Ears Embiggening: Just Stop Already!

If you've seen my three other Big Ears preview articles (one, two, three) you have probably figured out that I have scheduled myself for way more shows than a single pair of ears can manage. The basic physics of time and dimension aside, there is probably only so much music you can actually *hear* in a given span of time before your ears grow dull and everything begins to burble along like grown ups talking in a Peanuts cartoon. But why stop now?

This article is kind of a grab bag piece, an odds and ends wrap up. Not to imlpy that any of this music is somehow lesser than or anything, just that it did not fit under the neat little categories I whipped up of articles 1-2-3.

A biggie in my book is the appearance of electronic music pioneer Morton Subotnick, appearing Sunday at noon. You kids today with your synthesizers and samplers and stomp boxes…back in Morty's day, ya built your own damn noisemakers and ya liked it, I tells ya.

Seriously, Subotnick's earliest work predates the Moog synth, and his founding of the San Francisco Tape Music Center was a key historical event; Terry Riley and Pauline Oliveros made some of their earliest work there. Subotnick blazed a trail for Steve Reich and Eno and, for better or worse, literally every knob-twiddling noise artist of the past 60 years. Subotnick's own work is by turns soothing and jarring,

challenging and comforting. But this is the source code, people, and respect must be paid.

One of the obvious inheritor's of Subotnick's stream is Son Lux, a trio lately well-known for their soundtrack to *Everything Everywhere All at Once.* Son Lux is more compositionally formal than Subotnick, but the lineage is clear: the trio lixes their traditional instruments with electronics of all sorts to create living soundtracks. There will be a screening of *Everything* Friday at 10 a.m., followed by a conversation with Son Lux about scoring the movie. They appear in concert on Friday night and their guitarist, Rafiq Bhatia, has a solo set on Saturday evening.

(Speaking of films, there is a full-fledged film fest under the Big Ears banner all weekend long, as well as continuous screenings of films about Lonnie Holley at the UT Downtown gallery in conjunction with an exhibition of his art. You could spend the whole weekend there and be pretty damned happy about it.)

Concerts completely devoted to the works of composers Annea Lockwood, Eliane Radigue, Catherine Lamb, and Steve Reich are peppered across the schedule, and while this music is way outside my wheelhouse of purported expertise, everything I've listened to is fascinating and makes me want to hear it all. Among the performers in this series we find trumpeter Nate Wooley, new music ensemble Yarn/Wire, and three string quartets: Parker, Jack, and Mivos.

Kali Malone is a young American-Swedish composer who specializes in works for pipe organ. Her organ concert at St. John's Cathedral on Thursday night promises sonic transcendence, while her Saturday evening show will give another idea of the kinds of work Subotnick set in motion decades ago. She also has a program at the Knoxville Museum of Art on Saturday. *Living Torch*, performed twice, is an immersive electroacoustic piece that is perfect for the rich

acoustics of the museum’s atrium. Kind of essential, really.

Living Torch by Kali Malone

Another fest-within-a-fest is cooking in the singer/songwriter vein, with heavy hitters like Terry Allen, Andrew Bird, the Mountain Goats, Rickie Lee Jones. There’s a ton of bluegrass with folks like Bela Fleck and Sierra Hull. There’s an new music collective wandering around downtown on Friday performing a Robert Ashley opera, and plenty of electro dance pop, and a dose of wailing metal, and and and and I gotta stop and pack my suitcase now, but trust me…if you can’t find enough happening at Big Ears to fill your dance card you probably don’t like music very much, but even then you could go to the film fest, or just hang around Knoxville’s downtown square and watch people from around the world buzz around from one show to the next.

And then there is the free festival activity, with parades and films and concerts and whatever, I’m gonna stop now. If I have the time and psychic energy I’ll drop a dispatch or two during the festival and let you know what’s happening. Until then…

Go. Listen.

All That Jazz #2: Big Ears, Not Fig Ears

The allegedly weekly(ish) All That Jazz feature takes a gander at the jazz fest within the 2023 Big Ears Festival.

