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Gay Guerrilla: Julius Eastman and His Music. Edited by Renée Levine Packer and Mary Jane Leach. 244 pp. (University of Rochester Press, 2015, £25; e-book £20.54. ISBN: 978-1-58046-534-2).

A BUZZ of excitement grew over the abstract for Andrew Hanson-Dvoracek's paper on Julius Eastman's residency at Northwestern University, which he gave at the 2011 Society for Minimalist Music conference in Leuven, Belgium. Eastman (1940–1990) was African-American, gay, out and proud in the years around Stonewall and after. He was an arresting performer in Peter Maxwell-Davies' *Eight Songs for a Mad King* and later managed to enrage the normally unflappable John Cage, interpreting the instruction "give a lecture" in Cage's *Song Books* (1970–72), by presenting a lecture on sex as he undressed a young man. Eastman's end was tragic: becoming increasingly erratic as he failed to find secure work, Eastman lost his way, falling into drugs, being evicted—the sheriffs removing and destroying his collected work in the process—and dying alone and penniless. He certainly sought controversy: Hanson-Dvoracek focused on three of Eastman's compositions, which premiered on 16 January 1980 at Northwestern, the so-called *Nigger* series (*Evil Nigger*, *Crazy Nigger*, and *Gay Guerrilla*). As they were likely to offend, these titles were omitted from the programme at the premiere, leaving Eastman to provide his own spoken programme notes. They remain shocking; at the 2011 conference delegates visibly squirmed as they pronounced the titular "N word". The buzz grew so much that the session containing Hanson-Dvoracek's paper—a session in a secondary seminar room parallel to papers on John Coolidge Adams in the large primary lecture theatre—was standing-room only.¹ The paper was certainly worth the buzz of excitement, but there is even more to "buzz" about: Eastman's music.

Eastman is an important, once semi-forgotten, figure in the history of minimalist and postminimalist music who deserves study, and *Gay Guerrilla: Julius Eastman and His Music*, ed. Renée Levine Packer and Mary Jane Leach (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2015) fills this gap. *Gay Guerrilla* (somewhat ironically, a publication in the Eastman Studies in Music series) presents Eastman's life and work in an anthology of essays: biography, reminiscences, obituary, documentation and historiography, performance and composition, and descriptive analysis, as well as essays explaining Eastman's place in modern music as an African-American and gay musician. A native New Yorker, Eastman studied piano and composition at the Curtis Institute and became a Creative Associate at SUNY Buffalo; he was a gifted singer and theatrical performer. Eastman has an original compositional voice, a singular method of notation (commonly a series of stemless noteheads placed on systems marked with timings) and performance practice (often using consultation and directions in rehearsal) that includes graphic

¹ This session contained only one other paper, my "These Things Stop Breathing": Student Minimalism/Postminimalism in Redlands, California, 1975–1978".

elements and improvisation. His work presents a significant contribution to the body of minimalist and postminimalist works, and is truly worth rescuing from the obscurity caused by time, musical conservatism, and his own lack of self-promotion and care for his legacy.

Gay Guerrilla is the first comprehensive account of Eastman's work and life and is the result of years of effort by Renée Levine Packer and Mary Jane Leach. Leach, a composer and performer and a former member of the DownTown Ensemble, had met Eastman in 1981 when they performed together on a Valentine's Day "dance/party" concert.² In 1998 Leach searched for Eastman's *The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc*, for ten cellos (1981) for a course she was teaching at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), only to find that the score, and initially the recording, was lost. She expanded her search to all of Eastman's work, a quest that she documented in "In Search of Julius Eastman," a *New Music Box* article that forms the basis of "An Accidental Musicologist Passes the Torch," the first of Leach's two essays in *Gay Guerrilla*.³ Leach has devoted a sizeable section of her own composition website to Eastman's scores. Levine Packer wrote a memoir, *This Life of Sounds: Evenings for New Music in Buffalo* (OUP, 2010), about her time, first as administrator (with Lukas Foss and Alan Sapp) and then coordinator (with Jan Williams and Morton Feldman), for the Center of the Creative and Performing Arts at the State University of New York at Buffalo, one of the foremost new music institutions in American universities at the time. Eastman was a "Creative Associate" from September 1969 until 1975, one of twenty salaried composers and performers who were allowed freedom to create music without pressure to teach or to satisfy the market.⁴ Levine Packer provides the groundwork for *Gay Guerrilla* both in the book's introduction and the first chapter, Eastman's biography.

