

The Awesome Unflappability of Joseph Kubera

Amy C. Beal

It's high time that we celebrate Joseph Kubera's thirty-plus years of contributions to contemporary American music. This modest, seemingly tranquil man from upstate New York—who used to bike up and down the hills of San Francisco, who now lives in Staten Island, and who is not only a connoisseur of fine Chinese tea but who knows how to order street kiosk French fries in Czech—is one of this country's greatest living pianists. Blessed with both an analytic mind and enormous hands, Kubera has the additional gift of being able to find an element of fascination in almost anything.

Trained as a classical musician at SUNY Buffalo during the particularly fertile years between 1965 and 1969, Kubera was exposed to Stravinsky, Bartók, Hindemith, and Copland by his piano teacher Leo Smit, as well as to the usual common-practice era repertoire. Especially during his last year, performances by the Center for Creative and Performing Arts' Creative Associates as well as elaborate contemporary art and music events in greater Buffalo worked as catalysts to solidify Kubera's commitment to contemporary music, a commitment that has led to all of his achievements on record today. Next, in a one-year graduate program at Peabody Conservatory (1969–70), Kubera took a class with Earle Brown, who insisted that the most exciting things were happening in the San Francisco Bay Area. Once there, Kubera stayed for about four years (1970–74), teaching piano in the preparatory division of the San Francisco Conservatory, playing with its contemporary music ensemble (led by Howard Hersh and Robert Moran), and teaching at the Community Music Center in the Mission district. He gained experience playing graphic and otherwise experimental music, including works by Robert Ashley, Philip Corner, Morton Feldman, and Roman Haubenstock-Ramati. He first met John Cage during this time, and has since recorded some of Cage's most important contributions to the piano repertoire, including *Music of Changes* (1951) and *Solo for Piano* from *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* (1957–58).

After his time in the Bay Area, Kubera returned to Buffalo for several years, where he was engaged as a Creative Associate at the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts. There, in 1974, he organized a full-length performance of Erik Satie's *Vexations*, with Kubera himself at the piano for the first thirty-minute shift. At the Center he worked extensively with living composers, and met a number of musicians who would come to be important collaborators, including Julius Eastman, featured on this disc, and Petr Kotik, who, from that time on, featured Kubera as a member of his S.E.M. Ensemble, and, since 2001, has highlighted the pianist as a central performer at his Ostrava Days Festival for New Music in the Czech Republic.¹ Kubera's association with new-music initiatives in Buffalo, again, was transformative. He recalls: "Our growth as individual musicians was nurtured by the way the Center was set up with composers and players constantly interacting with one another—the constant feedback and the maximum time allotted for rehearsals."²

¹ Other Fellows and members of the Center during the time Kubera was there included Jan Williams, Renée Levine, Walter Gajewski, Harley Gaber, Linda Cummiskey, Peter Gena, Nils Vigeland, Garrett List (guest composer), Nora Post, Donald Knaack, Eberhard Blum, Benjamin Hudson, and Robert Moran. The Center for the Creative and Performing Arts opened at SUNY Buffalo in 1964; Lukas Foss and Allen Sapp were the first Center directors. Morton Feldman became artistic advisor for the Center in 1974.

² Kubera as quoted in Renée Levine Packer, *This Life of Sounds: Evenings for New Music in Buffalo*

In the late 1970s—a particularly provocative time in the development of the Downtown scene in New York City—Kubera moved to the East Village, living there for awhile before making Staten Island his home. There he practices, hours on end, on his Mason and Hamlin piano—an American model favored by certain in-the-know connoisseurs (you know who you are). Since the mid-1970s Kubera has performed with many New York contemporary music ensembles, both ones still active today (New York New Music Ensemble, the DownTown Ensemble) and others lost to history (Steve Reich and Musicians, the Bowery Ensemble, Essential Music). He has also collaborated at length with pianist Sarah Cahill, singer Thomas Buckner, and more recently, pianist Marilyn Nonken, to name just a few. He has premiered works written for him by Michael Byron, Anthony Coleman, Roscoe Mitchell, and Larry Polansky (to name just a few).

