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."

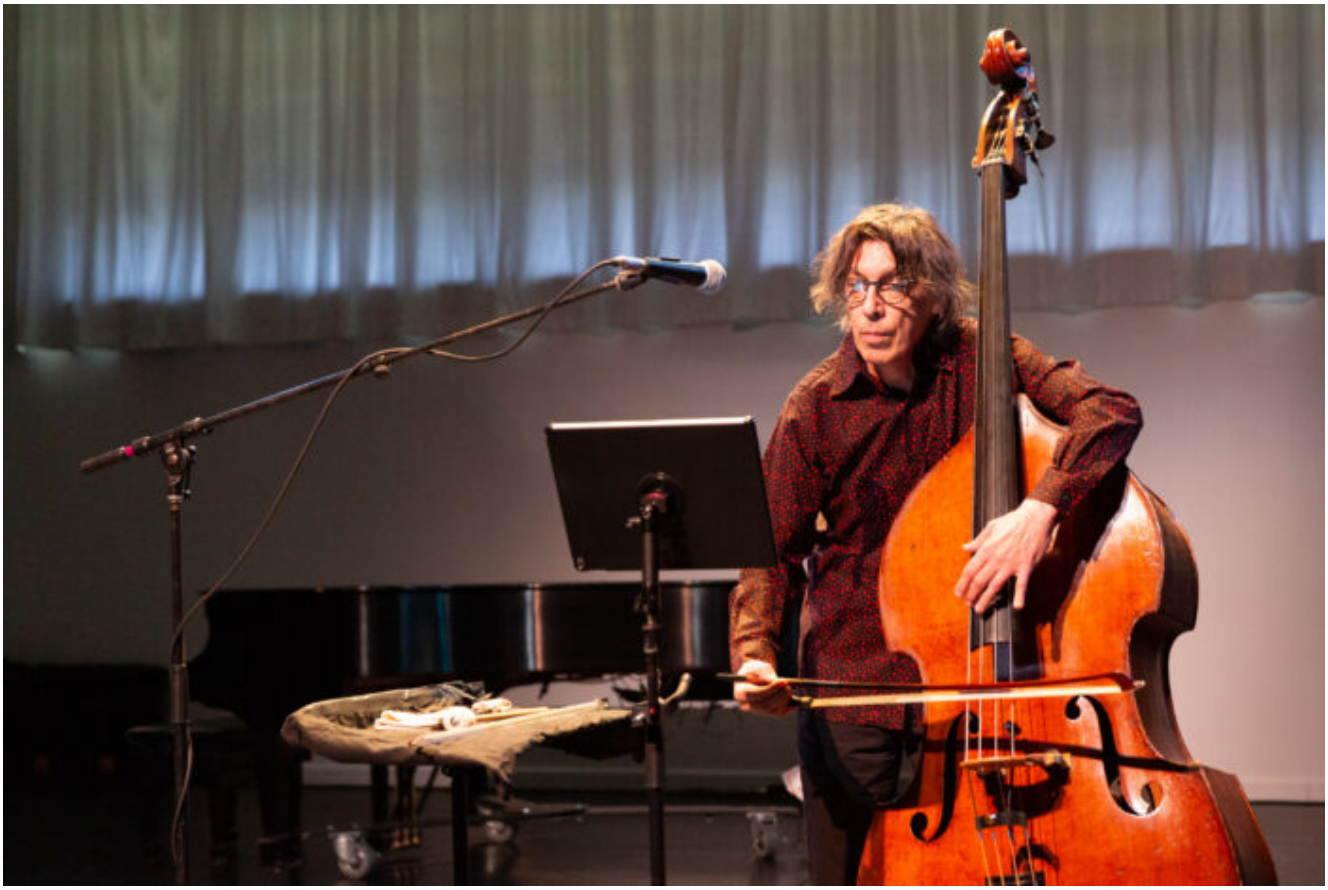
The lineup was eclectic in extremis and heavily populated by the Bang on a Can / Brooklyn new music crowd. There were several artists 'from away' – Philadelphia's Jamaladeen Tacuma, the Southern Oregon University Percussion Ensemble, Matmos from Baltimore, cellist Zoe Keating to name a few – but the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

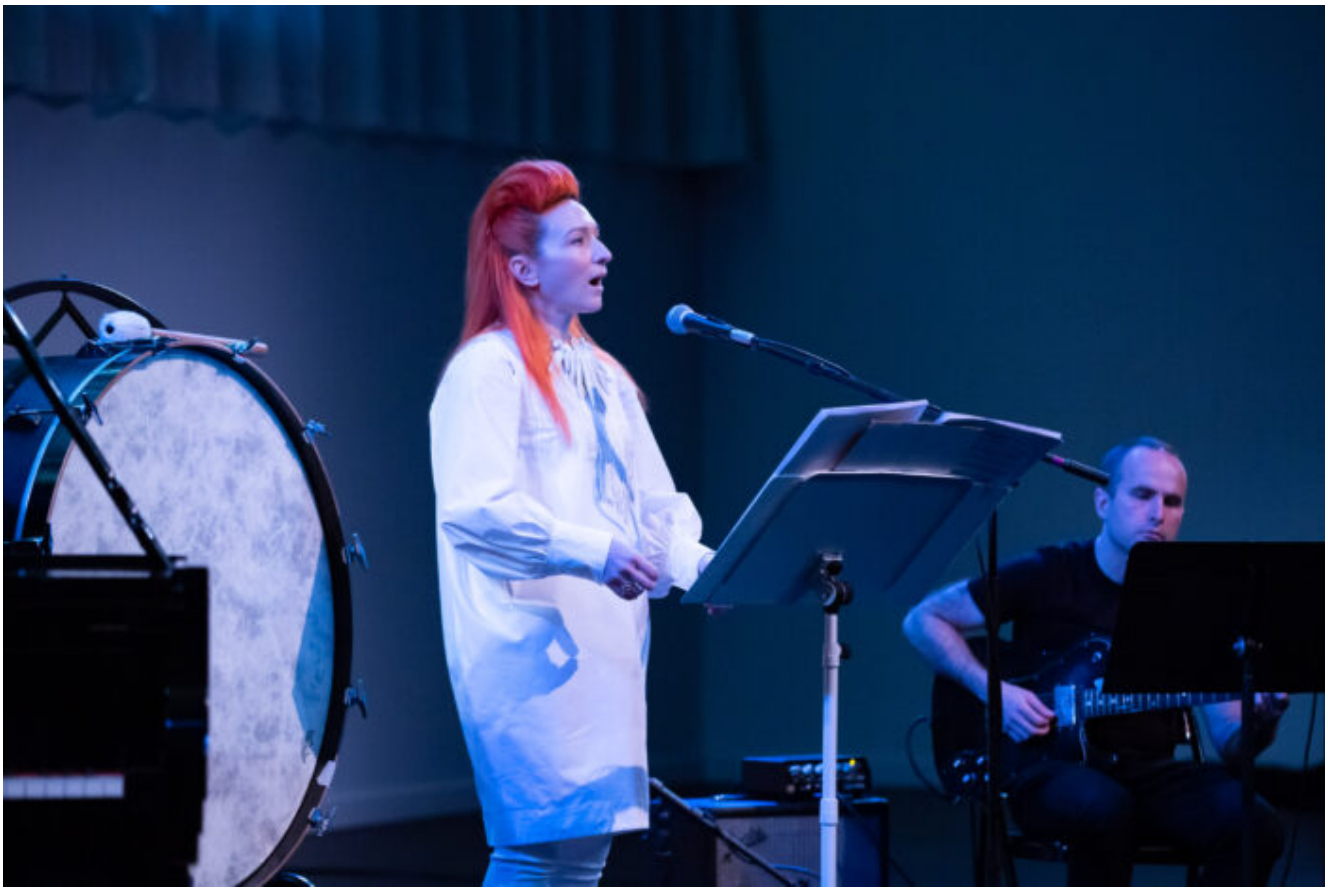
Black introduced *Theraps* by Iannis Xenakis (1975) as "an extreme piece of music in all sorts of ways" and recalled his sessions with Xenakis where the composer pushed him beyond anything remotely resembling a comfort zone. Click here for a recording of Black performing the Xenakis piece from an album 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 look 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 otherwordly, 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 be bop 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.

