

“Damned Outrageous”: The Music of Julius Eastman

In January of 1991 I published, in *The Village Voice*, an obituary for a composer who had died at age 49 the previous May. Active as he had been on the music scene of the 1980s, none of his closest associates on that scene knew he had already been dead for eight months. And when I called around for comments, some were skeptical of my news—because rumors of his death had circulated before. Such was the peculiar life of Julius Eastman, and its tragic, mysterious, yet somehow logical end.

Julius Eastman (1940–1990) was a taut, wiry, gay African-American man. He had such an appearance of athleticism and pent-up energy that he could look dangerous, yet he had a gentle sense of humor, and his deep sepulchral voice, incommensurate with his slight figure, conveyed the solemn authority of a prophet. He was a fiery pianist, and a singer of phenomenal range and power. In 1970 he gave the American premiere, at Aspen, of Peter Maxwell Davies’s *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, a crazy theater piece depicting the descent into dementia of King George III, and one of the most difficult and demanding vocal works of the avant-garde. His astounding 1973 recording of the piece for Nonesuch was probably the closest he ever came to any visibility in the mainstream music world—until now.

Born October 27, 1940, Eastman began studying piano at the age of fourteen, showing quick promise, and became a paid chorister in the Episcopal church in Ithaca, New York, where he was raised. He started at Ithaca College and then transferred to the Curtis Institute, where he switched from piano to composition, though he did study piano with Mieczyslaw Horszowski. Constant Vauclain was his composition teacher, and Eastman graduated in 1966. Discovered by composer/conductor Lukas Foss, Eastman joined, in 1968, the Creative Associates at SUNY Buffalo, the ensemble of crackerjack performers who coalesced around Foss’s (and later Morton Feldman’s) presence at that school, led by pianist Yvar Mikhashoff, percussionist Jan Williams, and others. Eastman also became a member of the S.E.M. Ensemble (whose acronym didn’t stand for anything, except for perhaps the middle of the word “ensemble”), led by flutist-composer Petr Kotik. The first time I saw Eastman, at Oberlin College in the mid-’70s, he and Kotik were touring as a duo, playing their own works, pieces that went on and on forever with the kind of lightly-inflected purposelessness of Gertrude Stein’s prose. (Kotik, in fact, often set Stein’s texts for Eastman to sing.)

I next saw Eastman in 1975 at the first June in Buffalo festival at SUNY Buffalo, organized by Feldman to bring famous composers and young composers in contact with each other. It was a notorious appearance, to which today still clings a legendary resonance in the new-music world. The famous composers involved that first year, besides Feldman, were John Cage, Earle Brown, and Christian Wolff, the original New York School. During a performance of Cage’s theater piece *Songbooks* that was chaotic in the best sense of the word, Eastman performed the segment of *Songbooks* that was merely the instruction, “Give a lecture.” Never shy about his gayness, Eastman lectured on sex, with a young man and woman as volunteers. He undressed the young man onstage, and attempted to undress the woman, who resisted. The next day, the ever-mild-mannered Cage gave an angry lecture about the misuse of performances of his music, and, before our incredulous eyes, pounded his fist on the piano to punctuate his words: “the freedom in my music does not mean the freedom to be irresponsible!”

As one of Eastman’s best friends told me when I broke the news of his death to her, “Sometimes he was just damned outrageous.”

Beneath Eastman’s brilliant and notorious reputation as a singer (he also toured with Meredith Monk in 1981, and sang in her production *Dolmen Music*) was the fact that he was also one of the leading and most original composers to surface in the wake of the minimalist movement, a fact finally given long-overdue recognition in the present set of recordings. Foss conducted his music with the Brooklyn Philharmonic. Eastman’s *Stay on It* (1973), which was toured across Europe by the Creative Associates, was one of the first minimalist-based pieces to show pop music influence, and also an early use of improvisation in a notated context. By 1979, Eastman was touring with a set of amazing works for multiple pianos that took the minimalist device of additive process to a new, structural level in the service of an irresistible political motivation. He presented those pieces at Northwestern University in 1980—the third time I ran into him—in a concert captured on the current recording. In 1981, they were performed again at New Music America in Minneapolis.

