

So Much Guitar #1: Mary Halvorson



So Much Guitar is i2b's weekly(ish) coverage of the best of the gajillion tremendous guitarists out there.

Doing it the hard way, one string slinger at a time. How long could it possibly take?

(Feature photo (c) Julian Parker-Burns)

Every week or two seems to bring another release featuring Mary Halvorson, a musician who has established herself over the past dozen years as one of the main names in 21st century jazz guitar. She gained early notice for her work with the legendary Anthony Braxton – her Wesleyan College music professor who inspired her, after one class session, to drop her biology major and commit to music – and has so far appeared on approximately 176 albumsAs per Rick Lopez's labor-of-love fansite ([click here](#)), and assuming I can count that high with accuracy., collaborating with a who's who catalog of her peers. She is a prolific composer who seems to be constantly on tour or in the studio. Honestly, does she ever sleep?

Halvorson is also one of those rare guitarists (e.g., Garcia, Fripp, Frisell) who is identifiable within a handful of notes. Like Frisell, she turns up in boodles of unexpected contexts, always enhancing the proceedings while sounding like literally no one but Mary Halvorson. Some of it has to do with her distinctive use of pedal effects, but like the three players I named it mostly comes down to tone, vocabulary, and syntax.

Her lines – intervallically angular and rhythmically skittering – sound like nobody else. And aside from being virtuosic, her playing belies a wry sense of humor; the music may be on the edge of avant-whatever, but it is never a stuffy, button-that-top-button kind of affair.

In May, Halvorson released two albums simultaneously on the Nonesuch label. *Belladonna* showcases her composing chops for string quartet (The Mivos Quartet) augmented by her guitar improvisations. Particularly noteworthy is the title track that closes the album, packed with thorny harmonies and overdriven by Mary's unhinged soloing over the final minute and a half.

Mivos Quartet also turns up for half of the tracks on *Amaryllis*, augmenting a sextet anchored by the drummer most likely to be found in a Halvorson production, the great Tomas Fujiwara. "Night Shift" opens with a staggered 5/4 pulse that swings like it's hanging by a rope. Jacob Garchik on trombone and trumpeter Adam O'Farrill play a gorgeous unison line over Patricia Brennan's vibraphone comping that recalls Grachan Moncur III's great mid-sixties Blue Note albums. Alternating between group improvisation and soloist-out-front excursions, it is one of my all-time favorite Halvorson tracks among literally dozens of notable candidates.

At the end of this month (September 30 if you are into that whole precision thing), the trio Thumbscrew will release (*Multicolored Midnight*, Cuneiform Records), their seventh album and a celebration of ten years as a band, a real honest to dog *band* and not just an assortment of people who happen to play together from time to time. With Michael Formanek on bass and the ever-present Fujiwara on drums and vibes, Thumbscrew represents some of Halvorson's most challenging *and* accessible work. The music veers easily between pretty and pretty weird, surprising transitions that work only because the players have such instinctive rapport after so many hundreds/thousands of hours playing together in different

formats.

Multicolored Midnight is a follow-up to *The Anthony Braxton Project* (Cunieform Records), which is perhaps the most accessible introduction to Braxton's work I have ever heard. The two albums before that – the companion releases *Ours* and *Theirs* – helped relaunch the invaluable Cunieform Records operation. *Ours* is a set of original pieces, three from each member, while *Theirs* features ten jazz near-standards; it's a quirky selection of tunes that works beautifully. All four albums were recorded in Pittsburgh, which has become a sort of second home to the Brooklyn-based trio via a string of residencies at City of Asylum.

Multicolored Midnight by Thumbscrew

Midnight is simultaneously sharp cornered and smoothly grooving, the rhythm section more than a match for Halvorson's propellant picking. There are compositions by each member, but the ultimate development of the work arises from a democratic alliance of people who know each in a way that only emerges over an long period of cooperative partnership. Of particular note, the tracks with Fujiwara on vibes suggests a radical sonic modernization of the classic Red Norvo Trio with Charles Mingus and Tal Farlow, a tad more bent but every bit as attendant to the air between the notes as that classic combo. (Check that old shit out, y'all. Those cats were not fooling.)

