

Heard Mentality

You've heard that voice somewhere before — all four of them, actually. The Voxy Ladies' Asheville contingent is, from left, Lauren McCullough, Lisa Biggs, Sharon Feingold, and Jacqui Fehl.



Major-Player Voiceover Artists Pull the Plug on Big-City Broadcasting

By Carolyn Comeau
Photography by Tim Robison

The rock-station promo you heard this morning. The e-learning program your daughter uses. That pesky phone menu you endure while trying to reach a gas-company human. Your child's favorite Nickelodeon character. All brought to you by VO artists.

It used to be you'd never have a chance to meet the humans behind such voiceovers. But thanks to tech wizardry, the business is no longer Hollywood's sole domain.

Formed a year ago, Voxy Ladies is a female voice talent collaborative of 25 pros with hubs in Asheville, Los Angeles, and New York City. Our chapter consists of group founder Lisa Biggs, who moved here from California and has a fiancé in the area; Sharon Feingold, who chose Asheville to escape NYC burnout and to be closer to Atlanta family; Jacqui Fehl, who's lived in WNC for 13 years; and newcomer Lauren McCullough. Fueled by lattes, their presence is way big as they cheerfully commandeer a Starbucks table. Animatedly, they discuss their work, which seeps into our consciousness subtly but is a ubiquitous part of the 21st-century aural landscape.

Before technology's advent, voiceover artists were relegated to living in New York and LA. "But no more," confirms Biggs. A self-described "backwards brander," she thought of their moniker before the Voxy Ladies concept was fleshed out. "I heard [Jimi] Hendrix's 'Foxy Lady' while driving, and that was it."

The group markets itself through promotional events and its website, which features samples and bios. This model veers greatly from the status quo of the traditionally male, über-competitive industry.

Fresh-faced Biggs — who sometimes auditioned as "Liam" Biggs in LA, to avoid discrimination — can morph easily from diminutive woodland creature to unicorn. "I specialize in authentic kids" — often little boys — "and cartoon characters," she says. Biggs has worked for Nickelodeon, Disney, and animation production studios around the globe.

Lisa Biggs' tiny voice is growing more famous every day. She has animated characters from *The Adventures of Toby*, Disney's *Baby Princesses*, and the video-game spinoff of *Despicable Me*, among others.



"My voice has made its way to six of the continents and 17 countries."

But reactions to her squeaky-sweet timbre weren't always positive. "I was teased through college. A professor told me that although he loved a presentation I did, I'd 'have to do something about that voice' to be taken seriously. He referred me to a speech therapist on the spot" — a traumatic experience. Luckily, a friend introduced Biggs to acting, where she learned to consider her high-pitched voice a gift.

Raven-haired Feingold does on-air promos for TV networks such as MTV/HGTV, and radio imaging. "I'm also the voice for the Atlanta airport's train system," she reveals.

Fehl, in a funky fedora, emphasizes that voiceover seems deceptively easy. "A good voice isn't enough," she says. "You need a solid acting foundation." Also a visual artist and a singer in the local band Carolina Rex, she adopts no less than half a dozen voices, from toddler to tough guy, in the space of an hour, and reveals that her teenaged daughter Haylie is already attending her own voiceover auditions. Fehl started as a temp at the LA branch of the venerable William Morris Agency. She was mentored, she says, "by the best in the business: Andrea Romano, Sue Blu. I saw what made voice actors successful ... or not."

Today, she is a menu spokeswoman whose voice can be heard in casinos and hotels throughout Las Vegas. She's also voiced a dolphin on a European amusement-park ride. VO is her passion. "Plus," she says with a sly smile, "I have no other job skills."

Traditionally, voiceover is isolating work, done in tiny studios far from the finished product. Fehl notes that her home studio has certain



advantages. "I'm able to voice a variety of projects with anonymity. Years ago, I did a very sexy, slinky read for a casino in Las Vegas. They had no idea I was actually nine-months pregnant and wearing sweatpants."

Demure McCullough represents the "voice next door," an assuring presence on e-learning products, book trailers, and numerous types of corporate narration. Hers is an artist's viewpoint. "Some of us don't feel comfortable approaching [potential clients] from a marketing standpoint," she says. "Whereas as a group, we have a pool featuring all types of talents. You're not forcing one voice on someone."

Accustomed to vying for jobs, Feingold found the collaboration model initially mystifying, but since then she's become such a fan of the approach she even coined a term to describe it: "coop-itation." While all four women were already professional voiceover actors, "we hoped to make it easier by joining forces," she says.

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— Lisa Biggs



(Venue and equipment used courtesy of ProComm Voices)

"In this business, it's hard to get ahead, and even harder to stay ahead," adds Biggs. That's when a compelling concept can open the right doors. "Our branding with Voxy Ladies is so tight that people are immediately curious."

Voiceover is going through big changes, due to a wider variety of players on the field and less logistical challenges. The godlike boom of the movie trailer, Don LaFontaine (aka "The Voice"), passed away four years ago. Newer well-known male artists have shown support for the Voxy Ladies, including Joe Cipriano (the announcer for the FOX and ABC-Family networks and for *American Idol*), Bill Ratner (the History and Travel channels), and Emmy-winning animation voice actor Rob Paulsen, whose first private student was none other than Biggs.

Before their group widened, Biggs wondered if she, Fehl, and Feingold should remain the Charlie's Angels of voiceover. But ultimately she saw more power in numbers, especially given the Voxy Ladies' A-list volume of activism. Various members have recently signed on, gratis, for a major animated project, bringing to life the character of Patches the Bear. The concept, which grew from a grassroots effort involving a traveling stuffed bear, will be penned by award-winning animation writer Phil Lollar (*The Adventures of Odysseus, Mr. Men and Little Miss*). Patches will soon have his

own show, aimed at kids who've suffered abuse and other trauma. (Biggs has been picked to voice the character.)

On December 1, the Voxy Ladies, with McCullough representing Asheville, will co-host The New York City Voiceover Mixer in Manhattan — the biggest event in the business. "It's a huge honor for us," says Biggs. "People fly in from all over the world."

Closer to home, Biggs, Fehl, Feingold, and McCullough gathered school supplies for local students during an event at The Bywater in August. Last month, they hosted a walk for breast-cancer awareness and spearheaded a national Halloween-costume drive for under-resourced kids.

"Doing it this way, getting involved, it feels more like being a community group, and not so much like a business venture," remarks McCullough.

Now that sounds like Asheville.

www.voxyladies.com