The Big Ears hullaballoo offers an almost preposterously wide range of musical styles, but you could just as easily spend the four festival days in your own hermetic jazz bubble. As long as your defininition of ‘jazz’ is a tad more flexible than, oh, Stanley Crouch or Albert Murray. So let’s go ahead and start with the stuff that makes the moldy figs cry.moldy fig: A 1940s modern jazz fan’s derogatory term for a fan of traditional jazz. It’s fun to note that many of those modern jazz fans became moldy figs themselves. (cf. Albert Murray and Stanley Crouch)

Let’s start with the John Zorn 70th birthday celebration, itself a sort of mini-fest within the Big Ears parentheses. You could park yourself at noon Saturday in the Tennessee Theater and stay put until the Sunday fest finale listening to all Zorn, all the time.

Zorn is hard to pigeonhole, though jazz is probably the prevelant component of his work. Zorn’s most apparent musical influence is probably Ornette Coleman – his alto sax style fits neatly into the current Ornette set in motion – but he is in no way an imitator. A committed improviser like Coleman, he has also gone deep into writing music that wanders far from the core of jazz vernacular (like Ornette’s symphonic and chamber compositions). He was one of the prime movers of the late-80s NYC ‘downtown’ scene that was as much rock as it was jazz. He writes for everything from solo piano to chamber trios to a capella vocal ensembles to large ensembles that eat genre boundaries for breakfast.

Last year, Zorn closed the festival with a 12-piece version of New Electric Masada that left everybody's jaw on the ground. (Imagine electric Miles as played by King Crimson with assist from the Ornette's Prime Time Band.) This year's capper is Zorn's famous *Cobra* composition, though composition falls short of describing the proceedings; Zorn refers to it as a "game piece." *Cobra* consists of a set of rules, printed on a deck of cards, that tell the musicians what to play. Zorn acts as the "prompter" – a variant on conducting/conduction – who directs the shape and pace of the piece by revealing the cards in whatever order he chooses. No two *Cobra* performances can possibly be the same and the possible instrumentation combinations are infinite.

Here's a New England Conservatory presentation of *Cobra* from 2014. The two guitarists, Wendy Eisenberg and Will Greene, will be part of the Big Ears performance.

Last year I caught 7 Zorn shows of every possible variety. You cannot go wrong here. To add to the allure, Zorn's music is almost impossible to come by via streaming, and he rarely ventures beyond NYC. Go. Listen.

Another fest-within-a-fest possibility centers around the International Anthem Record Company out of Chicago, which has emerged as one of my favorite labels over the past few years. Things kick off on Thursday night at 10.15 with the Rob Marurek Exploding Star Orchestra, whose new album, *Lightning Dreamers*, drops this Friday. At Big Ears, the Orchestra features keyboardists Craig Taborn and Angelica Sanchez, drummers Chad Taylor and Gerald Cleaver, cellist Tomeka Reid, guitarist Mary Halvorson, and words/samples from Damon Locks. I would go see any combination of these players, but Mazurek has created a framework that multiplies their gifts into something damn near otherwordly.

<a href="https://intlanthem.bandcamp.com/album/lightning-dreamers

”>Lightning Dreamers by Rob Mazurek – Exploding Star Orchestra

Friday evening brings two of International Anthem’s most visible projects: Irreversible Entanglements and Makaya McCraven’s *In These Times*. *ITT*, one of the most talked about jazz releases of 2022, is a deeply layered production that is equal parts swing, hip-hop beats, luxe 70s r&b, and acid jazz.

In These Times by Makaya McCraven

Irreversible Entanglements is one of my favorite current jazz groups. Fronted by the transcending starship known as Moor Mother, this band has picked up the vibe of late-70s Art Ensemble of Chicago – Great Black Music Ancient to the Future – and brought it slamming into the Soaring ’20s.

