

SPOTLIGHT ON.... Barbara Kessler

She has been an ice cream truck driver, an accomplished folk artist, and movie stand-in for actress Anne Archer. Recently, she added a few more roles to her repertoire: actress, songwriter teacher, and host of ESL's Open Mic nights, which begin on March 8 at 8:00 p.m. "She" is Barbara Kessler, a very talented and welcome addition to Enter Stage Left's theater family.

Although Barbara grew up with a song on her lips and a guitar in her hand, she didn't really start performing publicly until after graduating from Cornell. She was living on Cape Cod and driving an ice-cream truck by day, but at night she took advantage of the large number of Open Mic venues on the Cape. Her success at the coffeehouses emboldened her to try her hand at songwriting.

"I had always been intimidated by songwriting, especially since I was singing these songs by masters like Joni Mitchell, Simon and Garfunkel, Suzanne Vega and Bonnie Raitt," Barbara said. "But I learned that it was okay to write things yourself, and that helped me to overcome my intimidation."

Eventually Barbara moved to the Boston area, where she continued to perform in local coffeehouses, including the then renowned Old Vienna Coffeehouse in Westborough. It was there that she had her first big break: opening for

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Livingston Taylor in 1989. “I had butterflies in my stomach and thought ‘oh no, what if I stink and they don’t like me?’”

She needn’t have worried. She was invited by Rounder Records to enter their songwriting contest, where she was named the Folk Singer Runner Up. That led to an invitation to go to Martha’s Vineyard for an Open Mic night that was part of a weeklong songwriter’s retreat with Christine Lavin, where her performance was recorded and included on the *Big Times in Small Town* album.

In 1995 Barbara’s debut album *Stranger to this Land* was released, to great critical acclaim. It won Boston Music Award’s “Outstanding Debut Folk Album” honor, and was also selected as one of *Performing Songwriter Magazine*’s top 12 independent albums. That year Barbara was also named the National Academy of Songwriter’s Female Acoustic Artist of the Year.

“I was really excited to be doing the thing I always loved the most – playing, singing, and now writing songs,” Barbara said. “And the outside validation felt good!”

Barbara continued touring and winning contests, and eventually was approached by Jerry Marotta (drummer to renowned musicians such as Peter Gabriel and Paul McCartney) about producing a studio album. “That was a whole education,”

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Barbara says of the production of *notion*. “It was amazing to be in a studio with all these respected musicians, such as Marotta, Tony Levin and Jennifer Kimball.”

In addition to producing albums and garnering awards, Barbara was also busy starting a family with her husband and fellow musician, Phil Antoniadis. She is now the proud mother of Elaina, age six, and Emilia, age 11. “Emilia was a ‘road baby’ in the beginning, and would go on tour with us,” Barbara said. “But about the time she turned three years old I decided to slow down a little and focus more on being a stay-home mom.”

However, Barbara never completely left the music world. Currently she is producing music for companies like Sony Playstation, and her songs are also featured on TV shows such as *The Young and the Restless*.

She also continues to perform, and after singing at an ESL Coffeehouse she was encouraged to audition for ESL’s *USO Tribute Show*. “When Barbara performed at the coffeehouse we couldn’t believe how fortunate we were to have someone of her caliber right here in our community,” said Kelly Grill, a co-founder of ESL. “It was a wonderful night at the studio. When she said she would like to perform in some of our shows we couldn’t believe it! She had never done anything like

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this before but she is a natural talent and had no trouble transitioning from singer/songwriter to dramatic and then comic actress.”

Paul Champlin, a director and co-founder of ESL stated, “After directing Barbara in last Spring's *USO Tribute Show*, I had a sense that she possessed considerable, untapped acting talent and invited her to accept the role as Miep in *The Diary of Anne Frank*.” He added, “I was extraordinarily pleased to direct Barbara in her first dramatic acting performance, an opportunity that she embraced with passion and reverence. She possesses an inherent poise on the stage and a natural instinct for the study and portrayal of character as she readily considers new insights to refine and optimize her portrayals. It has been an honor for ESL to partner with her in so many projects over the last year!”

Barbara finds acting in the ESL productions to be a lot of fun. “In the *USO Tribute Show* I got to play Marlene Dietrich and an Andrew Sister -- it was like playing ‘dress up’ for grown ups,” she exclaimed. As for the ESL Community, “I love the people there – they are talented, committed people who put their own spin on things to pull off really great productions,” she said.

Recently Barbara started teaching ESL's songwriting class. “My favorite thing about songwriting is the process....how you find a melody or chord change or

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groove or one title or line that just propels you forward until something is born out of nothing,” she explained. “It’s such a high!”

Barbara’s next role is playing Issachaar in ESL’s upcoming production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. And if ESL has its wish, it won’t be her last. “ She is beautiful to watch on stage. She brings grace, charm and beauty to everything she does,” Kelly said. “We look forward to many productions with Barbara.”

Yesterday Female Acoustic Artist of the Year, today Issachaar, tomorrow – who knows? But whatever Barbara’s next role is, you can be sure she will do it with talent, flair, and passion.

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