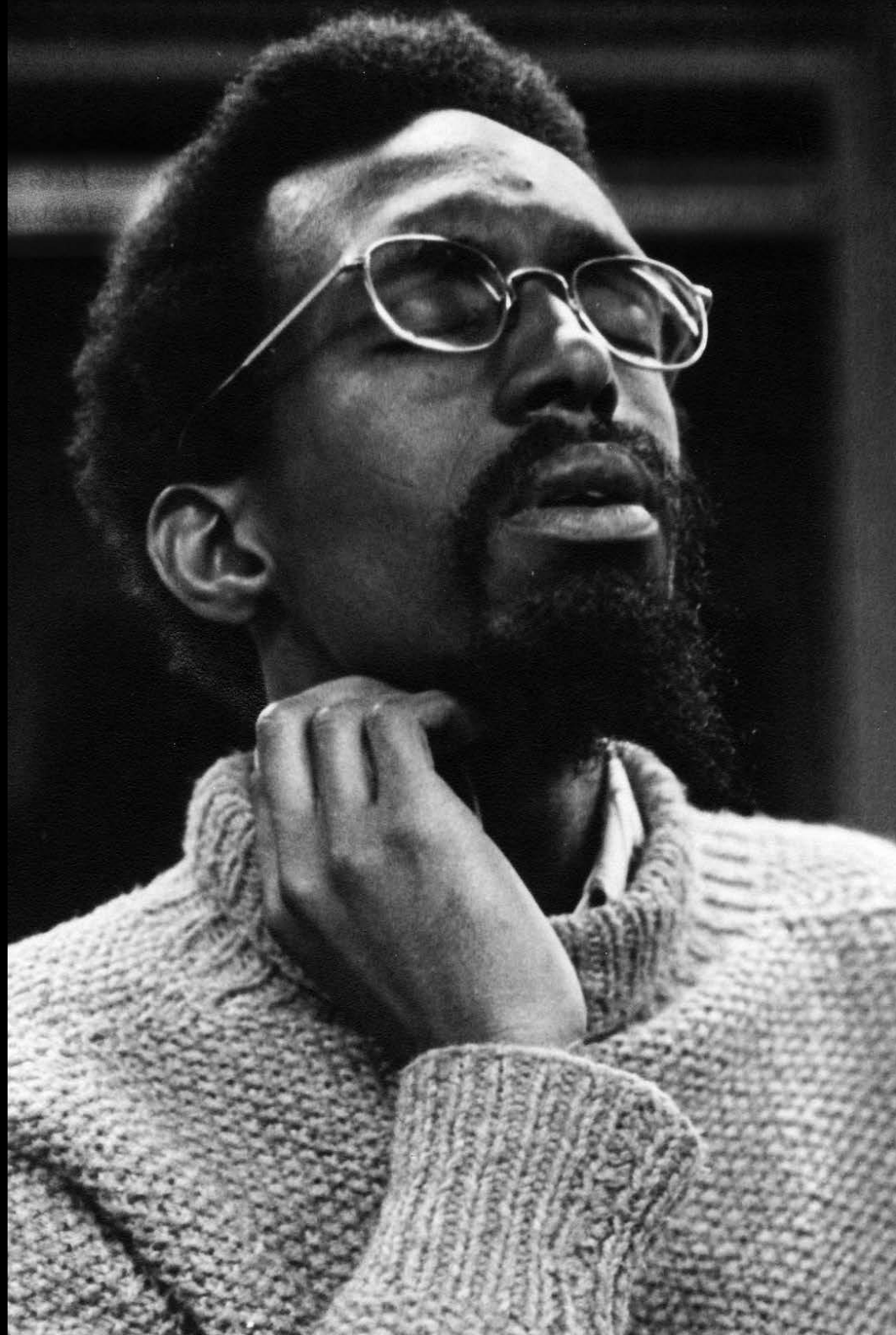
JULIUS EASTMAN VOL. 1

FEMENINE

WILD UP



WILD UP

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LINNEA POWELL, VIOLA / BELLS
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JODIE LANDAU, VIBRAPHONE / MARIMBA / SYNTH / VOICE / BELLS
LEWIS PESACOV, BELLS
JONAH LEVY, FLUGELHORN
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BRIAN WALSH, TENOR SAXOPHONE
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With eternal gratitude to Julius for what he brought to this world.

