

HARP OF GOLD

Brandee Younger is one of a new, younger generation of female jazz harpists, building on the legacy of Alice Coltrane and Dorothy Ashby. With her latest album *Gadabout Season* winning critical and audience plaudits, **Jane Cornwell** thinks it's time for this genre-bending musician to take the spotlight....

"Back in the day I spent a lot of my time trying to put the harp everywhere I could," says Brandee Younger, the Grammy-nominated musician, composer and bandleader, backdropped by a row of saucepans and cooking utensils in her kitchen in Harlem, New York City.

"We knew to expect it [the harp] in the orchestra. We knew to expect it at your wedding. But my point was, 'Look, it can be on all the tracks! It can play R&B. It can play hip-hop, do singer-writer, all the things. It feels good now, to see all of that work come to fruition."

It's not just her efforts, she adds quickly. The Internet has been key in raising the visibility of players intent on developing a jazz vocabulary for the harp. Some of them she taught in her capacity as a resident Artistic Director at the SF Jazz Center (where she'll be returning to work with the New Chamber Orchestra) and currently at both New York University, and at the more leftfield New School campus in Greenwich Village: "I tell my students, 'Sure, learn the classical repertoire. Then go and find your own voice."

Younger, 41, has spent three decades exploring and refining a singular sound that, according to her website, "connects spiritual jazz and classical training to the rhythmic soulfulness of R&B and hip hop."

The Grammy nod for Best Instrumental Composition was for her tune 'Beautiful is Black' from her 2021 Impulse! debut, *Somewhere Different* (making her the first black female solo artist to achieve such recognition). Younger's 2023 album *Brand New Life* featured little-known works by American jazz harpist, singer and composer Dorothy Ashby, whose 1968 album *Afro-harping* set out her stall as first great harpist in jazz, making her the go-to player for the likes of Bill Withers, Stevie Wonder and Minnie Riperton.

"I discovered Dorothy Ashby while listening to Stevie Wonder's *Songs in the Key Of Life*," says Younger. "And by listening to hip hop" (Ashby's rhythmic groove has been sampled by artists including J Dilla, Kendrick Lamar, Flying Lotus and Madlib). "When you grow up in New York, like I did, you're surrounded by it. One day I heard this amazing harp sample on a track by Pete Rock. I was like, 'Wow, so I can incorporate these other types of music too!' And then I freaking got to have Pete Rock to record with me!"


The hip hop artist/producer features on the *Something Different* track 'Livin' and Lovin' in My Own Way.' "Which was a dream come true," she says with a smile. "Then to have 9th Wonder then Salaam Remi and through him, Mumu Fresh..." She reels off the list of hip-hop features on her second Impulse! album. Having worked with everyone from Lauryn Hill and Beyoncé to Pharoah Sanders, Younger is her pop-soul-jazz generation's go-to, too.

"But this album, you know, is all created by me," she says, referring to her third and current release, *Gadabout Season*, a more personal and reflective project that lifts her bar even higher. Produced by bassist and frequent collaborator Rashaan Carter, a trio member alongside drummer Allan Mednard, the album was born on the road, partly in response to a personal crisis that neither of us go into (though her one-time partner Dezron Douglas, the double bassist with whom Younger released the 2022 duo album *Force Majeure* on International Anthem, is conspicuous by his omission) - but healing through the pursuit of joy is what she did, and what the album does. A free and whimsical spirit - that of the gadabout - is woven throughout.

"People only see the concert, the gig, but touring can be tough, and sometimes it's a matter of, 'Do we eat or try and grab some sleep?' But it was my distraction, my drug of choice," she says in her upbeat way. "I knew I needed to take time out. My cousin has a cabin in upstate New York where you get a lot of peace and quiet and see the stars at night. I brought everything to a screeching halt and went up there without anything in me and wrote without thinking anything was going to happen. But it did.

"I came back with some solid ideas," she continues. "Two weeks later my manager and Rashaan made me go back there so I could find some more. Rashaan came with his recording equipment. Allan brought drums. I thought the takes we did were fine, and I didn't want to kill the magic. But then Rashaan insisted that we come back to New York and record it all over again."

Photos: Erin Patrice O'Brien



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