

Art of the Improvisers



Springtime in Tallahassee offers a glut of high-caliber creative offerings that puts our little town, if only for a few weeks, on equal footing with the most celebrated cultural capitals. This weekend (April 12-14) , the Word of South Festival hosts its annual takeover of Cascades Park with a terrific lineup of music and literary heavies that I previewed for Tallahassee Magazine. The FSU School of Dance is kicking off a week-long celebration of the 100th birthday of the legendary Merce Cunningham. And just last weekend, the Tallahassee Film Festival mounted a well-attended series of films, panels, and performances that attracted broad notice well beyond anything their modest budget should have allowed.

But the hands-down highlight of this season for me is the leaderless trio of guitarist Nels Cline, saxophonist Larry Ochs, and percussionist Gerald Cleaver, landing at the terrific listening tavern 5th & Thomas in Midtown on Saturday, April 13.

This trio, which recently released its first album, *What is to Be Done*, on the visionary Clean Feed label, is running a short tour of the deep southeast to showcase their approach to structured improvisation. Aside from Atlanta and Nashville, all the stops on their agenda are smallish college towns like Gainesville, Chattanooga, Athens, and our own little outpost in the Panhandle.

I realize most folks do not follow the ins and outs of the improvised music world like I do, but I'd bet that most of you

recognize the name Nels Cline from his work with rockers Wilco over the past 15 years. Most Wilco fans may not realize that by the time he joined the band, Cline had been in the biz for 25 years and was widely recognized as one of the alt-jazz world's most prominent players. Cline calls himself a "near-jazz" guitarist, which seems about right while also underplaying his considerable technical abilities. He's a modest guy, even after *Rolling Stone* named him one of the top 100 guitarists of all-time.

But if you come out to 5&T expecting anything that sounds like Tweedy, you are in for something of a surprise. Cline and his trio partners Ochs and Cleaver are intrepid sonic explorers, musicians who cultivate the sound ground to generate surprise ecstasies and audiophonic epiphanies. There will be no verse/verse/chorus/bridge at this show, though it will likely incorporate elements of rock, jazz, folk, classical, and Oliveros-style Deep Listening in combinations you might not have imagined before.

I cannot stress enough: You really should be there to see what happens when three players of this caliber and collected experience set a framework and go to work. Contrary to conventional wisdom, structured improvisation is not an anarchy of everybody playing whatever they want whenever, especially when a guy like Ochs, founder of the legendary Rova Saxophone Quartet, is on hand. The guy is a wicked composer and conceptualist who establishes working paradigms – think of rules in a game – that serve to both spur and constrain the group. He also is a master of the circular breathing technique that allows him to play for extended periods without appearing to take a breath. He is actually pulling new air in as he plays. I do not really understand how it works. You might find yourself holding your breath during one of his sustained flights. Personally, I recommend that you breathe, but you do you.

Cleaver is an endlessly inventive drummer who has played with

the best musicians of the past 40 years, including Roscoe Mitchell, Taylor Ho Bynum, Matthew Shipp, and Craig Taborn. Prepare to have your sense of time and dynamics turned inside out.

How to listen to such a thing? First off, prepare to be mildly confused, maybe even utterly lost. Just hang with it. If you listen to them as closely as they will be listening to each other (listening being the prime directive and single most important skill an improviser can bring to the table), patterns will emerge. Conversations between musicians take shape, sometimes among all three at once, sometimes just two of them as the third steps back. Occasionally, one player will command the floor to make a statement, and not necessarily forcefully; the manipulation of dynamics is another of the improviser's key tools. A whisper to draw you closer, perhaps?

What is quieter than a whisper? Silence, perhaps. As in any great music, the space between the notes is as important as the notes themselves. The contrast between loud and soft, the emphasis a suddenly created space places on what came before or will come next: These are the building blocks of any conversation of depth. And in the end, that's what you are witnessing when you attend a show like this.

So come to 5&T (or to the other shows on the tour) and catch a glimpse of what another approach to music might have to offer. Our world is filled with infinite variety. It's nice when our musical diet is, too.

We Interrupt Regular

Programming...



I promised daily posts from the Big Ears hoolie. I failed. I promised an all-encompassing roundup that connects the dots between Africa, Appalachia, jazz, and the Euro-derived sonic explorations of the likes of Lucier, Budd, &c. I failed. Mea culpa.

