

Brandee Younger Interview VT Jazz Ctr 2025.01.14

[Eugene Uman]

I'd like to welcome to WVEW, Brandee Younger. Brandee Younger, her mission is to convey the depth of the heart's importance and to get beyond standard cliches. She is a tireless promoter of the music of Dorothy Ashby and Alice Coltrane, two Harvests who influenced her the most and whose music she continually revisits.

Brandee's flexibility is her calling card. Although fluent in the jazz language, she connects with musicians as disparate from the scene as Pete Rock and Beyonce. She has released eight albums as a leader and appears on over a hundred albums as a side person.

In 2022, she was nominated for two Grammy Awards and is the winner of a 2024 NAACP Image Award in the category of Outstanding Jazz Album for her album, *Brand New Life*. And we were just listening to some wonderful cuts from that. Brandee's expansive career includes recordings and touring opportunities with Liz Wright, Common, Drake, Bilal, Ice-T, Lauryn Hill, John Legend, Meshell Ndegeocello, Pharoah Sanders, BadBadNotGood, Christian McBride, and notable jazz recordings with Joel Ross, Makaya McCraven, Jeremy Pelt, Ravi Coltrane, Marcus Strickland, Lakecia Benjamin, Shabaka Hutchings, Terri Lyne Carrington, and many others.

Welcome to WVEW, Brandee Younger.

[Brandee Younger]

Thank you so much for having me.

[Eugene Uman]

Well, I'm really excited about your upcoming concert, Brandee, and it was so great, you know, getting to listen to your music in depth and hearing especially the *Brand New Life* album is just such a work of art, and I congratulate you on that and all of your wonderful work.

[Brandee Younger]

Oh, thank you.

[Eugene Uman]

I just wanted to welcome you and thank you for taking the time to join us. We so enjoyed your presence as a member of Makaya McCraven's group last year.

And that brings us to, you know, the album *Brand New Life*, which I understand that he helped produce. So, tell us a little bit about you and getting to know Makaya and how the two of you got together to create that wonderful artwork.

[Brandee Younger]

Oh, well, I actually met Makaya back when I was in college.

We were both in college. He was up in Western Mass, and I was in Hartford. And there was a jam session that the trombonist, Steve Davis, would host every Tuesday night.

And Makaya would come down sometimes to that jam session. So I met him then. But we didn't start working together really until *Universal Beings*, his album, around 2018.

But what is a funny memory is that years prior, I was visiting my sister in Chicago and had my friend's harp and went to Makaya's house. And like, we totally recorded and just jammed out him, some other folks, his mom. And that's where the first time we played that beautiful Hungarian lullaby that's on his album, *In These Times*, actually.

But when it came time to do *Brand New Life*, the whole premise of that was recording music of Dorothy Ashby that hadn't been recorded yet. So when I told him that I had this music that I wanted to record, he was like, "Oh, I have to be a part of that" and it turned into him producing the whole record.

So it was really a lot of fun work on that together.

[Eugene Uman]

Did you work on that in his famous basement?

[Brandee Younger]

Actually, I stayed upstairs because the harp was there, and then he and Rashaan recorded downstairs in the studio.

[Eugene Uman]

Right.

So you would be upstairs and he had some microphones that he could record you from downstairs.

[Brandee Younger]

Yeah, technology makes that all possible.

So we were like in the same space-ish, you know? I would yell downstairs when I needed to communicate. Great. And his playing on your album is also so cool.

[Eugene Uman]

I love that piece in *Seven* that you do.

[Brandee Younger]

Moving Target.

Thank you.

[Eugene Uman]

So cool. You have a way of playing with rhythm sections who are just super high level. When we discussed who you would be playing with at the Vermont Jazz Center, you mentioned Rashaan and Allan Mednard, two players known for their ability to groove hard.

I was surprised at your fearlessness in combining the harp with such powerful rhythm sections. And I wanted to know what your approach is to combining elements of harp with rhythm.

