The Ears, They Embiggen



Every year I eagerly await that unmistakable harbinger of autumn that lifts my spirits and brings me hope for better days ahead. No, it's not that god forsaken pumpkin spice everything. And for us inmates of America's most phallic-shaped state it damn sure ain't the crisp snap of cool and dry weather.

I speak of course of the annual unveiling of the Big Ears Festival's roster for the coming year's hullabaloo in Knoxville. Today's the day! Tickets go on sale September 14 at 9 a.m. EDT. Fair warning: If you want to attend, act early. Last year was completely sold out weeks before the first note sounded, and hotel reservations can be very hard to come by, especially the downtown joints that allow you to park your car when you arrive and basically forget where you stashed it until you get ready to leave.

This year marks the tenth iteration of this one-of-a-kind festival – founded in 2009, they skipped some years due to COVID and other difficulties – and the lineup so far is packed with names that promise to make the 2023 gathering worthy of its round number celebration. This is just the first tranche of artists gathering in East Tennessee next March 30 to April 2. There will be several more unveilings in the coming months, with last minute surprises dropping even after the gala is underway.

Unlike a handful of earlier lineups, it is difficult to narrow things down to one or two defining names for the program. As

always, the world of jazz (whatever that means these days) is represented by several of the more prominent names in the music. Living legends like Charles Lloyd, ~~Wadada Leo Smith~~, William Parker, and Bill Frisell stand out. Younger artists, the people who hold the future of this music in their heads/hands/hearts, include huge names like Mary Halvorson, Christian McBride, Makaya McCraven, Tyshawn Sorey, and Vijay Iyer.

~~(I'm especially excited to see Wadada in the lineup; I've been working on a profile of his nearly 60 year career since Spring and I am still trying to get my head around the gargantuan amount – and breadth – of work he has created. Look for this deep dive round about Wadada's 81st birthday, this December at~~ Salvation South~~.)~~

NOTE: The news of Wadada appearances is evidently a product of my fevered imagination. Egg on my face and all that. Mea maxima &c. I'm still dropping that Wadada deep dive for his birthday, though.

Big Ears was born touting the world of new music/classical/whatever (genres, man! ptah!), and they continue that tradition with a presentation of Steve Reich's string quartets and the work of composers like Eliane Radigue and Catherine Lamb. I would not be surprised to see some of ~~Wadada and~~ Sorey in this realm as well, given ~~their~~ his genre-obliterating output of late; but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Fittingly for a festival in the Tennessee mountains, bluegrass and *Americana* (somebody please come up with a new word) is smartly represented by cats like Bela Fleck and Sierra Hull. The alt-rock crowd can look forward to Iron & Wine, The Mountain Goats, and Terry Allen. Expect this sector to fill out as March approaches.

The offering for guitar geeks (mea culpa) is a banquet. Aside from Frisell and Halvorson, you've got Marc Ribot, James Blood

Ulmer, Bill Orcutt, Ava Mendoza, and Rafiq Bhatia. (fwiw, I've been preparing a few articles about several of these folks for a new recurring feature for i2b called *So Much Guitar*. First installment coming on September 14 featuring Mary Halvorson.)

As always, Big Ears spans the globe. The Catalan duo of Tarta Relena sings music that spans from Cosica, Mallorca, Monorca, Crete, and the Balearic Islands. Think an amalgam of the Western and Eastern tonal traditions of the trans-Mediterranean region combined with subtly applies electronics and minimalist percussion. It's a lush sound that spans centuries and sets new standards, both for the depth of sound two people can deliver and the ongoing development of electronics working as organically as acoustic instruments.

(Full disclosure: I had never heard of Tarta Relena until this press release landed. They have fast risen to the top of my list of sonic obsessions. Watch this.)

Descending from one of Gambia's five principal griot families, Sona Jobarteh is the first woman from the lineage to play the kora – a 21-string sort-of-harp – professionally. Her music is faithful to tradition and as hot as anything happening on the planet today. Mind dropping plucked string interplay, groove aplenty, and her voice is touched by an angel. Expect a crowd for this one.

Speaking of voices touched by an angel: One of last year's highlights was a performance by Pakistani singer Arooj Aftab, just a week before she became the first musician from that country to win a Grammy. She's back this year in collaboration with pianist Vijay Iyer and multi-instrumental iconoclast Shahzad Ismaily. If this track from their appearance at the Resonant Bodies Festival is any hint, this one holds the potential for DNA-scrambling at its finest.

This trio is the kind of event I look most forward to at Big Ears, unexpected collaborations where genre lines blur into

irrelevance. In this realm, Scottish harp goddess Maeve Gilchrist collabs with the Aizuri String Quartet, while Bill Frisell's trio joins with the superb Knoxville Symphony Orchestra. Mary Halvorson's *Belladonna* and *Amaryllis* projects showcase her compositions for string quartet with guitar and her fine sextet. (More on this on Wednesday.)

And speaking of category busting: Nobody has done more to undermine the limitations of genre jails than John Zorn. Following a fabulous nine show run at the Bijou Theater in 2022, Zorn returns for eight shows that include *Nove Cantici* for guitar trio (Frisell, Julian Lage, and Gyan Riley, for Pete's sake); a five-voice a capella set; a smattering of chamber music settings; and a variety of mix and match groups under his command. It all caps off with his near-mythical *Cobra* project. It's a system of rules printed on playing cards that determine what 10 or more musicians may or may not do within conditions that are always changing. A mind-boggling mashup of composition, improv, and random distribution of cards, *Cobra* is never the same thing twice.

Kind of like Big Ears itself.

And if you are having trouble convincing a pal to join you for all this "weird ass shit," just mention Los Lobos and Rickie Lee Jones are on the bill, too. Celebrating their 50th anniversary in 2023, Los Lobos remains one of the world's greatest rock and roll bands bar none. And don't sleep on Rickie Lee. I went to a solo show last Spring expecting a pleasant stroll down nostalgia lane; instead, Jones delivered an emotionally charged and exhilarating set from her 45 year-deep catalog; it is the mark of a great songwriter that the material's resonance deepens with the passage of time.

Go. Listen.