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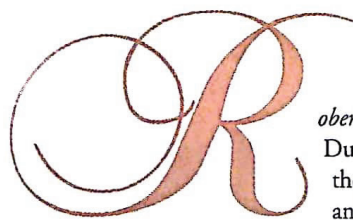
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Roberta. A 1935 RKO musical starring Irene Dunne, but long since more famous as the third screen pairing of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Rediscovered after languishing for decades in a studio vault, it becomes a favorite of a young couple in Torino, northern Italy. They love its classic Jerome Kern songs: "I Won't Dance," "Yesterdays" and especially "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes." When their daughter is born in 1972, there's no question as to what her name will be. Roberta. Roberta Gambarini.

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Fast forward to 2006. Gambarini's American debut, *Easy to Love*, has been released to uniliteral raves, and will go on to earn her a Grammy nomination for Best Jazz Vocal Album. Among the all-star players who crowd its 14 tracks is her mentor and friend James Moody. "Remember this name," Moody has said, "R-o-b-e-r-t-a G-a-m-b-a-r-i-n-i. She'll be the best jazz singer around for quite awhile." Revealing a multi-octave range, crystalline intonation and immaculate phrasing that elicit comparisons to Ella,

Sarah and Carmen, she skims the cream of the Great American Songbook—Porter, Gershwin, Sammy Cahn, Jule Styne, Dorothy Fields, Jimmy McHugh, Burton Lane—and also brilliantly recreates the landmark treatment of "On the Sunny Side of the Street" from 1957's *Sonny Side Up*, vocally replicating its triad of solos from Dizzy Gillespie, Sonny Rollins and Sonny Stitt. But the album's most personal cut is a Kern medley, blending "All the Things You Are" and "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" to shape a tender expression of gratitude to her ever-supportive mom and dad.

Four years later, Gambarini is still singing her parents' praises. "They are the coolest imaginable," she enthuses. It is the morning after her intimate but triumphant appearance at the 2010 TD Toronto Jazz Festival, where she performed with bassist Neil Swainson, drummer Montez Coleman and pianist Jonathan Batiste for a SRO crowd of 200. Though the diminutive singer's recordings contain nary a hint of an accent, her rich speaking voice fully reveals her Italian roots as she traces her colorful journey from Torino to her place as, in the words of the late Hank Jones, "the best new jazz vocalist to come along in 50 years."



