# Ask Your Doctor if Big Ears is Right For You



From the moment Big Ears announced their grand themes for 2019 – anniversary celebrations for the Art Ensemble of Chicago and ECM Records – it was clear that this year's hullabaloo would occasion extended reflection on my not-yet-long-enough life of digging into music.

Add in my approaching 60th and the 35th anniversary of my betrothal to Stanwyck (still my best move ever). Now toss in the daughter graduating from university and the son off and away to same. Way too many milestones converging to avoid some deep recapitulation of where I've been and where I'm going, not to mention how the various wheel spokes and dangling strands have managed to, somehow, add up to something that looks like a coherent narrative. Despite the fact that the whole shebang has been something of an improvisatory tap dance all along.

And then the old dog died. Never mind that whole cancer thing I was working overtime to pretend was not looming. Fook, mon. The universe was hitting me with some serious hey-bub shoulder tapping, mos def.

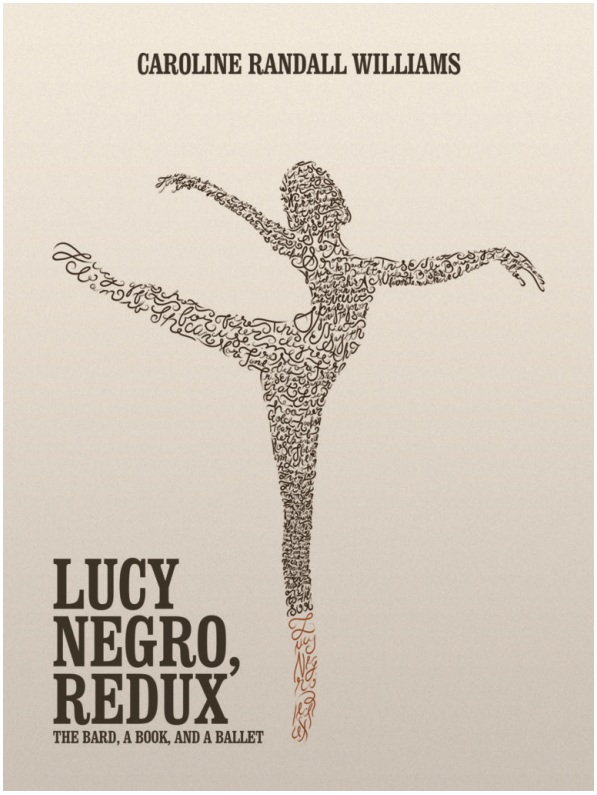
So yeah and truly, I was ripe for something that reeked of the dreaded curse of nostalgia, that sad wallowing in what used to be that lets us ignore – to some extent – what is and will be. At the same time, there was plenty on the schedule that is relatively new to me, and there are always surprises in store

if you take a wrong turn or get turned away from a too-full venue.

Full disclosure: My main goal for the Big Ears weekend was to cultivate a state of total denial re: my health realities, bolstered by hearing ALL the musics and drinking ALL the beers. As long as the music was playing and the beer was pouring, all that chemotherapy shit was just a distant fantasy. Take me away, yo.

## Wednesday

We drove up a day early to catch the *Lucy Negro, Redux* ballet, featuring the music of Rhiannon Giddens. I have been on a Rhiannon binge lately and was very excited to see this. The staging for *Lucy* is wonderful, and as far as my ignorant eyes can tell, so was the dancing. The music was plagued by some technical issues, but was still very effective. The great strength of the production – and perhaps its ultimate undoing – lies in poet Caroline Randall Williams' dynamite recitation of her text that is the basis of the ballet. I could not take my eyes off her. She was Lucy made flesh.



At one point, Williams strolled off stage and I suddenly realized that there were a dozen dancers on stage. Her presence had quite literally obliterated the rest of the team. Overall, the production was not quite what I had hoped for, but there were several instances of authentic power and beauty that make *Lucy Negro, Redux* worth catching if you get the chance. I imagine that, over time, the imbalances will get worked out. In the meantime, order her book. It is a knockout.