Who Sent You? by Irreversible Entanglements

Mazurek and Locks team up for *New Future City Radio* on Friday at noon. I have no idea what this duo set holds in store, but I plan to be there to find out. Harpist Brandee Younger delivers a solo set at St. John’s Cathedral Saturday evening, and force-of-nature tuba beast Theon Cross hits Sunday afternoon at Jackson Terminal. International Anthem, represent!

OK, you say, is there any *real* jazz on the docket? First off, shame on you, you moldy fig; go get your ears embiggened and unfiggened!

But yes, there’s plenty for “real jazz” fans of whatever purity. There are legends aplenty: Sun Ra Arkestra, Charles Lloyd, Andrew Cyrille, Reggie Workman, Bill Frisell, Joe Lovano, William Parker. Every one of these performers represents the deep and rich implications of whatever jazz was/is/will be. Every show is a guaranteed winner, but here are my picks.

- Sun Ra Arkestra: The past, present, and future all in one handy package, the Arkestra is led by Marshall Allen, damn near 98 years old and still going strong. His work over the past several years is focused on bringing as much of Sun Ra's unrecorded legacy to light as possible. Allen joined the Arkestra in 1958 and never left. See this band; I've done so nearly 30 times.
- Charles Lloyd Chapel Trio: At age 85, Lloyd is playing the best music of his historic career. His 60s quartet launched the careers of Jack DeJohnette, Keith Jarrett, Cecil McBee, and their live album *Forest Flower* remains one of the best-sellers in jazz history. Chapel Trio features Bill Frisell and bassist Thomas Morgan. Guaranteed to blow your mind.
- Joe Lovano Trio Tapestry: This trio features pianist Marilyn Crispell, one of my absolute favorites. Best known for her work with Anthony Braxton and often compared to Cecil Taylor, Crispell is also capable of delivering the most quietly devastating beauty a piano can produce. Highly recommended.
- Tyshawn Sorey Trio: Drummer/composer Sorey is establishing himself as a major force in the music. This trio is direct descendent of the great Paul Motian Trio, with Sorey assuming the Motian's throne; Frisell and Lovano played in the Motian Trio for decades and they have the kind of empathic connection that only comes with years if time listening and responding to one another.
- Vijay Iyer Trio: One of three Big Ears sets from Iyer, this one features his working trio of drummer Sorey and bassist Linda May Han Oh. If you don't know Iyer's music, change that malady immediately.
- James Brandon Lewis: Lewis is one of *the* up and coming players in the music. His 2021 album *Jesup Wagon* is a modern day classic that's firmly in the tradition. His latest, *Eye of I*, ventures farther afield. It's a collaboration with the Messthetics guitar/bass/drums

trio that calls to mind the Sonny Sharrock/Pharoah Saunders ravers and includes covers of both Donny Hathaway and Cecil Taylor. Maybe better to say it expands the field. This could be one of the secret miracles of this year's festival.

- Trio Imagination: Drummer Andrew Cyrille and bassist Reggie Workman played in a trio with Oliver Lake for decades. When Lake retired, they recruited pianist David Virelles. Between them, Cyrille and Workman have played with pretty much every important jazz musician of the past 60 years. The 30-year old Virelles brings youth and his Cuban heritage to bear against their formidable legacy and never comes up short.
- Ned Rothenberg's Crossing Quartet: Moldy figs, beware. Rothenberg represents the outer edges of the tradition. Joined by the superb pianist Sylvie Courvosier, guitarist Mary Halvorson, and drummer Tomas Fujiwara, this one sits high on my own gotta-see list, largely because Courvoisier is purely awesome.
- Wadada Leo Smith's Purple Kikuyu: I wrote at length about the legendary Wadada last year because he is one of the most important musicians in the jazz vein of the past 50 years. This quartet features pianist Erika Dohi, cellist Ashley Waters, and the magnificent Pheeroan ak Laff on drums.
- See also my piece on the many guitarists playing at Big Ears this year. Lotsa jazz, you betcha.
- Also too: The Bad Plus, Tarbaby with David Murray, Antonio Sanchez, and on and on. All eminently worthy, unlike myself who is a miserable worm for not covering everyone in the depth they deserve. Mea culpa.