As composer as well as performer, Eastman was a fixture in the new-music boom of the late seventies and early eighties. The scene had gotten off to a tentative but ambitious start in 1958 when La Monte Young and Terry Riley left Berkeley and moved to New York City. In 1960, Young and Richard Maxfield curated a wild experimental music series in Yoko Ono's loft in downtown Manhattan—a geographical oddity as well as an aesthetic one, because at the time most “classical” concerts happened Uptown in the neighborhood Lincoln Center would soon occupy. Also, with Riley, Tony Conrad, John Cale, Marian Zazeela, and others Young formed the Theatre of Eternal Music, the first minimalist ensemble, infamous for their deafening improvisations on overtones. That cantankerous genre “Downtown Music” was born.

Riley had also been performing with tape delay and tape loops; Steve Reich built on these techniques and invented “process music” with the gradual phase-shifting of *Come Out*. Philip Glass played in Reich's ensemble and brought additive process into minimalism, playing notes or phrases in patterns like A, AB, ABC, ABCD, ABCDE, and so on. When Reich's *Drumming* was released on the prestigious Deutsche Grammophon label in 1974, and Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* was performed at the Metropolitan Opera in 1976, scrappy little Downtown music became a public phenomenon.

In the summer of 1979 many of Downtown's leading lights gave a festival at The Kitchen, New York's premier space for experimental music, called New Music New York. This grew into the New Music America festival (1979–1989), which moved to a different city each year—first Minneapolis, then San Francisco, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and so on. The term “New Music” came to denote music that was simpler, freer, wilder, and less pretentious than the conventional instrumental music that was played Uptown, mostly involved as the latter was with twelve-tone techniques and genres inherited from Europe. Nurtured as well by the Brooklyn Academy of Music, New Music itself remained a highly visible movement until the mid-1980s, when the corporate-friendly policies of Ronald Reagan caught up with it, and the music world lapsed back into its previous conservatism.

Eastman was an integral figure in this world, but somehow its successes never translated to his own music. He appeared in New Music America in 1980 (with *Evil Nigger* and *Gay Guerrilla*) and 1981 (with *The Holy Presence of Joan D'Arc*). He toured Europe several times, sometimes playing his own works, sponsored by The Kitchen. But he never had a commercial recording during his lifetime—the current one is his first. Eager for the prestige that he rightly felt his magnificent musicianship merited, he searched endlessly for an academic teaching position. He had been promised one at Cornell, and after it failed to materialize in 1983, his life began to fall apart. He began drinking heavily and smoking crack. For a while he worked at Tower Records, until he just disappeared one day. He was kicked out of his Manhattan apartment at 4th Street and Second Avenue, and many of his belongings, probably including scores, were confiscated by the sheriff's office. He ended up living, at least part of the time, in Tompkins Square Park. Somehow, he died alone in a hospital in Buffalo, officially of cardiac arrest—brought on, depending on whom you talk to, by insomnia, tuberculosis, dehydration, starvation, exhaustion, or depression.

Eastman's brother Gerry, a guitarist for the Count Basie Orchestra, has blamed Julius's decline on racism in the classical music world, calling his brother “just another in the line of geniuses who get squashed in this particular hemisphere.” Yet others point to ways that Eastman shot himself in the foot—losing an invitation from the Paris Conservatoire by demanding an unreasonably large fee, screwing up a theory-teaching stint at SUNY because he couldn't adjust to the discipline of paperwork. Lukas Foss told me, “He was a very talented musician in every respect: as a composer, singer, pianist. He could have had it so good, if only he hadn't had the personality problems.” Even so, as late as 1986 Eastman's music was used by Molissa Fenley for a dance called *Geologic Moments* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and friends insisted that he was drug-free in the months before he died. I myself last ran into Eastman in 1989 in line for a show at BAM. He looked terrific, and seemed upbeat.