[Brandee Younger]

You know, I think just personally, as a person, I like for things to groove, you know? And I like to have that really strong, strong foundation.

It also makes my job easier, to be honest. But it's really just a feel that I like to have in anything that I write, in anything that I play.

[Eugene Uman]

The groove. The groove.

[Brandee Younger]

Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

[Eugene Uman]

But it's also such a contrasting timbre, you know, to have the harp versus like drums, which are hitting on things that are, you know, really cutting through versus the more delicate sound of the harp. And that doesn't seem to be a threat to you at all.

[Brandee Younger]

It used to be.

It took me a while. First, it was just like, okay, harp and bass, harp, bass and saxophone. And then I added drums.

It took a while, but then once I went, I couldn't go back.

[Eugene Uman]

So when you say harp and bass, are you talking about the duo, like what you did with Dezron?

[Brandee Younger]

Yeah, like just in terms of instrumentation, I think I always wanted a trio, but I was scared to add drums. So after bass, the natural progression was, okay, let's add a horn, because that's how scared I was to add drums.

But I mean, I wish I had done it sooner, to be honest.

[Eugene Uman]

Yeah. Well, you have such a great sense of time, and I think that that's why it works.

And I'm wondering if you studied rhythm in your practice sessions.

[Brandee Younger]

Oh, I mean, yeah, I mean, rhythm is a part of learning music... That is the proper response right there... But I mean, it is. It's a part of it. Just like you learn how to read notes, you learn how to count. And I'll admit, maybe everyone doesn't have a natural sense of feel. But I think, I don't know, if you can dance, you got a little rhythm going on there.

[Eugene Uman]

Yeah, yeah.

That's the old adage, right? About dancing and swinging.

[Brandee Younger]

Right, right.

So the harp is by nature an instrument that plays glissandos rather than individual notes.

How is it that you were able to feature the melodic aspects of the instrument? Is there a special technique that you've developed in order to cut through the waves of sound of a rhythm section?

[Brandee Younger]

Well, that's not true that we don't play individual notes. We do play individual notes. However...

[Eugene Uman]

I've been schooled. I'm sorry.

[Brandee Younger]

It's because when people hear a harp or think of a harp, they automatically think of a glissando. And that's why it's funny. So many harpists are hesitant to play glissandos for that very reason. I'm finally just like, okay, fine, let's just play the glissandos. I'm going to open a set with glissandos. Why not?

But, you know, I noticed, you know, when I transcribed Dorothy Ashby's music, whenever she would play her solo, she would double her hands so that they were in octaves. And I know it's like, you got to do the best you can to try to find the texture that is going to stand out between the bass and the drums. Because the harp is actually, it's percussive.

It's considered a plucked instrument.

[Eugene Uman]

Sure.

[Brandee Younger]

Because it has percussive qualities.

And then it's also a stringed instrument. So there are things that the harp can do that can sound like a quiet drum. And then there's the range of the harp that starts the conflict with the bass if you're playing in the same register.

So it's all about finding the places on the harp and the different textures so that all three instruments sound different to blend to make what I think is a pretty cool sound.

[Eugene Uman]

Absolutely. And so, when you say that Dorothy Ashby played using octaves, is that a technique that you also use?

[Brandee Younger]

Sometimes I do, yeah, because it's, you know, it depends on the song and depends on the arrangement, yes, maybe more specifically the arrangement.

But that is something that I've learned to double just so that everyone can hear what it's supposed to be and not confuse the melodic material with what's not melodic. So yeah, I do do it. I don't do it every single song, every single place, but I absolutely do it.

[Eugene Uman]

You have a strong connection with the music of Dorothy Ashby and Alice Coltrane, and you have a great story about, you know, meeting up with Ravi and playing at [Alice Coltrane's] the Memorial. But I'm interested in another story that I've heard you allude to. I haven't heard any details about you traveling to Alice Coltrane's ashram. And I'm wondering what that story is.

Can you tell us a little bit more, a few more details about being there and what that experience was like?

