

HIGHER

DXD EDITION

patricia barber



The Barber Legacy: An Appreciation

In the world of music, it's much easier to jump in and make an initial splash than it is to stay afloat, build a career, become an artist of consequence. In the case of pianist, singer, songwriter Patricia Barber, her early recordings like *Café Blue* and *Modern Cool* got her noticed by fans and critics alike and for a time made her the jazz artist du jour, the new talent that packed rooms in cities large and small, entranced reviewers, and turned the always staid jazz world on its ear. In subsequent albums like *Nightclub* and *Verse* she built, enriched, and proved not only that she was here to stay but that there was so much more to the story.

As the release of *Higher*, a collection of mostly original art songs, proves yet again there was always something much deeper stirring in Barber's art. Never content to be thought of as just a jazz artist, Barber aspired to create something more literate, more consequential and considered in her music. Behind the easy to understand and admire musical gifts, there was always ambition and a yearning to create new sounds, arouse new thoughts, push the jazz envelope. When even fans would be at pains to describe her music—"well, it kinda sounds like?"—it was clear she wasn't just going through the motions but was on a determined, creative journey.

Like so many others, I once braved the wild winds of a Chicago winter and made the pilgrimage to her Monday night gig at the north side's venerable Green Mill Cocktail Lounge. There she confidently dispensed biting social commentary, gorgeous jazz standards, extended flights of keyboard exploration, and jagged asides—all with equal aplomb. That a singer/pianist, billed as jazz, could draw a crowd, command a stage, and pack a joint best known for its connections to Al Capone turned me into a dedicated follower of that journey.

While “triple threat” is lazy slang for someone accomplished at playing,

singing, and writing music, the actual earthly existence of this most mythical of musical beasts is a rare event. Each of the three is a full-time job unto itself, and in truth, one facet of the craft usually dominates the other two, and yet Barber has grown to that status. Her expressive voice and gift for distinctive phrasing are what you notice first. Always a supremely crafty instrument, one that cries, beguiles, and can make points in a righteous fashion, her voice was best described by jazz critic Thomas Conrad who called it “a pure dark whisper straight up from the soul.” Barber often sings ballads in an intimate, middle range that she

can modulate down to the kind of sotto voce sound that can convince a listener they are being let in on a secret. She's also capable of breaking into a high, wordless wail as she does in, “Mourning Grace,” on *Café Blue* or adding a sexy, breathy tone that suddenly teases out heretofore unheard meaning in a tune as well known as “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town,” a recording of which was included on a heavyweight LP reissue of *Nightclub* in 2000. It's a stroke of fortune that Barber's expressive voice has been faithfully captured for twenty-seven years via her collaboration with the incomparable audio engineer Jim Anderson.

I've always greatly respected her voice and the way she masters the piano, drawing influence and inspiration from everyone from Art Tatum to Bill Evans, but it's her writing, arranging, and willingness to stretch musically that should draw the most admiration. Her melodies are inevitably tonal, many verging on the outright beautiful. Rhythmically, while she tends to favor the slow tempos that allow her voice full reign, she can also change things up and get funky, as in the 7/4 “Company” on *Modern Cool*, which served early notice that she had adventurous tastes in meters. While some close to her have joked that she should drop

music and become a poet, wordplay is another of her greatest strengths. In “Company,” just before a squeaky, joyous solo by trumpeter Dave Douglas, she struts her dense, wry lyrical chops with this dense tech-heavy lampoon:

**“For company
I like down-sized efficiency
touch-tone community
digitized,
expedited, and
systemized
for fiber-optic fraternity”**

Signing with Blue Note Records in 2002, Barber formed a fruitful

partnership with legendary label head Bruce Lundvall, whose prescient ears and open mind encouraged some of her most visionary ideas. In 2006, after receiving a Guggenheim fellowship to create a song cycle based on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*,



Barber and Blue Note released *Mythologies*. Written and performed

in many different styles and tempos, it is a heady masterpiece of dark and light, a fusion of words, grooves, and meters, all of which made the silent icon of antiquity come alive in wonderful new ways.

Her latest project, *Higher*, continues Barber’s logical artistic path toward becoming an artist whose only boundaries exist in the limits of her own prodigious imagination. Rather than just the completion of a long-held desire to create art songs, *Higher*, as its title suggest, is the answer to a calling, one Patricia Barber is gloriously answering.

