

# *You Sing Like A Girl*



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# YOU SING LIKE A GIRL

**by Eleanor Darby Wright**

I really didn't want to do it. But I could hardly say that Julie made me do it, could I? Obviously, she'd helped. She'd been the one to decide that the Goth makeup, the two-toned dyed hair, the studded clothing and the fake piercings would disguise me enough but also make me stand out from the crowd. I'd be sure, she said, to get into the television section of the tryouts for a place on the reality show.

Julie was right, of course. I trembled through the whole selection process and finally was placed in the line-up that was going to be on stage before the real judges. The black lipstick and thick eyeliner about my eyes helped a great deal, as did the pale foundation on

my face. Julie's long, leather coat over a bulky shirt and my jeans did the rest. I didn't look at all like the 'me' who had been laughed off the stage the last time I had sung in a talent contest in high school.

Then, I wouldn't have dared to wear makeup, and I would never, ever have worn a skirt and let everyone gawk at my shapely, smooth, girlish legs. And high heels and dangling earrings – they would have been totally out of the question.

"So, what's your name, dearie?" asked the supercilious English judge, a fixture now on all reality talent shows.

"Sam," I whispered to him as the size of the auditorium registered on me. There were people in the dimness back there, moving sound booms and cameras around. The one over Graham's head flared a bright red. Oh gods, I was being recorded. I was on television! I was talking to Graham Notting and there was a sneer on his face as he looked at me.

"Well, Samantha," he said to me. "What are you going to sing for us today, *Hell's Bells*?"

I couldn't blame him. The pretty, blonde, long-haired girl beside him had a fixed smile on her face as if she couldn't believe what she was looking at when she looked at me in my studded Goth gear and black and white makeup. I hadn't believed it an hour ago myself in the hotel room across the way from the theater where we were to perform.

I shook my head and Julie's earrings, black balls on the end of thin chains, swung wildly along my neck and chin.

"Going to give us a hint?" said Graham snottily, like his nickname. "Or do we have to guess?"

*"All I Ask of You,"* I whispered again, as the red light went out for a second and re-flashed from a camera way over on my left, from the stage entrance I had come through.

I faced the four judges who were sitting in a row at the edge of the stage, looking at me against a backdrop of stage curtains. The roadies who had organized us off stage were standing there, shaking their heads at me, looking quite disgusted. I had heard and seen all the others who had come before me for an hour. They had all been most lively or animated, the boys as well as the girls.

"Ask what you like," said Graham, smirking at his own sort of joke or pun, tossing his clipboard on the small table in front of him. "Christie?"

Christie, the blonde-haired glamor girl, was studying my face. "You've a lot of piercings," she said. Brilliant of you to notice, I thought sourly. "How many?"

"A lot," I muttered, trying to speak up a little. I must look and sound petrified. I was, of course.

"Going to show us all of your metalwork?" Graham had to ask luridly then as if he knew that I would have piercings in private places that he would never see. There were smiles at the thought of that all along the panel and on several faces in the darkness behind the television lights.

I shook my head again. Just let me sing my piece and get out of here, I thought to myself, shaking in distress, and blaming Julie for me being here to be embarrassed in this way. It isn't going to work, Julie, it just isn't, I thought to her, wherever she was hiding. When people looked at me, the way that the panel was, they'd laugh at me when I tried to sing. Being a Goth

was going to provoke a vile reaction, particularly with the music I'd chosen to sing.

"Who wrote that song?" asked the black girl, the guest judge, with a frown. "Andrew Lloyd Webber?"

I nodded.

"*The Phantom of the Opera?*" asked the other male judge, adjusting his black-rimmed glasses. I nodded again and he frowned at me.

"What we should have expected," murmured the black woman to Christie, who nodded and folded her arms, still looking at me distastefully.

"But that's a duet," persisted Keith, the fourth judge. He was a music producer and had worked a lot with pop artists as well as rock. "Which part are you doing, Sammie girl, Sarah Brightman's or Cliff Richard's?"

