Ears Embiggened: Icons

(The fifth in a series of preview posts as we count down to the
2019 Big Ears Festival in Knoxville, TN.
Part 1 here on the 50 year legacy of ECM Records.
Part 2 here on 50 years of the Art Ensemble of Chicago,
Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future.
Part 3 here on the magnificent Rhiannon Giddens and her Lucy Negro, Redux project.
Part 4 takes a stroll through the league of guitarists on tap.)

We often hear an artist described as an overnight sensation, even though in almost every case we are hearing about someone who has put in the work and paid the dues to arrive at their 'instant' success.

But you never really hear about an overnight icon. Defined as "a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol or as worthy of veneration," icon status is almost always predicated on longevity, extended and sustained effort, and definitional achievement in a field of endeavor. Exceptions: Bright flaming rockets that burn out fast but leave an unmistakable imprint, and even then, icon status usually has to wait a while. Cf. Hendrix, James Dean, Duane Allman, &c. These are the artists who have helped define their fields, the people that serious younger artists study and obsess about.

Big Ears has a pretty good track record of lining up artists that qualify for icon status. 2019 is no exception. I've

already written about some of these: Art Ensemble of Chicago, Bill Frisell, ECM Records, Richard Thompson. Time to take a look at the rest.

Carla Bley

Carla Bley stands about five feet tall, yet she is a undeniable giant. Stretching back nearly 60 years, Carla's compositions have been recorded by Jimmy Giuffre, George Russell, her ex-husband Paul Bley, Gary Burton, Charlie Haden, and many more. Along with her second husband, trumpeter Michael Mantler, she founded the Jazz Composer's Orchestra and the associated JCOA record label, which released important recordings by Don Cherry, Roswell Rudd, Grachan Moncur, Leroy Jenkins, and Cecil Taylor in the late 60s.

In 1971, JCOA released her epic jazz opera *Escalator Over the Hill*. It took three years to record, and established Bley as one of the great composer/arrangers in modern jazz. During the 70s, she collaborated with Jack Bruce and drummer Nick Mason of Pink Floyd, essentially writing and arranging albums released under their names. She also helped Charlie Haden actualize his great Liberation Music Orchestra.

Better known for most of her career for her composing/arranging, in the past twenty years she has developed into one of the most intriguing pianists in jazz. She's not a chops monster by any stretch, but her arranger's orientation has led her into a crazy wonderful ability to instigate quiet upheaval with peculiar chord voicings and melodic coloration. Her playing is probably closer to fellow arranger genius Gil Evans than anybody else, that uncanny knack for bending a chord in a way that makes you wonder if the ground has shifted beneath you.

This year she returns to Big Ears with a trio formed in 1994, featuring bassist Steve Swallow, and saxophonist Andy Sheppard. They play with the kind of instinct and

preternatural anticipation of one another’s choices that can only develop over a very long period of time. Saturday at 5 pm at the Tennessee Theater.

Getting to see her at Big Ears 2017, after 40 years of listening, was a dream come true. Also too: She also has the greatest hair in the history of the music.

Steve Swallow

Bassist and longtime musical and romantic partner of Carla Bley, Steve Swallow is the man who proved once and for all that the electric bass guitar is every bit as legitimate as the double bass in jazz. The man has all the tone and swing you could ask for. Since the early 60s, Swallow has worked with an almost ridiculous listing of the greats of the latter-20th century: Paul Bley, Jimmy Giuffre, Gary Burton, Don Ellis, Art Farmer, Stan Getz, Paul Motian, John Scofield, George Russell. His playing is elegant, smooth, and always exactly what the music needs. Appearing with the Carla Bley Trio.

Harold Budd

During the 60s, Budd was a composer of avant garde classical pieces. He began to become more interested in minimalism, an interest starkly at odds with academic composition of the day. By 1970, he says he had:

> *…minimalized myself out of a career. It had taken ten years to reduce my language to zero but I loved the process of seeing it occur and not knowing when the end would come. By then I had opted out of avant-garde music generally; it seemed self-congratulatory and risk-free and my solution as to what to do next was to do nothing, to stop completely."*

In 1978, he released his first major work, *Pavilion of Dreams*, on Brian Eno's Ambient Music Series. Any serious history of *ambient music* recognizes Budd's central role in the development of that genre, though Budd insists he was "hijacked" into the category.

Whatever. Labels never tell an accurate story. Suffice to say that his three presentations at this year's festival offer a rare opportunity to experience one of the path-forging icons of the past 50 years. Must. See.

Meredith Monk

Back in the day of college radio, a cluster of us became obsessed with every box of promo records that came in from ECM. One day in 1981 we pulled one out that looked a little different. The abstract imagery typical of the ECM cover was replaced by a dramatic b&w photo of a woman in shadow, head cocked to allow a dark shadow from an epic hair braid to fall across her neck.

This was the beginning of my love affair with the music of Meredith Monk.

It was like nothing I had ever heard, though it was as instantly accessible as the most finely crafted pop tune. It was funny. It was deep and dark. It was impossible. Even in its darkest moments, it exuded pure joy. I was hooked.

