Ears Embiggened – 50 Years of Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future



(The second 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.)

Among the highlights of Big Ears Festival 2019 are the coinciding 50th anniversary celebrations of ECM Records and the Art Ensemble of Chicago. There is a book to be written about Big Ears in general, and this round-number accident of the calendar in particular is fertile ground for way too much rumination for a couple of blog posts, but I will try to put a fence around it.

1969, the ostensible birth year of ECM and AEC, was the height of what pop history shorthands as the 'counterculture', that period of social, political, and artistic upheaval that continues to wield influence on both actual culture and nostalgic cable teevee documentaries intoning vapid bromides about upheavals, nothing would ever be the same, and so on. But it is easy to get jaded and glassy-eyed at the pabulum narrative and to forget that, yeah dammit, shit was going down, and even if some of it was not really "new", there was a critical mass of interest and action that gave some of the ideas and movements a heft that we would be foolish to forget.

One not-new idea held that communal living and collaborative decision-making could serve as a corrective to our degraded society. This led to a flood of collectives and communes and cooperative organizations, most of which came and went, victim to the usual parade of suspects: infighting, drugs, petty jealousies, personality cultism, bad weather, and so on. In large part, the failures were baked in the cake from the outset, as the children of relative privilege known as hippies<fn>I resemble that remark.</fn> were hamstrung by unrealistic expectations and nihilist fantasies. Many a Utopian adventure launched with insufficient appreciation for what it might take to make such a project work. For their trouble, they were in large part allowed to fail and then regain their position in privileged society, filled with contrition for their wayward apostasy while still indulging their fantasy of somehow standing up to "the man" that many of them would someday become. That many of these so-called vanguard became enthusiasatic cheerleaders for the worst in Reagan's Morning in America should come as no surprise.<fn>Also, too: take a look at the last presidential vote for indication of how this demographic cohort, well-educated and flush with 401k, turned out for Trump. The boomer track record ain't pretty.</fn>

Not all such groups were born of rainbow and unicorn wishful thinking. In situations where collective action was in fact a predicate for survival, the mission and sense of responsibility was somewhat more clearly defined. Groups with clearer vision of what their community needed, like the Black Panthers, created support systems to deliver essential services to their neighbors. Theirs was an ethos of self-sufficiency and discipline that aimed to uplift a marginalized community. For their trouble, they were targeted for elimination by a paranoid government, some murdered in their beds.

In the middle of this ferment, in 1965, a group of musicians

on Chicago's South Side formed the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. Predominantly African-American, the AACM performed each others' compositions, worked each other's concerts, pooled resources, and so on. The AACM also offered music lessons to kids and played benefit concerts for community needs. Several of the most important musicians of the late-20th century (Anthony Braxton, Henry Threadgill, Muhal Richard Abrams, and a couple dozen more) emerged from the AACM orbit. The place was as much a community center as it was an incubator for a musical movement.

In 1966, multi-reedist Roscoe Mitchell assembled an AACM sextet that included trumpeter Lester Bowie and bassist Malachi Favors to record *Sound* for the Delmark Records label. Much of the so-called free jazz at this time was wall of sound onslaught, typified by Coltrane's late period and the take no prisoners approach of Ayler, Shepp, and so on. *Sound* was notable for its cultivation of space and silence. Passages would float one into the other like clouds, leaving the listener feeling eerily like a cartoon character who just stepped off a cliff, suspended in time just ahead of a free fall. It was composed *and* improvised in a way that set it apart from just about anything else on the scene at the time.

The story goes that Mitchell convinced an employee of Delmark, Chuck Nessa, to get this album recorded and released. (Delmark was primarily known as a trad jazz and blues label, and a damned fine one at that.) A year later *Numbers 1&2,* released on the new Nessa Records label under Lester Bowie's name and with multi-reedist Joseph Jarman added to the mix, established the core lineup of the Roscoe Mitchell Art Ensemble. The story goes that Mitchell had persuaded Nessa to start his own record label. That label, like ECM, is still releasing vital recordings 50 years later.<fn>At the 2018 Big Ears Fest, when festival promoter AC was introduced to Chuck Nessa, he said, "You are the reason I am here."</fn>

By 1969, the Roscoe Mitchell Art Ensemble had relocated to the

outskirts of Paris, itself the locus of several strains of political and social pushback. As they embarked on a phenomenally fertile period of rehearsing, writing, recording, and touring, they added their hometown to their name: the Art Ensemble of Chicago was born. By 1970, drummer Don Moye – as fine a post-Max/Elvin era drummer as anyone not named Tony Williams or Jack DeJohnette – had completed the classic lineup.

From the outset, they agreed upon the same collaborative model that had made the AACM possible. Management of finances, creative decisions, sharing of money earned in outside opportunities (and these guys were in hot demand the entire time they were in Europe), all of these practices were a practical demonstration of the idealistic notions that the 60s are remembered for. One example: Bowie and his wife, Fontella Bass, had struck gold with "Rescue Me," a few years earlier. They sold everything they had, including a Bentley automobile, to finance the move to Paris. And yet because these arrangements were born of necessity rather than whim, and were driven by a defined sense of purpose, the AEC managed to stay together and succeed in ways that relatively few communal projects do.

Roscoe Mitchell, Lester Bowie, Joseph Jarman, Malachi Favors Maghostut, Famoudou Don Moye: The Greatest Band in the History of Forever <fn>Wherein we recognize that calling anything/body the G.O.A.T. is simply shorthand for saying "my favorite." I've had friends declaim the GOAT as (among many) The Who, Sex Pistols, Sleater Kinney, Phish, etc. Everybody is right; it's just that I am righter.</fn> turned Europe on its ear with its presentation of Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future.