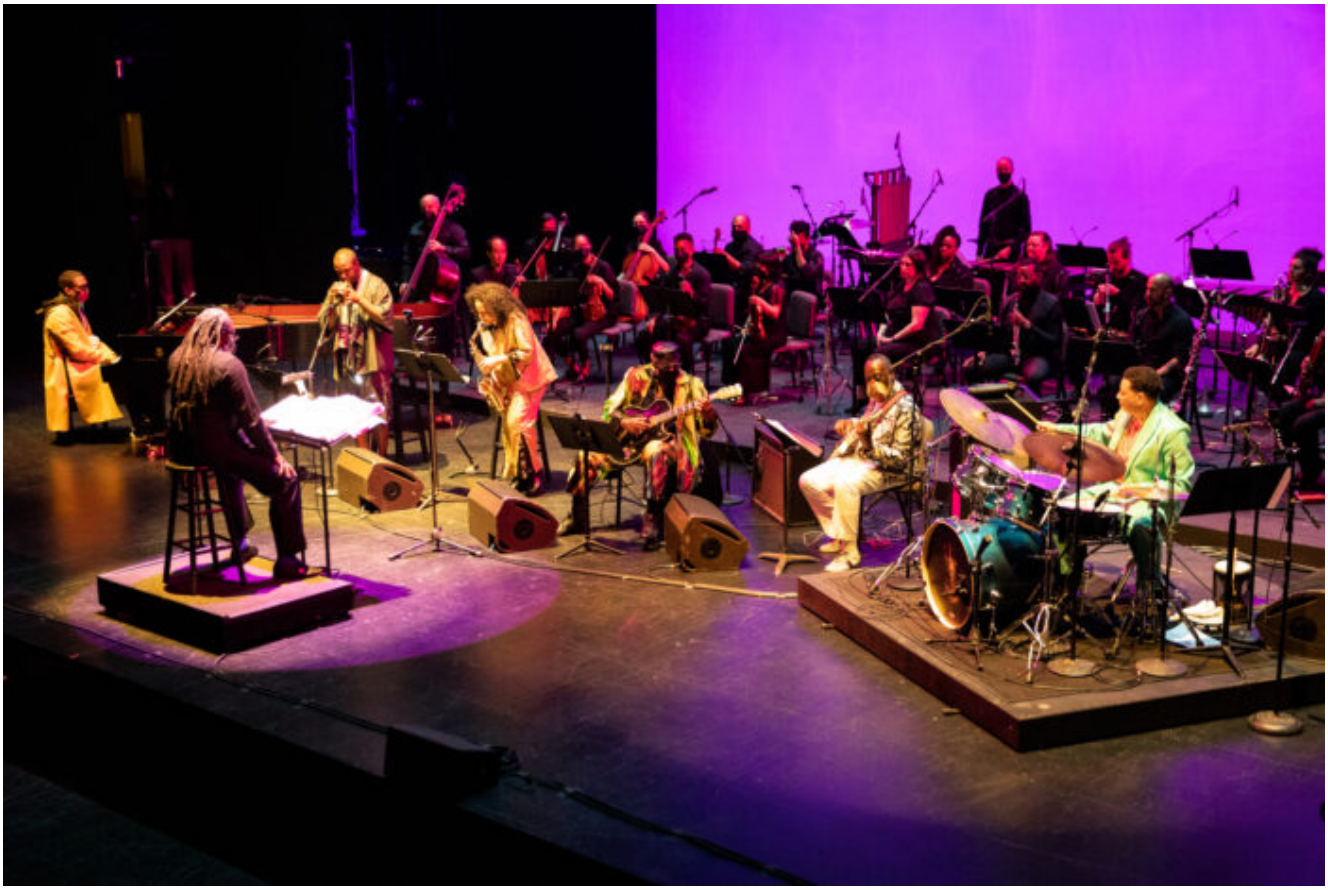


Photo Credit: Ellen Qbertplaya 2022, courtesy of Long Play Festival

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

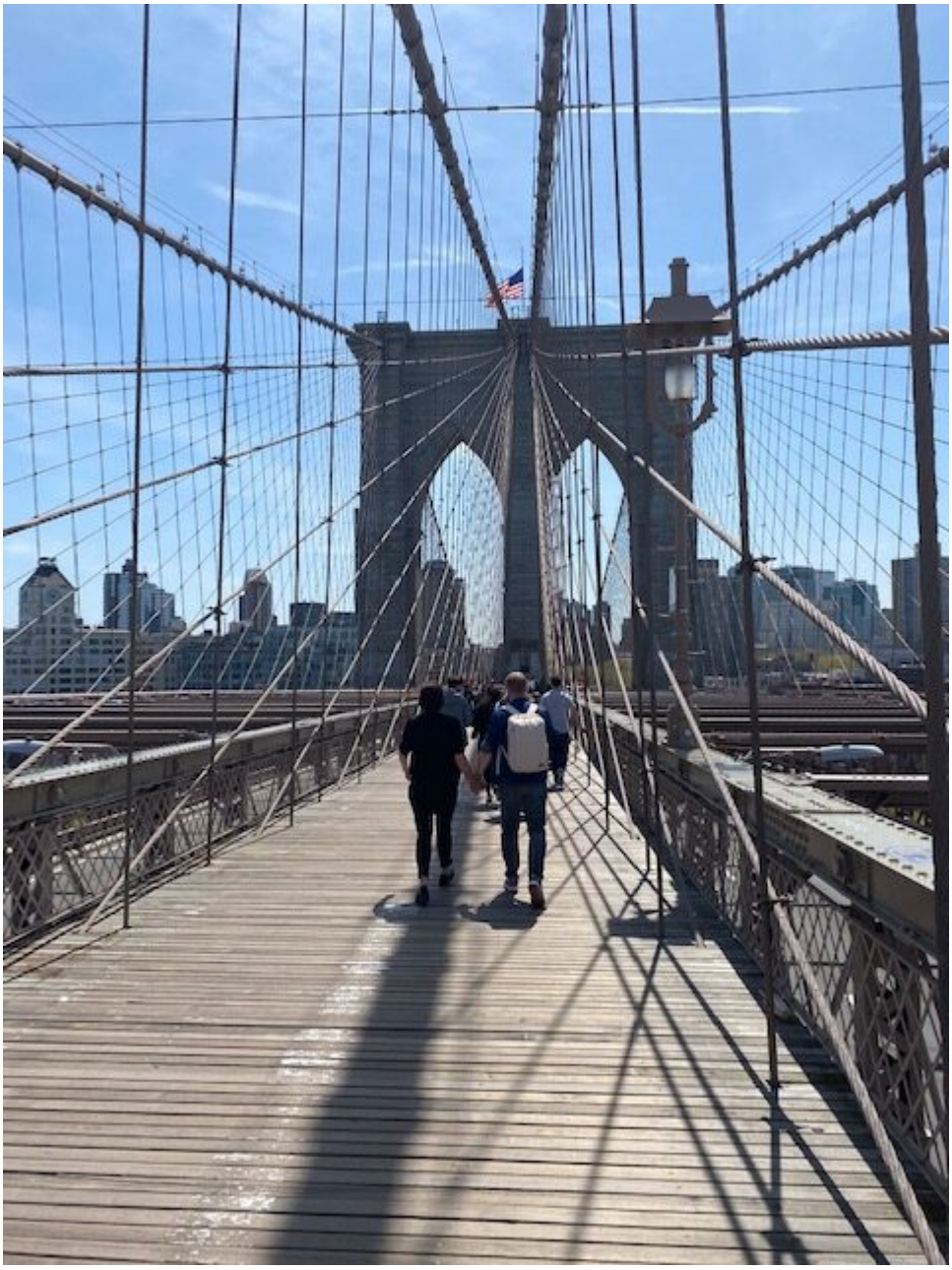
coherence, but the internal logic of Coleman's compositions defied the potential for anarchy; the center somehow held. One piece re-contextualized Coleman in the lineage of American composer Aaron Copland. Another was recognizably in the bop/big band vein, though only just, while others fixed Coleman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

It was a fitting capper 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.)

Ears Embiggened: Icons

(The fifth in a series of preview posts as we count down to the
2019 Big Ears Festival in Knoxville, TN.
Part 1 here on the 50 year legacy of ECM Records.
Part 2 here on 50 years of the Art Ensemble of Chicago,
Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future.
Part 3 here on the magnificent Rhiannon Giddens and her Lucy Negro, Redux project.
Part 4 takes a stroll through the league of guitarists on tap.)

We often hear an artist described as an overnight sensation, even though in almost every case we are hearing about someone who has put in the work and paid the dues to arrive at their 'instant' success.

But you never really hear about an overnight icon. Defined as "a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol or as worthy of veneration," icon status is almost always predicated on longevity, extended and sustained effort, and definitional achievement in a field of endeavor. Exceptions: Bright flaming rockets that burn out fast but leave an unmistakable imprint, and even then, icon status usually has to wait a while. Cf. Hendrix, James Dean, Duane Allman, &c. These are the artists who have helped define their fields, the people that serious younger artists study and obsess about.

