

"Congratulations," said the singing teacher. "You do not have an awful voice."
Notes from an aspiring songbird.

DO, RE, AND ME

BY SUE HERTZ

I sing like

a mule. I always have. In my seventh-grade music class I was ordered to sing only the final "la la la" of "Hey Jude." In high school I was bumped off of the piano bench on drizzly Saturday afternoons, when Diane Peterson and I sang the score of *My Fair Lady*. I was okay on the low parts, but when I reached the high stuff — "I could have danced, danced, DAANNCCED ..." — boom. Thirteen years later, Diane says my voice lacks color, that it is like "chocolate chip cookies without the chocolate chips."

That's almost kind. My singing has been called ragged, jagged, flat, and deeply grating. The only time my college chums allowed me to sing was on St. Patrick's Day, when enough green beer softened my harmony during "MacNamara's Band." Later, at office parties, when everyone congregated around the piano to belt out old Beatles tunes, Colin was asked to sing the baritone, Nancy was asked to sing soprano, and I was asked to pour the beer.

It's little wonder that every time I drove by the sign "Voice Lessons: All Types" that swung from the tree outside of that large, square, brick house right before you get to downtown Ipswich on Route 1A, I slowed, almost stopped, then floored it. You see, despite all of the criticism and flat notes, I harbor this fantasy.

I want to be a rock star.

I practice all the time. I dry the dishes to Aretha and vacuum to Stevie Wonder. I really hum during the chorus of "Signed, Sealed, Delivered, I'm Yours." Just last month, I almost lost the plumber when he glanced in the window and caught me screeching "Ain't Too Proud to Beg" into the stem of the coffee percolator. To him, I was a gyrating madwoman in sweat pants and T-shirt. To me, I was an electric power garbed in a silky black minidress with a wide purple belt and purple stockings that glitter.

In my fantasy, my hair is long and permed, so frizzed that it grazes both sides of the doorway. My lips are painted flamingo pink, my eyes are outlined in thick, black streaks, and from my ears dangle earrings the size of candelabras. The crowd loves me. I clutch the mike, clamp my eyes shut, and wail "BAAYYYBEE" till the crystal shatters.

And Diana Segora believes I can do it. In real life.

Segora is the voice behind the sign in Ipswich. She believes that anyone, absolutely anyone, can learn to sing. All it takes is concentration, dedication, and practice. Harmony may hinge on merely relaxing the tongue, not stretching the neck, or removing the psychological block — the "I can't sing" attitude. "Everyone," Segora says, "has a natural singing voice."

Continued on page 42

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Do, re, and me

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 15

On the phone she says maybe I can be a backup singer for a band, perhaps the lead. She hasn't heard me sing, but that doesn't matter. I'm hooked. Can "any type" learn to exhale a pleasant, melodic sound? Can I be trained to sing "Ticket to Ride" with confidence?

Can I be a rock star?

Diana Segora is jittery. She welcomes me into her studio and follows me from the coat closet to the microphone to the piano, pointing out her glass of water, my glass of water, and the framed invitations to her singing recitals that hang on the wall.

She isn't what I expected. She doesn't look like a worn opera star, all bloated and chesty and wrinkled with the frustration of never making it to Carnegie Hall. Instead, she looks like the lead singer who shakes the tambourine in bands you see at weddings. At 38, she's just over 5 feet tall and just over 94 pounds and has a penchant for dangly earrings and

black garb. Her mouth is wide, her eyes are small, and her shoulder-length brown hair hangs in her face. She has never made it to Carnegie Hall, but she has performed at the Marblehead Country Club, the New England Conservatory of Music, and the lounge at the Holiday Inn at the Portsmouth traffic circle.

She has a nervous, birdlike quality. "Hyper," she calls it. But when it comes to teaching, she's intense, totally engrossed in her students and their music. Her approach is spiritual, based on the philosophy that creativity starts in the mind. "If someone is truly motivated to sing nicely, they will be able to produce a pleasant tone," she says and hands me a white index card.

