



BIOGRAPHY ♦ JANUARY 2023

Patricia Barber has earned international acclaim as a dazzling and uncompromising jazz artist. Long known for her sultry vocals, compelling pianism, and sophisticated songwriting, she has come to be regarded as a significant "American composer" as well--a deeply visionary artist who blurs the lines between poetry, jazz, and art music.

Barber cut her teeth in the Chicago jazz scene during the 1980s, playing five nights a week at the Gold Star Sardine Bar where crowds lined up around the block. She sold her first CD *Split* (Floyd Records, 1989) from the stage after recording it at Chicago's Universal Recording with money her sister had lent her. After paying it back, she started saving to own a bit of real estate in case things got hard in the music business. When in 1991 Polygram Records' Richard Seidel called to ask her to sign for an all-standards recording, she said "no" and gave the same answer to Concord Records' Carl Jeffers. Only when Island Records flew Brian Bacchus to Chicago to assure her he'd record whatever she wanted did she agree to a contract and recording sessions in New York.

Those sessions gave Barber her first encounter with the quietly brilliant Jim Anderson, who was helming the recording booth at the Power Station. The album that emerged, *A Distortion of Love* (Polygram Antilles, 1991), became known for the cover of "My Girl" and her arrangement of "You Stepped Out of a Dream." Jim's sounds merged seamlessly with Barber's from the get-go. They are now celebrating a thirty-year collaboration.

Barber's move to Chicago's storied Green Mill in the mid-1990s freed her to perform original music on a weekly basis. Around the same time, she signed with the distinguished Chicago label, Premonition Records owned by Mike Friedman. The upshot, *Cafe Blue* (1994), became a breakout hit. Her next entry with Premonition, *Modern Cool* (1998), a mostly original album, surprised the jazz world by selling 120,000 copies, placing her on an international path. This set the stage for the critically acclaimed Blue Note/Premonition recordings that would cement her stature. When she finally decided it was time to record an album of standards for her mother, *Nightclub* (2000) ensued and sales peaked at 200,000.

Verse (2002) followed, with Barber again pushing the songwriting envelope. Her tunes were brash, heartbreaking, trippy, erudite, and sexy. The next year she received a Guggenheim Fellowship in composition to support research and writing for a jazz song cycle inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a project that culminated in her 2006 Blue Note album *Mythologies*. The album combined jazz players with rappers and a gospel choir, shaking off the strictures of the Great American Songbook with a refreshing new sound.

Although rarely tempted by teaching, Barber enjoyed a semester as a Townsend Resident Fellow at the University of California, Berkeley in 2007, concertizing while teaching jazz singing and accompanying her students in concert. By 2008 she was already recording *The Cole Porter Mix* (Blue Note, 2008), returning to the 32-bar song form and daring to interweave three of her originals with Cole Porter's. "Snow," "Late Afternoon and You," and "The New Year's Eve Song" have since become international hits.

She left her Blue Note legacy of the 2000s after the company was sold to a hedge fund and the president of the company, her dear friend and champion Bruce Lundvall, retired. Ever what critic Howard Reich called a "reluctant star," Barber used the time off for composition, reading, thinking, writing, piano-playing, gardening, and swimming.

Barber has toured the globe with her bands, performing in everything from stunning large venues to her favorite intimate club venues while long continuing to hold court and hone her craft at the Green Mill. Barber famously turns down touring offers and has walked away from lucrative opportunities, opting to live life and make art. Her "slow lane," one soon finds out, brims with activity. Out of the public eye, she focuses on an array of projects believing that education can only help, never hurt, her musicianship.

Barber resurfaced in 2013 with the all-original *Smash* (Concord Records), pushing the songwriting genre into ever more literary territory. Shortly afterwards she gained the notice of Renée Fleming, grande dame of American sopranos, who first heard her at the Jazz Standard in NY and then at Chicago's Green Mill. Reflecting on the experiences, Fleming has said: "'I was sitting there ... and I said, 'My God, these are art songs. This is really something special'" (*Chicago Tribune*). The encounter sparked a friendship, a collaboration, and in 2015 a sold-out tour entitled "Higher: Renée Fleming and Patricia Barber Perform the Music of Patricia Barber."

Barber views her highest and most compelling path to be that of harmonic evolution. For her, harmony is the foundational element upon which the melody, lyrics, and rhythm depend. Barber's 2019 CD *Higher* (ArtistShare) realized that vision through another song cycle, "Angels, Birds...and I," advancing the song genre yet again, inspired by her close mentorship by Fleming and composer Shulamit Ran.

2019 was a magical year for Barber—not just the year of touring *Higher* but of her induction into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences—a heady honor placing her in rarified company. When asked about it, Barber has deflected to an unexpected point of pride: not only was she to perform at the induction ceremony but Academy scientists wrote to request that she play her song "Redshift," a song for which she'd immersed herself in astrophysics to make sure she got her metaphors right. *Mythologies* is now taught in college courses, while "The New Year's Eve Song" is becoming an international classic along with other songs. And singers the world over are scheduling her songs in concert sets.

In 2020, Barber signed with Abey Fonn's audiophile label Impex Records, whose beautiful releases are taking the Patricia Barber/Jim Anderson collaboration to a new audio level, now with the added strength of Jim's engineer partner Ulrike Schwarz. Besides doing magnificent rereleases of Barber's legacy albums, Impex has released a new album of her covers and

standards, *Clique* (2021), featuring her extraordinary band, Patrick Mulcahy on acoustic bass, Neal Alger on acoustic guitar, Jim Gailloreto on tenor saxophone, and Jon Deitemyer on drums.

As the pandemic shuttered much live performance, Barber has embraced the new challenge of making her songs accessible to classical singers, notating her own piano accompaniments. Fully composed versions of "Surrender," "Muse," and "The Opera Song" are now complete, and "Morpheus" is in the works.

—*Shawn Marie Keener*



Barber's press, photos, concert schedule, contacts, and tour archive, can be found at www.patriciabarber.com