Big Ears has a pretty good track record of lining up artists that qualify for icon status. 2019 is no exception. I've already written about some of these: Art Ensemble of Chicago, Bill Frisell, ECM Records, Richard Thompson. Time to take a look at the rest.

Carla Bley

Carla Bley stands about five feet tall, yet she is a undeniable giant. Stretching back nearly 60 years, Carla's compositions have been recorded by Jimmy Giuffre, George Russell, her ex-husband Paul Bley, Gary Burton, Charlie Haden, and many more. Along with her second husband, trumpeter Michael Mantler, she founded the Jazz Composer's Orchestra and the associated JCOA record label, which released important recordings by Don Cherry, Roswell Rudd, Grachan Moncur, Leroy Jenkins, and Cecil Taylor in the late 60s.

In 1971, JCOA released her epic jazz opera *Escalator Over the Hill*. It took three years to record, and established Bley as one of the great composer/arrangers in modern jazz. During the 70s, she collaborated with Jack Bruce and drummer Nick Mason of Pink Floyd, essentially writing and arranging albums released under their names. She also helped Charlie Haden actualize his great Liberation Music Orchestra.

Better known for most of her career for her composing/arranging, in the past twenty years she has developed into one of the most intriguing pianists in jazz. She's not a chops monster by any stretch, but her arranger's orientation has led her into a crazy wonderful ability to instigate quiet upheaval with peculiar chord voicings and melodic coloration. Her playing is probably closer to fellow arranger genius Gil Evans than anybody else, that uncanny knack for bending a chord in a way that makes you wonder if the ground has shifted beneath you.

