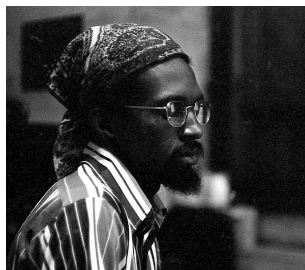


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REVIEWS

"To the Fullest": LA Phil Celebrates Iconic Avant-gardists

March 10, 2025 | By Richard S. Ginell



LOS ANGELES—Given the current administration's predilections, this might seem a dangerous time in which to launch a festival celebrating the music of two late Black and/or homosexual avant-gardists. But the first-time consortium of LA Phil Insight, REDCAT, and the ever-irreverent new-music ensemble Wild Up didn't hesitate for a moment to go ahead for with "To the Fullest: The Music of Julius Eastman and Arthur Russell."

This multi-concert, multi-stylistic event honors two short-lived, long-neglected-until-recently composers from the 1970s and '80s who pushed for the freedom to be who you are—sexually, spiritually, and musically. The title comes from a statement by Eastman: "What I am trying to achieve is to be what I am to the fullest: Black to the fullest, a musician to the fullest, and a homosexual to the fullest."

The kickoff concert on March 4 at Walt Disney Concert Hall offered Eastman's *Evil Nigger* (shortened to *Evil N* in the program book) and *Gay Guerrilla* as book ends to new arrangements of what was dubbed *The Arthur Russell Songbook*. The event was very well attended, the usual Green Umbrella new music aficionados joined by considerable numbers of predominantly young people.

Led by its energetic Founder and Artistic Director Christopher Rountree, Wild Up members created fresh interpretations of the two Eastman pieces, most often done with four pianos. But Eastman indicated that they could be performed with "any number of similar instruments"; Wild Up opted for as many as 19 dissimilar instruments. That added considerable color while not disturbing the composer's processes in the least.

Though both provide opportunities for aleatoric play and use minimalist techniques, the two Eastman pieces are quite different. *Evil N* has an ominous atmosphere with a cued-in seven-note "Dies Irae" motif in various spots, and *Gay Guerrilla* is gentle and more floating in texture, morphing and building after about 20 minutes to a grand announcement of Martin Luther's hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." Both build to an eventual point of atonal near-chaos and then ease into subdued closing stretches.

Rountree led *Evil* in the traditional spot in front of the ensemble, relegating his motions mostly to adjusting the dynamic levels and cueing in the "Dies Irae" outbursts. For *Guerrilla*, he was seated in the middle of the semi-circle of Wild Up performers, singing wordlessly. Wild Up played everything beautifully, allowing the music to flow and growl and sweep the listener downstream.

The numbers by Russell, described as an "avant-minimalist disco composer," were entirely different, obliterating the line between classical music and American pop styles of the post-British Invasion rock era. Some songs had a country-folk flavor, with simple vocal lines, others leaned toward great, dream-like washes of impressionistic sound. Allen Ginsberg is quoted in the program notes as characterizing Russell's music as "Buddhist bubblegum;" the Buddhist elements I cannot attest to, but "bubblegum music"—a late-1960s epithet for featherweight Top 40 hits by groups like The Ohio Express, The Archies, or The 1910 Fruitgum Co.—this was not.



Wild Up concertmaster Darian Donovan Thomas and percussionist Jodie Landau contributed their own arrangements and vocals, as did cellist Andrew Yee (duetting at times with Rountree), saxophonist Shelley Washington, and violinist Andrew Tholl. Guest vocalists included "alternative r&b artist" serpentwithfeet (Brooklyn based Jonathan Josiah Wise) and singer/songwriter Robin Pecknold. Just who arranged what in the *Arthur Russell Songbook* was not clarified.

The program promised about a half-hour of Russell's songs but expanded to nearly 45 minutes, which proved to be a bit much. Nevertheless, they were attractive enough to provoke curiosity as to what Wild Up will be serving up in *24 to 24 Music*, on May 1 and 2. It's to be a 90-minute Russell "minimalist disco," in which REDCAT will be decked out like a "large-scale downtown New York dance party" where audience members will be encouraged to dance the night away.

Other events in the "To the Fullest" Festival include a March 29 concert with cellist Seth Parker Woods, vocalist Dwight Trible, and Wild Up entitled *Julius Eastman: The Holy Presence*. An ongoing exhibition, *World of Echo*, featuring an audio installation by Woods, runs March 15 through May 4. Both events are at REDCAT.

Photos from the top: Julius Eastman, Arthur Russell, serpentwithfeet

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