Great Black Music was the Art Ensemble's strategy to escape the straitjacket marketing expectations and racist connotations of the label "jazz". It was also a timely and direct assertion of their identity as Black Musicians at a time where the music industry was consolidating its ongoing

practice of trying to whiten Black musics.<fn>See also, soft jazz and disco.</fn> The tag also allowed, as Mitchell once remarked, the group to freely access *all* music, not just the music that critics or marketers might insist they embrace. And that's exactly what they did, with music that encompassed African, Caribbean cultures, the African-American classical tradition, the legacy of string bands and brass bands, gospel, field hollers, funk, rock, soul, and just about every other style under the Sun. Not for nothing did they call their music Sun Music and recite poetry extolling the virtues and exploits of the People of the Sun. Theirs was an expression of Black Power that never shied away from challenging their audiences, which in my experience were predominantly white. The AEC was not separatist. But they were most definitely radical.

(We once drove from Athens to Gainesville, FL, c. 1982, to see the AEC perform outdoors at some bandshell at the University of Florida. It was bizarre. A standard-issue platoon of SEC drunkwhitefratboys hand trucked a keg down to the field and did what standard-issue drunkwhitefratboys do when confronted with proudly Black and utterly expectation-defying entertainments. They heckled. They laughed and joked, they capered. They were *not* subtle. The band did not back down, raising their level of ferocity to match the bohunk brigade. I would swear at one point I heard one of the AEC chant, "N——s here, get your n——s here." Fucking fearless.)

In Paris, the AEC set to work incorporating elements of theatrical ritual and dance, recitations, chant, kabuki and absurdist theater into their performances. On first glance these raucous happenings appeared to be uncontrolled and chaotic free-for-alls behind a wave of randomized sound. But repeated viewings and listenings revealed a carefully nurtured sense of structure and form, recognizable (if idiosyncratic) compositions, and tightly focused, exquisitely skilled instrumental tightrope trickery. Their "free" improvisation sections, largely unplanned beyond a basic instruction or

framework, never devolved into pointless squalling. Untold hours of rehearsal taught them how to communicate in the moment and achieve consensus as to which direction to take, how to transition from one place to another – essentially, how to behave as conscious and cooperative human beings in a musical context. It was the musical expression of their larger organizational strategy of mutually supportive collaboration and decision making.



Every one of the group is a master at their craft. They all play(ed) multiple instruments, including their array of toys and noisemakers they dubbed little instruments. Eventually, their stage set would include dozens of reed and brass instruments. Several cages of gongs, bells, drums, shakers stood ready. Costuming ranged from Mitchell's street clothes, to Bowie's lab coat, to Jarman, Moye, and Favors various styles of face paint and uniforms, all carefully chosen to reflect connection to a range of traditions from America to Africa to the Far East. (Jarman became a Buddhist priest

during his years with the AEC. Prior to the AACM, he had been in Vietnam. Details are skimpy, but he apparently spent some harsh time deep in the jungle behind enemy lines.)

The Art Ensemble of Chicago were/are anything but random. They worked with focus and commitment – to the music and to each other – in order to place themselves in a position to take advantage of opportunities that came their way. And at their peak, they were quite simply the best performing band on the planet.

The Big Ears Festival is celebrating two fiftieth anniversaries this year: both ECM Records and the Art Ensemble of Chicago debuted – separately – in 1969. Ten years later, the AEC would join ECM in what would be their most fertile commercial and (arguably) creative period. Certainly, their visibility would reach its peak during their ECM years. (They moved on to the Japanese DIW label c. 1986.) Talk about your harmonic convergence.

While AEC released only 4 albums under ECM during this time, they benefited from what amounted to major label support. ECM's association with Warner Brothers gave them the best marketing and distribution support of their history. Late last year, ECM released a 21-CD box set that includes every ECM recording that featured any of the AEC members, along with a 296-page book chronicling their history with the label.

Even better, ECM viewed touring as a marketing activity for the recordings<fn>These days that equation is inverted.</fn> and provided full economic support for multiple tours of Europe, Japan, and North America. The AEC hauled several tons of equipment, so that support made possible their elaborate, full force presentations. It wasn't just the music: the sheer theatricality of an AEC show – plus the fact that every night was dramatically different – was enough to make driving 10 hours to see a show like a bunch of Deadheads<fn>We did that for the Dead, too, fwiw.</fn> more than worth the effort.



This was the AEC that I encountered 40 years ago, the one that scrambled my DNA and set me on a path that brings me back around to the AEC/ECM birthday hullabaloo at Big Ears. Roscoe Mitchell mentioned last year that their 50th was coming, and I was pretty sure this was going to be part of the Big Ears menu this year. How could it not? And I remember thinking then that I would crawl over broken bottles to be there.

Of the original five, only Mitchell and Moye remain. I have no idea what to expect from the new lineup, which includes Hugh Ragin on trumpet, Junius Paul on bass, and Tomeka Reid on cello. I'm glad they are not trying to replicate the original lineup, though I imagine there is a certain philosophical orientation to the whole thing that evokes the AEC in their prime. Or maybe it will be something completely different, something I never expected to see in my wildest dreams, something that leaves me molecularily rearranged for my next 40 years. I'm willing to take the chance.

