

Roger Williams & Amy Gallatin

PARTNERS IN MUSIC, PARTNERS IN LIFE

Art Durny



Every once in a while, two music personalities' paths intersect, and they are both forever changed. Call it fate, call it destiny, but that's exactly what happened to resonator guitar ace Roger Williams and vocalist Amy Gallatin back in 2002. Once they teamed up and started performing together, there was a natural chemistry both on and off stage that led them to develop their own unique sound and brand of music that is unmistakable. Over the course of the last 14 years, Roger and Amy have performed at venues all over the North East, Canada, Europe, and the U.K., and have recorded several acclaimed albums together. They have become an integral part of the New England music scene, and their popularity continues to grow each year. Over time, Roger Williams and Amy Gallatin have truly become partners in music and partners in life.

Roger Williams

Roger's interest in music started almost as soon as he could talk, as he heard old-time country music constantly in his childhood home in Lawrence, Mass., either on the phonograph or during house parties among his musically talented family. From an early age, Roger learned to sing and harmonize from his mother Gerry Lee, who sang for years in a country band with Roger's father and was well-known in the area for her singing. But Roger particularly loved the sound of the steel guitar.

In his early teens, he was first introduced to bluegrass music at an Osborne Brothers concert. He immediately went home and started rummaging through his stepfather's bluegrass albums and came across a Flatt & Scruggs recording that included Josh Graves on

“Gallatin’s & Williams’ voices make for fantastic bittersweet harmonies.”

—*Hartford Advocate*

By Rick Lang

the Dobro. Something resonated immediately, and he was hooked. Soon after, he tracked down a resonator guitar at a local music store and started learning a few Roy Acuff songs like "Wabash Cannonball" and "Great Speckled Bird." A mere six months later, he was asked to sit in with the Lilly Brothers and Don Stover at the Hillbilly Ranch in Boston, Mass.

Months of practicing with records paid off when Don Stover asked Roger to join the White Oak Mountain Boys in 1975. That opportunity led to his first recording opportunity with the legendary Joe Val on his *Not A Word From Home* album. Later, he would perform with the Lilly Brothers Band, followed by Herb Aplin's group, the Berkshire Mountain Boys in '77.

In 1981, Roger signed on with Mac and Hazel McGee in White Mountain Bluegrass, where he became a part of the family band. Roger has fond memories of those years, as WMB was playing a lot of the songs Roger used to sing with his mother. "I'm really proud of that band's accomplishments which included a half-dozen recordings, trips up and down the East Coast and Canada, several European tours, making so many friends along the way," Roger says.

In 1983, Roger met brothers Bob and Dave Dick, two very talented New England musicians who would have a big impact on his life. Jamming with them at festivals led to the recording of *Fireball*, his first solo recording that included fiddler Ray Legere, widely considered to be one of Canada's most outstanding acoustic musicians. Two more solo projects would follow: *Route 2 To Amherst* and *River Of No Return*. After his long stint with WBM, Roger's next musical chapter was with Southern Rail, joining them on several albums and touring nationally with them for three years. This was followed by a five-year stint with prominent New England musicians Lincoln Meyers, current Infamous Stringdusters member Chris Pandolfi, bassist Pete Soukas, and vocalist Cecil Abels in the New England Bluegrass Band.

Roger's recording credits include projects with several other luminaries in the bluegrass field including Don Stover, Joe Val, Hazel Dickens, and Bill Grant & Delia Bell, among many others. Career highlights include more than a dozen European tours with various artists,

including an appearance at the prestigious Dobro Festival in Slovakia, residencies at Augusta Heritage Week (Elkins, W.Va.), Rob Ickes' ResoSummit, recording the father-son project *Williams Squared* with his son J.D., being featured on the CMH label *Pickin' On* series and, most recently, recording and producing *Phoenix, Something 'Bout You*, and *Everything I Wanted Love To Be* with his partner Amy Gallatin.

