Ears Embigilisticexpialidocious: Day 4

So yeah, I painted myself into a corner because there is not a fourth degree of superlative. Sue me.

Day 4 dawned early. Stanwyck had arranged an 8 a.m. breakfast date with some lovely Knoxville pals, but I was moving really slow and literally stumbled off the elevator to find Shara Nova waiting for a ride to Blue Hour tech check. We've zoomed and emailed a ton since January (big profile coming later this month to Salvation South!) but this was our first face to face. Because I am ~~a starstruck fanboy~~ so respectful of artist's privacy, I neglected to get a photo of the three of us. But it just goes to show: You miss a lot if you sleep in.

Good food and pal catch-up later, I wandered to the East Tennessee Historical Society Museum (highly recommended!) for a panel discussion by three of The Blue Hour composers: Rachel Grimes, Sarah Kirkland Snyder, and Angélica Negrón. (Caroline Shaw missed Big Ears for the first time in years and Shara was resting her pipes for the performance.) It was a fascinating discussion of how they developed the piece and some of the changes they made when they shifted from featuring singer Luciana Souza to the recording and current touring version with Nova. So fascinating that I missed the Zorn Gnostic Trio set that was high on my list. Just another one of a thousand regrets at Big Ears.

The weather was nicer on Sunday – and I was in energy conservation mode for day 4 anyway – so I opted for another cuppa in the sunshine before Wadada Leo Smith‘s Purple Kikuyu, with drummer Pheeroan akLaff, cellist Ashley Waters, and pianist Erika Dohi. I was excited to see Wadada live after I immersed into his work so intensely for last year’s Salvation South profile. It was everything I hoped it would be, and watching Wadada conduct his band through his pieces was as fascinating as the music itself. Pheeroan – who I’ve been listening to for more than 40 years, almost as long as he’s played with Smith – is one of my favorite drummers. The way he tunes his drums is so distinctive that you know who you’re hearing right away; his tumbling/rumbling rhythms are also truly one of a kind. Waters and Dohi have each been working with Wadada since the mid-teens and their empathy with his framework is evident. At age 81, Wadada shows no indication of slowing down. A beautiful set of music.

I was concerned about getting into the Frisell FOUR show an

hour later. The lines had seemed a bit more intense than previous years; nothing insurmountable, but the old days of easily-slip-into-another-~~world~~ show are a distant memory now. I heard some pretty aggravated grumbling about the crowds – one wag suggested a name change to “Queue Festival” – but overall the lines remain pretty manageable with a little planning and lot less FOMO. (On the upside, the difficulty of zipping/dipping one show to another might just encourage people to stay in their fkng seats and not disrupt the performance. The jamokes who took the effort to score front row Blue Hour seats only to dash twenty minutes in were the most egregious violators of basic courtesy. Schmucks.)

Anyway…

The Frisell FOUR album had not grabbed me. Like so many Frisell albums lately, the recording seemed undercooked, and the potency of this band shows why it might be better to record after a group plays live for a bit. But this performance was every bit as terrific as any of the dozens of Frisell shows I’ve seen in the past 20 years, and any reservations I had about the project are dead and buried. Knoxville resident Gregory Tardy was the focus of the set, though pianist Gerald Clayton and drummer Jonathan Blake took ample turns in the spotlight as well.

Gregory Tardy (Photo by Cora Wagoner, courtesy Big Ears Festival)

Blake was especially impressive in a solo stretch near the end of the set; his alteration between very spare and very busy were masterfully constructed, and any serious drummer should study the schematic development of this solo. But the high point was a duet between guitar and tenor sax on Billy Strayhorn's gorgeous "Blood Count." This is one of my favorite pieces from the Ellington orbit and I've never heard it rendered so beautifully. (This audience youtube has both the "Blood Count" and the drum solo. Catch it before the copyright cops take it away. I didn't do it!)

