Ears Embiggened: Rova



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The Rova Saxophone Quartet played in Atlanta tonight, a little sneak preview of the coming sonic onslaught of Big Ears. Two sets, unamplified, in the beautifully resonant Existentialist Congregation Church in Candler Park. There was a decent little crowd in attendance that knew how to listen and unpocket their cash for CDs.

Rova is appearing twice at Big Ears, once in the Knoxville Museum of Art (Friday at 2 p.m.) as a quartet. The sound in that building is perfect for Rova, which is celebrating its 40th year as an ensemble.

Consider that, the level of commitment that entails. No knock on the fellas (who are really fine company over a good meal), but this is not music to get rich by. Yet they have hung together, recording around three dozen albums and collaborating along the way with a brigade of prominent musicians, dancers, and composers.

Tonight's show was primarily material from their latest album, *In Transverse Time*. The high point of their two sets was the lengthy composition "Hidden in Ochre", a composition by tenor saxist Larry Ochs. At 24 minutes, this is not an easy pull for most audiences. The moods shift, there are alternating segments of silken beauty and percussive splats.

It is in some ways a prototypical Rova piece, a stealthy mix of composition and improvisation that – like the best of what was once called 'avant garde' or 'new music', and is now really just *music* – often leaves the listener wondering where the composition/improvisation border resides. No matter. The crowd fairly exploded at the quiet conclusion of this piece.

Pre-show, the quartet played a few notes of Coltrane's *Ascension*, a brief teaser for their Saturday midnight show at the Bijou. *Rova Channeling Coltrane: Electric Ascension* will feature the quartet alongside the likes of Nels Cline, Jenny Scheinman, Okkyung Lee, Cyro Baptista, Yuka Honda, Ches Smith, and Mazz Swift. It is one of the red star, must see events of the Big Ears banquet.

Coltrane's *Ascension*, recorded summer of 1965, is one of the most radically transformative works in the music some call jazz. It is also one of the most controversial: the seemingly unbridled energy belies a structural underpinning that listeners often miss. This structure forms the foundation of Rova's recreation. This is not cover band mimicry, but rather an attempt to tap into the energetic stream that Coltrane was cultivating in his later period. This is music in pursuit of ecstatic immersion, a headlong dive into the possibilities of transcendence through *souuuuund*. It is also a logical extension of Trane's pursuit of the transcendence – a headlong pursuit of what some call Godhead – that became apparent with *A Love Supreme*.

But damn. *Ascension* was hard listening for anyone trying to squeeze it into a jazz frame, or into any kind of frame that isn't *Ascension* itself. Since then, sonic explorations of this nature have become part of the accepted vocabulary, and at its worst, a set of cliches deployed by players who lack the depth and chops to make it really work. But even in the most capable hands, this is not easy listening by any stretch. Here comes that word again: commitment.

Lucky for us, Rova and their assembled cadre have the inside-playing credibility to turn their outside excursions into something worth hearing. It's worth the commitment.

Some folks – like me – believe music can change the world. The fact that Rova has the impulse – much less the sheer audacity – to bring *Ascension* to life 50 years after the fact indicates that they believe it, too. This may be one reason why they have persevered for 40 years.

Ears Embiggened: Seven Bassoons. No, Really.



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Last year, Big Ears kicked off with nief norf (more on them soon) performing Michael Gordon's composition "Timber", a piece for six percussionists playing amplified 2×4 pieces of wood with mallets. It was one of the great surprises and thrills of the festival. It's a terrific piece, hypnotizing and thrilling at the same time.

This year, nief norf is back (they are based in Knoxville at UT) and Bang on a Can is bringing it as well. But that's for

another post.

Hidden among the riches in the 2018 Big Ears schedule is the Rushes Ensemble on Saturday from 2-3 p.m. at the Knoxville Museum of Art. Now strangely, there is no mention of Rushes Ensemble on the festival lineup page, so they might be easy to miss.

Don’t. Miss them, I mean.

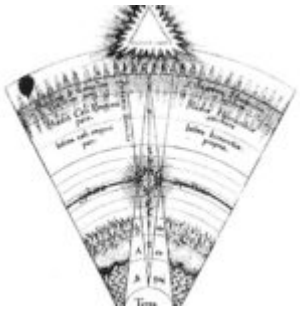
Rushes is a group of seven of the best bassoon players in the world. That alone is enough to pique interest, but their entire raison d’etre derives from a commission that led Michael Gordon to write a piece specifically for…yep…seven daggum bassoons.