Amy Gallatin

Unlike Roger, Amy didn't have a lot of music around her home when she was growing up. She and her mother played the piano a bit, and her father was apt to be listening to the popular music of the day, but it wasn't until high school when Amy's interest in music was sparked by seeing an appearance of folk singer John Denver on *The Tonight Show*. The sound of his 12-string guitar caught her attention immediately. "I clearly remember the simplicity and purity of that music as compared to what was on the radio at that time," Amy recalls. Linda Ronstadt was becoming prominent then, and she proved to be a big influence on Amy's singing style. When John Denver released *Back Home Again* with full acoustic bluegrass instrumentation in 1974, the blend and authenticity of those instruments set the stage for Amy's lifelong interest in the genre.

In college, Amy's guitar was always close at hand, and she would sing and play in the echoes of the stairwell of her dorm for hours between classes. Her interests expanded to the sounds of James Taylor, Carole King, Joan Baez, Bonnie Raitt, and Jackson Browne, to name a few. "The beauty of that music is that, like bluegrass, it's accessible and playable," Amy says. After graduation, the urge to travel took her to Oregon, Washington, the California Sierras, Montana, and Idaho. She worked at ski resorts, as a cook in hunting camps, worked as a wrangler, and sang at dude ranches, generally enjoying the outdoor life. "I was young, fit, and very active. On backcountry trips, I had this old beater guitar that we would load up on the last packed mule. Other times, it would accompany me on river trips, where I would sing around the campfire at night."

Amy got her first professional gig at the Lone Mountain Guest Ranch in Big Sky Montana, singing in a log cabin for ski

tourists. "The cooks would snowmobile my guitar up to the cabin when they went up to fire up the cook stove and prepare dinner for the guests. After dinner, I would perform. That was a dream job for me. I could scarcely believe I was actually getting paid to sing. As far as I was concerned, at the time, playing at Carnegie Hall couldn't have been any better."

Amy remembers a road trip in the off-season that ended up at the fifth annual MerleFest in North Carolina. "I was pitching my tent here and there, listening to this great music, cold rain pouring down the whole weekend. With my muddy sleeping bag wrapped around me, I was mesmerized by the amazing harmonies of the original Seldom Scene. I hadn't heard anything like that before. During their performance, lightning struck nearby and knocked out the sound system. They just kept singing and everyone gathered closer to the stage so they could hear them. That was like a religious experience for me."

She subsequently moved to New England to take advantage of the thriving acoustic music scene in and around Boston, immersed herself in local bluegrass, and cut her first album. "It was literally a dream come true for me. I loved my life out West, but was musically unfulfilled playing by myself. Once I got the taste of playing in a group, I've never been the same."

Roger & Amy

Roger and Amy's lives intersected in 2002. Amy was booked with her band Stillwaters at the Strawberry Park Bluegrass Festival in Preston, Conn., and she needed a resonator guitar player on short notice. "I was half scared to ask Roger to do the gig, intimidated by his reputation as the best-of-the-best in New England. Much to my surprise, he agreed. And, as we had no time to rehearse (he was living in New Hampshire), I asked Roger to get there early to run through the tunes before the show. But he strolled in just before we took the stage, and I was fuming—I am not a 'wing it' type of a gal. All my anxiety went away, however, when we started playing because he was just so good. Between sets and after the show, we hung out and started singing a few tunes we both knew. We seemed to really click vocally, and I soon realized that Roger

brought a lot more to the table than just playing the Dobro."

Over the next year, they used the hours spent traveling to and from shows together as an opportunity to sing and work out harmony parts. "We were both intrigued by how well our voices resonated together in a very natural, organic way." Up until then, Roger's focus in music had been primarily the resonator guitar, but singing with Amy would bring his vocal talent to the forefront.

Along the way, a romance developed that would solidify their relationship as partners in music, as well as partners in life. They say in life that one thing leads to another. Roger and Amy's new musical collaboration led to the recording of their acclaimed country duet album *Something 'Bout You* that featured their two voices stunningly harmonizing on a collection of carefully chosen vintage country numbers. Listening to the heartfelt renditions of each selection on this remarkable recording leaves no doubt that Amy and Roger were meant to sing together.

