performers from the Brazilian music and dance scenes, and “I put a show together and we had a blast. It was her life story with 13 of her songs. I got so into this music. I loved the way that Brazilians had taken samba and added it to rock, or reggae, or blues.”

Some of those performers, including guitarist and vocalist Keiko Freitas, became the earliest personnel of her Susan Carr Ensemble, which recorded the album *Paixao do Brasil* (Passion of Brazil) in 1993.

When she performs jazz and popular songs, now, it is still with her Ensemble, although the personnel has changed. Unaltered, however, is her theater-informed approach to jazz performance. On a recent night at Tula’s Restaurant, when Carr took the stage with the five other members of her sparkling troupe, she really did take the stage. Audience members, whether or not fans of her selections—standards, Jobim tunes, Joni Mitchell and Neil Young songs—could be in no doubt that here was a vocalist who can command a stage, and an audience.

And Carr can do that, of course, because she brings to bear the skills of a screen, television, and stage actor, an opera and musicals singer, a diversely talented performer able to assume characters and to project from the stage.

She’s a full package.

Her voice does not lend itself to any classic jazz style; rather, it has some of the characteristics and constraints that classically trained voices often have when turned loose on jazz. But as she delivers her sets, carefully varied with songs from all over, qualities of assurance, delivery, and staging win through. Carr sells her songs.

It helps, certainly, to have on board the likes of saxophonist Brian Kent and pianist Fred Hoadley, both veterans of various parts of the local scene. Hoadley has long led the Latin jazz ensemble, Sonando, while Kent is a highly respected, solid, and imaginative saxophonist, although to some degree he flies beneath the radar of popular acclaim.

Adding to the ensemble’s assurance is guitarist Robert Peterson, electric bassist Dan Schmidt, and drummer Don Dietrich, who have all worked with Carr for more than 20 years.

Carr sings some standards, but prefers to do what singers like Diana Krall do: “If you really listen, she takes obscure pieces that aren’t jazz and she jazzifies

them. I’d rather do that, because it’s unexpected.

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A pleasure of working in LA, she says, was that she could present shows that mixed in all her musical styles—opera, musical comedy, jazz, and folk—and perform for friends and friends’ friends’, and at the same time keep up her chops in all the genres.

She tries to think of her own ensemble the way she has always viewed bands she has worked with. “I go and see my bands perform, and give them lots of feedback,” she says. “I say, ‘OK, I’m just a person coming to your show.’ I imagine I’m a manager or a label guy coming to the show and asking myself, ‘Why would I sign your band?’”

The only reason she would, she says, is obvious: If “it’s the whole thing—it’s not just what I heard on a CD; it’s what you present to audiences.”

It’s the staging. The selling of the song. The engagement of folks out for an evening.

All her training and experience tell her, she says, that “if people are going to pay money, they should get to come and see a show.”

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