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Patricia
Barber

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The Tall Cool One

Off the beaten path with Patricia Barber.

By John Frederick Moore

Patricia Barber tends to stand out. It's hard not to notice a stylish, nearly six-foot-tall woman striding purposefully into a sleek coffee shop, as she does on a mild early-December afternoon in Chicago's trendy Andersonville neighborhood. Even if you didn't know that an international jazz star had just entered the room, you'd take a good look at her.

Her music is equally arresting, even if it's not easy to grasp at first. Packed with witty, intellectual lyrics, startling harmonic twists and vocals that range from a dusky whisper to a piercing scream, Barber's music isn't easily categorized. Her mix of jazz, pop and art song results in something completely unique. "She reminds me of some of those great performers, like a Judy Garland, just somebody who's so completely wrapped up in their performance that it just lights up the rest of the room," says pianist Kenny Werner. "There's a bit of intensity, there's definitely a serious sexuality, sometimes a pathos — all the elements that make for a dramatic performance. But she expresses that drama with poetry that makes it high art."

Friendly, often funny, and, yes, a bit intense, Barber chooses her words carefully in conversation. She's equally exacting in what she wants to express musically, which is why she replaced her longtime quartet with a new lineup. Barber wanted to push her music in a different direction. Werner, whom she considers a mentor, gave her the push she needed. "I get a lot of my musicians by recommendation from Kenny," she says between sips of espresso. "He was in Chicago and came to hear my band, and he said, 'It's time to change. You're too comfortable.' I wanted something quieter and musically more flexible. I got a band that is much less predictable. It can go any which way at any point." Barber's group now features bassist Larry Kohut, guitarist John Kregor and drummer Jon Deitemyer — all Chicago-based musicians. In addition to playing Monday nights at the Green Mill Cocktail Lounge, Barber's musical home since the mid-'90s, the band appears on her latest record, the excellent *Smash* (Concord Jazz), which was released in January.

"It's interesting for me to work with someone like Patricia,





who has such a great voice as a singer,” Deitemyer says. “And then immediately after you’re finished playing along with this beautifully sung melody, you have Patricia the pianist who’s part of the next experience. It’s almost like dealing with two different people musically on the bandstand. I think that serves the music in the sense that there’s always a certain amount of spontaneity. Whereas as a vocalist she can be very introspective and lyrical and very subtle, as a pianist she can be the opposite.”

Maintaining that level of spontaneity means keeping discussions about music to a minimum. Deitemyer notes that between sets, Barber mostly talks about other things, like books and politics; the music takes care of itself. Though she values spontaneity on the bandstand, offstage she’s a highly disciplined, self-directed musician. She declared 2010 as “The Year of the Piano,” and then dedicated herself throughout the next 12 months to working on classical techniques (she extended those labors into 2011). You can hear the results in new songs like “Romanesque” and “The Storyteller” and even on less piano-driven pieces like the trippy “Code Cool.”

“I’ve always studied classical music, but of course playing it you get a muscular memory of it,” Barber says. “It’s changed my composing. In something like ‘Code Cool,’ when you listen to the bridge, that’s really way out there. It goes through a lot of different harmonic territory, and it goes through it sort of out of rhythm. That’s also where I wanted to go with this new band.”

While Barber’s compositions are among the most unique in jazz, it’s her lyrics that get the most attention — and for good reason. Love and loss are the themes that appear most in the Barber canon. But several of the songs on *Smash* have an especially heightened sense of melancholy. Over a period of a year and a half, Barber lost five friends and family members, including her mother and her best friend. “It was just a tsunami,” she says.

Barber works doggedly at her craft. She says it takes, on average, about six weeks to finish a song. Syllable counts are important, an influence from both poetry and leading American songwriters. “The great songwriters, they’re like scientists,” she says. “There are pop writers who are very, very good — Joni Mitchell would be an example — who don’t count syllables. I do that sometimes, too, just throw a narrative into it. But Cole Porter, for instance, never took a chance with a syllable. I just learned more about form that way. It brings out different elements, whether harmonic, rhythmic or lyric. I find that fighting my way out of the bag has been good for me.”

That struggle with the nuts and bolts of songwriting is evident in one of Barber’s most effective lyrical techniques — sustaining a metaphor to unfold a story. On the new album, “Redshift” employs concepts of quantum physics and astrophysics to limn the end of a relationship. (Barber says she holed up for 10 days in the country, poring over science textbooks, to get certain images exactly right.) On top of a seductive bossa nova rhythm, Barber delivers clever references to protons, curved trajectories and Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle. For most of the song, the device puts the emotional core of the narrative at a certain remove, but that only makes

the final line — “You are leaving me” — utterly devastating. “I’m very aware of the way that you hear it the first time,” she says. “And I’m very aware of the fact that it should hit you at a certain point and have an effect. I should be able to predict when people will laugh or when they will cry.”

She’s also attuned to what her fans enjoy, noting that crowds typically respond best to her “angry songs.” “Devil’s Food” is one such song, though with its danceable beat it doesn’t sound particularly full of rage. Barber, who in 2011 married her longtime partner Martha Feldman, a professor of music history at the University of Chicago, says it was time for her to “write a goddamn gay song.”

“This one is a song that I really wanted to shove in their face,” she says, thrusting her hand out to underscore the point. “I was mad about the gay issue at the time I wrote this song, particularly this thing about marriage. The title, ‘Devil’s Food,’ gives part of it away about how I feel about it. It’s funny, when you look at people’s faces if they’ve never heard it, they’re not exactly sure what’s going on until a little while into it.” By the time Barber sings the lyric “Sweet on sweet/Meat on meat,” audiences usually get the picture.