I should have known that someone on the music panel would know that the female part was for a high soprano while the male part was for a crooner or baritone. I just stared at Keith for a moment as I thought about how to tell him that I had changed the words a bit so that it could be sung as a solo. I had pitched it as well into the best part of my range as a singer. So, no, he wouldn't hear an operatic singer, or a crooner, when I finally got to do my bit.

"Going to do a Susan Boyle on us, are you?" asked Keith then with an amused smile. I'd heard him say that to another girl, trying out earlier. I think it had been awfully intimidating for her. She messed up her excerpt from *Les Miz*, leaving the singers' area in tears, as she wasn't invited on to the next round of the competition.

What could I say to that? All the singers were there to make a good impression on the judges. Julie told me that I should get into the finals with the voice I had. It wasn't the voice that would stop me, I quivered in thought, but the way I looked when I sang. But Julie insisted that the contrast, the Goth makeup, the two-toned, spiky hair, the metal and leather in which I was clothed, and then the music I would sing, would get me past the judges' rounds.

"A new image," said Julie. "Now, whichever group they put you with, male or female, just go along with it. Don't complain. Don't explain. It's their own fault if they get it wrong."

So I had waited with the girls who were rock singers. I wasn't asked. I was in that group because of the way I looked. There were still five or six girls to come after me as soon as I was through.

"I, I don't think so," I muttered to Keith who had waited, head cocked, for me to answer his Susan Boyle question.

"So she speaks!" he crowed, laughing back at his smiling friends on the panel.

A lot of the boys and girls ahead of me had been asked lots of questions about themselves or their musical accomplishments. Those moving on to the next round had usually come from the self-assured ones whom the judges had seemed to like from the start.

"Well, Sammie girl," Graham said to me. "Any time you're ready." He looked as bored as he sounded. I noticed that the black girl had folded her arms like Christie and had slumped down in her chair as if just waiting for me to finish and get off. I could almost hear her saying, Whyever did you come here and waste all

our time when we could have been listening to the next Susan Boyle or Carrie Underwood?





I set myself quite still, took the mike in hand and closed my eyes. Just like on other singing talent shows, I had to sing without any accompaniment, which Susan Boyle had never had to do. Closing my eyes really helped me to hear the music in my head, the rhythm of the strings playing through a chorus in my brain, and then I could begin.

*"No more talk of darkness,"* I began, enjoying inwardly the way that Keith sat up, his mouth dropping open as, in my mind, I accompanied the strings in the first part of the duet. I tried not to launch myself too viscerally into the soprano part of the libretto, but it was hard to hold back to the range I had wanted to present as mine. Particularly in the second stanza, I flowed far too easily into Sara Brightman's soprano because I hadn't descended as deeply into the male part as I should have.

I didn't sing any false notes and I kept most of the power from pouring out of me. I didn't have to as there wasn't really a full orchestra behind me. I was whispering again as I finished slowly with, *"Love me, it's all I ask of you,"* hearing inside me the strings repeating the melody in a full orchestral sweep.

The judges were staring at me as I put the mike back in its stand. Then, Keith suddenly began to applaud me. I could feel myself flushing as I stood there, doing a little bow as the girls began to clap as well.

"Well, Keith," said Graham, rocking in his chair. "You liked that, did you?"

"I did!" said Keith enthusiastically as I stood there, waiting to be dismissed. He was staring at me. "I loved that opening. I was thinking Karen Carpenter and then you went spiralling through Mariah Carey but then you backed off on the power, didn't you? I would love

to hear you really rip that song even if it would have knocked us right off the stage!" He turned to Graham. "I think we just had our Susan Boyle moment, I really do."

"Let's not go that far," said the black female judge, making a face at me. "It was nicely sung but there wasn't much oomph behind the singing."

"Didn't need it," contradicted Keith, as I would have done if I had been able to say anything. "It was just right for this setting. I loved her not trying to overpower us and just letting the music enthrall us!"