How Italy's *Roberta Gambarini*
became a Great American Jazz Singer

By Christopher Loudon

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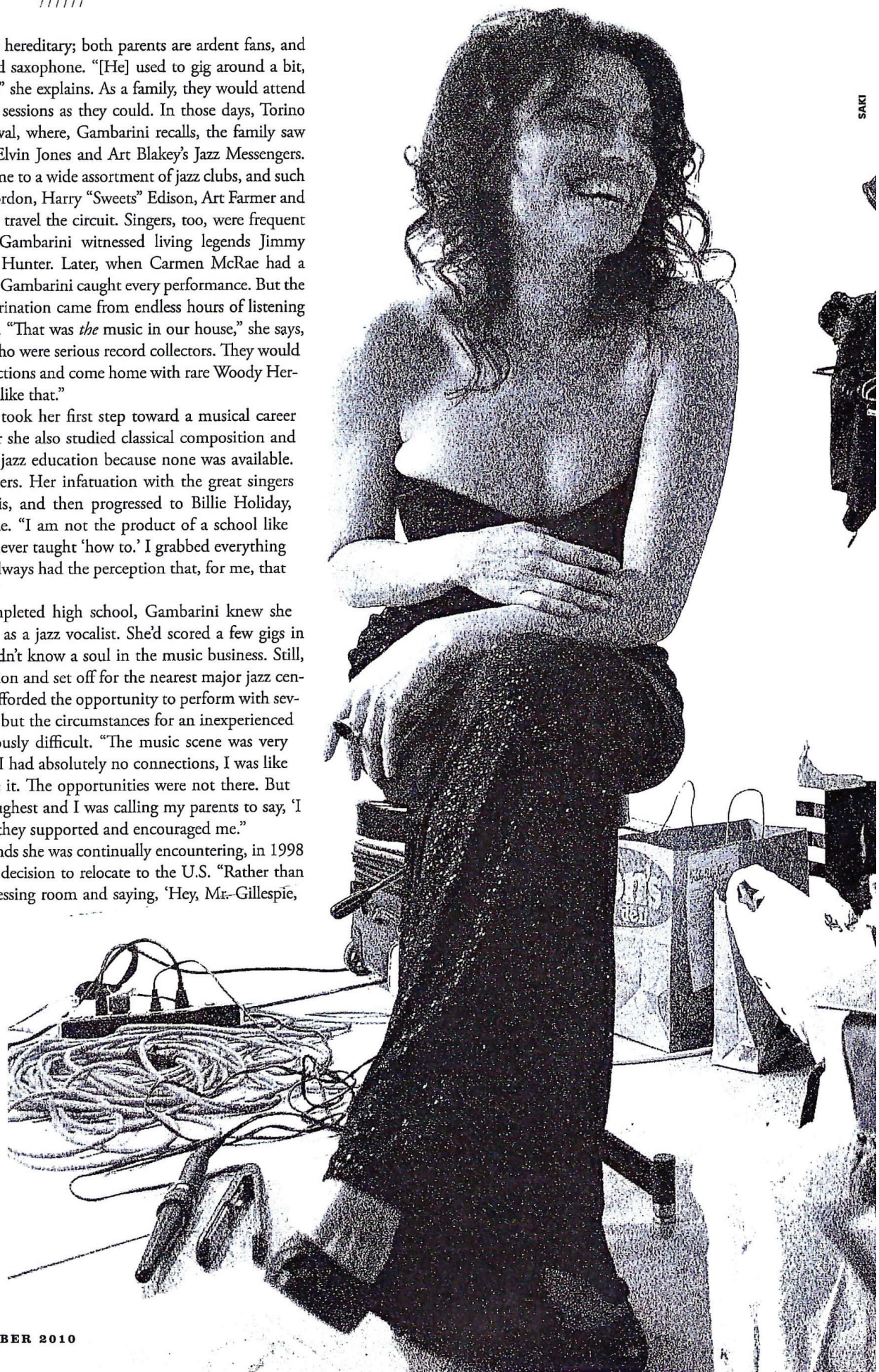
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Her love of jazz is hereditary; both parents are ardent fans, and her father played saxophone. “[He] used to gig around a bit, but just for fun,” she explains. As a family, they would attend as many concerts and jam sessions as they could. In those days, Torino played host to a JVC festival, where, Gambarini recalls, the family saw the likes of Count Basie, Elvin Jones and Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers. Northern Italy was also home to a wide assortment of jazz clubs, and such stellar soloists as Dexter Gordon, Harry “Sweets” Edison, Art Farmer and Zoot Sims would regularly travel the circuit. Singers, too, were frequent visitors: As a youngster, Gambarini witnessed living legends Jimmy Witherspoon and Alberta Hunter. Later, when Carmen McRae had a weeklong stand at Umbria, Gambarini caught every performance. But the majority of her jazz indoctrination came from endless hours of listening to her parents’ jazz records. “That was *the* music in our house,” she says, “and my dad had friends who were serious record collectors. They would travel all over Europe to auctions and come home with rare Woody Herman recordings and things like that.”

At age 12, Gambarini took her first step toward a musical career with clarinet lessons. Later she also studied classical composition and piano, but had no formal jazz education because none was available. Records became her teachers. Her infatuation with the great singers began with Ella and Louis, and then progressed to Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan and McRae. “I am not the product of a school like Berklee,” she says. “I was never taught ‘how to.’ I grabbed everything from what I heard, and I always had the perception that, for me, that was the best way to learn.”

By the time she’d completed high school, Gambarini knew she wanted to pursue a career as a jazz vocalist. She’d scored a few gigs in and around Torino but didn’t know a soul in the music business. Still, she steeled her determination and set off for the nearest major jazz center, Milan. There she was afforded the opportunity to perform with several of Italy’s top jazzmen, but the circumstances for an inexperienced newcomer proved enormously difficult. “The music scene was very political,” she says. “Since I had absolutely no connections, I was like a lone dog trying to make it. The opportunities were not there. But even when things were roughest and I was calling my parents to say, ‘I don’t think I can do this,’ they supported and encouraged me.”

Fed up with the dead ends she was continually encountering, in 1998 Gambarini made the bold decision to relocate to the U.S. “Rather than grabbing a minute in a dressing room and saying, ‘Hey, Mr.-Gillespie,



I really liked your playing, I longed to spend more time with the greats, to establish disciple relationships with them." To do so would, she knew, require a transatlantic move. As luck would have it, an opportunity arose for Gambarini to compete for a two-year residency at the New England Conservatory. She entered and won. Three weeks after her Stateside arrival, she shocked the jazz cognoscenti by placing third in the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Vocals Competition. (Jane Monheit came in second.) "I met a lot of important people there," she recalls, "and started getting invitations to play in New York." Her first Manhattan dates were with Billy Higgins, Curtis Fuller and Ronnie Mathews. Word quickly spread. Soon after, Gambarini was introduced to Larry Clothier, McRae's former manager, and he agreed to represent her.

