

SIX STRINGS TO HER BOW

With a pair of acclaimed new albums in the bag, session and live work booked well into the future, and awards coming in, things are looking good for **Mary Halvorson**. But there's no room for complacency: One of the finest jazz guitarists of her generation, she is possessed of a questing, restless spirit – as **Andy Robson** finds out

Damn. Forgot to ask her! What's it like being A Genius? I mean, guitarist Mary Halvorson has a bit of paper (and the dosh) to prove it. And not many can claim that. In 2019 Halvorson was awarded a stonking \$625,000 by the MacArthur Foundation. To be used over five years, the award acknowledges her years of steadfast commitment to new music through her composing and guitar playing. The Fellowship, commonly known as the 'Genius' fund, intends no less than to "recognize the potential to create objects of beauty and awe, advance our understanding of society, and foment change to improve the human condition."

No pressure, then. Beneficiaries from the jazz world have included Halvorson's mentor Anthony Braxton and writer Stanley Crouch. But awards also went to the likes of urban farmer Will Alan and Trevor Bedford, a computational virologist whose work couldn't be currently more vital.

For Halvorson, the award was timely. By 2020, like so much of the world that would need the 'genius' of Bedford, Halvorson found herself locked down, in Brooklyn, her home for the last 20 years.

At first it was frustrating: she'd had a two-night run booked for a fresh sextet, "And I was wanting to do something new. It seemed a cool combination of musicians and personalities." These included long time collaborators like Tomas Fujiwara on drums and Adam O'Farrill on trumpet. But she'd also brought in fresh sounds like Patricia Brennan on vibes and bassist Nick Dunston.

However, "like everything else that year, it got cancelled. But I was too excited to let it go."

So, despite the pandemic and the cancellation, the prospect of the new band (including another long time collaborator, the trombonist Jacob Garchik) "gave me a reason to keep moving forward", even though the prospect of a gig seemed unlikely. Simultaneously "I was thinking about writing for a string quartet, which I'd always wanted to do, but hadn't had the time."

In 2020, though, Halvorson had "nothing but time. So it was a good time to tackle that project. I started reading orchestration books and started taking composition lessons from my good friend Jessica Pavone." Pavone, best-known as a violist and composer, had come into the orbit of Anthony Braxton at Wesleyan University where Halvorson had taken classes with the

saxophonist. And the two women's relationship has remained strong ever since.

So where many withered given the isolation of Covid, Halvorson with typical tenacity brought both the quartet and sextet writings to fruition. Moreover, she saw how both, though written separately, could complement each other. She became fascinated by how an improvising string quartet could complement her new sextet. And as a guitarist who started, like Allan Holdsworth, on violin, she was intrigued to explore how her soloing guitar could entwine with the intense but intimate melodicism of the quartet.

So, for Halvorson, with time on her hands and composition on her mind, the next phase was how to bring the two works together: and the outcome of that dilemma you can now hold in your hands as either two separate discs - *Amaryllis*, the sextet plus strings - or *Belladonna*, featuring the Mivos String Quartet with Halvorson soloing around them. Or, as a double album, *Amaryllis/Belladonna*. The clue's kind of in the title(s).

Suggested by Halvorson's father, a landscape gardener ("He's always giving me song titles, usually the names of flowers," she smiles) the two flowers are of the same family, but differ in type and legend. Where *Amaryllis* is a love-struck maiden of Greek mythology, *Belladonna* (Deadly Nightshade as it's known in the UK), is the poisonous beauty, fatal to get too close to.

Halvorson smiles mischievously. Don't be fooled by the glasses and academic image: the guitarist has a wicked edge.

"In *Thumbscrew*, the collective group I share with Tomas (Fujiwara) and Michael (Formanek) I got fixated on poisonous plants. I found that duality about something that's simultaneously beautiful and deeply poisonous really interesting. A nice metaphor for the music!

"Of course you can say their names separately or together which describes (both) the plants and the interlocking of the two bands and albums."

Ever the leader, and thinking of recording and performing opportunities, Halvorson notes the twinning and twining of the musics "...was pragmatic, too. It was hard enough getting venues for a six-piece let alone a ten piece. But when it was possible (to play again) I'd be prepared for either instance. This way the music can be played as a sextet, or sextet plus the strings or me and the

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strings. The music is arranged for each line-up."

This flexibility of approach, this capacity to get inside the voice of other instruments ("if you gave me a violin now I'd make a horrible noise, but while writing I'd be air-bowing away!") and the tenacity to see a project through are typical of Halvorson's career and creative spirit. All line ups and styles are grist to her creative mill. From a covers solo album, *Meltframe*, to *Thumbscrew's* self-describing The Anthony Braxton Project, to two splendid Code Girl releases (a nickname given by Braxton) that included voice for the first time and the setting of her own poetry, there seems no end to Halvorson's fecundity.

Halvorson laughs at the suggestion; she has a generous smile and ready laugh that belies her seemingly studious on-stage presentation. Like another guitarist, Robert Fripp, known for his impassive demeanour, and for sitting, not standing, and who 'leads from the back' as he describes it, Halvorson doesn't turn on the tap at will when it comes to writing. *Amaryllis/Belladonna* may be the finished article now, but lockdown was a challenge.

"I don't feel constantly generative! Some days it's like 'I'm not feeling it, I've got nothing'. It's about being sensitive to daily rhythms. I'll try for 15 minutes, but if it's not there I'll run some scales or go do something else. If I'm feeling inspired I'll run with it and drop everything else. There's a huge difference day-to-day in how alert you are.

