

## No 'Changing' of Vocal Quality At Celebration Singers' Feast

By SUSAN M. DOUGHERTY  
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

SCOTCH PLAINS — "Oh, it's a costume party," one little boy noted as he saw the Celebration Singers in madrigal garb at Snuffy's Pantagis' Restaurant in Scotch Plains on Saturday, January 26.

In reality, it was a Madrigal Dinner Theater experience entitled, "The Changing of the Guard, A Madrigal Dinner."

It felt like stepping back to the medieval era, with colorful banners unfurled, castle boulders arrayed, serving wenches, a jester, a juggler

table. She gave her sob story: she was formerly a chef for the king until his majesty found her hair in his soup. Alas, she was reduced to a lowly serving wench.

The characters affected British accents, as they welcomed the guests to their seats in the banquet hall dubbed Deep Manor (pronounced "manure").

Right on cue, the procession began with brass musical heraldry and pageantry galore.

Four light songs presented before dinner were interrupted by the "Changing of the Guard," a running gag that reared its comely but cute head

the guests as they ate.

Mr. Berg's segment of a sing-along with the audience was a delightful highlight of the night. "It's easy," he said slyly. "Just repeat after me," then sang a tongue twister to beat all tongue twisters.

Undaunted, guests got up to take part in the sing-off competition.

Then, a melodrama took the stage with Wiley Wanda (Barbara Stroz), a damsel in distress, being hounded by the evil Sheriff of Notting, better known as Not 'n Honey, played to the hilt by Sean Carroll.

Robin the Boy Wonder (Rene Gabbai) paid a visit in the sketch while a Country Western melody twanged away in "A Song for Wanda."

After a series of groaner jokes in the too-long play, ("Let your pages do the walking through the yellow fingers"), the singers did what they do best: sing.

They finished off the evening with numbers previewed in their December concert. Memorable classics like "Lullay Thou Little Tiny Child," "Angels We Have Heard on High" and "Silent Night" took a Herculean effort of concentration on the vocalists' part with dance music thumping from the next room blasting in the background.

A testament to their talent and mental focus, the group's candle lit vocal recession was especially lovely.

A fun night for a family of all ages, this proved to be a rousing collaborative project for the Celebration Singers to share with friends and family.



FROM JESTERS TO KING...Royally costumed Celebration Singers entertain at their January 26 Madrigal Dinner Theater at Snuffy's in Scotch Plains.

and ladies and lords of the court ready for the introduction of the king and queen.

Before the program, however, the costumed members of the cast mingled with the guests and introduced themselves as people from another time and place.

"I am Sou Fhié," announced soprano Alisa Olin to those seated at our

many times throughout the night.

With fanfare, young pages brought in a decorated fake boar's head on a platter and the singers burst forth into "Boar's Head Carol."

Host of the evening, Inn Keeper Sean Berg, ever the versatile, energetic and charismatic conductor of the Cranford-based vocal group, strummed a guitar and interacted with

## Shanghai String Quartet To Perform with Symphony

WESTFIELD — On Saturday, February 10, at 8 p.m., at The Presbyterian Church in Westfield, the Westfield Symphony (WSO) will present Valentine — Asian style, an eclectic mix of dance, romance, creativity and unbridled energy, all from masters spanning four centuries of musical tradition.

This program includes Strauss "Waltzes," Debussy's scandalous "Prelude to Afternoon of a Faun," Zhou Long's "Poems From Tang" and culminates in Mozart's passionate "Symphony No. 40," with its almost universal language of elegance and charm.

This Valentine's celebration concert features a guest appearance by the Shanghai String Quartet, partnering with WSO in a special performance of Mr. Long's "Poems From Tang" (1995).

"I can think of no better ensemble to help me bring alive the Tang Dynasty mystique through 21st century musical colors," Mr. Long, composer

in residence, said.

Originally formed in Shanghai, the Shanghai Quartet is known for their passionate musicality, technique and multicultural innovations. "We are truly honored to welcome and partner with a quartet of such refinement and musical distinction," WSO Music Director David Wroe said.

Since its founding at the Shanghai Conservatory in 1983, the Shanghai Quartet has been seen on stage with artists such as Yo-Yo Ma, David Soyer, Eugenia Zukerman, Sharon Isbin, Ruth Laredo and Arnold Steinhardt.

Tickets may be purchased directly from the WSO office, 224 East Broad Street, or by calling the box office at (908) 232-9400. Tickets are also available at Fastframe on Westfield's Quimby Street and Martin Jewelers in Cranford.

For information, call (908) 232-9400, e-mail wso@westfieldsymphony.org or go to westfieldsymphony.org.

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## Arts & Entertainment

### Westfield Songster Jesse Hershkowitz Raps Up Cancer

By LINDA B. CONDRILLO  
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

WESTFIELD — Out of the hospital and — with a little luck — out of the woods, Jesse Hershkowitz's battle with cancer will be all but a distant memory one fine day. Gone forever, but definitely not forgotten. With a bit more luck, the 26-year-old aspiring hip-hop/rap artist known as "Urbalist" will have his plight immortalized in his newest release, "Cancerous Flow: Lyrical Journal."

