

CMA: a conversation with harpist Brandee Younger

by Mike Telin



Known for her eloquent performances of traditional harp repertoire, as well as for pushing the musical boundaries of the instrument, harpist Brandee Younger has shared the stage with jazz greats including Ravi Coltrane, Pharoah Sanders,

and Jack DeJohnette, as well as singer-songwriters John Legend and Lauryn Hill.

On Wednesday, May 10 at 7:30 pm at the Cleveland Museum of Art's Gartner Auditorium, [Brandee Younger](#) will be joined by equally talented and diverse pianist [Courtney Bryan](#) for an evening that will celebrate the music of jazz harpists Alice Coltrane and Dorothy Ashby. The concert is presented as part of CMA's [Performing Arts Series](#).

"I don't really consider myself to be a jazz harpist," Younger said during a telephone conversation. "I'm sort of anti-label because it throws you into this box, although I am most visible in the jazz world, and jazz harpists like Dorothy and Alice are my heroes. But I just consider myself to be a harpist."

In addition to Younger and Bryan, Wednesday's concert will also feature bassist Dezron Douglas and drummer Kassa Overall. "Courtney and Kassa are both Oberlin grads, so they're looking forward to being back in Cleveland. And Dezron has also played there before, so I'm the Cleveland newbie of the group."

Younger said that she and Bryan have a shared passion for the music of Alice Coltrane. "Like Dorothy Ashby, Alice was also from Detroit. Over the past few years we've both dug into her music. We've visited the [Ashram](#) and researched her background and the religion."

Original compositions by Younger and Bryan will also be included. “The program will be mostly new music, and if it isn’t new music, it’s probably going to be new to most people. So I’ll be sure to discuss the pieces before we play them.”

Growing up, Younger was encouraged by her parents to be involved with many extracurricular activities. Prior to the harp, she played the flute — she also participated in sports and eventually had to choose between harp lessons and swimming. “I was a kid so I thought I could either wake up at 5:00 am for swim practice — or not. But my parents were very smart and were thinking ahead to how they could increase my chances of getting a college scholarship, whether it was sports, music, or academics. It was even more important to get a scholarship because my sister was four years ahead of me, so there would be no gap between us when it came to tuition.”

Younger did receive that scholarship and chose to attend the Hartt School of Music. “I knew I wanted to pursue music, but not necessarily the harp. I was into the music business and education, but I studied the harp because that’s what got me the scholarship.”

Although Younger immersed herself in the classical music program, she said that she felt a little out of place. “I was sticking out like a sore thumb for multiple reasons. I was a harpist, so everyone was staring at me, and I was about the only person of color. I just didn’t feel comfortable.”

Ironically, one of the reasons Younger chose to go to Hartt was the school’s jazz program. “When I went to audition, Nat Reeves, the jazz bass instructor, came up to me and my mom and was so warm and welcoming. That was the beginning of a beautiful relationship that has lasted to this day.”

Younger said that Reeves and the great Jackie McLean invited her to their jazz classes. “I worked out my course, ensemble, and practice schedule so I could go to the jazz classes. They also had performances late at night so I fit those in as well. I would never play. I was too nervous and too busy learning to play Bach — I’d just go and sit through the masterclasses and concerts. I did that all through school.”

It was during that same time that Younger became obsessed with Alice Coltrane, and often wrote her letters. “My roommate’s boyfriend would help me edit them but I never thought they were good enough, so I never sent them. When she passed in 2007 I was kicking myself.”

Younger did get the opportunity to meet Ravi when he called and asked her to perform at a music memorial for Alice along with musicians who had played in

her and John Coltrane's band. "The fact that Ravi called me to play — it was like the stars had aligned, because he could have called anybody."

It was during that memorial when the harpist had her Aha! moment with jazz. "I knew I didn't want a career in an orchestra, although I've always played in them. That is what harpists do. I enjoy playing chamber music, but I wasn't sure I wanted to do that either. I didn't know what I wanted to do, but when I looked around at the memorial, I thought, 'I want to do this.' It was scary because I didn't improvise, so I knew it was going to be a hard road ahead."

Composing is something that came after college as well for Younger. "Classical majors didn't study composition, but the jazz majors did. I'd always think, how come *they* get to take composition and improvisation, all of the things that are necessary for a career in music?"

But when people began asking her to play her own compositions and she had none, she began to feel like an oddball. "I didn't know the first thing about composing, so my first steps were to write my own melody over an existing chord progression — little things like that. Now it's more of an organic process, but I am not a trained composer by any means."

Younger added that commissioning a new work for the harp is also a painstaking process. "It means sitting down with a composer and explaining everything about how the instrument works before they can even begin to write a piece. It is an undertaking."

Younger's latest album, *Wax and Wane*, was released in 2016. She also talked about her [tribute](#) with poet Joshua Bennett to Trayvon Martin, titled *He Has a Name* (Awareness). "It's the only piece I've ever written that came to me right away," Younger said.

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