"During the pandemic there would be a very different rhythm. There were weeks on end when I'd feel very depressed and couldn't get anything done. Which is very unusual for me. But then I'd have feverish waves of getting things done. Then I'd drop back again. I'd have to adapt to that rhythm. That was different for me."

But as she adapted to the new life style, so affordances were revealed.

"I was okay in the big picture. I love it here (in Brooklyn), we have a beautiful park round the corner, and I spent a lot of time cooking, exercising. Being still. Which was actually something I needed because I was pretty burned out from all the constant travel. I was in need of some rest. In a weird way part of lockdown was good for me to be home for a couple of years. It's not the way I would've hoped to be at home. But I tried to make the best of it. It's one reason I took the Zoom lessons with Jessica. It was a good excuse to stay in touch!"

The pandemic was not the only time Halvorson's felt challenged. She works tough for fate not to break her stride.

"I was always very shy as a kid. I remember the first time I performed on guitar, I was 13 or something. I was so nervous. My hands were shaking and my pick slipped from my hand and fell on the floor. I was that kid who never spoke in class. I was



terrified to raise my hand. I was never a spotlight person. I still can't talk to an audience."

She's also had to work at her technique and even technology conspires against her.

"I play sitting down because I use two pedals all the time and if I stood up, I'd fall down!" And when it comes to her dominant side, "I guess I'm ambidextrous," she muses. She writes "lefty" (as she calls it), likewise hits a baseball "lefty", but plays basketball (a real passion of hers, being an ardent Boston Celtics fan) "righty".

"My right hand is weaker although I naturally picked up a guitar right handed (despite Jimi Hendrix being a childhood inspiration). I had to work at my pick work to get it up to speed with my left hand. I like having a strong attack and I value (a repeated Halvorson verb, everything needs value for her) clear articulation. But it's something I have to keep up. Like you have to have a jog every day if you want to be a runner. I have to keep those muscles in shape."

Then for a time after college, she kicked back against making 'jazz'. And in her mid-twenties, it took discovering 'Sea Song' and the rest of Robert Wyatt's *Rock Bottom* to help her through low times. The epiphany still lives with her.

"I remember the moment," she recalls, almost affectionately. "It's so interesting: the older you get, the less and less you have of these moments when something really hits you. I remember sitting on my living room floor thinking 'I've never heard anything like this before!' and playing it just hundreds of times. And from there I checked out all his work."

The unlikely couple struck up a relationship by letter and email, culminating with Wyatt coming out of 'retirement' to perform three tracks on *Artlessly Falling*, her second Code Girl release.

"He's such a nice person and so cool. I still can't believe he agreed to do it even all these years later."

It says plenty for the loyalty and trust Halvorson nurtures in musicians that the 'reclusive' Wyatt was happy to collaborate with her. Yes, instrumentalists are attracted to her orbit because she writes specifically with their voices in mind (check out the space and contexts that Jacob Garchik is launched into on *Amaryllis*). But there's also something about the collective collaborative ethos Halvorson inspires in others. For Halvorson putting a band and a project together is "is more about the people than it is about the instrumentation."

"It matters a lot to get on with people," she earnestly asserts. "My tolerance for bullshit has gone down the older I've got. There are so many great musicians, and there are so many who are positive and fun to work with. I really make a point of trying to have it all!"

It's an attitude reflected in her leadership style.

"I don't want to dictate too much, to tell everybody what to do. I want to write the music and let people do what they want with it. It (leadership) is a lot of responsibility and I've had to learn how to do it. I've learned by watching other people. I've played with so many leaders you see what you like and don't like and try to emulate that. I want to respect my band, to have fun. I want to take care of everybody, to make it a positive experience. It can be stressful. The flight gets cancelled and everyone looks at you, 'What yah gonna do?'" And she laughs that laugh again. But she'll



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take in her stride what life and covid and dodgy airlines throw at her.

Somehow that teen girl picked up her pick and wowed the crowd. The girl guitarist who had no female role models climbed to the top of the tree. And along the way she's created ensembles where women can outnumber the men, where the talents of Ingrid Laubrock, Susan Alcorn, Pavone and Brennan and many more women shine bright. The schoolgirl too terrified to put up her hand in class somehow engaged with one of the most formidable, awe-inspiring icons

of contemporary jazz, Antony Braxton.

Where did the strength come from to achieve all this? For the first time in our Zoom, Mary Halvorson is speechless.

"I don't know..."

Instead, she adopts that thoughtful face so often seen on stage, just peeping above her music stand. (By the way this composer has no need to 'hide' behind her stand, as some critics assert. Her music speaks for itself and doesn't need her doing a Cab Calloway upfront. Though that would be a sight to see.)

Nor can her success and obdurate pursuit of beauty (poisonous or otherwise) be simply written in the stars. Although as a keen amateur astrologist she knows all the birthdays of her band mates and has assembled all their star charts.

"You know, there were five Librans in my octet..."

Applying that forensic mind that would have led her to be a scientist if music and Braxton hadn't intervened at college, her answer, when it finally comes, is as ego free as her music is complex yet beautiful, dark yet liberating.

"In some ways I'm a stubborn, determined person. I do it quietly. I want to makes things happen. And I care about what I do. If things don't come naturally to me, I work on them...if you want to do something you do what you have to do to get over those things."

And therein lies the genius of Mary Halvorson. I didn't need to ask after all. Anyway, she has an important Celtics game to catch.

"You've got to get away from the music sometimes!" she beams, and flashes that smile again.

Photo: Michael Wilson