"Write down your goal."

To sing like Pat Benatar? A tad presumptuous. To carry a tune? Reasonable. Segora nods gravely. She, too, thinks it's reasonable. A lot of singing teachers wouldn't. Bernard Barbeau, for one, believes if students can't carry a tune "they're starting from too far back." Barbeau has taught voice lessons at the New England Conservatory for 34 years

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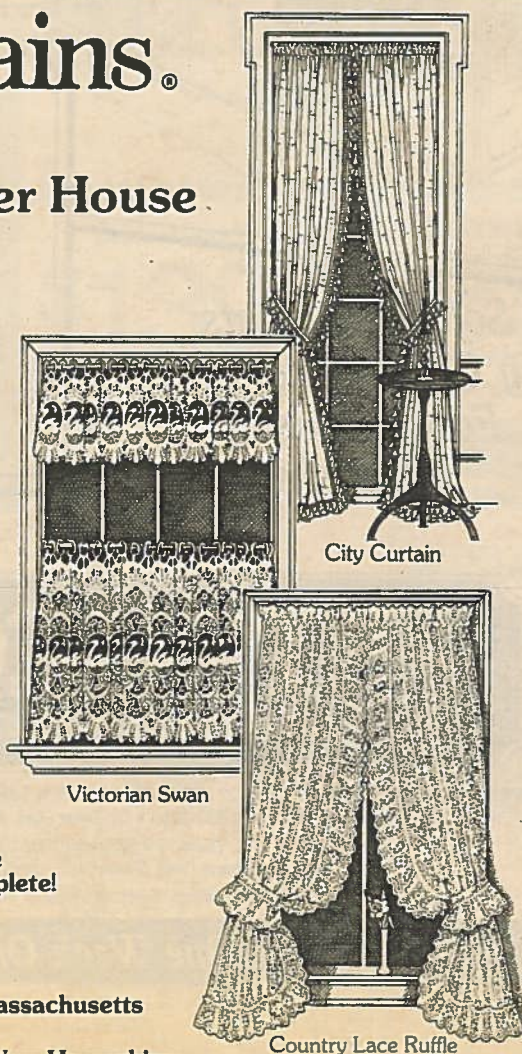
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and has sung arias with the Boston Pops. "Maybe they can accomplish something," he says, "but I wouldn't be bothered with them."

Good thing Segora will.

"Now," she says softly, "keep your eyes closed and visualize a scene where you feel totally at home, totally at ease, a place where you really feel free." I think of lying on a dock, the lake's waves gently lapping against the posts. "Think of a simple tune that you really like and feel like singing." I think of bounding up from my chaise, belting out "I Could Have Danced All Night," and reaching the high notes. "Hold that image," she says.

I can't. It changes. Now I'm dressed in a silky black minidress with a purple belt and purple hose, and I'm shrieking Benatar's "Hit Me with Your Best Shot."

"And now, make the formal choice," Segora whispers hypnotically. "Say in your mind as I say out loud, 'I choose to have the ability to carry a tune.'"

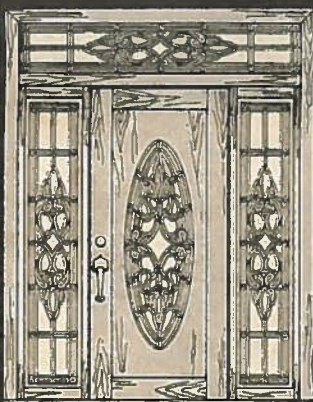
I open my eyes. Hers are closed. As she tries to get in touch with my energy, I try to figure out hers.

