

Between Sets with Pamela Luss

Nice Diva's Do...Sway!

Artist Interview by: [Karl Stober](#)

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The voice pulls you in and awakens a pulsation deep within the vault of yesteryear's memories. Growling with unclassifiable overtones, this furiously adept diva, Pamela Luss, has a purr to unleash.

Savant Records, with their 2008 menu of sounds, again lets a quality entree serve up a classic taste, with this young and insightful songstress. Pamela Luss and her 2008 effort *Magnet* has climbed further up the professional ladder of signature status. The one thought extracted from this disk's performance is Pamela's sensual coo; however, what you don't know is the effort behind the voice. Pamela is not short on researching her craft's formula--a true self study, each and every note!

Although, at times, you feel she is holding back from releasing her inner feel, it is really a diversion, for it's the emotional exclamation point to her formula--trait you notice as you spin, more and more in her creations. The style is fresh with musical modernism. Daring in that, Pamela vocalizes those songbook titles of the not-so-common ilk. In other words, she is stimulating and spontaneous with a calculating vision.



Like a select few of jazz's young luminaries, Pamela escapes the typical classic comparisons by opening up to a solicited daily dose of educational experiences. She talks to us about the pulling from every craftsman she meets or performs with. As in the case of Houston Person and Freddy Cole in the current spin *Magnet*, pulling music sheets from the past in order to create a "sound" is commonplace in her preparation. This vocalist has a personal quest "to practice her craft," with an intense desire to please.

So who is this young singer who passes through the arches of excellence in order to offer the fans, who she emotionally acknowledges, to help pave her journey? We start by going backstage and between sets with this smartly arranged vocalist...Pamela Luss.

JazzReview: The tone, the style, the candlelight appeal, it's all there on the outside. What's on the inside?

Pamela Luss: I am a very honest person. I am fun and laugh often but I am somewhat of a private person, believe it or not. I am good to those people close to me. I would like to think that I am also deep and insightful.

JazzReview: Anything you would like to improve on?

Pamela Luss: Hmm...maybe I worry a little too much! (Laughter) And, the music business does not help much for it's not the most stable business. I don't let things get me down. I take things as they come.

JazzReview: Your vocalization communicates to those it hypnotically draws in, releasing a moment from within their past. I believe that is one of the fundamental elements for a signature

songster. How did you go about nurturing that essential portion of your craft? Is it a part one's gifted makeup?

Pamela Luss: I was not even aware I did that. I appreciate that you say that!

What I try to do is really look for the right material and sing from my heart. If I do that, hopefully I touch people's hearts in a way that makes them happy enjoying the music.

I don't really try to target a certain emotion or a certain audience, I just do what I think works best. Again, I never heard that, but I do appreciate what you say.

JazzReview: Pamela, your voice has been critiqued with such language as delicacy, natural and "baby-doll-innocence," all of which is complementary. In your opinion, what best describes your vocal style?

Pamela Luss: I don't scat and I don't do a lot of "affected" things with my voice, so I guess it (my voice) would be equal to the word, "natural." It's hard to come up with another adjective for my voice, for I would be sounding immodest. Pure or unaffected, sounds about right!

JazzReview: At times, I feel as though your voice needs to be unleashed? I hear such poetic loveliness in songs such as "Georgia on My Mind" from your 2006 debut *There's Something About You I Don't Know*, all having a strong appeal to them, however, I sense there is more to come vocally from you. Is that a fair statement?

Pamela Luss: In my early experiences in recording, I had the chance to work with some great musicians and an incredible big band. It was a rewarding learning experience, although what I took from it was that sometimes, you can have a fantastic arrangement, one that sounds great instrumentally, but which isn't built around your voice in the way that it should be. I was a little bit restricted and I sort of had to fit into some of those charts, which hindered my ability to phrase and express myself the way I wanted too.

The first album, you heard some of me, but it was not really all of me at the time. Since then, due to my second album *Your Eyes* and the shows I have been doing in New York and the Telethon (Jerry Lewis), I find performing live is invaluable and you are really able to develop your voice more and more. Since that, coupled with the fact I met Todd Barkan who produced my second album, I learned it's really important for me to sit with an arranger and work the arrangement around my voice. What we do is, he (John) comes up with some ideas and I say I like it or don't. I have a lot of input into my own arrangements. It's very important because it gives me the ability to sing it the way I want, and enjoy what I am doing. I feel with each album, I am showing more of myself. On *Magnet*, I took a lot more risks, showing different parts of my range.

Maybe that's what is referred to being unleashed.

JazzReview: Let's go back a bit and talk about your pianist father. How much of a mentor was he and what portions of your growth did he influence most?

Pamela Luss: My father (Robert) influences me to this day. He has a great ear and tested highest in his percentage when he was younger. He does not really read music, but plays by ear. It is very helpful to me to have him, if he is available to sit in on a rehearsal. He comes to most of my recording sessions. He offers insightful advice, which helps me grow as a musician. He is still very involved in my music. I feel very fortunate about that.

