

## ROBERTA GAMBARINI

## DIZZYING &amp; DAZZLING

BY ORI DAGAN

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"Ella Fitzgerald was probably the first recorded human voice I heard in my life. My father played her music all the time. I was not even a year old yet but I was hooked at first listen," remembers vocalist Roberta Gambarini. The reason, she believes, is that Ella's musical personality and spirit is understood very well even by little kids, just like with Louis Armstrong. "Certain great artists—Judy Garland had this too," she says, "had this quality to awaken the child in the listener. When Judy sings 'Over the Rainbow', not only is her interpretation something that a child would relate to, but as an adult, it's almost like you are a child again." The same effect happens when Fitzgerald scats, she reasons: "you feel like you are playing in kindergarten and laughing and throwing things around. And when she sings 'Someone to Watch Over Me' it's like you are a child again in the arms of your mother; at least that's how I felt." So, at such a young age, Gambarini's connection to Fitzgerald was, as she identifies it, very primal, especially since at that time she didn't even know what jazz was. "It was before I could speak or walk; music was always in the house."

Gambarini has been justly identified as one of the heirs to Fitzgerald's throne for her spot-on intonation, majestic tone, unerring sense of rhythm and effortless flights of improvisation; her instantly recognizable sound also echoes Sarah Vaughan, Carmen McRae and Betty Carter. Raised lovingly by diehard jazz fans, her young ears were nourished by hearing the likes of Armstrong, Ellington, Basie and those aforementioned singers who resided in her parents' record collection. Growing up in Torino, Italy, she played the clarinet and piano before taking to the microphone in the Italian jazz club circuit. At the tail end of the 20th century, the songbird spread her wings to NYC—not an easy choice. "It was a very heavy, financially taxing decision, but you know, I got to a point where I said, 'Okay, I'll do it even if I don't have the money'," Gambarini recalls.

There were two parts to that decision she explains, the first being the desire to be able to meet in person and spend time with the giants of jazz she so admired. "I wanted to get a little bit to the source," she says, "to understand better where jazz came from by being on the same soil." The second reason was the fact that in Italy, especially at that time, she accomplished what she was allowed to, given her gender and social status. "To give you an example," she explains, "when I was very young, I made a demo and I took it to the main critic of the *Courier de la Sera*. He listened to it and told me, 'Wow, you know it's really great! And you're so young. But unfortunately, there's nothing you're ever going to be able to do here.'" In that critic's eyes, the reason being that even if Gambarini became as good as Sarah Vaughan she still wouldn't stand a chance. She remembers telling him, "We'll see about that." But in the end she came to understand that he was right, because in certain places, in certain societies, there is a certain order of things: a caste system. "Women, especially young women," she says, "are not seen as creators, as leaders. It's unfortunate." Gambarini has no regrets and an understanding of why she left Italy, which hinged on her financial ability. "I would probably have left earlier. But you know, it was good I left at the last possible moment."

Within months of relocating to NYC, Gambarini placed third in the 1998 Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz International Vocals Competition (behind Teri Thornton and Jane Monheit). Legendary saxophonists James Moody and Benny Carter quickly took the budding artist under their wings, and the rest is history. Her GRAMMY-nominated album *Easy to Love* (2006) established the singer as a tour-de-force. One of the highlights of that album emerged as "On the Sunny Side of the Street", an intoxicating ode to Dizzy Gillespie, Sonny Stitt and Sonny Rollins—equal parts vocalese and bop-till-you-drop scat magic. While Gambarini approaches each note with the musical precision of a first-rate horn player, her sparkling diction is that of a sophisticated storyteller. In collaboration with the late Hank Jones, the duo album *You Are There* (2007) is a showcase of great, intelligent choices both in terms of material and interplay. Miraculously, most of the songs from this session were recorded in one take. "Usually, you never want to do too many takes," she explains, "because then you lose the energy of the moment. Now I'm not one of those people that say, 'oh, I do everything the first take' (laughs), but sometimes you get lucky and it happens like that!"

