

Robin Barnes: From Songbird To Firebird

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According to the ancient Greeks, the phoenix—the firebird—was a long-lived bird that was cyclically born again and regenerated by rising from the ashes of its predecessor. As the ancient tales of Herodotus and others claim, the bird associated with the sun would obtain a new life over and over again.

But this is not the story of a phoenix. This is the story of a Robin—Robin Barnes to be exact.

Barnes is one of those children who has a momma who recognizes the power of a name. She is these days affectionately called the “Songbird of New Orleans,” but Robin’s mother named her daughter after her hopes for the future.

“From birth my mom named me Robin which means bright fame, bright light. My mom believed that names represent you as a person to manifest your destiny, and she thought whatever I was going to do was going to be for the world. I was immediately a Rockin’ Robin, a pretty bird, and a songbird.”



I learned from a young age that in my world everyone and their momma did music. It was never something where you even had the capacity to think about being competitive. You had to constantly think about how you can do your best. It sounds cliché, but you don’t want to be the next anybody, you want to be the first somebody.

Photo by Justen Williams

It was at age six when the little songbird, belting her heart out to “Ave Maria” in her parents’ church, started to live up to her name and destiny. Growing up in a family of musicians (which include **Dave Bartholomew**), the tiny bird’s eyes were wide open to the New Orleans music community and to the deep roots and tradition that surrounded her. Mom Betty was head clerk for the Naval Reserve

Personnel Center on Poland Avenue and Dauphine and Dad, Robino, was a consultant who mocked a musician in the church.

“I always loved Irma Thomas, the New Orleans Queen of Soul, and Shannon Powell the King of Soul and I was like, ‘I want a title, too!’ I wanted to be something that represents my home and who so why not a songbird? I started putting that in my self-description and bio, but it wasn’t until I started calling me that...and then when I got the official proclamation from the city as to my title I was like alright...that’s me!”

Indeed, there’s a mural of her at Toulouse and Rampart by artist Robin Daning, that was painted as part of **Community Visions Unlimited**, a program that is committed to revitalizing Metro New Orleans neighborhoods with an arts focus. Fats Domino, Leah Chase, and Teddy Riley are just some of the other murals in the beautification project.

Robin Barnes may also represent how the ancient Greeks saw the Land of the Dead’s influence on the Land of the Living. Barnes, with her native New Orleans blood, is very much present and alive in today’s digital landscape. With over **30,000 Instagram followers** plus a **strong social media presence**—not to mention a spot on a very popular Bravo television series (more on that later)—Barnes incorporates her love of her New Orleans past and boldly presents (and markets it) to an international audience that’s hungry for anything the Crescent City has to offer. As far as New Orleans natives, in a city where people can evaluate you depending on the hospital in which you were born, Robin’s roots are truly deep, and more than just skin deep. Her family traces its history all the way back to being slaves on Burnside Plantation.

“To quote **B Mike**, ‘I am my ancestors’ wildest dreams,’” she says. “I am a U.S. cultural ambassador, a **Billboard charting singer**, and I sincerely do what I love. I am my own boss. My husband and I are an interracial couple.” Referencing the Loving Act, the landmark Civil Rights decision of the U.S. Supreme Court that was overturned in 1967, Barnes continues, “My parents grew up in a time when interracial marriage would have been illegal. Recently, I cried when Kamala Harris was announced as vice president because every mom in the United States has told their daughter you can be whatever you can be as much as we say that, we never saw it. And now we see a Black woman vice president of the United States in our lifetime. I can finally say, and mean it, to my daughter that you can be whoever you want to be and sincerely mean it.”

Barnes is from a family of musicians, but getting her foot in the door—the one that is usually closed to talented members of the music community—meant that the songbird had to find her wings, so she could speak.



Robin Barnes at 10 years old. Photo courtesy of the artist.

