



PATRICIA BARBER

MYTHOLOGIES

With voice, words, and piano, **Patricia Barber** delivers intelligence and insouciance. She is a singular jazz singer and pianist, but for the last few years it is her songwriting that has been attracting big attention. In concert, she confides by whispering a song of sweet nothings into the listener's ear, then surprises with a rock-edged and trashy song about a one-night stand. She comes across more street-smart than book-smart.

And now Barber's gone academic, though the result is perhaps the most accessible music of her career. Over the past two years, Barber has been busy recording an eleven-song cycle. She titled it **Mythologies** and based it on *The Metamorphoses of Ovid* – the centuries-old classic of Western literature, filled with gods, mortals and apparently, humor.

"Ovid was a Roman poet who was putting a spin on Greek mythology," says Barber. "I just couldn't believe what a wonderful writer he was – how funny and smart and brilliant are these characters he created. He doesn't flesh them out so I can understand why opera composers and librettists throughout history have used Ovid again and again."

But – a *jazz* song cycle based on characters from Greek mythology? "I was definitely looking at other song cycles for inspiration, but they tend to be more in the classical realm. There were very few that I can recall in what I would call popular music, and jazz song cycles just don't seem to exist. It occurred to me that I could write a song cycle based on these characters but it was something that I thought would be a luxury and I would need some time off."

Time off does not come too easy to a career-focused jazz performer like Barber who has spent years developing a unique sound and an international following. For close to fifteen years, the Chicago-based singer/pianist has led her own band, toured tirelessly and is now, in every sense of the word, a success. She has recorded a series of utterly original and critically acclaimed albums, including Cafe Blue, Modern Cool, Nightclub, Verse, and Live: A Fortnight in France.

Mythologies is Barber's ninth career album, and comprises eleven tracks of varying musical styles and moods, each based on a character from Ovid's masterwork. It was a project that demanded focus and a bit of self-education – but how to set aside the time?

"I only thought of this project as a real possibility when I was thinking of applying for the Guggenheim Fellowship. It seemed the right kind of project because it was so rarified, and my life as it was couldn't justify all the time spent on research that would be necessary."

Guggenheim Fellowships are awarded annually "to men and women who have already demonstrated exceptional capacity for productive scholarship or exceptional creative ability in the arts." They are cash gifts intended to defray living costs allowing for focus on a single project; past recipients have included writer Noam Chomsky, poet e. e. cummings, and the classical composer Aaron Copland. Jazz musicians are a rarity, and a popular songwriter had never received a Guggenheim until 2003, when Patricia Barber was added to the list.



"I didn't necessarily expect to get the fellowship but then when I did I was thrilled. Actually this is the first grant in my life that I ever applied for." Barber received a year-long grant to study, compose and create a book of songs. How she achieved that end was up to her.

"I forced myself to study as much as I actually wrote. I had always studied songwriters like Cole Porter and Rogers and Hart. With the Fellowship, I used the time to study the great poets and the great classical composers, especially Chopin, some Verdi. And Schubert! His meter. His song. I would play them on the piano and I have notebooks charting the harmonies. Sometimes you'll hear in opera how a melodic line can float over a harmony – justify an unusual harmonic change. That was definitely something I learned during this year that was really a great lesson for me, very different from a Cole Porter kind of a song."

Barber looks back on the process as beneficial. "It's made me a much better musician, a better songwriter. It is exciting to have tools to enrich what I already know about jazz and popular songwriting."

Mythologies is the product of a careful balancing of the musical and literary – offering Barber's fans a number of ways into the music. "I'm very careful as a songwriter to give the songs multiple associations, but there should be an immediate satisfaction upon hearing a song. If it doesn't work the first time it's sung, it doesn't work. And then, hopefully it will wear well too."

Mythologies is also the product of a varied and flexible songwriting approach. In fact, as Barber recalls, "it's different for every song – sometimes the words came first. Sometimes the [melody] line was first."

"Some songs like 'Morpheus' sound simple but in fact are more complex: I knew ahead of time I wanted it to be two 16-bar sections. Having studied Schubert and harmony, I wrote a chordal structure. Then I laid a melody over that and a poem over that, the rhyme scheme based on a poem by [Lord Alfred] Tennyson. Some songs, like 'Whiteworld,' were written with less precision and more instinct."

Patricia Barber offers a song-by-song description of the album in her own words:

- **"The Moon"** actually predates my getting the Guggenheim Fellowship [the song opens Barber's 2002 release *Verse*]. "I am fascinated with the moon, how writers have written about the moon, and how poets have been moonstruck. I started reading everything I could get my hands on about the moon. I asked colleagues of my partner, who is a professor at the University of Chicago, to send me moon poetry. I thought perhaps I had a new angle on the subject, but wanted to make sure. The Moon, as character here, is a performer, broken-hearted, but she still has to dress up and step onto the universal stage every night. If she doesn't, it stays dark down here and all Chaos will ensue. This is her dilemma."
- **"Morpheus"** is very dear to me because I have sleep issues, bad insomnia. It's a prayer to the God of Sleep to send his son, Morpheus, the God of Dreams. It is one of my favorite songs of the entire song cycle.
- **"Pygmalion"** is very much in a classic American song form, written in that 32-bar style. There are a few harmonic variations and of course, what a wonderful story, how he waits for this cold piece of rock, this statue of a woman to come to life. That was easy for me to generalize to the universal question: "Can I will you to love me? Can I will the fantasy to life?"



