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Live Review: Big Ears 2018

An eclectic, audacious program featuring Milford Graves, Jason Moran, Tyshawn Sorey, Nels Cline and many more hits Tennessee

UPDATED APRIL 25, 2019 – DAVID R. ADLER



Milford Graves (credit: Andy Vinson/courtesy of Big Ears)

You know you're at the Big Ears Festival when Nathan Bowles, banjo and bones player for the old-time string band the Black Twig Pickers, enthusiastically shouts out Milford Graves, the sage of avant-garde jazz percussion. "I got my wig flipped!" Bowles said of Graves' solo set, which took place on the same stage just hours before. Flipping wigs in this fashion is precisely the goal of the annual creative-music confab, which took place March 22-25 in about a dozen venues in downtown Knoxville, Tenn.

Big Ears doesn't just cater to diehards of any one musical form or discipline. It finds commonalities between them, striving to cultivate a discerning public that finds value and sustenance in music of many kinds. And so iconic jazz composers and improvisers appear under the same banner as bluegrass veterans, classical mavericks, old-time folk primitivists, DJs and electronic sound sculptors. Film, prose and visual art have a role to play as well. There are artist interviews and panels, informal playing sessions and secret pop-up shows. There's a superbly designed mobile app that allows attendees to customize a schedule and receive alerts as things unfold.

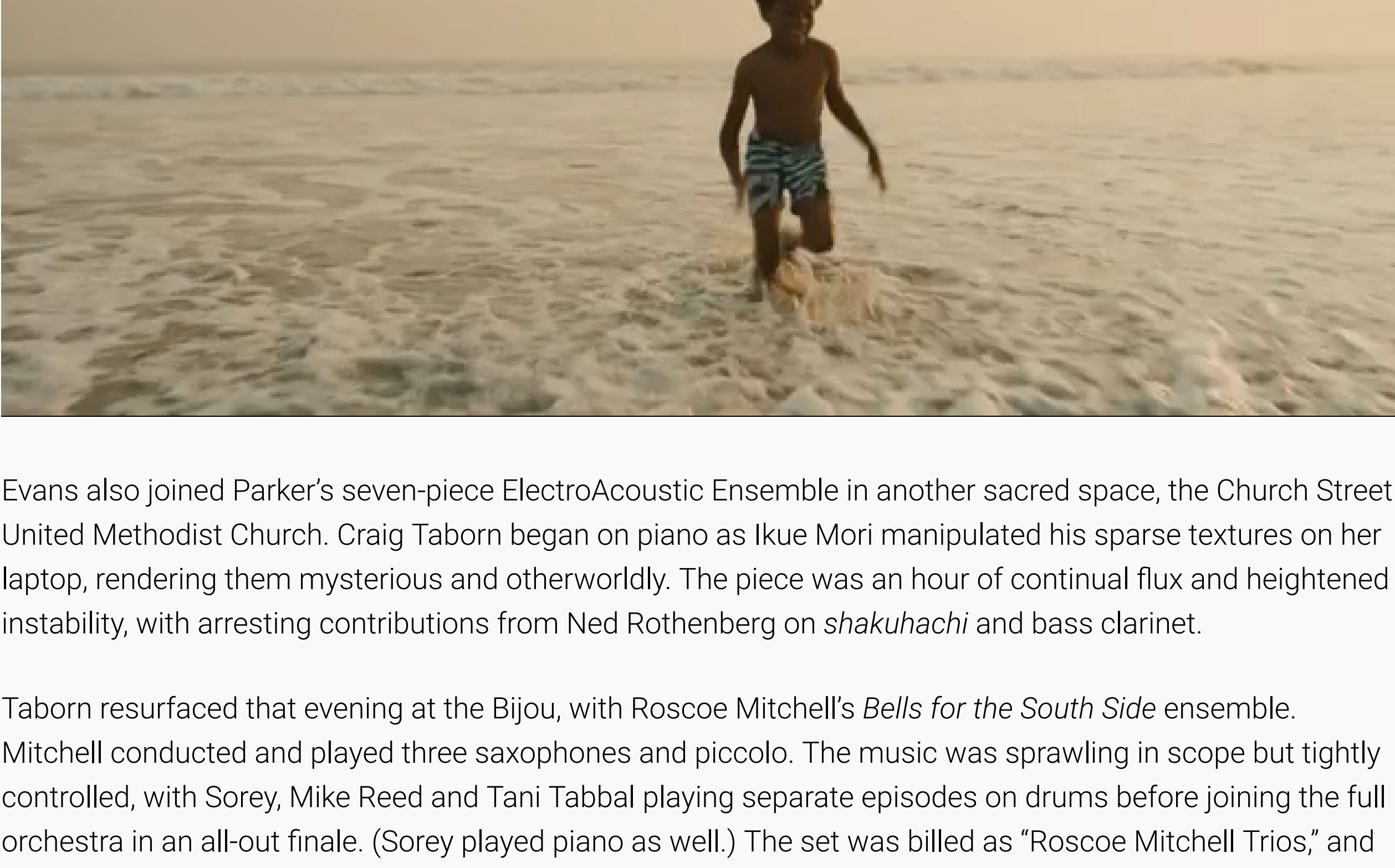
Evan Parker, Roscoe Mitchell, Craig Taborn, Jason Moran, Tyshawn Sorey, Nels Cline, Jenny Scheinman, Okkyung Lee, Marc Ribot and others appeared in more than one context. Béla Fleck and Abigail Washburn played spirited banjo duos in the Tennessee Theatre (about the size of the Beacon in New York, if not bigger). Singer/fiddler Sam Amidon played a full set in the elegant, comfortable Bijou Theatre, and hosted a gathering of amateur shape-note singers at the Knoxville Museum of Art. Author and critic Ben Ratliff, at the Scottish pub Boyd's Jig and Reel, led a discussion with experimental electronic artists Laurel Halo and Eli Keszler. Wander a bit and you'd discover something new.

