



The first 60 seconds of Mary Halvorson and Jessica Pavone's new CD are a typically mystifying affair for the pair of eclectic songwriters. Halvorson's brusquely strummed guitar works down a sequence of four descending chords, sounding each four times in strict meter, before rising slightly and repeating. Their slow, unison vocals mirror the melody in dissonant harmony, growing closer together as the verse descends.

*That that changed and is is him
Take advantage you or them
Everyday surroundings changed
Clergy man restore the train
Learn some shares that others do
You forgetting life or you*

At 38 seconds the guitar pulls back, now playing each chord only once, as Pavone's viola takes over the vocal melody. It sounds like the song is somehow stacked on top of itself. The vocals, the progression of the chords, are all impossibly close. Or it's like looking at a song through a keyhole, a narrow view of the full picture. Is there something missing? Or too much there?

Such questions tend to crop up whenever you listen to this duo's music. Over seven years—and with the release of *Thin Air* on Thirsty Ear this spring, three albums—Halvorson and Pavone have crafted a sound that's almost impossible to peg. Outside the duo, separately and together, they have played avant rock, string quartet music and forward-thinking jazz—most notably as members of Anthony Braxton's ensembles. But the sound they create together exists somewhere between formality and the resisting of formality, with the focus not on their considerable instrumental techniques but their modest singing talents. More than that, it's a music that comes off as deeply personal.

It's a risky proposition to say a musical group isn't quite like anything else. Chances are, the claim will be disproved. But Halvorson and Pavone invite the sort of allusions that are quickly followed with the phrase "only not really." They have been likened to notoriously bad 1960s pop band The Shaggs, but they are really closer to The Roches, or medieval song. Only, not really. In a word, they're, oh, enigmatic?

Their music feels slight, while suggesting a rich complexity. Pavone's violin and viola can scratch and moan with the extended techniques of free improv linguistics, and can sing with warm tones that reveal her conservatory training. Halvorson's big Guild hollowbody has the familiar voice of classic jazz guitar, which she then runs through distortion or throws on a roller coaster, digitally swooping notes with her Line 6 effects box.

Sitting in Halvorson's apartment in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn—just blocks from where free jazz legend Cecil Taylor lives, she notes—the two themselves struggle to say just what their music is.

"There's nothing fancy about it," Pavone says matter-of-factly. "It's really just bare-boned."

The two are prone to finish each other's sentences, or offer help when the other is looking for the right word. They often joke about being an "old married couple," and just as often laugh about being asked if they really are a couple.

Halvorson attempts a different definition of their sound. "It's kind of chamber music, I guess," she says. Then another. "We refer to it as 'folk music,' not being trained singers and singing our own songs."

Pavone then attempts from a more personal angle. "Our music is kind of like a diary. I can listen to a song we played a lot in 2005 and I can say, 'Oh, I remember what was going on in our lives at that time.'"

The question of influences is only a little less perplexing. Their responses are more in terms of lyricists than musicians. They agree on Leonard Cohen as a favorite. Pavone adds Bob Dylan and Jim O'Rourke, to which Halvorson quickly agrees and tosses in Robert Wyatt. "I feel like I'm a word person and music is an accessible way to get poetry out there," Pavone says.

As for their music, they are hesitant to cite influences, or maybe it's just another tricky question. Halvorson lists Marc Ribot, Sonny Sharrock and James "Blood" Ulmer as favorite guitarists, and names Wyatt again, at least inasmuch as she'd been listening to his records while writing her contributions to the new album. If anything, that might be a key to their writing—whatever they've been listening to might end up reflected in their work.

"This morning I was transposing Sun Ra, just to see how it was put together, and then I started writing my own thing," Pavone says. "It's going to seep in and come out your own way."

And the idea of "influence" isn't limited to musicians they admire. "For me it would be ideal to have so many influences that you couldn't say, 'This is like The Shaggs meet whatever,'" Halvorson explains. "I can be equally influenced by something I don't like. You go, 'Ugh—why don't I like that?' If I have a strong reaction either way, it helps me figure out what I want to do." (Pavone suggests Halvorson's gag reflex is triggered more than anything else by Steely Dan, and the rough edges of Halvorson's songs are, indeed, a far cry from the icy smoothness of Aja).

