

# LARA HERSCOVITCH

## ONE MORE ANGEL RUNNING

BY RICHARD CUCCARO



two greatest enemies of humankind are poverty and ignorance. Those among us who step up and fight against those two conditions can rightly be called angels. There are not enough to go around, but we can be grateful for those we have, despite their human fallibility. We have one in Lara Herscovitch, an uncommon woman with considerable gifts. She

possesses not only a huge reservoir of musical talent and a voice with a bell-like clarity, but a keen sense of global social concern and a fierce intellect. Stopping to consider that she's also extremely attractive, a thought may occur to the rest of us average souls: "Life is not fair." Two things are better considered: "Get over it," and "Fear not, she's on our side." It might seem too good to be true, but true it is. While a significant portion of the world collapses around us in a morass of lazy ineptitude, self absorption, meanness, and flat-out insanity, here is an oasis of brainy, energetic higher purpose.

Her songs brim with compassion. One primary jewel in her most recent CD, *Juror Number 13*, "Se Puede (It is Possible)" is a song about bravery in the face of uncertainty, and it most likely mirrors her own.

His view from the bullseye is nothing but darts  
Makes ducking and dodging a new form of art  
Doesn't care for arriving, is happy to go  
To meet all those people he doesn't know

He's not scared of falling but that he might jump  
When the wind blows the wrong way he won't push his luck  
He stars two left feet in his life's own ballet  
and he dances anyway  
Se... Se... Se puede...

She's a railroad car looking for track  
Wonders when her dues will pay her back  
Nowhere to go besides swimming upstream  
Heading home to water where she's never been

She tries not to think and tries not to dream  
Tries to stay balanced out there on that beam  
Wonders if her goal is just a cliché  
But tries to not stop at halfway

The melody takes hold and doesn't let go, pulling the listener in by the heart strings. Her poetic sensibility reflects an understanding of striving against heavy odds. A recent interview shed some light on the wellspring of her artistic vision.

### Beginnings

Lara was born in Stamford, Connecticut. When she was three, her family moved to Pound Ridge in Westchester County, New York. She lived there through her sophomore year in high school. Her earliest musical experiences



included piano lessons when she was 6 or 7 years old, and gathering with family members around the piano to sing and play. She didn't enjoy the lessons, but it got her acquainted with musical theory. She began writing her own songs at the age of eight. As she got older, she sang in the choir, took lessons on other musical instruments and continued on and off with piano lessons. She took guitar lessons at summer camp one year and learned three chords, but didn't really touch it again until she got to college.

Her early ambitions involved becoming a baseball player (age 5), then a tennis player (age 7). Her physical abilities were not enough to make those goals a reality, so she picked something within her grasp. Lara was set upon making a career choice early. Before getting to college, she picked law, for its intellectual challenge, use of language, and ability to affect things.

### Oops! Wrong Career!

Lara went to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. In college, she was starting to play guitar, but still writing songs on piano. She heard friends playing guitar and liked how it sounded. Upon hearing people like James Taylor and Shawn Colvin, playing the guitar took on new possibilities. She tried out for choir, but wasn't accepted because she couldn't sight read. A

**'If there's one thing I'm good at, it's knowing what I don't know and being able to listen to people who know more than I do.'**

Political Science major, she worked as a paralegal at a law firm during the summer and on holiday breaks while still an undergraduate. She applied to law school, was accepted and had put her deposit down. However, there were some discouraging factors. The market was pretty flooded with lawyers at that time. She heard from virtually all of the young lawyers how dissatisfied they were with their career choice - they never saw their families, were representing the "bad guys" in many cases, and overall, were they able to do it all again, would not pick law. They'd say, "Are you sure you want to do this?" She wound up deferring her entry into law school for a year. This proved to be another turning point. By this time she realized that she was interested in a "helping" career path.

### **Social Work Wins**

During her year off, she considered doing a tour in the Peace Corps. That was another path crowded with other young people. To make her application more competitive, she volunteered at a local homeless shelter, serving one meal per week at a soup kitchen where she lived, in Stamford Connecticut. Observing the disadvantaged population in the area, it occurred to her that there were people who did social



work for a living -- who worked at making the world a better place and "got by" doing it. Someone suggested that she do informational interviews with administrators at area non-profits, and she learned about a Master's of Social Work degree that included "macro" methods of study - policy & planning, community organizing, organizational development, management, etc., perfect for the

side of her that had been interested in law school. She applied to the program at the University of Connecticut, and got in. All through this period, she was still writing songs and still using the piano. She didn't give a thought to being a singer/songwriter. Writing songs was something she "just happened to do."

