

My Favorite World #36



Life brings you moments, events that are pebbles tossed into our little ponds. Most of them pass by, one to the next, leaving little trace. Lots of our moments roll right by without us realizing that there was a moment at all; we may notice ripples later on<fn>Sometimes years later.</fn> and wonder where they came from. Some make more of a splash, are harder to ignore. Either way, the moments accumulate and define what we become, our tastes, our habits, our passions.

And some moments land like a boulder. You see it happening, you know it's happening, and you know that nothing is ever going to be the same again.

So it was one April night in 1979 in Athens, Georgia, when I went to hear some jazz group that was supposed to be good. What did I know? I thought Return to Forever and Jeff Beck played jazz.<fn>Hold your fire! They were/are great. But not jazz. No.</fn>

I walk in and see a stage literally covered with every imaginable gong, drum, saxophone, flute, squeaky duck, penny whistle, plastic tube, bicycle horn, &c. Seriously, there must have been a few dozen gongs and bells, conch shells, and at least 20 saxophones, flutes, and trumpets. These guys had *all* the instruments. The low, pre-show lighting bounced spangles of dancing coins off these gleaming surfaces. I'd never seen anything like it.

The band walked on stage, several of the musicians dressed in

African tribal costumes with full face paint; one musician unadorned save his doctor's lab coat; and the fifth musician dressed in street clothes. As per their custom, they stood silently facing the East for what seemed forever. The lights had come up full by then, and the dancing coins had transformed into a vibrant planetarium show of stars and suns. It was dazzling.

And then all of heaven and hell broke loose, with the thunder of a gong and a blasting cacophony of horns and drums and bells and godknowswhat that literally pushed me back in my chair. I held my breath almost the entire time, and when it was over I went home without talking to anyone because I couldn't handle another piece of information of any kind. It was the strangest, most compelling and frightening and off-putting and enveloping experience of my first twenty years. It was music, it was noise, it was theater and dance and kabucki.<fn>Though I had no idea what *that* was at the time.</fn> It was multitudes.

I had run headlong into what the AEC called Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future, and I knew that nothing was ever going to be the same again. That was the beginning of my lifelong obsession with jazz in general, and especially with what critics have been calling *avant garde* jazz for going on 60 years now.<fn>How old does something need to be before it is *apres?*</fn>