The four pieces on this recording include two works written especially for him—Byron’s *Book of Horizons* (2009) and “Blue” Gene Tyranny’s *The Drifter* (1994)—and two pieces written independently, but ones that have never been recorded, namely Julius Eastman’s *Piano 2* (1986), and Stuart Saunders Smith’s *Fences, In Three Tragedies* (1998). Kubera presented the four works on this CD at a concert at the Issue Project Room in May 2013. The publicity for that concert called Kubera one of “contemporary music’s most gifted interpreters,” and a “new music piano virtuoso,” and praised his “unrelenting stamina, precision, and grace of his performances.” But these standard clichés don’t do Kubera justice, so rare is his ability to conquer the most difficult music, and to simply reveal its great beauty through his care for it. Uninterested in the more popular contemporary war horses—the Ligeti *Etudes*, for example!—Kubera prefers untamed wild animals whose behavior is not yet understood in any conventional way. To use a tired but apt cliché myself: *he makes it look easy*. Robert Carl of *Fanfare* magazine has written: “I think he may well be this era’s David Tudor—virtuosic, smart as hell, far more eclectic in his tastes than you might think, with a marathoner’s strength to deal with any transcendental performance challenge.” True enough, though I would assert that he is not this era’s *anybody*, he is of *our* time, he’s our Joe Kubera. His reputation speaks for itself, and has no need for comparisons.

Julius Eastman (1940–1990): *Piano 2* (1986)

The notorious and virtuosic Eastman grew up in Ithaca, New York, and attended Ithaca College and the Curtis Institute, studying both piano and composition. He joined the Creative Associates at SUNY Buffalo in 1968; his arrival coincided with Kubera’s last year as an undergraduate there. He proved his prowess as a vocalist while singing the American premiere of Peter Maxwell Davies’s *Eight Songs for a Mad King* in 1970; he also toured with Meredith Monk’s ensemble. Eastman was a member of the S.E.M. Ensemble, and later became a central figure in New York City’s “Downtown” music scene. Several years before his lonely death in Buffalo, his life unraveled. With the loss of his home and his possessions, the legacy of his music was condemned to an obscure existence. Only recently have a number of composers, musicians, and scholars begun to try to uncover and preserve that legacy.³

(New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010): 114.

³ Composer Mary Jane Leach has been particularly active in trying to locate manuscripts and make

Piano 2, a three-movement, fifteen-minute work, has no meters, bar lines, or tempo indications. Kubera recently recounted the following anecdote about his introduction to Eastman's *Piano 2*:

Julius showed up unannounced first thing early one morning at my front door with his current boyfriend, asked whether I had any scotch—"Kuuu-ber-aaa . . . got any scotch?"—and then proceeded to sit down at my old Weber grand and play this piece for me. That was my introduction to this piece.⁴

Kubera has played *Piano 2* since at least the 1990s, and has wanted to record it for some time. Acquaintances since the 1960s in Buffalo, Eastman enlisted Kubera into his ensemble performances as soon as the pianist landed in New York City, at venues like The Kitchen, and the Third Street Music Settlement. Of Eastman and *Piano 2*, Kubera also has this to say:

He could be unpredictable . . . but creatively he's very interesting. These pieces, even though they involve certain freedoms, seem to be very carefully worked out . . . It is demanding in that it is all over the keyboard, and you have to make sense of the big shapes, and so on. . . . Most of the piece is just about his very forceful personality—the insistence of these continuous sixteenth-notes. They form big arcs and there are big melodies that appear, overarching melodies of sorts. Some patterns are repeated; the opening motive comes back again and again, providing definition points.

