

**"If you're so smart, why aren't you rich? An exploration of Julius Eastman"**

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Described by musicologist and composer Kyle Gann as “A brilliant, honest, original, and influential musician”<sup>1</sup>, one would expect Julius Eastman’s imprint on the field of art music both as a composer and virtuosic musician would be visible. Having a Grammy-nominated recording as a vocalist, a top conservatory pedigree, and countless performances with the luminaries of the Downtown scene of the 1970s and 80s, Eastman should have enjoyed the spotlight. Examining his body of work – both within and without the Western Art realm, it comes as quite a shock that he is not yet included in the Oxford Music Online database, and that in an informal query, only one out of dozens of new-music aficionados at BGSU seemed to have any idea who Julius Eastman *was*. His is a puzzling story, and the struggle to piece together his legacy continues. This paper serves to shed some light on a composer whose work and life merits recognition by a wider music audience.

### ***Early experiences***

Eastman was born in Ithaca, NY, in October 1940. As a youth, he exhibited strong musical potential, and began studying piano and singing in a paid position at an Episcopal church in his hometown. Music seems to run in the family – Julius’ brother Gerry Eastman has performed as a guitarist with the Count Basie Orchestra, and is the founder and music director of the Williamsburg Music Center in Brooklyn. Julius’ first collegiate study was in piano, at Ithaca College, but he transferred to the Curtis Institute to study soon afterward. His teachers included Constant Vaucrain (composition) and Mieczyslaw Horszowski (piano). Soon after graduating in 1966, he was invited by Lukas Foss to join the Creative Associates Ensemble as a performer at SUNY Buffalo. Foss also served as an early champion of Eastman’s music, conducting

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<sup>1</sup> Gann, Kyle. *Music Downtown: writings from the Village Voice*. Berkeley: University of California Press (2006). P. 290.

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Eastman’s compositions with the Creative Associates on a European tour and other performances through 1979, and programming some of his works with the Brooklyn Philharmonic.

### *National spotlight and notoriety*

In 1970, Eastman performed the American premiere of Peter Maxwell Davies’ *8 Songs for a Mad King* at the Aspen festival. Also in the early 70s, in addition to this performance and others with Creative Associates, Eastman toured with flutist-composer Petr Kotik, performing each other’s compositions, “Pieces that went on and on forever with the kind of lightly-inflected purposelessness of Gertrude Stein’s prose”<sup>2</sup>. 1973 brought his first national attention – his recording of *8 Songs* with The Fires of London, on Nonesuch, was nominated for a Best Classical Performance – Vocal Soloist Grammy in 1975, alongside singers including Cathy Berberian, Jan DeGaetani, Birgit Nilsson, Sherrill Milnes, and Elly Ameling. (Leontyne Price won the award that year.)<sup>3</sup> Another notable moment for Eastman in 1975 was his performance at the inaugural June in Buffalo festival. This series, organized by Morton Feldman, was presented at SUNY Buffalo, featuring the works of John Cage, Christian Wolff, and Earle Brown. According to one source, Eastman’s presentation of one of the “Solos for voice” from Cage’s *Songbooks* caused quite a stir. He chose to give a lecture – on sex. His performance included undressing a young man on-stage, and attempting to undress a young woman (though he was unsuccessful in this attempt). It is reported that Cage was furious over this interpretation, and lectured angrily on it the next day, declaring “the freedom in my music does not mean the freedom to be irresponsible!”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Gann, Kyle. “Damned Outrageous”: The Music of Julius Eastman”. Liner notes to *Unjust Malaise*. CD (2005).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.metrolyrics.com/1975-grammy-awards.html>

<sup>4</sup> Gann, Kyle. “Damned Outrageous”: The Music of Julius Eastman”. Liner notes to *Unjust Malaise*. CD (2005).

Eastman’s next notable (or notorious) performance happened at Northwestern on January 16, 1980. His performance of a trio of four-piano works with pianists elicited protest by certain faculty and an African-American fraternity – due to the titles, which were not listed on the recital program: *Gay Guerilla*, *Evil Nigger*, and *Crazy Nigger*. Eastman explained his rationale for the titling in his spoken introduction to the pieces:

“The reason I use that particular word is, for me, it has what I call a *basicness* (emphasis his) about it...what I mean by niggers is, that thing which is *fundamental*; that person or thing that attains to a basicness or fundamentalness, and eschews that which is superficial, or could we say, elegant...there are 99 names of Allah, and there are 52 niggers. We are playing two of these niggers.”<sup>5</sup>

### ***Further successes – and failures***

The 1980s continued prosperously for Julius Eastman. In addition to his performances of the multiple-piano works at New Music America in Minneapolis in 1980, *The Holy Presence of Joan D’Arc*, a work for ten cellos, was performed at that 1981’s NMA festival. In the meantime, he toured Europe with funding from The Kitchen, a Greenwich Village art-space created in 1971 created for the purposes of “identifying and nurturing the best of a new generation of contemporary artists”<sup>6</sup>.

