

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

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| SECTION B

DEB



After 17 years, Deb & the Dynamics are still Rockin' Southwest Florida

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
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DEBRA BIELA BEGAN forming bands in her parent's basement in Waterbury, Conn. — an hour and a half north of New York City — at age 11 or 12.

By 16 she had landed her first real gig and at 18, after forming a band with her sister, she hit the road.

SEE DEB, B4 ►

Debra Biela of Deb & the Dynamics at Sonic Recording Studio in Cape Coral.

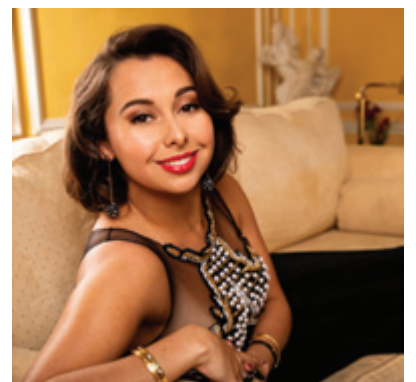
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Collector's Corner

Two horses of a different color are equally compelling. **B2** ►



Top Picks

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If it happens in Vegas ...

"Nana Does Vegas" a good bet at Off Broadway Palm. **B3** ►

Gulf Coast Symphony grows in a space transformed

BY NANCY STETSON

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Andrew Kurtz's dream is becoming reality ahead of schedule.

And he couldn't be happier.

In 2019, when the executive and musical director of the Gulf Coast Symphony met with his board at its annual strategic retreat, he presented "a vision of the Gulf Coast Symphony 2.0. We were going into our 25th anniversary year," he recalls.

"I was always saying, 'This isn't a year about looking back, it's about looking forward.' As we celebrated the past (that



SEE SYMPHONY, B15 ► Gulf Coast Chamber Orchestra.

COURTESY PHOTO



Dining

Enjoy al fresco dining at Shrimp Shack among other spots in town. **B19** ►



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Deb & the Dynamics play Rusty's in Cape Coral. Of her young bandmates, Deb Biela says, "It feels like I'm passing on the whole legacy to a new generation."

DEB

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Flash forward 40 years.

Ms. Biela no longer lives the rock 'n' roll lifestyle that saw her sleeping in parking lots, going gig to gig in a repurposed school bus or touring the U.S. and Europe and opening for acts such as the Beach Boys, Chuck Berry and Buddy Guy.

Yet she never really left the road, if the road is life as a working musician. It finally led her to Southwest Florida. Seventeen years ago, she started a band called Deb & the Dynamics. It has become one of the region's most popular live acts with its blend of rock, soul, blues, funk and R&B hits. The seven-piece Dynamics are typically booked five nights a week during season, 250 shows a year, and take few months off during the summer.

These days, Ms. Biela often takes time to grab a nap or cook dinner for her husband — a habit ingrained in her Italian heritage — before her nightly gigs. She jokes with her husband, "It's not easy being a domestic rock star."

Harnessing a big, full sound, the Dynamics are tight and soulful on stage, with the shimmering excitement of brass and showmanship. They get people dancing with a loyal following that seeks them out, be it at their usual Sunday afternoon gig at Doc Ford's on Fort Myers Beach, at Cork Soakers in Cape Coral, Shorty's Place in Punta Gorda or Dogtooth Sports Bar in Naples.

(You can find a complete schedule of gigs on their website, www.DebandtheDynamics.net).

Music has run through Ms. Biela's veins from a young age. She soaked up the songs her parents loved by Glenn Miller, Frank Sinatra and Louis Armstrong. Her favorite period includes

1970s rock, blues and soul and she was also influenced by many of the musicians she worked with along the way.

Her first band after high school, called Sugar, played hotels and wore matching gold spandex, she recalls.

In the mid 1980s, she formed and became lead singer of an all-original girl band called Moxxie with the late Deborah Coleman, an acclaimed blues guitarist with seven albums to her name, according to Wikipedia.

Ms. Biela remembers her stage fright when they landed an opening act gig for the hit London band Emerson, Lake & Palmer at a huge coliseum — only their second live performance as a band.

After Moxxie broke up she formed a trio, again with Coleman, called Mis' Behaven. And in the 1990s she and Coleman toured together in the Rhythm and Blues All Stars.

Ms. Biela lived in Virginia Beach, Va., for four years prior to moving her home base to Florida in 2000. She got together with Coleman's band, touring the United States and Europe. They also recorded two albums: "Livin' on Love" (2001) was produced by the legendary Jim Gaines in Memphis, Tenn. And "Soul Be It" (2002) was recorded live in Chico, Calif.

Around 2003 or 2004, Ms. Biela decided to get "off the road." She formed Deb & the Dynamics, whose first gig was at Bert's Bar & Grill on Matlacha in Pine Island. As time went by, she kept adding people to the lineup. She has seven core members.

Some of her bandmates have been with her for more than a decade. Some come and go and she has also added several new players in the last few years, including two brothers from Virginia Beach who are both in their early 20s — one of them named Robert Morris after the legendary blues guitarist Robert Johnson.

"Now this kid, he is so good," Ms. Biela says. "He's got the vocals and the playing ability. He's unbelievable."

He is on lead guitar, vocals and har-

monica.

