

PATRICIA BARBER

Jazz Singer/Planist/Songwriter/Educator



photo by Jammi York

In 2011 Patricia Barber has just finished a new 'live' album of the Patricia Barber Quartet recorded by Chris Grabowski at the wildly popular Green Mill residency. *Monday Night, vol2* is available through her website: patriciabarber.com She is also putting the finishing touches on other Floyd Records projects, one a DVD entitled *Patricia Barber & Kenny Werner-- 'Live' in Concert*. This chronicles a resplendent evening with Patricia and Kenny and two 9' Steinway pianos at the sold-out 1000 seat Pick-Staiger Auditorium--this DVD will be available in the spring. Patricia is also and mostly busy finishing a set of all original songs for an eagerly awaited album to be called, *Synchronicity* due out in the fall. These days you will hear Patricia playing most often with her Quartet, the **pbq**, with Neal Alger on guitar, Larry Kohut on bass, and Eric Montzka on drums. This Quartet continues to develop new, innovative ways of presenting jazz and remains the crowd favorite. Patricia is also performing concerts with personnel stepping into the Quartet from Paris, NY, Fargo, Brazil and beyond. She is performing with classical musicians, solo, leading a variety of different ensembles and composing commission works for musicals, classical groups, singers, and jazz ensembles. This year's bookings have her all over the world, starting with the historic double-bill with Kenny Werner, followed by a residency at the Jazz Standard in NY and continuing the year in Macedonia, Turkey, San Francisco, South Africa, etc. and of course, France.

For most concert artists, this would be a light schedule, and she likes it that way. It leaves her time to read, think, compose, work with her trio and quartet at the legendary Green Mill in Chicago on Monday nights, and live her life in a self-designed art orbit, allowing her to pen some of the most original and lasting music being written anywhere. In 2003, Barber received the first Guggenheim Fellowship ever awarded to a songwriter. The task, to compose a song cycle based on Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, resulted in the category-defying *Mythologies* for jazz quintet, child rappers, gospel choir, and backup singers. *Mythologies*, promoted with major sponsorship by Blue Note Records, and The Poetry Foundation and the Museum of Modern Art, like others of Barber's recording projects and concerts, garnered spectacular reviews while leaving a few dazed and confused. This seems to be Barber's path--to break ground by devoting her life to building repertoire that is by turns smart, funny, sad, trashy, elegant, alternative, contemporary/classical, hip, and cutting-edge, but in the end is truly and deeply jazz.

Barber is a study in contradictions. She is one of the most highly sought-after concert artists in jazz, and one of the most difficult to get. Her music is uniquely hers (and her fans'); she doesn't explain it or herself (most probably the reason she has never been nominated for a Grammy). She doesn't have a TV, she isn't a voting member of NARAS. She is at once a big success and a well-kept secret. She will turn down most offers, choosing instead to study, compose, practice the piano, polish a language, or tend to

her family and garden. She is elusive but pulls out all the stops at the few venues where she chooses to perform throughout the year. She regularly sells out concerts in European Capitals from Lisbon to Moscow. Paris is her musical second home.

Barber's early days were spent playing at Chicago's legendary Gold Star Sardine Bar. As early as 1994, Bill Zehme of *Esquire Magazine* wrote "Patricia Barber makes jazz the way Tiffany makes crystal -- sleek and smart and dazzling. You must hush the world when she plays and listen to that which no one ever thought to do before with notes, with voice, with style penultimate. She is, for my money, the best jazz performer currently working the planet." At one moment her voice is ploughing dusky low registers, at another careening the upper stratospheres; it has drawn comparison to "chilled bourbon," and been called "a pure dark whisper straight up from the soul." She has long since evolved from the fine-tuned nightclub artist of the Gold Star Sardine Bar into a sinewy, risk-taking vocalist and "top-flight pianist" (the *Chicago Tribune*).

