



MARILYN MAZUR

BY ANDERS GRIFFEN

Marilyn Mazur is a unique artist: percussionist, composer, vocalist, dancer and multi-instrumentalist who has pioneered her own path. In a fantastic career spanning almost 50 years, over 200 album credits and numerous awards, she has worked with a variety of artists, including Miles Davis, Wayne Shorter, Gil Evans, John Tchicai, Jeanne Lee, Irène Schweizer, Lindsay Cooper, Jan Garbarek, Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen, Eberhard Weber, Dino Saluzzi and Pierre Dørge's New Jungle Orchestra, among many others.

Born in New York City, Mazur and her family relocated to Copenhagen when she was six. In Denmark she started violin lessons at seven. She didn't take to that instrument but began dreaming and made a connection between music and magic. "I established my 'secret world', where my fantasy dance teacher [Mrs. Mysticulum] would teach me the steps of *Le Sacre du Printemps*, my absolute favorite music, which has been rooted deeply inside me my entire life. I would draw the curtains in our living room, so I was alone on our red carpet, put the record on and dance."

At nine she began piano and ballet lessons, which were much more to her liking. She was serious but maintained her secret world where both dance and music were magic and creative ways of living. As a teenager, she was inspired by records. She enjoyed Cream and Frank Zappa, but when a friend sat her in a dark room with headphones to listen to *Bitches Brew* it made a huge impression. It was also as a teenager that she started experiencing more live music. "I started to listen to live music and would always dance, rather wildly, at live concerts with my favorite groups: [Alex] Riel/[Palle] Mikkilborg V8, led by two Danish jazz icons, who I later got to work with extensively, and

Kenneth Knudsen's Coronarias Dans."

Around 16 she left school and joined The Creative Dance Theatre and toured with them for about three years. Sometimes they worked live with musicians such as Dollar Brand, Karl Berger and the Swiss group OM. Her piano teacher wanted her to attend the Royal Music Conservatory to receive an advanced musical education. At that time, in Denmark and the States alike, music studies were strictly classical and Mazur had no aspirations of becoming a classical pianist, so she pursued the music education track and began to focus on percussion, among other things.

"I joined the new education [called AM] at the Conservatory, which was meant to train music teachers and included conducting, arrangement, choir and more. This gave me a broader perspective while I was developing as a jazz musician. Being into body movement and rhythm, it felt very natural to get my first drumset and study classical percussion as my main instrument and this really took hold of me."

As a pianist, she formed her first group as a leader, Zirenes, which included two Swedish women she met at the Vallekilde Jazz Summer course and augmented by drummer Riel and saxophonist Uffe Markussen. "Going to Vallekilde in the early '70s made it clear that the others were practically all men and that they had different 'rules' than me. So, it was tempting to bond with the few other women and find our own musical path."

Although she has had many inspirations, different sounds and her imagination, rather than a particular tradition, have always led the way. Her approach results in a personal sound with a homemade touch. In the beginning she collaborated with free jazz musicians, avoiding the established route into jazz. "As a drummer, I found that I could communicate easily by ear and feeling, so I didn't worry much about tradition and [i.e.] bebop. This doesn't necessarily mean that I am breaking rules—which I am not applying in the first place—because I use lots of energy on fitting into and enlarging the actual musical expressions, whichever these are."

By the late '70s Mazur had established herself as a percussionist through numerous collaborations, including those with Tchicai, Mikkilborg and The

Danish Radio Jazz Orchestra. She created the all-women music/theater ensemble, Primi Band, "to further explore the female qualities" and to focus on dance, rhythm, voice and experimental performance.

Since Denmark is a small country, especially when performing music that is not mainstream, touring was always the norm. She could maintain her groups and various collaborations while traveling Europe to perform with various musicians in other countries. However, that changed in the '80s when she became a world traveler. In 1985, Mazur was part of Mikkilborg's recording of his suite of compositions in tribute to Miles Davis, who was the soloist on the session, which became the album *Aura*. Soon after, Davis invited Mazur to join his band.

