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….

Ears Embiggened: 50 Years of ECM

*(The first in a series of preview posts as we count down to the
2019 Big Ears Festival in Knoxville, TN.)*

Back in the old days – way before the internet machine made hearing just about any recorded piece of music in the world as easy as finding a homemade porno of some celebrity and/or politician – finding out about music beyond the typical commercial channels took some real work. Much of this involved poring over publications of varying literacy levels to find out who was playing with who, where, and how often.<fn>God bless the *Village Voice*.</fn> You had to spend time dialing in college and alternative radio stations (no internet radio! You had to be within hailing range.) and hoping against reason that the stoned DJ <fn>I resemble that remark.</fn> might remember to announce the name of the track you were dying to identify. Often, you would listen to six or eight more songs in a row, only to have the hapless jock (mea culpa) announce

only the last two because, well, he forgot, man.

You had to haunt the record stores. There used to be mammoth stores – stores like Peaches and Turtles and Virgin – aisle after aisle of record bins sorted by genre, carefully filed in alphabetical order. This was for the new, sealed releases. Very expensive, at least 5 or 6 bucks a record.

Then there were the used record stores, meccas for music geeks where you could stand for hours flipping through the stacks hoping to find a gem that you could make off with for two clams, three if it was a double disc set. You could drop 20 bucks on a pile of records just on whim. Maybe you saw a name you recognized, or the album cover was cool. Whatever. If you liked it, you win. If you didn't, you could bring it back the next week and trade it in for a dollar credit. A buck for a listen or two seemed like a deal.

After a while, you spent lots of time with the album covers, checking out the liner notes and musician credits. Patterns emerge. You start to recognize more names, and not just the players. Engineers and producers start turning up again and again – Rudy van Gelder, Bob Thiele, Teo Macero. You start to keep an eye peeled.

You learned to recognize the record labels. You started to realize that any Blue Note album was worth the 2 bucks. Same for anything on Impulse. Specialty labels like ESP Disk were always worth a tumble, even though you might end up with a squabbling wall of artifactual noise that all but obliterated whatever the music was trying to be.<fn>Many Sun Ra albums, especially on his El Saturn label, were like this, but you learned to buy them anyway because you just never knew what you might find.</fn>

And then there was ECM. Pretty standard rule of thumb: If you saw an ECM in the cutout bin, you bought it. If not for you, then for one of your pals. Don't recognize the Scandinavian

cascade of consonants and diacriticals? Don't worry, just buy it. If it had Manfred Eicher's seal of approval, it was worth the candle.

Codona: A typically lovely ECM cover design.

By the time I got serious(ly addicted) about vinyl collection and music that could be safely characterized as out-of-the-mainstream, ECM was a ten year old label with a solid reputation for attention to detail in curation, design, packaging, and recording quality. The covers were thick paper and beautifully printed, the liner sleeves a refined, no friction material, never rough paper. No cheap, junked vinyl here; the discs were heavy and thick, an obvious cut above the major labels pressings on horse chips. They had to be, you see: the ECM sound would not survive the surface noise of standard-issue vinyl.

What about that sound quality? The first few years of releases had varying sonic personalities, but by the mid-70s the characteristic ECM Sound was firmly established, notable for its cultivation of audible space and silence. Even on recordings that were somewhat wall of sound-ish (e.g., Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians*) Eicher's close attention to microphone selection and placement provided clearly defined separation of instruments in the mix. Add to that a well-

articulated stereo image and a layering of reverb that served to build a concert hall in your living room. And no matter who was playing, it was the same concert hall every time.

In a 1999 interview with Home Studio Magazine, Eicher explained that he

> *…listened to a lot of jazz records, mainly Impulse! Or ESP releases; I found the music very interesting, but I didn't like the way it was produced, mainly because I felt something was lacking, a part of the message had disappeared. My main concern, when I founded ECM, was to respect every aspect of the music. That meant be able to hear every nuance of the instrument, every colour, and respect the dynamics of sound, as given by the musician. This was quite a different way of recording jazz, and public was sensible to it."*

Some of this attention to detail no doubt grew from his experience at the classical Deutsche Grammophon label, long admired for its close attention to audio excellence. <fn>DG is another label, like ECM, that has somehow managed to maintain fierce fidelity to its guiding principles and pursuit of quality, still going strong 120 years after its founding. Maximum Respect!</fn> But there is a marked difference between the ECM and DG sound signature. Eicher was drawn to the atmospherics of reverb – both natural and simulated – where DG cultivated a drier studio sound. One is not necessarily better than the other. Vive la difference! But one thing is certain: You could identify an ECM project within a few seconds of listening.

