

FEATURING: Yves Lambert Trio • Larry Penn • Kari Tauring • Lauren Sheehan • 9 Songs

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# Sing Out!

FOLK MUSIC • FOLK SONGS

## LAUREN SHEEHAN

### Loves Traditional Music

BY TOM D'ANTONI

Hailing from Portland, Oregon, teacher and school administrator-turned folk blues guitarist/vocalist Lauren Sheehan is a clever interpreter of folk blues and other rooted styles. You could call her a transformer ... a human synthesizer of traditional music, if you will. It's what we call the folk tradition. Influenced by New England fiddle music at first, then Irish music and then Piedmont blues, as Lauren grew musically, she expanded her repertoire to include different blues forms, folk tunes, a little ragtime, a little bit of this and a dash of that.

In a 2008 conversation, I talked with her about how she sees herself in relation to the tradition. It was a subject on which she had obviously given a great deal of thought.

"What I'm doing is reinterpreting songs with all the tools available to me as a musician: chord substitutions, rhythmic changes or different phrasing, or singing in a different way," she said. "There are some people who I really like to imitate, they've touched me."

To this day, she'll find an older musician and just hang out, sometimes on the other side of the continent, learning from them, playing with them and making their tradition part of her own.

"A Piedmont country blues might be a classic sound that one of these old masters plays within their own style," she told me, "but I might take it and jazz it up quite a bit or make it folkie or bring old-time mountain elements

into it even though that's not how I heard the master play it.

"I use what I know about certain styles. Sometimes it's not calculated. I understand intuitively that it might be a very cool sound. On the surface you can take a song and interpret the story, phrase it, give it musical qualities to help convey the emotions of the story."

"I don't want to be a living history museum but in some ways that's what I'm doing, keeping these older sounds alive. To me it's not history. It's relevant to my life. It's what I play. It's real and a vibrant form of human expression."

Lauren Sheehan takes her art and her craft seriously and with much thought, both before and after. That's one reason she took six years between releasing *Two Wings*, her



photo by Rich Dady

The Kalamazoo Gals on break at the Gibson Factory, 1944  
photo by Margaret Hart

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second album in 2005 and her third, *Rose City Ramble* in 2011.

Her fourth was released in March 2013 and was totally out of character for the methodical Sheehan ... it was an unplanned birth. *The Light Still Burns* is the companion recording to John Thomas' book *Kalamazoo Gals: A Story of Extraordinary Women and Gibson's 'Banner' Guitars of WWII*.

The story, suppressed (or certainly not advertised) by Gibson Guitars for decades is all about how, during World War II, while the Gibson male factory workers went off to war, the guitars were built by (mostly) women who worked the factory in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and kept the guitars in production. Gibson just didn't bother to tell anyone. Today, having a factory of female luthiers would be a marketing plus, but you know how those things go, or went.

Thomas writes, "... while the company commissioned advertising art promising that it would await the return of 'the boys' before producing another instrument, it reluctantly and perhaps under the cover of darkness shipped out some 10,000 girl-made guitars. It graced the headstock of each of those guitars with a small, golden, silk-screened banner emblazoned with 'Only a Gibson is Good Enough.' When those boys did return home to retake most of the jobs held by women, good enough apparently became insufficient and the banner disappeared."

The irony is that many say those "Banners" are arguably some of the finest instruments Gibson ever produced.

Thomas found his first Kalamazoo Gal in September of 2007 when he visited the factory for the first time. He was there to have his 1943 instrument re-inspected. Turns out it was re-inspected by the original female inspector. Six years later, the book was published.

Needless to say, Sheehan plays all Gibson Banners on her new album. Given the long, meticulous process she usually takes with her albums, this one was done in a relative flash and decided upon in one quick afternoon.

"I was driving through New Haven on a tour and I stopped by Thomas' house," she recounts. "My touring musician had some business with him. Over a cup of tea, he told me about a book he was writing. He became more and more animated and shared the idea that he had that he thought was really crazy ... to make a record and feature the Banner guitars so people could hear what they sounded like while they read the story.

"He said wouldn't it be even cooler if a woman played them. And then he said, 'Would you like to do it?' It was as simple as that. I had known him for twenty minutes and he had never heard me play.

