

The Life and Times of Roberta Sherwood

Written by Antolin García Carbonell
July 2010

She was the most famous Miami entertainer you never heard of



In 1956 Biscayne Park resident Roberta Sherwood, a mother of three caring for disabled husband, was improbably trying to support her family as a nightclub singer. Her voice, which critics compared favorably to Ethel Merman's, was in great shape, but Sherwood herself was not exactly glamorous. In fact she was a bit dowdy. Onstage in her horn-rimmed glasses, she would drape a sweater over her evening gown to ward off the air-conditioned chill. She was also somewhat eccentric. While singing, she was in the habit of keeping time by tapping on a hand-held cymbal.

Down to \$10-a-night appearances in third-rate bars around Miami, she greatly appreciated the engagement she landed at Murray Franklin's off-beat Miami Beach nightclub. Her pay: \$150 per week.

Comedian Red Buttons tipped off syndicated columnist Walter Winchell about Sherwood's unappreciated talent. Winchell recalled years later: "I found her in a café at Miami Beach...singing love songs, torch songs, sittin' on the porch songs -- 'You're Nobody 'Til Somebody Loves You,' 'Cry Me A River,' 'Take Your Shoes Off Baby and Start Runnin' Through My Mind' -- and so many other greats."

Following the tip from Buttons, Winchell wrote in his widely read column: "Attention Networks, Recording Execs, et. al: Take the fastest plane, train, or bus and go to Murray Franklin's place opposite the Roney Plaza, Miami Beach, and find yourself a gold mine named Roberta Sherwood!"

The world listened. Within two weeks, Earl Wilson wrote in his competing syndicated column: "Rocking chairs in a night club! Murray Franklin, Jack Benny's double, has them in his screwball spot which also features on the walls 'college pennants' from Atlanta, Alcatraz, and Lewisburg penitentiaries. Plus wonderful woman singer Roberta Sherwood."

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Not long after that, the *Miami News's* Herb Rau reported: "Things have changed at Murray Franklin's. Now you have to fight your way into the room and practically make a reservation for a rocking chair. And it's only the beginning. Roberta Sherwood just signed with Decca." Ten days later, Irving Berlin himself dropped in at Murray Franklin's.

At the age of 43, and seemingly overnight, Sherwood had become the "Cinderella of Song."

Sherwood had made her Miami singing debut on New Year's Eve 1933, when Don Lanning, her future husband, introduced her as part of the musical review at his Silver Slipper nightclub. Lanning was by then well on his way to becoming, according to the *Miami News's* Jack Kofoed, "The unanimous choice for Miami's official master of ceremonies."

A talented actor and singer, Lanning first appeared in Miami in 1923, with leading roles in several touring company productions of Broadway hits. Following a stint at film star Harry Richman's New York nightclub, he went on tour again. Then, in 1929, a fire destroyed Richman's club. Lanning decided to return to Miami, where he directed several musical reviews that toured the South. He was perfectly positioned in 1933 to mount a spectacular show for the opening of the Silver Slipper, a former speakeasy going legitimate with the repeal of Prohibition.

Sherwood quickly became the Silver Slipper's main attraction. In April 1934, the *Miami News* hailed her: "Ethel Merman does not sing 'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes' as well as Roberta Sherwood." She continued to headline at the Silver Slipper through 1936, but performed at other clubs as well. By 1942, the *Miami News* reported, she had appeared in 18 clubs, a South Florida record.

In 1937 Lanning opened his own supper club at 7800 Biscayne Blvd., where the former INS office building now stands. Lanning's club was an instant hit. He bought a house on nearby NE 74th Street in 1938 and married Sherwood a year later. With two sons, born in quick succession during World War II, Sherwood worked out the seamless routines that made her complicated life

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possible. After a full day of housework and child care, she put her sons to bed, dressed elegantly, and was on stage by 8:30 p.m. At 10:00 p.m. she took a break from singing, raced home, breast-fed her youngest, and returned for the second show.

Her stage persona emerged during this time. Columnist Kofoed noted that she “discovered that she likes the percussion department and annexed herself a cymbal to beat time to her singing at Don Lanning’s.”