(I've written about my love of the Art Ensemble of Chicago before.
The Best. Band. Ever.<fn>ymmv</fn>)

Hat tip to Paul Steinbeck for his terrific AEC history Message to Our Folks. Another great resource is A Power Stronger Than

Itself by George E Lewis, a massive history of the AACM. Get ’em.

Ears Embiggened: 50 Years of ECM



(The first in a series of preview posts as we count down to the
2019 Big Ears Festival in Knoxville, TN.)

Back in the old days – way before the internet machine made hearing just about any recorded piece of music in the world as easy as finding a homemade porno of some celebrity and/or politician – finding out about music beyond the typical commercial channels took some real work. Much of this involved poring over publications of varying literacy levels to find out who was playing with who, where, and how often.<fn>God bless the *Village Voice*.</fn> You had to spend time dialing in college and alternative radio stations (no internet radio! You had to be within hailing range.) and hoping against reason that the stoned DJ <fn>I resemble that remark.</fn> might remember to announce the name of the track you were dying to identify. Often, you would listen to six or eight more songs in a row, only to have the hapless jock (mea culpa) announce only the last two because, well, he forgot, man.

You had to haunt the record stores. There used to be mammoth stores – stores like Peaches and Turtles and Virgin – aisle after aisle of record bins sorted by genre, carefully filed in alphabetical order. This was for the new, sealed releases. Very expensive, at least 5 or 6 bucks a record.

Then there were the used record stores, meccas for music geeks where you could stand for hours flipping through the stacks hoping to find a gem that you could make off with for two clams, three if it was a double disc set. You could drop 20 bucks on a pile of records just on whim. Maybe you saw a name you recognized, or the album cover was cool. Whatever. If you liked it, you win. If you didn't, you could bring it back the next week and trade it in for a dollar credit. A buck for a listen or two seemed like a deal.

After a while, you spent lots of time with the album covers, checking out the liner notes and musician credits. Patterns emerge. You start to recognize more names, and not just the players. Engineers and producers start turning up again and again – Rudy van Gelder, Bob Thiele, Teo Macero. You start to keep an eye peeled.

You learned to recognize the record labels. You started to realize that any Blue Note album was worth the 2 bucks. Same for anything on Impulse. Specialty labels like ESP Disk were always worth a tumble, even though you might end up with a squabbling wall of artifactual noise that all but obliterated whatever the music was trying to be.<fn>Many Sun Ra albums, especially on his El Saturn label, were like this, but you learned to buy them anyway because you just never knew what you might find.</fn>

And then there was ECM. Pretty standard rule of thumb: If you saw an ECM in the cutout bin, you bought it. If not for you, then for one of your pals. Don't recognize the Scandinavian cascade of consonants and diacriticals? Don't worry, just buy it. If it had Manfred Eicher's seal of approval, it was worth

the candle.



Codona: A typically lovely ECM cover design.

By the time I got serious(ly addicted) about vinyl collection and music that could be safely characterized as out-of-the-mainstream, ECM was a ten year old label with a solid reputation for attention to detail in curation, design, packaging, and recording quality. The covers were thick paper and beautifully printed, the liner sleeves a refined, no friction material, never rough paper. No cheap, junked vinyl here; the discs were heavy and thick, an obvious cut above the major labels pressings on horse chips. They had to be, you see: the ECM sound would not survive the surface noise of standard-issue vinyl.

What about that sound quality? The first few years of releases had varying sonic personalities, but by the mid-70s the characteristic ECM Sound was firmly established, notable for its cultivation of audible space and silence. Even on recordings that were somewhat wall of sound-ish (e.g., Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians*) Eicher's close attention to microphone selection and placement provided clearly defined separation of instruments in the mix. Add to that a well-articulated stereo image and a layering of reverb that served to build a concert hall in your living room. And no matter who

was playing, it was the same concert hall every time.

In a 1999 interview with Home Studio Magazine, Eicher explained that he

> *…listened to a lot of jazz records, mainly Impulse! Or ESP releases; I found the music very interesting, but I didn't like the way it was produced, mainly because I felt something was lacking, a part of the message had disappeared. My main concern, when I founded ECM, was to respect every aspect of the music. That meant be able to hear every nuance of the instrument, every colour, and respect the dynamics of sound, as given by the musician. This was quite a different way of recording jazz, and public was sensible to it."*

Some of this attention to detail no doubt grew from his experience at the classical Deutsche Grammophon label, long admired for its close attention to audio excellence. <fn>DG is another label, like ECM, that has somehow managed to maintain fierce fidelity to its guiding principles and pursuit of quality, still going strong 120 years after its founding. Maximum Respect!</fn> But there is a marked difference between the ECM and DG sound signature. Eicher was drawn to the atmospherics of reverb – both natural and simulated – where DG cultivated a drier studio sound. One is not necessarily better than the other. Vive la difference! But one thing is certain: You could identify an ECM project within a few seconds of listening.

These days, that ECM aesthetic is more widespread, signal of the influence ECM has had on the way we record and listen to music in the wake of their example. (For better or worse, the whole "New Age" genre pretty much owes its existence to ECM and Eno's Ambient Music releases.)

The sound – the company motto calls it "the Most Beautiful Sound Next to Silence" – took some critical shots from those who found it icy, cold, antiseptic. Because Eicher, and many

of his favorite artists, were from Scandinavia, the label was dubbed “fjord music” and “the Great Northern Sound”. As with too many critical shorthands, the jibes are better as provocative copy than accurate description.

