Banging the Can

By Rob Rushin-Knopf, Culture Warrior
(Photo of Shara Nova by Peter Sterling, 2022, courtesy of Long Play Festival)

On May Day (workers unite!) I attended the final day of Bang on a Can's inaugural Long Play Festival. Scheduled to debut in 2020 (but, well, ya know…), the festival delivered three full days of music, with roughly 60 acts across eight venues mostly within a roughly four block radius; two stages were less than a mile distant. On my way to collect my festival pass, I considered the times I had seen BOAC perform, all of them at the Big Ears Festival. I mentioned this to BOAC's Director of Development Tim Thomas and noted that the Long Play setup – multiple sets run simultaneously among easily-walked locations – was similar to the Knoxville vibe.

In mock dudgeon he replied, "Are you suggesting that we copped this idea from Ashley Capps?? We absolutely did."

The lineup was eclectic in extremis and heavily populated by the Bang on a Can / Brooklyn new music crowd. There were several artists 'from away' – Philadelphia's Jamaladeen Tacuma, the Southern Oregon University Percussion Ensemble, Matmos from Baltimore, cellist Zoe Keating to name a few – but the aesthetic was pure Brooklyn.

It's an aesthetic that is near impossible to pigeonhole, and therein lies its charm. You could catch the BOAC All Stars perform Brian Eno's seminal ambient classic *Music for Airports*

or Terry Riley’s legendary *In C*; the always compelling Attaca Quartet playing music by Glass, Caroline Shaw, Flying Lotus, and more; or the Sun Ra Arkestra, still traveling the spaceways under the direction of the 98-year old Marshall Allen.

Sadly, I saw none of these acts, and another dozen or two that would cause me too much psychic pain to mention. But my one day there was everything I could have hoped for, an opportunity to immerse in performances that shatter notions of genre restriction, music by turns unexpected, bizarre, ecstatic, hilarious, and deeply touching. Who could ask for anything more?

Bassist Robert Black, a longtime BOAC all-star, started my day with a solo recital that stretched my conception of the double bass to near the breaking point. His opening piece, *Four Moons of Pluto* (2015) by Miya Masaoka, is an open string and harmonics affair using a just intonation tuning scheme that generated layers of strange harmonics and wave-interference beats that created internal rhythms that pushed this droning wonder into a subtly insistent groove. Masaoka wrote this for one to five basses; one can only imagine the shimmer a full compliment would engender.

Robert Black at Long Play 2022 (*Photo Credit: Peter Serling 2022, courtesy of Long Play Festival*)

Black introduced *Theraps* by Iannis Xenakis (1975) as "an extreme piece of music in all sorts of ways" and recalled his sessions with Xenakis where the composer pushed him beyond anything remotely resembling a comfort zone. Click here for a recording of Black performing the Xenakis piece from an album released a month before the festival. (WARNING: Not for the faint of heart.)

Then I caught cellist/singer Iva Casian-Lakos playing Joan LaBarbara's *a trail of indeterminate light* and *ad astra…for cellist who sings*. La Barbara is a living legend whose *Voice is the Original Instrument* (1976) is perhaps *the* iconic document of extended vocal techniques. (Good look finding a copy.) She appeared on Steve Reich's masterwork *Drumming* and famously sang the alphabet on *Sesame Street*. (No lie, y'all.) A collaborator with new music giants like John Cage, Alvin Lucier, Philip Glass, and Morton Subotnick (Go! Listen!), La Barbara has established a significant body of her own

compositions. *ad astra…* is a BOAC commission written specifically for Casian-Lakos. By turns melodically dreamy and terrifyingly banshee, this was a performance to be reckoned with.

Here's the premiere of *ad astra…* during BOAC's 2021 annual marathon, held via livestream during the pandemic.

Next up, the utterly luminous Shara Nova (pictured up top and below) embodied the Reaper in BOAC co-founder David Lang's *death speaks* (2013). Occasionally you happen upon a performance that completely transforms your being. This was one of those. I could barely breathe.

Death, where is thy sting? *(Photo of Shara Nova by Peter Sterling, 2022, courtesy of Long Play Festival)*
(I'll be back soon with a longer look at Shara Nova, aka My Brightest Diamond. I've become a tad obsessed, to be honest.)