As if this were not enough, Mary found time for Nate Wooley's latest Columbia Icefield album, the superb *Ancient Songs of Burlap Heroes*. There was also a European tour with pianist Sylvie Courvoisier in support of their late 2021 release *Searching For The Disappeared Hour*, documented beautifully here in a February, 2002 performance in Amsterdam.

A little poke at the google machine will reveal more great Halvorson material than you can shake a guitar at. And if you wouldn't mind some sound (sic) advice: Get thee hie to the

2023 Big Ears Festival in Knoxville. She will perform the *Belladonna/Amaryllis* music and appear as part of the John Zorn 70th birthday ruckus. Maybe more.

Go. Listen.

The Ears, They Embiggen



Every year I eagerly await that unmistakable harbinger of autumn that lifts my spirits and brings me hope for better days ahead. No, it's not that god forsaken pumpkin spice everything. And for us inmates of America's most phallic-shaped state it damn sure ain't the crisp snap of cool and dry weather.

I speak of course of the annual unveiling of the Big Ears Festival's roster for the coming year's hullabaloo in Knoxville. Today's the day! Tickets go on sale September 14 at 9 a.m. EDT. Fair warning: If you want to attend, act early. Last year was completely sold out weeks before the first note sounded, and hotel reservations can be very hard to come by, especially the downtown joints that allow you to park your car when you arrive and basically forget where you stashed it until you get ready to leave.

This year marks the tenth iteration of this one-of-a-kind festival – founded in 2009, they skipped some years due to COVID and other difficulties – and the lineup so far is packed

with names that promise to make the 2023 gathering worthy of its round number celebration. This is just the first tranche of artists gathering in East Tennessee next March 30 to April 2. There will be several more unveilings in the coming months, with last minute surprises dropping even after the gala is underway.

Unlike a handful of earlier lineups, it is difficult to narrow things down to one or two defining names for the program. As always, the world of jazz (whatever that means these days) is represented by several of the more prominent names in the music. Living legends like Charles Lloyd, ~~Wadada Leo Smith~~, William Parker, and Bill Frisell stand out. Younger artists, the people who hold the future of this music in their heads/hands/hearts, include huge names like Mary Halvorson, Christian McBride, Makaya McCraven, Tyshawn Sorey, and Vijay Iyer.

~~(I'm especially excited to see Wadada in the lineup; I've been working on a profile of his nearly 60 year career since Spring and I am still trying to get my head around the gargantuan amount — and breadth — of work he has created. Look for this deep dive round about Wadada's 81st birthday, this December at Salvation South.)~~

NOTE: The news of Wadada appearances is evidently a product of my fevered imagination. Egg on my face and all that. Mea maxima &c. I'm still dropping that Wadada deep dive for his birthday, though.

Big Ears was born touting the world of new music/classical/whatever (genres, man! ptah!), and they continue that tradition with a presentation of Steve Reich's string quartets and the work of composers like Eliane Radigue and Catherine Lamb. I would not be surprised to see some of ~~Wadada~~ and Sorey in this realm as well, given ~~their~~ his genre-obliterating output of late; but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Fittingly for a festival in the Tennessee mountains, bluegrass and *Americana* (somebody please come up with a new word) is smartly represented by cats like Bela Fleck and Sierra Hull. The alt-rock crowd can look forward to Iron & Wine, The Mountain Goats, and Terry Allen. Expect this sector to fill out as March approaches.

The offering for guitar geeks (mea culpa) is a banquet. Aside from Frisell and Halvorson, you've got Marc Ribot, James Blood Ulmer, Bill Orcutt, Ava Mendoza, and Rafiq Bhatia. (fwiw, I've been preparing a few articles about several of these folks for a new recurring feature for i2b called *So Much Guitar*. First installment coming on September 14 featuring Mary Halvorson.)

