

Ears Embiggened: Big Ears Sensory Overload



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The Big Ears Festival in Knoxville is, for me, the singular music event of the year. Four days jam packed with more music than you can shake a stick at, and way more than you can hope to catch. It is a banquet that offers far more than you can possibly sample, even if your appetite is yoooge. The option anxiety I face as I try to wrangle the Big Ears schedule into a digestible menu is fierce. I know I will miss something that I will regret. And yet...

And yet that doesn't even begin to address the film portion of the programming, a subset to the music that is arguably as strong as most film festivals that stand on their own ground. And then there are the literary events, and the panel discussions, and the Sunday morning brunch and the beer exchange and the various and sundry places to get your coffee/food/beer/wine thing happening. And a day long bluegrass hoedown in Market Square and and and.

Promoter Ashley Capps tells us this embarrassment of riches is not as sadistically perverse as it might appear. While acknowledging that many people try to chart an expeditious dash between conflicting events, his suggestion is to make a choice and stick with it. You can worry about what you are

missing or you can immerse in the where-you-are. Be here now, as the old Ram Dass book suggests.

Look at it as something of an exercise in Zen acceptance: you are either going to hear Milford Graves – a jazz legend who, among other notable achievements, played with Albert Ayler at John Coltrane's funeral – or you can catch the vitally important Anna & Elizabeth and their excavations of Appalachian culture. Even for an inveterate jazzbo like Your Narrator, this is no easy choice. Graves is a living icon of the music; A&E are fantastic performers and serious historians. Where will I end up at 4.30 pm on Friday? I won't know until 4.15. I'll be sure to let you know as soon as I do.

These kinds of conflicts abound. Another big choice awaits on Saturday morning. Violinist Jenny Scheinman presents *Kannapolis: A Moving Portrait* from 12.30 – 1.30. It's a mixed media show, with old film footage and new/old music set to evoke the history of an area of North Carolina and Tennessee just before WWII. But at 1 p.m., Rhiannon Giddens – founder of the Carolina Chocolate Drops, music historian, and Guggenheim fellow – delivers a keynote address. This is a woman with something to say about, say, the musical history of North Carolina and Tennessee.

A week ago, these events did not overlap on the schedule, but at Big Ears, scheduled events can change. Add to that the "secret events", appearance that you only find out about hours or minutes before they take place. One of your favorites, popping up in a one-of-a-kind collaboration. The hell? You thought you knew what you were doing. You have to adapt, think on your feet. Improvise. Make a choice and live with it.

This is tough for an OCD fellow like Your Narrator. My greatest fear is that I will die with the best book ever written sitting on my nightstand, unopened. That I will not get around to hearing all the music that needs to be heard, the movie that will change my insight, the simple turn of

phrase in a poem that will be the click in the lock that is really all I needed to understand, to just simply *underfuckingstand*, don't you get it?



Perhaps you can understand my dilemma. It's a funny thing, this dance between accepting a gift with gratitude or looking just behind the giver to see what you might grab if you just...If only...What about...

Now if I could only figure out what to do about the conflict between Craig Taborn and the Bang on a Can All-Stars.

Curse you, Capps!