



MELT THE FRAME

MARY HALVORSON'S NEW PERSPECTIVE ON JAZZ by **KEN MICALLEF**

IN HER REWORKING OF THE BEATLES' "WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS," ON THE 2018 TRIBUTE ALBUM, *A DAY IN THE LIFE: IMPRESSIONS OF PEPPER* (IMPULSE RECORDS), BROOKLYN GUITARIST AND COMPOSER MARY HALVORSON REINVENTS BOTH HER INSTRUMENT AND THE SONG.

Most baby boomers can hum the tune of the Beatles' classic, from *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, in a handful of notes. It might take longer to recognize Halvorson's joyous, angular version. A master of jazz phrasing, guitar technique, avant-garde discourse, and effects pedals, Halvorson bends the Beatles song to her 21st century will.

Playing her large-body Guild Artist Award archtop guitar through a Line 6 DL4 Delay Modeler pedal and a Fender Princeton Reverb amplifier¹—the guitar strings and body and the amplifier are both miked and then mixed—Halvorson introduces the song's triumphal vocal sequence ("Bil-ly-Shears!") with luminous chords, then recites its verses as purely as Jim Hall

might—but in Halvorson's hands the familiar chorus bucks and jolts via stark chords and intricate picking. Melody is displaced by startling reharmonizations, swerving spectral notes, liquid, bent-string displays, and eruptive, on-the-beat rhythms. Bittersweet strums close the performance, returning the song to earth. It's still that same Beatles tune, but it's forever altered by Halvorson's language and spirited imagination.

At 40, Halvorson is a prolific artist, with 10 recordings as a leader and 50 collaborative recordings. She has performed and recorded with many of New York City's premier improvisors, from Anthony Braxton (with whom

¹ Halvorson also uses a Mission Engineering EP1-L6 pedal, Mooer Black Secret, Trelicopter, and Tender Octaver pedals, a Dunlop X volume pedal, Elixir NanoWeb Strings, and a Dunlop 1mm stubby pick.

PHOTO: JAMES WANG



she studied at Wesleyan University) and Bill Frisell to Tom Rainey, Joe Morris, Tomeka Reid, Ben Goldberg, Marc Ribot, Ingrid Laubrock, and Jessica Pavone, in every manner of jazz ensemble: duos, trios, quartets, quintets. She's also a member of the octet Living By Lanterns, which combines four musicians each from New York and Chicago. She has recorded a brilliant solo album, *Meltframe*.

Often lauded as one of jazz's freshest voices, perhaps what's most unusual about Halvorson's playing is how she combines pure and undiluted guitar tone—think Johnny Smith, one of Halvorson's heroes—while deconstructing musical forms like her mentor Anthony Braxton. Halvorson's music isn't always easy to grasp—although sometimes it is. Either way, once absorbed, it becomes irresistible. Her quirky wit, playful demeanor, and disruptive temperament sometimes tweak and sometimes slam jazz conventions.

In 2018, Halvorson released *Code Girl*, a widely praised double CD with Amirtha Kidambi on vocals, Ambrose Akinmusire on trumpet, Michael Formanek on bass, and Tomas Fujiwara on drums. *Code Girl* became a concept and then a band, and now it's back: The ensemble Code Girl released a second CD, *Artlessly Falling* (Firehouse 12), adding Maria Grand on tenor saxophone, Adam O'Farrill on trumpet, and 75-year-old former Soft Machine drummer Robert Wyatt; Wyatt shares vocals with Kidambi. *Falling* is an improvisatory album, but it features poetry and frequently sounds like art song.

Halvorson's forthcoming releases include Thumbscrew's *Never Is Enough* and two recordings of John Zorn's bagatelles, one with her quartet of Miles Okazaki (guitar), Drew Gress (bass), and Tomas Fujiwara (drums), the second with pianist Kris Davis's

quartet: Davis, Halvorson, and Gress, with Kenny Wollesen on drums.

KEN MICALLEF: Your version of "A Little Help from My Friends" is a unique distillation of the Lennon-McCartney classic. It recalls your *Meltframe* solo record.