She is a composer, film director, choreographer and one of the pioneers of extended vocal technique. She returns to Big Ears with her latest work, *Celluar Songs*, described as a blend of

> *movement, theatrical characters and images, light, and video installation. The work, at once playful and contemplative, draws inspiration from such cellular activity as layering, replication, division and mutation, and looks to underlying systems in nature that can serve as a prototype for human behavior in our tumultuous world. Conjuring cycles of birth and death throughout, Monk once again reminds us of her vitality as an artist who cuts to the core of experience, continuing to share the genius of her discovery and innovation.*

I am so there.

Alvin Lucier

I have to admit: Before this year's festival schedule dropped, Alvin Lucier was a vaguely recognized name for me. But dang, y'all, the man has delivered the deep sounds for more than fifty years. As much a 'sound artist' as a musician composer, Lucier's work suggests a sensibility in line with Pauline Oliveros' concept of Deep Listening.

One of his most recognized pieces, *I Am Sitting in a Room*, begins with the performer reciting and recording a paragraph of text that describes the piece. The recorded passage plays back in the room, recorded again, and played back again, and

again, etc. A simple layering technique not unlike Fripp's dual-Revox Frippertronics, but the only additive information is created by the resonance of the room itself, and the acoustic peculiarities of speakers and microphones recording the proceedings. Within a few minutes, the speech becomes nearly unrecognizable, with specific tones emphasized or muffled by the room resonance to create a strange push-pull effect. By the end, everything is a wash of enveloping sound.

During his early years, Lucier created several pieces of this nature; let's call them mechanical processes in that an initial action sets off a chain of successive occurrences without performer intervention. He later moved onto composing for trained musicians, often accompanied by pure wave generator. The variances of the musician's tones in reference to the pure wave creates washes of harmonic overtones that can take on the character of other instruments, celestial choirs, or skull-threatening dark vibration.

At 88 years of age, Lucier rarely performs, but he has three sets on tap at Big Ears, including one with his longtime collaborator Joan LaBarbara. Make a point of catching at least one.

Joan LaBarbara

Who is Joan LaBarbara, you asked quietly as you read the last paragraph.

LaBarbara was one of the second wave of extended vocal technique champions, heir to Cathy Berberian's 1960s investigations and contemporaneous with Meredith Monk. Her debut album, *Voice is the Original Instrument*, is a psychedelic funhouse ride, most notably her use of circular breathing and multiphonics.

And if you – or your kids – are of a certain age, you might even know her work.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y819U6jBDog
LaBarbara performs twice at Big Ears, once in a solo career retrospective and alongside Alvin Lucier and the Ever Present Orchestra in a program of Lucier's work.

Jack DeJohnette

Along with Tony Williams and Famoudou Don Moye, Jack DeJohnette is one of the primary definers of the post-Elvin Jones/Max Roach approach to drumming.Go ahead and @ me if I left off your personal hero. In the 60s, DeJohnette played with Charles Lloyd, Betty Carter, Chick Corea, Bill Evans, and a brief but transformational stint with *Bitches Brew* era Miles Davis. From there, he moved into a long association with ECM, appearing as a leader and sideman on dozens of essential recordings with the likes of Keith Jarrett, John Abercrombie, Dave Holland, Lester Bowie, George Adams, Bill Firsell, Geri Allen, Joanne Brackeen… I mean, I'm gonna stop and send you to the tender mercies of wikipedia to get a fuller picture.

The man deserves a book or five and a documentary or two. He is one of the instantly recognizable drummers in jazz. His sense of swing and his range of touch on the drums and, especially, the cymbals mark him within a few bars. He is also a fine pianist and composer. The man is, well, an icon.

At Big Ears, DeJohnette rolls in with a trio featuring Ravi Coltrane on sax and Matt Garrison on bass and electronics. Ravi's dad? John Coltrane. Matt's dad? Trane's longtime bassist, Jimmy Garrison. An icon with the sons of two icons. Is it gonna be great? I'm skipping at least three performances I really ought to see for this one. Whaddyagonnado? Saturday, 7.45 pm, at the Tennessee Theatre.

Here's one of my favorite DeJohnette tracks from his New Directions quartet.

Wadada Leo Smith

Wadada Leo Smith was born in Leland, Mississippi and recieved his first musical education in the Delta blues at his father's knee. He went through the military band program and ended up in the middle of the 1960s Chicago scene, one of the early members of the Association for the Advancement for Creative Musicans. He is a prolific composer, an educator, and has always maintained his musical practice as a component of his social activist practice.

Here's a partial list of Smith's collaborations: Anthony Braxton, Leroy Jenkins, Roscoe Mitchell, Henry Threadgill, Lester Bowie, Joseph Jarman, Cecil Taylor, Steve McCall, Anthony Davis, Carla Bley, Don Cherry, Jeanne Lee, Tadao Sawai, Muhal Richard Abrams, Ed Blackwell, Kazuko Shiraishi, Han Bennink, Marion Brown, Charlie Haden, Malachi Favors Magoustous, Jack Dejohnette, Vijay Iyer, Ikue Mori, Min Xiao Fen, Bill Laswell, John Zorn, Ronald Shannon Jackson, Frank Lowe, Andrew Cyrille, and Bill Frisell.

