

BARBARA LEA is a singers' singer. She has no appreciable style, because style implies self, and when she sings she puts her ego to one side and attempts to make each song exactly what its composer and lyricist intended. She has a deep, forceful voice; her tones resonate. She also has an even vibrato, great rhythmic agility, sharp dynamics, and voice timbres that move from silk to sandpaper. Offstage, she has a damn-the-torpedoes manner, and she always seems slightly incredulous. Her face is square and handsome, and her chin determined. Her hair is reddish and short. She lives in a three-room apartment on West Fifty-fifth Street, not far from the old Fifty-fifth Street Playhouse, above which another determined singer, Sylvia Syms, once lived. Barbara Lea has a canny ear, and she likes to talk about singers and singing:

"Billie Holiday couldn't sing a song without embellishments. What she did, especially in the early days, was terribly honest and direct. She flattened out the melody of her songs. She could swing incredibly. Sweet-and-sour, dill pickles, strong, cutting—she was an absolute. She sprang full grown from the head of Jove. Mabel Mercer ushered in a new era of singing. She ushered in the era of paying attention to each word. Before, sad was sad and happy happy, and they were always the same. She became terrifically specific with lyrics. She is a singing actress, as was Ethel Waters, who was outside the general run of singers. Frank Sinatra was the first big singer who took great care with his phrasing. He was a *purposeful* singer. He paid attention. There is a lot of shtick in Sarah Vaughan. She doesn't value songs. But she has a fine voice and a fine ear. When Mel Tormé sings straight, he sings beautifully. His time is second to no one's. I wish he didn't have to be a star. I wish he could be a nobody, he's so talented. Bobby Short structures a song beautifully. He gives it such a dramatic lift. When he's got it together, his movements are marvellous—eyes, face, shoulders. And he'll break out those hands. He's not self-indulgent.

"Nor have I ever been. I was born in Detroit, and we moved out to Melvindale, which is near Dearborn, when

I was very little. We were always singing and making music around my home. I grew up assuming everyone could sing and play instruments. My brother, who sang, tap-danced, and played harmonica, kept winning amateur contests. It was the age of amateur nights. People still entertained themselves, and it was still possible to be a Hollywood star. I was born Barbara LeCocq, which was changed to Leacock when I was four or five. I started using Lea when I made my first recordings, in the early fifties, and I've also had three married names. My father was an assistant attorney general in Michigan. He could be a brilliant, charming, sparkling man, and other times he could be critical and picky and putting-down. He probably should have been a classical clarinetist. He played in the pit band for Al Jolson's 'Sinbad' after the First World War, and he studied with the first clarinetist of the New York Philharmonic. But, with his strict background, it was unthinkable to go into music. My mother is intelligent and fun, and everybody loves her. She wasn't around a lot when I was little. She worked, and my grandmother took care of me. But she's very motherly, my mother. There were hard times when we lived in Melvindale, even though we were comparatively well off. We moved back to Detroit when I was ten. I'd been in a little town where I was the smartest in the class and my father was on the school board, so I was resented. I got in the habit of trying to be inconspicuous. When I was sent to a huge school in Detroit, I waited for them to find out I was good, but they never bothered.



It took a long time before I learned to come out of that shell.

"I went to Wellesley. I liked the music department, and the place was physically beautiful. I studied counterpoint and orchestration and composition, but there was no ear training, and my ear deteriorated from lack of use. I spent a lot of time in Boston listening to jazz and singing with groups like the Crimson Stompers, at Harvard. I had started singing in high school and had had some coaching. Summers, I sang a little at an outdoor dance place near a cottage we had in Belle River, Ontario. Father had to ask the leader if I could sing with the band. Billie Holiday was my idol; and I saw Mildred Bailey in Boston. After graduation, I supported myself as a secretary in Boston, at thirty-five dollars a week, and I collected cover charges at the tables

for George Wein at his Storyville Club. I sang with Lester Lanin-type groups. Then I went to New York, and through a friend of my parents I found a steady job in a clip joint in Union City. There were four chorus girls, too, and all of us were expected to sit with the customers, but I was bad at that. I was bad at everything. I had no stage presence. I was scared to death. I didn't know what to do with my hands. So I retreated to Boston, and worked in lounges where it was safe and dark. I slowly got tough. I worked with a piano player in Boston who couldn't read, couldn't keep a beat, couldn't transpose, couldn't play the songs of the day, and hated to play the piano. And that gave me a great musical independence—I learned to sing with anyone, anywhere, under any conditions. I made my first record in 1954, and moved to New York for good. Things began to happen. I made a record for Riverside in the spring of 1955. It got great reviews, and John Wilson listed it as one of the albums of the year, along with Marlene Dietrich and Bing Crosby and the 'Oklahoma!' soundtrack. I won a *Down Beat* poll as the best new singer in 1956, and I worked at the Village Vanguard. But I didn't believe any of it. I considered myself a college kid who wanted to sing. I didn't accept myself as a grownup. I had got married and my husband managed me, but we split up and I was convinced I couldn't go on working without him. So I started at the Lane Theatre Workshop, on West Forty-sixth Street. It was run by a brilliant man named Burt Lane, who, by choice, is now driving a cab. Jean Shepherd sent me there. I began to learn about people: that they didn't always mean what they said, that you didn't have to tell the truth—or, rather, that other people didn't. I learned something about alternatives in life and art. I began to come out of my dream world. I had a twenty-dollar flat in SoHo, which I had to heat myself. I made a movie full of libelous dialogue about Castro called 'Rebellion in Cuba,' and I had a substantial part in 'Finnegans Wake.' The first was shot in Coral Gables and I was the leading lady and it was terrible, and the second was made in New York and shown maybe twice. I got a job with the Stanley Woolf Players in the Catskills. Tony Curtis came out of them. We stayed in Liberty and went out to a different hotel every night. It was thirty a week and room and board. I did some Off Broadway and a lot of summer stock, and I gener-