

The Embiggening: Day 3



The i2b team of one continues their coverage of the Big Ears Festival in Knoxville, TN. Please share widely. And if you are feeling generous, click that DONATE button over the so we can bail out the photographer. Don't ask.

It's a safe bet that Day 3 of the 2018 Big Ears Festival reached the highest concentration of sheer ecstatic power we will witness this year, and perhaps in the history of the festival. As Day 2 had managed to slip over into the wee hours of Day 3, so too did Day 3 roll right into Day 4. As of this writing, Day 3 may even still be in process for the hardcore attendees of the 13 hour overnight Drone Flight, the world's coolest slumber party. But let's begin at the beginning.

Our day began with an hour or so chat with guitar icon Nels Cline. We talked mostly about Coltrane changed his life. Cline, aside from being one of the great creative guitarists around today<fn>I am told he belongs to a rock'n'roll combo, too. Something called Wilco.</fn>, is a walking encyclopedia of music history, and his passion for Coltrane is enormous.

Other topics included his gig with Jenny Scheinman ("that felt really great") and his frank assessment of his popup gig with Cup ("really terrible", due to TSA removing a critical cable for his wife's electronics rig, "but it was a great crowd"). He spoke of his love for the music of Ralph Towner and John Abercrombie. And we got geeky together over our enthusiasm for the music of the late Jimmy Giuffre. More on this in the future as we transcribe the interview. Suffice to say that we

were off to a great start for the day.

Wandered over to Jenny Scheinman's Appalachian ode, *Kannapolis: A Moving Portrait*. Commissioned by Duke University to create a soundtrack for recently discovered Depression era film footage of the region. Joined by Robbie Fulks and Robbie Gjersoe on a smattering of string instruments and vocals, this was traditionalist Scheinman. Her voice is pure and her fiddle playing strong.



Honestly, we thought we would dip into *Kannapolis* for a few minutes on our way to hear Rhiannon Giddens' keynote address, but the combination of the music and the imagery kept us in our seat for the duration. Aside from the generosity of spirit in both the music and the footage, the film's concentration on so many young people could not help but evoke the March for our Lives kids who were at that moment leading a movement in something like 800 cities. Kids playing catch and hopscotch,

riding bikes, preening for each other in mating ritual. Kids goofing off and making funny faces for the camera. It was just sweet, y'all. We won't falsely romanticize the era, or the place; this was the heart of Jim Crow segregation, and the Depression hit areas like the Kannapolis region especially hard. The contrast between watching kids being kids then versus watching kids today remind us that they are the mass shooting generation is stark and more than just a little sad. And it's a reminder that as awesome as Big Ears is, the real action in our world today was set in motion by a group of kids who are fed up with the shitshow we've handed them.

It was a damp cold day, suitable for a leisurely stroll to the next venue, thoughts of the Parkland kids filling our hearts. Good fortune smiled, and the perfect music for our mental and emotional state was waiting for us at the Knoxville Museum of Art. The Rushes Ensemble was formed to play one specific piece of music. Michael Gordon's *Rushes*, an hour-long piece for seven bassoons, found its perfect setting in the hands of this group in the atrium of this lovely and richly resonant museum. Against a backdrop of the city skyline – complete with Sundome looming – we were invited to move freely though the atrium during the performance to “experience the different overtones that can build up in different parts of the space”.

It began as a faint glimmer, layers of 8th and 16th notes in the upper register of the bassoon. Slowly, range expanded, and volume increased as the layers and echoes began to commingle to create ghost images of instruments that were not there. Voices, organs, chimes, violins: all were present in a room where none were present. Wandering around revealed strange sound quirks, and standing in a corner v. under a curving staircase offered striking sonic contrasts. But in the end, we decided that this was music for sitting still.

With rain streaking the windows and a raw wind moving the trees, we were warm inside this music. It eventually filled the room so completely as to constitute a physical

manifestation, which is of course absurd because nothing could form out of a bunch of vibrating air molecules, right? Crazy talk. It never got loud, per se, but the music occupied every available space, both inside and outside our bodies. As we approached the fifty minute mark, we had to close our eyes.



And then, suddenly, it stopped. The massive roar of Silence was so stunning that we reactively looked up and around to see what had come into the room. For around a minute, there was pure Silence. The genius of this piece lies in its creation of a sound structure so enveloping and gorgeous that it emphasizes the stark beauty of Silence itself.