I apologize for not getting back to you sooner, but I've been busy having cancer. I made a point of not posting this on April 1.

The short(ish) story: I've been feeling crappy for a few months. Not sure when it really started, but I remember that Crompton had to really push me to do the last RoboCrompton gig in October. I just had no desire to play a guitar. I had told Stanwyck years ago that if she ever found me disinterested in playing that something was probably wrong. I was right.

My energy level was crap. I was having night sweats. My lymph nodes started to swell in some curiously asymmetrical ways. But I figured I would eventually fight off the crud, hopefully in time for the Big Ears trip. Priorities, people.

A couple of months and several quarts of well-examined body fluids later, no answer. Lymphadenopathy continued apace. I knew I was in for some drama when my general practitioner's eyes nearly popped out of her sockets at the sight of my anterior nodes. It is never a good feeling to have your doctor look alarmed.

So they packed me off to an oncologist who removed a slab of

tissue for analysis. The result: Angioimmunoblastic T-Cell Lymphoma, a diagnosis so rare that my slab was forwarded to a specialist in San Antonio for verification. Turns out it was correct.

Hooray for me! I am a medical fucking mystery yet again.

Within two minutes of telling us this news, our local oncologist declared himself unequipped for treating this. At a rate of 500 cases per year globally, there are damned few who ever see this variety. As it happens, one of the docs who has seen this more than a few times practices at the University of Florida, just two hours down the road. Off to see the specialist, but not before I extracted a promise from Stanwyck that we would defer treatment until after Big Ears.

Like I said: Priorities.

The timeline looked like this. Two weeks before Big Ears began, I received a diagnosis. One week out, I saw the specialist and worked out a plan. The day before the festival began, we scheduled my first treatment.

The Festival was essential, everything I could have hoped for to prepare myself for a long and arduous treatment. I'll write about Big Ears 2019 in another post. It was a ridiculously rich experience, especially the hour-long interview with Rhiannon Giddens my first afternoon there. I'll work that up for publication soon. It was a delight. (It was also the moment I realized that I did not have the juice for my normal Big Ears campaign. More on that later.)

By the end of the festival I was feeling generally horrible. The day after the festival we drove home. The next day, we drove to UF where I began treatment. I had a semi-permanent port implanted in my chest for infusion and extraction. I spent five days tethered to a chemotherapy pump that managed to beep loudly at regular intervals overnight. Hospitals are the worst place to try to sleep.

Because my medication is essentially a biohazard, I was not allowed to leave the ward. I walked laps around the hallway with my tower of IV bags, 14 laps per mile. I read two and a half thick books. I listened to 460 pieces of music, delivered at random by iPodious.

I slept. I ate like a horse, especially when decent food was smuggled in from the outside. I had an expansive view of the UF campus from my 8th floor perch. The staff was top notch, professional and extremely kind and reassuring. We started to joke about it being a luxury spa. I could not fucking wait to get out of there.

Yesterday we came home for a two week stretch, then we go back again for another five days of turning my bloodstream into a Superfund site, then home two weeks, for six full cycles.

So far, everything is as it should be. Initial treatment relieved most of the lymph swelling, aches, and night sweats. I no longer look like John Goodman in *Barton Fink*. I actually feel better than I have in months.



"I'll show you the life of the mind!"

Side effects from chemo have been mild so far, but I have to stay away from people and germs and life and everything. The dogs are not allowed to lick my face, a grievous sacrifice in quality of life. But I got no real complaint.

We arrived home to find our house scrubbed from top to bottom. The yard looks better than it has in a long time, thanks to good friends. The offers of food and running errands and such are incredible. We have got a team, y'all, and it rocks.

(We also have adequate insurance, for which I am both grateful and humbled. Everybody should have access to this kind of care. Someday, the rampant goatfuckery of our society will twig to this and deliver.)

Then there is Stanwyck herself. An amazement on her worst day, on her best day she is a fearsome force of nature, an implacable bulldog. Fair warning to any health care professional or bureaucrat who thinks they can half-ass around Stanwyck: She will have your head on a pike. Jes sayin...

