~~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.