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A Long-Lost Score, Rebuilt With the Help of a Photo

By Seth Colter Walls
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The death of the composer and performer Julius Eastman in 1990 went largely unobserved, even in the artistic circles he had long traveled in. By then, after a string of misfortunes, documentary evidence of his music had withered nearly to nothing. For those who cherished the work of this inventive firebrand — a conceptualist steeped in dance, Minimalism and jazz-informed improvisation — a restoration seemed deeply implausible.

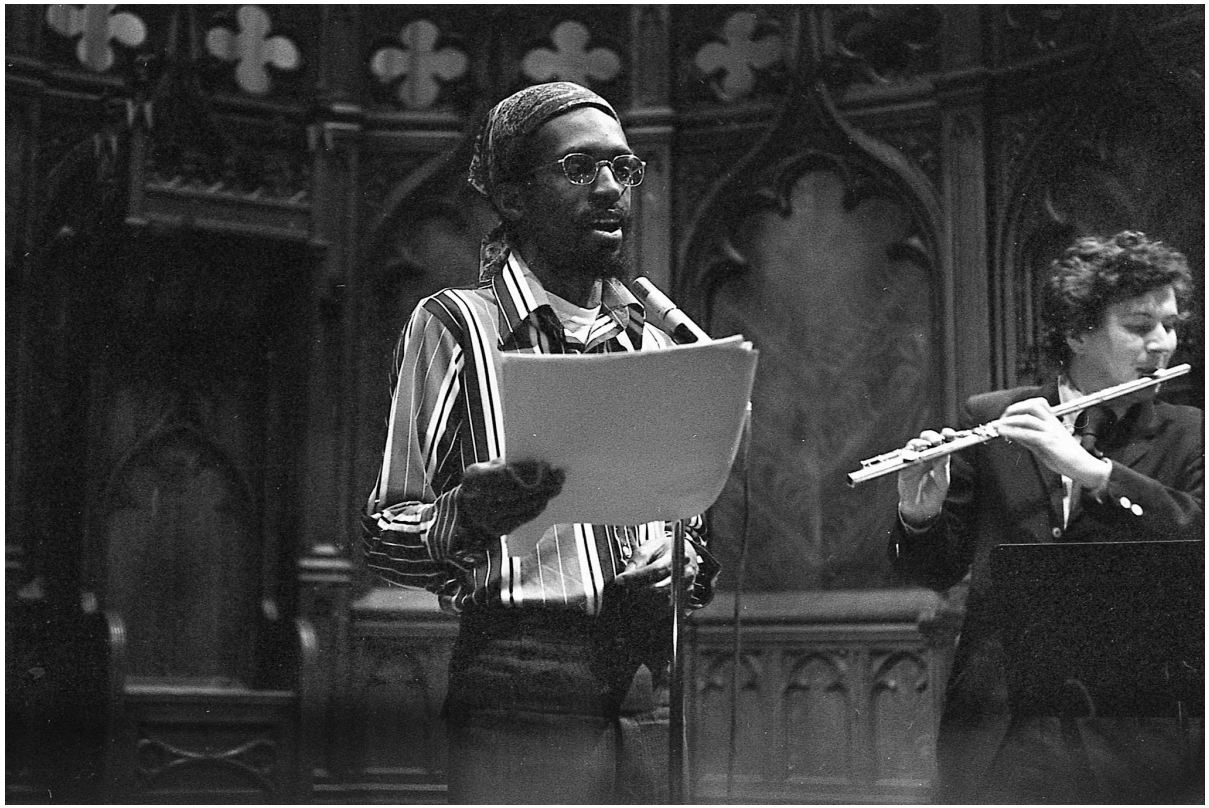
Yet that is what has transpired. The diligent research of scholars like Mary Jane Leach has resulted in the discovery and release of multiple recordings, as well as a 2015 collection of essays called "Gay Guerrilla," after one of Eastman's politically pointed pieces.