[Brandee /younger]

So by the time I went to her ashram, she'd already passed away, so this was after the Memorial. And the ashram was still there, and the students were still there, you know, still basically continuing the tradition that she had started and practiced all of these years, which was really beautiful to be able to witness that, and to also, you know, meet and learn about her.

I hate to say sacred music because it was all sacred, but [meeting] with the ashram singers, and learning that repertoire, and playing with them was really special. She really covered a lot in her lifetime, you know, musically speaking.

Yeah. I'm actually sitting, I'm sitting right next to her harp as we speak, which is crazy. Yeah.

[Eugene Uman]

Yeah, I read a little bit about that, that was given to her by John Coltrane?

[Brandee Younger]

Yeah, so they went, so back in the day, to Lyon and Healy, which is the harp company, it's based in Chicago, they had a showroom on 57th Street, and they ordered the harp, and sadly, he never lived to see it.

You know, it takes about a year to make it, and it's a beautiful 18-carat gold leaf harp, really their top of the line instrument. So it, you know, it didn't show up until after he passed away. So it's, you know, really special to have this gift from your husband that just shows up later, you know?

[Eugene Uman]

Wow. And how did you become the proud owner of it?

[Brandee Younger]

Well, I wouldn't say I own it.

[Eugene Uman]

Okay, it's an extended loan.

[Brandee Younger]

For so many years, the harp was at her daughter's, at Michelle Coltrane's home in California. These instruments, they're made out of wood. I consider them living beings. They really need to be played.

This year has been what the Coltrane home has dubbed the Year of Alice, where there's just so, there are so many concerts happening, and there's an exhibition that's opening soon at the Hammer Museum in LA. So many things in her honor this year - one big part of this big year was that the harp got restored.. And it's just sounding beautifully.

And we premiered the restored harp at the Detroit Jazz Festival this fall. And now it's here where I've recorded on it. I recorded my next album on the harp. And we have some concerts coming up.

So it's really special. I've got the harp next to me. And then across from me, I have [Alice Coltrane's album playing that harp] A Monastic Trio, that album cover, with the harp.

Of course, I have to be a nerd. Because it's sort of like, it's sort of like, it's like surreal. You know, you look at the picture, and then you turn around like, whoa, this is, this is it!

[Eugene Uman]

So when you were at the ashram, were you playing Alice's music with the singers that she trained with?

[Brandee Younger]

Yeah, so that was, that was intense. We were playing her music. Yeah, with the choir from the ashram.

What we played as the music that she had written for her students from the ashram. This was not from the commercial releases that we all knew so well, that are finally now out in the world. But at this time, they weren't released commercially.

[Eugene Uman]

Did you also play with them? I know that you were with Geri Allen at the memorial, but were, didn't they also appear at the memorial?

[Brandee Younger]

They did. So that was actually my first time seeing them or hearing them. I didn't have a chance to play with them at the memorial.

The memorial was really special. I mean, it was, I mean, I can't, I'll never forget it. It was, it was unreal, because it was really everyone that had played with her, you know, for the most part, Cecil McBee on bass, Charlie Haden, and Reggie Workman on bass, Rachied Ali on drums, Jack DeJohnette... And yeah, yeah, it was crazy. Steve Wilson played and, and, and Geri Allen, you know, played piano the entire night.

So for me, it was a real turning point for me, both musically, and personally.

[Eugene Uman]

All right. It seems like you have such a heart connection to her.

I'm wondering if your most recent album *Serenity*, the EP of meditative music, was influenced by your experience of being surrounded by her music.

[Brandee Younger]

You know, maybe that one track, "Dreamful Love Story", makes me think some of her, you know, some of her meditative music. But it's funny, the rest is really music that I wrote for intermediate beginners that were learning music.

And then we just recorded it. It was pretty much for streaming.

And I'm laughing because people are always like, wow, this is really beautiful. I really love putting this on in the background. And my sister just had a baby last week.

And guess what's playing in the hospital room? You know? It's funny. And it's so, it's actually quite heartwarming to know that people really connect with it.

And it's appealing.