"I was stunned, and then I was full of questions. He had never done anything like that before, none of this was planned. It was very impulsive on his part, too."

The road that led her to Thomas's house was a long one. Sheehan has been a full-time professional musician since her first album came out in 2002. She started playing classical music on her guitar when she was ten-years-old, but soon dipped in to the folk-pop end of the pool, including playing Joni Mitchell and the Grateful Dead. Fiddle music caught her ear when she was in college in Massachusetts.

After transferring to Reed College in Portland, Oregon, she fell in with friends who played folk music. "It looked like they were having a lot more fun playing folk music together than I was having in the little studios practicing classical music by myself," she recalls, "and the



spirit just was really quite contagious. It took me about a year to be able to play by ear and not by eye."

She married architectural sculptor Ed Carpenter (now world-famous), and had two kids, Zoe and Luke. She was teaching at and running a private school in suburban Portland, playing music at home parties, attending every folk and blues festival she could find and absorbing every ounce of inspiration from the professional musicians she met.

"I taught modern dance to children," she told me as her first album was

landing on the blues charts. "I was a dance accompanist for ten years for modern dancer Joan Gunness. I taught college level music classes and some children's music classes and then I started Swallowtail School in 1994 ... a little private school. I was a classroom music teacher and administrator. I ran the show ... chief cook, bottle washer, toilet cleaner and lesson planner. I started it so that my kids could have the kind of school that I would be excited about for them. The school was successful, and I became a full-time administrator-teacher. I still played, but just to chill. Since I was a child I had always gone into a room at night and played guitar, and I didn't stop."

All the while, Lauren was heavily involved in playing with friends in homes and at festivals. She says, "Most of the music I love and the spirit that moves me to play it comes from being a social musician, from hanging out around players young and old, playing with them for fun, absorbing the feel of the music by playing together and being willing to do this under many different circumstances."

"Thirty years ago, one of our National Treasures, Kevin Burke, tipped me off that if I wanted the music, I had to be ready to wait for it, I took that to mean that the magic would happen, but

not on demand. So I learned the 'smell' of a good session brewing, then how to hang around and wait for it by enjoying myself in good company until the instruments eventually emerged."

Carpenter encouraged her to make an album. She enlisted renowned harmonica player Phil Wiggins, whom she had met at various blues festivals, to accompany her. At that point, "My husband Ed was enormously supportive in making the recording, to let my fantasies go wild," she said. "He encouraged me to quit my day job to be a folk musician. I had an epiphany. My CD got played and it was on the folk charts ... there was a little bit of destiny a lot of hard work."

The family lived in a beautiful house in the woods on the banks of the Wilson River, between Portland and the Oregon Coast, where she could be alone with her guitars in a second-floor studio overlooking the river, and play to her heart's content. When the first album came out, she began spending more and more time in Portland where they had bought a house. All of a sudden she was in bands and touring as a solo performer.

