All That Jazz #1: Obomsawin, Philion & Knuffke

*The first in a series that will alternate irregularly with 'So Much Guitar,' a place to talk about the mountain of amazing *jazz*Whatever meaning that word has these days. happening these days. We are awash in a creative tsunami. Life is good.*

Today, a couple of swinging large ensemble bangers and a delicate serving of chamber jazz from a trio of contemporary masters.

Go. Listen.

Mali Obomsawin: *Sweet Tooth*

Sweet Tooth (Out Of Your Head Records, 2022) is the debut release from Wabanaki bassist/vocalist Mali Obomsawin. The lineage of Native American jazz heroes is imposing – Jimmy Blanton, Thelonious Monk, Jim Pepper, Don Cherry, Kid Ory, Don Pullen, Charlie Parker, the luminous Lena Horne, to drop just a fraction of the names – and Obamsawin's first outing lays solid claim to the heritage. With six original tunes, three of them with lyrics from traditional and contemporary Wabenaki chants, Obomsawin delivers "a suite for Indigenous resistance" that poses a challenge to anyone expecting Native American culture to pander to tired cliché and a simplistic expectation.

"It's the story of my people and why we survived," Obomsawin explains. "This movement is about the lineal and cultural

inheritance that Indigenous people receive from our ancestors.”

Obomsawin’s bass – more than a tad reminiscent of the great Charlie Haden – anchors a rhythm section that features the superb drummer Savannah Harris and guitarist Miriam Elhajli. The front line trio wields a tonal reed range from bass clarinet to the high tones of soprano saxophone around the cornet/flugelhorn of Tylor Ho Bynum. The composition/arrangements echo Carla Bley, especially her work with the Liberation Music Orchestra, while the sections of free creation recall Mingus or the Art Ensemble of Chicago. But even with all those reference points, *Sweet Tooth* stands as an impressively original declaration from a young artist who is clearly here to stay.

Full album releases on October 28. This preview track is built around a 17th century Abenaki ballad, with an arrangement that evokes the brass bands the Jesuits brought to Native reservations as part of their ‘salvation’ mission.

Sweet Tooth by Mali Obomsawin

Ethan Philion: *Meditations on Mingus*

This year marks the 100th birth anniversary of the monument known as Charles Mingus. The man was a giant in every way. He was one of the greatest bass virtuosos of the 20th century, one of the century’s greatest composers, and a bandleader who could spot great rising talent and knew how to bring out the best in them. He was also difficult, profane, prone to outbursts of violence and paranoia. He played with Miles and Monk and Bird and Duke, was muse to an enamored Joni Mitchell, and then up and died in 1979 at the young age of 56.

His widow Sue – who died just over a week ago at age 92 – kept his work alive since the 80s with the Mingus Dynasty project, but aside from that his classic compositions have been sorely under-performed. Aiming to remedy this neglect, Chicago-based

bassist Ethan Philion put together a 10-piece band to perform his arrangements of the Mingus songbook.

Meditations on Mingus (Sunnyside Records, 2022) is a set of eight well-known Mingus classics that reminds us of the melodic bounty and rhythmic heft of Mingus's writing. Mingus wrote at the same level as Ellington, delivering the music that made calling jazz "America's classical music" more than wisenheimer marketing copy.

I can't tell you how hard it was to pick one cut from this set for preview. This is one of my favorite Mingus tunes and it showcases Philion's deep chops on the big bass fiddle.

Meditations on Mingus by Ethan Philion

Kirk Knuffke Trio: *Gravity Without Airs*

Kirk Knuffke seems to be everywhere these days, sideman and collaborator to an astonishing array of musicians, contemporaries (Mary Halvorson, Allison Miller, Myra Melford) as well as venerated elders like Marshall Allen, Roswell Rudd, and Tootie Heath. On *Gravity Without Airs* (TAO Forms, 2022), he delivers some of the most gorgeous chamber jazz of recent memory. Calling to mind the classic Jimmy Giuffre Trio featuring Steve Swallow and Paul Bley – with Knuffke's cornet in the Giuffre clarinet role – the fourteen pieces on *Gravity* are a mix of Knuffke compositions and free form spontaneous creations. Pianist Matthew Shipp is one of the music's current masters. A player steeped in the histories of jazz and classical and possessed of prodigious technical skill, he not only has the entire piano vocabulary at his fingertips, but the wit and discrimination to know exactly what needs to go where/when. Bassist Michael Bisio, a member of Shipp's exceptional trio since 2009, brings huge ears and a massive, earthy tone to the proceedings. The result is pure gold.