JazzReview: The Weill Recital Hall at the Carnegie Hall was a moment in your life that helped launch your image. Tell us about that evening.

Pamela Luss: That was a while back, however, we did have a few of them (Weill performances), but overall, that it is where I met Vince Herring, one of the great alto players. He introduced me to so many musicians, and that led to my first album. I thank Vince for sort of getting me started, but it (Weill) was a great experience. I have been so fortunate and it was what sort of started me.

I was working in human resources and I figured I could get a regular paycheck and do my singing, but it really didn't work. You really have to put your time and heart-n-soul into your

music if you're going to get anywhere with it professionally. He (Vince) helped me to make the decision and transition into the music world full-time.

JazzReview: Tell us about one of those recent performances?

Pamela Luss: What sticks in my mind in the last couple of years was singing in the Jerry Lewis Telethon. It was one of the most thrilling experiences of my life. I really enjoy being on live television.

JazzReview: You seem to embrace the Great American Songbook with a passionate understanding of the classics; however, you do tend to go to the margins of that book, looking at cuts that have been less likely showcased. What draws you outside the normal perimeters of selections?

Pamela Luss: I try. The standards are great to do, and great for the voice. I really spend a lot of my time so that I am hopefully different from other vocalists. I try to do what others are not doing.

I spend time researching music and Will Friedwald, who is the repertoire consultant on this album, *Magnet*, helps me with a lot of music, too. It is something I think is important and interesting to me, finding a new song and making it my own.

JazzReview: When can we expect the original works of Pamela Luss to emerge?

Pamela Luss: I really do not write my own music. Maybe one day I will. I surprise myself with some of the things I do (Laughter) so maybe! I have no plans for the near future.

JazzReview: One of the true pleasures of your works, aside from your vocalization, is the company you keep. On *Magnet* you surround your sound with such artists as Houston Person, Freddy Cole and producer Todd Barkan, all fine and firmly-cemented jazz figures. Talk about their impact on your success, projects, style and those who have become staples on stage with you.

Pamela Luss: I think Todd Barkan is a wonderful producer. He is very serious about making sure the vocalist is comfortable and that the arrangements cater to the voice. He allows me to sing how I want to and enjoy it. He has a bunch of musicians he usually works with on his albums. He also introduced to me a few new musicians on this album and I met some musicians on the way that I asked to have on both albums. It's a combined effort. He (Todd) really tries to promote the album. He is very proud of it and is really very helpful.

Houston Person is a mentor to me in certain ways. Not only do I think he is the best tenor saxophone player I have heard in my experiences thus far, but the way he plays around a singer is incredibly beautiful. He is right there to support you. I respect him not only as a horn player, but as a person, we are friends.

John Di Martino did most of the arrangements and most of the playing on this album and my last one. I think he is one of the most brilliant accompanists and arrangers out there that I have met. He has a very sensitive touch on the piano. The two of us together come up with something that is truly unique, at least to me it is. Hopefully the audience will agree. So we have a sort of magic that we really embrace.

Freddy Cole (vocals) was just an incredible experience. He is one of a kind and a really nice guy, but I do have to say I was a little bit nervous in the studio. (Laughter) It was a lot of fun doing "No Not Much," as I think it worked out nicely.

Richie Goods is on every one of my albums. I met him recording my first album and we have become friends, and he is extremely supportive. He is such a talented bass player.

I feel one of the most important things for an album, or any performance, is that you like the personalities of everybody you work with and, of course, they have to be talented. There is certain energy or vibe that comes apparent both on albums and performances when everybody wants to work together. That is helpful.

I don't really have a complaint. I have enjoyed everybody I have worked with on my albums.

JazzReview: The upbeat tempo of the title cut "Magnet" is an extremely stimulating portion of your disc. The flute solo experience with the samba-esque beat is a great push-n-play. Your voice is tailored to the arrangement--crisp with a highly respectable "in the groove" delivery! Talk about this piece and its development.

Pamela Luss: I have to give credit to John on this particular song because John is one of the masters of Brazilian sambas. He has it down! I thought we were going to swing it. Actually it was a demo of Jackie Paris originally. Although, I heard one other person record it, it was different, not Latin at all. I asked if there was any way we could get it on the album because it was very catchy, but it was John's idea to make that Samba/Latin feel. He went with it and I just sang. (Laughter) I have to be honest; it was one of the only arrangements on the album that I had no ideas on. I am glad you like it and happy I could sing it.

JazzReview: Critics have commented highly on the medley of "I Could Have Told You/Glad to be Unhappy" piece. It has that element of innocence, yet sensual warmth to it. Tierney Sutton did this a while back with great success and your version is equal to the task, making it a possible signature piece of the album. Address the arrangement development and how you attempted to execute the "feel" of this medley?

