

That Which Is Fundamental

Julius Eastman, 1940-90

By Kyle Gann

It's January 1990. Place the mythically conservative Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Julius Eastman, in motorcycle boots and dreadlocks, stomps on stage and introduces three multiple-piano works: *Evil Nigger*, *Gay Guerrilla*, and *Crazy Nigger*. "There was a little problem with the titles of the pieces," he tells us without a trace of irony in his deep, distinctly articulated voice. "A few students and one faculty member felt that the titles were somehow derogatory. There is a whole series of these pieces which I call the 'Nigger' series."

This column is a ridiculously belated obituary. Julius Eastman died May 28, 1990, at Millard Fillmore Hospital in Buffalo. He was 49. According to the death certificate, he died of cardiac ar-

rest. Depending on who you talked to, it was brought on by insomnia and possible tuberculosis, dehydration, starvation, exhaustion, or depression (supposedly not AIDS). According to his brother, his body was cremated, and there was a family memorial service in Annapolis, Maryland.

I found out last week, and most of his closest associates, when I called them for confirmation, had heard nothing about it. Those who had were dubious, for rumors of Eastman's death had circulated before. Eastman pretty much dropped out of the music scene around 1983, started drinking heavily and smoking crack (though the last friends who saw him insisted he was drug-free in the weeks before his death). He had been living sometimes with his mother in Ithaca, sometimes with his brother in Brooklyn, with friends in New Jersey, at Catholic

Charities in Buffalo, and often in or around Tompkins Square Park. He was a brilliant, honest, original, and influential musician.

"The reason," he said at Northwestern, in smoothly modulated tones, "I use that particular word is, for me, it has what I call a *basicness* about it. The first niggers were, of course, field niggers. Upon that is the basis of the American economic system. Without field niggers, you wouldn't have the great and grand economy that we have. That is what I call the *first and great nigger*. What I mean by nigger 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. A nigger attains [sic] himself or herself to the *ground* of anything. There are many niggers, many kinds of niggers. There are 99 names of Allah, and there are

52 niggers. We are playing two of these niggers."

One of the least-recognized and most imaginative minimalists, Eastman was a pioneer. His *Stay on It* (1973), performed across Europe by SUNY at Buffalo's Creative Associates, was one of the first pieces to introduce pop tonal progressions in an art context, and the middle section was an early use of free improvisation. He was also a remarkable singer with a dark, versatile, sepulchral timbre that, once you heard it, you never forgot. That voice brought him 15 minutes of fame in 1973: Nonetheless recorded *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, which British composer Peter Maxwell Davies had written expressly for Eastman's growl. Eastman's moment of infamy came in 1975 when, at Morton Feldman's annual June in Buffalo symposium, he performed in John
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Barbara Kruger's new work "plays itself across every available surface," writes Kim Levin. "Floor, walls, and ceiling flare words and photo-images in this powerful wraparound installation that traps the viewer at the epicenter of its fury."

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Gena

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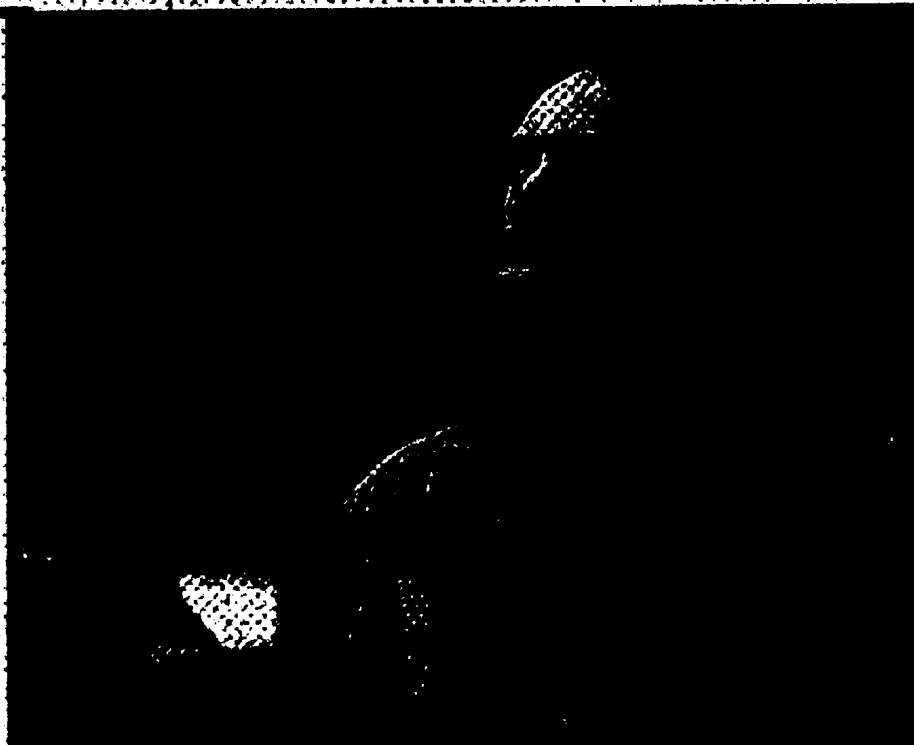
Cage's Soapbooks, and fulfilled the instruction "Give a lecture" by talking about sex and undressing a young man onstage. The next day an angry Cage pounded on the piano and fumed that the freedom in his music did not mean freedom to be irresponsible.