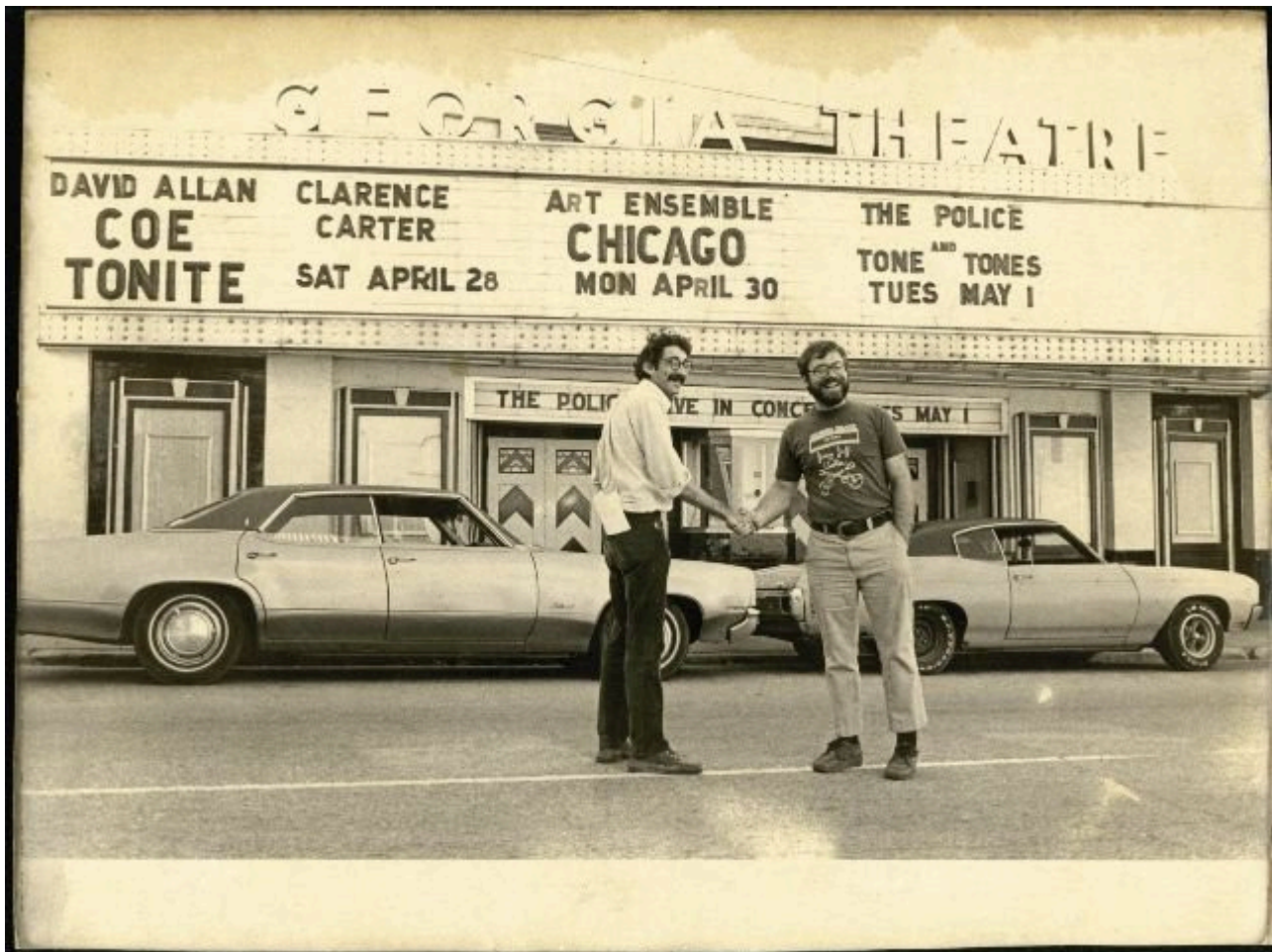
I had no frame of reference. Aside from the drum kit (which represented about 1/20th of the total percussion array on stage), none of the instruments were part of what had been my pretty standard suburban white boy musical diet. I had to learn about these instruments and the people who made them come alive. I would literally buy 10 albums a week, and I was borrowing and taping a dozen more. At this time, you could go to the used record store and buy LPs for 2 buck apiece, 3 bucks for a double album. It made it easy to take a flyer on something you weren't sure about; maybe you recognized a name

of someone from another album, or maybe it was just the record label, or maybe the cover caught your eye, and if a record sucked, you could trade it back in the next week for a buck credit. I couldn't get enough.<fn>Fun fact. I bought most of these LPs from a fledgling guitar player named Pete Buck. I heard he made it kind of big later on in accounting or something.</fn>

That's almost 40 years ago, and I remember that show and its aftermath as clear as a bell. It remains one of the handful of transfiguring experiences of my life. And it opened, in turn, a willingness to seek out different forms of literature, art, theatre, films...you name it. Seeing AEC led me to Coltrane and Miles and Cecil and Ornette and Braxton and the list never ends because I knew there was music out there that could surprise and confound me and disturb me if I just looked hard enough.

Here's a piece from their album *Nice Guys*. It's a pretty good representation of the way they would blend incredible composition and delicate ensemble playing with the wildest free jazz around, and even better, how they manage to move from one realm to the other on a dime, smooth as silk. I still have a framed copy of the cover photo on an ECM promo poster.

So thank you Lester Bowie, Joseph Jarman, Roscoe Mitchell, Malachi Favors, and Famadou Don Moye, for cracking my bean wide open and filling it with such a magnificent array of riddles and sounds and possibilities. I can't begin to imagine what kind of human I would have become without this.



And thanks to Mitchell Feldman (left), the guy who made this show happen in a time and place where such a proposition – a Deep South presentation of Great Black Music – was decidedly unlikely. When Mitchell left Athens, I took over his Wednesday noontime jazz show at WUOG, *Out to Lunch*; this experience was probably the most valuable aspect of my undergraduate education. (Photo taken in front of the Georgia Theater the afternoon of the show.)

The video below is a 20 minute blast of AEC at their best. For a dozen years at least, whenever and wherever they took the stage, they were the greatest band on earth.

Bad. Ass. Mother. Fuckers.

Respect!

My. Favorite. World.