This track closes the album with a movingly beautiful melody and the kind of uber-sensitive group listening that makes this

entire double disc set an absolute gem.

Gravity Without Airs by Kirk Knuffke Trio

Go. Ya know….

So Much Guitar #3: Ava Mendoza

Photo: Laurent Orseau

Ava Mendoza appeared on my radar with the arrival of William Parker's *Mayan Space Station* (Aum Fidelity, 2021). Mendoza's playing blew my head clean off. A trio outing with bassist Parker and drummer Gerald Cleaver, this one calls to mind Sonny Sharrock at his face-melting finest. No mystery why it landed on so many Best of 2021 lists. (Mine included.)

Mayan Space Station by William Parker

Miami-born Mendoza has been generating buzz since her days in the Mills College music program where she studied with Fred Frith, Maggi Payne, and John Bischoff. Now based in Brooklyn, Mendoza has been bouncing around the globe for the past dozen years, following wherever the music takes her. She spent her early years studying classical guitar, but fell prey to the siren song of making massive noise via six strings on a plank

and a passel of pedals for dialing in sounds unknown. The technique she earned through classical training remains evident, but Ava’s work is as far from the buttoned up ways of Parkening and Fisk as you can get.

Torrential. Paint peeling. Scathing. Coruscating bellows of post-Hendrixian skronk. And often as comforting and tender as a gentle summer rain.

This Guitar Contains Multitudes (*Photo by Matthew Muise*)

A few months after *Mayan Space Station* came out, Mendoza released the solo set *New Spells*, a joint release by Relative Pitch Records and Astral Spirits. It is hard to pick just one of the five tracks, but I replayed this one four times in a row on a recent car trip, so maybe go with that scientific indicator of quality.

New Spells by Ava Mendoza

Mendoza is a prolific collaborator. Among her many co-conspirators we find Nels Cline, Jamaaladeen Tacuma, Rova Saxophone Quartet, Can vocalist Malcolm Mooney, and John Zorn. She was part of trumpeter-composer Nate Wooley's superb 2020 release *Seven Storey Mountain VI*, a collaboration that no doubt set her up for the call when Wooley needed a touring substitute for Mary Halvorson in his Columbia Icefield project with pedal steel wizard Susan Alcorn. (Check out question 5 in the Q&A down below for Ava's observations on this project.)

Ava sent me this tidy two minute Icefield clip from Stockholm last May. (EXCLUSIVE!! (perhaps) MUST CREDIT I2B!!!)

Video shot by Gavin Maycroft

If that grabs ya, here's a 40+ minute set from Austria in late 2021. I've come back to this performance several times. (And the two Icefield albums with Halvorson are damned fine, too.)

There's a lot more where that came from. Her trio Unnatural Ways is a post-punk maelstrom. She writes music for film and video; her tidy little set of soundtracks, *With Other Media*, offers a glimpse of the Bernard Herrman lurking within. Mendoza is the musical Roy Kent: She's here, she's there, she's every…

Next Spring, Mendoza has multiple gigs at the Big Ears Festival. As I mentioned last week, the performance debut of Orcutt's *Music for Four Guitars* (Palilalia Records) has me completely a flutter, and you can bet I would crawl over

broken glass to catch her with Mayan Space Station. But there's another set that has me very curious: Ava in performance with artist/engineer Sue-C, whose video/technology based work (she calls it "real time cinema") promises to be one of those *sui generis* happenings that makes Big Ears my personal pilgrimage to Lourdes. And it would not surprise me to see her pop up in other collaborations over the weekend.