Unlike me, Segora has never hesitated to sing before an audience. As a kid growing up in Queens, she skipped around her block singing "Love and Marriage" until the neighbors begged for silence. As an undergraduate and graduate student at Queens College City University of New York, she belted out everything from "Heart of Gold" to "Eight Days a Week" in Brooklyn bars. As a college counselor she moaned Joni Mitchell tunes at coffeehouses. When she moved to Boston in 1977 to counsel

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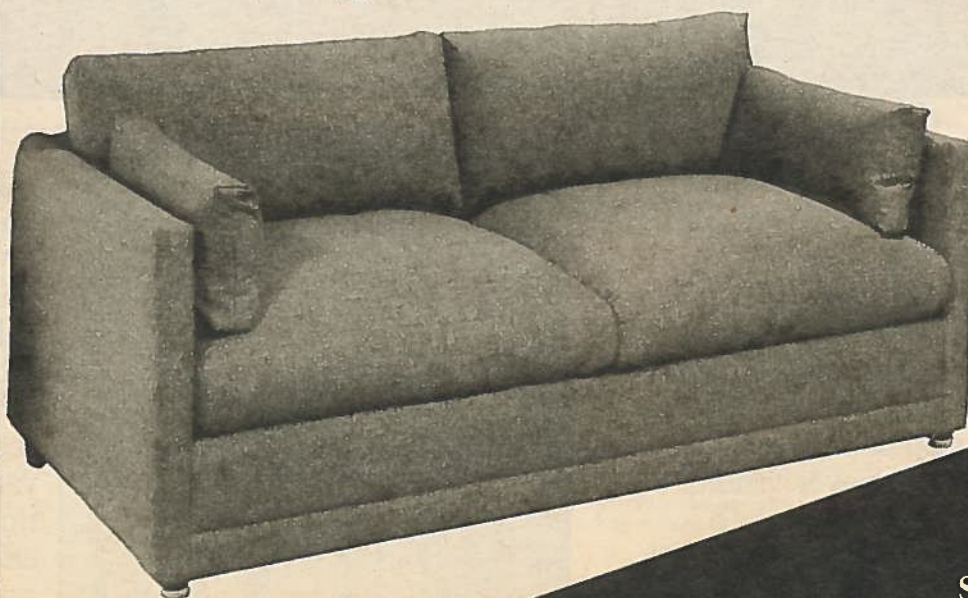
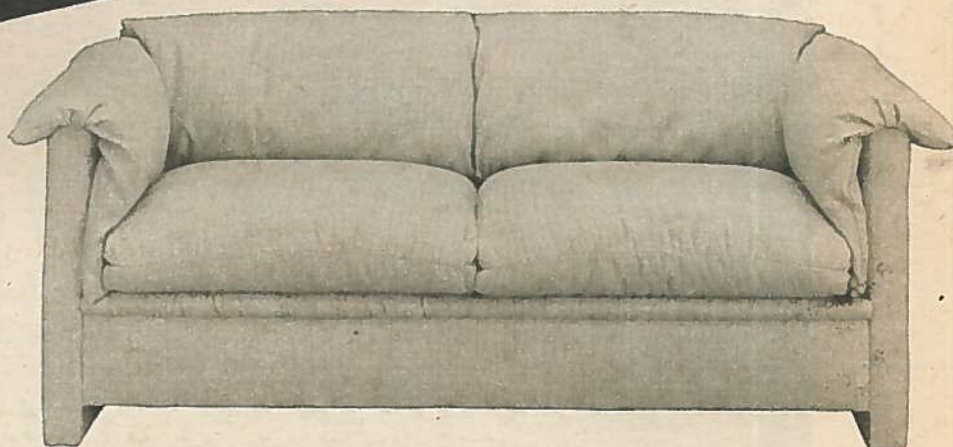
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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 43

students at Emerson College, she switched to classical music, studying Respighi and Puccini and performing recitals at the Harvard Musical Association and New England Conservatory. Her heart, however, lay with pop. In 1982 she and her husband, Dan Mahony, formed a duo called The Synthos. He played the keyboard and guitar while she sang Fleetwood Mac numbers at weddings and bars and once at a birthday party at the Boston Yacht Club. But it wasn't enough.

"I reexamined my goals," she says. In August of 1984, weary of Holiday Inns and the transient nature of bands, weary of counseling and working for an organization, Segora chucked her job to teach singing in the front room of her Ipswich home.

