CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

A Long-Lost Composer Is Raised From the Dead

Julius Eastman: That Which Is Fundamental NYT Critic's Pick

By Zachary Woolfe
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Near the end of a performance on Sunday evening, nine people emerged from the audience to join the four pianists playing. Arranging themselves a few to each piano, these interlopers began to press the keys, too, for a climactic effect that eventually matched the rich, chaotic peal of a full carillon of church bells.

It took a village to complete the work, "Crazy Nigger," one of the brooding late-1970s pieces to which the composer Julius Eastman gave bluntly confrontational titles. And it has taken a village to raise Eastman (1940-90) from the dead, where he and his music languished for years, unheard.

The performance on Sunday, at the Knockdown Center in Queens, was part of the essential festival Julius Eastman: That Which Is Fundamental. Organized by the artist Tiona Nekkia McClodden and by Dustin Hurt of Bowerbird, a Philadelphia arts organization, along with members of the curatorial team at the Kitchen in Chelsea, it is the latest marker in the ongoing restoration of a crucial artist.

It continues. Go, on Tuesday at the Kitchen, to an evening exploring Eastman's dance collaborations. And on Saturday there, for the reincarnation of his unruly "Trumpet" and the intense "Holy Presence of Joan D'Arc," for 10 cellos. See, until Feb. 10, an exhibition blending archival riches and contemporary reverberations.

Not so long ago, such a dense revival of Eastman's work would have been impossible. Destitute and mentally ill in the late 1980s, he fled New York City and made his way to Buffalo, his former home, where he died in a hospital of causes that remain vague.

By then he was so distant from the artistic scene of which he was once a vibrant member that it was only when The Village Voice published an obituary in January 1991, eight months later, that his old friends and collaborators found out he was gone. His scores had years before been destroyed or vanished; recordings of them were more or less nonexistent, and none released commercially.

A vital career seemed entirely lost. First in Buffalo, whose state university campus was a new-music hotbed, and then in another hotbed, the downtown New York of the '70s, Eastman had been the charismatic center of the party — sweet-natured, arrogant, exuberantly provocative. His compositions radiated confidence; his solo-piano improvisations balanced conviction and meditation; his bass voice, in music by Meredith Monk, Peter Maxwell Davies and Frederic Rzewski, was a formidable mixture of reverberation and clarity.

All that was stilled, long before he died.

It was because of the determination of a small circle of advocates — particularly the composer and performer Mary Jane Leach, who had worked with Eastman in the 1980s — that material began to reaccumulate. Archival recordings and scores were discovered and released; transcriptions were created. The past decade has seen a trickle, and then a relative flood, of performances.



The S.E.M. Ensemble playing Eastman's "Femenine" at the Kitchen on Thursday. Richard Termine for The New York Times

Younger composers of what could be called a Post-Post-Minimalist bent, like Nico Muhly, have recognized Eastman's importance; John Adams has included his works in concerts with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. That a major American symphony orchestra would be programming "Evil Nigger" — it's in Los Angeles on Feb. 20 — would, I think, have delighted Eastman, who certainly never relished obscurity. Had he not died, his brother, Gerry, told the audience at the Kitchen on Saturday, performances of his works would need Carnegie Hall or Yankee Stadium to fit all those who would want to hear them.

It doesn't fill Carnegie — yet — but this music found alert and enthusiastic audiences over the past few days. Clangorous and forlorn, forceful then suddenly tender, it makes the ears ring and the heart ache.

Eastman's best works — sprawling; seething but slow-shifting — seem to press beyond formal structures and become almost immersive environments. In mood, his work is almost always ambiguous: The loudest moments in "Joy Boy," mostly a delicate pitter-patter of a piece, might just as easily be cries of pain as joy. Those incendiary-titled late-'70s works rage, but they also grin, plainly proud of a virtuosic pianistic exuberance that recalls Liszt and Rachmaninoff.

These performances didn't sanitize Eastman, but they occasionally smoothed him. "Thruway," on Saturday, was not the demented happening reported by The Buffalo Evening News in 1970, with "the chorus wandering through the audience as though blind." At the Kitchen, the chorus of the Arcana New Music Ensemble remained in place for whooshing evocations of wind and waves of babble.

A combination of sobriety and cacophony, it had the flavor of a riotous religious service, a reminder that Eastman had his start as a performer singing as a boy in church choirs. It was preceded by the brief "Buddha," one of Eastman's final works and one whose instrumentation is unspecified. Here it was recast for a small ensemble and a black, billowing cloud of a choir, an ominous drone with tinges of Romanticism.

It showed how much experimentation can still be done with Eastman, as did an arrangement of "Gay Guerrilla" on Sunday for 11 electric guitars instead of the usual four pianos. I wasn't entirely persuaded — the larger forces tended to diffuse the piece's tension — but the version brought out the punk, metal and psychedelia in the music.

I most relished the return of "Femenine," a 1974 masterpiece whose anchor is the ceaseless, machine-driven shake of sleigh bells. A vibraphone rhythm keeps calling out, a perpetual annunciation; the ensemble surges and recedes, again and again, moored to a mellow piano; a flute line soars, a kind of benediction. Over 70 minutes, it all makes a teeming, wintry pastoral.

At first, I found myself disliking the performance on Thursday by the S.E.M. Ensemble, which long collaborated with Eastman. The sleigh bells were too loud, I thought, the vibraphone not crystalline enough. It was, in other words, different than the recording released in 2016, the way I'd grown passionately to love the piece.

But if Eastman's work is to truly live on, it will be in its divergence from — as much as its fidelity to — the archival evidence. And on Thursday, little by little, "Femenine" surely cast its spell: A community — one made not of unanimity but of communication, negotiation, advance and retreat — formed, and remained.

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

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