After 1983, however, Eastman experienced a rather rapid decline. There is evidence that he continued performing – Eastman’s performance of his own *His Most Qualityless Majesty* was reviewed in the New York Times in October of that year<sup>7</sup>. Though his music continued to be

<sup>5</sup> Gann, Kyle. *Music Downtown: writings from the Village Voice*. Berkeley: University of California Press (2006). P. 290.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.vasulka.org/archive/Kitchen/KLM/KLM003.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Pareles, Jon. “Music: Eastman Piano Piece”. *NY Times*: 10/23/1983. Accessed from NY Times Online, 12/7/2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/1983/10/23/arts/music-eastman-piano-piece.html?scp=1&sq=%22julius%20eastman%22&st=cse>

performed sporadically, Eastman was never able to maintain a university teaching position, and he eventually fell into a lifestyle of alcohol and (most sources agree) crack cocaine. At one point, he was evicted from his apartment in Manhattan, and his belongings were confiscated by law enforcement (or more poetically, strewn in the street). These lost possessions likely included most of Eastman’s scores. He spent the next several years living alternately with family, and on the street in Tompkins Square Park in the East Village of New York. Though it is reported by acquaintances that in early 1990 he was clean and looking healthy, Eastman died alone in a Buffalo hospital that year, the official cause of death listed as cardiac arrest. His death was unknown to most of his acquaintances until nearly a year later, when Kyle Gann wrote an obituary in the *Village Voice*.

### ***Eastman’s works***

To better understand Eastman’s voice as a composer, one must examine his works. A few will be discussed here. *Stay on It*, as mentioned above, premiered in 1973. The earliest extant example of his compositions, *Stay on It* is a chamber work for voice, clarinet, two saxophones, violin, piano, and mallets<sup>8</sup>. It is notable for its time; in 1973, Minimalism was still in its infancy. *In C* was less than a decade old, Steve Reich’s *Music for 18 Musicians* had not yet been written, and Philip Glass was still writing *Music in Twelve Parts*. Eastman’s use of pop elements (like the recurring “cadential figure”<sup>9</sup>) within a minimalist framework was far ahead of its time – foreshadowing the later work of Post-minimalists and sampler artists. In addition, Eastman incorporated aspects of improvisation in *Stay on It*, a practice not often utilized by most other conservatory trained composers of the 1960s and 70s.

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<sup>8</sup> Gann, Kyle. “‘Damned Outrageous’: The Music of Julius Eastman”. Liner notes to *Unjust Malaise*. CD (2005).

<sup>9</sup> Gann, Kyle. “‘Damned Outrageous’: The Music of Julius Eastman”. Liner notes to *Unjust Malaise*. CD (2005).

*The Holy Presence of Joan D'Arc*, dating to 1981, is an example of what Eastman referred to as his "organic form"<sup>10</sup>, a sort of additive process extended to phrase structure within the compositional framework. Written for an ensemble of ten cellos with a recitative-like vocal introduction (sung by Eastman), this work exemplifies Eastman's innovation – though also written in a minimalist style, he incorporated aspects of atonality, dissonance, and non-linear transformations – compositional concepts that would not come into vogue until a decade later as "Totalism"<sup>11</sup>. *The Holy Presence* is important too, for its political content – Eastman was unique in his involvement of activist themes in his works. In his introduction to *The Holy Presence*, he says it is:

"A reminder to those who think they can destroy liberators by acts of treachery, malice, and murder . . . 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"<sup>12</sup>.

His reference to "my own people" has meaning on more than one level. As a black man, Eastman surely had faced racism throughout his life – especially working in a field dominated by white men. To add to this minority status, Eastman was an "out" gay man, amongst mostly heterosexual (or closeted) colleagues. Though Eastman did not live in New York City until 1976, he surely was aware of the Stonewall Riots – the incident mentioned most often as the beginning of the LGBT rights movement<sup>13</sup>. At that time in New York, it was common for police to raid those establishments generally considered "gay bars", enforcing the anti-homosexuality laws that

<sup>10</sup> Gann, Kyle. "'Damned Outrageous': The Music of Julius Eastman". Liner notes to *Unjust Malaise*. CD (2005).

