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SPOTLIGHT ON SINGING & MUSIC

> By Jean Schiffman

Performing in Rock Musicals

As Chuck Berry famously sang, "Hail, hail rock 'n' roll!" Rock musicals abound these days, but if your musical theatre performing experience has been restricted so far to traditional musicals, there are some things you should know before you leap genres. The actors I called agree on several of them: In rock musicals, vocal fatigue is a big factor, you'll need a strong belt, music drives the story, and there's often great freedom to improvise.

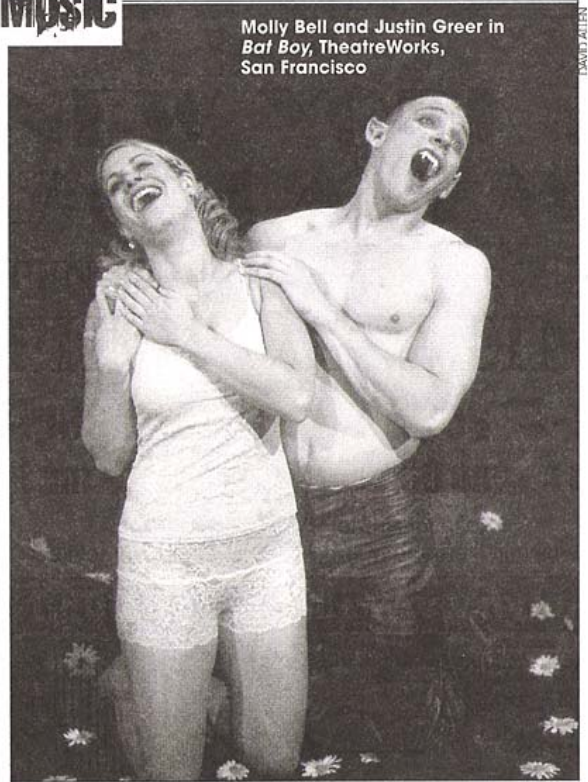
San Francisco Bay Area actor James Monroe Iglehart, whose performance

in David Bryan and Joe DiPietro's musical *Memphis* at TheatreWorks in 2004 shook the rafters, says the basis of acting doesn't change for any show, but your vocal quality—how you use your instrument—differs from genre to genre. Iglehart was raised singing in the Baptist church and uses a gospel belt (as opposed to a "Broadway belt," which he says requires more of a head tone) for rock and a more classical sound for traditional musicals. The gospel belt, he says, is a "hard, strong sound"—pushed, gritty, but not screaming. He doesn't get hoarse,

because his vocal cords are used to it and because his mother, a voice teacher, taught him how to protect his voice. But he has known actors who have appeared in *Rent* and *Dreamgirls* who didn't take care of themselves and hurt their voices. "You don't want to be the person who only does three shows a week because you've messed up your voice," he warns. Currently he's singing in a nonrock musical, *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, opening this month in Boston.

One of his cast mates in *Memphis*, C. Kelly Wright, who also appeared in

Molly Bell and Justin Greer in *Bat Boy*, TheatreWorks, San Francisco



DAVID J. PHILLIPS

TheatreWorks' production of *Bat Boy: The Musical*, agrees that rock musicals are especially hard on the voice. "If you don't use your voice properly," she cautions, "you won't last." Also taking a break from rock musicals, she's currently preparing to play Mabel Mercer in the new musical *Bricktop* in Washington, D.C. When I talked to her, she was recovering from strep throat. "When my voice goes, I don't have a show," she says.

That's every singer's fear, especially in rock musicals, which are so vocally demanding. I asked Chicago rock singer-songwriter Cathy Richardson, who was in the Off-Broadway cast of *Love, Janis* and is now appearing in an extended commercial run of the show in San Francisco, how she takes care of her voice. In *Love, Janis*, she plays Janis Joplin's singing persona alongside another actor who plays the character when Joplin's not singing, a curious gimmick that works quite well. But the demands of the show are such that Richardson shares her role with another singer, Mary Bridget Davies. To save their voices, each performs four times a week; they even space out their performances so that if a singer works three days in a row, she gets two days off.

