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## Music, Sex, and Friendship Downtown: Julius Eastman's Queer Collaborations

Ryan Dohoney

Ryan Dohoney, Assistant Professor of Musicology, Affiliate Faculty, Gender & Sexuality Studies, Bienen School of Music at Northwestern University, USA is currently writing a study on experimental composer-performer Julius Eastman's involvement in New York City's music scene in the 1970s and 1980s.

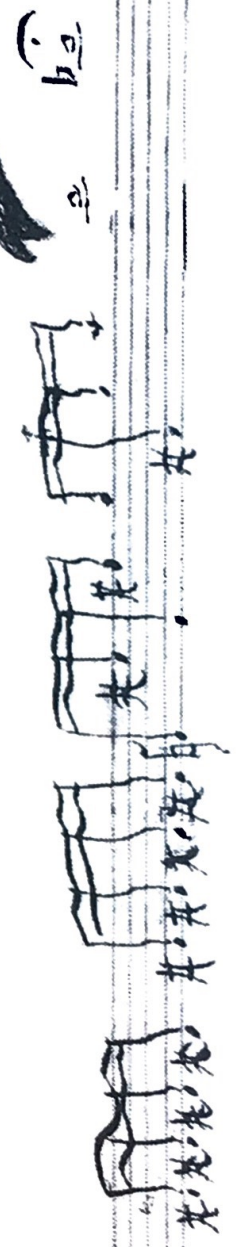
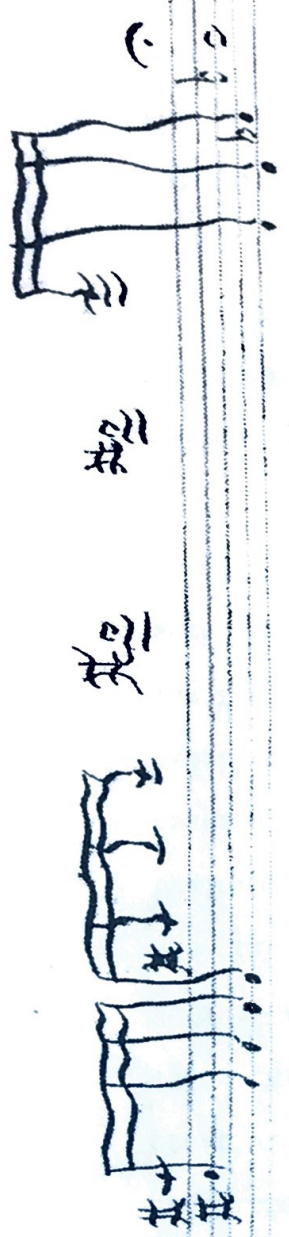
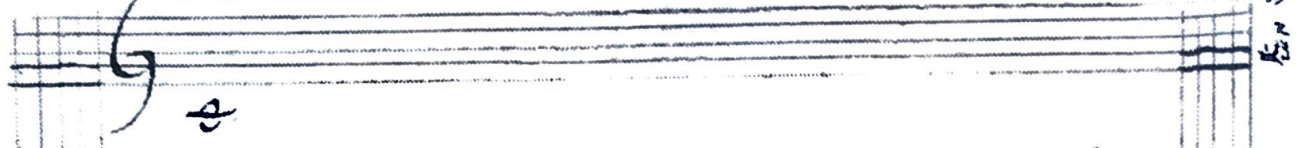
*Electric Renaissance*, the art-event held at Club 57 that this sequel-as-exhibition celebrates, is exemplary of a mode of collaboration and creativity pervasive in downtown New York City's cultural life from the 1960s through the 1980s. Stefano Castronovo's artistic partnership with Julius Eastman (1940-1990) marked but another moment in Eastman's varied and idiosyncratic career that began within disciplinary conservatory training of the Curtis Institute of Music in the 1960s, moved into the transnational experimental avant-garde and transitioned into the genre-blurring creativity of the downtown scene. Any label on Eastman's life can't capture the breadth of his musical and artistic interests. Labels such as "minimalist" composer ignore his more brash collage-based works as well as his varied improvisational practice in both experimental and jazz traditions. Emphasis solely on his identity as a composer ignores his extensive collaboration on myriad projects. Through it all though, his creative practice was, in the words of Michel Foucault, a "care of the self." As Eastman said, "What I am trying to achieve is to be what I am to the fullest—Black to the fullest, a musician to the fullest, a homosexual to the fullest. . . . It is through art that I can search for the self and keep in touch with my resource and the real me."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Portions of this essay were presented at "Kiss Me Again: the Life and Legacy of Arthur Russell" at New York University on October 10, 2009. Julius Eastman to Renate Strauss. "Julius Eastman: Will the Real One Stand Up?" *Buffalo Evening News*, July 16, 1976.