Enough! This is some sloppy ass writing here, but I wanted to get this out of the way so we could get back to the stuff that matters: Music, books, movies, food. Love. I promise to write more better prettier next time.

Til then, in the immortal words of Patti Smith:



Ears Embiggened: Icons



(The fifth 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.

Part 3 here on the magnificent Rhiannon Giddens and her Lucy Negro, Redux project.

Part 4 takes a stroll through the league of guitarists on tap.)

We often hear an artist described as an overnight sensation, even though in almost every case we are hearing about someone who has put in the work and paid the dues to arrive at their 'instant' success.

But you never really hear about an overnight icon. Defined as "a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol or as worthy of veneration," icon status is almost always predicated on longevity, extended and sustained effort, and definitional achievement in a field of endeavor. Exceptions: Bright flaming rockets that burn out fast but leave an unmistakable imprint, and even then, icon status usually has to wait a while. Cf. Hendrix, James Dean, Duane Allman, &c. These are the artists who have helped define their fields, the people that serious younger artists study and obsess about.

Big Ears has a pretty good track record of lining up artists that qualify for icon status. 2019 is no exception. I've already written about some of these: Art Ensemble of Chicago, Bill Frisell, ECM Records, Richard Thompson. Time to take a look at the rest.

Carla Bley

Carla Bley stands about five feet tall, yet she is a undeniable giant. Stretching back nearly 60 years, Carla's compositions have been recorded by Jimmy Giuffre, George Russell, her ex-husband Paul Bley, Gary Burton, Charlie Haden, and many more. Along with her second husband, trumpeter Michael Mantler, she founded the Jazz Composer's Orchestra and the associated JCOA record label, which released important

recordings by Don Cherry, Roswell Rudd, Grachan Moncur, Leroy Jenkins, and Cecil Taylor in the late 60s.

In 1971, JCOA released her epic jazz opera *Escalator Over the Hill*. It took three years to record, and established Bley as one of the great composer/arrangers in modern jazz. During the 70s, she collaborated with Jack Bruce and drummer Nick Mason of Pink Floyd, essentially writing and arranging albums released under their names. She also helped Charlie Haden actualize his great Liberation Music Orchestra.

Better known for most of her career for her composing/arranging, in the past twenty years she has developed into one of the most intriguing pianists in jazz. She's not a chops monster by any stretch, but her arranger's orientation has led her into a crazy wonderful ability to instigate quiet upheaval with peculiar chord voicings and melodic coloration. Her playing is probably closer to fellow arranger genius Gil Evans than anybody else, that uncanny knack for bending a chord in a way that makes you wonder if the ground has shifted beneath you.

This year she returns to Big Ears with a trio formed in 1994, featuring bassist Steve Swallow, and saxophonist Andy Sheppard. They play with the kind of instinct and preternatural anticipation of one another's choices that can only develop over a very long period of time. Saturday at 5 pm at the Tennessee Theater.

Getting to see her at Big Ears 2017, after 40 years of listening, was a dream come true. Also too: She also has the greatest hair in the history of the music.



Steve Swallow

Bassist and longtime musical and romantic partner of Carla Bley, Steve Swallow is the man who proved once and for all that the electric bass guitar is every bit as legitimate as the double bass in jazz. The man has all the tone and swing you could ask for. Since the early 60s, Swallow has worked with an almost ridiculous listing of the greats of the latter-20th century: Paul Bley, Jimmy Giuffre, Gary Burton, Don Ellis, Art Farmer, Stan Getz, Paul Motian, John Scofield, George Russell. His playing is elegant, smooth, and always exactly what the music needs. Appearing with the Carla Bley Trio.

Harold Budd

During the 60s, Budd was a composer of avant garde classical pieces. He began to become more interested in minimalism, an interest starkly at odds with academic composition of the day. By 1970, he says he had:

...minimalized myself out of a career. It had taken ten years

to reduce my language to zero but I loved the process of seeing it occur and not knowing when the end would come. By then I had opted out of avant-garde music generally; it seemed self-congratulatory and risk-free and my solution as to what to do next was to do nothing, to stop completely."

In 1978, he released his first major work, *Pavilion of Dreams*, on Brian Eno's Ambient Music Series. Any serious history of *ambient music* recognizes Budd's central role in the development of that genre, though Budd insists he was "hijacked" into the category.