FOREWORD: UNABASHED ADORNMENT

SETH PARKER WOODS

Hail, Dionysos,
god of frenzy and release,
of trance and visions,
hail to the manifestations
of your might,
thanks for admitting me to
your ritual…

—“Hail, Dionysos”
by Dudley Randall

Where do we go from here? Following the unremitting efforts of composer Mary Jane Leach, Julius Eastman has come back to the public, or finally arrived, in a way that has at once celebrated his life and music while at the same time being overshadowed or prescribed alongside the tragic spiral that ended it all. Leaving us far too young, Eastman, the protominimalist left behind a scattered body of work that we’re still trying to figure out how to grapple with and make sense of. In a way, Eastman was a man of immense and unabashed talent whose ethos is inextricably sewn into his creative oeuvre, as well as the works of his collaborators. Representing a new breed of creative intellectuals, Eastman’s energy, intersectionality, and creativity marked a moment where artists like him, no longer willing to confine themselves based on the terrain, sought to redefine it to bring participants closer to their true selves. His music was the people’s music, a social music. This new recording of Femenine (1974) by Los Angeles-based band, Wild Up, marks a new generation of musicians navigating the life, aesthetic and music of Julius Eastman.

I first came to know Eastman’s music in 2011 when I was given a copy of his Holy Presence of Joan d’Arc (1981) for ten cellos. Never before had I heard writing with such extreme register placement that was equally percussive, lyrical, angular and bombastic. What I heard in that recording was marathon-like warfare that resem-

bled a bacchanal feast. Blown away by the writing of this raucous setting for ten cellos, the thing that would eventually keep me up at night was—Who was Julius Eastman, and why was I only now hearing about this man?

This was the moment my obsession began.

At a time when there were many gay and queer musicians and composers active in NYC, including his peer Arthur Russell, Eastman existed in a space where he fought to be unapologetically Black, gay and creative on his own terms, and to this day that radical act, not to mention his titles, continues to ruffle feathers. A recent article by musicologist Ellie Hisama calls upon scholars to acknowledge Eastman's work "as a Black, gay man who worked in a primarily White new music scene…with respect to both of these social categories, rather than to disregard them within a post-race or sexuality neutral context." As I and my peers, try to make sense of Eastman's past erasure brought on by political and social contestations beyond him; a man positioned at the junction of intersectionality, avant-garde creation/process and uncloseted sexuality; I fall back to critical theorist Fred Moten's writings. Moten draws attention to "a vast interdisciplinary text representation not only of a problematically positivist conclusion that the avant-garde has been exclusively Euro-American, but of a deeper, perhaps unconscious, formulation of the avant-garde as necessarily not Black." If anyone were to attend a live performance given by Eastman at the time, or listen to any of his brilliantly adorned scores, they would proclaim him ahead of his time and indeed avant-garde. There exists now, just as it did then, a mammoth in the room—self-appointed gate keepers of any given creative medium or movement—that I believe looked to find ways to ultimately keep Eastman out because his aesthetic or mode of operation didn't fit their idea of a composer in that time. Truth be told, Eastman created and collaborated just as those, mainly White and male, who were welcomed into the canon. In the end, I believe Julius Eastman's full presence, an assemblage of complex layers of expression that he wore proudly, forced certain people in creative circles to examine hard truths of their own personal and creative identities that they weren't ready or willing to deal with, and for that, he had to go.

Hail, Dionysos,
god of frenzy and release,
of trance and visions.

I see them recede,
handsome men, beautiful women,
brains clever and bright,
spirits gay and daring,
see eyes turn glassy, tongues
grow thick, limbs tremble
and shake, caught in your

divine power, carried away on
the stream of your might,
Dionysos.