These days, that ECM aesthetic is more widespread, signal of the influence ECM has had on the way we record and listen to music in the wake of their example. (For better or worse, the whole "New Age" genre pretty much owes its existence to ECM and Eno's Ambient Music releases.)

The sound – the company motto calls it "the Most Beautiful

Sound Next to Silence” – took some critical shots from those who found it icy, cold, antiseptic. Because Eicher, and many of his favorite artists, were from Scandinavia, the label was dubbed “fjord music” and “the Great Northern Sound”. As with too many critical shorthands, the jibes are better as provocative copy than accurate description.

Still, the sound was an ECM signature, and on some releases (like Eberhard Weber’s 1979 *Fluid Rustle*, which happens to be the ECM debut of Bill Frisell), the sound itself is often more notable than the performance. Descriptions of ECM as the “beautiful music” label emerged, and not in a kind context. To be sure, there were more than a few releases that were just perfect for those 3 a.m. oh-god-I-just-can’t-come-down episodes, times when an ECM record provided just the right amount of sonic-envelopment and gentle massage. This aesthetic would find broader – and less satisfying – expression with the emergence of so-called New Age music from labels like Windham Hill in the 80s.

But the perception is at odds with the reality. Close listening to something like *Fluid Rustle* offers satisfying elements of compositional innovation, and the performances are superbly delivered. I won't likely spin this one often, but there is more there, there, than meets the ear. And on balance, the ECM catalog is studded with recordings that are definitional in their realm, with ambitious releases from the likes of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Dave Holland, Meredith Monk, Steve Reich, Arvo Part, &c. that more than make up for those releases that one might be tempted to dismiss as sonic wallpaper. More than a few people have told me in no uncertain terms that Reich and Part are really just fancy-pants Muzak. For myself, I had long considered Keith Jarrett's *Sun Bear*

Concerts, a ten-album set of solo improvisation recorded live in Japan in 1978, little better than background hum. Yet here I am, about 3 hours into the box's roughly 7 hours of music, and I find myself in a serious re-evaluation of my opinion of Jarrett overall and this recording in particular. YMMV.

With the Big Ears Festival's celebration of ECM's 50th anniversary less than a month away, I find myself immersed in the ECM catalog, revisiting so much music that has fallen out of my regular listening rotation. Most of the label's 1500 or so releases are available via your favorite streaming service. <fn>This is ECM authorized streaming, so you can listen guilt-free, though you should buy some of the recordings anyway. Streaming fees are not enough to keep them going for 50 years more.</fn> This is some deep nostalgia for me, a traipse through the soundscapes that helped establish my overall aesthetic philosophy about what music – and art in general – can accomplish in a world in need of healing action.

How I think about music, how I respond to certain creative gestures and techniques, owes much to the ECM ethos. (Especially to my favorite of their roster of artists, the Art Ensemble of Chicago.) My interest in music that comes from other realms and cultures, music that defies easy categorization, or music that can appear harshly repellent or deceptively beautiful at first listen but that reveals more and more depth with every listen. Music that asks us to open our ears to the unfamiliar, to the possibly difficult and challenging. This aesthetic informs my engagement with pretty much all creative work, both my own and from other artists.

If you get right down to it – and apologies for presuming to speak for the Big Ears director – I expect that this is similar to the formation of Ashley Capps' aesthetic, too. We came of age around the same time and around a lot of the same music. (AC and I met at the Bijou Theater in Knoxville in 1980 at his presentation of the Art Ensemble, one of his first shows.) We both were college radio geeks, the kinds of people

who would spend hours flipping through the cutout bins in search of some holy grail recording of someone only we knew about.

And that is likely why Big Ears resonates so strongly for me. When I look at the lineup, it is as though I had just sat down and made a list of the artists I really want to hear and see. It rings the bells that Manfred Eicher started pealing in my head 40 years ago, bells that have shaped much of my life since.

ECM was not the first label to establish such a distinct personality, nor the last. Labels like India Navigation, Soul Note, Black Saint, hatHut, and dozens more have since created powerful catalogs of work in the jazz realm, and Nonesuch is prominent in its delivery of important creative music after its humble origin as a discount bin classical label in 1964. But not many labels have the longevity of an ECM: Fifty years on, Eicher's vision remains intact (albeit expanded to embrace more classical music since c. 1985) and the company's business model presumably solid. Hell, 50 years in the recording industry is about three lifetimes. Certainly such a thing is impossible.