“Right off the bat, I learned from a young age that in my world everyone and their momma did music. It was never something where you even had the capacity to think about being competitive. You had to constantly think about how you can do your best. It sounds cliché, but you don’t want to be the next anybody, you want to be the first somebody. My siblings and I were taught to play smarter not harder,” states Barnes matter-of-factly, who is very aware of how competitive the music community as a whole can be, especially in a city that relies on music for its lifeblood, and where there are so many homegrown excellent performers.

“The negativity that sometimes comes with competition can be something healthy to push you and your friends to get better and better. I had such a hard time getting support and no one ever let me in their clique. They never let me in except for people who knew my family. It was never a situation where I was competing against someone in a music group. I had to learn to be an individual: to get people to notice me for my music. In this industry everybody is talented in multiple genres like jazz, soul, reggae, and pop. I had to learn to be comfortable with who I am and how to just really stick to that and to hone it.”

As a Black woman, Barnes certainly got served a recipe for the trajectory of success.

“Throughout my entire career I’ve been constantly told I need to straighten my hair, wear more revealing clothes, wear more make-up. I talked about this at my cousin Dave’s Bartholomew’s funeral. When I was young and said to Dave that I just wanted to be me; I didn’t want to be like everyone else, he told me, ‘The saddest day is when a lamingo wants to be a turkey. The turkey is a standard of what is buyable and commercial and a lamingo has a rare beauty but she dumbs it down to be a turkey that anyone can buy at a store.’ I want to be the lamingo like he talked about...I want to be my real self.”

Barnes is quick to point out that her parents were more like lamingos than your regular ol’ turkeys, so to speak.

“My mom loves Elton John...a Black woman loves him for his individuality. My dad loves James Brown because he never it the cookie cutter standard, and yet he produced a pro it as an artist,” she says.

And although her parents were eclectic in their musical tastes, they encouraged Robin to take the straight and narrow. A competitive golfer since the age of 9, Barnes almost attended NYU on scholarship but decided to stay closer to home after Katrina to help her community rebuild. She enrolled at UNO and as soon as she inished her undergraduate degree, her parents felt she should try out a regular job or at least rush to get her MBA as soon as possible. And so she did, right back at UNO.

“If I had followed so many parents’ advice about going into corporate America, I think I would have lost my job by now. The pandemic should have taught everyone the time to follow your heart is now because nothing is guaranteed. People can’t even be guaranteed retirement.”

But the songbird took her notes at UNO and used her MBA courses to get her foot in the door— at Hotel Monteleone to be exact. Barnes’ father and brothers were more musically-inclined but well-known in the church community. They had not performed in clubs or pitched themselves as talent when Barnes graduated in 2010.

“I was running into a lot of interesting conversations with men who run clubs who told me we should go on a date, let’s do a handshake deal, a lot of BS. The main thing that deterred them was me saying I’ll be emailing you my contract and 100 percent all of them declined. I actually had to go and get a day job because it took me six to nine months to ind my irst gig. I worked for a non-pro it and I was like this is it—maybe I just go back to a 9 to 5 job. Even back then I was helping other artists. But then I thought, “I don’t want to work for someone else; I can do this.”

Barnes did her homework, like any good UNO student would do, conducted her market research and came upon an opportunity.

“I went to a female-owned bar. I did my market research, I found out the logistics. I stalked this venue for two months (the former Twist Cocktail Bar which was once housed in the Lafayette Hotel on Lafayette Square). It was just dead, on Wednesdays. It was crazy because the Square was right next door to Wednesdays at the Square [the YLC’s semi-annual event], but if you are not marketing a space correctly, people don’t know. I said to the manager, ‘I’ll give you a discounted rate and we’ll try performing here for a week or two and we’ll part ways if it doesn’t do well. If it does, this will be my real fee!’ I can’t lie—for the first show I invited every relative I have because I didn’t really know how it would turn out, and I know things take time to develop. I called all my friends and cousins and we packed the place. The next week I didn’t think I’d get all my cousins and mommas, but the next week more people were there because people saw the bar was popping and it grew and grew and the partnership flourished. From there I was pursued by the Hotel Monteleone and Windsor Court. I always marketed myself as an artist. Those lounges are amazing opportunities...they are bread and butter. You are not going to see at a festival what you see at a hotel bar. People would just call me a lounge singer...but I gave them my take on ‘Sunny Side of the Street’ and ‘Fly Me to the Moon.’”