The subsequent essays place Eastman in the context of gay and African-American culture; in personal recollection; in his work as a singer and performer; in descriptive analysis of his work; in his instrumentation and performance practice. In his foreword, George Lewis explores Eastman's role in American experimentalism (in its "classical" sense) and as a part of the African-American (jazz) avant-garde. Lewis focuses on Eastman's colour rather than his sexuality, as "black artists were far less in evidence in the Downtown New York music scene than queer ones" [p. ix]. Lewis provides useful context to Eastman's *Nigger* series and relates Eastman's use of repetition, not just to Young, Reich, Feldman, Riley, and his Creative Associates colleagues in Buffalo, but also to Miles Davis and John Coltrane. After Levine Packer's introduction and biography, the next three essays combine personal reminiscence with artistic detail. First is David Borden's "Unjust Malaise", on Borden's association with Eastman musically and personally since 1967 (*Unjust Malaise* was originally the title of a piece dedicated to Eastman in Borden's Anagram Portrait series); second, "The Julius Eastman Parables", a personal, poetic memoir by Eastman's lover and housemate R. Nemo Hill, who discusses Eastman's visual art as well as his music; and

² Mary Jane Leach, in "An Accidental Musicologist Passes the Torch," in Leach and Levine Packer, *Gay Guerrilla*, p. 107, writes that she met Eastman when they were both "hired to be vocalists in a theatre piece by Jim Neu". However, Leach has recently discovered that she performed with Eastman at the Valentine's party at A's, New York (poster, in a Facebook post, 23 June 2017, <<https://www.facebook.com/mjleach?fref=nf>>).

³ Mary Jane Leach, "In Search of Julius Eastman," *NewMusicBox*, November 8, 2005, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/In-Search-of-Julius-Eastman/>; "An Accidental Musicologist Passes the Torch," in Leach and Levine Packer, *Gay Guerrilla*, pp. 108–115.

⁴ Andrea Moore, review of Packer, *ECHO*, 12/1 (2014), <http://www.echo.ucla.edu/review-packer-this-life-of-sounds/>.

third, “Julius Eastman and the Conception of ‘Organic Music’”, in which, through a personal account, Kyle Gann (who, as critic for the *Village Voice*, first wrote of Eastman’s death) ties Eastman’s compositional style to Downtown minimalism and his original concept of “organic music”, a kind of sectional additive process.

The next chapters focus on Eastman’s performance. John Patrick Thomas writes about Eastman’s work as a singer, including his performances of works by R. Murray Schafer, Hans Werner Henze, Frederic Rzewski, Pauline Oliveros, and others, with interesting details about his rehearsal preparation, voice production and his use of extended techniques. Ryan Dohoney focuses on Eastman’s time in New York City (from 1976 until his death), including his work with Meredith Monk on *Dolmen Music* (1981), Arthur Russell’s group Dinosaur L at The Kitchen in 1979, his association with the Brooklyn Philharmonia Community Concerts series and the Society of Black Composers, his jazz improvisations with his brother Gerry, as well as concerts with Phill Niblock, Ned Sublette and other residents of the New York experimental loft scene.

The next two chapters are analytical: first David Borden’s musical description of *Evil Nigger*, including Joseph Kubera’s instructions to the ensemble when he performed the piece; second, Andrew Hanson-Dvoracek’s more formal analysis of *Crazy Nigger*, with consideration of whether his work was minimalist, postminimalist, or, as Hanson-Dvoracek seems to think, a kind of “alt-minimalism”. These two essays form two sides of the analytical coin, as it were. Though Hanson-Dvoracek provides deeper theoretical detail, Borden, with his personal experience of Eastman’s work, gives a greater knowledge of *Evil Nigger* as it is read and performed.

The final three chapters examine the music in different ways. By combining score extracts, recordings, critical commentary and participant accounts the critic Matthew Mendez explores Eastman’s 1973 piece *Stay on It*. Although Mendez uses an admirable range of materials, his conclusions regarding its status as a musical “work” through its indeterminacy and existence as fragments, and the possibility of reconstruction, is muddy and perhaps unanswerable. Leach’s second essay, “Connecting the Dots”, is a study of Eastman’s works through his instrumentation, both traditional and using extended techniques. Leach pays special attention to his text setting in the Prelude to *The Holy Presence of Joan d’Arc* (1981), comparing Eastman’s spare repetition of fifteen words with Virgil Thomson’s busy catechism of saints in *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1928, 1933). This essay includes nearly all of Eastman’s article on composer/performers, “The Composer as Weakling.”⁵ In the final essay, “*Gay Guerrilla: A Minimalist Choralphantasy*,” the composer and writer Luciano Chessa focuses on Eastman’s use of Luther’s hymn “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”, to propose that this song of muscular Christianity parallels the strong character necessary to live as gay in a straight world (Eastman defined “guerrilla” in his spoken introduction to the premiere at Northwestern as “someone who is...sacrificing his life for a point of view” (p. 194)). Chessa concludes with an outline of the musical features of *Gay Guerrilla*. The book concludes with an appendix listing Eastman’s compositions compiled by Leach, a chronology, and a selected bibliography.