MARY HALVORSON: I avoided listening to the original recording and tried to come up with a cover based on playing guitar from the song embedded in my memory. That song is clearly embedded in *all* our memories, even though I hadn't listened to it recently at the time when I got the request. I liked the idea of trying to go on my impressions or memory of the song. I did go back and listen to the original song at some point and added ideas to the arrangement based on that. It was fun because it wasn't something I would've thought to do on my own. I do love and grew up listening to The Beatles. Sometimes, it's really interesting when somebody presents something to you which you wouldn't have thought of but does seem like a really cool thing to do.

KM: At 40, you already have a large body of recorded work. You can play guitar with a pure jazz tone, stylized folk picking, and the more angular stuff with the effects pedals and slide. The way you use distortion recalls punk or prog. How did you come to include distortion in your style?

MH: That was one of my earliest influences, before I got into jazz. Jimi Hendrix was the reason I started playing guitar. And I was really into Led Zeppelin and the Allman Brothers Band and the Beatles. Some of the first touring I did, when I was 24, was with Trevor Dunn's trio, and we did a month of shows opening for The Melvins. That reignited my interest in heavy, distorted stuff. It was so inspiring to hear them every night. I also had an experimental rock band around that

Left to right: Code Girl: Adam, Michael, Mary, Amirtha, Tomas, Maria.

time called People, where I would sing and play guitar.

KM: Are you a sieve or a sponge?

MH: My goal is to be evolving and to take in new things, keep challenging myself and growing and incorporating new ideas. I try to check out a lot of different music and challenge myself to not make the same record twice.

KM: What are you listening to currently?

MH: One thing I was really excited about was the last Fiona Apple record, *Fetch the Bolt Cutters*. It's *so* good. I really needed that record in this quarantine moment. And I've been listening to a lot of Duke Ellington, Ornette Coleman—classic stuff that I've been into for a long time. Also, Jacob Garchik's *Clear Line*, a big band record.

KM: You play a hollow body electric guitar, a Guild Artist Award, and you mike both the amplifier and the guitar strings.

MH: What has always interested me with an electric guitar is that duality of having both the acoustic and the electric sound present. The reason I like that big Guild archtop guitar is because it has such a beautiful acoustic sound and such a *big* sound, and you can really hear the strings and the attack and the resonance of the instrument. I almost never practice through an amp, because I love the sound of that guitar by itself. But when you add the amp, then you get this whole other element, which you can then augment with distortion and all kinds of effects. I've always been drawn to the idea that you can hear both of those things at once, the strings and the guitar body, and it gives the guitar a three-dimensional sound.

KM: That big guitar makes me think of Johnny Smith.

MH: He's one of my favorites. I'm obsessed with Johnny Smith. The guitar I play the most, which is a Guild Artist Award from 1970, Guild designed that to be the Johnny Smith Award guitar. Johnny Smith decided he didn't want it. They couldn't call it the Johnny Smith Award anymore, so they called it Artist Award. And that's the guitar I play. But I didn't know who Johnny Smith was, or I had no idea about any of this when I got the guitar.

KM: Sometimes, your playing is very pure and reminds me of Johnny Smith.

MH: I'll bring him up with people, and they have no idea who he is. It's fascinating. I can't believe I initially missed him. I did a Johnny Smith duo tribute record a couple of years ago, with Bill Frisell. It's *The Maid With the Flaxen Hair: A Tribute to Johnny Smith* (Tzadik, 2018).

KM: Your guitar sometimes sounds treated. Are you putting playing cards under the strings or something?

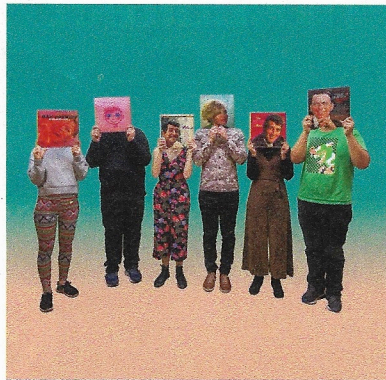
MH: Sometimes I'll use a slide to make buzzy types of sounds, but generally I don't treat it. The pitch-bending thing is a Line 6 Delay Pedal.

