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## Mary Lambert: Spreading the love

Call singer-songwriter Mary Lambert a missionary for self-acceptance. When it comes to bipolar disorder, body-image and more, she won't take shame for an answer.

By Stephanie Stephens



Mary Lambert doesn't care if the world knows her secrets. She recites them, sings them, and lives them large with a candid, "this is really me" demeanor that endears her to legions of loyal fans. Along the way she sets a powerful example of how to steadfastly love yourself even when you've been programmed not to—because you're not a size 4, because you have a [mental illness](#), because people in your life treat you as if you're worthless.

Hearing her hit single "Secrets" for the first time often prompts a double-take: "Did she really sing that?" Yes, she did, just like this:

**I've got bi-polar disorder  
My sh\*\*\* not in order**

The bubbly and disarming multi-hyphenate (singer-songwriter, poet, and spoken-word artist) remembers telling her friends how she was going to start the song. Aghast, they asked her, "Are you sure you want to do that?" She shot back without hesitation, "Yes!"

"Then I woke up the next morning with a 'truth hangover,'" laughs Lambert, on break from a U.S. tour with the Irish band The Script and singer/songwriter Colton Avery.

"Being vulnerable is essential to my music, the way I function and love, and how I connect with people," the 26-year-old says. "Vulnerability is the key to empathy, but it is also a double-edged sword. ... When you put yourself 'out there,' now someone has information they can use against you, but I guess for me the positive outweighs the negative." Lambert's openness earned her an Erasing the [Stigma](#) leadership award from Didi Hirsch Mental

Health Services in April. Named a Didi Hirsch Mental Health Ambassador, she seems destined for the role of challenging shame by putting all of herself out there.

"I've felt like if I couldn't fully express myself I'd explode or worse," she muses.

**Telling the truth it might  
mean you get broken  
But letting it hurt that's  
my method of coping**  
—From "Ribcage"

Music was a conduit to total self-expression before it became a way to make a living—a prolific about-face from her former career as a barista, bartender and waiter in Seattle.

Lambert has lived in that hipster city since 2007. She grew up in nearby Everett, Washington, surviving instances of sexual abuse that seeded deep feelings of worthlessness. Thinking she'd be a music teacher, she obtained her bachelor's degree in music at Seattle's Cornish College of the Arts and by early 2012 was contemplating graduate school.

Instead, she gave herself two years to pursue a performing career. "My first solo show had 14 people," she recalls of her coffee-house days. Music wasn't her only outlet. She participated in poetry slams, even representing Seattle in an international competition carried by HBO. (Slams involve teams of spoken-word artists reciting their original works.) She also puts her poetry on the page: Her first collection, *500 Tips for Fat Girls*, came out in 2013.

Challenging her body image issues has been central to Lambert's arduous climb to self-love. Her powerful piece "Body Love," written at age 19, tours the troubled psyches of young women "trying to fit into the social norm ... used up and sad and drunk and/ Perpetually waiting by the phone for someone to pick up/ And tell us that we did good."

The ultimate message to them, and to herself: "You are worth more than a waistline." Lambert told *Rolling Stone* that "Body Love," which she performs frequently in her live shows, still has power to lift her out of a negative loop when she's having "a sh\*\* body day." (Words are Lambert's currency, and she doesn't mince them—or clean them up for public consumption.)

Self-acceptance is an ongoing struggle against society's belittling messages, she notes: "I've dealt with my size, my relationship with my body, and [my self-worth](#). But how alienating does it feel for someone to go in a store when there aren't even any clothes in your size?"

**They tell us from  
the time we're young  
to hide the things that we  
don't like about ourselves  
inside ourselves.**  
—From "Secrets"

It didn't take two years for Lambert to get national recognition, thanks to a fortuitous teaming with Seattle-based hip-hop duo Macklemore & Ryan Lewis. In spring 2012, they invited Lambert to work with them on a song about gay rights. When their debut studio album *The Heist* came out later that year, it included the anthem "Same Love" with Lambert singing the chorus she'd contributed: "And I can't change/ Even if I tried/ Even if I wanted to."

Being a lesbian is another thing Lambert refuses to keep secret, although she admits to an "internal battle" to balance her commitment to Christianity with her sexual orientation. Lambert's heartfelt hook draws straight from the crucible of her upbringing in the evangelical Pentecostal faith, which views homosexuality as a sin.

"Same Love" attained double platinum status in the U.S. and Lambert joined Macklemore (real name: Ben Haggerty) and Ryan Lewis to perform the song at their concerts and in numerous guest spots. Some highlights: *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards (where "Same Love" won Best Video with in January 2014 (where they accompanied the weddings of 33 gay and straight couples alongside megastar Madonna).

