

Raise Your Voice: Singer Shea Rose Forges a Career on Her Own Terms

By: Marlo Jappen

Shea Rose's soulful voice resonates through the canary yellow walls of her home in Roxbury. She's singing a jazzy rendition of Stevie Wonder's "Living for the City" in a space that looks more like a yoga studio rather than a practice room. The décor—a Buddha statue, tea light candles, bamboo, and colorful tapestries—contribute to a "Zen" atmosphere that's reflective of Shea's inviting personality.

Her style is funky and comfortable: striped parachute pants, flowy top, bare face. She no longer rocks a sky-high afro, which was once her signature 'do. Instead, her head is shaved clean. ("When fans see me it's like they're seeing Santa Claus without the beard.") The gutsy move, in Shea's words, was a "spiritually transformative celebration." Shea sometimes speaks like she's a New Age guru, infusing flowery words like "journey," "truth," and "inspired" into conversation. As other performers crowd into the space—a beat boxer, a tap dancer, and a cajón player—she welcomes each with a warm smile and hug.

She and the other musicians are rehearsing for a private holiday party at the Institute of Contemporary Art. Shea commands the room with confidence:

"No," Shea interrupts. "Let's do that in a different key."

"Everybody sing 'move,' when I sing 'move.'"

As for what the group will wear to the show? Shea decides on a street-style theme so she won't have to put on makeup or a dress.

She begins to rap and her fierce persona emerges. The words burst from her mouth at a rapid-fire pace. As the rhythm flows through Shea's body, she closes her eyes and bounces her bare foot against the cedar floor. Then, she smoothly transitions into singing the chorus, which is hurricane-like in force and fury.

With this powerful voice, she sang the National Anthem at Fenway Park, won two Boston Music Awards, was selected by Queen Latifah to be a spokesperson for a CoverGirl music campaign, and landed on the cover of *The Improper Bostonian* and the annual style issue of *The Boston Globe*. She uses this voice to create social change in her community. It's the same voice that makes Shea a "Little Warrior."

"Little Warrior" isn't just a moniker, but a lifestyle that Shea represents in her music. She defines it as "a woman who is empowered, independent, resilient, and kind. She stands up for others and boldly goes after her vision." She encourages other women to be "Little Warriors," too. For her social media campaign called "Warrior Wednesday," she uploads videos of women in the Boston area who share their story about success and failure. She featured powerful women including Lisa Pierpont, editor-in-chief of *Boston Common Magazine*, and Ayanna Pressley, the first woman of color to be elected to the Boston City Council.

The music industry, Shea says, is pervaded with misleading and unobtainable images of women. "It's easy to be empowered on stage when you're above everyone else and you're sexy and you have makeup on," Shea says. "I don't know if they have that in real life."

Even though Shea embodies this warrior persona— she's bold and fierce in her speech, style, and performance—she's open about her self-doubt. "The image I put out there is strong and empowered, that's part of who I am, but I'm also gentle and sometimes fearful." Shea considers herself to be a vulnerable singer. Once she experimented with rap during her sophomore year at the Berklee College of Music, she felt more confident in her vocal ability. "There's a different type of empowerment I feel when I'm rapping," She says. "It's not so much based on melody or pitch. It's more about the words and the message." In her song "Pretty Girls," she reverts back to the insecurity she felt during middle school. She raps: *So what's wrong with me? My booty don't fit in those skinny jeans. Can't place my*

face on magazines. She's Maybelline. I'm just maybe. For the chorus, she sings: *I want to know what it's like. I want to be a pretty girl.*

"That uncertain, ugly duckling is still a part of my story," Shea says. "It sometimes shows up when you don't think it would."

This timid side of Shea surfaced when she was offered a contract from the notable record company, Universal Music Group, in 2013. They told her she had to produce "black music" in order to be successful in the music business. This meant rock was out of the question. ("But rock *is* black music. Why couldn't I have it?")

"I was paralyzed," Shea said. "I was scared to speak my truth verbally and tell them what I was uncomfortable with." Since the executives were all men, she was uncertain if she was being mistreated because of her gender.

"There was no comfort or advocacy." During this time, she developed a polyp (a blister that erupts on the vocal cords after strain) and was put on vocal rest. She shares this experience in her 2014 talk for TEDxBeaconStreet called "Somebody Stole My Voice Again." Shea overexerted her voice in order to keep up with the pressures of the industry; she sang even when she was tired or sick. But the polyp, Shea believes, was also a result of an internal imbalance between her voice and what she was feeling inside. She kept quiet during the negotiation process with Universal Music Group. "In different environments, empowerment may wane or wiggle," Shea explains. The company convinced her to record a song called "I'm the Sh!t," in which she wore dramatic makeup and glamorous, barely-there outfits.

Losing her physical voice gave her the realization she needed. After six months, she finally stood up to the company and rejected their offer. "I wasn't willing to sign the deal and sacrifice my voice to be somebody else," she says. Shea was recently discharged from voice

therapy after a long journey. Although Shea hasn't come around to watching her entire TEDxTalk, she hopes it'll motivate others to listen to themselves even if it means saying "No."