When we heard of his death, those of us who loved and remembered Eastman's music despaired of ever hearing it again. The music of those who die young is often difficult to retrieve, but Eastman was a special case. Not only was he disorganized to begin with, his possessions had been scattered when he was evicted from his apartment. Many of his scores will likely never be recovered. He is rumored to have written a symphony: Does it exist? If so, can its notation be deciphered and implemented? Like so many composers on the Downtown scene, Eastman did not notate in neat, conventional ways. His style came partly from the tradition started by Terry Riley's *In C*, in which isolated melodic fragments are to be repeated any number of times the performer wishes. The Downtown scene was a scene of composers performing their own music, and (as with the piano parts of Mozart's concertos) there was no reason to notate every detail, since instructions could be communicated to the performer; also, the minimalist trend led to works whose exact notation

would be cumbersome and contrary to the spirit of the music. Downtown music was something of a compromise between classical music and pop, with identifiable structures whose details were left to the performer or even to chance.

For instance, the scores to Eastman's multiple-piano pieces (I saw them all many years ago, and I am looking at a Xerox of *Crazy Nigger* as I write) consist merely of noteheads, timings, the occasional dynamic marking, and the even less frequent verbal direction, like, "this is one line, one melody," and "take this as a guide and continue in like manner." As a starting point for reconstruction, the score without the recording would be misleading: Eastman notates almost all the repeated notes in the treble clef, but listening to the recording, it becomes clear that this is just a guide, and the register in any given measure is left up to the performer. Any reconstruction of Eastman's music will require comparison and integration of both the scores and the recordings. Even so, there are places in the score that become sketchy, and it is difficult to ascertain just what it is Eastman told his performers to do.

Luckily, institutions have memories. Composer and producer Mary Jane Leach has been able to pull together some archival recordings in excellent condition from SUNY Buffalo, Northwestern University, and private sources. Their presence on this set of discs is a bold beginning to restoring to history the works of one of the most important members of the first postminimalist generation. Now is the time for some ambitious musicologist to complete the restoration work and make these pieces available for future performance.

None of Eastman's works can be said to have become well known, but the piece that remained most often associated with his name is the earliest one we have, *Stay on It* from 1973, scored for voice, clarinet, two saxophones, violin, piano, and mallet percussion. For its date, it is truly a remarkable work. Keep in mind that at this time Steve Reich had produced *Drumming* but not yet *Music for 18 Musicians*, and Philip Glass had made *Music with Changing Parts* but not yet *Music in Twelve Parts* or *Einstein*. In other words, minimalism was a movement still in its austere phase, one-dimensionally conceptual and concerned with abstract pattern. In one giant step, Eastman upped the ante considerably, and forecast things that would be happening to the movement fifteen years hence. In the first place, he takes for his primary material a kind of pop cadential figure, mixing genres and making reference to a sonic object outside the style he's working in. In the 1980s, postminimalist and sampler music would swing off in this direction, but not in the seventies.

Second, there's nothing linear about Eastman's process, as had been true of minimalist music up to that point. The repetitions of that cadence in *Stay on It* are not for the purpose of a gradual process, but instead for a kind of framing device to create both unity and surprise. The first time that pattern pauses for silence is jarring, and the changing elements in its orchestration and voicing keep it lively. In the middle of the piece it becomes a reference point for rhythmic changes, and by the end it has faded into a shadow of its former self. Meanwhile, and thirdly, the cadence becomes a prop for improvisation (starting with the title sung in falsetto), into which it sometimes disappears altogether. Improvisation had become a concern for certain classically trained composers from the 1950s on, but you weren't supposed to mix minimalism (clean, abstract-pattern-oriented) with improvisation (messy, performer-personality-oriented)! From the beginning, one of the great things about Eastman's music is how cheerfully it flouts cherished assumptions.

Zip ahead to 1978 and we have *If You're So Smart, Why Aren't You Rich?* Not all of Eastman's works were minimalist in origin or repetition-based. This big essay for violin, two horns, four trumpets, two trombones, tuba, piano, chimes, and two basses is a strange sonic meditation on one of the most pedestrian phenomena possible, the chromatic scale. One suspects that the opening trumpet solo is an exercise in working up to the trumpet's highest performable note, which is then picked up by the ensemble. At times the chorales of climbing half-steps, or sometimes ascending and descending at once, remind one of the device known as a Shepherd's Scale, a scale replenished from the lower registers as it dies out at the top for an illusion of continuous upward motion.

