

# We Begin, Again, Constantly



Once again, Immune to Boredom begins.

A load of bosh, I hear you say. How dare this Unreliable Narrator come along and pretend he will provide regular content for his small-yet-largely-indifferent readership? Haven't we been fed this horse pucky once or thrice before?

Well, yeah. Hard to go head to head with that assessment.

Seven years and two months ago, I launched this blogswamp to give myself a reason to write. I figured if I committed myself to regular, on-time postings, I would break out of an illness-induced torpor and sharpen my writing skills. That was about as far ahead as I could think about things. I had no justification other than this: I needed it.

Things went pretty well. My traffic was never going to break the internet, but there was steady appreciation and growth. It was encouraging and confidence affirming. Within a year, I had my first real-life writing assignment from The Bitter Southerner. This kicked off my second career as a features writer. Lots of work for Bitter Southerner, some features for Flamingo Magazine (one of them scoring me a major award!) and occasional bits and pieces for a few other publications. And all through that, I kept the blog up and running, more-or-less regularly.

And then I started feeling shitty. Like really, incredibly shitty, unable to concentrate or sleep or write. I had zero interest in playing guitar; my best friend and longest musical

collaborator had to browbeat me into what turned out to be my last gig. We played in October, 2018. Every note was a labor, the evening interminable. I went home and put my gear in a closet. I barely played so much as a note for the better part of three years.

Turns out I was suffering the front end of an aggressive lymphoma. `<fn>Angioimmunoblastic T-cell Lymphoma` for the medically curious.`</fn>` By the time I was diagnosed, I could barely walk across the room without needing a nap.

And yet: With Stanwyck's help, I flayed myself through the 2019 Big Ears hoolie, conducted a few interviews, and posted several pre- and post-event articles. Two days after the music stopped, I gave myself over to the tender mercies of the medical-industrial complex at the University of Florida cancer center. I was given a 60% chance of surviving the treatment. If successful, I had a 40% chance of remaining cancer free for another year.

I managed to keep regular posting through seven months of deep chemo and, in the end, a stem cell transplant. I was awarded my major award for my George Clinton profile while in hospital. I interviewed filmmaker Ken Burns by phone from the hospital lobby the day before my transplant procedure began; I wrote and filed the consequent article with Bitter Southerner late that night.

The next day began three weeks of pure torment. And as with my 2014 medical mystery, I remember one specific moment where I was dead certain I would not make it to the next sunrise.

That was a little more than three years ago. And still, I persist.

But not without some hiccups.

Treatment left me depleted: zero energy, no muscle tone (I had been pretty much prone for 7-8 months), and scattered

concentration. I managed a few posts and was planning my return to Big Ears 2020 where I hoped to recapture my zest for writing, music, and, well, living.

And then COVID. Talk about your demotivating factor.

Pretty quickly I adopted a routine: sleeping late, reading all day, afternoon cocktails on the lawn with Stanwyck. What else was there, aside from waiting for the zombie hordes to come breathe on us? Homebound, my physical therapy foundered. Over time, I lost interest in just about everything except beer.

I squeezed off a handful of posts, but those felt like grim obligation, feeble gestures to prove I was other than a depressed, out of shape, drunken lump with a nagging wonder: Is this what I survived for?

But the time was not right. Nor was the writer right.

That was then. This is now.

Nine months ago, I swore off alcohol. Not a drop since. I took up yoga, four or five times a week. I resumed meditation. I began walking long distances again.

Three months ago, my erstwhile musical pal Jeff Crompton visited. I plugged in a guitar, and we gave it a go. It was shabby and glorious. Within an hour, I was so tired I could barely lift my guitar off my body. But I was alive. Again.

Since then, I have had guitar in hand every damned day by 6 a.m. for an hour or two of mostly callisthenic exercises. When I began again, I could not sustain an exercise for more than 15-30 seconds. Neither my hands or my concentration could bear it. Now, I am running complex patterns for five to ten minutes at a time. I've begun moving into re-learning material. And RoboCrompton may step out for a few gigs this Spring, COVID willing.