Disclosure and Advice

Full Disclosure: This listing does not take into account schedule conflicts. There is simply no way to catch all this unless you've mastered cloning or time hopping or the like. It

hurts. Friday night and Saturday afternoon are especially painful just choosing among the jazz possibilities. Add in some of the Odds and Allsorts (coming soon) and the festival can become an exercise in tormenting option anxiety.

What to do? My advice is make your choice and commit to it. Don't do the "I'll catch ten minutes of X and run over to 15 minutes of Y before Z starts…" This way madness lies. Go to a show. Settle in. Plan on staying. If it doesn't grab you, move along to something else. But the scramble to catch *everyone* doesn't really add up.

Or maybe it does and I just suck at that sort of thing.

Go. Listen.

~~So~~ Too Much Guitar #4: The Embiggening

So Much Guitar is i2b's weekly(ish) coverage of the best of the gajillion tremendous guitarists out there. This week, we take a gander at the tsunami of string slingers invading Knoxville for the 2023 Big Ears Festival. I've been thinking a lot about Col. Bruce this past week and almost went with "Too Many Gittars" but I lost my nerve.

It is truly overwhelming to consider, and there is no way to

honorably cover everyone who deserves it, much less hold any hope of seeing even half of the shows on offer. But fools rush in, as they say.

The venerable Bill Frisell continues his reign Official Guitar Hero of Big Ears™, with another year of more than half-a-dozen appearances. He kicks off the first night with his trio alongside the Knoxville Symphony Orchestra. I'm inherently sceptical of jazz/classical mashups, but this one holds real promise. First, Frisell's songbook is filled with dozens of my favorites. Second, the KSO is an crackerjack ensemble. Finally, the arrangements are by the superb Michael Gibbs, who has known Frisell since his days in Boston as an occasional student at Berklee.

Bill's listed for 7 shows (so far), including four shows within John Zorn's two-day mini-fest at the Tennessee Theater; his latest quartet with Knoxville's own Gregory Tardy on sax; the Tyshawn Sorey Trio with Joe Lovano; and the Charles Lloyd Chapel Trio with bassist Thomas Morgan.

Lloyd is an absolute legend, 85 years old and truly better than ever. He and Frisell have collaborated in multiple settings since 2015, and their sense of connection is already something to behold. Check this reading of the Billy Strayhorn classic "Blood Count."

The Sorey Trio is a direct descendent of the great Paul Motian Trio, with Sorey assuming the drum throne; Frisell and Lovano played in the Motian Trio for decades and they have the kind of empathic connection that only comes with years if time listening and responding to one another.

Of the Zorn hits, a trio with guitarists Gyan Riley and Julian Lage on Saturday at noon is my guitar pick (sorry) of the fest. Zorn wrote a suite of guitar trio pieces inspired by Francis of Assisi and St. Teresa of Avila. This is the first of ten listed performances curated and directed by Zorn. (The

fest is already teasing at least one “surprise” set in this series.) Zorn Sunday kicks off with the Gnostic Trio, with Frisell, harpist Carol Emmanuel, and longtime Frisell drummer Kenny Wolleson on vibes. Both of these trio shows are must-attend for me. Here’s a full performance of the Gnostic Trio. Pure shimmer.

Next on my gotta-see list is the incomparable Mary Halvorson. She presents back-to-back shows at the Bijou Theater on Saturday afternoon to showcase her twin albums released last year (on the same day) for Nonesuch records: *Amaryllis* and *Belladonna*. (I reviewed them here.) These albums represent Halvorson’s finest compositional effort to date. *Belladonna* features Halvorson with the Mivos Quartet (who will also present Steve Reich’s string quartets elsewhere at the fest), while *Amaryllis* showcases her sextet, with occasional assist from Mivos. Here’s a sample of what happens when both ensembles take flight.

