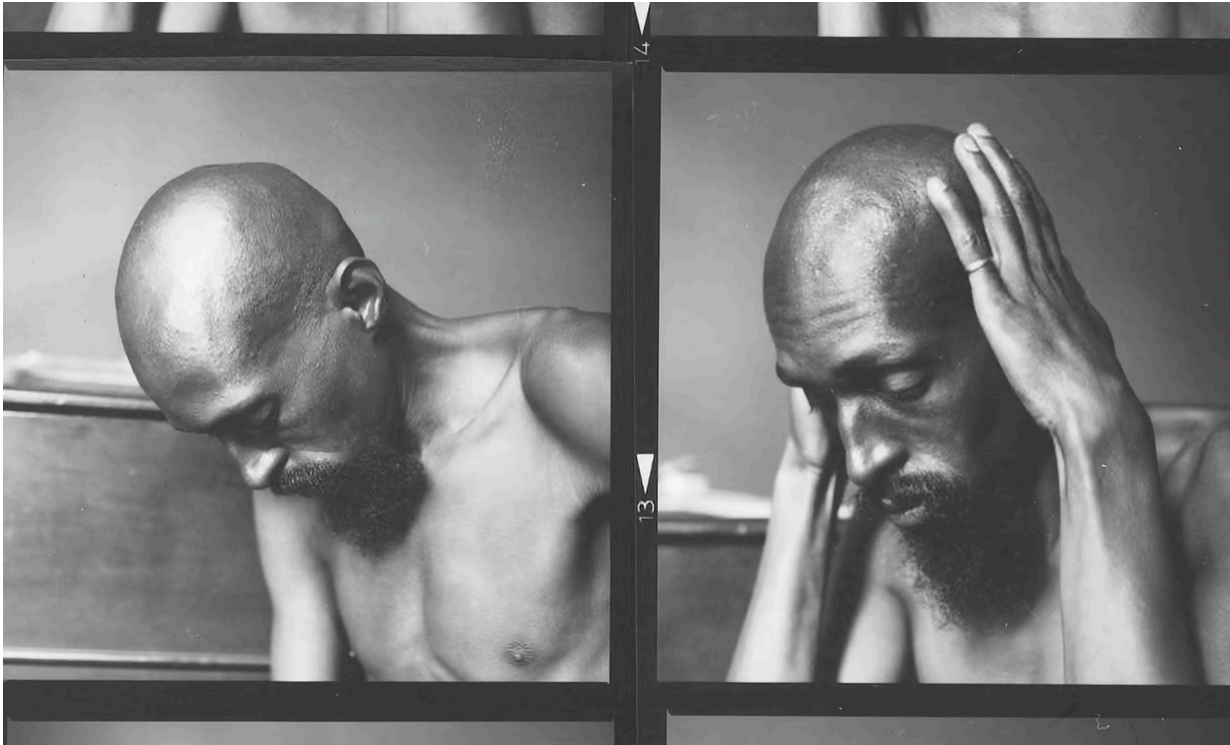


## Music

🕒 This article is more than 10 years old

# Julius Eastman: the groundbreaking composer America almost forgot

When the pianist died homeless and alone in 1990, it looked like his music had died with him - but fans and one tireless researcher refused to let that happen



📷 A former child soprano and ballet dancer, Julius Eastman's reputation as a pianist and composer grew in the 1970s. Photograph: Andrew Roth/PR Company Handout

---

---

---

---

**Andrew Male**

**T**he last time Rocco Di Pietro saw [Julius Eastman](#) was on a freezing April morning in Buffalo in 1989. “Julius showed up at my door,” remembers Di Pietro. “He was homeless and looking for bus money to get to California. I gave him what I could, offered to make him an omelette, buy him cigarettes and drive him to the station. He was wearing this oversize jacket with all these pockets. They were stuffed with miniature scores. He pulled out this Brahms lieder, sat at my piano, and played. He was singing full-force. It was unbearable. He still had such a wonderful voice. I never saw him again. A year later I heard he was dead.”

It’s an August afternoon in Columbus, Ohio, and 66-year-old teacher and composer Di Pietro is in his basement looking through old letters. We should be discussing the release of [Femenine](#), a recently discovered 1974 recording by his old friend, the late composer Julius Eastman, but memories keep getting in the way. “I came down this morning,” says Pietro, an audible catch in his voice. “I don’t know why. Your phone call, maybe. And I found all these letters from Julius, and a handwritten score. And all these years I’ve been telling people I don’t have any.”

When Eastman died of heart failure, alone, in Millard Fillmore hospital in Buffalo, New York, on 28 May 1990, aged just 49, his work disappeared with him. A former child soprano and ballet dancer from Ithaca, New York, who studied piano and composition at Philadelphia’s Curtis Institute, Eastman first came to prominence with Buffalo University’s early 70s avant-garde [SEM Ensemble](#), performing with [Morton Feldman](#), [John Cage](#) and [Pauline Oliveros](#). Through bravura piano and vocal recitals at Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center, his reputation grew, culminating with a Grammy-nominated

---

---

## Most viewed



Muscles, metrosexuals and male tears: the 39 pictures that changed the way we see men (for good and for bad)



Key player in false Talarico rumor has history of online posts invoking Nazi Germany



The ultra-rich are spending one million dollars a day fighting California’s proposed billionaire tax



Insults, odd obsessions and rambling thoughts: a week in Trump rallies

---

performance as George III on the 1973 recording of [Peter Maxwell Davies's Eight Songs For A Mad King](#).

