



# THE AMERICAN TRADITIONS VOCAL COMPETITION CELEBRATES 25 YEARS IN SAVANNAH

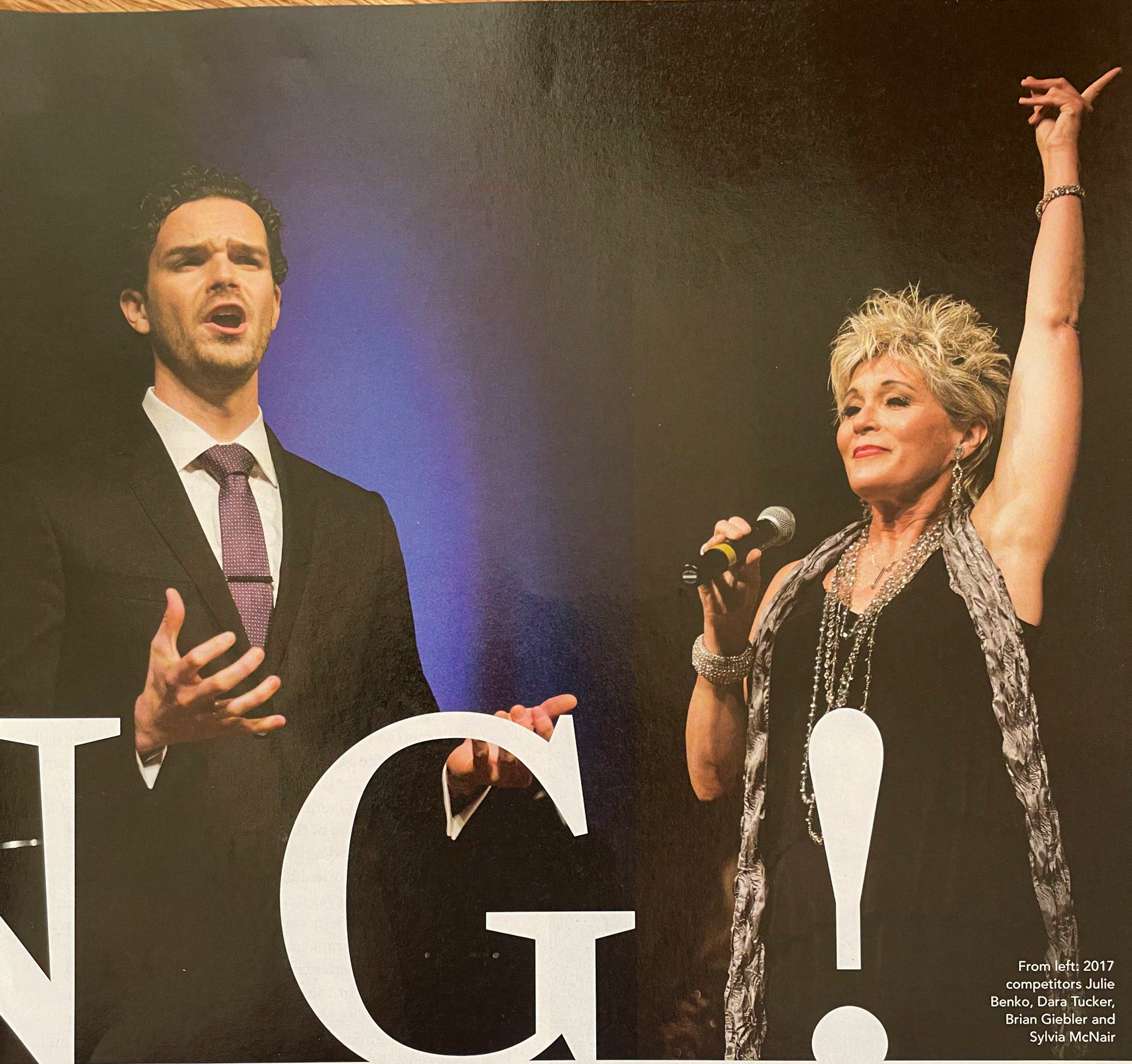
BY BEVERLY WILLETT

**ASK ANYONE** in the music business and they'll agree: There's simply nothing like the American Traditions Vocal Competition.