He is equally at home in what we might call "classical" music as he is digging in with the funk-skronk of the band Harriet Tubman or his *Yo, Miles* collaborations with Henry Kaiser. He can blast you through your seat or make you float into someplace you never knew existed. His graphic scores, executed in a system he calls Ankhrasmation, are on display in museums.

I last saw Wadada live in 1980, at Papp's Public Theatre. The amount of space between notes was at times nearly unbearable. But then, the right note, or smear or gesture, arrived to maintain a sense of structure that kept me from leaping from my seat in anxiety.The acid had kicked in strong by showtime, and the fact that a NYC cabbie had rear-ended my car just outside the theater likely created a certain adrenalistic frisson that I do not recommend to anyone. But there was

something about the performance that stuck with me: The patience, sensitivity. The sense of mutual support. I mean, damn, you stand on stage in front of a full house and try to maintain intentional silence for ten, fifteen, twenty seconds: It is a barely endurable eternity for most musicians. Not Wadada.

For Big Ears, Smith has two performances in store. His solo exploration, *Reflections and Meditations on Monk*, drops at The Standard on Saturday at 2 pm. But the big deal is the presentation of Smith's 1978 masterpiece *Divine Love*, with original trio members Dwight Andrews and Bobby Naughton. That happens at the Tennessee Theatre on Sunday at 6.15 pm, a perfect lead in to the festival-capping performance by the Art Ensemble of Chicago.

Ears Embiggened: So Much Guitar

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project.)

My first guitar lesson was the first week of September, 1969. The teacher was named Leo Goldberg, and at the time I figured he was about eleventy thousand years old. He got me started on my nylon string Gianninni guitar (which I still have in a closet) playing things like Skip to My Lou and Moon River. As a devoted fan of Grand Funk Railroad, I was frustrated, at best.

I may have stopped lessons, but my attraction to banging on wood and strings never stopped. To say that I have been a guitar geek for nearly 50 years is an understatement. And that's one reason this year's Big Ears has my fingertips tingling.

The level of guitar heroics on tap this year is astronomical. Just nuts. Where to begin? Even harder: where to stop. I am sure I will neglect someone's worthy favorite. Mea culpa, friends. I am ecstatically drowning here.

Randomly, let's start with (Sir) Richard Thompson. Aside from being, arguably, the best songwriter of the past 50 years not named Zimmerman, he is without question one of the most innovative guitar heroes of that span. Electric or acoustic, solo or with small or large ensemble, RT's playing is song supportive, tasteful, and utterly non-cliched (unless he is mocking cliches). He can peel the paint off of any wall, or turn and deliver the most heartbreaking passage you ever imagined.

For Big Ears, RT appears with the Knoxville Symphony Strings to present *Killed in Action*, a song cycle honoring the 100th anniversary of the World War I armistice. It is "based on letters, diaries, ad interviews, and in most cases, are verbatim extracts, with little attempt to make them rhyme or turn them into 'art'." Bijou Theatre, Sunday, 1.30 pm.

I've seen RT at least 25 times, probably more, and surely more

than anyone except Sun Ra and the Grateful Dead. Every time he comes around, I think, “been there, done that,” imagining that I don’t need to see him again. Then I end up going anyway, only to get myself gobsmacked one more time by his mastery of composition, singing, playing, and funny-as-all-get-out crowd control.

This presentation has me deep intrigued. RT with strings. RT with deep historical archaeology. RT, period. As if that were not enough, he appears with Rhiannon Giddens and Rachel Grimes for a panel discussion about how they use archival materials to create new works of music. Saturday at Visit Knoxville, 3 pm.

Okay, so I’ve already died and gone to heaven to have yet another of my all-time fave musicians on the bill. Let’s glance around and see who else might be…

There’s Mary Halvorson, appearing with her Code Girl quintet, her essential trio, Thumbscrew, and Columbia Icefield, alongside pedal steel whiz Susan Alcorn and trumpeter Nate Wooley. Halvorson has been defining chapter and book what guitar can mean in a post- bop/modernist/shred world. Her early work with Anthony Braxton displayed the kind of spiky harmonic disarray that plants her firmly in the *avant garde* (whatever the hell that is) and she continues to deliver some of the thorniest string beautynoise on the scene. But her evolving body of work highlights a keen sense of melodic regard alongside her more abstract explorations.

Her first solo album (*Meltframe*, 2015) finds her exploring standards by Duke Ellington, Oliver Neslon, Ornette Coleman, Roscoe Mitchell, and Carla Bley. Check out her recent duet album with Bill Frisell honoring the great Johnny Smith, or her *New American Songbook* collaborations with Ron Miles on cornet and drummer Greg Saunier of Deerhoof: this is someone with respect for tradition, but not the kind of hidebound devotion that can lead musicians into the trap of becoming

museum pieces. Aside from helping to define what qualifies as a ‘standard’ in the ongoing conversation that is jazz, she is establishing herself as one of the most adventuresome and prolific creative musicians of our time.

Listen to this haunting solo delivery of Ellington’s uber classic *Solitude*; it is not enslaved to the original, yet the shape of the composition never wavers. It is a model for how to treat a beloved piece of music with both reverence and a spirit of expansive exploration.

