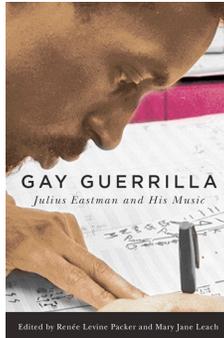


"Julius Eastman's 'Exuberant Chaos' "
by Toni Lester (March 20, 2018)



One of the things about the late, pioneering, composer and artist, Julius Eastman, is that he had his heart and soul in some of the most important social and artistic movements of his, and now, our, time. He was a proud, vocal black and gay man when both of these identity categories were widely demeaned, and composed improvisational music for classically trained artists that found inspiration in a wide array of divergent sources, including pop and downtown house music, jazz, and the kind of chance-based music favored by his elder contemporary - John Cage. Eastman even toyed with Buddhist spirituality for a time.

Full of that kind of strong-willed, flaming brilliance that is associated with a certain of artistic genius, some found him difficult to work with, while others, including his brother - the jazz artist Gerry Eastman - cite racism and prejudice as the main reasons he was not able to reach the kind of acclaim that came so readily to the likes of Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Le Monte Young, and others after them. Eastman created works that were both sonically sophisticated and provocative. With ensemble pieces entitled "Evil Nigger" (1979), "Femenine" (1970s), and "Gay Guerilla" (circa 1980), he often linked overtly queer and racialized themes to art music. The composer died in obscurity in 1990 at the age of 50, destitute and ill. He was once supposed to have said: "What I am trying to achieve is to be what I am to the fullest ... Black to the fullest, a musician to the fullest, a homosexual to the fullest."¹ Now, 28 years after his death, his work is being heralded and performed around the world.

There is more to write about Eastman, his fellow SUNY Buffalo S.E.M.¹ composers, and the whole early New York art and minimalist music scene. Keep a look out for something from me on that soon. In the meantime, check out the exhaustive and excellent 2015 anthology dedicated to him and his work, Gay Guerilla (edited by Mary Jane Leach and Renee Levine Packer).² But for those of you who wish to simply situate yourself into the middle of Eastman's sonic vision, devoid of all the narrative rhetoric, get the disc set, Unjust Malaise.³ Listening to the CD, Alex Ross from the New Yorker imagined what it must have been like to be at one

¹ See <http://semensemble.org>.

² See <https://boydellandbrewer.com/gay-guerrilla.html>.

³ See http://www.newworldrecords.org/album.cgi?rm=view&album_id=15097.

particular performance probably pre-orchestrated by Eastman, where seemingly all of a sudden, certain audience members jumped out of their seats and joined the musicians on stage to participate, the overall effect being one of "exuberant chaos".² Based on what we know of Eastman, no doubt this metaphor extended to the innovative chaos he generated cognitively, politically and artistically for anyone who came into his orbit. So sit back, listen, and feel grateful to people like composer, Mary Jane Leach,³ who almost single-handedly worked to keep Eastman's good name and papers from being lost to time and ignorance all these years. As you do, notice how refreshingly "new" Eastman's music still sounds, and perhaps feel a bit of regret for not having been there when it was still smoldering in the flame of his short, but authentically lived life.

¹ Zachary Woolfe, " Minimalist Composer Julius Eastman, Dead for 26 Years, Crashes the Canon," New York Times, Oct. 30, 2016, at www.nytimes.com/2016/10/30/arts/music/minimalist-composer-julius-eastman-dead-for-26-years-crashes-the-canon.html.

² Alex Ross, "Julius Eastman's Guerrilla Minimalism," The New Yorker, Jan. 20, 2017, at www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/23/julius-eastmans-guerrilla-minimalism.

³ See <http://www.mjleach.com/eastman.htm>.