Femenine, an expansive 60+ minute jam controlled by stopwatch timings, is the epitome of Eastman's long form "organic music." Organic music refers to an additive process whereby each phrase of a piece contains a bit of the previous phrase. Within Femenine, Eastman adds, subtracts and evolves material based on a 13-beat "Prime" melody that is made up of two notes. The piece exists entirely in E-flat major with momentary clashes of bitonality. Underscoring or surrounding, depending on how you listen, is an almost cosmically camp clamoring of bells that lulls performers and listeners into some sort of trance.

Considering the sheer magnitude of performing such a work, let alone attempting to even rehearse it requires trust amongst the players. A social trust to be present and to create as a resident in this music instead of a visitor, a trust to hold space for each other to express collectively and individually. These forms of trust give way to a strong state of empowerment for each performer to make choices that inform what and how the collective plays as a group. As players venture from the musical cells that structure the entire work, different levels of agency emerge.

In Wild Up's recording, we witness a new offering and perspective on what it is to live inside Femenine and honor the ethos of Eastman, realized in part through the addition of individual solos strategically placed throughout the work. The solos showcase something human and individual that isn't mechanical, especially in relation to the bells in the 1974 recording with Eastman at the piano. In adding those solos, the "Prime" which has been constant and grounding, becomes so buried that you can't help but marvel at the individual proclamations, those reminiscent of a cantor. While the collective plays on in this trance-like state, new layers shift the gaze of the collective as something new, individual and fleeting emerges.

To play Eastman's music is to feel that you are both in and of the world and visiting at the same time. Just as those who knew Eastman—though it's hard to believe he really let many get too close—you never feel as if you have totally grasped the work. He finds a way to leave something out, if only to have us clambering for more during the musical ritual we've taken part in. What we are left with, through the frenzied ecstasy, is a state of feeling a little more connected and alive—a little more seen and uninhibited.

NOTE: PIANIST WILL INTERRUPT RICHARD VALITUTTO

On May 28, 1990, Julius Dunbar Eastman Jr. died in a hospital bed in Buffalo, New York at the age of 49, his mother at his bedside. This tragedy went virtually unnoticed until eight months later, when Kyle Gann's obituary in The Village Voice alerted readers to his passing—contrite and elegiac in its belatedness. Despite his once diverse and overlapping networks of friends and collaborators, Eastman was precipitously vanishing from the collective creative consciousness. His many creative idiosyncrasies already hindered any easy transition into the contemporary classical music record of canonic posterity, and his undeniably proud identity as a Black gay man exacerbated it. Thankfully, Eastman—composer, concert pianist, Grammy-nominated opera virtuoso, dancer, actor, painter, and creative polymath—is now acknowledged for his crucial contributions to the annals of American art. Since 1998, his scores, documents, and recordings have been recovered and preserved with increasing momentum and urgency. Most importantly, his music is being rediscovered, performed, and experienced by musicians and audiences all over the world. Indeed, one doesn't so much listen to Eastman's work as much as one experiences it. The seismic shift Eastman brought to the then-newly-coined "New Music" is finally being fully felt, its aftershocks even greater than the initial quake of his already uncontainable musical persona.

Call it what you will: archival fate, luck, or the too-late recognition of a stifled creative genius ahead of his time.

Thanks to the tireless efforts initially spearheaded by Mary Jane Leach—composer, "accidental musicologist" (her term), and Eastman's longtime friend and colleague—the works and legacy of Eastman are being salvaged piecemeal. The celebration of discoveries and recoveries is equalled only by the sobering reality that a good deal is most likely irretrievably gone. There's a score manuscript here, a concert recording there, but the majority of his sizable oeuvre was literally scattered to the wind by the New York City police during an eviction from his East Village apartment in winter 1981-82, leading to years of homelessness and professional floundering. Ironically, this rupture occurred amidst some of Eastman's most promising, fertile years—between several record releases from Meredith Monk and Arthur Russell featuring Eastman's abilities as singer, keyboardist, and conductor—and just one year after his notable (if notorious) composer residency at Northwestern University, where he presented and performed three large-scale, proto-minimalist works using four grand pianos: Evil Nigger, Crazy Nigger, and Gay Guerrilla.

