

# LISTENING POST: A Circle of Atoms

Georgia musicians exult in the spirit of Pasaquan; Atlanta musicians elate us with their new music



WAILING AT PASAQUAN: CHICKASAW MUDD PUPPIES PERFORMING UNDER THE STARS AND LIGHTS FOR 'A CIRCLE OF ATOMS: THE PASAQUAN SESSIONS.'

By DOUG DELOACH Thursday June 3, 2021 11:15 am EDT

So we're on our way back into the breach. Vaccinated and wary, masked when appropriate, we're venturing back into the garden of earthly delights with fellow human beings in reasonable proximity, attended by the occasional hug. Thanks be to science in the service of wise administrative governance, and no thanks to the nation's deplorables and their obdurate wingnut idiocy.

Speaking of which: There's a special election on June 15 in North Cobb for state representative of House District 34, which covers Kennesaw and a portion of Marietta. The Republican who won in November bailed on a pledge to serve his constituents in favor of a sweet job at Georgia Tech. Go figure. The Democrat he defeated, Priscilla Smith, is back in the running to lead the district with a sharply honed progressive agenda and the moxie to hold her own in the General Assembly. Vote for Priscilla on June 15 or donate to the cause. Keep the blue train rolling full steam ahead.

Y'all know about Pasaquan, right, the phantasmagorical 7-acre art compound in southwest Georgia near Buena Vista? (If not, maybe you've been amazed by the outdoor exhibit of colorful art work in the Folk Art Park, located downtown on Courtland Street at the I-85 overpass.) Constructed with minimal assistance over three decades by Eddie Owens Martin, otherwise known as St. EOM (pronounced ohm), Pasaquan is one of the world's great visionary art environments. "Pasaquan lavishly fuses African, pre-Columbian Mexico and Native American cultural and religious symbols and designs, along with motifs inspired by James Churchward's books about the 'Lost Continent of MU,'" according to Columbus State University (CSU), which serves as the site's institutional caretaker.



EARTH, WE HAVE A PROBLEM IS THE TITLE OF AN IMPROVISED SONG BY LONNIE HOLLEY AND CHRISTOPHER PAUL STELLING INCLUDED ON THE ALBUM 'A CIRCLE OF ATOMS: THE PASAQUAN SESSIONS.' PHOTO CREDIT: MICHAEL MCFALLS

As the self-ordained first Earthly citizen of an alien race called the Pasaquoyans, St. EOM advocated for a peaceful world in which human beings live in harmony with nature, seeking enlightenment through ritual practices, some of which involved donning brightly hued levitation suits and coiffing one's hair to simulate the reversal of a gravitational predisposition to falling. About the Pasaquan compound, St. EOM once said, "Here, I can be in my own world with my temples and designs and the spirit of God. I can have my own spirits and my own thoughts." Derived from a combination of Spanish and Oriental words, pasaquan roughly translates to "bringing the past and future together." In 1986, following years of failing health, Martin committed suicide at age 77.

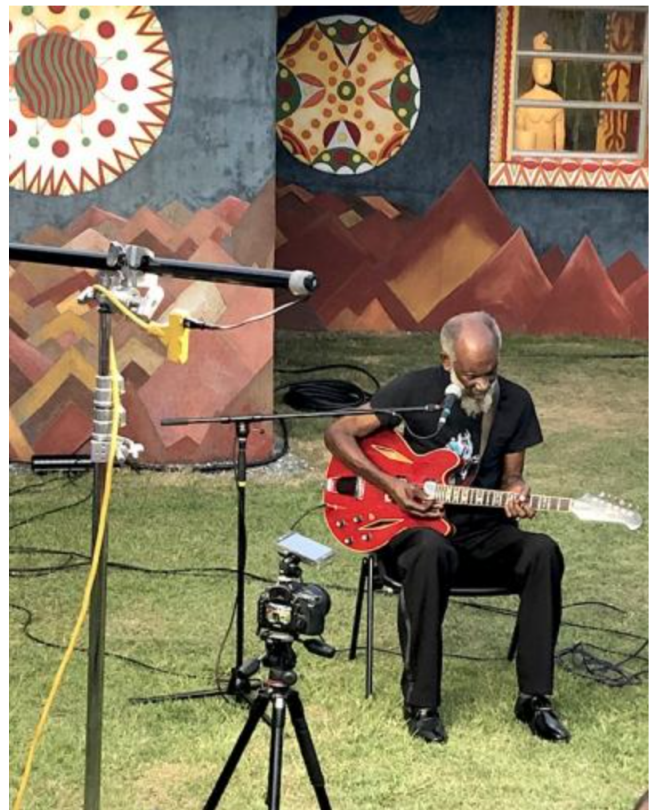
In 2016, after an extended period of degradation, Pasaquan was restored to its current glorious state, thanks to a collaborative effort by the Pasaquan Preservation Society (PPS) and CSU and with major funding from the Kohler Foundation. In recent years, PPS and CSU have staged Pasafest, an annual outdoor concert and arts fair on the Pasaquan property. When COVID compelled the cancelation of last year's fund-raising fandango, organizers pivoted to producing a series of videos showcasing the scheduled artists. In turn, the video production spawned *A Circle of Atoms: The Pasaquan Sessions*, a limited-edition vinyl release featuring a subset of the Pasafest participants.