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Before long, Gambarini was building the sort of professional relationships she dreamed of with the giants of the music. "The first of the greats who offered me his support and friendship was Benny Carter," she says. "It was one of the greatest encounters of my life. He gave me lots of suggestions about repertoire and helped teach me how to navigate the business. Then there was James Moody. He is like a father to me. There are no words to describe how wonderful he's been to me. He is a natural teacher who opened up my ears and changed my way of singing. I have only scratched the surface of all the things he showed me. I have enough to last at least five reincarnations!"

From Moody's perspective, he and Gambarini are "musical soulmates. My wife, Linda, and I love her like a daughter. When she visits our home, we sit at the piano together and work on music. She has a very keen ear and picks up things from every musician she is around. She is always learning. She is completely at home singing in any style. I think the sky is the limit for her."

But Carter and Moody are just two of many legendary figures Gambarini counts as mentors. "There are so many others who have given me so much," she says. "Dave Brubeck, Clark Terry, Slide Hampton, Michael Brecker and, of course, Hank Jones. They provided precisely the kind of education I was after. I think it was the greatest university I could possibly have attended."

Gambarini's kinship with Jones, who would serve as the lone accompanist on *You Are There*, her 2008 sophomore release, was fortuitously facilitated by Lionel Hampton. She was booked into the Jazz Gallery with Mathews, Walter Booker and Jimmy Cobb. Unbeknownst to any of them, Clothier had invited Hampton to attend one night. Hampton was impressed enough to invite her to participate in his annual festival at the University of Idaho. The event boasted its acclaimed mix of workshops, student groups and professional performances, and featured Hank Jones as pianist in the house band. After the two hit it off in Idaho, says Gambarini, "we did the North Sea Festival and then went on tour and ended up recording *You Are There* together. I was just talking about him with Joe Lovano, and he agreed how extremely lucky I was to have the chance to work so extensively with Hank."

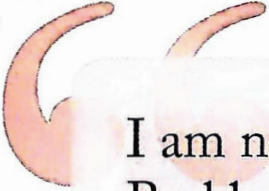
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Though Gambarini had done some recording in Italy (a two-disc compilation, *Under Italian Skies*, comprising 18 tracks featuring bassist Andrea Donati, is widely available), her initial attempts to land a Stateside record deal fell flat. "Larry and I

tried the usual route," she says. "We went around to all the big record companies, but there was no interest in the type of material I wanted to do. I believe that if you can't find anyone to do what you want, then you have to do it on your own." So together with Clothier and producer Jacques Muyal, Gambarini formed her own label, naming it Groovin' High because, she says, "Jacques is from Switzerland. He was one of Dizzy Gillespie's most intimate friends and was also Norman Granz's assistant. So it is a group effort from true jazz lovers."

For their debut project, *Easy to Love*, the trio assembled, in addition to Moody, such stellar players as Joe La Barbera, Willie Jones III, Tamir Hendelman and Chuck Berghofer, plus John Clayton and, guesting on piano on "Only Trust Your Heart," his son Gerald. Recalling the sessions, Moody says, "Roberta is completely professional in the studio. She is totally aware of what her voice is capable of, and she has great ideas. She had the confidence to trust her own judgment on tune selection, how she wanted the album to sound, and where she wanted me to play. The proof is in the pudding, as they say. How many artists get nominated for a Grammy for their first album?" In addition to the Grammy nod, *Easy to Love* was named "Vocal Record of the Year" by *Swing Journal International* in Japan. "I was stunned by the response it got," she says. "It immediately gained worldwide resonance, which was truly amazing."

Though Groovin' High later aligned with Universal Music's Emarcy imprint for distribution purposes, Gambarini and her partners maintain full creative control. "I think it is important," she says, "not because I want to be a snob or say I know what's best, but because the music industry is currently so confused. Everything is so scattered that it is very difficult to stay your course. The big record companies are



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dealing with their own survival, so they have to get results in a very short period. That is not a good environment for artists. It puts too much pressure on them. There is an entire generation of twentysomethings—remarkable artists like Jonathan Batiste—who are really talented and need to be given the room and opportunity to grow. And if you want to pursue music that way, you have to keep some control."

Three months after the release of *Easy to Love*, Gambarini was asked to participate in a very special project at the Monterey Jazz Festival. Dave Brubeck had been invited to write something to commemorate the 60th anniversary of John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*, which is set in the Monterey area. She was invited to portray Dora, the brothel owner in the story, with Kurt Elling playing opposite her as marine biologist Doc, a pillar of the community. When she received the music for Brubeck's complete "Cannery Row Suite," Gambarini says, "my first thought was, 'I'll never be able to do this,' because the writing, which mixed together the classical and jazz worlds, was so far beyond anything I'd seen. It was very, very unique. But we had a ball working on it. It was one of the greatest experiences of my life."