In contrast to the outer movements, Kubera writes that the second movement presents a "bittersweet, bleak, and austere landscape."⁵ The wide emotional range of *Piano 2* runs from manic to somber. Similar to Michael Byron's music (discussed below), here Kubera's greatest challenges are endurance and accuracy. In the words of Kyle Gann, who closely followed Eastman's music and performance activities:

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.⁶

Eastman's music known. See Leach, "In Search of Julius Eastman," *NewMusicBox*, November 8, 2005; <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/In-Search-of-Julius-Eastman/>; for a more thorough overview of Eastman's life and work, see Kyle Gann, "'Damned Outrageous': The Music of Julius Eastman": *Julius Eastman: Unjust Malaise* (New World Records, 2005).

⁴ Kubera, written communication with the author, January 3, 2014.

⁵ Kubera, program notes for Issue Project Room (New York) concert, May 29, 2013.

⁶ Gann, "'Damned Outrageous', 14.

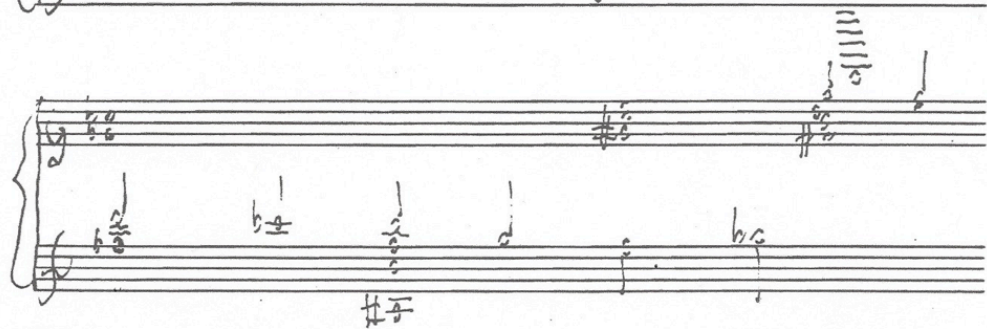
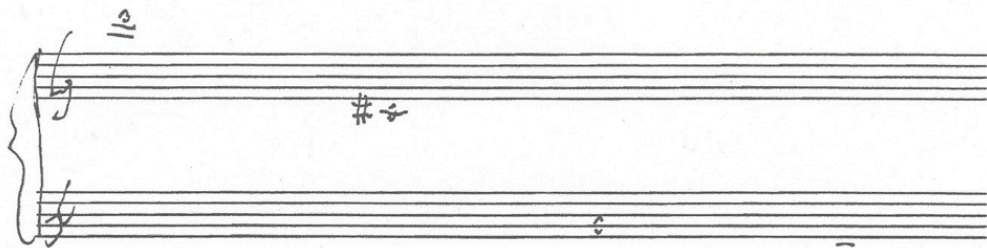
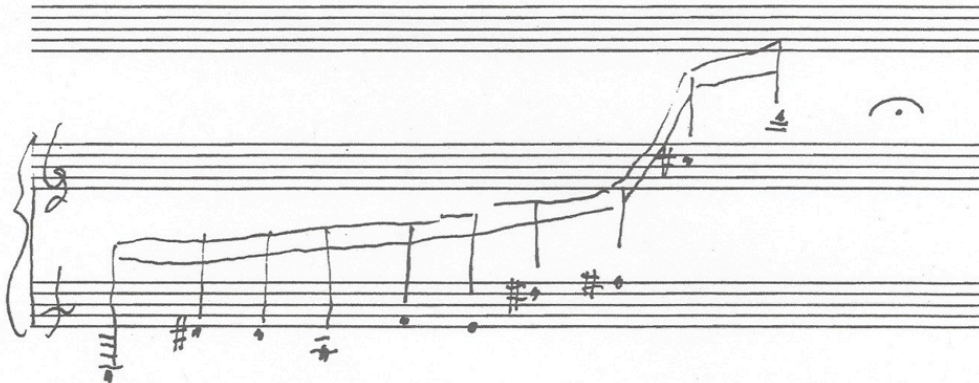
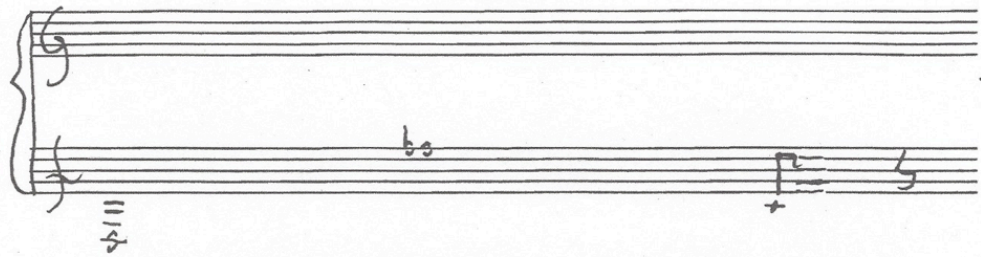
piano *piano 2*

