

AIRFLOW DEPT.

ANOTHER “BARBIE” OSCARS SNUB: BEST WHISTLER!

Molly Lewis, a professional whistler who provided part of the movie’s soundtrack, and who has a new LP, “On the Lips,” shows a music class how it’s done.

By Michael Schulman
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Illustration by João Fazenda

There is not yet an Academy Award for Best Whistling, but, if there were, Molly Lewis would be a shoo-in. Lewis, who is thirty-three, is a professional whistler. Her mellifluous sound, spanning two octaves, is part Snow White communing with the birds, part haunted theremin. Millions of people have heard her whistle, whether they know it or not, thanks to her latest credit, on “Barbie.” During the scene in which Barbie meets her creator, Ruth Handler (Rhea Perlman), in an enchanted kitchen at Mattel headquarters, an instrumental version of Billie Eilish’s Oscar-nominated song “What Was I Made For?” plays on a radio, with Lewis whistling the melody. It replays over the credits; the final sound in the film is that of air passing through her lips.

“I’ve been blessed by the whistle gods,” Lewis said the other day, over tacos in Brooklyn. She had her strawberry-blond hair in bangs, clipped with a barrette, and wore a black sweater. Her musical taste, like her look, is retro-jazzy. “Whistling can be associated with anything happy and jingly and jolly,” she said. “The music I love is a little bit sad or ambiguous.” She hosts a sultry lounge act in L.A., called Café Molly, and this month releases her debut LP, “On the Lips,” which comes with instructions advising the listener to play it with mood lighting, ideally while splayed on a chaise longue, in velvet, silk, or the nude.

Lewis grew up in Australia and Los Angeles. Her father, Mark Lewis, makes documentaries about animals. “Cane Toads: An Unnatural History,” a film of his from 1988, is “quite famous in Australia,” Lewis noted. (A sequel, “Cane Toads: The Conquest,” came out in 2010.) Lewis learned to whistle when she was four. “I remember finally making a sound and being quite pleased with myself,” she recalled. For her birthday one year, her parents gave her a CD of Steve (The Whistler) Herbst whistling Broadway covers, and she realized that she could whistle along. She taught herself how to make a sound breathing in as well as out, so that she could whistle uninterrupted. When she was a teen-ager, her parents showed her the documentary “Pucker Up,” about the International Whistlers Convention, in Louisburg, North Carolina. “My dad told me, ‘If you ever get into that competition, I’ll take you there.’”

In 2012, Lewis was twenty-two and living in Berlin when she got into the contest, so her father brought her to North Carolina. She sang the Queen of the Night aria (“which I found out later is kind of a clichéd choice for whistlers”) and Patsy Cline’s “Crazy,” and won a plaque for “Whistler Who Traveled the Greatest Distance.” A few years later, she moved back to L.A. to work in film, and some artist friends who knew about her “sordid whistling past” asked her to perform at galleries. When the Italian musician Alessandro Alessandroni (“one of my whistling heroes”) died, in 2017, Lewis staged a tribute evening, which led to more gigs, from Mexico City to Shanghai. She has duetted with Karen O, of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, on a verse of “Just a Closer Walk with Thee,” at a Harry Dean Stanton tribute; done session work on an album produced by Dr. Dre; and performed in a lingerie fashion show on the steps of the Palais Garnier, encircled by BMX bikers. Last spring, Mark Ronson summoned her to New York, to record the “Barbie” track. “For a long time, I kind of felt weird about saying I was a whistler,” she said. “But it’s what I do now.”

She walked around the corner, to Brooklyn Music School. Through a parent she knew, she’d agreed to give a lesson. “I’m a little nervous,” she said, heading into a classroom strewn with Tubano drums and Loog guitars. Eleven children, ages five to ten, sat on a carpet. “I’m a whistler,” Lewis told them. “That’s my instrument. Do any of you guys know how to whistle?” Three hands went up.

“My dad taught me how to whistle for my dog,” a boy in a gray hoodie bragged, and demonstrated.

“That’s great!” Lewis said. She took a request—“Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star”—and accompanied herself on guitar. After a quick tutorial (Lauren Bacall said it best: “You just put your lips together and blow”), the kids tried it out, with varying success. “I talk to birds sometimes,” Lewis told them. “I say hello to them, and they say hi back.”

Any questions? “Do you lick your lips when you whistle?” a girl sucking a lollipop asked. (No, but “a whistler should always have ChapStick on them,” Lewis advised.) Did she do any Ed Sheeran songs? (Nope.) How does she practice? “Well, this is another thing I like about whistling,” Lewis said. “You can do it while you’re just walking down the street!”

“You may not be able to whistle underwater,” a girl observed.

“That is one place that I can’t do it, unfortunately.”

A boy asked, “What about while you’re scuba diving?”

Lewis smiled. “I would love to try.” ♦

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