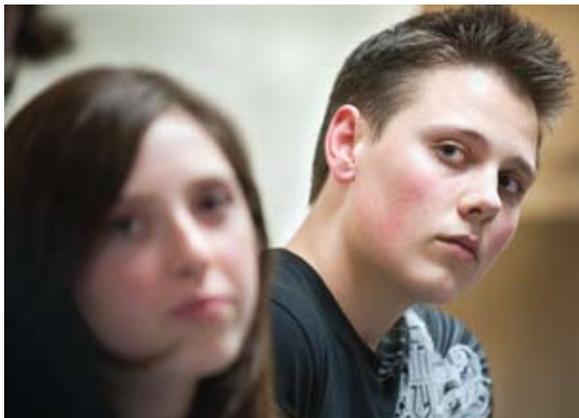


# Something to **Sing** About



Marin a cappella group helps  
teens find their voice

**BY** DANIEL JEWETT

**PHOTOS** TIM PORTER



**H**e might not teach the world to sing, but vocalist Austin Willacy has spent the last 13 years helping small groups of Marin young people perform in near-perfect harmony.

Willacy, who travels all over the world with his San Francisco-based a cappella band The House Jacks, is the mentor and leader of "Til Dawn, an award-winning teen a cappella group based in San Rafael.

"Music helps [the teens] express themselves; it helps them express emotions," he says. "They get a chance to be confident in something and learn the nuances of what it takes to make something good, great."

Organizationally, "Til Dawn is a program of the nonprofit Youth in Arts, which operates a San Rafael teen center and a variety of visual and performing arts programs for kids county-wide. Singing in the group is an intense year-round proposition involving two practices a week, group retreats and as many as 40 shows a year at festivals, in schools and for nonprofit



OPPOSITE TOP: Jake Brinskele, Emma Reese, Emmett Choy, Melanie Macri, Lily Goldman and Jessie Land sing "Under the Sea." OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Lily Goldman and Jake Brinskele. THIS PAGE TOP: Gaby Mercer-Slomoff, Lily Goldman, Austin Willacy and Melanie Macri. THIS PAGE BOTTOM: Maralisa Simmons-Cook and Maria Pougiales-Posey.

groups like Bread and Roses. “People take it seriously and they make sacrifices,” says Redwood High School sophomore Austin Smith, 16, called “Sansom” by the group to avoid name-confusion with the instructor. “The group is a really cool thing to be in. It changed my life big time and really advanced me musically.” Besides greatly improving his musical ear, the experience helped him make a shift from performing in musical theater to writing and singing his

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own songs. The commitment and regular performance schedule have also made him more mature, he says, and helped him deal with the occasional bout of stage fright.

Sean Simerly, 18, a senior at Tamalpais High School in his last year of the program, says the experience has inspired him to consider one day opening his own music studio. But he believes “Til Dawn and Youth in Arts are as beneficial to the community as they are to the students who take part. “Youth in Arts provides arts for schools that don’t have it,” he says. “You should see the faces of the elementary school kids light up as we perform.”

“Til Dawn accepts as many as 16 members at a time, and most stay with it for the duration of their time in high school. With no instrumental accompaniment, everything, including the rhythm, must be handled vocally. The job of vocal percussionist, a technique known as beat boxing, usually goes to an older member who also sings bass.

Right now Simerly fills that role. “I was really enamored of VP and totally blown away,” he confesses. “I found myself spitting all over my friends and myself trying to learn it.”

Actually, he almost didn’t make it into the group at all—he didn’t pass the audition the first year he tried. “Austin is very good and

very understanding,” Simerly says of the rigorous tryout process. “Just because you get shot down once doesn’t mean it is over.”

Willacy, who didn’t find and develop his own vocal talent until he wanted to impress a girl he had a crush on in high school, says it’s fascinating to watch kids come together from different high schools and peer groups into a cohesive unit. “Everyone has the opportunity to make sure his or her gifts are given to the space and acknowledged,” he says. And each member gets one solo with the group singing backup.

The group members also go on three or four retreats a year to help build chemistry and keep the lines of interpersonal communication open. “They participate as people, as friends and as people who enjoy each other’s company,” Willacy says. “It comes out in the music.”

The teens aren’t the only ones who benefit from the group-building. “There is richness and challenge to working with youth at that age,” Willacy confides. “It is and continues to be wonderful. I grow every year.”

This mentorship path was not what he envisioned when he came to the Bay Area after college in 1992: “What does that mean?” was his reaction when first asked to take over the loosely formed singing group. “But I thought about it and it seemed like it could be a lot of fun.” More than 17 years later, he has no regrets.

One of the new members, 15-year-old Lily Goldman of Tamalpais High, is especially pleased that the group’s repertoire now includes Dido’s “White Flag,” one of her favorite songs. Soloing can be a little “nerve-wracking” and “takes some getting used to,” she admits, but being in this group has one advantage over her previous experiences in choir: “I feel a lot more comfortable inviting my friends [to concerts],” she says.

Recently, *Til Dawn* received an Avanti Award, which will provide nine scholarships for teens who can’t afford the annual \$1,500 tuition. And with new members coming in and Willacy enthusiastic as ever, the group’s immediate future looks upbeat.

*Hear *Til Dawn* at its spring concert May 8 at the First United Methodist Church in San Rafael, or pick up the new CD *Crescendo*. 415.457.4878, [youthinarts.org](http://youthinarts.org)*