—Robert Baird

A Note from Patricia Barber

Throughout my career I've been pushing the boundaries of songwriting. In the past years I've been inspired to write songs that combine lyric poetry with an enriched harmonic language that draws from classical music as well as the more circumscribed harmonic system of jazz and the classic American songbook. Shulamit Ran, my mentor and friend, has been an important part of my harmonic development. For some years now, I have no longer been restricted in my harmonic choices, the vista is as wide and open as the sky.

Higher features these new directions in *Angels, Birds, and I...*, a song cycle made up of art songs that can be done by classical singers as well as jazz

vocalists and instrumentalists. In 2015, I had the honor of performing an early version of the cycle in concert with Renée Fleming in Chicago, Washington DC, and New York. In 2016 Renée sang them at a Carnegie Hall recital. Her performance of "Higher," a song I wrote for my mother, at the sold-out Krannert Center for the Performing Arts in Champaign-Urbana was a gift she gave me I will never forget.

In 2016 composer Augusta Read Thomas and the Ear Taxi New Music Festival asked that I open the festival with the cycle. The songs are at once "new music" in an art music vein and indebted to traditional jazz and classical harmony.

A Note from Jim Anderson

Having worked with Patricia Barber for almost 30 years, every time that we have entered the studio we have endeavored to present to the audience the most compelling audio experience available. With Patricia's new project, *Higher*, we feel that we've created a new audiophile standard—having recorded, mixed and mastered in DXD.

I feel that this recording, for the time being, is *the* opportunity for Patricia's fans to enjoy her music in a quality that has been previously unimaginable. We know that the audio benchmark is always moving upward and we are committed to creating the best possible experience for Patricia's audience. We hope that you enjoy *Higher* on DXD in its fullest.



Neal Alger
acoustic guitar



Jim Gailloreto
tenor saxophone



Patrick Mulcahy
bass



Jon Deitemyer
drums

Angels, Birds, and I...

...is Patricia Barber's paean to music and singers. It reflects on her own double vision as composer and performer to give us a form-shattering work that is also about a division of labor, composition on one side and singing/performing on the other. Put that together with Barber's passion for classical myth (her 2006 Blue Note song cycle *Mythologies* was based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) and you have the basic proposition that runs throughout: If you give me form, I will give you music. This is the bargain the gods in *Angels, Birds, and I...* try to strike with mortals, whose rapturous performances can alone give form to the sounds and words crafted by an immortal god. Since the gods of antiquity are always

longing to descend to earth and consort with humans, the ingredients are in place for a re-conception of the songwriter, the protagonist of the opening song "Muse" who wields the power to create the song but lacks the power to take the stage. Also in place are the ingredients needed to rethink the canons of jazz songwriting, here realized in a new level of sophistication in Barber's evolving harmonic practice. As the cycle opens, the muse dreams of slipping into the body that can give life to her songwriting. Meanwhile the melody, feather-light, floats tonally off-balance over a Fauré-like arpeggio accompaniment. Everything now happens in the conditional, presaging the cycle as a whole ("If I

could, would you dance with me? ... would you sing with me?") —a kind of dreamscape specially reserved for music, poetry, and singing. And so the voice—Barber's own, delivering the delicate, mysterious chromaticism—rarely comes to rest on the home key of A-flat (a recurrent tonal center in the cycle). This new harmonic language is essential to setting the poetic language invented for it.

Elsewhere in the cycle, transubstantiation between material and immaterial realms persists, but the protagonist shifts. In "Voyager," Barber speaks as a kind of universal stage manager who announces what her soprano will need to step onto the stage and ascend into the "rare upper air,"

that stratosphere where sopranos thrive or perish and where music inspires the listener: four lines, some sticky rhyme, a sturdy stage, a story, scansion, flowers and birds. In short, a song with as much lift as a rocket ship to get her through the lonely, precarious journey beyond the footlights.

Both "Muse" and "Voyager" are short songs, albeit stretched in performance by the exceptional jazz soloists assembled here. With brevity also comes a new way of handling poetic form. Fragments of lines and enjambments—one line's words spilling over into the next—frequently mark the verses, challenging the conventions jazz uses to set lyrics.

