

DOGON A.D.

Julius Hemphill



mbaai



*Photo still of African sculptures from the collection of Dr. Donald Suggs that appear in the untitled film by John Millaire. All stills are taken from this film.*

## Notes on *DOGONA.D.* by Marty Ehrlich

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### PART I

**“Dear Friend, thank you for your interest in the products MBARI has to offer to the public. Our immediate goal is to develop lines of communication among people who have an interest in the creative endeavors of Black artists.”<sup>1</sup>**

This is the opening of a letter on MBARI stationary, headed “St. Louis, Missouri 4/20/72,” with the logo you see on the cover of this recording. At the age of 34, Julius Hemphill has created a production company for his work in music, theater, film, and education. One of the beauties of the sentence above, from this always specific and stylish prose writer, is Julius’s goal of “lines of communication.” K. Curtis Lyle, Julius’s closest poetic collaborator, said that Julius had an ongoing drive to give people insight into the creative act.

*“One of the basic considerations MBARI has is to provide top-level artistic works to the public at reasonable rates. We feel that there is too great an interval between our serious Black artists and the people and perspectives that contribute to the composition/creation of their art.”<sup>2</sup>*

It is telling that the LP cover of *Dogon A.D.* does not have Julius Hemphill’s name on it. Just the album title and Mbari, contained within the silhouette of the artists. You can interpret this as you will, though it surely points the listener toward

1 Letter in the Julius Hemphill Papers at the Fales Library at New York University, dated 4/20/1972.

2 Ibid.

the collective, something other or bigger than the individual artist.

*“The Dogon, who are mainly farmers, live according to a social and religious system related to a vast cosmology, which inspires, directs and permeates all their activities. It is in this perspective that, through the forms, colors, and even the materials used, the manifestations of their art, which is essentially symbolic, are seen to be linked with the system of the world as they conceive and live it. The purpose of their art is to portray their beliefs, which are profound and often secret.”<sup>3</sup>*

\* \* \*

*“I grew up in the “Hot End” of Fort Worth. The Hot End is where people come for entertainment, such as it was, and to drink and carry on. It was musically rich. I could hear Hank Williams coming out of the jukebox at Bunker’s, the white bar. And Louis Jordan, Son House, and Earl Bostic from the box at Ethel’s, the black bar across the street. Texas gets hot, you know. Winter is an afterthought. We had all the windows raised. Right across the street, these two jukeboxes were blaring. I had a great childhood. I mean, I was right down there with the action. It helped formulate some ideas, you know what I mean.”<sup>4</sup>*

There are six main music manuscript notebooks in the Julius Hemphill Archive at New York University which were used by Julius for his compositional work. One has “Original Dogon and Rites” written on its cover. Inside we find three compositions scored out in clear, careful notation for the same quartet instrumentation, written as one continuous work. The first composition is entitled *Shadows/Echos*

<sup>3</sup> Germaine Dieterlin, liner notes for *Les Dogon: Les Chants De La Vie — Le Rituel Funéraire* (Ocora OCR 33), 1966.

<sup>4</sup> From the Smithsonian Oral History Project interview with Julius Hemphill. Done by Katea Stitt on March 6–7, 1994. Transcription in the Julius Hemphill Papers.



*Julius Hemphill & Baikida Carroll*

(Hemphill's spelling). For the longest time, in my work compiling the Hemphill archive, there was no recorded representation of this multi-sectional composition.

Directly following *Shadows/Echos* is *Dogon A.D.* and *Rites*, both of which appear on the recording we have before us. At some later point, in a different pen, the word "Original" is added to the titles of *Dogon A.D.* and to *Rites* in the composition-al notebook.