She did internships while in graduate school at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work. One of her internships was at Save the Children, a member of the International Save the Children Alliance. She continued writing songs, still not thinking about making music her life.

### **Two Trains Running**

The rest of her story becomes like two trains running on parallel tracks. On one, her desire to be of service to her fellow man. On the other, a dormant, ready-to-blossom hunger to make music that would finally burst into full bloom.

When she got out of grad school Save the Children hired her and started sending her around the world -- to Africa (Ethiopia, Mozambique), Asia (Thailand, the Phillipines), South America (Bolivia) and Central America (Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Dominican Republic and Guatemala). She quickly moved up from Program Associate to Program Officer to Education Specialist. Music continued to pull at her.

It was here that she picked up the guitar in earnest. While traveling and spending months in foreign countries, the guitar was a more practical alternative than even a keyboard with an amp.

Lara's team was responsible for providing technical support and program evaluation for field offices in different countries. Program evaluation involved finding out what was going well and how to do more of it on a greater scale or what wasn't going well and how to fix it. She'd spend anywhere from one week to two months abroad. Lara liked everyone she worked with in each country but quite often, she was left alone with "significant" amounts of time at her disposal. Making music was not just a desire, but a need. "That's when I realized how much in love with music I am and how much a part of my soul music is," she states today.

### **Epiphany**

From the time she was in grad school, Lara's mother had been ill and doctors could not figure out what it was. After a number of theories, it was thought that she might have Lyme Disease. Finally, during the time that Lara was crisscrossing from the United States to one country after another, her mother was finally (correctly) diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. The gravity of her mother's condition brought down upon her the conclusion that if her own life were to be cut short for any reason, she would most regret not having pursued music.

### **Music Takes Over**

Lara first played her sister's classical guitar, but preferred the sound of steel strings. Someone then gave her a guitar that had been stored in an attic that they didn't want anymore. She brought that one around with her on trips overseas for a couple of years. On her travels, the guitar became her friend during many solitary hours. She connected with people for whom music was the spirit of life. She participated in musical circles in places like the Phillipines and Bolivia. Her Spanish was rudimentary then, but just singing in English created a connection with everyone who was playing or listening.

At home, she attended her first open mic night in Stamford at the Next Door Cafe. She played two songs in ten minutes time and got positive feedback, playing one song on piano and one on guitar. That opened the floodgates. She did open mics for 9 months and recorded material at the same time.

She explained her rapid learning curve this way: "If there's one thing I'm good at, it's knowing what I don't know and being able to listen to people who know more than I do. I'm grateful for that skill. I was guided so well by amazing people from day one."

Rich Franzino was opening the Acoustic Cafe in Fairfield, Connecticut at the same time that Lara was getting started. Often, when no one was booked, he'd ask Lara to grab her guitar and go on stage and sing. Tony DeMatteo, who worked in the repair room at Sam Ash was another mentor. Both Rich and Tony told her to record, to practice and to be true to her own vision.

When music became a primary force in her life, traveling on a moment's notice for Save the Children became a problem ("You're going to Guatemala on Friday!"). Regretfully, she decided that it would be necessary to leave Save the Children. At that point, she was accepted to the PhD program at Brandeis in Social Policy (political science/sociology/economics combination). At first she figured that being in the Boston

area would be great for music, but realized that academia at that level would trap her in books and would take her away from the guitar, so she didn't go.

She got a job stateside as program director for the Greater Bridgeport (CT) Area Foundation. That allowed her to stay in the field of social work, but still plan ahead for gigs. This set her course on a firm foundation and she was on her way. She stayed with them for four years. Eventually, she needed a job where there would be more time for music. That came to pass. Her current job at the Connecticut Fund for the Environment allows her to work from Monday through Thursday, allowing one more day for playing gigs.

Her first CD, *Sin Tierra* was released in 2000. The second, *There* in 2002. *Juror Number 13* was released in 2006. A fourth CD is in progress.

## Influences and "Crafting"

While Shawn Colvin was her biggest influence, she includes others like: Tracy Chapman, James Taylor, Jackson Browne, Richard Shindell, Catie Curtis, Kris Delmhorst, Jennifer Kimball, Ellis Paul and Vance Gilbert. Cheryl Wheeler, Christine Lavin, John Gorka helped her see the value of bringing humor into her performances.