Amaryllis by Mary Halvorson

Halvorson is also slated for three Zorn performances, including the festival capping *Cobra* hullabaloo, alongside guitarists Will Greene and Wendy Eisenberg. Last year’s Zorn finale near about slayed everyone in attendance. Bet yer bottom I’ll be there for this 12-piece wailer.

Speaking of Wendy Eisenberg, they are down for a solo set at Boyd’s Jig & Reel. There is literally no way to predict what their set will sound like; Eisenberg covers the spectrum. But I am extra curious about this, largely because Eisenberg is part of one of my favorite projects of 2022.

I wrote about Bill Orcutt’s *Music for Four Guitars* when it landed. I was knocked out then and still love this one beyond all sense and reason. As I wrote then, “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." Guitarist Shane Parish transcribed the whole thing, which Orcutt had multi-tracked in his home studio. Augmented by Parish, Eisenberg, and the interstellar Ava Mendoza, we now get a chance to hear this live, with all members playing Orcutt's distinctive 4-string tuning configuration. Count this one among the shows I would crawl across broken glass to hear.

The players in the Orcutt gang are delivering big across the weekend. There's Eisenberg's presence, and Parish (I profiled him for Salvation South last year) has a solo set at Boyd's on Friday. Orcutt teams up with drummer Chris Corsano for some paint- and face-peeling improv skronk Saturday afternoon at Jackson Terminal. Their 2021 album *Made Out of Sound* is a masterwork in the genre.

Orcutt co-conspirator Ava Mendoza appears twice more, once in a multimedia collaboration with video artist Sue-C. This promises to be one of those events where you have no idea what to expect and then walk away wondering what the actual hell you just experienced, a classic Big Eargasm. But the essential Ava deal for me is William Parker's Mayan Space Station, a full-metal power trio featuring bassist Parker, drummer Gerald Cleaver, and Mendoza in full-throated Hendrixian howl. Their 2021 album remains in my regular listening rotation two years on.

Mayan Space Station by William Parker

Oh but wait, there's ~~so~~ too much more, and we're running a tad long as it is. Still a few more guitarists I need to acknowledge.

I'd be remiss to leave out the superb David Hidalgo of the band Los Lobos. The band is celebrating 50 years together and performs twice: on opening night at the Tennessee Theater and

again at a free outdoor street party at the Historic Southern Railway Station. Hidalgo is hands down one of the greatest rock'n'roll guitarists the world has ever known and Los Lobos belongs in any serious consideration about what rock music has been, is, and will be. That's it. That's the review. Miss him and miss one of our most criminally underappreciated legends.

The uncategorizable Marc Ribot is on hand with his Los Cubanos Potizos, his format-bending organ trio The Jazz Bins, and for one of Zorn's three Bagatelles performances. If you love the inexhaustible range of possibilities the guitar represents – Ribot is your guy.

I wrote last time about Sona Jobarteh, a Gambian *kora* genius with killer guitar chops to spare. Let's go ahead and call the *kora* an honorary guitar so we can mention the Malian superstar Bassekou Kouyate. Kouyate – himself descendent of a long line of *griots* – plays the *ngoni*, a West African antecedent of a cigar-box guitar made from a gourd and stretch animal skin. Kouyate tastefully uses amplification and effects with the *ngoni*, a modernizing strategy that never crosses the line into gimmickry. His group, Ngoni Ba, features several other *ngoni* players with his wife, Amy Sacko, the primary vocalist. I've seen this band several times, and they will knock you sideways, guaranteed.

Back to guitars but hanging onto the West African groove, the band Etran De L'Air from Niger is a bubbling stew of blues and slinky rhythms beneath three interweaving guitars that call to mind the best of King Sunny Ade and Mdou Moctar. If you don't dance to this music, you may already be dead.

Look, it's getting late, and I barely mentioned Julian Lage (with his trio in support of singer Margaret Glaspy) and Gyan Riley (solo set at St. John's Cathedral Friday evening, and you'd be a fool to skip it), much less the solo appearance by Sonic Youth founder Lee Ranaldo. And then there's all the bluegrass and country stylists, and I really wonder if Jeff

Parker is hitting with Makaya McCraven, because if so I've got another gotta-see on my list. I figure I'm leaving out someone essential that will make me wake up at 3 a.m. shouthing "D'oh!" and then not being able to sleep because I'm such a schmuck. Mea culpa.