Speaking of Frisell, he is on hand for at least five performances: his duo with Thomas Morgan, his longtime trio of Kenny Wolleson and Tony Scherr accompanying the films of Bill MorrisonJust get your tickets now and quit arguing, his quartet with sublime singer Petra Haden, a pre-festival duet with saxophonist Greg Tardy, and – in one of the most intriguing bills of the festival – as part of *Absînt*, a collaboration with saxist Tim Berne, guitar wizard David Torn, and my favorite living New Orleans saxophonist/composer/artist, Aurora Nealand. This is my pick for the hidden treasure of the festival. I’ve been listening to Nealand for a good dozen years, and she always knocks me out.

Bill Frisell is a quintessential pick to represent the ECM guitar tradition. From his first appearance on Everhard Weber’s 1979 *Fluid Rustle*, through his wide ranging sideman work with the likes of Kenny Wheeler, Paul Motian, Arild Anderson, Paul Bley, Jan Garbarek, and on and on, through his earliest releases under his own name, Frisell was the perfect ECM guitarist: a range of tone and sound that makes his presence both transparent and unmistakable and an almost eerie ability to deliver exactly what each artist or composition needs – no more, no less. Along with Pat Metheny, Terje Ripdal, and the late John Abercrombie, Frisell embodied the ECM guitar ethos.

Frisell left ECM because he had more music in mind than the ECM release schedule could accommodate. But he came back to the Scandinavian fold with his *Small Town* duo with Morgan, and has since appeared with Wadada Leo Smith and Andrew Cyrille for *Lebroba*, one of the finest ECM releases in years and one of 2018's best releases in any genre.

Like many guitarists of varied skill and ambition, I have a specific "Bill Frisell changed my life" story that I will save for later. Suffice to say, if you've heard the guy, you know you need to see him whenever/wherever and with whoever. If you have not, get with the program.

But wait. We have another strong contender for ECM guitar icon: Ralph Towner. It makes perfect sense to have Towner on hand at a festival honoring the 50th anniversary of ECM Records. Best known for his work with the group Oregon, Towner is a master of texture, tone, and space. The opportunity to see him anywhere is a gift from above. The chance to hear him in a space as sonically rich as Knoxville's St. Johns Episcopal Cathedral is a universal blessing. I just wish John Abercrombie were still with us to revisit this longtime favorite of mine.

Anyone who loves guitar knows of the mad genius of David Torn. Another picker long associated with ECM, Torn's experimentations range as far afield as any guitarist of the past 40 years. As at home with solo soundscapes that range from the ethereal to the epically noisy, Torn also knows how to play a head and improv over changes. He has worked with David Bowie, Tori Amos, Jeff Beck, Madonna, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Don Cherry, Tony Levin, and Bill Bruford (and a zillion more) and penned soundtracks for television and film. At Big Ears, he appears solo, with his trio Snakeoil, and with the *Absînt* project. Given the way Big Ears throws popup show surprises, I'd bet on him appearing in other settings, too.

Rafiq Bhatia presents Breaking English, an electroacoustic

trio enhanced by a multimedia swirl of sight and sound. He is a smoking good player who places his chops at the service of concept and composition; nothing is gratuitous. He cites his inspiration for Breaking English as “including but not limited to Jimi Hendrix concert videos, blaring prayer calls from Turkish mosques, East African archaeological sites, the death of Trayvon Martin and Flying Lotus sound collages.” The Standard, Friday, 12.30 pm.

Who else? Chris Eldridge of the Punch Brothers will provide accompaniment to Fatty Arbuckle’s 1917 silent film classic *Coney Island*. The Punch boys will also close out the festival Sunday evening as the capstone to the Big Ears investigation of the musics of Appalachia. This will surely be one of the most attended concerts in the festival. Mill & Mine, Sunday, 8.15 pm.

Shane Parish presents a solo set as part of the Pilot Light series (all free, all the time, and one hell of a lineup it is, too). Perhaps better known for his work with the electric band Ahleuchatistas, Parish is building a reputation for his solo acoustic work that places him squarely in the tradition of John Fahey, willing to play material of just about any origin in a style that makes it unmistakably his own. Pilot Light, Sunday at 6 pm.

Derek Gripper is a South African classical guitarist who has unlocked the code for translating the style of traditional African instruments like the kora to six nylon strings. A player of infinite technique and feel, you can close your eyes and imagine a room full of griots. Sublime. Knoxville Museum of Art, Thursday, 7.30 pm.

On the pure energy and skronk front, the Messthetics brings the Fugazi rhythm section of Joe Lally and Brendan Canty together with guitarist Anthony Pirog. Pirog is something of a hidden treasure, making big waves in the DC scene but only recently gaining wider exposure. He owes more than a little

bit to the Crimson vocabulary, and the trio itself strongly recalls the heydey of Fripp's League of Gentlemen. But this is not a tribute band; Messthetics deliver a signature sound that demands serious head thrashing. They play The Standard on Saturday at 6 and will team up with the great Lonnie Holley at Mill and Mine on Friday at 1 pm.

Guitarist Tashi Dorji, born in Bhutan, appears in duo with percussionist
Tyler Damon for spontaneous improvisations that range from delicate shimmers and star twinkles to full bore supernova explosions. Pilot Light, Friday, 10.30 pm.

But wait, there's more. But that's about enough for this post. Check the Big Ears schedule and let me know which one of your favorites I forgot to mention. I bet there are at least a dozen more twangers I wish I knew about. Help a buddy out!