It was striking to see the Jerry Douglas Band and the Tyshawn Sorey Trio play the same room, a cavernous rock venue with high ceilings and no seats called the Mill & Mine. Douglas, the eclectic Dobro master, cranked it up and went toe-to-toe with guitar beast Mike Seal while sporting a "Resist" T-shirt (something he made a point of mentioning). Sorey had fun with the room's sonic potential as well, coaxing wide dynamics from a huge field drum, among other tools in a sprawling drum-and-percussion kit. Pianist Cory Smythe and bassist Chris Tordini responded in kind, with hushed sensitivity and tremendous power in turn.

St. John's Episcopal Cathedral proved ideal for unaccompanied sets from saxophone legend Evan Parker and trumpet virtuoso Peter Evans. Parker's playing brimmed with cascading figures and circular breathing, but his soprano could also sound disarmingly warm, allowing for space and reflection. (At one point he slipped into an extended quote of John Coltrane's "Miles' Mode.") Evans was more extreme, making bold use of the microphone for loud and breathtakingly resonant effects.



Peter Evans (credit: Jake Giles Netter/courtesy of Big Ears)



Evans also joined Parker's seven-piece ElectroAcoustic Ensemble in another sacred space, the Church Street United Methodist Church. Craig Taborn began on piano as Ikue Mori manipulated his sparse textures on her laptop, rendering them mysterious and otherworldly. The piece was an hour of continual flux and heightened instability, with arresting contributions from Ned Rothenberg on *shakuhachi* and bass clarinet.

Taborn resurfaced that evening at the Bijou, with Roscoe Mitchell's *Bells for the South Side* ensemble. Mitchell conducted and played three saxophones and piccolo. The music was sprawling in scope but tightly controlled, with Sorey, Mike Reed and Tani Tabbal playing separate episodes on drums before joining the full orchestra in an all-out finale. (Sorey played piano as well.) The set was billed as "Roscoe Mitchell Trios," and that's how it proceeded, mostly in units of three. Ches Smith's mallets, Hugh Ragin's trumpet, James Fei's soprano saxophone and electronics and Jaribu Shahid's bass all shared time in the spotlight.

Earlier at the Bijou, which was filled to capacity, Milford Graves and pianist Jason Moran united for an engaging duo set. Graves often intones vocal syllables and sounds on the mic as he drums, and this can be infectious; it made perfect sense when Moran grabbed a mic and began to vocalize along with him. The crowd demanded an encore, and at the start there was a prolonged, almost awkward silence. A deep and inscrutable musical gesture, perhaps? Not really: Graves was having a problem with his snare drum stand, and a tech emerged onstage to help fix it. "I apologize," Graves said, and the house clapped appreciatively. Graves added: "No, I was talking to the drum."

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