

a reluctant star



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Chicago Tribune

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they create."

— DePaul University instructor Lisa Buscari

And yet: Don't video games have some responsibility to not contribute to an already violent culture?

The other night, at the end of my umpteenth game of "Battlefield 1943," an alarming statistic flashed across my TV screen: In the four years or so that I had been playing "Battlefield 1943," I had killed 43,291 people. I had bombed them and hit them with Jeep run over them with tanks, mowed them down from planes and plowed into them with boats. But primarily I shot them. Intrigued by that statistic, I popped in an old "Call of Duty" game that I once played a few times a week: Over many hours of play, I had killed 21,008 people.

To recap: I had killed — mostly shot with an assault rifle — 64,299 digital soldiers.

And how did I feel about this?

Not sociopathic. Conflicted.

I killed, virtually, so often that the groans of pain from digital soldiers became the white noise of computer war and often went unnoticed. A did the reflexive, Bourne-like way I reloaded a spent rifle. Did this desensitize me, leave me less empathic, more prone to aggression? After particu-

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Tuesday's release of Patricia Barber's "Smash" (Concord Jazz) will be her first major-label recording in five years.

Chicago singer-songwriter-pianist Patricia Barber returns to the fast lane with 'Smash,' a major recording with dark undertones

BY HOWARD REICH | Tribune critic

at exactly two minutes before showtime, Patricia Barber whisks into the Green Mill Jazz Club, says a quick hello to the guys on the bandstand, stretches the joints in her hands, places her iPad inside the grand piano, noodles on the keyboard for a minute, tosses off a couple of vocal scales and plunges into her set.

No small talk. No schmoozing up the crowd. No announcing song titles or musicians' names or anything — except music.

You don't get the sense that Barber necessarily wants to be here — until the set heats up and she sounds as if she doesn't want to be anywhere else.

"I always have the same feeling about it; I hate it before I do it," says Barber, a Chicagoan who will be

doing a lot of "it" in coming months, for on Tuesday she releases her first major-label recording in five years, "Smash" (Concord Jazz). She'll soon be traveling the world to promote the album, kicking off the tour with a special engagement Friday and Saturday nights at the Green Mill, where she's typically in residence Monday evenings.

The album, a brilliant collection of original songs, all dispatched with Barber's famously voluptuous voice and steeped in her atmospheric instrumental settings, marks a major step forward for one of the most significant jazz artists to come out of Chicago in the past two decades or more. These songs, often ambiguous in meaning but extremely seductive in tone, crystallize the high craft of Barber's writing while inspiring unorthodox arrangements and often wizardly solo pianism.

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ABEL URIBE/TRIBUNE PHOTOS

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Barber: A reluctant star

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Yet, on this night, Barber plays but one tune from "Smash" during her opening set, telling the crowd neither its title nor the forthcoming major release it comes from.

Like Glenn Gould in classical music, Barber, who's in constant demand in clubs, concert halls and festivals around the planet, still seems ambivalent about everything surrounding the art of music (except, of course, for the music itself). Performing, touring, promoting, negotiating — they all seem like distractions that happen to be required to reach a public that routinely places Barber's albums high atop the jazz charts.

Getting on stage, says Barber, "is like getting into a Batwoman suit, pulling on clothes that are very tight."

"And once I'm in 'em, once I'm there, once I start, it gets easier and easier. I can start to chat, sometimes, explain who the musicians are, a little bit about the music, 40 minutes in.

"Then I've lost enough of the nerves." Whatever trepidation Barber feels when she typically sits before an audience, however, will be heightened dramatically because of "Smash," an album that carries an unmistakable note of sorrow. Though it includes a few lighthearted tunes, as most Barber albums do, the darker pieces come from a very autobiographical place.

In the title song, "Smash," Barber takes the measure of deep personal loss. In "Scream," she chronicles a host of troubles, some of which many of us will experience sooner or later. In "Missing," she somehow traces, in extraordinarily succinct verses, many seasons of longing.

Let any of this sound self-indulgent, be assured that these songs, years in the making, reflect a painful recent period in Barber's life, hence the central emotion that underlies the album: melancholy.

"Yeah, I would have to agree with that," says Barber. "I hate to admit that a lot of times... I didn't write it (the album) for that reason."

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"There's tremendous intimacy between the music and the words," adds Feldman, who believes that Barber now is singing in what Feldman calls "the space of life."

What's remarkable is that "Smash" was recorded, for Barber famously has spent many chapters of her career walking away from major record deals, major tours, major anything.

When Verve/Polygram courted her in the mid-1990s, for instance, she said "no thanks," instead recording for a Chicago indie, Premonition, that operated out of its owner's kitchen. The album that resulted, "Modern Cool," raced up the Billboard and Gavin charts in the summer of '98, eventually leading to Barber's work with what was then most prestigious label in jazz, Blue Note.

But Barber's relationship with Blue Note ended after the 2008 release of "The Cole Porter Mix," the label going through ownership changes, and Bruce Lundvall, her longtime champion, stepping down as president. That, plus the aforementioned adversities in her life, led Barber to once again shy away from a major-label deal for the past several years.

"I just wanted to step back from the fast lane," says Barber, who also decreased the tempo of her international touring. "I thought I would sort of slow down a bit, enjoy our Michigan property, the organic gardening and swimming."