This year she returns to Big Ears with a trio formed in 1994, featuring bassist Steve Swallow, and saxophonist Andy Sheppard. They play with the kind of instinct and preternatural anticipation of one another's choices that can only develop over a very long period of time. Saturday at 5 pm at the Tennessee Theater.

Getting to see her at Big Ears 2017, after 40 years of listening, was a dream come true. Also too: She also has the greatest hair in the history of the music.

Steve Swallow

Bassist and longtime musical and romantic partner of Carla Bley, Steve Swallow is the man who proved once and for all that the electric bass guitar is every bit as legitimate as the double bass in jazz. The man has all the tone and swing you could ask for. Since the early 60s, Swallow has worked with an almost ridiculous listing of the greats of the latter-20th century: Paul Bley, Jimmy Giuffre, Gary Burton, Don Ellis, Art Farmer, Stan Getz, Paul Motian, John Scofield, George Russell. His playing is elegant, smooth, and always exactly what the music needs. Appearing with the Carla Bley Trio.

Harold Budd

During the 60s, Budd was a composer of avant garde classical pieces. He began to become more interested in minimalism, an

interest starkly at odds with academic composition of the day. By 1970, he says he had:

> *…minimalized myself out of a career. It had taken ten years to reduce my language to zero but I loved the process of seeing it occur and not knowing when the end would come. By then I had opted out of avant-garde music generally; it seemed self-congratulatory and risk-free and my solution as to what to do next was to do nothing, to stop completely.”*

In 1978, he released his first major work, *Pavilion of Dreams*, on Brian Eno’s Ambient Music Series. Any serious history of *ambient music* recognizes Budd’s central role in the development of that genre, though Budd insists he was “hijacked” into the category.

Whatever. Labels never tell an accurate story. Suffice to say that his three presentations at this year’s festival offer a rare opportunity to experience one of the path-forging icons of the past 50 years. Must. See.

Meredith Monk

Back in the day of college radio, a cluster of us became obsessed with every box of promo records that came in from ECM. One day in 1981 we pulled one out that looked a little different. The abstract imagery typical of the ECM cover was replaced by a dramatic b&w photo of a woman in shadow, head cocked to allow a dark shadow from an epic hair braid to fall across her neck.

This was the beginning of my love affair with the music of Meredith Monk.

It was like nothing I had ever heard, though it was as instantly accessible as the most finely crafted pop tune. It

was funny. It was deep and dark. It was impossible. Even in its darkest moments, it exuded pure joy. I was hooked.

She is a composer, film director, choreographer and one of the pioneers of extended vocal technique. She returns to Big Ears with her latest work, *Celluar Songs*, described as a blend of

> *movement, theatrical characters and images, light, and video installation. The work, at once playful and contemplative, draws inspiration from such cellular activity as layering, replication, division and mutation, and looks to underlying systems in nature that can serve as a prototype for human behavior in our tumultuous world. Conjuring cycles of birth and death throughout, Monk once again reminds us of her vitality as an artist who cuts to the core of experience, continuing to share the genius of her discovery and innovation.*

I am so there.

Alvin Lucier

I have to admit: Before this year's festival schedule dropped, Alvin Lucier was a vaguely recognized name for me. But dang, y'all, the man has delivered the deep sounds for more than fifty years. As much a 'sound artist' as a musician composer, Lucier's work suggests a sensibility in line with Pauline Oliveros' concept of Deep Listening.

One of his most recognized pieces, *I Am Sitting in a Room*, begins with the performer reciting and recording a paragraph of text that describes the piece. The recorded passage plays back in the room, recorded again, and played back again, and again, etc. A simple layering technique not unlike Fripp's dual-Revox Frippertronics, but the only additive information is created by the resonance of the room itself, and the acoustic peculiarities of speakers and microphones recording

the proceedings. Within a few minutes, the speech becomes nearly unrecognizable, with specific tones emphasized or muffled by the room resonance to create a strange push-pull effect. By the end, everything is a wash of enveloping sound.

During his early years, Lucier created several pieces of this nature; let's call them mechanical processes in that an initial action sets off a chain of successive occurrences without performer intervention. He later moved onto composing for trained musicians, often accompanied by pure wave generator. The variances of the musician's tones in reference to the pure wave creates washes of harmonic overtones that can take on the character of other instruments, celestial choirs, or skull-threatening dark vibration.

At 88 years of age, Lucier rarely performs, but he has three sets on tap at Big Ears, including one with his longtime collaborator Joan LaBarbara. Make a point of catching at least one.

Joan LaBarbara

Who is Joan LaBarbara, you asked quietly as you read the last paragraph.

LaBarbara was one of the second wave of extended vocal technique champions, heir to Cathy Berberian's 1960s investigations and contemporaneous with Meredith Monk. Her debut album, *Voice is the Original Instrument*, is a psychedelic funhouse ride, most notably her use of circular breathing and multiphonics.

And if you – or your kids – are of a certain age, you might even know her work.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y819U6jBDog
LaBarbara performs twice at Big Ears, once in a solo career retrospective and alongside Alvin Lucier and the Ever Present

Orchestra in a program of Lucier’s work.

Jack DeJohnette

Along with Tony Williams and Famoudou Don Moye, Jack DeJohnette is one of the primary definers of the post-Elvin Jones/Max Roach approach to drumming.Go ahead and @ me if I left off your personal hero. In the 60s, DeJohnette played with Charles Lloyd, Betty Carter, Chick Corea, Bill Evans, and a brief but transformational stint with *Bitches Brew* era Miles Davis. From there, he moved into a long association with ECM, appearing as a leader and sideman on dozens of essential recordings with the likes of Keith Jarrett, John Abercrombie, Dave Holland, Lester Bowie, George Adams, Bill Firsell, Geri Allen, Joanne Brackeen… I mean, I’m gonna stop and send you to the tender mercies of wikipedia to get a fuller picture.

The man deserves a book or five and a documentary or two. He is one of the instantly recognizable drummers in jazz. His sense of swing and his range of touch on the drums and, especially, the cymbals mark him within a few bars. He is also a fine pianist and composer. The man is, well, an icon.

