

“I was searching for my own language, for a new sound, a new territory. My goal is to make music that no one expects from a harpist”

Photo: Monika S Jakubowska



Alina's HipHarp Collective at Ronnie Scott's with guests Tony Kofi and Jay Phelps

drums in Bzhezinska's quartet.

"When we were last in Adelaide" – Bzhezinska played the WOMADelaide festival on the back of *Inspiration* – "I visited Joel's parents in the family home; his father Don showed me this whole studio filled with percussion belonging to Joel, told me he won competitions as a child and young man and wanted him to play more. It was my last conversation with Don, who has since passed away, but when I was thinking about this new sound I thought, 'That's it. Joel is on percussion'. And he's awesome."

All the musicians in HipHarpCollective have palpable rapport, both in the core group and in the wider, more fluid line-up with its invited guests. Among them, on *Reflections*, Birmingham rapper SANITY and French/English poet Tom theythem [*sic*], both of whom add prose to 'Paris Sur Le Toit' – telling of a goddess at a Paris roof top party that is shut down by police, who then wanders with her heavy harp on her back, ignored, seeking acceptance and love.

Which isn't so far from the truth (and for Bzhezinska, as for Ashby and Coltrane, truth in music is everything). Bzhezinska has previously spoken about the travails of a) being a female bandleader, carting her harp unaided from her car into venues; and b) the stereotypes that follow a female harpist (among them, "god's messenger on earth"), obscuring the diversity of an instrument that can imitate sounds of nature or, strings bent, scream and shriek, or, with pedal slides, play jazz.

Like its parallel instrumental version, 'Paris Sue Le Toit' ft. SANITY and Tom theythem is based on a real life event that saw Bzhezinska playing with beatsman Kamaal Williams in a roof top car park in Pigalle during Paris Fashion Week, an illegal happening that was halted moments after starting.

"On the train back I thought, 'What just happened?' I was already thinking about electronics and remixes" – American hip hop/deep house producer DJ Spinna and her BBE label mate, Paris-based Sly Johnson, have remixed both 'Paris Sur Le Toit' tracks, wildly increasing Bzhezinska's Spotify traffic – "but this crazy experience kickstarted my experiments."

And so Bzhezinska's harp continues its sojourn on *Reflections*, making a detour back into the original harp sound on closing track 'Meditation', an improvisation that borrows from Middle Eastern melodies and features Julie Walkington on double bass. The last piece Bzhezinska wrote for the album, the lovely, lilting title track, again featuring Walkington, comes early: "I'd created a

narrative in how I'd placed the tracks, a theme that connected one to another but I needed a final piece of the puzzle.

"I was sitting right here on a late summer afternoon like this one," she says, waving an arm toward the open window and the large verdant trees outside. "There was a warm breeze, and the colours of the leaves were turning. I'd been listening to *Undercurrent* by Bill Evans and guitarist Jim Hall, which is very tranquil and spacious, with this gentle comping that I was trying to do with the harp when I started playing on this afternoon.

"Suddenly this tune came out." She pauses and smiles. "I thought, 'This is my tune'. It felt like I was looking around and reflecting on my life, on everything I'd done. My personal life had undergone some huge changes and I finally felt strong, like the world was my oyster. So this is a tribute to traditional jazz, as well as a catharsis after everything I touch on in the album, from grieving for my teacher, to being banished from the Paris roof top, from getting into the spiritual sound of Alice Coltrane to studying the life and work of Dorothy Ashby. It's all that."

But since its creation preceded the 24 February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, what it is not, is a direct response to the crisis inflicted on Bzhezinska's homeland by what she calls "the Russian monster machine." Bzhezinska has so far been involved in over two dozen fundraisers for Ukraine since the invasion, overseeing the purchase and delivery of goods and vehicles, driving one of the vehicles in convoy to the country. With the conflict showing no signs of abating, she is worried about compassion fatigue ("Ukraine is not front page news anymore"), and feels a responsibility to try and maintain awareness.

"I don't call myself an activist," she says. "But 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. We can't just quietly mind our own business."

As Bzhezinska prepares to tour the colourful, nuanced, oh-so-emotional work that is *Reflections*, she's hoping that the exposure it brings – for Ukraine, for multi-cultural London, for Ashby and Coltrane – will have a ripple effect. Raising awareness. Fostering appreciation. Getting us to think while we groove, swoon, or chill.

"For me the biggest compliment I can receive as a musician is when people recognise where my traditions are coming from but can also acknowledge that I haven't stopped developing. Creating my own language."