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.

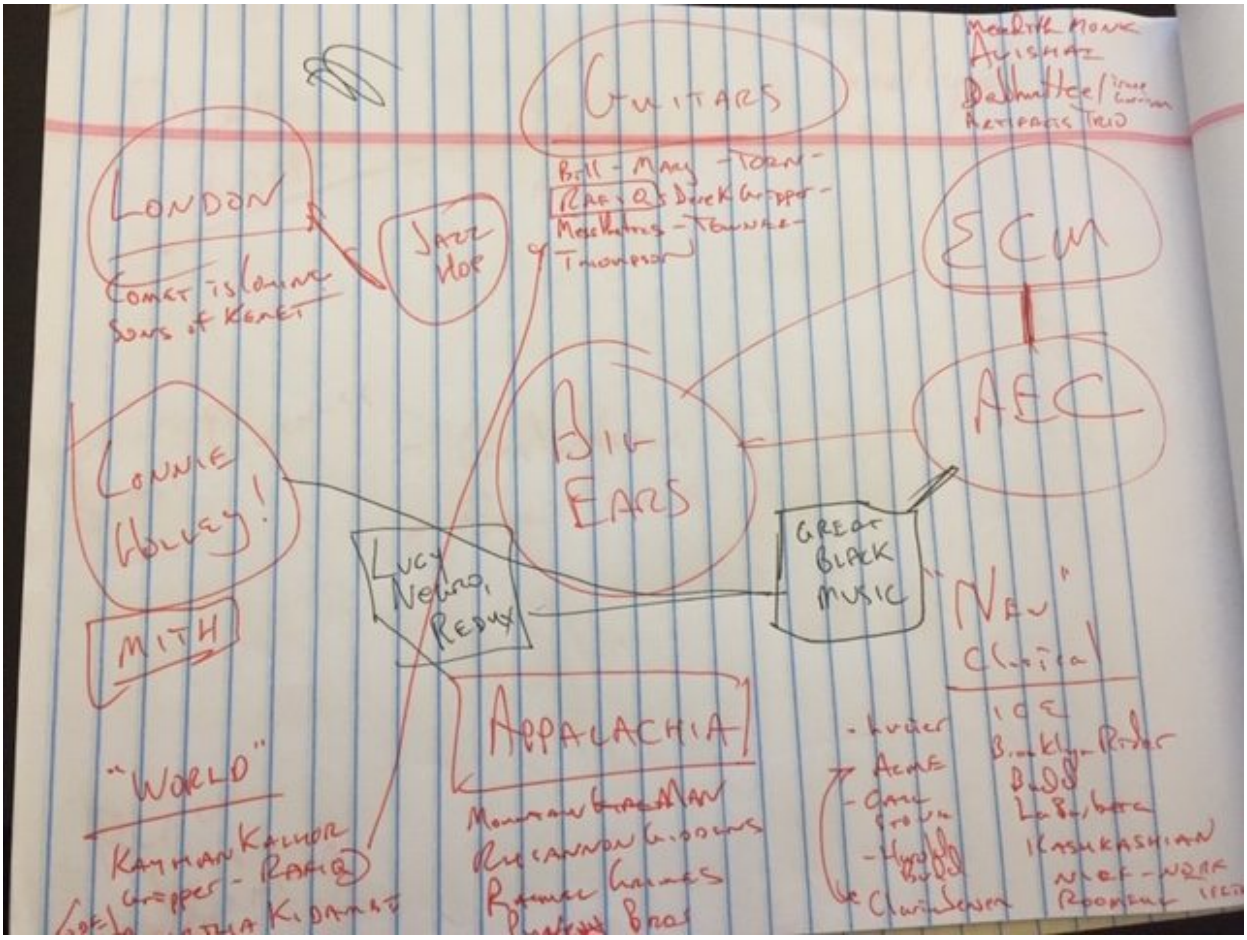
Hey, just trust me, okay?



