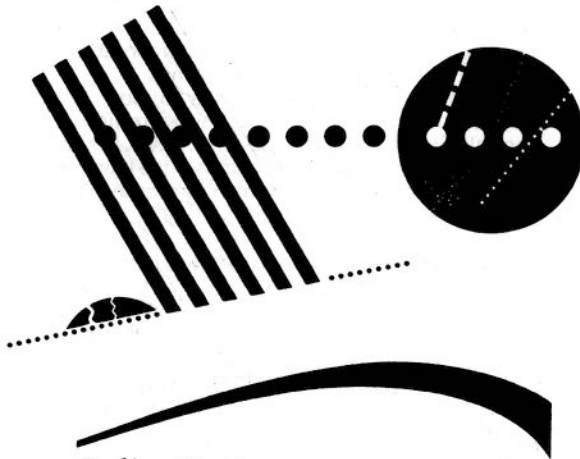


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New Wilderness Foundation
365 West End Avenue
New York, NY 10024

Volume 5, Number 6
June/July 1980

MAGAZINE



Julius Eastman

33 Grand St., NYC April 3, 1980

Like it or not, theater is a part of every concert. Performers can leave standards unquestioned and present a concert that ignores the enhancements of theater, or setting, lighting, placement of audience and performer, and the movements of the performer all can be utilized in the service of a conscious intention.

Julius Eastman sang his unaccompanied "Sacred Songs" in a very simple but well considered setting. The performance space was small, the audience necessarily limited to less than thirty. Lighting was from a single overhead spot and Eastman stood directly beneath it at the center and front of the stage. Everything about the performance emphasized singleness and isolation, which were a concern of the texts he sang. The overhead spot put Eastman's face into deep shadow, a welcome gesture of privacy in a performance so personal. Every time I have seen Eastman perform he has been dressed the same way, in torn and dirty clothing. Normally one ignores a musician's clothing, but here it seemed to count because it emphasized the unglamorously of his non-conformity. The performance was strenuous for both Eastman and the audience. His voice is among the few that have the power and variety to succeed in a solo a cappella format. Eastman used no written music, but the songs were too carefully structured, with recurrent themes and figures, to imply much improvisation. The cycle of songs, with only brief pauses between each, lasted at least an hour and fifteen minutes.

The cycle of "sacred songs" was titled "Taking Refuge In The Two Principles," and the texts were written by Eastman. What made them sacred was not any association with a specific religion, but the fact that the texts concerned ideals sacred to Eastman. The central statement was, "I take refuge under the umbrella of two principles—Universality and Impartiality." The words Altruism and Equality were used also. That statement came up again and again, and was always followed by the declaration that those principles did not, in fact, give him refuge or protection from anything. His belief in these principles, according to the text, has separated him from most people and, painfully, even from his friends. There were reiterations and extensions of these ideas. About midway through the piece there was a touching section in which Eastman sang, "I place my friends around me. I place them on my left side. I place them on my right side." And he went on, listing where he places his friends, developing slowly from physical images to more abstract poetic ones. It was during this section that Eastman gestured most. Other times he often kept his hands clasped at his chest, not in an imploring way, but in a casual, absent-minded way. The text never seemed pretentious even at its most philosophical, because of its "soul-laid-bare" quality.

The vocal line encompassed the distant limits of Eastman's famous range (listen to his performance of Peter Maxwell Davies' "Eight Songs for a Mad King" on Nonesuch records), concentrating on the lower register. A contour common to the whole cycle was this: Eastman would start quietly on a note and, in the form of a long melisma (often on "I"), he would slip down and up about a half step in quick little grace notes. These never seemed haphazard, and his pitch was always under control. Gradually, as more words were sung, the lines became more drawn out and intervals widened until, at a climactic point, his voice was jumping back and forth at least an octave, sometimes straining and loud without being unmusical. Within this soft-to-loud contour was a great deal of variety, never an overly obvious gradation. The music had a ritualistic quality to it and was probably influenced by the religious music of both east and west. This seemed to be more a result of common purpose and the extension of a tradition, rather than any need of Eastman's for an antecedent.

This was relentless music. At times it was like being shouted at. There was an intensity of conviction both physically and psychologically that was harrowing. The physical ordeal of singing for so long with such endurance complimented the difficulties inherent in the philosophical paradoxes of the text. It gave me a headache. It was startling that one person, in a small room, could generate such a thorough experience on so many levels.

David Garland

