

## The world catches up to iconoclastic composer Julius Eastman

He died homeless almost three decades ago, and his work was nearly lost. But classical music finally has room for a queer black voice in the minimalist pantheon.

When minimalist composer Julius Eastman died of cardiac arrest in a Buffalo hospital in 1990, the 49-year-old had been homeless for most of a decade. His obituary in the *Village Voice* wouldn't appear till eight months later. He'd lost most of his possessions (probably including his scores) when he lost his apartment, and no commercial recordings of his pieces existed. It became nearly impossible for musicians to play his work, or for listeners to hear it. In life, Eastman had been unforgettable: outspoken, provocative, brilliant, unapologetically queer and black. But the lonely circumstances of his death threatened to erase him from memory.

Not everyone could forget such a powerful personality, of course, and years of dogged and loving research—by people who'd known Eastman and those who'd only heard the stories—uncovered partial scores, long-neglected tapes in university libraries, and other fragments of his output. So far less than half of his catalog has been recovered, but in 2005 the first of many commercial releases of Eastman's music finally appeared: a three-CD set of archival material called *Unjust Malaise* (New World). In 2015 the University of Rochester Press published a collection of

Eastman's legacy is still being pieced together today. Mary Jane Leach, a fellow performer and composer on New York's downtown music scene in the 80s, has led much of the effort to recover his lost music. She assembled the recordings on *Unjust Malaise* by searching libraries at SUNY Buffalo and Northwestern University as well as the collections of private individuals. With musicologist Renée Levine Packer, she edited the 2015 anthology *Gay Guerrilla: Julius Eastman and His Music*, named after one of the composer's best-known works.

Beginning in the late 90s, Leach and many others laid the groundwork for the accelerating Eastman revival: over nearly two decades, they played exhausting rounds of phone tag with potential sources and made countless inquiries and archive searches, hitting nearly as many dead ends. Leach might hear that someone had a tape of a long-ago Eastman radio broadcast, only to find the cassette box empty. If she actually located a tape, it might be too degraded to salvage. Composer and producer Chris McIntyre reconstructed the Eastman piece *Trumpet* by consulting a blurry photo and transcribing a 1971 recording. The

Eastman scholarship. Recent events devoted to Eastman's music and life include a December 2016 series by the London Contemporary Music Festival, a January 2017 program by Monday Evening Concerts in Los Angeles, and two iterations of a festival called *Julius Eastman: That Which Is Fundamental*, one last spring in Philadelphia and the other this year in New York. It's all part of an upwelling of interest in the composer that surpasses anything he enjoyed when he was alive.

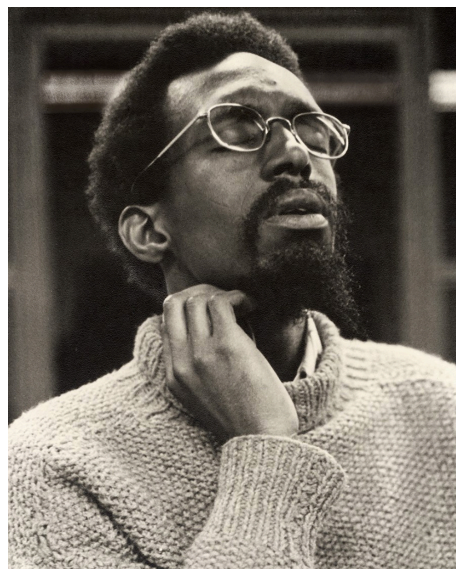
*Eastmania*, as this phenomenon is sometimes known, arrives in Chicago in force this week. On the afternoon of Sunday, February 25, the *Frequency Festival* (programmed by Reader critic Peter Margasak) hosts the city's first Julius Eastman portrait concert, curated by Chicago cellist Seth Parker Woods and held at the Cultural Center's Preston Bradley Hall.

As a composer, Eastman practiced an ecstatic, emphatic, and sometimes militant form of minimalism, eventually developing what he called "organic music"—a style of gradual accrual and accumulation, often followed by gradual disintegration. He was also a bass singer of extraordinary depth and dexterity, and as a performer and improviser he traversed a variety of musical communities in New York: not just minimalism but also free jazz and disco. Those who remember Eastman attest to the brilliance of his artistry, his inimitable and sometimes outrageous personality, and his lifelong preoccupation with spirituality. He aimed to live an outside life, and summed up his ideal in a 1976 *Buffalo News* interview: "Black to the fullest, a musician to the fullest, a homosexual to the fullest."



pursuit has yet to end, and it continues to bear fruit: recent Eastman releases include the 1974 recording *Feminine* (Frozen Reeds, 2016) and a 1980 performance packaged as *Julius Eastman: The Zürich Concert* (New World, 2017).

