The Embiggening: Day One



Follow @immunetoboredom on Twitter or check back here for updates throughout the Big Ears Festival. Share this widely if you please.

Day one is in the books<fn>Actually, it is still going on, but this boy is done.</fn>, so let's recap.

Went to the opening remarks, which drew a standing room crowd at the Visit Knoxville listening room. Glad I went, as I was able to hear Anna & Elizabeth harmonize beautifully and to get a 15 minute master class demonstration from Bela Fleck, from raga to "Sound of Silence" to jazz standards to traditional breakdowns, the history of the banjo in a pair of hands.

But the first official concert was the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE) performing "In the Light of Air" by Icelandic composer Anna Thorvaldsdottir. That this was performed by an ensemble called ICE was more than fitting. This music made cold palpable and, oddly enough, alluring. Five musicians – piano, harp, violin, percussion, and cello – created washes of sound, waves cascading over waves. The feeling of traveling on a boat, slowly, with great chunks of ice clanking against the hull, giving way to sunrise, and noonlight glimmering on water, to sunset, to chill nighttime, to another sunset.

The Mill & Mine hosted this show, and it was the perfect venue. The ensemble was arrayed on the floor, with the audience encircling the players. This configuration is where

Mill & Mine shines. The warehouse resonates like the finest concert hall, with the added benefit of the audience sitting literally a few feet away from the musicians. The proximity is key to the transformative effects of the music. Not just transformative: transportive. The capacity crowd was transfixed for an hour, and likely could have taken an hour more.

Quickly from there to The Standard to hear Susan Alcorn redefine the parameters of the pedal steel guitar. She played a piece by Messiaen and two pieces by tango legend Astor Piazzola. The “Invierno porteno” – the Winter Tango – was devastating in its beauty. Alcorn has uncovered elements of the pedal steel that were hard to imagine, but that seem perfectly logical once you hear and see her work. Her original compositions – especially the one inspired by the sickness-inducing meal she got on a transatlantic flight – are little gems.



The i2b team spent a few minutes at the gorgeous Tennessee Theater listening to Marc Ribot and David Hidalgo. They delivered gritty blues and Latinx folk tunes, an affable pair of pickers who seemed more like they were on someone’s front porch than a theater stage. Good stuff, and the crowd loved.

A quick scamper back to Mill & Mine for a solo set from cellist Okkyung Lee. This was a take no prisoners event. Lee has all the chops you could ask for from a well-trained cellist, but she was not bringing that style. Scrapes, harmonics, low bleats, swirls of sounds: this is her bag, *Ascension* via cello, relentless and committed. At one

point, her high register scrabblings began to sound like a Braxton or Roscoe Mitchell sopranino solo, complete with keypad tappings and the dog whinny yelps. Gorgeous work, exceptionally well received.



Okkyung Lee wishes to inform you that everything you think you know about the cello is wrong.

Dash across the railroad tracks, back to The Standard for a set by my pals Duet for Theremin and Lap Steel (D4T&LS). I have heard these guys dozens of times – and played with them a few – and I have never heard them better than tonight. At

last, a sound system that can deliver what they intend, from delicate whisper to ground-rattling bottom to shimmering clouds of ambient float. They have two more appearances this weekend. Catch one or be sorry.



Finally, back to Mill & Mine for the sonic mayhem of Godspeed You! Black Emperor. I can think of several reasons to not like this performance – lack of rhythmic/tempo variety, overly simple composition and harmonic development chief among them. But I loved it. It was way, way, way fucking loud, a blast of feedback and howling from the 9-piece group. They know each other, and they know what they are trying to do: their music is an outgrowth of the Coltrane *Ascension* aesthetic, a headlong pursuit of transcendence through sheer sonic excess.

It's easy to hear references to the great sonic explorers of rock – Hendrix, The Who, Led Zep, Floyd, and especially King Crimson – all of whom absorbed the Coltranian *zeitgeist* that

transformed not just “jazz”, but rock-based seekers as well.

Both D4T&LS and Godspeed benefited from intelligently curated film imagery. Godspeed’s film technician really deserves full band member credit, his elaborate dance – managing four 8-mm projectors and a large spinning carousel of film loops to choose from – as much a part of the performance as anything else.

And speaking of film, there is an enormous film festival component to Big Ears. Can your intrepid correspondent find time for a moving picture show?

Stay tuned.

