

MUSIC

Diva schmiva Jazz and pop greatness without all the 'tude

BY TJ NORRIS

VERSE

Patricia Barber • Blue Note Records



Jazz label giant Blue Note has released the newest and the bluest from lesbian pianist/singer/songwriter Patricia Barber, titled *Verse*.

On the disc opener, "The Moon," she has captured a mystical melding of jazz, spoken word and cool attitude. Silken vocals twist oh so sweetly, with brilliant confidence and the pure, deep bass of Michael Arnpol and singing trumpet of Dave Douglas.

Some may say that it is all in the pacing, and here, well, it's true. Lyrics like "tonight there won't be light, 'cause I can't shine without you" reveal true passion. Filled with plenty of questions, the short "Lost in This Love" recalls an echo of Suzanne Vega.

Partly cabaret storytelling, Barber lights up her search with the vibrato of her Fender Rhodes strings on "Clues," making for an ethereal contemporary sound. Tongue-twisted lyrics sung over softened percussion and cymbal work provided by drummer Joey Baron offer an atmosphere of solitude.

Barber's lyrics are biting and pronounced, her speech styled, with an almost neo-beat phrasing appealing to a jazz aesthetic more in the vein of Betty Carter and early Abbey Lincoln, who use(d) their voices like musical instruments rather than, say, Dinah Washington or Mildred Bailey, whose sassy feminine charm and wit defined their public selves. Not to say that this record is lacking in those areas—it's just more icy than soulful, more cerebral than earthy.

On this seventh disc since 1989, Barber has suited up and tightened her sound to include the smoldering French-sung "Dansons la Gigue." Douglas sounds so skillfully sleek in a rare understated performance here in a lilting, kinda blue, Miles Davis sorta way.

"If I Were Blue" concludes the disc with Barber mesmerizing about Hockney, Hopper, Picasso and Goya as she radiates through illusions produced through color and sensual light. She talks about their silences as Neil Alger delicately wields a Spanish-flavored guitar.

A beautiful song about indigoes, the rain and the thick of

night becomes a meditation. Barber breathes with the precision, if not the attitude, of any notable diva.

HOMETIME

Alison Moyet • Sanctuary Records

After an eight-year hiatus, Alison Moyet has returned to form on her first full-length recording since 1994's critically successful *Essex*.

In *Hometime* we experience the divine, deep tonal rapture we've grown accustomed to from a rare British diva in the same vein as Annie Lennox and Tracey Thorn. Moyet's bold chords are still in great shape after a handful of perfect pop gems: her 1984 solo debut, *Alf*; its follow-up, *Raindancing*; and the gay dance floor anthems of *Upstairs at Eric's* from her former band, Yazoo.

Hometime provides lush tunes without a lot of pomp and circumstance. Here Moyet shines vibrantly on the title track, crooning "I'll remember his name, and he'll remember mine" with a shy curl of a knowing smile. "Say It" sways in its bold refrains and full chorus with brash lyrical repetition.

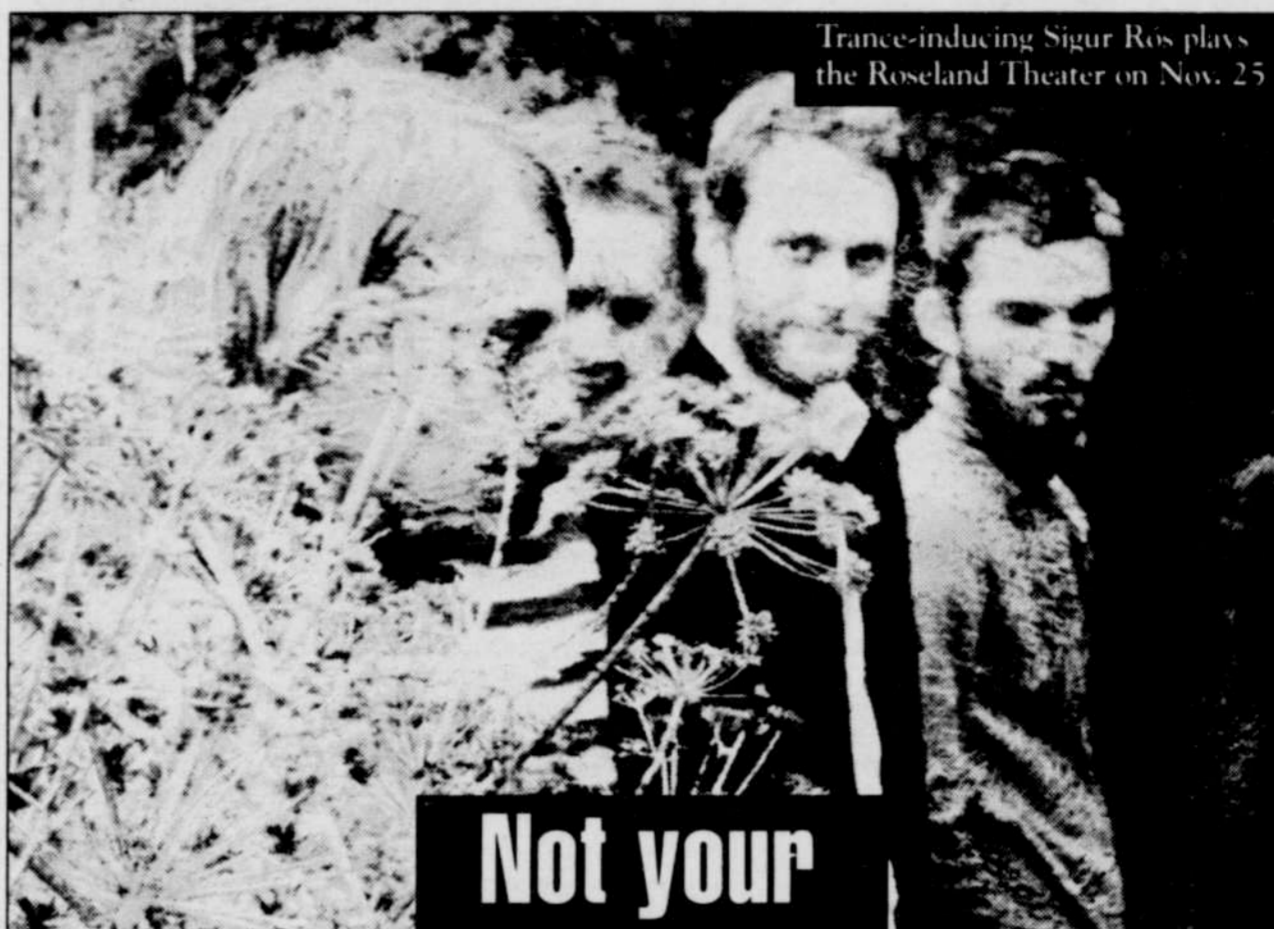
Though no track here has the same flavors of her older and wiser recordings, Moyet takes us on a more subtle ride, purring all the way through sensual pop songs like "More," harkening back to 1991's soulful *Hoodoo*.

