

Roberta Gambarini On Piano Jazz

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Studio Sessions

April 1, 2011 3:11 PM ET

Set List

"My Shining Hour" (H. Arlen, J. Mercer)

"Poor Butterfly" (R. Hubbell, J. Golden)

"In Your Own Sweet Way" (D. Brubeck)

"Lush Life" (B. Strayhorn)

"Multicolored Blue" (D. Ellington, B. Strayhorn)

"Estate" (B. Martino, B. Brighetti)

"On the Sunny Side of the Street"

"Centerpiece" (J. Mandel)

Vocalist Roberta Gambarini was born in the Italian city of Torino, the daughter of diehard jazz fans. Her father moonlighted on saxophone, and Roberta was named for an eponymous 1935 RKO musical that featured the standards "Yesterdays" and "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," by Jerome Kern. At 12, Gambarini began studying clarinet and later piano and composition. Her jazz education came by way of recordings of Ella Fitzgerald,

Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McRae. By her late teens, Gambarini was singing in local clubs; she soon moved to Milan, where she worked in radio and television.

However, the city's jazz scene proved a tough nut to crack, so in 1998 she made the jump stateside on a scholarship to the New England Conservatory of Music. Two weeks after her arrival, Gambarini placed third at the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Vocal Competition, a showing that brought her talents to the attention of the New York club scene. It eventually led to work with Benny Carter and later James Moody, who became a dear friend and priceless teacher. Under Moody's wing, Gambarini learned volumes about performing the music and picked up practical advice on how to survive in the music business.

In the past five years, Gambarini's career has flourished. Her album, *So in Love*, was a 2009 Grammy nominee for Best Vocal Jazz album.

In Her Own Sweet Way

On this episode of *Piano Jazz*, Roberta Gambarini joins guest host Jon Weber for a set of standards in the spirit of the great ladies of song. She gets going with the uptempo "My Shining Hour," her perfect pronunciation and phrasing an authentic reflection of the 1943 film that premiered the tune, *The Sky's the Limit*. And she follows with a brilliant take on "Poor Butterfly," singing the opening verse unaccompanied.

Gambarini's singing also caught the ear of living legend Dave Brubeck, and she performs the seldom-heard vocal to Brubeck's "In Your Own Sweet Way," adding a bit of laid-back scat singing to the tune with accompaniment from Weber. The true litmus test for any jazz singer follows, as she performs a stunning take on Billy Strayhorn's "Lush Life." Gambarini delivers the verse at a measured and patient pace, with absolute command of her voice's volume that never veers into overstatement.

Though a native Italian, Gambarini performs this set of standards with flawless diction and not a trace of an accent. However, in "Estate," she takes the opportunity to sing a tune written in her native tongue. The effect is no less arresting than her performance of "Lush Life" — and perhaps more so for non-Italian-speaking listeners, as Gambarini's inflection serves to translate the remorseful emotion of the lyric.

The session ends with "Centerpiece," a clever Johnny Mandel tune that was a favorite of Gambarini's mentor, the late James Moody. Weber walks the bass line and trades solo bars with Gambarini's swinging scat singing to end this installment of *Piano Jazz* with a bluesy feel.

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Roberta Gambarini