Every February since its founding in 1994, ATC brings promising vocalists from around the world to Savannah, where they compete live before an enthusiastic audience and a panel of prestigious judges.

Sound familiar? A litany of reality programs use a similar format, but it's noteworthy that ATC came nearly a decade before any of them. And unlike *American Idol*, singers 18 and older





From left: 2017 competitors Julie Benko, Dara Tucker, Brian Giebler and Sylvia McNair

apply by submitting audio recordings of three songs from different genres. Judges choose 28 contestants to compete in three live elimination rounds, in styles ranging from jazz, country and gospel, to blues, the Great American Songbook and more. Sprawling oeuvre aside, ATC's mission is simple: to celebrate and preserve all styles of classic American music.

The grand prize winner is awarded the largest slice of the \$35,000 in total prizes, as well as a paid performance with

the Savannah Philharmonic Orchestra. To get there, she or he must demonstrate the technique and artistry required to perform nine different styles of music—and all of them authentically.

“If you’re singing a Johnny Mercer song like an operatic aria, you’re doing something wrong,” explains Mikki Sodergren, ATC’s artistic director and 2014’s gold medalist. In other words, winners are accountable to both the music and to themselves. It’s quite a challenge. While *American Idol* and other

reality shows are highly commercial, pop-oriented and aimed at creating superstars, ATC’s greatest demand is that it requires performers to stretch well beyond the comfort zone they’ve already been trained in.

Elizabeth Oxnard, who co-founded ATC with her late husband Ben, recalls how it all began. Composer Stewart Gordon had been showcasing winners from competitions around the world in Savannah Onstage, a predecessor to the Savannah Music Festival. »





2017 competitor  
Erica Everett



2014 gold  
medal  
winner  
Mikki  
Sodergren

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One day Stewart and Ben were sitting on the Oxnards' deck, when Stewart suggested they start their own competition—so in 1994, they did.

At the outset, the competition was for women only, but men were accepted beginning in 1996. ATC eventually split from the Savannah Music Festival, forming its own non-profit in 2011. Though only six months remained before the next competition, Oxnard was determined to make the most of the organization's restructuring, forging a new and more independent identity in the process. "We worked like dogs, flew by the seat our pants and raised whatever money we could," she says. By 2018, applications hit a record high, with submissions from as far away as Australia and the Philippines.

Beyond experience and the promise of reward, singers come for the prestige ATC offers. Regardless of outcome, most leave with newfound confidence in their performance abilities. And judges, contestants and Savannah host families form bonds that continue long after the competition ends.

Indeed, Sodergren, the artistic director and past winner, remembers standing backstage with her co-finalist in 2013, awaiting the judges' decision on the gold medal, when her competitor turned to her and offered her a job with her singing group in New York.

"I learned a lot about collegiality in music," Sodergren says. "It changed my point of view about the kind of performer I wanted to be. There's room for all of us."

Renowned baritone Robert Sims entered the competition in 1999 to perfect his rendition of African-American spirituals. Of course he wanted to win, but he also wanted to perform this music professionally and



knew the credibility an ATC medal would provide. After winning the gold medal, he became known in the music industry for his inspirational interpretations and toured the nation with two ATC judges.

Along the way he never forgot Savannah, ATC or the generosity of his host family. They treated him like an adopted son, he says, and still do today. He's returned to Savannah over the years, too—including a visit to sing graveside at Bonaventure Cemetery for Ben Oxnard's funeral.

Other contestants have gone on to perform on Broadway, with symphonies and opera companies, and at prestigious clubs and cabarets. Some are university professors, another is currently frontwoman in an indie folk band. Not every ATC winner becomes a star—not every winner wants to. But regardless of personal ambitions, the experience gained from competing gives contestants a decided edge in the professional music world.

Recently, the organization expanded its educational outreach to Chatham County schools, working with local teachers to reinforce in Savannah's youth population an awareness of classic American music and its influence on the popular music they already know and love. In January 2019, ATC will host its first-ever junior competition, featuring local high school students.