Still, the sound was an ECM signature, and on some releases (like Eberhard Weber’s 1979 *Fluid Rustle*, which happens to be the ECM debut of Bill Frisell), the sound itself is often more notable than the performance. Descriptions of ECM as the “beautiful music” label emerged, and not in a kind context. To be sure, there were more than a few releases that were just perfect for those 3 a.m. oh-god-I-just-can’t-come-down episodes, times when an ECM record provided just the right amount of sonic-envelopment and gentle massage. This aesthetic would find broader – and less satisfying – expression with the emergence of so-called New Age music from labels like Windham Hill in the 80s.



But the perception is at odds with the reality. Close listening to something like *Fluid Rustle* offers satisfying elements of compositional innovation, and the performances are superbly delivered. I won't likely spin this one often, but there is more there, there, than meets the ear. And on balance, the ECM catalog is studded with recordings that are definitional in their realm, with ambitious releases from the likes of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Dave Holland, Meredith Monk, Steve Reich, Arvo Part, &c. that more than make up for those releases that one might be tempted to dismiss as sonic wallpaper. More than a few people have told me in no uncertain terms that Reich and Part are really just fancy-pants Muzak. For myself, I had long considered Keith Jarrett's *Sun Bear*

Concerts, a ten-album set of solo improvisation recorded live in Japan in 1978, little better than background hum. Yet here I am, about 3 hours into the box's roughly 7 hours of music, and I find myself in a serious re-evaluation of my opinion of Jarrett overall and this recording in particular. YMMV.

With the Big Ears Festival's celebration of ECM's 50th anniversary less than a month away, I find myself immersed in the ECM catalog, revisiting so much music that has fallen out of my regular listening rotation. Most of the label's 1500 or so releases are available via your favorite streaming service. <fn>This is ECM authorized streaming, so you can listen guilt-free, though you should buy some of the recordings anyway. Streaming fees are not enough to keep them going for 50 years more.</fn> This is some deep nostalgia for me, a traipse through the soundscapes that helped establish my overall aesthetic philosophy about what music – and art in general – can accomplish in a world in need of healing action.

How I think about music, how I respond to certain creative gestures and techniques, owes much to the ECM ethos. (Especially to my favorite of their roster of artists, the Art Ensemble of Chicago.) My interest in music that comes from other realms and cultures, music that defies easy categorization, or music that can appear harshly repellent or deceptively beautiful at first listen but that reveals more and more depth with every listen. Music that asks us to open our ears to the unfamiliar, to the possibly difficult and challenging. This aesthetic informs my engagement with pretty much all creative work, both my own and from other artists.

If you get right down to it – and apologies for presuming to speak for the Big Ears director – I expect that this is similar to the formation of Ashley Capps' aesthetic, too. We came of age around the same time and around a lot of the same music. (AC and I met at the Bijou Theater in Knoxville in 1980 at his presentation of the Art Ensemble, one of his first shows.) We both were college radio geeks, the kinds of people

who would spend hours flipping through the cutout bins in search of some holy grail recording of someone only we knew about.

And that is likely why Big Ears resonates so strongly for me. When I look at the lineup, it is as though I had just sat down and made a list of the artists I really want to hear and see. It rings the bells that Manfred Eicher started pealing in my head 40 years ago, bells that have shaped much of my life since.

ECM was not the first label to establish such a distinct personality, nor the last. Labels like India Navigation, Soul Note, Black Saint, hatHut, and dozens more have since created powerful catalogs of work in the jazz realm, and Nonesuch is prominent in its delivery of important creative music after its humble origin as a discount bin classical label in 1964. But not many labels have the longevity of an ECM: Fifty years on, Eicher's vision remains intact (albeit expanded to embrace more classical music since c. 1985) and the company's business model presumably solid. Hell, 50 years in the recording industry is about three lifetimes. Certainly such a thing is impossible.

And yet, they persisted. Happy birthday, ECM, and thanks for everything.

(Credit to the Home Studio Magazine interview with Eicher and Tyran Grillo's superb website, a heroic labor of love from a guy who just wanted to write a thoughtful review of every album ECM ever released. And immense thanks to the Big Ears Festival
for throwing ECM a big ass birthday hoolie this year.)

The Prodigal Returns



Forgive me readers, for I have sinned.

The primary directive for bloggers who wish to be well attended: Keep your content fresh. Post frequently so that your legions of followers know they will always find something new every time they check your page.

In this, I have failed. Mea maxim culpa.

But I’m back, better than ever, so fatten up a calf for me and gather round to hear my plans.

First off, you may ask yourself: How can I (the reader) trust this bounder (your inconsistent correspondent) to keep up his end of the bargain, to toil diligently so that I (the reader) might enjoy high quality distractment at my (the reader’s) beck and call. Because instant gratification is the coin of the realm, evidently.