Onward through the rain to hear the Evan Parker Electro-Acoustic Ensemble. Again, we were presented with music that leads us to consider the relationships between sound and space and time and space. The chapel was full. Where *Rushes* suggested we treasure Silence by taking it away completely, albeit gently, Parker's team parceled Silence out in fragments, a brilliantly executed piece of group improvisation.



We finally found a minute for food before the highly anticipated Milford Graves – Jason Moran duo show. Hundreds were standing in line, in the rain, for admit to the Bijou Theater. We were among the lucky ones; many more were turned away.



Moran is one of the music's great young leaders, a masterful pianist with a deep knowledge of musical history. Graves is, well, a legend, one of the creators of free jazz, and a revered elder. They carried on an intergenerational conversation, at turns dense and foreboding or puckish and playful. The audience was with them at every turn, and nobody left their seat until it was over.<fn>When shows reach capacity at Big Ears, a notification goes out announcing that they are now at "one out, one in" status. In this case, no one went out.</fn>

The team was exhausted by this time, so we huddled over a steam vent under an awning and took a nap to gird ourselves for the eagerly anticipate Roscoe Mitchell Trios performance, again at the Bijou. We entered to a stage filled to capacity: two pianos, three drum kits, two percussionists, and an array of wind instruments and electronics gear. Nine musicians, who manifest as 4 distinct Mitchell trios, among other

combinations, took the stage. The place was buzzed,

Again, the watchwords here were time and space. On the leaders cue, a resounding chord shaped by all nine players tuned the room. It was a thunderclap, but for the longest time, it was to be the only really “loud” sound we would hear. Under Mitchell’s direction, each player – or some subset combination of players – took their turns defining certain sectors of the soundscape. Following a set of coded gestures by Mitchell – gestures which correspond to various “cards” and motifs – a slowly developing landscape unfolded. Over time, the subsets became larger, the sound began to gather density and weight, until the group achieved a critical mass condition and embarked on what the Art Ensemble used to call an “intensity structure”.



Oh and mercy, it was intense. Thunderous, waves crashing, Mitchell and fellow reed player James Fei blistering their

horns, the five (!) drummers and percussionists exploring every manner of coaxing apocalyptic din from their respective *batteria*. Perhaps the most alarming character was pianist Craig Taborn. We had seen him earlier with the Parker ensemble, where he had come across as thoughtful in the context of less cacophony. Here, he was sheer power unleashed, one of the most exciting and free-roaming piano performances we've seen since Cecil Taylor.

The overwhelming energy pressed the audience back in their seats. We were absorbed and surrounded by a sonic tsunami. And then, on a dime, the group dropped into Mitchell's *Odwalla*, the Art Ensemble classic that signals the end of the show. Mitchell is a dry person, very serious but with a great sense of humor just underneath. His introductions of the band members were quietly funny. And then we were done.

The faces around us were rapt. Big Ears promoter Ashley Capps looked to have achieved nirvana. Rova member Steve Adams wondered aloud what they might be able to do in this same space a few hours later. How do you follow an elemental force of nature?

We had thought to nap before the midnight show, but instead found ourselves in the hotel lounge with Roscoe Mitchell, legendary record producer Chuck Nessa, and most of the Mitchell bands. Roscoe was very happy with the event, and the musicians themselves had the aspect of battle-weary warriors just off the field.

A few talked about some of Mitchell's instructions such as "Silence is your friend" and "We have all the time in the world. Don't be in a hurry." with the kind of reverence Henry V spurred at Agincourt. For his part, Mitchell, sitting with old friend Nessa, spoke expansively of past glories, future projects, and funny escapades. It is rare in life that we have an opportunity to enjoy the company of people who literally changed the course of our lives. This was one of those

