So Much Guitar #3: Ava Mendoza

Photo: Laurent Orseau

Ava Mendoza appeared on my radar with the arrival of William Parker's *Mayan Space Station* (Aum Fidelity, 2021). Mendoza's playing blew my head clean off. A trio outing with bassist Parker and drummer Gerald Cleaver, this one calls to mind Sonny Sharrock at his face-melting finest. No mystery why it landed on so many Best of 2021 lists. (Mine included.)

Mayan Space Station by William Parker

Miami-born Mendoza has been generating buzz since her days in the Mills College music program where she studied with Fred Frith, Maggi Payne, and John Bischoff. Now based in Brooklyn, Mendoza has been bouncing around the globe for the past dozen years, following wherever the music takes her. She spent her early years studying classical guitar, but fell prey to the siren song of making massive noise via six strings on a plank and a passel of pedals for dialing in sounds unknown. The technique she earned through classical training remains evident, but Ava's work is as far from the buttoned up ways of Parkening and Fisk as you can get.

Torrential. Paint peeling. Scathing. Coruscating bellows of post-Hendrixian skronk. And often as comforting and tender as a gentle summer rain.

This Guitar Contains Multitudes (*Photo by Matthew Muise*)

A few months after *Mayan Space Station* came out, Mendoza released the solo set *New Spells*, a joint release by Relative Pitch Records and Astral Spirits. It is hard to pick just one of the five tracks, but I replayed this one four times in a row on a recent car trip, so maybe go with that scientific indicator of quality.

New Spells by Ava Mendoza

Mendoza is a prolific collaborator. Among her many co-conspirators we find Nels Cline, Jamaaladeen Tacuma, Rova Saxophone Quartet, Can vocalist Malcolm Mooney, and John Zorn. She was part of trumpeter-composer Nate Wooley's superb 2020 release *Seven Storey Mountain VI*, a collaboration that no doubt set her up for the call when Wooley needed a touring substitute for Mary Halvorson in his Columbia Icefield project with pedal steel wizard Susan Alcorn. (Check out question 5 in the Q&A down below for Ava's observations on this project.)

Ava sent me this tidy two minute Icefield clip from Stockholm last May. (EXCLUSIVE!! (perhaps) MUST CREDIT I2B!!!)

Video shot by Gavin Maycroft

If that grabs ya, here's a 40+ minute set from Austria in late 2021. I've come back to this performance several times. (And the two Icefield albums with Halvorson are damned fine, too.)

There's a lot more where that came from. Her trio Unnatural Ways is a post-punk maelstrom. She writes music for film and video; her tidy little set of soundtracks, *With Other Media*, offers a glimpse of the Bernard Herrman lurking within. Mendoza is the musical Roy Kent: She's here, she's there, she's every…

Next Spring, Mendoza has multiple gigs at the Big Ears Festival. As I mentioned last week, the performance debut of Orcutt's *Music for Four Guitars* (Palilalia Records) has me completely a flutter, and you can bet I would crawl over

broken glass to catch her with Mayan Space Station. But there's another set that has me very curious: Ava in performance with artist/engineer Sue-C, whose video/technology based work (she calls it "real time cinema") promises to be one of those *sui generis* happenings that makes Big Ears my personal pilgrimage to Lourdes. And it would not surprise me to see her pop up in other collaborations over the weekend.

I got in touch with Ava to see if she was up for a round of "One Question Per String," which is a barely clever name for something I hope to include in most of the *So Much Guitar* posts from here on it. She was more than game, returning this set of thoughtful replies that allow me to leave her with the last words, save two.

1) Who/what was the main spark that made you want to dedicate yourself
to six strings and a plank?

Q1 was so impossible for me to answer that I gave up. Sorry!

2) Who is on your bucket list of people you really want to work with? (any instrument/discipline/universe)

Big Freedia, Buddy Guy, Will Guthrie, Moor Mother, Iggy Pop

3) If you had to cut your pedal array down to only 3, which ones do you keep?

Blackstone Appliances Mosfet Overdrive, Dunlop Volume Pedal, and Red Panda Tensor. The Blackstone isn't usually on my pedalboard these days, but if I do a gig where it makes sense to bring a smaller rig, often I'll bring it because it's so versatile. It has two gain stages, brown level and red level, which are basically overdrive and distortion. You can really dial them both in and get a lot out of them. So, it's not my favorite fuzzbox in the world, but if I want something that can do a lot in one box, it's great.

Dunlop Volume pedal, pretty self-explanatory! I'm always riding my volume pedal, using it for swells and just to control dynamics.

Red Panda Tensor- It can be a semi-normal delay, but it can also do extreme pitch shifting, glitch, fast forward rewind and looping effects. So, depending how you dial it in you can use it just to add some subtle echo to your sound, or noise it out and go to Pluto right off the bat.

4) Do you ever work with altered tunings?

I use drop D all the time, that's all over most of my recordings. And sometimes solo I use drop D with a capo at the first fret, so drop D# essentially. Other than that I'm usually in standard. This past year I've been learning things in alternate tunings actually, open D minor, D major, and open A. Jessie Mae Hemphill and John Lee Hooker things, and then I'll just improvise on my own. It's been really great to work on at home, but I'm not sure yet how it will pan out in terms of my own writing. [I]n any case it's been really good for me to learn some new music in altered tunings, and it's changing the way I approach bends and resonating strings in any tuning. We'll see what comes of it!

5) How did you approach filling Mary's chair in Columbia Icefield?

I brought my own background and approach to the music, essentially how I would do on any gig. Unless you are subbing on a Broadway show, I don't think the goal of subbing should ever be to sound like the person that you're subbing for. Mary is a friend and a great player and person, and we've played together in a bunch of different contexts. Everyone was aware, going in, that we sound pretty different, and as a bandleader Nate wants people to be themselves, so I felt free to do that.

Nate has described the band as "Americana" and that is really

how I hear it and how I approach the music. Not Americana in the saccharine "the prairie, the white picket fence, the greatest nation in the world" sense! But in a more cold, hard, realistic look at the country, sometimes a brutal and frightening one. It's about a giant expanse of frozen, ice-covered land! I listened to the record a lot, and really tried to sink into its pacing, because it's a slow, chilly, patient record, and I wanted those qualities to come thru live.

My take on the music probably owes as much to doomy country as to "jazz" or free jazz. There were two guitarists that kept coming to mind for me as I worked on the music and developed my approach. One was Dylan Carlson (Earth) because of how measured, heavy and substantial his riffs are, things you can listen to over and over. And Roy Buchanan, for his tone and crazy phrasing, pinched harmonics and big bends behind the nut. I think of him as sort of blues and country extended technique. Hearing him make a sound calls to my mind a whole past, present and future of American music.

6) Hendrix, Hazel, or Cosey?

Hm, all masters and true originals, good for different things. They're all distorted guitarists who ride the line between rock and blues, and in Pete Cosey's case the line with jazz as well. All of them use some effects. But I think of each of them as so special in terms of their playing and the role they occupied in their bands, it's impossible pit them against each other. Hendrix is fluid fire, he's like if Albert Ayler was a blues rock guitarist, this amazing spontaneity and feel. Eddie's pocket is sooooo deep no matter what he's playing, even when he's shredding somehow he's always playing rhythm guitar. And Cosey is more adventurous harmony-wise than the other two, plays more intervalically and atonally. No way to pick! {Ed. Note: This is indeed the only correct answer.}

Go. Listen.