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Caballito Negro: embracing the void

Ashland-based flute and percussion duo strives to ‘connect with the world as it is’

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by MATTHEW ANDREWS

I almost don't want to tell you about [Abbie Weisenbloom House](#) in southeast Portland, where Ms. Weisenbloom has been hosting living room potluck shows for most of a decade. Like surfers and brunch enthusiasts, I don't want to give up a sweet secret spot, lest it become overcrowded. This is, of course, an exquisitely Portlandian problem, and a bullshit one, which is why I've decided to tell you all about the intense, intimate concert I attended there on a dark, windy night in February. The stars of the evening: flutist [Tessa Brinckman](#) and percussionist [Terry Longshore](#), a pair of [accomplished Ashland-based](#) musicians who compose, record and tour together as [Caballito Negro](#).

I spoke with Brinckman and Longshore after the show, and later by phone; their answers have been edited for flow and clarity.

On “Caballito Negro” and Why They Do It

Longshore: We have played [George [Crumb's Madrigals](#)] together with a wonderful vocalist, Christine Williams. And we found that that really spoke to us on the idea of both our modern music and our influence of musics of the world, traditional music of India, Spain, etc., and that cross-pollination of influence just there, [hanging out for us to take](#).

Brinckman: I like also the translation: you can say “little black horse” or “little dark horse,” the English expression of being a dark horse. I like that. The idea of going where music is not nice but meaningful and necessary is something we are both quite fond of.



Longshore & Brinckman

There is always that moment, right before you're about to go do performance and you've worked so hard and there is so much stuff and so many bits and pieces that can go wrong, and you think “what the hell was I thinking?” There is always that moment, and then the opposite of that is this ridiculous enthusiasm for music that is a visceral addiction. I can't not do it.

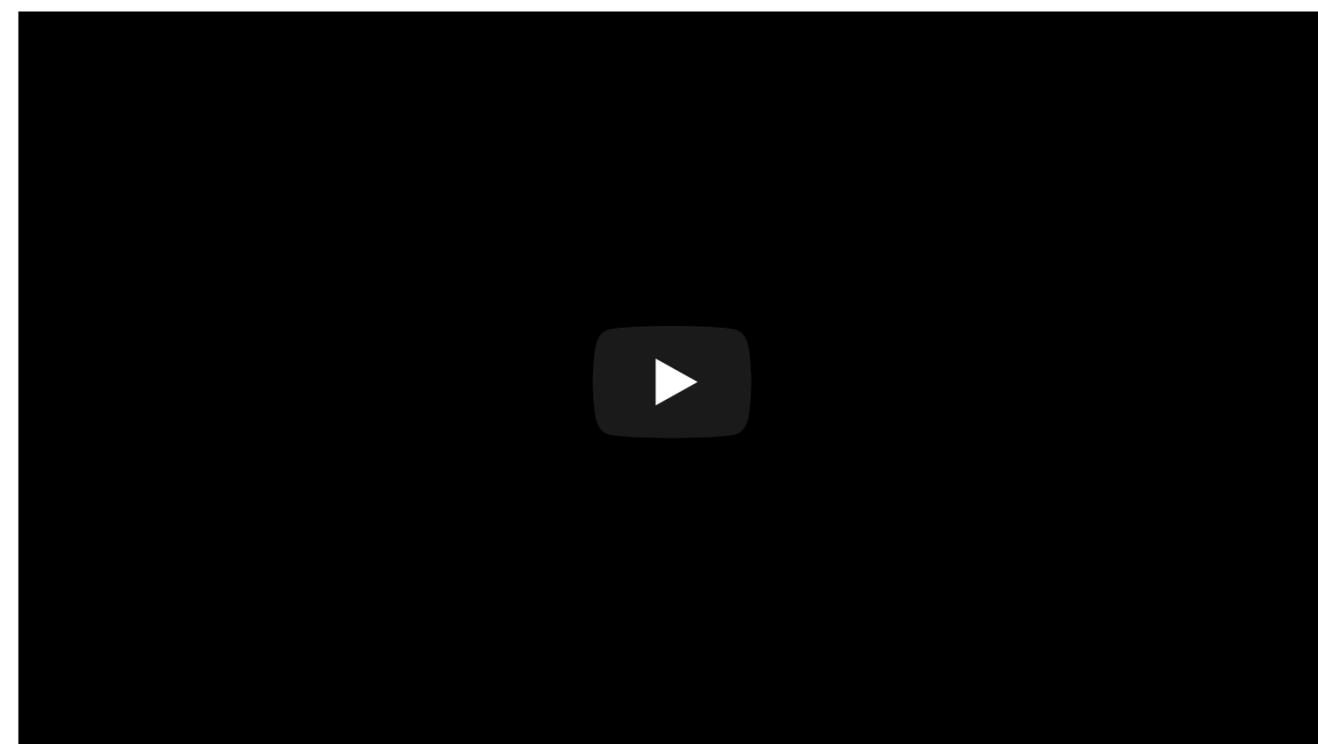
Longshore: It's the same thing for me. Once I started doing it, I couldn't stop. It's the combination of physical, mental, emotional, spiritual reward I get from doing it. And I know what it feels like when I am inspired by someone else's art. And I always aspire to do that myself. I think some of the most rewarding things are when you know you've been moved by a performance you've given and it has moved someone. That you connected with someone at that level is a very special feeling.

