

PATRICIA BARBER

On her latest album *Higher* (ArtistShare 2019), pianist and vocalist Patricia Barber has boldly blurred the otherworldly lines between poetry, jazz, and art song. By combining literate integrity with powerful musical inventiveness, she's created a consistently brilliant and original new music, one that defies easy classification and exudes what's implied in the title of one of her best-known albums, a distinctly "modern cool."

Of Barber's alluring, uncompromising art *Downbeat* magazine enthused: "Barber braids wrenching, elemental poetry into a private musical language fashioned from the yearning ache of Bill Evans' piano, Joni Mitchell's zigzag introspections, Jobim's winking mix of high end philosophy and pastel melody and an occasional explosion of skronk and funk."

A believer in the music inherent in language as well as a supremely gifted vocalist and master of the keys, Barber has the practiced eye and ear of a poet. In a 2005 essay in *Poetry Magazine*, under the evocative title, "Bolts of Melody," Barber explained her artistic convictions.

"Music is a demanding but mysterious discipline... It is a gift endowed by blood, then perfected by tremendous desire and perseverance... but for me art can be created neither by logic nor diligence. Like music, poetry is created in the mouth, in the ear, and in the air. As poetry is music and music is magic, so too is poetry magic."

As the first non-classical songwriter ever to be awarded a year-long fellowship for composition from the Guggenheim Foundation, in 2003, Barber has recently been referred to as an American Composer, an honor and a title she takes very seriously, particularly in the newly shaped art song cycle entitled *Angels, Birds, and I...* that is at the core of *Higher*.

"The harmonic language of jazz, as well as that of the Great American Songbook, is certainly rich -- look how much has come out of it -- but it's circumscribed. I started wanting to hear something else.

"Listening to Debussy, Ravel, Reynaldo Hahn, and especially Fauré, I began to think, why can't I use some of those chords in songs that I want to write? At the same time, my lyrics were becoming more like poetry, so it made sense that in order to put those two things together, instead of writing lyrics and music for a 32-bar tune, which I still love, this story would be more symbolic, more like a poem, and the harmonic vehicle for it would have to be different."

Barber's new approach to composition first came to fruition on her 2006 *Mythologies* album on Blue Note Records, an original song cycle inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Hailed by critics as "a single moment in jazz when the entire music moves forward" and "Barber's masterpiece—thus far," it was also a project encouraged by the legendary President of Blue Note records, the late Bruce Lundvall, whom Barber credits as someone who allowed her imagination free rein: "He was much more than a friend--a mentor, so important to me."

Barber's innovative new direction continued with the 2013 release of **Smash** on Concord Records. Calling it "an extraordinary achievement," Thom Jurek of *Allmusic.com* went on to note, "The predominant subject matter of these songs is love's loss: the frustrated desire, grief, acceptance, longing, and healing its aftermath brings. Barber is as empathic and insightful as a depth psychologist. Her language is rich, precise, and devoid of trite sentimentality."

A successful 2015 tour with preeminent American soprano **Renée Fleming** entitled "Higher: Renée Fleming and Patricia Barber Perform the Music of Patricia Barber" further assured Barber that this new direction had promise. "Renée gave me confidence. She assured me that what I was doing, my harmonic evolution, wasn't crazy."

About Barber's new songs, the soprano told the *Chicago Tribune*: "'I was sitting there [at the Green Mill] a year ago, and I said, My God, these are art songs,' ... aptly describing the high craft and layered meanings of Barber's best compositions. 'This is really something special.'"

Born in the Chicago suburbs, Barber came by music naturally. Her father was Floyd "Shim" Barber, a saxophonist who had worked with Glenn Miller's orchestra, and the instrument beguiled young Patricia: "When he played the saxophone around the house, I'd put my hand in the bell to feel the music." She began playing piano at the age of six, but by the time she had graduated from high school – in South Sioux City, Nebraska, where the family had moved in the mid-60s, following her father's death – Barber had forsworn jazz entirely.

"It was hanging over my head the whole time," she recalled years later. "But I thought that becoming a jazz musician was such a stupid thing for a woman to do – for a smart woman to do – that I tried to resist it."

Barber enrolled at the University of Iowa with a double major in classical music and psychology, while continuing to indulge the voracious reading habit she had nurtured since childhood. But the jazz echoes she thought she'd banished only grew louder, and by graduation, she had decided to follow in her father's path. She returned to Chicago, and in 1984 she landed the gig that put her (and the venue at which she performed) on the national jazz map: five nights a week at the intimate Gold Star Sardine Bar, which held 60 people with lines running around the block to get in, and where the audience made up in sophistication what it lacked in size.

Soon her reputation spread beyond Chicago, spurred by enthusiastic responses to performances at the Chicago Jazz Festival (1988) and the North Sea Jazz Festival in the Netherlands (1989), culminating in the debut album **Split** (1989) on her own Floyd Records label and then her major label debut, **A Distortion of Love** on the *Antilles* label in 1992. Seeking greater creative control Barber signed with Chicago-based Premonition Records and released **Café Blue** (1994) and **Modern Cool** (1998). These distinctive, sophisticated albums made Barber an international star, with **Modern Cool** selling more than 130,000 copies and the follow-up, **Nightclub** (2000), even more. This caught the attention of storied jazz label Blue Note Records, which leased Patricia's music from Premonition in 1999 and began distributing her discs as part

of a unique partnership – the first joint imprint in the fabled label’s then-six-decade history. The rave reviews would continue with the release of *Companion* (1999), *Nightclub, Verse* (2002), *Live: A Fortnight in France* (2004), *Mythologies*, and *The Cole Porter Mix* (2008), the last three all released solely on Blue Note who signed her to that label in 2002.

At the same time, Barber was building her rep at Chicago’s Green Mill, a joint oozing with character that was owned in the 1920s by a lieutenant of Al Capone and is today considered the city’s leading jazz room. When not on tour, she continues to perform there every Monday night. She has also played most of the world’s major jazz festivals, and in 2016 she opened the Ear Taxi New Music Festival at the Harris Theater in Chicago’s Millennium Park.

An active collaborator with other artists, Barber has performed with vibraphonist Stefon Harris at the Montreal Jazz Festival and Detroit’s Fischer Music Center and with pianist Kenny Werner in such venues as Evanston’s Pick-Staiger Hall and Montreal’s Maison Symphonique. A duo performance between Barber and Werner can be seen on the DVD *Live in Concert* which, along with another DVD, *Patricia Barber, Live: France 2004*, has remained commercially available.

Ever the student, Barber returned to academia in the mid-90s to earn her master’s degree in jazz pedagogy while studying twentieth-century music at Northwestern University. She continues to give master classes in this country and overseas. In 2007 she was awarded a resident fellowship at the Doreen B. Townsend Center for Humanities at the University of California, Berkeley where she taught students and performed concerts.

With the release of *Higher*, a recording featuring her original song cycle, “*Angels, Birds...and I*,” Barber has reached new heights of daring and imagination. Singers all over the world are performing Patricia’s songs and recently classical singers too have been putting them into their recital programs, following Fleming’s lead.

Barber will be on tour playing the music from *Higher* in Chicago, New York, and many other locations at home and abroad in 2019.

Robert Baird