Whatever. Labels never tell an accurate story. Suffice to say that his three presentations at this year's festival offer a rare opportunity to experience one of the path-forging icons of the past 50 years. Must. See.

Meredith Monk

Back in the day of college radio, a cluster of us became obsessed with every box of promo records that came in from ECM. One day in 1981 we pulled one out that looked a little different. The abstract imagery typical of the ECM cover was replaced by a dramatic b&w photo of a woman in shadow, head cocked to allow a dark shadow from an epic hair braid to fall across her neck.

This was the beginning of my love affair with the music of Meredith Monk.

It was like nothing I had ever heard, though it was as instantly accessible as the most finely crafted pop tune. It was funny. It was deep and dark. It was impossible. Even in its darkest moments, it exuded pure joy. I was hooked.

She is a composer, film director, choreographer and one of the

pioneers of extended vocal technique. She returns to Big Ears with her latest work, *Celluar Songs*, described as a blend of

movement, theatrical characters and images, light, and video installation. The work, at once playful and contemplative, draws inspiration from such cellular activity as layering, replication, division and mutation, and looks to underlying systems in nature that can serve as a prototype for human behavior in our tumultuous world. Conjuring cycles of birth and death throughout, Monk once again reminds us of her vitality as an artist who cuts to the core of experience, continuing to share the genius of her discovery and innovation.

I am so there.

Alvin Lucier

I have to admit: Before this year's festival schedule dropped, Alvin Lucier was a vaguely recognized name for me. But dang, y'all, the man has delivered the deep sounds for more than fifty years. As much a 'sound artist' as a musician composer, Lucier's work suggests a sensibility in line with Pauline Oliveros' concept of Deep Listening.

One of his most recognized pieces, *I Am Sitting in a Room*, begins with the performer reciting and recording a paragraph of text that describes the piece. The recorded passage plays back in the room, recorded again, and played back again, and again, etc. A simple layering technique not unlike Fripp's dual-Revox Frippertronics, but the only additive information is created by the resonance of the room itself, and the acoustic peculiarities of speakers and microphones recording the proceedings. Within a few minutes, the speech becomes nearly unrecognizable, with specific tones emphasized or muffled by the room resonance to create a strange push-pull effect. By the end, everything is a wash of enveloping sound.

During his early years, Lucier created several pieces of this nature; let's call them mechanical processes in that an initial action sets off a chain of successive occurrences without performer intervention. He later moved onto composing for trained musicians, often accompanied by pure wave generator. The variances of the musician's tones in reference to the pure wave creates washes of harmonic overtones that can take on the character of other instruments, celestial choirs, or skull-threatening dark vibration.

At 88 years of age, Lucier rarely performs, but he has three sets on tap at Big Ears, including one with his longtime collaborator Joan LaBarbara. Make a point of catching at least one.

Joan LaBarbara

Who is Joan LaBarbara, you asked quietly as you read the last paragraph.

LaBarbara was one of the second wave of extended vocal technique champions, heir to Cathy Berberian's 1960s investigations and contemporaneous with Meredith Monk. Her debut album, *Voice is the Original Instrument*, is a psychedelic funhouse ride, most notably her use of circular breathing and multiphonics.

And if you – or your kids – are of a certain age, you might even know her work.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y819U6jBDog>

LaBarbara performs twice at Big Ears, once in a solo career retrospective and alongside Alvin Lucier and the Ever Present Orchestra in a program of Lucier's work.

Jack DeJohnette

Along with Tony Williams and Famoudou Don Moye, Jack DeJohnette is one of the primary definers of the post-Elvin Jones/Max Roach approach to drumming. Go ahead and @ me if I left off your personal hero. In the 60s, DeJohnette played with Charles Lloyd, Betty Carter, Chick Corea, Bill Evans, and a brief but transformational stint with *Bitches Brew* era Miles Davis. From there, he moved into a long association with ECM, appearing as a leader and sideman on dozens of essential recordings with the likes of Keith Jarrett, John Abercrombie, Dave Holland, Lester Bowie, George Adams, Bill Firsell, Geri Allen, Joanne Brackeen... I mean, I'm gonna stop and send you to the tender mercies of wikipedia to get a fuller picture.