At a January 27 concert hosted by Manhattan



Julius Eastman in 1974, during a rehearsal of the S.E.M. Ensemble at SUNY Buffalo  
CHRIS RUBINAK

arts space the Kitchen, jazz guitarist Gerry Eastman (who controls Julius's estate) began the evening with a lengthy remembrance of his younger brother. The event was part of the New York installment of *That Which Is Fundamental*, organized by Tiona Nekkia McClodden and Dustin Hurt for Philadelphia arts nonprofit Bowerbird. The festival ran January 19 through February 10 and included not just a concert series (featuring the composer's work and newly commissioned pieces inspired by his life) but also an Eastman exhibit with archived reviews, audio interviews, and rare photos.

As Gerry told it, the siblings grew up in Ithaca, New York, where Julius showed interest in the family piano at an early age. His mother encouraged him to take lessons, and his teacher urged him to join an Episcopal choir, where he served as pianist and a boy soprano; he also participated in glee club throughout junior high and high school. Eastman attended Ithaca College for a year, then left in September 1959 for Philadelphia's prestigious Curtis Institute of Music—one of the most selective conservatories in the world, in part because its students don't pay tuition. At the time, the

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school housed students with local families rather than in dorms, but no family would host Eastman. (It's worth remembering that the Civil Rights Act was still five years away.) He was so hell-bent on getting a musical education that until his graduation in May 1963 he lived in a claustrophobic room at the local YMCA.

Eastman moved in spring 1967 to Buffalo, at the time a thriving center for contemporary music. Renée Levine Packer was then working in SUNY Buffalo's music department. "Julius Eastman appeared in my office unannounced one day—a slim, handsome black man of medium height dressed in a long army-green trench coat and white sneakers, carrying some music scores under his arm," she recalls in *Gay Guerrilla*. In September 1969, Eastman established a formal affiliation with the school's Center of the Creative and Performing Arts, becoming a Creative Associate (today the SUNY Buffalo music library is the main source for archival Eastman material). In fall 1970 he joined Petr Kotik's S.E.M. Ensemble, the group whose 1974 rendition of his piece *Femenine* was released in 2016. Eastman also became part of the university's music department, teaching music theory.

During this period Eastman performed extensively as a pianist and vocalist, presenting works by luminaries such as Frederic Rzewski, Pauline Oliveros, and Alvin Lucier. (Later in the 70s, he'd stage concerts with Meredith Monk, Carman Moore, Tania León, Arthur Russell, and others.) At the Aspen Music Festival in July 1970, Eastman sang the U.S. premiere of Peter Maxwell Davies's *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, a demanding work that showcased his vocal agility and theatrical range. Later that year in the UK he made a studio recording of the piece that was nominated for a Grammy in 1973.

Most notoriously, Eastman caused a minor scandal at the 1975 June in Buffalo festival while performing John Cage's *Song Books*. Loosely interpreting Cage's already loose direction to "perform a disciplined action," Eastman brought a man and a woman onstage,

then theatrically and erotically undressed the man (the woman refused). Cage treated his own homosexuality as a private matter, and he was incensed—the Zen saint of the avant-garde, famous for letting sounds be sounds, apparently had a tougher time letting people be people. But Eastman saw no

distinction between experimenting in his music and negotiating his identity. As Northwestern professor Ryan Dohoney noted in a [2014 academic paper](#), "Eastman, like numerous queer musicians before him . . . used his compositions, improvisations, and performances as modes of creating gay life."

When Eastman moved to New York City in the late 1970s, his work began to reflect this negotiation—most plainly in the confrontational titles he gave his pieces, which sometimes provoked vehement backlash.

During an Eastman residency at Northwestern University in early 1980, the school posted concert announcements that listed the works he'd present: *Crazy Nigger*, *Evil Nigger*, and *Gay Guerrilla*. According to a [2011 history of the residency](#) by Eastman scholar Andrew Hanson-Dvoracek, black student alliance For Members Only challenged the titles as "racist," threatened to protest the concert, and demanded a meeting with Eastman and Peter Gena, director of Northwestern's Contemporary Music Ensemble. Eastman and Gena agreed that public announcements and posters would instead list the event as "New Music for Four Pianos." Eastman didn't change the titles, but he shared them only inside the concert hall.