Along with sobriety, flexibility, and gigability, this regimen

has re-sparked my writer's itch. And so, Immune to Boredom begins again. Again.

And again, there is little justification for this other than: I need it.

But atop that, I like to think I will bring something to the fetid swamp of the internets that others need, too.

For starters, I want to share the best bits of the mountains of music and books that I've been marinating in. There is a banquet on the table, but so much of it is buried by an algorithmic flood of junk food that it can be hard to sort out the worthy from the worthless. So expect plenty of recommendations about cool stuff I've found that you might otherwise never hear about.

Back in the day, many of my high-traffic/widely shared posts touched on politics and history. Expect some of that. I hold hope that you will find it more useful than the workaday rantings and received wisdom oatmeal so prevalent on the interwebs.

Another somewhat popular aspect of before times i2b was the occasional personal essay. Again, these would go weirdly viral from time to time. I'll be going back to that format, as well.

Mostly, i2b will be a sandbox for me to play in, to explore ideas that grab me, to tout the wondrousness of the arts that set my feet on fire.

And I will be opening up a comments section where I truly wish for your feedback, either praise or brickbats, corrections, and other such like. I hope we can keep it free of viagra and CBD peddlers. Still figuring that out.

Please drop by and give my ramblings a minute of your time here and there. Follow me on the various social media hellsites. If you are so moved, sharing and retweeting and all

that social media jazz will be greatly appreciated.

To be or i2b? That is the question. To which I say: Why not both?

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PS – This post hits on the evening of Jan 20, 2022. On Friday, Jan 21, I once again surrender myself to the fine people at UF Shands Cancer Center for my regularly scheduled poke and prod. I expect this to be routine and uninteresting. If not, it will give me something to write about. I can't lose.

PPS – Poke and prod says nothing to worry about. Thanks for all your good wishes.

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## **Emerge. Slowly. Look Both Ways.**



Is there anybody out there?

It has been a solid two years in near total isolation for us. A year of lymphoma treatment and quarantine ended just in time for the Trump virus to shut everything down for another year.

Finally, Stanwyck and I are fully vaxxed and ready to take those first tentative steps back into polite society. As luck would have it, our resurrection coincides with Tallahassee's

annual Word of South Festival of music and literature. It's one of my favorite events on the local calendar, and it was sorely missed last year under the COVID pall. As difficult as it is to contemplate crawling out of my hidey hole, Word of South offers a fine motivation to poke my head up and see if I remember how to be social and such.

As always, the lineup has prime talents, with music from Dom Flemons, Allison Moorer, Randall Bramblett, Royce Lovett, and the great New Orleans trumpeter Wendell Brunious. Writers talking to writers. Writers talking to musicians. People who love books and music hob nobbing in the beautiful Tallahassee springtime weather.



Yeah, the weather has gone to hell in a hockey bag. But the rain has plagued WoS before, and I figure they will come up with alternate venues and such, although a fair number of the alternate venues from festivals past have shuttered due to the pandemic. As of this afternoon, I have not seen any official announcements. Here's hoping they pull another miracle.

It is an amazement that the festival is still with us. Chalk it up to a committed team of mostly volunteers throwing their shoulders to the wheel. It was a towering act of faith to program and schedule this event without knowing what the COVID drama would bring. Even with limiting the daily attendance by issuing tickets in advance, if the vaccine rollout had been any less effective we would not even think of attending.

And with events moving indoors, perhaps, we may have to think twice anyway.

Word of South 2019 was my last public appearance, aside from the occasional trip for groceries. Two weeks after first chemo and it was clear that I was too compromised to be there. So the idea of WoS serving as my post-transplant debutante party was pretty slick, symmetry-wise. My original dream had been a

triumphant return to Big Ears, but they have deferred for another year.