At Big Ears, DeJohnette rolls in with a trio featuring Ravi Coltrane on sax and Matt Garrison on bass and electronics. Ravi’s dad? John Coltrane. Matt’s dad? Trane’s longtime bassist, Jimmy Garrison. An icon with the sons of two icons. Is it gonna be great? I’m skipping at least three performances I really ought to see for this one. Whaddyagonnado? Saturday, 7.45 pm, at the Tennessee Theatre.

Here’s one of my favorite DeJohnette tracks from his New Directions quartet.

Wadada Leo Smith

Wadada Leo Smith was born in Leland, Mississippi and recieved his first musical education in the Delta blues at his father's knee. He went through the military band program and ended up in the middle of the 1960s Chicago scene, one of the early members of the Association for the Advancement for Creative Musicans. He is a prolific composer, an educator, and has always maintained his musical practice as a component of his social activist practice.

Here's a partial list of Smith's collaborations: Anthony Braxton, Leroy Jenkins, Roscoe Mitchell, Henry Threadgill, Lester Bowie, Joseph Jarman, Cecil Taylor, Steve McCall, Anthony Davis, Carla Bley, Don Cherry, Jeanne Lee, Tadao Sawai, Muhal Richard Abrams, Ed Blackwell, Kazuko Shiraishi, Han Bennink, Marion Brown, Charlie Haden, Malachi Favors Magoustous, Jack Dejohnette, Vijay Iyer, Ikue Mori, Min Xiao Fen, Bill Laswell, John Zorn, Ronald Shannon Jackson, Frank Lowe, Andrew Cyrille, and Bill Frisell.

He is equally at home in what we might call "classical" music as he is digging in with the funk-skronk of the band Harriet Tubman or his *Yo, Miles* collaborations with Henry Kaiser. He can blast you through your seat or make you float into someplace you never knew existed. His graphic scores, executed in a system he calls Ankhrasmation, are on display in museums.

I last saw Wadada live in 1980, at Papp's Public Theatre. The amount of space between notes was at times nearly unbearable. But then, the right note, or smear or gesture, arrived to maintain a sense of structure that kept me from leaping from my seat in anxiety.The acid had kicked in strong by showtime, and the fact that a NYC cabbie had rear-ended my car just outside the theater likely created a certain adrenalistic frisson that I do not recommend to anyone. But there was

something about the performance that stuck with me: The patience, sensitivity. The sense of mutual support. I mean, damn, you stand on stage in front of a full house and try to maintain intentional silence for ten, fifteen, twenty seconds: It is a barely endurable eternity for most musicians. Not Wadada.

For Big Ears, Smith has two performances in store. His solo exploration, *Reflections and Meditations on Monk*, drops at The Standard on Saturday at 2 pm. But the big deal is the presentation of Smith's 1978 masterpiece *Divine Love*, with original trio members Dwight Andrews and Bobby Naughton. That happens at the Tennessee Theatre on Sunday at 6.15 pm, a perfect lead in to the festival-capping performance by the Art Ensemble of Chicago.

Ears Embiggened: So Much Guitar

(The fourth in a series of preview posts as we count down to the
2019 Big Ears Festival in Knoxville, TN. Part 1 here on the 50 year legacy of ECM Records.Part 2 here on 50 years of the Art Ensemble of Chicago,
Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future. Part 3 here on the magnificent Rhiannon Giddens and her Lucy Negro, Redux

project.)

My first guitar lesson was the first week of September, 1969. The teacher was named Leo Goldberg, and at the time I figured he was about eleventy thousand years old. He got me started on my nylon string Gianninni guitar (which I still have in a closet) playing things like Skip to My Lou and Moon River. As a devoted fan of Grand Funk Railroad, I was frustrated, at best.

I may have stopped lessons, but my attraction to banging on wood and strings never stopped. To say that I have been a guitar geek for nearly 50 years is an understatement. And that's one reason this year's Big Ears has my fingertips tingling.

The level of guitar heroics on tap this year is astronomical. Just nuts. Where to begin? Even harder: where to stop. I am sure I will neglect someone's worthy favorite. Mea culpa, friends. I am ecstatically drowning here.

Randomly, let's start with (Sir) Richard Thompson. Aside from being, arguably, the best songwriter of the past 50 years not named Zimmerman, he is without question one of the most innovative guitar heroes of that span. Electric or acoustic, solo or with small or large ensemble, RT's playing is song supportive, tasteful, and utterly non-cliched (unless he is mocking cliches). He can peel the paint off of any wall, or turn and deliver the most heartbreaking passage you ever imagined.

For Big Ears, RT appears with the Knoxville Symphony Strings to present *Killed in Action*, a song cycle honoring the 100th anniversary of the World War I armistice. It is "based on letters, diaries, ad interviews, and in most cases, are verbatim extracts, with little attempt to make them rhyme or turn them into 'art'." Bijou Theatre, Sunday, 1.30 pm.

I've seen RT at least 25 times, probably more, and surely more

than anyone except Sun Ra and the Grateful Dead. Every time he comes around, I think, “been there, done that,” imagining that I don’t need to see him again. Then I end up going anyway, only to get myself gobsmacked one more time by his mastery of composition, singing, playing, and funny-as-all-get-out crowd control.

This presentation has me deep intrigued. RT with strings. RT with deep historical archaeology. RT, period. As if that were not enough, he appears with Rhiannon Giddens and Rachel Grimes for a panel discussion about how they use archival materials to create new works of music. Saturday at Visit Knoxville, 3 pm.

Okay, so I’ve already died and gone to heaven to have yet another of my all-time fave musicians on the bill. Let’s glance around and see who else might be…

There’s Mary Halvorson, appearing with her Code Girl quintet, her essential trio, Thumbscrew, and Columbia Icefield, alongside pedal steel whiz Susan Alcorn and trumpeter Nate Wooley. Halvorson has been defining chapter and book what guitar can mean in a post- bop/modernist/shred world. Her early work with Anthony Braxton displayed the kind of spiky harmonic disarray that plants her firmly in the *avant garde* (whatever the hell that is) and she continues to deliver some of the thorniest string beautynoise on the scene. But her evolving body of work highlights a keen sense of melodic regard alongside her more abstract explorations.