## Thursday

The following noontime we enjoyed Giddens and her *Lucy Negro* collaborator Francesco Turrisi in a lunchtime performance at Visit Knoxville. Community radio WDVX airs a live performance every weekday at noon, usually regionals and the occasional touring act. The line for this was enormous, a harbinger for the rest of the fest.Almost every show I attended was packed. It is hard to see how the festival can get any bigger.

With none of the technical issues of the night before, and in a space that was downright intimate, this sucker took flight from the get go. Performing pieces from their upcoming album, *there is no Other*, Giddens and Turrisi weaved spells. No other way to say it. From Sicilian folk tunes that sounded like Celtic reels to re-imagining of operatic classics like “Black Swan”, the duo clearly demonstrated one strand of Giddens’ ongoing musical project: that all of our musics, indeed, all of us, are intimately entwined and connected. There is, literally, no such thing as “Other.”

And then she went and sang “Wayfaring Stranger”, and I was that stranger, laid bare. I was coming undone, unmoored. As if that were not enough, Rhiannon announced “I am not really a believer, but this song is a comfort to me when I need strength,” launching into a heartbreaking rendition of “He Will See You Through,” at one point hitting a note so long and pure and penetrating that any pretense of denying cancer puddled at my feet. And I, as unbelieving an unbeliever as you

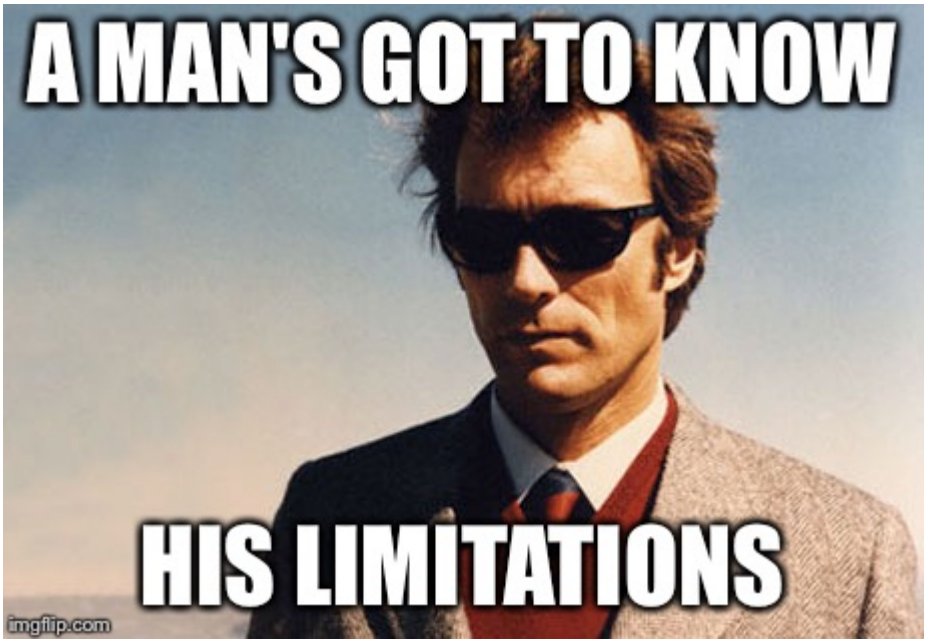
will find outside of any foxhole, found himself undone, in the very best possible way.

(My favorite Paul Simon lyric is ‘Sometimes, even music / Cannot substitute for tears.’ True. And Sometimes, they just go hand in hand.)

We grabbed a nice lunch, Stanwyck and I. It was her first trip to Big Ears, so we wandered around town a bit and took in the sights. Then it was time for Your Narrator to get to work. I had arranged an interview with Rhiannon and Francesco before I realized the extent of my illness. I was tired, but would have crawled over broken glass for the chance to chat with this singular artist.