Shea uses her voice to engage her community. "It feels like it's what I was supposed to do," she says. For the past two years, she's been partnered with ABCD's Safer is S.E.X.Y., a program that educates young women from low-income areas about topics not often talked about: HIV and sexual health.

"She makes the message palatable to people," says Irvienne Goldson, deputy director of ABCD. "She has bought us into spaces where we normally wouldn't have access to."

Irvienne has set up an informational booth during Shea's performances at Brighton Music Hall and the Boston Urban Music Festival. She believes the most fitting word to describe Shea is "humble." "She's a role model to young women in the community," she says. "The words to her songs are poetry. It's healing."

Shea also co-hosts and curates the Isabella Gardner Museum's RISE Concert series, which connects emerging artists with the community. For this event, she selected artists from genres that usually aren't paired together—such as rap and country—because she believes both tell introspective stories.

"We have the opportunity to bring humanity together in a way we might not sometimes see," she says.

Shea was recently commissioned to co-write a song for the Amazon Aid Foundation to raise awareness about the environmental issues in the rainforest. As part of the project, she coached a 300-piece children choir including 13-year-old Darwin Michael Harris from Quincy, Massachusetts. After the project, Darwin's parents reached out to Shea and she's

been mentoring him ever since. Shea featured him as a community spotlight feature in her RISE series and included him in the Institute of Contemporary Art holiday performance. She also coaches Berklee students.

“I understand the emotion and the angst when you haven’t seen what the music industry is all about,” Shea says. “There’s this race to get to something and you don’t know what it is. I want to help them with understanding that there’s not an urgency. It’s a process and I make sure they have all the information and tools they need so they can make good decisions for themselves.”

Growing up in Braintree, Massachusetts, Shea only sang when she was alone in her room. She even thinks her career choice would come as a shock to her high school peers. “I was very shy and awkward.” She finally performed for the first time as a high school senior when she was part of the chorus of the school’s production of “Hello, Dolly!”

After earning her bachelor’s in English and Communications at Bay Path College, an all-women school, Shea wanted to do something different. She applied to other colleges in the area and was accepted to Berklee. On a whim, she enrolled. “My parents were confused,” she laughs. They had no clue that she was interested in singing.

Once Shea arrived at Berklee, she had her doubts about pursuing music and took a semester off. But after she returned, she found her niche: community engagement. “I was in a space where I was feeling really depressed and uncertain about singing because it’s very competitive,” she says. “I was sourcing for other answers.” As a sophomore, Shea checked her inbox and read an email about a community service work-study position with The Movement at Berklee, a program in which students collaborate with partner organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club. She applied and got the job. “That was the opening to understanding that music is a powerful catalyst in the community,” Shea says. She graduated in 2011 with a degree in professional music.

It's 8p.m. on a Friday and Shea's face pops up on a computer screen. She's surrounded by other faces, the members of her management team. The team relies on Google Hangout sessions because some live in Nashville and Detroit. Tonight, they're discussing the release of her six-song EP, *Dance This Mess Around*.

The EP has been delayed since Shea's negotiation with Universal Music Group. She recorded these songs with funding from a Kickstarter, which raised more than Shea's goal of \$5,500. She and her team tried to find an innovative way to share the EP, but they hit a wall.

"Part of the issue was that we were starting to package everything in a way that wasn't authentic to the process of creating the music," Shea explains. "It needs to feel more human."

Shea came up with a solution: show the process behind the art. Shea recently filmed a music video for "*Dance This Mess Around*," which turned out to be failure. It was too "over the top" and did not align with Shea's down-to-earth image. In presenting the video, Shea will explain the hurdles she faced in shooting it so other artist may learn from her mistakes.

Shw also wants to share the story behind "*Kennedy Rose*," a song she wrote with a guitar player. "At the time, the guitar player was a challenging person to be with in the band because of some substance abuse issues he has." He was kicked out of the group before the final recording of the song. "It happens all the time, but we often don't hear people's stories," she says.

She plans to release the GarageBand version she recorded with the guitar player along with the finished product featuring a new guitarist. "It meant so much to the process," she says. "My goal is to get these stories out because I think they'll help other people."

The following night, Shea gets ready for her holiday performance at the Institute of Contemporary Art. Most people say Shea looks tall on stage. They're right. She towers with confidence much larger than her petite 5'2 frame as she stands in a room overlooking the water. Shea is dressed for comfort—mustard-colored jacket, gold cowgirl boots, and a newsboy cap—as she strides towards the microphone to introduce Darwin to the audience before he sings Mariah Carey's "All I Want." Afterwards, she sings "Transformations: Sisters on the Rise," a remake of a Nona Hendryx song, while accompanied by a tap dancer.

Sister, do you hear me? We're worth so much more.

Shea's upbeat and radiant onstage and her energy seems to be contagious. The audience grooves along to her thunderous voice. "Shea knows how to work a crowd," Darwin's mother says.

She doesn't need makeup or costumes or theatrics or even the backing of a major record company to be heard. Her voice is enough. "I feel connected to humanity when I perform," Shea says. "I feel free."