[Eugene Uman]

Well, I'm sure you put your heart into it while you're playing it too. And I'm sure the quality of music is excellent.

You know, simplicity is something which is sometimes looked down upon. But really, it's something that we need to strive for sometimes, because it really makes the music so accessible to such a broad range of people.

[Brandee Younger]

You're absolutely right.

You're right. 100%.

[Eugene Uman]

All of your recordings have a very specific vibe to them. And I'm wondering how you come up with a unifying concept that creates a statement and then maintains that throughout a whole disc.

[Brandee Younger]

Mmm. It's always a groove for me.

So for pleasure, I listen to old school R&B, like 70s, like stuff my parents were listening to. So I feel like that regardless of what I write, I feel like there's an undertone of that in almost everything. In everything you play? Yeah.

And everything I write. So it's like, there's this element of soul that's going to be there regardless of what the actual song is. And I think that that's the thread.

[Eugene Uman]

Why don't you tell us a little bit about your new album.

{Brandee Younger}

We were just listening back to the mixes and this would be less groovy than the rest of my stuff, you know? So it actually sounds quite different. It still sounds like me.

It still has the soul in there. But it's like, it's like I took a, not a detour, but just a little bit of a turn, you know? So I'm excited. I'm excited for this because it's just a different part of me that I don't flaunt.

I flaunt the grooves. I flaunt the groove. It's just a bit more personal.

[Eugene Uman]

And when you say that you're focusing more on something more personal, is that, what would the difference between that and an album that grooves sound like? How could you describe that in words?

{Brandee Younger}

So my default is like grooves. That's what feels good. I guess that's what it is.

That's what feels good to me. So with this, it was, okay, if we strip some of that away, it's almost like, I don't know, it's sort of like being fully dressed and then wearing a bikini. You have to be ready for that Bikini...

You know, it's revealing and then you can get a little self-conscious, a little vulnerable when it's all out there, if you know what I'm saying.

[Eugene Uman]

Absolutely. I think that's a good analogy. Yeah.

{Brandee Younger}

That's the best way I can think about it. So when you hear the new record, you're gonna be like, oh, okay, [she's wearing the] bikini.

[Eugene Uman]

And can you tell me what the instrumentation is?

{Brandee Younger}

It's still largely trio, but just not necessarily delivering you the same exact, you know, it's not gonna, it's still trio. It's Allan, Rashaan, Makaya makes the cameo, Joel Ross makes the cameo. Couple more guests, you know, making cameos.

But yeah, it's just what we did with the music was a little bit different.

[Eugene Uman]

Do you feel that artists have a responsibility to make an activist statement in the music that they're playing or the messages that they're conveying and introducing their work to the public?

{Brandee Younger}

I do think it's important for them I guess. I do think it's important for us to use our platform with the talent that we have.

The reason why I'm wording it that way is because someone like me, you're not gonna see me posting on Twitter my thoughts about what's going on in the world, just because I'm not that type of human being. However, I will quickly, write a piece of music. And we think about musicians and visual artists, they have this way of expressing that no one else does.

So I guess I, yes, that was a long way of saying, yeah, I think we do have an obligation. You can call it activism. It's a form of activism.

Everyone doesn't think of it that way. But it is a form of activism, yeah.

[Eugene Uman]

Maybe it's because there's a public platform, and therefore people are paying attention to you.

So if you feel strongly about something and write a song about it, you don't even need to explain it. But just by playing it, it conveys that it's something that's meaningful to you, and that you would encourage other people to think twice about it.

{Brandee Younger}

Yeah, yeah.

[Eugene Uman]

I'm curious - I have an idea of what it was like to go into the recording studio to play, you know, jazz music. I get that. I know Joel, I know Makaya. But I have no idea about the lives of people like Beyonce or Common. And what's it like to go into a recording studio and play with people of that level and caliber?

[Brandee Younger]

Pop artists, you mean?

[Eugene Uman]

Well, pop stars...