Brinckman: I feel also that what we are doing is connecting with the world as it is. It's not sticking our faces towards the wall and being separate from the world. It's not ignoring the pain in what's going on. And to really get mixed up in it is a worthy thing. I don't want to be the kind of artist that is separate from it. Because I would feel ashamed. I feel a responsibility to connect with what is going on and not ignore something. So all the issues that are hot, getting hotter, there is always a way to react with it artistically.

My favorite art of anybody's engages who we are. Using our privilege for good deeds. The good witches. Using our powers for good.

A Music Salon in Southeast Portland

An assortment of percussion instruments covered the little stage area, toy pianos and various flutes filling the rest of the space, a rug on the floor for Brinckman and Longshore to sit and play on. Chairs lined the living room, spilling over into the den, where I huddled under maps and books and [tchotchkes](#) and other souvenirs from Weisenbloom's travels. An old upright piano anchored one wall, bookcases framed the others, a busy back kitchen buzzed with popping wine corks and potluck leftovers and audience chatter.



Upstage, the musicians were flanked by a drawing of [Pan](#) on the left and some [Rothko](#)-esque miniature to the right. Appropriate in myriad ways, that pair, Pan's divine [chthonic](#) flute and Rothko's divine foursquare order indicative of the [Apollonian-Dionysian spirit](#) in the house, classically trained musicians performing wildly personal intercultural modern music for a tribe of tipsy enthusiasts passing around hand-folded programs

in a dimly lit living room.

It turns out Brinckman once lived in this same neighborhood, had in fact known Weisenbloom when she first turned her home into a music venue.

On Playing Weisenbloom House

Brinckman: Abbie was a neighbor of mine. I used to live right in that block. She has done an amazing job making a series of it work. She's dedicated. She's truly created a Parisian salon—she used to live in France, so she knows what she is doing. And she really wants to bring the world, as she says, to her house. What is beautiful about it is she gets people communing—eating and drinking—especially in the drinking before the concert, they're in a space where they just want to connect. They're not inhibited or wondering how comfortable they feel. They're in it with us.

And that's what we long for as musicians—that we're not just kind of objects on stage. People crave things from us, demand things from us, and there is this kind of loop of energy that goes along. It's always a competition going on with the audience, and you absolutely need that, otherwise you might as well stick on a CD and leave.

The whole thing with classical music is that it can tend to become an object onstage, which is really sad. It's never what you want. You want the sense of the same visceral claiming that goes on in a rock concert. You absolutely want that in a classical concert.

Longshore: I agree. I want to feel like I communicated with the audience, that I got something back from them, that I gave something to them, that there was energy moving between. I love that energy transfer.

Alone, Together

The duo's program, Alone | Together, alternated music and poetry, adding a strongly ritualistic element to the otherwise low-key, familiar vibe. A little [psychedelic incense](#) and I could have believed we were in some [Delphic cave](#) listening to oracular chants and prophecies. The evocation of this ancient spirit was no accident: flute, drum, and voice are among the oldest musical instruments known to humanity, and the separation of music and poetry is [strictly a modern invention](#). It was easy to imagine a tribe of our distant ancestors gathering in [some cave in the French countryside](#), sipping fruit wine and noshing on mushrooms and mastodon stew while antler-crowned shamans enacted proto-Homeric fireside performances of their animated story rites.



Caballito Negro at Weisenbloom House

Caballito Negro laid out a smorgasbord of musico-poetic modern music and poetry on this antique bed of cozy camaraderie. The show opened with a short piece by no less a new music luminary than [David Lang](#), himself [a keen exponent of ritual experiences](#). The duo presented their arrangement of Lang's [Wed](#), originally composed for solo piano as one of his "[memory pieces](#)" dedicated to departed friends and later [arranged for Kronos Quartet](#). In this duo version, Longshore's glimmering glockenspiel laid out the work's higher rhythmic anchor while Brinckman performed Lang's characteristically chromo-tonal chord sequences on her [melodica](#). That latter touch haunted me, as Brinckman used her fine flutist breath control to carefully sculpt chords originally written for the percussive piano. The arrangement's handheld compactness made me think of street corners, bistros, balconies—this vivid, expressive music could be performed anywhere.

