

Facing the Music

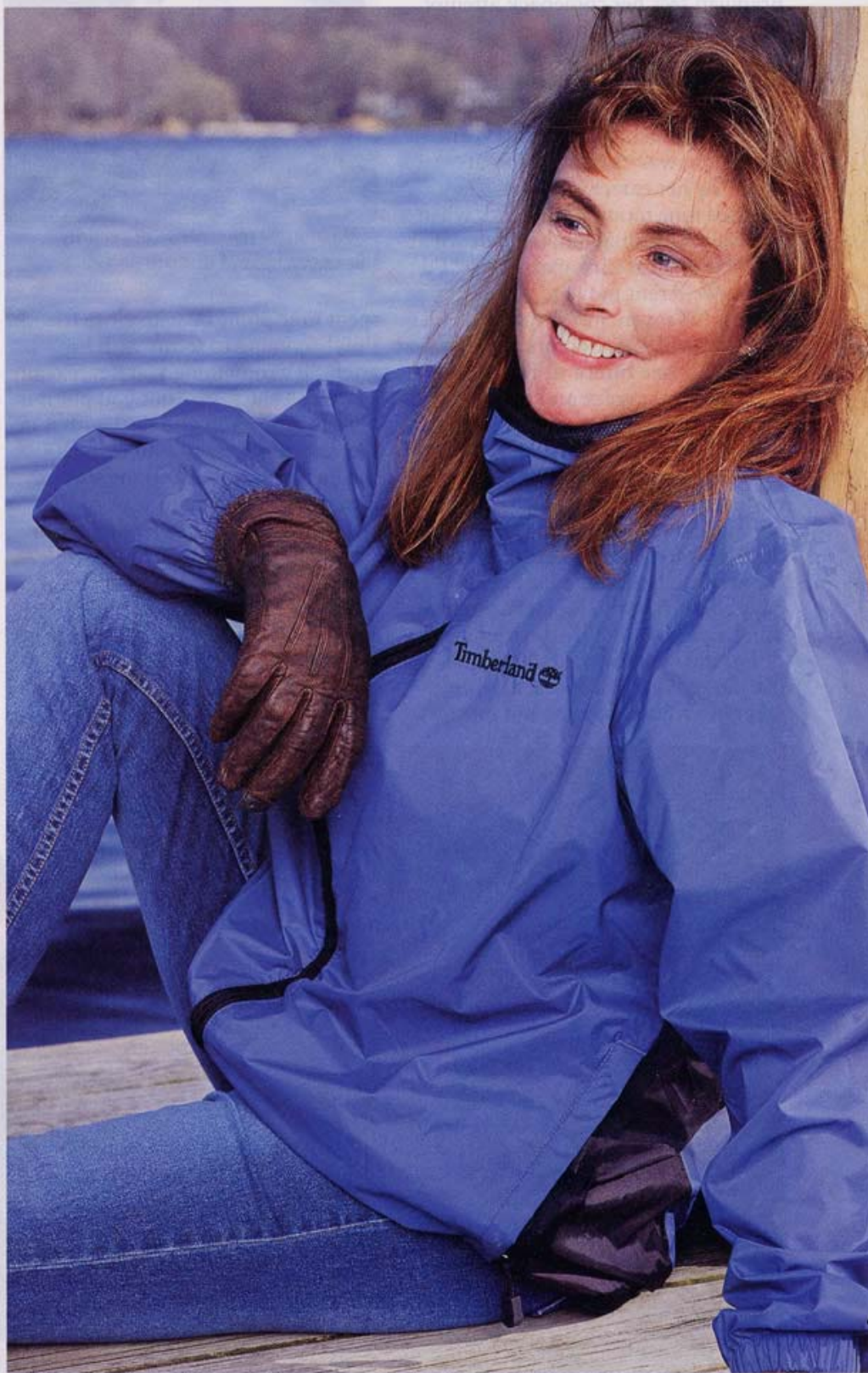
Emerging from years of grief, '80s diva Laura Branigan finds her voice again