Her first solo album (*Meltframe*, 2015) finds her exploring standards by Duke Ellington, Oliver Neslon, Ornette Coleman, Roscoe Mitchell, and Carla Bley. Check out her recent duet album with Bill Frisell honoring the great Johnny Smith, or her *New American Songbook* collaborations with Ron Miles on cornet and drummer Greg Saunier of Deerhoof: this is someone with respect for tradition, but not the kind of hidebound devotion that can lead musicians into the trap of becoming

museum pieces. Aside from helping to define what qualifies as a ‘standard’ in the ongoing conversation that is jazz, she is establishing herself as one of the most adventuresome and prolific creative musicians of our time.

Listen to this haunting solo delivery of Ellington’s uber classic *Solitude*; it is not enslaved to the original, yet the shape of the composition never wavers. It is a model for how to treat a beloved piece of music with both reverence and a spirit of expansive exploration.

Speaking of Frisell, he is on hand for at least five performances: his duo with Thomas Morgan, his longtime trio of Kenny Wolleson and Tony Scherr accompanying the films of Bill MorrisonJust get your tickets now and quit arguing, his quartet with sublime singer Petra Haden, a pre-festival duet with saxophonist Greg Tardy, and – in one of the most intriguing bills of the festival – as part of *Absînt*, a collaboration with saxist Tim Berne, guitar wizard David Torn, and my favorite living New Orleans saxophonist/composer/artist, Aurora Nealand. This is my pick for the hidden treasure of the festival. I’ve been listening to Nealand for a good dozen years, and she always knocks me out.

Bill Frisell is a quintessential pick to represent the ECM guitar tradition. From his first appearance on Everhard Weber’s 1979 *Fluid Rustle*, through his wide ranging sideman work with the likes of Kenny Wheeler, Paul Motian, Arild Anderson, Paul Bley, Jan Garbarek, and on and on, through his earliest releases under his own name, Frisell was the perfect ECM guitarist: a range of tone and sound that makes his presence both transparent and unmistakable and an almost eerie ability to deliver exactly what each artist or composition needs – no more, no less. Along with Pat Metheny, Terje Ripdal, and the late John Abercrombie, Frisell embodied the ECM guitar ethos.

Frisell left ECM because he had more music in mind than the ECM release schedule could accommodate. But he came back to the Scandinavian fold with his *Small Town* duo with Morgan, and has since appeared with Wadada Leo Smith and Andrew Cyrille for *Lebroba*, one of the finest ECM releases in years and one of 2018's best releases in any genre.

Like many guitarists of varied skill and ambition, I have a specific "Bill Frisell changed my life" story that I will save for later. Suffice to say, if you've heard the guy, you know you need to see him whenever/wherever and with whoever. If you have not, get with the program.

But wait. We have another strong contender for ECM guitar icon: Ralph Towner. It makes perfect sense to have Towner on hand at a festival honoring the 50th anniversary of ECM Records. Best known for his work with the group Oregon, Towner is a master of texture, tone, and space. The opportunity to see him anywhere is a gift from above. The chance to hear him in a space as sonically rich as Knoxville's St. Johns Episcopal Cathedral is a universal blessing. I just wish John Abercrombie were still with us to revisit this longtime favorite of mine.

Anyone who loves guitar knows of the mad genius of David Torn. Another picker long associated with ECM, Torn's experimentations range as far afield as any guitarist of the past 40 years. As at home with solo soundscapes that range from the ethereal to the epically noisy, Torn also knows how to play a head and improv over changes. He has worked with David Bowie, Tori Amos, Jeff Beck, Madonna, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Don Cherry, Tony Levin, and Bill Bruford (and a zillion more) and penned soundtracks for television and film. At Big Ears, he appears solo, with his trio Snakeoil, and with the *Absînt* project. Given the way Big Ears throws popup show surprises, I'd bet on him appearing in other settings, too.

Rafiq Bhatia presents Breaking English, an electroacoustic

trio enhanced by a multimedia swirl of sight and sound. He is a smoking good player who places his chops at the service of concept and composition; nothing is gratuitous. He cites his inspiration for Breaking English as “including but not limited to Jimi Hendrix concert videos, blaring prayer calls from Turkish mosques, East African archaeological sites, the death of Trayvon Martin and Flying Lotus sound collages.” The Standard, Friday, 12.30 pm.

Who else? Chris Eldridge of the Punch Brothers will provide accompaniment to Fatty Arbuckle’s 1917 silent film classic *Coney Island*. The Punch boys will also close out the festival Sunday evening as the capstone to the Big Ears investigation of the musics of Appalachia. This will surely be one of the most attended concerts in the festival. Mill & Mine, Sunday, 8.15 pm.

Shane Parish presents a solo set as part of the Pilot Light series (all free, all the time, and one hell of a lineup it is, too). Perhaps better known for his work with the electric band Ahleuchatistas, Parish is building a reputation for his solo acoustic work that places him squarely in the tradition of John Fahey, willing to play material of just about any origin in a style that makes it unmistakably his own. Pilot Light, Sunday at 6 pm.

Derek Gripper is a South African classical guitarist who has unlocked the code for translating the style of traditional African instruments like the kora to six nylon strings. A player of infinite technique and feel, you can close your eyes and imagine a room full of griots. Sublime. Knoxville Museum of Art, Thursday, 7.30 pm.

On the pure energy and skronk front, the Messthetics brings the Fugazi rhythm section of Joe Lally and Brendan Canty together with guitarist Anthony Pirog. Pirog is something of a hidden treasure, making big waves in the DC scene but only recently gaining wider exposure. He owes more than a little

bit to the Crimson vocabulary, and the trio itself strongly recalls the heydey of Fripp's League of Gentlemen. But this is not a tribute band; Messthetics deliver a signature sound that demands serious head thrashing. They play The Standard on Saturday at 6 and will team up with the great Lonnie Holley at Mill and Mine on Friday at 1 pm.

Guitarist Tashi Dorji, born in Bhutan, appears in duo with percussionist
Tyler Damon for spontaneous improvisations that range from delicate shimmers and star twinkles to full bore supernova explosions. Pilot Light, Friday, 10.30 pm.

But wait, there's more. But that's about enough for this post. Check the Big Ears schedule and let me know which one of your favorites I forgot to mention. I bet there are at least a dozen more twangers I wish I knew about. Help a buddy out!

Ears Embiggened: Rhiannon Giddens – Great Black Music, Redux

(The third in a series of preview posts as we count down to the
2019 Big Ears Festival in Knoxville, TN. Part 1 here on the 50 year legacy of ECM Records. Part 2 here on 50 years of the Art

Ensemble of Chicago,
Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future.)

