

Open Letter to Bill Frisell



Dear Bill,

Your wife introduced us a few weeks ago, just after the Bill Frisell Harmony performance at the Big Ears Festival. I had just finished sobbing over the “We Shall Overcome” arrangement, so not at my most composed. I tried to express a sliver of what your work has meant to me, but it did not come out quite as clarion clear as I had hoped. You were gracious even as you seemed baffled by my prattling.

I don’t blame you. I have had, over the years, at least half a dozen opportunities to walk up to you and tell you my how-Bill-Frisell-changed-my-life story. I never really wanted to because I knew that my words would never convey the immensity of the thing. When I met Carole earlier that day, I joked about how I would probably never tell you – or anyone – the whole thing. And because she is kind and lovely, she took me in hand and introduced us so I could get it over with, and, alas, I was a fumble-tongued fanboy. But I’m a better writer than talker, so here goes my shot at redemption.

In Fall, 2003, my family hosted a 3-month guitar course at our home in Atlanta. Anywhere from 16 to 23 guitarists bunked into our house, all of us cooking and cleaning and working together to create some truly wonderful music. The recording that came from those weeks represent, to my ears, the best of what is generally known as Guitar Craft. Guitar Craft was founded by Robert Fripp in 1985 and continues to this day under a variety of different guises. Plenty of info out there for the curious.

It was a tremendous experience, one of the keystones in my life as a musician.

And then came November. It was over, the cadre of scruffy guitarists scattered back to the winds, our bustling beehive of a home pretty darned empty. I was left wondering *what next* for my work as a musician. The Guitar Craft approach is highly disciplined, with an emphasis placed on technical precision. In fairness, it is about much more than this, and the music is, at its best, breathtaking. But after 3 months of fine tuning to where sustained cross-picking of 16th notes at 132 bpm is like falling off a log, I will aver that the emphasis on chops began to feel a bit weighty. Further, Guitar Craft is excellent training for learning how to work productively with other Guitar Craft players. But the roadmap for working with non-GC folks – which was my looming reality with everyone gone home – was not clear. I needed to figure something out.

In December, as a reward for her superhuman forbearance, I took Stanwyck to New York for a spree. She is a painter, so it was mostly to be about visual art. But it happened that you were playing the Vanguard with Kenny and Tony, so we decided to check it out. I was vaguely familiar with your work, so I was not really prepared for what happened. I was expecting some jazz chops, man, some blazing and scorching, some primo face melting. Instead, I got a Hank Williams tune. Somewhere Over the Rainbow. A Dylan joint. Some three-chord folk ditties. What the World Needs Now, fer cryin out loud.

I mean, come the fuck on, man. And yet, I was captivated, my drink untouched. I was *in*, totally there, ready for whatever you did next.

And then you started Jules Styne's *People Who Need People*, and I laughed out loud. More of a guffaw, really. And you stopped and looked around and said, "You think I'm joking or what?" and went ahead and played it. And I was in perfect heaven. You can hear this on the Further East/West album. Yes indeed, I

once recorded with Bill Frisell.

I did not think you were joking. I laughed because I felt this liberation at the idea that any song is worthy, any song can be a vehicle for your joy. It was not about chops or speed or any of the stuff that – while valuable to a point – had begun to get in my way as a musician.

So I walked out of the High Church of Vanguard with ideas, ways to move into another phase of work. Standing on the street corner at 7th Ave. South and Perry Street, abrim with a sense of possibility and momentum, I turned to Stanwyck and said, “I think my inner Jerry just got permission to come out and play.”

So when I got home I started listening to ALL the Frisell, and all the everything that Frisell pointed to, like Jim Hall and Johnny Smith and Lee Konitz and Paul Motian &c. Going through the Harry Smith and Alan Lomax collections. Learning the standards and originals as best I could in New Standard Tuning because, hey, 20 years of fretboard mapping is not going over the rail just like that.

But more than anything: More than the quirky melodies (hello “Rag” and “Amarillo Barbados”) or the intricate nesting-doll jigsaws of pieces like “Throughout” Carla Bley is correct. This is a perfect piece., there was something about the attention to space, the willingness to listen and play spare. The idea that a couple of well placed notes might be sufficient, if not superior, to a cascade of shimmering 16ths.

And this somehow started to slip into the everyday of my life. Listening more. Contributing less often, worrying less about whether I can keep up with the fastest hi-flyers. Full disclosure: I never could. Thinking about texture and negative space and color. Somehow, your playing that night in the Vanguard twigged a response that ran deep and utterly transformed how I worked and thought as a musician and human

being. Since then, I have seen you at least two dozen times, and every time, I learn something else about living life tethered to a slab of wood and six wires.

There is no blame or complaint on Guitar Craft in this. The volumes I learned in that orbit continue to reverberate. But the time had come for me to explore a different path. It could have been a different spark than your show, but it wasn't. Reckon I'm glad it wasn't an Abba tribute band that weekend, but then again, that might have been pretty damn skippy, too. Music is.

