



As doctor's office walls of fame go, Scott Kessler's are a doozy. While most high-profile physicians have an autographed head shot here and there, visitors to this ear, nose and throat guru's New York digs can barely spy an inch of paint. So eager are his famous patients—crooners including Madonna, Mariah Carey and Michael Bolton—to share the love via framed platinum albums, inscribed plaques and autographed compact discs that Kessler has to rotate his stash to keep everyone happy. (The CDs are attached with Velcro, and there are crates of them waiting to be swapped in.)

"They just send them," says Kessler, waving at a few gargantuan wall hangings, like the glitzy one from Carey thanking him for his role in helping her move more than 160 million records. "That one arrived in a huge box," he recalls, chuckling. "I asked her, 'What am I gonna do with *that*? If I hang it, it will look like *your* waiting room, not mine.'"

Kessler tends to the vocal cords of world-class belters, among them Anita Baker, Barry Manilow and a slew of Metropolitan Opera stars, and has helped them make some of the biggest decisions of their careers, including canceling Madison Square Garden a half

hour before a scheduled appearance, as two of his clients have done. One, an R&B singer he declines to name, was so reluctant to incur the wrath of the Garden attorneys that she considered going on despite the possibility of causing irreparable damage to her voice. But Kessler insisted that she bail. "She said, 'Nobody's ever stood up for me like that,'" he says. "Because she knew she couldn't sing that night."

Of course, not every ailing patient bends so easily to Kessler's will. "Some A-list rock stars think they're not human," he says, and they trot out onstage regardless of the shape they're in. "If I get the feeling that they're not going to cooperate—and it's not just canceling a show; it can be an adjustment in their behavior like staying silent for three days—I make it clear that they're taking a risk. And I've never had someone blatantly disregard my wishes."

Except for Jon Bon Jovi, that is. "Forget about shows—he's told me I wasn't going to do entire *tours*," says the rocker, a patient for 20-plus years. "There were tours when he's said, 'Listen, [your voice] is shot. I don't think you're gonna make it.' And not only did I make it, but I got stronger. And a lot of that has to do with his nurturing. He's my doctor, shrink

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Singing Sensation

Scott Kessler M.D. tends to the vocal cords of some of music's biggest voices.

Photographs by LEE CLOWER



Scott Kessler in his New York office, framed by autographed CDs. Far left: A Tommy *Playbill* signed by cast members, many of them Kessler's patients.

Singing Sensation

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One reason he does is that Kessler understands the difference between minor swelling, which can be quelled with a steroid injection to help get through a performance, and full-blown vocal cord bruising, which can be caused when a performer screams or strains his or her voice. And his penchant for skipping the substance-abuse lectures—despite the punishing, drying effect alcohol and weed have on the throat—likely appeals to those patients who will booze and smoke pot.

Despite his starry roster, Kessler, 56, doesn't name-drop. And while he initially charged each patient the same fees regardless of their Q ratings, he chucked that strategy early on. Now, in a bit of a Robin Hood scenario, he happily reports that ministering to the rich and famous enables him to provide some services gratis or at a reduced fee, such as those he offers to Juilliard students and uninsured performers. “He's nonsectarian,” says Carly Simon, another longtime patient. “He can fit almost everybody in, even unknown actor-singers and children performing in their high school musicals.”

A major theater and music buff, Kessler studied otolaryngology at New York's Mount Sinai Medical Center and briefly considered a career in plastic surgery. It wasn't until he worked with a doctor who treated high-maintenance opera singers that he discovered his calling. “I saw there was this need for singers and performers—they needed a different set of rules,” he says. Former Met star Sherrill Milnes worked his way through a list of New York's top otolaryngologists in the Eighties before he found Kessler. During a performance of *La Traviata*, Milnes recalls, Kessler examined his vocal folds “almost between every scene. Well, doctors don't *do* that. I'm old enough to have gone to all his predecessors, most of whom were from Europe. Scott blended the best of the European know-how with American smarts.”

He also offers genre-specific care. “Opera singers need to be as perfect as possible for each performance, and it's often wiser to cancel a show rather than just ‘get through it,’” Kessler notes. “Broadway performers, on the other hand, might be able to push through in spite of a minor illness so they won't disappoint the audience, and they often sing when they shouldn't.” And while recording artists can electronically beef up their vocals in the studio, they still need stamina to deliver the goods live. To that end, Kessler sends medical “care packages” to touring patients and provides referrals for docs around the globe.

“He has saved my ass on so many occasions,” says Manilow. “We singers work so hard, and then you get a virus, you get bronchitis. I don't know what he does, all the voodoo stuff he's got. But I follow his directions with his magic potions and stuff that I spray in my mouth and breathe. He has done some miraculous things for me.”

Working with an arsenal of high-tech diagnostic equipment, Kessler assesses the trouble and then dials through a laundry list of traditional and natural remedies, including humidification, antibiotics and, if the situation warrants, referring a patient for surgery. (He stopped operating about four years ago.) Kessler considers himself “aggressive” medically—especially if a curtain call is looming. “I would rather give the medicine that might not be needed as opposed to finding out later that they should have been on something three days ago,” he says. “I don't want to overmedicate, but I want to get results quickly.”

Naturally, the stakes are sky-high when A-list voices are in play, a fact Kessler knows all too well. In the late Nineties, he was sued by Julie Andrews, who alleged that she wasn't sufficiently briefed about the potential downside of an operation he performed to remove noncancerous nodules from her throat. Andrews claimed the surgery resulted in permanent damage to those legendary *Mary Poppins* pipes. The case was settled out of court in 2000, and while he refuses to discuss the matter, Kessler does concede that it still saddens him.

Since the early days of Kessler's career, the field of “voice medicine” has all but exploded. “When I first started, there were only a few doctors—maybe three or four—at the A-list level,” he says. “Now every hospital has a voice center.” And thanks to the advent of *American Idol*, YouTube and countless cable channels, there are more showcases for singers than ever. Kessler counts at least one *Idol* spawn—Clay Aiken—as a patient, and at times he has ministered to the entire Broadway casts of such shows as *Wicked* and *Hairspray*. In appreciation for his hand-holding, his patients pile on the comp tickets. “I don't want to feel like I'm too old, but I just can't go out every night,” says Kessler, a father of two and an accomplished illustrator whose strangely beautiful renderings of the human body have appeared in several medical textbooks. “My wife and I will go if there's an opening night invitation, which is always pretty glorious,” he admits. “And we'll go to concerts when Madonna is in town, or Mariah.”

During a performance of *Der Rosenkavalier* at the Met years ago, Kessler nursed mezzo-soprano Tatiana Troyanos backstage. “She was sick as a dog,” he says, “but she was determined to go on.” As the curtain was about to rise, Troyanos asked Kessler to help her to the stage: “As we got closer, her sinuses dried up, her face lit up, she started taking deep breaths. I'm not spiritual, but it was like watching a miracle.” She brought down the house. “She was just magnificent,” he says, smiling at the memory. “So resonant, so full.”

But no sooner had the lights dimmed than Troyanos did as well. “We're walking backstage, and with every step she gets sicker and sicker,” Kessler says, laughing. “We get back to her dressing room, and she collapses on the sofa.” Experiencing the singer's short-lived adrenaline surge was a first for the doctor. “I witnessed that whole show-must-go-on thing,” he says. “That's not something I could ever take credit for.”

—DANA WOOD

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In Kessler's workspace, medical models of the ear, nose and throat share turf with an ever rotating stash of music and backstage passes.