I got in touch with Ava to see if she was up for a round of "One Question Per String," which is a barely clever name for something I hope to include in most of the *So Much Guitar* posts from here on it. She was more than game, returning this set of thoughtful replies that allow me to leave her with the last words, save two.

1) Who/what was the main spark that made you want to dedicate yourself
to six strings and a plank?

Q1 was so impossible for me to answer that I gave up. Sorry!

2) Who is on your bucket list of people you really want to work with? (any instrument/discipline/universe)

Big Freedia, Buddy Guy, Will Guthrie, Moor Mother, Iggy Pop

3) If you had to cut your pedal array down to only 3, which ones do you keep?

Blackstone Appliances Mosfet Overdrive, Dunlop Volume Pedal, and Red Panda Tensor. The Blackstone isn't usually on my pedalboard these days, but if I do a gig where it makes sense to bring a smaller rig, often I'll bring it because it's so versatile. It has two gain stages, brown level and red level, which are basically overdrive and distortion. You can really dial them both in and get a lot out of them. So, it's not my favorite fuzzbox in the world, but if I want something that can do a lot in one box, it's great.

Dunlop Volume pedal, pretty self-explanatory! I'm always riding my volume pedal, using it for swells and just to control dynamics.

Red Panda Tensor- It can be a semi-normal delay, but it can also do extreme pitch shifting, glitch, fast forward rewind and looping effects. So, depending how you dial it in you can use it just to add some subtle echo to your sound, or noise it out and go to Pluto right off the bat.

4) Do you ever work with altered tunings?

I use drop D all the time, that's all over most of my recordings. And sometimes solo I use drop D with a capo at the first fret, so drop D# essentially. Other than that I'm usually in standard. This past year I've been learning things in alternate tunings actually, open D minor, D major, and open A. Jessie Mae Hemphill and John Lee Hooker things, and then I'll just improvise on my own. It's been really great to work on at home, but I'm not sure yet how it will pan out in terms of my own writing. [I]n any case it's been really good for me to learn some new music in altered tunings, and it's changing the way I approach bends and resonating strings in any tuning. We'll see what comes of it!

5) How did you approach filling Mary's chair in Columbia Icefield?

I brought my own background and approach to the music, essentially how I would do on any gig. Unless you are subbing on a Broadway show, I don't think the goal of subbing should ever be to sound like the person that you're subbing for. Mary is a friend and a great player and person, and we've played together in a bunch of different contexts. Everyone was aware, going in, that we sound pretty different, and as a bandleader Nate wants people to be themselves, so I felt free to do that.

Nate has described the band as "Americana" and that is really

how I hear it and how I approach the music. Not Americana in the saccharine "the prairie, the white picket fence, the greatest nation in the world" sense! But in a more cold, hard, realistic look at the country, sometimes a brutal and frightening one. It's about a giant expanse of frozen, ice-covered land! I listened to the record a lot, and really tried to sink into its pacing, because it's a slow, chilly, patient record, and I wanted those qualities to come thru live.

My take on the music probably owes as much to doomy country as to "jazz" or free jazz. There were two guitarists that kept coming to mind for me as I worked on the music and developed my approach. One was Dylan Carlson (Earth) because of how measured, heavy and substantial his riffs are, things you can listen to over and over. And Roy Buchanan, for his tone and crazy phrasing, pinched harmonics and big bends behind the nut. I think of him as sort of blues and country extended technique. Hearing him make a sound calls to my mind a whole past, present and future of American music.

6) Hendrix, Hazel, or Cosey?

Hm, all masters and true originals, good for different things. They're all distorted guitarists who ride the line between rock and blues, and in Pete Cosey's case the line with jazz as well. All of them use some effects. But I think of each of them as so special in terms of their playing and the role they occupied in their bands, it's impossible pit them against each other. Hendrix is fluid fire, he's like if Albert Ayler was a blues rock guitarist, this amazing spontaneity and feel. Eddie's pocket is sooooo deep no matter what he's playing, even when he's shredding somehow he's always playing rhythm guitar. And Cosey is more adventurous harmony-wise than the other two, plays more intervalically and atonally. No way to pick! {Ed. Note: This is indeed the only correct answer.}

Go. Listen.

