All That Jazz #1: Obomsawin, Philion & Knuffke

*The first in a series that will alternate irregularly with 'So Much Guitar,' a place to talk about the mountain of amazing *jazz*Whatever meaning that word has these days. happening these days. We are awash in a creative tsunami. Life is good.*

Today, a couple of swinging large ensemble bangers and a delicate serving of chamber jazz from a trio of contemporary masters.

Go. Listen.

Mali Obomsawin: *Sweet Tooth*

Sweet Tooth (Out Of Your Head Records, 2022) is the debut release from Wabanaki bassist/vocalist Mali Obomsawin. The lineage of Native American jazz heroes is imposing – Jimmy Blanton, Thelonious Monk, Jim Pepper, Don Cherry, Kid Ory, Don Pullen, Charlie Parker, the luminous Lena Horne, to drop just a fraction of the names – and Obamsawin's first outing lays solid claim to the heritage. With six original tunes, three of them with lyrics from traditional and contemporary Wabenaki chants, Obomsawin delivers "a suite for Indigenous resistance" that poses a challenge to anyone expecting Native American culture to pander to tired cliché and a simplistic expectation.

"It's the story of my people and why we survived," Obomsawin explains. "This movement is about the lineal and cultural

inheritance that Indigenous people receive from our ancestors.”

Obomsawin’s bass – more than a tad reminiscent of the great Charlie Haden – anchors a rhythm section that features the superb drummer Savannah Harris and guitarist Miriam Elhajli. The front line trio wields a tonal reed range from bass clarinet to the high tones of soprano saxophone around the cornet/flugelhorn of Tylor Ho Bynum. The composition/arrangements echo Carla Bley, especially her work with the Liberation Music Orchestra, while the sections of free creation recall Mingus or the Art Ensemble of Chicago. But even with all those reference points, *Sweet Tooth* stands as an impressively original declaration from a young artist who is clearly here to stay.

Full album releases on October 28. This preview track is built around a 17th century Abenaki ballad, with an arrangement that evokes the brass bands the Jesuits brought to Native reservations as part of their ‘salvation’ mission.

Sweet Tooth by Mali Obomsawin

Ethan Philion: *Meditations on Mingus*

This year marks the 100th birth anniversary of the monument known as Charles Mingus. The man was a giant in every way. He was one of the greatest bass virtuosos of the 20th century, one of the century’s greatest composers, and a bandleader who could spot great rising talent and knew how to bring out the best in them. He was also difficult, profane, prone to outbursts of violence and paranoia. He played with Miles and Monk and Bird and Duke, was muse to an enamored Joni Mitchell, and then up and died in 1979 at the young age of 56.

His widow Sue – who died just over a week ago at age 92 – kept his work alive since the 80s with the Mingus Dynasty project, but aside from that his classic compositions have been sorely under-performed. Aiming to remedy this neglect, Chicago-based

bassist Ethan Philion put together a 10-piece band to perform his arrangements of the Mingus songbook.

Meditations on Mingus (Sunnyside Records, 2022) is a set of eight well-known Mingus classics that reminds us of the melodic bounty and rhythmic heft of Mingus's writing. Mingus wrote at the same level as Ellington, delivering the music that made calling jazz "America's classical music" more than wisenheimer marketing copy.

I can't tell you how hard it was to pick one cut from this set for preview. This is one of my favorite Mingus tunes and it showcases Philion's deep chops on the big bass fiddle.

Meditations on Mingus by Ethan Philion

Kirk Knuffke Trio: *Gravity Without Airs*

Kirk Knuffke seems to be everywhere these days, sideman and collaborator to an astonishing array of musicians, contemporaries (Mary Halvorson, Allison Miller, Myra Melford) as well as venerated elders like Marshall Allen, Roswell Rudd, and Tootie Heath. On *Gravity Without Airs* (TAO Forms, 2022), he delivers some of the most gorgeous chamber jazz of recent memory. Calling to mind the classic Jimmy Giuffre Trio featuring Steve Swallow and Paul Bley – with Knuffke's cornet in the Giuffre clarinet role – the fourteen pieces on *Gravity* are a mix of Knuffke compositions and free form spontaneous creations. Pianist Matthew Shipp is one of the music's current masters. A player steeped in the histories of jazz and classical and possessed of prodigious technical skill, he not only has the entire piano vocabulary at his fingertips, but the wit and discrimination to know exactly what needs to go where/when. Bassist Michael Bisio, a member of Shipp's exceptional trio since 2009, brings huge ears and a massive, earthy tone to the proceedings. The result is pure gold.

This track closes the album with a movingly beautiful melody and the kind of uber-sensitive group listening that makes this

entire double disc set an absolute gem.

Gravity Without Airs by Kirk Knuffke Trio

Go. Ya know….

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.)

A Critic’s ManiPedi Festo

Today marks my second article for Salvation South, the new online magazine founded by my old buddy Chuck Reece (widely known as the founder and face of The Bitter Southerner; more on me and Chuck coming soon to the blog). This week's feature about young guitar hero Yasmin Williams marks the beginning of my weekly gig riding the SS culture desk. Even if my desk is a half-busted peach crate stood on end in a spiderweb-free corner of the back porch, I am tickled to have this platform on the regular.

My mandate calls for me to cover Southern culture, or culture about the South, or maybe things that are Southern adjacent. That could be music, books, films, teevee, comedy, dance, mumbly-peg championships, Civil War re-enactments, worm gruntin' festivals, whatever. Add the fact that I can gin up a decent argument for some degree of Southern-ness for just about any cultural artifact you can find and you have a recipe for an absolute free for all based on not much more than the random direction I point my shiny-object detector in any given week.