As always, Big Ears spans the globe. The Catalan duo of Tarta Relena sings music that spans from Cosica, Mallorca, Monorca, Crete, and the Balearic Islands. Think an amalgam of the Western and Eastern tonal traditions of the trans-Mediterranean region combined with subtly applies electronics and minimalist percussion. It's a lush sound that spans centuries and sets new standards, both for the depth of sound two people can deliver and the ongoing development of electronics working as organically as acoustic instruments.

(Full disclosure: I had never heard of Tarta Relena until this press release landed. They have fast risen to the top of my list of sonic obsessions. Watch this.)

Descending from one of Gambia's five principal griot families, Sona Jobarteh is the first woman from the lineage to play the kora – a 21-string sort-of-harp – professionally. Her music is faithful to tradition and as hot as anything happening on the planet today. Mind dropping plucked string interplay, groove aplenty, and her voice is touched by an angel. Expect a crowd for this one.

Speaking of voices touched by an angel: One of last year's highlights was a performance by Pakistani singer Arooj Aftab,

just a week before she became the first musician from that country to win a Grammy. She's back this year in collaboration with pianist Vijay Iyer and multi-instrumental iconoclast Shahzad Ismaily. If this track from their appearance at the Resonant Bodies Festival is any hint, this one holds the potential for DNA-scrambling at its finest.

This trio is the kind of event I look most forward to at Big Ears, unexpected collaborations where genre lines blur into irrelevance. In this realm, Scottish harp goddess Maeve Gilchrist collabs with the Aizuri String Quartet, while Bill Frisell's trio joins with the superb Knoxville Symphony Orchestra. Mary Halvorson's *Belladonna* and *Amaryllis* projects showcase her compositions for string quartet with guitar and her fine sextet. (More on this on Wednesday.)

And speaking of category busting: Nobody has done more to undermine the limitations of genre jails than John Zorn. Following a fabulous nine show run at the Bijou Theater in 2022, Zorn returns for eight shows that include *Nove Cantici* for guitar trio (Frisell, Julian Lage, and Gyan Riley, for Pete's sake); a five-voice a capella set; a smattering of chamber music settings; and a variety of mix and match groups under his command. It all caps off with his near-mythical *Cobra* project. It's a system of rules printed on playing cards that determine what 10 or more musicians may or may not do within conditions that are always changing. A mind-boggling mashup of composition, improv, and random distribution of cards, *Cobra* is never the same thing twice.

Kind of like Big Ears itself.

And if you are having trouble convincing a pal to join you for all this "weird ass shit," just mention Los Lobos and Rickie Lee Jones are on the bill, too. Celebrating their 50th anniversary in 2023, Los Lobos remains one of the world's greatest rock and roll bands bar none. And don't sleep on Rickie Lee. I went to a solo show last Spring expecting a

pleasant stroll down nostalgia lane; instead, Jones delivered an emotionally charged and exhilarating set from her 45 year-deep catalog; it is the mark of a great songwriter that the material's resonance deepens with the passage of time.

Go. Listen.

Banging the Can



By Rob Rushin-Knopf, Culture Warrior

(Photo of Shara Nova by Peter Sterling, 2022, courtesy of Long Play Festival)

On May Day (workers unite!) I attended the final day of Bang on a Can's inaugural Long Play Festival. Scheduled to debut in 2020 (but, well, ya know...), the festival delivered three full days of music, with roughly 60 acts across eight venues mostly within a roughly four block radius; two stages were less than a mile distant. On my way to collect my festival pass, I considered the times I had seen BOAC perform, all of them at the Big Ears Festival. I mentioned this to BOAC's Director of Development Tim Thomas and noted that the Long Play setup – multiple sets run simultaneously among easily-walked locations – was similar to the Knoxville vibe.

In mock dudgeon he replied, “Are you suggesting that we copped this idea from Ashley Capps?? We absolutely did.”