Again, I took a breather between shows, both to rest my ears and to get in line for a good seat at the Tessa Lark / Knoxville Symphony program. (I learned that the house would not be cleared between that and Blue Hour, so I wanted to catch my favorite spot in the Bijou balcony.) To my happy surprise, the Lark program – Michael Schachter's violin concerto *Cycle of Life* – was a terrifically engaging 7-

movement piece performed exceptionally well. Lark is an enormously talented violinist and conductor Aram Demirjian demonstrated why he earned the Sir Georg Solti Conducting Award in 2020.

And then, at last, the moment I'd been anticipating since it was announced last fall: The Blue Hour, featuring Shara Nova.

Photo by Stanwyck

I'm going to have a lot more to say about this piece in my upcoming Shara profile for Salvation South, but let me offer a couple of observations.

First of all, it was glorious. There is a lot going on with the album production that is impractical for a live performance, but Shara and the three composers on-site oversaw a remarkably faithful production. The Knoxville Symphony's execution was top-drawer and the incorporation of the musicians as chorus along with some of the sound design

elements sprinkled throughout were excellent strategies to fill out the sound. And if I may just gush…Shara Nova's voice is miraculous, and she pulled off this demanding piece with seeming effortlessness. But that was just the appearance; Blue Hour is 80 minutes of near-constant singing across a range of around three octaves. But put the technical measure aside: Blue Hour is emotionally arduous, and any effective performance requires the performer to inhabit some dark and terrifying psychic terrain. Nova was fully committed to every line. Stunning.

It turned out I was sitting just in front of composer Rachel Grimes. She was clearly proud as punch about the whole thing and could not rave enough about Nova's performance. I observed she had done some heavy lifting over the past hour or so, and she just beamed with tears in her eyes, "*Reallly* heavy lifting! I'm so proud of her." So it wasn't just me.

That was that. Fork stuck in me, done. We walked past the blocks-long queue for Zorn's *COBRA* (which I heard was epic) without a second glance. As with the Arooj Aftab capper on Saturday, the idea of pouring more sound into these ears at that moment felt sacrilege. So it was back to the hotel to get Stanwyck a bourbon rocks and me a ginger ale, another fantastic festival in the books.

Regrets? I had a few, but then again, that's the story of Big Ears, a festival where you miss more great music than you hear. But damn y'all, that's the kind of problem I can wrap my ears around. Until next year…

Go. Listen.

Ears Embiggest: Day 3

Saturday dawned sunny and extremely windy, gusts so strong I was often pushed back a step and forced to walk at a 45* forward tilt. The festival was forced to postpone their parade and street party until Sunday. Yet we soldiered on…

We began our day with the first offering in the John Zorn 70th Birthday celebration. The program was drawn from two albums of a trilogy inspired by Zorn's interest in Christian mysticism (*Nove Cantici Per Francesco D'Assisi* and *Teresa de Avila*). But the real draw was the chance to hear three guitar virtuosi on one stage. Bill Frisell, Julian Lage, and Gyan Riley have chops to spare, but the treat was in witnessing how they played off each other and how the level of listening and mutual respect created a music that transcended compositions that were (*opinion alert – ymmv*) competent if not especially memorable.

It is impossible to think about guitar trios without recalling the McLaughlin/Di Meola/de Lucia supergroup, but the playing here was less about the gratuitous pyrotechnics of that project and more in service to a balanced group sound. Riley (on nylon strings) and Lage handled most of the ripping runs, with Frisell offering the kind of spare and enigmatic undercurrent that has characterized his recent playing. It was pretty fantastic. Everybody knows about Lage by now, but you will do yourself a favor by catching up on Riley's work, including some terrific recordings with his dad, the legendary Terry Riley.

Last year, Zorn took over the Bijou for two full days, but the crowds were so big that the fest moved them to the Tennessee Theater for the 2023 sessions. It was a smart move; this quiet little show was absolutely packed, and the lines around the Tennessee for the next two days were always considerable. (We bailed on the *Cobra* finale partly because of the lines.)