"It was a fantastic adventure to meet and play and tour with Miles and I really learned a lot about grooving and musical presence through those years. Miles gave me a lot of freedom, but his music at that time was pretty concrete, which demanded a certain 'masculine' energy from me, although Miles probably wanted me to bring more air and poetry into the band. Yes, I was the only woman in Miles' bands, but that was only one of the ways I was different from the rest and I was used to being an 'outsider'. It felt strange in the beginning [1985], the second Miles band I was in [1988] was more social, but, wow, what an experience with Miles' leading power and inspiration—to tour the whole world under those grand circumstances and have the chance to give whatever possible to Miles' music!"

That experience was followed by touring and recordings with the Gil Evans/Laurent Cugny Big Band Lumiere in 1986 and a world tour with Shorter in 1987 and then back with Davis in 1988. In 1989 Mazur formed her own dream band, Future Song, and from 1991 to 2005 she had a fruitful collaboration with Norwegian saxophonist Jan Garbarek.

After all of these amazing experiences, she fondly remembered the Primi Band like family. So, when the Copenhagen Jazz Festival asked her to revive the group in 2015, she was thrilled. Putting the original group back together was not possible at this point, but a sort of new version was assembled called Shamania.

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LEST WE FORGET



DOROTHY DONEGAN

BY ALEX HENDERSON

Dorothy Donegan was never easy to categorize. During her long career, the native Chicagoan pianist performed everything from boogie woogie, swing, blues, bop and stride to European classical music. But whatever she played, Donegan was a virtuoso.

Born on Apr. 6th, 1922, Donegan was six when she began studying piano. Her early influences included Art Tatum, Earl "Fatha" Hines, Fats Waller, Count Basie and Duke Ellington as well as classical piano and at 12 she performed with the Chicago Symphony. Donegan, who was first recorded in 1942, later absorbed the influence of Bud Powell, Oscar Peterson and other bop pianists. Although she didn't record as often as her admirers would have liked—and no studio albums at all from 1964-74, Donegan built an impressive catalog, which included dates for mostly independent labels.

In her discography were many live albums. She was famous for her shows, which were as fun as they were unpredictable. Because she was so spontaneous,

Donegan could be difficult for bassists and drummers to keep up with. Danish bassist Mads Vinding, who played with Donegan during the '80s, recalls, "Dorothy could play different melodies in either hand at the same time. We had no setlists and she never gave a clue as to which melody she was playing. Sometimes, she changed melody or key in the middle of a solo. Quite difficult to follow sometimes, but it was a good exercise for the ears." Another bassist, Jon Burr, played in Donegan's trio extensively during the '90s and remembers her as someone who wanted to make sure that the audience had a good time. "Dorothy was unique," he explains. "I heard it said about her that Dorothy maybe wasn't the greatest jazz pianist, but she was certainly the greatest pianist in jazz. She was recognized as such by other pianists and she was an entertainer; that was the focus of her show. Dorothy had a comedic aspect to her showmanship. She would walk out on stage wearing flats, carrying high heels. Then she would sit down on the piano bench and the first thing she would do is change the shoes. And she would do stuff like play the last note with her foot... It was said that nobody wanted to follow her because she was such a dynamic entertainer. She would often get a standing ovation very early in the set and by the end of her set, people would be roaring."

Burr describes playing with her as an adventure in which the surprises were constant: "There was never any rehearsal. There was never any indication of what was coming. Dorothy would do stuff like, she could be

playing 'Cherokee' in A to begin with and then, new key. She wouldn't call out, 'Go into B flat' or whatever. She wouldn't call it out, she would just go there. And after a while, I started to get the hang of it."