The letter from 4/20/72 referenced above goes on to describe the products available from MBARI. The LPs *Dogon A.D.* and *The Collected Poem for Blind Lemon Jefferson*, which is a collaboration with poet K. Curtis Lyle and actor Malinké Elliott, are available for \$4. The film "Sweet Willie Rollbar's Orientation," which involved numerous members of the Black Artist Group (BAG) in St. Louis, and which Professor Brent Edwards of Columbia University has in recent years lovingly resurrected, is listed for rent. Hemphill then advertises his ensemble for concert performance. "Only original music is performed. The style of the music is basically "new thing" with jazz/blues/African elements."<sup>5</sup>

Hemphill lists upcoming products, one being a 30-minute "videotape featuring authentic African sculpture and original music and dance."<sup>6</sup>

An important acquisition during the assembling of the Julius Hemphill Archive were ten video cassettes of Hemphill theatrical performances in St. Louis taken by visual artist John Millaire, who worked closely with Julius and Malinké documenting these works. Taken in one of the first formats for video, some of these tapes had not been seen in fifty years. Upon making the digital transfers, we discover that the videotape captures complete performances of *Shadows/Echos*, *Dogon A.D.*, and



*Dancer's name unknown*

<sup>5</sup> Letter in the Julius Hemphill Papers at the Fales Library at New York University, dated 4/20/1972.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

## *Rites* as found in the compositional notebook.

The video, made with one camera, c. 1970–71, is a dance and music performance in an open room, probably in the converted warehouse that was the home of the Black Artist Group in St. Louis. A range of African sculptures and masks, bowls and tapestries, frame the dance space, all from the art collection of St. Louisan Dr. Donald Suggs. Around that space is the Julius Hemphill Quartet: Hemphill on alto saxophone and flute, Baikida Carroll on trumpet, Phillip Wilson on drums, and John Hicks, the great pianist from St. Louis, here playing vibes. (The ostinato on the composition *Dogon A.D.* was originally composed for vibraphone.) The musicians are each in full-length African ceremonial robes.

The music accompanies two dancers, probably from the Katherine Dunham Company, which was based in East St. Louis, joined by the master Senegalese percussionist Mor Thiam and his cousin Zak Diouf, who were resident artists with the Dunham Company. The dancers create a series of solo and duo choreographies, integrating these art objects into their movement. The music of the video begins with *Shadows/Echoes*. *Shadows/Echoes* is episodic and through-composed, a practice Hemphill will extend and continue to use for theatrical collaborations.

This music for flute and muted trumpet is spare and evocative, with circular phrases being repeated out of time. Within the composition's form is a melody played in call-and-response between Mor Thiam's voice, accompanying himself on djembe, and Hemphill's flute. *Dogon A.D.* and *Rites* follow in order in the video, with short improvisational moments. The first home of these compositions is directly located in the African Continuum.





*Dancers' names unknown*

## PART II

The recording session for *Dogon A.D.* in February 1972 is with Phillip Wilson, Baikida Carroll, and Julius, but with cellist Abdul Wadud as the fourth member. (Baritone saxophonist Hamiet Bluiett will join in on *The Hard Blues*.) Julius has met Abdul at Oberlin College, introduced by painter Oliver Lee Jackson, who is teaching at Oberlin and brings Julius for a performance in 1970. Oliver tells that Julius and Abdul improvised together in a practice room for an hour or so, and as it is said, the rest is history. Abdul becomes an integral member of Julius's music world.

I have written this description of the *Dogon A.D.* composition: "Julius composes a melodic line for alto sax and trumpet placed over an ostinato in the cello and drums. This ostinato has an odd number of beats, written in an 11/16 meter, something not heard directly in West African music. The drums sound the 11 sixteenth notes on the high-hat, but the cello and the bass drum outline a stately 4/4/3 pattern. Its totality evokes the repetitive, hypnotic element Julius speaks of in the Dogon's music. The figure played by the cello may be heard as a musical relative to Muddy Waters's "Mannish Boy," or other Southern blues figures, especially when you put the emphasis on the last of the three cello notes, a minor third falling back into the drum pattern. Julius's horn melody uses the same blues call as its seed. (Abdul will echo it during the improvisation.) The horn melody begins to talk to itself, in call-and-response. It unfolds slowly, always with spaces within it, blank canvas left, till it turns suddenly toward a new orientation. What happens next in the melody is an unexpected collage of actions, separated by varying-length rests, that break up the opening theme's regularity. We hear a single low, loud note in the horns, then a repeated phrase of wide-interval leaps, followed by a winding chromatic melody, neither blues nor bebop, but surely "Hemphillian." Sharp chordal gestures follow, notes acerbic and wide in their spacing. And then a repeated riff, reminiscent of the opening melody,