In a way, that night was about connecting me back to the aspects of playing that had made me want to play in the first place (cf. my "inner Jerry" comment). That feeling of connecting with the music in an organic way. The idea of music as an ongoing conversation that can happen between people of a wide range of backgrounds and vocabularies.

Over time I became a different musician, which is to also say that I became a different human being. Maybe not readily apparent to most people around me, but palpable and dramatic from within my own skin.

The day before we met, you and Abigail Washburn hosted a Sound & Silence event. Sitting in a circle of people actively cultivating Silence is a familiar activity for me and is a central part of the Guitar Craft work. (Another thread/strand coming full circle.) Afterwards, during comments, a young woman commented that your guitar playing had imposed a masculine intrusion on her experience. Her experience is her own, and I do not doubt her sincerity, but I found her characterization at odds with how I hear your work.

For better or worse, I'd suggest., the guitar has become a cliché for phallic excess, a priapic extension of the armadillo-trousered rock god, the guitar community long a hotbed of dudebro exclusion. And Guitar Craft, despite the

best intentions and the participation of some fantastically strong women, has historically been something of a sausage fest.

But I do not get that with your playing. Your reserve and propensity to understate, to hear what is being said before contributing, strikes me as more representative of what we might short-handedly call *the feminine principle*, a manifestation of nurturing and yielding. (And yeah, the whole feminine/masculine dichotomy is every bit as fraught with nonsense as left-right brain or moon/sun energy reductions. But let's just go ahead on since we got this far.)

Like many of my generation, I was raised to attain standards of masculinity that are not just physically and psychologically impossible; they are utterly ruinous to those who try. Toxic masculinity is an almost impossibly perfect label for this shit. I have no idea if your upbringing carried the same freight, but as white guys of a certain age, it seems we must have endured some of the same pressures and expectations.

Like I said, the changes in the way I play guitar began to seep across to how I lived, loved, acted as a friend and parent. And vice versa. My pursuit of a *feminine* aspect of playing flowed back and forth between the playing/non-playing me in a way that helped me shed some of the baggage of my raising and allow myself to embrace a sense of vulnerability as something positive rather than shameful.

It has been a good change. It has been honest and hard earned. And here, 15 years after that first real exposure to your music, I remain utterly grateful for the information you shared and proud of the work I've been able to do.

When we met, I was wrapped up in this narrative of how important your work had been to me, so it is only natural that I would have been a blithering dope. Maybe next time we meet

we can talk about stuff, just a couple of guitar players sharing stories. Like, hey, were you ever a Deadhead? How did you like the Art Ensemble 50th anniversary show? Isn't Carla Bley the absolute coolest? Or even, hey, you're married to a painter, too? It's like we're twinsies!

Bless you, Bill, and thank you beyond what words can express. Wishing you and your wonderful partner Carole all the best in the world.

See ya around,

rr

Ask Your Doctor if Big Ears is Right For You



From the moment Big Ears announced their grand themes for 2019 – anniversary celebrations for the Art Ensemble of Chicago and ECM Records – it was clear that this year's hullabaloo would occasion extended reflection on my not-yet-long-enough life of digging into music.

Add in my approaching 60th and the 35th anniversary of my betrothal to Stanwyck (still my best move ever). Now toss in the daughter graduating from university and the son off and away to same. Way too many milestones converging to avoid some

deep recapitulation of where I've been and where I'm going, not to mention how the various wheel spokes and dangling strands have managed to, somehow, add up to something that looks like a coherent narrative. Despite the fact that the whole shebang has been something of an improvisatory tap dance all along.

And then the old dog died. Never mind that whole cancer thing I was working overtime to pretend was not looming. Fook, mon. The universe was hitting me with some serious hey-bub shoulder tapping, mos def.

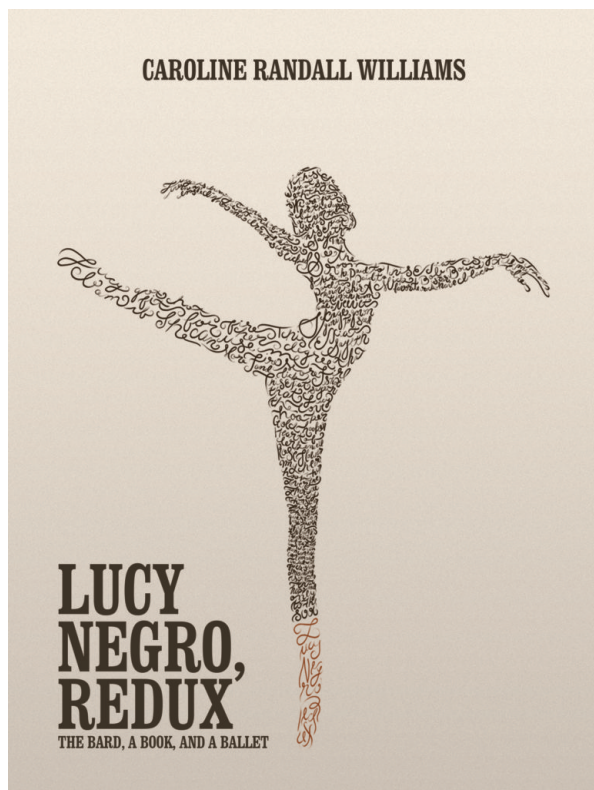
So yeah and truly, I was ripe for something that reeked of the dreaded curse of nostalgia, that sad wallowing in what used to be that lets us ignore – to some extent – what is and will be. At the same time, there was plenty on the schedule that is relatively new to me, and there are always surprises in store if you take a wrong turn or get turned away from a too-full venue.