Ears Embiggened: Rhiannon Giddens – Great Black Music, Redux

*(The third in a series of preview posts as we count down to the
2019 Big Ears Festival in Knoxville, TN. Part 1 here on the 50 year legacy of ECM Records. Part 2 here on 50 years of the Art*

Ensemble of Chicago,
Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future.)

The eruption of way too many old photos of white politicians in blackface was a real chef's kiss for Black History Month. There quickly followed predictable hand wringing, assertions of surprise that such a thing was actually *still a thing,* and heartfelt intonations that such evidence "does not reflect who I am within my heart," a heart that surely resides in a body that contains not a single "racial bone."

Blackface has a long history, back at least as far as Shakespeare's *Otello*. More pertinent to the American experience is its introduction in the mid-1700s as a device to shorthand stereotypes about happy-go-lucky slaves and indolent and shiftless darkies. It was in the 1830s when Thomas Rice introduced the character of Jim Crow and the practice of whites capering in blackface – minstrelsy – became one of the most popular entertainment tropes in America and, often, in Europe.

Many of the songs were stolen wholesale from slaves and free Blacks and their wide popularity was tied to a significant act of erasure: White performers replaced Blacks as they purported to accurately represent the hijacked culture. See also, Dixieland, rock'n'roll, British blues, &c. These acts of cultural theft are well known.

The reality was different. While the overt acts of theft<fn>e.g., Elvis as the King, or the claim inherent in the name of the Original Dixieland Jass Band, an all-White ensemble that achieved notable popularity c. 1917-1935)</fn> are well-documented, the organic syncretism on the ground was the result of a more fluid commingling of whites and blacks, especially in rural and mountain communities.

A little less well-known is the centrality of African-American influence on musics that are widely regarded as "white" music:

bluegrass and country. Much of this is an outgrowth of the sorting imposed by the recording industry in its early years and the separation of *race music* and old timey/country, which was allegedly the province of white folks. Jazz and blues were deemed to have slave and African roots, while country and mountain music was declared an offshoot of the Scots-Irish tradition, distinctly white. The markets for these now-sorted musics was presumed to be distinct, as well, though the reality of how music lovers seek out and collect music made these false distinctions somewhat irrelevant as American music developed.Categories are for sheep. Maybe that should be the Big Ears motto.

One of the most successful erasures in American music history lies in the revisionism that eventually decreed the banjo as the whitest instrument of them all, despite the fact that the *banjer*, or *banza*, came to America from Africa via slave ship, an unintended import, perhaps, carried in memory by the more intentional human cargo. The banjo, an instrument imported from Africa and subsequently employed to confer authenticity on the performers pretending to be black, was ultimately stripped of its African identity.

For at least the past 15 or 20 years, there has been a concerted effort at re-framing the banjo and its associated musics in a more explicitly African-American context. One of the most successful of the musical archaeologist/apostles is Rhiannon Giddens, formerly of the Carolina Chocolate Drops, MacArthur “genius” recipient, trained operatic singer, and banjo wizard.

Aside from the sheer pleasure of her singing and playing, Giddens’ work is a concerted campaign to undo multiple acts of erasure that have decentered African-Americans from a central component of their cultural legacy. Everything about her career asks us to reconsider the “facts” we all know are true. Things like “banjos and opera are for white folks.Among her many projects, Giddens hosts a podcast series called *Aria Code*

that examines one great operatic aria per episode, with a variety of surprising guests. Her interests are broad.

In my last piece, I related how the Art Ensemble of Chicago rejected the jazz label and christened their genre Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future. It was a strategy that gave them access to the universe of musics that derive from the Black experience, which in practicality means just about any sound or style they found interesting. Unlike some acts of illegitimate appropriation (minstrelsy, Led Zeppelin, etc.), their claims represent a re-appropriation of something rightfully their own.

A survey of Rhiannon Giddens' career reveals a similar strategy. She may never have thought of herself as part of the Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future orbit, but to listen to the breadth of musics she has (re)claimed, it is hard for me not to put her under that banner. Just take a listen to her latest release on Smithsonian Records, *Songs of Our Native Daughters*. Her and her three partners in this project (all WoC who play the banjo, by damn) mine their various traditions – both direct and inferred – to create a journey that is a model of intersectional storytelling.

Give a listen to "Barbados." The wordless melody is every bit as harrowing as Blind Willie Johnson's "Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground." But bracketing the lament is a polite recitation that slyly suggests: "So relax, my friend – we're not all complicit."

Buy this album. You will not be sorry.
In its own way, her embrace of the banjo and her ongoing musical archaeology are acts of cultural radicalism that have rippled out in ways she likely never imagined when she first hooked up with her eventual Chocolate Drop partners. It is a body of work that rejects and resists the acts of erasure and othering that underlie the greatest rifts in our culture.

And one of her most substantial acts of creative radicalism will be on display at the 2019 Big Ears Festival.

This machine kills fascists

In 2012, poet Caroline Randall Williams traveled to England to pursue a hot tip about Shakespeare's sonnets, specifically numbers 127 to 154.

