New York

Though delighted, the crowd that attended last Thursday’s show at the Bowery Ballroom here by Shara Worden might have been confused by the appearance of BatalaNYC, an 11-piece all-women drum band that performed before she took the stage. Its joyous, rattling polyrhythms were a marked contrast to the subtle, studied music of Ms. Worden’s earlier albums.
But it’s a new era for Ms. Worden, who works under the name My Brightest Diamond. While true to her history of flawlessly conveyed chamber rock informed by her classical training, Ms. Worden’s latest recording, “This Is My Hand” (Asthmatic Kitty), is influenced by percussion, particularly marching-band drums, she said last week during a stroll along the High Line here. Crisp drumming welcomes listeners to the disc via its opening numbers “Pressure” and “Before the Words,” and it remains a compelling presence, adding funk and dance rhythms to Ms. Worden’s musical cache. At times, “This Is My Hand” all but commands listeners to dance.

Which isn’t to say she’s abandoned her greatest strengths. Ms. Worden remains a master at arranging electronic and acoustic instruments to serve her steady contralto and rounded articulation of tones and words, but now they’re employed, on disc and in concert, in a more aggressive environment that’s also defined by blaring brass and electric guitars. Even a contemplative tune like “Looking at the Sun” is propelled by the snap of snare drums and toms. Her sympathetic in-studio band features the excellent bassist Chris Bruce and drummers Earl Harvin and Brian Wolfe; producer Zac Rae played a variety of instruments, as did Ms. Worden. “I’m Not the Bad Guy” rises from rock riffs featuring Ms. Worden’s guitar, while “Resonance” opens with textured percussion and jazz chords on what may be synthesized guitar. On both tracks, and throughout the album, Mr. Bruce is at the heart of the music’s alluring sway. In the studio, he’s Ms. Worden’s not-so-secret weapon, and to enter her universe via his playing provides insight into her ingenious approach as a composer and bandleader.

As she walked along the High Line, Ms. Worden said the inspiration for “This Is Your Hand” came from her exploration of what she called “pre-music.” She read Daniel Levitin’s “The World in Six Songs: How the Musical Brain Created Human Nature,” Jared Diamond’s “The Third Chimpanzee” and Robert Graves’s “The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of the Poetic Myth” to connect to music’s primordial roots. In her new song “Before the Words,” she sings: “Before the verse there was the sound / Before the form there was music.”

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Also, she said, she was enthralled by the music at a Thanksgiving Day parade in her hometown of Detroit, and saw how the attendees reacted to it with jubilation. It became a symbol: music as essential to community spirit. Though she never recorded her compositions for marching bands, her affection for the percussion, the brass and the joy of sharing music stayed with her. New processes for composition emerged, she said, and she tried “to subvert some of my natural tendencies toward introversion.”

At the Bowery Ballroom, it was hard to believe Ms. Worden isn’t a born extrovert. In a white suit with Joan Crawford shoulders, she declined to remain behind her keyboards. Though BatalaNYC and a four-piece horn section played on “Pressure,” the concert’s opening number, for the most part Ms. Worden was accompanied instrumentally only by bassist Mason Lithgow, drummer Tim Mulvenna and prerecorded sounds. In “I’m Not the Bad Guy,” she issued harsh lines on electric guitar. “Lover Killer” emphasized its funk underpinnings. Gentleness appeared with songs from earlier albums, including “I Have Never Loved Someone,” a number dedicated to her son, Constantine, that she performed solo, and “Be Brave,” in which she sings: “Shara, now get to work. Shara, this is going to hurt.”

As the evening progressed, Ms. Worden grew more uninhibited. During “Apple,” she picked up an electric thumb piano and danced furiously as Messrs. Lithgow and Mulveena kept up the crackling rhythmic pulse. During “Freak Out,” strobe lights flashed as she and her onstage guests exploded into a maniacal frenzy—and then stopped suddenly when the music returned to a less-frenetic tempo. For her encore, she sang “Fever,” a finger-snapping song by fellow Detroiter Little Willie John, and left the stage to vamp among the crowd. It had by then become accustomed to the thought that Ms. Worden was delivering a different experience than might have been expected.
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