Maybe the only answer to the question of what kind of music Mary Halvorson and Jessica

Pavone make is the obvious one, even if it runs the risk of cliché. The music they make is their own, it sounds like them. "It's not like we're trying to be weird," Pavone says. "That's just what's coming out."

Halvorson and Pavone have the pedigrees of professional musicians, even if both harbored doubts along the way. Halvorson, 28, grew up in Brookline, MA, and started taking violin lessons when she was 6, switching to guitar at 12. Her father, an architect, would paint at home, and her mother sang and played piano, so the arts were in her formative air.

"I did not like classical music and I wasn't good at it," she says. "After I switched to guitar, I was listening to rock musicians like Jimi Hendrix, but then I had a teacher who was into jazz. When I was learning jazz, I was listening to horn players and pianists. Jazz guitar has never been a passion or an influence. I don't really like the traditional role of jazz guitar—the tone. I thought, 'I'd rather hear a piano.'"

By the time she went to Wesleyan University, she still wasn't thinking of a career in music. She entered as a biology major, but fell under the sway of the school's remarkable music program and its star professor, Anthony Braxton. She developed a passion for other nontraditional guitarists and took private lessons with Joe Morris (it was her introduction that instigated the phenomenal four-disc set of improvisations by Braxton and Morris, released by Clean Feed last year). Growing concerned about developing her technique, she later transferred to the New School in New York City for a more disciplined course of study.

"I used to practice eight hours a day because I hated my apartment," she recalls. "I remember being frustrated, but then one day my fingers started moving in a different way and I was improvising."

Pavone, 32, grew up in Queens and the New York suburbs. She came at the music from the opposite direction, starting with formal instruction and later discovering more experimental approaches to music-making.

"No one in my family was a musician, but I started asking for a violin when I was 3," she says. "I think I saw it on TV. My dad asked why I wanted a violin when I was 5 and I said because I like the sound, and he said, 'Oh, there must be something to that.'"

She added the viola when she was 12, and in high school band started playing upright bass and then electric bass—which she still plays. But her thoughts weren't on a career in music, or anything else, at the time.

"I grew up playing classical music and going home and listening to classic rock, and they didn't connect," she says. "It was totally frustrating. I didn't want to go to college. I wasn't

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interested in school or academics, but then I thought maybe music school would be fun. I thought it'd be creative, but it wasn't."

She attended the Hartt School at the University of Hartford in Connecticut, a short drive from Wesleyan University in Middletown, initially in the performance program but switching to music education. She also started playing with the Middletown Creative Music Orchestra, where she came to befriend a number of Wesleyan students—and eventually Prof. Braxton—and to discover broader, more philosophical thoughts about playing and composing.

"I'd go to Wesleyan and it was a totally different experience," she says. "It seemed like they knew so much more about what was going on with music than the conservatory kids who were just like 'I'm going to practice 17 hours a day.'"

"I'm lucky I stumbled into Wesleyan," she adds. "I was about to quit music and then I met Anthony and people who were studying with him. I wasn't really forming any goals about being a musician until I was out of school. I almost feel like I'm self-taught—everything I've learned I learned after I was 21."

For one of her classes at Hartt, Pavone wrote a palindromic rhythm pattern to be played by one finger on a tabletop. It didn't go over well with her classmates, she laughs now, and probably would have been better received in Prof. Braxton's classroom.

She graduated in 1998 and stayed in the area until 2000, organizing bands with people from the Wesleyan crowd, but didn't meet Halvorson until they both ended up in Brooklyn in 2002. Pavone took over the room Halvorson had been subletting in bassist Chris Dahlgren's apartment and they were soon spending time together. But making music wasn't immediately the basis of their budding friendship.

"It was almost like an afterthought," Halvorson says, looking back. "We were just hanging out."