I was the last of probably four or five interviewers that afternoon, and my arrival was not the occasion of great rejoicing. The first few minutes were rough going, but I somehow found a way to get Rhiannon revved up, and man, she talked a blue streak for near about an hour. It was beautiful and revelatory and pure pleasure. At the end, I thanked her for enduring yet another Q&A, and she thanked me, saying that not all interviews are created equal. I have the transcript and will post it here at the blog soon.

Then I went back to my room and fell fast asleep. I could have fallen asleep in the elevator. This was the moment I realized that my usual Big Ears strategy of live fast and sleep little was never going to work. It was time to explore the nuances of letting go.




I caught a bite and a beer at a pop-up Richard Thompson performance/broadcast, a terrific little event where he competed with a wall of televisions broadcasting the NCAA basketball tournament. As always, he was terrific, but the radio announcer kept asking him dumb questions so that he only had time for three songs. But the last was “I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight,” so I was a happy boy as I dashed over to The Standard for my first dose of Frisell.

The duo of Bill Frisell and Thomas Morgan is destined to rank among the great duos in jazz history. Think Jim Hall and Bill Evans or Jim Hall and Ron Carter. Intimate and sophisticated conversations between two players who know the music and each other inside out. It was an hour of string telepathy, with an ample dose of Monk leavened by a romp through “Wildwood Flower.” My only quibble, and one that pertains to many of the shows at The Standard: This is music better suited to sitting down and settling.

We met friends and grabbed a bite. The weather was raw and I was fading hard. I moved to call it a night. Stanwyck, bless her, was having none of it and rallied me to the next show. She was, naturally, correct to do so. The Artifacts Trio — Nicole Mitchell on flute, Tameka Reid on cello, and Mike Reed on drums — is a third generation AACM ensemble that demands

reconsideration of our ideas of what a jazz trio can sound like. Running through originals and a handful of AACM classics by composers like Steve McCall, Mitchell is the most enjoyable jazz flautist I've ever heard. She has a full and muscular tone that she leavens with accompanying vocalizations, and she swings hard. I was so glad I was there.

And then I was done, asleep before midnight at Big Ears for the second night in a row. Wimp. So many great artists on the Thursday late schedule that I would have loved to hear.

## Friday

Up in time for a proper breakfast and back to The Standard for Rafiq Bhatia's *Breaking English*. This is a seriously smart and grooving power trio, spiced with lots of real-time laptop manipulation by all three players. Drummer Ian Chang is definitely someone to keep an eye on, but it is Bhatia who pulls this together. Superb.



Onward to catch a bit of the Alvin Lucier concert. Based on perceptible wave conflicts created by instruments playing pitches close-but-not-quite-the-same, these gorgeous pieces demanded exquisite levels of pitch control from the musicians. Deep listening plus.

Then a deep dilemma: Mary Halvorson and Code Girl or Harold Budd with nief-norf? I opted for Budd in the Church. The place was jammed and the music was glorious. But. The experience of listening to recorded Budd is a seamless drift from one piece to the next. In concert, there was poorly thought out shuffling of musicians and sheet musics from one piece to the next, with evident confusion as to who belonged where. Since his pieces are often kind of short, the effect was like a case of the hiccups, making it difficult to relax into the flow. Based on the crowd reaction, my opinion is decidedly minority.



I scurried over to the Trance Map+ show at The Bijou, an 8-piece electro-acoustic improv performance headed up by Evan Parker and Ned Rothenberg. This was a sensitively rendered set, with delicate textures and colors that never overwhelmed. That all of life could be so lovely.

Time for Ralph Towner. This was high on my list of must-see concerts. Towner is about as prototypical an ECM artist as you can imagine, and his recital here was almost everything I could have hoped for.Why oh why did he ignore the piano? Not quite jazz, and surely not quite classical, it was somehow both of these things and then some. Mastery and beauty from a musician who has provided more than a little of the soundtrack of my life, this was an hour spent in a cocoon of pure musical pleasure, though I must admit that the late John Abercrombie sprang to mind several times, which naturally led to considerations of other great ECM artists – Don Cherry, Colin Wolcott, Nana, and so on – who are no longer with us, which in

turn led – naturally – to considerations of mortality and the swift flight of time's arrow and goddamit there I am again deprived my state of blissful denial. And yet, it was somehow okay. And beautiful.