In the year and a half since she has hung up her sign, Segora has worked with 25 aspiring crooners, their ages ranging from 8 to 50. Some hope to sing "Auld Lang Syne" without embarrassment; others hope to

perform. One man studied so he could sing at his daughter's wedding. Another, Craig Gerish, was hired by the Curtis Knight Band, a local Top-40s group, to play guitar and sing backup nine months after he started lessons. Segora beams when she talks about Gerrish, who is 22, tall and sinewy, with long, thin, straight brown hair. A Jackson Browne clone. "He's come a long way," she says.

But did he start like this?

"Yes," says Gerrish.

"Yes," says Segora.

Before her students get to hum a bar, they must purge themselves of all distracting thoughts and tensions. The body, just like a mechanical instrument, requires tuning. By concentrating on my breath, I'm tuning into "my inner self."

"Breathe deeply," she says, "from your diaphragm." She ignores my chuckle.

"Now exhale as a sigh."

I try. Nothing.

"Ahh ... AAAHHHH. ..."

This sounds like a scene from *Debbie Does Dallas*.

I think of what I look like, sitting on this stool with my eyes closed, mouth open, and breathing like Debbie. Segora tells me I sighed "a beautiful,

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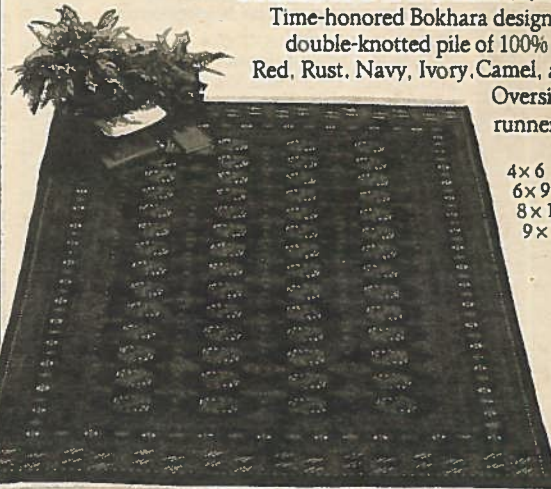


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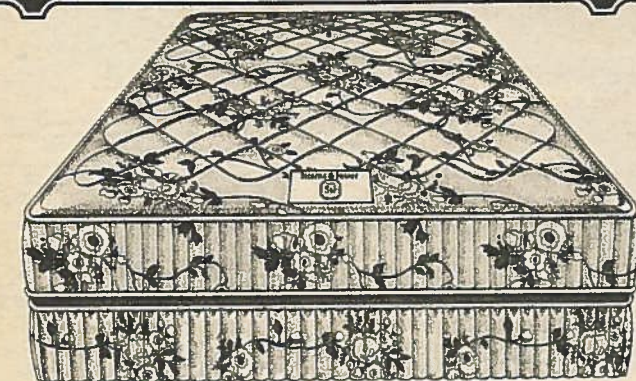


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deep, lovely sound." She must
hear something I don't. I think
of my three years' singing in
the Hingham Congregational
Church children's choir. My
own father refused to hear me
perform.

"I just can't," I overheard
him whisper to my mother
again and again.

I open my eyes. My first
lesson is over. My assignment
is to "breathe from your dia-
phragm and sing."

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It's safe. I can bloat my belly
with air and exhale "loooove"
with Stephanie Mills and no one
will hear, except the toll booth
attendants on the Tobin Bridge.
And they have yet to crack a
smile.

I should have warned her
about my range. I was once
told by a classical music crit-
ic that my friends "would be
more comfortable" at parties if
I could sing more than four
notes. Now, it seems, I'm down
to one.