Full disclosure: My main goal for the Big Ears weekend was to cultivate a state of total denial re: my health realities, bolstered by hearing ALL the musics and drinking ALL the beers. As long as the music was playing and the beer was pouring, all that chemotherapy shit was just a distant fantasy. Take me away, yo.

Wednesday

We drove up a day early to catch the *Lucy Negro, Redux* ballet, featuring the music of Rhiannon Giddens. I have been on a Rhiannon binge lately and was very excited to see this. The staging for *Lucy* is wonderful, and as far as my ignorant eyes can tell, so was the dancing. The music was plagued by some technical issues, but was still very effective. The great strength of the production – and perhaps its ultimate undoing – lies in poet Caroline Randall Williams' dynamite recitation of her text that is the basis of the ballet. I could not take

my eyes off her. She was Lucy made flesh.



At one point, Williams strolled off stage and I suddenly realized that there were a dozen dancers on stage. Her presence had quite literally obliterated the rest of the team. Overall, the production was not quite what I had hoped for, but there were several instances of authentic power and beauty that make *Lucy Negro, Redux* worth catching if you get the chance. I imagine that, over time, the imbalances will get worked out. In the meantime, order her book. It is a knockout.

Thursday

The following noontime we enjoyed Giddens and her *Lucy Negro* collaborator Francesco Turrisi in a lunchtime performance at Visit Knoxville. Community radio WDVX airs a live performance every weekday at noon, usually regionals and the occasional touring act. The line for this was enormous, a harbinger for the rest of the fest. Almost every show I attended was packed. It is hard to see how the festival can get any bigger.

With none of the technical issues of the night before, and in a space that was downright intimate, this sucker took flight

from the get go. Performing pieces from their upcoming album, *there is no Other*, Giddens and Turrisi weaved spells. No other way to say it. From Sicilian folk tunes that sounded like Celtic reels to re-imagining of operatic classics like “Black Swan”, the duo clearly demonstrated one strand of Giddens’ ongoing musical project: that all of our musics, indeed, all of us, are intimately entwined and connected. There is, literally, no such thing as “Other.”

And then she went and sang “Wayfaring Stranger”, and I was that stranger, laid bare. I was coming undone, unmoored. As if that were not enough, Rhiannon announced “I am not really a believer, but this song is a comfort to me when I need strength,” launching into a heartbreaking rendition of “He Will See You Through,” at one point hitting a note so long and pure and penetrating that any pretense of denying cancer puddled at my feet. And I, as unbelieving an unbeliever as you will find outside of any foxhole, found himself undone, in the very best possible way.

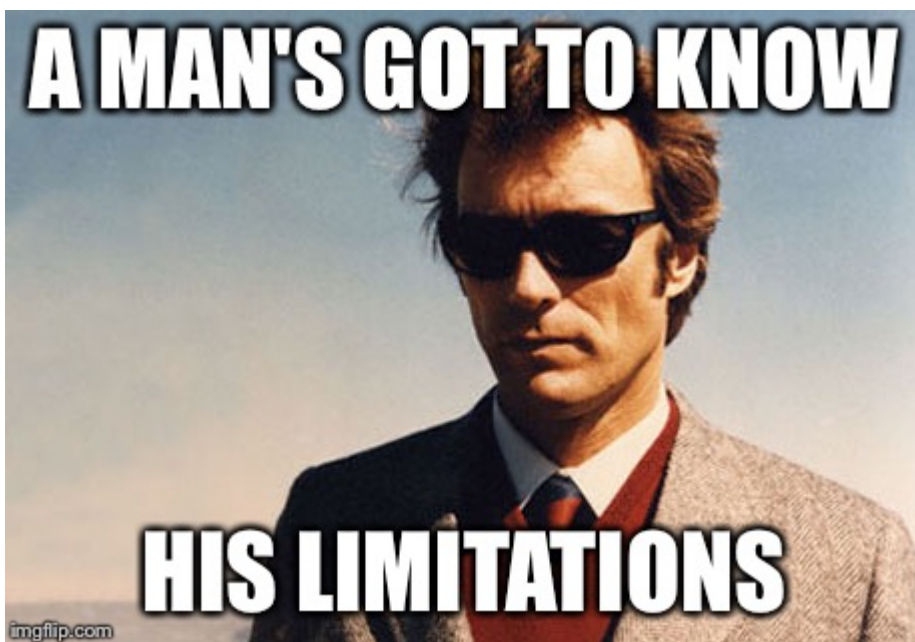
(My favorite Paul Simon lyric is ‘Sometimes, even music / Cannot substitute for tears.’ True. And Sometimes, they just go hand in hand.)

