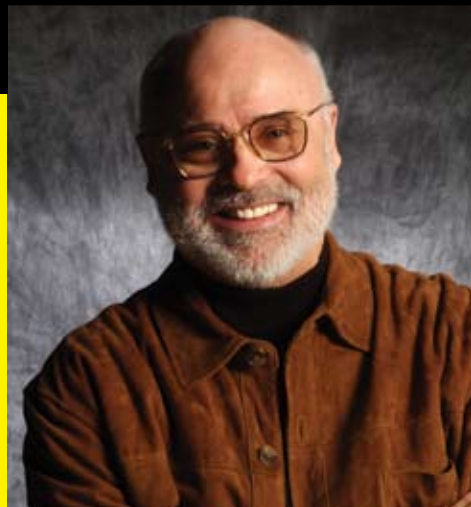


Seth Riggs, Vocal Teacher

"I DO IT ALL," EXCLAIMS SETH RIGGS PROUDLY, AND INDEED HE DOES. HE HAS performed with the New York City Opera and published a vocal training book, he consults on film projects and vocal therapy, and he runs a children's summer camp at Mount Saint Mary College. Most significantly, he developed a singing technique that has helped him build a long and impressive list of students. Seth has worked with huge artists like Barbra Streisand, Natalie Cole, Michael Jackson, Stevie Wonder, and the late Ray Charles. He's also helped actors like Whoopi Goldberg and Val Kilmer prepare for singing roles. Seth squeezed us into his busy schedule to chat about how he has become one of the most respected and sought-after vocal teachers in the industry.



BY VERONICA DOMINGUEZ-GARCIA

How did you become interested in a musical career?

I started out as a boy soprano at the Washington National Cathedral, in D.C. At 8, I was singing Bach, Handel, and Mendelssohn. I was really grooving on it. It was so exciting that some way or another, I wanted to stay in music. So, I graduated from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, with an Opera Major at the Peabody Conservatory of Music. I got my Masters in Opera Theater from the Manhattan School of Music in New York City.

What were you hoping to pursue?

I didn't know exactly. I was performing and was trying to get some sort of an education at the same time. In trying to learn about singing, I got so excited that I started to teach. When I moved out to the West coast in the 60s, [the director] Bob Fosse recommended me to Universal Pictures to work with Shirley MacLaine in *Sweet Charity*. That's where it all began, and I went on to work with whole bunch of other people.

Why did you become a vocal teacher?

When I began to study singing, I couldn't seem to find a source that really could help me. So I tried to find a different pedagogy. That's how my *Speech Level Singing* came about. It is patented and trademarked. I teach singers how to go from their chest voice into their head voice with no break. They go right up to what we call a strong mix. It is applicable to all musical genres.

What do you like best about your career?


You never know what jewel you'll discover. For instance, Q'Orianka Kilcher, Kim Basinger, and Val Kilmer all have great singing voices.

Can you offer any singing tips?

The main tip I could give is there cannot be a break between your chest voice and head voice. You can't do anything if your voice isn't together in the middle. It's not good to be in falsetto as you go up. A lot of people call that "style," but it's not: It's bad singing. It's the coordina-

tion of the vocal chord structure that makes the mix happen. You have these [register changes] in your voice called bridges and once you get through them, you're set. That's why we happen to work with many different types of singers as we do. Our singers' voices don't break.

How have you helped some of your star students?

Michael Jackson called me up one day and asked me to fly out to Cincinnati to help him on a recording. He was singing "Dirty Diana," and was cracking on that final "a" in "Dian-a." I told him to sing an "eh" because that narrow vowel sound would keep his voice from cracking. He then asked me to come on his 1988 World Tour. That whole tour, he never missed a note. I also had the great honor of working with Ray Charles during the last 4 years of his life. When he first came in, he said he had lost his falsetto. He sang "Georgia" to demonstrate, and his voice cracked on the "ah." I told him to try singing an "uh" instead. And he said, "Oh my God, it's there." I said, "Mr. Charles, it was always there." 

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