"Surrender," a love song to music so powerful it can sweep you away like a lover, goes by in a near-photographic instant, a single swoop of melody and harmony, a single musico-poetic gesture. It's the closest thing here to the short forms of the French *mélodies* by Fauré and Debussy that are among the cycle's inspirations, but "Pallid Angel" (Barber's outré romantic Christmas song), "High Summer Season," and "Higher" are akin to *mélodie* too. Perhaps it's unsurprising, then, that all these songs are shot through poetically with color, a favorite medium of Barber, who has synesthesia. Cobalt hair, citrine, and sapphire blue. Azure skies, lavender lips, cerulean sheets, aubergine, alabaster, and amber. Color is porous and insubstantial, like

angelic bodies, birds in flight, and song itself, all mediums of liminality and transformation, of passing away and passing through.

Never one without comedy, Barber also leavens the cycle with "The Opera Song" and "The Albatross Song." The Opera Song" follows a would-be opera singer who packs up her 9-5 office job in the opening verse and heads off to the opera house after a wry allusion to the Diez and Schwarz hit "You and the Night and the Music." During four strophes of the A section, she dreams of replacing a cold-stricken leading lady, then careens into all-out babbling fantasy in the bridge, spitting out an opera rap until she recovers herself for the final A strophe to declare "la prossima stella will be me" (the next star will be me)!

Jazz idioms are not especially the stuff of "The Opera Song." Not so the sardonic "Albatross Song." Marked "slouchy, colla voce blues," it's a bluesy tune with a difference, an impudent beat laid down by the bass that keeps it loping along in 5/4. What else for a song about a woman who leaves her crude capitalist husband for an Australian bird? Not just any bird but the most fantastical and storied of birds, the Wandering Albatross, a dancing seabird whose wingspan exceeds that of any other feathered creature, whose soaring and sloping are the stuff of myth, and whose matings last a lifetime.

The albatross may be a droll object of humor but birds, birdsong, and the ability to take flight lie at the deepest heartland of *Angels, Birds, and I...* They

return in Barber's most personal song, "Higher." Dedicated to her mother, a big-voiced blues contralto, "Higher" is the most direct and innocent of all the songs in the cycle. Poetically, it's composed of four short-lined quatrains, each rhyming regularly abcb. The song asks, "Oh what shall we sing sitting on this firewire / with the rest of the flock I'll lift my song higher / well above the din / north of the grayest day / angels, birds and I / leap up and away." Therein lies a key to the whole cycle. Even those "stilled by pain" can return to life when air "blows in like spring." How can we escape such earthly bounds? "Raise your voice, take wing."

— *Martha Feldman*



Muse

for Renée

If I could, would you dance with me?
The elder Strauss perhaps
And we will waltz wrapped
In each other's arms

Such sweet entanglement
Fingers, legs, and hips
Let the world spin
I have dreamed of this

If you would, could you dress for me?
Décolletage in crêpe du Chine
Alabaster in aubergine
We are splendid in your skin

Bejeweled bodice wherein
Luster becomes you
Citrine and sapphire blue
Sibylline Seraphim

If I could, would you sing with me?
Draw the Muse inside
Given form, I will provide
Your deepest inspiration

Now language light as air
Refined by your lips
Will make Music there
I have dreamed of this

Surrender

for Shulamit

A melody line
Nimble thread through
Your limbs tying you
To the fact of it

All ears now you are
At rest and still
The harmony will
Entreat surrender

Complete as the heart
Entangled too
For lovers do

Capture each other

Pallid Angel

for Martha

Winter light covers you
Like a blue stencil
Like ice on lavender lips

I lean in to kiss
My pallid angel
With her cobalt hair
Under an azure sky
Eight limbs akimbo
We splashed into love like this
In your saltwater eyes
Are tender blueberries

On December twenty-fifth
Cerulean sheets
Resemble the open sea
Shall we set the sail
On this Christmas morning!