We grabbed a nice lunch, Stanwyck and I. It was her first trip to Big Ears, so we wandered around town a bit and took in the sights. Then it was time for Your Narrator to get to work. I had arranged an interview with Rhiannon and Francesco before I realized the extent of my illness. I was tired, but would have crawled over broken glass for the chance to chat with this singular artist.

I was the last of probably four or five interviewers that afternoon, and my arrival was not the occasion of great rejoicing. The first few minutes were rough going, but I somehow found a way to get Rhiannon revved up, and man, she talked a blue streak for near about an hour. It was beautiful and revelatory and pure pleasure. At the end, I thanked her

for enduring yet another Q&A, and she thanked me, saying that not all interviews are created equal. I have the transcript and will post it here at the blog soon.

Then I went back to my room and fell fast asleep. I could have fallen asleep in the elevator. This was the moment I realized that my usual Big Ears strategy of live fast and sleep little was never going to work. It was time to explore the nuances of letting go.



I caught a bite and a beer at a pop-up Richard Thompson performance/broadcast, a terrific little event where he competed with a wall of televisions broadcasting the NCAA basketball tournament. As always, he was terrific, but the radio announcer kept asking him dumb questions so that he only had time for three songs. But the last was “I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight,” so I was a happy boy as I dashed over to The Standard for my first dose of Frisell.

The duo of Bill Frisell and Thomas Morgan is destined to rank among the great duos in jazz history. Think Jim Hall and Bill Evans or Jim Hall and Ron Carter. Intimate and sophisticated conversations between two players who know the music and each other inside out. It was an hour of string telepathy, with an ample dose of Monk leavened by a romp through “Wildwood

Flower.” My only quibble, and one that pertains to many of the shows at The Standard: This is music better suited to sitting down and settling.

We met friends and grabbed a bite. The weather was raw and I was fading hard. I moved to call it a night. Stanwyck, bless her, was having none of it and rallied me to the next show. She was, naturally, correct to do so. The Artifacts Trio – Nicole Mitchell on flute, Tameka Reid on cello, and Mike Reed on drums – is a third generation AACM ensemble that demands reconsideration of our ideas of what a jazz trio can sound like. Running through originals and a handful of AACM classics by composers like Steve McCall, Mitchell is the most enjoyable jazz flautist I’ve ever heard. She has a full and muscular tone that she leavens with accompanying vocalizations, and she swings hard. I was so glad I was there.

And then I was done, asleep before midnight at Big Ears for the second night in a row. Wimp. So many great artists on the Thursday late schedule that I would have loved to hear.

Friday

Up in time for a proper breakfast and back to The Standard for Rafiq Bhatia’s *Breaking English*. This is a seriously smart and grooving power trio, spiced with lots of real-time laptop manipulation by all three players. Drummer Ian Chang is definitely someone to keep an eye on, but it is Bhatia who pulls this together. Superb.



Onward to catch a bit of the Alvin Lucier concert. Based on perceptible wave conflicts created by instruments playing pitches close-but-not-quite-the-same, these gorgeous pieces demanded exquisite levels of pitch control from the musicians. Deep listening plus.

Then a deep dilemma: Mary Halvorson and Code Girl or Harold Budd with nief-norf? I opted for Budd in the Church. The place was jammed and the music was glorious. But. The experience of listening to recorded Budd is a seamless drift from one piece to the next. In concert, there was poorly thought out shuffling of musicians and sheet musics from one piece to the next, with evident confusion as to who belonged where. Since his pieces are often kind of short, the effect was like a case of the hiccups, making it difficult to relax into the flow. Based on the crowd reaction, my opinion is decidedly minority.



I scurried over to the Trance Map+ show at The Bijou, an 8-piece electro-acoustic improv performance headed up by Evan Parker and Ned Rothenberg. This was a sensitively rendered set, with delicate textures and colors that never overwhelmed. That all of life could be so lovely.

Time for Ralph Towner. This was high on my list of must-see concerts. Towner is about as prototypical an ECM artist as you can imagine, and his recital here was almost everything I could have hoped for. Why oh why did he ignore the piano? Not quite jazz, and surely not quite classical, it was somehow both of these things and then some. Mastery and beauty from a musician who has provided more than a little of the soundtrack of my life, this was an hour spent in a cocoon of pure musical pleasure, though I must admit that the late John Abercrombie sprang to mind several times, which naturally led to considerations of other great ECM artists – Don Cherry, Colin Wolcott, Nana, and so on – who are no longer with us, which in

turn led – naturally – to considerations of mortality and the swift flight of time's arrow and goddamit there I am again deprived my state of blissful denial. And yet, it was somehow okay. And beautiful.

A hustle crosstown to The Standard for a high-expectation show from ABSINT, with Tim Berne, David Torn, Bill Frisell, and NOLA hero Aurora Nealand. Maybe my expectations were a trap, but this one never gelled for me. It was like watching an overweight seabird trying to gain speed for takeoff. With rocks tied to its wings. Alas.