Yet, as an out gay black man working in a predominantly straight white environment, Eastman grew progressively more uncomfortable. In a pivotal SEM performance of [John Cage's Song Books](#) in June 1975, with Cage present, Eastman staged a lecture on “a new system of love” in which he undressed a male volunteer (possibly his boyfriend), while making sexual overtures in acrobatic baritone. Cage was furious.

“Julius tried to ‘out’ Cage,” Di Pietro says. “He said, I hate that Cage never speaks about sex. But he regretted it because Cage was so angry. Julius was deeply divided.”

“Cage thought it was a parody of him,” says SEM co-founder [Petr Kotik](#). “It was a huge scandal. Julius started identifying with the black community. He moved to New York in 1976, just as [Pierre Boulez](#) wanted to do Mad King with him. Do you know how many doors that would have opened?”

Instead, Eastman immersed himself in Manhattan's downtown scene, collaborating with [Meredith Monk](#), [Robert Wilson](#) and, significantly, [Arthur Russell](#). He conducted the orchestras for Russell's Instrumentals and Tower of Meaning. It's his operatic vocals you hear on [Dinosaur L's 24>24 Music](#).



Trump pauses new Russia sanctions passed by Congress amid deepening row with Ukraine

## Video unavailable

This video is not available

“That Lower East Side gay scene was just emerging,” says [Evan Lurie](#), keyboardist and co-founder of downtown no-wave jazzers [the Lounge Lizards](#). “I first met Julius at the Bar on Second Avenue. He said, ‘Don’t you play with the Lounge Lizards? I want to meet their keyboard player.’ He wanted to give me composition lessons. My first lesson was to play Satie, whilst he put on lipstick. I now wonder if that was a test, to see if it would push me away. He was saying, I have all of this knowledge I want to pass on. I still have my copy of Gymnopédies, smeared in red. The lessons petered out [when] things became difficult for Julius.”

Around the end of 1981, Eastman was evicted from his East Village apartment due to unpaid rent. All his belongings, including his music, were abandoned on the street and, when he didn’t return, taken to the city dump. Effectively homeless, still composing, Eastman became increasingly reliant on alcohol and drugs. He lived rough for a few years in Tompkins Square

Park, then drifted off the map. Following his death, eight months passed before the first obituary.

“That’s the first I knew he’d died,” says composer [Mary Jane Leach](#). “I’d first met him in New York, spring 1981. We all thought we were pretty hip back then, but Julius walked in off the street, dressed in leather and chains, drinking from a glass of scotch at 10 in the morning. It was like, woah!”

In 1998, Leach began teaching composition at [Cal Arts](#). Attempting to track down an Eastman piece for 10 cellos she’d seen him conduct in 1981, Leach encountered a series of dead ends: “It gradually dawned on me. All his music was missing.”

As a consequence, Leach became “an accidental musicologist”, hunting for Eastman’s lost works. “My analogy is like coming across an accident,” she says. “I couldn’t walk away and hope someone else would show up.”

First fruits came in 2005 with [Unjust Malaise](#), a 3CD collection centred around a January 1980 Northwestern University concert for four pianos, a trio of hour-plus post-minimalist pieces entitled Evil Nigger, Crazy Nigger and Gay Guerrilla.

