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REVIEW

# REVIEW: PATRICIA BARBER – HIGHER (DIGITAAL)

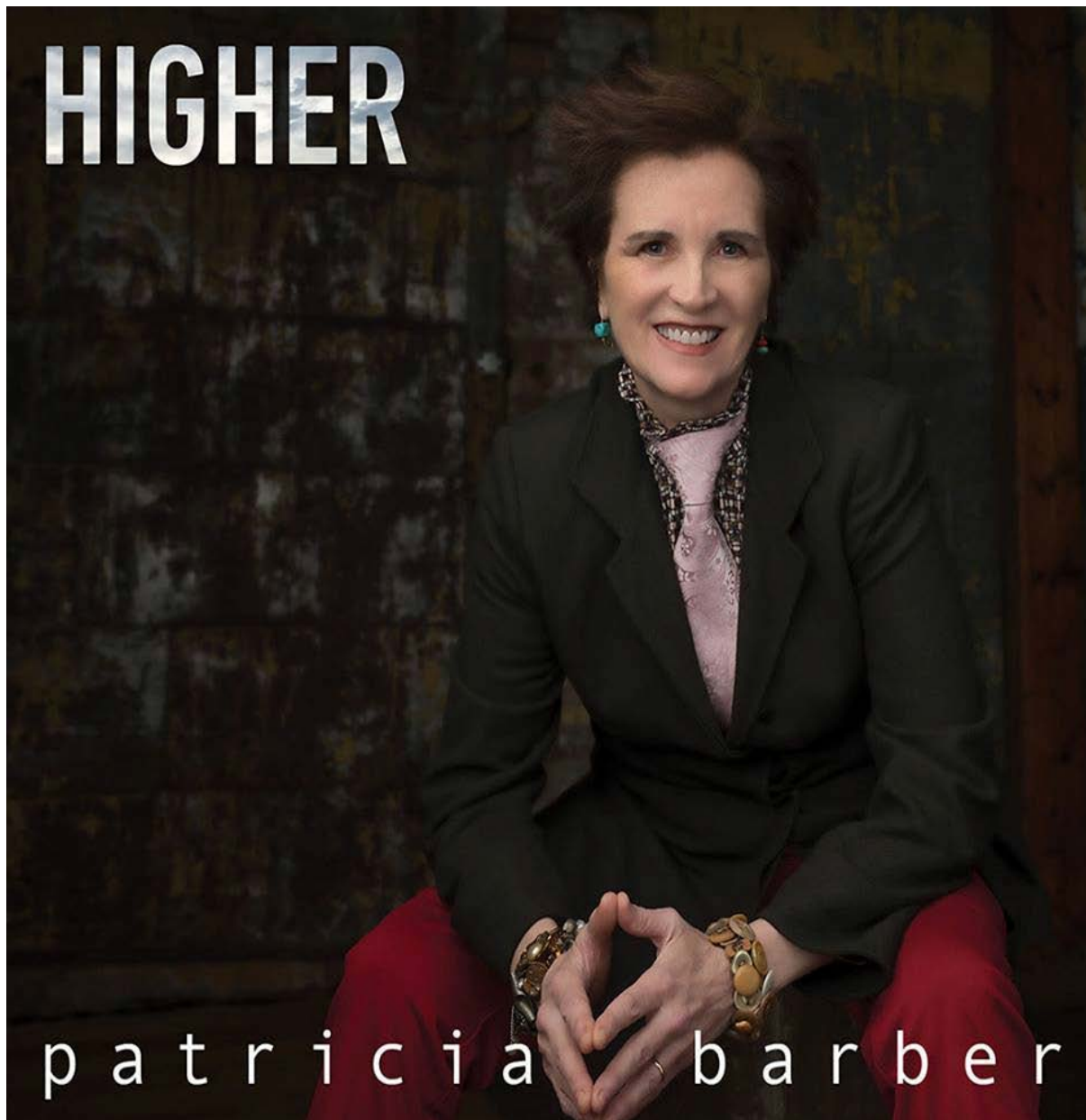
ERIC DE BOER | 26 MARCH 2019

*Higher* is the new studio album by composer, singer, and pianist Patricia Barber. Inspired by classical works and the challenge of making jazz music more expansive, the latest project came to life. And again Barber knows how to create a more artistic side of modern jazz, without denying the traditional roots of American jazz music.