It is hard to describe. The music takes much from Steve Reich’s pulsation methods, and while the overall effect is of something like a Fripp Soundscape – all washes and gorgeous drone – the ensemble is playing to a click track to ensure that the pulsations are overlapping precisely. Eventually, overtones begin to build that create illusions of instruments that are not actually there. I’ve experienced this effect before as both a musician and an audient. It is one of the rare and wondrous physical manifestations of music. The impact on deep listeners can be profound and emotional. It is both gentle and not for the faint of heart.

You can dig around on YouTube and find a performance of this piece by this group. I say, don’t do it. Just turn up Saturday afternoon and experience this for yourself in the acoustically lively atrium of the museum. This could well be the hidden gem of the whole danged festival.

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Ears Embiggened: The Fine Vibrations of the Well Plucked String



Another in a series of 2018 Big Ears Festival previews courtesy of the i2b staff. All one of us. Share this widely if you please.

A passel of soul-thieving tempters in disguise; Pythagoras was fascinated by them, developed several laws of physics by observing them, and found his way to proposing a cosmology based on those laws. The well plucked string is a slippery damn slope, no question. Ask anyone who has a bottomless guitar collecting habit. Or ask their significant other.

There’s something irresistible about an exquisitely excited string. Acoustic or electric, nylon or steel or gut, strung taut over wood or gourd or some kind of animal skin – or even an old cigar box or tin can. Cleanly replicated or tormented beyond recognition by tubes, transistors, and unholy volumes. Plucked, strummed, bowed or otherwise placed in motion, the string is the elemental sound of life, of sex, of sadness and joy, mourning and loss and ecstasy on a strand of molecular vibration. If recent physics theory is to be believed, the string is essence of all existence.

Pythagoras was no fool.

So the old guy he would have been beside himself at the prospect of the string ticklers scheduled at this year's Big Ears. You've got banjos (Bela Fleck and Abigail Washburn chief among many) and dobro (Jerry Douglas is as good as any musician on the planet). A highlight of the 2017 fest, Wu Fei returns with her *gezheng* in duet with Washburn and as the leader of a massive "improvisation game" at the Knoxville Museum of art. Deep-dive folk archivers Anna & Elizabeth might wield any manner of stringy thingy as serendipity demands.

There's a string quartet – Brooklyn Rider in full and in collab with Fleck, and their violinist will present a concert of the entire Bach solo violin repertoire – and the string sections of the Bang on a Can All-Stars, the International Contemporary Ensemble, and the Knoxville Symphony Orchestra, together, apart, re-configured, hell, hanging upside down from a chandelier, even. Anything is possible.

Cellist Okkyung Lee draws sounds out of her instrument that are surprising and soothing and sometimes disturbing. Violinist Jenny Scheinman brings her distinctive jazz/folk/rock voicings in multiple contexts, from trad with silent films (Kannapolis: A Moving Portrait) to a paint-peeling Coltrane-ish howl for Rova's Electric Ascension. (Trust me, you've heard her, either with Bill Frisell or Norah Jones or Lucinda Williams or too many others to list. You've heard her. And she is fantastic.) Aine O'Dwyer is certain to play the harp – the proper harp, the thing that looks like the inside of a piano – though tbh, I am hoping she plays her *Music for Church Cleaners* for pipe organ.

Pedal steel player Susan Alcorn takes her instrument way outside the expected mainstream suggested by its history. She can shift on a dime, from dreamy twang to terrifying yowls, but always with a connection to the instrument's traditional heritage. Lap steel player Frank Schultz – half of the aptly

named Duet for Theremin and Lap Steel – tends to a more gentle approach, coaxing dream tones and reverberations that compliment Scott Burlands oddball sci-fi doohickey clouds.<fn>I kid. Scott's a pal and I love his whatzamajammer noise machine.</fn> They are playing three times, so you have no excuse not to catch them at least twice.

From Africa, Tal National and Innov Gnawa blend electric guitars and traditional instruments like the *sintir* to induce trance with an interlocking sound that will drag even the most doubly-left footed lunk onto the dance floor. Be prepared. You will dance and you will sweat.