When her family needed her, Gambarini had to take some time away from the studio and the road. Following a hiatus of nearly a decade from recording, fans are excited to hear her again, including a conceptual preview of a new album at Dizzy's Club this month with Cyrus Chestnut (piano), John Lee (bass) and Billy Hart (drums). She is naturally excited about the four-night run because she's getting ready to go back into the recording studio in October. "Cyrus Chestnut is, you know, a true master," she enthuses. "We've been playing together for many years in different situations, especially with Moody up until he passed in 2010. We play together in the Dizzy (Gillespie) All Stars." She considers Chestnut a phenomenal musician and someone who really understands playing with a singer, noting that Moody used to call him "the mesmerizer" because he has a very otherworldly quality and expression in his playing. Says the pianist of his mutual respect for the singer: "It's always a pleasure to work with Roberta. Her warm spirit flows through her music and lifts all who listen." Gambarini considers John Lee another great friend, and a part of her musical family, with whom she's been on the road and played with everywhere. Of her, Lee says, "Roberta is a musician's singer because she understands the music so well. She has a great knowledge of jazz history, especially of vocalists and big bands; she studied all the singers before her, from Ella to Sarah to Carmen to Nancy Wilson. Her knowledge shines through in her singing." And about Billy Hart, she adds, "Billy is a musician that I just adore and I have the greatest respect and awe for, so I'm really looking forward to these concerts."

The new album will uniquely feature Gambarini in both quartet and big band settings, in tribute to some of the heroes she lost in the past decade, including her cherished peer, trumpeter Roy Hargrove. "I met Roy at The Jazz Standard in early 1999," she recollects. "Back then I was supporting myself by working for a famous jazz music publisher doing transcriptions. We would

also do concerts dedicated to artists in the company." One of those artists was Kenny Dorham, a player whose music she considers among her favorites of all time. She even had written lyrics to some of his compositions, and so was thrilled to discover the company had the publishing for all of his catalog. One of their concerts, a celebration of Dorham, featured Virgil Jones (trumpet), Charles Davis (baritone), Ronnie Mathews (piano) and Ben Riley (drums). Hargrove, a big fan and connoisseur of Dorham's music came to the concert that night. "And we talked," she says simply, of that first-time encounter.

A little later on when Gambarini started going on the road and working with a manager (Larry Clothier, who also managed Hargrove, McRae and Vaughan, is still Roberta's manager today), she got to know Hargrove better because they would often be booked in the same festivals. Eventually, Hargrove asked Gambarini to sing with his big band and, as a result recorded an album (*Emergence*, 2009) for which he wrote some arrangements. "We got to be almost like stablemates (laughs) and we became very close," she recalls, "almost like family." There were a lot of jam sessions, and good times: "I would be singing and if he finished his own gig he would sneak up behind me, he loved playing so much." Gambarini racked up a considerable history with Hargrove, touring all over the world. It was a big trauma for her when he passed at age 49 in 2018 from kidney failure, and she says she hasn't recovered from it yet. "I got to know so many of his inner workings in how he thought about music, how he listened to music, how he wrote lyrics to music," she says.

Going back into the studio, Gambarini shares that she wants to highlight not only Hargrove as a great lyrical improviser with ballads, but also his skill and talent as a modern jazz composer. Putting a fine point on her love and admiration, Gambarini declares with passion and emphasis: "It was a tight-knit family who really loved Roy." There will be a dedication to him on the album as that important part of her history, as well as others from her musical family. Says Lee, "Back when we started working with (Roberta), some of the guys in the band were James Moody, Jimmy Heath, Frank Wess and Slide Hampton and they all developed a great respect for her. She is one of the greatest jazz singers out there."

For more info visit [robertagambarini.com](http://robertagambarini.com). Gambarini is at Dizzy's Club Sep. 11-14. See Calendar.

**Recommended Listening:**

- Roberta Gambarini/ Antonio Scarano — *Après lude* (Splasc(h), 1991)
- Roberta Gambarini — *Easy to Love* (Groovin' High, 2006)
- Roberta Gambarini & Hank Jones — *You Are There* (EmArcy, 2007)
- Roberta Gambarini — *The Shadow of Your Smile* (*Homage to Japan*) (Groovin' High, 2013)
- Roberta Gambarini (with The Heath Brothers Band) — *Connecting Spirits* (Groovin' High, 2014)
- Roberta Gambarini — *Dedications: Roberta Gambarini Honors Ella, Sarah & Carmen* (55 Records, 2018)

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