To explain himself, Eastman opened his January 1980 concert with a spoken introduction, which appears on *Unjust Malaise*. "Now there was, there was a little problem with the titles of the pieces," he said. "There were some students and one faculty member who felt that the titles were somehow derogatory in some manner, being that the

word 'nigger' is in it. . . . Now the reason that I use that particular word is because for me it has . . . what I call a 'basicness' about it. . . . And what I mean by 'niggers' is that thing which is fundamental, that person or thing that obtains a basicness, a fundamentalness, and eschews that thing which is superficial or, what can we say, elegant."

Music critic and composer Kyle Gann (a longtime *Reader* contributor) attended that concert, and recalls Eastman delivering "a wise, calm speech." As confrontational as the composer's ideas could be, his bearing was serene. "He carried himself calmly, and his deep bass voice gave him a remarkable gravitas, like an Old Testament prophet," Gann says. "His ideas were way out of the mainstream and he expressed them fearlessly, but it was their content that provoked people, not his manner."

Within just a few years, though, and still in his early 40s, Eastman seemed to sense that his life was coming to a close. He was evicted from his apartment in late 1981 or early '82, at which point most of his belongings were confiscated—likely including all the scores he still had. In a [1984 interview with radio host David Garland](#), recorded when he was drifting between his mother's and brother's homes, he described himself as in his "last stage." A faculty job he'd hoped to land at Cornell University fell through, and Eastman's drinking and drug use picked up. He worked for a few months in the late 80s at a Tower Records in Manhattan, and according to his boss there (Paul Tai, later of New World Records), Eastman was also in therapy. But he never found a place of his own again.

As Leach has noted, many of Eastman's works from this final period—some composed, some improvised—seem preoccupied with spiritual themes, such as *Sacred Songs* (1980), *The Four Books of Confucius* (1982), *Buddha* (1984), *One God* (1985-'86), and *Our Father* (1989). During these years, Eastman would appear in "all white toga-like garb," according to

Packer, as "a tacit proclamation of his spiritual endeavor."

Eastman's spirituality was combinative; though raised Christian, he had many guides. In the interview with Garland, he professed interest in parts of

Zen and said he'd been reading the Koran and studying the works of Confucius and Lao Tzu. "I live like a wandering monk," he said. "I've been fighting with the Lord for a long, long, long, long time."



Eastman at work  
DONALD BURKHART



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The works on this Sunday's program convey Eastman's reverence as well as a corresponding defiance. First is *Gay Guerrilla* (1979), followed by the solo vocal piece *Prelude to the Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc* and *The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc* (1981) for ten cellos. When Eastman premiered *Gay Guerrilla* at his January 1980 Northwestern concert, he explained its title as well:

"These names, either I glorify them or they glorify me," Eastman said. "And in the case of 'guerrilla,' that glorifies 'gay.' . . . A guerrilla is someone who in any case is sacrificing his life for a point of view. And you know if there is a cause, and if it is a great cause, those who belong to that cause will sacrifice their blood because without blood there is no cause. So therefore that is the reason that I use 'gay guerrilla,' in hopes that I might be one if called upon to be one."

Composed for any number of identical instruments but most often performed on four pianos (as it was at Northwestern), *Gay Guerrilla* begins slowly and somberly—"like bells tolling," as concert curator Seth Parker Woods describes it. Over the course of 20 minutes it builds to a booming, brazen musical quotation of the Lutheran hymn "Ein Feste Burg Ist Unser Gott" ("A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"). Though Eastman's piece is instrumental, the original hymn includes the lines "And though this world, with devils filled / Should threaten to undo us / We will not fear, for God hath willed / His truth to triumph through us."

Eastman wrote *Gay Guerrilla* in 1979, ten years after the Stonewall riots and on the cusp of the devastating AIDS epidemic, as musicologist Luciano Chessa noted in his contribution to the book of the same name. Reflecting on this historical moment, Parker Woods points out that 1979 was just before "all hell broke loose" for the gay community, so that the precarious questions of "who could say what" and "who could come out" were newly fraught and unsettled.