And holy cow, Jake Xerxes Fussell (profiled here in Salvation South last year) has a four-night run in the prime time slot at Boyd's Jig & Reel. Fussell is an excavator of old music that he brings into the present moment with a bourbon-honeyed voice and the smoothest finger-picking this side of James Taylor. This Tiny Desk Concert opens with "River St. John," the most agreeable earworm I've ever met.Seriously, whenever I get an unwelcome earworm like Don't Stop Believin' stuck in my brain, I sing this one to myself and it's Journey be gone!

I can't stop now, not without a nod to the historically decisive monument James "Blood" Ulmer. Born in 1940 in St, Matthews, South Carolina, Ulmer came up on the jazz and r&b circuit in the 60s, playing with folks like Paul Bley, Rahied Ali, Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers, Joe Henderson, and Larry Young. But it was his association with Ornette Coleman that transformed Ulmer into an essential component of jazz and guitar legend. He became one of the movers behind what became known as the No Wave movement and is one of the most singular voices in the history of the plank-and-wires machine. Living history, y'all.

Here's one of my Ulmer favorites, a 1980 track featuring Oliver Lake and David Murray on saxes and Olu Dara on trumpet. Back in my early-80s DJ careerThat's DJ on the radio, kids. Ask your parents. I played this cut on almost every shift I pulled.

Go. Listen.

The First Instrument #1: Voices Embiggened

The first in a series that will alternate irregularly with ‘So Much Guitar’ and ‘All That Jazz,” a place to talk about the array of beautiful voices. We are awash in a creative tsunami. Life is good.

Today, a look at some of the sirens impending at the 2023 Big Ears Festival.

First off, deepest regrets for i2b falling silent these past months. Between my work for Salvation South and a seemingly endless parade of deaths and illnesses among family and friends, I’ve had to let something slide. Sadly, it was this. But hey, back in the saddle what what!

As always, I am (inordinately, perhaps) excited about the annual Big Ears hoolie in Knoxville next weekend. The schedule is significantly expanded, with a few venues added – 17 in all this time – to spread the crowd out a bit. On the one hand, the expanded schedule creates even more opportunities for option anxiety, with several clusters of seriously essential performers in overlapping time slots. Tragically difficult decisions loom. How I suffer. On the other hand, the last festival found the queues for some of the more popular acts a bit overwhelming; several pals groaned about getting shut out

of some shows. So the embiggening of Big Ears this season may actually serve to relieve some of the crowd grumbles that emerged last year.

As always, the lineup is staggeringly cool. Today, I want to focus on the singers. Overall, the fest is a global vocal feast that covers the gamut of styles. Here are my highlighted picks. If you can't be there, there are a bunch of musical rabbit holes you can dive into instead.

First up, my absolute pick of the entire festival: The collaborative trio of vocalist Arooj Aftab, pianist Vijay Iyer, and bassist Shahzad Ismaily.

Their first album together, *Love in Exile*, released today. Aftab, raised in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, moved to the U.S. in 2005 to study at Berklee College of Music. She flew under the radar for a while until her 2021 release *Vulture Prince* – my pick for Album of the Year 2021 – made her the first Pakistani artist to perform at and win a Grammy award. Her set at last year's fest – part of a world tour that included an improbable and triumphant appearance at the Coachella free-for-all that made news in her native Pakistan – was all the buzz before and after her set.

Aftab sang every song but one on *Vulture Prince* in the Urdu language. On *Love in Exile*, it's all Urdu. But that's not nearly the most distinctive aspect of the new album; *Exile* is a spontaneously composed 70+ minute set that sounds as though the group had meticulously arranged the pieces ahead of time. The sensitivity and deep listening on display here is rare and remarkable in our hyperagitated society. Must. Hear. This.

