



MIDDLEBURY  
PERFORMING ARTS SERIES

P R E S E N T S

# Brandee Younger Trio

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2023

7:30 PM ET

ROBISON HALL, MAHANEY ARTS CENTER



# Brandee Younger Trio

**Brandee Younger, Harp**  
**Rashaan Carter, Bass**  
**Allan Mednard, Drums**

*The program will be announced from the stage and performed without intermission.*

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<http://go.middlebury.edu/BrandeeJazz23/>

Full color programs, including large print, can also be found on the streaming page.

## Artist Biographies

### Brandee Younger, Harp

The sonically-innovative harpist Brandee Younger is revolutionizing harp for the digital era. Over the past 15 years, she has worked relentlessly to stretch boundaries and limitations for harpists. In 2022, she made history by becoming the first black woman to be nominated for a Grammy Award for Best Instrumental Composition. That same year, she was also nominated for an NAACP Image Award. Ever-expanding as an artist, she has worked with cultural icons including Common, Lauryn Hill, John Legend, and Moses Sumney. Her current album, *Brand New Life*, builds on her already rich oeuvre and cements the harp's place in pop culture. As the title of the album suggests, *Brand New Life* is about forging new paths—artistic, personal, political, and spiritual. On this album, Younger salutes her musical foremother, the trailblazing harpist Dorothy Ashby,



while also speaking to the sentiments of more recent generations. “We’re bringing new life to Dorothy Ashby’s popular and previously unreleased compositions. We’re creating new life...for the instrument,” she explains. *Brand New Life* is an album about living fully, in neon bright color.

In March of 2022, Younger flew to Chicago and began recording *Brand New Life* in the home studio of her longtime collaborator and friend, Makaya McCraven, who both produced and played drums on the album. In the Windy City, Younger hoped to harness some of Ashby’s funky energy from a recording she did there nearly five decades before. Younger gathered artists who have had a sense of kinship with Ashby, from the internationally lauded, neo-soul bassist/vocalist/rapper Meshell Ndegeocello, to her long-time bassist Rashaan Carter, plus the legendary rapper and producer Pete Rock and the talented contemporary producer 9th Wonder. The latter producers introduced hip hop and R&B listeners to Ashby in the 1990s and early 2000s via slick samples. Pete Rock and CL Smooth’s 1992 release “For Pete’s Sake” samples Ashby’s 1968 hit “Come Live with Me.” 9th Wonder’s remix of singer Amerie’s 2003 R&B classic “Why Don’t We Fall in Love” also includes a Dorothy Ashby sample from “Come Live with Me.” With Younger’s solo rendition of this heavily sampled song on *Brand New Life*, she builds a sonic bridge between generations. “I wanted everyone on the record to have a special connection to Dorothy [Ashby],” she offered. For the project, Younger also recorded a number of Ashby’s never-before recorded compositions alongside Ashby fan favorites and Younger originals.

The emotional complexity of the album is stunningly captured in the title track “Brand New Life,” an original co-written by Younger and singer Mumu Fresh. “This love is so deep, time and space couldn’t keep you away from me,” Fresh sings. Younger’s playing paints lush details over Fresh’s smooth vocals, leaving nothing to be sonically desired. Against the backdrop of current social issues—climate change, racism, health disparities, and women’s rights—the song speaks to a desire for change, for something new in the world. “Brand New Life” reaches listeners at the human level.

Love is a subtle but insistent thread throughout the album. The opening track, “You’re a Girl for One Man Only,” is a previously unrecorded Dorothy Ashby composition. It’s a tender evocation of a first kiss or the early seasons of new romance. Younger recalls the original song’s lyrics’ more traditional message of romantic longing that we still hear in popular music today: Boy chases girl. Girl succumbs. In Younger’s version, there is a sense of agency and exploration within a mesmerizing atmosphere. In the second half of the track, we are met with a delicate dance between Joel Ross on vibraphone and Younger on harp, the two instruments pining through the melody.

*Brand New Life* is part of her steadfast efforts to amplify the contributions of black women harpists and to keep their legacies alive. Her care for and attention to Dorothy Ashby as a musical ancestor has been consistent throughout her career. Akin to the popular hashtag #CiteBlackWomen, which demands that consumers credit and recognize black women for their intellectual labor, Younger urges us to recognize Ashby's contribution to the American songbook. The album is part of a larger project of recognizing not only the history of innovators of distinguished harp—a that places Ashby and Younger together on a continuum—but also the presence of everyday black women.

