

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.

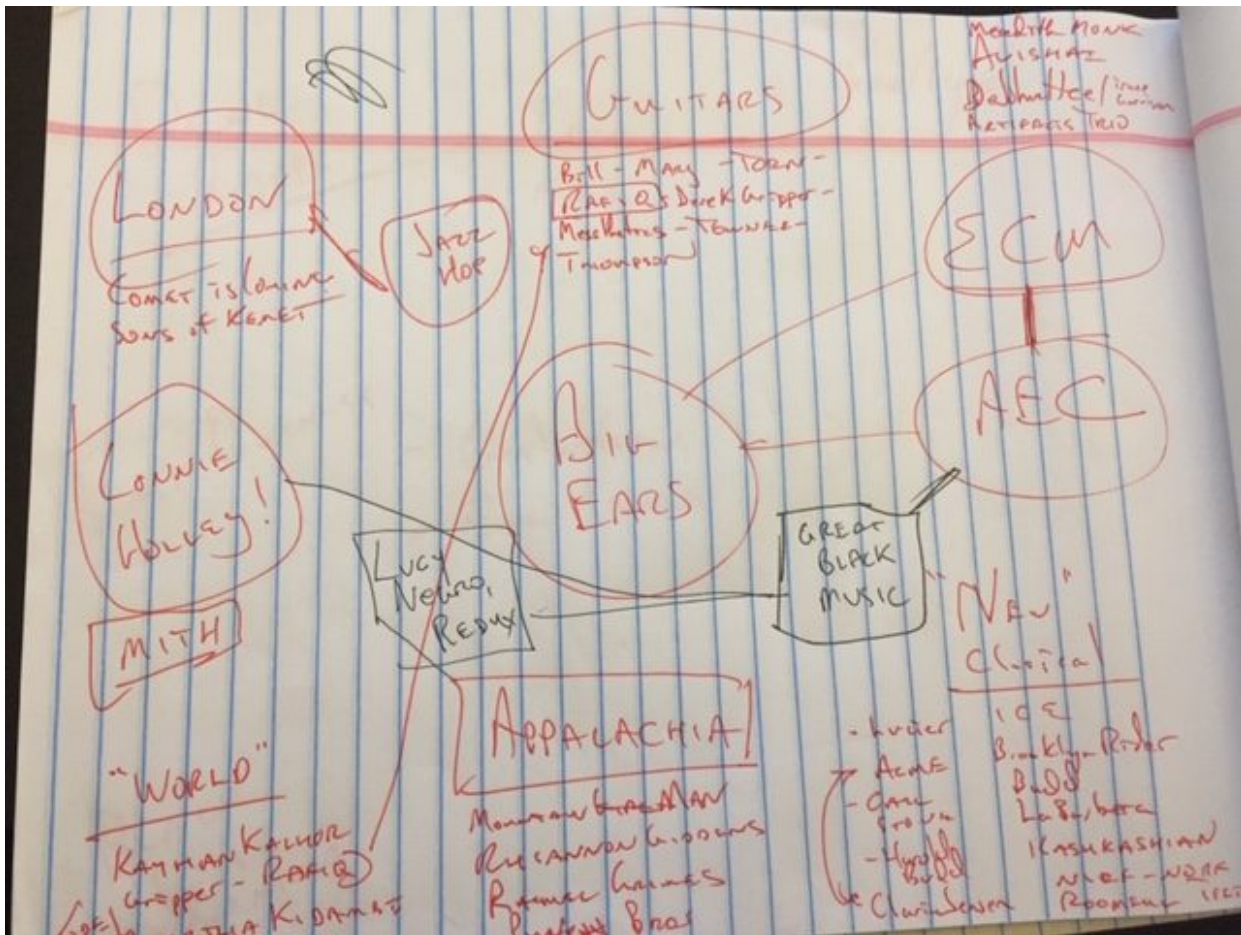
Hey, just trust me, okay?



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. 5&T is establishing itself as a first rank room for *listening* 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. 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.