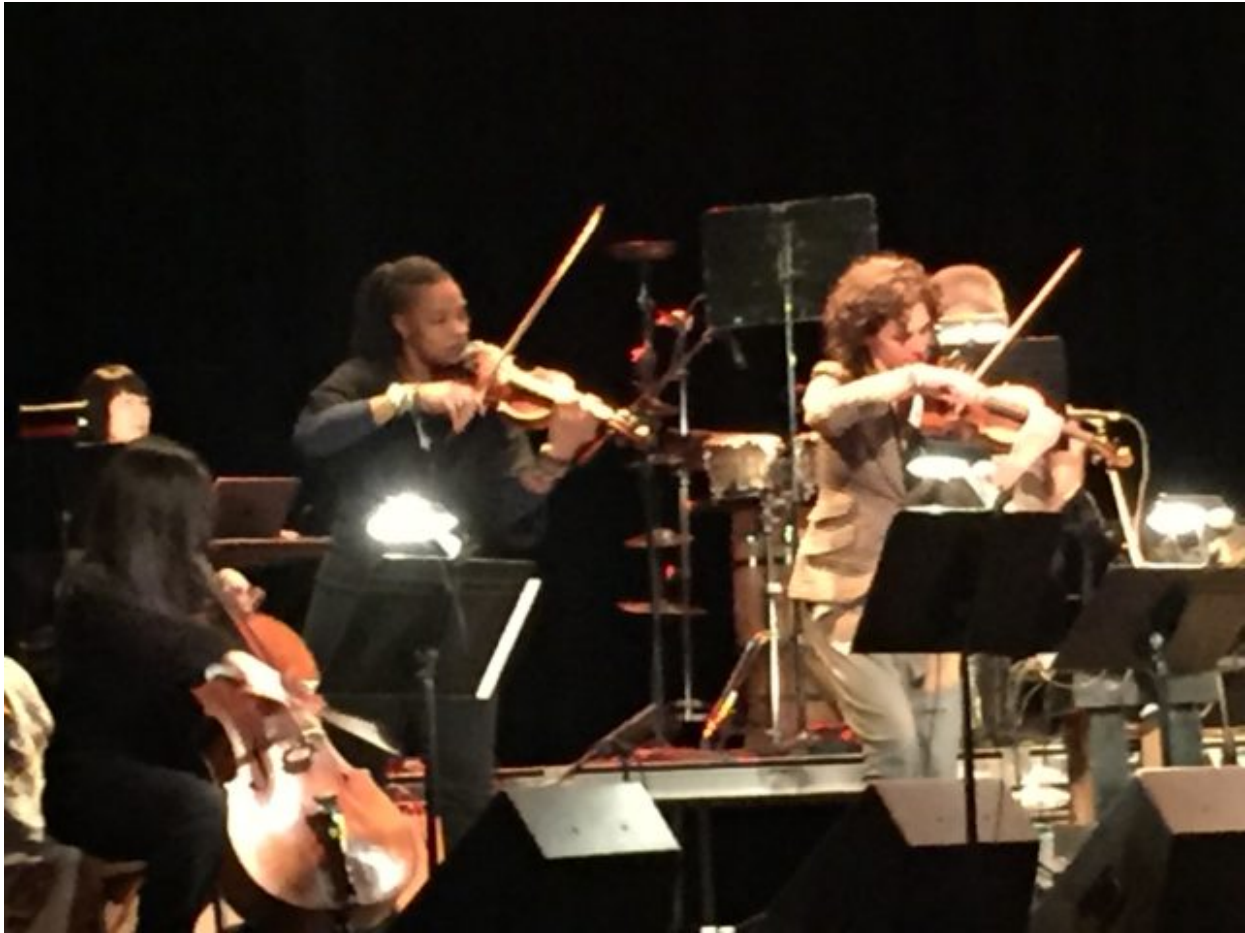
moments.



Narrator with Heroes

But the game is afoot. No time for modest stillness and humility. Once more unto the breach!

Back to the Bijou for *Rova Channels Coltrane: Electric Ascension*. Thirteen musicians, including Cline on guitar and effects; Jenny Scheinman and Mazz Swift on violin; Okkyung Lee (who still wishes to inform you that everything you think you know about the cello is wrong); Ikue Mori and Yuka Honda on electronics; Chess Smith and Cyro Batista on drums and percussion; and the Rova boys.



The ROVA String section

Christ almighty, what a blast of sound. In its day, *Ascension* was iconoclastic, a point of argument between Coltrane classicists and those who embraced his forays outside the norm. But 50 years on, listening to *Ascension* is almost tame in comparison to much of what has come since. Rova's spark of inspiration is re-telling the tale with a completely different instrumentation. And it works, you see. It works.



Rova's Larry Ochs was beaming. "I told you, didn't I?" Yes, he did. Cline spotted us and with a big smile asked, "Well? Did we do it?" Well, yes, dammit, you did, and then some.

By now it was 1.15 a.m., and we had one more stop before bed. The Duet for Theremin and Lap Steel was holding forth at the all-night Drone Flight, joined by guest saxophonist Jeff Crompton. Just as it is rare to spend time with your inspirational heroes, it is equally rare to watch good friends spotlighted at an event as significant as Big Ears. Surrounded by 100 or so people, most of them laid out on the floor of The Standard with pillows and sleeping bags, D4TaLS plus Crompton delivered a perfectly gorgeous meditation amid a kaleidoscope of lights and abstract projections. It was the perfect end to an astonishing day.