"Running Game" was an obscure seven-inch single release originally entitled "Double Talkin" that featured Ashby on piano. In the song's intro, we hear what sounds like a casual conversation at a black women's beauty salon or at a social gathering of sorts where women freely share advice and observations on life with one another. The voices in the intro are of Younger's mother and aunt. Younger sets up listeners by reading the lyrics from Ashby's original. "Every man I meet is double talkin.' Where did the good men go?" The women candidly respond to the song lyrics. One says, "As far as game, men have been running game since day one." The track leads into "Running Game," a ballad with inflections of Negro spirituals and the blues. Here, Younger's expressivity on her instrument is incomparable. As the strings (arranged by DeSean Jones) hum behind her, the "double-talking" gold-digging man comes into full view. "Running-Game" ends on a note of optimism, of marching forward despite life's struggle.

Younger was born and raised in Hempstead, New York. As a teen in the early 1990s, she bopped to the beats of artists like LL Cool J, Queen Latifah, and Busta Rhymes. Among these hip-hop greats, she discovered Ashby's music by way of hip-hop legend Pete Rock. She began playing harp at the age of eleven and eventually enrolled at the Hartt School of Music at the University of Hartford in Connecticut where she studied classical music. Through the encouragement of legendary saxophonist Jackie McLean, she made her first foray into jazz with the harp.

Hearing Ashby for the first time led her to envision new possibilities for herself as a harpist. "She was covering all these popular tunes and soundtracks [of the time] and I wanted to do that. She's playing pop, jazz, and everyone's sampling her—DJ Premier, Pete Rock, J. Dilla. Hearing, then seeing her as a Black Woman, while I'm this random little isolated black girl playing a harp by myself was everything to me." Younger forged her way with a small but mighty group of black women harpists as examples—Sarah Lawrence from her hometown, Ann Hobson-Pilot, Dorothy Ashby, and Alice Coltrane—who were consistent sources of inspiration.

In 2006, after graduating from the Hartt School, Younger went on to develop a name for herself on the jazz and commercial recording scene in New York City. To date, her performance roster is fierce. As a side-woman, she has played alongside jazz icons such as Pharoah Sanders, Ravi Coltrane, Jack DeJohnette, and Reggie Workman. Younger's commitment to carrying the torch can also be seen through her work as a performer and educator. In 2008, she earned a Master of Music from New York University's Steinhardt School. She has been guest faculty and lecturer at numerous universities including but not limited to Berklee College of Music, Princeton University, Howard University, and Tulane University. Currently, she serves as teaching artist faculty at New York University and The New School.

In 2020, Younger was named winner of the *DownBeat* Critics Poll in the category of "Rising Star" harpist. In recent years, she has appeared on albums by Lakecia Benjamin, Robert Glasper, Jeremy Pelt, The Baylor Project, and Makaya McCraven, just to name a few.

### **Rashaan Carter, Bass**

Rashaan Carter grew up in the Washington D.C. area. It was there, with the nurturing of his father, a saxophonist, and his mother, a jazz radio programmer, that Rashaan forged an interest in music. After stints with various instruments, the bass became the voice for his musical expression. Rashaan worked and gained experience in the local scene in Washington D.C., and after high school he moved to New York City to attend the New School University, where he studied with Buster Williams and Reggie Workman. While attending the New School he also began to work with many of the faculty, including Joe Chambers and Jimmy Owens, among others. Since moving to New York, Rashaan has become entrenched in the jazz scene and has worked with Benny Golson, Curtis Fuller and Louis Hayes, Wallace Roney, Marc Cary, Cindy Blackman, Doug and Jean Carn, Antoine Roney, Sonny Simmons, and many more. He's also studied with one of his prime influences, Ron Carter. Rashaan regularly performs with a myriad of artists in and outside of New York and can be found on various recordings as well.



### **Allan Mednard, Drums**

Drummer Allan Mednard was born and raised in Queens, New York. His early musical experiences involved New York City's All-City High School Music program, Bayside High School's Academy of Music, and Queens College's Preparatory Studies in Music program. He graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree in jazz performance from the City College of New York. While attending the City College of New York he studied with Carl Allen. He has performed around the globe with ensembles led by Jeremy Pelt, Ben Allison, Kurt Rosenwinkel, Aaron Parks, Alix Ambroise, Le Boeuf Brothers, and many more.



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