My Favorite World #38

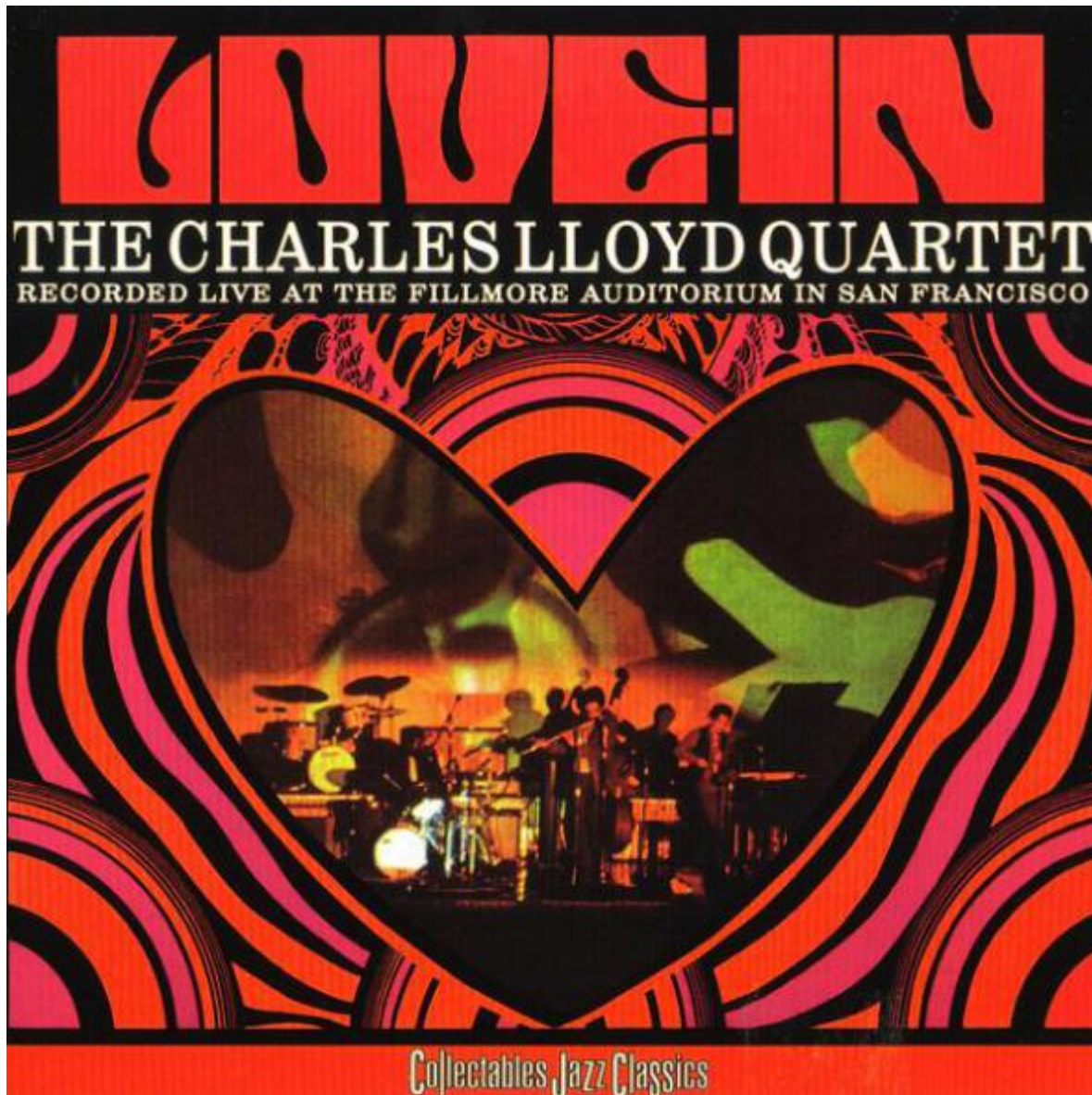


After an outpouring of reader demand, The Writer is back with My Favorite World, a (purportedly) once-weekly feature that highlights some things that make this my favorite world. I had stopped posting MFW after week 37 because it seemed to be not so popular. However, the application of true cash money attached to a request to resume is more than I can deny.

So here: a piece of Terrible Beauty to herald the arrival of Trump.

Charles Lloyd has been on the scene since the 50s. It would be ridiculous to list everybody he's worked with because it's pretty much everybody who counts. His first group as a leader gave big breaks to Keith Jarrett, Jack DeJohnette, and Cecil McBee.<fn>If any of those names is unfamiliar, get to work!</fn> The Quartet was the first jazz group to play the Fillmore, appearing alongside Hendrix, Cream, the Dead, Joplin, Airplane, &c. For many a tripped out hippie, it was

the first jazz they ever heard.