To follow up *Easy to Love*, Gambarini drew upon her road trips with Jones. "We were having so much fun that after our tour we simply

agreed to go into the studio and knock out some tunes. There was no preparation and no set playlist. Of course, Hank knew every song in the universe, so it wasn't a problem. To go in and follow whatever your ears and heart tell you was a way of life for him, but it was a big challenge for me. It was all done in a single afternoon, live in the studio, which is a great way of working. I imagine that's how records were made in the old days, so I was able to get a taste of that." The pair recorded more than two-dozen standards that afternoon, 14 of which found their way onto *You Are There*, released in early 2008.



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The following June, Gambarini was back in the studio, crafting what would become *So in Love*, her second Grammy-nominated project. The sessions reunited the singer with Moody, Hendelman, Berghofer and Gerald Clayton, and included bassist Swainson, drummers Jack Hanna and Montez Coleman, Carmen McRae's former pianist Eric Gunnison and special guest Roy Hargrove. "There is never a lot of conceptualizing for any of my albums," she says. "Each is a snapshot of my life at that time. Before we recorded *So in Love*, I was touring a tremendous amount, and spending half my life on planes. That gives you an odd perception of life. Your usual routines are gone and your artistic impulses come at you in entirely different ways. It provides fresh insights. The songs on *So in Love* come from that instinctual world."

Among the album's highlights is Gambarini's impassioned reading of the Italian jazz classic "Estate." During her hardscrabble days in Milan, she had become friends with the song's composer, Bruno Martino. "He was a wonderful writer and produced a large body of work," she explains, "'Estate' is one of his best songs, but not his *very* best. Someday I hope I'll be able to develop more of his repertoire. Maybe that will be something for a future album, an all-Italian project. When I knew him he was singing and playing at a funky dive near the Academy of Visual Arts. Painters and writers would go there; it was a very bohemian, intellectual crowd. I was very young, but remember it so clearly, and my interpretation of the song is shaped from those memories."

A surprising departure from the finely rendered standards that have dominated all three of her albums is "You Ain't Nothing But a JAMF," with Gambarini's cheeky lyric laid atop Johnny Griffin's "The JAMFs Are Coming." Griffin is another of the giants who befriended and encouraged her. They had met years earlier, and subsequently performed together several times. "I'd known the song for a long time and thought it was great," she says, "but Johnny had to explain to me what 'JAMF' stood for. The lyric I wrote is actually dedicated to my ex-boyfriend. I thought it was very fitting!"

Also included on *So in Love* are two tracks—"You Must Believe in Spring" and a medley from *Cinema Paradiso*—recorded with Gunnison, bassist George Mraz and drummer Al Foster in late September 2001. Two weeks earlier, Gambarini had been tidying her tiny Manhattan apartment in anticipation of a planned visit from her parents.

The TV was playing with the volume off, and out of the corner of her eye she caught a glimpse of the twin towers. When the realization of what she was seeing sunk in, she immediately called her father and mother, whom she knew would be frantically worried about her safety, and then

James Moody is like a father to me. There are no words to describe how wonderful he's been to me. He is a natural teacher who opened up my ears and changed my way of singing."

tried to reach a friend who lived downtown. Like so many other dazed New Yorkers, she spent the rest of the day wandering the streets. Booked to appear at the Monterey festival a week later, Gambarini and her bandmates decided it was important to fulfill their commitment. "The airport was completely silent," she muses. "No one was around, and there were only about 10 passengers on the flight to California. We went to the Red Barn in Big Sur, a beautiful place owned by the Beach Boys' Al Jardine. All those feelings about 9/11 were wrapped up in the recordings we did. We chose 'You Must Believe in Spring' because of its promise of hope, and the songs from *Cinema Paradiso* because the movie is about how the past and present intertwine, which seemed so fitting."

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Though Gambarini has no concrete plans for her next album, she knows what she would like it to be. "I really want to do a recording with a large ensemble, a big orchestra with strings," she says. "I don't know if we'll have the budget for that, but I've had discussions with arrangers and am waiting to see when we can do it. I think audiences now know me, so I'd also like to expand my repertoire and start to do some originals. And I'm fascinated by everything that involves acting and the theater. I love literature and reading, so I would like to do some [theatrical] projects that have literary connotations."

Meanwhile, her tour schedule is booked solid, crisscrossing the globe between Europe, Asia and North America, and she senses she's in "a good space. I feel like I'm in a moment where something new and exciting is on the horizon, but I'm also immensely grateful that my evolution has been made possible because of the advice I've gotten from James Moody and Hank Jones and so many others. Now I feel like I have the confidence to really do something with what they've taught me. I remember Hank once said, 'I'm striving to make the next note I play better than the one I just played.' That's the sort of inspiration you absorb from the greats, and I hope I can match even one tenth of what they accomplished." **JT**