A hustle crosstown to The Standard for a high-expectation show from ABSINT, with Tim Berne, David Torn, Bill Frisell, and NOLA hero Aurora Nealand. Maybe my expectations were a trap, but this one never gelled for me. It was like watching an overweight seabird trying to gain speed for takeoff. With rocks tied to its wings. Alas.

This kind of improv performance is tricky, especially for a group that has not played together before. The chance of serendipity, of the angels descending to blow trumpets of gold, is real. Absent that, though, the kind of anticipation and nuance that develops over a long period of playing together is not available to the group. Someday I hope to walk out of an ABSINT show and say, "Man, they have really got it together now." Someday.

Time for a bite and beer and on to one of my highly anticipated shows: Meredith Monk and her Vocal Ensemble. From the first time I heard her ECM debut, *Dolmen Music*, I was hooked by the evident sense of humor, compassion, and decency in her music. Stanwyck was flagging, so it was my turn to rally her. It was the right move. This Monk was probably her favorite show of the weekend.

Performing pieces from her latest work, *Cellular Songs*, Monk's ensemble was a vision of powerful womanhood. The combination of simple choreography and elaborate vocal constructions was intended to evoke the life and interactions of cells. The piece was, Monk told us, inspired by the book *Emperor of All Maladies*, an epic history of, well…an epic history of fucking cancer.

Is there no escape?

No, nor does there need to be. The connection was more oblique than preachment, and the sheer joy cascading off Monk and her wymmins brought me and Stanwyck into a state of sheerly giddy happiness and comfort. Honestly, I wish I could visit Meredith Monk every day for a cup of tea, just to hang out.

She closed with two pieces from *Dolmen Music*, the elegaic "Gotham Lullaby" – which took us both to tears – and the timelessly hysterical "The Tale" from her *Education of the Girl Child* cycle. Pure magic.

The late night offerings were serious temptations, but the thought of putting any other sound atop the Monk felt disrespectful. So for a third night, to bed at Big Ears well before midnight.

Letting go, people. Letting go.

## Saturday

Without getting into detail, let's just say that Friday night and Saturday morning saw my symptoms worsen pretty aggressively and I began to wonder if my brilliant scheme of cocooning myself in denial was dumb as a box of rocks.

But I hurled myself upright and ambled over to The Emporium for a session of Sound and Silence with Abigail Washburn and Bill Frisell. Had no idea what to expect, but I definitely did not expect 100-plus folks milling about a space that would comfortably hold 40. Some quick thinking by the Big Ears team led us to parade out the door, down the stairs, under the tracks and down an alley to a dance studio where volunteers where hastily setting up chairs. We were instructed to turn off our phones – no exceptions! – and cautioned that no one would able to leave once the event began.

The almost supernaturally charming Ms. Washburn settled us in with instructions. Sit quietly. Bill would play a single note. After ten minutes of Silence, Bill would play for twenty

minutes. In this instance, he played direct to amp: no effects or trickery, just a guy sitting around and playing. He eventually found his way into “We Shall Overcome.” Then he was done. Ten more Silent minutes punctuated by a single note.

That’s it. Simple. Magical. And for me, incredibly familiar from my many years spent sitting in circles, silently. Big Ears asks us to recognize connections, tendrils of contact that we might tend to overlook, so there I was in my ECM/Art Ensemble cocoon catching a timely reminder of my legacy within the Guitar Craft community, a span that covered a good 30 years. Rich.

As someone who has not dropped onto a sitting cushion for many years, this was a beckoning: Perhaps time to re-examine the possibilities inherent in such a practice. Dobbs knows I will have plenty of time in the coming months to explore depths of Silence and Stillness.

I literally could have gone la la for the rest of the afternoon in the sunshine. I had to force myself to The Standard for Columbia Icefield at noon. I am so glad I did.