This kind of improv performance is tricky, especially for a group that has not played together before. The chance of serendipity, of the angels descending to blow trumpets of gold, is real. Absent that, though, the kind of anticipation and nuance that develops over a long period of playing together is not available to the group. Someday I hope to walk out of an ABSINT show and say, "Man, they have really got it together now." Someday.

Time for a bite and beer and on to one of my highly anticipated shows: Meredith Monk and her Vocal Ensemble. From the first time I heard her ECM debut, *Dolmen Music*, I was hooked by the evident sense of humor, compassion, and decency in her music. Stanwyck was flagging, so it was my turn to rally her. It was the right move. This Monk was probably her favorite show of the weekend.

Performing pieces from her latest work, *Cellular Songs*, Monk's ensemble was a vision of powerful womanhood. The combination of simple choreography and elaborate vocal constructions was intended to evoke the life and interactions of cells. The piece was, Monk told us, inspired by the book *Emperor of All Maladies*, an epic history of, well...an epic history of fucking cancer.

Is there no escape?

No, nor does there need to be. The connection was more oblique than preachment, and the sheer joy cascading off Monk and her wymins brought me and Stanwyck into a state of sheerly giddy happiness and comfort. Honestly, I wish I could visit Meredith Monk every day for a cup of tea, just to hang out.

She closed with two pieces from *Dolmen Music*, the elegaic “Gotham Lullaby” – which took us both to tears – and the timelessly hysterical “The Tale” from her *Education of the Girl Child* cycle. Pure magic.

The late night offerings were serious temptations, but the thought of putting any other sound atop the Monk felt disrespectful. So for a third night, to bed at Big Ears well before midnight.

Letting go, people. Letting go.

Saturday

Without getting into detail, let’s just say that Friday night and Saturday morning saw my symptoms worsen pretty aggressively and I began to wonder if my brilliant scheme of cocooning myself in denial was dumb as a box of rocks.

But I hurled myself upright and ambled over to The Emporium for a session of Sound and Silence with Abigail Washburn and Bill Frisell. Had no idea what to expect, but I definitely did not expect 100-plus folks milling about a space that would comfortably hold 40. Some quick thinking by the Big Ears team led us to parade out the door, down the stairs, under the tracks and down an alley to a dance studio where volunteers were hastily setting up chairs. We were instructed to turn off our phones – no exceptions! – and cautioned that no one would be able to leave once the event began.

The almost supernaturally charming Ms. Washburn settled us in with instructions. Sit quietly. Bill would play a single note. After ten minutes of Silence, Bill would play for twenty

minutes. In this instance, he played direct to amp: no effects or trickery, just a guy sitting around and playing. He eventually found his way into "We Shall Overcome." Then he was done. Ten more Silent minutes punctuated by a single note.

That's it. Simple. Magical. And for me, incredibly familiar from my many years spent sitting in circles, silently. Big Ears asks us to recognize connections, tendrils of contact that we might tend to overlook, so there I was in my ECM/Art Ensemble cocoon catching a timely reminder of my legacy within the Guitar Craft community, a span that covered a good 30 years. Rich.

As someone who has not dropped onto a sitting cushion for many years, this was a beckoning: Perhaps time to re-examine the possibilities inherent in such a practice. Dobbs knows I will have plenty of time in the coming months to explore depths of Silence and Stillness.

I literally could have gone la la for the rest of the afternoon in the sunshine. I had to force myself to The Standard for Columbia Icefield at noon. I am so glad I did.

Led by trumpeter Nate Wooley and featuring the fabulous Mary Halvorson (guitar) and Susan Alcorn (pedal steel), this set represents everything I go to Big Ears for. It is adventuresome music, a sophisticated meld of composition and structured improvisation executed by musicians who can flat out play but, more importantly, know how to listen. Brilliantly conceived and executed, and even better, new to my ears.



Slipped next door to Sweet P's Barbecue for the fifth or sixth time. The place is too damn good. Don't tell anyone.

Back into The Standard for another show that really should have been seated, Wadada Leo Smith's *Solo Reflections and Meditations on Monk*. Wadada is all about space and the elasticity of time, and his music, while beautiful and full of soul, can be downright disorienting, a string of tied whole notes at 40 bpm doing their best to unmoor my sense of permanence. I had to sit on the floor for most of this.

Grabbed a quick nap in the sun and then back into The Standard for Thumbscrew, Mary Halvorson's stab at power trio noisifying. Super powerful, nobody seemed to mind standing through this one. Just one clever composition and solo after another, with enough sonic punch to make even the most pedal-happy guitar geek happy. Halvorson continues to develop herself as one of the most instantly identifiable guitarists on the scene. Her embrace of standards – the Herbie Nichols classic *House Party* was a Thumbscrew highlight – in

conjunction with her spiky Braxtonian pedigree makes her someone I can listen to all day and night. Huzzah!

I scurried quick to meet Stanwyck for the Carla Bley Trio at the Tennessee Theatre. Bley and her husband Steve Swallow are two superheroes in my pantheon. They do not play too little; they do not play too much. There is an economy and precision to their music that sets them apart from pretty much anybody else you can name. Here's one of my favorite Carla quotes:

"I'm like a slow sponge, I take in ideas from everywhere, and when I eventually find my notes, I know they're the right ones."