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La Mano Di San Francesco

Eastman's first musical success came as a member of the Creative Associates at the University of Buffalo in Buffalo, New York. There he was a member of one of the earliest academic centers for experimental music and performed as a vocalist, pianist, and dancer in his own works as well as those by John Cage, Pauline Oliveros, Morton Feldman, Hanz Werner Henze, to name but a few.<sup>2</sup> After leaving Buffalo in 1976, Eastman settled in New York City and integrated himself into an experimental network that extended from his time in Buffalo. He quickly became featured composer-performer at the Kitchen in downtown Manhattan and an important collaborator across disciplines. We're fortunate that when we start looking, traces of performances are recoverable and the voice of Eastman emerges as a cantus firmus through Downtown's history: He provided the rafter-shaking *basso profundo* on Meredith Monk's *Dolmen Music*, and played organ in *Turtle Dreams*. He later appeared on the soundtrack to Peter Gordon, Kathy Acker, and Richard Foreman's opera *The Birth of the Poet* performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Perhaps unexpectedly, he recorded disco tracks with Arthur Russell, lending his particular vocal extravagance to Dinosaur L's classic album *24 -> 24 Music*. His network expanded to include nightlife collaborations like *Electric Renaissance* with Castronovo at Club 57 and a show at the Mudd Club with Jeff Lohn of the no-wave band the Theoretical Girls. Tracing Eastman's network to Arthur Russell, Castronovo, Lohn and beyond finds artists and musicians opening up important points of contact between experimental music and experimental forms of gay life being developed in the discos, sex clubs, and collectives that shared downtown with artists and musicians. As with Eastman, these worlds often

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<sup>2</sup> I detail Eastman's performance of John Cage's *Songbooks* as well as his work with the Creative Associates in my "John Cage, Julius Eastman, and the Homosexual Ego" in *Tomorrow is the Question: New Directions in Experimental Music Studies*, Benjamin Plekut, ed. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2014. 39-62.



# LIVELY ARTS

## This Young Composer Apparently Can Do Anything --- and Does

By CAROL STEINER

**C**OMPOSER Julius Eastman is around town and into a few projects, probably not more than a dozen at once. In his mid 20s, he pursues versatility as a way of life, and you'll get the idea from a brief survey of recent seasons, months and weeks:

In a piano program in New York City's Town Hall in the winter of 1966 he played Rameau Schubert, American composer Robert Palmer, Ravel and Vaucian, did a free improvisation on a given theme, and concluded with Eastman playing Eastman.

The following summer in Cornell University, he played Rameau and Ravel, did another improvisation, and then went to work. As Eastman the dancer, he performed an Eastman choreography to a Trio by Eastman for soprano, cello and piano. He could have done the keyboard part, too, if he weren't moving around the floor. And he wound up singing a Schubert lieder group.

**IN BUFFALO** this season he gave an excellent performance as one of the Three Kings in the Philharmonic Holiday Festival "Amahl and the Night Visitors," and portrayed The Astrologer in Britten's "Burning Fiery Furnace," rated by the press as superb. And he also performed his own well-received piano works on the UB Creative Associates "Evenings for New Music" series in Albright-Knox Art Gallery auditorium, repeated in Carnegie Recital Hall in New York.

Most recently, on Tuesday a Buffalo State College program offered Eastman chamber works, and some adapted glimpses of his latest ballet, "The Moon: Silent Modulation." It was part of a continuing course titled "The Black Experience."

Born in Ithaca, he started as a boy soprano, graduated from Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, sang and played recitals in New York and cities of Europe, became guest instructor in Cornell and at the Saratoga Festival, and currently is teaching and studying in Buffalo State College. One of his earlier teachers was the former great basso of the Met Opera, Julius Heuhn.



**COMPOSER-PIANIST-SINGER** Julius Eastman portrayed the wily Astrologer to King Nebuchadnezzar (Alan Creech) in the mid-season UB Music Department presentation of Britten's "Burning Fiery Furnace."

### Julius Eastman's Music In Black Arts Festival

Works of composer Julius Eastman will be a feature of the Buffalo State College Black Arts Festival Sunday at 8 PM in Albright-Knox Art Gallery auditorium, admission free. Flutist Robert Cantrick, the Jongleurs Chorus, soprano Patricia Oreskovic, percussionist Lynn Harbold and a string ensemble will take part.

A festival jazz concert by the Mel Brewer Octet will be presented tomorrow at 2 PM in the Student Union Social Hall.

ALBRIGHT-KNOX GALLERY

By Carol Steiner

## Eastman Touch Is Evident In a Wide-Ranging Recital

When the listener identifies a new work of art as the product of a particular composer, it's a sign the artist has attained an original style which will be his basis for development and upon which he will stand or fall.