By his own design, Zorn's music is difficult to come by. He does now allow his Tzadik label releases (by him or anyone else) on any streaming service, and you can only buy CDs or vinyl: no downloads of any sort. He rarely leaves New York, so unless you catch him at a Big Ears-like event, you gotta go to him, either at his club, The Stone, or in his other frequent NYC performances. But he is one of the most prolific and influential composers and players of the past 40 years, and pretty much everyone who is anyone jumps at the chance to play with him. The sheer mass of his catalog can be intimidating, but it is worth the effort to dive in and discover.

Later that afternoon we caught one of his three *Bagatelle* concerts, this one featuring guitarists Mary Halvorson and Miles Okazaki with bassist Jorge Roeder and drummer Tomas Fujiwara. They were on fire from the drop. I've seen Halvorson a dozen times (twice more this weekend) and this probably the most shredbeastly I've seen her. Okazaki was a perfect match, and bassist Roeder is surely one of the best in the game right now. Fujiwara and Halvorson have been playing together for at least 15 years now and the psychic connection is well established. It was a highlight set, though regrettably only 30 minutes long. The second half hour went over to the band Trigger, which was young, fast, and extremely loud. Zorn embraces all forms, and this was his dip into speed metal. The band was tight as a tick, but after one tune and part of another, I figured I had caught the gist of it and jumped to catch an actual meal (one of maybe three I ate all festival; the rest was energy bars and lots of coffee).

But I'm ahead of myself. From the guitar trio I zipped over to

St. John’s (which is really my favorite venue this year) for the JACK Quartet performing the string quartets of Catherine Lamb. This is difficult, beautiful, and deeply mysterious music. Based on just intonation (most music you have heard is performed in equal temperament), this is more of the deep listening I’ve described elsewhere. The JACK musicians have the difficult task of playing and hearing the microscopic adjustments this tuning demands. The result is a build of overtones that create a psychoacoustic phenomenon that defies easy description. The first fifteen minutes found me reminding myself to drop expectation and let go my resistance to the dissonance I was feeling. Closing my eyes, I found myself ‘hearing’ a French horn and an oboe. Soon after that, a flute and bells came along. An eyelid-projection lightshow took shape, a left-to-right flow of blue/greens alternating with yellow/oranges as the rest of the illusory symphony joined in. And then, ten or twenty years later, the hour ended and I was back. Woo woo, kids…a truly memorable listening experience.

But not for everyone! One friend walked out after noting that “there’s more than one note, you know” and another with recurring tinnitus was driven to flee. I loved it.

I moved from string quartet to electric guitar skronk and wail. Bill Orcutt and Chris Corsano settled into the Jackson Terminal for an hour or so of improv chaos. This duo’s 2021 album *Made Out of Sound* gets repeated play at home. They delivered the goods, setting the skulls of earnest young men bobbing and twisting in pure metal ecstasy.

Not content with the duo’s assault on what remains of my hearing, I scampered over to The Standard for William Parker’s *Mayan Space Station* featuring guitarist Ava Mendoza and drummer Gerald Cleaver. It was another packed house but worth the jostle to catch this trio. Parker is one of the jazz world’s most prolific bassists, and at age 71 he is enjoying something of a peak in visibility. *Mayan Space Station* is a classic power trio and Mendoza is a present-day

Hendrix/Sharrock screamer. She has mentioned the influence of Nels Cline in the past, and her approach to effects and unorthodox string manipulations honors that debt. Mendoza is a distinctive voice equally at home in high-octane skronk as she is in the meditative soundscapes of someone like Nate Wooley. Here's hoping she gets the kind of widespread notice she deserves.

From here I was on to Halvorson's *Bagatelle* set, so the entire day was pretty much a guitar lover's dream.

We waited in line after dinner for Brandee Younger's set, but the start time kept slipping in fifteen minute increments, one of the few schedule glitches I heard about through the weekend. (With this many concerts, it's a wonder it doesn't happen more often.) Then a notification about another pop-up show came through: Arooj Aftab. Stanwyck made a decisive call: Run.

St. John’s to The Point is one of the longer treks on the festival map, but whatever. I had seen a photo of Arooj performing with Frisell the night prior and felt serious jealousy, so we were determined to catch this. We ended up in the front row where I took that picture at the top of this ramble. A few minutes later it looked like this.