John Hicks, vibraphone; Mor Thiam, djembe

descends gently down for the improvisation to begin.”<sup>7</sup>

“A. D.” refers either to Adaptive Dance or Altered Dance. It may be Hemphill’s way of defining his own composition. It may equally refer to the fact that the Dogon did not share their full dance with the outsider, an act of survival and resistance which would have resonated with Julius. Oliver Lee Jackson has spoken often to me of Julius’s sense of *simpatico* with the Dogon idea of “functional spirituality.” That through their dance, through their rites, the sky opened, and the rains did come.

When Philip Wilson starts the 11/16 rhythm, the female dancer immediately gets the lope and spaciousness of its feel in her choreography. Numerous years later, on a rehearsal recorded in Julius and Ursula Oppens’s New York apartment, Julius works with the drummer Mike Clark to get just the right sound from the hi-hat for the drum pattern. He is looking for a rattle, an African aesthetic, achieved with the hi-hat hit slightly open so that the two cymbals “clang” together, much like the metal rings added to a kalimba’s keys. He slows the tempo down ever so slightly, to get what Robert Palmer hears as connecting “Hemphill’s home territory, Fort Worth, Texas, which is flat and dry, with the African savannah of the Dogon....”<sup>8</sup>

*Rites*, by contrast, is the great condensation of ideas that Charles Parker points to in his *Confirmation*: contrasting rhythmic figures juxtaposed in the melody, a burst of linear imagery to be exploded and explored in the collective improvisation. This short composition, in its opening and its extended ending, is a wonder. Nothing repeats in it, yet there is a sure unity in its contrasts. Both *Dogon* and *Rites* share a unique Hemphill quality: The vertical chords stated by alto/trumpet/cello are similar

<sup>7</sup> Julius Hemphill: *The Music of Dogon A.D. A Critical Edition*. Marty Ehrlich, author and music editor. Subito Music Publishing, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Palmer, liner notes to the Arista/Freedom release of *Julius Hemphill: Dogon A.D.*, 1977.



Dancer with Phillip Wilson, drums

in both pieces. They hang in space, guided by Julius's phenomenal musical ear for harmonic tension. This is one dialogue across these two contrasting works. And in this dialogue, we hear the great blend and phrasing achieved by Hemphill and Carroll, with Abdul Wadud as a third horn.

I want to point the listener to the unaccompanied flute solo that opens *The Painter*. Julius's use of his voice in his flute playing sounds singular to me: As vocalized and inflected as his alto and soprano saxophone improvisations are, anchored with virtuosic chromatic lines, it is his voice *through* the flute that gives us the core of his personal expression. He will explore this aspect of flute performance further on *Blue Boyé* and other recordings. The flute will play a less prominent role in his work over the years, but it was key to his creativity in this first decade as a recording artist. *The Painter* is, in some ways, the outlier on the *Dogon* recording. It is deceptively simple, a folk song of sorts, though the melody becomes more involved as it unfurls, with ever longer phrase shapes, challenging expectations. As always, it sets an immediate mood, tongue-in-cheek in its opening arpeggio, and ever sweeter as it progresses. We hear how Abdul evokes an oud and a kora in his ever-inventive playing. Julius does not return to this piece in the known archive: It is his portrait of painter Oliver Lee Jackson, his lifelong artistic associate.