Authentically Authentic

I have a review up at Salvation South today about Jake Blount's latest album *The New Faith* (Smithsonian Folkways, 2022). As with most albums I review I listened to it repeatedly, along with other releases in Blount's catalog. I also scoured the intertubes for most of the original versions of the songs he reimagined for the album; I love hearing the source material and comparing it with the new versions. As usual, those tracks led me down other (semi) related rabbit holes, way more than I could fit into a reasonably cogent review. So here's my psychic overflow from the experience.

The Blount album opens and closes with songs originated by Bessie Jones and the Georgia Sea Island Singers. The word "originated" is working overtime here; the songs pre-date the Sea Island Singers, but they are the ones who first performed the pieces for field recordist Alan Lomax.

The first piece on Blount's album is "Take Me to the Water." (You can hear the Blount version here.)

The Blount album ends with "Once There Was No Sun." (Blount's take here.)

A cursory A-B listen to the originals/remakes reveals some

obvious alterations. Some might call them discrepancies, or worse. With “Once There Was No Sun,” the liberties taken are especially pronounced. The string and vocal harmonies are far more modern, the beat is decidedly funkier, and the implementation of elements like digital looping are the kinds of things that could drive purists and authenticity gatekeepers to righteous indignation. How dare he &c.?

Take it a step farther. Blount’s first recordings were faithful to the accepted roots music format, strictly acoustic affairs with minimal studio sleight of hand. Blount’s approach on *The New Faith* – twining shout with gospel, rock, blues and hip hop – represents a significant innovation, one that purists and gatekeepers might deem heretical. (Recall the outrage when Dylan when electric.)

But the idea that Blount’s version of “Once There Was No Sun” is unfaithful demands that we believe that Bessie Jones did not take any liberties of her own with her source material, either intentionally or via sketchy memory, or imperfect transmission from whoever she learned from, themselves a source we must likewise assume was faultless in memory and so on back to whoever actually “wrote” the song in the first place. (“Wrote” being a pretty problematic notion given the circumstances of slavery in the first place.)

At any rate, I am pretty comfortable vouching for Jake’s bona fides, not that my take amounts to a hill of beans in this crazy world of ours.There, that allusion: Cheap pop reference or sincere homage?

In the late 1980s I saw a performance by The McIntosh County Shouters at Emory University’s Cannon Chapel. During their performance they lamented that their generations-old music would likely die out soon since most of the young people in their community were not interested in the “old folks” music, preferring the fresher sounds of rap and hip-hop. Most of us were likely inclined to believe their dire prediction.

Instead, they remain an active performing group, beneficiaries perhaps of the post-*O Brother* resurgent interest in American folk forms like bluegrass and country, not to mention the insistence of Black historians and performers – led by the Carolina Chocolate Drops among several – that the pan-racial origins of American roots music be recognized and celebrated.

The Shouters' 2017 Smithsonian Folkways release is a fantastic document of the ring shout in its "authentic" form, and the production and recording quality is a good deal more polished than their 1984 Smithsonian release. (Hailing from a relatively isolated community in the low country of Georgia – a place made infamous in Melissa Fay Green's book *Praying for Sheetrock* – the Shouters were "discovered" in the early 80s still practicing 'authentic' ring shouts and slave songs.) Here are two versions of "Jubilee" 33 years apart.

1984 Slave Shout Songs from the Coast of Georgia by The McIntosh County Shouters

2017 Spirituals and Shout Songs from the Georgia Coast by The McIntosh County Shouters

Which one is more authentic? Is a casual performance more genuine than answering an audience expectations for polished presentation? Is the clarity of a professional studio less "real" than a field recording? Are the Shouters of 1984/2017 *really* being faithful to the forbearers, or have they corrupted the original purity along the way?

