

Coach helped Eighties star get back into fine musical shape

WHEN Dexy's Midnight Runners decided to embark on a comeback tour, lead singer Kevin Rowland was concerned his voice might be a little out of shape.

After an absence of 17 years, the band wanted to be certain they hit all the right notes.

So with tour dates closing in, Rowland, who lives in Brighton, turned to voice coach Mary Jo Paranzino for help.

Mary Jo, known simply as MJ, moved to Hove from the United States a year ago.

Trained as a music teacher, she has tutored singers young and old, from all walks of life. She admits her current client list contains well-known celebrities, as well as stars from several West End shows.

She has been working with Rowland, famous for singing such Eighties hits as Come On Eileen and Geno, for about a year.

Far from being star struck, MJ said she had no idea who Rowland was when she was introduced through another client. Despite his rough and ready image, she found him to be polite and gentlemanly.

She said: "My friends here in Brighton went ballistic when I told them. They couldn't stop raving about him."

"Kevin is a real gentleman, a real swell guy. He was anxious about his voice. As you grow older your voice changes and it's important to be aware of that."

"Kevin and I have



READY FOR TRAINING: New Sussex girl band On Ice have benefited from the expert skill of MJ since their launch last month

Giving voice to her new home

worked on making sure all the right elements are in check - the breath control, the diction, the pronunciation.

"It seems to have worked well and I've enjoyed working with him very much."

Other local performers to have benefited from her expert tuition include new Sussex girl band On Ice, formed

last month by budding Brighton music mogul Sam Razavi, 22.

Talented 13-year-old Harriet Woodley, from Hove, is also a student.

The youngster has recently been seen performing with a full band, the Tony Lewis Quartet, at the Sussex Arts Club.

MJ is on a composition course at Trinity College of Music in London.

Having spent holidays in the city as a child, she knew Brighton and Hove was the sort of place where she would fit in.

She said: "It's really my kind of place. There is such a community of artists here and it is such a stimulating city. Being so near the ocean and the beach seems to somehow make it a creative place to be."

From the moment she moved into her flat in Palmeira

Square, she was determined to make an impact. In July she set up her own choir called the Brighton City Singers, which has a membership of more than 20.

An accomplished singer, she is also perfecting her own rhythm and blues, jazz-influenced act MJ And The Boys, a collaboration with local percussionists Ben Wright and Jason Salmon.

The trio will perform at the Joogleberry Playhouse, in Kemp Town, tonight and every first and third Thursday of the month thereafter.

MJ, who is in her 40s, also has two residences at the Sussex Arts Club on Friday and Saturday nights.

She said: "I love to sing. It comes naturally to me. It was never something I decided to do."

"It was instinctive. Singing is the essence of MJ."

As a child, she remembers performing in front of her family, singing Sinatra songs with her dad.

She took piano lessons and did a music teaching degree. For a time she was part of a Left-wing campaigning girl band but soon began to focus on voice coaching.

"Teaching runs in my family and I have always been very comfortable with it," she said.

"I always had a yearning to be a voice coach and when I started I found it enjoyable and rewarding."

"I believe everybody has the ability to sing and the notion somebody is tone deaf or cannot carry pitch are more the product of baggage they have carried with them through their lives. As children we can all sing."

"Singing is about so much more than just carrying a tune."

"It is about pronouncing the words, projection, breath control, how you hold yourself and how you convey a message to an audience."

The teacher's vocal talents have even been recognised by the man who discovered Eva Cassidy, Sussex-based Hot Records' executive Andrew Bowles.

He has expressed an interest in signing MJ, who is due to release her next CD early next year.

But despite her success, she is hungry for more.

"Sometimes I feel it's a slow slog through the mud."

"Then I think, I've only been in Brighton for a year and look at all I've achieved."

The Brighton City Singers meet every Wednesday between 8pm and 10pm at St John's Church in St John's Road, Hove.

Anyone is welcome.

Tonight's performance begins at 9pm, with tickets on sale for £4.

For more details about MJ's work, email mjzino@hotmail.com

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OLD HAND: Kevin Rowland