I wandered in a daze to the next and nearest show, pretty sure anything after *death speaks* would be a letdown. Instead, I

found myself transfixed by interdisciplinary artist eddy kwon.

I knew her name from the Art Ensemble of Chicago's 50th anniversary project, but had no idea what to expect. It was another complete mind melt.

kwon's website explains that "her practice connects composition, performance, improvisation, dance, and ceremony to explore transformation & transgression, ritual practice as a tool to queer ancestral lineage, and the use of mythology to connect, obscure, and reveal" and that "[h]er work as a choreographer and movement artist embodies an expressive release and reclamation of colonialism's spiritual imprints, connecting to both Japanese Butoh and a lineage of queer/trans practitioners of Korean shamanic ritual." Somehow even those expansive descriptions fall short of expressing the essence of expression that was otherwordly, touchingly sad, extremely funny, and punctuated by musicianship of the highest caliber.

The first piece (I'm pretty sure it was an excerpt from her *Umma-Ya* project) struck me as a Kurosawa epic compressed into who knows how many minutes – I seriously lost all sense of time – in the body of a single performer. Here's a series of excerpts from an earlier staging of *Umma-Ya*.

Other pieces showcased his violinist chops (multiple Bach quotes) and his representation as a gender fluid artist and activist. Lyrics such as "hips like lambs' horns" evoked deep longing and desire, while the line "your life does not have to be a dubious, sticky sweet secret" offers encouragement to anyone yearning to embrace their authentic core. I could watch/listen to her for days.

Soo Yeon Lyuh was running behind schedule, so I was able to catch her mastery (sorry for the gendered term, but what is the alternative?) on the *haegum*, the 2-string Korean spike fiddle. Her set ranged from traditional to free improv with a guitarist to a composition by BOAC co-founder Michael Gordon performed with recorded pulse/drone backing. Mesmerizing.

A few tacos at Tacombi set me up for the festival finale at the stunning Brooklyn Academy of Music Opera House: An orchestral re-imagining of Ornette Coleman's groundbreaking album 1959 *The Shape of Jazz to Come*.

Released the same year as *Kind of Blue* and *Giant Steps*, these three albums mark a stark inflection point between their swing and bebop predecessors and what was emerging as the so-called "new thing in jazz." Sixty years on it is impossible to imagine the kind of impact they had on unprepared listeners. *Shape* was considered especially anarchic in its day, though in retrospect it seems a quite logical next step from the Bird-Gillespie be bop innovations. As with Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and other mythical artistic upheavals, these works inevitably established themselves as a new norm waiting to be upended by subsequent innovators. But it is no exaggeration to state that these recordings changed the world.

Fittingly, the star power around this event was tremendous, both on stage and in the audience. For the festival, BOAC enlisted seven contemporary composers – some considered jazz, some not – to reimagine the six *Shape* pieces for sextet plus the Bang on a Can Orchestra conducted by classical piano titan Awadagin Pratt.

Photo Credit: Ellen Qbertplaya 2022, courtesy of Long Play Festival

The sextet featured Ornette's son, drummer Denardo, with OC alumni Jamaaladeen Tacuma (bass) and James "Blood" Ulmer (guitar). Jason Moran, the reigning embodiment of the jazz piano tradition, was my pick for star of the hour, resplendent in a canary yellow duster that was almost as spectacular as his playing. (fwiw, the entire sextet was fashionably fabulous, a nod to Ornette's commitment to spectacular wardrobe.) Wallace Roney, Jr. held down original trumpeter Don Cherry's role, while multi-reed phenom Lee Odom tackled the challenge of standing in for the late master on alto with admirable confidence and gusto; her solos captured the essence of Ornette's singular vocabulary without falling prey to mimicry and pastiche. Mark her as one to watch.

The star power carried over to the lineup of composers/arrangers: Pamela Z, Nicole Mitchell, Craig Harris, David Sanford, Nick Dunston, and Carman Moore. (Go! Listen!) The variety of styles at play stretched the program's

coherence, but the internal logic of Coleman's compositions defied the potential for anarchy; the center somehow held. One piece re-contextualized Coleman in the lineage of American composer Aaron Copland. Another was recognizably in the bop/big band vein, though only just, while others fixed Coleman in the realm of 20th-century classical abstraction reminiscent of his own *Skies of America*.