What – more pointedly, who – defines authenticity anyway? It has been an issue as far back as Peerless Ralph Peer recording all those 'hillbillies' in Bristol, mainly because that was around the time music became a commodity that non-creative types were desperate to control. That's oversimplifying things, sure. At that point, records were just accessories to

induce people to buy furniture-sized record players; the actual music was secondary to the commerce of furniture sales.

But the marketers stuck their noses in early on, spurred by concerns that decent white folks would not wish to invite Negro musicians into their parlor, even if only via shellac discs. Splitting music by race categories set in motion a drive to label every music as being one thing or another. Too many consumers responded like good sheep by accepting these imaginary categories as something very real and worth defending and became intimately identified with specific genres, much the way they do with specific sporting teams or religious belief. This is largely driven by the identity-formative experiences of age ~2 to 20 and lingering fears of ostracism from their fellow tribalists; it has a lot less to do with choices freely made than most people would care to admit.

A growing gaggle of music journalists happily leapt in, relieved to have something to write about that required neither musical literacy or actual ears to hear. The various gatekeepers – professional and hobbyist alike, and all more or less self-appointed – set themselves to keep their corner safe from incursion. Add to this audience's determination that artists and art remain what it is: Give us something new, the throng demands, as long as it is what we expect. This led to inevitable factionalism among fans of different genres, which gave way to bitter debate within factions as to whether this or that artist was pure to the form or a pathetic sellout.

Rock music – an amorphous term that has flipped itself inside out more often than a cheap folding chair – offers some of the more hilarious examples, though the inherent racism, sexism, and homophobia aimed at the funk and dance musics of the 70s, or pretty much any music performed by a person without a penis, is a decidedly unfunny demonstration of the prevailing sausage fest mentality of that sect.

Country music has long had its internecine dramas regarding what “real” country is and who it belongs to. Seemingly more open to women than rock – ‘seemingly’ the key word here – an accusation of inauthenticity has been a key weapon ever since country music became a money making proposition. Money changes everything, right? *That* can’t be country, because that would take a sliver of my piece of the pie. Can’t let those people in, or that instrument, and so on.

And despite the fact that most mainstream country music today sounds like pale imitations of 70s Southern boogie (sprinkled with the occasional “rap” for flava), the Country Music Association has crawled right up its own rectum in the face of such threats to their “tradition” as Black musicians, or even worse, Black women musicians; worse still, Black LGBTQ+ musicians. The CMA’s disgraceful hissy fit over Lil Nas X’s delightful “Old Country Road” – an affectionate and funny sendup of cowboy music tropes – is the most visible example of this, but the ongoing struggles of POC and queer musicians to break into country/Americana/etc. belie a much deeper cultural sepsis.

A while back, a bunch of musicians tired of being frozen out of the Nashville-dominated country music scene rallied under a new banner: Americana. Though I hate this genre label with the burning fury of a thousand suns, it has managed to provide platform and access for many worthy musicians otherwise shut out. And like most genre labels, it has become meaninglessly expansive in scope.

And, predictably, another generation of gatekeepers is getting more than a touch defensive over what has become lucrative turf.

(But hey, credit where due: the Americana Awards just this week bestowed Album of the Year honors on the superb debut from Allison Russell, *Outside Child*. So while I still hate the Americana label, their industry community is way ahead of

their counterparts at the Grammys and CMAs.) Russell is Canadian, which apparently counts as American; wonder if musicians between the US/Mexican border and Tierra del Fuego would also qualify. We shall see.

Then there's the inherently jingoistic echo in the word. Americana emerged in the late 1990s, its spurt of growth coincident with the worst of Bush-Iraq era patriotic Amurikafukyeah excess, exemplified by the banishment of the Dixie Chicks for their vocal anti-war sentiment. The Nashville establishment were as accomodationist as 1950s Hollywood in this embarassing flag-humping orgy. (As I recall it, the Americana community largely viewed the DCs as big industry sellouts, so not much help there.)