<sup>11</sup> Gann, Kyle. "Minimal Music, Maximal Impact – Minimalism Gets Complex: Totalism". New Music Box Online, accessed 12/7/2010. <http://www.newmusicbox.org/page.nmbx?id=31tp06>

<sup>12</sup> Gann, Kyle. "'Damned Outrageous': The Music of Julius Eastman". Liner notes to *Unjust Malaise*. CD (2005).

<sup>13</sup> "Stonewall Rebellion". *Times Topics*. NY Times online. Accessed 12/7/2010. [http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/subjects/s/stonewall\\_rebellion/index.html](http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/subjects/s/stonewall_rebellion/index.html).

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were in place at the time (bear in mind - during the late 60’s, homosexuality was illegal in 49 states<sup>14</sup>). Later, Eastman was active as a performer in the disco scene; it is likely the persecution of gays with anti-homosexuality ordinances directly affected him and many of his friends within that community.

The multiple piano series that included *Gay Guerilla*, *Evil Nigger*, and *Crazy Nigger* share certain aspects – all are based on repeated patterns or pitches for each of the performers, with changes cued by timings rather than specified measures. His pop-style calling out of “One, two, three, four!” are clearly audible on the Northwestern archival recordings of the works. Employing “organic” processes similar to *The Holy Presence*, Eastman used the Martin Luther hymn “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” as musical material in *Gay Guerilla*, building up to a clear statement of the hymn tune from repeated figures in whole or half-steps in a constant galloping rhythm. Kyle Gann refers to *Gay Guerilla* as Eastman’s “gay manifesto”<sup>15</sup>; this seems apt. According to Eastman, “There aren’t many gay guerrillas...A guerrilla is anyone who is sacrificing his life for a point of view...I use *Gay Guerrilla* in hopes that I might be one, if called upon”<sup>16</sup>.

### ***Affiliation with Arthur Russell and the disco scene***

As mentioned earlier, Julius Eastman had ties to The Kitchen. One of these was conservatory-trained composer, cellist, producer, and Kitchen music director Arthur Russell, whose career and output mirrors Eastman’s in many ways. Though many remember Russell by his disco tracks such as “Go Bang! #5” and “Is It All Over My Face?” Arthur Russell’s

<sup>14</sup> Holden, Stephen. “Stonewall Uprising”. *Movie Reviews*. NY Times online. Accessed 12/7/2010.

[http://movies.nytimes.com/2010/06/16/movies/16stone.html?ref=stonewall\\_rebellion](http://movies.nytimes.com/2010/06/16/movies/16stone.html?ref=stonewall_rebellion)

<sup>15</sup> Gann, Kyle. *Music Downtown: writings from the Village Voice*. Berkeley: University of California Press (2006). P. 291.

<sup>16</sup> Gann, Kyle. *Music Downtown: writings from the Village Voice*. Berkeley: University of California Press (2006). P. 291.

compositional output ranged from instrumental works to experimental electronic pieces. Russell had studied composition at San Francisco Conservatory, Manhattan School, and Columbia. Similarly to Eastman, Russell mixed and matched techniques in his compositions, in his case ranging from orchestral disco to avant-rock tracks. Russell was a gay musician living in New York in an era not friendly towards homosexuals. Lastly, after his death of AIDS in 1992, Russell’s music was all but forgotten – until a posthumous release of his music in 2004, a year before *Unjust Malaise*. The parallels between these two musicians are numerous.

Perhaps due to their similar backgrounds, Julius Eastman and Arthur Russell had a long-lasting working partnership. Eastman often participated in Russell’s projects at the Kitchen, as both a vocalist and keyboard player. Eastman appeared on Kitchen performances such as 1979’s orchestral-disco jam session<sup>17</sup>. Outside The Kitchen, Eastman worked with Russell on other projects, including conducting a performance of theatre music for a Robert Wilson production of *Medea*. In addition, Eastman worked on Russell’s dance albums as a keyboardist and vocalist, appearing on such tracks as the aforementioned “Go Bang #5”, and “In the Corn Belt”. These performances seem far-removed from Eastman’s compositional output. However, knowing that Russell was “convinced that disco...could be a form of serious music that revolved around shifting, repetitive structures”<sup>18</sup>, it makes sense that Eastman would participate in such projects – after all, he was a *composer of serious music* that utilized *shifting, repetitive structures* himself.