Although there are immediate pleasures to be found in her music, Barber’s artistry also demands from her audience a willingness to be surprised. It’s part of what make her fans so devoted to her, but it’s also what’s kept her from being as widely popular as, say, Diana Krall. Not that her records don’t do well commercially. *Modern Cool*, from 1998, sold more than 120,000 copies — a strong figure for a jazz record — and *Nightclub*, a collection of standards, did even better two years later. Still, she’s not exactly a household name. Then again, this is an artist who used the money from her 2003 Guggenheim Fellowship to make *Mythologies*, a song cycle based on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

“There’s edge to what she does, and that’s what makes her material original,” Werner says. “And that’s what makes the people who are aware of her so fiercely loyal.”

At 57, Barber certainly has no intentions of changing her approach. But then, she never has. In the early ’90s, she turned her back on PolyGram Records when executives there wanted to dictate the material she would record. Instead, she signed with the small Premonition label where, with complete artistic control, she made some of her most beloved records, including *Modern Cool*. She eventually moved to Blue Note for which she recorded four albums, starting with 2002’s *Verse*.

“She has to be who she is, and any [record] company has to understand who she is,” Werner says. “She’s not going to convert herself to something else because of a concept a company has of what they think they can sell. You can see it in five minutes. She’s the kind of artist that if she couldn’t follow her moment-to-moment inner urge, she would probably lose her confidence completely.”

Which is why Barber herself was surprised when she signed with Concord Records in 2012. After a shakeup at Blue Note during which the label’s parent company was sold and label



Monday Nights at the Green Mill

As stirring as Patricia Barber's records are, seeing her live at Chicago's Green Mill Cocktail Lounge — once a favorite hangout of Al Capone — is the best way to get the full Barber experience. Watching her at the piano is an event in itself; she grunts, grimaces and contorts her body as she plays. Sometimes she sings so quietly you have to strain to hear her, other times her wail can pierce the walls. And she makes surprising musical choices, from completely reconfigured Monk tunes to classic pop songs.

"She brings something every Monday night that is unique," says Barber's drummer Jon Deitemyer. "It's a strong aura she possesses. I think anyone who's willing to do something that's sincere and personal and sounds honest, people are drawn to that regardless of the style. And I feel like Patricia does that."

That's why people travel from all over the world to head to the gritty Uptown neighborhood to watch her perform. Admission is a mere \$7, and you can stay for both sets if room is available. Barber took up residency at Green Mill in the mid-'90s. She attracts regulars who've made the bar their Monday night home, as well.

"We don't let anyone reserve seats," says Green Mill owner Dave Jemilo. "But there's this one woman who comes in and puts her coat on the chair right in the front by the piano every week, and we let her. Then there are people who might have heard about her in Europe and they find out she's playing at the Green Mill for seven bucks and they're freaking out about it. That's kind of a cool thing because in certain circles, she's kind of big stuff, man."

Before taking the stage, Barber heads behind the bar and pours herself a glass of cognac from which she will periodically sip onstage. Such are the privileges of a performer who has become synonymous with a particular place.

"The way we look at things is she's part of the family," Jemilo says. "The Green Mill wouldn't be the Green Mill without her." —JFM

president Bruce Lundvall — a close friend of Barber's — vacated the top spot after 25 years at the helm, Barber asked to be released from her contract. While independent, she self-released two volumes of *Monday Night: Live at the Green Mill*. She told friends that she was in a semi-retirement phase. But Nick Phillips, Concord's vice president of A&R, talked her into signing with the label.

"When I got the offer, I said no," she recalls. "I said I'm going to continue playing and singing and performing, but I'm going to do it much less and at a much higher level. And then Nick came out to see me at a gig in San Francisco. I just liked him so much; he reminded me so much of Bruce Lundvall. It turns out that Bruce was one of his mentors, and he always wanted to be a Bruce Lundvall type."

Despite her new corporate home, being an outsider suits Barber. Somehow, she's never been nominated for a Grammy, though she has an idea why. "I heard from an insider once, a long time ago, when *Modern Cool* hit 100,000 copies as soon as it came out," she says. "Apparently it went through the Grammy committee, they put on 'Touch of Trash' [a dark, wicked tale about superficial notions of female beauty — not exactly "My Funny Valentine"] and somebody powerful within the committee said, 'She will never be nominated for a Grammy. Over my dead body!' And to this day that has been true.

"But I think it's worked for me at a certain point," she adds. "I would kind of hate to ruin that now. It's made me kind of like a cult figure because I obviously don't have mainstream acceptance. But should I? I mean, just listen to mainstream music. As long as we keep filling the halls, it seems to work."

Barber, who suffered from severe stage fright early in her career, has developed an unusually close rapport with her fans. "I feel protected," she says. "They are *everywhere*. There is no place I can go where somebody isn't there that I know. I was playing in Fallon, Nevada, and I thought, 'Nobody's going to be there that knows me.' Sure enough, these two gay guys had come up from San Francisco and stayed in my hotel just to make sure that someone I knew was there. It's so sweet."

Barber feels a similar sense of comfort in Chicago. Most musicians seeking a wider audience eventually decamp to New York or Los Angeles. For several years, singer Kurt Elling played Wednesday nights at the Green Mill. On any given week, you could see two of jazz's top vocalists perform at a neighborhood bar for less than \$10 a show. But Elling moved to New York a few years ago. Meanwhile, Barber remains committed to staying in Chicago, not only because the city is so familiar to her but also because of the sense of freedom it affords to an artist set on going her own way.

"I see no reason to leave," she says. "I've got everything I want. A musician can actually afford to buy a house in the city. That's very different than New York, the way they scrape and scrimp. It's not for me. And if you try and make it big in New York, the real estate is worth so much money that club owners don't want you if you can't fill it. I don't know how you can possibly experiment. Here, there's not that much pressure. That's an enormous thing." ▲