Once they started playing together, however, it quickly became a disciplined endeavor. They discovered their compositional ideas were more than a little complementary and were soon getting together every week, making stir fry with soba noodles, watching *Six Feet Under* and *The Sopranos*, and honing an unusually fragmented, delicate sound.

"We didn't just get together and jam, we each brought in sketches," says Pavone. "We weren't even thinking about playing a gig, but we were so adamant about playing once a week. When the power went out in 2003, I remember the two of us sitting there playing with no electricity, no ice, no lights. What geeks! It was like 100 degrees, there we were sweating."

It wasn't long, however, before they were being asked to play at small clubs, cafes and bookstores around Brooklyn, often by other Wesleyan alumni who were following the DIY ethic common among many of Braxton's former students: finding new places to book shows and starting home-based record labels. (Much of Pavone's music, in fact, and that of some of the Wesleyan crowd, can be heard on her own label, Peacock Records—"pavone" is Italian for "peacock.")

And it also wasn't long before the two were a central part of the increasingly impressive community of young musicians traveling the new music corridor between Middletown and New York City. Such Braxton alumni as Taylor

Ho Bynum, James Fei, Chris Jonas, Jackson Moore and Matthew Welch have created a new vibrancy in the city, not just making their own opportunities but playing in each other's groups, building the sort of musicians' community more common in smaller cities than in the bustle of New York. And often—as in Bynum's sextet, which can be heard on last year's excellent *Asphalt Flowers Forking Paths* on hatOLOGY—the Halvorson/Pavone duo is to be found ensconced in those bands.

"It's understandable that they get lumped together because of the strength and intimacy of their duo," according to Bynum. "But for me, it's the striking individualism of each of their respective musics that makes that duo so strong and unique. Like most bands, the sum can only be greater than the parts if the parts are pretty bad-ass to begin with. Their instrumental and compositional voices are really distinct, from Jessica's soul-drenched lyricism to Mary's quirky, angular surprises. It's the way they balance and combine these distinctions that makes the duo thrilling for me."

In addition to his sextet, Bynum plays with Halvorson and Pavone in a group with the sextet's drummer, which inventively works as two duos and a quartet.

"I've done several tours with them in the Thirteenth Assembly, where their duo performs, my duo with Tomas Fujiwara performs, then we all play together," he says. "I still dig Jessica and Mary's tunes even when I hear them for eight straight nights. And I really enjoy playing their music myself. It's interesting how different the quartet sounds from the two duos; really a sign of how in creative music, it's all about how you mix the ingredients."

"I don't think many people could take a blindfold test of their duo and guess they are Anthony Braxton protégés," he adds. "I think that's a testament both to Mary and Jessica's originality and the strength of Braxton's mentorship. Braxton's influence is never dogmatic. He doesn't want us to play stuff that sounds like him, he wants us to explore our own interests and aesthetics as creatively as he has explored his own. And Mary and Jessica are doing that as well as anybody out there."

Halvorson and Pavone agree that their friendship and their musical connection carry over into their work in other groups, especially in the complex systems of Braxton's music, which demands a strict adherence to structure while allowing a remarkable freedom for interplay within those structures. By allowing band members to play his compositions within the framework of larger pieces—essentially letting smaller groups emerge within the ensemble—the familiarity of band members who have worked together in other contexts only increases the viability of Braxton's vision.

"I always feel it because we have a very strong connection," Halvorson says of playing with Pavone in other bands. "Especially in the case of Braxton's music, it's easy for us to anticipate each other and play together. Probably other people can't sense it, but I do."

Connecticut's Thirsty Ear label has released records by a wide array of song-based acts, but the duo of Halvorson and Pavone is an odd fit for the label's Blue Series. Overseen by jazz pianist Matthew Shipp, the Blue Series contains records by some of New York's strongest voices in free jazz (Tim Berne, Roy Campbell, William Parker and others) as well as by some of the more innovative artists in hip-hop

and electronica, including ELP, DJ Spooky and the British duo Spring Heel Jack—and has often brought the two camps together. Whether you call them folk, chamber song or avant pop, the Halvorson/Pavone duo is like nothing else in the Blue Series.

