
BIG EARS 2017: PIONEERING PLANNING & LISTENING



PIONEERING

Deeply distilled in Tennessee is a tradition of exploration and expansion. Knoxville's seven daring [Big Ears Festivals](#) have embraced this penchant for innovation in stunning artistic expression. Each year that I return to this one of a kind event, the growth of Knoxville's creative and independent energy seems to propel the growth of the nation's most eclectic and experimental music and film festival.

Nils Okland's beautiful melodies filled a packed St. John's Cathedral on Friday

PLANNING

What distinguishes Big Ears from so many other music festivals is its setting. Because of the smart economic development of many people like festival founder Ashley Capps, Knoxville is Tennessee's 3rd biggest city, but has preserved its laid back provencal vibe and still feel like a sleepy little town. Framing the center of town is one of the South's most vibrant city squares, rich in locals and tourists dining at well-established hipster eateries like The Tomato Head. Festival planners have figured out the magic of expanding the festival's offerings and opening new venues. Combined with cross-scheduling and comparatively low cost tickets, they have reduced crowding. Big Ears patrons are never seen waiting in line for porta-potties. Rather, they sit in gorgeously preserved historic theaters, like the intimate Bijou and majestic Tennessee Theater. This year, the latter venue hosted musical acts as different as Wilco and San Jose's experimental ensemble Xiu Xiu, who performed a radical reinterpretation of the Twin Peaks soundtrack music. As the city's historic Old City continues to revitalize warehouse spaces, venues like the Mill and Mine offer a more spacious feel for bands like post-rock legends Tortoise.



Jeff Tweedy and Wilco were ubiquitous throughout the festival performing in a variety of ensembles that demonstrated their versatility



Lisa Moore's intimate set at the Mill and Mine was a passionate mix of explosive energy and soothing minimalism.

LISTENING

This year's festival was no different than previous in highlighting a dizzying array of musical legends. Perhaps at the top of this was the appearance of pianist and composer Carla Bley. After hundreds of compositions and dozens of records, Bley's rich history in the jazz avant-garde stretches back to the mid 1960's when she worked with virtually the who's who of jazz, including Charlie Haden. Another legendary performer and composer present was minimalist classical composer Gavin Bryars, who performed his stunningly beautiful *The Sinking of the Titanic* in Knoxville's breathtaking

St. John's Cathedral. 2016 Pulitzer Prize winning composer and altoist, Henry Threadgill also made an appearance with his eclectic ensemble Zoid. Like previous ones, this year's festival presented a number of significant global performances. This year, several prominent Norwegian musicians were



Mira Billotte aka White Magic performed a dreamy set of psychedelic folk at the tiny Square Room

featured in various formats. Most significant of these was that of fiddler Nils Okland, playing a truly transcendent set of music that defied category. Okland's band featured vibraphone, saxophone and harmonium, all of which softly combined to support Okland's melodies that had an ancient familiarity.

ABOUT RADIO FREE JAZZ AMERICA

Radio Free Jazz America was started in 2014 as a not for profit effort to promote music that is left of center. We support various efforts in the South that advance alternative and avant-garde music like Moogfest, Big Ears, the Art of Cool and various venues. We applaud those take risks to support the musicians who take risks.

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