It has been six years since Patricia Barber's latest studio album was released. *Smash* continued on the path Barber took with *Mythologies* (2006), by weaving together influences from classical music with literature or poetry into an eclectic jazzy whole with depth. Barber once promised herself she would delve into classical works when she reached the age of 50, and she did so. In recent years, the expressionist-minded artist has increasingly immersed herself in the many forms of classical music and, thanks to a remark by a friend, felt challenged to prove that jazz, like classical music, could contain short songs. Just like works by Schumann or Schubert.

The challenge that Patricia Barber set for herself was a large one. Not because it proves the view above, but simply because Barber is rather purist, and perfectionism suits her whole being. That resulted in years of composing, testing, and looking for inspiration to give shape to her project. It was probably the knowledge acquired in her work with Kenny Werner in combination with her collaborations with the celebrated opera singer Renée Fleming and her own investigations that led to the song cycle that plays the leading role on *Higher*.

Patricia Barber christened the song cycle “Angels, Birds and I...,” written to be performed by classically oriented artists and suitable for improvisation by jazz musicians, with the song “Higher,” written for her mother, as a central piece in the classically oriented jazz.



The album delivers a sea of serenity and crystalline works, sometimes full of emotion, and then full of hope, or even humor. Yes, from a textual and musical point of view, *Higher* is a poetic gem that far surpasses Barber's previous works. And that is remarkable for an artist who has set the bar extremely high for herself for three decades.

The harmonic evolution, as Barber calls the chosen path, is a song cycle of eight tracks, which "just for pure fun" are supplemented with three variations on tunes from the Great American Songbook. The cycle is described contextually by a single protagonist, who, speaking from the stance of the artist, empathizes with the inability to deliver works of the highest quality on stage ("Muse") or receives the means for doing so ("Voyager"),

aspires to a future in opera (“The Opera Song”) or ponders the pure love of music (“Surrender”).

The distance between human (artists) and the realm of the gods is often reflected in the songs, which combine musical harmony with contemporary jazz in a unique way. Really beautiful is the addition of the saxophone (as usual on her albums fabulously played by Jim Gailloreto) to the winter song “Pallid Angel.” Accompanied by her regular collaborators, Patrick Mulcahy on bass, John Deitemyer on drums, and Neal Alger on acoustic guitar, Barber explores and mixes colors and seasons with objects and emotion. A special mention is needed for the track “The Albatross Song,” where Barber and her band members tell a bluesy story, led by the bass in 5/4 time, of a woman who leaves her boorish capitalist husband for a new, distant relationship with the almost mythical bird—surreal and beautifully interpreted at the same time.

The poetic lyrics and harmonic melody lines on *Higher* bear witness to an artistic skill that is reserved for only a few. The performances on the tracks that make up the song cycle *Angels, Birds and I...* can indeed be performed by classically trained people (as is beautifully demonstrated in the second performance on the album of “The Opera Song,” sung by the soprano Katherine Werbiansky), but the music continues to operate within the modern jazz genre. Happily. With the crystallization of the melodies, harmonies, and the compositions as a whole, the instrumental interpretation is a bit different than on previous Barber albums. That makes the album quieter and perhaps less accessible than all previous releases, since the combination of text and compositions requires a lot more attention from the listener. And that won't appeal to everyone (nor will everyone recognize it).

Anyone who dares to delve into the lyrics, the compositions, and the genius of the song cycle on *Higher* will not only find themselves emotionally and intellectually stimulated but can get many hours of pleasure out of the new album. *Higher* offers modern jazz of a very high quality, on which Patricia Barber and her accompanists do not deny their own origins, but on the contrary extrapolate them to a logical next step in their own evolution. And thereby reinvent themselves, which is both daring and downright clever. The proof of honoring those "roots" is of course obvious, given the three extra tracks on the album on which Barber and her band honor Johnny Mercer, Dave Brubeck, and Paul. F. Webster and Sammy Fain. Enjoy them unadulterated, which the performers themselves do audibly while playing the songs.

*Higher* may not be the most eclectic or accessible Barber album that could have been released from her active artistic life in these three decades, but it is the most artistic, balanced, intelligent, and challenging album for the listener. Not thanks to the perfect playing of all members of this ensemble, but owing to the fact that the music, the serenity of the compositions, and the choices made beg to be listened to attentively. Patricia Barber has managed to take this album to an even higher level, something that could hardly have been thought possible. The recording, production, and mastering are of a high level and do nothing to the performers and the music. *Higher* can be ordered

on both CD and 24-bit downloads via its new ArtistShare label. And an LP version is coming. I can't wait for the physical media....