But here's the thing after two years of hibernation: The idea of crowds and small talk and conversation and trying so hard to hide that I have lost all recall of the name of whatever person I am talking to that I have known foreverName recall never having been my strong suit, the random access memory is even worse post-treatment. My apology in advance. – all that stuff has been giving me a real case of the yips.

I figure I'm not the only one. So, assuming we get to go at all, I've settled on some strategies to cope.

- Breathe (even in situations where it is optional).
- Smile.
- Be kind.
- Embrace awkward silences.
- Smile some more.
- Resist asking "So how's it been going?"
- Do not stare at my shoes for more than ten seconds at a time.

Speaking of shoes, I notice that several of the bands on tap at the young people's stage (young meaning anything under say 50) describe their genre as shoegaze, which seems to indicate an amalgam of jam band and emo, though there is probably some sort of "something-core" involved, too. I don't know. I am, as my kids remind me, an Old. But it sounds like something I would like.

So maybe you'll see me grooving at the shoegaze stage where my inordinate interest in my laces will not seem so out of place. Or maybe you'll run into me somewhere else. If I forget and stare at my fancy kicks for more than a count of ten, please tell me to look up and smile. I'm really out of practice and could use a little help.

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# John Brown's Body: Your Electric Picture Radio Box Matters #4



One of my long-standing hobby horses is the story of Osawatomie John Brown. In 1986, through happy accident, I found myself at the Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, National Historic Park. I dutifully read the plaques and displays and wondered how I had never heard of this guy and his adventures. Aside from owning the album by Kansas that featured John Steuart Curry's iconic painting of Brown on the cover, my exposure to Brown's story was nil.



It had never occurred to me that this guy was an actual real person.

I carried around my meagre crumbs of knowledge (abolitionist, secessionist, likely crazy as a shithouse rat) for a dozen years or so. In 1998, Russell Banks published his novel *Cloudsplitter*, a historic fiction tale told from the POV of one of Brown's surviving children that recounts Brown's life in great detail, much of it, perhaps, true. Or at least truthy. That led me into yet another obsession, lots of reading and trying to tease a coherent picture out of multiple-and-often-conflicting renditions. This was likely the germ seed of my not-yet established Civil War mania.

All that I was "sure of" was that the cat was deeply committed to the abolitionist cause (undeniable) and he was a bugfuck crazy fundamentalist loon (not so fast there).

The latest novelization of Brown arrived in 2013 in James McBride's National Book award winner *The Good Lord Bird*. This tale, seen through the eyes of Onion, a fictional slave boy Brown freed and took under his wing, is as much a re-imagining of *Huckleberry Finn* as it is a reliable historic document. But damn the facts and up with truthiness: This tale is a romp and

a decent meditation on Brown's last act on history's mortal stage and the kind of impact his actions had on a nation teetering on the edge of dissolution. And as told by McBride, it has the added benefit of being pure deejit high-larious, largely stemming from Brown's misapprehension of our narrator's gender. Onion was wearing a burlap sack when Brown freed him, leading the Old Man to assume he was a she and to mishear his name Henry as Henrietta. Onion, shrewd enough to recognize an opportunity and meal ticket, went along with the notion. Hijinx ensue.

Now this thrilling tale of mistaken identity and derring do is available via your Electric Picture Radio Box in a seven episode series on Showtime. And that gives me an excuse to ruminate anew on one of my favorite historical figures.

I typically approach askance any filmification of great books, but my skepticism here was well-misplaced. *The Good Lord Bird*, starring Ethan Hawke as Osawatomie Brown and newcomer Joshua Caleb Johnson as Onion, is a knockout. The graphic design and music is pitch perfect. All the performances are outstanding, especially Daveed Diggs. Another product of the *Hamilton* juggernaut. as a fairly buffoonish Frederick Douglass, the only Negro in the series who does not recognize that Onion is a he passing as a she; in this he stands in lockstep with all the white folks who see him as a saint.