More is still being uncovered. The Kitchen in Chelsea, where Eastman had important performances, has begun a three-week festival, "Julius Eastman: That Which Is Fundamental." Modeled after a similar presentation in Philadelphia last year, it is organized by the artist Tiona Nekkia McClodden and by Dustin Hurt of Bowerbird, a Philadelphia arts organization, along with members of the Kitchen's curatorial team.

Along with newly unearthed biographical material from the Kitchen's archives, the festival will also include a performance of a riotous Eastman work, "Trumpet" — written in the early 1970s for seven trumpeters (ideally), or (barring that) seven soprano instruments. While the library at the State University of New York

at Buffalo has a recording of a 1971 performance, no part of the score was thought to have survived.

But the recent discovery of the first two pages of “Trumpet,” along with a transcription of the Buffalo performance by Chris McIntyre, has made possible what he calls a “realization” of the work, which will be presented at the Kitchen on Feb. 3 by the ensemble TILT Brass. Here are edited excerpts from a conversation with Mr. McIntyre about the reconstitution.



Eastman rehearsing in Buffalo in 1972. Ron Hammond

How did the first pages of the score fall into your hands?

This gentlemen, Ron Hammond, attended a concert of “Trumpet” at a church in Buffalo. He’s a photographer, and he took photographs throughout the event. He then requested a couple pages of the score. And he just photographed it and superimposed it [over a portrait of Eastman].

Then last year, he saw a profile [of Eastman] in The New Yorker, and it was like, “Oh, wait a minute, I know who that is.” And he went back into his archives, and found that photograph.

By then, you were already working on a transcription of the 1971 recording. How had that been going?

The plan was just to reverse-engineer, as best as possible, what I’m hearing in my ears. There’s often seven completely different performances happening at once. It was scary.

I do assume always with Julius’s work — and it’s certainly audible — that there are improvisational moments for sure. That being said, there are also clearly things that are not improvised. And so in the midst of the chaos, differentiating between those was going to be an almost impossible task. Before I had those pages, I would have said it’s going to take me a year, just to really try and suss it out. But with those score pages, it gave me a much tighter focus.

Eastman wrote out seven different opening lines, one for each player. But then, at an early hinge point, the players are supposed to choose one of the first three of those lines to repeat, 10 times. Does that give you clues about the relationship between free choice and scripted requirement in the rest of the score?

That amount of freedom kind of winnows and expands throughout the piece. It snaps back and forth between those two perspectives. [In the opening] the pitch material is pretty limited, but it’s really dense. You sort of gather that it is meant to be this kaleidoscopic thing.

The cover of the 2016 release of Eastman's "Femenine" (Frozen Reeds).

You have a background in both modern-classical and jazz performance. What goes through your mind when you see Eastman's indication in the score that "Trumpet" should be played with a "jazzlike" feel?

For a long time, I didn't register the "jazzlike" indication! But "jazzlike," I think, would probably tell someone new to it that it was supposed to be kind of loose and free and have a certain verve to it. There are jazz players on the recording. They actually do kind of swing a little bit.

Your ensemble will have members of TILT Brass and also guests like Jaimie Branch. How did you decide which player takes which part?

This is one of those facts of musical life, especially in improvisation: People matter. There's definitely things I've put on Jaimie's plate, just because it's Jaimie. When it's really a [jazz-style] "blowing" moment, you're going to go to the person in the band whose working method that is.

How important is it for everyone to be exactly in sync at the changeovers from one section to the next?

My instruction is going to be: Don't worry about others around you at all. Don't make it sound like you're purposely not trying to start with them — but don't try and start with them. It's an eschewing of hierarchy. That was really the zeitgeist.

Yes, there are certainly melodic fragments here. And people pop out when they play those things. But it's not really, "Now it's my turn to shine." It's more, "I'm adding to the flow of what we're all doing."

Julius Eastman: That Which Is Fundamental
Through Feb. 10 at the Kitchen; the kitchen.org.

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