The man deserves a book or five and a documentary or two. He is one of the instantly recognizable drummers in jazz. His sense of swing and his range of touch on the drums and, especially, the cymbals mark him within a few bars. He is also a fine pianist and composer. The man is, well, an icon.

At Big Ears, DeJohnette rolls in with a trio featuring Ravi Coltrane on sax and Matt Garrison on bass and electronics. Ravi's dad? John Coltrane. Matt's dad? Trane's longtime bassist, Jimmy Garrison. An icon with the sons of two icons. Is it gonna be great? I'm skipping at least three performances I really ought to see for this one. Whaddyagonnado? Saturday, 7.45 pm, at the Tennessee Theatre.

Here's one of my favorite DeJohnette tracks from his New Directions quartet.

Wadada Leo Smith

Wadada Leo Smith was born in Leland, Mississippi and received his first musical education in the Delta blues at his father's knee. He went through the military band program and ended up

in the middle of the 1960s Chicago scene, one of the early members of the Association for the Advancement for Creative Musicians. He is a prolific composer, an educator, and has always maintained his musical practice as a component of his social activist practice.

Here's a partial list of Smith's collaborations: Anthony Braxton, Leroy Jenkins, Roscoe Mitchell, Henry Threadgill, Lester Bowie, Joseph Jarman, Cecil Taylor, Steve McCall, Anthony Davis, Carla Bley, Don Cherry, Jeanne Lee, Tadao Sawai, Muhal Richard Abrams, Ed Blackwell, Kazuko Shiraishi, Han Bennink, Marion Brown, Charlie Haden, Malachi Favors Magoustous, Jack Dejohnette, Vijay Iyer, Ikue Mori, Min Xiao Fen, Bill Laswell, John Zorn, Ronald Shannon Jackson, Frank Lowe, Andrew Cyrille, and Bill Frisell.

He is equally at home in what we might call "classical" music as he is digging in with the funk-skronk of the band Harriet Tubman or his *Yo, Miles* collaborations with Henry Kaiser. He can blast you through your seat or make you float into someplace you never knew existed. His graphic scores, executed in a system he calls Ankhramation, are on display in museums.

I last saw Wadada live in 1980, at Papp's Public Theatre. The amount of space between notes was at times nearly unbearable. But then, the right note, or smear or gesture, arrived to maintain a sense of structure that kept me from leaping from my seat in anxiety. The acid had kicked in strong by showtime, and the fact that a NYC cabbie had rear-ended my car just outside the theater likely created a certain adrenalistic frisson that I do not recommend to anyone. But there was something about the performance that stuck with me: The patience, sensitivity. The sense of mutual support. I mean, damn, you stand on stage in front of a full house and try to maintain intentional silence for ten, fifteen, twenty seconds: It is a barely endurable eternity for most musicians. Not Wadada.

For Big Ears, Smith has two performances in store. His solo exploration, *Reflections and Meditations on Monk*, drops at The Standard on Saturday at 2 pm. But the big deal is the presentation of Smith's 1978 masterpiece *Divine Love*, with original trio members Dwight Andrews and Bobby Naughton. That happens at the Tennessee Theatre on Sunday at 6.15 pm, a perfect lead in to the festival-capping performance by the Art Ensemble of Chicago.

Ears Embiggened: So Much Guitar



(The fourth 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. Part 3 here on the magnificent Rhiannon Giddens and her Lucy Negro, Redux project.)

My first guitar lesson was the first week of September, 1969. The teacher was named Leo Goldberg, and at the time I figured he was about eleventy thousand years old. He got me started on my nylon string Gianninni guitar (which I still have in a closet) playing things like Skip to My Lou and Moon River. As

a devoted fan of Grand Funk Railroad, I was frustrated, at best.

I may have stopped lessons, but my attraction to banging on wood and strings never stopped. To say that I have been a guitar geek for nearly 50 years is an understatement. And that's one reason this year's Big Ears has my fingertips tingling.

The level of guitar heroics on tap this year is astronomical. Just nuts. Where to begin? Even harder: where to stop. I am sure I will neglect someone's worthy favorite. Mea culpa, friends. I am ecstatically drowning here.