Occasionally, when space or context considerations force us to cut ideas from the SS article, I will provide some expansion here at the i2b blog. The blog will also continue, at intervals, to serve as my platform for ideas and musings that do not fit the Salvation South mission. Like this ramble you are reading now, assuming you are still there. Hello?

There is an abundance of excellent cultural work on offer right now, and it is nearly impossible for most people to get their work noticed. There were roughly 300,000 books published and 100,000 recordings released in 2021. Most of the PR oxygen

goes to a handful of big names, leaving the small press and indie labels – not to mention the self-promoted artists – scrambling for scraps. This is why you won't read about Taylor Swift at my joint. (For the record, I like her a bunch and admire her smarts and professed values. But she does not need my help.) And don't even get me started on the absurd inundation of video swamping the web tubes.

Too many "critics" are mere hype agents, mostly underpaid scribblers hoping to hit clickbait gold with limp twatwaffling about this or that "must see" or "what *we all* are watching" flavor of the minute. I empathize, but only just. At the other end of the stick, there are the spawn of Bangs poison-penners who live for the snappy putdown, the curt dismissal, or the sneering above-it-all brush off.

(NOTE: Not all critics, just too many! There are tens – yes tens! – of excellent writers and thinkers that I rely upon in my excavations. Who are your favorites?)

Lucky for my readers: I don't have the time or patience to hype the mediocre, and there is way too much truly cool shit on the wind to waste time on a takedown of something I do not care for. (Unless J.D. Vance shits out another book. That guy just pisses me off.) I am beholden to no press agent or advertiser or corporate megamedia conglomerate. Naturally, Chuck holds veto power as Editor; I've never met a set of toes I could not step on given enough time, but I think we are cool here. It really comes down to my taste and my ability to sift gold from an inundation of sand. I write about the things I believe in. Whether my taste aligns with yours is in the lap of the gods.

My primary goal is to amplify the work of committed culture workers who might fly below the most folks' radar, artists and scholars whose work might offer my readers a taste of that somethingsomething that reminds us that humankind offers an enormous and rich banquet of epic wonder.

Come on and really: Life is hard enough making it through one more day of this mean old world. Surely it is easier to just listen to/watch something familiar, slip into the equivalent of that fuzzy old robe, and just sit the fuck down and rest.

Sure, we all know there is more there there. But who has time or energy to look in the dark corners of the interwebs in hopes of finding something unexpected and excellent?

Turns out I do, because I need the hunt and discovery like a pig needs mud. And since I'm down in the wallow anyway, why not share the occasional acorn or truffle?

I love to immerse myself in the back catalog of writers and musicians I have just discovered, some current, some long dead or forgotten. Days on end listening to the same artist, comparing early works to later, songs re-worked over time, the evolution of the artist's voice…that life could always be so fine. Some people binge Netflix; I binge musicians and writers and have done since an early age. (More on this in an upcoming post.)

Onward.

This week for Salvation South I wrote about Yasmin Williams, a young WOC from Virginia who is breaking down the artificial white-guys-only image of guitar virtuosity. In my lede, I explained one of the personal reference points that comes into play when I listen to music: Shimmer. If you missed it, kick over to the article and read the first 4-5 paragraphs.

Since Shimmer is basically my own new coinage, I emailed Yasmin those grafs for a reality check. Here's our exchange.

> *yw: Shimmer is an interesting concept as a musical genre. It goes beyond the more surface level, general musical genre definitions and delves deeper into the qualities of a musical piece itself. Shimmer seems to use an almost spiritual description of a genre and encompasses how music can make us*

feel or remind us of, which is certainly a unique approach to describing a musical genre. I'm assuming Shimmer can apply to any genre, since its definition lends itself to a wider interpretation. I think, logically, everyone would have a different interpretation of what qualifies as being a part of Shimmer, which might make this term difficult to use in a musical critique. However, this could be a good thing as a lot of music criticism focuses on comparisons and not on emotion.

rr-k: I really appreciate the consideration you gave to this. And yes: There will be disagreement as to what qualifies as Shimmer and what does not. Then again: What is Jazz? What is Country? And so on forever….

yw: Yes exactly! But since Shimmer is a new term there isn't a general consensus on what it means yet, whereas jazz and the like have an understood implication. I think this is good though. Shimmer is less about comparing one band/song to another band/song or forcing music to fit into a neat genre "box," than it is about analyzing the actual qualities of the music and what makes it great or makes us feel. Anyway, finally some fresh ideas in music criticism, thanks for this!

rr-k: There is no consensus because nobody but you and me even knows it exists!

yw: Hahaha well yeah.

Two comments in particular stand out for me.

"Shimmer seems to use an almost spiritual description of a genre and encompasses how music can make us feel or remind us of…"

…and…

> *“Shimmer is less about comparing one band/song to another band/song or forcing music to fit into a neat genre “box,” than it is about analyzing the actual qualities of the music and what makes it great or makes us feel.”*

Man, talk about getting it.

My other big goal for this column is finding a way to articulate the *thing*, that whatever-it-is-ness a piece or body of work delivers that gives me a tingle in my fingers and toes, gives me that warm spread in my belly I used to get from beer.

The driving Question, capital ‘Q’: What is happening when artists give us a glimpse inside something bigger than ourselves and let us in on something mysterious and ineffable?

Shimmer is part of that calculus. I’ll be struggling to find more language, an always imperfect medium for expressing the ineffable, to fill out the equation. Along the way, I would love for readers to weigh in on this conundrum. I am opening comments again here on the blog despite the constant barrage from Eastern European porn and vape merchants. Help make it worth my while.

That’s it for now. Hold the victims of war in your hearts, and hold your loved ones close. While you do that, here’s one of my fave songs of recent vintage. Let’s all be one of these.

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?