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The Secrets of Finding Vocal Work

There is a great career to be had as a gigging singer—but why do some singers get more work than others? One of the UK's top session singers, Kim Chandler, explains the secrets of staying constantly employed.



It is no secret that Kim Chandler is one of the UK's most in-demand session singers. She's worked with Bjork, Natalie Cole, Michael Bolton, and Diddy (aka Puff Daddy)—to name just a few. She has a schedule that would make anyone's head spin: I caught her between a gig at her favorite “posh” 5-star London Hotel, a flight to Guernsey for a concert, teaching private lessons and studio work as a vocal producer. We had to speak soon because Kim was just about to be immersed in filming the next series of the UK hit television series *Don't Forget The Lyrics* where she has to learn hundreds of songs in just a few weeks!

But how does Kim keep getting work? More than that, how does she keep getting the kind of work that she wants, enjoys, thrives on and suits her soul? The following interview was pursued in motion—on Skype and cell phones, from trains and cars moving all over the UK—as I chased Kim down between her many jobs to discover the secrets of her success.

Did you always know you would make money from singing?

If you had told me years ago that I was going to make my living from singing, I would have laughed! It was never the plan. I was studying flute at university in a classical degree program. I enjoyed singing at the time, but didn't see it as my career. Since then I've gone from being a

flautist who sometimes sang to a singer who sometimes plays the flute—as I did on an album with British rockers Uriah Heep.

What was the turning point in moving from hobby to career?

Back in the late 80's I had my first job in a commercial recording session. I was thrilled with the process. The recording studio is a strange environment—you either love it or hate it—it polarizes people. Everything you do is under scrutiny. Everything you sing is going down for posterity, so it has to be the best it can be. I had never before had the experience of being directed so intensely in order to get to this level of polish—I loved it! Maybe it's because I am perfectionistic by nature. I love the live environment too but for different reasons. I try to achieve a balance in my life between recording sessions, live work and teaching—this is the mix that makes me happiest.

The music industry isn't known for its job stability and yet you've achieved a successful, steady and growing career. How is this?

It's a rare person who can just specialize in one thing in today's 'climate'. The music industry is trend based. You have to go with what is happening at the time and not berate it for not being what you want. If you want to be a part of the industry, you have to play by its rules.

It's about wearing different hats—not about specializing in one thing. I am often asked, "What do you specialize in?" I specialize in versatility! People love putting people in boxes and I love juggling them! This predisposes me to having a session career.

I love the variety of what I do, which is another reason why I have not considered the "artist's path" of focusing only on one style. I immerse myself in diversity; that's my art.

What advice do you have for the singer who wants to build a successful career?

First, we have to define success. I have to say that career and fame are two different things. Fame is capricious. There is no clear career path to fame—you can't guarantee it. If you just want to be famous, go on Big Brother! People who want to get into music as a vehicle for fame are in it for the wrong reasons. You have to love singing and performing for what it is. Once you have some talent and determination you can start

to build a career.

So, where does one start?

If you are in a music school it's obvious: form a band with people on your course. Nearly every vocal school is a part of a larger music school, so the people you need to work with are all around you. Get your band together, work hard, produce a quality demo and get a MySpace music webpage in order to prove that you are of the level to be out there in the public domain.

After this, you need to get out there and do research on venues. Be careful to match what you and your group do well to what the venue is looking for—don't waste your time (and the venue's) by marketing your material to a particular venue when they are looking for something completely different. Advertising helps a lot—you can use websites like www.gumtree.com or www.kijiji.com and all kinds of community-based websites to find gigs.

For singers outside of the school or college environment, a good place to start is the open mike circuit—larger cities are full of these. It's a great way to start performing in front of people where money isn't involved. The live band behind the open mike session may give you feedback if you ask them. You will meet other musicians—it's all about networking. Don't sit at home expecting the phone to give you a gig! You've got to be proactive about it.

Yet there is a huge difference between landing gigs and staying in steady work. You've cracked that secret code.

