

Pamela Luss

By Eric Nemeyer

J1: Talk about your new CD *Sweet and Saxy*. What are you particularly excited about with this CD? What are some of the highlights? How does it differ from *Your Eyes and Magnet*?

PL: It is exciting to work with Houston Person for many reasons. It was most rewarding for me because I was learning from a master. His wealth of knowledge is really remarkable. When we worked together on *Your Eyes and Magnet*, we discovered that we had a good chemistry musically; this led to the creation of *Sweet and Saxy*. Not only did Houston pick the right songs for me, songs I hadn't been familiar with before, he was also open-minded about any of my song suggestions. From beginning to end, he was a total pleasure to work with. We accomplished a lot in a short amount of time without any stress. He also has the wisdom to pick songs that worked really well together so that the album has a definite mood and flows all the way through. John di Martino and I worked on the arrangements together, and Houston was always involved. We spoke constantly on the phone, and Houston came to some of the rehearsals, so we could all make musical decisions together. Due to the combined effort beforehand, we were able to record *Sweet*



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and Saxy in two 4 hour sessions without the need to do many takes. Houston put together a great band, with James Chirillo (guitar), Ray Drummond (bass), and Willie Jones III (drums), in addition to Houston and John, which was another reason as to why the recording session went so smoothly. Houston played on every track but one, and that was because Houston wanted "It's Too Late" recorded with just piano and guitar. It's no secret that Houston really knows how to play with a singer! He literally gets inside my head and knows where I'm going before I do. I like to think that this positive energy comes through on the album. Even the title, *Sweet and Saxy*, was a collaborative effort between the two of us.

J1: How did this love affair with singing begin?

PL: My Mom says that even as a young child, I was extremely responsive to rhythmic sounds. She says I used to mimic everyday sounds such as singing with a hairdryer or start dancing to the busy signal on the telephone. My parents say that I could sing back notes at a very early age, and that when I started to sing as a small child, it was always in pitch. At an early age,

my dad played the piano for me, so I could sing. My father's family has a musical background, and he plays the piano extremely well for a non-professional player. He has amazingly good taste in songs and singers. He introduced me to singers, instrumentalists, and great songs early on and over the years. My parents continued to nurture my interest in music by always making music available to me as a child and then supporting me in my own musical endeavors as I continued to grow.

J1: What is it about singing jazz in particular that you enjoy so much, as opposed to other styles of singing?

PL: Again, my dad exposed me to jazz early on. What's great about singing Jazz and the American Songbook is we can take any song and make it something completely personal, and something that completely reflects one's own musical thinking and desires. That's the exciting and creative part for me because there are no restrictions in Jazz. We can make it our own both rhythmically or conceptually. For me, the idea is to

create something that's intimate and totally personal. Some of the older songs from the American Songbook and even some pop songs from different eras have uniquely beautiful music and lyrics that you may not hear very often in today's environment.

J1: What steps did you take to start a career as a singer? I know you went to New York University. What steps did you take to begin making a name for yourself, other than just "being really good?"

PL: Thank you for saying that. I took private voice lessons early on, and I also studied music after school and during the summers. After NYU where I majored in Music, I began working at a demanding day job and attempted to do my singing at the same time. I didn't really pursue it full time until I was able to sing at a benefit at Weill Hall at Carnegie Hall. It was there that I met and worked with the wonderful saxophonist Vincent Herring for the first time. Vince produced my first album, which was *There's Something About You I Don't Know* and introduced me to Savant/HighNote Records. During that time, I was also performing weekly at a restaurant called Bruno Jamais in New York City.

J1: What have been some of the highlights of your career thus far and why?

PL: I really love performing as a singer. I especially love the clubs where you can feel intimate with the audience, so I do feel good every time I perform to a

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live audience. As I mentioned, I sang at Weill Hall a few times, which is a fairly large hall – and that led to my pursuing singing as a full-time career, so I'd have to say that was a highlight along with meeting Vincent Herring, who eventually introduced me to HighNote/Savant for my first album was a highlight. I also performed on live, national television on the Jerry Lewis telethon. That was actually fun, and I wasn't as nervous as I thought I would be. We had a live audience as well as TV cameras, and they were a great audience, so I felt at home. I've had the opportunity to meet and work with very talented people as a result of my career, almost too many to mention, but certainly Todd Barkan was one who stands out. He produced my last two albums, one of which was *Magnet*, which was featured twice on iTunes, both in Jazz and Vocal, another highlight. He was extremely helpful to me. Then too, of course, working with Houston Person has been an enormous career highlight – I guess I've told you that before – can't say enough good things about Houston.