In the 1982 music video for her hit song "Gloria," Laura Branigan grooves awkwardly in a studio, a single disco ball spinning above her head. "I have on black spandex pants and knee-high boots," says the singer. "It's hysterical." But while she pleads guilty to a litany of fashion offenses in the 1980s, Branigan still takes pride in the "killer song" that stayed in the *Billboard* Top 40 for 36 weeks and went platinum. Even now, "I have to end every show with 'Gloria,'" she says. "The whole room is just screaming."

Recently that's a sound she has rarely heard. After spending much of the '80s playing hits like "Self Control" and "How Am I Supposed to Live Without You?" to packed stadiums around the globe, Branigan, now 44, quit the music business in 1994 when her husband, Larry Kruteck, was diagnosed with colon cancer. For two years she nursed him full-time until he died in 1996 at age 58. "That's what I lived for," she says. "It was not even a choice." Paralyzing grief kept her away from a music career for years. But now Branigan is dipping her toe back into the pop scene with a dance remake of ABBA's "The Winner



"The things I wore onstage!" gasps Branigan (at an Atlanta nightclub in '84).



"I'm in this to touch people," says Branigan (at her lakeside home in New York).

● where are they now?

Takes It All," a single that *Billboard Magazine* editor Chuck Taylor calls a "satisfying high-energy thumper."

While the new single may not stir the same kind of fervor "Gloria" did, Branigan sees her comeback attempt as an emergence from years of mourning. As a 24-year-old in 1981, when she met Kruteck at a Manhattan party, Branigan was on the way up. But Kruteck, a lawyer 20 years her senior, was "not at all threatened" by her career, she says. They married nine months later and, when she wasn't touring, hunkered down at their New York City apartment. "I'd cook. We'd rent movies," Branigan recalls. "We were just great friends."

Then, in 1994, doctors found a grapefruit-size tumor in Kruteck's colon. After surgery and chemotherapy, he was given two months to live—a prognosis Branigan refused to accept. Branigan put him on herbal treatments; they began spending more time at a beach cottage in the Hamptons, and Kruteck survived for another two and a half years. Says close friend Vicki DePasquale, 52: "A piece of her died with Larry."

For the next five years Branigan did the occasional concert to supplement her royalty income but mostly



"He brought me a sense of security," Branigan says of Kruteck (in 1994).

spent time alone or with close friends, slowly coming to terms with her grief. "It's something you never really get over," she says, "but you put it in a place inside you and deal with it in the way you have to." In early 2001 she finally went back to the studio. But a freak accident in June of that year—she broke both femurs when she fell 10 feet from a ladder while hanging wisteria outside her three-bedroom lakeside home in Westchester County, N.Y.—landed her in physical therapy for six months.

She still has rods and pins in both legs, but she's back in the studio,

recording an album she hopes to release this summer—and more confident of her talents than ever. Growing up in Brewster, N.Y., "I was real shy," says Branigan, the fourth of five children. When her parents—James, a mutual-funds broker (who died in 1984) and Kathleen, now retired—separated, Branigan turned even more inward. But in her senior year she landed the lead in the high school musical. "For the first time," she says, "I felt I could really express myself." After graduating, she scored a gig as a backup singer for Leonard Cohen's 1977 European tour. A chance meeting with manager Sid Bernstein on her return led to her first recording contract.

The taste for grunge in the early '90s nearly derailed her career. But Branigan blames bad management for her decline in popularity. This time she's managing her own career and so far has dates booked through the summer. She's in no hurry, however, to date other men. For now at least, music is her elixir. "Everybody's been through love and pain in their lives," she says, "and that's what music is about."

- Susan Horsburgh
- Mark Dagostino in New York



"She's not showbiz," says pal DePasquale of Branigan (at home with friends and her mom, second from left). "She's very heartfelt."