From the moment Henry is mistaken for a girl, the parallel with Huck is set. His adventures with Old Man Brown as his Jim feature the same kinds of mishaps and sudden violences that Clemens bestowed upon his character. And like Huck in drag, Onion has more confidence in his costume than he should. Just as the women in Twain spotted Huck's fakery in an instant, so did every Black character – save for Douglass – see through Onion's flimsy imitation. Most people see what they want to see, or what they are told to see. Once Brown pronounced Henry as Henrietta, the question was settled for everyone who did not have to keep their antennae sharp to survive. People like

the comfortably ensconced Douglass. For those steeped in the life and death necessity of seeing things as they really are, Onion's subterfuge holds no water.

I have to admit that amping up the clown makeup for an African-American icon – one depicted more than a little hagiographically 99.9% of the time – struck me as more than a little bold, and generally to McBride's credit that he took the character there. It presents a stark comparison between Douglass, the man of words, versus Brown, the man of action. Douglass here is a vainglorious toff, all puffery and pretense. Upon meeting the man Brown calls King of the Negroes, Onion calls him Fred, demonstrating all the manners and refinement of a Huck Finn. Douglass bristles:

*Do you know you are not speaking to a pork chop but rather a fairly considerable and incorrigible piece of the American Negro diaspora?*

Later we find Douglass and Onion drinking bourbon, with Fred chasing the not-a-girl around the parlor like a dog after a pork chop.

So why spoof up the icons this way?

*I think heroes who are not flawed are not believable. John Brown was clearly flawed in real life. John Brown was clearly flawed in real life. He did some terrible things, but he did some things none of us would have had the heart to do. His moral leanings were unquestionably admirable.*

*James McBride in Publisher's Weekly, July, 2013*

But. He was on the right side of history, on the side of the future. Like James Baldwin 100 years later, he knew that white people were doomed until we dealt with the reality and responsibility of slavery. He was not just out to save Negroes from bondage; he wanted to save the whites who were being

consumed by the evil, too.

Okay, all that aside for a second: This is Ethan Hawke's party, a chance to create an epic character, and he makes the most of it. In the first screen portrayal of Brown since Raymond Massey in *Seven Angry Men* (1955) and *Santa Fe Trail* (1940) Twice in the same historical role!, Hawke adds more depth to Brown's character than popular culture typically acknowledges: more compassion and generosity, a dash of doubt and despair. But it still leans hard on the one thing *most* people seem to agree upon: That Old Man Brown was crazy as a loon.



"My name is John Brown."

I italicize *most* because there is a growing pushback among Brown scholars (and some of his descendants) regarding this tricky notion, one that I have held as self-evident since I first heard of Brown. I mean, and come on here, isn't violence spurred by religious zealotry the very picture of insanity? Can't we reasonably agree that Guy Fawkes or Timothy McVeigh or Osama bin Laden – not to mention our current crop of Christo-Fascist nutters marauding the Capitol and beyond – are

wacko, bonkers, round the bend, cornery, all the way fruit loops?

Brown intended the Harpers Ferry raid to spark a slave revolt, an uprising of the Negro race against their oppressors. (So, for that matter, did Charles Manson when he unleashed his bloodletters on Los Angeles.) He understood the Nation to be at an unavoidable crossroads over the Peculiar Institution of slavery, and that it was an issue that would only be settled through bloodshed. This idea was not only *not* crazy, but with benefit of hindsight, almost blindingly obvious. But very few people were willing to see this reality, much less act upon it.

Brown's letters reflect a man of intelligence, sobriety, and firmness of will. They do not betray a closet lunatic, and his popular image in his time was of a good and decent man committed to a righteous and just cause. Unless you were on the wrong end of his sword, in which case you were a slaver or supported slavery. And it is worth noting that Brown considered violence a last resort of self defense against an implacably cruel and savage oppressor. (In this, he is not unlike Malcolm X.) He writes, foreshadowing future musings.

Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry is widely considered the first battle of the Civil War. Coincidentally, the Federal force that defeated Brown's crew was led by Robert E. Lee and J.E.B. Stuart. If this were not true, it would be a preposterously overdetermined plot gambit, but indeed, it was Brown against the future military brain trust of the Confederacy. The plan was wildly overambitious, almost certainly a suicide mission, but despite the fact that the local slaves did not rise up in response, the skirmish set in stark relief the fracture that was to engulf the nation, and foreshadowed the carnage inevitable.

The elevation of John Brown, Crazy Person™, was as necessary a part of Lost Cause revisionism as was Lee the Noble the

Slaver. It would never do to have such a character seen as *compos mentis* if the aim was to rewrite the history of slavery to fit the gauzy focus of *Birth of a Nation* or *Tara*. The Lost Cause demands that we see the Peculiar Institution as largely benevolent, despite the few bad actors that gave slavery a “bad name.”

Thus, John Brown *must* be seen as extremist, unstable.

The great pitfall of any kind of hero worship is that every hero has clay feet. This makes it easy for determined debunkers to undermine the actions that make heroes heroic in the first place. Brown has always been one of my favorite characters in history, but not because I find him the most admirable role model. It is his complexity – whether crazy or not – that makes him so fascinating, just as Nixon’s bizarre juxtaposition of conflicting facets make him the most fascinating of our ex-presidents.

I have always been troubled by one idea regarding Osawatomie Brown: Who Would John Brown Scourge in our time? His fundamentalist bent is all too familiar to anyone observing the madness being wrought by the extremist right actors of pro-life terrorism, *molon labe* fantasies, and imaginary Constitutional justifications for, oh I dunno, things like storming the U.S. Capitol or opening fire on/gunning a car through a crowd of ‘godless’ protestors. Would John Brown fill a truck with fertilizer and park it in front of a government building if he believed his cause righteous?

Would Old Man Brown be on the side of the angels these days? Depends on which angels you got in mind, I guess.

Whatever. *The Good Lord Bird* is a great electric picture radio program and an even better novel. It’s worth the coin to enjoy both. (And you can probably get a trial subscription to Showtime and watch the series in a binge for nothing.)

PS – I’ll be back with another YEPRBM essay real soon. It’s a

big season for reclaiming the cardboard flat depictions of our heroes.

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# The Big Band Golden Age is Now



The Swing Era of the 30s and 40s is commonly remembered as the golden age of the jazz big band. Ellington. Basie. Miller. Shaw. Goodman. Calloway. Eckstine. Dizzy. And dozens more, busloads of troupers riding town to town to play at venues ranging from high school gyms to roller skating rinks to any venue that could accommodate a few hundred people dancing their asses off.

The economics and logistics of keeping a dozen or more musicians on the road were never sustainable. Add in the fact that dance music – and the big bands were first and foremost dance bands – was drifting towards the burgeoning rock'n'roll sound, and the demise of the big band was inevitable. Ellington and Basie kept going well into the 1970s, but big bands became less important as the small ensemble ethos of be- and post-bop became the prominent vehicles for jazz.

The idea of the large ensemble never really went away, with artists as varied as Miles (with Gil Evans), Coltrane (*Africa Brass* and *Ascension*), and Charles Mingus flirted with expanded

instrumentation through the 50s and 60s. But these cats and a few others (e.g., Buddy Rich Fun fact: Buddy Rich Big Band is the first concert I ever attended alone., Maynard Ferguson) aside, the big band became something of a relic.

A few NYC-based big bands kept the flame alive. The Thad Jones/ Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra kept up a pretty good run, thanks to a weekly gig at the Village Vanguard. Now known as the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, only the COVID era has shut down their 50 year-plus Monday night run. Here's hoping they – and the Vanguard – will pick up and keep. fucking. going. once the vaccine does its work.

Gil Evans kept his vision alive with a similar Monday night regular gig in New York, Mondays being the night that the best pro musicians were “off” and thereby available to play for very little money. People so wanted to play with Gil Evans that there would be as many cats in the audience with horns (or harmonicas: Toots Thielemans sat in one night I was there and played for three hours) at the ready as there were on stage.