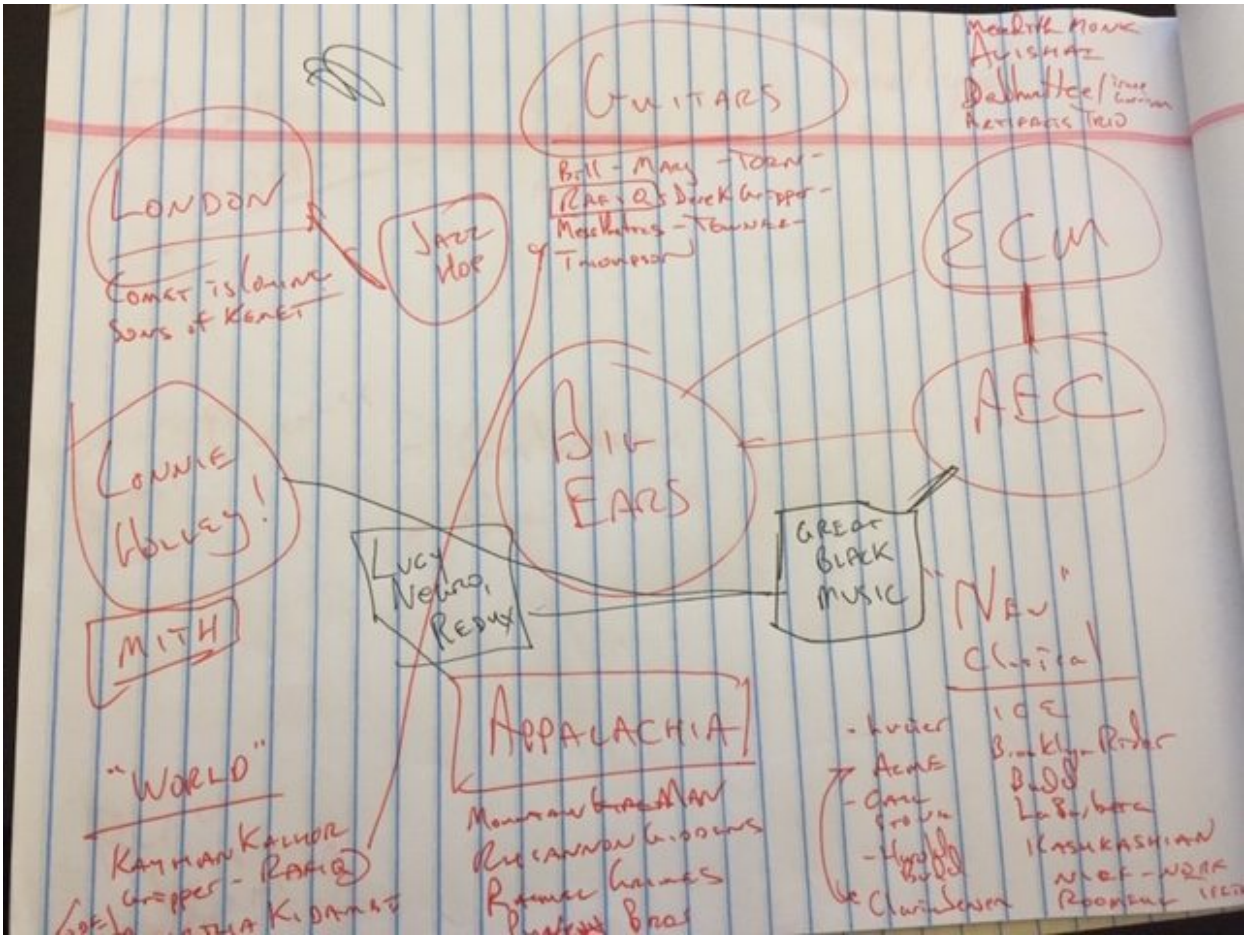
Hey, just trust me, okay?



I swear on my grandchildren…

Besides, there is so much more that I want to write about that nobody wants to pay me to write about that I might as well just start typing and putting it up here for free.

I’m working on a site re-design, because four years is plenty for the same look. But that’s just cosmetics. Expect a great deal more of the music/lit/tv/film content, starting with the annual wall-to-wall cogitations about the 2019 Big Ears Festival. The scope of this year’s festival is making me dizzy. It is not just the challenge of navigating performance schedules<fn>Saturday afternoon’s lineup in particular is a fantod-inducing embarrassment of riches, thanks very much.</fn> that trigger my most extreme option anxiety. Even the (allegedly) simple task of sorting and categorizing the proceedings — something any decent music writer has to be able to do — is an exercise in recursive Venn diagramming and cross-category perplexity that would make a lesser writer quail, if you could find one.



The tidy process of an orderly mind

So get ready for some flailing attempts at exegesis and grand-scheme syncretism. I'll get my head around this thing or collapse trying. From the 50th anniversaries of ECM records and the Art Ensemble of Chicago to the brand new ballet (yep) from Rhinnon Giddens, this festival has got my blood all het up. Don't even get me started on the guitarists on tap.

The blog will also pay more attention to the cultural highlights here in Tallahassee. It still isn't quite NYC, but significant things are happening here and there is a real scarcity of arts coverage in this town. I've noticed several significant events come and go lately with scarce a word of notice, to the point where we only find out about some of these happenings after the fact. I will do what I can to fill the gaps.

The April calendar is chock a block with world-class creative work. It also happens to be Tallahassee's most lovely time of

year: temperate climate, azaleas in bloom, and enough pollen to stun an elephant. Get your travel plans ready.

The Tallahassee Film Festival brings an expanded scope of activity April 5-7. On top of smartly curated films, there will be a Saturday night shindig at The Wilbury featuring Baltimore-based electronics wizard and DJ Dan Deacon, described as “notorious for his wild and spontaneous live shows that meld the vibe of a performance-art happening with his free-thinking permutations on decades of avant-garde music lineage.” More details on this cool fest as the schedule firms up, but it promises to be a big treat.