Oct 27, 1940
May 28, 1990



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II



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1

III



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“Blue” Gene Tyranny (a.k.a. Robert Sheff, b. 1945): *The Drifter* (1994)

Tyranny writes pieces in many different styles and forms of organization, and he places *The Drifter* in the category of “lyrical pieces.” Indeed, after the ferocious insistence of some of Eastman’s *Piano 2*, the ears are bound to welcome the gentle lyricism of Tyranny’s piece, written for, and dedicated to Kubera. Though Kubera heard Tyranny play some of his own music when they were both still in the Bay Area in the early 1970s, it wasn’t until later, in New York, that they became better acquainted through their participation as the two pianists in Robert Ashley’s *El Aficionado* (1987). As with Eastman, Tyranny’s identity as a pianist tends an affinity and a certain shared experience with pianist Kubera, who Tyranny calls “a musician’s musician with an innate sensibility that is thrilling to listen to.”

The Drifter was commissioned by Roulette with funds provided by the Mary Flager Cary Charitable Trust. The piece is unified by a central, recurring motive Tyranny refers to as “the Drifter figure”—a long, half-note triplet motive. This figure, in the words of the composer, “appears when the music is repeated, and serves to redefine the harmony.” Kubera elaborates on this figure:

It’s kind of a row, really. Many of the sections are played without it. And then things are repeated with the drifting notes inserted over it. . . . What’s interesting about the “drifter” pattern is that you play a section of music without it, and then when it’s repeated with “the drifter,” it changes the harmony, its resultant; and it sometimes doesn’t go along with what you heard before. And as you play it you learn that there are different points of tension that arise, and you treat it differently than when you played it the first time.⁷

Tyranny’s notes in the score offer a musical image describing a “wanderer-in-time” who is confronted by a series of megaliths in Tibet, near Lake Pang-gong. The composer explains:

These quartz pillars are laid out in 18 rows, with circles of stones at the ends of each row. The purpose of the megaliths is unknown. The form of this ancient structure is imitated in the music by 5-note chords arranged in 3-pair sets in 3 sections, each section a transformation of the previous, for a total of 18 chords. Among these floats the “drifter” figure which redefines the tonality. Of course, a transforming realization can occur in any place, even your own backyard.

Evoking the iconic American image of a transformed Dorothy returning to her “own backyard” in Kansas, Tyranny offers a mystical and physically vivid explanation for the harmonic motion in *The Drifter*. The idea of a series of chords giving structure to a larger composition or set of improvisations is a thread running through much of Tyranny’s work. This piece, in five sections played without pause, makes extensive use of finger legato.

⁷ Kubera, interview with the composer, October 24, 2013.