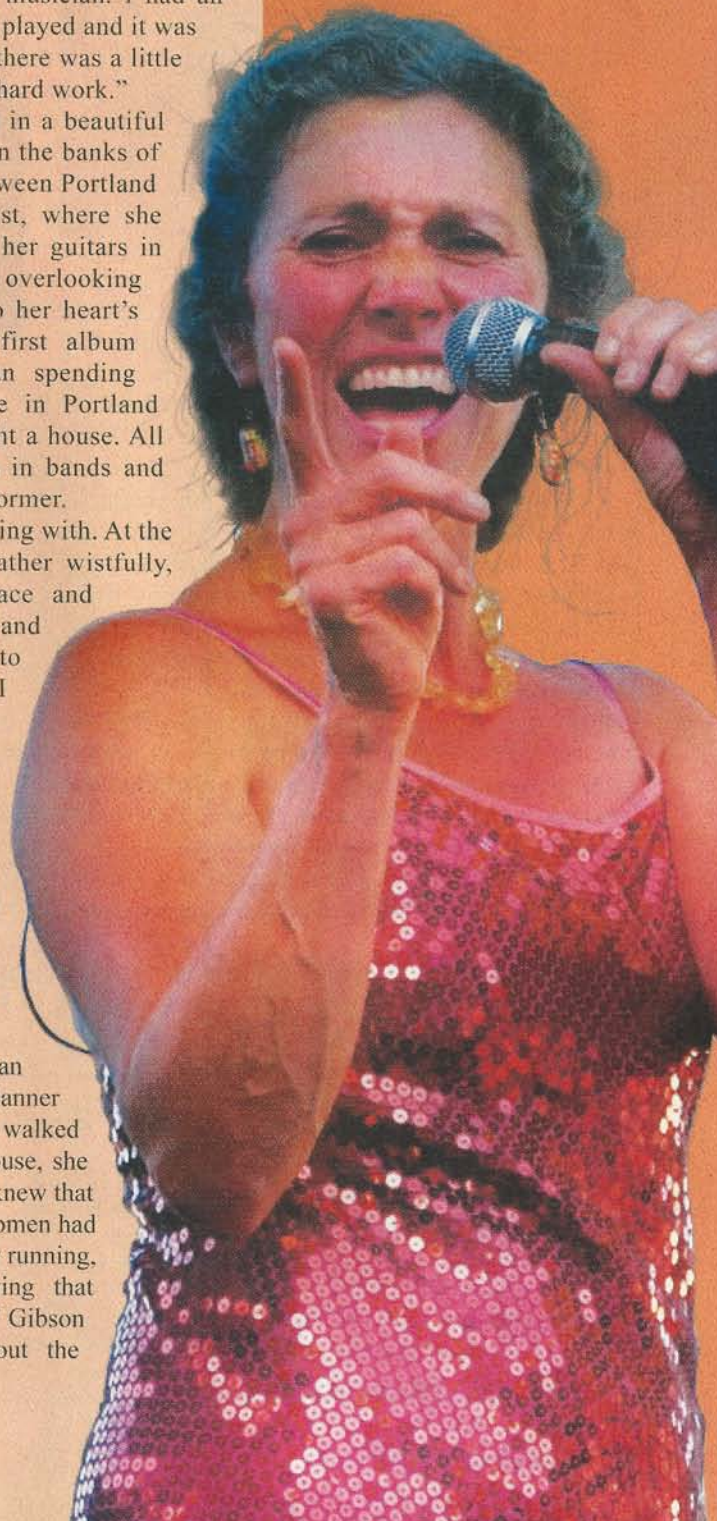
It took some dealing with. At the time, she told me, rather wistfully, "It's a beautiful space and it's a beautiful view and it's quite conducive to playing in the style I most like to play ... just a front porch, passing time kind of way. Sort of easy going, sonorous way of letting some time go by. Kind of an old fashioned notion."

Since then, though, she's never looked back.

Although Sheehan had heard of the Banner guitars on the day she walked into John Thomas's house, she hadn't heard much. "I knew that during World War II women had kept the Gibson factory running, but other than knowing that that particular kind of Gibson existed, that was about the extent of it, she says."

(LEFT) Jay Summerour, Lauren Sheehan, and Washboard Chaz  
photo by Roz Powell

(BELOW) Lauren performs at the 2010 Waterfront Blues Festival.



(BELOW) Lauren Sheehan with the late John Jackson.  
(RIGHT) Lauren plays the mandolin with Jay Summerour and Jerron Paxton at the Port Townsend Country Blues Festival.



After learning the story she bonded. "I found I had a very strong emotional musical relationship to the women in the story. Many songs started occurring to me that would be perfect for the album and were part of the same vernacular that these women represent to me.

"When I first picked up one [of the guitars], I was surprised at how fat and pudgy the neck was. The first one's I played were John Thomas'. They were very nicely set up ... nice and warm. I could feel the thrill that comes when you get to play vintage guitars. It's a very singular thing ... and to know what was around the corner.

"I'm very proud to be helping to tell the story and be supporting and bringing light to another effort of women and another show of strength and capability that women have. It dovetails really beautifully into my love of historic music.

"It's a quiet thrill and complement to be able to give back to something that means so much, personally, to me."

She chose songs such as "I Wish that I Could Shimmy Like my Sister Kate," "Precious Lord," a "In the Sweet By and By/ Keep on the Sunny Side" medley, "Soldier's Joy," a "When Johnny Comes Marching Home / Johnny I Hardly Knew Ya" medley, and "America the Beautiful" among others.