Photo by Billie Wheeler courtesy of Big Ears

Shahzad Ismaily and Maeve Gilchrist are members of Aftab’s touring band, so we heard stripped down versions of most of the *Vulture Prince* material. Aftab told us that even though they had played around 200 shows last year, they had trouble remembering the tunes that day. It did not sound that way, and to say these versions were stripped down is to miss the fact that Gilchrist is beyond whatever virtuosic might mean; she is an orchestra unto herself. And Ismaily demonstrated once again why he is such a sought after collaborator; everything he plays on bass or Moog is understated and utterly perfect, never wasting a note.

And what to say of Arooj Aftab? She has one of the most

captivating voices I've ever heard, and when she dips into the lower range I feel like someone has plugged a low-voltage current into my spine. The scale of the venue was far better suited to Aftab's intimate singing, though the way her career is going we best get used to hearing her in larger halls. Especially considering her *Love In Exile* project with Ismaily and Vijay Iyer, it seems that last year's Grammy is really just the beginning for this rare talent.

That was it for Saturday. I felt that pouring any more sound on top of this exquisite sound nectar would be like painting a moustache on the Mona Lisa.

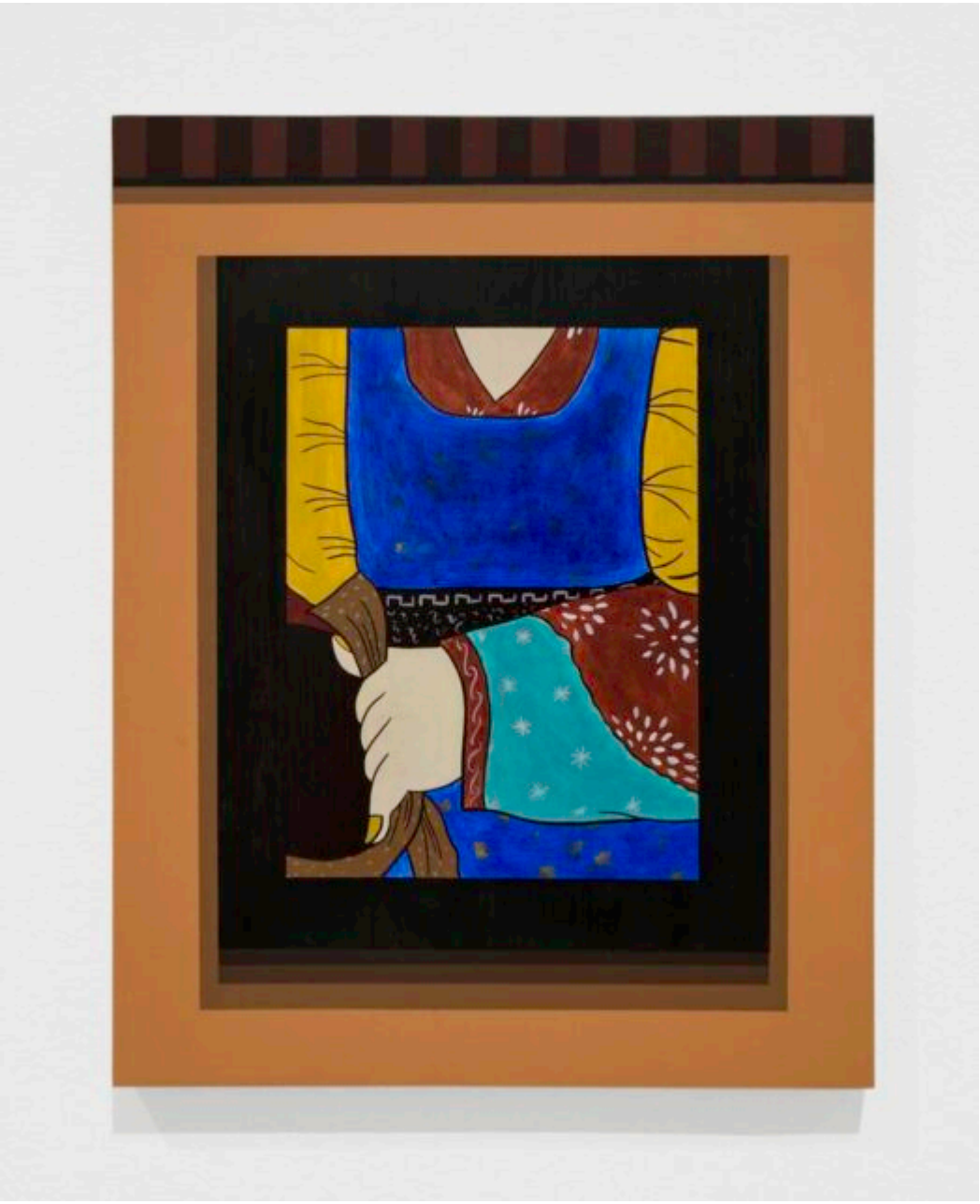
Ears Embigger: Day 2

Beginning Friday I abandoned the idea of posting every day. It was all too much. So here we go on catch up.

We took time to visit the Tennessee Triennial at the Knoxville Museum of Art. While we were there we heard Kali Malone sound checking her *Living Torch* presentation. The atrium at the museum is a fantastic place for immersive listening; the acoustics are lively and deliver dramatically different frequency responses depending on where you are in the room. It sounded fantastic but sadly it was my only trek out to the museum. It's not really that far from the main venue cluster but somehow feels daunting when dashing from one show to the

next.

Of note among the art on exhibit were five paintings by painter Mary Laube. Born in South Korea and adopted to the United States, Laube visited her native country as an adult and began to explore her heritage. The results are gorgeous, deep images that bridge her Korean and American backgrounds and draw the viewer into the frame. An Assistant Professor at University of Tennessee Knoxville, Laube also co-founded the Warp Whistle Project with composer Paul Schuette. Their work is a blend of music/sound and Laube’s visual art. Here’s a photo from her website of one of the Triennial pieces. It makes me want to see more of her work.