The lineup was eclectic in extremis and heavily populated by the Bang on a Can / Brooklyn new music crowd. There were several artists 'from away' – Philadelphia's Jamaladeen Tacuma, the Southern Oregon University Percussion Ensemble, Matmos from Baltimore, cellist Zoe Keating to name a few – but the aesthetic was pure Brooklyn.

It's an aesthetic that is near impossible to pigeonhole, and therein lies its charm. You could catch the BOAC All Stars perform Brian Eno's seminal ambient classic *Music for Airports* or Terry Riley's legendary *In C*; the always compelling Attaca Quartet playing music by Glass, Caroline Shaw, Flying Lotus, and more; or the Sun Ra Arkestra, still traveling the spaceways under the direction of the 98-year old Marshall Allen.

Sadly, I saw none of these acts, and another dozen or two that would cause me too much psychic pain to mention. But my one day there was everything I could have hoped for, an opportunity to immerse in performances that shatter notions of genre restriction, music by turns unexpected, bizarre, ecstatic, hilarious, and deeply touching. Who could ask for anything more?

Bassist Robert Black, a longtime BOAC all-star, started my day with a solo recital that stretched my conception of the double bass to near the breaking point. His opening piece, *Four Moons of Pluto* (2015) by Miya Masaoka, is an open string and harmonics affair using a just intonation tuning scheme that generated layers of strange harmonics and wave-interference beats that created internal rhythms that pushed this droning wonder into a subtly insistent groove. Masaoka wrote this for one to five basses; one can only imagine the shimmer a full compliment would engender.



Robert Black at Long Play 2022 (*Photo Credit: Peter Serling 2022, courtesy of Long Play Festival*)

Black introduced *Theraps* by Iannis Xenakis (1975) as “an extreme piece of music in all sorts of ways” and recalled his sessions with Xenakis where the composer pushed him beyond anything remotely resembling a comfort zone. [Click here](#) for a recording of Black performing the Xenakis piece from an album released a month before the festival. (WARNING: Not for the faint of heart.)

Then I caught cellist/singer Iva Casian-Lakos playing Joan LaBarbara’s *a trail of indeterminate light* and *ad astra...for cellist who sings*. La Barbara is a living legend whose *Voice is the Original Instrument* (1976) is perhaps the iconic document of extended vocal techniques. (Good luck finding a copy.) She appeared on Steve Reich’s masterwork *Drumming* and famously sang the alphabet on *Sesame Street*. (No lie, y’all.) A collaborator with new music giants like John Cage, Alvin Lucier, Philip Glass, and Morton Subotnick (*Go! Listen!*), La Barbara has established a significant body of her own

compositions. *ad astra...* is a BOAC commission written specifically for Casian-Lakos. By turns melodically dreamy and terrifyingly banshee, this was a performance to be reckoned with.

Here's the premiere of *ad astra...* during BOAC's 2021 annual marathon, held via livestream during the pandemic.

Next up, the utterly luminous Shara Nova (pictured up top and below) embodied the Reaper in BOAC co-founder David Lang's *death speaks* (2013). Occasionally you happen upon a performance that completely transforms your being. This was one of those. I could barely breathe.



Death, where is thy sting? (Photo of Shara Nova by Peter Sterling, 2022, courtesy of Long Play Festival)

(I'll be back soon with a longer look at Shara Nova, aka My Brightest Diamond. I've become a tad obsessed, to be honest.)

I wandered in a daze to the next and nearest show, pretty sure anything after *death speaks* would be a letdown. Instead, I

found myself transfixed by interdisciplinary artist eddy kwon. I knew her name from the Art Ensemble of Chicago's 50th anniversary project, but had no idea what to expect. It was another complete mind melt.

kwon's website explains that "her practice connects composition, performance, improvisation, dance, and ceremony to explore transformation & transgression, ritual practice as a tool to queer ancestral lineage, and the use of mythology to connect, obscure, and reveal" and that "[h]er work as a choreographer and movement artist embodies an expressive release and reclamation of colonialism's spiritual imprints, connecting to both Japanese Butoh and a lineage of queer/trans practitioners of Korean shamanic ritual." Somehow even those expansive descriptions fall short of expressing the essence of expression that was otherworldly, touchingly sad, extremely funny, and punctuated by musicianship of the highest caliber.

