

# Ashby's Early LPs Restored

**Dorothy Ashby—With Strings Attached (New Land; ★★★★★ 3:33:49)** is a lavishly packaged, vinyl-only, limited edition collection of six albums recorded by the gifted, innovative harpist between 1957 and 1965. It serves her well: Ashby (né Dorothy Thompson, 1932–'86) can be overlooked no more. Embracing her highly flexible instrument, she had a lustrous career starting with these albums, eventually extending to first-call studio status, collaborations with stars including Stevie Wonder and posthumous clips used by today's producers.

She was abetted at the start of her career by Frank Wess, who arranged the Detroiters' debut recording in New York for the short-lived Regent Records. Wess is co-billed on the first three LPs included here, playing flute to help set a standard of classy, entertaining, subtle and often seductive takes on standards and blues. But Ashby herself demonstrates wit, grace and substance. Her music is a treat for those who prize tuneful, swinging, sophisticated jazz, structured freshly if rather conventionally for its era and market.

Sixty-six years later, however, *The Jazz Harpist* sounds fresh and true, hewing to the original mixes of the six albums by original engineers Rudy Van Gelder and Tom Dowd, among others. Good taste and exquisite execution have staying power. "Thou Swell," the opener, establishes the Ashby-Wess duo's crisp yet warm feel, suggesting flirtation, if not intimacy. The harp — aka lyre, veena, chang, yaal, depicted in Egyptian art as early as 3000 B.C. — has famously gentle timbres and resonance. It can be manipulated for harsher sounds, but Ashby embraces its essence, the touch of fingertips to strings, letting their vibrations ring but never overdoing it for bathos. She is restrained, cool, noble. Wess' fleet flute is the perfect balance against supple rhythms provided by bassist Wendell Marshall and drummer Ed Thigpen, and on *Hip Harp* and *In A Minor Groove*, subsequent Prestige releases, bassist Herman Wright and understated Art Taylor and Roy Haynes.

Ashby's programs are characterized by her catchy compositions ("Aeolian Groove," "Pawky," "It's A Minor Thing") and apt American songbook choices ("There's A Small Hotel," "You'd Be So Nice To Come Home To," "Alone Together"). She's a constant, as enriching when she comps as she is forthright building solos, floating her figures deftly, spinning out phrases flecked sparingly with arpeggios and glisses for emphasis and color. Her two hands work together more like an ambidextrous knitter's than a pianist's or guitarist's. She is adept at trading quick phrases, but her true metier is orchestrating songs for her in-



Dorothy Ashby had a lustrous recording career.

strument. One sterling example: "Yesterdays," cinematic and heavenly.

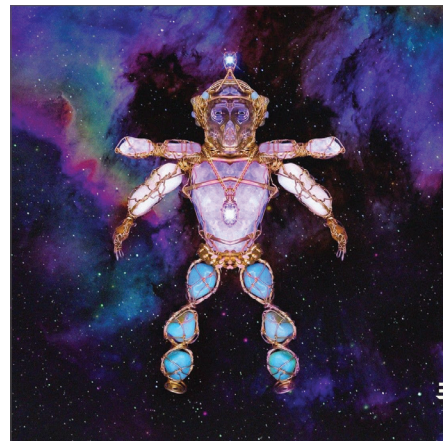
On *Soft Winds*, well-matched with vibist Terry Pollard, Wright and drummer Jimmy Cobb, Ashby applies her approach happily on tracks including "The Man I Love" and "I've Never Been In Love Before," but can't do much to avoid sentimentality on "Laura" and "Misty." If commerciality steered her towards make-out music and exoticism, she usually circumvented schmaltz, preferring tart themes like "Secret Love," elegant ones like "Satin Doll" and "Li'l Darlin'," or deep drama as in her take on "Gloomy Sunday."

High sales eluded Ashby, but aficionados appreciated her art. In 1965 Atlantic Records producer Arif Mardin supervised *The Fantastic Jazz Harp Of Dorothy Ashby*, featuring bassist Richard Davis, conguero Willie Bobo, drummer Grady Tate and a four-man trombone section on four tracks (including "House Of The Rising Sun" and the Israeli folk song "Dodi Li"). Oddly, these arrangements (uncredited; are they Ashby's, Mardin's or Ollie McLaughlin's?) work. The horns murmur support and lay easily over the rhythm team, and Jimmy Cleveland's one solo is in the groove.

As Ira Gitler wrote in liner notes reproduced here, Dorothy Ashby was neither the first (Caspar Reardon) nor the first female jazz harpist (Adele Girard). In the 1940s, Paul "Spike" Featherstone played harp in Space Cooley's Western Swing band. But Dorothy Ashby brought the harp to contemporary materials from bebop to beyond (hear her Middle Eastern-inflected *Rubáiyát*, not included in this collection).

Forty years since her death, having been sampled ad infinitum, Dorothy Ashby's music is restored to life as she made it in the day, proving every instrument has potential that transcends stereotype, depending on the personal resources of the person playing it. **DB**

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## Marquis Hill *Rituals + Routines*

EDITION

★★★★½

This quick hit from trumpeter, composer and producer Marquis Hill leaves a long-lasting impression. *Rituals + Routines* deepens Hill's unique recipe of jazz, hip-hop, R&B and electronica and positions him as a sound sculptor in the new tradition of Makaya McCraven or Christian aTunde Adjuah.

Hip-hop appears here more in the sense of beats than of rapping — however, spoken words also play a role. Each track features verbal commentary about a ritual/routine from a typical day in the human life. On "Stretch (The Body)," it's a looped lecture about those rituals in general. What follows has a remarkable variety, featuring strong rhythmic work from bassist Junius Paul and drummer Indie Buz and electronic washes from keyboardist Micheal King.

Hill's trumpet is less prominent; on tracks like "Cleanse (The Waters)" and "Break (Fuel)" it blends into the ambient wash. When it is a more assertive voice, as on "Rise (All Possibilities)" and "Breathe (Give Thanks & Gratitude)," it is no less ambient, if impressive and artfully applied.

Given its brevity, the album bypasses extended improvis in favor of atmosphere and mood. Tracks begin, linger long enough to make their point, and leave. One has to conclude that it's meant more as a momentary meditation than a full-length artistic statement, and at this it does a marvelous job. Still, it'd be nice to hear the individual players and special guests, most of them talented and soulful jazz improvisors, with opportunity and space to really munch on these ideas. —Michael J. West

**Rituals + Routines:** Rise (All Possibilities); Breathe (Give Thanks And Gratitude); Stretch (The Body); Cleanse (The Waters); Smoke (Herbs & Teas); Peace (Be Still); Break (Fuel); Outside (Protected). (24:36)

**Personnel:** Marquis Hill, trumpet, flugelhorn, effects, vocals; Michael King, piano, Rhodes, organ, synths; Junius Paul, bass, toys, effects; Indie Buz, drums, toys, percussion; Braxton Cook, alto saxophone (4), vocals (4); Joel Ross, vibraphone (3); Ariesfoolmoon (1), G. Thomas Allen (6), Doelow Da Pilotman (5), Phoelix (8), vocals.

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