Shipp no doubt understood it when he saw them play an afternoon set at the 2007 Vision Festival. They didn't quite fit in there, either, but clearly he heard something he liked. He approached them immediately after their set and said he wanted to record them. They accepted the offer but, having just released their second record, *On and Off* (on Skirl, the label run by saxophonist Chris Speed), said they wanted to hold off while they developed new material.

"What Mary and Jessica do is completely fresh—no doubt about it," Shipp says. "People sometimes compare them to The Shaggs but they sound like no one else. It's a project born of a bond between them—cunning intelligence and a high degree of musicality. It takes balls to do what they do."

"The way the music is shaped is unpredictable but sounds familiar, even though you would be hard put to figure out who or why there is a familiarity to it," he continues. "And it is beautiful. They push the envelope but are not afraid to just be musical when that is what is called for."

While Shipp notes that their association with Braxton added to his interest, he hears their own work as completely different from what they do in Braxton's groups—confirming, perhaps, Halvorson's observation that the symbiosis might not be as apparent to outsiders.

"Even though they work with Braxton, they have the intelligence to keep their own project 100 degrees away from anything that Anthony is involved with," he said. "In fact, the Mary and Jessica that play with Braxton and the Mary and Jessica that do this duo are almost two different entities."

If they didn't quite fit in at the Vision Festival, they may not have seemed a natural opening for the avant rock band Xiu Xiu on a ten-day U.S. tour last year either. Their strangely intermeshed melodies probably struck many as overly simplistic at the Vision Festival, where so much of the music is about instrumental prowess, and the quiet midrange of their songs likely slipped past many waiting for the main act at rock clubs. But they clearly enjoy the risk.

"It was fun to play for different crowds," Halvorson says. "It's always a challenge. People were wanting something more like Xiu Xiu, and we're not like Xiu Xiu."

"You've got to be kind of a music geek to like our music," Pavone adds.

The Xiu Xiu tour came about through the band's drummer, Ches Smith, who also plays in the Mary Halvorson Trio. That group released *Dragon's Head*, a strong and very well-received record, last year on Firehouse 12. Like *Thirsty Ear*, Fire House 12 is based in Connecticut, providing a couple stops along the new music corridor. And like *Thirsty Ear* and the other labels the Halvorson/Pavone duo has recorded for, Fire House 12 is co-run by an artist, in this case Bynum. It's fair to say that the two are musicians' musicians.

The previous year saw the release of Pavone's *Walking, Sleeping, Breathing*, a brief and fascinating set of dedications on Nowaki. Clocking in at just over 20 minutes, the CD in-

cludes pieces for fellow violinist Leroy Jenkins and blues singer Elizabeth Cotton without trying to emulate them. The abstract and highly focused pieces, Pavone writes, "highlight functions that are easily taken for granted, but essential for survival."

2007 saw the release of another CD by another group with Halvorson and Pavone at the core, *Calling All Participants* on SkyCap with Smith and Devin Hoff, as well as *Misbegotten Man* (I & Eye), the second record from Halvorson's duo People.

People, with drummer Kevin Shea (also of the excellent bent bop quartet Mostly Other People Do The Killing), is far removed from—but just as perplexing as—the duo with Pavone. People possesses a loud and almost manic energy, an extreme amalgam of Halvorson's simple singing and twisting guitar and drumming that could be likened to Keith Moon's. The collision seems almost accidental, but in fact is also highly composed, with Halvorson setting music to Shea's inscrutable fantasias of lyrics. Shea's titles—"But I Like My Rotten Head: Sleeper Cells Were His Bailiwick Until That Fateful Moment When the Heart Stopped Pumping," for example—can have as many words as an entire song Halvorson might write for the Pavone duo. And if the Pavone duo is folk, only not really, People is a unique take on post-punk. Only, not really.