Those pieces at the 1981 Northwestern performance were my introduction to Eastman, as for many, thanks to the New World Records watershed release Unjust Malaise. (The album title is an uncanny anagram of "Julius Eastman," borrowed from the eponymous piano duo composed in memoriam by David Borden, Eastman's Ithaca colleague and supporter, and noted electronic minimalist.) These archival recordings—including Eastman's prefatory remarks, where he patiently and sagely explains the titular epithets (though not without his tongue in his cheek, perhaps)—have been oft-discussed since, being a sort of makeshift manifesto of a composer for whom the written record provided none. And while the arresting, polemical nature of these works' titles is notable, the musical inventiveness and sheer audacity of the pieces' creative power is equally compelling, if not more so. Whether assessed through the sheer visceral experience (have you heard four pianists pound away for an hour straight?) or by the analysis of their carefully designed formal structures, Eastman's signature style is on full display, captured at the seeming height of his powers, deftly weaving minimalist techniques with aleatoric improvisation into epic masterworks.

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Eastman composed Femenine in 1974, a transitional year for him in many respects, and the piece offers a first glimpse at his creative approach to those later piano ensemble works. In the early '70s, his diverse compositional experiments
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could be summed up as pluralistic and avant-garde. He was prolific, pumping out music that fell under (or rather, on top of) the umbrella of Euro-American experimentalism practiced by the so-called "New York School." This was during his years of residency as a performer and composer with the Creative Associates at SUNY Buffalo, directed by his mentor there, the luminary composer-pianist-conductor Lukas Foss. With Femenine we hear an (extreme) example of Eastman's new interest in large-scale, slowly-shifting musical textures over an undeniable collective groove—a far cry from the mercurial experimentalism or austere modernism of previous works. His inclusion of more pop-oriented idioms (such as the exuberant disco-inflected riffs in Stay On It) were balanced with greater opportunities for performer improvisation, coherently organized within cleverly-designed harmonic and formal structures.

In 1975 Eastman moved to New York City, perhaps a necessary break in pursuit of divergent creative paths offered by jazz improvisation, interdisciplinary theatricality, greater sexual freedom, and his political activism initially inspired by the national uproar over the Attica prison riots. More scandalous, it could've been the direct result of a falling-out with John Cage. According to musicologist Ryan Dohoney's detailed account, Cage—the gay elder-statesman of experimental music—publicly and angrily scolded Eastman for his "mistake" of interpreting one of Cage's more open-ended pieces from Songbooks as a comical and overtly sexual theater-piece at the first "June in Buffalo" festival. The incident underscores how—even in American art and music culture, a bastion for gay men (albeit practically all White)—Eastman's bawdiness and brazen politics were not commonplace. Whether on- or off-stage, anecdotes from Eastman's friends and collaborators consistently portray someone who reveled in his intersectional identity so comfortably that he often employed it as an awkward weapon of social subterfuge. Suggestive vocalizations, theatrical non-traditional playing techniques, and campy presentations were formerly limited to and slyly tucked within the abstract musical material of his compositions. From 1974 onward, homoerotic, genderqueer, and racial politics had moved decidedly to the forefront of his compositions—personality metamorphosed to aesthetic. Even the titles themselves became increasingly uncompromising and provocative, centered on asserting and celebrating his queer Black identity, and consequently bringing those issues to the printed program, poster, and marquee.

Thanks to the Norwegian record label Frozen Reeds, we have a beautiful and instructive live recording of Femenine with Eastman performing as pianist and ensemble leader. At that 1974 concert in Albany, the piece was presented alongside Joy Boy (another Frozen Reeds release) and Masculine (no score or recording survives). Perhaps with a wink to their titles, Eastman performed these works in a dress (though playing in some kind of drag was not uncommon for him). In Eastman's inimitable way, these pieces collectively re-mythologize gender beyond the contemporary cis-heteronormative binary. He artfully, abstractly collapses stereotypical gender identities, intentionally upending traditional assumptions, both personal and cultural. Accordingly, for performers, Femenine (like Joy Boy) has a fair amount of open-endedness, but its most tightly-controlled element is pitch. We are guided by prescribed (or suggested) melodic figures or chords, but to fill the massive duration of the work we are essentially impelled to improvise, profusely so. Notes and rhythms are either selected, freely generated, or even (respectfully) ignored. Also equally valid: one may simply not play at all.