Led by trumpeter Nate Wooley and featuring the fabulous Mary Halvorson (guitar) and Susan Alcorn (pedal steel), this set represents everything I go to Big Ears for. It is adventuresome music, a sophisticated meld of composition and structured improvisation executed by musicians who can flat out play but, more importantly, know how to listen. Brilliantly conceived and executed, and even better, new to my ears.



Slipped next door to Sweet P’s Barbecue for the fifth or sixth time. The place is too damn good. Don’t tell anyone.

Back into The Standard for another show that really should have been seated, Wadada Leo Smith’s *Solo Reflections and Meditations on Monk*. Wadada is all about space and the elasticity of time, and his music, while beautiful and full of soul, can be downright disorienting, a string of tied whole notes at 40 bpm doing their best to unmoor my sense of permanence. I had to sit on the floor for most of this.

Grabbed a quick nap in the sun and then back into The Standard for Thumbscrew, Mary Halvorson’s stab at power trio noisifying. Super powerful, nobody seemed to mind standing through this one. Just one clever composition and solo after another, with enough sonic punch to make even the most pedal-happy guitar geek happy. Halvorson continues to develop herself as one of the most instantly identifiable guitarists on the scene. Her embrace of standards – the Herbie Nichols classic House Party was a Thumbscrew highlight – in

conjunction with her spiky Braxtonian pedigree makes her someone I can listen to all day and night. Huzzah!

I scurried quick to meet Stanwyck for the Carla Bley Trio at the Tennessee Theatre. Bley and her husband Steve Swallow are two superheroes in my pantheon. They do not play too little; they do not play too much. There is an economy and precision to their music that sets them apart from pretty much anybody else you can name. Here's one of my favorite Carla quotes:

> *"I'm like a slow sponge, I take in ideas from everywhere, and when I eventually find my notes, I know they're the right ones."*

They focused on music from their latest ECM release, *Trios*. But in the end, they turned to Bley's magnificent re-setting of Thelonious Monk's "Mysterioso", originally conceived for a big band, but every bit as penetrating in the trio format. From the moment Andy Sheppard breathed the opening note to her intro-outro melody, my heart caught, and I spent the next five minutes or so in purely purgative sobbing, enveloped by music that felt as timeless as the nearly 60 years I've spent on this planet so far. Suspended. Cocooned. Safe. And yet, as vulnerable as the day I was born.

As with the Meredith Monk set, it seemed wrong to layer something as aggressive as Time Berne's Snakeoil or the Messthetic on top of the Bley. These are two bands I had high on my must-see list, but a little food, good conversation with old friends, and a beer or seven took precedence.

And then. The legendary Jack DeJohnette Trio, featuring the sons of Coltrane and Garrison. The man seems to levitate behind the drum kit, his sound as instantly recognizable as any musician I know. Ravi Coltrane delivered the goods, especially on sopranino sax, and Matt Garrison mixed laptop samples in with his heavy low end. A high point: Their rendition of the Coltrane classic "Alabama". Spine chillers.

Again, there was so much on the late night schedule that I so wanted to hear. Makaya McCraven, more Budd, Nils Frahm. The films of Bill Morrison with live music by Frisell and trio. Sons of Kemet. The all night Drone Flight.

Stanwyck wisely steered me to the hotel, abed pre-midnight a fourth night in a row.

Letting go, people. Letting go.

## Sunday

Slept in, up just in time to catch the bus to an offsite event at the Loghaven Artist Residency in South Knoxville. The foundation behind this organization is a major supporter of Big Ears, and this was a chance to show off this gorgeous property to a bunch of artists and journalists and others lucky enough to wangle an invite. Harold Budd played for about 25 minutes in a room jammed with 30 people. It was pretty perfect.

Next up, a farm-to-table twist on the traditional Southern meat-and-three served up by hotshot local chef Jesse Newmister. Along the way, we met up with painter Carole D'Inverno. Stanwyck told her, "My husband loves your husband, but I am a fan of your work." We had a lovely time chatting, and I teased Carole with, "Someday I will tell Bill how he changed my life. But not yet."