- **"Hunger"** is one of Ovid's fun characters. When I was reading about Hunger I was just dying imagining all the possibilities. She's such an ugly character, thin and voracious and mean with greenish skin. In our society it's chic to be thin so I had the idea to simply turn the story on its head and I made Hunger chic and glamorous and mean. It's dark but it's funny. It has one of my favorite lines of the entire song cycle: "Now the Hunter is prey and the Hungry are meat..."
- **"Icarus"**, in my version, doesn't crash. He just keeps flying up until you can't see him anymore. I grafted the Nina Simone story onto the Icarus story and dedicated the song to her. It starts with Daedalus, Icarus's father, crafting the wings. The second verse is about Nina at the Midtown club outside of Philadelphia in her chiffon dress. They both know that only by taking a big risk will you ever fly.
- **"Orpheus"**, as I wrote it, is an actual sonnet. It is based on one of the most beautiful stories every written. He was a musician appealing to Hades to let his love, Eurydice live again. I tried to find a contemporary angle – so my modern day Orpheus is a gardener. This is a sad, sad song.
- **"Persephone"** is fun, fun, fun – she's such a wonderful character. There wasn't quite enough in Ovid about her. She's in Book Five – abducted by Hades and taken to the underworld and then in Book Ten as one of the judges of Orpheus's plea. So I went back to Homer, the origin of the written story of Persephone, and I read Dante because I was curious about Hell. I seized poetic license and created a story in which Persephone ends up liking her power down there. She is the only god who can traverse the upper- and underworlds. She becomes Virgil leading an angel through hell, trying to corrupt her as she is showing signs of weakness. She will use anything at her disposal to get what she wants. It's a song of seduction.
- **"Narcissus"** – I had notes written down that this would be one of my "smart" songs because of the obvious double-entendre possibilities. Then I started reading secondary literature about Narcissus and it was very interesting – it was slightly moralistic in its judgment of the danger of "Narcissistic" love as being homosexual. Being gay myself, I thought, why not embrace that idea? If homosexual love is Narcissistic, and you don't know whether you're making love to yourself or to the other, how much fun is that? That's what it's about and it turned out to be a very sweet, simple, lyrical, beautiful song, with a musical twist in that it's in a time-signature of 10/4. It could be the gay wedding song.
- **"Whiteworld"** was the first song I wrote after I won the Guggenheim [the song appears on Barber's 2004 release Live: A Fortnight In France]. It's the only song that isn't titled with a character – it's about Oedipus. He was clearly a young, arrogant man who killed his father. I read the Sophocles version of the story: "I came to a juncture of two roads" – the bridge of the song is actually Sophocles verbatim. There, an old man hit him. He not only hit him back but he "had to kill them all." Given historical and current events, the song wrote itself.
- **"Phaethon"** also wrote itself and is about another arrogant young man – he thinks he can drive his father's chariot – the chariot of the Sun. But he can't – he doesn't have the skill or the maturity so he ends up scorching the earth until there are very few species left. At the end of the story Mother Earth pleads with Zeus to kill Phaethon before every single last species is dead, which he does. It has a lot of obvious modern-day parallels. I asked some wonderful kids from the Chicago Children's Choir to rap a list of endangered species over the final section of the song.



▪ **“The Hours”** are two Goddesses in Ovid. They are everywhere, watching. They simply watch us as we squirm and scream out in pain and they do nothing but mark time. They never lift a finger. So the song is railing against their callousness, and it is an homage to human courage in the face of Death. I read the writing of Primo Levi, an Auschwitz survivor, to try to understand what it feels like knowing death is coming soon. I also consulted my doctor, who took me through the University of Chicago hospitals and talked to me about life and death. It gave me some purchase on the subject. I had to have my favorite choir, Choral Thunder, sing it. If this song doesn't bring tears to your eyes, nothing will.

“The Hours” is very dear to me – it's about time, life and death. But it's also about life as a performance, or more accurately, a performer, writing about our life as a performance. Mythologies starts with a recording of a small tape recorded solo piano performance, the introduction to “The Moon.” It is a distancing technique; it is there to remind you that this story is being told by a performer and that we're all performers on the universal stage. “The Hours” acts as a matching bookend to “The Moon,” and says, “this performance [is], in fact, last, and sweetly in vain, so let me entertain you one more time.”

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Tourdaten: www.karsten-jahnke.de

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