Randomly, let's start with (Sir) Richard Thompson. Aside from being, arguably, the best songwriter of the past 50 years not named Zimmerman, he is without question one of the most innovative guitar heroes of that span. Electric or acoustic, solo or with small or large ensemble, RT's playing is song supportive, tasteful, and utterly non-cliched (unless he is mocking cliches). He can peel the paint off of any wall, or turn and deliver the most heartbreaking passage you ever imagined.

For Big Ears, RT appears with the Knoxville Symphony Strings to present *Killed in Action*, a song cycle honoring the 100th anniversary of the World War I armistice. It is "based on letters, diaries, and interviews, and in most cases, are verbatim extracts, with little attempt to make them rhyme or turn them into 'art'." Bijou Theatre, Sunday, 1.30 pm.

I've seen RT at least 25 times, probably more, and surely more than anyone except Sun Ra and the Grateful Dead. Every time he comes around, I think, "been there, done that," imagining that I don't need to see him again. Then I end up going anyway, only to get myself gobsmacked one more time by his mastery of composition, singing, playing, and funny-as-all-get-out crowd control.

This presentation has me deep intrigued. RT with strings. RT with deep historical archaeology. RT, period. As if that were not enough, he appears with Rhiannon Giddens and Rachel Grimes for a panel discussion about how they use archival materials to create new works of music. Saturday at Visit Knoxville, 3 pm.

Okay, so I've already died and gone to heaven to have yet another of my all-time fave musicians on the bill. Let's glance around and see who else might be...

There's Mary Halvorson, appearing with her Code Girl quintet, her essential trio, Thumbscrew, and Columbia Icefield, alongside pedal steel whiz Susan Alcorn and trumpeter Nate Wooley. Halvorson has been defining chapter and book what guitar can mean in a post-bop/modernist/shred world. Her early work with Anthony Braxton displayed the kind of spiky harmonic disarray that plants her firmly in the *avant garde* (whatever the hell that is) and she continues to deliver some of the thorniest string beautynoise on the scene. But her evolving body of work highlights a keen sense of melodic regard alongside her more abstract explorations.

Her first solo album (*Meltframe*, 2015) finds her exploring standards by Duke Ellington, Oliver Nelson, Ornette Coleman, Roscoe Mitchell, and Carla Bley. Check out her recent duet album with Bill Frisell honoring the great Johnny Smith, or her *New American Songbook* collaborations with Ron Miles on cornet and drummer Greg Saunier of Deerhoof: this is someone with respect for tradition, but not the kind of hidebound devotion that can lead musicians into the trap of becoming museum pieces. Aside from helping to define what qualifies as a 'standard' in the ongoing conversation that is jazz, she is establishing herself as one of the most adventuresome and prolific creative musicians of our time.

Listen to this haunting solo delivery of Ellington's uber classic *Solitude*; it is not enslaved to the original, yet the

shape of the composition never wavers. It is a model for how to treat a beloved piece of music with both reverence and a spirit of expansive exploration.

Speaking of Frisell, he is on hand for at least five performances: his duo with Thomas Morgan, his longtime trio of Kenny Wolleson and Tony Scherr accompanying the films of Bill Morrison. Just get your tickets now and quit arguing, his quartet with sublime singer Petra Haden, a pre-festival duet with saxophonist Greg Tardy, and – in one of the most intriguing bills of the festival – as part of *Absînt*, a collaboration with saxist Tim Berne, guitar wizard David Torn, and my favorite living New Orleans saxophonist/composer/artist, Aurora Nealand. This is my pick for the hidden treasure of the festival. I've been listening to Nealand for a good dozen years, and she always knocks me out.

Bill Frisell is a quintessential pick to represent the ECM guitar tradition. From his first appearance on Everhard Weber's 1979 *Fluid Rustle*, through his wide ranging sideman work with the likes of Kenny Wheeler, Paul Motian, Arild Anderson, Paul Bley, Jan Garbarek, and on and on, through his earliest releases under his own name, Frisell was the perfect ECM guitarist: a range of tone and sound that makes his presence both transparent and unmistakable and an almost eerie ability to deliver exactly what each artist or composition needs – no more, no less. Along with Pat Metheny, Terje Rypdal, and the late John Abercrombie, Frisell embodied the ECM guitar ethos.

