Ears Embiggest: Day 3

Saturday dawned sunny and extremely windy, gusts so strong I was often pushed back a step and forced to walk at a 45* forward tilt. The festival was forced to postpone their parade and street party until Sunday. Yet we soldiered on…

We began our day with the first offering in the John Zorn 70th Birthday celebration. The program was drawn from two albums of a trilogy inspired by Zorn's interest in Christian mysticism (*Nove Cantici Per Francesco D'Assisi* and *Teresa de Avila*). But the real draw was the chance to hear three guitar virtuosi on one stage. Bill Frisell, Julian Lage, and Gyan Riley have chops to spare, but the treat was in witnessing how they played off each other and how the level of listening and mutual respect created a music that transcended compositions that were (*opinion alert – ymmv*) competent if not especially memorable.

It is impossible to think about guitar trios without recalling the McLaughlin/Di Meola/de Lucia supergroup, but the playing here was less about the gratuitous pyrotechnics of that project and more in service to a balanced group sound. Riley (on nylon strings) and Lage handled most of the ripping runs, with Frisell offering the kind of spare and enigmatic undercurrent that has characterized his recent playing. It was pretty fantastic. Everybody knows about Lage by now, but you will do yourself a favor by catching up on Riley's work, including some terrific recordings with his dad, the legendary Terry Riley.

Last year, Zorn took over the Bijou for two full days, but the crowds were so big that the fest moved them to the Tennessee Theater for the 2023 sessions. It was a smart move; this quiet little show was absolutely packed, and the lines around the Tennessee for the next two days were always considerable. (We bailed on the *Cobra* finale partly because of the lines.)

By his own design, Zorn's music is difficult to come by. He does now allow his Tzadik label releases (by him or anyone else) on any streaming service, and you can only buy CDs or vinyl: no downloads of any sort. He rarely leaves New York, so unless you catch him at a Big Ears-like event, you gotta go to him, either at his club, The Stone, or in his other frequent NYC performances. But he is one of the most prolific and influential composers and players of the past 40 years, and pretty much everyone who is anyone jumps at the chance to play with him. The sheer mass of his catalog can be intimidating, but it is worth the effort to dive in and discover.

Later that afternoon we caught one of his three *Bagatelle* concerts, this one featuring guitarists Mary Halvorson and Miles Okazaki with bassist Jorge Roeder and drummer Tomas Fujiwara. They were on fire from the drop. I've seen Halvorson a dozen times (twice more this weekend) and this probably the most shredbeastly I've seen her. Okazaki was a perfect match, and bassist Roeder is surely one of the best in the game right now. Fujiwara and Halvorson have been playing together for at least 15 years now and the psychic connection is well established. It was a highlight set, though regrettably only 30 minutes long. The second half hour went over to the band Trigger, which was young, fast, and extremely loud. Zorn embraces all forms, and this was his dip into speed metal. The band was tight as a tick, but after one tune and part of another, I figured I had caught the gist of it and jumped to catch an actual meal (one of maybe three I ate all festival; the rest was energy bars and lots of coffee).

But I'm ahead of myself. From the guitar trio I zipped over to

St. John’s (which is really my favorite venue this year) for the JACK Quartet performing the string quartets of Catherine Lamb. This is difficult, beautiful, and deeply mysterious music. Based on just intonation (most music you have heard is performed in equal temperament), this is more of the deep listening I’ve described elsewhere. The JACK musicians have the difficult task of playing and hearing the microscopic adjustments this tuning demands. The result is a build of overtones that create a psychoacoustic phenomenon that defies easy description. The first fifteen minutes found me reminding myself to drop expectation and let go my resistance to the dissonance I was feeling. Closing my eyes, I found myself ‘hearing’ a French horn and an oboe. Soon after that, a flute and bells came along. An eyelid-projection lightshow took shape, a left-to-right flow of blue/greens alternating with yellow/oranges as the rest of the illusory symphony joined in. And then, ten or twenty years later, the hour ended and I was back. Woo woo, kids…a truly memorable listening experience.

But not for everyone! One friend walked out after noting that “there’s more than one note, you know” and another with recurring tinnitus was driven to flee. I loved it.

I moved from string quartet to electric guitar skronk and wail. Bill Orcutt and Chris Corsano settled into the Jackson Terminal for an hour or so of improv chaos. This duo’s 2021 album *Made Out of Sound* gets repeated play at home. They delivered the goods, setting the skulls of earnest young men bobbing and twisting in pure metal ecstasy.

Not content with the duo’s assault on what remains of my hearing, I scampered over to The Standard for William Parker’s *Mayan Space Station* featuring guitarist Ava Mendoza and drummer Gerald Cleaver. It was another packed house but worth the jostle to catch this trio. Parker is one of the jazz world’s most prolific bassists, and at age 71 he is enjoying something of a peak in visibility. *Mayan Space Station* is a classic power trio and Mendoza is a present-day

Hendrix/Sharrock screamer. She has mentioned the influence of Nels Cline in the past, and her approach to effects and unorthodox string manipulations honors that debt. Mendoza is a distinctive voice equally at home in high-octane skronk as she is in the meditative soundscapes of someone like Nate Wooley. Here's hoping she gets the kind of widespread notice she deserves.

From here I was on to Halvorson's *Bagatelle* set, so the entire day was pretty much a guitar lover's dream.

We waited in line after dinner for Brandee Younger's set, but the start time kept slipping in fifteen minute increments, one of the few schedule glitches I heard about through the weekend. (With this many concerts, it's a wonder it doesn't happen more often.) Then a notification about another pop-up show came through: Arooj Aftab. Stanwyck made a decisive call: Run.

St. John’s to The Point is one of the longer treks on the festival map, but whatever. I had seen a photo of Arooj performing with Frisell the night prior and felt serious jealousy, so we were determined to catch this. We ended up in the front row where I took that picture at the top of this ramble. A few minutes later it looked like this.

Photo by Billie Wheeler courtesy of Big Ears

Shahzad Ismaily and Maeve Gilchrist are members of Aftab’s touring band, so we heard stripped down versions of most of the *Vulture Prince* material. Aftab told us that even though they had played around 200 shows last year, they had trouble remembering the tunes that day. It did not sound that way, and to say these versions were stripped down is to miss the fact that Gilchrist is beyond whatever virtuosic might mean; she is an orchestra unto herself. And Ismaily demonstrated once again why he is such a sought after collaborator; everything he plays on bass or Moog is understated and utterly perfect, never wasting a note.

And what to say of Arooj Aftab? She has one of the most

captivating voices I’ve ever heard, and when she dips into the lower range I feel like someone has plugged a low-voltage current into my spine. The scale of the venue was far better suited to Aftab’s intimate singing, though the way her career is going we best get used to hearing her in larger halls. Especially considering her *Love In Exile* project with Ismaily and Vijay Iyer, it seems that last year’s Grammy is really just the beginning for this rare talent.

That was it for Saturday. I felt that pouring any more sound on top of this exquisite sound nectar would be like painting a moustache on the Mona Lisa.