If You're So Smart seems related to the S.E.M. Ensemble's music, which was often an exploration of "nonhierarchical form." This was an idea inherited from Cage, a conception of music without beginning, end, or climaxes, in which every part was as important as any other part. The non-climactic ending for two trumpets, along with the pauses for chimes and an extended violin solo whose virtuoso riffs still outline chromatic scales, have the feel of Eastman's extended duets with Kotik, which moved along endlessly in banal materials and could have ended anywhere. The piece's relation to its title, aside from the latter's obvious relevance to Eastman's life, is anyone's guess.

The remaining works are political in connotation, if only through the titles alone. They are also examples of what Eastman called his “organic form,” in which every phrase contains the information of the phrase before it, with new material gradually added in and old material gradually removed: minimalism’s additive process expanded to the level of phrase structure. *The Holy Presence of Joan D’Arc* (1981) is a more personal work, more austere and meditational in its form, than the others so far. In his introduction, Eastman calls the piece

a reminder to those who think they can destroy liberators by acts of treachery, malice, and murder. . . . [L]ike all organizations, especially governments and religious organizations, they oppress in order to perpetuate themselves. Their methods of oppression are legion. But when they find that their more subtle methods are failing, they resort to murder. Even now in my own country, my own people, my own time, gross oppression and murder still continue.

Eastman’s prelude, a fine example of his vocal prowess, is a minimalist yet virtuoso recitative, building up phrases by an additive process wherein a litany of saints exhort the Saint, “Joan, speak boldly, when they question you.” The main section for ten cellos begins with a vigorous ostinato over which dissonant melodies enter. There is no break in the continuous momentum, yet the texture continually metamorphoses—not in the linear, predictable way of classic minimalism, but in a counterpoint in which melodies and accompaniment are both moving in unforeseeable directions. The use of dissonance and even atonality in this minimalist context, dissolving into transcendence, is once again ahead of its time; such elements would reconverge in New York’s “totalist” movement of the 1990s.

The recordings of the three works for multiple pianos are all from a January 16, 1980, concert at Northwestern University organized by Peter Gena, and at which I was present as a student. Eastman’s titles elicited protest; an African-American fraternity and some faculty members objected, and as a concession, the titles were not listed in a printed program. In his intro preserved here, though, Eastman made it clear that he was reclaiming the word “nigger” as something to be proud of:

What I mean by niggers is, that thing which is fundamental; that person or thing that attains to a basicness or a fundamentalness, and eschews that which is superficial, or, could we say, elegant. . . . There are 99 names of Allah, and there are 52 niggers.

The subsequent energy of the pieces, with Eastman and his pianist team pounding repeated notes in relentless continua, was astounding.

The multiple piano works are all made up of repeated notes or figures, with timings given to indicate when the pianists move to the next section (in the Minneapolis performance, I held up time cards to indicate the beginning of each new section). The organic form is less obvious than in *Joan D’Arc* because there is no regular aural cue as to the beginning of each section. Through most of *Crazy Nigger*, for instance, a new phrase begins every 90 seconds. The pieces modulate simply by the addition of new pitches and the eventual subtraction of old ones, creating dissonance and ambiguity whenever more pitches are present than fit in one key.

The distinguishing feature of *Gay Guerrilla* is a propulsive “badadDUM, badaDUM” rhythm, heard in counterpoint with a slower motive of alternating whole- or half-steps. Eventually the music begins to move through harmonies at a quicker rate in that rhythm, and finally through the tonal fog appears Martin Luther’s hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” in octaves, cumulatively multiplying in counterpoint with itself and being quite subversively transformed, given the intention implied by Eastman’s title, as a gay manifesto. The piece dies away in canonic lines rising at different times in each piano.

Evil Nigger is even more high-energy, starting with a quick three-note run to a repeated D in every piano before breaking into its trademark motto D-A-B-flat-F-G-A-D. Here coordination among the pianos is more important, and Eastman achieves it frankly at pivotal moments by yelling out “one, two, three, four!” The recognizability of that gesture may make this the most “accessible” piece on the disc, despite the dissonant pleromas built up, and despite the piece’s sudden disintegration into seemingly random sustained notes at the end.

