

MUSIC

# Where has she been all my life?

Jazz phenom Patricia Barber was in my head and I didn't know it

BY ORIANA GREEN



I've been a serious jazz fan all my adult life. KMHD provides my daily soundtrack, and in my 20s I was even a groupie of sorts, following a jazz quintet from gig to gig.

So I am astonished that until a few months ago, Patricia Barber managed to elude my radar. And my gaydar.

While lesbian folk singers with guitars seem to proliferate like bamboo fed by an underground spring, a lesbian jazz singer who plays piano is as rare as a zinnia in December. And so is Barber's fourfold talent. She is equal parts amazing composer, lyricist, pianist and singer.

Which is why her talents seem somewhat wasted on her latest album, *Nightclub*, a compilation of jazz standards. She says she did it, in part, to appease her faithful fans who wanted a recording of the rest of the music she plays during her regular gig at Chicago's Green Mill. There's nothing wrong with the CD; I just prefer her original material.

I have since made up for lost time by listening to every one of her five CDs several times over and have come to realize Barber was in my life all along. Now that I'm attuned to the smoky, sultry timbre of her voice that is at once both hot and cool, I catch her on KMHD several times a day.

I had the great fortune to experience Barber live last August at the Mount Hood Jazz Festival. Perhaps no one told her she'd be playing her set in the scorching 90-degree sun—or perhaps she traded comfort to look jazz club-hip dressed all in black. No matter; her music was cool enough to ice off the whole throng that gradually crowded the lawn in front of her stage.

In person, she plays like a dancer—when she finishes a phrase she retracts her hands to her body in exotic, dramatic gestures that manage to look spontaneous and natural. Her vocal range seems even wider, and her deep, throaty register is both poignant and evocative.

"Post-Modern Blues" from her hit album *Modern Cool* went over especially well with the crowd. The catchy lyrics were appreciated, despite the distractions of restless children somersaulting across the grass. Pro that she is, Barber held the fans in her thrall and cooked up a big sound from her quartet to finish with Duke Ellington's "Caravan."

We met up after the gig but decided to do our interview via e-mail. While Barber is no closet case, she doesn't think of herself as a lesbian musician and declined to answer questions about the impact of her orientation or the challenges she's faced as a woman fronting a jazz group. And although she seems to be having fun playing with gender identity in songs such as "Black Magic Woman" and "She's a Lady," she didn't respond to questions about that, either.

**Question:** Are you where you thought you'd be in your career after 20 years in the business?

**Answer:** Yes, I'm probably exactly where I thought I'd be after 20 years. I thought I'd be a kind of cult success, and I think I've achieved at least that and even a little more than I expected in other ways.

**Q:** Your CDs have displayed solid musicianship and stellar turns from the beginning. With all the glowing reviews you've received in recent years, do you ever feel like your

Jazz can be taught to those with natural talent for it. It is only moderately successful to teach music at all to those without a natural musical talent. And often, jazz doesn't need to be academically taught at all; it can be best to learn it "on the streets."

**Q:** In the song "If This Isn't Jazz," you write about the occupational hazard of smoke in your lungs and ask, "Is this a lifestyle mistake?" Is the jazz club scene starting to lose its appeal—or perhaps you were never in love with those venues to begin with? Would you

rather just compose, record and tour to larger, smokeless venues?

**A:** I love the nightclub scene and always have. My new CD, *Nightclub*, is dedicated to the late-night fans I've played for in nightclubs for years. Yes, as I gain more control and as I get older, I ask for no smoking, and that's important to me now. Eventually, I'd like to perform less and compose more—cook and do a lot of nothing. But performance will always be an important part of the music. It's hard to imagine a life without it now.

**Q:** What started your lyrics flowing, since they don't appear until *Cafe Blue*? Since your first recorded compositions were instrumental, did you intend all along to also write lyrics, or did they just start flowing one day? Is that part of songwriting pleasure or agony? Are you able to resist making your songs autobiographical, or is that a great way to vent? I'm thinking of "Winter" and "Let It Rain."

**A:** As a jazz singer, I became frustrated with the jazz vocal repertoire and thought I would give composing lyrics a go. It is both pleasure and agony, and some of my songs are autobiographical, but not all of them could be. At some point a writer has to take on the persona of a fictional character because either the material would be too paltry or the life would be too chaotic.

**Q:** So many of the songs you write seem to be melancholy. Does that reflect your basic personality, or is it just cooler to be blue?

**A:** For some reason, it's hard to capture happiness because it comes in the form of a quiet, contented and relatively undramatic shape. It's as elusive to portray as it is to find.

**Q:** Do you still dream of opening your own nightclub? Any other big dreams you want to share?

**A:** I would no longer like to own a nightclub. I'm having a very noisy, fun-filled, exciting life. My dreams for my future would be simple and quiet and full of family and friends and music.

If you have even the tiniest bit of inclination to appreciate jazz or just a great musician, you should run, not walk, to your nearest CD vendor and buy any Patricia Barber album you can find. My faves are *Cafe Blue* and *Modern Cool*. Check them all out at [patriciabarber.com](http://patriciabarber.com). **JN**

ORIANA GREEN will never miss another Portland appearance of Patricia Barber. She is also the Entertainment Editor of Just Out and can be reached at [oriana@justout.com](mailto:oriana@justout.com).

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