All That Jazz #2: Big Ears, Not Fig Ears



The allegedly weekly(ish) All That Jazz feature takes a gander at the jazz fest within the 2023 Big Ears Festival.

The Big Ears hullaballoo offers an almost preposterously wide range of musical styles, but you could just as easily spend the four festival days in your own hermetic jazz bubble. As long as your defininition of ‘jazz’ is a tad more flexible than, oh, Stanley Crouch or Albert Murray. So let’s go ahead and start with the stuff that makes the moldy figs cry.moldy fig: A 1940s modern jazz fan’s derogatory term for a fan of traditional jazz. It’s fun to note that many of those modern jazz fans became moldy figs themselves. (cf. Albert Murray and Stanley Crouch)

Let’s start with the John Zorn 70th birthday celebration, itself a sort of mini-fest within the Big Ears parentheses. You could park yourself at noon Saturday in the Tennessee Theater and stay put until the Sunday fest finale listening to all Zorn, all the time.

Zorn is hard to pigeonhole, though jazz is probably the prevelant component of his work. Zorn’s most apparent musical influence is probably Ornette Coleman – his alto sax style fits neatly into the current Ornette set in motion – but he is in no way an imitator. A committed improviser like Coleman, he has also gone deep into writing music that wanders far from the core of jazz vernacular (like Ornette’s symphonic and

chamber compositions). He was one of the prime movers of the late-80s NYC 'downtown' scene that was as much rock as it was jazz. He writes for everything from solo piano to chamber trios to a capella vocal ensembles to large ensembles that eat genre boundaries for breakfast.

Last year, Zorn closed the festival with a 12-piece version of New Electric Masada that left everybody's jaw on the ground. (Imagine electric Miles as played by King Crimson with assist from the Ornette's Prime Time Band.) This year's capper is Zorn's famous *Cobra* composition, though composition falls short of describing the proceedings; Zorn refers to it as a "game piece." *Cobra* consists of a set of rules, printed on a deck of cards, that tell the musicians what to play. Zorn acts as the "prompter" – a variant on conducting/conduction – who directs the shape and pace of the piece by revealing the cards in whatever order he chooses. No two *Cobra* performances can possibly be the same and the possible instrumentation combinations are infinite.

Here's a New England Conservatory presentation of *Cobra* from 2014. The two guitarists, Wendy Eisenberg and Will Greene, will be part of the Big Ears performance.

Last year I caught 7 Zorn shows of every possible variety. You cannot go wrong here. To add to the allure, Zorn's music is almost impossible to come by via streaming, and he rarely ventures beyond NYC. Go. Listen.

Another fest-within-a-fest possibility centers around the International Anthem Record Company out of Chicago, which has emerged as one of my favorite labels over the past few years. Things kick off on Thursday night at 10.15 with the Rob Marurek Exploding Star Orchestra, whose new album, *Lightning Dreamers*, drops this Friday. At Big Ears, the Orchestra features keyboardists Craig Taborn and Angelica Sanchez, drummers Chad Taylor and Gerald Cleaver, cellist Tomeka Reid, guitarist Mary Halvorson, and words/samples from Damon Locks.

I would go see any combination of these players, but Mazurek has created a framework that multiplies their gifts into something damn near otherwordly.

Lightning Dreamers by Rob Mazurek – Exploding Star Orchestra

Friday evening brings two of International Anthem’s most visible projects: Irreversible Entanglements and Makaya McCraven’s *In These Times*. *ITT*, one of the most talked about jazz releases of 2022, is a deeply layered production that is equal parts swing, hip-hop beats, luxe 70s r&b, and acid jazz.

In These Times by Makaya McCraven

Irreversible Entanglements is one of my favorite current jazz groups. Fronted by the transcending starship known as Moor Mother, this band has picked up the vibe of late-70s Art Ensemble of Chicago – Great Black Music Ancient to the Future – and brought it slamming into the Soaring ’20s.

Who Sent You? by Irreversible Entanglements

Mazurek and Locks team up for *New Future City Radio* on Friday at noon. I have no idea what this duo set holds in store, but I plan to be there to find out. Harpist Brandee Younger delivers a solo set at St. John’s Cathedral Saturday evening, and force-of-nature tuba beast Theon Cross hits Sunday afternoon at Jackson Terminal. International Anthem, represent!

OK, you say, is there any *real* jazz on the docket? First off, shame on you, you moldy fig; go get your ears embiggened and unfiggened!