Well, you've got to have talent. Talent and skill gets you the gig but what keeps you gigging is your character. For example, what are you like to work with? Did you learn the material you were asked to? Are you upfront about your skills? Are you fun to be around? Are you a good team player? Are you honest? Etc. etc.

Look, I'm not the greatest singer on the planet but I know what I do well and I stick to that. At the end of the day I've seen superior singers to me come and go; it isn't their voice—it is their attitude. I will see someone sing fabulously but think, 'I'll never see them again'. Why? Because they are a pain in the ass! Life is too short to work with people who are hard

work—no one is so good that they can get by without having a good character.

What are the top qualities one needs—after talent?

Standard professional stuff—like punctuality. Nothing is more frustrating to a producer or your fellow musicians than someone who comes in late—and when you come in late you are flustered and it takes time for things to settle. Now we all have times when things happen beyond our control. But it has to be our habit to be on time.

Another one is preparedness. You can never rest on your laurels. If you've got to perform material you are really familiar with over and over again, your challenge is to make it interesting for yourself. If you've got new material to learn, then an MP3 player becomes your best friend. You need to go over it and over it—I don't want to waste studio time learning a song when I was expected to learn it beforehand. Do whatever you need to do to get the music you are working on into your system.

You mentioned honesty. That word doesn't always come up in an image driven industry.

It's easy to get disheartened with an industry that has attracted more than its fair share of sharks. People should be able to know you and trust you for your integrity. People know if you are being straight with them and they know if you are pretending to be someone that you're not—or they'll find out.

In other words, don't say yes to everything—only do things you really can do. If you can't deliver something you are not doing anybody any favors by taking it on; you feel bad because you couldn't do it and the person who booked you feels bad and will never book you again. I'm good at a lot of things—but there are some things which aren't my bag. I will put my hand up and tell the truth.

You've turned down gigs?

Yesterday I was offered a great gig—it was doing backing vocals for the headlining band at a festival where 150 bands were going to be performing. It was going to be a really big gig and I felt the pressure to

take it on. But as much as I loved the material and wanted to do it for my CV, it wasn't 'me'. The vocal style was quite "blokey"—there had been no female backing vocals on the original recordings, so I couldn't see that I would compliment the music. I told them "you really need a male backing vocalist for this." I turned down the gig but in doing so maintained my integrity; this gives people a sense of security in you and gives you a better chance of them coming back to you in the future.

I don't want you to think that someone as established as me can rest from pursuing future work. Even in busy times, I am regularly in touch with people, constantly networking, being aware of trends and more work possibilities. Part of it is that I love people and if someone pops into my mind, I contact them—just because. It helps me enormously, work-wise, to pursue every lead I can think of.

Is the rumor true that you have a gigging grandmother?

Yes. My grandmother was regularly gigging as a pianist until the age of 89—it was only breaking her wrist that stopped her! Even though they both loved music and performing, my parents chose a safer career path with their lives as teachers. It's been thrilling for me to see both of them moving into more gigging in their retirement—and to see how happy they are as a result. My mother, who is a singer too, already has over 50 bookings for next year and my dad's vocal group is incredibly active. Look, I've got to go. I've just parked my car and I can't keep this vocal group waiting...

Kim Chandler is one of the UK's top (and busiest!) session singers and voice coaches. You can find out more about her career at www.kimchandler.net

© 2008 Greg Barker. Greg is a freelance editor and writer living in the heart of Wales.

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It is so true finding work as a singer is a big job. There are so many singers out there all battling for the same work it's a cut throat business. It's no good just having 2 or 3 agents you've got to get out there and find the work yourself. I find a lot of agents seem to pass the majority of the work on to friends and family and their favorite acts before offering it to others it doesn't matter how good you are they always seem to come first.