Early on, she fell in love with the multiple crafts of writing poetry, and music and playing guitar. She also fell in love with the craft of performance and began studying it. The workshops of Vance Gilbert were a great help. She read Livingston Taylor's book called *Stage Performance*. After a show, he was incredibly generous, spending 45 minutes with her, answering questions about performing.

We asked her about writing melody and lyrics and she responded: "I try to craft them separately, but there's a certain point where they fuse together and I let it happen at that point. I get excited to hear the song and sometimes I get distracted. The poetry isn't as finely crafted as I need it to be. I have to remember to stop and 'craft.'" A recent Rocky Mountain Workshop with Steve Seskin was highly instructive. Steve showed how he goes back through each song with a fine tooth comb and makes sure that every word belongs.

## Styles

In the process of so much travel, she developed a style that music writers call "World music." this is most evident on "Ddembe," a song whose roots sprang from the rhythm of a bird she heard singing while on a trip to Africa. It developed into a round with overlapping harmonized riffs in the native tongue that she learned from their guide on the trip. The duet with K.J. Denhart on *Juror Number 13* is exquisite.

Lara seemed surprised when I posed the possibility of her doing jazz. However, "Sylvia's Eyes," also from *Juror*, shows her handling a shuffling beat, sophisticated breaks and pauses with aplomb. Her tonal quality shows a ready adaptability to jazz forms. It's a genre she could master if it suits her. She took guitar lessons for a year from jazz great Joe Beck (who played with Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Paul Simon and Steely Dan, among others). While it's not all that pertinent, she already has the looks of a very classy jazz diva. We look forward to hearing her include more jazz stylings in her work.

## New Work

We were privileged to get demos of two new songs, "Carry On" and "Lightning." They show a continued growth in her

mastery of poetic imagery. We especially like, in "Carry On," the allusions to the "Sham-in-Chief" [our expression]:

He speaks of peace and dreams in war  
Wines and dines the troops, spins it 'round the dance floor  
His fingers are crossed behind his back again  
Again he speaks of us and winks at them

She speaks of pulling together to overcome monumental disasters:

Ashe and flood waters recede  
into our veins and carve  
another generation's refrain  
So hang on, we'll carry each  
other as we carry on...  
So proudly we hail --  
hope we always will  
That our neighbors are worth  
more than the dollar bill...

In "Lightning," we hear a cry of defiance:

New York City, veiled in rain  
and lamplight Tried to sell my  
soul, but didn't get a bite...  
This is my work, this is my way  
I'll get there tomorrow,  
if not today  
If you're not coming, step out  
of the way

Lara intends to make music her full-time career. *Acoustic Live* feels that it's only a matter of time. While the world of social work will lose a valuable soldier, it will gain a musical champion. One who has been to the front lines and back. One who can bring us the world's stories. This also is important work. Angels can take many forms.

## Upcoming Shows

In addition to joining *Acoustic Live* in one of its late-night guerrilla showcases at the Northeast Regional Folk Alliance at Kutscher's Resort Hotel in the Catskills (NY) this November, her other gigs include:

- Nov 15** Western CT State University, Midtown  
Coffeehouse 8pm Alumni Hall on the Midtown  
Campus Danbury CT 203-837-8547
- Nov 29** Mocha Maya's 7pm 47 Main Street  
Shelburne Falls MA
- Dec 8** The Peace Cafe @ First Congregational Church  
8pm 37 Main Street Southington CT  
860-621-8898
- Dec 12** SUNY Rockland Community College Singer-  
Songwriter Series - 5:30 pm 145 College Road  
Suffern NY 845-574-4300
- Jan 6** Tribes Hill Presents: Westchester County Center  
Farmer's Market - 11:30 pm 198 Central Avenue  
White Plains NY 914-995-4050 Also featuring  
Robert Hill and Julia Joseph.
- Jan 12** Valley Folk Concert 7:30 pm 254 Baldwin Street,  
Rural Research Laboratories Elmira NY  
607-962-4461 Price: \$10 info@valleyfolk.org
- Feb 1** Lyrics Coffeehouse 7:30pm 37 Lonetown Road  
Redding CT 203-938-2551 Price: \$10 (\$8 adv., 1/2  
student/senior



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