> *These sonnets have been called the "Dark Lady" sonnets for quite a while now, because of their focus (in contrast to the preceding 126, which are addressed to "a fair youth" and a "rival poet") on a woman who consistently figures as "dark" or "black," in his descriptions of her.*
>
> *p. 8, Lucy Negro Redux: The Bard, A Book, and ! Ballet, Caroline Randall Williams, Third Man Books, 2019*

Inspired by this research, Williams spun out a book of poems, *Lucy Negro, Redux*, informed by her experience as a Black woman and her identification with a woman who (may have) been like her, an unexpected identification with a central character in a canon of work that she loved deeply. The idea of William

Shakespeare devoting a substantial portion of his work to Black Luce – a well-documented brothel owner in Shakespeare's London – generated both disquiet (Luce likely being a madam and/or prostitute, sparking parallels with the exploited Black bodies of slave women) and elation (the possibility of placing a Black body at the center of the *ne plus ultra* of the White European literary tradition). As the NY Times review of the ballet premiere points out:

> *Caroline Randall Williams also descends from white men who raped her black ancestors. She carries in her very DNA the conflict at the heart of "Lucy Negro, Redux": What does it mean for a woman to be both desired and reviled for the color of her skin?"*

It is one hell of a volume. The poems are gorgeous, angry, sexual, repellent, yearning. They are explicit and blunt and irresistibly musical. Her use of space on the page enhances this notion of rhythm and musicality. And their intensity made it difficult for me to read more than a couple at a time. Some are stark revenge fantasy; others are demands to be seen or a fight against the ever-looming threat of erasure. Others are pained cries of yearning, of a wish to be loved for and as herself. Shakespeare as a deep blues. Or maybe the other way round.

The Nashville Ballet's artistic director, Paul Vesterling, read it and knew he wanted to stage the work. He had just the dancer in mind for the role of Lucy: Kayla Rowser, a Nashville Ballet company member who had been named one of *Dance Magazine's* Top 25 to watch.

Naturally, a ballet needs music. And that's where Rhiannon Giddens comes back in. Vesterling asked Giddens to create the soundscape. She collaborated with Francesco Turrisi to compose a score that they perform live for the ballet. (They will also appear in concert at Big Ears, separate from the *Lucy Negro,*

Redux presentation, as they explore commonalities between American, Celtic, and Islamic musical traditions. World music, y'all.)

Lucy Negro, Redux, a ballet, is an assertive act of resistance against multivalent forces of erasure and false sorting. Imagine the stage. Giddens as a visual and sonic focus. Williams herself appearing as narrator and centering presence, her words and body claiming her place alongside ole Billy Bard. Kayla Rowser establishing the presence of Black Luce, her story retold through the imagination of Williams, the movements of Rowser, and the music of Giddens. It makes me shiver.

The programming at Big Ears encourages broader connection-drawing, grand schemes that dig for the meaning of life, the universe, and everything. Aside from the convergence of the 50th anniversaries of ECM and the Art Ensemble of Chicago – an obvious bit of harmonic convergence – there are the broader questions of how the programming might encourage us to ponder broader implications of how the music (and film and dance &c.) we enjoy might direct us to finer considerations of the ways we all – all of us – might connect one to the other in the broader scheme of things.

Is Rhiannon Giddens really an expositor of Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future? Honestly, chances are good she would laugh in my face at the idea. But it seems to fit, in the same way that her work and the work of the AEC fit hand in glove with the admonitions of James Baldwin to open our eyes and ears and hearts, to make them bigger and more able to see and hear and feel a deep and rich history that has been largely hidden from us, one that could have disappeared entirely without the efforts of the artists and scholars who insist on keeping it alive. It is work that asks us to enlarge our vision to embrace the vast and wondrous possibilities that await, if only we could overcome the limitations imposed upon us by a social and economic system that profits by our

ignorance and separation.

> *"And if the word integration means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it. For this is your home, my friend, do not be driven from it; great men have done great things here, and will again, and we can make America what America must become."*
>
> *"The Fire Next Time," James Baldwin*

Maybe the whole idea of *"art"* somehow being a reasonably accurate and/or useful reflection of our shared human condition – and by extension, the possibility that *"art"* might somehow manifest something like a healing action or force upon our beleaguered condition – is somehow valid, somehow pertinent to our hourly/daily/weekly efforts to figure out the answer to what David Foster Wallace called our essential existential question: What does it mean to be fucking human?

Ears Embiggened – 50 Years of Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future

(The second in a series of preview posts as we count down to the
2019 Big Ears Festival in Knoxville, TN. Part 1 here on the 50 year legacy of ECM Records.)

Among the highlights of Big Ears Festival 2019 are the coinciding 50th anniversary celebrations of ECM Records and the Art Ensemble of Chicago. There is a book to be written about Big Ears in general, and this round-number accident of the calendar in particular is fertile ground for way too much rumination for a couple of blog posts, but I will try to put a fence around it.

1969, the ostensible birth year of ECM and AEC, was the height of what pop history shorthands as the 'counterculture', that period of social, political, and artistic upheaval that continues to wield influence on both actual culture and nostalgic cable teevee documentaries intoning vapid bromides about upheavals, nothing would ever be the same, and so on. But it is easy to get jaded and glassy-eyed at the pabulum narrative and to forget that, yeah dammit, shit was going down, and even if some of it was not really "new", there was a critical mass of interest and action that gave some of the ideas and movements a heft that we would be foolish to forget.