It’s this phase in her musical career that Robin first deemed herself the “firebird.”

“I belt, I’m not a quiet sultry singer. I talk on the mic, interact with the audience. It’s my background. I don’t think a lot of people in the beginning realized how much marketing and having my own company and doing business are things I just knew. There are so many conferences and webinars that tell musicians how to have a business these days and I’m shocked people don’t know that. I’m grateful that I know this stuff! My taxes, my company, marketing, my branding were valuable, thanks to my education at UNO.”



I’m not positive because it’s cool and trendy, but because I’ve been through so much in my life health-wise, and positivity connects to your health.

The Firebird was all of a sudden busy, finding herself touring Europe (her first time outside of the country) and indulging in all the delicacies the Continent had to offer. In her 20s galavanting through Greece and France, she found herself testing her limits as a performer and a player on life's stage. Returning to New Orleans, she felt startlingly drained. She attributed her inability to walk from a pain in her side to mere "jetlag," convinced that a girl from New Orleans just was not accustomed to a jet setting lifestyle. Finally, her mother convinced her to go to the ER. And it's a good thing she did.

The bird with a broken wing vaguely recalls in the hospital haze being told she was now to take various cocktails of drugs, that her kidney was severely damaged, and that she "had something to beat."

What that was, she did not know exactly. Doctors wrongfully surmised she was diabetic, and the next several months were made up of medical appointments, bedridden days, and tons of depression. In the prime of her life, Barnes was now walking with a cane. "I had to stop working full time as a musician and had no insurance and there was no assistance. I had nothing. I wasn't able to perform, I was recovering, spending all my money on medical bills. There's no other way to say it than I was depressed. Until my mother, who is always so positive, saw me moping in bed one day, tore open the curtains and said that I needed to get out of bed and 'move ya' brass.'"

The fire inside resurfaced. Barnes started seriously re-evaluating her New Orleans lifestyle that revolved so heavily around rich foods and alcohol. Ashamed to admit she was struggling, she still managed to take to social media to ask if friends wanted to start doing cardio on Monday jogs with her. Fast forward seven years later, Robin is founder and CEO of Move Ya Brass, a NOLA-centric cardio program that enjoys a partnership with Crescent City Park. Her classes, even during pandemic (socially-distanced, of course) are a hit even in a community that usually values étouffées and hurricane drinks over personal fitness. Now the singer was marketing herself not only as an entertainer, but also as a wellness leader.

That firebird marketing instinct would serve her well once again when she was approached by longtime friend Tamica Lee (host of WGNO) and other local pals like Barry Smith (Lee's husband), to partake on the Bravo series Southern Charm: New Orleans. Meant to be a sister franchise to the smash success Real Housewives, the Southern Charm shows, which film in Charleston and New Orleans, focus less on the drama of kept housewives and more on the kinships and struggles of friends trying to make it in cities below the Mason-Dixon Line.

“At first I didn’t know anything about reality TV but I joked that I’m just going to be myself and be as positive as I can be. I’m not positive because it’s cool and trendy, but because I’ve been through so much in my life health-wise, and positivity connects to your health. I went into it completely nervous about it...the cast was doing their thing and I was asked to perform in the first season. It ended up that I got to do the theme song for the show as well. I wanted to continue creating music so Pat [Casey, Barnes’ husband] and I started venturing into music licensing. I did the theme song with another guy, but a lot of the background music we did was Pat and myself. Then we did some music for *NCIS New Orleans* and NBC’s *The Blacklist* so that’s how we segued into that adventure. Basically, I got in by people asking: ‘Who was this girl on the first season? Let’s invite her back!’ Her practical advice for getting attention: “I learned when you are on-camera, don’t curse or eat too much or make a weird face they’d use for a meme!”

