

Forever Momentary Space



My final installment of my Big Ears coverage focuses on the musical ambassadorship of Damon Locks Black Monument Ensemble during their time in Knoxville. This is a super-condensed introduction to their music.

(Part 1 of the series [here](#). Part 2 [here](#). A little something extra for Part 2 [here](#).)

Black Monument has released two albums on the Chicago-based International Anthem label, 2019's *Where Future Unfolds* and the monumental *Now*. Recorded during summer 2020 – under the shadow of pandemic, social unrest, and an unutterably bizarre political climate – *Now* qualifies as an instant classic, right down to the chorus of cicadas that accompany the outro to the title track. (Due to Covid, the *Now* sessions were held in a garden behind the recording studio.)

Both albums are grounded in Locks' sound sampling which he described to me as analogous to the collages he creates in his visual arts practice. (He is represented by the Goldfinch Gallery.) But the overall sound is distinctly that of a group creating together, from the ultra-tight vocal harmonies to the roiling percussion of Dana Hall and Arif Smith, cornetist Ben Lamar Gay's refreshingly un-Wynton-esque sound, and the transplendent force of nature embodied by clarinetist Angel Bat Dawid (pictured above).



*Damon Locks Black Monument Ensemble at Big Ears Festival 2022
(Photo by Eli Johnson, courtesy of Big Ears)*

In a New York Times profile of Locks by Marcus J. Moore, drummer Fred Armisen explained, “That’s how much I believed in him.” Yeah, that Fred Armisen. The Portlandia guy.

Trenchmouth, which lasted 8 years, is where Locks began experimenting with sound collage as part of live performances, using snippets from movies, broadcasts, speeches, and whatever bits of noise he found useful. By the twenty-teens, he was working solo when he hit upon the idea of adding singers to his performances. Singers led to percussionists led to a towering Black Monument. The current membership of the group ranges from five to fifteen or more, depending on whether they include dancers or a children’s choir.

The result is something that transcends the narrow definition of “a concert.” It is more in line with the sensory overdrive extravaganzas of Sun Ra, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, or

George Clinton's P-Funk universe. Like those artists, the attention to detail in every element of the Black Monument presentation – from composition to sound quality to visual envelopment through theater, dance, and costuming – is acute, and it belies the band's mere four years together, with two and a half years under pandemic separation.

Armisen noted this quality in the Times profile. "Oh, this guy is just a genius. This is a brilliant person who cares about every millimeter of what something looks like and sounds like."

Aside from the obvious musical debt to Sun Ra, other recognizable influences range broadly across liberation jazz (like Max Roach's "Freedom Now Suite" and Archie Shepp's "Attica Blues") to soul-jazz (Eddie Gale's "Black Rhythm Happening") to the declamatory hip-hop of artists like Public Enemy and NWA.

The title track from *Now*, with its blend of samples, traditional drums, yearning clarinet, and lush vocal harmonies, is a terrific introduction to their self-described "intersection of gospel, jazz, activism & 808 breaks." Featuring Locks' visual art interspersed with footage of the garden recording session, it is that rare example of a video that does not feel incidental to the music.

Black Monument is not a band that lends itself to an easy pigeonhole. Their celebratory blend may be saddled with the 'jazz' tag, but the music ranges far wider than that fraught four-letter genre jail can encompass. The best I can do is borrow the Art Ensemble of Chicago's motto: Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future.

Go. Listen.