"The women in the book revealed different attitudes and philosophies towards the war and blanket patriotism and that made me do some

songs that were commentaries, she said recently. "The songs 'When Johnny Comes Marching Home' and 'Johnny I Hardly Knew Ya,' made sense because they had so much relevancy to the project. In the studio, I chose a guitar from the collection there that had gone to the front and come back. It sounded really beautiful, an incredible instrument. That's the one I used on that medley.

"Other guitars, I'd have in my hand and kind of go through the song list, which was two times as long as we needed. I wanted a lot of options. Certain guitars were more right for finger-picking, some for flat-picking. Some of it is the feel under my right fingers. Some of the strings you can pluck more easily; they have a certain roundness and clarity of tone and ping out which makes them more comfortable finger-picking. My voice would blend with those.

"Some of the others were better for strumming and flat-picking, trying to blend all those sound simultaneously. It was mostly an intuitive process."

It was a new experience for Sheehan to step outside of her own artistic expression and be a part

## DISCOGRAPHY

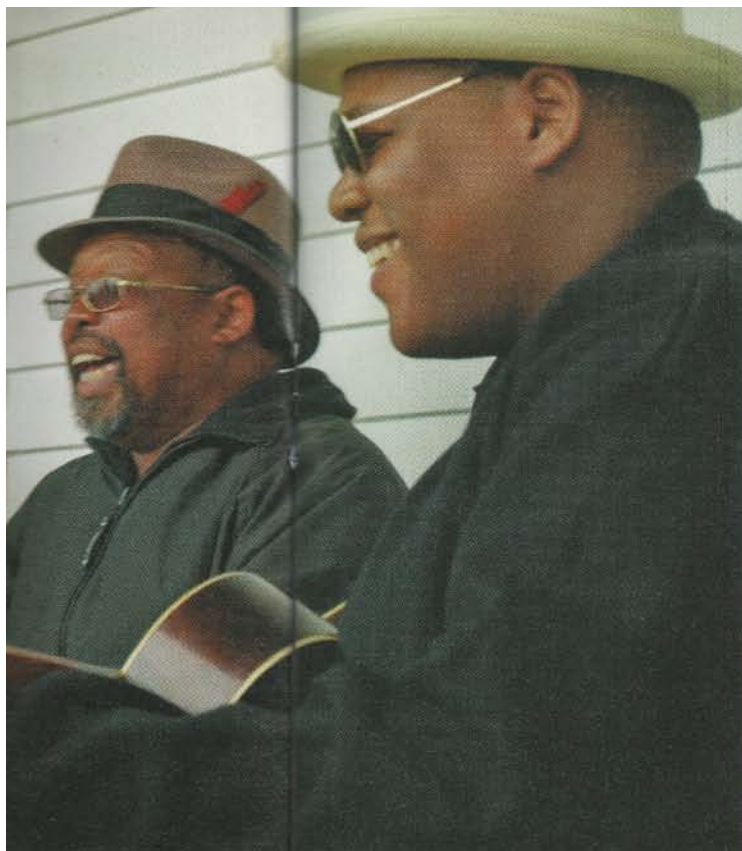
*The Light Still Burns*, 2013, Wilson River  
*Rose City Ramble*, 2011, Wilson River  
*Two Wings*, 2005, Wilson River  
*Some Old Lonesome Day*, 2002, Wilson River

## ON THE WEB:

<<http://www.laurensheehanmusic.com>>



The Lauren Sheehan Stringband: Bill Uhlig, Lauren Sheehan, and Peter Siegel.



of a larger project, one she's still internalizing, even as she goes out on the road to promote the album and play the tunes on the Gibson Banner she now owns.

In the meantime, and in between tours and teaching, she is in the midst of some serious woodshedding in technique and research. Lonnie Johnson-style guitar playing is on her shed bucket list.

There is no hurry to make a new album.

"I'm really curious about my career now because this particular project came out of the blue, and it's been so cool. I'm really looking forward to seeing what comes next because I've been working on this project for a year and a half and it was such a surprise. It's like someone put me on jet and now I'm coming home a year later ... so, so, so what now?" she chuckled. 🎸



The Lauren Sheehan Stringband: Bill Uhlig, Lauren Sheehan, and Peter Siegel.