## Julius Eastman - Unjust Malaise (full album)

Ανορθόγραφο σκουλήκι



Watch on

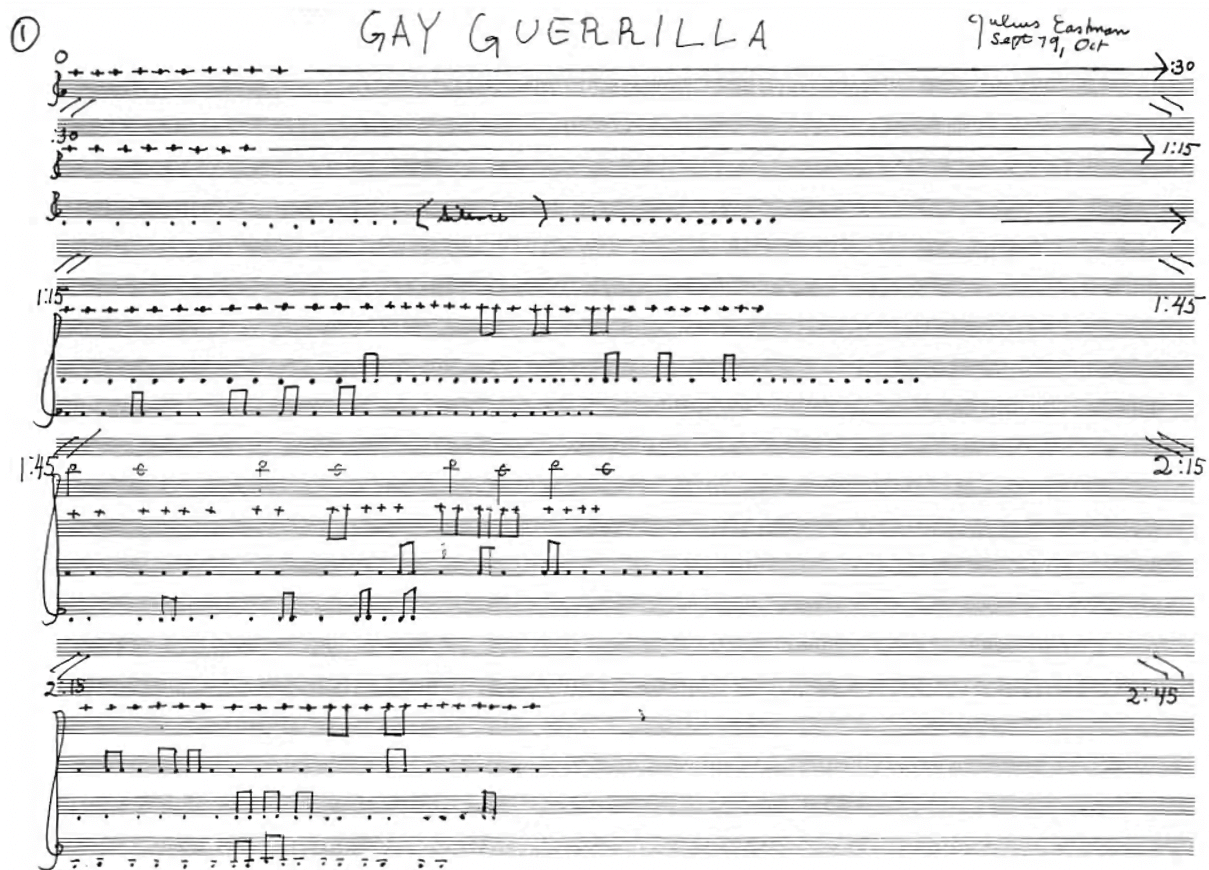
In a spoken-word introduction, Eastman equates the “Nigger” series with “the field niggers on which the American economic system was built ... that fundamental thing which eschews the superficial”. Gay Guerrilla, he adds, “means someone sacrificing his life for a point of view ... [I hope] I might be one, if called upon.”

Unjust Malaise effectively rewrote the history of post-war American New Music, restoring to its narrative a gay black voice creating a liberating, high-energy form of organic minimalism. Leach’s most recent find, Femenine, continues the story.

Performed by SEM Ensemble, in Albany in 1974, with Eastman on piano, Femenine is an immersive hour-plus chamber piece for piano, mechanised sleigh bells, vibraphone, woodwind, horns, strings and synthesiser. “Eastman wanted to please listeners,” says Leach. “He said of Femenine that ‘the end sounds like the angels opening up heaven.’”

The performance was organised by 24-year-old composition student, Julie Kabat, who'd met Eastman at a New Hampshire music workshop in 1973. Kabat doesn't recall the exact number of players or instruments on Femenine, but does remember that Eastman served soup during the performance and wore a dress. Steve Cellum, who recorded the concert, thinks it could well have been an apron, "for the soup".

"I loved Julius's wit," Kabat says. "Everyone wandering around with their soup, as this music gently shifted, that provocative commentary at the edge of it. His music still resonates, because those race issues still haunt us."



📷 A page from Julius Eastman's Gay Guerrilla score. Photograph: Andrew Przystanski and Bennington College

In 2013 Jace Clayton, AKA [DJ/rupture](#) played homage to Eastman's resonant music with [The Julius Eastman Memory Depot](#), which digitally manipulated new recordings of Evil Nigger and Gay Guerrilla.

In 2016, says Di Pietro, “many young composers are getting back to ‘that fundamental thing’. Julius was ahead of the curve. In fact, he got so far ahead of the curve there was nothing left.”

Mary Jane Leach cites one young Philadelphia group, [Bowerbird](#), who, she says with some relief, look set to take over her role as Eastman's unofficial researchers. Before then, there are a handful of Eastman works still left to release, including, she hopes, “a 1980 solo concert for piano and voice [that] sounds like Cecil Taylor”.

However, two days after our interview, Di Pietro sends me an email, telling me he's transcribed the Eastman score he found in his basement. It's called Hail Mary.

“Julius sent it in 1984,” he says, “as a little meditation, when I was isolated in the world. He was saying, ‘It will all be OK, don't give up’, at a time when he was giving up. I was grateful, but I was embarrassed as well. I buried it, for 32 years.”

The piece will premiere in November.

*Julius Eastman's Femenine is available now on CD from frozen reeds. Gay Guerrilla: Julius Eastman and His Music, edited by Renée Levine Packer and Mary Jane Leach is published by University of Rochester Press.*



**Most viewed**