

Ears Embiggened: So Much Guitar



(The fourth in a series of preview posts as we count down to the 2019 Big Ears Festival in Knoxville, TN. Part 1 here on the 50 year legacy of ECM Records. Part 2 here on 50 years of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future. Part 3 here on the magnificent Rhiannon Giddens and her Lucy Negro, Redux project.)

My first guitar lesson was the first week of September, 1969. The teacher was named Leo Goldberg, and at the time I figured he was about eleventy thousand years old. He got me started on my nylon string Gianninni guitar (which I still have in a closet) playing things like Skip to My Lou and Moon River. As a devoted fan of Grand Funk Railroad, I was frustrated, at best.

I may have stopped lessons, but my attraction to banging on wood and strings never stopped. To say that I have been a guitar geek for nearly 50 years is an understatement. And that's one reason this year's Big Ears has my fingertips tingling.

The level of guitar heroics on tap this year is astronomical. Just nuts. Where to begin? Even harder: where to stop. I am sure I will neglect someone's worthy favorite. Mea culpa, friends. I am ecstatically drowning here.

Randomly, let's start with (Sir) Richard Thompson. Aside from being, arguably, the best songwriter of the past 50 years not named Zimmerman, he is without question one of the most innovative guitar heroes of that span. Electric or acoustic, solo or with small or large ensemble, RT's playing is song supportive, tasteful, and utterly non-cliched (unless he is mocking cliches). He can peel the paint off of any wall, or turn and deliver the most heartbreaking passage you ever imagined.

For Big Ears, RT appears with the Knoxville Symphony Strings to present *Killed in Action*, a song cycle honoring the 100th anniversary of the World War I armistice. It is "based on letters, diaries, ad interviews, and in most cases, are verbatim extracts, with little attempt to make them rhyme or turn them into 'art'." Bijou Theatre, Sunday, 1.30 pm.

I've seen RT at least 25 times, probably more, and surely more than anyone except Sun Ra and the Grateful Dead. Every time he comes around, I think, "been there, done that," imagining that I don't need to see him again. Then I end up going anyway, only to get myself gobsmailed one more time by his mastery of composition, singing, playing, and funny-as-all-get-out crowd control.

This presentation has me deep intrigued. RT with strings. RT with deep historical archaeology. RT, period. As if that were not enough, he appears with Rhiannon Giddens and Rachel Grimes for a panel discussion about how they use archival materials to create new works of music. Saturday at Visit Knoxville, 3 pm.

Okay, so I've already died and gone to heaven to have yet another of my all-time fave musicians on the bill. Let's glance around and see who else might be...

There's Mary Halvorson, appearing with her Code Girl quintet, her essential trio, Thumbscrew, and Columbia Icefield,

alongside pedal steel whiz Susan Alcorn and trumpeter Nate Wooley. Halvorson has been defining chapter and book what guitar can mean in a post- bop/modernist/shred world. Her early work with Anthony Braxton displayed the kind of spiky harmonic disarray that plants her firmly in the *avant garde* (whatever the hell that is) and she continues to deliver some of the thorniest string beautynoise on the scene. But her evolving body of work highlights a keen sense of melodic regard alongside her more abstract explorations.

Her first solo album (*Meltframe*, 2015) finds her exploring standards by Duke Ellington, Oliver Nelson, Ornette Coleman, Roscoe Mitchell, and Carla Bley. Check out her recent duet album with Bill Frisell honoring the great Johnny Smith, or her *New American Songbook* collaborations with Ron Miles on cornet and drummer Greg Saunier of Deerhoof: this is someone with respect for tradition, but not the kind of hidebound devotion that can lead musicians into the trap of becoming museum pieces. Aside from helping to define what qualifies as a 'standard' in the ongoing conversation that is jazz, she is establishing herself as one of the most adventuresome and prolific creative musicians of our time.

Listen to this haunting solo delivery of Ellington's uber classic *Solitude*; it is not enslaved to the original, yet the shape of the composition never wavers. It is a model for how to treat a beloved piece of music with both reverence and a spirit of expansive exploration.

Speaking of Frisell, he is on hand for at least five performances: his duo with Thomas Morgan, his longtime trio of Kenny Wolleson and Tony Scherr accompanying the films of Bill Morrison. Just get your tickets now and quit arguing, his quartet with sublime singer Petra Haden, a pre-festival duet with saxophonist Greg Tardy, and – in one of the most intriguing bills of the festival – as part of *Absînt*, a collaboration with saxist Tim Berne, guitar wizard David Torn, and my favorite living New Orleans

saxophonist/composer/artist, Aurora Nealand. This is my pick for the hidden treasure of the festival. I've been listening to Nealand for a good dozen years, and she always knocks me out.

