

Grammy® Nominated

2024 NAACP Image Award® Winner

Brandee Younger

“No harpist thus far has been more capable of combining all of the modern harp traditions — from Salzedo, through Dorothy Ashby, through Alice Coltrane — with such strength, grace and commitment.” - The New York Times

[Photos: Erin Patrice O’Brien](#)

Brief Bio:

Brandee Younger is revolutionizing the harps’ role in modern music. Over the past fifteen 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 and later, the **winner** of the **2024 NAACP Image Award** in the category of **Outstanding Jazz Album** for her latest album **Brand New Life**. Ever-expanding as an artist, she has worked with cultural icons including Common, Lauryn Hill, John Legend, Pharoah Sanders and Christian McBride. Her original composition “Hortense” was featured in the Netflix Concert-Documentary, **Beyoncé: Homecoming** and in 2019, Brandee was selected to perform her original music as a featured performer for **Quincy Jones** and **Steve McQueens’** “Soundtrack of America”. Brandee is often noted for standing on the shoulders of the very women who ushered in the harp as a clear and distinct voice in jazz & popular styles - particularly Detroit natives **Dorothy Ashby & Alice Coltrane**. Her latest album, Brand New Life, builds on her already rich oeuvre, and cements the harp’s place in popular culture. As the title of the album suggests, Brand New Life is about forging new paths—artistic, personal, political, and spiritual. Younger's music is imbued with a sense of purpose and respect of legacy, creating a larger platform for the harp to reach newer and wider audiences than ever before. In addition to performing and recording, Brandee Younger is on the faculty at New York University, Steinhardt School and The New School College of Performing Arts. *Follow:* [@harpista](#)

BRAND NEW LIFE Album Bio

2024 NAACP Image Award Winning Album

The sonically innovative harpist, Brandee Younger, is revolutionizing the harps’ role in modern music. Over the past fifteen 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,” Younger said. *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 long time 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 said. For the project, Younger also recorded a number of Ashby's compositions that were never recorded before, 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,” Mumu Fresh sings. Younger's playing paints lush details over Mumu 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 that many people have for change, for something new in the world. “Brand New Life” reaches listeners at the level of the human.

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. Sonically, it is tender and evocative 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. Younger creates 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 history 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’” and 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. It was through the encouragement of legendary saxophonist Jackie McLean that 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 of 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. During this time, she began to work seriously as an educator. 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. Her work as side-woman is evidence of Younger's undeniable presence in the sound of contemporary jazz today. 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. In addition to her contributions as a side-woman, Younger's commitment to honoring the legacy of black women harpists can be seen through her curatorial work. She has curated a number of performances dedicated to honoring the work of Dorothy Ashby and Alice Coltrane. This work speaks to her dedication as a purveyor of black music and history.