Donegan died of colon cancer on May 19th, 1998 at 76. According to Burr, the living musician who has the most in common with her musically is pianist/singer Johnny O'Neal. "Johnny has the incredible spontaneity that Dorothy had," Burr continues, "Dorothy would get faster, she would get slower and the effect of it was really emotional. I haven't heard anyone else do that... You would be playing something fast and the next thing you know, you're suddenly playing a ballad. But it would be a different tune. With Dorothy, anything was liable to happen at any time." ❖

Recommended Listening:

- Dorothy Donegan—*Donnybrook with Dorothy* (Capitol, 1959)
- Dorothy Donegan—*It Happened One Night* (Roulette, 1960)
- Dorothy Donegan—*The Many Faces of Dorothy Donegan* (Mahogany-Storyville, 1975)
- Dorothy Donegan—*Makin' Whoopie (The Definitive Black & Blue Sessions)* (Black and Blue, 1979)
- Dorothy Donegan—*The Explosive Dorothy Donegan* (Progressive-Audiophile, 1980)
- Dorothy Donegan—*The Incredible Dorothy Donegan Trio (Special Guest Dizzy Gillespie)* (Chiaroscuro, 1991)

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him and copying everything he was doing, only backwards—I felt a little bit like Ginger Rogers.

TNYCJR: Has anyone ever said something to or about you that was especially affirming?

SA: Somebody once said something that always stuck with me. It was back sometime in the early to mid '80s. Back then, I was mostly playing country-western music in big dance halls. This woman who was standing by the stage, holding up her young daughter, said, "Look there, sweetie; that's a woman. A woman steel guitar player." Like the project documented on the new album, *Bird Meets Wire*, it's three women, but it never entered my mind. It's just me, Ingrid and Leila and that's all it needs to be.

TNYCJR: How did that project come about?

SA: Kevin Reilly from Relative Pitch put us together for a couple of gigs before we recorded the album on Easter Sunday in a little studio in Queens. He hit the record button and we started playing. It's as simple as that. We played everything with no discussion beforehand. We simply started playing, each using our ears and sensibilities to guide us along. This was back in 2017. It was wonderful improvising with these two musicians. I'm really glad that this music we made was documented. Huge thanks to Kevin.

TNYCJR: It's poignant to think of how different the world was when you recorded that album compared to the world into which it is soon to be released. What have you been working on since the pandemic hit?

SA: When everything stopped in mid-March 2020, I took it as a great opportunity to write and record some really difficult music that I wouldn't have had time to get into had I been touring. I started working on an album built around Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, particularly the section called "Abîme des oiseaux". It was originally written for clarinet and the score calls for these tiny volume swells, which the clarinetist would normally create with the breath. I spent hours and hours trying to recreate that effect with my volume pedal, until my ankle eventually gave out. There were months during which I could only play for five minutes at a time. In any case, you live and learn. I think, I hope, that maybe I know my instrument a little better than I used to and hopefully myself as well.

TNYCJR: When did you develop an interest in improvisation and who were your greatest teachers?

SA: At a fairly early age. I guess I just started by noodling. I was able to improvise over blues or country music—anything with one key center, but jazz seemed like an entirely different thing. I could play the tunes, but improvising did not come easily. Someone had told me to think of the scales for each chord. But then I met Conrad Johnson, an iconic jazz musician and educator in Houston, who taught me a way to play over chord changes using pentatonics. Then everything slowly began to make sense. Ornette Coleman and Harmolodics have also had a lot to do with how I hear improvisation. Another teacher I had, on pedal steel, was Maurice Anderson in Dallas, Texas. I only had one lesson with him, in the middle of which he stopped and said he wouldn't charge me, but we stayed in touch his whole life. He was a great jazz musician who is little known outside the steel guitar community. Pauline Oliveros and her Deep Listening approach significantly changed how I approached the instrument as well. She showed me a different way of seeing what a note is, what surrounds the note, the space that contains it and sound, including noise as music.

TNYCJR: Who do you admire currently in the pedal steel community?

SA: As far as people doing something different with the instrument, there's a player in New Orleans named Dave Easley who was the first to play steel at the Village Vanguard, where he played with Brian Blade. In France, Lionel Wendling just put out an album called *Steel World*. I admire Hal Merrill out on the West Coast. There's also Bob Hoffnar, based in Austin, who does a lot of microtonal things and who studied with La Monte Young; Chas Smith, who studied composition at Berklee and was close friends with the late Harold Budd. There is a non-pedal steel guitarist Mike Neer whose work I am also quite fond of. Then there are Nashville players, like Paul Franklin and Tommy White, true virtuosos who can play anything. Buddy Emmons was the ultimate pedal steel guitarist. When he was in his prime, his energy was boundless. He was the Paganini of the pedal steel.

