



artist bio

PATRICIA BARBER

In reviewing Patricia Barber's 2006 album Mythologies, a song cycle based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that she wrote as a result of receiving the Guggenheim Fellowship in 2003, *JazzTimes* celebrated her as "the most fearless, most intellectually stimulating and, by extension, most interesting singer-songwriter-pianist on the American jazz scene." Likewise, *DownBeat* championed the album, calling it "brilliant" and proclaiming that her "noir, conspiratorially whispered alto is by now legendary." And Don Heckman, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, praised Barber for taking "her natural form of expressiveness into dazzling new arenas of lyrical creativity."

For her latest album on Blue Note Records, singer/pianist Barber applies that "natural form of expressiveness" to breath stimulating and intimate new life into the music of one of the Great American Songbook composers. A 13-tune collection that exhibits her austere power of singing, The Cole Porter Mix not only spotlights her artful interpretations of Porter's songs but also features her modern-cool compositional prowess on three Porter-inspired originals that seamlessly fit into the set list. "Cole Porter has always been my songwriting idol," says Barber. "I love his music and I've been singing his songs for so many years."

Barber's band includes guitarist Neal Alger, who has been performing with her the past six years, and bassist Michael Arnopol, who has worked with her since 1980. "We're like brother and sister," she says. "We learned jazz together and played all those gigs in Chicago together when I was coming up." Drum duties are shared by Eric Montzka and Nate Smith, who is in Dave Holland's bands. Another Holland sideman and formidable leader in his own right, tenor saxophonist Chris Potter guests on five tracks. Barber plays piano throughout as well as contributes melodica colors to some tunes, including her gem, "The New Year's Eve Song," that closes the album.

For more than two decades, Barber, based in Chicago, has led her own band and released a series of highly acclaimed, strikingly singular albums, dating back to 1992's breakout major label album Distortion of Love. It featured her rendition of Smokey Robinson's pop hit, "My Girl," predating by a year Cassandra Wilson's similarly groundbreaking Blue Light Til Dawn. "At the time, no one else was recording contemporary pop tunes in a jazz vein," Barber said in an interview a decade later. "I do feel like a postmodern pioneer. Soon after, all music began to be viewed as viable material for jazz vocalists and instrumentalists. The old repertoire distinctions between popular music and jazz were falling away."

She added that a key hurdle was convincing listeners that there was life after the era of iconic singers that included Sarah Vaughan, Peggy Lee, Carmen McRae and Ella Fitzgerald. "Many jazz fans have lost the ability to imagine the future, yet anything innovative in jazz vocals has taken place in spite of people lamenting the loss of Sarah, Peggy, Carmen, and Ella," she said. "People try to appropriate, copyright and own the music, but it refuses to be contained. In spite of the people who don't want to see music change, it finds its way like water coursing through rocks."

Barber continued to be a jazz agent for change, exhibiting her prowess as a jazz vocalist with the releases of Café Blue (1994), Modern Cool (1998) and Nightclub (2000), all of which garnered her an avid international following. Her 2002 album Verse earned a steady flow of critical plaudits. *Stereophile* magazine celebrated Barber as "more than a poet, more than a singer, more than a songwriter. None of these categories alone can do justice to the fullness of her artistic presentation" while *W Magazine* wrote that she "has the voice of a cabaret chanteuse, the soul of a beat poet and the mind of an English professor, and they come together here with remarkably spooky results."

Barber followed that album two years later with Live: A Fortnight in France, which was equally well received. The *Los Angeles Times* wrote, that Barber was "the most convincing jazz singer-songwriter

since Peggy Lee...her dark imagery, gripping interpretations and propulsive piano playing are among the great wonders of contemporary music." Her hometown paper, the *Chicago Tribune*, also critiqued the album in glowing terms: "Though listeners have come to expect illuminating results from Patricia Barber, Live: A Fortnight in France represents another significant stride...During the past few years, [she] has reached beyond merely interpreting jazz and pop standards, and she reiterates the point with some of the most erudite jazz songwriting being penned today."

That's certainly true on The Cole Porter Mix, where Barber contributes three originals. As for those tunes, she says, "I needed the time to write them. I'm such a slow songwriter. Plus, it takes hubris to put my own material on an album that pays tribute to Cole Porter. But I write like him. I've learned from him. I count syllables like he did. So on my song 'Late Afternoon With You,' I counted syllables and used internal rhymes like he did. There are lines that hang, that make you want to wait, so that the waiting in the song itself becomes quite literal. And the effect of the song is not quite sad, but the sadness is there. Cole Porter never wrote a song that said 'I'm miserable.'"

Another original on The Cole Porter Mix is the teeming-with-metaphors "Snow," a song that Barber says is full of food and sex. "It's a very sexy song about longing," she notes. "I love that last line, 'Do you think of me at all?' There's also a white/black dichotomy all the way through, like snow with jazz and salt with oil."

On "The New Year's Eve Song," Barber brought Potter into the session, acting out a role at the songwriter's suggestion. "I asked Chris if he ever played schmaltzy," she says. "He said no, but he could if I wanted him to. So he plays on this song as if he's half drunk then slips into his typical Chris Potter brilliant piece of playing."

"It was pretty exciting to have Chris play on this album," Barber says. "I wanted saxophone for this record and I've admired his playing. It's amazing how he blows on 'Just One of Those Things' and how perfectly he plays 'In the Still of the Night,' that we fly through with a samba beat. I told Chris that I wanted him to make his sax solo sound like he just walked into the session and then just walked out. And the way Chris and Eric play at the end, well, it's wild."

As for the Porter tunes, Barber delivers them with utmost respect as well as playful liberty. "Easy to Love" is performed with a straight-up bossa nova beat done in a breezy style that she says "goes down easily." "I Get a Kick Out of You" swings with "a very sexy" arrangement that Barber created years ago, in an unusual key with changed chords. One of the highlights of the album, "You're the Top" not only features new lyrics Barber contributed but also a fine piano stretch in the middle.

Another song with Potter on saxophone and Barber on melodica, "C'est Magnifique" was originally from Porter's smash 1953 Broadway musical comedy, *Can-Can*, that was adapted into film in 1960 starring Frank Sinatra, Shirley MacLaine and Maurice Chevalier. "Chris is more or less astounding and I played melodica to give it a French feeling," Barber says. "I also sang it before we warmed up for the day's sessions so my voice comes out sounding gruff and very French."

"Get Out of Town" is rendered with a dark, ominous rhythm ("I asked Neal to play some lonely-town sounds on his guitar, and that old-fashioned rock/snare groove makes the song sound even lonelier"), "I Concentrate on You" is delivered in a fun way ("It's rangy, stuck in a slow bossa beat and lyrically one of Cole Porter's best"), "What Is This Thing Called Love?" is coolly intriguing (with Barber singing at the bottom end of her vocal range) and "Miss Otis Regrets" is a storytelling beauty. "It's really just a folk song," says Barber.

With The Cole Porter Mix Barber adds one more remarkable chapter to her oeuvre, continuing to explore intriguing improvisational terrain at the vanguard of female jazz vocalists and instrumentalists.

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**For more information, contact Cem Kurosman at Blue Note Records
(p) 212.786.8634 (e) cem.kurosman@emimusic.com**