I can't move above or be-
neath middle C. Segora is un-
daunted. Open your mouth
wider, linger on the vowels, she
instructs; vowels open your

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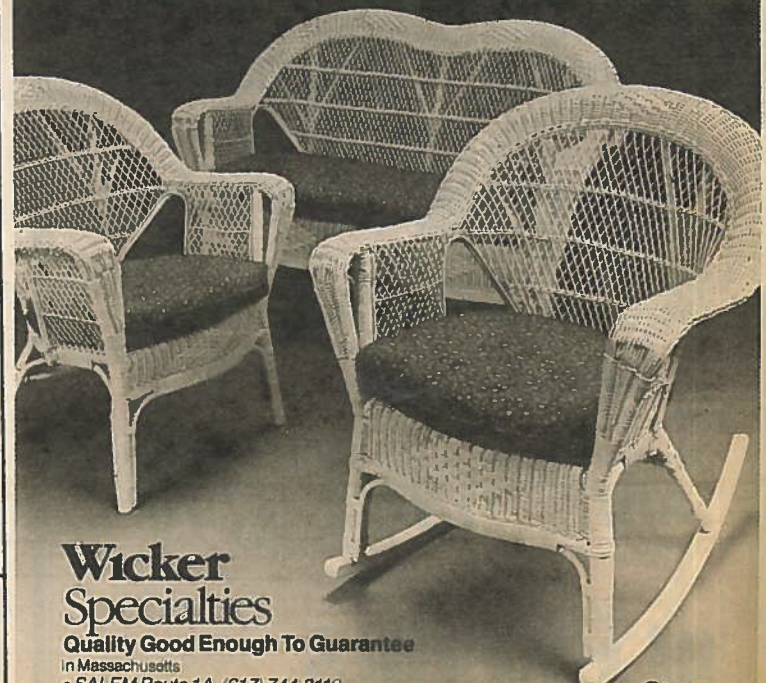
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mouth. She stares at my dental fillings. Did I floss this morning? "Congratulations," she says. "You do not have an awful voice."

The cracked notes, the quivering "maa, maa, maaa"s are okay. Some notes are out of my range, but with practice I can reach them. Suddenly, I'm encouraged. I feel light, happy. Diana Segora thinks I can sing.

I try a song, "If I Fell," by the Beatles. No go. I can't make it past the third note. My glee fades. We try "On the Street Where You Live." It's drizzly Saturday afternoon at the piano again, only this time Diane Peterson isn't here to shove me off the bench.

Segora isn't laughing anymore. In fact, she looks worried. Encouragement goes only so far. She tries lifting her arms so I'll lift my voice. She tries singing with me. No go. I'm not connecting with my diaphragm, and the air, which is supposed to come out in a steady, supportive stream, feels like hyperventilation.

"Practice," Segora says. So I do.

I practice in the car.

I practice in the shower.

I practice while the water



Voice teacher Diana Segora reading music in her Ipswich home. She tells her students: "Write down your goal."

runs to wash the dishes.

I don't practice in silence.

