

'YOU DON'T OWN ME ANYMORE'

# SIBLING HARMONIES



The Secret Sisters will be at The Kate on Aug. 23.

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**OLD SAYBROOK** » When Laura Rogers showed up on a whim for an open audition in Nashville in 2009, she was a callow 23-year-old college graduate with a plan to pursue a career in business. She'd grown up in Muscle Shoals, Ala. harmonizing with her family on car drives and singing a cappella while attending her hometown church.

"I'd never performed in front of anyone," Laura said in a recent phone interview from Killen, Ala. in advance of her appearance on Wednesday, Aug. 23 at The Kate as one part of the sweet-singing Americana duo The Secret Sisters.

"And she had really bad stage fright," chimed in younger sister Lydia who, both agreed, was considered the performer in the family. "I guess she just got some guts that day and decided to go try out."

Laura wowed them. They asked her to come back. "I told them I had a younger sister who sings too," she said.

In what seemed like a flash, "a couple of random redneck girls from Alabama," as Laura put it in her gentle southern lilt, were dubbed the Secret Sisters, signed to a fat major label deal with Universal Music, and flown out to LA to figure out how to be a band.

Revered super producer T Bone Burnett was so impressed with the purity of their sound that he created his own imprint for their album's release. Former White Stripes frontman and roots icon Jack White signed on as producer.

Rolling Stone named them its Nov. 16, 2010 Band of the Week. "If the Andrews Sisters had recorded an album of Carter Family songs during World War II, it would sound just like this," the Washington Post wrote.



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For PopMatters, the sisters "compel you with their voices like sirens forcing your hand to steer your ship to certain doom."

Soon they were singing Hank Williams songs with Elton John backstage, touring with Levon Helm and Ray LaMontagne, and opening for Bob Dylan, Willie Nelson and Paul Simon. Not to mention making appearances on Letterman, Leno, and BBC television.

"Those early days were incredible and larger than life," Laura said. "It was this kind of Cinderella story."

Their magical ride continued with the inclusion of their Alabama tornado-inspired song, "Tomorrow Will Be Kinder," on "The Hunger Games" soundtrack. The single, which also boasted tunes from Taylor Swift, Miranda Lambert, and Maroon 5, had the sisters walking the red carpet of the Hollywood premiere in 2012.

"We were just so awestruck by everything," Lydia told The Hollywood Reporter. "We still don't know how to approach other artists, just to be completely honest."

That refreshingly authentic take might have foretold what came with "Put Your Needle Down," their 2014 release. Reviews were mixed, with savingcountrymusic.com bemoaning the way the album's "over-produced

wall of serrated sounds punishes the ear" due to T Bone Burnett's "extremely heavy hand in his producing capacity."

In retrospect, their wide-eyed rise to fame was unsustainable. "We were nice Southern girls who didn't know the industry and hadn't learned to say no," Lydia said. "We let ourselves be pigeonholed into this retro throwback niche."

The fall was sudden and dramatic. The label dropped them, citing disappointing sales. Left without the means to hire a band, "we couldn't go on tour and earn a living," Laura said. Their former manager sued the duo after they let him go. Laura took a job cleaning houses to help pay her mortgage. Having decamped to Alabama, they filed for bankruptcy and resigned themselves to a future without music.

"It was a nightmare that every day seemed to worsen," Laura said.

Then, almost two years later, came a call from Brandi Carlile. The Sisters had opened for the critically acclaimed singer-songwriter in 2011; she'd kept in touch with them over the years and had been urging them to keep writing songs even without a label.

Carlile was a fervent admirer. "I remember the first time I ever heard them sing and I literally could not believe that it was happening in

real life," she told Rolling Stone. "They were and continue to be two of the most stunning singers in the world."

No surprise, then, that, as Lydia recounted, "she invited us to open two shows for her in Seattle." During the soundcheck, they played a song they'd written.

"She heard the song and was like, 'Girls, you better not have written that song,'" Laura recalled with a laugh. "We went backstage and showed her more of the songs we had and she got really excited and said she wanted to help us make a record. Mind you, she'd never produced an album for anyone before."

The result: "You Don't Own Me Anymore." Released in June, it's a defiant 12-track set of murder ballads and skewering roasts that has critics buzzing.

Music critic Hal Horowitz praised the album as a "strong, welcome return and a reminder of just how powerful and moving the merging of two stunning voices can be."

Savingcountrymusic.com sounded a similar take, proclaiming that, "with their new home of New West Records, the Secret Sisters can get back to what they do best, which is being themselves, and shivering spines with the incredibly smooth precision of their close harmonies, and the enrapturing nature of their storytelling."

For their part, the Secret Sisters wouldn't change a thing about their wild rollercoaster ride. "We feel like we've learned where not to be, and where to go," Laura said.

The Secret Sisters will appear at the Katharine Hepburn Cultural Arts Center, 300 Main St., Old Saybrook on Wednesday, Aug. 23 at 7 p.m. For tickets and information, visit [thekate.org](http://thekate.org) or call 877-503-1286.