The pieces written for *Thin Air* follow the sound developed over the previous two records (the first, *Prairies*, was released on Lucky Kitchen, the label run by sound artists Alejandro and Aeron) but the album also shows some new directions. The pieces are longer, with more sections, and continue to expand their sphere of influence. Pavone based her "Barber" on the rhythm of Nirvana's "Floyd the Barber," while "Lullabye" was composed while she was studying medieval music. The album's title track, written by Halvorson and at seven minutes the longest on the album, moves gradually through a slow melody then starts to fall apart, quickly unfolding into one of the noisier passages on the disc and just as quickly returning to the somber verse, repeating the process five times. While most of their songs are through-composed, the score for "Thin Air" includes otherwise blank measures with the words "Loud Improv" written over them.

The fact that the songs aren't jointly written—pieces are brought in completed, with only minor changes made as they work on them—is surprising given the cohesiveness of the sound. And it reaffirms that they came together with very like aesthetics. Halvorson's songs are knottier and more driven by shifting rhythms, while Pavone's are more about putting the lyrics in front, but both write slow melody lines with close harmonies and neither seems very inclined to write choruses to their songs.

Nor do either of them seem inclined to change the writing process, or add other musicians to the mix for that matter. "Collaboration doesn't really work for me," Pavone says. "I'm an independent worker. This is the closest I'll ever get to collaborating, because we're so close."

Halvorson, of course, is again quick to agree. Despite another close relationship, that with Shea in People, she doesn't consider herself a collaborator, or primarily as a songwriter either: "I don't think of myself as a composer."

I write for bands, but I think of myself as a guitarist. And I don't call myself a singer. I hate walking around with my guitar because every freak on the subways asks, 'Oh, do you sing?' I hate that. I just say 'No.'"

Singing wasn't initially a part of the duo's work. When they first started playing together, Halvorson and Pavone were doing all instrumental music, but then Pavone brought in her song "Sometimes" with two vocal parts. Although, as Pavone says, "neither of us are singers and that's always been a point of contention," something about singing together made it easier for both of them. The piece eventually showed up as one of only two vocal pieces on *Prairies*.

But as a singing duo, they don't take it easy on themselves. They write dissonant, shifting harmonies. "It's really hard if you're not a singer to make that sound like it's not an accident," Halvorson says.

Convening again at Odessa, a humble bar in the East Village which retains the trappings (and, in fact, the menu) of its previous life as a diner, the two are considering their possible fates had they not found their muses.

"I'd be a step aerobics instructor," Pavone says. "In a sense, it'd be like being a teacher, and I'm really into physical fitness."

It makes sense given the whip-cracking personality that's earned her the nickname "Sarge." She's the one who gets people onto the proverbial tour bus on time, or gets the check at the restaurant. Halvorson, for her part, sees herself as being something more ethereal if performing hadn't been in the mix.

"My interests are never normal," she says. "I'd probably want to be an astrologer. If I had to do something more 'acceptable,'" she adds, making air quotes with her fingers, "I guess I'd be a therapist."

In fact, the two regularly call each other to check on their astrological charts, especially when something unusual happens on a given day.

"It really pisses people off because they think it's stupid," Halvorson says. "But all this fluff astrology in pop culture gives it a bad name. Once somebody offered me a gig at The Stone with my trio anytime one week and I noticed on one day I had a particularly good astrological transit, so I said 'Why not?' And it turned out to be a really great gig."

Pavone interjects: "It's so mathematical—it's an art, it's a science, it's a language."

"And it's nice to have an interest other than music," Halvorson concludes.

With all their work and social networks being in performance and composition, they agree that its imperative to have interests outside of music.

"For me, it's painting," Pavone says. "I'm not a trained painter. With music I know too much, or not too much, but I know about technique. Painting helps be to be creative without getting in my own way."

But with their third album out, at this point they're not looking back. "We always say we're going to do this duo until we're 80," Pavone says. "So we'll see." ★

Kurt Gottschalk is a staff writer at All About Jazz New York. He wrote about Diamanda Galas in STN#49.