They focused on music from their latest ECM release, *Trios*. But in the end, they turned to Bley's magnificent re-setting of Thelonious Monk's "Mysterioso", originally conceived for a big band, but every bit as penetrating in the trio format. From the moment Andy Sheppard breathed the opening note to her intro-outro melody, my heart caught, and I spent the next five minutes or so in purely purgative sobbing, enveloped by music that felt as timeless as the nearly 60 years I've spent on this planet so far. Suspended. Cocooned. Safe. And yet, as vulnerable as the day I was born.

As with the Meredith Monk set, it seemed wrong to layer something as aggressive as Time Berne's Snakeoil or the Messthetic on top of the Bley. These are two bands I had high on my must-see list, but a little food, good conversation with old friends, and a beer or seven took precedence.

And then. The legendary Jack DeJohnette Trio, featuring the sons of Coltrane and Garrison. The man seems to levitate behind the drum kit, his sound as instantly recognizable as any musician I know. Ravi Coltrane delivered the goods, especially on soprano sax, and Matt Garrison mixed laptop samples in with his heavy low end. A high point: Their rendition of the Coltrane classic "Alabama". Spine chillers.

Again, there was so much on the late night schedule that I so wanted to hear. Makaya McCraven, more Budd, Nils Frahm. The films of Bill Morrison with live music by Frisell and trio. Sons of Kemet. The all night Drone Flight.

Stanwyck wisely steered me to the hotel, abed pre-midnight a fourth night in a row.

Letting go, people. Letting go.

Sunday

Slept in, up just in time to catch the bus to an offsite event at the Loghaven Artist Residency in South Knoxville. The foundation behind this organization is a major supporter of Big Ears, and this was a chance to show off this gorgeous property to a bunch of artists and journalists and others lucky enough to wangle an invite. Harold Budd played for about 25 minutes in a room jammed with 30 people. It was pretty perfect.

Next up, a farm-to-table twist on the traditional Southern meat-and-three served up by hotshot local chef Jesse Newmister. Along the way, we met up with painter Carole D'Inverno. Stanwyck told her, "My husband loves your husband, but I am a fan of your work." We had a lovely time chatting, and I teased Carole with, "Someday I will tell Bill how he changed my life. But not yet."

By the time the bus got back to town, we were aced out of the Richard Thompson show. We dawdled a bit until time for Frisell's Harmony, featuring Petra Haden. It was Frisell choral music, sumptuous arrangements of well-recognized classics and oddball tunes. Truly gorgeous and understated – especially the lovely *Lush Life* – the set wended its way into *We Shall Overcome*. When they hit the verse of "We are not afraid" I crumbled. The fuck we aren't pal. But of course, even those singing this under the harshest conditions across history were scared AF. The point. We are WE. Afraid? Oh fuck

yes.

I was mopping the tears off my face when Carole appeared. "Come with me," she said, and I followed, and there I was being introduced to Bill and I tried to explain how much his work had meant to me, how it had changed me in ways that go way beyond "just" music. It went about as well as could be expected, which is why I have avoided meeting him on several occasions for the past 15 years. But he was kind and gracious in the face of my fanboy blabbering. Maybe next time I see him I won't be so tongue tied.

Time for dinner with pals and then the Big Event: the 50th Anniversary of the Art Ensemble of Chicago. It was so very different from the AEC of my youth. Fifteen musicians, including several women and several white folks. This is not your Daddy's AEC, yet its identity was apparent from the start.

The music was over the top wonderful. The squalls of noise and the vast areas of lingering space, the virtuosity and the joyous cacaphony of the "little instruments". Roscoe wailing, Famoudou bringing the thunder from the drum kit. Also too: Moor Mother delivered the gospel, real deal.

I admit it was jarring to see Moye walking with a cane, the passage of time having its way with this Sun Warrior. But it was still him, still delivering. We all of us slow down a step eventually, no?

Yes.

Back to the hotel where the bar was a veritable smorgasbord of musical heroes ready for the chatting. But I was done.

Letting. Go.

So What Does It All Add Up To?

I get it. It is easy to get sucked into the grind of just

making it from one day to the next, easy to lose the plot in the minutiae. It is easy to take a nap and wake up 20, 40, 50 years later. Music has been the through line for me, the constant touchstone that I have always been able to tap for a reminder of some core essence of me no matter how snoozy I can get. Old music, new music, music that matters. It is the thing that has kept me as close to on track as I have been able to manage.

But there is nothing like the specter of looming mortality to sharpen the senses, to deliver that proverbial poke of the pointy stick that says, "Wake the fuck up, fella, shit is getting real." And so I maneuvered this year's Big Ears in a state of some not-at-all-mild tumult, passing easily in a cycle of denial, sheer bliss, discomfort, and full on panic fear. Yet always supported and comforted by the music and the people that make the music possible. And of course, by the she who has made me a better person, Stanwyck herself.