Heartache at Dusk, acrylic and oil on panel, 2023

Back to the music, I began my Friday the same way I did Thursday, settling in at St. John's Cathedral for another dose of Yarn/Wire. This program was dedicated to the work of composer Annea Lockwood, who was in attendance for the show. It was also a big draw for several of the musicians in the festival, always a sign you're in the right place for something special. And it was.

Yarn/Wire pianist Laura Barger opened with "Ear Walking Woman," a ten-movement piece for solo prepared piano. The mix of standard and graphic notation gives the performer plenty of room for interpretation, and Barger was well up to the moment,

delivering a wide range of strange and beautiful sounds/noises. The full Yarn/Wire quartet ended the set with a piece Lockwood developed with them called “Into the Vanishing Point.” Inspired by reports of the world’s collapsing insect population, the piece evokes the sounds of natures without resort to explicit mimicry. As with all the Yarn/Wire performances I heard, the opportunity for deep listening is the point, and it is an invitation to be cherished.

In between those two pieces, Nate Wooley delivered what was perhaps the most transcendently sublime moment of the festival: “Becoming Air,” a solo trumpet piece he commissioned from Lockwood. I doubt there are any sounds left unturned in trumpet vocabulary after this. Standard tones; odd chirps and bleats; tones produced on the trumpet without a mouthpiece; tones produced on the mouthpiece alone, from either end; circular breathing segments; a segment with a microphone shoved deep into the instrument, run through a Fender guitar amp (Deluxe perhaps?) for clean amplification, distortion, and feedback. Between each segment, Wooley sat quietly in meditation, as if to “become air” himself. (This is someone who clearly maintains a personal meditation practice.) The piece ended with circular breathing that lasted for-ev-er while Wooley slowly rose to standing until the trumpet was pointed skyward, volume peaking, and then just as slowly returned to seated as the volume decreased into a whisper.

Nate Wooley, “Becoming Air” (back of composer’s head in the center)

I had to take a break, letting go my clever plans to catch two or three acts before the next essential. I opted for a cup of coffee and a sit on a bench in the sunshine to recapitulate and absorb Lockwood’s stunning musical universe. (Check out the album *Becoming Air/Into the Vanishing Point* here.)