What else? One of the first million-selling albums in jazz history. Toured everywhere, including the Far East and the Soviet bloc nations. Lloyd, born in Memphis with heritage derived from African, Cherokee, Mongolian, and Irish ancestors, was one of the first “world music” explorers. He was, as the kids have it, the shit.

He has a new group – Charles Lloyd and the Marvels – featuring steel guitarist Greg Leisz, drummer Eric Harland, bassist Reuben Rogers, and some kid named Bill Frisell on guitar. He has a new album on Blue Note, *I Long to See You*. It is purely beautiful.

Lloyd has never shied from political expression, so on Inauguration Day<fn>Black Friday</fn>, he released to YouTube a version of Dylan's "Masters of War" by the Marvels with guest vocalist Lucinda Williams. The song is 50+ years old and has never felt dated.

He released this statement with the piece:

Nations have been throwing rocks at each other for 1000s of years. We go through spells of light and darkness. In my lifetime I have witnessed periods of peace, protest, and uprising, only to be repeated by peace, protest and more uprising. The fact that Bob Dylan's "Masters of War" was written in the early 1960s and not during the last decade, makes it timeless and timely. It breaks my heart to think that there are current generations of young people all over the world who are growing up without knowing of Peace in their lives. The words Dylan wrote are a laser beam on humanity. This line, in particular, has stuck with me for over 5 decades:

*"Let me ask you one question
Is your money that good
Will it buy you forgiveness
Do you think that it could
I think you will find
When your death takes its toll
All the money you made
Will never buy back your soul"*

The world is a dog's curly tail – no matter how many times we straighten it out, it keeps curling back. As artists we aspire to console, uplift and inspire. To unite us through sound across boundaries and borders and dissolve lines of demarcation that separate. The beautiful thing is that as human beings, even under the most adverse conditions, we are capable of kindness, compassion and love. Vision and hope. All life is one. Who knows, maybe one day we'll succeed. We

go forward.

Lucinda. I do love me some Lucinda Williams. When that woman goes for rasp she can sing the chrome off a trailer hitch. Her delivery here is terrifying and borderline ugly, ugly in that beautiful way that calls up and confronts the horror and fear many of us are feeling in these rickety times. It's a clarion, a beckoning. Hear it.

Now, go plunk down your filthy dollars and buy a copy of this. You won't be sorry.



Hell, it's even got Willie Nelson on one track, Norah Jones on another. Whaddya waiting for?

My Favorite World.

A Typically Hackneyed End of

Year Sum It All Up Post



Hey kittens! It's been far too long since I dropped some knowledge here in the bloggy vineyard. The wait for knowledge will, alas, continue, but there are a few things to talk about as we wrap up the 2016 calendar.

First off, and maybe biggest: we've (you and me) amassed a little more than \$4000 towards my travel expenses for the Uganda/RUTF project. Massive gratitude to everyone who donated, and big props to pal Doug Blackburn who put together a terrific piece for the Tallahassee Democrat to give this project wider exposure.

As of last week, we are targeting mid-February for the journey. We had hoped to go in October, then November. We are at the mercy of the NGO we are traveling with and the conditions on the ground in Africa. I am about to crawl out of my skin with anticipation.

AND IF ANYBODY NEEDS TO RING UP A LAST MINUTE TAX DEDUCTION,
please click here
and drop a little coin in the kitty.
Fully tax-deductible, and all for a good cause.
You'll feel so much better if you do.

It's been quite a year in the vineyard, even though the blog frequency has been, uhm, infrequent. Mea culpa. Life has been full, and I've had the great luck to place two pieces in The Bitter Southerner in 2016, one of them included in their Best Stories of 2016 roundup. Attention ho that I am, I am

extremely proud and honored, especially when you think of the consistently amazing writing they serve up all year long.