Pamela Luss: Well, I am glad you feel that way because it is one of my favorites. I am a sucker for ballads. We can't put everything in the beginning of the album; it has to be well balanced. I love to sing it live.

The reason I put those two songs together is because "Glad to be Unhappy" is a song that I sang with my dad when I was younger. I was too young to understand it but I heard it again and I completely remembered the words which are very strange, but possibly a sign that I should sing it again! So it was meant to be! We were playing another song in the house "I Could Have Told You" I just heard it for the second time in my life. The reason I put them together is because I think the lyrics are very introspective. The way I look at it is that the singer is singing to themselves. They fit nicely as a medley because of the theme and lyrics.

JazzReview: Joining your cast is vocalist Freddy Cole and what an impact! On "No, Not Much," the duet was a cool emotional spin. Speak about the emotional climate with Freddy.

Pamela Luss: I was honored, it was a real complement. It was not easy. I picked the song myself and I gave a list of songs to Freddy through Todd. The man knows so many songs so it's not like you're stuck (Laughter) with Freddy Cole!

Believe it or not, we didn't rehearse. We went into the studio and recorded it. He is such a master and I have to admit I was a little bit nervous. Here he was, an inch away from my face (Sigh), and I said to myself, "Okay, I am really going to have to swing with him." He is one of a kind.

JazzReview: Now that you have three CDs to your credit in *There's Something About You I Don't Know* (2006), *Your Eyes* (2007) and *Magnet* (2008), what do you see are the three major influences, differences and/or changes that have come about on this three-disc journey?

Pamela Luss: From what I have heard, there are a lot of female vocalists (Laugh) and I have met some myself. You really have to stay true to yourself and sing from your heart. Try to do things that are different. Find different material and create unique arrangements, and somehow try to find a way to stick out from the other female vocalists. It's a lot more difficult than I would have anticipated. You have to hope a reviewer or DJ will want to listen to you over the others.

Now I have three albums out - *Magnet* was just released - and so far, I have gotten good feedback I hope it continues to get good feedback.

JazzReview: You mention female vocalists; give me two that really stand out in your mind.

Pamela Luss: I love Diane Reeves; she is one of my favorites. I would say Diana Krall. I really love Liz Wright and I think she has a phenomenal voice. Live, her voice is extremely strong.

JazzReview: Now you get to have the last word. The stage is yours so tell us something we don't know about you.

Pamela Luss: I have something people don't know...I think it's my great grandfather [who] actually sang in Carnegie Hall way back. Like I said I really do come from a musical background. I am also a total sucker for romantic comedies. (Laughter) Oh, and I can't stand whistling!

JazzReview: Now its time to let our hair down. Answer; if you will, these probing questions and be blatantly honest...I will print everything!!!!

Pamela Luss: (Laughter)

1. Two most influential CD's in your library? Sarah Vaughan's *Snowbound*, Chet Baker's *Chet Baker Sings*, and anything by Ella Fitzgerald or Frank Sinatra. Love the Beatles and Streisand too.

2. Favorite performance site? That's hard! What if someone reads this? (Laughter) The Jerry Lewis Telethon. I have to be honest, there are three or four venues in the city I love to perform at.

3. When you're out with the girls, what's your pleasure? I like girl talk... we do not do anything crazy. No strip joints, that is so NOT me...I value my girlfriends.

4. Magazine of choice to sit with? I like New York magazine and Jazz Times. Also JazzImprov and JazzReview.com... (Laughter).

5. Your favorite restaurant? Macelleria in Manhattan, it's my friends place. It's fabulous!!!

6. Favorite curse phrase? Nice Diva's don't curse!

After Sets with Ray Osnato, Savant/High Note Records

Ray Osnato: People tell me I'm a jazz egghead. With my classical training I tend sometimes to over intellectualize things. I once gave a two-hour lecture on Louis' solo in Potato Head Blues, much to the dismay of those in attendance. Fear not gentle reader that will not be the case here.

I've been lucky enough to have known Pamela since her first record came out on the Savant label in 2006. I liked her singing then. She had a way with certain tunes: finding the quirkiness in them and building a whole arrangement on it that was unlike others I had heard. I liked her ballads; straightforward and not the least self-conscious. And of course, the opera lover in me liked her voice, her supreme command of pitch and vibrato.

Here it is, a scant two years later, and I no longer like her voice, I love it! Her interesting phrasing and powers of communication have deepened as a result of gigging at joints like Feinstein's, Birdland, Enzo's and Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola. Oh sure, she can still look inside a tune and turn it upside down, but what impresses me most about Pamela's singing, is the complete lack of self-aggrandizing and ostentatious show. It's all about the music.

I don't need a two-hour lecture to sum up my feelings on Pamela's talent. If you can take the abstract symbols we call music, off the page, and manipulate the emotions of an audience with them the way Pamela can, then I need only one word. Pamela Luss is "magic."