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karengilmore · 10 years ago

I am a professionally trained female vocalist and finding vocal work is one of the hardest things I have ever had to do. This information is invaluable and I am pleased to say that I have done exactly that - played musician evenings for what seems like forever and as the music business is very incestuous, I have now built a reputation and gained respect from fellow musicians in and around my city, so that's a result in itself. I just want to gain work further afield and would like to work with professionals. I have been in the business for fifteen years and it does feel like the whole thing has been one long apprenticeship! I also have a website which I would like some

feedback about on a constructive basis - open to offers and opinions please. Karen

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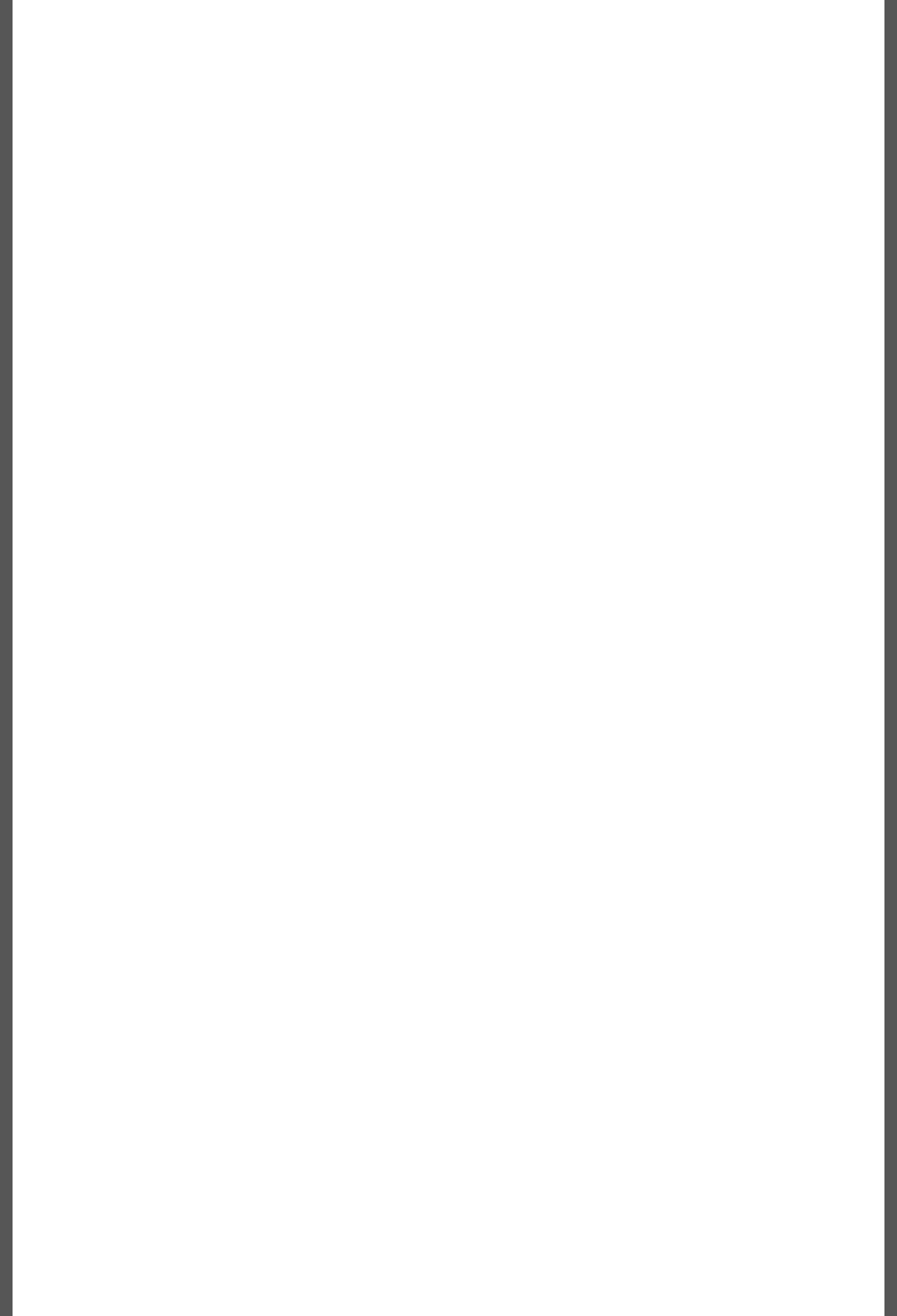
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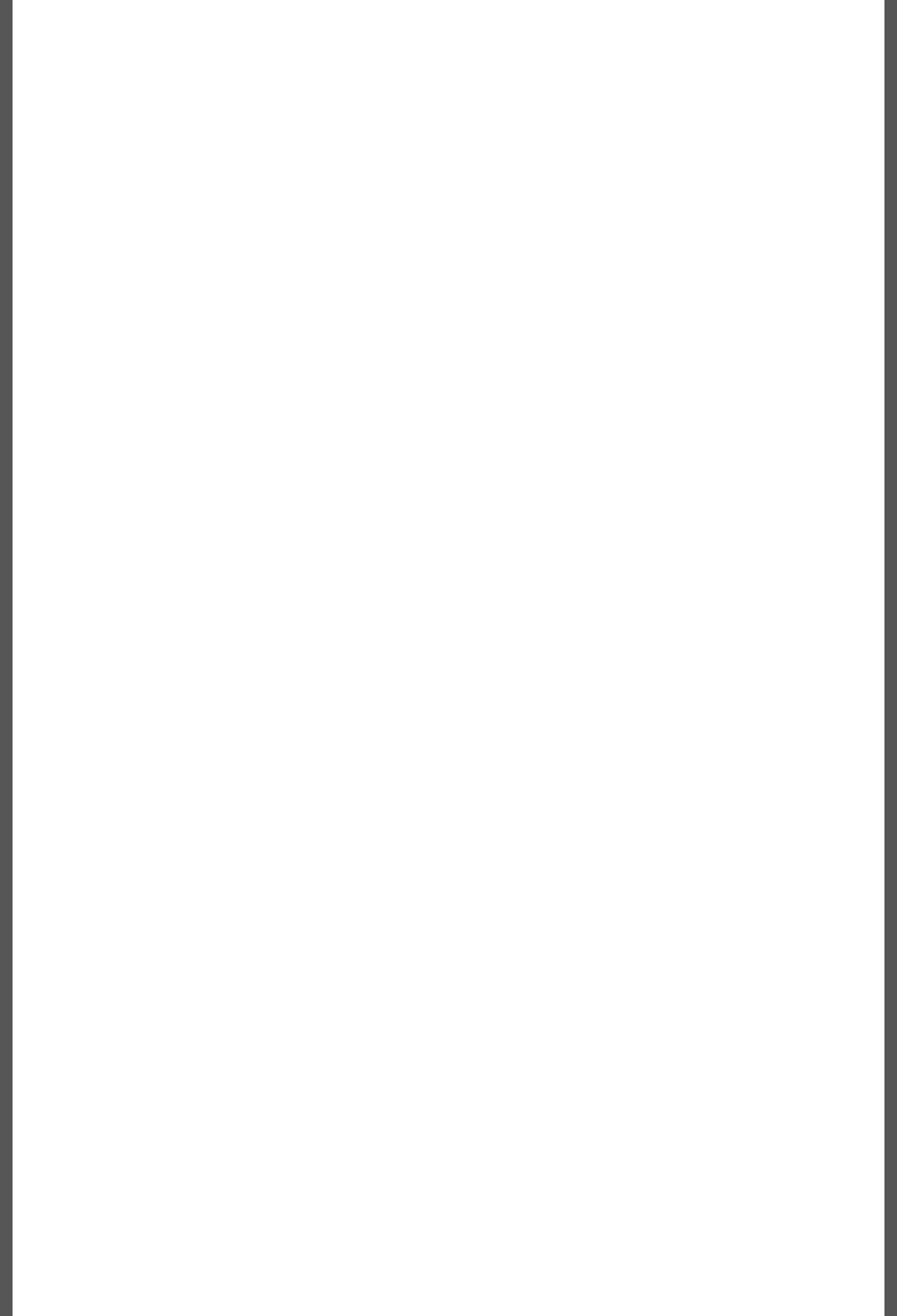
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Greg Barker

Greg Barker is the commissioning editor of VoiceCouncil Magazine, an author and lecturer. He also likes vocalists.



