

Entertainment & Life

## **SOUNDS AROUND TOWN: Roberta Lamb's new album signals a return to her first love: making music**

**By Ed Symkus, Correspondent**

Posted Jun 8, 2020 at 2:12 PM

Updated Jun 8, 2020 at 2:12 PM

Roberta Lamb's newest album, "Not Your Mama's Blues," is also her first album, and it comes after decades of playing music – piano and guitar – moving into musical theater, shifting over to classical singing, reinventing herself as a dietitian and nutritionist, then finding her way back into music as a singer-songwriter.

The Dallas native, who lived in Weston for more than 20 years, and recently moved to East Providence, spoke by phone about her various career moves, and what finally brought her into a recording studio.

"I'm the youngest of four kids, and my mother got us started with a private piano teacher. I began lessons when I was 5," said Lamb. "Guitar started when I was in third grade, and I had a phenomenal home teacher who taught us all these songs in German and Spanish, as well as songs by Bob Dylan. I played guitar for a few years but I didn't really keep up with it, and I stopped playing piano for a while."

But there were already other artistic interests brewing. Her family often vacationed in New York City, where they would go to Broadway shows, and the soundtracks of the musical shows were regularly played at home. On top of that, when a summer stock group formed in Dallas, Lamb landed parts in plays throughout her middle school and high school years.

"Musical theater was kind of my gig," she said. "But I was somehow always the dowager aunt or big mouth broad or a witch or a lady of the night."

And though she loved singing, her teachers in the Dallas school system

discouraged her parents from giving her classical opera lessons, suggesting that she should wait till her voice was more physically developed.

“So, the only classical singing I did was in concert choir,” she said. “Then when I went to college, my teacher started to vocalize me. I’d always been a mezzo, but my teacher told me that I was a soprano. She had me sing stuff that was really crazy for an 18-year old. I started singing serious opera, and that was so much fun, I decided to become a voice major. And soon I was doing a lot more classical music than theater.”

A chance meeting with the German soprano Elisabeth Schwarzkopf while Lamb was vacationing in Italy with her parents at the end of her junior year led to four years of studying voice in Austria. Upon her return home, she began questioning herself on whether she had the needed talent to be in the music business, decided no and, at the age of 25, went back to school, graduating with two degrees in nutrition, and limiting her singing mostly to gigs at weddings and funerals.

But the changes never stopped. They included getting married, having two children, moving to the West Coast, moving to Boston, where her husband had family roots, getting back into singing classical music, founding the opera company Opera Aperta, becoming a dietician again, getting a divorce, and going through some personal medical issues.

“That last part was transformative,” she said. “I was home for a while, and I picked up the guitar and started singing and playing. I showed up at an open mic in Weston. I had learned ‘Tears in Heaven’ and ‘City of New Orleans,’ and I played those.”

That show turned out to be a right time-right place scenario. Local singer-guitarist-songwriter-producer Kenny Selcer was in the audience. Lamb got to chatting with him, they started up a correspondence, he told her about other open mics, and they’ve now played a number of gigs as a duo. He also produced “Not Your Mama’s Blues” with her.

Though the poppy-folky-bluesy album consists of all originals, Lamb started writing her own music only about two years ago.

“I just sat down and did it,” she said. “I had been listening to music by certain

people, including Karla Bonoff and Jackson Browne. I really liked Karla's chord progressions, and I thought writing would be fun. The first song I ever wrote was 'Rocky Soil'."

The last track on her album, the song is ostensibly about gardening. And yes, Lamb is an avid gardener. But asked if gardening in the song is perhaps a metaphor for something else, she said, "Yes, it's a metaphor for effort and hope. It's about humility and peace. Through rocky soil, I found my peace."

Lamb goes full-out autobiographical in other songs. The searing "It Takes Two" is about the breakup of her marriage. The delightful "Rebel in the Crib" is about one of her kids. And then there's the politically charged "Let's Drink to That," which praises the scientists who stand up to fight a politician that she only refers to as "you know who."

"I wrote it more than a year ago, way before the pandemic," she said. "It's about water quality, but it's totally apropos to what's happening today."

Asked what pushed her over the edge to bring her songs into a recording studio, Lamb said, "I was always seeing these shows where performers were saying, 'Buy my album,' and I realized that it was the ticket. I really wanted to play, and get experience. The only way to do that is to promote yourself, to have something that people can have as a reference point. I knew I had to start somewhere.

"And I was so lucky to have Kenny producing and playing on it, and to have this phenomenal group of talented players – Steve Gilligan on bass and Bernie Geddry on percussion. And, of course, there was Kenny's expertise in the studio. He kind of walked me through it, and let me do many, many takes. He was amazing."

Known for including covers of songs by some of her favorite composers (Jackson Browne, Richard Thompson, Lennon-McCartney) alongside her own material at live shows, Lamb is already considering what to do for her second album.

"I'm thinking, should I do some covers?" she said. "I'm into a kind of Chuck Berry phase at the moment."

"Not Your Mama's Blues" is available in both physical and digital formats on

Bandcamp and on Lamb's Website [www.robertalamb.com](http://www.robertalamb.com).

Ed Symkus can be reached at [esymkus@rcn.com](mailto:esymkus@rcn.com)

