



The Soundscapes group at Harborfest: Mateo Ayala Roman, from left, performance ensemble coach; Angelina Christie; Colin Smallridge; Tyler Pickett; Shyota Smith; and Reynaldo Ramirez, co-founder and program director. **COURTESY/SOUNDSCAPES**

SOUNDSCAPES

Young musicians, starting on a strong note

Roberta Lea is nonprofit's first pro paired with students, offstage and on

By Allison Johnson
CORRESPONDENT

The chance to perform at Harborfest as a high school musician was big enough. But playing with a professional musician in an opening set for R&B legend Patti LaBelle?

"Incredible," said Angelina Christie, 18, a Hampton High School graduate. "Really, really cool. It's hard to put into words."

Christie was one of a quartet of young instrumentalists from Soundscapes, a music education nonprofit in Newport News, to take the stage with Roberta Lea, a Norfolk native and successful singer-songwriter, in June at the popular Norfolk festival.

Lea is the first professional artist participating in the Soundscapes Luminary program, a new initiative that pairs local students with working musicians who can share insights, lessons and performance spaces. Throughout the 2026-27 program year, Lea will participate in mentorship sessions and feature students as guest artists at her country-neo-pop-folk music shows. They also will learn one of her original



Roberta Lea — a Norfolk native and singer-songwriter who performs locally and as a touring member of The Black Opry — is the first professional artist participating in the Soundscapes Luminary program.

AJ ELLIOT/COURTESY ROBERTA LEA

compositions for a concert.

"I would have benefited from all this as a high school student," she said. "Back then, I assumed that music was a hobby because I wasn't

exposed to it as a possible career path. It was more of an 'only-if-you-have-time' thing. I'd like to be a guiding light for them."

Lea, 40, has loved music since her

grandfather gave her a keyboard at age 6; she took up the violin at 10. Yet her first career was in teaching. A 2004 graduate of Norview High School, she majored in foreign language at Virginia Wesleyan University (now Batten University), taught secondary school Spanish, and had two children, now 12 and 10.

After pivoting to become a full-time musician in 2021, Lea released her debut album, "Too Much of a Woman," in 2023 as a crowdfunded project and put out a deluxe version in 2025. She now has regular gigs at local venues and is a touring member of The Black Opry, a national collective that supports Black artists in country, Americana, folk and roots music.

In March, Lea met Carol Minter, executive director of Soundscapes, at a Hampton festival celebrating female artists in Virginia. Soundscapes, a nonprofit founded in 2009, uses education in instrumental music to foster confidence and life skills. To that end, it offers after-school programs, a youth orchestra

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A Soundscapes quartet onstage with Roberta Lea at Norfolk's Harborfest in June. They played one of her songs as she opened for Patti LaBelle. **COURTESY/SOUNDSCAPES**

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and jazz band, and summer programs, charging nothing or setting fees on a sliding scale.

Now serving about 300 students of all ages annually, Soundscapes opened a satellite after-school program in Chesterfield County this past January and plans to launch a similar initiative in Hampton in 2027.

For older musicians, Soundscapes also holds auditions for a paid ensemble that performs at local and regional festivals, private parties, weddings and concert venues. The Luminary program takes that a step further by adding an experienced artist as a coach.

"We want to inspire students, let them ask questions and highlight some of the talent that has come right from their own backyard," Minter said. "Beyond learning to play instru-

ments, they should understand all of the possibilities that could be open to them."

At Harborfest, four students — on the violin, saxophone, French horn and clarinet — played with Lea and her band on her song "Dinner, Sunset, Nina Simone." Future Luminary events will be announced this fall and winter.

For violinist Tyler Pickett, an 18-year-old graduate of Woodside High in Newport News, experiencing an event with multiple artists and stages was eye-opening.

"You had to adapt to change and be calm," said Pickett, who is majoring in political science and minoring in music at Virginia State University. "You also had to carry yourself well when people approached to talk because you were representing more than just yourself."

Onstage with Lea, he had a pinch-me moment when he saw the sea of lawn chairs in the audience: "Everyone was in such high spirits; there were

such great vibes. Everything comes to a halt in your mind, and you're just in the music."

Christie, now a freshman majoring in environmental science at the University of Virginia, agreed.

"I was a little nervous, but it was so amazing and fun," she said. "I saw how much effort and collaboration go into a single performance. We were a real team."

Lea, in turn, was impressed by the students' professionalism.

"They were very prepared," she recalled. "It was so great being able to take them to a setting where they're warming up a stage for Patti LaBelle. They'll never forget it."

As Christie put it: "What a special ending to my Soundscapes journey. Going out with a bang, right?"

Details: soundscapes.org, contact@soundscapeshr.org, 757-273-6178

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