Ears Embiggened: Rova



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The Rova Saxophone Quartet played in Atlanta tonight, a little sneak preview of the coming sonic onslaught of Big Ears. Two sets, unamplified, in the beautifully resonant Existentialist Congregation Church in Candler Park. There was a decent little crowd in attendance that knew how to listen and unpocket their cash for CDs.

Rova is appearing twice at Big Ears, once in the Knoxville Museum of Art (Friday at 2 p.m.) as a quartet. The sound in that building is perfect for Rova, which is celebrating its 40th year as an ensemble.

Consider that, the level of commitment that entails. No knock on the fellas (who are really fine company over a good meal), but this is not music to get rich by. Yet they have hung together, recording around three dozen albums and collaborating along the way with a brigade of prominent musicians, dancers, and composers.

Tonight's show was primarily material from their latest album, *In Transverse Time*. The high point of their two sets was the lengthy composition "Hidden in Ochre", a composition by tenor saxist Larry Ochs. At 24 minutes, this is not an easy pull for most audiences. The moods shift, there are alternating segments of silken beauty and percussive splats. It is in some ways a prototypical Rova piece, a stealthy mix of composition and improvisation that – like the best of what was once called 'avant garde' or 'new music', and is now really just *music* – often leaves the listener wondering where the composition/improvisation border resides. No matter. The crowd fairly exploded at the quiet conclusion of this piece.

Pre-show, the quartet played a few notes of Coltrane's *Ascension*, a brief teaser for their Saturday midnight show at the Bijou. *Rova Channeling Coltrane: Electric Ascension* will feature the quartet alongside the likes of Nels Cline, Jenny Scheinman, Okkyung Lee, Cyro Baptista, Yuka Honda, Ches Smith, and Mazz Swift. It is one of the red star, must see events of the Big Ears banquet.

Coltrane's *Ascension*, recorded summer of 1965, is one of the most radically transformative works in the music some call jazz. It is also one of the most controversial: the seemingly unbridled energy belies a structural underpinning that listeners often miss. This structure forms the foundation of

Rova's recreation. This is not cover band mimicry, but rather an attempt to tap into the energetic stream that Coltrane was cultivating in his later period. This is music in pursuit of ecstatic immersion, a headlong dive into the possibilities of transcendence through *souuuuund*. It is also a logical extension of Trane's pursuit of the transcendence – a headlong pursuit of what some call Godhead – that became apparent with *A Love Supreme*.

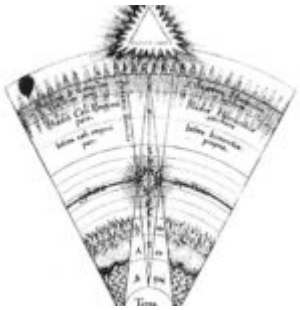
But damn. *Ascension* was hard listening for anyone trying to squeeze it into a jazz frame, or into any kind of frame that isn't *Ascension* itself. Since then, sonic explorations of this nature have become part of the accepted vocabulary, and at its worst, a set of cliches deployed by players who lack the depth and chops to make it really work. But even in the most capable hands, this is not easy listening by any stretch. Here comes that word again: commitment.

Lucky for us, Rova and their assembled cadre have the inside-playing credibility to turn their outside excursions into something worth hearing. It's worth the commitment.

Some folks – like me – believe music can change the world. The fact that Rova has the impulse – much less the sheer audacity – to bring *Ascension* to life 50 years after the fact indicates that they believe it, too. This may be one reason why they have persevered for 40 years.

Ears Embiggened: The Fine Vibrations of the Well

Plucked String



Another in a series of 2018 Big Ears Festival previews courtesy of the i2b staff. All one of us. Share this widely if you please.

A passel of soul-thieving tempters in disguise; Pythagoras was fascinated by them, developed several laws of physics by observing them, and found his way to proposing a cosmology based on those laws. The well plucked string is a slippery damn slope, no question. Ask anyone who has a bottomless guitar collecting habit. Or ask their significant other.

There's something irresistible about an exquisitely excited string. Acoustic or electric, nylon or steel or gut, strung taut over wood or gourd or some kind of animal skin – or even an old cigar box or tin can. Cleanly replicated or tormented beyond recognition by tubes, transistors, and unholy volumes. Plucked, strummed, bowed or otherwise placed in motion, the string is the elemental sound of life, of sex, of sadness and joy, mourning and loss and ecstasy on a strand of molecular vibration. If recent physics theory is to be believed, the string is essence of all existence.