The first piece (I'm pretty sure it was an excerpt from her *Umma-Ya* project) struck me as a Kurosawa epic compressed into who knows how many minutes – I seriously lost all sense of time – in the body of a single performer. Here's a series of excerpts from an earlier staging of *Umma-Ya*.

Other pieces showcased his violinist chops (multiple Bach quotes) and his representation as a gender fluid artist and activist. Lyrics such as "hips like lambs' horns" evoked deep longing and desire, while the line "your life does not have to be a dubious, sticky sweet secret" offers encouragement to anyone yearning to embrace their authentic core. I could watch/listen to her for days.

Soo Yeon Lyuh was running behind schedule, so I was able to catch her mastery (sorry for the gendered term, but what is the alternative?) on the *haegum*, the 2-string Korean spike fiddle. Her set ranged from traditional to free improv with a guitarist to a composition by BOAC co-founder Michael Gordon performed with recorded pulse/drone backing. Mesmerizing.

A few tacos at Tacombi set me up for the festival finale at the stunning Brooklyn Academy of Music Opera House: An orchestral re-imagining of Ornette Coleman's groundbreaking album 1959 *The Shape of Jazz to Come*.

Released the same year as *Kind of Blue* and *Giant Steps*, these three albums mark a stark inflection point between their swing and bebop predecessors and what was emerging as the so-called "new thing in jazz." Sixty years on it is impossible to imagine the kind of impact they had on unprepared listeners. *Shape* was considered especially anarchic in its day, though in retrospect it seems a quite logical next step from the Bird-Gillespie bebop innovations. As with Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and other mythical artistic upheavals, these works inevitably established themselves as a new norm waiting to be upended by subsequent innovators. But it is no exaggeration to state that these recordings changed the world.

Fittingly, the star power around this event was tremendous, both on stage and in the audience. For the festival, BOAC enlisted seven contemporary composers – some considered jazz, some not – to reimagine the six *Shape* pieces for sextet plus the Bang on a Can Orchestra conducted by classical piano titan Awadagin Pratt.



Photo Credit: Ellen Qbertplaya 2022, courtesy of Long Play Festival

The sextet featured Ornette's son, drummer Denardo, with OC alumni Jamaaladeen Tacuma (bass) and James "Blood" Ulmer (guitar). Jason Moran, the reigning embodiment of the jazz piano tradition, was my pick for star of the hour, resplendent in a canary yellow duster that was almost as spectacular as his playing. (fwiw, the entire sextet was fashionably fabulous, a nod to Ornette's commitment to spectacular wardrobe.) Wallace Roney, Jr. held down original trumpeter Don Cherry's role, while multi-reed phenom Lee Odom tackled the challenge of standing in for the late master on alto with admirable confidence and gusto; her solos captured the essence of Ornette's singular vocabulary without falling prey to mimicry and pastiche. Mark her as one to watch.

The star power carried over to the lineup of composers/arrangers: Pamela Z, Nicole Mitchell, Craig Harris, David Sanford, Nick Dunston, and Carman Moore. (Go! Listen!) The variety of styles at play stretched the program's

coherence, but the internal logic of Coleman's compositions defied the potential for anarchy; the center somehow held. One piece re-contextualized Coleman in the lineage of American composer Aaron Copland. Another was recognizably in the bop/big band vein, though only just, while others fixed Coleman in the realm of 20th-century classical abstraction reminiscent of his own *Skies of America*.

It was a fitting caper to an ambitious inaugural weekend. Like the festival, it was a swing for the fences turn at bat, and when it connected the results were transformative. The evening's scope reflected the festival's ambitious programming that offered something for everyone with willing ears to hear.

