



Torch Singer 101 classmates let loose their inner divas



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Mary Colacurci did the late, great Rosemary Clooney proud -- and maybe even Danny Kaye, too.

Because here she was at Zen's Lounge in downtown Lincoln -- dressed to the nines in a short black dress and brown stole she inherited from her mother-in-law, a pink feather in her hair and a sparkly bracelet on her wrist -- crooning Clooney's "Love, You Didn't Do Right by Me" from

the holiday film classic "White Christmas," which also starred funnyman Kaye.

"Those who know me know I act more like Danny Kaye than Rosemary Clooney," she joked with her audience before launching into the torch song.

Her performance of the Clooney classic wasn't perfect. Far from it. But that wasn't the point.

The 53-year-old Colacurci is not a singer. She's a recently retired executive vice president of the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation. She's a wife, a mother and a grandmother.

Before taking Jackie Allen's Torch Singer 101 class for a second time, her performance career amounted to singing in church and winning the lead in the musical at Lincoln Northeast High School "a long, long time ago."

She took Allen's six-week course as a retirement gift for herself.

"I thought, 'Now that sounds like fun,'" she said. "I mean who doesn't have this secret desire to be a diva or a torch singer?"

So here was Colacurci letting loose her inner Barbra Streisand. After crooning the Clooney classic, she launched into "Winter Wonderland," changing the lyrics a bit to reflect her upcoming move to San Antonio, Texas.

"I'm saying goodbye to the blizzard and hello to the lizard," she sings, drawing chuckles from her audience.

"I can't say this was on my bucket list because I never thought of doing such a thing," Colacurci said the day following her performance. "Once I heard about it, it became a bucket list item."

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Allen introduced Torch Singer 101 to Lincoln shortly after she and her husband, double bass

player Hans Sturm, moved here in June from Muncie, Ind.

The 52-year-old is an accomplished jazz singer -- she has nine CDs to her credit, including a 2006 release on Blue Note records -- who worked the Chicago scene for many years. Her husband's career is why she is now in Lincoln. He is the new double bass professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

In addition to performing, Allen is a respected jazz educator, having served on faculties at schools in Indiana, Illinois and her home state of Wisconsin. She began teaching her torch singing more than 10 years ago at Chicago's Old Town School of Folk Music.

Her idea for the class was to give novice male and female singers outside an academic setting a chance to live out their fantasies. The idea resulted from an online survey she had read. In it, people listed their dream jobs. Men desired to be airline pilots and baseball players, and women ...

"Lounge singers," Allen said. "I thought, 'Wow, that's interesting that so many women have this fantasy.'"

Needless to say, her class became a hit, with many of her students, ranging in age from 20 to 80, taking it again and again and again.

She mentioned her torch singing classes to acquaintances in Lincoln, who encouraged her to try it here. Unlike her previous classes, she has taught these out of her home. She likes what they've become. Her students are more relaxed. There is wine to loosen inhibitions. It's become as much a social event as a learning experience.

"It's kind of like a book club, but we get up and sing instead," said 30-year-old law student Alex Kissel, who has taken both of Allen's classes.

Students pay \$95 for seven sessions over six weeks, which concludes in a two-song performance with a backup band. The most recent concert featured Sturm on bass and Lincoln's Tom Larson on keyboards.

The live band sets it apart from a karaoke performance. That and the music, Allen said, which the students interpret themselves, finding a key signature that best suits them. You know how "American Idol" judges tell contestants to make songs their own. This was what Allen taught her students to do in her classes.

"They are not imitating someone else," she said. "These are their own interpretations of songs that inspire them."

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Sheila Stratton couldn't stop smiling. She admitted later she was nervous, but was ready to sing, referencing actress Michelle Pfeiffer from the film "The Fabulous Baker Boys" during her introduction.

Except here there was no piano for her to lie across. Larson was playing a small electric keyboard.

"This is kind of cool," Stratton said to the audience. "Never ever did I think I would get to play like this."

She was the second of nine singers to perform at Zen's, with Allen sitting nearby for encouragement.

Tracy Haefele preceded her, telling the audience she felt like she should be channeling Dean Martin, "because I could use a drink right about now."

Other performers included Alex Kissel and her mother, Joanne Kissel, whose parents sat on the black leather couch in the front row.

"This may be the first time my parents have been in a martini bar together," said Joanne, who would perform "Baby It's Cold Outside" as a duet with her daughter. It was a nice, tender moment.

Also singing were Penny Lange, Kristi Newcomb and husband-and-wife Charley Friedman and Nancy Friedemann. Classmate Chris Lohry missed the performance because of illness. All were newcomers to Allen's class except Colacurci and Alex Kissel.

The 47-year-old Stratton performed "I'll Have a Blue Christmas" and Peggy Lee's "I Love Being Here With You." When she finished, she did a Snoopylike happy dance, telling the audience, "This was fun, you guys should think about doing the class."

Afterward, she said there was no pressure to be good. She missed a few notes here and there, but nobody in the crowd seemed to mind. She credited Allen for relieving the stress.

"There were a few moments (in class) when I was comparing myself to other people," said Stratton, a social worker at Lincoln Public Schools. "A couple of people could really sing. A couple more were in the middle and a couple were not as strong. That (feeling) didn't have a chance to fester because of the environment we created. It was not about that. It was about fun."

Allen noted as much, too.

"I get to relive the excitement through each and every one of them," Allen told the Zen's crowd before wowing them with a song of her own. "It takes me back to my beginnings."