The First Instrument #1: Voices Embiggened



The first in a series that will alternate irregularly with ‘So Much Guitar’ and ‘All That Jazz,” a place to talk about the array of beautiful voices. We are awash in a creative tsunami. Life is good.

Today, a look at some of the sirens impending at the 2023 Big Ears Festival.

First off, deepest regrets for i2b falling silent these past months. Between my work for Salvation South and a seemingly endless parade of deaths and illnesses among family and friends, I’ve had to let something slide. Sadly, it was this. But hey, back in the saddle what what!

As always, I am (inordinately, perhaps) excited about the annual Big Ears hoolie in Knoxville next weekend. The schedule is significantly expanded, with a few venues added – 17 in all this time – to spread the crowd out a bit. On the one hand, the expanded schedule creates even more opportunities for option anxiety, with several clusters of seriously essential performers in overlapping time slots. Tragically difficult decisions loom. How I suffer. On the other hand, the last festival found the queues for some of the more popular acts a bit overwhelming; several pals groaned about getting shut out of some shows. So the embiggening of Big Ears this season may actually serve to relieve some of the crowd grumbles that emerged last year.

As always, the lineup is staggeringly cool. Today, I want to focus on the singers. Overall, the fest is a global vocal feast that covers the gamut of styles. Here are my highlighted picks. If you can't be there, there are a bunch of musical rabbit holes you can dive into instead.

First up, my absolute pick of the entire festival: The collaborative trio of vocalist Arooj Aftab, pianist Vijay Iyer, and bassist Shahzad Ismaily.



Their first album together, *Love in Exile*, released today. Aftab, raised in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, moved to the U.S. in 2005 to study at Berklee College of Music. She flew under the radar for a while until her 2021 release *Vulture Prince* – my pick for Album of the Year 2021 – made her the first Pakistani artist to perform at and win a Grammy award. Her set at last year's fest – part of a world tour that included an improbable and triumphant appearance at the Coachella free-for-all that made news in her native Pakistan – was all the buzz before and after her set.

Aftab sang every song but one on *Vulture Prince* in the Urdu language. On *Love in Exile*, it's all Urdu. But that's not nearly the most distinctive aspect of the new album; *Exile* is

a spontaneously composed 70+ minute set that sounds as though the group had meticulously arranged the pieces ahead of time. The sensitivity and deep listening on display here is rare and remarkable in our hyperagitated society. Must. Hear. This.

I'll probably just go ahead and close the Album of the Year competition now.
Another performer at the top of my chart: the luminous genre-straddler Shara Nova, a classically trained, three-octave singer/composer who also works the pop singer-songwriter side of the street. I first heard Shara last year at the Long Play Festival and I was immediately hooked. She appears on opening night in her My Brightest Diamond persona and then again on closing night with the Knoxville Symphony performing the transcendent *My Blue Hour*, my pick for Album of the Year in 2022. Based on the poetry of Carolyn Forché, it was composed by a quintet of five superb women composers: Nova, Caroline Shaw, Angélica Negrón, Sarah Kirkland Snider, Rachel Grimes.

The Blue Hour by Rachel Grimes, Angélica Negrón, Shara Nova, Caroline Shaw, Sarah Kirkland Snider, A Far Cry

We'll have a deep dive on Shara's career and her Big Ears experience at Salvation South in late April.

Three-time Grammy winner Cecile McLorin Salvant is widely considered the preeminent jazz vocalist of our time, but I think that sells her short. Her work certainly has a firm foothold in the jazz realm, but Salvant is in a fact a subtly subversive genre buster. Her repertoire ranges from the Great American Songbook to Kurt Weill to Kate Bush.

Ghost Song by Cecile McLorin Salvant

Her latest album (release today) is a multi-lingual telling of the Euro-folklore myth of Mélusine featuring five original tunes alongside nine interpretations of songs dating as far back as the 12th century.

Here’s a tune from 12th century France, translated into Haitian Creole by Salvant’s father, Alix.

Mélusine by Cecile McLorin Salvant

Probably better to call her a *chanteuse* in recognition of her stylistic range and Haitian and French parentage. Expect a long line for this show.

Allison Russell, born in Montreal but by now firmly and truly a Nashvillian, opens the festival on Thursday at the Bijou. Once known primarily as a member of Rhiannon Giddens’ Our Native Daughters project, Russell is emerging as one of the skyrocket stars of whatever people are calling Americana these days. She recently made waves as the organizer of a star-drenched “Love Rising” protest/benefit concert in response the the Tennessee legislature’s recent legislative targetings of the LGBTQIA+ community. Russell is certain to, um, mention this issue during her appearance at Big Ears, but with all her activism and address of serious social concerns, she remains committed to inspiring us all to be, well, this. Planning a big piece on Russell for Salvation South for later this year.

Outside Child by Allison Russell

The rest of the lineup is too rich to detail here, but there’s one more that I want to highlight. File this one under the “sleeper” category.

Tarta Relena is a “folk duo” from Catalan, but once again genre labels are insufficient to capture what’s going on with these two. They sing in a smattering of Mediterranean languages – including Latin – and draw on sources as varied as Catholic prayers, Sephardic love songs, flamenco, and electronic dance music.

Here’s their take on the “Stabat Mater,” a 13th century hymn to the Virgin Mary. Reckon I’d start going to church again if this kind of thing were on offer.

Fiat Lux by Tarta Relena

I am not really sure what to expect aside from their near-miraculous harmonies but I’m pretty sure this is going to be one of those patented “holee fukk, did you catch…” Big Ears moments.

There are at least another half-dozen women I don’t want to miss but probably will. If you are looking for more rabbit holes, here ya go.

Sona Jobarteh – Born to a long line of Gambian griot masters, Jobarteh is the first woman to become a recognized master of the kora, a 21-string harp/lute ancient to West Africa. She also plays piano, guitar, and cello.

Ibeyi – Parisian-born twin sisters who sing in English, French, Spanish, and Yoruba, their music is a smart blend of traditional styles and contemporary styles. They pull off the kind of two bodies/one voice harmonies that it seems only siblings can manage. Joyful and rhythmically irresistible.

Maeve Gilchrist – A master of the Celtic harp and a member of Arooj Aftab’s band, Gilchrist laid me out last year with her originals and covers of folks like Richard Thompson. Go for the Scottish lilt alone.

Apologies to whoever I missed. Mea culpa.

Go. Listen.