Of note: Upon their return to performing and recording, the Chicks performed on the 50th CMA awards show with Beyonce. Good on the CMA, reckon. Seriously, the lines are confusing AF, but nothing shouts louder than the almighty buck. The Chicks also dropped the Dixie stain from their name and are considered by some to be Americana artists now.

So who was more authentic? The anti-imperialist Dixie Chicks or the faux macho men in hats like Toby Keith who fanned flames of bigotry and militarized Christianity? I'd love to ask Woody Guthrie or Johnny Cash their opinions.

How about jazz? During the 80s, Wynton Marsalis and Stanley Crouch set themselves up as the authenticity tribunal; they took fealty to specific forms and gestures to near-reactionary extremes. To be sure, Wynton created some fantastic music during this period and he has since toned down the purity pronouncements. (He even performed alongside the likes of Willie Nelson and Eric Clapton – mon dieu!) But the sense of repression and market limitation was damaging to a generation of musicians who did not fit the prescribed mold.

Along the way, as musicians misbehaved by absorbing and

combining different influences, we had to come up with another level of labeling to keep up: Hence the hyphenate musics, or just slapping the tag *fusion* on these Dr. Moreau-like abominations as warning that the creations are impure.

So where ya going with all this, you ask? Likely the best I can do here is reassert my belief that all these attempts at genre policing and all the high dudgeon the goes along with authenticity gatekeeping – I mean, seriously, is there any greater clucking scold of the moral failings of wayward artists than the free-spirited Lester Bangs, for example? – are just static and noise that undermines the very act of musicking itself.

Increasingy, genre labeling is to music as gated neighborhood development is to community: They undermine the very thing they purport to serve.

The music is the important thing. It literally changes the world we inhabit on a daily and global basis. Committed musicians work hard to make art that is most often lost in the sheer mass of music that comes out every single day; most music comes and goes with nary a ripple, no ears ever hearing its offering.

Who can possibly keep up? Nobody, really, which makes all of us *critics*, with our claims to vast wisdom and refined discrimination, every bit the con artists as Ralph Peer or Richard Branson. You could try to listen to everything (ha!) but then you would hear pretty much none of it. Best you can do is keep the antenna up for something new to you and open your ears to the possibility.

I won’t argue that there are no standards. Picture yourself in a boat listening to William Shatner sing The Beatles; despite the production values, the inauthenticity is howlingly apparent. Also too: howlingly funny. I got nothing against camp/kitsch, which is inherently anti-authentic, but no one

would mistake it for great -or even good – art. Or would they?

We can still make judgements, have robust opinions about music that gets under our skin and makes us **feel** and move and think and then bug our friends with you-gotta-hear-this insistence. It's half the fun, perhaps, but the lesser half. The meat of the matter lies in our sincere engagement with the art itself. Hell, I spend most of my waking life trying to figure out what my own standards are and how they might change from day to day.

Is this or that musician/album/whatever authentic? Or even any good? Everybody gets to be the judge, and no one person has any better insight than anyone else. And with that, I may have written my way out of a job.

Go. Listen.

So Much Guitar #2: Bill Orcutt

One of the coolest surprises of the recent Big Ears Festival lineup for 2023 is the Bill Orcutt Guitar Quartet with Ava Mendoza, Shane Parish, and Wendy Eisenberg performing Orcutt's new album, *Music for Four Guitars* (Palilalia Records). I've been listening to this fantastic set on repeat for about a month now and I never imagined it would be performed live.

Four Guitars is Orcutt's seventh solo release, a mesmerizing set of fourteen 2-3 minute miniatures that evoke the string strangling of his early work but with the more formalized construction that has emerged since his return to active duty in '09. Imagine Beefheart's Magic Band playing Steve Reich's Electric Counterpoint or Fripp's League of Crafty Guitarists gone electro-anarchic and you get an idea, but there is no clear antecedent to *Four Guitars*. There is nothing *shimmer* about it. Sonically aggressive ambient soundscapes, perhaps? Works for me.