KM: Were you already involved in experimentation when you arrived to study at Wesleyan?

MH: That's where I got into more experimental music, at Wesleyan. I went there not intending to major in music, maybe take a few music classes. When I started college, I was probably playing more straight-ahead jazz, just 'cause that's what I was learning. When I went to Wesleyan and studied with Anthony Braxton, that's when things really opened up for me.

KM: How do you think about the sound of your records and how they'll appeal to listeners, and does that affect your record production?

MH: That's one of the beautiful things about making a record, as opposed to performing live: You can really tune in to all the nuances of sound and balance and trying to get everything just right. I spend a lot of time thinking about the mix and the individual sounds of the instruments and how everything fits together. We recorded the latest album for the label Firehouse 12. They have two recording studios in New Haven and the label owner is also the engineer, Nick Lloyd. Their second studio is almost like a cathedral space; that's where we recorded this. We got really good sounds. At the same time, it was a tough record to mix because there's three different voices,



two horns—there's a lot happening. I wanted it to sound dynamic but also to sound blended. That's sometimes a hard balance, especially with vocals. I wanted the voices to sit in the music, as if the vocals were another horn, as opposed to the vocals being twice as loud as everything else as on rock records. It took some work. I put quite a lot of thought into how the record sounds.

KM: Your audio system consists of ProAc Studio 100 speakers, Audeze LCD-X headphones, Bose Wave Music System III, and an early 1960s KLH Model Eleven, which is an all-in-one portable system with turntable, amplifier, and detachable speakers.

MH: My dad gave me the KLH, which I use when I listen to records, and the Bose if I want to quickly throw on a CD. I love the KLH. If I play a record on it, it sounds beautiful. I've never tried to get another record player. That's the only one I've ever had. Records sound very warm, very present on the KLH. You can really hear all of the sounds and all the scratches. It's probably not the cleanest player, but it has a lot of character, and you can hear all the details of the vinyl.

KM: How are you driving the ProAc's?

MH: Those are hooked up to a Pioneer VSX-830-K receiver. It's connected to my TV. I can plug in an external USB stick to it and listen to music from my computer. I listen to a lot of different things using the ProAc's.

KM: Where does the Bose system come into play?

MH: The Bose is very bass heavy, which can be nice for certain things, but the ProAc's are very true. You hear so much detail. If I'm listening to a mix, it lets me hear all the details. It doesn't color the sound in one way or the other. It's very clear. That's what I like about the ProAc's.

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MH: My *Code Girl* coproducer, David Breslin, recommended the ProAcs and the Audeze. He said, "You're a musician. You need a really good pair of headphones." For me, again, it's that clarity, and the imaging of those headphones is amazing. To be able to hear every detail. It's amazing to have those headphones in a recording session and hear the other musicians in a way that sounds good. It doesn't feel irritating to have these headphones in a studio. They're also very comfortable, which is unusual. Usually my head is killing me, but by the end of the day in the studio with the Audeze my head feels fine.

KM: Braxton called you Code Girl?
MH: I called the band Code Girl as a nod to Anthony Braxton. We were on the road and he'd said, "Code Girl." At the time I was working on lyrics and titles and thought, "Oh, that's cool." I always carry this notebook where I write down phrases. He said, "What's the code?" I've no idea what he was talking about, but he told me the code was "5555." I wrote down, "Code Girl (5555)." I thought it would be an interesting band name. So, it's a nod to one of my most important teachers and mentors. Also, the lyrics on the album are pretty coded. On the first

ENGINEER NICK LLOYD

Halvorson's engineer on *Artlessly Falling*, and on several of her previous recordings, is Nick Lloyd, owner and engineer at the label Firehouse 12, which he cofounded with brass player Taylor Ho Bynum, another Anthony Braxton protégé. Lloyd's other production/engineering credits include albums by Bynum, Braxton, Wadada Leo Smith, and the Kronos Quartet. Lately he's been collaborating with composer David Lang, cofounder of Bang on a Can. Lloyd is also a musician, a Hammond B3 specialist who has played on recordings by The National and Taylor Swift. I asked Lloyd about working with Halvorson.