Any weaknesses in *Gay Guerrilla* are few and minor; confined to placement and small details. Most forewords either provide a personal view of the subject, or a friendly introduction to what

⁵ Julius Eastman, “The Composer as *Weakling*,” *Ear Magazine*, 5/1 (1979), n.p.

will happen.⁶ Lewis's foreword is a critical essay on Eastman's place in the context of African-American artists in New York, and would have benefitted had it been expanded into a standalone chapter. Matthew Mendez makes the only major error in his otherwise useful examination of Eastman's rehearsal methods for *Stay on It*, when he observes that Eastman's working methods were like "composer-led ensembles of the 1960s (such as those of Cornelius Cardew and Steve Reich) [p. 152]." While Reich has led his eponymous ensemble for decades with the firm control of a traditional big band leader, Cardew never led a permanent ensemble devoted solely to his music.⁷ Cardew's prepublication rehearsals and performances of his 193-page graphic score, *Treatise* (1963–67), with various groups are very much like Eastman's rehearsal methods, in that the details of interpretation were worked out in rehearsal, rather than slavishly observing instructions laid down by the composer or score. After his consultative rehearsals, Cardew published *Treatise* without instructions, leaving its interpretation up to performers.

The great strength of *Gay Guerrilla: Julius Eastman and His Music* is that, unlike many university press research publications, it is eminently readable throughout. Although its historical methodology is rigorous, none of the essays are densely "academic" or bogged down in irrelevant critical theory. Only Lewis, Dohoney and Hanson-Dvoracek include the type of critical theory references or literature reviews common in academic musicology, and these appear only when relevant (and in Dohoney's case, appear in footnotes). In many single-subject anthologies, there is an unavoidable repetition of basic information that grates when the anthology is read as a book, but the repetition in each chapter of *Gay Guerrilla* usually appears within the context of a new perspective and as such provides a welcome reminder of the facts. Each essay can be read alone, but the musical, biographical, critical and analytical perspectives work well when read in order. I found it to be easy to access contextual materials outside the book, such as scores, without confronting paywalls. Borden's description of *Evil Nigger* and Hanson-Dvoracek's analysis of *Crazy Nigger* are enhanced with access to the scores, which are freely available, as are others, on Leach's website.⁸ Finally, despite Eastman's colourful, controversial, and finally tragic life, the authors never let that story become sensationalist or prurient. Eastman is portrayed throughout as a rounded individual and an original composer whose music should be far more widely known.

Gay Guerrilla provides a strong foundation for all future Julius Eastman studies and will be extremely useful as Eastman's work is explored further. This is a pioneering collection of essays in a research area that is certain to develop further as more material is found. This is certainly a developing situation: only a few weeks ago the SUNY Buffalo library obtained two pages of Eastman's early piece for seven instruments, *Trumpet* (1970), which had been thought to be lost forever. Being a new research area, *Gay Guerrilla* also raises almost as many questions as it

⁶ Or what will not happen. Gavin Bryars, in his foreword to *The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2009), writes entirely about English experimental composers who appear nowhere in the book itself.

⁷ Mendez must be referring to the Scratch Orchestra (1969–74) as Cardew's composer-led ensemble, but this group of composer-performers was more a collective effort than musicians who perform a single composer's works. Cardew cofounded the Scratch Orchestra with composers Howard Skempton and Michael Parsons and established a group based entirely on the equality of its membership in which all members (including musically-trained composers and performers, artists, and other interested parties) could contribute compositions.

⁸ Mary Jane Leach, "The Julius Eastman Project," <http://www.mjleach.com/eastman.htm> .

answers; for example, Eastman's notation in *Evil Nigger*. Borden described the notation—the stemless noteheads and timings—and its interpretation, but there is so much more that the notation says, and can say. Leach notes that much of the interpretation was effected orally, involving “a lot of discussion (p. 181)”. Kubera's notes on *Evil Nigger* (pp. 137–8) present that kind of oral discussion in written form. This interplay between notation and interpretation in Eastman's work needs further, closer study.

Gay Guerrilla thus provides the foundation and launch point for future research on Julius Eastman. Levine Packer, Leach and the essay authors have made an excellent case for Eastman as a major figure in minimalism and postminimalism who deserves attention. Eastman's life and work is fascinating; it is also a subject that can strike out in new areas, free of the well-trodden path of the “great composer” lineage that still weighs down most academic research. *Gay Guerrilla* should definitely be in university libraries, as Eastman would be a great subject in university twentieth-century music courses, but it should be of interest to any intelligent reader.

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