The weekend of April 12-14, our annual Word of South Festival is gonna be terrific (lineup is under press embargo for now, but trust me…LIT!). Aside from a ticketed concert on Friday night, everything is free. The fest sprawls across Cascades Park in everything from small tents to bigger tents to huge tents to the mainstage amphitheater. Once again, the crew at The Bitter Southerner is programming their own stage for the weekend. They were so well attended last year that they have been moved to the large stage adjacent to The Edison. It’s a smart move. More details on WoS here when the schedule is released.

(I also have a WoS feature landing in Tallahassee Magazine first week of March and a review of last year’s hoolie here on the blog.)

Piling on. Saturday, April 13 – smack dab in the middle of Word of South, finds the sonic blasts of the Nels Cline / Larry Ochs / Gerald Cleaver trio at 5th and Thomas.<fn>5&T is establishing itself as a first rank room for l*istening* to good music. Primarily a venue for touring Outlaw Country and roots rock bands, this booking happened almost by accident, but let’s just genuflect for a moment at good fortune and get our assess out to fill the joint for this one so we can convince management to bring more in this vein.</fn> Cline is one of

the most active and influential guitarists on the scene, or rather, on many scenes, maybe even every scene. Best known as the guitarist for arena rockers Wilco, Cline's curiosity ranges across every style you can imagine and his trickery with electronics and sheer souuuuuund will leave you wondering how/what the hell happened. On this gig, you get to see him up close. I pity the fool who misses this. And I pity lovers of creative music in Tallahassee if we don't fill the room for this one.

Larry Ochs, one of the founders of the Rova Saxophone Quartet, is a beast on tenor and soprano, a thoughtful composer and arranger, and restless seeker of high grade collaborators like Anthony Braxton, Kronos Quartet, John Zorn, and Sam Rivers. Drummer Gerald Cleaver is a veteran of the jazz and free jazz world, often heard alongside creative giants like Roscoe Mitchell, Henry Threadgill, and Craig Tabor. People, this is a true creative music supergroup. You can listen to and order their first recording, released last month, at the Clean Feed website. <fn>You will be hearing a lot more about Clean Feed here in the coming months, too. It is an insanely prolific and high-quality record label based in Lisbon. Yowsa.</fn> Recommended track: "Shimmer Intend Spark Groove Defend."

What else can I offer to regain your trust and traffic? How about thoughts on the use of moral philosophy as a plot platform in (ostensibly, perhaps) funny television programs? Or maybe the intersection of racial discrimination, education policy, banking practices, and criminal justice reform? Maybe you just want the occasional reading recommendation, or maybe just a recipe for a good soup.

I am not running away from the political, but damn if anything I write about the ongoing atrocities does not seem outdated by new atrocities before I can even hit publish. But campaign season is nigh upon us, a full year before the first caucus or primary, so I'm sure I will find a way to make myself look foolish soon enough.

As always, I love hearing from readers. Complaints, outrage, fawning praise, whatever. Seriously, there’s no money in this here bloggy vineyard, so let me know you are out there.

Unless you aren’t. In that case, carry on.

The Embiggening: Day 4



The i2b team of one continues their coverage of the Big Ears Festival in Knoxville, TN. Please share widely. And if you are feeling generous, click that DONATE button over there so we can buy gas and go home.

Day 4 began with some drama for the i2b team. We had hoped to be through with the excitements once we bailed out the photographer, but alas, no. We don’t know how the copy editor actually got to Dollywood, not the exact nature of the alleged unpleasantness that so alarmed the Pigeon Forge constabulary, but on behalf of the entire i2b team, we offer our regrets and apologies. However, any restitution for damages shall be the sole responsibility of the copy editor, who we had conveniently sacked several hours before whatever unpleasantness may or may not have occurred at whatever time – past or future – the alleged acts may or may not have etc and so forth. There will be no further comment on this matter.

We finished our Day 3 summary just in time to scamper to the Mill & Mine for the highly anticipated Tyshawn Sorey Trio performance at noon. Aside from being named a 2017 MacArthur Genius, Sorey has a rich discography as both leader and sideman. Fantastically talented on drums, piano, and trombone, Sorey has also been making his mark as a composer.



But not every event can live up to expectation, even at Big Ears. Beginning with a long, pensive introduction by Cory Smythe – a terrific pianist who we saw several times with the International Contemporary Ensemble – every section of this 75 minute, single composition performance seemed to go too long. Multiple apparent endings would come and go, a comma appearing where a period would have provided much needed respite for the audience. Still, moments of the set were thrilling. Smythe is a remarkably inventive pianist and Sorey's reputation as a percussionist is well deserved. It was not a bad show, but it certainly was not great. Combine the need for editing with the

fact that we were a standing audience in the over-sized (for this show) Mill & Mine: the overall effect was to add to the exhaustion that three full days of music-chasing had created.

This sense of exhaustion hung over the final day of the festival. You could see it in the faces of the listeners, the festival staff, the security guards, the good people vending the beverages and the snacks. But kudos to Knoxville and the event attenders: even with this pervasive fatigue, everyone remained friendly and patient. We are just glad that the all-day rain of Saturday had drifted away.

A quick note on weather: it was not good for the festival until Sunday afternoon, when the sun came out and the winds died down. Aside from forcing a relocation of the epic fiddler jam, the weather had little impact on the festival programming. Venues were full and lines for food and drink around town were formidable. The price we paid for bad weather lies in the diminishment of the street scene. Where last year found the plazas and sidewalk cafes jammed with scores of people speaking a dozen or more languages, this year saw people huddled indoors, always taking the most direct line between venues to limit exposure to the elements. For a town as charming as Knoxville, this was indeed something to lament.