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

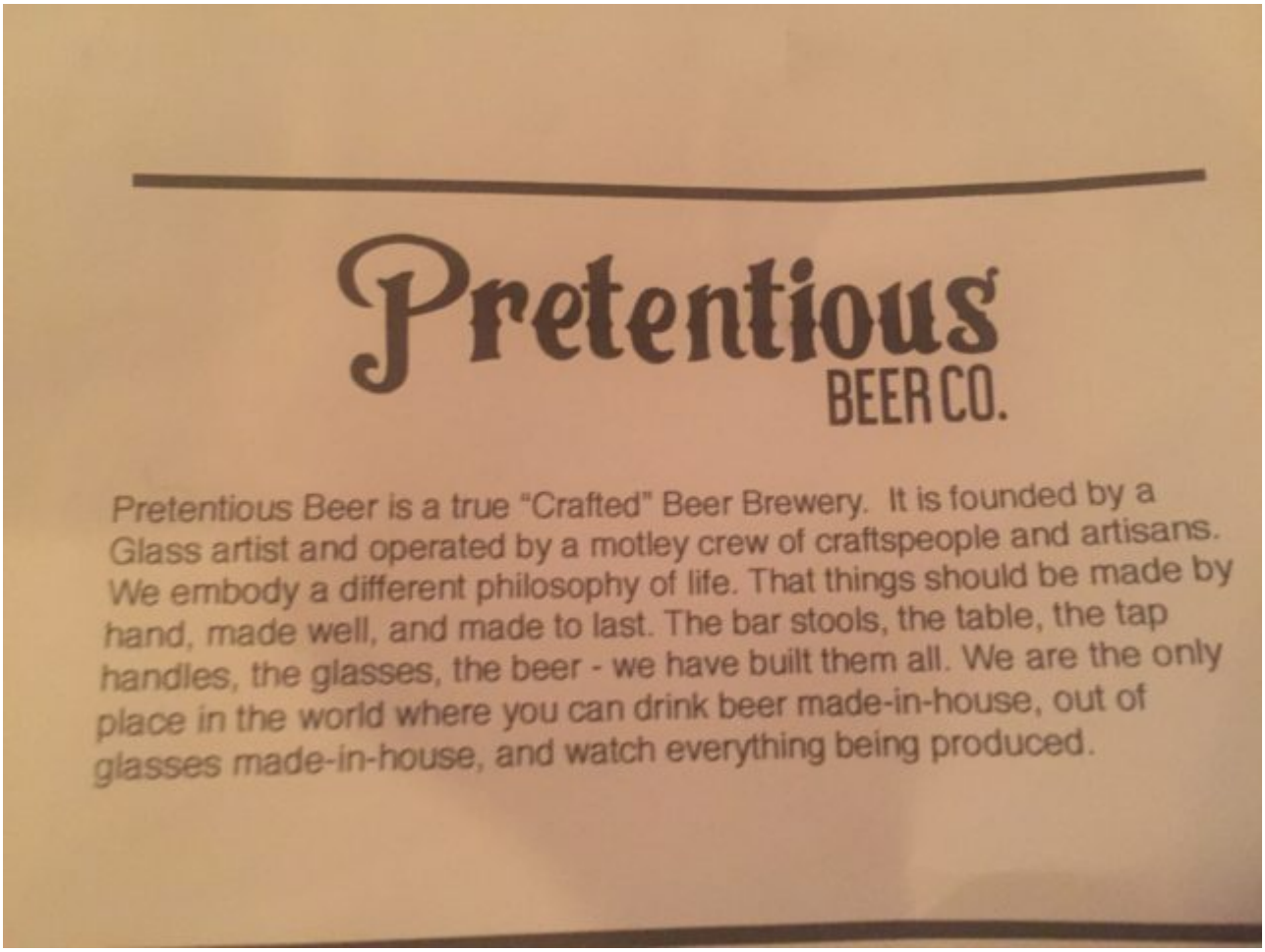
“Cheating, Lying, Stealing”.<fn>Gordon, Lang, and Wolfe are founding members of BoaC.</fn> This was as much prog rock as it was classical music, whatever that means anymore. Against the backdrop of these pieces, Philip Glass’s “Closing” sounded damn near romantic, lush and calm and lovely. This respite 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.



The Embiggening: Day Two



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 the so we can feed the copy editor.

Day Two started off with a bang. The Roscoe Mitchell Trio Five, featuring Vincent Davis on drums and Junius Paul on bass. Mitchell began on alto, angular intervallic leaps with lots of space, the rhythm section responding to his prompt. Then it began to build, the phrases getting longer until the circular breathing kicked in. That's when things got really compelling and the legend of Roscoe Mitchell manifested. There's a reason he has been one of the most important musicians in the so-called "jazz" world for more than 50 years.

Beautiful and occasionally terrifying, the cascades of notes became by turns molten and solid, a dense wall of sound that explored everything the alto had to offer for around 20 minutes. After a bass/drum interlude, Mitchell picked up the sopranino. Again, circular breathing set the stage for a vigorous exploration of the highest ranges of this high-register instrument. Fifteen to twenty minutes later, another rhythm section feature and a switch to soprano. Finally, a switch back to alto and the Trio brings it home with Mitchell's "Odwalla", a the classic Art Ensemble of Chicago

walk off music since the 70s.



This was creative music of the highest order. Mitchell is, simply, a master musician, with prodigious technique backed by a theoretical and philosophical framework that allows him to engage in the improvisation he describes as “in the moment composition. It is never random.”



“Look, it is exactly the same a composing, you just have to make decisions faster. If I’m working on a score, I can make the decision today or next week, whenever. But when we improvise, we make exactly the same kinds of decisions. We just do it *right now*.”

The place was packed. Friends of mine bailed on trying to get in after pictures of the lines outside circulated on the internet machines. Inside was jammed with one of the best audiences you can imagine. Mitchell remarked later that the crowd was especially good: Rapt, deep listening people who stood patiently for the hour-plus set.