And yet, they persisted. Happy birthday, ECM, and thanks for everything.

(Credit to the Home Studio Magazine interview with Eicher and Tyran Grillo's superb website, a heroic labor of love from a guy who just wanted to write a thoughtful review of every album ECM ever released. And immense thanks to the Big Ears Festival
for throwing ECM a big ass birthday hoolie this year.)

Ears Embiggening: A Roscoe Mitchell Preview

The first in a series of preview posts for Big Ears 2018. Share this widely if you please.

Last year, somebody that looks like me called Big Ears “the best festival pound-for-pound in the United States”. It was a lush feast, damn near too much for any human to absorb in a four-day stretch.<fn>In fact, it was well more than too much for one set of ears.</fn> I caught 27 full shows in 4 days, plus another three I sampled that were not for me. By the end of it, my knee was swollen, my feet were aching. My ears were full; I drove home in seven hours of road hum silence, and did not intentionally listen to music for at least 4 days beyond that. I was done.

It was heaven. I could not imagine anything better.

And now comes the 2018 version which is, probably, better. As always, there are big themes at play in the Big Ears lineup, and central characters from which a great deal of the action emanates. Perhaps it is a function of personal bias, but I’d call this the Year of Roscoe Mitchell.

I have been a fan of Roscoe Mitchell since a spring day in 1979 when I attended a concert by the Art Ensemble of Chicago in Athens, GA. Over the years, I found myself driving preposterous distances to see them perform.<fn>One such road trip, in 1980, found me in Knoxville at the Bijou Theater. The promoter that night, Ashley Capps, went on to found the Big

Ears Festival. Thus do a couple of circles come full.</fn> This year, Roscoe is performing several times, and a number of other musicians who owe him an artistic debt are appearing as well. I am building my schedule around these events, Roscoe as the hub and his comrades – Tyshawn Sorey, Craig Taborn, Even Parker, and so on – the spokes of the wheel.

Mitchell is recently enjoying something of a moment, with multiple album releases and large-scale commissions (he was wrapping up an orchestral recording when I spoke to him a few days before the Festival) and glowing notices in the NY Times and the Village Voice (among others). It might seem as if this is some sort of comeback, but the man has been composing, performing, and recording at a steady clip for a little more than 50 years now.

(His debut, *Sound*, came out in 1966 on the Delmark label, and featured future Art Ensemble partners Lester Bowie and Malachi Favors. It is a landmark in modern music. Listen.)

Last year, ECM released his *Bells for the South Side*, recorded live in 2015 at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art as part of an exhibition devoted to the 50th-anniversary of Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians.<fn>There is much to be said about this phenomenal organization. It was and is truly revolutionary.</fn> It is a miraculous recording that serves as both retrospective and clarion statement of current intent. It is a dizzying combination of composition and improvisation and at Big Ears, the same nine musicians will reassemble for the first time since that recording.

Mitchell's output far exceeds the capacity of any single label to release it all, but there seems no shortage of outlets for his work.<fn>This, too, is an indication of his commitment, as anyone who has ever tried to release an album, book, film, etc. can attest.</fn> His association with ECM records began

in the late 70s with the Art Ensemble. But he goes back even farther with the Nessa label.

Chuck Nessa worked for Delmark when *Sound* was released. Mitchell and Lester Bowie urged him to split away and form his own label. In 1967, the first Nessa release, *Numbers 1 & 2* under Lester's name, is another groundbreaker, and a clearer antecedent to the Art Ensemble with the addition of Joseph Jarman. In 2018, Nessa released *Ride the Wind* by Roscoe Mitchell and the Montreal – Toronto Art Orchestra. Mitchell plays on just one track here, a blistering sopranino sax solo on "They Rode for Them – Part 2". Click here folks. School's in.

(I love how, when he finished tearing the roof off, he steps back calmly and puts his hand in his pocket. So smooth.)

The rest of the album is an orchestral performance based on transcription of a Mitchell Trio performance from 2013. It is wondrous, and a fine example of the range of structures he is ready to deploy in an effort to keep his music from standing still.

The man will be 78 this year, yet the pace of his activity – not to mention the considerable level of fitness necessary for his performances – shows no indication of diminishing. Wherever he plays at Big Ears, I will be there, jaw hanging.