Mr. Hershkowitz never planned on using cancer as his shtick, but for Urbalist, healing via hip-hop was a lifesaver. There's even a Jewish spin to the CD, with one of the tracks entitled "Oy-Vey." But it is the first song, "The First Five Days," which chronicles the awful reality of being diagnosed with cancer, that transcends the limits of any musical genre.

Speaking to the *Westfield Leader* and *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* from his parents' home in Westfield, where he has been recuperating since last summer after being diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma, Mr. Hershkowitz said, "When I write and record, I forget about everything else—including the fact that I have cancer. Making the album was a way for me to 'fast

forward' this time in my life."

Until last August, with eyebrows that could once make Brooke Shields jealous, Mr. Hershkowitz lived and worked in Georgia with former college roommate Moses Hernandez, whose nom de rap is Moe Mentum.

The pair earned culinary arts degrees at Johnson and Wales and discovered early on that they had more in common than food preparation.

"We were just sitting around in the dorm one day and Moe thought I was working on a paper — when I told him it wasn't homework, but a

fracture." In layman's terms, it was a tumor, so small it was barely visible on the film, which had caused his humerus to break.

And while it certainly helps to have a mother who is as skillful at dishing out meds as any "Top Chef" contender, it also helps to have an oncologist in the family with ties to Sloan Kettering.

After the trip to Overlook, they were soon on their way to Connecticut to see Ms. Linder's cousin, Dr. Dennis Slater. Mr. Hershkowitz still didn't know what the words "patho-



UNDER WRAPS...To prevent repeated sticking with needles to accommodate the amount of chemotherapy necessary to treat his cancer, a mediport was surgically implanted under Jesse Hershkowitz's skin.

### Powerful Women of Song Presents Singer Toshi Reagon

By MEREDITH MANNINO  
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

WESTFIELD — Entertaining and rhythmic singer Toshi Reagon performed at last weekend's Powerful Women of Song concert series at the Watchung Arts Center. The series is the brainchild of Ahrré Maros, owner of Ahrré's Coffee Roastery in Westfield. Tickets are reasonably priced, and proceeds are donated to the Watchung Arts Center.

In September 2006, Mr. Maros launched the women's music series, hoping it would create a loyal fan base.

"I know lots and lots of singer/songwriters, and many of them are women. I've noticed that these women are incredibly powerful; they touch you," Mr. Maros said. "Many female artists are extremely soulful, introspective and inspiring."

After seeing Ms. Reagon perform live, Mr. Maros asked her to perform; fortunately, she said yes.

Saturday's show was great, as Ms. Reagon played her guitar and sang to a packed house. Her performance was fun and evocative, and the beats grooved and rocked. The girl power energy was refreshing and vital, reminiscent of being a student at Hobart and William Smith Colleges.

Perhaps the best thing about the singer / songwriter / guitar player is her smile is as big, exuberant and warm as her voice and music. Of course, she's not always singing about happy experiences and subjects; her expression of sorrow and pain is just as moving as the joyful one.

Hearing Ms. Reagon sing in her incredibly strong, far-ranging voice, lyrics, such as "I believe in kindness / I believe in sweetness," exemplify that words truly can transform and inspire.

Early in the show, she performed a moving, folk rendition of Bob Marley's "Concrete Jungle." Her

smooth voice gave the reggae song a jazzy feel, and it sounded great.

She developed a following and earned the respect of musicians and critics after opening for popular rock star Lenny Kravitz on his first world tour several years ago.

Music and political activism are in her blood; her parents belonged to SNCC's (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee), and The Freedom Singers, a folk group that sprung from the Civil Rights movement and toured the country to teach people about civil rights through song. Her mother, Bernice Johnson Reagon, is founder of the world-renowned, a capella ensemble Sweet Honey In The Rock.

Ms. Reagon's bio at [toshireagon.com](http://toshireagon.com), paints a very accurate and clear picture: "In some ways, singer Toshi Reagon is a throwback to classic R&B artists, like Stevie Wonder or Prince, or old-school

rock group Led Zeppelin. Despite (or because of) her genre-bending, Toshi fits comfortably on a stage at Carnegie Hall, or in a dirty rock club."

The rich artistic and educational history of the Watchung Arts Center makes it a perfect venue for the Powerful Women of Song series. The center is in a 125-year-old building, part of which was the original schoolhouse for the Borough of Watchung.

The non-profit volunteer-run center is also host to many art exhibitions and performing arts shows, and offers classes in drawing, photography and yoga.

Next month, the Powerful Women of Song series will present Zoë Lewis. Ms. Lewis is a British-born musician, who combines jazz, Latin grooves, swing, international folk and funk originals, according to press material. If interested, check out [eventbrite.com/event/41825100/](http://eventbrite.com/event/41825100/) for more information.



