

The Original Blue Man

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Douglas Ewart works with his hands, and that's not just because he's a musician. The Chicago-based Ewart not only composes and plays but builds his own instruments, creates artwork for performances, and designs and makes the costumes for himself and his band. (He is a trained tailor, after all.)

"Everything merges," Ewart said in a phone interview with the *River Cities' Reader*.

So when Ewart brings his jazz ensemble, the Inventions, to the Tent Stage on Sunday, come expecting to hear and see much more than a jazz band.

The inventiveness doesn't stop with instruments and costumes. Ewart has created a musical piece that incorporates basketballs and basketball players; when one person has the ball, "it's a solo with the ball, basically," Ewart said. The work brings together the sound, movement, and music of sport. (Unfortunately, LeClaire Park isn't a suitable venue for the piece.)

Another composition features musicians in boats on a body of water, with people on the shoreline responding.

In short, Ewart's art embraces a wide range of aural and visual stimulation, and there are few if any boundaries. The instruments have a musical function, certainly, but they are also sculptures. Basketball is a visual spectacle, but it also has its rhythms and music.

Ewart started building his own instruments in 1965, two years after he moved from his native Jamaica to Chicago. That inventiveness "grew out of having built many of my own toys back in Jamaica," Ewart said. When he came to the United States, he wanted a bamboo flute, but "I really couldn't afford to buy it." So he made it.

Ewart has also made percussion, string, and wind instruments, along with "invented things." He didn't even have any formal training in instrument-making until he'd been doing it for 20 years.

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In 1967, Ewart joined with the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), with which he maintains close ties. Ewart's ensemble (the group for the MVBS will have seven members, including the leader) is drawn almost exclusively from the ranks of the free-jazz organization, which is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year.

Ewart built his reputation in Chicago working as a wind-instrument player for artists such as Fred Anderson, George Lewis, Muhal Richard Abrams, Anthony Braxton, and Chico Freeman.

But it's with his instruments that he's crafted a niche for himself. Ewart has worked with many found materials, from crutches to skis to oars to gun shells. He's even made flutes more than nine feet long, which produce a sound that you can't even hear. "You're talking about really low frequencies here," he said.

Now he's making didgeridoos, which are instruments native to Australia. "I've been experimenting with a lot of different materials," he said, "clay, glass, metal. ... Those things help to design the character of the sound."

What was once done out of economic necessity is now done for the musical and visual possibilities it opens up for the artist. "There's a certain kind of science and a certain kind of magic" to making instruments, he said. "You don't always know what you're going to get." This hand-made visual, musical, and spiritual journey is what Ewart calls "the search."

Of course, like experimental music, instruments built by hand can be wildly successful or horrifically bad. "Sometimes the thing looks great" but doesn't play well, he said. But for somebody who's taught himself much of what he knows, "failure" is a negative way of looking at a constructive process. "These failures are ways of learning what to do," he said.

Although Ewart is well-regarded, he has shied away from record labels, in part because he's protective of his legacy. He has a handful of recordings available on his own label, and doesn't seem in a hurry to make any commercial splash. "I continue to document my work ... so it will be there," he said.

Ewart said he hasn't pursued record companies because he wants to ensure that his projects are not just recorded but promoted properly. "You won't find my recordings in the cut-out bins," he said. "Not while I'm alive, anyway."