My apartment is in one of those old Federalist houses with the

Janet Knott, The Boston Globe

ASK THE EXPERTS THE EXPERTS ASK

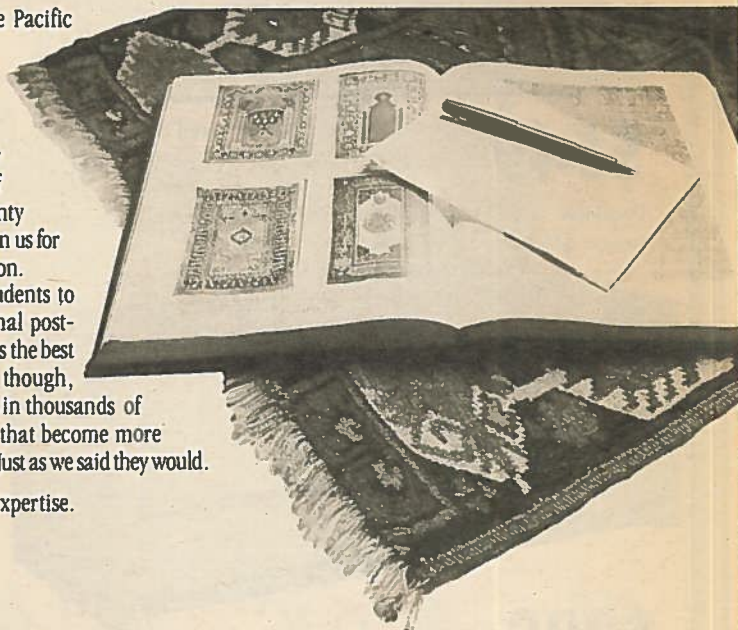
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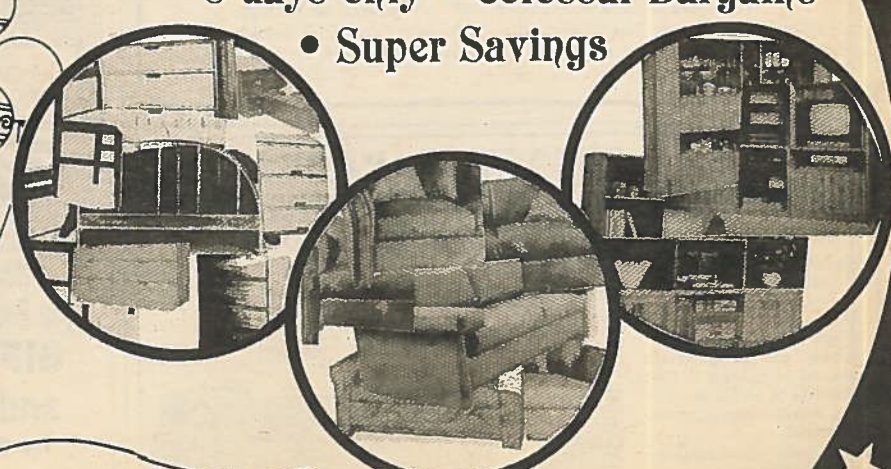
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wide pine floorboards and wafer-thin walls. Not a belch in the building escapes my ears. I tried the "maa maa maaa"s once after supper but was interrupted by a loud thumping noise from upstairs. When I stopped, so did the thumping.

I don't blame the thumpers. Despite the vowels, despite opening my mouth, despite breathing from my diaphragm, I still sound like Rod Stewart with a hangover. My voice is thin and reedy. There is no fullness, no body. It's like jug wine.

Even Heather Houser sings better than I do. Heather is 8, with pink, puffy cheeks and long blond hair, and she is a student of Segora's. Even though she wears high-top Nikes and barrettes with pink ribbons, she gets away with singing "What About Love," by Heart. She may not hit the high notes — okay, she doesn't hit any of them — but she stands close enough to the mike to kiss it and closes her eyes when she sings. She looks more like a rock star than I do.

And then there's Kim Rigby. She is a rock star — sort of. Rigby is 35 and an assistant staff psychologist at the Hogan Regional Center, a facili-

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ty for retarded adults in Danvers. As a kid, she wanted to be Laura Nyro and asked to sing with her brother, a professional saxophone player. But she giggled too much and, for the next 19 years, buried her dream in graduate school, work, marriage, and a son, Michael. But last May, searching for a diversion from work and home, something "all for me," she called on Segora and liked what she saw. "She's gentle and encouraging," Rigby says.

Rigby used to practice five times a day until Michael, who is now 4, told her, "Don't sing in the house." Since then, she's become a closet singer. At 1:30 p.m., after Michael goes down for his nap, she sneaks into her bedroom, shuts the door, puts on a headset, and belts out the Everly Brothers' hit "Dream." The practice has paid off.

Last Halloween she scoffed a few Heinekens, straightened her corduroy pants, and stood on the platform of The Other Side, a Newburyport restaurant, and sang "Be My Baby" and "Heat Wave" with the band. She knew some of the members, but still. "It was a fantasy come true," she says.

Unlike Segora, Rigby

doesn't look like a tambourine shaker. She has that North Shore look — blond pageboy, button-down Oxford shirts, jeans, and no dangly earrings. But that hasn't stopped her.