My sense was that the crowd was mostly locals. At 1500 attendance over three days, the scene was congenial and friendly. I can imagine Long Play evolving into a destination event along the lines of Big Ears – though some of the cozier venues may not scale if the festival takes off – and given the rising price of lodgings in Knoxville for festival weekend, a weekend in Brooklyn would not cost that much more.

Hell, let's just do both.

And if you plan things right, you can take a stroll across the Brooklyn Bridge. Bucket list plus!



(Pro tip: The bridge is not actually for sale. Boy, do I feel dumb.)

Forever Momentary Space



My final installment of my Big Ears coverage focuses on the musical ambassadorship of Damon Locks Black Monument Ensemble during their time in Knoxville. This is a super-condensed introduction to their music.

(Part 1 of the series [here](#). Part 2 [here](#). A little something extra for Part 2 [here](#).)

Black Monument has released two albums on the Chicago-based International Anthem label, 2019's *Where Future Unfolds* and the monumental *Now*. Recorded during summer 2020 – under the shadow of pandemic, social unrest, and an unutterably bizarre political climate – *Now* qualifies as an instant classic, right down to the chorus of cicadas that accompany the outro to the title track. (Due to Covid, the *Now* sessions were held in a garden behind the recording studio.)

Both albums are grounded in Locks' sound sampling which he described to me as analogous to the collages he creates in his visual arts practice. (He is represented by the Goldfinch Gallery.) But the overall sound is distinctly that of a group creating together, from the ultra-tight vocal harmonies to the roiling percussion of Dana Hall and Arif Smith, cornetist Ben Lamar Gay's refreshingly un-Wynton-esque sound, and the transplendent force of nature embodied by clarinetist Angel Bat Dawid (pictured above).



*Damon Locks Black Monument Ensemble at Big Ears Festival 2022
(Photo by Eli Johnson, courtesy of Big Ears)*

In a New York Times profile of Locks by Marcus J. Moore, drummer Fred Armisen explained, “That’s how much I believed in him.” Yeah, that Fred Armisen. The Portlandia guy.

Trenchmouth, which lasted 8 years, is where Locks began experimenting with sound collage as part of live performances, using snippets from movies, broadcasts, speeches, and whatever bits of noise he found useful. By the twenty-teens, he was working solo when he hit upon the idea of adding singers to his performances. Singers led to percussionists led to a towering Black Monument. The current membership of the group ranges from five to fifteen or more, depending on whether they include dancers or a children’s choir.

The result is something that transcends the narrow definition of “a concert.” It is more in line with the sensory overdrive extravaganzas of Sun Ra, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, or

George Clinton's P-Funk universe. Like those artists, the attention to detail in every element of the Black Monument presentation – from composition to sound quality to visual envelopment through theater, dance, and costuming – is acute, and it belies the band's mere four years together, with two and a half years under pandemic separation.

Armisen noted this quality in the Times profile. "Oh, this guy is just a genius. This is a brilliant person who cares about every millimeter of what something looks like and sounds like."

Aside from the obvious musical debt to Sun Ra, other recognizable influences range broadly across liberation jazz (like Max Roach's "Freedom Now Suite" and Archie Shepp's "Attica Blues") to soul-jazz (Eddie Gale's "Black Rhythm Happening") to the declamatory hip-hop of artists like Public Enemy and NWA.

The title track from *Now*, with its blend of samples, traditional drums, yearning clarinet, and lush vocal harmonies, is a terrific introduction to their self-described "intersection of gospel, jazz, activism & 808 breaks." Featuring Locks' visual art interspersed with footage of the garden recording session, it is that rare example of a video that does not feel incidental to the music.

Black Monument is not a band that lends itself to an easy pigeonhole. Their celebratory blend may be saddled with the 'jazz' tag, but the music ranges far wider than that fraught four-letter genre jail can encompass. The best I can do is borrow the Art Ensemble of Chicago's motto: Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future.

Go. Listen.