$\text{♩} = \text{MM } 68-76$

Handwritten musical score for piano and bass. The score is written on five systems of staves. The first system consists of two staves with treble and bass clefs, featuring triplet markings and a first ending bracket labeled '1.'. The second system also has two staves with treble and bass clefs, with dynamic markings 'pp' and 'mp'. The third system has two staves with treble and bass clefs, with dynamic markings 'mp' and 'p'. The fourth system has two staves with treble and bass clefs, with dynamic markings 'p' and 'mp', and tempo markings 'A tempo' and 'poco rit.'. The fifth system has two staves with treble and bass clefs, with dynamic markings 'p' and 'mp'. The score concludes with a double bar line and a final chord. Below the fifth system, there are two empty systems of staves.

Stuart Saunders Smith (b. 1948): *Fences, In Three Tragedies* (1998)

When Kubera first met Stuart Saunders Smith in Baltimore, he was fascinated by the visual appearance of Smith's scores, composed over four staves on enormous pieces of paper. The three-part *Fences*, likewise, has a large score written in either three (parts 1 and 2) or four staves (part 3). An experienced jazz vibraphonist, Smith carefully hid the tune to "The Days of Wine and Roses" and a few other popular songs within the pointilistic texture of this piece. The piece was requested by, and written for, pianist Drew Krause, who also premiered it.

In the score, Smith explains the freedoms that are given to the pianist, which constitutes an important aspect of the piece, namely, that the musician contribute to the act of *composing*:

The dynamics, tempi, and articulations should be composed by the performer. Do not compose your version by using a pre-compositional system; rather, compose your version by letting your interpretation emerge as you practice the score. There is one exception to this rule: Section II should be loud and fast.

Kubera says "there's an airiness about having things spread out on four staves," and he feels that the spatial quality of Smith's piece makes him "think in a different way." The poignancy of what he calls "beautiful, affecting harmonies" allow for a stream of consciousness state of awareness.

The composer includes this poetic note as a program for *Fences, In Three Tragedies*, explaining the three tragedies as they relate to The Personal, The Community, and The Country:

*Jump cuts,
between,
the personal,
tragedy of alcoholism,
between,
the community,
tragedy of racism;
between,
the country,
tragedy of nationalism—
.
.
.
And Jesus wept.*

Fences, In Three Tragedies Stuart Saunders Smith

I. Personal Tragedy

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Michael Byron (b. 1953): *Book of Horizons* (2009)

Michael Byron has been writing piano music for over forty years, but if one were to lay side by side his modest, earliest efforts for solo piano (*Song of the Lifting Up of the Head*, 1972) with the piece included here, one might be perplexed by the differences in scope, scale, material, complexity, and sheer technical demands. But the pieces have in common sensitivity for the sound of the piano; a sensibility of extended playing/listening; and an interest in repetition and change through gradual and seemingly clandestine processes that transform and extend what we hear. Both pieces, early and recent, create situations demanding a great deal of relaxed yet relentless concentration on the part of the performer as well as the listener.

The title track on this recording, written for and dedicated to Kubera, Byron's *Book of Horizons* honors a special working relationship—now some fourteen or so years old—between this obsessive composer and this exacting performer. Their first collaboration on a *solo* work written especially for Kubera resulted in the expansive, three-movement piano solo called *Dreamers of Pearl* (recorded by Kubera for New World Records in 2008). *Book of Horizons*—"a complex work in structure and emotion," in the words of the composer—is written in the same relentless style, which Byron has described as a "long string of abstract counterpoint operations" in which the counterpoint is made up of largely asymmetrical figurations.⁸ About *Book of Horizons*, Kubera says it is just as challenging as the third movement of *Dreamers of Pearl*, arguably a giant among the most difficult music composed in the last half century. Kubera premiered the piece at Roulette in New York City on March 17, 2011.