On Collaboration

Longshore: We've always had an agreement with each other that we bring different ideas to the table, and if one of us really isn't into it, then one of us says forget it. It isn't worth someone trying to force themselves to like a piece or a certain thing. We'd rather put our energy into things we are both excited about. We're dedicated to finding or creating or having created for us music that we are very passionate about playing and

that we connect with in a very deep and spiritual way and not just for the sake of playing.

Brinckman: Definitely. There is so much music in the world to play. Composing together, we both bring different ideas—at different times both of us will have a bug in our ear about certain things we are thinking about. There is always an element of being graceful and interested in what someone else really, really wants and noticing how you really feel about it, but giving it time to simmer, giving it time to really cook before you say “yes I really want that” or “no I’m not really feeling it.” That gracefulness is a really important part of collaboration, sharing creativity. That way you don’t drop your own needs, but you also include someone else’s. That’s really important because the music profession is so gruesome, so grueling, that you have to have energy—you have to do things that give energy back.

Poetry, Science Fictions, Faith and Spirituality

Brinckman recited her poem “Your Rocket Ship is a Corncob” as a lead-in for her solo composition Blazing World, an ode to 17th-century speculative fiction writer [Margaret Cavendish](#). Brinckman’s poetry mashed up [Ramones](#) lyrics, a breakdown of [the sordid labor history of a computer chip](#), lines about a Puerto Rican moon landing, and a quote from the [Earthseed Book of the Living I](#) invented by [Octavia Butler](#) in her novel [Parable of the Sower](#): “The child in each of us knows paradise.” Brinckman’s music united [Baroque flute](#) melodies with [electroacoustic](#) accompaniment based on Australian astrophysicist [Paul Francis](#)’ sonifications of the [Orion constellation](#) and a [black hole](#). Dense stuff, appropriate for a wintry cave ceremony.

Longshore’s poem “Why?” preceded the duo’s co-composed That Which Colors the Soul, which closed the concert. The poem, a meditation on questions of faith and ministry, led straight into the Indian-classical-inspired music, fluty [raga riffs](#) and electronic drones and Longshore’s [hand-drum-synthesizer thingy](#), the duo whirling away on their melodically rich and rhythmically complex music, coloring our minds.

On Spirituality and Indian Music in The West

Longshore: [“Why?”] is an embellished retelling of my experience as a kid, trying to get my mind around what they taught in church, which was if we didn’t accept Jesus as our personal savior we were going to burn in hell. I couldn’t get my mind around that, that a loving God could actually do that. It stuck with me a long time and really challenged my faith, and ultimately I kind of lost that.



Caballito Negro

I went to India in 1998. That was a huge awakening for me, to see that spirituality was not necessarily separate from [everyday life]. We’re so segregated here in the United States. You’re religious or you’re not, you’re black or you’re white, you’re this or you’re that. When I was in India, I was struck by how I was constantly touched by and surrounded by a feeling of spirituality. It was just part of everyday life, everywhere you looked.

Brinckman: We wanted to wrestle with us Westerners playing a piece that is Indian, with a culture that is vast and mysterious because it is so huge. It is a never-ending universe as you get into Indian music. We wanted to combine that with our consciousness of what we understand our existence to be as Westerners. So Terry came up with the wonderful backing track, which is not like [a usual tambura](#)—a very settling and harmonious thing where the heavens will open up because everything aligns perfectly—but is really kind of unsettling. I think that represented Western philosophy, the sense of restlessness and questioning which has both positive aspects and negative aspects. I was interested in us expressing where we are as people living in the United States, with a deep love and appreciation and experience of Indian music, but also bringing the experience of what it means to be alive now.

Poetry, Music, Ritual

The music and poetry wove all together like this for something like two hours, which felt [too long but not in a bad way](#). [Wally Gunn](#)’s cross-rhythmic [Bare White Bones](#), [Christopher Adler](#)’s loony [The Toy Robot’s Mechanical Heart](#), and Brinckman & Longshore’s wonderfully spooky original composition [Phantom Canyon](#) all played around with the familiar sound world of post-modernist contemporary-classical syncretism, interlaced with spoken word passages from “[Prophet of the Space Age](#)” [Arthur C. Clarke](#), Ashland poet [Amy Miller](#), memoirist [Adrian Shirk](#),

even a bit of translated [Scottish balladry in Gunn's piece](#).