By the time the bus got back to town, we were aced out of the Richard Thompson show. We dawdled a bit until time for Frisell's Harmony, featuring Petra Haden. It was Frisell choral music, sumptuous arrangements of well-recognized classics and oddball tunes. Truly gorgeous and understated – especially the lovely *Lush Life* – the set wended its way into *We Shall Overcome*. When they hit the verse of "We are not afraid" I crumbled. The fuck we aren't pal. But of course, even those singing this under the harshest conditions across history were scared AF. The point. We are WE. Afraid? Oh fuck

yes.

I was mopping the tears off my face when Carole appeared. “Come with me,” she said, and I followed, and there I was being introduced to Bill and I tried to explain how much his work had meant to me, how it had changed me in ways that go way beyond “just” music. It went about as well as could be expected, which is why I have avoided meeting him on several occasions for the past 15 years. But he was kind and gracious in the face of my fanboy blabbering. Maybe next time I see him I won’t be so tongue tied.

Time for dinner with pals and then the Big Event: the 50th Anniversary of the Art Ensemble of Chicago. It was so very different from the AEC of my youth. Fifteen musicians, including several women and several white folks. This is not your Daddy’s AEC, yet its identity was apparent from the start.

The music was over the top wonderful. The squalls of noise and the vast areas of lingering space, the virtuosity and the joyous cacaphony of the “little instruments”. Roscoe wailing, Famoudou bringing the thunder from the drum kit. Also too: Moor Mother delivered the gospel, real deal.

I admit it was jarring to see Moye walking with a cane, the passage of time having its way with this Sun Warrior. But it was still him, still delivering. We all of us slow down a step eventually, no?

Yes.

Back to the hotel where the bar was a veritable smorgasbord of musical heroes ready for the chatting. But I was done.

Letting. Go.

## So What Does It All Add Up To?

I get it. It is easy to get sucked into the grind of just

making it from one day to the next, easy to lose the plot in the minutiae. It is easy to take a nap and wake up 20, 40, 50 years later. Music has been the through line for me, the constant touchstone that I have always been able to tap for a reminder of some core essence of me no matter how snoozy I can get. Old music, new music, music that matters. It is the thing that has kept me as close to on track as I have been able to manage.

But there is nothing like the specter of looming mortality to sharpen the senses, to deliver that proverbial poke of the pointy stick that says, “Wake the fuck up, fella, shit is getting real.” And so I maneuvered this year’s Big Ears in a state of some not-at-all-mild tumult, passing easily in a cycle of denial, sheer bliss, discomfort, and full on panic fear. Yet always supported and comforted by the music and the people that make the music possible. And of course, by the she who has made me a better person, Stanwyck herself.

Bless her, she was afraid that the festival would wear me down to my last ounce of energy, that it was a fool’s errand, that I would feel awful when the music stopped. And she was pretty much correct.

Except: I could have spent those five days fretting around the house, wishing I had gone to Knoxville. I could have spent five days “resting” for my treatment. And I would have been miserable, and probably not felt any better than I did when I turned up at the hospital two days after Big Ears ended to surrender myself to the tender mercies of the cancer-industrial complex.

And I would have not had this, this memory and inscribed experience that I have tried to relate here, something for which language is insufficient, but which emerged as real and tangible as I lay awake gazing at a chemo pump at 3 a.m., as I tossed and turned, as I began to experience the inevitable consequences of dripping cytotoxic chemicals into my

bloodstream over the next 4-6 months.

If the doctors (and the nurses, may Dobbs bless them every one) manage to save my hide, I won’t claim that Big Ears saved my life. But I will damn sure say that it gave me a sense of contiguous connection with the me of 40 years ago, with the me of 20, 15, 2 years ago. And that it likely prepared my psyche for the ongoing science experiments that are the current quotidian fare.

So ask your doctor if Big Ears is right for you. If she says no, find a new doctor. And mark this down: I will see you there next year, motherfuckers.