[Brandee Younger]

Well, so, I never met John Legend. I recorded probably three, maybe four tracks, maybe two ended up on the album. And actually, fun fact, I recorded "All of Me" but they stripped the harp and kept the piano.

But you know, a lot of times in those instances, they're the producers that are making these calls. So they're like, oh, I really want this sound. I want a harp here.

So I'll end up spending most of my time with the producer who has a musical vision. So a lot of times the artist isn't there. And then you get artists that are very hands on.

And they're going to be a part of the whole process. So I did record on that one Common album in 2009. He was there for the whole process.

And I just remember that specific session. It's actually like night and day [compared with John Legend]. So you have that session. He was there. He was very active in what was happening. And Raphael Saadiq was there to support.

It's like a family vibe. Right.

[Eugene Uman]

Nice.

[Brandee Younger]

And then like for the John Legend session, I did a couple. It was literally me and the producer and the engineer. You know, it's just like, I don't know.

I don't know. Sometimes some artists, some pop artists can be very hands off.

[Eugene Uman]

Right.

[Brandee Younger]

Once they've done their part. So it is interesting to see that kind of dynamic and who's hands on and who's not. So I think that's how it happens a lot.

But also nowadays, like if I were to get called for a session, I'd probably do it right here in my house. So actually, Kanye West's last album, *Donda*, that's something I recorded right in my living room. We're just in a different time now.

You know, I can't count how many times I've brought my harp down the steps at Electric Lady. And the time and effort it takes it's worth doing it at home. So I'm one of those people - I do not mind recording at home.

[Eugene Uman]

Right. And you've got a nice set up there. Is that the same set up you had with Dezron [bassist, Dezron Douglass] when you were doing the [Covid releases]...

[Brandee Younger]

No. You know, those were like literally live streams. Well, I saw a couple of them.

That's what the recordings are. We didn't go in the studio. Those were from the living room [and released] on Facebook or whatever we were streaming on.

So that was raw. Raw would be the word for that. And then the good folks at International Anthem, you know, they mix the audio to try to make it sound nice, you know.

[Eugene Uman]

Yeah. Well, they did a great job mastering it because it sounds wonderful!

[Brandee Younger]

Oh, they really did.

But we didn't have mics. You know!

[Eugene Uman]

Oh, no kidding.

That was done through the computer?

[Brandee Younger]

I mean, there was there was one mic. It was one mic in my phone that I stuck in the bottom of my phone, like the charging cord.

Like that's literally it- it is so raw. Wow. But I think that that is probably what speaks to people, the authenticity, you know.

[Eugene Uman]

Oh, yeah. And so now you have a studio in your house or apartment.

[Brandee Younger]

So I've always[had one] even pre pandemic, I would record from home.

And then if it's a recording where I'm really going to be exposed - on the harp, Rashaan actually has a mobile setup that he has been coming here for years and recording me. Cool. So if it's like really, it really needs to be high, high quality, then he does it.

So I would just stack sessions. Like if I had three to do, I was like, are you free on Wednesday night? And we'll just bang out the three sessions in one night, you know.

[Eugene Uman]

And you're able to use Alice Coltrane's harp on some of these now.

Well, well, now I could, but it must be a very special recording.

[Brandee Younger]

Hey, kudos on all of your albums, but *Brand New Life* just feels like such a major statement, both because of your tribute to Dorothy Ashby, but also because of the heavy hitters you invited to perform with you and the seamless way that you fused the aesthetics. I want to know what was your process of choosing the artists that you felt supported your music and expressed a sense of humanity, even though they're these legendary artists, there's still this sense of depth and honesty and beauty.

[Brandee Younger]

You know what the hook was? The hook was Dorothy Ashby. So, because I had this music of Ashby's that hadn't been recorded, I knew that there were these producers that loved her because they sampled her, and Pete Rock was the first. So even just in thinking about the album, he was the first person that I wanted to be a part of the project.

But yeah, I wanted all the guests to share a special kinship with her. And I think maybe a year or two prior, Meshell Ndegeocello wrote something to me on Instagram about Dorothy Ashby. So I knew that she liked her.