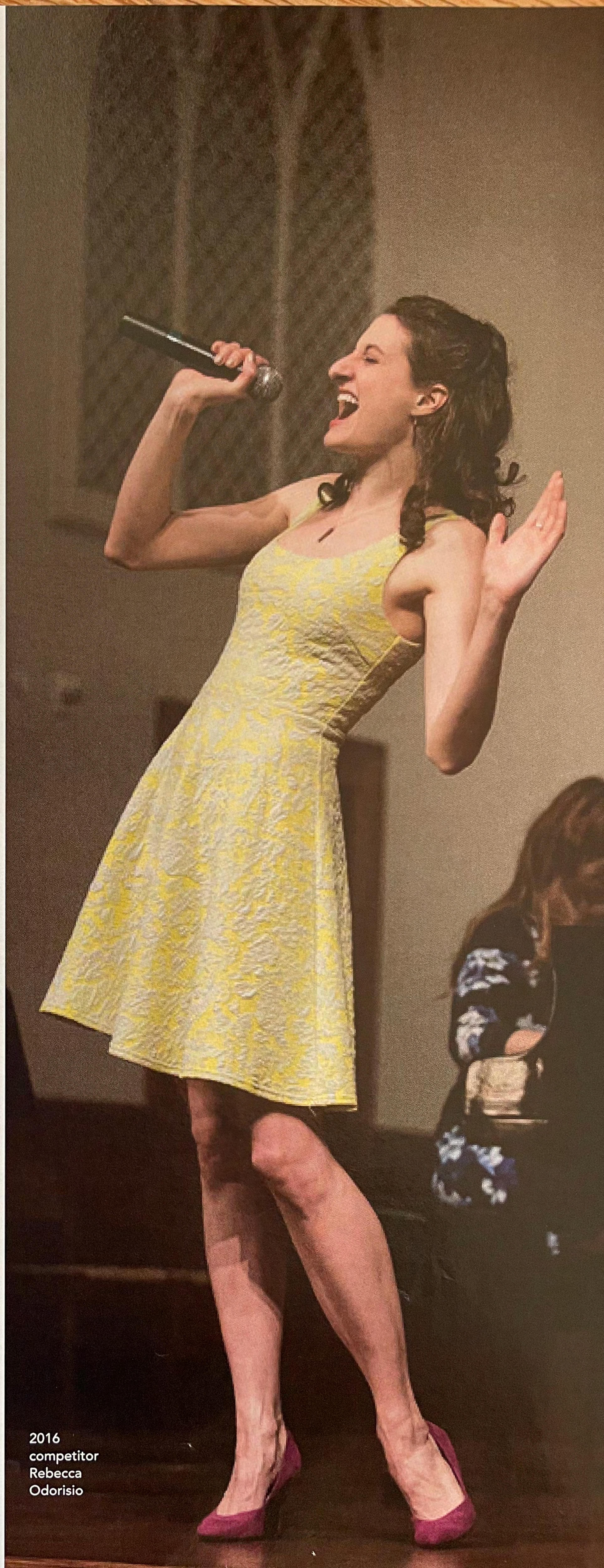
Another element of ATC's expansion plan is aimed at drawing audiences from beyond Savannah. Oxnard envisions a nationwide tour and would love to see a category for patriotic music added to the current lineup to attract audiences from Fort Stewart and Hunter Army Airfield. Sims dreams of winners reuniting for a concert at Carnegie Hall or Lincoln Center.

ATC has grown, and will continue to grow. Yet at its heart, the uniqueness of the experience remains unchanged.

Back in 1994, judges awarded the first gold medal to Ernestine Dillard, a 52-year-old African-American nurse who grew up in Mississippi. When they called her name, Dillard literally fell to the floor.

The following year she sang her ATC finale, "God Bless America," before a nationally televised audience at the memorial service for victims of the Oklahoma City bombing. Then she toured the country singing, and has since performed for three U.S. presidents.

A quarter century later, Oxnard still remembers the electricity that filled the auditorium the night Dillard won. The gold medalist stood, threw her hands in the air and erupted in joyful song. A live audience of 900 people joined in. One judge, the legendary Della Reese, was in tears. "The place went crazy," Oxnard says, feeling the moment, and hearing the music, even now. ●



2016  
competitor  
Rebecca  
Odorisio