I'll probably just go ahead and close the Album of the Year competition now.

Another performer at the top of my chart: the luminous genre-straddler Shara Nova, a classically trained, three-octave singer/composer who also works the pop singer-songwriter side of the street. I first heard Shara last year at the Long Play Festival and I was immediately hooked. She appears on opening night in her My Brightest Diamond persona and then again on closing night with the Knoxville Symphony performing the transcendent *My Blue Hour*, my pick for Album of the Year in 2022. Based on the poetry of Carolyn Forché, it was composed by a quintet of five superb women composers: Nova, Caroline Shaw, Angélica Negrón, Sarah Kirkland Snider, Rachel Grimes.

The Blue Hour by Rachel Grimes, Angélica Negrón, Shara Nova, Caroline Shaw, Sarah Kirkland Snider, A Far Cry

We'll have a deep dive on Shara's career and her Big Ears experience at Salvation South in late April.

Three-time Grammy winner Cecile McLorin Salvant is widely considered the preeminent jazz vocalist of our time, but I think that sells her short. Her work certainly has a firm foothold in the jazz realm, but Salvant is in a fact a subtly subversive genre buster. Her repertoire ranges from the Great American Songbook to Kurt Weill to Kate Bush.

Ghost Song by Cecile McLorin Salvant

Her latest album (release today) is a multi-lingual telling of the Euro-folklore myth of Mélusine featuring five original

tunes alongside nine interpretations of songs dating as far back as the 12th century.

Here's a tune from 12th century France, translated into Haitian Creole by Salvant's father, Alix.

Mélusine by Cecile McLorin Salvant

Probably better to call her a *chanteuse* in recognition of her stylistic range and Haitian and French parentage. Expect a long line for this show.

Allison Russell, born in Montreal but by now firmly and truly a Nashvillian, opens the festival on Thursday at the Bijou. Once known primarily as a member of Rhiannon Giddens' Our Native Daughters project, Russell is emerging as one of the skyrocket stars of whatever people are calling Americana these days. She recently made waves as the organizer of a star-drenched "Love Rising" protest/benefit concert in response the the Tennessee legislature's recent legislative targetings of the LGBTQIA+ community. Russell is certain to, um, mention this issue during her appearance at Big Ears, but with all her activism and address of serious social concerns, she remains committed to inspiring us all to be, well, this. Planning a big piece on Russell for Salvation South for later this year.

Outside Child by Allison Russell

The rest of the lineup is too rich to detail here, but there's one more that I want to highlight. File this one under the "sleeper" category.

Tarta Relena is a "folk duo" from Catalan, but once again genre labels are insufficient to capture what's going on with these two. They sing in a smattering of Mediterranean languages – including Latin – and draw on sources as varied as Catholic prayers, Sephardic love songs, flamenco, and electronic dance music.

Here’s their take on the “Stabat Mater,” a 13th century hymn to the Virgin Mary. Reckon I’d start going to church again if this kind of thing were on offer.

Fiat Lux by Tarta Relena

I am not really sure what to expect aside from their near-miraculous harmonies but I’m pretty sure this is going to be one of those patented “holee fukk, did you catch…” Big Ears moments.

There are at least another half-dozen women I don’t want to miss but probably will. If you are looking for more rabbit holes, here ya go.

Sona Jobarteh – Born to a long line of Gambian griot masters, Jobarteh is the first woman to become a recognized master of the kora, a 21-string harp/lute ancient to West Africa. She also plays piano, guitar, and cello.

Ibeyi – Parisian-born twin sisters who sing in English, French, Spanish, and Yoruba, their music is a smart blend of traditional styles and contemporary styles. They pull off the kind of two bodies/one voice harmonies that it seems only siblings can manage. Joyful and rhythmically irresistible.

Maeve Gilchrist – A master of the Celtic harp and a member of Arooj Aftab’s band, Gilchrist laid me out last year with her originals and covers of folks like Richard Thompson. Go for the Scottish lilt alone.

Apologies to whoever I missed. Mea culpa.

Go. Listen.