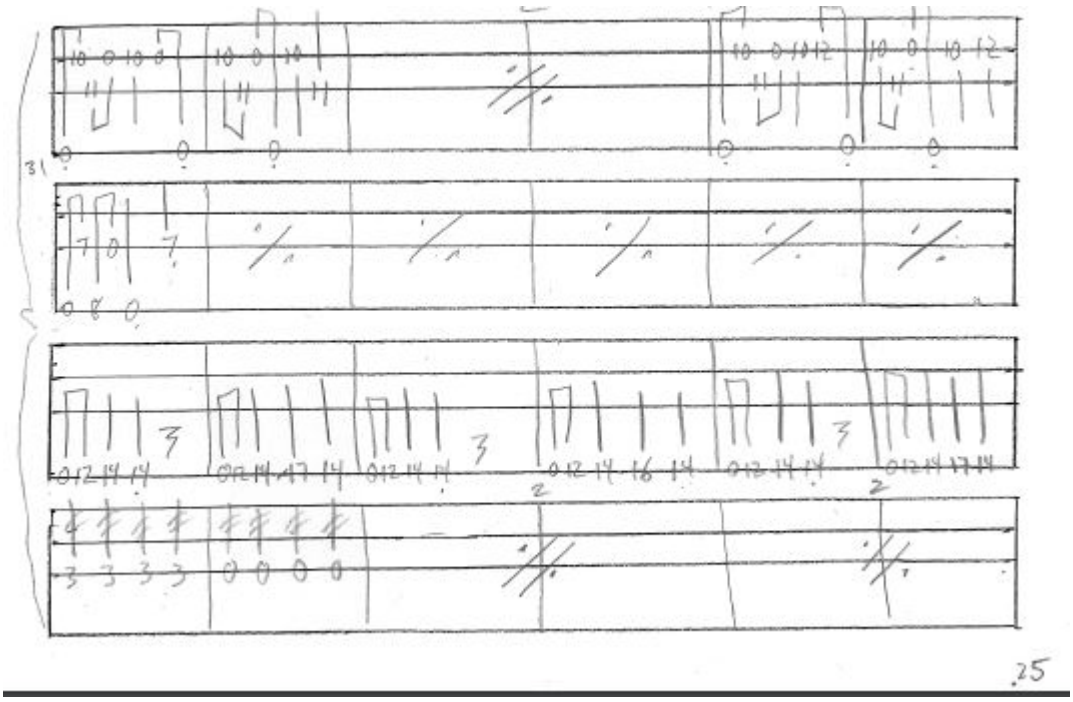
"At a Distance," the longest cut at just under 3 minutes, recalls Celtic music in a roundabout way. Check it out, but don't stop there; this is an album that bears multiple through-listens. At a certain point the layers separate from one another and the sub- and cross-melodies begun to jump out at you.

Music For Four Guitars by Bill Orcutt

Orcutt built these thorny little etudes out of loops he fed into his Logic recording software, the raw material for tons of editing and reconfiguration, a true Frankenstein affair. A live performance? Unpossible! Where would you even begin?

Maybe start with asking guitarist Parish to transcribe the music. I asked him how he detangled everything.

> *[Bill] sent me isolated guitar tracks [and] an overview of the Logic sessions… I transcribed each riff separately before plugging them into the larger structure. I had to make my own tablature paper to look like his guitar neck. He said he liked the way my handwriting looked, kind of like a graphic work of art, so that's why we went with the handwritten version.*



Music for Four Guitars excerpt

The 84 page tablature is included with the digital album download so you and your pals can re-create the music yourselves, your own version of the super-quartet Orcutt recruited. How hard could it be to find three killer guitarists willing to learn idiosyncratic music that has never been played before? All of them on mutant 4-string necks, standard guitars with the 4th and 5th stings removed, the only configuration Orcutt plays any more.

Whatever happens, reckon, we're gonna have a chance to hear it live.