"Mary's concept for the music is so clear at the outset (and I'm spoiled by this) that we are really just working toward a transparent representation of her vision for the music. There is

still a lot of work on the mix to do once we're done tracking, but since we have worked so much together, it makes the balancing much less subjective.

"We recorded a big space, but the only things in the big space were the guitar and the bass. We actually had some trouble getting the horns to blend because they were recorded in a booth and were really too clean, too dry initially. The big space really helps with the upright bass tone; it is so nice to work in a room with almost no resonances in the low end for bass."

I also asked Lloyd about miking Halvorson's guitar. "As far as the mic, on her recent records, we have used a DPA 4099 clip mic, which allows us to get the mic element very close to the guitar, and doesn't move relative to the instrument," he said. "And I try to use as many ribbon mics as possible. :-)"



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album, there are a lot of 5s embedded in the album art.

KM: What's the goal for *Artlessly Falling*, the second Code Girl album?

MH: One is that I wanted multiple singers. One of my biggest heroes, Robert Wyatt, is a guest. That's very exciting for me, that he was even open to doing it. I wrote a few songs specifically for him. And in addition to adding the poetic forms for the lyrics I wanted a little more cohesion. We knew these songs very well when we recorded them.

KM: Why is Robert Wyatt a hero?

MH: I remember so clearly the first time I heard his album, *Rock Bottom*.² It was one of those moments like with Johnny Smith. I remember being bowled over by it. For me, music is very emotional, and you can't always grasp exactly why something is hitting you so hard. Robert Wyatt's music, its beauty and the emotions that come with it, is unique and strong. It's simultaneously beautiful and unique and strange. A perfect balance of those elements. He's making these beautiful songs that don't sound like anything else. I'd send him a sample of me singing a song and playing guitar so he could get a sense for whether it's something he'd be open to singing. I didn't want to give him too many instructions. I loved everything he did.

KM: The song "Last-Minute Smears" quotes Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh.

MH: Just taking words from his congressional testimony in 2018. He was angry and indignant and caused people to say these hyperbolic things, like "people will die." I wanted to turn it into a song. It's a snapshot of that moment in time and also symbolic of the

larger problems we're facing as a country. Amirtha's vocals gave it a mournful quality. Made it a sad song instead of something angry and indignant. It's not a political album, it's not an album of love songs. It's about the crazy state of the world.

KM: How do you feel about media coverage of female jazz artists in the me-too era?

MH: It's great. When I started playing guitar as a teenager, I didn't know

of other women playing jazz guitar. I had no female role models. I was very lucky because I had a lot of very cool, very positive male role models who encouraged me and were very inclusive. But a lot of women are very discouraged from starting out in the music, because it might feel like a boys' club, or because none of their girlfriends are playing jazz or playing instruments. The momentum is changing now, and the more women that do it, the more examples young women starting out will have to point to. That's really important. What I hope is ultimately you won't have to showcase women in that way because it will be more of an equal balance. That shift is already happening. It's not uncommon for me now to play in bands where women outnumber men. I'm playing with Tomeka Reid, Ingrid Laubrock, Jessica Pavone, Kris Davis, Susan Alcorn, Amirtha, Maria Grand. I'm playing with women all the time. That's really, really fantastic. There's still a way to go, but it's deserving of attention, and it's great that the momentum is changing. ■

² I chose *Rock Bottom* as one of my Records to Die For in 2007.—Jim Austin

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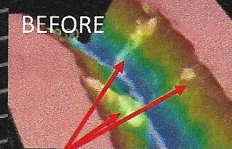


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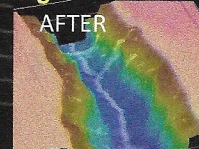
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