I have not always understood Mitchell's music, and to be honest, there have been times when I have been utterly befuddled and even put off. But I have never been sorry I listened to his work. Much like his fellow AACM pioneer Anthony Braxton, Roscoe's music so clearly demonstrates intelligence, passion, and commitment that – even when I can't figure out wtf is happening – my gut tells me to stop thinking and let the music do its work. Analysis can come later. Beyond that, it is utterly his own. He sounds like no one except Roscoe Mitchell. There are damn few artists in any

discipline who match that description.

In the moment, whether it is the monumental wash of sound he generates through his phenomenal technique<fn>There is no one more skilled in the art of circular breathing, for example.</fn> or through his deployment of *intensity structures* (a strategy for group improvisation that creates aural tsunami), or through his careful attention to space and silences, this is music that demands and rewards attentive listening. And it is important to keep in mind that many of the more chaotic segments may in fact be composed, while many of the seemingly arranged elements are in fact spontaneous compositions. Notions of freedom v. restriction and composition v. improvisation are ping pong balls scattered on crosswinds. Try to keep up. Or don't. It probably doesn't matter for the most part. If you think about it too much, the music has flown away from you.

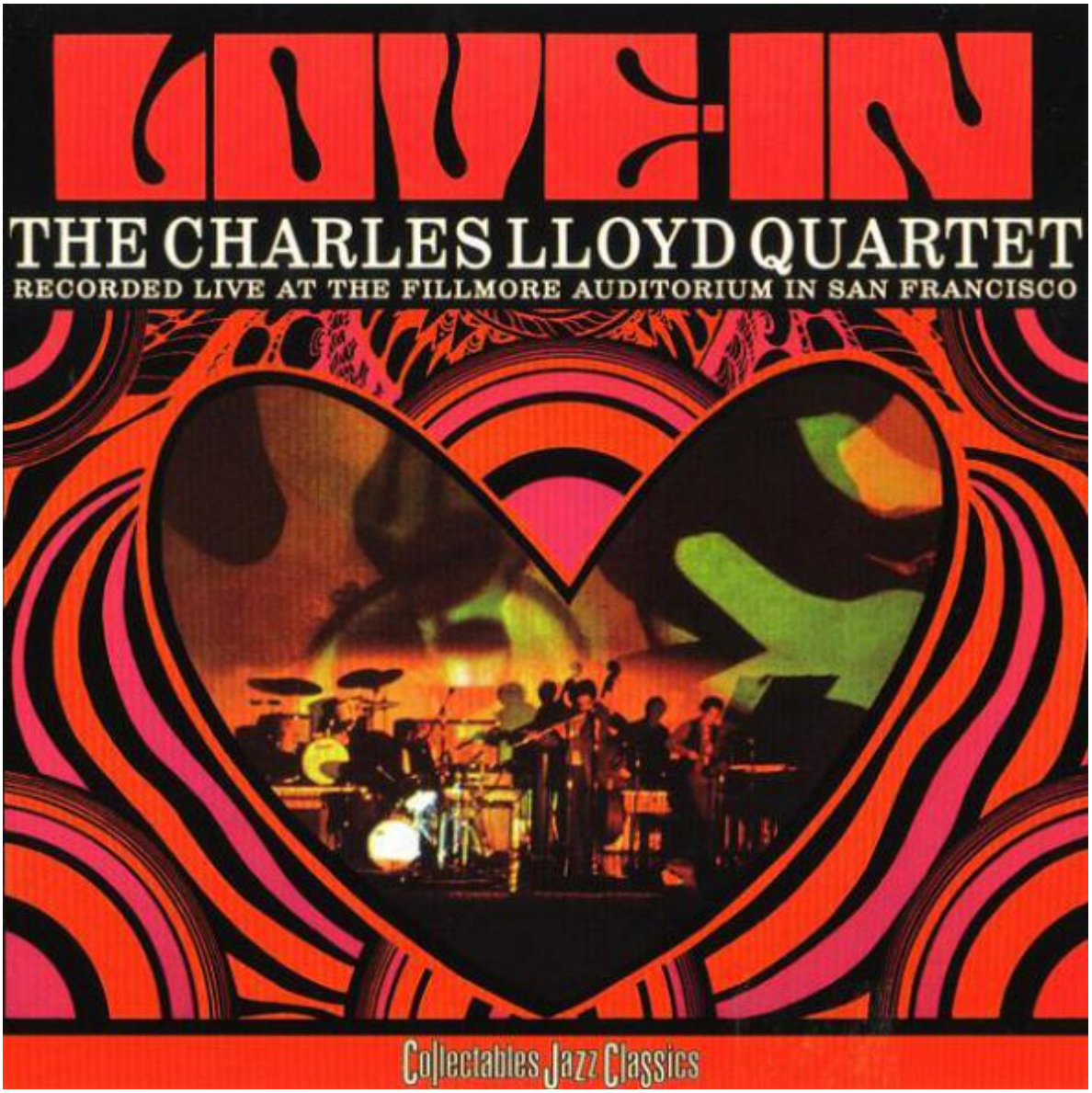
The guiding light of the 2017 festival was the late Pauline Oliveros, and really, she might as well just wear that honor forever. She once held the Darius Milhaud Chair in Composition at Mills College that Mitchell now fills. Their music is similar in that it rewards *deep listening* in a way that defies description. Try it.