Each of the five movements of *Book of Horizons* is characterized by an evocative title, a personal dedication (four friends and Byron's daughter), and a vivid tempo designation. The five movements, which alternate between agitation and tranquility, are:

1. "Unknown Americas," for Peter Garland (*madly*);
2. "Porcelain Nights," for David Mahler (*unhurried*);
3. "Like the Eyes of the Bride," for Amy Beal (*with abandon*);
4. "A World Full of Hope," for Katherine Elizabeth Byron (*luxurious . . . full, deeply resonant throughout*);
5. "Appearances and Architraves," for Larry Polansky (*uncompromising*).

Much of the work's texture could be stylistically characterized as Baroque, given the perpetual motion and the mostly dry two-voice polyphonic layering, some of it distortedly imitative. The progression of events in the third movement evokes the impression that the fluttering melodic figures, the emphatic chords, and the arpeggiated grace notes are all different expressions of the same "obsessive image" (in the composer's words). Careful listeners will confront the mystery and constancy of Byron's obsessive image through the work's thematic characters, the gestural languages they speak, the rhythmic puzzles they solve, and the harmonic landscapes they negotiate—and which they eventually conquer, as the breathtaking finale seems to imply.

Though these pieces sound entirely unpredictable, they are actually "airtight" and "unforgiving in structure," as Byron admits, yet also written with great clarity. Mostly modal pitch relationships and asymmetrical temporal ones alike are relentlessly rigorous. For the persevering analyst, a complex solar system is in operation here; but for the average listener, an emphatically passionate confession reveals itself from beginning to end.

⁸ See Beal, "Dreaming of Virtuosity," liner notes for Michael Byron, *Dreamers of Pearl* (New World Records 80679-2), 2008.

A WORLD FULL OF HOPE

for Katherine Elizabeth Byron

MICHAEL BYRON

$\text{♩} = 54$
luxurious...full, deeply resonant throughout

PIANO

f

pedal generously

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We might consider the contents of this recording to be the equivalent of the old-fashioned piano recital. We have been expertly treated to a carefully selected and widely varied collection of musical temperaments and personalities, as expressed by the four composers featured here. They are magically brought to life by the unique temperament and personality of Joseph Kubera, a stealthy man with nerves of steel, who is as equally comfortable on the formidable stage of Merkin Hall as he is at a piano in the modest multi-purpose room of a Staten Island Public Library. Awesomely unflappable, every composer should be so blessed to work with such a committed interpreter.

Amy C. Beal is Professor of Music at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She is the author of New Music, New Allies: American Experimental Music in West Germany from the Zero Hour to Reunification (2006), Carla Bley (2011), and a forthcoming book on composer Johanna Magdalena Beyer.

Michael Byron (b. 1953, Chicago) is a composer of instrumental and vocal music, which is noted for its multidirectional character. He was a pupil of James Tenney, and later, Richard Teitelbaum. Byron's early works were restrained, avoiding both drama and extravagance. However, by the mid 1970s this tendency had all but disappeared. His music today is harmonically rich, rhythmically elaborate, and exclusively virtuosic. He was editor and publisher of the legendary *Pieces* anthologies, highly regarded for its publication and dissemination of radical directions in American music. He has collaborated closely with Joseph Kubera for over a decade. During this period, all of his music for piano solo has been composed for, and dedicated to Kubera. His scores are available from Frog Peak Music. Four CDs of Byron's music have been released on Cold Blue Records, two of which are exclusively devoted to his music. His one-hour work for piano solo, *Dreamers of Pearl*, is recorded on New World Records.

“Blue” Gene Tyranny–B.G.T., born Robert Sheff in San Antonio, Texas, has been composing avant-garde music for more than fifty years. Writing for electronic and acoustic instruments and voices, he is also known for his intricate and spontaneous piano playing in solo and group concerts. His compositions include *How to Discover Music in the Sounds of Your Daily Life* (1967), *The Forecaster* (1988), *The Invention of Memory* (2003) and the album *Free Delivery* (1990). Further details at bluegenetyranny.com.

Stuart Saunders Smith

At 66
winter
is always
with me.

