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Singer Finds Her Inner Voice By ADAM ORTH Recorder Staff

GREENFIELD — The phrase came to her in a dream 20 years ago: "Love flows like the blood, of a river."

These words have a significance — in part because of who said them — that Laura Siersema may never reveal. No matter. It's enough to know that, after years of searching, she has found both the voice and the courage to sing them.

Indeed, they form the lyrical backbone for the title song of her second CD: "Love Flows Like the Blood of a River." Recently released at TurningStone Coffeehouse, an intimate performance space on Greenfield's Main Street, the CD arrives at a time when Siersema has all-but made her peace with the creative forces that drive her.

A person committed to plumbing the depths of her unconscious, Siersema taps its creative energy with poetry, songwriting, and piano playing. Her crystal-clear voice and skill at the keyboard entice the listener into a journey both reflective and emotional.

It wasn't always that way.

Raised in Amherst County, Va., Siersema was one of four siblings born to parents who performed in a folk music group called the Hon-o-lees.

Naturally, she was singing, playing ukulele, guitar and piano at an early age. She and a friend would be called out on stage during events headlined by her parents, such as Hootenanny Night at the Lion's Club. Then, at 11, her father's job was transferred to western Florida. The family followed and, somehow, Siersema lost the courage for music. She became a cheerleader, the good student. "I think, in ways I don't really know, leaving Virginia was very hard for me," she said. "It just went way inside."

Unbroken was her interest in piano, a musical thread created with lessons from her mother. She took a year of classical piano lessons. But, other needs called. After graduating from high school she went to college to become a doctor.

"It was doing was what was expected of me, because I did so well in school," said Siersema. "It was a desire, in many ways, to please my parents. To give them something of obvious worth."

She was in her second year at the University of Florida, in a zoology class, when Siersema realized she could not make herself truly like being a doctor. She called her parents.

"I remember crying when I told them I couldn't do it," she said. "I knew I would never be what they imagined I could be."

Siersema dropped her pre-med studies and instead became a nurse. She moved to New York City. The seeds of change had been sown, however. She'd written her first lyrics on a napkin in nursing class. In New York, she had a piano in her apartment. She started learning about different types of singing. She met the first of two therapists whose help would prove pivotal. She continued to capture her dreams in a journal.

In all, she would spend seven years in nursing, either in hospice or in psychiatrics. Nursing did not trouble her — it just wasn't enough.

"Just because you're good at something does not mean that is who your crucial self is," she said. "It was the best way I had, at the time, of surviving."

One day, Siersema's lack of fulfillment built up enough for her to set her sights on the Berklee School of Music. It took a while, but one day she dumped her nursing books into her apartment's incinerator.

They dropped seven floors. She left for Boston.

Siersema continued to do nursing in the summers to pay the bills while in school. But the main thing was the music. It was at Berklee that she found her voice: as a songwriter, a poet and a singer. Her singing voice, says Siersema, was the most deeply buried of her creative energies. Professional singing lessons helped it emerge, yet offering it up publicly continues to tax her courage.

"To discover the full range of my voice was an entirely phenomenal and necessary experience," she said. "It's the most vulnerable thing I can do, sing."

It was at Berklee that Siersema made her first attempt to build a song from the phrase "Love flows like the blood, of a river." It didn't work. She felt forced by the deadline of completing school work. She wasn't yet adept at plumbing her unconscious.

"I think true creativity comes from the unconscious. I don't think it's something you are deliberate about except in that discipline of waiting for things to appear," she said.

"I could never think of the poems that I've written," she added.

"Turn us into ashes and sycamore in bold stroke and mentor of your fire so that I can sing across days fitful and plain like you would my letters to the dead and ranting."

— Poem that starts "Love Flows Like the Blood of a River."

Free-association writing opened the door to Siersema's unconscious. She discovered its power at Berklee and got in the habit of picking a word or phrase — sometimes by pointing at a newspaper — and then seeing where it took her.

"Our culture doesn't promote that way of doing things, or even that process, that slow, untimed process," she said.

Siersema keeps these fragments, waiting for them to come together into a finished work. Her graduation from Berklee was about two years distant before she captured the phrase that would become the first lyric of her CD's title song.

She remembers waking up in bed, reaching for the paper. It was dark, yet there was enough light to see. She still has that original paper. The words on it are all-but identical to the lyrics in their final form. "It was really exciting, because I hadn't written like that for a long time," Siersema said. Here is that first verse:

"He stretched the strings of his guitar drove his demons kicking against the walls of a closing March indifferent to his heart —

love flows like the blood of a river."

Siersema met her partner, George Touloumtzis, during her first year in Boston. She started playing coffeehouses. She was also building material for her first CD, "when I left loss." She performed with a vocal ensemble and began doing solo work in churches. She took on students and started teaching voice and piano. One of them, Emma, was clearly an artist. "I knew she would have a difficult time because of that," Siersema said.

It was Emma who provided the second verse.

"Emma you look angelic and you're watching me It's not so hard —

when you're used to shells and poppy seeds picking them apart —

love flows like the blood of the river."

Siersema looks for beautiful sounds, both in her songwriting and in her music, and lets that guide her creativity. It was the second lyric that alerted Siersema to her emerging song.

"When I realized I could say 'love flows like the blood of the river' with either, that's when I realized I could put it together," she said. "It's not something to be thought about until after the finish." Siersema listened to the song, and let it direct her where to go next. "It seemed what I had was a man speaking and a story about a woman," she said. "I had two expressions that I was making into one. Both from a musical point of view and maybe from a male/female point of view." Here is her third verse:

"His hand reached out and touched her hip as the traffic died in the distance the heater hissed and the blanket worn from footsteps overhead we slam the doors and we curse the other, we try too hard —

love flows like the blood of a river."

Siersema, who released her first CD in 1999, started recording for her second CD, "Love Flows Like the Blood of a River," in 2000. It wasn't released until early 2003.

She co-produced it with Doug Hammer of Dreamworld Studios in Lynn. Steve Wilkes plays percussion and Eugene Friesen plays cello.

There are several original songs and poems on this CD, including one written by Siersema's mother. There are also several remakes of traditional songs, like "Green Sleeves," "O Sinner Man," and "Shenandoah."

It's this reworking of traditional songs that interests Siersema these days. She hopes to put together a third CD by taking such songs, which resonate deeply with her, and altering them.

"That has been the coolest experience," she said. "I never would have guessed I would be so driven." But, meanwhile, she must sell her second CD. Siersema, who moved to Greenfield in September, ordered 1,000 of them. "It came to my home in late February," she said. "It arrived in 10 boxes, in the snow."

Her CD party at the TurningStone Coffeehouse was attended by a small group of enthusiastic family and friends. She's sent about 200 CDs to different venues in hopes of getting it reviewed or aired. WUMB in Boston, which she calls "The Boston station," is playing her songs and so is at least one station in Worcester. A review of her CD, in "Sing Out!" magazine, is set to hit newsstands Aug. 8. The CD is on sale at TurningStone, at Boswell's Books in Shelburne Falls, at Amazon.com, and on her Web site — www.laurasiersema.com. Her Web site also has music files of her songs, including "Love Flows Like the Blood of a River."

She's also looking for local venues to perform. She played Cafe Koko and is among the performers in the July and August lineup for The Station, at the Greenfield Energy Park.

"What I do is solitary, but the message is meant for everyone or anyone and the only way I can have people hear it is to sing it myself," she said. "I guess that's one of my main questions now. Where do I go to be heard?"

Here is the fifth, and final, verse of the title song:

"Whatever you might have been looking for's in the shadow of the Tobin Bridge.

love flows like the blood of a river."

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