Joan of Arc inspired Eastman as a symbol of the indestructibility of the human desire for dignity and freedom. As a leader of the French army during the Hundred Years' War, she was captured and put on trial by the English for heresy, theft, and cross-dressing, among other crimes. In her defense, she said she'd been obeying the voices of saints, but she was burned alive in 1431. Almost 500 years later, she was canonized by the Roman Catholic Church. When Eastman premiered *The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc* at The Kitchen in New York in April 1981, his [program notes](#) read in part:

"Dear Joan,  
"Find presented a work of art, in your name, full of honor, integrity, and boundless courage. This work of art, like all works of art in your name, can never and will never match your most inspired passion. . . . I offer it as a reminder to those who think that they can destroy liberators by acts of treachery, malice, and murder. They forget that the mind has memory. They forget that Good Character is the foundation of all acts. They think that no one sees the corruption of their

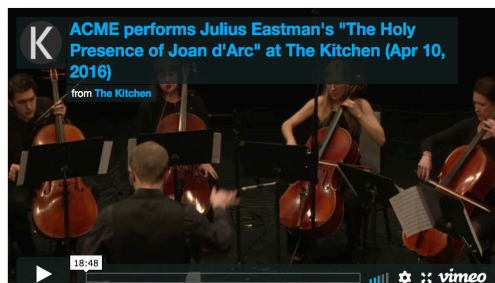


Julius Eastman plays the violin at Griffie Sculpture Park in East Otto, New York, during a 1975 rehearsal by the S.E.M. Ensemble.  
CHRIS RUSNAK

deeds, and like 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. Therefore I take your name and meditate upon it, but not as much as I should."

In the piece's solo vocal prelude, Eastman names the saints that Joan heard: Saint Michael, Saint Margaret, and Saint Catherine. And he repeats their admonition to her: "Joan, speak boldly when they question you."

The prelude and the piece itself were never performed together while Eastman was alive. He recorded himself improvising the prelude at his



East Village apartment not long before he was evicted, and in the early 80s it was broadcast on the radio before a recording of *The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc*. Contemporary performers can duplicate that sequence only because multiple scholars and performers have transcribed the improvised prelude.

In the words of Parker Woods, *The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc* is both "a call to prayer" and a "call to arms." Three of its ten cellos (the

three saints?) soar above the others with songlike voices, while the others maintain an insistent, nonstop pulse.

Today one of Eastman's most popular works, *The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc* inspired Mary Jane Leach to begin her search for his music. She found a dub of that early 80s radio recording in the possession of composer C. Bryan Rulon, then acquired the master tape through engineer Steve Cellum. The first two pages of its score she located in the collections of the New York Public Library's Performing Arts Research Center, where they ended up after Eastman failed to reclaim them at the end of a 1982 exhibit. The sheet music most frequently used today was transcribed from Cellum's tape by cellist Clarice Jensen.

Any transcription of a piece for ten identical instruments is by necessity a painstaking task, and likely to result in an approximation of the original score at best. The love and labor that Jensen devoted to *The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc* parallel the time and energy that countless people have poured into this Eastman resurgence.

Parker Woods counts himself as part of the "new generation of champions" of the composer's music. He describes what draws him to it: "You can hear the fragility, you hear the struggle, but you hear—at the core of it—you hear beauty, and you hear extreme experimentation . . . [reflecting] on many parts of life: the comedic, the sensitive, the serious, the strained. It's all in there, you know, in all the different pieces I've heard or witnessed. And I think now is the time. It's a music we need to hear. [Eastman's] music is a social music; it's a commentary on the times . . . [P]eople are now realizing again."

Eastman sought to do good. With his art he addressed moral, social, spiritual, and political questions, not just aesthetic ones. In an autobiographical blurb for a poster advertising a 1981 concert, he referenced the Buddha's Eightfold Path: "Right thought, speech and action are now my main concerns. No other thing is as important or as useful. Right thought, Right Speech, Right action, Right music."

This quest for "right music"—a fierce seeking after the discipline and wisdom necessary to create art that operates in alignment with moral truth—must be considered a major part of Eastman's legacy. He maintained it even through the lean years at the end of his career. "Not that many people are banging on my door for this or for that," he admitted in 1984, "so I'm mostly writing imaginary music. No one's really commissioning me."

It's not Eastman's work that's changed since then. Audiences have changed, slowly, as the public collectively interrogates its assumptions about whose music should be heard, whose voices should be amplified, and who should be permitted to live their lives to the fullest. The current fervor for his music suggests that society has begun to apprehend the truth he grasped, however fleetingly, more than three decades ago.

—Kerry O'Brien