Moyet hasn't been resting pretty during the time away from the recording studio; she was refocusing her energies in the theater, starring in the stage smash *Chicago* in London's West End. Like the Pet Shop Boys—whose *Some-where* tour established their passion for the grand theater back in 1997, leading to a collaborative stint with playwright Jonathan Harvey in *Closer to Heaven*—she seems to be part of a



new type of British invasion on the London stage.

"If You Don't Come Back to Me" is Moyet's flirtation with dramatic jazz that has essence-au-Massive Attack written all over it. She succeeds in traversing to a new place on one of 2002's brighter discs. Welcome back, Alison, and don't keep us waiting another eight years! **J**



Trance-inducing Sigur Rós plays the Roseland Theater on Nov. 25

Not your average rock band

Get ready, Portland, for Sigur Rós

BY CORI TARATOOT

First, some context. Sigur Rós is from Iceland. Four guys: gay frontman Jónsi Birgisson (vocals, guitars), Kjarri Sveinsson (keyboards), Orri Páll Drason (drums) and Goggi Holm (bass). The band is named after Birgisson's little sister and translates as "victory rose."

You should know that Birgisson sings nonsense lyrics in a made-up language he calls "Hopelandic." You should probably also know that the band's second album, 2000's *agaetis byrjun* (Icelandic for, approximately, a good beginning), stoked a fire in the pants of mainstream and alternative music critics. Sigur Rós is not your average rock band.

So when the band made the long trek to North America for their first U.S. shows in the spring of 2001, urban myths propagated wildly. Fans reportedly fell down (literally) at the feet of the humming haunted amplifiers—fainting, coming to, then walking away dazed, hypnotized and in love.

You might not understand Birgisson's lexicon (with sounds like "ils-eye-yoh"), but you'll recognize something strange and familiar in his haunting falsetto. Undereath the rise and fall of tender, quivering vocals and cello-bowed electric guitar, the lead singer's bandmates create atmospheric open melodic lines that meet him in a narcotic fog.

It's been said you can hear Iceland in the veins of this band—quiet and icy and big,

moving slowly toward something, on the verge of something you can just barely understand.

Sigur Rós is not likely to get radio airtime, but some of Hollywood gets it—Cameron Crowe hired them to write two songs for *Vanilla Sky*. Chances are the band won't do that again, but much of

what they do would serve a film well. More than a traditional verse-chorus-verse-bridge pop band, the four boys create an entire habitat of music. And where much of the post-1970s Eno ambient sounds fall into the "background music" category, Sigur Rós distributes incremental doses of light-psychedelic beauty that'll stop open-eared junkie music lovers in their tracks.

Which leads us to their latest, (). A spare title, no-name tracks and empty white pages for liner notes, this is another epic release. With most cuts exceeding eight minutes, Sigur Rós rightfully assumes an intelligence in their listeners. And while this album's tone and color closely resemble earlier works, the band has fought off the demons that often torch artists with the noose of expectations readied around their necks.

This is an album even more unconventional than the last, with songs drifting further from the anchor of beginning-middle-end structures. Listen to it in one sitting—the band obviously intended for it to be experienced as a 71-minute tale. Then go catch Sigur Rós on Nov. 25 at the Roseland. Don't forget the smelling salts. **J**

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