Last year she also picked up Robert's younger brother, Thomas Morris, on drums. He's the youngest member of the band at 21.

Ms. Biela says she is inspired by these young bandmates.

"It feels like I'm passing on the whole legacy to a new generation," she said. "It kind of feels meant to be."

The Dynamics' brass section lends a powerful sound with a trio of saxophone players.

Dylan Young on alto sax is a University of Central Florida graduate who studied music performance with an emphasis on jazz.

Donny Hulgass on baritone saxophone comes from a line of sax players, his father and grandfather before him. He has played with the Dynamics for 14 years.

Ernie Cantu on sax brings nearly five decades of performance experience. The San Antonio, Texas native and his wife also own and run Red Salon and Spa in Fort Myers.

On keyboards, Michael Baer is a self-taught piano player who grew up near Detroit, Mich. He has been with the Dynamics for 11 years.

Other musicians sometimes join the band's seven core members on stage as well.

And of course, you'll find Debra Biela on lead vocals and bass guitar.

On a Tuesday afternoon in early March, I met her at Sonic Recording Studio in Cape Coral, where the Dynamics rehearse, for a few questions and to make some photographs. Some of the other band members stopped by too.

(This interview has been edited for length and clarity).

Q&A with Debra Biela

EW: Did you have a happy childhood?

DB: Yes. (laughs). It was a little dysfunctional. But I don't think I realized

it. I had a tough father, he was a tough Italian guy but he taught me how to take care of myself, you know what I mean? I was a '70s kid.

EW: What was it like opening for Chuck Berry?

DB: The crowd was ready. So it was awesome. They came to see him, you know. He hired local musicians to play. He was pretty older back then. It was the '90s. And he still did that move you know with his leg, bouncing. It was just awesome. I felt so privileged. I look back and appreciate it now more that I'm older, all the stuff I've done.

EW: What's the first song you learned that made you want to play guitar?

DB: "At Seventeen" by Janis Ian. (She sings a couple of lines at low volume: "I learned the truth at 17/ That love was meant for beauty queens").

EW: What song gets you dancing?

DB: I don't dance.

EW: What have you been listening to lately, anything good?

DB: I'm sorry to say I don't listen to a lot of new music. I've been trying to listen to a little more jazz music. But I'm always going to like '70s and soul music.

EW: Do you believe in ghosts?

DB: Yes. I believe in angels. I don't know if that's the same thing. I feel like I have angels around me all the time.

EW: What did you have for breakfast?

DB: I had bacon on a roll. And then I had spaghetti and broccoli — I put it together and heated it up.

EW: What inspires you?



BIELA

DB: These kids. The kids in the band. The young talent in the band. Otherwise I would have quit a long time ago, I think. They're so good and fresh they're not burned out or jaded. The drummer just turned 21, you know. I think it's just the raw good talent that you have.

EW: What is the best and the worst things about being a musician?

DB: I think they're both the same: The Party.

EW: How often do you rehearse and where?

DB: Sonic Studio. Summer we rehearse twice a week. Right now once or twice a month because we're doing five nights a week.

EW: Where would you like to visit?

DB: I miss home. I miss New England. I wanted to go to New York City so bad last year. Sometimes you just want to go back to your roots, you know? But I always loved Italy. I'll go back to Italy anytime.

EW: Do you dream? If so, what was the last one you remember?

DB: I dream sometimes and sometimes I'm psychic. But this one, I go, "honey I had a dream that you told me that the worst mistake you ever made was marrying me."

EW: What are you most proud of?

DB: I think my friends and family, my husband for sure, marrying my husband. And keeping this little legacy I have with Deb & the Dynamics.

EW: What advice would you give an aspiring musician?

DB: Stay true to the music and don't sell out. You know what I mean by selling out?

EW: What does that mean?



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Deb & the Dynamics has become one of the region's most popular live acts with a blend of rock, soul, blues, funk and R&B hits.

DB: Playing something that you don't feel in your heart, because it shows on stage.

EW: What's an average working day for you like?

DB: Coby Smith, he carries all the equipment. I pick him up around 11 o'clock. He unloads the whole van full of equipment. He's been with us since he was 28; he's 40 years old. I don't think I could ever replace him. He's like this big dude, man.

I set up all the wires, all the lights. I do all the setup myself. I go home, have lunch, take a nap, then I get ready to play that night. Or I come home and I cook for my husband. I'm still a little old school

when it comes to that, making him dinner and taking care of the house. I'm still a housewife a little bit. I call myself a domestic rock star. I tell my husband, "it's not easy being a domestic rock star."

EW: What makes you nervous?

DB: Interviews.

EW: What do you love about South-west Florida?

DB: The people are really fun. I like the people and of course the water. And the attitude, I like just the whole laid back attitude. But definitely the boating. And there is lots of music here. There are a lot of bands. You can go see a band every night of the week. ■

In the KNOW

Deb & the Dynamics

- » You can find a complete schedule for Deb & the Dynamics on their website, www.DebandtheDynamics.net.
- » It is advisable to call the club ahead of your visit since musicians and club owners have plans that are sometimes subject to change.



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Debra Biela with Deb & the Dynamics bandmates, from left: Michael Baer, Dylan Young, Thomas Morris and Robert Morris, at Sonic Recording Studio in Cape Coral.