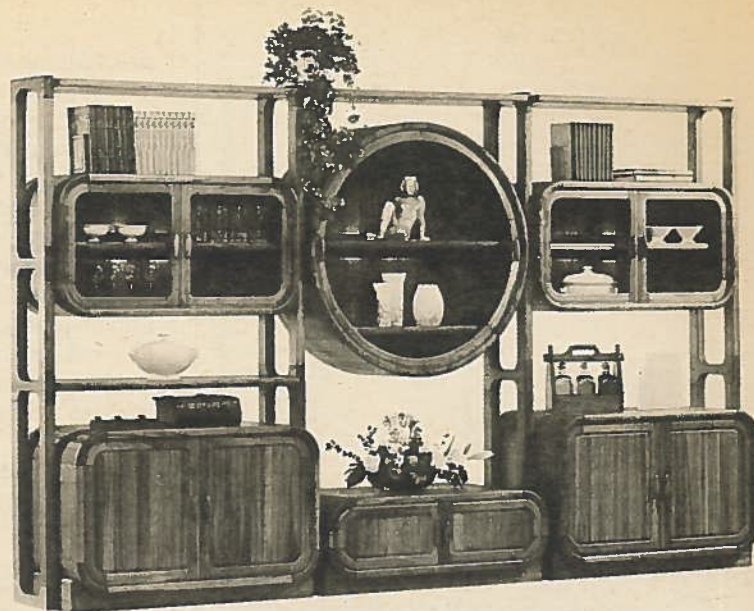
A month later, at a party at the Golden Island on Route 1, she asked the band if she could sing. They said sure. She sang "Dream." All by herself.

Since then, she's sung "Splish Splash" and "Rockin' Robin" at a Valentine's Day party and thought about looking for a band. Segora says Rigby "may be ready." Rigby's family, however, isn't so sure. Husband Paul calls her "depressing" when she sings "Town Without Pity," and Michael still tells her to shut up.

But in my eyes, she's a star.

I'm terrified of the microphone. I stare at it from arm's length as Segora adjusts it to my height.

"I have a song for you," she says: "Yesterday." I hate that song. It's slow and sad and reminds me of lying in my bedroom with the lights out, mourning the loss of my eighth-grade love. The song doesn't like me any better. I wear the headset and hear only the mu-



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sic, a Minus One tape, they call it. I jump in at the wrong chord, my voice cracks, and I still can't get above middle C.

"I don't think you realize the amount of energy and commitment singing demands," Segora says. She's right. She talks a lot about commitment. Maybe I don't practice enough. Maybe I'm not concentrating on my diaphragm enough. Whatever it is, it isn't enough, and my voice still lacks the chocolate chips it needs for me to sing at office parties, let alone like Pat Benatar.

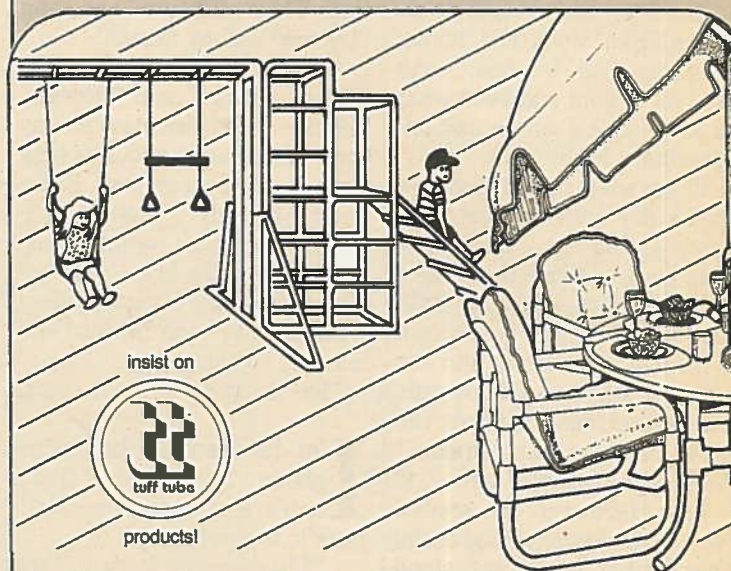
Am I hopeless?
"Yes," says Margaret Shirley between body-wrenching laughs. Margaret is a friend who has taken singing lessons off and on for 20 years. She has offered to play the piano and listen to me sing "Yesterday." She's hysterical.