Sam Rivers enjoyed a similar situation after he retired to Orlando, where the various theme park gigsters were hungry for some real music to play. He kept up a weekly gig with that gang almost until his death in 2011. A limited edition 3-cd set of the Rivbea All Star Orchestra from this period will run you around \$950 if you can find a copy.

Carla Bley kept the large ensemble vibe running across a variety of orchestras, most notably the Liberation Music Orchestra led by Charlie Haden. Quietly and consistently, Carla Bley remade the jazz orchestra in her own image and likeness: beautiful, lithe, forward, kind, ferocious, and gently idiosyncratic. Along with Evans, every composer/arranger working today owes a deep debt to Bley, most especially the several women who have followed in her path that we'll look at today.

A few others took up the challenge of standing up a big band along the way. Joe Henderson launched a one-off big band recording in '95 that was superb and un-tourable. In the 80s-90s, a smattering of razor sharp European big bands – the Vienna Art Orchestra and Willem Breuker Kollektief chief among them – leveraged the government arts funding on tap in Europe (long since eliminated by the bastards of the Reagan raj in the U.S.) to withstand the immense challenges of taking a large ensemble on the road.

In the U.S., institutional support made possible the Carnegie Hall Jazz Orchestra (for a while) under Jon Faddis and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra under Wynton Marsalis (still rolling strong). With the cachet and endowment heft of Lincoln Center behind them – along with Wynton's massive media profile and considerable talents – the Lincoln Center crew has toured extensively, alternating between their mission as a repertory ensemble and their function as a vehicle for Wynton's more ambitious projects.

One notable exception to this pendulum arc between feast (via institutional support) or famine (due to the nature of economic reality) was the Sun Ra Omniverse Solar Myth Science Heliocentric Arkestra (among so many recombinant naming possibilities – let's just call it The Arkestra), formed in the mid-50s and, remarkably, still alive today. How Sun Ra managed to keep this group together for so long is a mystery and a marvel, especially when one considers the fact that he kept A-plus blazers like John Gilmore, Marshall Allen, and many others on board when they could have gained more money and fame striking out in their own small ensembles. And those who did move on to greater fame often made their way back to the Arkestra. Such was The Sun's gravitational pull.

Even after Ra's death in 1993 – and the subsequent passing of the great Gilmore and June Tyson – the Arkestra continues to thrive under the direction of Marshall Allen, who last year celebrated his 96th birthday by launching the first new

Arkestra recording in 20 years. *Swirling* is a complete delight, mixing old Ra favorites like *Angels and Demons at Play*, *Rocket #9*, and *Sea of Darkness* with previously unrecorded Ra material and one Allen original. (Allen claims there are hundreds of unrecorded Ra compositions, some of them Ra felt too dangerous to ever be played outside of rehearsal.) Add in a boodle of archival Arkestra recordings spanning 40 years of angels and demons traveling the spaceways, and *Our Year of Quarantine* was a very good year for diving into one of the greatest big bands of all time. Keep traveling; Sun will wait for you.

Rob Mazurek's Exploding Star Orchestra derives a great deal of its ethos and energy from Sun Ra's Afro-Futurist vibe. Their 2020 release, *Dimensional Stardust*, boasts a who's who lineup of the best of Chicago's current crop of musicians, many of them associated with the legendary Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. Among this number, flautist Nicole Mitchell and cellist Tomeka Reid stand out, as does the seems-to-be-on-every-great-album-this year guitarist Jeff Parker. It is funky and spiky, with spoken word elements weaving into the mix of composition and improvisation like the best of Ra's futuristic fantasies, yet unmistakably an entity like no other.

