

The graphic features a golden treble clef on the left, with several golden musical notes floating around it. The word "who" is written in a red, cursive font at the top left. The word "INSPIRES" is in a large, bold, dark blue, sans-serif font in the center. The word "you?" is written in a red, cursive font at the bottom right. The background consists of several concentric, golden, wavy lines that resemble sound waves or a stylized musical staff.

who INSPIRES you?

Jeanie LoVetri—Never Give Up

BY MICHELLE LATOUR

Renowned teacher Jeanie LoVetri began her career as a singer in New York City. She shares where the inspiration to start teaching came from and how she has persevered through thick and thin.

This month I have the pleasure of sharing Jeanie LoVetri's story of who inspired her. LoVetri, who is currently artistic director of the Contemporary Commercial Music Vocal Pedagogy Institute at Shenandoah Conservatory in Winchester, Virginia, is someone who has inspired many singers and teachers. She inspired me to learn more about musical theatre styles and she gave me the courage to sing musical theatre in public. It is an honor to share her sources of inspiration.

Although LoVetri is mostly known for her work in the world of contemporary commercial music styles, she was initially trained as a classical lyric soprano. Like many singers, LoVetri found early inspiration from her family, who are all very musical. I asked LoVetri to elaborate about who sparked her interest in music.

"My mother was a professional dancer in New Orleans on Bourbon Street in a very high-end nightclub called the Silver Slipper," she explains, "and my mother and I would sing together for fun at home. My aunt, my mother's older sister, was a vocalist and ended up singing with Jack Teagarden's band. My uncle, also on my mother's side, was a professional trombone player. My father had a nice voice, too, and he used to sing in church when he was young."

LoVetri also found inspiration and encouragement at school. "I was fortunate to have an excellent music education in public school," she says. "It was probably the primary reason I became a professional vocalist. Being singled out by my teachers gave me the confidence to sing publicly. By the time I was in fifth grade, I was playing the organ in church for mass and, sometimes, before mass I sang. No one stopped me, so I assumed I was doing an adequate job. By the time I was in high school, I was singing a lot.

"I began voice lessons at 15, where I was guided into classical repertoire and I also upgraded my piano skills," she says. "At this point, I sang at weddings, both at church and at receptions. At 17, I was cast as Marian Paroo in a production of *The Music Man* in a local company for high school and college students run by Broadway professionals. These were big-budget performances, and I learned a lot about singing, acting, and dancing. After the second summer, in which I played Magnolia Hawks in *Show Boat*, I decided I wanted to pursue singing in college. I got into Manhattan School of Music in New York as a voice major."

While still actively pursuing her own professional singing career, LoVetri stumbled into teaching in 1971. "I started teaching when I was 22 because

I was asked to be the vocal director for a production of *Finian's Rainbow*, and then another company asked me to vocal direct for a production of *Once Upon a Mattress*," she says. "I didn't really expect to teach, but since I was asked, I gave it a try. I haven't stopped since. From that, I had my first private students."

She juggled teaching and singing professionally for many years, while still also studying, herself. "I was still performing and was going into New York for auditions and performances," LoVetri recalls. "I studied with quite a few teachers, but my last one was the first person who talked about vocal function. He helped me more than anyone else. After working with him for five years, I was in very good shape. In short order, I was juggling part-time office work, part-time singing, and part-time teaching. I moved to New York when I was 26 and immediately started a small voice studio at home. Surprisingly, my studio grew rapidly."

It was in New York that LoVetri's own musical experiences expanded beyond the strictly classical genre. "I continued to audition and did some wonderful performances in Manhattan of rock musicals, gospel, and pop material and also sang in two churches," she says. "I bounced around this way for the first three years, doing whatever was

available, and again I was fortunate to work with many Broadway professionals—not in a show on Broadway, but in many concerts and performances in a wide variety of venues including Lincoln Center.

“I continued to teach. By the late 1970s, I decided to stop performing and to become a full-time singing teacher. In 1980, I had my first Broadway student. She was starring in the revival of *42nd Street* as Peggy Sawyer. Most recently, I worked with one of the understudies for a lead in *The Bridges of Madison County*.”

A highly acclaimed teacher, LoVetri’s students have won Grammy Awards, received Tony nominations, and have performed in venues such as Carnegie Hall, Avery Fisher Hall, Broadway, Off-Broadway, the Jazz Standard, the Blue Note Jazz Club, and Madison Square Garden. But it wasn’t always easy. “There were times when I barely survived as a teacher of singing,” she reveals. “Being a self-employed female in the arts in New York City was a continuously daunting task. I had no choice but to keep putting myself out into the world, working to learn more, and being in touch with the music business.”

Part of that was figuring out a sound vocal technique for contemporary styles. “It was clear to me that singers on Broadway had to be able to sing many different kinds of music, and that vocal training was geared only to opera, which had a different set of values,” LoVetri says. “I did not understand why I had been unable to find someone to teach me how to make the sounds I heard on Broadway and why I was told they were harmful or even dangerous.

“I had an affinity for all kinds of music and could sing in many styles, but I was never absolutely secure in any of them because my training had not adequately addressed vocal function or the vocal production needs of styles other than classical,” she continues. “When I finally found a teacher who could explain what was expected in the world of classical music, it helped, but he couldn’t offer any guidance with the other styles. I was on my own.”

How did she stay inspired through the rough patches and bumps in the road? “Keeping myself and my studio afloat was more than a full-time job, but what kept me going was my passion for singing, my desire to be of use to other singers, and my interest in further study,” she says. “Every time I came close to giving up, something would come along and keep me afloat. I managed to keep singing, too, in small classical concerts and cabarets, in private venues, and at parties. The singing was important to my psychological life as it kept me in touch with my original love of song and that, in turn, kept my spirit going when things were difficult.”

When it comes to advice for aspiring artists, LoVetri brings it back to the technical basics. “Keep studying technically, with different teachers and in different styles, in order to broaden your base of knowledge about music, style, and vocal production,” she says. “Understand the mechanism, the music business, and the demands of both.

“It is important to believe in yourself, in your art, and in what you want to create,” she continues. “It is vital to have a vision of what you want to do and very useful to have a plan of action to get there. Things probably won’t work out as you expect, but it’s better than not having a plan at all.”

Finally, LoVetri stresses the importance of being resilient and tapping into your motives for singing in the first place. “Understand that everyone gets bad advice, has rough experiences, and is disappointed along the road to success, but that you need to ‘pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and start all over again,’” she says. “Live what you want to do as completely as you can and act as if you were already successful. Knowing that you are doing what you wanted to do gives you a satisfaction that no one can take away.”

If you would like to contribute to a future installment of “Who Inspires You?” please contact Michelle at michellelatour@me.com.

Soprano Michelle Latour is active as a singer, teacher, writer, adjudicator, and workshop presenter throughout California, Nevada, and the Midwest. Visit her online at www.michellelatour.com. ©