### ***Explanations for failure***

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<sup>17</sup> Lawrence, Tim. *Hold On To Your Dreams: Arthur Russell and the Downtown Music Scene, 1973-1992*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009. P.157.

<sup>18</sup> Lawrence, Tim. *Hold On To Your Dreams: Arthur Russell and the Downtown Music Scene, 1973-1992*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009. P.157.

Gerry Eastman (Julius’ brother) believes that Julius died due to “mental stressed causing physical deterioration...Racism within the classical world prevented him from doing the things he was doing. The system was rigged against him...Julius is just another in the line of black geniuses who get squashed in this particular hemisphere”<sup>19</sup> It is likely that Eastman’s status as a double minority (gay and black) was a factor in his struggle to achieve success in the academic realm. However, certain other factors may not be overlooked. In fact, Julius Eastman *had* been employed as a theory teacher at SUNY, but lost the position when he could not keep up with the administrative duties. Another promised position at Cornell in 1983 never materialized, and it is thought that this failure led to Eastman’s descent into drugs and alcohol. In addition, Eastman had a habit of requesting incredibly high fees for his appearances. According to Renee Levine, “He was terribly conflicted about success. I’d call to offer him a gig and he’d say, ‘Sure I’ll come, if you can give me a thousand dollars a week’”<sup>20</sup> In a similar fashion, Eastman’s invitation to the Paris Conservatoire was rescinded when he would not agree to the offered fee. Though Eastman’s career was likely affected by his orientation and race, these were certainly not the only reasons he never garnered the success he (and many others) felt he deserved.

### ***Collecting evidence of Eastman’s work***

In the last few years, there has been a resurgence of interest in the life and works of Julius Eastman. In an article that appeared in 2005 in *New Music Box*, Mary Jane Leach chronicles her search for a score to *The Holy Presence of Joan D’Arc*, and how she discovered the dearth of extant information regarding Eastman. “I began to realize that it wasn’t just *Joan* that was difficult to locate, but all of Julius’s music”<sup>21</sup>. Her search for that one piece led to a several years

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<sup>19</sup> Gann, Kyle. *Music Downtown: writings from the Village Voice*. Berkeley: University of California Press (2006). P. 291.

<sup>20</sup> Gann, Kyle. *Music Downtown: writings from the Village Voice*. Berkeley: University of California Press (2006). P. 292.

<sup>21</sup> Leach, Mary Jane. “In Search of Julius Eastman”. *NewMusicBox* online, accessed 12/1/10.

of phone calls to performers of Eastman’s music and other collaborators, hunting for scores and archival recordings (some of which were in near-unusable condition). This search resulted in the release of a 3-CD set of Eastman’s music on *Unjust Malaise*, the only commercially published recording of Eastman’s music available. She now has a collection of both complete and incomplete Eastman scores on her personal website. In addition to Leach, Kyle Gann (a composer and longtime contributor to the *Village Voice*) is another published source of information. His obituary of Eastman, as well as mentions in several other *Village Voice* articles over the decades Eastman was active, are evidence of his visibility on the music scenes of the 70s and 80s.

In *Hold On To Your Dreams*, his recent book on Arthur Russell, musicologist Tim Lawrence chronicles Eastman’s activity with Russell in and out of the Kitchen, illuminating Eastman’s non-“serious” projects. According to Lawrence in recent personal correspondence, musicologist Ryan Dohoney presented a paper on Eastman at a conference about Arthur Russell that Lawrence spearheaded at NYU in 2009, and is currently preparing a book about Julius Eastman<sup>22</sup>. Contacting Prof. Dohoney revealed that his research includes interviews with Meredith Monk, other oral histories, finding archival sources at the New York Public Library, and Renee Levine Packer’s *This Life of Sounds: Evenings for New Music in Buffalo*, about the Creative Associates.

### ***Conclusion***

Even if Julius Eastman seemed to sabotage his own chances for academic appointment, the fact that his music has basically been neglected for the last twenty years is shameful. Such an

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<http://www.newmusicbox.org/article.nmbx?id=4411>

<sup>22</sup> Author’s personal correspondence with Tim Lawrence via email, 12/7/2010.

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innovative composer who bridged certain chasms between the "serious" and "other" musics of 1970s New York begs deeper study. Though his music speaks for itself, *Unjust Malaise* should not be the only remaining substantial evidence of Julius Eastman's composition. It is encouraging that a publication is in the works, and it is awaited with anticipation.