The eruption of way too many old photos of white politicians in blackface was a real chef's kiss for Black History Month. There quickly followed predictable hand wringing, assertions of surprise that such a thing was actually *still a thing,* and heartfelt intonations that such evidence "does not reflect who I am within my heart," a heart that surely resides in a body that contains not a single "racial bone."

Blackface has a long history, back at least as far as Shakespeare's *Otello*. More pertinent to the American experience is its introduction in the mid-1700s as a device to shorthand stereotypes about happy-go-lucky slaves and indolent and shiftless darkies. It was in the 1830s when Thomas Rice introduced the character of Jim Crow and the practice of whites capering in blackface – minstrelsy – became one of the most popular entertainment tropes in America and, often, in Europe.

Many of the songs were stolen wholesale from slaves and free Blacks and their wide popularity was tied to a significant act of erasure: White performers replaced Blacks as they purported to accurately represent the hijacked culture. See also, Dixieland, rock'n'roll, British blues, &c. These acts of cultural theft are well known.

The reality was different. While the overt acts of theft<fn>e.g., Elvis as the King, or the claim inherent in the name of the Original Dixieland Jass Band, an all-White ensemble that achieved notable popularity c. 1917-1935)</fn> are well-documented, the organic syncretism on the ground was the result of a more fluid commingling of whites and blacks, especially in rural and mountain communities.

A little less well-known is the centrality of African-American influence on musics that are widely regarded as "white" music:

bluegrass and country. Much of this is an outgrowth of the sorting imposed by the recording industry in its early years and the separation of *race music* and old timey/country, which was allegedly the province of white folks. Jazz and blues were deemed to have slave and African roots, while country and mountain music was declared an offshoot of the Scots-Irish tradition, distinctly white. The markets for these now-sorted musics was presumed to be distinct, as well, though the reality of how music lovers seek out and collect music made these false distinctions somewhat irrelevant as American music developed.Categories are for sheep. Maybe that should be the Big Ears motto.

One of the most successful erasures in American music history lies in the revisionism that eventually decreed the banjo as the whitest instrument of them all, despite the fact that the *banjer*, or *banza*, came to America from Africa via slave ship, an unintended import, perhaps, carried in memory by the more intentional human cargo. The banjo, an instrument imported from Africa and subsequently employed to confer authenticity on the performers pretending to be black, was ultimately stripped of its African identity.

For at least the past 15 or 20 years, there has been a concerted effort at re-framing the banjo and its associated musics in a more explicitly African-American context. One of the most successful of the musical archaeologist/apostles is Rhiannon Giddens, formerly of the Carolina Chocolate Drops, MacArthur “genius” recipient, trained operatic singer, and banjo wizard.

Aside from the sheer pleasure of her singing and playing, Giddens’ work is a concerted campaign to undo multiple acts of erasure that have decentered African-Americans from a central component of their cultural legacy. Everything about her career asks us to reconsider the “facts” we all know are true. Things like “banjos and opera are for white folks.Among her many projects, Giddens hosts a podcast series called *Aria Code*

that examines one great operatic aria per episode, with a variety of surprising guests. Her interests are broad.

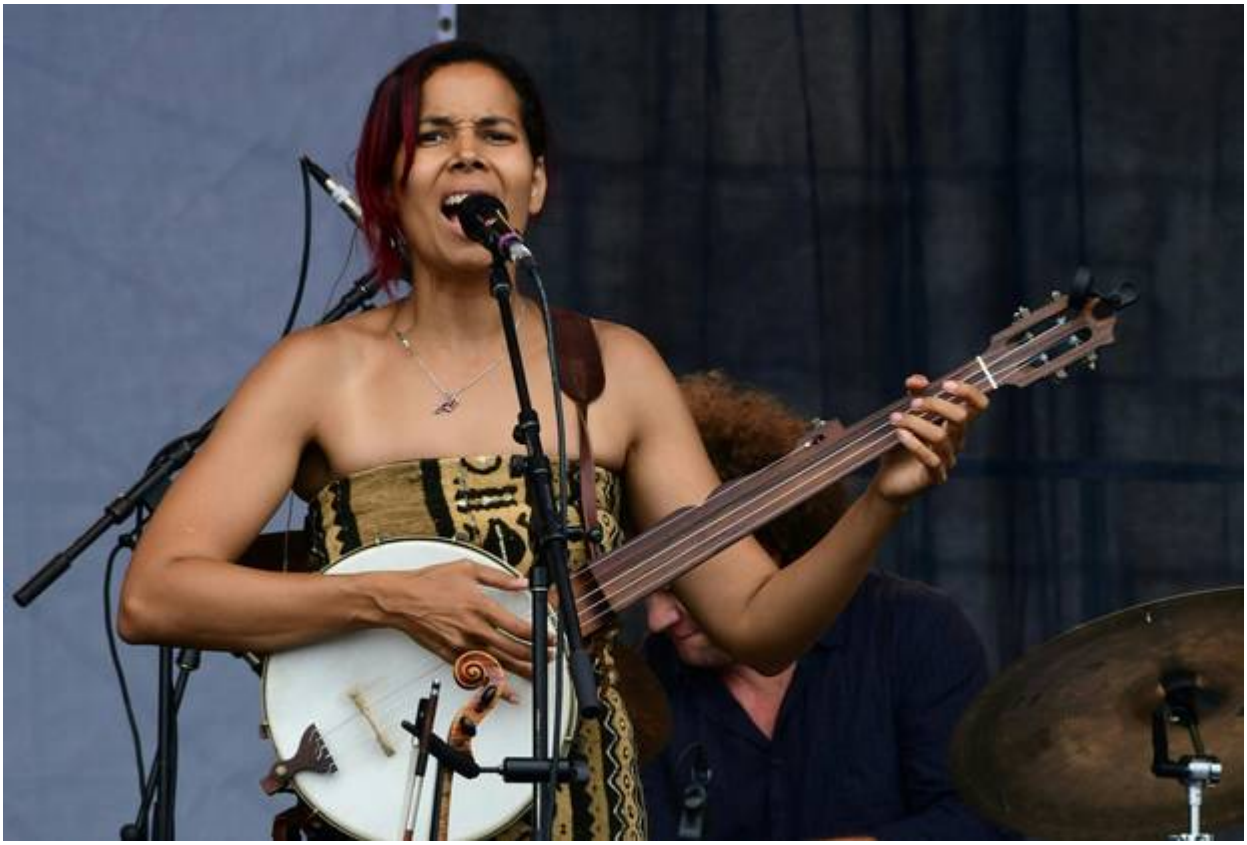
In my last piece, I related how the Art Ensemble of Chicago rejected the jazz label and christened their genre Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future. It was a strategy that gave them access to the universe of musics that derive from the Black experience, which in practicality means just about any sound or style they found interesting. Unlike some acts of illegitimate appropriation (minstrelsy, Led Zeppelin, etc.), their claims represent a re-appropriation of something rightfully their own.

