Ears Embigilisticexpialidocious: Day 4

So yeah, I painted myself into a corner because there is not a fourth degree of superlative. Sue me.

Day 4 dawned early. Stanwyck had arranged an 8 a.m. breakfast date with some lovely Knoxville pals, but I was moving really slow and literally stumbled off the elevator to find Shara Nova waiting for a ride to Blue Hour tech check. We've zoomed and emailed a ton since January (big profile coming later this month to Salvation South!) but this was our first face to face. Because I am ~~a starstruck fanboy~~ so respectful of artist's privacy, I neglected to get a photo of the three of us. But it just goes to show: You miss a lot if you sleep in.

Good food and pal catch-up later, I wandered to the East Tennessee Historical Society Museum (highly recommended!) for a panel discussion by three of The Blue Hour composers: Rachel Grimes, Sarah Kirkland Snyder, and Angélica Negrón. (Caroline Shaw missed Big Ears for the first time in years and Shara was resting her pipes for the performance.) It was a fascinating discussion of how they developed the piece and some of the changes they made when they shifted from featuring singer Luciana Souza to the recording and current touring version with Nova. So fascinating that I missed the Zorn Gnostic Trio set that was high on my list. Just another one of a thousand regrets at Big Ears.

The weather was nicer on Sunday – and I was in energy conservation mode for day 4 anyway – so I opted for another cuppa in the sunshine before Wadada Leo Smith‘s Purple Kikuyu, with drummer Pheeroan akLaff, cellist Ashley Waters, and pianist Erika Dohi. I was excited to see Wadada live after I immersed into his work so intensely for last year’s Salvation South profile. It was everything I hoped it would be, and watching Wadada conduct his band through his pieces was as fascinating as the music itself. Pheeroan – who I’ve been listening to for more than 40 years, almost as long as he’s played with Smith – is one of my favorite drummers. The way he tunes his drums is so distinctive that you know who you’re hearing right away; his tumbling/rumbling rhythms are also truly one of a kind. Waters and Dohi have each been working with Wadada since the mid-teens and their empathy with his framework is evident. At age 81, Wadada shows no indication of slowing down. A beautiful set of music.

I was concerned about getting into the Frisell FOUR show an

hour later. The lines had seemed a bit more intense than previous years; nothing insurmountable, but the old days of easily-slip-into-another-~~world~~ show are a distant memory now. I heard some pretty aggravated grumbling about the crowds – one wag suggested a name change to “Queue Festival” – but overall the lines remain pretty manageable with a little planning and lot less FOMO. (On the upside, the difficulty of zipping/dipping one show to another might just encourage people to stay in their fkng seats and not disrupt the performance. The jamokes who took the effort to score front row Blue Hour seats only to dash twenty minutes in were the most egregious violators of basic courtesy. Schmucks.)

Anyway…

The Frisell FOUR album had not grabbed me. Like so many Frisell albums lately, the recording seemed undercooked, and the potency of this band shows why it might be better to record after a group plays live for a bit. But this performance was every bit as terrific as any of the dozens of Frisell shows I’ve seen in the past 20 years, and any reservations I had about the project are dead and buried. Knoxville resident Gregory Tardy was the focus of the set, though pianist Gerald Clayton and drummer Jonathan Blake took ample turns in the spotlight as well.

Gregory Tardy (Photo by Cora Wagoner, courtesy Big Ears Festival)

Blake was especially impressive in a solo stretch near the end of the set; his alteration between very spare and very busy were masterfully constructed, and any serious drummer should study the schematic development of this solo. But the high point was a duet between guitar and tenor sax on Billy Strayhorn's gorgeous "Blood Count." This is one of my favorite pieces from the Ellington orbit and I've never heard it rendered so beautifully. (This audience youtube has both the "Blood Count" and the drum solo. Catch it before the copyright cops take it away. I didn't do it!)

Again, I took a breather between shows, both to rest my ears and to get in line for a good seat at the Tessa Lark / Knoxville Symphony program. (I learned that the house would not be cleared between that and Blue Hour, so I wanted to catch my favorite spot in the Bijou balcony.) To my happy surprise, the Lark program – Michael Schachter's violin concerto *Cycle of Life* – was a terrifically engaging 7-

movement piece performed exceptionally well. Lark is an enormously talented violinist and conductor Aram Demirjian demonstrated why he earned the Sir Georg Solti Conducting Award in 2020.

And then, at last, the moment I'd been anticipating since it was announced last fall: The Blue Hour, featuring Shara Nova.

Photo by Stanwyck

I'm going to have a lot more to say about this piece in my upcoming Shara profile for Salvation South, but let me offer a couple of observations.

First of all, it was glorious. There is a lot going on with the album production that is impractical for a live performance, but Shara and the three composers on-site oversaw a remarkably faithful production. The Knoxville Symphony's execution was top-drawer and the incorporation of the musicians as chorus along with some of the sound design

elements sprinkled throughout were excellent strategies to fill out the sound. And if I may just gush…Shara Nova's voice is miraculous, and she pulled off this demanding piece with seeming effortlessness. But that was just the appearance; Blue Hour is 80 minutes of near-constant singing across a range of around three octaves. But put the technical measure aside: Blue Hour is emotionally arduous, and any effective performance requires the performer to inhabit some dark and terrifying psychic terrain. Nova was fully committed to every line. Stunning.

It turned out I was sitting just in front of composer Rachel Grimes. She was clearly proud as punch about the whole thing and could not rave enough about Nova's performance. I observed she had done some heavy lifting over the past hour or so, and she just beamed with tears in her eyes, "*Reallly* heavy lifting! I'm so proud of her." So it wasn't just me.

That was that. Fork stuck in me, done. We walked past the blocks-long queue for Zorn's *COBRA* (which I heard was epic) without a second glance. As with the Arooj Aftab capper on Saturday, the idea of pouring more sound into these ears at that moment felt sacrilege. So it was back to the hotel to get Stanwyck a bourbon rocks and me a ginger ale, another fantastic festival in the books.

Regrets? I had a few, but then again, that's the story of Big Ears, a festival where you miss more great music than you hear. But damn y'all, that's the kind of problem I can wrap my ears around. Until next year…

Go. Listen.