She recalls the moment when her new status struck home: at a Macklemore & Ryan Lewis concert in Seattle in October 2012, when she performed before more than 7,500 people.

"I remember people cheering, and I was overwhelmed and so happy," Lambert recalls. "But later, I cried because of a sense of mourning that my anonymity was lost. Not that I wanted to be a bartender all my life, but at that pinnacle moment, I put my former life in a box, knowing things would never be the same after that night."

Lambert signed with Capitol Records and her first studio album, *Heart on My Sleeve*, came out in October 2014. Rich in love songs, it also keeps up Lambert's forte of therapeutic introspection with tunes like "Monochromatic" ("Everybody's hurting/ There's nothing more human than that") and "Sum of Our Parts" ("Don't go looking for some kind of rescue/ You are the only one who can save you").

**Keeping my head  
above water is all that  
I know how to do...**

**ever since I was a child,  
I was always a sad one.**  
—From “Born Sad”

Lambert has been dealing with mood issues most of her life.

“I’ve been in therapy since I was a kid,” reports Lambert, who says she still keeps a therapist on call.

Diagnosed with [bipolar](#) at age 16, she was convinced her mood swings were in line with the daily drama and hormonal changes typical of that age.

“All my friends seemed to be diagnosed with something at some point,” she says. “I got out of high school and realized at 19— after I had attempted suicide in 2007— that maybe I really did have bipolar, even though I didn’t want to believe it. Another evaluation confirmed bipolar II.”

Nor was she ready to make the lifestyle changes that are vital to managing bipolar. There was a time when she was drinking so heavily it rendered her [medications](#) useless, when a fifth of tequila was de rigueur, when she smoked a pack of cigarettes every two days. The myth of the tortured artist had a strong hold on her.

“I used to think I needed to be self-destructive in order to have material to write about,” she says. “I was constantly trying to screw up my life so I could write something really profound. Like, ‘going off meds would be really great to write about.’”

So off her meds she went, for a stretch of several years: “I thought they inhibited my creativity, my writing. I wanted to make sure I could still relate directly to people— and sabotaged my own health and wellbeing for my art.”

Over the past few years, she has worked with her doctors to arrive at a dosage that helps her manage [symptoms](#) while remaining the intensely creative person who speaks for all the “little lambies,” as her fans call themselves.

As with so many aspects of her life, Lambert practices [forgiveness](#) and compassion toward her younger self and her medication misadventure.

“You do the best with the faculties you have,” she says. “I’m here, even though I made a lot of terrible decisions and mistakes.... Things like that happen when you are raised in a traumatic environment. Making music and being creative was a means of survival for me—the way I got through.”

She can also take pride in her steps toward self-care, which began before the whirlwind ride of “Same Love” success.

“I started working on what was necessary for me to function and feel better ... I’m really grateful for that time, which is when I also stopped smoking and learned how to eat better.”

She adds, “I’m trying to cook more. I made polenta and it felt like a very adult thing to do.”

For fun, Lambert likes to go bowling and biking. (She named her new bicycle Clover.) She also walks a lot and welcomes the chance to spend time outdoors. This spring, she signed on as a Centennial Ambassador for the National Park Service’s Find Your Park campaign.

**I know I’m not  
the only one who spent  
so long attempting  
to be someone else  
well I’m over it.**  
—From “Secrets”

Oddly enough, Lambert finds it hard to let those around her know if she’s off balance or explain what she’s experiencing during mania or [depression](#). She says she’s “worked relentlessly” in the past few years on [communicating](#) better when she doesn’t feel like herself.

“It’s always a work in progress,” she says. “It helps to have a partner who’s a great listener and really wants to help.”

During her weeks on tour, wellness strategies are harder to maintain. Lambert has come up with a few helpful rituals. “On the road, I keep things around me to keep me centered,” says Lambert. “I take a massive suitcase, even if I don’t need to, full of clothes and shoes.”

Lambert may tour with an ample wardrobe, but metaphorically, she bares all on stage. It’s hard work.

“Come to my show, and you’ll see I am completely [emotionally] naked there, and that can be really draining,” she says.

Lambert famously makes her shows a “safe space” where fans are encouraged to cry if they want to. She invites the audience to sing along. After a performance at Northern Michigan University, one concertgoer wrote on Lambert’s Facebook page, “That show gave me life!!! It was exactly what I needed after a tough few weeks....THANK YOU!”

That’s exactly the kind of reaction Lambert hopes for. After all, this is a woman who studs her social media with statements like, “I want to wrap the world in a hug,” and, “love love love love all the time.” As she explains on her website, “All I’ve ever dreamed of was to use my art, my music, my voice to [shine light](#) on issues that are important to me.”

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