Julius did not date his scores or parts, or rarely so. *The Hard Blues* seems by the way it is notated to be one of his earliest works. The earliest hand-written parts have the three main sections, but no introduction. The composed cello introduction is in place by the time of the recording session, on a new part, and becomes a set part of the piece over the years regardless of instrumentation. Julius adds an ostinato riff for the improvisation, which we hear Abdul elaborate on at length. Twenty years later Julius will introduce the piece at a big band concert saying "We would like to round out the program here on a healthy note. (Laughter). It's a piece that has been around

for a minute. The form is certainly as old as good times and bad times, I suppose. The title of this is *The Hard Blues*.<sup>9</sup>

### PART III

Julius will perform and continue to compose “on” *Dogon A.D.* and *The Hard Blues* throughout his artistic life. (From the archival record, they are the two most performed works in his catalogue.) In 1980, he forms the Julius Hemphill 12-Piece Ensemble for a premiere concert at New Jazz at the Public, on a double bill with Max Roach. (This writer performed in the sax section.) Julius arranges large-ensemble versions of both works. For *Dogon*, he adds a bass part that answers the cello/marimba ostinato in call-and-response, continuing the blues tonality, anchoring the ostinato’s essence. *Dogon* is not done. For his JAH band with two guitars later in the ’80s, Julius adds a third part to the ostinato, and while on tour with Nels Cline and Bill Frisell, adds a poignant new guitar line for the coda of the work. (One of the guitars is playing the trumpet part of *Dogon*, the other has a new composed role.) Julius then includes *Dogon* in his final large-scale theatrical presentation, *Long Tongues: A Saxophone Opera*, in a new orchestration for chamber orchestra and his Saxophone Sextet, with new backgrounds and riffs.

*The Hard Blues* will see its biggest transformation in a new version later in the 1980s for the Julius Hemphill Saxophone Sextet. Julius makes a new baritone sax part, an anchoring ostinato, and adds a short moment of full saxophonic blowing to the compositional form, giving the composition four distinct sections, a history of Black Music in one piece: the strut of the country blues, the incisive two-note gesture



Hemphill & Carroll with dancer

<sup>9</sup> Performance on WGBH Radio Boston “Big Bands/Jazz on the Edge”, with the Jazz Composer’s Alliance, Daryll Katz, musical director, 1989.

of the New Jazz, repeated seven times, into the uptempo bebop line, and then the short burst of collective sound, which settles into the baritone sax blues vamp to start the improvisation. *The Hard Blues* will be played every night as part of Julius's collaboration with choreographer Bill T. Jones, *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin: The Promised Land*, and at every Sextet concert thereof, usually as we played through the aisles, ending the evening in celebration.

*Rites* does not show up again in any live recording, though it stays in the book of the JH Quartet, a book Baikida Carroll lovingly oversees. But the story is not over. For the *Julius Hemphill Big Band* recording in 1988 for Elektra Musician, Julius writes an involved, reimagined large-ensemble version of *Rites*, now with an extended chord progression for the improvisation. We rehearse this work, but it does not end up on the LP. Julius does hear it played by the JCA orchestra in Boston. It awaits further realizations.

## CONCLUSION

Julius's colleague in BAG and WSQ, Oliver Lake, recently shared these words: "I remember when Julius had just recorded 'Dogon.' We were listening to it in the BAG building. It was so original and compelling. I was so inspired. I began to compose my next piece in an odd meter."<sup>10</sup> Saxophonist/composer Tim Berne recently spoke in *The New York Times* to the "ecstasy" that Julius achieves through his melodic approach, saying that "even today, I get chills listening to the (*Dogon A.D.*) solo."<sup>11</sup> Robert Palmer memorably states that "Hemphill and trumpeter Baikida Carroll do not deliver fashionably funky solos, but instead testify at length, with a fervor reminiscent of the Southern and Southwestern shouting preachers recorded by the

<sup>10</sup> Letter to the author, 2025.

<sup>11</sup> "5 Minutes That Will Make You Love the Alto Sax," *The New York Times*, November 9, 2025.



