

A BLUES SINGER WHO REALLY LOVES JAZZ

by Elizabeth Goodwin

(Jazz Now Magazine October 1998, cover story)

A petite woman with curly red hair, singer-songwriter Pamela Rose has a warm, hearty, infectious laugh, and her eyes twinkle with mischief and enthusiasm. She answers questions thoughtfully, usually pausing and pondering them before answering. She is a funny, intelligent, introspective, unassuming, sensitive spirit who genuinely enjoys what she is doing and wouldn't have it any other way. She is content but never complacent and conveys a sense of being at peace with herself about her career.

That career has included stops at various musical vista points. She has sung jingles for Taco Bell and California raisin commercials, has given well-received performances in Denmark and Northern Europe, and done session work. She has also performed various club dates, toured with Hammond B-3 organ talent Merl Saunders and vocalist Glenn Walters, and is a former member of Zasu Pitts Memorial Orchestra, which is known for performing Motown hits. She also has a degree in nineteenth century literature from the University of California at Berkeley.

Most recently, however, the Los Angeles native, who now makes her home in San Francisco with her husband and two children, is working assiduously toward building on the success of her two CDs with the Nate Ginsberg Trio. On the Jazzy Side of Blue (1993 with Ginsberg on piano, Maurice Cridlin on bass, and Billy Lee Lewis on drums) and Every Time I'm With You (1996 with Scott Morris on drums, Scott Steed on bass, and various musical guests).



Both projects were independently produced for Rose's Three-Handed Records. Every Time I'm With You was highlighted in the Sharper Image catalogue as part of a demonstration of high-end fidelity audio products. Pamela is currently working with her Blue Five Band, which consists of Tony Lufrano on organ, Jeff Ervin on saxophone and vocals (he's also a songwriter), Tim Landis on guitar, Michael Fellows on drums, and bassist Maurice Cridlin.

An avid, diehard lover of the blues with a burgeoning love and respect for Jazz, Rose has found herself balancing these two art forms in both her live performances and her studio dates, a task that has proved to be creatively challenging. Besides, she admits, there's something about that doggone Hammond B-3 organ she just can't leave alone.

"I'm essentially a blues singer who really loves Jazz," she says, leaning forward with a joyful glint in her eyes. "The soulful, bluesy side is what I like. But from playing with Merl (Saunders) all those years way back when, I never let go of the sound of the Hammond B-3 organ, the real deal. There's something about the B-3 that brings it all together. With the Blue Five, I'm putting together a band that can incorporate those different elements of Jazz and blues."

Rose does an impressive job of combining those elements on her recordings. She has a stirring, broad range on tunes where she belts out the way it's going to be in a love affair, while her tone can be gentle and reassuring on the ballads. She sings with a confident, soul-drenched mellowness that is smooth and facile. On some tunes she can be downright sassy, with attitude to spare.

However, her self-described strong, maternal, nurturing, yet no-nonsense style is paramount on the foot-stomping "Three-Handed Woman" (the brazen title says everything), Cab Calloway's amusing "Oh Grandpa," and the head-bobbin' Rose-Ginsberg-Lewis composition "Take Me Back" (all from On the Jazzy Side of Blue). The more straight-ahead, Jazzier Every Time I'm with You features a romantic "Love for Sale" and two tunes penned by Rose and Ginsberg the wistful "Never Known a Morning" and the tauntingly playful "Consider Me". Rose and Ginsberg also cowrote the breezy "Whether to Stay or Go", about a man with cold feet on the brink of drowning in the pool of love.

Her influences include such luminaries as Irma Thomas ("I love her salty, alto one. I like that about Gladys Knight



too," she says); Ray Charles ("I think if I could die and come back as anybody I'd be Ray Charles," she says with a hearty laugh, "because he's not afraid to do anything. He sits there fearlessly between a lot of genres, and it all sounds like him."); Horace Silver ("There's something so haunting about his constructions. A Song for My Father" is so beautiful. I get tearful when I listen to this record."); and Wes Montgomery ("He played like he was singing a lyric. I just love that!").

But the person who brings it home for Rose is the inimitable Louis Armstrong. "He seriously got me into Jazz as a vocalist. I noticed how much his trumpet playing reminded me of Billy Holiday's voice. He created it all for us because I don't think there were any musical barriers for him at all. He did it all. I'd listen to Louis Armstrong when I was depressed because you couldn't be depressed and listen to his music!"

Rose says she fell in love with the blues after listening to a lot of rock and roll. "Rock and roll was mainly male-dominated ground. But when I started listening to the blues, there were some amazing women, and when they started to sing, you knew they were telling you the truth, you felt it, and you knew it!" she says emphatically.

As for the Jazz appeal, Rose listened to Sarah Vaughan and Ella Fitzgerald and thought that "they always made singing Jazz sound so easy, but one I tried what they did, I found out this wasn't so easy," she says with a chuckle. "Really, harmonically, they're different every time on the same song."

Rose has a great love for songwriting, which she considers her strongest suit. (Check out the title tune on "On the Jazzy Side of Blue".) She was bitten by the Jazz bug when she and her collaborator, Nate Ginsberg, who was also a member of Zasu Pitts, started writing songs after they left the group. They began performing the songs live and found they got a favorable response.

"Performing these tunes was very different from singing "Chain of Fools", which most people know," she recalls. "But you do something a little more obscure that takes some thought, and you're going to get a different response. I found that I liked that different response," she says.

For now, however, the versatile Rose, who also plays piano and guitar, is betting on the crowd's reaction to their band, the Blue Five. A concert recorded live at Storyville in San Francisco last December (but not yet released) should help cement their reputation as a cohesive band with gritty, down-home grooves. Rose says she and the band are working on a CD due for release sometime in 199. She also appreciates the camaraderie of the "warm, friendly musical community found in the Bay Area. People really cheer you on and want to see you do well. I'm amazed at how many great players there are right here."

She also believes firmly in the importance of showing gratitude for matters of the heart, something she definitely does not take for granted.

"I have an incredible husband who's been very supportive and two wonderful children, and I've been blessed to be able to make a living for many years doing something I love.

"Being a working musician is not a rarefied position in life. You really have to work at it, but then you get up there and sometimes you have the right people--the right moment--and most of the time, it's the musicians you're with and also the audience. There are moments when you literally have these out-of-body experiences. I've talked to others who feel the same way. It's like you go off on some musical tangent, and your head is opening wide up, and I don't know where you go, but you go somewhere, and it's really exciting. I look forward to more of those moments."