Christie liked what I had sung and the way that I'd sung it. Damned with faint praise, I thought.

"So, next round?" asked Graham. There were four votes and, shaking like a leaf, I was handed a ticket to Las Vegas and the next round of the *Voice of the Americas* reality show.

I stumbled away, not impressing the judges by squealing or thanking them profusely. I couldn't do that. I was numb at the compliments paid me, that they had listened to my singing and hadn't laughed at me.

I was stunned into silence even when the roadies, and some kind of roving reporter, Burt, tried to get me to talk to them, a camera following me. I went out into the hall where relatives and friends were waiting.

"Well?" asked Julie, coming forward with a big smile on her face, putting out her arms to me.

She hugged me as I put the ticket into her hands. That made her squeal and start jumping up and down on the spot.

"I told you!" Julie screamed at me. "I told you!" She flung her arms about me, hugging me, which I didn't

mind at all. I had to shiver though as the earrings bounced around against my neck again. It was those things, and the styling of my hair, I was sure, that had made the cretins on the *Voice* show think that I was a girl. Were they ever going to be surprised when they found out that I wasn't any kind of girl, Goth or otherwise. And, yes, my name was really Sam, as in Samuel, not Samantha.

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I loved to sing and, when I was a boy, it wasn't hard to enjoy being in the choir at all. It was when I was in my teens, however, that people began to nudge themselves whenever Mr Brett got me to sing a solo. I don't remember the exact day but one time I looked around and realized that I was the only teenaged boy left in the contralto and soprano sections. Even Andrew Anderson's voice had cracked and broken. He came in to play piano accompaniment at times.

The tenors and basses, a lot of teachers among them, were all older than me, even the students. So I lied when I knew that Mr Brett was going to put me at the front again to do *Pie Jesu* with one of the girl sopranos.

"I, I'm sorry, Mr Brett," I had told my disappointed teacher, trying to be hoarse and whispery. "But, I think, I think, my voice has broken. I, I don't think I can sing again like I used to, not for a few years anyway."

Mr Brett looked at me and at the nudging boys and girls behind me. "Yes, well," he said. I don't think he really believed me. He didn't take me over to the piano and test me as he had other boys like Andrew. They had been trying to sing higher but their voices had al-

ways cracked. I had tried to practice that but it wasn't easy.

"Yes, well, it has to happen to all of my best singers sooner or later," said Mr Brett sympathetically. "I had hoped for one more final performance from you, John," that was my real first name, as in John Samuel Barrington, "but we will just have to go on without you, I'm afraid. Susan McIlroy, please come here!"

That's how quickly I was replaced. I could have stayed and watched the choirs perform but I didn't. Mr Robbins, my home room teacher, stepped out of the ranks of tenors, to pat me on the back and tell me how much he was going to miss my singing, how much he had enjoyed listening to me solo in the past and lead the sopranos to the heights that they could achieve. It was cold comfort to me as I went off to the library to sit, shaking with what I had done, effectively cut off from most of my social life, to become one of the guys.

I tried. Even after we moved towns, and I went to a new high school, I tried. I just should never have let myself be cajoled into singing at the talent contest. I thought that my new friends had really liked my 'crooning' style. I didn't realize until I had made a perfect fool of myself with *The Way We Were* and *People* that I had been set up.

Only when the emcee said, "Thank you, Ms Streisand, and let's get on with the competition now," did I look around and see how everyone was laughing at me. They all thought it such an enormous joke. I don't know how I got out of there without either crying or punching somebody.

I had to endure the taunts for days on end. "Hey, Barbra!" was the nicest of them all. "The boy's got no

cojones!" was a favorite, though other words were substituted for the Spanish name for my testicles.

I thought that Julie was going to start on me as well as I sat outside in the park beside the school to eat my solitary lunch, wondering how I could last two months of what I was going through before I could sit my tests, graduate, and get on with the rest of my life. Oh, I was definitely going out of state if I went to college. I wasn't going to go through the rest of my life with 'Color Me, Barbra', written all over my books and papers, in pink crayon, of course.