A survey of Rhiannon Giddens' career reveals a similar strategy. She may never have thought of herself as part of the Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future orbit, but to listen to the breadth of musics she has (re)claimed, it is hard for me not to put her under that banner. Just take a listen to her latest release on Smithsonian Records, *Songs of Our Native Daughters*. Her and her three partners in this project (all WoC who play the banjo, by damn) mine their various traditions – both direct and inferred – to create a journey that is a model of intersectional storytelling.

Give a listen to "Barbados." The wordless melody is every bit as harrowing as Blind Willie Johnson's "Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground." But bracketing the lament is a polite recitation that slyly suggests: "So relax, my friend – we're not all complicit."

Buy this album. You will not be sorry.
In its own way, her embrace of the banjo and her ongoing musical archaeology are acts of cultural radicalism that have rippled out in ways she likely never imagined when she first hooked up with her eventual Chocolate Drop partners. It is a body of work that rejects and resists the acts of erasure and othering that underlie the greatest rifts in our culture.

And one of her most substantial acts of creative radicalism will be on display at the 2019 Big Ears Festival.



This machine kills fascists

In 2012, poet Caroline Randall Williams traveled to England to pursue a hot tip about Shakespeare's sonnets, specifically numbers 127 to 154.

> *These sonnets have been called the "Dark Lady" sonnets for quite a while now, because of their focus (in contrast to the preceding 126, which are addressed to "a fair youth" and a "rival poet") on a woman who consistently figures as "dark" or "black," in his descriptions of her.*
>
> *p. 8, Lucy Negro Redux: The Bard, A Book, and ! Ballet, Caroline Randall Williams, Third Man Books, 2019*

Inspired by this research, Williams spun out a book of poems, *Lucy Negro, Redux*, informed by her experience as a Black woman and her identification with a woman who (may have) been like her, an unexpected identification with a central character in a canon of work that she loved deeply. The idea of William

Shakespeare devoting a substantial portion of his work to Black Luce – a well-documented brothel owner in Shakespeare's London – generated both disquiet (Luce likely being a madam and/or prostitute, sparking parallels with the exploited Black bodies of slave women) and elation (the possibility of placing a Black body at the center of the *ne plus ultra* of the White European literary tradition). As the NY Times review of the ballet premiere points out:

> *Caroline Randall Williams also descends from white men who raped her black ancestors. She carries in her very DNA the conflict at the heart of "Lucy Negro, Redux": What does it mean for a woman to be both desired and reviled for the color of her skin?"*

It is one hell of a volume. The poems are gorgeous, angry, sexual, repellent, yearning. They are explicit and blunt and irresistibly musical. Her use of space on the page enhances this notion of rhythm and musicality. And their intensity made it difficult for me to read more than a couple at a time. Some are stark revenge fantasy; others are demands to be seen or a fight against the ever-looming threat of erasure. Others are pained cries of yearning, of a wish to be loved for and as herself. Shakespeare as a deep blues. Or maybe the other way round.

The Nashville Ballet's artistic director, Paul Vesterling, read it and knew he wanted to stage the work. He had just the dancer in mind for the role of Lucy: Kayla Rowser, a Nashville Ballet company member who had been named one of *Dance Magazine's* Top 25 to watch.

Naturally, a ballet needs music. And that's where Rhiannon Giddens comes back in. Vesterling asked Giddens to create the soundscape. She collaborated with Francesco Turrisi to compose a score that they perform live for the ballet. (They will also appear in concert at Big Ears, separate from the *Lucy Negro,*

Redux presentation, as they explore commonalities between American, Celtic, and Islamic musical traditions. World music, y'all.)

Lucy Negro, Redux, a ballet, is an assertive act of resistance against multivalent forces of erasure and false sorting. Imagine the stage. Giddens as a visual and sonic focus. Williams herself appearing as narrator and centering presence, her words and body claiming her place alongside ole Billy Bard. Kayla Rowser establishing the presence of Black Luce, her story retold through the imagination of Williams, the movements of Rowser, and the music of Giddens. It makes me shiver.

The programming at Big Ears encourages broader connection-drawing, grand schemes that dig for the meaning of life, the universe, and everything. Aside from the convergence of the 50th anniversaries of ECM and the Art Ensemble of Chicago – an obvious bit of harmonic convergence – there are the broader questions of how the programming might encourage us to ponder broader implications of how the music (and film and dance &c.) we enjoy might direct us to finer considerations of the ways we all – all of us – might connect one to the other in the broader scheme of things.

Is Rhiannon Giddens really an expositor of Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future? Honestly, chances are good she would laugh in my face at the idea. But it seems to fit, in the same way that her work and the work of the AEC fit hand in glove with the admonitions of James Baldwin to open our eyes and ears and hearts, to make them bigger and more able to see and hear and feel a deep and rich history that has been largely hidden from us, one that could have disappeared entirely without the efforts of the artists and scholars who insist on keeping it alive. It is work that asks us to enlarge our vision to embrace the vast and wondrous possibilities that await, if only we could overcome the limitations imposed upon us by a social and economic system that profits by our

ignorance and separation.

> *“And if the word integration means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it. For this is your home, my friend, do not be driven from it; great men have done great things here, and will again, and we can make America what America must become.”*
>
> *“The Fire Next Time,” James Baldwin*

Maybe the whole idea of *“art”* somehow being a reasonably accurate and/or useful reflection of our shared human condition – and by extension, the possibility that *“art”* might somehow manifest something like a healing action or force upon our beleaguered condition – is somehow valid, somehow pertinent to our hourly/daily/weekly efforts to figure out the answer to what David Foster Wallace called our essential existential question: What does it mean to be fucking human?