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# BIG EARS TURNS 10

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Thousands of the world's most musically-adventurous listeners attended Knoxville's 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary [Big Ears Festival](#) last weekend. Curious attendees navigated four days and nights of radically different performances in one of the South's most hospitable



cities. The main challenge was how to oscillate, mainly aesthetically, from dozens of divergent musical experiences spanning the town's large and small venues. Staggered scheduling allowed fans of jazz, avant-garde, indie rock, folk and classical strategic opportunities to make judicious choices.

Nik Bärtsch's [Ronin](#) at the [Tennessee Theater](#). Combining jazz & minimalism they create deeply meditative "Zen-funk."

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## ECM RECORDS

This year's festival included a recognition of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of [ECM Records](#). The iconic label's non-idiomatic roster parallels the

expansive musical ethos of Big Ears. Numerous performers who find roost at ECM performed at the festival. Standouts included a duet from pianists Craig Taborn and Vijay Iyer, performing music from their 2019 release, [The Transitory Poems](#). The dynamic interplay between these two highlighted rhythmic and chromatic inventions melding Taborn's spacious progressions with Iyer's calculative upper-register kinetics. Overall, their four hands formed indivisible waves of hypnotic patterns, forceful crescendos and complex harmonies filling the near-perfect acoustics of the Tennessee Theater. Another engaging ECM artist performance was Ronin, the quartet of [Nik Bärtsch](#). Combining evolving minimalism with throbbing bass and motorik drumming, Ronin's extensive "Modul's" obliterate boundaries between rock, jazz and classical. Ronin is among a handful of contemporaries, like The Necks, and Mark Guliana who are redefining small jazz ensembles. Ronin's driving rhythms derive as much from drummer Kasper Rast as from the contrapuntal tongue slapping of reedman Sha and Bärtsch's hammering on the open strings of his keyboard.



Veteran altoist [Tim Berne's](#) ensemble Snake Oil features multi-instrumentalist [Oscar Noriega](#). Their [Bijou](#) set illustrated Berne's compositional skills that highlighted the gifted musicians in his ensemble.

The festival's most visceral performances included the explosive reed work from [Shabaka Hutchings](#) and [Evan Parker](#). Each of these two British innovators performed respectively in several different ensembles and represent vastly different generational and aesthetic dimensions of improvisation. Hutchings led his Sons of Kemet ensemble at the [Mill and Mine](#) for a scorching polyrhythmic set.

**"It's good that there's a force for supporting non-idiomatic music"**

*GUITARIST DAVID TORN ON  
THE ROLE OF ECM RECORDS  
IN MODERN MUSIC*

Guitarist and band-leader, [Mary Halvorson](#), returned to the festival with her new genre-defying ensemble Code Girl, playing compositions from their sprawling 2018 eponymous release. Michael Formanek's insistent bass grooves allowed trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire to give counterpoint to Halvorson's angular guitar progressions on songs like their dreamy performance of "Thunderhead" Among so many high-calibre performances, Halvorson's set was a fitting analog to the direction of the exciting new music presented at Big Ears.