"I really loved your singing," Julie said to me. "I really did. You didn't know that you sounded like a girl, did you? I am so sorry that I laughed at you, Johnny B." There were a lot of Johns and Johnnies in that school. "I should have known that anything that Cotton and his gang were telling everyone to watch was a set-up in which someone was going to get badly hurt. I'm not the only girl who wants to tell you that I'm sorry about what happened."

I'd gathered my stuff together and, head down, started back to the school and afternoon classes. "It's all right," I mumbled. "Thanks and it'll never happen again."

I was half way into school when Julie came racing up to me and put her arm through mine. "I'd like to hear you sing again," she said. I felt a tremor inside me. That was never going to happen again. "Really."

"Never," I murmured.

"Then let's talk of something else," Julie said brightly as we neared an entrance to the school. A lot of Cotton Bryant's pals were standing around.

“Hey!” said one of the bright ones, Gil, who had been really a pal in showing me around in my first days in Whitefalls. “I didn’t know that Streisand was a lesbian!”

Julie was furious. The crowd was sniggering while I was mortified at what happened to a girl just trying to be nice.

“Hope you and your loser pals are going stag to Prom!” Julie called over her shoulder. “Maybe you gay boys should double date each other! You’re so fixated on being queer, aren’t you?”

The murderous looks sent my way, and Julie’s, made me groan. “Don’t help me!” I said, really hoarse that time. “You’re only making it worse for me!”

“Then, I’d better come over to your house tonight and make it better,” Julie said, leaving me for her English class, while I had, believe it or not, Auto Repair.

I knew she wouldn’t be there. No-one knew where I lived, I was certain, as we had moved three times since we had been in Whitefalls, our newest apartment in an older part of the town, over a store.

“How did you know where I lived?” I had to ask Julie as I went off with her in her parent’s car which she had ‘borrowed’ for the evening.

“When you’ve been in office detention as often as I have,” said Julie with a grin, “you know where everything is. And I was this afternoon, after Mindy said she was going to the Prom with Cotton. I called her a bitch in front of Ms Grainger.”

We went fifty miles down the highway to a drive-in movie where there was no-one at all from Whitefalls whom we knew. It was the start of a relationship that’s lasted what, three years’ now?

Mom and Dad wouldn't, couldn't, pay for college for me unless I went to State. With Cotton and his gang going there, I just couldn't. I saved enough after working a year, and paying rent to my parents, to get in a year at Morton College, across the border. Mom and Dad thought that, now I was past eighteen, it was time for me to be out on my own anyway and supporting myself. They couldn't understand my fixation on college as they'd never gone. They were only waiting, I knew, for me to move out permanently so that they could make some money by hiring out my room. Or by moving to a less expensive place.

I saw two or three people I knew at Morton but I had changed enough, my hair in particular, that I don't think anyone knew me there. Or probably, I wasn't as notorious as I thought that I was.

That was when the bottom dropped out of the job market. I was bemoaning that fact to Julie at her home. She was looking for summer work, just like me.

"Why don't you sing?" Julie asked me, right out of the blue, as we sat together in her living room, studying the Classifieds in the local rag. There were only about five red circles around ads we could even try for, landscaping and telemarketing, with a hundred people going for such places, just like us.

"That's for girl singers and groups," I said as Julie tapped her fingers on the ad that she'd seen.

"I figure we make a pretty good duo," said Julie. "We sing together well. You said so yourself."

"That's just in the car, with the radio on," I protested.

“Win it all,” Julie said, tapping the paper, “and you get five thousand dollars as a scholarship for College, plus you get room and board.”

“Only if you win,” I said dubiously, a knot forming in my stomach as I looked where she was pointing. “Only half each for a duo anyway.” Funny, but I didn’t challenge her about my voice. I knew it was high-pitched. I got funny looks whenever I hummed something or sang a few words to what was on the radio. I tried to make out that I was joking and it was all a laugh. Most people just seemed to shrug me off as weird, if they thought about me at all.

But I didn’t challenge Julie. I just sort of went along with her as if I knew that I had a girlish voice and could only sing if I was going to be a girl. She seemed to presume that I understood that. So, I just went along with her and didn’t think about the consequences to myself of what I was accepting in her thinking.

The contest was backed by a radio station and the finals were being broadcast live all over the station’s network. Julie turned on the radio and later that night we heard two deejays discussing it.

“Just two more days for entries,” the girl deejay was saying. “We’ve had a thousand tapes and disks here at the station already. But don’t think that you’re out of it, girls! You want to be the next *American Idol* or *Voice of the Americas*? Well, here’s a chance for local girls to get a start! Two days to get your tapes in! Callbacks next week. And we have a new sponsor, Homegrow Foods, who have added another ten thousand to the scholarship we’re awarding. Good luck, girls, and get those tapes in over the next two days!”

“They’ll get over a thousand in the next two days,” I said skeptically as Julie got really wound up with ex-



citement and said we had to enter a tape. It was after all a lottery and you couldn't win that without a ticket, could you?

"What chance does anyone have of being chosen for the last hundred?" I protested, thinking how weird I would sound on tape.

"It's two hundred that are heard live," said Julie. "That's a one in ten chance. And with your voice, Johnny B ..."

"And that's the problem," I laughed. "I'm Johnny Barrington, not Joanna!"

"We could fix that," said Julie seriously, making my insides do another flip as I realized that she really did mean it. This was no longer a joke, my insides informed me, as I felt so awful and wanted to heave. "But if we don't make a tape, or don't get invited on the show, we don't have to do that."

It was idiotic but Julie was persistent. She was obstinate and that was why she was in so much trouble all the time. We went over to her house and the piano that she had in her front room. The first problem was finding songs that Julie could play. The second was that she couldn't sing well and play well at the same time.

We tried but the tapes weren't very good when we played them back. And my voice. Well, it hadn't improved any, I thought. If anything, it was worse. I hated hearing the girlish voice I had on the Cindy Lauper and Carlie Simon songs that Julie wanted to record. We did try a little Destiny's Child and I had to put in a couple of Simon and Garfunkel, as well, in as much of a male voice as I could manage.

I don't know why my voice stayed where it was, at such a high register. It wasn't as if I didn't grow hair and develop as a boy in all the other obvious places. But I didn't have a prominent Adam's apple. The only doctor I had the nerve to talk to about it said that it was probably that, something to do with the way my larynx developed. For an astronomical amount of money, I could have a surgery that would 'open up or lengthen' my vocal cords and then I would have a deeper voice. I did notice in the recordings that Julie and I had made that my voice had changed somewhat. It wasn't as thin as it used to be and I had developed a tremolo since I had last sung so intensely when I was fourteen or so.

Julie came bouncing in the following week just as I was about to head out to the burger stall, the only job I had been able to come up with. "Well, we're in the last two hundred," she announced. It took me a moment to even recall what she meant. I almost threw up as I looked at her happy, laughing face.

"Seven thousand five hundred apiece," Julie said in delight. "And rent and board for the rest of the summer. Dad and Mom are really pleased!"

"But they don't know," I gasped, feeling so awfully sick. No, they weren't going to have to dress up and disguise themselves as a girl. I was.

"No!" Julie yelled at me. "And we aren't going to tell them, either. I told them I have this new girl friend, Sam, and they thought Samantha, right away. And you don't want anyone connecting with your last name, do you, so I entered us as Samantha and Julie, the Carter Sisters!"

Her last name was Stoneman. Her parents thought it quite a laugh that she had changed her name. I shud-

dered as I thought about what I was going to have to change and it was a lot more than just my last name.

"I can't do this!" I exclaimed. "And I'm late for work!"

Julie waved that off. "You've quit!" she shouted at me. "Now, over to my place, Sam, and we get you ready for the first appearance anywhere, of the Carter Sisters!"

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"Mum and Dad are over at my aunt's for the weekend and so we have the place to ourselves," explained Julie as I nervously let her lead me by the hand into her bedroom.

"I can't do this," I repeated for the umpteenth time as Julie led me to her bathroom, a steaming and fragrant, womanly fragrant, bath already drawn for me.

"I've gone over this enough times, Sam," said Julie pointedly using her new name for me. "It's like the first time that I heard you singing and I thought, Oh man, she sounds so great, she's got the contest won before I even get to play my piano solo! And then I rush around to the front to see you on stage and there's this wimpy boy warbling away as if he was Streisand herself. I was so disappointed!"

"You said shocked before," I murmured nervously.

"That, too," said Julie. "Now get into the bath, Sam, and let's get rid of the male hair that you have. Nothing on your legs or chest or under your arms and I'm going to wax that stuff on your upper lip and chin. Thank goodness you haven't shaved in the last week or so."

You see, Julie automatically knew what I had to do if I wanted to be a singer. I had to look like a girl. I knew it as well. But I didn't want to get into it as much as she was determined that I should.

I didn't shave very often. That was one of the things that I hated about myself and then I saw this program on ice hockey of all things. Players grow beards for the playoffs but there were some guys who just couldn't grow decent beards or mustaches, macho guys, laughing about it. One, Patrick Kane, of the Chicago Blackhawks, was even growing a mullet at the back of his head instead of a beard. I didn't feel so odd then when I saw those guys. But smearing my legs with Veet, and my arms, the back of my hands and my chest, didn't seem right.

"I don't need to do this," I gasped at Julie. "I'm not going to be wearing a dress."

"Not in the early rounds," said Julie with exaggerated patience. She said it to me several times already. "But the later rounds will be televised for local news, and, to win, we, meaning you, have to put on more of a show than just standing there, in jeans, like a wet blanket, as you were at Whitefalls High."

Why, oh why, did I ever agree to go through this Carter Sisters taping thing with Julie? It wasn't that I really did want to sing in public, I wanted to argue with her. It was just that I hadn't stopped her when she let her imagination run away with her. She'd taken it for granted that I had agreed to disguise myself as a girl. And this wasn't going to be me with a little lipstick on, in a wig and my own clothing. No, Julie wanted me to really look like a girl.

So I was going to become this Samantha Carter for a little while, I thought with a shudder, as I got into the

bath covered all over in cream, even on my back which Julie had got for me. She'd been surprised when she saw me naked. I did have quite a bush about my penis. Because I had a girl looking at me, my manhood was quite aroused as well, nearly as big as it was when I 'abused' myself, often thinking about Julie and being in bed with her. Not that I had ever suggested that, not wanting to get her to break up with me.

"Oh boy, we are going to have to do something about him," said Julie as she scrubbed me after I had soaked in the bath and all the hair was coming off me in small, dark balls. She sprayed more Veet onto my bush as well before I could stop her and so, after a few more minutes, I was as naked of hair as I had been in sixth grade.

"It will grow back," said Julie to all of my objections. "Now, I had to remove the hair so that we can duct tape you back there and not embarrass ourselves with you popping forward or bulging at an inappropriate time."

That's when I learned that one of the uses of duct tape was by female impersonators to keep their male parts out of sight.

"How did you know this?" I asked in a trembly voice as Julie handed me a pair of her black panties. Oh no, I couldn't wear my own underpants, could I, I thought with yet another quaking running through me?

"The Internet," said Julie with a smile. "It's fascinating what female impersonators do to make themselves look more girlish."

"Hey!" I said in alarm, reaching for the black panties and beginning to take them off.



“Relax, Sammie,” said my girl friend. “We’re not going to go that far. I promised you, didn’t I?”

I think that Julie was into piecrust promises, those easily made and easily broken.