.
I am no longer
bothered by the cold.

.
We all inherit
the cold;
And
end cold.

.
.
Then, just then,—
We . . . heat up by the light
of the long tunnel.

Pianist **Joseph Kubera** has been a leading interpreter of contemporary music for the past three decades. Recent activities include a video of Cage's *Music of Changes* for Swiss television and performances at Cage 100 celebrations in New York, Boston and Philadelphia. He has been a soloist at such festivals as the Warsaw Autumn, Berlin *Inventionen*, and Prague Spring, and has worked closely with such legendary composers as John Cage, Morton Feldman, La Monte Young, and Robert Ashley. Composers who have written works for him include Larry Austin, Michael Byron, Anthony Coleman, David First, Alvin Lucier, Roscoe Mitchell, and "Blue" Gene Tyranny. He toured widely with the Cunningham Dance Company at John Cage's invitation, and he has recorded the *Music of Changes* and *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*. Mr. Kubera has been awarded grants through the NEA and the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts.

Mr. Kubera is a core member of S.E.M. Ensemble, the DownTown Ensemble, and Ostravska Banda, and he has performed with numerous ensembles ranging from Steve Reich and Musicians to the Brooklyn Philharmonic. Mr. Kubera's playing is featured on the Wergo, Albany, New Albion, New World, Lovely Music, OO Discs, Mutable Music, Cold Blue, and Opus One labels. Website: www.josephkubera.com

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Michael Byron

Awakening at the Inn of the Birds. Cold Blue CB 0012.

Dreamers of Pearl. New World Records 80679-2.

Elegant Detours. Included on *Marty Walker: Dancing on Water*. Cold Blue CB 5.

Marimbas in the Dorian Mode. Included on *Cold Blue*. Cold Blue CB 8.

Music of Nights Without Moon or Pearl. Cold Blue CB 0002.

Julius Eastman

Unjust Malaise. New World Records 80638-2 [3 CDs].

Stuart Saunders Smith

At Sixty. 11 West Records [2CDs] (Smith Publications).

Books of Flutes. 11 West Records (Smith Publications).

Breath: The Percussion Music of Stuart Saunders Smith. 11 West Records (Smith Publications).

The Links Series of Vibraphone Essays. New World Records 80690-2 [2CDs].

Wind in the Channel. OO Discs 31.

"Blue" Gene Tyranny

Country Boy Country Dog: How To Discover Music in the Sounds of Your Daily Life. Lovely Music LCD 1065.

Free Delivery. Lovely Music LCD 1064.

Out of the Blue. Unseen Worlds UW 01.

Take Your Time. Lovely Music LCD 1066.

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The Drifter is published by the composer.

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Francis Goelet (1926–1998), *In Memoriam*

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BOOK OF HORIZONS

MUSIC BY MICHAEL BYRON, JULIUS EASTMAN, STUART SAUNDERS SMITH, AND "BLUE GENE TYRANNY"

JOSEPH KUBERA, *PIANO*

80745-2

Julius Eastman (1940–1990)

Piano 2 (1986) 14:56

- 1. Movement 1 6:46
- 2. Movement 2 3:31
- 3. Movement 3 4:31

"Blue" Gene Tyranny (b. 1945)

- 4. *The Drifter* (1994) 13:34

Stuart Saunders Smith (b. 1948)

- 5. *Fences, In Three Tragedies* (1998) 7:30
 - I. Personal Tragedy (2:48)
 - II. Community Tragedy (1:53)
 - III. Country Tragedy (2:52)

Michael Byron (b. 1953)

Book of Horizons (2009) 26:51

- 6. I. Unknown Americas 4:01
- 7. II. Porcelain Nights 4:50
- 8. III. Like the Eyes of the Bride 4:28
- 9. IV. A World Full of Hope 6:03
- 10. V. Appearances and Architraves 7:18

TT: 63:02

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