JJ: What events current or upcoming are you excited about in your musical life?

PL: We just played at Jazz Standard as the official debut of *Sweet and Saxy*. I'm looking forward to doing other club appearances next at Phil's Café in Philadelphia and the Metropolitan Room. I will be doing an in-store performance for *Sweet and Saxy* at Barnes and Noble, and lots of radio interviews. Presently, I'm also putting together ideas for a concept-driven show, which is something new for me.

JJ: What is the primary motivational force in your musical endeavors?

PL: My passion for music and for singing! If I'm not singing myself, I'm usually out to hear live music around New York or even listening at home to iTunes or various cds. You can't be involved in the music business unless you're incredibly passionate about it. This is not just something that you fall into – you have to really want it – and pursue it with a great deal of tenacity.

JJ: What are your top five desert island vocal records that you couldn't possibly live without, and please state why? There is so much out there to find and it helps to get recommendations from the singers themselves.

PL: (1) Frank Sinatra – *In the Wee Small Hours* – That is the apex of the Great American Songbook. Anyone who wants to know how to sing this music should start right here, with "Glad to Be Unhappy" and "What Is This Thing Called Love." This is as good as it gets! I sang "Glad To Be Unhappy" as part of a medley on my last album, *Magnet*.

(2) Jon Lucien – *A Time For Love* – I've picked Jon Lucien not only because I love his singing and his voice, but his music, and this album in particular, has a lush, relaxing, tropical groove to it that would be especially appropriate to listen to it on a desert island!

(3) Ella Fitzgerald – *Ella in Berlin* – Well, she's Ella, what else can I say? (4) Bill Withers – *The Best of Bill Withers* – He was a brilliant, consistently inspired singer-songwriter, this album is proof; although, I can't pick one favorite. Houston and I liked "Ain't No Sunshine" so much that we did our own interpretation on the new album. (5) Houston Person – *The Art and Soul of Houston Person* – Okay, technically he's not a vocalist, but there is no better living interpreter of the great songs. Houston gets to the essential core of each song in a way that most singers can only dream about, and this is a great collection of classic tunes that's constantly in my CD player or on my iTunes list.

JJ: As an artist, your state of mind and ability to dig deep is important. Outside of playing, what do you do to re-center and find peace of mind? Or perhaps, you feel that angst is good for music?

PL: Recently I moved to a new apartment that's right near the East River in Manhattan. My favorite diversion, since then, is to take a nice soul-clearing walk along the waterside – usually listening to music. Other than that, I like to ride my bike and exercise when I get a chance. I also value spending quality time with friends and family. Oh, I have to mention, there are some evenings when I love to chill out with a good TV show or a movie and a few gummy bears! But really, walking along the river is my new passion; that's about the most relaxing and centering activity that I can imagine.

JJ: As a musician, what do you feel your role or responsibility is in our society? Is what you do something only for you and the musicians you are sharing the stage with, or are you trying to achieve something outside of that microcosm?

PL: When I sing, I try to reach people's hearts – move them, inspire happy memories, or make people feel they are not alone in what they might be feeling, even if it's sad. I would like to think that music can help to remove some of the angst in people's lives and contribute to their well being. I try to express lyrics with genuine emotion, hoping to stay honest and keep it real.

JJ: What is the greatest compliment that you can receive as a singer?

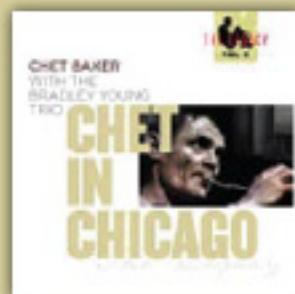
PL: If I could pick the greatest compliment, I would ask to be told that I'm unique and that I have my own sound, rather than imitating someone else or sounding like someone else. I often listen to instrumentalists when researching a song, so that I do develop my own sound vocally without picking up the sounds or phrasing of other singers. I do listen to and greatly enjoy other vocalists, but I never attempt to sound like one of them consciously, but I do like to imitate Houston when he does a solo – only for fun! ■

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