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ON THE TOWNS

A Teen-Age Idol-in-the-Making With a Grown-Up Following

By BARRY SCHWABSKY

WERE living through the triumph of teeny-bopper rock. So goes the lament of pop music critics, anyway, as the synthetic beat of corporate constructs like Britney Spears and the Backstreet Boys flies out of the stores and into the hands of their pre-teen fans. But lately, some critics have been discovering a teen-age idol of their very own.

Marianne Nowotny, a high school junior from Sparta, gave her first public performance as recently as Jan. 15, but her music has already been hailed by Mike Wolf in *Time Out New York* as "stunning and really original." And her CD, "Afraid of Me," was called "as fabulous and strange a debut as I've heard in some time" by Kenneth Goldsmith, the disc jockey from WFMU-FM in Jersey City, in his cover article on Ms. Nowotny in the weekly *New York Press*.

What is most surprising about her music is how little it shares in any recent pop-music trends. It seems to come out of nowhere, which is undoubtedly why critics find it so fascinating. (Ms. Nowotny cites the experience of listening to her mother play classical piano at home as a major influence.) Accompanying herself on an electric keyboard, she builds each song from a mosaic of agitated or insinuating little motifs, oddly juxtaposed, over which floats an extraordinary dark voice that twists every syllable around like a sculptor molding clay. Without the usual rock-and-roll music of drums, guitars and so on, the music has a naked quality, a feeling that is at once intimate and abstract.

Mr. Goldsmith, also a well-known visual artist, may be a bit excitable on the subject of Ms. Nowotny; after all, his article described her as "a stunning 6-foot bleached-



Nancy Siesel/The New York Times

Marianne Nowotny of Sparta performing last month at Tonic in Manhattan.

blond teen-ager who dresses in Victorian-era clothes." In fact, she is about half a foot shorter than that. But his description, which is accurate as far as her taste in clothing goes, does capture the fact that in a quiet way, Ms. Nowotny's presence is larger than life. Offstage, at least, she seems preternaturally self-possessed and,

with her ramrod-straight posture, anti-quated dress and reserved yet precise manner, more like the product of a Swiss finishing school than someone who has spent all her 16 years in small towns like Millville, Newton and Sparta.

That striking presence drew the attention of Lori Bortz, a playwright who moved

from New York City to Newton with her husband, the painter Mark Dagley, a few years ago. Ms. Bortz had recently started a small press, Abaton Book Company, to publish her own work as well as pamphlets by artists. When she struck up a conversation, the 14-year-old Ms. Nowotny's response was, "I'm a writer, too."

Ms. Bortz was sufficiently taken with her poetry to publish some of it. But it was her tapes of the music she had been making with Donna Bailey, a friend from Millville, that really electrified her and Mr. Dagley, who had played guitar in a punk band in the 1970's but drifted away from music. "Marianne's music was the first thing I'd heard in 20 years that made me want to get back into it," he said. He ended up turning part of his painting studio into a recording studio, where "Afraid of Me" was recorded.

Ms. Nowotny seems oddly invulnerable to the sudden flurry of attention. Asked about the experience of seeing her face on a magazine cover, she shrugged. "Sure, it's overwhelming to see your face blow down the street," she said. And perhaps because she is self-taught as a musician, what comment she makes on her music seems more metaphorical than technical. At a recent rehearsal with Mr. Dagley, she tried out a new song she was still working on. "What I'm trying to get here is a feeling of just floating in a white room," she said. "Or not even a room, but pure white, with nothing below you. Like an out-of-body experience."

Mr. Dagley offered, "Like a singer in the 50's, when they had the idea of the strings creating an atmosphere that the voice could just float on."

Ms. Nowotny's taste in music may not be that of today's typical teen-ager, but neither is it that of her admirers. Mr. Goldsmith wrote that he was amazed to

discover she had never heard some of the best-known experimentalists in either classical or rock music, from Charles Ives to Stereolab. Instead, her favorite albums turn out to be ones by Gothic, industrial and synth-pop bands of the 1980's and early 90's. "When was this made?" Mr. Dagley asked after she played a track by one obscure English group. When she said 1985, he seemed befuddled: "You were just 3 years old then."

Mr. Dagley and others have been eager to fill the gaps in this young protégée's musical background, but for the moment she seems too involved in her own teeny psyche to pay much attention. Of all her new discoveries, only the space-jazz pioneer Sun Ra seems to have made a deep impression.

A recent performance at Tonic, a Manhattan nightclub, showed her to be a performer of equal parts brilliance and awkwardness. Between songs, she sounded like your typical nervously self-conscious teenager, throwing out comments that tended to trail off into a diffident "Well, anyhow..." before beginning to peck at her keyboard almost as if she were still at home trying to fend off adolescent boredom. But as the rising and falling rhythms took hold, she seemed possessed by a spirit of mysterious certainty. (Her next dates are at the Knitting Factory in Manhattan on Aug. 25 and a benefit for WFMU this fall.)

"Marianne's got the potential to be totally major," Mr. Goldsmith said. "Already some major labels are looking at her. The worst-case scenario is that somebody turns her into the next big pop star by taking everything eccentric out of her music. In the best case, someone will help her develop her own vision." For now, at least, the one talent she hasn't shown is pliancy. With any luck, she won't have what it takes to be the next big star.