

by Kyle Gann

In 1973, Nonesuch records issued a recording of Peter Maxwell Davies's avant-garde work *Eight Songs for a Mad King*. Based on the intermittent insanity of King George III, the piece featured a stunningly histrionic vocal technique over an awesome range, achieved by an unknown name: Julius Eastman. Over the next few years, Eastman's name would crop up occasionally, in connection with the Creative Associates new music group at SUNY at Buffalo, associated with Lukas Foss and Morton Feldman, and touring with Petr Kotik's SEM ensemble. Eastman was a phenomenal singer with an outrageous personality to match. He

was a composer, one of the first to start twisting minimalism into a new direction. He was African American, he was gay, he was outspoken, he was political. He created a scandal at the June in Buffalo festival in 1975 still argued about today. Performing a piece by John Cage, he took the liberty of undressing a young man onstage, and the next day the usually mild-mannered Cage pounded his fist on the piano shouting about it.

Sometime in the 1980s, Eastman disappeared from the music world. I happened to see him, in line for a concert at Brooklyn Academy of Music, around 1989. In January, 1991, I got wind of a rumor that

Julius



he had died. I started calling around, and confirmed: he had passed away alone, age 49, at Millard Fillmore Hospital in Buffalo. I published his first obituary in the *Village Voice* on January 22, 1991. Some of his friends were skeptical, for rumors of Julius's death had circulated before.

Only several years later did the struggle to resurrect Eastman's amazing music begin. Buoyed by the Creative Associates, he had toured his music in Europe in the early 1980s, and a faint paper trail still existed. Fellow composer-performer Peter Gena had organized a concert of Eastman's multiple piano works at Northwestern University, which I attended as a student. The titles were expressions of Eastman's political concerns: *Crazy Nigger*, *Evil Nigger*, *Gay Guerrilla*. In his elegantly modulated, sepulchral voice, Eastman gave a pre-concert talk explaining his affection for the offending word:

What I mean by niggers is, that thing which is fundamental; that person or thing that attains [sic] to a basicness or a fundamentalness, and eschews that which is superficial, or, could we say, elegant.... There are 99 names of Allah, and there are 52 niggers.

Nevertheless, in response to student protest, the titles were omitted from the program.

Over the next several years, Eastman torpedoed his own career. He was a brilliant diva. Friends would arrange job offers, which he would lose by demanding too much money. His brother was a jazz

radio station. Other friends, Mary Jane Leach and Peter Gena especially, had scores squirreled away. Leach began the task of collecting what was left. Eastman's scores were idiosyncratically notated, often just in noteheads with cryptic markings. Recordings were found, though, and Paul Tai at New World Records agreed to issue a three-CD set titled *Unjust Malaise* (an anagram of his own name that Eastman favored), which is now available. (Ironically, Tai had been Eastman's boss at Tower Records.)

If the early minimalism of Reich and Glass was sleek and cool, Eastman's minimalism was a roaring furnace. *Stay On It*

who remember performances are invaluable aids in reconstruction.

For someone whom we all felt had slipped through the cracks of history as completely as a composer could, Eastman is having a remarkable comeback. The New World set has garnered a wild underground reputation. In December 2006 I arranged a performance of *Gay Guerrilla* for guitars (his piano pieces were supposedly performable on any multiple instruments) at Bard College, possibly his first performance since his death. The California E.A.R. Unit performed *Crazy Nigger* in April of 2007 at REDCAT, and Dutch pianist Cees van Zeeland arranged another performance at

Eastman

musician, and it seems apparent that Eastman carried around some guilt about being involved in "White man's music." He started drinking heavily, and got into crack, but as late as 1986 he provided music for a dance by Melissa Fenley at BAM. About that time he was working as a clerk at Tower Records in New York. And then: nothing. He was evicted from his apartment, his scores and possessions thrown out on the street by the sheriff. I heard later he was sleeping in Tompkins Square Park. When I saw him that one last time, he looked fine. Friends are convinced he died of AIDS; but the family denies it, and the official cause of death was cardiac arrest.

Those of us who knew Julius feared that his music was gone for good, existing only in our memory. However, before leaving Chicago I had gotten a duplicate tape of that Northwestern concert. I passed a few copies around, played it on my Internet

(1973) was a precocious fusion of minimalist stasis and dance beats, with voices chanting the title. *Evil Nigger* (1979) was an attack on four keyboards in savage repeated notes. *Gay Guerrilla* (ca. 1980) ended with the pianos playing "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" in canon, reinterpreted as a gay manifesto. *The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc* (1981) was a pulsating homage to that saint for ten cellos, performed and recorded at The Kitchen in New York. Eastman had a theory about "organic" music, whereby each new section or phrase contained all of the earlier sections or phrases. In practice it was a kind of additive process, wherein new ostinatos would be added over old ones, which would gradually drop out. It was some of the most angry and physical minimalism ever made. And yet others of Eastman's scores are just cryptic, and it's difficult to tell where the music comes from. Friends

the Hague for last March. In April Ne(x)t-works revived *Stay on It* and a piano sonata at the Kitchen.

It's a story worth making into a movie. Eastman was rumored to have written a symphony: it's been found, but whether it can be deciphered is another matter. Leach has devoted part of her web site to his music, including his scanned scores, at <http://www.mjleach.com/EastmanScores.htm>. As one of Eastman's best friends told me after he died, "Sometimes he was just damned outrageous." And somehow, astonishingly, his outrageous music is back in circulation.

Composer Kyle Gann is a professor at Bard College. His latest book is Music Downtown: Writings from the Village Voice. His music is recorded on the New Albion, New World, Lovely Music and Cold Blue labels.