

University of Arizona, Bzhezinska is an avid researcher, wont to disappear down jazz-history rabbit holes in her quest to discover as much as possible about her touchstones. About Alice Coltrane, whose improvised recordings, first heard, proved epiphanic: "I felt scared; I couldn't believe somebody could be so free. The challenge for me in jumping from classical to jazz was believing I could make fast, complex harmonic changes using pedals. To learn the rules, then break them."

The Coltranes' story is well documented: Alice was an accomplished pianist ("She said the piano was like a sunrise and the harp was like a sunset") who channelled her grief at losing her sax-titan husband John in 1967 by teaching herself to play the harp he'd bought for her (and in 1983, under her Sanskrit name Alice Coltrane Turiyanagananda, founded the Sai Anantam Ashram in California). Who recorded some 40 - forty! - albums as a bandleader before her own death aged 69 in 2007. Her tune 'Fire', co-written with tenor player Joe Henderson, features on *Reflections*, and was recorded in one take with Kofi and Phelps in a way that respects the original while using improvised melodies and rhythmical clusters that speak to Coltrane's piano stylings and Bzhezinska and Co's freedom of expression.

"It's important to have the right people," she says. On arriving in London in 2015 Bzhezinska heard Kofi playing at Dalston's Brilliant Corners and recognised a kindred soul; their duo began soon after. "The music definitely has to be soulful."

Especially, perhaps, when interpreting Dorothy Ashby - a multi-instrumentalist and composer who worked the clubs of Detroit, collaborating with artists from Motown here, establishing the harp as a prominent instrument there, investing what was formerly a symbol of serenity and celestialty with be-bop energy and releasing 11 solo albums along the way. That Ashby left behind virtually no interviews or archive footage after her death aged 53 in 1986 might have consigned her to the history's dustbin had not fans - including contemporary harpists Brandee Younger, Zena Parkins and indeed, Bzhezinska - taken it upon themselves to reverse her reputation as one of the most unjustly under-loved jazz greats of the 1950s.

"Nobody ever spoke to me about Dorothy, or Alice," says Bzhezinska, who, taught by her mother, starting learning piano and harp aged five, going on to music school then studying at the F Chopin Academy in Warsaw, just over the Polish/Ukrainian border from Lviv. Who, after a stint living in Glasgow, came to the attention of London and the world in a starry 2017 triple bill at the Barbican featuring Denys Baptiste and Pharoah Sanders, a tribute to the music of the Coltranes.

"My classical education was very strong for 15 years. I studied Boulez, Cage, Lutoslawski, all those composers but even in the West no one seemed to know about Alice or Dorothy, these African-American women playing old instruments in a male-dominated arena, one in the shadow of her husband, the other an activist but without a school or students to follow her."

Bzhezinska read that Ashby's father was a jazz guitarist who

encouraged his daughter to play piano with the jazz musicians who visited their home, in between playing harp in Cass Tech's long respected Harp & Choir class.

"You can hear that Ashby studied the harp properly. Even on her duo albums with flutes, her harp is leading, definitely equal. Listen to Alice Coltrane with Pharoah Sanders or Joe Henderson, and while she has her own language it is very different, more open and spiritual.

"The only time you might think 'Is this Coltrane?' is on *The Rubaiyat of Dorothy Ashby*, an album inspired by the writing of Persian poet Omar Khayyám, where Ashby is singing and playing the Japanese koto (plucked half-tube zither)."

It was Ashby's *Hip Harp* that literally changed Bzhezinska's professional identity. Fed up with having her surname mispronounced - there's a YouTube video where she phonetically breaks it down into bite-size syllables (Bshair-shn-ska) - she began billing her solo shows with harp and electronics as, simply, Alina HipHarp. "It tells you who I am, and who I'm inspired by. That what I'm doing is hip and edgy. That there's harp. It suggests hip hop; I'm a huge fan of J Dilla, whose electronic beats and drum programming influenced so many hip-hop producers as well as my new album," she adds.

HipHarpCollective was created during lockdown, with the intention of bringing the international jazz harp community together online, indirectly furthering Bzhezinska's explorations of unusual settings and combinations, as with those early mixtapes.

When HipHarpCollective became a live concern, she knew she wanted electric bass as well as both drums and percussion ("Together they make such a strong rhythm section, which no one else has done with the harp") and beats, loops and effects.

"I was always interested in distorting the harp sound. There was something in me that was hungry, you know? I mean, I love the pure harp sound so I try and be faithful to it. But I also like the idea of going somewhere, having a little detour then coming back to the original harp sound without any amplification."

What we hear in *Reflections*, then, is a harp on its own journey, from the Ashby-penned opener 'Soul Vibrations' with string quartet-style violin and viola by multi-instrumentalist Ying Xue and a funky psychedelic arrangement by Bzhezinska, through 'For Carrol', an elegiac piece for her late teacher that

moves from heart-rending ("The trumpet melody is like a cry of desperation") to funky and free, to the much covered 'Afro Blue' - its contrasting brass parts written by Kofi, the vocals by Rowe a masterclass in range, phrasing and tempo change and every bit as good as those of Erykah Badu in the 2012 Robert Glasper version. *Reflections* is an album, too, on which the core members of the London-based HipHarpCollective are vital: aforementioned upright/electric bassist Michele Montolli, from Italy. Drummer Adam Teixeira from South America via Canada. Joel Prime from Adelaide, Australia on percussion, having previously played kit

/// I agree with Nina Simone, who said it is the role of the artist to reflect the world. Any difference you can make, however small, is something, and the world needs this now more than ever ///



L-R: Michele Montolli, Alina, Adam Teixeira and Joel Prime

Photo: Ed Ochere