The Opera Song

VERSE:

With mezzo forte
I have been condemned
My soul to die
in this fluorescent Hell
The blank verse
of the baritones offend

So I lock my desk and bid farewell
To the amateur, the office clown
For the magic moon will soon dispel

The dry parlando
of the men uptown
And the troubadours
have a tale to tell
Into the night and the music

I am bound
In my next life, I long to be
The prima donna with the sterling C
In sotto voce
I whisper lies
While the mezzo tries to harmonize
Brillante recitative

The tenor dies,
the chorus grieves

In my next dream I'll need a chef
A vocal coach of the treble clef
Gowns galore of silk and tulle
A pilot, a husband or two
A stylist, as tickets are sold
I'm a star, I am gold

Basso buffo has his schtick
The baritone his bailiwick
All profoundly sad and still, a thrill
This kiss and tell and kiss and kill
Carismatica is she
The soprano I long to be

In my fancy what I want next
Are libretti or musical text
Incantesimo from my throat and lips
This magic this lyrical mix
Raffinata, elegant, chic
Questa lingua I now speak:

BRIDGE:

Sforzando glissando sostenuto
e tutto
Misterioso espressivo delicato
martellato
Maestro spinto secco e falsetto
Arietta arioso verismo e stretto
Chiaroscuro messa di voce
brillantissimo e capriccio

Gesamtkunstwerk Singstimme
Zwischenfach Sprechstimme
Mise-en-scène intermezzo en
pressant ritornello
Repertoire recitando erotische
rinforzando
Gracieux coloratura allegretto
sprezzatura
Cabaletta cavatina la commedia
è finita
Appassionata tessitura piacevole
piangevole
Simon Boccanegra, Giuseppe Verdi,
Desdemona, Donizetti
Don Giovanni, Violetta, Cellini,
Puccini, Poppea, Tosca, Bellini.

At dress rehearsal, as singers will
She strained her voice
She caught a chill
Now the stage, the lights,
The love are mine
The understudy, the next headline
Paparazzi clamor to see
La prossima stella will be me!

High Summer Season

Oh, when will the season turn?
Patches of snow linger
She is a stubborn winter guest
Oh, when will the songbird fly

Into the Argentine sunset?
Like ancient mariners by night
The moon and stars their guide
This pilgrimage to summer

Perennial act of faith
Near cookstove and coffee I wait
For the amber glow
To crack the cold horizon

Oh, when will the warbler call?
Slow afternoons lengthen
When will the old house hale again
Windows open to a warmer wind

Oh, when will the season turn?
The nightingale arrive
Bluebird, thrush, and starling
Feathered Angels singing the sky
Into High Summer Season

The Albatross Song

My husband cuts a figure
In jacquard silken tie
Distinctive
On high thread count white
His eyes look better
With a pair of Ray Bans
Pure Ivy League
He's an impressive man
My lover, the other
Whose sartorial splendor's

Resplendent
In silken white feather
The outdoor type he likes to hunt
And to fish
How could I fall
For an Australian at all?

My husband is endowed
In manner, style, and cash
Bourgeois
Travels the globe first class
World-wide chaos, crime,
And climate change
Cannot deter
A man in a Range Rover

My lover, the other
On the other hand
Native
More like a bird than a man
With bedroom eyes, a beak
Three toes, and webbed feet
Triathlete
Winged god of the sea

My husband, the sovereign
Suburban overlord
Lexus LX
But his queen is bored
She's leaving the Mister for a
Wandering Albatross
Criss-crossing the sky

With my other
Lover
Voyager
I'll want four lines
Some sticky rhyme
To slow a particular kind
Of lexical glut

And I'll want
Floors like that
Solid and flat
A pencil thin black
And white pied-à-terre

I'll want a plot
Rhapsodic fiction
To highlight her inimitable diction
And heart

And I'll want
Scansion and verse
Flowers and birds
A silvery high-design
Musical rocket ship

There she will dress
And in the finest
Couture she steps
Onto the stage

This is a launch pad
The center must hold

She is alone now
In outer space
Her gown shimmers
She becomes pure light
In the rare upper air

Higher

for Men

Oh what shall we sing
Sitting on this firewire
With the rest of the flock
I'll lift my song higher

Well above the din
North of the grayest day
Angels, birds, and I
Leap up and away

And you my true love
Have been stilled by pain
Grounded in silence
On earth you'll remain

Until an air
Blows in like spring
You'll be young again
Raise your voice, take wing

**ALL WORDS AND MUSIC IN THE EIGHT
SONGS OF THE SONG CYCLE
ANGELS, BIRDS, AND I...
ARE BY PATRICIA BARBER. BMI.
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there is no recorded silence like yours
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you are brilliant and you generously
share that with me
27 more years?
—PLB*



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