Evidently, they did use Robin as a meme but she survived. When you talk to her, it seems a huge part of her survival is based on the mutual love and affection she shares with her bassist husband, Pat Casey, and their one-year-old daughter, Riley. The story of Robin and Pat reads like a New Orleanian fairy tale, complete with upright bass player and sassy chanteuse.



Photo Courtesy of Robin Barnes

“It was love at first sight. Pat was living in a house full of jazz musicians. I was going in for a rehearsal and he was walking out with an upright bass, tucking down to get the bass out of the way. He has the most beautiful smile and we both said hi to each other. I asked my friend who he was, and he said, ‘Oh, that’s Bob.’ The scene is not that small...it’s big, but somehow I didn’t see ‘Bob’ for three or four more years after that. In my band, my dad was my bass player and Charles, my best friend since I was three-years-old, was on piano. I was gigging a lot and my dad had to take a step back, and I needed a bass player. Charles said he’d reach out to Pat as a bassist and that Friday, Pat showed up with his upright bass and walked in, ducking down to get through the door frame. I said OMG that’s Bob. That’s not Bob, that’s Pat! I was in a relationship at the time, but honestly over the next six months I just couldn’t get Pat out of my head. I loved his spirit and I loved him and I ended the other relationship. That first night I played with him...he was amazing...I thought I had to have this bass player. I joked, “What are you doing for the rest of your life?” “Ummm, playing with you,” he said. “Ummm you’re hired!”

And now Pat and Robin, living happily ever after in their Gently nest with baby bird Riley, are adapting together to the new world post-Covid 19. Barnes credits him with helping her with her firebird 2.0 revamp.

“We are polar opposites, which is amazing. I am hyper and Pat is a sloth. He is so chill. He is the bass player from *Finding Nemo* and I highly recommend that everyone should marry a bass player: they are the foundation of a band, the backbone. Pat has always been able to let me shine and we build each other up—one is the bass and the other is the melody. My career, from before him to after, has escalated tenfold. I finally found someone who I can talk to about what I want to sound like. In the past I had their own plans for what they wanted me to do and he understands how to develop my diversity...I love jazz, soul, gospel, high intensity music, jam band, funk. I was finally able to have a real evolution from songbird to firebird with him.”

Robin 2.0 is now a momma bird and she and Pat are mindful of the delicate balancing act it takes to be both parents and working musicians.

“I would definitely say there’s a lot of maneuvering. I’m grateful that Pat and I both have different sets of skills. I’m the dreamer and quick thinker, and he’s the realist. Our dynamic as a family works in every way. I definitely was gigging a lot; so was he. It’s a balance and a challenge. You have to hustle for this new baby, but you have to hustle and there is no maternity time or money—you have to go out and earn it. Fortunately for me, my parents have been amazing. In the beginning, I only took two weeks off after having my baby because I had to get to work. My parents had to watch the baby and gig at the same time—there’s day care, no night care. My background is business and organizational skills; building a schedule is really easy for me but implementing a schedule for a child learning to live has taught me as a human to be more patient and flexible.”

Science fiction writer Octavia Butler mused, “In order to rise from its own ashes, a phoenix first must burn.” Burning with an unmatched positive resilience is what Robin Barnes has done across the landscape of her life. From sickness to supreme health, from not booking musical gigs to becoming a Billboard charting artist, the firebird has consistently collected herself from the ashes to see her rise, time and time again. And in her new metamorphosis as momma bird, Barnes guarantees her daughter will benefit from all the lessons she has learned along the way.

Long may the Robin who transformed into a firebird continue to rise.



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