Disorganized Eastman manifestly was, but he wasn't irresponsible in his art. His music had a beautiful directness, a common sense that cut through all the bullsh*t of modern-music rationalizations. His tonal logic was clear and grippingly cumulative. "These pieces," he explained, "are an attempt to make organic music. That is to say, the third part of any part has to contain all the information of the first two parts, and then go on from there. Therefore, unlike Romantic music and Classical music in which you have contrasting sections, these pieces' sections contain all the information of previous sections, or else the information is taken out at a gradual and logical rate."

Though tonal and repetitive, his music seethes with tension, hatred, triumph. *Evil Nigger* hammers repeated tones so insistently that the piano is sure to be out of tune afterward. *Gay Guerrilla* builds up scaring discords with slow, propulsive momentum—*stun bahn stun bahn stun*—before breaking, one piano after another, into "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," reinterpreted as a powerful, wondrous, gay manifesto.

"These names, either I glorify them, or they glorify me, and in the case of *Gay Guerrilla*, that glorifies 'gay.' There aren't many gay guerrillas. I don't feel that gaydom does have that strength. Therefore I use that word in the hope that they will. At this point gay guerrillas can't match Afghan guerrillas, or FLO guerrillas. A guerrilla is anyone who is sacrificing his life for a point of view. If there is a cause, and it is a great cause, those who belong to that cause will sacrifice their lives. Without blood there is no cause. I use *Gay Guerrilla* in hopes that I might be one, if called upon to be one."

What Eastman sacrificed his life for remains unclear. For his younger brother Gerry, a pianist for the Coast Music Orchestra, Ju-



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lius died of "mental stress causing physical deterioration.... Racism within the classical world prevented him from doing the things he was doing. The system was rigged against him. It's the same old Scott Joplin/Charlie Parker story, only with a different person. Julius is just another in the line of black geniuses who get squashed in this particular hemisphere."

And yet others disagree, pointing out that Eastman had had enviable opportunities. After graduating from the prestigious Curtis Institute in composition, he was discovered by Lukas Foss, who conducted some of his music with the Brooklyn Philharmonic, and brought him into SUNY at Buffalo's Creative Associates beginning in 1968; the group toured Eastman's music in Europe and continued to perform it through '79. Eastman also had a brief theory-instructor stint at SUNY, reputedly a disaster because he couldn't adjust to the rigors of teaching. He was twice featured on *New Music America*, 1980 in Minne-

sapolis (a performance I participated in) and 1981 in San Francisco. In between, he toured Europe, sponsored by the Kitchen, and also worked with Meredith Monk. As late as 1986, the Brooklyn Academy of Music's "Next Wave" series featured his music in a dance collaboration called *Geologic Moments*, with Melissa Fesley. A black fraternity and black faculty members protested the Northwestern concert mentioned above, saying that the titles, if taken out of context, could exacerbate campus racial tensions. As a concession, concert organizer Peter Gena didn't print the titles in the program.

Explanations of Eastman's downward spin vary widely in chronology and nuance. Arts consultant Renee Levine, co-director of the Creative Associates during Eastman's tenure there, says, "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.' He torpedoed an invitation

from the French Conservatoire by insisting on a far larger fee than they had offered anyone else." Eastman's mother thinks he let his life go to waste in 1983, after a promised job at Cornell failed to come through. Despite working as a vocal coach and dance accompanist, he never landed the permanent academic position he looked for, but then, in the status-conscious '80s nobody without a doctorate got a teaching job. One thing everyone agrees on is that he was a brilliant enough composer, pianist, singer, dancer, even choreographer, with promising connections that should have guaranteed him a successful career—by American composer standards.

Summing up the general reaction, composer Peter Gena said, "It's a sad commentary that someone so talented could fall through the cracks." Others saw Eastman's end as inevitable and self-inflicted. "He was terribly undisciplined," said one colleague. "He had an unbelievable voice, and so much talent he didn't know what

to do with it. He didn't realize what a gift he had." Foss echoed: "He was a very talented musician in every respect: as a composer, a singer, a pianist. He could have had it so good, if only he hadn't had the personality problems." Renee Levine painted a vivid picture: "He was so charismatic, so... arresting, so charming. He was a Renaissance man. He had a lot of tickets written to him. But he lacked discipline. He became increasingly unreliable. And sometimes he was just damned outrageous. But I loved him, and it breaks my heart."

More pertinent than figuring where Eastman's life took its wrong turn is starting a project to collect and revive his gorgeous body of work. There are no commercial recordings, but the Creative Associates archives at SUNY at Buffalo have tapes and manuscript scores of some pre-1980 major works, including *Throughway*, *Macle*, *Stay on It*, and *If You're So Smart, Why Aren't You Rich?* Eastman lost some scores and most of his tapes in the early '80s when he was kicked out of his apartment at 4th Street and Second Avenue. (They were confiscated, his brother recalls, by the sheriff's office.) His mother has a few scores he kept under his bed at her house, but she has no idea where the symphony is that he wrote in his last years. Other works are in his brother's possession, and pianist Edmund Niemann has a piano sonata that Eastman wrote in '86. Where the *Nigger* pieces, or his *The Holy Presence, Jean D'Arc* for 10 cellos, are, no one I talked to knew. His scores were sketchy, and even once they're collected, reconstruction will depend on the memories of musicians who played them.

"The Julius we knew and loved died long ago"—that resigned sentiment cropped up in various wordings. Yet some thought that, in the last few months, he was getting his act together. I last saw Julius at a BAM concert in fall of '89. He looked great, thin and muscular as usual, cleanly dressed. He was in good spirits. He seemed ready to make a comeback. I remember hoping that I would finally get a chance to write about his music, which had meant so much to me, in the *Voice*. ■