Bless her, she was afraid that the festival would wear me down to my last ounce of energy, that it was a fool's errand, that I would feel awful when the music stopped. And she was pretty much correct.

Except: I could have spent those five days fretting around the house, wishing I had gone to Knoxville. I could have spent five days "resting" for my treatment. And I would have been miserable, and probably not felt any better than I did when I turned up at the hospital two days after Big Ears ended to surrender myself to the tender mercies of the cancer-industrial complex.

And I would have not had this, this memory and inscribed experience that I have tried to relate here, something for which language is insufficient, but which emerged as real and tangible as I lay awake gazing at a chemo pump at 3 a.m., as I tossed and turned, as I began to experience the inevitable consequences of dripping cytotoxic chemicals into my

bloodstream over the next 4-6 months.

If the doctors (and the nurses, may Dobbs bless them every one) manage to save my hide, I won't claim that Big Ears saved my life. But I will damn sure say that it gave me a sense of contiguous connection with the me of 40 years ago, with the me of 20, 15, 2 years ago. And that it likely prepared my psyche for the ongoing science experiments that are the current quotidian fare.

So ask your doctor if Big Ears is right for you. If she says no, find a new doctor. And mark this down: I will see you there next year, motherfuckers.

Art of the Improvisers



Springtime in Tallahassee offers a glut of high-caliber creative offerings that puts our little town, if only for a few weeks, on equal footing with the most celebrated cultural capitals. This weekend (April 12-14) , the Word of South Festival hosts its annual takeover of Cascades Park with a terrific lineup of music and literary heavies that I previewed for Tallahassee Magazine. The FSU School of Dance is kicking off a week-long celebration of the 100th birthday of the legendary Merce Cunningham. And just last weekend, the Tallahassee Film Festival mounted a well-attended series of films, panels, and performances that attracted broad notice

well beyond anything their modest budget should have allowed.

But the hands-down highlight of this season for me is the leaderless trio of guitarist Nels Cline, saxophonist Larry Ochs, and percussionist Gerald Cleaver, landing at the terrific listening tavern 5th & Thomas in Midtown on Saturday, April 13.

This trio, which recently released its first album, *What is to Be Done*, on the visionary Clean Feed label, is running a short tour of the deep southeast to showcase their approach to structured improvisation. Aside from Atlanta and Nashville, all the stops on their agenda are smallish college towns like Gainesville, Chattanooga, Athens, and our own little outpost in the Panhandle.

I realize most folks do not follow the ins and outs of the improvised music world like I do, but I'd bet that most of you recognize the name Nels Cline from his work with rockers Wilco over the past 15 years. Most Wilco fans may not realize that by the time he joined the band, Cline had been in the biz for 25 years and was widely recognized as one of the alt-jazz world's most prominent players. Cline calls himself a "near-jazz" guitarist, which seems about right while also underplaying his considerable technical abilities. He's a modest guy, even after *Rolling Stone* named him one of the top 100 guitarists of all-time.

But if you come out to 5&T expecting anything that sounds like Tweedy, you are in for something of a surprise. Cline and his trio partners Ochs and Cleaver are intrepid sonic explorers, musicians who cultivate the sound ground to generate surprise ecstasies and audiophonic epiphanies. There will be no verse/verse/chorus/bridge at this show, though it will likely incorporate elements of rock, jazz, folk, classical, and Oliveros-style Deep Listening in combinations you might not have imagined before.

I cannot stress enough: You really should be there to see what happens when three players of this caliber and collected experience set a framework and go to work. Contrary to conventional wisdom, structured improvisation is not an anarchy of everybody playing whatever they want whenever, especially when a guy like Ochs, founder of the legendary Rova Saxophone Quartet, is on hand. The guy is a wicked composer and conceptualist who establishes working paradigms – think of rules in a game – that serve to both spur and constrain the group. He also is a master of the circular breathing technique that allows him to play for extended periods without appearing to take a breath. He is actually pulling new air in as he plays. I do not really understand how it works. You might find yourself holding your breath during one of his sustained flights. Personally, I recommend that you breathe, but you do you.

Cleaver is an endlessly inventive drummer who has played with the best musicians of the past 40 years, including Roscoe Mitchell, Taylor Ho Bynum, Matthew Shipp, and Craig Taborn. Prepare to have your sense of time and dynamics turned inside out.

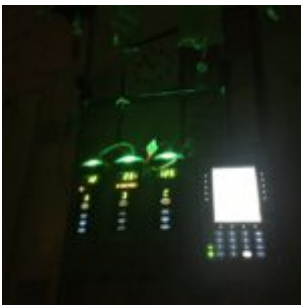
How to listen to such a thing? First off, prepare to be mildly confused, maybe even utterly lost. Just hang with it. If you listen to them as closely as they will be listening to each other (listening being the prime directive and single most important skill an improviser can bring to the table), patterns will emerge. Conversations between musicians take shape, sometimes among all three at once, sometimes just two of them as the third steps back. Occasionally, one player will command the floor to make a statement, and not necessarily forcefully; the manipulation of dynamics is another of the improviser's key tools. A whisper to draw you closer, perhaps?