"You're right," she says, hiccuping. "You can't sing."

I suggest another tune, perhaps "The Impossible Dream." Margaret shakes her head. "But I like that song," she says. She plays it anyway, and I sing and keep singing, through the sour notes and missed pitch. When I hit the right notes,

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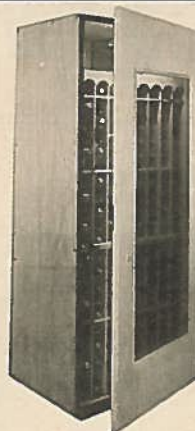
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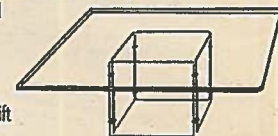
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we're both surprised. She asks me to hold a note.

"To reeeeeeach the unreeeeeachable staarr..."

She nods approval. I stop.

"Do you think I could be taught to sing?"

"Yes." Pause. "You could."

Pause. "But it would take a very long time, and a very patient teacher with a very tough ear."

Segora is talking about my nose. She has been listening carefully to my voice, and I'm nasally. Since I talk through my nose, I sing through my nose. I also sing out, not up, and I shouldn't fret that I can't sing like Linda Ronstadt.

"You cannot put it on a schedule," says Segora.

I had hoped to be able to carry a tune and be well on my way to the microphone and black silk minidress by this time. I've been at this for weeks, and I'm still on the first verse of "Yesterday."

We work on breathing and vibrato and holding those vowels. Segora throws her left arm up in the air to guide my notes higher, to inspire a sense of "aliveness." Flat. Drab. Dead.

And then I have an idea.

I want life. Cheer. Give me something I know, a tune I've practiced, enjoyed, danced around the kitchen to. Segora doesn't know "Ain't Too Proud to Beg," so we'll go for "Dancing in the Streets." No mike, no Minus One. She plays the chords, and I sing.

"Calling ouuttt..."

She looks startled.

"Around the woooooorrrld..."

I move a little, dance a little. I feel at home. This is like scrubbing my Farberware and singing with Aretha.

"Are you ready for a brand new beeatttt..."

Maybe I won't be the next Pat Benatar or croon in the lounge at the Holiday Inn at the Portsmouth traffic circle. Maybe I'll give my black silk minidress to Kim Rigby and the candleabra earrings to Heather Houser. It doesn't matter.

"Summer's here, and the tiiimme is rrriggght..."

I don't know how I sound, and I don't care. I'm off of the "do re me"s, the "la laa laa"s, the slow and morose. I'm rolling. I'm jiving.

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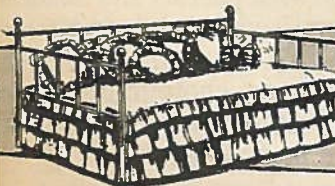
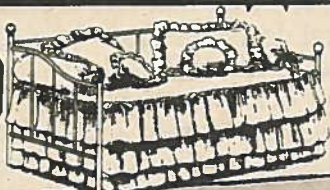
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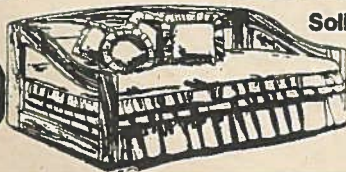
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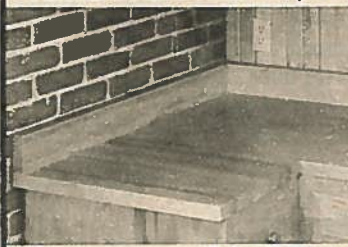
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