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Orcutt first crossed my radar last year with *Made Out of Sound* (Palilalia 2021), a duo with drummer Chris Corsano. Across pandemic 2020, Corsano recorded improvised drum tracks in Ithaca, New York; Orcutt added his improvisations in his Bay Area studio and stitched the bits together. It lives in a haywire realm between jazz and rock, an on the edge 'going for it-ness' that put *Made Out of Sound* on my best of 2021 list.

His six mostly-improvised solo guitar albums since 2009 have garnered critical acclaim, but he remains something of an

underground figure. To my ears, Orcutt fits in a zig zaggy lineage that runs across oddballs like John Fahey and Gary Lucas through Fred Frith, Nels Cline, and Sir Richard Bishop. Orcutt's playing often sounds like two or three guitarists at once, with an edgy tone as sharp and brittle as a stone knife.

Orcutt has been on the noise guitar world's radar since the 90s with his work in the band H@rry Pu$sy, a duo project with his wife of the time, Adris Hoyos. (The real spelling is all letters, nothing fancy. But once I searched the name my ad feed on google and twitbook has been offering some, um, oddities.) Imagine the White Stripes on the harshest acid since the Woodstock brown stuff and wrung through a Beefheart/Yoko filter. The short songs – typically between 30 seconds and two minutes – are sexually explicit and anarcho-violent. I think. Intelligibility of lyrics was not an evident concern; neither was conventional song structure. Orcutt has called HP "my perfect band." Not my cuppa, but the kernel of Orcutt's unhinged guitar techniques are evident. And you can't get where you're going if you never went where you been.

HP dissolved along with the marriage in the late 90s. Orcutt dropped out of the music world for about a dozen years, working in the Bay Area as a software engineer riding the dot com train. In 2008, he compiled a bunch of old HP tracks and felt the itch to play again. His 2009 release, A New Way To Pay Old Debts is a set of fractured blues and all out assaults on a broken, barely repaired, borderline unplayable Kay guitar. (It was the origin of his four-string excursions, born of accident and necessity.) He never looked back. You can hear the wild attack of HP here, but in service to more or less recognizable tunes.

His next outing, How the Thing Sings (2011), is in the same vein but with the tunes veering toward more formal coherence. The final track is a 14 minute exploration titled "A Line from Old Man River." It was a harbinger of the next release, *A History of Every One* (2013), with a set list pulled from a b-

level version of the Great American Songbook. As Orcutt explained it to The Guardian, “I just chose the most debased songs I could think of.” Nevertheless, the melody genie was out of the bottle.

With the release of 2017’s *Bill Orcutt*, our intrepid string mangler returned to electric guitar – a Telecaster in the now-standard 4-string configuration – that highlighted his ongoing interest in standard tunes. From the opening of Ornette Coleman’s classic “Lonely Woman,” his playing is sensitive and filled with space.

Bill Orcutt by Bill Orcutt

While Orcutt never gets close to the kind of pastoral shimmer that Frisell brings to his oldies excavations, this album and the 2019 companion follow-up of mostly originals, Odds Against Tomorrow, are brimming with Telecaster tunefulness and thoughtful exploration. *Odds* finds Orcutt working with multi-tracked guitars for the first time (I believe), a technique that will reach its fullest expression (so far) on *Four Guitars*. Check out the title track.

Odds Against Tomorrow by Bill Orcutt

The distance from the Orcutt of HP to these albums could not be more pronounced, but he remains capable of epic skronk. On the aforementioned *Made Out of Sound* and *Brace Up!*, his 2018 studio set with drummer Corsano, Orcutt delivers the kind of paint-peeling blasts of free playing that he has long been known for. Yet both these sets bear more than ample witness to Orcutt’s growing affinity for recognizable form.

With *Four Guitars*, it appears all the elements have come together. The form is there; there is plenty of space, too, and enough moments of skronk to please fans of his sharper-elbowed days. How will all this play out live at Big Ears? I dare not predict, but it is absolutely one of the shows where I will crawl across glass to find out.

Go. Listen.

Next Week in So Much Guitar: Ava Mendoza