Library of Congress during the thirties.”<sup>12</sup> Hemphill himself says in an interview, “If I have anything to contribute to this art form... It’s a voice of our culture. This is a voice right out of them cotton fields—this ain’t out of the conservatory. This is out of the *neighborhood*. And that’s where my impetus comes from... I have seen it from the bottom up.”<sup>13</sup>

Throughout my years of talking with Julius, the desire on his part to reach a directness of expression, to communicate in a direct way, was an ongoing imperative in his thoughts. The *Dogon A.D.* recording session introduces him to the world as a protean composer, as a singular and passionate improviser and instrumentalist, and as a cultural thinker. In this striving toward transcendence, he brings in a sense of celebration and high spirits, of tough loss and sadness, and of proud resistance and survival. This recording, made on a cold February day in St. Louis in a studio with little heat, has lit up the musical world for so many for so long. It is wonderful to have it available again in this iteration for a new generation of listeners.

*Marty Ehrlich is the chief researcher in the Julius Hemphill Papers in the Downtown Collection of the Fales Library at New York University. He is editor of the complete compositions of Julius Hemphill published by Subito Music Publishing. A native of St. Louis, Mo., he performed in varied ensembles of Julius Hemphill from 1974 to 1995. He continued the work of the Julius Hemphill Saxophone Sextet from 1995 to 2006 and curated the Julius Hemphill Composer Portrait concerts. He produced the New World recording The Boyé Multi-National Crusade for Harmony, recordings drawn from the Hemphill Archive. Ehrlich is a distinguished composer and instrumentalist.*

12 Robert Palmer, liner notes to the Arista/Freedom release of *Julius Hemphill: Dogon A.D.*, 1977

13 See note 4.

## Notes and Reflections by Baikida Carroll

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I first met Julius in September 1968. He approached me while I practiced trumpet in Forest Park (St. Louis). I immediately noticed a regal essence about him. He complimented me and invited me to join the Black Artist Group of St. Louis. That encounter spearheaded the trajectory of my musical career to this day. From that point on, through both good and bad times, we became very close friends and collaborators.

We all knew, within the *coalition* of the Black Artist Group, Julius was gifted with exceptional instrumental and compositional skills. His creative mind, internal vision, and masterful craftsmanship produced groundbreaking, breathtaking music that inspired all within his sphere. His innovative, personal approach pushed traditional boundaries and inspired the imagination of all who witnessed it.

Though rehearsing and preparing for the session was demanding, the conceptually unique, modern, abstract, and deep complexity of the music offered a myriad of colorful improvisational possibilities.

Working with Julius, Phillip, and Abdul was an exhilarating and momentous point in my life. I’m the remaining living member of the ensemble, and I miss them all.

Phillip’s versatility, storied musical past, and adventurous nature were on full display when tackling complex pieces like the innovative *Dogon A.D.* and its gnarled 11/16 time signature. Phillip was the backbone.

The musicianship and musical knowledge of Abdul mesmerized me beyond belief. His response and interpretations were spot-on. It was such a joy and learning experience working with him.

The *Dogon A.D.* recording was one of the most monumental and cherished events in my life. It remains so to this day!

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John Millaire was the videographer of the film—  
[https://wp.nyu.edu/library-hemphill\\_papers/](https://wp.nyu.edu/library-hemphill_papers/)  
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THIS REISSUE IS DEDICATED TO  
ANTHONY AND CHRIS HEMPHILL,  
AND IS IN MEMORY OF JULIUS HEMPHILL, ABDUL WADUD,  
PHILLIP WILSON AND HAMIET BLUIETT.

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**JULIUS HEMPHILL** (1938–1995)

DOGON A.D.

JULIUS HEMPHILL, Alto Saxophone &amp; Flute

BAIKIDA CARROLL, Trumpet

ABDUL WADUD, Cello

PHILLIP WILSON, Percussion

HAMIET BLUIETT, Baritone Saxophone (*The Hard Blues*)

1. **Dogon A.D.** 14:52
2. **Rites** 8:23
3. **The Painter** (for Oliver Lee Jackson) 15:00
4. **The Hard Blues** (for K. Curtis Lyle) 20:11

TT: 58:26



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