Then there are your basic, run of the mill guitar players. Right. The guitarists at Big Ears this year are a veritable hero gallery. Nels Cline, Arto Lindsay, Marc Ribot, David Hidalgo, and Mary Halvorson – a lineup akin to the 1927 Yankees, heavy hitters every one of them – are on hand to demonstrate pretty much the full range of what a guitar has to offer.

And no slouch herself, Anoushka Shankar, daughter of Ravi and established sitar master in her own right, brings her poignant piece about immigration, "Land of Gold", to the Historic Tennessee Theater. One of the festival's must-see events, you can expect a big crowd for this one, so go early if you want a good seat.

Have I missed anyone? You bet. Godspeed You Black Emperor fields a trio of guitarists as part of their sonic onslaught, and Atlanta-based Algiers thrashes with the best of them. And we haven't even begun to talk about the broad array of bluegrass/traditional pickers that will be literally all over downtown Knoxville throughout the festival.

We could go on, yes, we could. And we will, with coverage throughout the weekend from our crack team. i2b never sleeps.

Ears Embiggened: Big Ears Sensory Overload



Follow @immunetoboredom on Twitter or check back here for updates throughout the festival. Share this widely if you please.

The Big Ears Festival in Knoxville is, for me, the singular music event of the year. Four days jam packed with more music than you can shake a stick at, and way more than you can hope to catch. It is a banquet that offers far more than you can possibly sample, even if your appetite is yoooge. The option anxiety I face as I try to wrangle the Big Ears schedule into a digestible menu is fierce. I know I will miss something that I will regret. And yet…

And yet that doesn't even begin to address the film portion of the programming, a subset to the music that is arguably as strong as most film festivals that stand on their own ground. And then there are the literary events, and the panel discussions, and the Sunday morning brunch and the beer exchange and the various and sundry places to get your coffee/food/beer/wine thing happening. And a day long bluegrass hoedown in Market Square and and and.

Promoter Ashley Capps tells us this embarrassment of riches is not as sadistically perverse as it might appear. While

acknowledging that many people try to chart an expeditious dash between conflicting events, his suggestion is to make a choice and stick with it. You can worry about what you are missing or you can immerse in the where-you-are. Be here now, as the old Ram Dass book suggests.

Look at it as something of an exercise is Zen acceptance: you are either going to hear Milford Graves – a jazz legend who, among other notable achievements, played with Albert Ayler at John Coltrane's funeral – or you can catch the vitally important Anna & Elizabeth and their excavations of Appalachian culture. Even for an inveterate jazzbo like Your Narrator, this is no easy choice. Graves is a living icon of the music; A&E are fantastic performers and serious historians. Where will I end up at 4.30 pm on Friday? I won't know until 4.15. I'll be sure to let you know as soon as I do.

These kinds of conflicts abound. Another big choice awaits on Saturday morning. Violinist Jenny Scheinman presents *Kannapolis: A Moving Portrait* from 12.30 – 1.30. It's a mixed media show, with old film footage and new/old music set to evoke the history of an area of North Carolina and Tennessee just before WWII. But at 1 p.m., Rhiannon Giddens – founder of the Carolina Chocolate Drops, music historian, and Guggenheim fellow – delivers a keynote address. This is a woman with something to say about, say, the musical history of North Carolina and Tennessee.

A week ago, these events did not overlap on the schedule, but at Big Ears, scheduled events can change. Add to that the "secret events", appearance that you only find out about hours or minutes before they take place. One of your favorites, popping up in a one-of-a-kind collaboration. The hell? You thought you knew what your were doing. You have to adapt, think on your feet. Improvise. Make a choice and live with it.

This is tough for an OCD fellow like Your Narrator. My greatest fear is that I will die with the best book ever

written sitting on my nightstand, unopened. That I will not get around to hearing all the music that needs to be heard, the movie that will change my insight, the simple turn of phrase in a poem that will be the click in the lock that is really all I needed to understand, to just simply *underfuckingstand*, don't you get it?



Perhaps you can understand my dilemma. It's a funny thing, this dance between accepting a gift with gratitude or looking just behind the giver to see what you might grab if you just…If only…What about…

Now if I could only figure out what to do about the conflict between Craig Taborn and the Bang on a Can All-Stars.

Curse you, Capps!