Longshore performs 'Aphasia' at Weisenbloom House.

One composition I have to describe in more detail: Longshore's performance of [Stanford](#) composition professor [Mark Applebaum](#)'s gestural composition [Aphasia](#). Longshore and the [SOU](#) percussion ensemble [recorded](#) Applebaum's strangely layered edifice [30](#) a couple years ago, but Aphasia requires no equipment other than a speaker and a chair and a performer willing and able to perform the work's detailed face and body movements. At first I thought Longshore was using some sort of [Imogen Heap type haptic system](#) to trigger the sound samples, but it turned out to be simpler and weirder: [the score](#) lays out the movements and sounds, and the performer simply performs the gestures in sync with the recorded grunts and whistles. I asked myself what [kind of a human being](#) would compose such a thing, and [what kind of musician](#) would perform it. Portland culture is particularly notorious for such performance art gimmicks, but this was easily the best one I've seen.

Little Red Hens

Brinckman: I am kind of a [Luddite](#) in the sense that I love playing instruments that I can feel through my body—the vibrations, the sounds. I don't dive massively into programs that are complex because that takes all my time and energy and makes me unhappy. I have written a number of solo pieces where I know we'll use electroacoustic stuff, and I'm using [GarageBand](#) or very basic programs. I have noticed that we both really love the tactile aspect of being a musician. "Do we have this thing that we really need?" Being little red hens, we'll make it ourselves.

Longshore: I'm kind of the same way. I collaborate a lot with composers that use really advanced tools like [Max/MSP](#), but I've never really dived into that world myself. I have a degree in computer amplification and I know my way around computers really well, but I'm like Tessa—I'd rather play a real instrument most of the time.

Brinckman: It is more like "what do I hear in my head? How do I get there? Is it through an instrument or something electronic? What's the most basic way I can do this without having to suffer through learning something that will change literally in six months and annoy me again?" But I'm amazed by the sounds electronics can produce. There is something so seductive about it. And my favorite thing is where there is interaction between electronics and instruments that are engineered or made feasible by bodies. To me, the body is central—the human, the human experience, the sensory experience—and from there out, you can build stuff.



Tessa Brinckman

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You know the story of [the little red hen](#)? It's a fable. No one will help her and she says "fine, I'll do it myself" and then she ends up building this whole thing that everyone thinks is marvelous. And I think being little red hens is sort of what we have to do as artists. You end up going "damn it, I'll do it myself" and it can be great, it can be awful, it can be a combination thereof.

I was thinking of that whole composer-performer thing. It wasn't because I thought "oh I'm a composer," but one day I thought "no one is writing the music I want. Fine. Little red hen, I'll do it myself." That's literally how I lurched into doing it.

On Duende

Longshore: Inspiration, passion, soulfulness, mystery—a bit of mystery, because in Spanish folklore, [duende](#) was this mysterious impish character. I love that mystery of "what the hell, what does that word mean, what is this all about?" To me, that is when I am making music at the highest level, or experiencing music at the highest level, where I am listening to it or dancing to it or making it: that feeling of just not being able to put it into words is what duende is to me, and that's what we are always trying to capture, that level of energy and excitement.

Brinckman: For me, it is also embracing the void, embracing life and death simultaneously. Embracing paradox. Really feeling things, not on an emotional level, but an intellectual and spiritual level, and being in a lot of different places at once, which as musicians is what we do—literally. We are doing a million things simultaneously, and somehow it is organized and we produce music. How miraculous is that?

I always think of duende as exquisite suffering. It's the delicious suffering for something that is worth suffering for. You are engaging with the void, with the deepest stuff that moves us the most. But you're not avoiding what life really is, and I think music is a fantastic way to counter this kind of bland, robotic existence that modernity forces on us. Music forces us to commune, not just with each other, but with all the aspects of who we are, all the machines we've built, all the trees that are around us, everything that has happened and trying to understand that, yet knowing we could never really understand. So I like the eternal paradox.

Later this month, Caballito Negro [collaborates in a double duet](#) with new music flutist [Elizabeth McNutt](#) and Portland Percussion Group co-founder [Chris Whyte](#), performing one of the earliest [John Luther Adams](#) compositions, his set of miniatures [songbirdsongs](#). Meanwhile, Abbie Weisenbloom House will close out September with Brazilian trio [Choro das 3](#) performing [on the 25th](#).

[Matthew Neil Andrews](#) is a composer, singer, percussionist, and editor of Subito at Portland State University, and serves on the board of [Cascadia Composers](#). He and his music can be reached at [monogeite.bandcamp.com](#).

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