"Roger knew I always liked country music, but it took me a while to find my

voice. In college, I was singing everything from Motown covers to Southern Rock. It was listening to Emmylou Harris, among others, that helped me to find where my voice belonged. Credit to Roger for further developing and fine-tuning the way I sing and sound today. Roger was the real deal, and I felt I'd finally found my home and voice with him."

From that point on, Amy's band Stillwaters would establish a brand new identity and signature sound. Roger's son, J.D., now plays mandolin, guitar, and fiddle for the group. A graduate of Berklee College Of Music, J.D. is one of the finest young musicians in the area. The chemistry of father and son is remarkable, and it really shows both on stage and throughout their recorded works. Schooled by his dad, J.D. grew up learning Roger's old-school approach to playing: state the melody, *then* embellish the melody.

Rounding out the band on acoustic bass is one of the region's favorites, veteran player Eric Levenson, a former member of Joe Val and the New England Bluegrass Boys. Their current repertoire ranges from traditional bluegrass, country duets, folk, plus strong original material both from Roger and J.D. and some of their go-to songwriters like Syracuse's John Cadley (whom Amy refers to as a "near-undiscovered gem") and Canadian songwriter Ryan Roberts.

Another important gig for Roger and Amy is being a part of the annual Christmas In New England concert tour. Along with the Blackstone Valley Bluegrass Band and Rick Lang & Friends, they performed six shows in three states last year. It's the 14th year of the tour which keeps gaining in popularity each season. Amy says, "I've been a part of it for the last ten years. It was already in full swing with Blackstone, songwriter Rick Lang, and Karen Lincoln Wilber. One year, I tagged along with Roger and knew it was something I wanted to be part of. It's easily one of the most rewarding musical endeavors I've ever done. The experience has inspired me to plan to make a Christmas album sometime in the next year or so."

Last year was a year of excitement and surprises for both Amy and Roger. It began with the reunion of the Hot Flashes, an eclectic female-fronted group now backed by Roger and J.D., that made a name for itself a decade or so ago,

featuring Amy, singer-songwriter Gail Wade, and former Traver Hollow alumnus Peggy Harvey. Their sound is built on soulful lead singing, dazzling vocal harmonies, and jazz-flavored music stylings. All three share a passion for acoustic music and have amassed a wealth of beautifully performed songs drawn from bluegrass, folk, vintage country, swing, jazz, blues, with a few cowboy and traditional tunes thrown in for good measure. The Flashes developed a strong and loyal following in their heyday who are thrilled the band got back together. In addition to actively touring together, the women recorded a brand new album capturing their signature sound.

Roger received an unexpected honor when he was invited to participate in the ResoSummit for the first time. This annual event is a unique three-day workshop featuring the top resonator guitar players in the country. "It was a very rewarding experience for me. When I first arrived in Nashville at the registration room, there was a young man from the British Isles playing off in the background, preparing for upcoming classes the next day. Took me a minute to realize it, but it was an original tune of mine that he was playing—note for note, to perfection. That alone was enough for me to realize that I was at the right place, at the right time, for the right reason."

Since their paths first crossed a decade and a half ago, there is no doubt Roger Williams and Amy Gallatin were destined to be together. Both are seasoned veterans in the music industry, have similar influences, and their voices blend beautifully to create an unmistakable sound of their own. Roger's world-class guitar work coupled with Amy's powerful lead vocals make them one of the most talented acts in the North East. They both still have a lot of "tread on the tire" and we can all look forward to many years worth of live performances and new recorded works. Partners in music, partners in life. Meant to be? Definitely!



Rick Lang of Kingston, N.H., is an award winning songwriter, current chair of the IBMA Songwriter Committee, and freelance writer. He has owned and operated a NH based lumber company "Highland Hardwoods" serving the high-end woodworking trade.

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