Lanning and Sherwood closed the Biscayne Boulevard club in 1947, when their third son was born. After running the Fiesta Club in downtown Miami for a couple of years, they took over the Neptune Room at the Robert Richter Hotel on Collins Avenue in 1950. They also purchased a \$25,000 home in Biscayne Park but kept the NE 74th Street house in Miami’s Upper Eastside. Sherwood made her first televised appearance in 1951 as a guest, along with choreographer Bob Fosse, on *Cavalcade of Stars*.

In August 1953, Lanning was diagnosed with cancer and had one of his lungs removed, the only treatment at that time. Sherwood and Lanning then decided to sell their Upper Eastside home and, despite Lanning’s illness, use the proceeds to open a new club at 225 NE 79th St. This club failed, and the family faced a bleak 1955.

After her discovery at Murray Franklin’s club, Sherwood’s career took off. She released her first album in March 1956 and moved her act up Collins Avenue to the Eden Roc, which announced, “Roberta Sherwood, America’s heartbeat set to music. Decca recording star courtesy of Murray Franklin.” Two days after her premier, Walter Winchell wrote, “Roberta Sherwood opened at Eden Roc and confirmed the raves about her song styling. She doubles at Murray Franklin’s.... Real loyalty to the man whose showcase elevated her to success.”

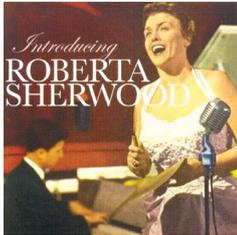
Earl Wilson interviewed Sherwood after her June opening at New York’s Copacabana: “I’ve been playing the tank towns for 30 years, but the closest I ever got to the big city before was Elizabeth, New Jersey.’ ...She was born in St. Louis, daughter of Bob Sherwood, theater and circus guy. ‘I was hanging by my teeth at 12.... At my age, you can’t belt all the time, so I got some resting songs.’” She opened with Mickey Rooney in Las Vegas in August, and in October was the subject of an extensive profile in *Life* magazine by writer Joe McCarthy.

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Winchell flew in with Joe DiMaggio for her October opening at the Club Mocambo in Los Angeles. Lucille Ball and Debbie Reynolds also attended the opening. Syndicated writer Hedda Hopper described the scene: "During an hour of song, she took your heart out, squeezed it, patted it, and gave it back to you. When the orchestra struck up 'Auld Lang Syne,' everyone in the place rose. She left tears in sophisticated eyes. Roberta is a combination of Libby Holman, Ethel Merman, and Judy Garland. At 43 she has come full circle in one of the greatest success stories in show business."

Sherwood told another columnist: "No matter what happens, I'll never let anyone try to glamorize me.... If you put me in mink and fancy clothes, it wouldn't be me. I'd lose my personality."



She returned to Miami for PTA meetings and fund-raising performances for the marching band at her sons' school, North Miami High. Following her husband's death in February 1960, she made guest appearances on *The Donna Reed Show* and *The Lucy Show*, then tried to spin off a TV sitcom, *Mother's the Most*

, based on her life as a working mother and singer raising three sons in Miami. She also had a small part in the 1963 movie *The Courtship of Eddie's Father*. She also included her sons in many of her guest appearances, paving the way for their subsequent show-business careers.

By the early 1960s, Sherwood found it harder to spend time in Miami, but neighbors occasionally ran into her shopping for groceries at Little Farm or dining with friends at the Persian Room in the Shalimar Motel on the Boulevard. She missed Miami's beaches, but the Biscayne Park house was a financial burden, so she sold it reluctantly in 1965. Whenever she was in town, however, she'd drive by for a look.

Sherwood's last known Miami appearance was in October 1980 at the Gusman Performing Arts Center's "Noontime Lively Arts Series." She toured nationally with the Russ Morgan Orchestra through 1983 and performed in Los Angeles as late as 1987. Spending her final years at her

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Sherman Oaks apartment, surrounded by family and friends, Sherwood died at age 86 in July 1999.

Herb Kelly's *Miami News* review of her 1959 opening at the celebrated Latin Quarter nightclub in Miami Beach best captures Sherwood's special gifts: "When Roberta Sherwood starts singing, an air of wholesomeness prevails.... It would not be surprising to see her break off a song and start doing the dishes. A wonderful performer, she is still a housewife and mother. Her act is warm and the audience is hers when she enters, singing 'Love Is a Many Splendored Thing.' She strolls around the tables, shakes hands, adjusts her sweater, and peers at guests through her horn-rimmed glasses."

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