

So Much Guitar #1: Mary Halvorson



So Much Guitar is i2b's weekly(ish) coverage of the best of the gajillion tremendous guitarists out there.

Doing it the hard way, one string slinger at a time. How long could it possibly take?

(Feature photo (c) Julian Parker-Burns)

Every week or two seems to bring another release featuring Mary Halvorson, a musician who has established herself over the past dozen years as one of the main names in 21st century jazz guitar. She gained early notice for her work with the legendary Anthony Braxton – her Wesleyan College music professor who inspired her, after one class session, to drop her biology major and commit to music – and has so far appeared on approximately 176 albums. As per Rick Lopez's labor-of-love fansite ([click here](#)), and assuming I can count that high with accuracy., collaborating with a who's who catalog of her peers. She is a prolific composer who seems to be constantly on tour or in the studio. Honestly, does she ever sleep?

Halvorson is also one of those rare guitarists (e.g., Garcia, Fripp, Frisell) who is identifiable within a handful of notes. Like Frisell, she turns up in boodles of unexpected contexts, always enhancing the proceedings while sounding like literally no one but Mary Halvorson. Some of it has to do with her distinctive use of pedal effects, but like the three players I named it mostly comes down to tone, vocabulary, and syntax.

Her lines – intervallically angular and rhythmically skittering – sound like nobody else. And aside from being virtuosic, her playing belies a wry sense of humor; the music may be on the edge of avant-whatever, but it is never a stuffy, button-that-top-button kind of affair.

In May, Halvorson released two albums simultaneously on the Nonesuch label. *Belladonna* showcases her composing chops for string quartet (The Mivos Quartet) augmented by her guitar improvisations. Particularly noteworthy is the title track that closes the album, packed with thorny harmonies and overdriven by Mary's unhinged soloing over the final minute and a half.

Mivos Quartet also turns up for half of the tracks on *Amaryllis*, augmenting a sextet anchored by the drummer most likely to be found in a Halvorson production, the great Tomas Fujiwara. "Night Shift" opens with a staggered 5/4 pulse that swings like it's hanging by a rope. Jacob Garchik on trombone and trumpeter Adam O'Farrill play a gorgeous unison line over Patricia Brennan's vibraphone comping that recalls Grachan Moncur III's great mid-sixties Blue Note albums. Alternating between group improvisation and soloist-out-front excursions, it is one of my all-time favorite Halvorson tracks among literally dozens of notable candidates.

At the end of this month (September 30 if you are into that whole precision thing), the trio Thumbscrew will release (*Multicolored Midnight*, Cuneiform Records), their seventh album and a celebration of ten years as a band, a real honest to dog *band* and not just an assortment of people who happen to play together from time to time. With Michael Formanek on bass and the ever-present Fujiwara on drums and vibes, Thumbscrew represents some of Halvorson's most challenging *and* accessible work. The music veers easily between pretty and pretty weird, surprising transitions that work only because the players have such instinctive rapport after so many hundreds/thousands of hours playing together in different

formats.

Multicolored Midnight is a follow-up to *The Anthony Braxton Project* (Cunieform Records), which is perhaps the most accessible introduction to Braxton's work I have ever heard. The two albums before that – the companion releases *Ours* and *Theirs* – helped relaunch the invaluable Cunieform Records operation. *Ours* is a set of original pieces, three from each member, while *Theirs* features ten jazz near-standards; it's a quirky selection of tunes that works beautifully. All four albums were recorded in Pittsburgh, which has become a sort of second home to the Brooklyn-based trio via a string of residencies at City of Asylum.

Multicolored Midnight by Thumbscrew

Midnight is simultaneously sharp cornered and smoothly grooving, the rhythm section more than a match for Halvorson's propellant picking. There are compositions by each member, but the ultimate development of the work arises from a democratic alliance of people who know each in a way that only emerges over an long period of cooperative partnership. Of particular note, the tracks with Fujiwara on vibes suggests a radical sonic modernization of the classic Red Norvo Trio with Charles Mingus and Tal Farlow, a tad more bent but every bit as attendant to the air between the notes as that classic combo. (Check that old shit out, y'all. Those cats were not fooling.)

As if this were not enough, Mary found time for Nate Wooley's latest Columbia Icefield album, the superb *Ancient Songs of Burlap Heroes*. There was also a European tour with pianist Sylvie Courvoisier in support of their late 2021 release *Searching For The Disappeared Hour*, documented beautifully here in a February, 2002 performance in Amsterdam.

A little poke at the google machine will reveal more great Halvorson material than you can shake a guitar at. And if you wouldn't mind some sound (sic) advice: Get thee hie to the

2023 Big Ears Festival in Knoxville. She will perform the *Belladonna/Amaryllis* music and appear as part of the John Zorn 70th birthday ruckus. Maybe more.

Go. Listen.