It was a fitting capper to an ambitious inaugural weekend. Like the festival, it was a swing for the fences turn at bat, and when it connected the results were transformative. The evening's scope reflected the festival's ambitious programming that offered something for everyone with willing ears to hear.

My sense was that the crowd was mostly locals. At 1500 attendance over three days, the scene was congenial and friendly. I can imagine Long Play evolving into a destination event along the lines of Big Ears – though some of the cozier venues may not scale if the festival takes off – and given the rising price of lodgings in Knoxville for festival weekend, a weekend in Brooklyn would not cost that much more.

Hell, let's just do both.

And if you plan things right, you can take a stroll across the Brooklyn Bridge. Bucket list plus!

(Pro tip: The bridge is not actually for sale. Boy, do I feel dumb.)

Forever Momentary Space

My final installment of my Big Ears coverage focuses on the musical ambassadorship of Damon Locks Black Monument Ensemble during their time in Knoxville. This is a super-condensed introduction to their music.

(Part 1 of the series here. Part 2 here. A little something extra for Part 2 here.)

Black Monument has released two albums on the Chicago-based International Anthem label, 2019's *Where Future Unfolds* and the monumental *Now*. Recorded during summer 2020 – under the shadow of pandemic, social unrest, and an unutterably bizarre political climate – *Now* qualifies as an instant classic, right down to the chorus of cicadas that accompany the outro to the title track. (Due to Covid, the *Now* sessions were held in a garden behind the recording studio.)

Both albums are grounded in Locks' sound sampling which he described to me as analogous to the collages he creates in his visual arts practice. (He is represented by the Goldfinch Gallery.) But the overall sound is distinctly that of a group creating together, from the ultra-tight vocal harmonies to the roiling percussion of Dana Hall and Arif Smith, cornetist Ben Lamar Gay's refreshingly un-Wyntonesque sound, and the transplendent force of nature embodied by clarinetist Angel Bat Dawid (pictured above).

Damon Locks Black Monument Ensemble at Big Ears Festival 2022 (Photo by Eli Johnson, courtesy of Big Ears)

In a New York Times profile of Locks by Marcus J. Moore, drummer Fred Armisen explained, “That’s how much I believed in him.” Yeah, that Fred Armisen. The Portlandia guy.

Trenchmouth, which lasted 8 years, is where Locks began experimenting with sound collage as part of live performances, using snippets from movies, broadcasts, speeches, and whatever bits of noise he found useful. By the twenty-teens, he was working solo when he hit upon the idea of adding singers to his performances. Singers led to percussionists led to a towering Black Monument. The current membership of the group ranges from five to fifteen or more, depending on whether they include dancers or a children’s choir.

The result is something that transcends the narrow definition of “a concert.” It is more in line with the sensory overdrive extravaganzas of Sun Ra, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, or

George Clinton’s P-Funk universe. Like those artists, the attention to detail in every element of the Black Monument presentation – from composition to sound quality to visual envelopment through theater, dance, and costuming – is acute, and it belies the band’s mere four years together, with two and a half years under pandemic separation.

Armisen noted this quality in the Times profile. “Oh, this guy is just a genius. This is a brilliant person who cares about every millimeter of what something looks like and sounds like.”

Aside from the obvious musical debt to Sun Ra, other recognizable influences range broadly across liberation jazz (like Max Roach’s “Freedom Now Suite” and Archie Shepp’s “Attica Blues”) to soul-jazz (Eddie Gale’s “Black Rhythm Happening“) to the declamatory hip-hop of artists like Public Enemy and NWA.

The title track from Now, with its blend of samples, traditional drums, yearning clarinet, and lush vocal harmonies, is a terrific introduction to their self-described “intersection of gospel, jazz, activism & 808 breaks.” Featuring Locks’ visual art interspersed with footage of the garden recording session, it is that rare example of a video that does not feel incidental to the music.

Black Monument is not a band that lends itself to an easy pigeonhole. Their celebratory blend may be saddled with the ‘jazz’ tag, but the music ranges far wider than that fraught four-letter genre jail can encompass. The best I can do is borrow the Art Ensemble of Chicago’s motto: Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future.

Go. Listen.