"I can always live on the down low... I kind of wanted to do fewer concerts, make more interesting music. I had so much music I wanted to invest in, harmonically and otherwise... I poured myself into (studying) piano, two piano years. I practiced like crazy."

You can hear it on the album and on this evening at the Green Mill, Barber's right-hand lines so beautifully sculpted and her harmonies so complex that she would be eminently worth hearing if she didn't sing a note.

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"I think Patricia has evolved... The sounds she makes with her voice are instrumental, in that they can be (both) melodic and percussive, which is very interesting and very much an extension of real language."

But next comes the tough part — touring again, getting back on the fast lane. How is Barber, perhaps the most reluctant star in jazz today, feeling about that?

"Excited, anxious and depressed," she says. "When I look at my dogs, Martha, my house — I've always felt that way" about leaving everything behind for the rigors of the road.

"I've always wanted to be a musician, I remember, but I didn't realize as a kid that you had to travel so much. And I never thought I would be more than a Chicago musician... I didn't know you had to fly all over the world."

That you must, if you hope to begin to satisfy an expanding global audience.

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"It started as a syllabic song series," adds Barber, meaning she sought to challenge herself by trying to pen lyrics that used particular numbers of syllables per line.

Along the way, however, "Five main people in my life died within a very short period. That just happened, and I was writing this music."

Among Barber's losses: her mother, Margaret Orton, who died in 2009 at age 90.

Beyond this tremendous toll, however, there was another source of anguish as well.

"After 2006, we went from European capital to European capital, and every show except Rotterdam was completely sold out," says Barber.

Unfortunately, she adds, a financial dispute with a business associate cost her deeply.

"For two straight weeks I didn't sleep," she says. "You know how dangerous that is. Anger is, I found, one emotion that will keep you up..."

"Now," adds Barber, speaking from the distance of some years, "it's just money. It's not breast cancer. So I let it go."

Well, not totally, in that Barber clearly has transformed her rage and hurt into art, to searing effect. No one has witnessed this process more closely than Martha Feldman, Barber's partner and a musically sophisticated observer.

"This album deals with some very deep human issues of life and death," says Feld-

man, a professor of music and the humanities at the University of Chicago. "She's had a lot of time to drill very deeply down."

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Even as she sought to dial down her activities, however, another major label came calling. This time, Concord Jazz executive Nick Phillips tried to persuade Barber to record for a firm that most jazz musicians would love to hear from. As usual, Phillips got the gentle brush off.

"Nick called: 'Would you like to work for Concord?' " Barber recalls. "I said: 'I don't think so. I'm still grieving about the relationship with Blue Note and their relationship with the world and my relationship with Bruce.'"

Phillips remembers it a bit differently.

"I never felt like there was any kind of resistance or hurdle," he says. "More of a question was: Could we put together on the business side a deal, and I was dealing with Reggie (Marshall, Barber's manager now) on that."

"With Patricia, it was more on the music."

Both agree, though, that Phillips came to catch a Barber show at Yoshi's, in Oakland, Calif., and "damn if he didn't sound like Bruce," Barber remembers. "He could talk to me musically, about 'Touch of Trash' (a famous Barber original), about harmonics. He was just like a young Bruce Lundvall."

"I said, 'OK, let's go for it.'"

Phillips concedes that Barber gave him anything but a conventional jazz-vocal recording. Aside from the off-mysterious



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lyrics and sometimes brooding message, the album eludes other expectations. Toward the beginning of the opening song, "Code Cool," for instance, Barber and the band stretch out for an extended, otherworldly instrumental sequence that's practically a cut in itself. Clearly not tailored for radio airplay.

"Maybe precisely because it's not what's expected, (it) may be a very good thing," says Phillips. "And what your conception of jazz might be, and the boundaries of that — Patricia is not concerned with that."

Most important, the way Barber creates and develops harmony throughout the recording makes "Smash" at once sophisticated and accessible, provocative and attractive. And the way her chord changes reflect the ever-shifting emotional nuances of her lyrics underscores her rising achievements as songwriter.

"She's becoming more and more potent and focused, and the sense of who she is (is) becoming more crystallized and really exceptional," says Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Shulamit Ran, a University of Chicago music professor and Barber devotee.

Add to this the suppleness and sensuousness of Barber's vocals, plus the econo-

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my and force of her pianism, and you have an artist of unusual communicative power.

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And what about the constant tension and release of facing an audience?

"I would love to stop singing, (but) I would miss it, so that's why I don't do it," says Barber, pondering the paradox.

"I love the singing, but it's so much of a heart opener, it's so hard to do. I would love to be (only) a piano player, come in on a gig and play the (devil) out of the piano."

So Barber continues as she has, performing every Monday night at the Green Mill, except when she's on tour. Sometimes, though, when she's onstage, she feels the presence of those she has lost, she says.

"When I'm singing and playing, I'm somewhere between life and death, in a corridor," Barber says.

"When you're in that corridor, you can reach people. 'Smash' definitely so, and 'Romanesque,'" she adds, citing two of the album's most haunting pieces.

"I feel I can almost touch and see them," she adds, before adding a characteristically cryptic thought.

"I can see which way to go."

Patricia Barber marks the release of "Smash" at 9 p.m. Friday and 8 p.m. Saturday at the Green Mill Jazz Club, 4802 N. Broadway; \$15; 773-878-5552 or greenmilljazz.com

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