Bill Frisell is a quintessential pick to represent the ECM guitar tradition. From his first appearance on Everhard Weber's 1979 *Fluid Rustle*, through his wide ranging sideman work with the likes of Kenny Wheeler, Paul Motian, Arild Anderson, Paul Bley, Jan Garbarek, and on and on, through his earliest releases under his own name, Frisell was the perfect ECM guitarist: a range of tone and sound that makes his presence both transparent and unmistakable and an almost eerie ability to deliver exactly what each artist or composition needs – no more, no less. Along with Pat Metheny, Terje Rypdal, and the late John Abercrombie, Frisell embodied the ECM guitar ethos.

Frisell left ECM because he had more music in mind than the ECM release schedule could accommodate. But he came back to the Scandinavian fold with his *Small Town* duo with Morgan, and has since appeared with Wadada Leo Smith and Andrew Cyrille for *Lebroba*, one of the finest ECM releases in years and one of 2018's best releases in any genre.

Like many guitarists of varied skill and ambition, I have a specific "Bill Frisell changed my life" story that I will save for later. Suffice to say, if you've heard the guy, you know you need to see him whenever/wherever and with whoever. If you have not, get with the program.

But wait. We have another strong contender for ECM guitar icon: Ralph Towner. It makes perfect sense to have Towner on hand at a festival honoring the 50th anniversary of ECM Records. Best known for his work with the group Oregon, Towner is a master of texture, tone, and space. The opportunity to see him anywhere is a gift from above. The chance to hear him in a space as sonically rich as Knoxville's St. Johns

Episcopal Cathedral is a universal blessing. I just wish John Abercrombie were still with us to revisit this longtime favorite of mine.

Anyone who loves guitar knows of the mad genius of David Torn. Another picker long associated with ECM, Torn's experimentations range as far afield as any guitarist of the past 40 years. As at home with solo soundscapes that range from the ethereal to the epically noisy, Torn also knows how to play a head and improv over changes. He has worked with David Bowie, Tori Amos, Jeff Beck, Madonna, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Don Cherry, Tony Levin, and Bill Bruford (and a zillion more) and penned soundtracks for television and film. At Big Ears, he appears solo, with his trio Snakeoil, and with the *Absint* project. Given the way Big Ears throws popup show surprises, I'd bet on him appearing in other settings, too.

Rafiq Bhatia presents Breaking English, an electroacoustic trio enhanced by a multimedia swirl of sight and sound. He is a smoking good player who places his chops at the service of concept and composition; nothing is gratuitous. He cites his inspiration for Breaking English as "including but not limited to Jimi Hendrix concert videos, blaring prayer calls from Turkish mosques, East African archaeological sites, the death of Trayvon Martin and Flying Lotus sound collages." The Standard, Friday, 12.30 pm.

Who else? Chris Eldridge of the Punch Brothers will provide accompaniment to Fatty Arbuckle's 1917 silent film classic *Coney Island*. The Punch boys will also close out the festival Sunday evening as the capstone to the Big Ears investigation of the musics of Appalachia. This will surely be one of the most attended concerts in the festival. Mill & Mine, Sunday, 8.15 pm.

Shane Parish presents a solo set as part of the Pilot Light series (all free, all the time, and one hell of a lineup it is, too). Perhaps better known for his work with the electric

band Ahleuchatistas, Parish is building a reputation for his solo acoustic work that places him squarely in the tradition of John Fahey, willing to play material of just about any origin in a style that makes it unmistakably his own. Pilot Light, Sunday at 6 pm.

Derek Gripper is a South African classical guitarist who has unlocked the code for translating the style of traditional African instruments like the kora to six nylon strings. A player of infinite technique and feel, you can close your eyes and imagine a room full of griots. Sublime. Knoxville Museum of Art, Thursday, 7.30 pm.

On the pure energy and skronk front, the Messthetics brings the Fugazi rhythm section of Joe Lally and Brendan Canty together with guitarist Anthony Pirog. Pirog is something of a hidden treasure, making big waves in the DC scene but only recently gaining wider exposure. He owes more than a little bit to the Crimson vocabulary, and the trio itself strongly recalls the heyday of Fripp's League of Gentlemen. But this is not a tribute band; Messthetics deliver a signature sound that demands serious head thrashing. They play The Standard on Saturday at 6 and will team up with the great Lonnie Holley at Mill and Mine on Friday at 1 pm.

Guitarist Tashi Dorji, born in Bhutan, appears in duo with percussionist

Tyler Damon for spontaneous improvisations that range from delicate shimmers and star twinkles to full bore supernova explosions. Pilot Light, Friday, 10.30 pm.

But wait, there's more. But that's about enough for this post. Check the Big Ears schedule and let me know which one of your favorites I forgot to mention. I bet there are at least a dozen more twangers I wish I knew about. Help a buddy out!