But yes, there’s plenty for “real jazz” fans of whatever purity. There are legends aplenty: Sun Ra Arkestra, Charles

Lloyd, Andrew Cyrille, Reggie Workman, Bill Frisell, Joe Lovano, William Parker. Every one of these performers represents the deep and rich implications of whatever jazz was/is/will be. Every show is a guaranteed winner, but here are my picks.

- Sun Ra Arkestra: The past, present, and future all in one handy package, the Arkestra is led by Marshall Allen, damn near 98 years old and still going strong. His work over the past several years is focused on bringing as much of Sun Ra's unrecorded legacy to light as possible. Allen joined the Arkestra in 1958 and never left. See this band; I've done so nearly 30 times.
- Charles Lloyd Chapel Trio: At age 85, Lloyd is playing the best music of his historic career. His 60s quartet launched the careers of Jack DeJohnette, Keith Jarrett, Cecil McBee, and their live album *Forest Flower* remains one of the best-sellers in jazz history. Chapel Trio features Bill Frisell and bassist Thomas Morgan. Guaranteed to blow your mind.
- Joe Lovano Trio Tapestry: This trio features pianist Marilyn Crispell, one of my absolute favorites. Best known for her work with Anthony Braxton and often compared to Cecil Taylor, Crispell is also capable of delivering the most quietly devastating beauty a piano can produce. Highly recommended.
- Tyshawn Sorey Trio: Drummer/composer Sorey is establishing himself as a major force in the music. This trio is direct descendent of the great Paul Motian Trio, with Sorey assuming the Motian's throne; Frisell and Lovano played in the Motian Trio for decades and they have the kind of empathic connection that only comes with years if time listening and responding to one another.
- Vijay Iyer Trio: One of three Big Ears sets from Iyer, this one features his working trio of drummer Sorey and bassist Linda May Han Oh. If you don't know Iyer's

music, change that malady immediately.

- James Brandon Lewis: Lewis is one of *the* up and coming players in the music. His 2021 album *Jesup Wagon* is a modern day classic that's firmly in the tradition. His latest, *Eye of I*, ventures farther afield. It's a collaboration with the Messthetics guitar/bass/drums trio that calls to mind the Sonny Sharrock/Pharoah Saunders ravers and includes covers of both Donny Hathaway and Cecil Taylor. Maybe better to say it expands the field. This could be one of the secret miracles of this year's festival.
- Trio Imagination: Drummer Andrew Cyrille and bassist Reggie Workman played in a trio with Oliver Lake for decades. When Lake retired, they recruited pianist David Virelles. Between them, Cyrille and Workman have played with pretty much every important jazz musician of the past 60 years. The 30-year old Virelles brings youth and his Cuban heritage to bear against their formidable legacy and never comes up short.
- Ned Rothenberg's Crossing Quartet: Moldy figs, beware. Rothenberg represents the outer edges of the tradition. Joined by the superb pianist Sylvie Courvosier, guitarist Mary Halvorson, and drummer Tomas Fujiwara, this one sits high on my own gotta-see list, largely because Courvoisier is purely awesome.
- Wadada Leo Smith's Purple Kikuyu: I wrote at length about the legendary Wadada last year because he is one of the most important musicians in the jazz vein of the past 50 years. This quartet features pianist Erika Dohi, cellist Ashley Waters, and the magnificent Pheeroan ak Laff on drums.
- See also my piece on the many guitarists playing at Big Ears this year. Lotsa jazz, you betcha.
- Also too: The Bad Plus, Tarbaby with David Murray, Antonio Sanchez, and on and on. All eminently worthy, unlike myself who is a miserable worm for not covering everyone in the depth they deserve. Mea culpa.

Disclosure and Advice

Full Disclosure: This listing does not take into account schedule conflicts. There is simply no way to catch all this unless you've mastered cloning or time hopping or the like. It hurts. Friday night and Saturday afternoon are especially painful just choosing among the jazz possibilities. Add in some of the Odds and Allsorts (coming soon) and the festival can become an exercise in tormenting option anxiety.

What to do? My advice is make your choice and commit to it. Don't do the "I'll catch ten minutes of X and run over to 15 minutes of Y before Z starts…" This way madness lies. Go to a show. Settle in. Plan on staying. If it doesn't grab you, move along to something else. But the scramble to catch *everyone* doesn't really add up.

Or maybe it does and I just suck at that sort of thing.

Go. Listen.