One not-new idea held that communal living and collaborative decision-making could serve as a corrective to our degraded society. This led to a flood of collectives and communes and cooperative organizations, most of which came and went, victim to the usual parade of suspects: infighting, drugs, petty jealousies, personality cultism, bad weather, and so on. In large part, the failures were baked in the cake from the outset, as the children of relative privilege known as hippies<fn>I resemble that remark.</fn> were hamstrung by unrealistic expectations and nihilist fantasies. Many a Utopian adventure launched with insufficient appreciation for what it might take to make such a project work. For their trouble, they were in large part allowed to fail and then

regain their position in privileged society, filled with contrition for their wayward apostasy while still indulging their fantasy of somehow standing up to “the man” that many of them would someday become. That many of these so-called vanguard became enthusiasatic cheerleaders for the worst in Reagan’s Morning in America should come as no surprise.<fn>Also, too: take a look at the last presidential vote for indication of how this demographic cohort, well-educated and flush with 401k, turned out for Trump. The boomer track record ain’t pretty.</fn>

Not all such groups were born of rainbow and unicorn wishful thinking. In situations where collective action was in fact a predicate for survival, the mission and sense of responsibility was somewhat more clearly defined. Groups with clearer vision of what their community needed, like the Black Panthers, created support systems to deliver essential services to their neighbors. Theirs was an ethos of self-sufficiency and discipline that aimed to uplift a marginalized community. For their trouble, they were targeted for elimination by a paranoid government, some murdered in their beds.

In the middle of this ferment, in 1965, a group of musicians on Chicago’s South Side formed the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. Predominantly African-American, the AACM performed each others’ compositions, worked each other’s concerts, pooled resources, and so on. The AACM also offered music lessons to kids and played benefit concerts for community needs. Several of the most important musicians of the late-20th century (Anthony Braxton, Henry Threadgill, Muhal Richard Abrams, and a couple dozen more) emerged from the AACM orbit. The place was as much a community center as it was an incubator for a musical movement.

In 1966, multi-reedist Roscoe Mitchell assembled an AACM sextet that included trumpeter Lester Bowie and bassist Malachi Favors to record *Sound* for the Delmark Records label.

Much of the so-called free jazz at this time was wall of sound onslaught, typified by Coltrane's late period and the take no prisoners approach of Ayler, Shepp, and so on. *Sound* was notable for its cultivation of space and silence. Passages would float one into the other like clouds, leaving the listener feeling eerily like a cartoon character who just stepped off a cliff, suspended in time just ahead of a free fall. It was composed *and* improvised in a way that set it apart from just about anything else on the scene at the time.

The story goes that Mitchell convinced an employee of Delmark, Chuck Nessa, to get this album recorded and released. (Delmark was primarily known as a trad jazz and blues label, and a damned fine one at that.) A year later *Numbers 1&2,* released on the new Nessa Records label under Lester Bowie's name and with multi-reedist Joseph Jarman added to the mix, established the core lineup of the Roscoe Mitchell Art Ensemble. The story goes that Mitchell had persuaded Nessa to start his own record label. That label, like ECM, is still releasing vital recordings 50 years later.<fn>At the 2018 Big Ears Fest, when festival promoter AC was introduced to Chuck Nessa, he said, "You are the reason I am here."</fn>

By 1969, the Roscoe Mitchell Art Ensemble had relocated to the outskirts of Paris, itself the locus of several strains of political and social pushback. As they embarked on a phenomenally fertile period of rehearsing, writing, recording, and touring, they added their hometown to their name: the Art Ensemble of Chicago was born. By 1970, drummer Don Moye – as fine a post-Max/Elvin era drummer as anyone not named Tony Williams or Jack DeJohnette – had completed the classic lineup.

From the outset, they agreed upon the same collaborative model that had made the AACM possible. Management of finances, creative decisions, sharing of money earned in outside opportunities (and these guys were in hot demand the entire time they were in Europe), all of these practices were a

practical demonstration of the idealistic notions that the 60s are remembered for. One example: Bowie and his wife, Fontella Bass, had struck gold with “Rescue Me,” a few years earlier. They sold everything they had, including a Bentley automobile, to finance the move to Paris. And yet because these arrangements were born of necessity rather than whim, and were driven by a defined sense of purpose, the AEC managed to stay together and succeed in ways that relatively few communal projects do.

Roscoe Mitchell, Lester Bowie, Joseph Jarman, Malachi Favors Maghostut, Famoudou Don Moye: The Greatest Band in the History of Forever <fn>Wherein we recognize that calling anything/body the G.O.A.T. is simply shorthand for saying “my favorite.” I’ve had friends declaim the GOAT as (among many) The Who, Sex Pistols, Sleater Kinney, Phish, etc. Everybody is right; it’s just that I am righter.</fn> turned Europe on its ear with its presentation of Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future.

Great Black Music was the Art Ensemble’s strategy to escape the straitjacket marketing expectations and racist connotations of the label “jazz”. It was also a timely and direct assertion of their identity as Black Musicians at a time where the music industry was consolidating its ongoing practice of trying to whiten Black musics.<fn>See also, soft jazz and disco.</fn> The tag also allowed, as Mitchell once remarked, the group to freely access *all* music, not just the music that critics or marketers might insist they embrace. And that’s exactly what they did, with music that encompassed African, Caribbean cultures, the African-American classical tradition, the legacy of string bands and brass bands, gospel, field hollers, funk, rock, soul, and just about every other style under the Sun. Not for nothing did they call their music Sun Music and recite poetry extolling the virtues and exploits of the People of the Sun. Theirs was an expression of Black Power that never shied away from challenging their audiences, which in my experience were predominantly white. The AEC was

not separatist. But they were most definitely radical.

(We once drove from Athens to Gainesville, FL, c. 1982, to see the AEC perform outdoors at some bandshell at the University of Florida. It was bizarre. A standard-issue platoon of SEC drunkwhitefratboys hand trucked a keg down to the field and did what standard-issue drunkwhitefratboys do when confronted with proudly Black and utterly expectation-defying entertainments. They heckled. They laughed and joked, they capered. They were *not* subtle. The band did not back down, raising their level of ferocity to match the bohunk brigade. I would swear at one point I heard one of the AEC chant, "N——s here, get your n——s here." Fucking fearless.)

In Paris, the AEC set to work incorporating elements of theatrical ritual and dance, recitations, chant, kabuki and absurdist theater into their performances. On first glance these raucous happenings appeared to be uncontrolled and chaotic free-for-alls behind a wave of randomized sound. But repeated viewings and listenings revealed a carefully nurtured sense of structure and form, recognizable (if idiosyncratic) compositions, and tightly focused, exquisitely skilled instrumental tightrope trickery. Their "free" improvisation sections, largely unplanned beyond a basic instruction or framework, never devolved into pointless squalling. Untold hours of rehearsal taught them how to communicate in the moment and achieve consensus as to which direction to take, how to transition from one place to another – essentially, how to behave as conscious and cooperative human beings in a musical context. It was the musical expression of their larger organizational strategy of mutually supportive collaboration and decision making.

Every one of the group is a master at their craft. They all play(ed) multiple instruments, including their array of toys and noisemakers they dubbed little instruments. Eventually, their stage set would include dozens of reed and brass instruments. Several cages of gongs, bells, drums, shakers stood ready. Costuming ranged from Mitchell's street clothes, to Bowie's lab coat, to Jarman, Moye, and Favors various styles of face paint and uniforms, all carefully chosen to reflect connection to a range of traditions from America to Africa to the Far East. (Jarman became a Buddhist priest during his years with the AEC. Prior to the AACM, he had been in Vietnam. Details are skimpy, but he apparently spent some harsh time deep in the jungle behind enemy lines.)

The Art Ensemble of Chicago were/are anything but random. They worked with focus and commitment – to the music and to each other – in order to place themselves in a position to take advantage of opportunities that came their way. And at their peak, they were quite simply the best performing band on the

planet.

The Big Ears Festival is celebrating two fiftieth anniversaries this year: both ECM Records and the Art Ensemble of Chicago debuted – separately – in 1969. Ten years later, the AEC would join ECM in what would be their most fertile commercial and (arguably) creative period. Certainly, their visibility would reach its peak during their ECM years. (They moved on to the Japanese DIW label c. 1986.) Talk about your harmonic convergence.

While AEC released only 4 albums under ECM during this time, they benefited from what amounted to major label support. ECM's association with Warner Brothers gave them the best marketing and distribution support of their history. Late last year, ECM released a 21-CD box set that includes every ECM recording that featured any of the AEC members, along with a 296-page book chronicling their history with the label.

Even better, ECM viewed touring as a marketing activity for the recordings<fn>These days that equation is inverted.</fn> and provided full economic support for multiple tours of Europe, Japan, and North America. The AEC hauled several tons of equipment, so that support made possible their elaborate, full force presentations. It wasn't just the music: the sheer theatricality of an AEC show – plus the fact that every night was dramatically different – was enough to make driving 10 hours to see a show like a bunch of Deadheads<fn>We did that for the Dead, too, fwiw.</fn> more than worth the effort.

This was the AEC that I encountered 40 years ago, the one that scrambled my DNA and set me on a path that brings me back around to the AEC/ECM birthday hullabaloo at Big Ears. Roscoe Mitchell mentioned last year that their 50th was coming, and I was pretty sure this was going to be part of the Big Ears menu this year. How could it not? And I remember thinking then that I would crawl over broken bottles to be there.

Of the original five, only Mitchell and Moye remain. I have no idea what to expect from the new lineup, which includes Hugh Ragin on trumpet, Junius Paul on bass, and Tomeka Reid on cello. I'm glad they are not trying to replicate the original lineup, though I imagine there is a certain philosophical orientation to the whole thing that evokes the AEC in their prime. Or maybe it will be something completely different, something I never expected to see in my wildest dreams, something that leaves me molecularily rearranged for my next 40 years. I'm willing to take the chance.

(I've written about my love of the Art Ensemble of Chicago before.
The Best. Band. Ever.<fn>ymmv</fn>)

Hat tip to Paul Steinbeck for his terrific AEC history Message to Our Folks. Another great resource is A Power Stronger Than

Itself by George E Lewis, a massive history of the AACM. Get ’em.