Pythagoras was no fool.

So the old guy he would have been beside himself at the prospect of the string ticklers scheduled at this year's Big Ears. You've got banjos (Bela Fleck and Abigail Washburn chief among many) and dobro (Jerry Douglas is as good as any musician on the planet). A highlight of the 2017 fest, Wu Fei

returns with her *gezheng* in duet with Washburn and as the leader of a massive “improvisation game” at the Knoxville Museum of art. Deep-dive folk archivers Anna & Elizabeth might wield any manner of stringy thingy as serendipity demands.

There’s a string quartet – Brooklyn Rider in full and in collab with Fleck, and their violinist will present a concert of the entire Bach solo violin repertoire – and the string sections of the Bang on a Can All-Stars, the International Contemporary Ensemble, and the Knoxville Symphony Orchestra, together, apart, re-configured, hell, hanging upside down from a chandelier, even. Anything is possible.

Cellist Okkyung Lee draws sounds out of her instrument that are surprising and soothing and sometimes disturbing. Violinist Jenny Scheinman brings her distinctive jazz/folk/rock voicings in multiple contexts, from trad with silent films (Kannapolis: A Moving Portrait) to a paint-peeling Coltrane-ish howl for Rova’s Electric Ascension. (Trust me, you’ve heard her, either with Bill Frisell or Norah Jones or Lucinda Williams or too many others to list. You’ve heard her. And she is fantastic.) Aine O’Dwyer is certain to play the harp – the proper harp, the thing that looks like the inside of a piano – though tbh, I am hoping she plays her *Music for Church Cleaners* for pipe organ.

Pedal steel player Susan Alcorn takes her instrument way outside the expected mainstream suggested by its history. She can shift on a dime, from dreamy twang to terrifying yowls, but always with a connection to the instrument’s traditional heritage. Lap steel player Frank Schultz – half of the aptly named Duet for Theremin and Lap Steel – tends to a more gentle approach, coaxing dream tones and reverberations that compliment Scott Burlands oddball sci-fi doohickey clouds.<fn>I kid. Scott’s a pal and I love his whatzamajammer noise machine.</fn> They are playing three times, so you have no excuse not to catch them at least twice.

From Africa, Tal National and Innov Gnawa blend electric guitars and traditional instruments like the *sintir* to induce trance with an interlocking sound that will drag even the most doubly-left footed lunk onto the dance floor. Be prepared. You will dance and you will sweat.

Then there are your basic, run of the mill guitar players. Right. The guitarists at Big Ears this year are a veritable hero gallery. Nels Cline, Arto Lindsay, Marc Ribot, David Hidalgo, and Mary Halvorson – a lineup akin to the 1927 Yankees, heavy hitters every one of them – are on hand to demonstrate pretty much the full range of what a guitar has to offer.

And no slouch herself, Anoushka Shankar, daughter of Ravi and established sitar master in her own right, brings her poignant piece about immigration, “Land of Gold”, to the Historic Tennessee Theater. One of the festival’s must-see events, you can expect a big crowd for this one, so go early if you want a good seat.

Have I missed anyone? You bet. Godspeed You Black Emperor fields a trio of guitarists as part of their sonic onslaught, and Atlanta-based Algiers thrashes with the best of them. And we haven’t even begun to talk about the broad array of bluegrass/traditional pickers that will be literally all over downtown Knoxville throughout the festival.

We could go on, yes, we could. And we will, with coverage throughout the weekend from our crack team. i2b never sleeps.

Ears Embiggening: A Roscoe Mitchell Preview



The first in a series of preview posts for Big Ears 2018. Share this widely if you please.

Last year, somebody that looks like me called Big Ears “the best festival pound-for-pound in the United States”. It was a lush feast, damn near too much for any human to absorb in a four-day stretch.<fn>In fact, it was well more than too much for one set of ears.</fn> I caught 27 full shows in 4 days, plus another three I sampled that were not for me. By the end of it, my knee was swollen, my feet were aching. My ears were full; I drove home in seven hours of road hum silence, and did not intentionally listen to music for at least 4 days beyond that. I was done.

It was heaven. I could not imagine anything better.

And now comes the 2018 version which is, probably, better. As always, there are big themes at play in the Big Ears lineup, and central characters from which a great deal of the action emanates. Perhaps it is a function of personal bias, but I’d call this the Year of Roscoe Mitchell.