What is quieter than a whisper? Silence, perhaps. As in any great music, the space between the notes is as important as the notes themselves. The contrast between loud and soft, the

emphasis a suddenly created space places on what came before or will come next: These are the building blocks of any conversation of depth. And in the end, that's what you are witnessing when you attend a show like this.

So come to 5&T (or to the other shows on the tour) and catch a glimpse of what another approach to music might have to offer. Our world is filled with infinite variety. It's nice when our musical diet is, too.

We Interrupt Regular Programming...



I promised daily posts from the Big Ears hoolie. I failed. I promised an all-encompassing roundup that connects the dots between Africa, Appalachia, jazz, and the Euro-derived sonic explorations of the likes of Lucier, Budd, &c. I failed. Mea culpa.

I apologize for not getting back to you sooner, but I've been busy having cancer. I made a point of not posting this on April 1.

The short(ish) story: I've been feeling crappy for a few months. Not sure when it really started, but I remember that Crompt had to really push me to do the last RoboCrompt gig in October. I just had no desire to play a guitar. I had told

Stanwyck years ago that if she ever found me disinterested in playing that something was probably wrong. I was right.

My energy level was crap. I was having night sweats. My lymph nodes started to swell in some curiously asymmetrical ways. But I figured I would eventually fight off the crud, hopefully in time for the Big Ears trip. Priorities, people.

A couple of months and several quarts of well-examined body fluids later, no answer. Lymphadenopathy continued apace. I knew I was in for some drama when my general practitioner's eyes nearly popped out of her sockets at the sight of my anterior nodes. It is never a good feeling to have your doctor look alarmed.

So they packed me off to an oncologist who removed a slab of tissue for analysis. The result: Angioimmunoblastic T-Cell Lymphoma, a diagnosis so rare that my slab was forwarded to a specialist in San Antonio for verification. Turns out it was correct.

Hooray for me! I am a medical fucking mystery yet again.

Within two minutes of telling us this news, our local oncologist declared himself unequipped for treating this. At a rate of 500 cases per year globally, there are damned few who ever see this variety. As it happens, one of the docs who has seen this more than a few times practices at the University of Florida, just two hours down the road. Off to see the specialist, but not before I extracted a promise from Stanwyck that we would defer treatment until after Big Ears.

Like I said: Priorities.

The timeline looked like this. Two weeks before Big Ears began, I received a diagnosis. One week out, I saw the specialist and worked out a plan. The day before the festival began, we scheduled my first treatment.

The Festival was essential, everything I could have hoped for to prepare myself for a long and arduous treatment. I'll write about Big Ears 2019 in another post. It was a ridiculously rich experience, especially the hour-long interview with Rhiannon Giddens my first afternoon there. I'll work that up for publication soon. It was a delight. (It was also the moment I realized that I did not have the juice for my normal Big Ears campaign. More on that later.)

By the end of the festival I was feeling generally horrible. The day after the festival we drove home. The next day, we drove to UF where I began treatment. I had a semi-permanent port implanted in my chest for infusion and extraction. I spent five days tethered to a chemotherapy pump that managed to beep loudly at regular intervals overnight. Hospitals are the worst place to try to sleep.

Because my medication is essentially a biohazard, I was not allowed to leave the ward. I walked laps around the hallway with my tower of IV bags, 14 laps per mile. I read two and a half thick books. I listened to 460 pieces of music, delivered at random by iPodious.

I slept. I ate like a horse, especially when decent food was smuggled in from the outside. I had an expansive view of the UF campus from my 8th floor perch. The staff was top notch, professional and extremely kind and reassuring. We started to joke about it being a luxury spa. I could not fucking wait to get out of there.

Yesterday we came home for a two week stretch, then we go back again for another five days of turning my bloodstream into a Superfund site, then home two weeks, for six full cycles.

So far, everything is as it should be. Initial treatment relieved most of the lymph swelling, aches, and night sweats. I no longer look like John Goodman in *Barton Fink*. I actually feel better than I have in months.



“I’ll show you the life of the mind!”

Side effects from chemo have been mild so far, but I have to stay away from people and germs and life and everything. The dogs are not allowed to lick my face, a grievous sacrifice in quality of life. But I got no real complaint.

We arrived home to find our house scrubbed from top to bottom. The yard looks better than it has in a long time, thanks to good friends. The offers of food and running errands and such are incredible. We have got a team, y’all, and it rocks.

(We also have adequate insurance, for which I am both grateful and humbled. Everybody should have access to this kind of care. Someday, the rampant goatfuckery of our society will twig to this and deliver.)

Then there is Stanwyck herself. An amazement on her worst day, on her best day she is a fearsome force of nature, an implacable bulldog. Fair warning to any health care professional or bureaucrat who thinks they can half-ass around Stanwyck: She will have your head on a pike. Jes sayin...

Enough! This is some sloppy ass writing here, but I wanted to get this out of the way so we could get back to the stuff that matters: Music, books, movies, food. Love. I promise to write more better prettier next time.

Til then, in the immortal words of Patti Smith:

