

San Jose Mercury News

JANUARY 31, 2003 | FRIDAY

THE NEWSPAPER OF SILICON VALLEY



MERI SIMON — MERCURY NEWS

Jessica Johnson has been singing at weddings, parties and fairs since seeing a video of "Annie" at age 5.

Where stars are born

S.J. GIRL PICKED TO SING AT APOLLO THEATER'S AMATEUR COMPETITION

By Mark de la Viña
Mercury News

As the judge of talent for "Apollo Theater Amateur Night on Tour," Vanessa Brown has endured repeated renditions of the pop hit *du jour* and countless versions of Dolly Parton's "I Will Always Love You" and the Barney ditty "I Love You."

But Jessica Johnson, the 15-year-old San Josean who auditioned last month in Berkeley, caught Brown off guard with a swinging version of Nat "King" Cole's "Orange Colored Sky." The exuberant rendition of the old-school standard landed Jessica one of 14 spots in tonight's "Apollo Theater Amateur Night on Tour" at Zellerbach Hall in Berkeley.

"It helped that she didn't sing one of those other songs," Brown says, "but Jessica had a great voice, and she had a lot of energy. And I believe she has potential to become a star."

■ APOLLO THEATER AMATEUR NIGHT ON TOUR

Where: Zellerbach Hall, University of California-Berkeley

When: 8 tonight

Tickets: \$20-\$40

Call: (510) 642-9988 or check www.calperfs.berkeley.edu

Along with her rich alto, Jessica also has a talent for setting herself apart. Whether it's her unconventional choice of tunes or her desire to improve as a singer, rather than merely achieve stardom, Jessica is unlike the ranks of "American Idol" wannabes.

A straight-A freshman at Lincoln High School, Jessica has sung the National Anthem at San Jose Sharks and San Jose Giants games. She has played chanteuse on cruise ships and at Disneyland. And her bedroom table is cluttered with trophies, ribbons and prizes, including six medals she brought home from the World Championships of Performing Arts in Burbank last October.

"When I get out there to perform, I'm in my

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"I got this feeling inside of me, and I just wanted to sing."

— JESSICA JOHNSON



JESSICA | San Jose singer gets a chance to shine

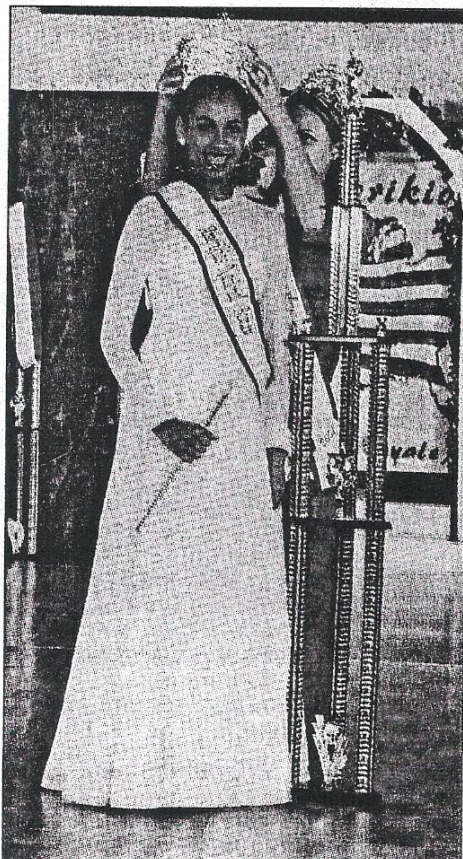
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own world," Jessica says with an infectious smile. "It's like I'm not really there."

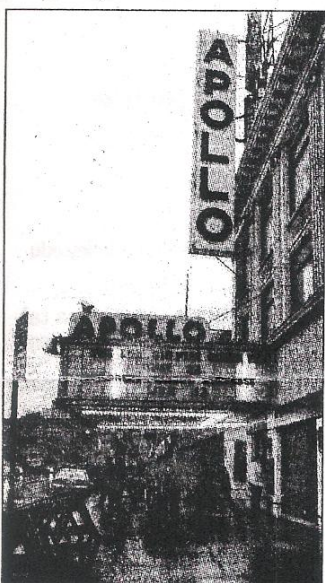
Perhaps the biggest test for Jessica so far will come tonight in the touring version of "Amateur Night at the Apollo." The ambience of "Amateur Night," an institution at Harlem's Apollo Theater since 1934, is re-created in performance halls across the country, where audiences are encouraged to cheer or boo as vociferously as the New York City crowds. Comedian Capone will emcee, and C.P. Lacey, a.k.a. The Executioner, will usher performers on and off stage. The winner will bag \$1,000 and advance to the national competition at the venerable performance hall that is something of a holy site for African-American performers.

Jessica says it's an honor to participate in this version of the contest that launched Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday and James Brown. As for the drone of potential boo birds, Jessica isn't worried.

"I just go out there and do



Jessica Johnson has competed in — and won — pageants, including the Amerikids Pageant in Las Vegas in 2002.



NEW YORK TIMES ARCHIVES

The Apollo Theater in Harlem has been holding amateur contests since 1934.

my best," she says. "That's all I can do."

Jessica became smitten with performing at 5, when she saw the film version of "Annie" at her grandmother's house. Though her soccer-coach father, Richard, encouraged her to participate in sports — Jessica laughs at her brief, failed career as goalie — he and his wife, Kathy, recognized and encouraged her new passion.

"I got this feeling inside of me," Jessica says, holding her stomach, "and I just wanted to sing."

She began vocal and dance lessons at the Dance Arts Academy of San Jose and was soon performing at parties, weddings and fairs and entering pageants. Jessica enrolled in Castillero Middle School and then Lincoln high school, both magnet schools for students interested in the visual and performing arts.

"I work with a lot of talented students, and they're all great kids," says Lou De La Rosa, chairman of Lincoln's performing arts department. "But she's has an extraordinary instrument, and she doesn't toot her own horn."

Unlike many youngsters with a lick of marketable talent, Jessica isn't eyeing the trappings of fame. She plans to attend college and perhaps become a vocal or dance teacher. She eventually wants to put out an album and perform, she says, "but they don't have to be big shows."

As for "Amateur Night," Jessica and her mother believe there is more to the contest than first prize.

"She said something about it," says Kathy Johnson, "and I told her she's *already* won."

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