

## BOTTLE BLONDE GOES BRUNETTE - AND SOLO

By SCOTT D. LEWIS

In order to find her voice, Barbara Lusch had to put down the bottle. The bottle of peroxide, that is.

"I did color my hair, I'm more of a brunette," Lusch says of her stint as a member of Pepe and the Bottle Blondes, "and once in a while I wore a wig."

As that splashy group - which Lusch describes as "the Andrews Sisters backing Ricky Ricardo" - turned increasingly toward frantic Latin pop, Lusch was increasingly drawn to the music of the past.

Specifically, Lusch could no longer deny her love of popular, jazz vocal tunes from the 1940s to the '60s told from a woman's point of view. So she left the group to pursue her solo muse, which dovetailed with bandleader Pepe Raphael's move to New York City.

"I love the storytelling of those songs and the lyrics and the simplicity," she says.

*With her - smoky mezzosoprano singing voice that embraces Julie London's overt sensuality, Peggy Lee's cool, even Doris Day's sense of playfulness, it's not hard to get carried along by the familiar tunes filling her debut self-titled solo album.* "Come On-A My House," a hit for Rosemary Clooney, is - fittingly enticing; "Black Coffee," strongly associated with Ella Fitzgerald, starts racing and then slinks about; and Lusch's rendition of "So Nice" is not too far off the mark set by Astrud Gilberto.

Lusch's band, anchored by Bobby Torres' understated percussion and classy arranging, works like the gears of a fine timepiece, even making room for the occasional solo. But *it's her animated voice and the songs' underlying meanings that give these tunes their spark.*

As it should, "I Love the Way You're Breaking my Heart" aches in more ways than one. "It's talking about a woman having her heart broken and loving it ... at least a certain part of it," Lusch explains. "It's bittersweet. Bobby said it was a beautiful song and I said, 'No, Bobby, it's not; it's about a woman who is either having an affair or she's totally in the moment with this guy and she knows that the next day she's going to be left on her own and miserable.' It's so sad."

Then there is the cover of the Doors' "Light My Fire," certainly the oddball track of the 12. *Lusch compares favorable with Shirley Bassey, Patricia Barber and Mae West in giving the sexually charged song a decidedly female perspective.*

"I just thought it would be fun to do that song," Lusch says with a slight laugh. "I thought it was sexy and fun to do and then we go into a cha-cha at the end. I wanted to take songs that people are familiar with and put on our own twist." Lusch is happy with her new-old hair color, her latest musical direction and whatever lies ahead. "I learned a lot in the studio. I feel like I graduated from graduate school, and this is just a really great time in my life.

Sounds like ample reason to go pick up the bottle - a bottle of champagne, of course.



BARBARA LUSCH



## Naylor, Walkup, Lusch CDs reveal no shortage of "lady days"

*Editor's Note: Kyle O'Brien is a freelance writer and frequent contributor to Jazzscene magazine and other publications. Here, O'Brien reviews the latest CDs of three singers who will be making Oregon appearances at various venues this spring.*

By Kyle O'Brien

**Barbara Lusch, Barbara Lusch, vocals.** As a Bottle Blonde with Pepe & the Bottle Blondes, Barbara Lusch was one of three backup singers that had to share stage time with flamboyant bandleader Pepe Raphael. Now the brunette Portland vocalist gets a chance to show that she has a fine voice all on her own with her first solo disc. **And a lovely voice it is - pure, relaxed and alluringly breathy at times. She plays the chanteuse in a retro sense, channeling a blend of voices like Peggy Lee, Billie Holiday, and Rosemary Clooney on some classic and not-so-classic tunes. The former New York and L.A. actress / musical theatre performer has a delicious sense of timing, drawing the listener in like a siren, with a delivery that sways sexily behind the beat,** as on her slinky swing version of "Come-On-A-My-House," and a Latin swing version of "Light My Fire." Lusch peppers her disc with a light Latin flair, as on the rhythm-fueled intro to a bluesy "Black Coffee," and a tropical summer Samba." A fine band of local musicians back Lusch with understated precision, including pianist Dan Gaynor, percussionist Bobby Torres, drummer Reinhardt Melz, and bassists Essiet Essiet and Scott Steed. They all propel the music forward and give Lusch a solid platform to transport the melody with her plush voice. A fine and overdue debut. Blush Records, 2004, Playing Time: 46:18, ★★★★★ (Lusch will perform April 1 at Bacchus in Vancouver and will host her official CD release party April 2 at Savannah in Old Town.)



**WEDNESDAY** March 31, 2004  
**BLONDE UNBOTTLED**

Barbara Lusch- Portland's own former actress who had a starring role as a Bottle Blonde with Pepe- releases her first solo CD this Friday. The Jazz-inflected party is set for Savannah at 9pm.