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**'A Little
Night
Music' a
big treat**
Page 15



Reaching
FOR THE
stars

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Reaching for the stars

"Star Search" winner Vickie Natale makes her Bay Area debut

by Robyn Israel

It takes guts to get up on stage at Harlem's legendary Apollo Theater. This is, after all, a venue where amateur nights are judged by the audience, a notoriously discerning crown whose applause -- or lack thereof -- can make or break performances.

It takes even more moxie to perform at the Apollo if you're 15 years old. But singer Vickie Natale is no ordinary performer. Blessed with powerhouse vocals, Natale opted to compete in the adult competition on "Showtime at the Apollo," a televised program. She didn't win, but she didn't get booed either -- a personal victory of sorts.

"I wanted to do it. I wanted to sing," the Brooklyn native said. "And when you want it that bad, you take risks."

It's that go-for-the-gold mentality that recently landed the 22-year-old vocalist on CBS' "Star Search," where she was named grand champion and awarded \$200,000 in prize money. In addition, Natale earned a \$1 million Sony Music recording contract, a result of having won the finals of the adult vocal category.

This weekend, Natale will make her Bay Area debut at a concert benefiting the Community School of Music Arts (CSMA). Proceeds from the concert, a co-production between CSMA and Hearts of Silicon Valley, will assist CSMA in raising the final funds for its new 25,000 square-foot, \$11.5 million facility in Mountain View. Silicon Valley's first-ever Center for Music and Arts Education is now 80 percent complete and is slated to open in February 2004.

Natale's Oct. 19 concert, set to take place at a private home in Atherton (the show will be open to the public), will feature Natale singing songs she performed on "Star Search," such as "Chain of Fools," "Saving All My Love For You" and "I'm Going Down." The program will also include original material, musical standards and pop tunes.

Those unfamiliar with the singer might unfairly assume she is just another product of the unholy union of record labels and "reality" television. In truth, Natale is a down-to-earth, determined young woman who has studied her craft and worked hard to achieve her success. A former music teacher, she now feels committed to help create opportunities for up-and-coming performers.

"I think it's great the Community School is doing this. I feel honored they brought me out here to perform and share my story. There's a lot of boys and girls out there who want to sing or learn about music, and some just don't have the money," she said.

Natale can totally relate.

A native of Brooklyn, N.Y., Natale grew up in a fatherless household, the middle of three daughters. Her mother loved listening to Motown, and Natale's early influences included Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Maria Callas, Stevie Wonder and Aretha Franklin. She began singing at the age of four and composing music at the age of 12.

"Music was my way of dealing with not having a father," Natale said. "We didn't have much money. My mother would say, 'Do you want to eat or do you want music lessons?' You find ways to learn, through CDs, and you have good positive people."

Natale found such a mentor in Maxine Patarini, her music teacher at Lafayette High School.

"She took the time to really sit there with me. She never asked for money for a lesson. She saw my talent and helped me grow it, which is the reason I feel so close to music education."

Intent on studying her craft, Natale continued her education at the Mannes College of Music in Manhattan, where she majored in jazz and studied piano and voice.

"I knew jazz was at the heart of a lot of American music -- R&B, some pop, even hip-hop music. So I knew that would give me the fundamentals ... I didn't want to be just another singer," she said.

During her college years, Natale began performing at open-mic nights at the Sugar Bar, a Manhattan club owned by Valerie Simpson and Nick Ashford (of Ashford and Simpson fame). The regular Thursday night gig gave her the chance to test the waters in a place where she felt "at home." She also would perform cabarets there with fellow Lafayette alumnus Tirrell Anthony (of "American idol" fame), whom she had befriended when they were classmates.

Musical luminaries would regularly stop by on Thursday nights at the Sugar Bar. People such as Patti Labelle, Maya Angelou and Chaka Khan and the late Nina Simone were patrons and offered Natale encouragement.

Natale distinctly recalled the night Khan heard her perform "God Bless the Child."

"(That) she respects your music. Wow. Someone who's been through so much, who's influenced every R&B singer out there. That she enjoys your interpretation of the song. That's a blessing. It's encouraging, as well."

One night in early 2003, "Star Search" casting director Greg Harvey heard Natale perform at the Sugar Bar and encouraged her to try out for the show. Natale had already auditioned once before and hadn't been called back. But the second time was a charm, propelling Natale onto the show, where she endeared herself to judges Naomi Judd, Ben Stein, Ahmet Zappa and diverse guest judges. She also managed to overcome a nasty case of bronchitis before the first round performance of "Chain of Fools."

"I had no voice. It was so scary," Natale recalled. "Here's my opportunity to show people what I have. I'm a singer -- this is what I can do."

After that performance, Natale found herself trailing her competitor by one point, but the home audience boosted her score, keeping her in contention.

For the Battle of the Champions, Natale had one day to learn her song, "I Refuse to Be Lonely," an obscure '90s tune suggested to her by one of the show's music directors.

"He said, 'Vickie, you're such an emotional singer.' He thought the song would be perfect for me," Natale recalled. "So I listened to the song and I loved it. I loved the message."

Throughout the competition, Natale kept teaching at the Mark Twain School for the Gifted and Talented on Coney Island, where she had to prepare her students for their spring concert.

"Everyone was coming out to check out Ms. Vickie Natale, the teacher. The parents and the kids were very supportive. Some of my students downloaded my image and brought it in for me to sign. I thought it was adorable."

Natale's teaching days are over, at least for now. She is currently preparing to record her debut album, and is writing songs and contemplating covers. The material be a mixture of pop and R&B, she said, adding that she is taking her time in getting the project off the ground.

"People say, 'Where's my album? (But) you have to find the right song for you, the right key. It has to all meld."

Natale seems to have her feet on the ground while she reaches for the stars. She still rents a room on Staten Island from her old music teacher, Maxine Patarini. Patarini is also in business with Natale and Anthony, with the trio running "Manhattan Bound," a company that writes commercials and jingles. And Natale is well acquainted with the business end of the music industry, having interned at Blue Note records as a college student.

"In this business, it's very easy to want to quit -- things don't happen as fast as you want them to, people promise things, and they don't come to fruition. And you also have to make things happen for yourself."

Who: "Star Search" Grand Prize winner Vickie Natale, presented by Hearts of Silicon Valley and the Community School of Music and Arts.

When: Oct. 19 at 2 p.m.

Where: A private home in Atherton (outdoor performance)

Cost: Tickets are \$35 general seating; \$65 priority seating (includes two drinks and an autographed photograph); \$125 premier seating (includes two drinks and a limited-edition live recording). Student tickets (ages 10-17, with a paying adult) are \$20 (bleacher seating). Tickets include hors d'oeuvres and a no-host bar. All seating is limited and will be available on a first-come, first-served basis.

Info: Call (650) 856-8041 or visit www.hosv.org