TNYCJR: Do you think of yourself differently when playing solo versus in a group?

SA: Playing solo is different with the pedal steel, which can be very orchestral. When played in a certain way, it can fill up a whole sound world so that people don't miss the presence of another instrument. And, of course, if I feel like changing something, I can do that at a moment's notice. With a group, you have to follow what's going on, but there's a certain something about all those combinations of timbres that's really beautiful, as well as the interaction with other instruments and other musical minds. There's a sense of communion I feel with the music and the people with whom I'm sharing this experience. With a band, in many ways, you're playing for each other. Of course, you're playing for the audience too and you hope they like it, but attention is, by necessity, often focused on the other musicians and that one wild and crazy moment—the groove—when, like magic, everything just seems to fall in place. ❖

For more information, visit susanalcorn.net. Alcorn live-streams Mar. 3rd at [youtube.com/channel/UCnKdQfHYKdGCgDQIK_dzihw](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnKdQfHYKdGCgDQIK_dzihw).

Recommended Listening:

- Susan Alcorn—*Uma* (Uma Sounds, 1999)
- Susan Alcorn—*And I Await The Resurrection of The Pedal Steel Guitar* (Olde English Spelling Bee, 2007)
- Ellery Eskelin/Susan Alcorn/Michael Formanek—*Mirage* (Clean Feed, 2011)
- Susan Alcorn—*Touch This Moment* (Uma Sounds, 2010)
- Susan Alcorn/Joe McPhee/Ken Vandermark—*Invitation to a Dream* (Astral Spirits, 2017)
- Susan Alcorn—*Pedernal* (Relative Pitch, 2019)

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Among this group of highly respected musicians from different countries, saxophonist Lotte Anker is the only original Primi member. The name Shamania, Mazur explains, is a female form of Shaman and mania, "symbolizing the act of setting Woman Power free. I believe that music at its best is a kind of magic, uniting humanity, freeing us from physical conformity."

There have always been women musicians of the highest caliber. When asked if there are more today or just more opportunity to hear them, Mazur replied, "Compared to my youth, there are more great female music artists now... The amount isn't so important, but it's great to hear strong female expressions and that it is possible to influence the music and be a part of the scene and development."

Mazur had a good start to 2020 with Shamania and a new version of "Bitches Brew" with the Danish Radio

Big Band before the cancellations started as a result of the pandemic. Live recordings of Future Song from 2015 were released in August as the album, *Live Reflections*. When venues and travel open up again, Mazur will have plenty to do with regular groups along with several loose projects and a number of invitations, her priority being the projects she leads: Shamania, two quartets, a trio and solo performance. She co-leads the 13-piece semi-big band Maluba Orchestra and works regularly with the Makiko Hirabayashi Trio along with her husband, bassist Klavs Hovman. She is excited about a new composition for a chamber music festival this summer, a new trio with Jon Balke and Torben Snekkestad and a festival appearance featuring Norma Winstone. "In these quarantine times, it is clear to me how music can add to the spiritual well-being and keep people company even when isolated. For me, music and other abstract art forms are like openings into the essence of life itself. You can share and transform emotion, moods, experiences into energy, colors. Especially with improvised music we are able to live in the moment and react to each other." ❖

For more information, visit marilynmazur.com

Recommended Listening:

- Pierre Dørge—*& New Jungle Orchestra* (SteepleChase, 1982)
- Lotte Anker/Marilyn Crispell/Marilyn Mazur—*Poetic Justice* (Dacapo, 2000)
- Marilyn Mazur/Jan Garbarek—*Elixir* (ECM, 2005)
- Jean-Michel Pilc/Mads Vinding/Marilyn Mazur—*Composing* (Storyville, 2015)
- Marilyn Mazur—*Shamania* (RareNoise, 2017)
- Marilyn Mazur's Future Song—*Live Reflections* (Stunt, 1990/2008/2015)



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