But you can ask Memphis Minnie about the weather: crying won’t help you and praying won’t do you no good. Plus, the Sunday schedule somehow seemed less packed than the first three days, not that it was free of desire conflicts. With a glimpse of the sun, we settled into a seat on the square in front of coffee and pastry, happy to watch the lovers stroll and the children frolic, bemused that the strolling lovers were, many of them, destined to become the parents chasing children in frolic. An older gentleman busked with his violin, playing some Eastern European pieces that spurred our research assistant to drop a few bills in the fiddler’s open case.

Fortified by this interlude, we shook off our lethargy and

ambled over to catch the set by *guzheng* maestro<fn>We really need a non-gendered version of this word.</fn> and banjo avatar Abigail Washburn at the Bijou. Now, we'll be honest: Our expectation for this set was low. It had all the earmarks of a boardroom planned cultural *pastiche* ready made for a PBS fundraiser program. Our plan was to catch a tune and get back outside for a nap in the sun.



We were wrong. This show was the quirky surprise event of the weekend. Abigail and Fei, it turns out, have been friends for years. The songs in the set were developed on the front porch during afternoons spent watching their children frolic. (They both live in Nashville and have kids around the same age.) What could have been a corny commingling of cultures turned out to be one of the most generous and refreshing things we've witnessed in a long time.

Turns out they have been gigging this material in coffee shops and open mic nights around Nashville; this was perhaps their

first proper concert; Fei expressed her gratitude at playing someplace where nobody thought they were weird. They began standing back to back, each singing into the soundhole of a *guzheng* stood on end. The harmonies and resonances matched anything heard all weekend. Okay, then, one more tune. And then one more, and one more, until the hour had passed by.

One piece they examined was a Chinese Communist anthem that was used to spur worker productivity. Turns out it began as an old time farmer's tune about chickens,. They paired that with the Appalachian traditional "Old Cluck Hen". They are, it seems, the same dang tune, and the effect of harmonized English and Chinese lyrics is literally tear inducing. Another song about a dutiful daughter from the countryside, sent to the city to earn a living at the mill or factory – only to be turned into an escort for a well-heeled man – took a fine turn when the destination city turned out to be Shanghai.

Throughout, Fei and Abigail demonstrated a solid social conscience. The two pieces described above convey a solid awareness of the commonality of their rural working class backgrounds, and later, their performance of a piece about the (true) historical figure Mulan was prefaced with a comment about strong women and "douchebags in power".

Washburn, who at seven months pregnant assured us that her doctor had given her clearance to clog dance her heart out, is a natural born comic and story teller. Fei is her straight person, a dry as toast foil to Abigail's good humored jokester. Dang, we love these women, and cannot wait to hear the album they promised is coming this fall.

Just a little while later – long enough for another cup of joe in the sunshine – the trio Bangs took to the Bijou stage. Pianist Jason Moran announced that Bangs – with guitarist Mary Halvorson and cornetist Ron Miles – had been together for six years and four gigs. It was beautiful, dreamy music, with a solid balance of composition and improvisation, swinging tunes

and outside abstractions. The i2b team has loved all of these musicians over the years, but this was the first time catching this rare combination. They offered a CD for sale that was sold out before we could get to them, but rumor suggests copies are available online. We'll be listening as soon as we think we can absorb more music.<fn>Big Ears proves that one can ingest a sufficiency, at least, that demands a recovery period.</fn>

We were at a critical juncture. We could have called it a weekend, succumbed to the temptations of one or the other of Knoxville's fine taverns, secure in the knowledge we had done our best to hear as much as humanly possible. But that would have been a lie, so onward to the Tennessee Theater for a transition from Bangs to Banging on a Can.

Local heroes *nief norf* presented Steve Reich's 2013 composition "Quartet" for two pianos and two marimbas. We usually expect the interlocking melody lines from Reich. Here, the polyrhythms played out in muscular block chords. Just the thing to boost flagging energies and to prepare us for what came next. During the Reich, we noticed music stands and microphones set up around the audience, so we made sure to get a central seat for the Bang on a Can All Stars 30th Anniversary blowout.



With a little help from *nief norf*, BoaC began with Michael Gordon's "Big Space" for thirty musicians: 15 on stage, 9 in the balcony, and 3each in orchestra seating right and left. Gordon is quickly shaping up as one of our favorite composers. Just as with "Rushes" for 7 bassoons – and "Timbers" from last year's fest, for six 2×4 boards – Gordon aims to fill the space with repetitions that layer to create sound cascades through the performance space, and while this may appear merely "Reichian", Gordon has developed his own spin on things. The surround sound effect was miraculous, aside from *Electric Ascension* and *Godspeed*, nothing we heard approached this level of sonic envelopment. (Granted, we missed Lightning Bolt; reports from that front described volumetric heights that triggered scientific instruments out at Oak Ridge. Or so we heard.)