To play the famous 1960s icon, Richardson, whose natural voice has a clear belt, puts on "a lot of growl," she says. "It's my voice, affected. Janis was a screamer." She has figured out how to do it without hurting herself, but she does get tired: "I think Janis sounded like she was working harder than she was. She was singing through her head voice. But she had a chest, belting voice, which was very powerful. But her head voice became very raspy from smoking and belting." Richardson says her own voice, too, has changed over time. "When you use one part of your vocal cords for a long period of time, you get calluses," she explains. "They're debilitating. I have for years had tiny nodules on my vocal cords. They haven't gotten bigger or worse for many years. I imagine Janis had that. But it was more her lifestyle than her singing that was bad for her." Richardson doesn't drink alcohol, drinks lots of water, and considers herself lucky to have a strong voice.

To play the lead in *Bat Boy* at TheatreWorks, New York actor Justin

Greer (now dance captain in *The Producers* on Broadway) had to produce a gritty, emotional sound. Classically trained at Carnegie Mellon University, he says *Bat Boy* required him to find a different placement for his voice, "more forward in the mask of my face—a throatier color to the sound without compromising the breath support that you need.

"You can't sing it like a rock singer would," Greer continues, "because you have to sing it eight times a week. You have to sing with great abandon and find within that a healthy framework." *Bat Boy* was especially demanding because—playing a half human, half bat—he had to climb all over the stage and produce an exhausting batlike screech. He also had to learn to achieve that screech and the rock sound without tightening his throat. Greer says his *Bat Boy* songs ranged from "lullabyish head voice to a showbizzy song to three angst-ridden numbers to a love duet. The vocal demands were vast. Traditional musicals are usually not as high as rock musicals. In a Rodgers and Hammerstein, you have maybe a high note at the end, and it's mostly in the middle voice," whereas in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, he says, the principals sing high notes continually—A's and G's, which can be very exhausting. "That's the challenge," he says. "To sing fatiguing music in a way that isn't fatiguing."

So it's a given that, in general, rock musicals are more difficult than traditional musicals. (One exception: the musicals of Stephen Sondheim—Igglehart says *Sweeney Todd* was the hardest musical he's ever sung, bar none—but then you can hardly consider Sondheim's work "traditional.") Also, according to the performers I interviewed, in the rock genre the music tends to drive the story. That's because, says Igglehart, audiences come for a specific style: "Every song in a rock musical has to be able to stand on its own as a single if it had to. Mostly, the story just happens to be there; people are there for the music." In *Love, Janis*, for example, the songs are like a concert woven into a play. But that allows for a certain freedom on the performer's part. "I've done *Show Boat*, and you stay pretty much the

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way the music is written," Igglehart observes. "The same with *A Little Night Music*. But in *Memphis* and *Bat Boy*, you're freer to do what you want. The music is there as a foundation, and you can build on that foundation. The riffs can change every night. Sometimes I find a riff I like and keep on doing it. It's alive all the time. Audiences can see the show three times and see completely different shows."

Of course, some of that freedom depends on the director and the

demands of the choreography. In *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Bat Boy*, Igglehart was allowed to do any movement he wanted within a set framework. He also says he let his *Memphis* character evolve directly from the songs.

Richardson loves *Love, Janis* because, despite its vocal demands, there's latitude within the songs to improvise, to keep it constantly fresh. "I'd like to keep doing it for as long as possible," she says. For her, rock musicals are about having a sense of freedom and a youthful energy.

Greer, despite his classical training, loves doing rock musicals. "I love the

singing—it's gritty, emotional, all those things that are really fun to do as an actor," he says. "There's a great beat and a heavy bass, and I can sort of scream the high notes on top of it, and that gives modern singers and audiences a thrill." But the bottom line, he says, is that eight shows a week is no joke. "Make sure when you're learning the music that you don't forget your traditional techniques," he advises, though he concedes that sometimes you have to "bastardize your technique to create the color and sound you're looking for.... Rock musicals take a special kind of attention." <