And then 9th Wonder we also sampled her [Ashby]. The only wild card was Mumu Fresh.

[Eugene Uman]

Right, the vocalist who sings on the title track.

[Brandee Younger]

When we recorded the music, I knew right away that we needed a vocalist for this. And I reached out to Salaam Remy, a legendary producer, and I said, I'm doing this new album, can you listen to it? But particularly this track, I need a singer who has really smooth backgrounds, but a soulful lead. Do you know a person that can do both of those things? He recommended her.

And I knew of her as a singer and a rapper. I didn't know this beautiful, smooth side as well. So it was touchy, because Salaam reached out to her.

And she said, okay, but then her little brother passed away. And we didn't want to bother her. But you know, she went into the studio and wrote this for her little brother.

[Eugene Uman]
Oh, the lyric?

[Brandee Younger]
And this is what came out. Yeah. I mean, I can say it because she wrote it, because I don't say things out like things I do, things of my own.

This is one of the most beautiful pieces of art I'd ever heard, literally.

[Eugene Uman]
So there is that sense of humanity that we all hear.

[Brandee Younger]
Yeah, yeah.

Really, just that authenticity sticks out. I feel really lucky. It's really beautiful.

And we finally got, finally, I had the opportunity last March to perform the whole album with her, with Pete Rock, with Meshell and David. I mean, it was this, it was like, it sounds so cheesy, like a dream. But it's true.

[Eugene Uman]
Wow. Was Makaya on it too? Yeah. Makaya, Rashaan, everyone, everyone that was on the album, except 9th Wonder.

It was really special. There's like a YouTube of one of the songs on there, I think. Brand New Life, I think.

So yeah, that was special.

[Eugene Uman]
I'm going to go check it out. I love the, you know, speaking of Meshell Ndegeocello, I love that tune Virgo that you did with her.

[Brandee Younger]
That is so much fun.

[Eugene Uman]
I love the way you guys stretched out, my God, with Julius on those cool sounds.

[Brandee Younger]
Yeah. Yeah. That's great.

[Eugene Uman]
It's so happening.

Yeah. So let's wrap this up. You're going to be performing with Allan Mednard and Rashaan Carter at the Vermont Jazz Center this coming Saturday, January 18th.

Please tell us about your connection with these two wonderful musicians and what the audience can expect.

[Brandee Younger]

Oh my gosh. So we go way back.

Rashaan is my best friend. I think I met Rashaan around the same exact time that I met Ravi Coltrane.

We're talking like 17 years or so, 18 years. So we're like glue. And then Allan, we met playing with the singer Morgan James.

We were both playing with her. I can't remember where it was, but I was like, wow, I really like that drummer.

I mean, this was so many years ago and we've stayed in touch ever since. But, you know, the three of us now, we're quite funny. We're like a little peanut gallery on the road together.

I love them so much.

[Eugene Uman]

Nice. And what is the repertoire that you're going to be working from?

[Brandee Younger]

So we're going to do some stuff from Somewhere Different, the album before Brand New Life. I'm sure we'll do a couple from Brand New Life. We're going to play some new tunes from the new record.

So it'll be a blend of those things. And depending on the vibe of the audience, who knows? We might bust out a Marvin Gaye.

[Eugene Uman]

That'd be great.

I think people would welcome that very much. So, yeah. Well, thank you so much.

It's just a pleasure to speak with you and to spend some time learning a little bit more about you and your music and your concept. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

[Brandee Younger]

Thank you for having me.

I'm really looking forward to this weekend. It's going to be amazing.

[Brandee Younger]

Thank you. Thanks for having me.

[Eugene Uman]

Have a good night. See you this weekend. Okay.

Looking forward to it. Bye-bye. Bye-bye, Brandee Younger.

What a treat. What a treat. That's what this is.

We are so fortunate to be able to have these conversations, and I want to thank WVEW for being a wonderful facilitator of the arts and for giving opportunities like this to our small but mighty community.