The expansive sections of Femenine are controlled by stopwatch timings, and the score takes at least 63 minutes to perform, depending on how long the untimed final section lasts. The tenacious vibraphone part—a 13-beat syncopated fanfare tattoo using only two pitches—is unchanging throughout. Other than a few exceptionally dramatic moments of clashing bitonality, the piece exists entirely in euphonious E-flat major, mostly pentatonic, eschewing the leading tones and chords which would make the music feel like it's "going somewhere" harmonically speaking. The melodic material changes very gradually: Eastman adds or subtracts a note or two every few minutes, and the rhythmic density increases or decreases often on the scale of tens of minutes at a time. For the first several minutes, the music seems too self-same, almost monotonous. But the meditative profundity of Femenine is balanced and decorated by a constantly improvising piano-part, and eventually lush, ecstatic textures emerge and evolve, where single tones seem to disappear in a rapturous harmonic ocean, wave after wave. This confident, tidal surging is later anchored by calls-to-action from the piano and bass instruments. The response: blasted, insistent eruptions from the full band. In contrast with Joy Boy's "masculine"—campy, effervescent, a bit nervous—the "feminine" occupies the place of a grounded, powerful, inexorable force.

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In 1979, Eastman wrote a pithy op-ed for EAR Magazine, “The Composer As Weakling,” in which he exhorts all musicians to transcend the received hierarchy and narratives of Western art music and scolds them for their collective lapse into solipsistic specialization and creative isolation. He is obviously firing back at Milton Babbitt’s notorious essay from two decades prior, “The Composer as Specialist” (a.k.a. “Who Cares If You Listen?”). Eastman focuses the brunt of his invective on the composer “birthing music in his lonely room,” initially using the male indefinite pronoun, seemingly for writerly convention’s sake. In the final paragraphs, he freely alternates pronouns for “the composer,” genderqueer politics and aesthetic ideals coalescing, jarring yet poetic: “The composer is therefore enjoined to accomplish the following: she must establish himself as a major instrumentalist, he must not wait upon a descending being, and she must become an interpreter...and give a fresh new view of the known and unknown classics.” While at first the antiquated and weak “specialist” is referred to as “he,” Eastman fluidly switches to and mixes in “she,” announcing the “total musician,” harbinger of renewed vitality and relevance in musical culture. Before it became a hashtag or a meme, it would seem that Eastman was asserting: “The Future is Female,” or perhaps something even greater, a progressive, utopian inclusivity beyond what we ourselves have imagined or allowed.

Since Wild Up’s first posthumous collaborations with Eastman in 2013, performing his music has always felt like it was made for us, or better, we for it. Eastman’s exuberant creativity forces us to grapple with a constantly-evolving performance practice, including styles and interpretive modes from a spectrum of genres. More importantly, we are required to deeply consider the crucial intersectionality of Eastman’s musical legacy and the immediacy it brings to the present. It is our hope that this also brings increased awareness, imagination, and action to the very real issues of equality, compassion, and justice, as they are ever more relevant—even urgent.

— richard valitutto
Ithaca, NY
10 March 2021

with special thanks to Xak Bjerken, David Borden, Thomas Feng, David Friend, Jonathan Hepfer, Isaac Jean-François, Joseph Kubera, Ellie Hisama, Matthew Mendez, Roger Moseley, Kiko Nobusawa, Annette Richards, Chris Rountree, Adam Tendler, Seth Parker Woods, David Yearsley, and everyone in Wild Up
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FEMENINE

1. PRIME
2. UNISON
3. CREATE NEW PATTERN
4. HOLD AND RETURN
5. ALL CHANGING
6. INCREASE
7. Eb
8. BE THOU MY VISION / MAO MELODIES
9. CAN MELT
10. PIANIST WILL INTERRUPT MUST RETURN

Solos in order of appearance: Sidney Hopson, vibraphone (prime); richard valitutto, piano; Marta Tiesenga, baritone saxophone; Seth Parker Woods, cello; Jonah Levy, flugelhorn; Odeya Nini, voice; Allen Fogle, horn; Brian Walsh, tenor saxophone; Jodie Landau, synth and voice.