The ridiculously long piece on New Orleans and the Panorama Jazz/Brass Band and the merely-absurdly long piece on Hearty White were true labors of love. The opportunity to stretch out and tell stories about places and people that I love is one of the year's great blessings for me. Hard to thank the BS crew enough, especially Chuck Reece, for letting me ramble at length. And now there's another piece in the pipeline for the Bitter crowd, one that will be either longer or shorter than the Hearty piece, but definitely shorter than the NOLA ramble.<fn>btw, I've started looking at how I might expand the NOLA material into a book. Anybody knows a publisher or a deep-pocketed benefactor, please send her my way.</fn>

And bigly: Judy invited me to collaborate on her new Comma project. Look at me, Ma! I'm in the Academy!

I'm also deep into the research on the Uganda project and have begun sketching out some fiction projects that are either short stories or novels or perhaps a multi-volume epic that will make me richer than George JK Rowling Martin.

Hey, kidz! Let's get interactive. Take this poll to help me decide which fiction project to tackle first.

[Total_Soft_Poll id="2"]

Vote. It's important.

On top of all that, some fairly challenging and satisfying corporate 'ho type work that has been fun and rewarding. Hey, a guy has to eat.

And on top of that topper, a couple of really cool music projects in the first half of the year kept me hopping. Most notable of these was the Edgewood Big Band project led by my pal Jeff Crompton (pictured up top). Fortunately, this beast

will rise again in 2017, with at least one ATL performance already on the books.

Here's a taste of EBB in action. Really excited about this next go round.

There's more over at Jeff's SoundCloud page if you get the hankering.

So, yeah, I've been as busy as a one-armed wallpaper hanger with the hives. And the blog has suffered neglect. But I'm back, bitches. Plans for the next year include regular visits to the vineyard. I hear we have a new Prezmit to look after.

Other plans for the year? They're yoooge, the best plans anyone has ever had, you really aren't gonna believe them. Suffice to say it means lots of scribbling, lots of string tickling, and lots of walking.

We may be in a world of hurt with the Orange Haired Thin Skinned Pencil Dick in charge, but there is still Shit. To. Be. Done.

Who's with me?

How Can We Miss You...



Frank Sinatra died 18 years ago today. It's like he never

left. Really. Books, and re-releases, documentaries and tribute albums. Even Bob is in on the act.<fn>YMMV</fn> Frank is everywhere, still. And that's pretty great. I grew up listening to Sinatra. My dad loves him, and every Saturday night at martini time, we would listen to *Sinatra at the Sands*, with the Count Basie Orchestra. Great, great stuff.

But this ramble isn't really about Frank.

Yesterday, for no reason other than idle intertubing that led me down a rabbit hole of 70s pop hits<fn>Spurred by a search for the Staples Singers' *I'll Take You There.*</fn>, I found myself listening to Jim Croce.

Croce had a couple of #1 hits and was on a rocket trajectory until his charter plane crashed on takeoff after a concert in Natchitoches, LA, in 1973. He was everywhere back then – *Midnight Special*, *The Tonight Show*, *Dick Cavett*, *The Helen Reddy Show*, Don Kirshner's *In Concert* – and on top of some tightly crafted pop songs, he was a pretty amiable storyteller. He was good and popular and likely would have gone on to bigger things. And then he was gone.

But this post isn't about Jim Croce, either.

Because alongside Croce in that video – and on every appearance you can find – is a very unassuming guy named Maury Muehleisen. This post is about him.

Back then, as a fledgling guitar player, I loved this guy. His touch and timing – even though I didn't really know about that kind of thing then – was just fantastic. Listening last night, I realized that the arrangements they were playing were pretty clever and tight. And that apparently came from Maury.

He was the guy who brought that sense of structure and sophistication to the music everyone knew as Croce's. His harmony singing is subtle and lovely. Here was a guy, very

soft-spoken, who barely moved when he played and sang, just delivering the goods with no undue fuss. And it made what would have been a more-or-less novelty folkie into something a little more.

I'm not going to oversell this. Croce's was pop music, albeit at a time when pop music could actually deliver a surprise or two. He wrote entertaining lyrics and was by all accounts a genuinely good guy. And this song, though played to death over the years, is really wonderfully constructed. It's a damned model of a pop song.

I spent hours trying to figure out Maury's part on this tune. I never got there.

Maury Muehleisen. The guy was the real deal, a true musician who was happy to sit in back and make everything sound better, never hungry for a spotlight, a player who worked the road and died from it.

How can we miss you if we don't remember?