Barber did not start writing her own songs with lyrics until the early 1990s, and continues to perform them alongside jazz standards, vocal and purely instrumental, and occasional jazzed up pop covers. Today she is recognized as one of the foremost songwriters of our time, compared more than once by the LATimes with Joni Mitchell and Peggy Lee. In 2001 Margo Jefferson of the New York Times announced: "This is what Patricia Barber has: adventurous piano playing, a low-vibrato alto on perpetual rhythm and timbre alert and smart songs about the way we think and live, not just the way we love... This is the kind of art we need to be on the lookout for everywhere. The 21st century has started. We can't afford to be left behind." Barber has an uncanny knack for embedding complexly layered music and verse in classic Barber-tweaked song forms marked by exquisite elegance, strange commentary, and brilliant, funny surprises. Elsewhere the NY Times called her a "literary critic, philosophy student, and needling social commentator rolled into one." And The *Minneapolis Star Tribune* summed her up in a headline that read "Part [Cole] Porter, Part Prince, All Art," adding that Barber is "the most complete jazz artist today."

Born in a west Chicago suburb to a big-band saxophonist father who played on call with Glenn Miller and a sometime blues singer mother, Barber studied classical piano and psychology at the University of Iowa. She resisted the pull to become a jazz artist, but by the time she finished college her musical gifts had won out. Fame came early in the mid-1980s when she began a nightly engagement at the legendary Gold Star Sardine Bar. A decade later her devoted following pursued her to the city's oldest and most popular club, the Green Mill, where she's continued to play Monday nights when she's in town.

Barber has cut nine albums, with a tenth on the way. The first was her self-produced *Split* (1989), followed by *A Distortion of Love* (Polygram Antilles, 1992). From 1994 through 2002, when she came into her own as a songwriter, it was with a string of five discs for the Chicago indie label Premonition Records, all Barber-produced in collaboration with owner Mike Friedman, after which she went on to record for her current label Blue Note. *Cafe Blue*, *Modern Cool* and *Nightclub* shocked the musical community with their success; in fact *Modern Cool*, one of the first ever mainly originals jazz vocal albums, and then *Nightclub*, her first collection of standards, recorded for her mother, each sold well over 100,000 records. The year 2002 saw the issue of her first CD of all original material, the highly touted *Verse* (Premonition), followed in 2004 by a live-recorded tour through France issued as *Live: A Fortnight In France* (Blue Note) and documented in a one-hour film by award-winning director I. Michael Toth. With each new album, Barber's pianism has become more and more virtuosic, adventurous, and harmonically masterful, and her singing ever more subtle and shaded, with worldwide acclaim, on airwaves and international tours, growing apace. As *Time Magazine* wrote, "Cross Diana Krall with Susan Sontag, and you get Patricia Barber, whose throaty, come-hither vocals and coolly incisive piano are displayed to devastating effect."

Barber's work is included in Blue Note's three-disc *A Story of Jazz*. She has performed in such major performance centers as Carnegie Hall, Herbst Hall in San Francisco, the Opéra Comique, Cité de la Musique in Paris, the Cemal Resit Concert Hall in Istanbul, and major performing arts centers in such far-flung capitals as Seoul and Moscow, while receiving rave receptions at major jazz festivals the world over (the North Sea Jazz Festival, Netherlands, Umbria Jazz, Italy, and others in Chicago, San Francisco, Montreal, Monterrey, Nice, New York, Dublin, Paris, Korea, Vancouver, etc.). She is a recipient of a Townsend Residential Fellowship from the University of California at Berkeley where she lived and taught for a semester. Among sites of her renowned master classes, workshops, and lectures are Symphony Space and the Allen Room at Lincoln Center, New York, Northwestern University, Roosevelt University, the University of California at Davis, the Gleacher Center of the University of Chicago, Western Iowa Tech, and the University of Wisconsin at Madison, as well as private events and clinics the world over. Barber is on the faculty of the University of Illinois at Chicago.