Norwegian drummer/composer Gard Nilssen's 16-piece Supersonic Orchestra hearkens back to the heyday of the Willem Breuker Kollektief and Vienna Art Orchestra. Bravura ensemble passages and smashing feats of derring-do from the soloists, this is the kind of big band you wish you could see live just for the thrill of leaping out of your chair every couple of minutes. *If You Listen Carefully The Music is Yours* slings its three bass/ten horns onslaught with humor, drama, and the occasional whiff of high wire dancing and trapeze heroics. Get it. (Bandcamp takes payment for this one in Norwegian Kroner. No worries. The 70 NOK digital download is eight bucks and a quarter U.S., a bargain at twice the price.)

If you crave the supersonic skronk blast of saxophones in overdrive, this is your jam.

Moving on to Those Who Owe Much to Bley/Evans.

The Vanessa Perica Orchestra's self-released *Love Is a Temporary Madness* – her first recording – is a bold and ambitious blast from Australia. Perica cites Ennio Morricone and Joe Henderson's big band as primary influences and acknowledges her debt to Gil Evans, too. Coming this Spring, her orchestra is set to present *Love is...* in partnership with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. Despite my ingrained skepticism about the ability of classical orchestras to swing, I'm really curious to hear how this expanded sonic palette changes her already sumptuous harmonic layering.

Kathrine Windfeld is another comer in the Scandinavian big band sweepstakes. This Danish composer/pianist has a quartet and sextet project, but her primary avenue is her big band work. *Orca* is her third release, and it derives heavily from the Bley/Evans vocabulary and palette. Deeply textured with rich melodies. Highly recommended.

Back to New York. The Webber/Morris Big Band released *Both Are True* to widespread critical acclaim. Anna Webber and Angela Morris act as each other's mirror in a sense. Each is a superb tenor/flute player and composer. On Webber's tunes, Morris plays while Webber conducts. And vice versa. Like the best arrangers as far back as Ellington – and everybody else mentioned on this page – they know their players and write to fit their strengths.

This Webber piece, *Rebonds*, is a terrific example of the deft mixing of composition and improvisation the band offers. And it has a wonderful skank guitar bit that makes me all tingly..

One of the most anticipated releases of 2020 came from Maria Schneider, who has been turning out magnificent large ensemble works for 27 years with a big band notable for the consistency

of its membership. Let's just say she lived up to very high expectations with *Data Lords*. Landing at or near the top of most of the Best of 2020 lists, it is something of a career culmination (so far) for this one-time protégé of Gil Evans. Since her first release in 1994, *Evanescence*, Schneider has consistently been at the top of the composer/arranger heap. She was named an NEA Jazz Master in 2019 and has collaborated with, among many, Sting, Dawn Upshaw, and this guy.

*Data Lords*, a double album in the OG sense of the phrase, is a musical examination of the dichotomy in our society between our digitized sensibilities and the rhythms of the analog world. With one disc of material devoted to each realm, one can apprehend a difference in mood and tone, but the difference is not dogmatic or heavy handed. Following along with liner notes fills in the picture, but it is easy enough to just let the music wash over and let the thematic considerations be.

One exception is the last track on the album – *The Sun Waited for Me*. This piece brings that combination of achingly gorgeous melody and rising action arrangement that typifies the best of the Evans/Bley canon. Donny McCaslin's tenor sax solo is deeply moving, and Frank Kimbrough's piano demonstrates the magnitude of loss his death in late December laid upon the music scene.

Based on a poem by Ted Kooser, the words behind the music are just the right tonic for this morning when we await the disposal of our recent and benighted president and hope, collectively, for a new and better day.

*How important it must be  
to someone  
that I am alive, and walking,  
and that I have written  
these poems.  
This morning the sun stood*

*right at the end of the road  
and waited for me.*

– *Ted Kooser*

Originally written for soprano Dawn Upshaw, this instrumental arrangement is one of my favorite pieces of music in a year that was crammed full with great work. Not to mention a year that brought more than its share of challenge, grief, and terror.

Here's to the Sun, Ra and otherwise, still waiting for us all.