Frisell left ECM because he had more music in mind than the ECM release schedule could accommodate. But he came back to the Scandinavian fold with his *Small Town* duo with Morgan, and has since appeared with Wadada Leo Smith and Andrew Cyrille for *Lebroba*, one of the finest ECM releases in years and one of 2018's best releases in any genre.

Like many guitarists of varied skill and ambition, I have a specific “Bill Frisell changed my life” story that I will save for later. Suffice to say, if you’ve heard the guy, you know you need to see him whenever/wherever and with whoever. If you have not, get with the program.

But wait. We have another strong contender for ECM guitar icon: Ralph Towner. It makes perfect sense to have Towner on hand at a festival honoring the 50th anniversary of ECM Records. Best known for his work with the group Oregon, Towner is a master of texture, tone, and space. The opportunity to see him anywhere is a gift from above. The chance to hear him in a space as sonically rich as Knoxville’s St. Johns Episcopal Cathedral is a universal blessing. I just wish John Abercrombie were still with us to revisit this longtime favorite of mine.

Anyone who loves guitar knows of the mad genius of David Torn. Another picker long associated with ECM, Torn’s experimentations range as far afield as any guitarist of the past 40 years. As at home with solo soundscapes that range from the ethereal to the epically noisy, Torn also knows how to play a head and improv over changes. He has worked with David Bowie, Tori Amos, Jeff Beck, Madonna, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Don Cherry, Tony Levin, and Bill Bruford (and a zillion more) and penned soundtracks for television and film. At Big Ears, he appears solo, with his trio Snakeoil, and with the *Absînt* project. Given the way Big Ears throws popup show surprises, I’d bet on him appearing in other settings, too.

Rafiq Bhatia presents Breaking English, an electroacoustic trio enhanced by a multimedia swirl of sight and sound. He is a smoking good player who places his chops at the service of concept and composition; nothing is gratuitous. He cites his inspiration for Breaking English as “including but not limited to Jimi Hendrix concert videos, blaring prayer calls from Turkish mosques, East African archaeological sites, the death of Trayvon Martin and Flying Lotus sound collages.” The

Standard, Friday, 12.30 pm.

Who else? Chris Eldridge of the Punch Brothers will provide accompaniment to Fatty Arbuckle's 1917 silent film classic *Coney Island*. The Punch boys will also close out the festival Sunday evening as the capstone to the Big Ears investigation of the musics of Appalachia. This will surely be one of the most attended concerts in the festival. Mill & Mine, Sunday, 8.15 pm.

Shane Parish presents a solo set as part of the Pilot Light series (all free, all the time, and one hell of a lineup it is, too). Perhaps better known for his work with the electric band Ahleuchatistas, Parish is building a reputation for his solo acoustic work that places him squarely in the tradition of John Fahey, willing to play material of just about any origin in a style that makes it unmistakably his own. Pilot Light, Sunday at 6 pm.

Derek Gripper is a South African classical guitarist who has unlocked the code for translating the style of traditional African instruments like the kora to six nylon strings. A player of infinite technique and feel, you can close your eyes and imagine a room full of griots. Sublime. Knoxville Museum of Art, Thursday, 7.30 pm.

On the pure energy and skronk front, the Messthetics brings the Fugazi rhythm section of Joe Lally and Brendan Canty together with guitarist Anthony Pirog. Pirog is something of a hidden treasure, making big waves in the DC scene but only recently gaining wider exposure. He owes more than a little bit to the Crimson vocabulary, and the trio itself strongly recalls the heyday of Fripp's League of Gentlemen. But this is not a tribute band; Messthetics deliver a signature sound that demands serious head thrashing. They play The Standard on Saturday at 6 and will team up with the great Lonnie Holley at Mill and Mine on Friday at 1 pm.

Guitarist Tashi Dorji, born in Bhutan, appears in duo with percussionist

Tyler Damon for spontaneous improvisations that range from delicate shimmers and star twinkles to full bore supernova explosions. Pilot Light, Friday, 10.30 pm.

But wait, there's more. But that's about enough for this post. Check the Big Ears schedule and let me know which one of your favorites I forgot to mention. I bet there are at least a dozen more twangers I wish I knew about. Help a buddy out!