I have been a fan of Roscoe Mitchell since a spring day in 1979 when I attended a concert by the Art Ensemble of Chicago in Athens, GA. Over the years, I found myself driving preposterous distances to see them perform.<fn>One such road trip, in 1980, found me in Knoxville at the Bijou Theater. The promoter that night, Ashley Capps, went on to found the Big

Ears Festival. Thus do a couple of circles come full.</fn> This year, Roscoe is performing several times, and a number of other musicians who owe him an artistic debt are appearing as well. I am building my schedule around these events, Roscoe as the hub and his comrades – Tyshawn Sorey, Craig Taborn, Even Parker, and so on – the spokes of the wheel.

Mitchell is recently enjoying something of a moment, with multiple album releases and large-scale commissions (he was wrapping up an orchestral recording when I spoke to him a few days before the Festival) and glowing notices in the NY Times and the Village Voice (among others). It might seem as if this is some sort of comeback, but the man has been composing, performing, and recording at a steady clip for a little more than 50 years now.

(His debut, *Sound*, came out in 1966 on the Delmark label, and featured future Art Ensemble partners Lester Bowie and Malachi Favors. It is a landmark in modern music. Listen.)

Last year, ECM released his *Bells for the South Side*, recorded live in 2015 at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art as part of an exhibition devoted to the 50th-anniversary of Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians.<fn>There is much to be said about this phenomenal organization. It was and is truly revolutionary.</fn> It is a miraculous recording that serves as both retrospective and clarion statement of current intent. It is a dizzying combination of composition and improvisation and at Big Ears, the same nine musicians will reassemble for the first time since that recording.

Mitchell's output far exceeds the capacity of any single label to release it all, but there seems no shortage of outlets for his work.<fn>This, too, is an indication of his commitment, as anyone who has ever tried to release an album, book, film, etc. can attest.</fn> His association with ECM records began

in the late 70s with the Art Ensemble. But he goes back even farther with the Nessa label.

Chuck Nessa worked for Delmark when *Sound* was released. Mitchell and Lester Bowie urged him to split away and form his own label. In 1967, the first Nessa release, *Numbers 1 & 2* under Lester's name, is another groundbreaker, and a clearer antecedent to the Art Ensemble with the addition of Joseph Jarman. In 2018, Nessa released *Ride the Wind* by Roscoe Mitchell and the Montreal – Toronto Art Orchestra. Mitchell plays on just one track here, a blistering sopranino sax solo on "They Rode for Them – Part 2". Click here folks. School's in.

(I love how, when he finished tearing the roof off, he steps back calmly and puts his hand in his pocket. So smooth.)

The rest of the album is an orchestral performance based on transcription of a Mitchell Trio performance from 2013. It is wondrous, and a fine example of the range of structures he is ready to deploy in an effort to keep his music from standing still.

The man will be 78 this year, yet the pace of his activity – not to mention the considerable level of fitness necessary for his performances – shows no indication of diminishing. Wherever he plays at Big Ears, I will be there, jaw hanging.

I have not always understood Mitchell's music, and to be honest, there have been times when I have been utterly befuddled and even put off. But I have never been sorry I listened to his work. Much like his fellow AACM pioneer Anthony Braxton, Roscoe's music so clearly demonstrates intelligence, passion, and commitment that – even when I can't figure out wtf is happening – my gut tells me to stop thinking and let the music do its work. Analysis can come later. Beyond that, it is utterly his own. He sounds like no one except Roscoe Mitchell. There are damn few artists in any

discipline who match that description.

In the moment, whether it is the monumental wash of sound he generates through his phenomenal technique<fn>There is no one more skilled in the art of circular breathing, for example.</fn> or through his deployment of *intensity structures* (a strategy for group improvisation that creates aural tsunami), or through his careful attention to space and silences, this is music that demands and rewards attentive listening. And it is important to keep in mind that many of the more chaotic segments may in fact be composed, while many of the seemingly arranged elements are in fact spontaneous compositions. Notions of freedom v. restriction and composition v. improvisation are ping pong balls scattered on crosswinds. Try to keep up. Or don’t. It probably doesn’t matter for the most part. If you think about it too much, the music has flown away from you.

The guiding light of the 2017 festival was the late Pauline Oliveros, and really, she might as well just wear that honor forever. She once held the Darius Milhaud Chair in Composition at Mills College that Mitchell now fills. Their music is similar in that it rewards *deep listening* in a way that defies description. Try it.