Such is the case with composer Julius Eastman, who had a recital of his compositions Sunday night in Albright-Knox Art Gallery, part of the Black Arts Festival sponsored by the two State University campuses and other auspices.

Performers were violinists Harry Taub and Jules Kovach, violist Bernard Flesher, cellists Robert Martin and Robert Carapetyan, flutist Robert Cantrick, mezzo-soprano Patricia Oreskovic and dancer Karl Singletary.

"CONTRAPUNCTUS" Nos. 1 through 4 for chamber strings and flute, are involved intellectual fare, something one gladly would go back to again and again, for thorough absorption.

There are double themes, inversions, retrogrades, simultaneous playing of theme fragments, a whole treatise of con-

trapuntal technique in an ingenious mold.

Four Songs, sung by Mr. Eastman and Mrs. Oreskovic with string accompaniment, is a more recent work. They are miniatures of resigned melancholy. The first three have biblical texts.

The last, however, "Baby, Baby, Baby" is a mock of the unrealistic Utopia sold by pop musicians. Eastman uses instrumental noise, gives word jumbles to the players, backdropping the confusion with sustained vocal tones.

**ONCE AGAIN** we were given excerpts from "The Moon's Silent Modulation," the latest Eastman ballet. Dancer Singletary was very fine in the stark and beautifully graphic role of the moon, despite a slippery wood floor with perilous ridges.

Having commented on this masterwork in a different version, also a fractional one, I can only add that I think it's shortsighted and absurd that one of the arts-sponsoring organizations doesn't see to a proper and total performance.



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overlapped and an accounting for them is necessary for any narrative we want to tell about practices of queer life in the U.S post-Stonewall. This is, of course, a political imperative in our time as the struggle for queer rights and queer lives continues. The importance of recovering Eastman's life lies with the examples set by his startlingly original modes of community. His experimental assemblages also address a contemporary need, in the words of Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, to "promote radical aspirations of queer culture building . . . the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex."<sup>3</sup> Eastman's collaboration with Russell demonstrates this potential. The Kitchen was the initial setting for Russell and Eastman's work together.<sup>4</sup> Initially, Russell enlisted Eastman as a conductor for his orchestral music. With his close ties to composer-conductor Lukas Foss and the Brooklyn Philharmonic, Eastman served until 1979 as conductor of a subset of that orchestra funded by the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, a governmental program that provided work for underemployed musicians in the city. Eastman enlisted members of the this so-called CETA orchestra for a performance of Russell's mammoth *Instrumentals* in February of 1978. Both Eastman and Russell also became involved with the choreographers and performance artists among the Kitchen's group of artists. Eastman provided music for Andy de Groat, who had choreographed work with theater director Robert Wilson, including *Einstein on the Beach*. Eastman's music for de Groat was titled *The Holy Presence of Joan of Arc* and was based in part on a quotation from Patti Smtih's song *Rock n'Roll Nigger*. Russell had a tumultuous and

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<sup>3</sup> Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public" in *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone, 2002), 187

<sup>4</sup> For more on Arthur Russell see Tim Lawrence, *Hold on to Your Dreams: Arthur Russell and the Downtown Music Scene, 1973-1992* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).



Portrait of Julius Eastman by Stefano Castronovo (detail)

ultimately unsuccessful collaboration with Wilson on the performance piece *Medea*. Eastman would later conduct the music Russell had written for Wilson, which was subsequently retitled *Tower of Meaning* and recorded in 1983. Besides their orchestral collaborations, Russell invited Eastman to participate in his disco collective. An early incarnation of the group that would become Dinosaur L was appeared at the Kitchen in 1979. The recording sessions for *24→24 Music* that followed the Kitchen performance are exemplary of the sort of experimental assemblages Russell, Eastman, Peter Gordon, Peter Zummo, Castronovo, Lohn, and others created. As Tim Lawrence has suggested in his writing on Russell, these collectives were often queer spaces, less sharply delineated by sexuality than many other downtown communities. Russell's inclusion and advocacy of difference allowed for radically individualistic musicians like Eastman to bring their particular sounds to performance and create an aesthetic of plurality among musicians. Eastman in particular brought his amazing voice to Dinosaur L. From the unhinged utterance of "No Thank You" to his diva turn on "In the Corn Belt," Eastman emerges as a performer of erotic exuberance. Situated in Dinosaur L, Eastman maintains his experimental vocal identity as well as the jazz modernism of his organ playing on the record. Through this collaboration, Eastman's queer experimentalism was translated from the largely white avant-garde into the gay multi-racial dance music world of the Paradise Garage that moved to the sound of Dinosaur L's "Go Bang." Through his collaborations, Eastman created an *ars erotica* figured as an *ars musica*—a practice that afforded and sustained spaces for musical and sexual difference and sounded in the queer spaces of downtown and beyond.