

# The Opposite of Nothingness: My Favorite World #39 (COVID Series #1)



I danced around this piece all last week. With everything so upheaved, I felt obligated to deliver something with heft, depth, and consequence. To offer something that might offset the grim reality that plagues our everyday.

Writing essays about how the world is fucked up and bullshit are easy enough in normal times. Now it's just shooting fish in a barrel. And really, what's the point? Don't even get me started on the futility of coming up with something fictional when we are living inside some Mary Shelley/Camus/Kafka fever dream. We are all sharing the same streams of information, more or less, and unless you are gamboling around the fringier fringes of the internet machine, the news is stark: This shit is real and it is not going away quickly. That first rush of "I can ride this out standing on my head" bravado has withered and died. The long haul, we are in it, and sorry y'all, but it feels like so much nothingness I could just fucking scream.

Thus my bright idea to leaven the isolation by offering up some My Favorite World diversions. Share a few tidbits that might lively up yourself, shed light on some, perhaps, lesser noticed gems that make this My Favorite World.

But what a fraud! Who am I to suggest to anyone how to lighten the burden? Where does this Grumpy Gus get off chirping about

MFW and cherishing the gems of culture as a shield against the darkness.

Because here's the the thing that I've been missing: Joy. It is staggeringly difficult for me to find true joy right now. Moments of contentment, perhaps, even moments where I almost fully forget the looming terror and disappear into a moment of – is that joy? – only to have it snatched away.

Oh the bitter irony of the person who forgets his own prevailing ethos! Because both the i2b / MFW sensibility comes down to one key verb: Choice. Always has done. Immunity to boredom is a choice along a continuum. Savoring the only world you have to choose from is damn near binary. But it remains: Make a choice. Doctor, heal thyself!

I turn then to an old Guitar Craft adage, the one that suggests when we feel we are not up to a task, or somehow unworthy, that we Assume the Virtue and go ahead anyway. In plain English: Fake it til ya make it.

So without further ado, here are a few gorgeous tidbits from this mixed up, muddled up, shook up world. It's my favorite, by the way. World, I mean.

First up, a master of the Chinese *guzheng*, a 21-string zithery thing that sounds like a room full of chiming twelve-string guitars.

Wu Fei means "opposite of nothingness". And that, I reckon, ought to encompass everything, including the Joy that I seem to have misplaced somewhere.



I first heard Wu Fei at the Big Ears Festival in 2017. Her solo set summoned angels and devils and ghosts, and I've been a fan ever since. Her collaborations range from far edge new music improvisers like Fred Frith and Carla Kihlstedt to guitar virtuoso Gyan Riley (son of legendary composer Terry Riley).

The Wu Fei / Gyan Riley 2011 album *Pluck* is available over at Fei's Bandcamp page for a mere seven beans. Go. Buy.

Until recently, my favorite Wu Fei collaboration was this monstrous Duo for Guzheng and Freight Train. Chaos. Roaring Chaos, at that. And in the middle of it all a stillness, filled with Joy.

Here's the key thing about Wu Fei: Her music brings Joy. Even in the sad or dark pieces, there is joy in the suffering. And nowhere does the Joy shine more brightly than in her recent recording with banjo wizard Abigail Washburn on the Smithsonian Folkways label.

I caught this pair at Big Ears a couple years ago. Because I was ducking in out of the rain for “a song or two” before I moved on to something more something or other-ish. I mean, c’mon. On paper, the matchup has all the appeal of something cooked up for NPR fundraising week by a bunch of market driven pencil pushers, yet another in a long march of pedestrian world music mashups. I, I sniffed, am above such RiverDance-esque manipulations.

An hour later I was still in my seat, my coat still on, tears of sorrow and laughter streaking my cheeks. This was no bit of clever, audience-tested oatmeal. Fei and Washburn have been friends for years, ever since Washburn studied in China, and more recently as Fei has relocated to Nashville. And in the best tradition of pure folk music, they cooked up their stew jamming on the front porch while they tried to keep their young’uns in line.

The resulting album, produced by Washburn’s husband Bela Fleck, is one of my favorites in recent years. It is soulful and authentic and virtuosic and just so damned full of Joy I could just fucking scream. Happy scream.

So Much Joy

Go buy it. And while you’re at it, check out the cover story on Fei and Abigail in the new issue of Songlines, penned by my fine old buddy DD.

And while we’re talking about good old pals, there is nothing like hearing the voice of an old friend, even if he’s telling you stories you’ve heard a million times. Hell, these days, that might be the best medicine of all.

So here’s a kicking little Tiny Desk Concert from John Fogerty and his kids rocking a few old favorites. I especially love the actual baseball bat guitar he uses on ‘Centerfield’. There’s an old joke about Stratocaster just being baseball bats with strings. This one looks really uncomfortable to

play, but it sounds great.

And finally, just because this naughty little ear worm has been deviling me for days, a happy little ditty from 1970 by the Kinks. I was maybe ten or eleven when this came out, and while it took me years to realize what was really going on, I loved it right off. And that's the way that I want it to stay.

Pronoun Confusion is nothing new  
Y'all be well and holler if the spirit moves ya. And as  
always...

LOVE EACH OTHER MOTHERFUCKERS!

It matters a difference.

PS – Click [here](#) for Part 2 of this post, because I forgot something really important that I remembered at 3 a.m. Mea culpa.