Next up, a Mary Halvorson extravaganza, with performance of her *Amaryllis* and *Belladonna* albums by her sextet and the Mivos Quartet respectively. I ~~wrote~~ raved about these albums last year and the performances lived up to expectation. Halvorson’s playing has always been a delight; these albums

show her remarkable growth as a composer.

I had to duck out of *Belladonna* a tad early to be sure I got a seat for the highly-anticipated Aftab/Iyer/Ismaily trio at the Tennessee Theater. This is a group to be reckoned with, and Aftab continues to establish herself as one of the most gifted singers on the scene. The sound mix did them no favors – Aftab was giving the sound engineer explicit directions regarding EQ and reverb between songs to alleviate the muddiness – but nobody walked away disappointed. Vijay Iyer is setting standards these days, and it is easy to hear why Shahzad Ismaily is regarded so highly by his varied collaborators; his contributions are subtle and beautiful, always on point. And I'd love to get a translation of Aftab's Urdu lyrics.

As soon as the trio took a bow I dashed to the Bijou to catch the Tyshawn Sorey Trio with Bill Frisell and Joe Lovano. Music simply cannot be better than this. Though I often found myself confused about where they were within the form of any given piece, the trio had no such trouble; their ability to hold the form intact as they venture farther and farther from recognizable formal landmarks is staggering. And as with the Vijay Iyer Trio the evening previous, Sorey delivered another clinic in what jazz drumming is all about.

I gobbled an energy bar and took a few dip-in moments at Gyan Riley (St. John's) and Marc Ribot (The Standard). Both were terrific, but I had a destination in mind: Jackson Terminal for Irreversible Entanglements. When I heard their first album, I declared "This is the best Art Ensemble of Chicago album I've heard since 1985!" Live it gets even better. This is pure energy jazz, but it is by no means a random squawking fest. The sax, trumpet, bass, and drums are playing with clearly recognizable structures that morph one into the next. Anchored by drummer Tcheser Holmes and Luke Stewart (delivering the most Malachi-like bass since, well, Malachi himself), the group began and after about 55 minutes of non-stop intensity, completed their set to ecstatic applause.

The focal point of Irreversible Entanglements is poet/artist/activist Camae Ayewa, known more widely as Moor Mother. I'd been trying to catch her again ever since she appeared with the Art Ensemble at Big Ears 2019. It was worth the wait, but I'm damned if I'm waiting that long again. Moor Mother is one of the most electrifying and committed performers I've seen in any context; her energy and vigor makes Iggy look like a playful puppy. We picked up a book of her poetry because, well, because she is fkng awesome, that's why. Moor Mother appeared at least three other times at Big Ears, including a set with Lonnie Holley that everyone was raving about. I'll be making room in my schedule for more Moor Mother next time.

That was it for us – even though Makaya McCraven was down the street and the legend David Murray around the corner – but as a wise sage once said: A man has got to know his limitations.

Ears Embig: Day 1

It was a low key beginning to my festival, but no less wondrous for that. A short summary…

Began my festival with Yarn/Wire, a 2 piano/2 percussion quartet from NY that presented a program of works by Alvin Lucier, Andrew McIntosh, and Misato Mochizuki. It was glorious. I took only one photo all evening, the one up top. It's a lame attempt at catching the sunset refracted through the stained glass of St. John's Cathedral, but I looked up and realized that sound and light had merged into a perfect compliment. Yarn/Wire might not look like a "band" in the popular vein, but after 18 years these four musicians have established an uncanny group awareness. They work together like a Swiss watch.

The Lucier piece began with a single note of a vibraphone, repeated at long intervals. Then a member came out carrying a snare drum tuned to resonate to the vibes note. She wandered around the space as another member with a snare came walking in from the far side, followed by another from behind. The snares moved around the space for around ten minutes as the vibes began to bend the note slightly flat then back to pitch. It was ten minutes of immersive listening, a glorious launch to the Embiggening.