Paring down to 6 musicians, the All Stars followed up with Julia Wolfe's "Big, Beautiful, Dark & Scary" and David Lang's

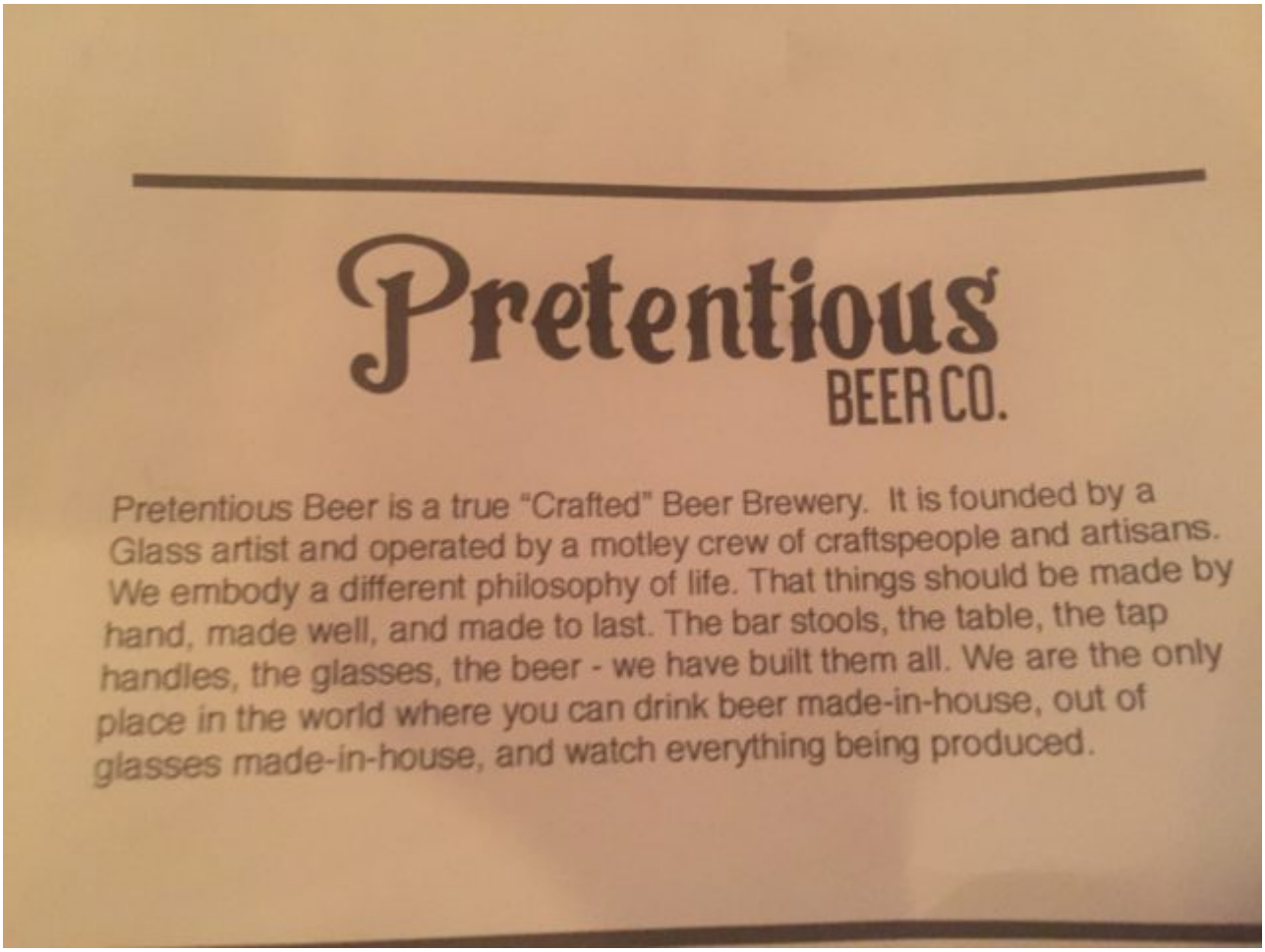
“Cheating, Lying, Stealing”.<fn>Gordon, Lang, and Wolfe are founding members of BoaC.</fn> This was as much prog rock as it was classical music, whatever that means anymore. Against the backdrop of these pieces, Philip Glass’s “Closing” sounded damn near romantic, lush and calm and lovely. This respite saved us for the final assault, Steve Martland’s “Horses of Instruction”. Let’s just say that Martland learned his Crimson lessons well. This piece was all energy, a runaway train of shifting time signatures, tricky ostinato figures, and hell for leather tempo. It was a fitting crescendo.



And it was then, when we wandered into the gentle evening air, that we knew we were done. Apologies to Craig Taborn, who turned in what we heard was a fine performance, but we had nothing left. Our ears proved not quite big enough.

But we were well beyond happy, both with the music we heard and the conversations and new friends that bubbled up. We

wandered down to Old City, where we saw the entrances to several more Big Ears venues that we had never made it to, and found our way to Pretentious Beer & Glass Company for some post-show replenishment of essential bodily fluids. An amazing place, where everything you see was made by hand: tables, stools, the bar, the beer, and most incredibly, the glasses themselves. One side of the joint is a glass-blowing studio where our pals Duet for Theremin and Lap Steel had performed to accompany some glass making. So very cool.



We are sorry to have missed that performance – along with our inability to be eight places at once to catch Anna & Elizabeth, Jon Gibson, Peter Evans a few times, Diamanda Galas, and Anoushka Shankar. Sure, it hurts to miss something you know you would have loved – especially when your friends tell you, "Dude, I can't believe you missed *that*. It was so awesome." But on the other hand, there is something comforting in knowing that you literally stuffed yourself to the gills

with music most excellent, and still there is a surfeit out there just waiting to fill your ears for the first, or five hundredth, time.

Last year, some smart-ass writing for the Bitter Southerner offered that Big Ears is “arguably the best festival pound-for-pound in the United States.” I ran into that guy, who insisted I take his picture. He wants you to know that he stands by that assessment.