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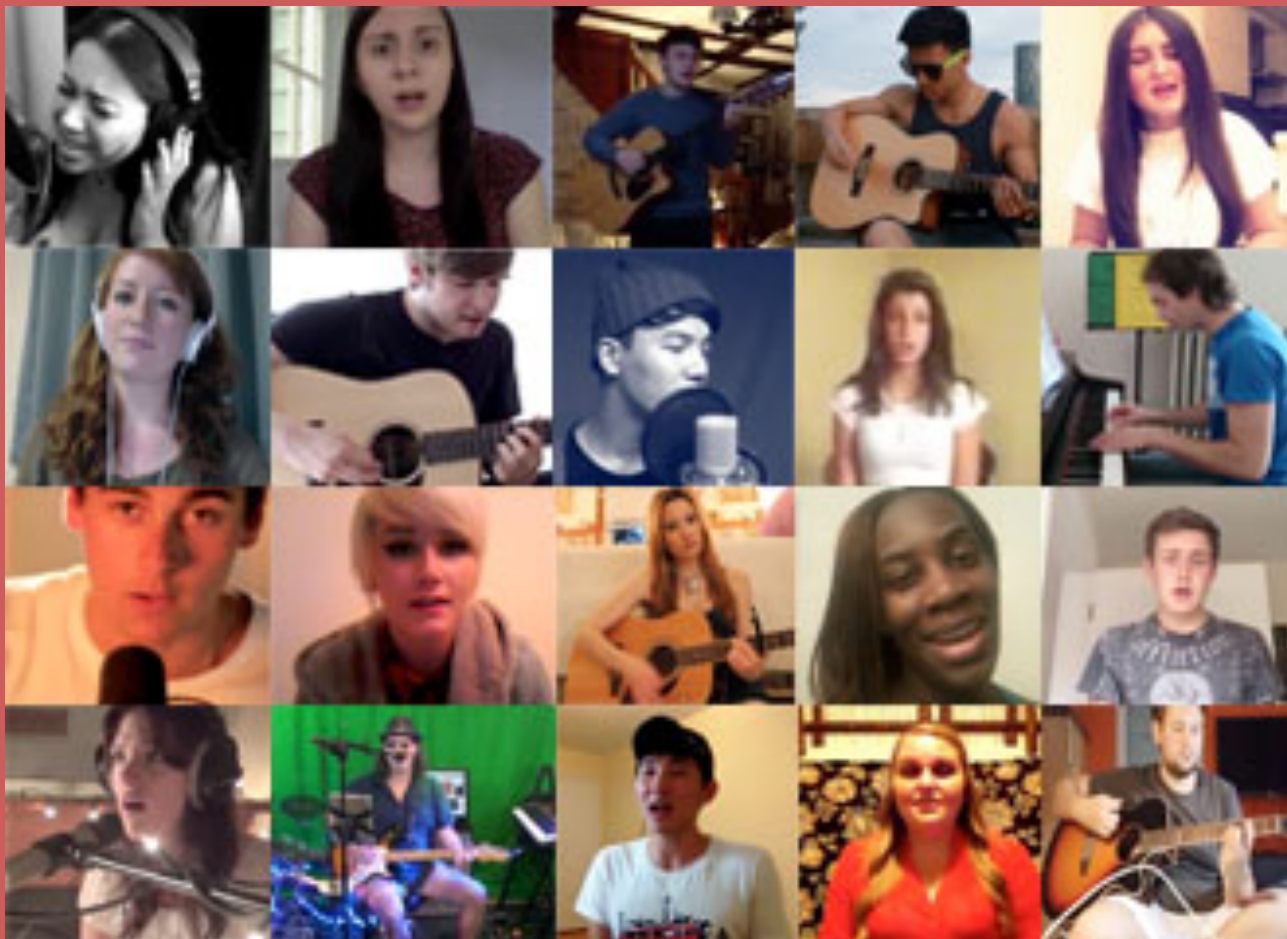
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