The McIntosh piece began with tubular bells and high pitch

piano clusters. Then things started going every which way: gongs and bells and cymbals for days, occasional thunder rumbles of low tone piano fist pounding. (Is the piano a percussion intrument? Fkng A right it is.) There was evident shape to it all, and there were several spots where one could imagine the piece had ended. Unfortunately, too many in the audience – primed to compete in the next-show sprint – took it as a cue to head for the exits.

The ensemble was focused and unperturbed, but this happened several times during the 30-minute piece; when the McIntosh ended there was a standing ovation and a mad rush, though the groups first notes of the Mochizuki convinced a few to sit back down. The ensemble could have managed expectations better but had decided on zero introductions. Still, there was a frigging drum set at the front of the stage that had not yet been used, and like Chekov's gun, the show is not over til the drum kit is fired.

And oh, how it was fired. Sae Hashimoto began with slightly off kilter slow roll, joined soon by Greenberg. Things wavered in and out of phase as it built towards a slamming crescendo, joined at last by pianists Laura Barger and Julia Den Boer on cymbal blasts until a sudden silence. The audience held this for a brief moment and erupted.

I scampered to the Frisell Trio/Knoxville Symphony show at the Civic Auditorium. There were moments, but I really wanted to like it more than I did. The Civic Center is one of the farthest-flung venues, so a little hard to get to, and it is a classic of the 70s era multi-purpose venue. Even still, the acoustics were far more enjoyable than I would have expected, and the Symphony is a fine sounding ensemble. But the marriage of symphony and improvising trio was neither feast nor fowl to my ears, so I set out on the next long walk. Plenty more Frisell throughout (see what I did there?) the weekend.

I made it to the Standard while the Bill Orcutt Guitar Quartet

was sound checking and heard about 15 minutes of them getting ready. The prospect of massive sonic assault and standing for another hour was too much for my lameoid self, so I booked it over to The Point (another new venue, and a tad far flung) to catch the beginning of My Brightest Diamond. Boy, am I glad I did.

(And yeah, I'm certain the Orcutt was massive and I'm crazy to miss, etc. That's Big Ears for ya.)

Shara Nova delivered an utterly engaging performance, a set of old and new MBD tunes and one from The Blue Hour. I love this woman's voice but I had never experienced her as an entertainer. Along with the music, her set balanced theater, prop comedy, standup comedy, dance, and crowd participation. She entered from the rear of the church wearing a Britney Spears mask and carrying a trunk filled with costume changes and various accessories. Then she delivered her 'Letter to Britney' from her opera *You Us We All* followed by a formal introduction to the evening's "karaoke" performance that invoked her grandfather, born about 30 miles southwest of here in Mt. Vernon, Tennessee. Bringing at all around, the closing number was her 'Letter to Beyonce', and I swear that no matter how many times I hear it, the typewriter clackety clack with the tartly sung "Yours" to end these letters will never stop being funny.

How good was it? Stanwyck, who is pretty hard to impress, leaned over about ten minutes in and said, "Oh my god, I looooove her" and declined any further concerts for the night. It was how she wanted her day to end, Stanwyck decreed. Nuff said.

I trekked back to St. John's for Kali Malones organ recital. It was standing room only, but I found a sliver of a pew for my skinny ass and settled in for enveloping shimmer. She was joined by another pair of hands (connected to a bady, natch) as we floated on looooong held chords. The lowest notes were

especially physical. Even where the pieces had obvious ending points, there was very little audience churn during the breaks.

Then a quick dash to the Bijou for Vijay Iyer Trio, and wow, what a good move. Tyshawn Sorey’s drum kit was a basic as it gets: snare, kick, hi hat, and ride cymbal. And he still got more color and shape and tone out of it than drummers buried in a mountain of gear. Bassist Linda May Han Oh is an unstoppable force and Iyer showed why he sits among the top of the current pianist crowd. Stunning conversation and flow, these three were scary how quickly and seamlessly they caught each others’ shifts and push/pull gestures. Group improvisation really does not get any better than this.

Solid hard sleep after that, the kind you get when the deepest part of your soul is fully fed.