

Eric Chenaux

The Rose Hill, Brighton, UK

Introducing the title track from his latest album *Say Laura*, Canadian singer-guitarist Eric Chenaux reveals that it's a riff on the ballad "Laura", famously recorded by Charlie Parker with a lush string section in 1950. As an aside, though, he adds that his favourite version is the 1961 rendition by vocalist Jeanne Lee and pianist Ran Blake – a sparse deconstruction of the gooey standard in which Lee's voice is, at times, so fragile as to be almost transparent, and in which she delivers a wordless vocal improvisation with a vulnerable, slightly mournful feel. It speaks volumes about Chenaux's approach to his own performance.

Delivered in a warm, soulful falsetto, his songs are certainly ballads, generally – albeit obliquely – expressing romantic longing. And Chenaux has clearly listened closely to the great jazz singers:

minutes before the show starts, we're chatting enthusiastically about Betty Carter. Yet his unconventional verses are stretched into long, meandering forms that give the impression of rambling into dissolution, burrowing deeper into dazed introspection until subtly nudged back into a structure dictated by their own obscure logic, as though suddenly startled by the spotlight.

Perhaps an echo of the European oral folk tradition is also at work here. I'm reminded of a performance I once saw The Incredible String Band's Robin Williamson give in a 900 year old church where each of his near endless, bardic sprawls seemed to encompass the centuries themselves. With Chenaux, however, there's a sense of looking inward and mapping a private, emotional terrain. In a hushed pin-drop room, it creates an almost agonising sense of intimacy.

The guitar on his knee is like the

ventriloquist's dummy that keeps on bursting the earnest bubble with a rude comment. He tells me it's the same make of guitar that Derek Bailey played, which he has customised with a wide, flat whammy bar – and, sure enough, improvisation is his primary vehicle. He sketches fragmentary, jazz-inflected chord sequences, using pedals (observed behind the onstage monitor from where I'm perched) to transform them into gorgeously unfurling busts of golden light or dizzily whooshing spirals, accompanied by a low, steady, bodily pulse.

That provides the foundation for long, wildly idiosyncratic solos that conjure a plenitude of weird sounds: a robotic clang, a paper and comb buzz, a spectral clavichord. Leaning heavily on the whammy, he imparts a wonky wobble that constantly threatens to derail the solo, dipping down towards a kind of goofy microtone that really shouldn't work but

somehow does. Looking around the room, I can see plenty of incredulous smiles – but clearly he knows exactly what he's doing, employing an almost raga-like structure that keeps on returning to the guitar's lowest notes as a base camp ahead of the next foray. On "There They Were", he locks into an extended bout of breath-taking split-brain prowess, singing a pleading, tongue-twister refrain over and over again while delivering his most unguarded, directly lyrical guitar solo of the evening.

Reading Ted Berrigan's early 1960s sequence of poems *The Sonnets* a few days later, I come across a repeated epithet that runs throughout his blunted lines: "*Feminine marvellous and tough*". It's as good a description of Eric Chenaux's captivating, transporting and uncompromising music as any I can think of.

Daniel Spicer

Womens Work

Wigmore Hall, London UK

London's Wigmore Hall marks International Women's Day 2022 with a set of pieces using the title *Womens Work* – originally a 1975 publication of instructional scores by women, conceived by Fluxus founder member Alison Knowles and Annea Lockwood. The evening is hosted by researcher Irene Revell, who republished a version of *Womens Work* in 2019.

Vocal artist Elaine Mitchener is a singer, improviser and experimental musician whose work confronts issues of racism, feminism, colonialism and capitalism. She parks a question in the auditorium and leaves it there for the audience to find their own meaning.

Her early gospel training, where singers are often called to perform with no notice, provided a grounding in improvisation which, she says, requires holding back, not always sounding, intense listening; the thing to do is leave silences. The

pieces in this concert require virtuosic skill to develop and sustain long, intense contrasting periods of silence.

Womens Work is directed by Mitchener in a democratic way that avoids what she calls the "maestro hierarchy" of classical music. Each ensemble member is valued for their originality and responsible for making their own sounds, exploring how physical movement affects the voice, challenging the performance space and transforming the usual classical orderliness of Wigmore Hall.

The concert opens with only the ensemble's instruments on stage and a tiny carved wooden box labelled "Blue Danube" as they perform Younghi Pagh Paan's *Ma-am* by in ancient Korean language, from scattered positions throughout the auditorium. This leads into Pamela Z's *You* – recited lists of pop titles that start with the word you.

The ensemble thread their way towards the stage performing Alison Knowles's #1 *Shuffle* (1961), with the intriguing

sound of their footsteps in a constrained, shuffling movement. Hannah Kendall's *Tuxedo: Between Carnival And Lent* is a special commission for this evening, named after Jean Michel Basquiat's painting. It opens with the ensemble playing wind-up music boxes, which morph into high string harmonics and minimal piano with vocalised excerpts of text from Basquiat's painting, that highlight the abuse of Black people in slavery.

There are works by Tansy Davies and Jennifer Walshe and in Knowles's *Event Score #7*, each musician thinks of their own song, cued by Mitchener, who chooses Poly Styrene's "Oh Bondage Up Yours!" to set the tone for an explosive vocal cacophony.

Mitchener's politics and Jamaican roots are highlighted most poignantly in Matana Roberts's "*Gasping for air considering your purpose Dissolving...*". During Mitchener's Borealis festival commission *Sweet Tooth* (2020), seating space was limited for the audience so

they could not stretch out in their seats, to express African enslaved people's experience. In this performance of Roberts's piece, the word gasping is stretched, with long silences, extended breathing sequences, powerfully activating a claustrophobic feeling of constricted breathing. The piece was composed in the aftermath of the Rodney King US police trial, but Mitchener received the revised score just days before the 2020 murder of George Floyd, a raw wound that is portrayed to the audience during this concert.

A short piece follows by Jeanne Lee, who was a strong early influence on Mitchener, and Pauline Oliveros's *The Inner/Outer Sound Matrix* ends the concert, playing on words from Françoise Vergès's *A Decolonial Feminism*. The ensemble exit the stage to Alison Knowles's *Shuffle*, concluding a powerful evening of profound reflection on women's influence in the world.

Jo Hutton



From left: Elaine Mitchener, Sarah Saviet, Siwan Rhys, Heather Roche, Tamaki Sugimoto, Bridget Carey, Mira Benjamin