In *Crazy Nigger* the interest is a little more drawn out into large textural continua, with each pitch as it appears spread through all octaves. Repeated notes form the texture, with occasional melodies spelled out and folded in every minute and a half. The emphasis here is on gradual changes of dynamics and texture, often with quick repeated notes contrasted with

slower repeated notes suggesting different keys in the bass. There are some amazing textures, including quasi-impressionistic passages in which little pentatonic melodies trickle down. Near the end, the music comes to rest on a low C-sharp from which a harmonic series is slowly built up, requiring so many hands that a horde of adjunct players had to come onstage to handle the extra notes.

These discs are far from exhausting all of Eastman's surviving recordings—there's a piece with S.E.M. called *Femenine* (sic), another called *440*, some improvisation, a 1986 piano sonata Joseph Kubera played at The Kitchen, and who knows what else will surface—but it's a generous beginning. Eastman was an energizing underground figure, one whose forms are clear, whose methods were powerful and persuasive, and whose thinking was supremely musical. There was no timidity or theoretical obscurity to his music—it cut to the chase. It did eschew anything superficial or elegant. His works show different routes minimalism might have taken, and perhaps some of those will now be followed up. There's a lot more to be done to transmit his music to posterity and bring it back into the concert hall, but those of us who loved it first time around can now breathe a sigh of relief. When has such a brilliant composer come so close to disappearing from history's grasp?

—Kyle Gann

Kyle Gann, a composer, has been the new-music critic for The Village Voice since 1986, and teaches at Bard College. His books include The Music of Conlon Nancarrow, American Music in the 20th Century, and Music Downtown: Writings from The Village Voice. His music has been recorded on the New World, Cold Blue, Lovely Music, Monroe Street, and New Tone labels.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gann, Kyle. "That Which Is Fundamental," *The Village Voice*, January 22, 1991.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Peter Maxwell Davies. *Eight Songs for a Mad King*. The Fires of London, Julius Eastman, baritone, Peter Maxwell Davies conducting. Unicorn-Kanchana DKP 9052.

Produced by Mary Jane Leach and Paul M. Tai

Engineer: Steve Cellum, *The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc*; others unknown

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Stay on It was recorded in concert at SUNY Buffalo on December 16, 1973. *If You're So Smart, Why Aren't You Rich?* was recorded in concert at SUNY Buffalo on February 11, 1979. *Gay Guerrilla*, *Evil Nigger*, and *Crazy Nigger* were recorded in concert at Northwestern University on January 16, 1980. *The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc* was recorded at the Third Street Music Settlement, New York City, date unknown.

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BACK BOOKLET COVER:

JULIUS EASTMAN (1940–1990)

UNJUST MALAISE

80638-2 (3CDs)

DISC 1

1. *Stay on It* (1973) 24:20

Georgia Mitoff, voice; Petr Kotik, piano; Benjamin Hudson, violin; Amrom Chodos, clarinet; Joseph Ford, Doug Gaston, saxophones; Dennis Kahle, Jan Williams, percussion

2. *If You're So Smart, Why Aren't You Rich?* (1978) 24:29

Akram, piano; Benjamin Hudson, violin; Daniel Wittmer, Lori (Noody) Osgood, French horns; Charles Lirette, Philip Christner, Geoffrey Brown, Christopher Conlon, trumpets; James Kasprovicz, Thomas Miller, trombones; Don Harry, tuba; Michael Pugliese, Edward Folger, chimes; Paul Schmidt, Thomas Perl, double basses; Julius Eastman, conductor

3. *Prelude to The Holy Presence of Joan D'Arc* (1981) 11:43

Julius Eastman, voice

DISC 2

1. *The Holy Presence of Joan D'Arc* (1981) 20:29

Jodi Beder, Sarah Carter, Barry Gold, Julie Green, Christine Gummere, Maureen Hynes, Chase Morrison, Abby Newton, Larry Rawdon, David Sabee, cellos, Julius Eastman, conductor

2. *Gay Guerrilla* (c. 1980) 28:59

Julius Eastman, Frank Ferko, Janet Kattas, Patricia Martin, pianos

3. *Evil Nigger* (1979) 21:29

Julius Eastman, Frank Ferko, Janet Kattas, Patricia Martin, pianos

DISC 3

1. *Crazy Nigger* (c. 1980) 55:00

Julius Eastman, Frank Ferko, Janet Kattas, Patricia Martin, pianos

2. Julius Eastman's spoken introduction to the Northwestern University concert 6:25

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