CONCRETE JUNGLE...Rhythmic singer Toshi Reagon performs at the Powerful Women of Song concert series at the Watchung Arts Center.

song I was writing, we started talking about music, and found out we both liked the same thing. We started writing together and decided to form a group, and to really take it seriously."

After graduation, they stayed in Providence and formed the group "Hybrid H." Three years later, they moved to Atlanta, where, according to Mr. Hershkowitz, hip hop is not only thriving, but also an affordable place to live in comparison to New York, Los Angeles and Miami.

Moe Mentum soon found work as a chef by day, spending off hours with Urbalist cutting demos. The two were up and running in their Pro Tools-equipped studio, recording other artists under the indie "Risk It All Records" label, as well as trying to get their own big label contract.

Mr. Hershkowitz got recognition, taking first prize in the Great American Song Contest of 2006 in the hip-hop category for his song "Depression." Life was good.

Then, an annoying pain in Urbalist's arm that just wouldn't go away led to an emergency room visit, where, without so much as an x-ray, he was told it was probably bursitis and given a Motrin.

As they say with cooking, timing is everything. It just so happened Mr. Hershkowitz had plans to fly to New Jersey to attend his grandmother's 85th birthday party the very next day. He never made it to the party.

Instead, his mother, Louise Linder, took him to Overlook Hospital where he did have an x-ray and, being a nurse herself, "was horrified" when she heard the words "pathological

logical fracture" meant. As forthright as his music, he asked his mom straight up for a best-case/worst-case scenario.

It was then, on the long car ride, he heard the word cancer for the first time. "I just sat back in my seat 'begging karma' please, don't let it be cancer." But luckily for Urbalist, because the cancer was found so early, his chances for a full recovery are excellent.

Oddly, it wasn't the fact that he was facing his own mortality that worried Urbalist. Mr. Hershkowitz told *The Westfield Leader*, "My first thought wasn't that it was life threatening. It was more like a giant inconvenience. All I could think about was that I didn't want to leave my friends in Atlanta, leave my grind, leave my hustle. I was working on a record deal, and I just took the news as 'squashing my dreams.'

"All I could think about was how the recovery would make me lose time promoting the record, stopping me in my tracks," he added.

His parents provided studio equipment in their home, allowing their son to record—when he was up to it. Urbalist said, "If I didn't have an album to work on with songs to write and record, or my love for music and my need for healing, I would have gone absolutely insane; torn myself up."

But he was torn up, physically at least. "It was a nightmare; the whole thing was just a nightmare," Ms. Linder told the newspaper. Urbalist wrote at his "lowest points," which included painful side effects from a

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### Filmmakers Brings Best Of Festival Circuit to NJ

MOUNTAINSIDE — Starting February 26, Filmmakers Symposium will run for 12 weeks in New Jersey at AMC Loews Mountainside and AMC Loews Monmouth Mall. This series has hosted 1,162 movie premieres with 765 live guest appearances over the past 16 years.

"The program will always be flexible in order to take advantage of opportunities as they arise," said Symposium director Chuck Rose. "Wonderful surprises and fantastic celebrities can pop up out of nowhere, so I try to keep the schedule as fluid as possible. In the past two years, we premiered 91 films, which later earned a total of 38 Oscar, 44 British Academy, 39 Golden Globe, and 31 European Film Award nominations."

Oscar winners and nominees Danny

Aiello, Alan Arkin, James Cromwell, Frank Darabont, Ethan Hawke, Jean-Pierre Jeunet, John Sayles, Marc Shaiman, Howard Shore and David Strathairn have joined Dylan Baker, Al Franken, Famke Janssen, Delroy Lindo, Derek Luke, David Morse, Viggo Mortensen, Connie Nielsen and Kevin Smith as guest speakers who have come to share their insights with Symposium participants.

Mr. Rose added, "Last fall, well in advance of public release, we previewed Academy Award nominees *Pan's Labyrinth*, *Jesus Camp* and *Little Children*, highlighted by a fascinating discussion with screenwriting nominee Tom Perrotta. In the spring, we previewed Oscar nominee *Water* with its captivating star, Lisa Ray joining us."

Among the many films under consideration for the upcoming session are: *Away From Her* with Julie Christie, Gordon Pinsent, director Sarah Polley; *Gracie* with Elisabeth Shue, Dermot Mulroney, director Davis Guggenheim; *The TV Set* with David Duchovny, Sigourney Weaver, director Jake Kasdan; and *Paris Je T'aime* directed by Ethan and Joel Coen, Alfonso Cuarón, Alexander Payne, Walter Salles and Tom Tykwer.

For information or to register, call 1-800-531-9416 or visit [PrivateScreenings.org](http://PrivateScreenings.org).

The series is open to anyone, but seating is limited, so early enrollment is advised. Subscription is \$166 for six weeks or \$299 for 12 weeks. Discounts will be available for registrations made by Monday, February 12.

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