Honestly, there were times when out team thought someone had slipped some psychedelics into their coffee, closing our eyes from time to time to protect against sensory overload. The thought occurred that we were witnessing something akin to the late Coltrane, with the relentless sheets of sound that became something other than simply notes through a saxophone. Music is a peculiar thing. The best musicians spend a lifetime cultivating an ability to excite the air molecules around us in specific ways, and somehow, those bouncing molecules can become transformational, something near-solid that transmits intelligence, intention, and impact.

A quick word on bassist Junius Paul. We talked before the set, and he mentioned how awe-inspiring it is to be the bassist in the re-formed Art Ensemble of Chicago, filling the role held by the late and great Malachi Favors. He can stop worrying. The Malachi chair is in more than capable hands as Mitchell readies the group for an AEC 50th Anniversary tour in 2019. Rejoice, people!

Onward, sort of. We found it hard to settle into the next couple of events after the Roscoe onslaught. We dipped in and out of a few well-attended events, finally coming to rest in front of the collage films of Lewis Klahr at the UT Downtown Gallery. It was just the tonic, something to embiggen the eyes and let the ears reconstitute themselves in the new world Roscoe created.

We made it to the International Contemporary Ensemble performance at the Church Street Methodist Church, another truly lovely venue undergoing some expansion construction. As the group settled into their chairs, the construction crew arrived back from lunch and set to work with their jackhammers. It actually sounded very cool, but they were offered another lunch hour so the music could continue. Various combinations of percussion, cello, harp, oboe, flute, voice, and piano took shape to explore compositions by Pauline Oliveros, Anna Thorvoldsdottir, Ellen Reid, and others.

Gorgeous and very spacious music that resonated wonderfully in the church space.

Next up, the legendary (that word again) percussionist Milford Graves. Graves, like Mitchell, has been part of the jazz world since the 60s. He played with Albert Ayler at Coltrane's funeral and recorded with Sonny Sharrock, Pharaoh Sanders, Paul Bley and a gazillion more. At the Bijou Theater, Graves sat alone behind a drum kit with only one cymbal, a hi hat. He proceeded to drum and chant, calling down the Elders and Ancestors and keeping a capacity crowd on the edge of their seats.

Finally, a gap for food, though it was a gap that meant missing Arto Lindsay, Aine O'Dwyer, and Ned Rothenberg. Hey, the team's gotta eat.

Reinforced, we dove into violinist Jenny Scheinman's Mischief and Mayhem quartet, featuring Nels Cline on guitar. Scheinman is a radiant presence and a remarkably good improviser. Her compositions gave the band plenty of room to stretch and explore, and while the focus was largely on the melodic instruments, the rhythm section was tight and playful, kicking the front line players up a notch. Cline demonstrated why he is considered one of the world's great guitar players, his mastery of effects matched by a strong melodic sense and a penchant for creating souuuuund. Way cool.



A long walk across town gave us a chance to catch the last 15 minutes of Evan Parker’s solo soprano sax performance at St John’s Cathedral. Parker, a contemporary and occasional collaborator with Mitchell, has made a science of the circular breathing technique, and the richly resonant Cathedral was perfect for him.

Again, attention was flagging and more fuel was necessary to continue. Ran into some pals who convinced me to check out Norwegian singer Susanna at the Bijou. It was a quiet revelation. Backed by a trio of harp, accordion, and violin – and guest singer Bonnie “Prince” Billy – Susanna’s high, clear

voice and spare arrangements are hypnotic. Song selections like the American folk standard “Rye Whiskey” and Leonard Cohen’s “You Know Who I Am” were recast as haunting Nordic laments. Exceptionally Beautiful.



A quick dash to Mill & Mine to check out Tal National, a guitar-driven quintet from Niger. Think a stripped down King Sunny Ade show: heavy on the syncopation and interlocking guitar parts, this was shake your moneymaker music from the jump.

Then down the street to hear The Thing, a Scandanavian free jazz trio featuring saxophonist Mats Gustafsson, bassist Ingebrigt Håker Flaten, and drummer Paal Nilssen-Love. This was pure energy, muscular free improv among three players who know each other – and their instruments – very well. It was a fitting bookend to a day that began with Roscoe Mitchell mining the same vein in his own way, and a demonstration of

the range that is on offer in the free improv world.



We could have quit, but pianist Jason Moran was about to begin just down the street, so we stopped in to catch his Fats Waller Dance Party. Moran is one of the music's great players, and he can hit it in any style, even with an enormous Fats Waller mask over his head. But his introductory segments to "Honeysuckle Rose" and "Ain't Misbehavin" raised expectations beyond what Waller's catalog re-imagined as hip-hop could support, at least to these old man ears. Get off my damn lawn.



Staggered, the team fell abed soon after, and no amount of flogging could induce the writer to write until this morning. Day Three dawns with an embarrassment of riches on offer, a series of impossible decisions, and rain on the horizon.

If this ain’t living good, ain’t nothing that is.