

# The New York Times

## Meet the Next Generation of Cabaret Showstoppers

Teens competing for the New York Cabaret Convention are proving that young people are invested in the Great American Songbook.



**The New York Cabaret Convention has put a spotlight on teens: from left, Julia Parasram, Jennifer Poroye, Anaïs Reno, Kylie McNeill and Leonay Shepherd. Credit...Simbarashe Cha for The New York Times**

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By Elysa Gardner

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As the longtime cabaret backers Adela and Larry Elow approached their 90s, their thoughts turned to today's teenagers and what the Great American Songbook means to their future — whether they know it or not.

“Most of them aren't aware of this music, because their parents are young people, too,” said Adela. Larry, a jazz pianist and composer in his earlier years, was more blunt. “Their parents are rock addicts,” he lamented. “But the songbook is our great legacy.”

To drive that point home, the couple, members of the board of trustees of the [Mabel Mercer Foundation](#), created an endowment for budding singers, to be distributed as part of the organization's annual New York Cabaret Convention. This year marked the third Adela and Larry Elow American Songbook High School Competition — and, because of Covid-19, the first to be held online for the 1st Virtual [Cabaret](#) Convention. As usual, competitors performed songs written between 1900 and 1970. Only students from New York City public performing arts schools requiring auditions were eligible, and this year the winner and finalists are all women. Four are artists of color.

The foundation's artistic director, the cabaret veteran KT Sullivan, noted that several alumni of the competition are already rising stars — among them last year's winner, Anaïs Reno, still only 16, who has performed at Birdland and Feinstein's/54 Below.

“When these young artists perform songs from the American songbook for their peers, they all get excited,” Sullivan said. “Because the songs take us somewhere — they're stories.” Reno, Savannah Lee Henry (this year's winner), and the other 2020 finalists shared details of their own stories, and where they see themselves headed.

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Anais Reno, 16



**Credit...Simbarashe Cha for The New York Times**

**Born in Geneva, raised in Manhattan; class of 2021, Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts in Manhattan.**

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**Influences** “Definitely more dead singers than living singers,” among them Frank Sinatra, [Ella Fitzgerald](#), Mel Tormé, Sarah Vaughan, Johnny Hartman and, recently, Carmen McRae. The daughter of a violinist and a former opera singer, Reno was self-conscious as a child about “only liking the old stuff. But the moment I didn’t care about what other people were doing anymore, I let myself love jazz without any apologies.”

**Stage presence** “This may sound clichéd, but onstage I feel the most myself; I can be free physically and emotionally,” said Reno, who is drawn to bluesy ballads. “I have a pretty dark tone, and I find myself attracted to the sad aspects of things — not morbid, but realistic.”

**Teacher’s notes** John Prestianni, a musical director and accompanist at LaGuardia, hasn’t taught Reno, but he admires her soulful alto and precocious interpretive powers: “What impresses me most is her confidence — to sing for an hour and 20 minutes at Birdland in front of 150 people with the lights low would be hard for most 40-year-olds.”

**Signature song** “[‘Mood Indigo’](#) has become a staple because it has a lot of emotional depth, and I’m a sucker for the lonely thing,” Reno said. “But I’ve probably performed [‘I Ain’t Got Nothin’ But the Blues’](#) more than any other song. It’s got so many layers; because of the melody and the feel, it’s saying, ‘You know what?’ I don’t *need* nothing but the blues.’ It’s proud in a way, and sassy.”

**I have dreamed** “I want to be a jazz singer, to record and perform and tour. That’s how I want to spend the rest of my life.”