

Big Ears Recommendations

Sunday, March 25

- **DAVONE TINES with the KNOXVILLE SYMPHONY STRINGS - Were You There - Bijou Theatre – 1 p.m.** We owe this gem in our weekend program to Aram Demirjian - the Knoxville Symphony Orchestra's visionary artistic director, music director, conductor. I hope he doesn't mind if I simply quote what he wrote to me when he proposed it: "We would like to present a 40-minute production called 'Were You There,' featuring nationally renowned baritone (and my former classmate!) [Davone Tines](#). Davone is part of an exciting new initiative called [AMOC](#) (American Modern Opera Company), which is made up of some of the most vibrant and diverse young singers, dancers and instrumentalists in the country. Their goal is to reimagine the experience of opera, from conception to performance, and *Were You There* is one of their first productions. 'Were You There' is about moving from darkness to light and finding spiritual communion; it's a memorial for death, it's a celebration of life; it's about how our voices can lift us up and serve to remember. The stage is strewn with a forest of simple sculptures that consist of microphones connected to amps connected to light bulbs—when activated, the bulbs light up according to the volume of Davone's voice. Davone sings a 40-minute set of theatrically staged songs, ranging from Spirituals to a new piece composed by Matthew Aucoin, resulting in a climactic *Amazing Grace*, which starts wild and abstracted but becomes simple and direct in subsequent verses, with Davone eliciting the audience to join in singing with him. Once the audience is holding the melody, Davone leaves the stage, allowing the audience to continue to sing indefinitely. They become complicit in the activation of this abstract memorial: when their voices are loud, the bulbs shine bright, and when their voices collectively fade into silence, the light in the room goes out. In addition to the song by Matthew Aucoin, a number of the spirituals were arranged by Michael Schachter. It was workshopped at the recent [Resonant Bodies Festival](#) in Brooklyn (though the project has evolved a great deal since then). Big Ears would have among the first performances of the fully fleshed-out version of this production, as well the premiere of a new string chamber orchestra version. We are really excited about this project for so many reasons — the biggest being: Davone is a star. I don't know if I can find adequate words to describe his voice — but it's one of those natural gifts that you hear and it's hard to believe something this powerful and soaring exists. He is someone Big Ears' audience needs to hear. This is a highly personal production for Davone, and I know from talking with him that he is extremely excited at the possibility of performing here."
- **ABIGAIL WASHBURN & WU FEI - Bijou Theatre – 3 p.m.** Banjo player/singer Abigail Washburn needs little introduction to Knoxville audiences (she also performs the day before this at Big Ears, Saturday, in her duo with husband, Béla Fleck). Wu Fei delivered one of Big Ears' most memorable and extraordinary performances last year during her solo show at St. John's Cathedral. Abby and Fei have been friends and collaborators for many years. They dig deep and this is sure to be one of the most beautiful and powerful shows of the Big Ears weekend. (Here's another [YouTube link](#) from Capps.)
- **ALICE COLTRANE TURIYASANGITANANDA: The Ashram Experience - The Mill & Mine – 6 p.m. (also the evening before at St. John's).** Last year's release of *World*

Spiritual Classics: The Ecstatic Music of Alice Coltrane on Luaka Bop Records, the label founded by David Byrne, was a revelation for many – and for those of us who've spent hours entranced by this rich, deeply moving music, these two events are among the most eagerly anticipated of the weekend. Pianist and harpist Alice Coltrane was the wife of the late jazz legend, John Coltrane, and was the pianist in this band before his death. In 1972 – after several recordings as a leader on her own (and now regarded as classics of the period) – Alice Coltrane left the secular life and devoted herself to religious practice – ultimately leading her own Ashram until her death in 2007. This is devotional music she composed and performed with the members of her Ashram during those 35 years – and it was recorded but with no intention of commercial release until Luaka Bop received permission to release it last year. These performances are by the members of the Ashram that lived and worshipped with Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda, performing this music every day as part of their devotional practice. (Here's another [YouTube link](#) from Capps.)