For Hart, the good feelings of jazz started early in life, in a household where the recordings of Sarah Vaughan, Nancy Wilson, and Johnny Mathis were standard fare. "I was a latchkey kid, and my signal to go to school every day was hearing Nancy Wilson's "I Had a Ball," which was always played at the end of a certain radio program," she smiles. "And so I learned that music well.

Growing up in Los Angeles, Hart spent much of her youth in her room with the door closed, belting out the classics along with the record player. "I always loved music, but never thought about pursuing a serious singing career until I moved to Austin in 1982. At that point, an inner voice said to her, "Okay, it's time for me to be an artist." Before then, she was finding steady work around town. Austin has been good for me. It's beautiful, safe, friendly, and a music haven.

The after-work crowd at Eddie V's Edgewater Grill is visibly keyed up, swarming with individual rehash sessions of the day's office events. And then...

Troubles melt like lemon drops.

Pamela Hart begins to soothe frazzled nerves with jazz-oriented renditions of standards such as "Summertime," "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," and "Ain't Misbehavin." The resonating familiarity of the tunes is nicely balanced with inventiveness of delivery: Her warm, clear tone and meticulously controlled pitch carry an illusion of effortlessness. Strong, unexpected closing passages leave the listener ever-optimistic for the next piece.

Notably, even the most heart-wrenching of melancholies comes across with an inexplicable measure of optimism. This is not entirely surprising, given Hart's state of mind when at the mike. "Jazz represents a special kind of freedom to me," she explains. "I go into my own private place when I sing, a comfort zone, a kind of place. I don't worry about who is looking, it's a good feeling."
A highlight of Hart’s career has been producing and performing in the recurring Women in Jazz Concert Series. A premier event for Texas jazz devotees, the series includes musical programs for the public and workshops for amateur and professional singers.

Armed with private and public endowments for the project, Hart has been able to bring nationally-acclaimed vocalists to Austin. “Recently we’ve lost some of our private funding,” she says. “But that’s okay. When the economy picks back up, we’ll get it again. Meanwhile, we have to narrow our scope a little and not bring in so many high dollar acts, to use more local singers and give more workshops.”

In these workshops, singers have the opportunity to hone their craft. They learn microphone techniques and stage presence. And perhaps most importantly, they learn to communicate with musicians, a skill that holds special relevance in a genre where much of the creative process occurs on the spur of the moment. “Whereas traditionally-trained musicians have sheet music with all the notes, maybe four pages for a song, the jazz lead sheet has just the chords, only the basic structure of the tune.” Hart explains. “It’s usually one page. Everything beyond that is improvisation. So, jazz singers must speak a silent language with the musicians during the performance, they must know how to use a nod, a verbal hint, a body posture. In the workshops, we teach that language.”

Hart considers the Women in Jazz series to be one of her two most significant professional undertakings. The other was her CD, entitled May I Come In?, which was completely conceived and produced in Austin. This venture included a foray into uncharted territory for Hart: writing her own music. She wrote two of the 11 pieces on the album, and has since continued composing.

To find the raw materials for contemporary jazz lyrics, Hart reveals that she concentrates “on subjects that people relate to every day, the kind of difficulty or happiness that they are always experiencing.”

More often than not, the specific stimulus is close to home. Her example:

“My husband Kevin and I were having one of our anniversary weekends out at the lake. Until that time, I had maintained this mysteriousness about myself, this keep-him-guessing attitude. That weekend I decided to let that go. I wrote I Want You to Be My Man, just for him, so he could be more self-assured about our relationship.”

Similarly, the inspiration for the feel-good, rhythmic tune Catch Yourself came from Hart’s best friend, Cheryl. “She’s a carefree person, so when she had children, she wanted them to be independent as early as possible. One day she was speaking to her two-year old. The child was getting ready to say something smart to her, she could feel it coming, so she said, ‘You’d better catch yourself!’ It really made me laugh for her to be drawing on that concept with someone so young. And of course, that idea can apply to everybody sometimes.” That particular incident prompted Hart to write:

You come home from work all up tight,
Your honey treats you nice.
You act all crazy
‘cause the freezer’s out of ice...
Before you cross that line,
Get a hold of your mind,
And catch yourself.

A crucial element in the CD production, the Women in Jazz series, and in her regular live performances has been teaming up with the right local musicians. “While I’m performing with someone, we have a different relationship than when we’re off the stage,” she says. “We’re in this place where we get it with each other. We have a mental connection. We look at each other and our eyes are talking. I might even temporarily love a musician. And then,” she laughs, “it will all fade away when we stop playing.”

One might think it would be easier to find just the right instrumentalist in a large city like Los Angeles. That isn’t necessarily so. “Austin has more talented musicians than L.A. Often when I go visit California, I can’t even find a decent jam session. That’s never a problem here.”

The establishment of her niche in local venues has also been extremely important. In addition to performing at Eddie V’s Edgewater Grill, she appears at Ringside at Sullivan’s and the Elephant Room. On Valentine’s Day, she will perform at One World Theatre.

“I don’t believe that Women in Jazz or Pamela Hart would have reached their potential anywhere but Austin,” asserts Hart. Her reasons: a local culture oriented to the arts, audiences with a passion for music, and the availability of funding for worthy projects.

Who could ask for anything more?