My Favorite World #38

After an outpouring of reader demand, The Writer is back with My Favorite World, a (purportedly) once-weekly feature that highlights some things that make this my favorite world. I had stopped posting MFW after week 37 because it seemed to be not so popular. However, the application of true cash money attached to a request to resume is more than I can deny.

So here: a piece of Terrible Beauty to herald the arrival of Trump.

Charles Lloyd has been on the scene since the 50s. It would be ridiculous to list everybody he's worked with because it's pretty much everybody who counts. His first group as a leader gave big breaks to Keith Jarrett, Jack DeJohnette, and Cecil McBee.<fn>If any of those names is unfamiliar, get to work!</fn> The Quartet was the first jazz group to play the Fillmore, appearing alongside Hendrix, Cream, the Dead, Joplin, Airplane, &c. For many a tripped out hippie, it was the first jazz they ever heard.



What else? One of the first million-selling albums in jazz history. Toured everywhere, including the Far East and the Soviet bloc nations. Lloyd, born in Memphis with heritage derived from African, Cherokee, Mongolian, and Irish ancestors, was one of the first "world music" explorers. He was, as the kids have it, the shit.

He has a new group – Charles Lloyd and the Marvels – featuring steel guitarist Greg Leisz, drummer Eric Harland, bassist Reuben Rogers, and some kid named Bill Frisell on guitar. He has a new album on Blue Note, *I Long to See You.* It is purely beautiful.

Lloyd has never shied from political expression, so on

Inauguration Day<fn>Black Friday</fn>, he released to YouTube a version of Dylan's "Masters of War" by the Marvels with guest vocalist Lucinda Williams. The song is 50+ years old and has never felt dated.

He released this statement with the piece:

> *Nations have been throwing rocks at each other for 1000s of years. We go through spells of light and darkness. In my lifetime I have witnessed periods of peace, protest, and uprising, only to be repeated by peace, protest and more uprising. The fact that Bob Dylan's "Masters of War" was written in the early 1960s and not during the last decade, makes it timeless and timely. It breaks my heart to think that there are current generations of young people all over the world who are growing up without knowing of Peace in their lives. The words Dylan wrote are a laser beam on humanity. This line, in particular, has stuck with me for over 5 decades:*
>
> *"Let me ask you one question*
> *Is your money that good*
> *Will it buy you forgiveness*
> *Do you think that it could*
> *I think you will find*
> *When your death takes its toll*
> *All the money you made*
> *Will never buy back your soul"*
>
> *The world is a dog's curly tail – no matter how many times we straighten it out, it keeps curling back. As artists we aspire to console, uplift and inspire. To unite us through sound across boundaries and borders and dissolve lines of demarcation that separate. The beautiful thing is that as human beings, even under the most adverse conditions, we are capable of kindness, compassion and love. Vision and hope. All life is one. Who knows, maybe one day we'll succeed. We go forward.*

Lucinda. I do love me some Lucinda Williams. When that woman goes for rasp she can sing the chrome off a trailer hitch. Her delivery here is terrifying and borderline ugly, ugly in that beautiful way that calls up and confronts the horror and fear many of us are feeling in these rickety times. It’s a clarion, a beckoning. Hear it.

Now, go plunk down your filthy dollars and buy a copy of this. You won’t be sorry.

Hell, it’s even got Willie Nelson on one track, Norah Jones on another. Whaddya waiting for?

My Favorite World.