Contained within **A Circle of Atoms** is a constellation of Georgia-centric artists: James Husband, Robert Coleman, Nikki Speake, Crispin Wah, Jim White, Chickasaw Mudd Puppies and Lonnie Holley. Some songs, such as Husband's "Goin' Pasaquan," directly evoke the physical site and mystical ruminations of its creator; other tracks, including White's "Sum of What We've Been" and Speake's "Blue Moonlight," bear a poignant, albeit loosely thematic, relationship with the Pasaquoyan ethos.

Recorded in July on the grounds and inside the main house at Pasaquan, *A Circle of Atoms* represents a joint venture between CSU, PPS, and Institute 193, a nonprofit art space and publisher in Lexington, Kentucky. Institute 193 was founded by Phillip March Jones, an artist, curator, and inaugural director of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation.

"I'm pretty sure it was Phillip who first suggested making a record, since we were already making the music videos," said Michael McFalls, associate professor of art at CSU and director of Pasaquan.

For production assistance, McFalls enlisted CSU colleague Dr. Matthew McCabe, an assistant professor and supervisor of the Schwob School of Music's techno-acoustic activities. In addition to mixing and engineering *A Circle of Atoms*, McCabe turned the project into a hands-on, masked, and socially distanced learning experience for some of the school's graduate and undergraduate students.



MACON BLUES ICON ROBERT COLEMAN GETS READY TO PLAY HIS SONG, "SOMEBODY LOVES ME," FOR 'A CIRCLE OF ATOMS: THE PASAQUAN SESSIONS.'  
PHOTO CREDIT: MICHAEL MCFALLS



“The whole process was fun in a strange way,” McFalls said. “It was awkward because the pandemic made everything feel so uncertain. There were only a few of us doing anything at any given time.”

*A Circle of Atoms* showcases disparate styles within a distinctly regional community. Macon blues icon Coleman delivers a swinging, up-tempo version of his song “Somebody Loves Me.” Athens-based Chickasaw Mudd Puppies wail through a swamp boogie foot-stomper called “Prison.” Exotic Bird Hunter imparts a jangly reverb-laden dream-pop number, “Safekeeping,” over archival recordings of St. EOM spreading the gospel of Pasaquoyanism. Atlanta denizens Crispin Wah supply one of their patented shredgaze joints titled “Home Movies.

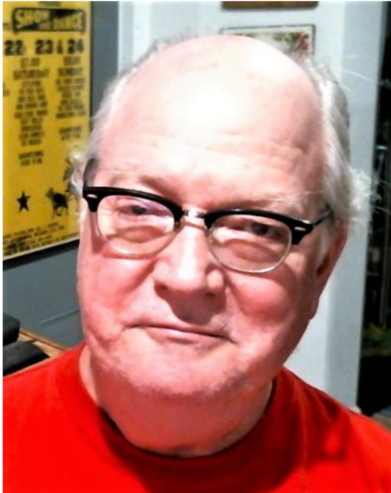
“Earth, We Have a Problem” was improvised by Lonnie Holley and Christopher Paul Stelling on a steamy afternoon in Pasaquan’s large circular sandpit, St. EOM’s preferred spot for dancing, poetry readings, and other happenings. Accompanied by Stelling’s languid electric guitar thrumming and Holley’s simple, melodically astute, organ fingering, the singer muses on the seemingly paradoxical existence of “Such a lovely place, a spot in the wilderness, the passersby don’t even know that it’s here” in the midst of plagues both literal (COVID) and figurative. “I can’t breathe,” Holley intones at the end of the song, invoking the dying plea of George Floyd, who was brutally murdered by Minneapolis police in May of 2020.

“The performance in the sandpit was amazing,” McFalls recalled. “Lonnie was definitely channeling some sort of spirit.”

That would be the spirit that inhabits every three-dimensional groove of *A Circle of Atoms: the Pasaquan Sessions*, the spirit of Eddie Owens Martin, an unbridled visionary and eccentric Southern artist whose legacy will forever inspire the world he transcended with singular poetic grace.

# Doug DeLoach

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An Atlanta native, Doug DeLoach has been covering music and the arts in his hometown and beyond for four decades. In the early '80s "Listening Post," his music column, debuted in *Creative Loafing*, where he has been writing features and commentary ever since. A regular contributor to *Songlines*, a world music magazine based in London, his ruminations on arts and culture have appeared in such publications as *Georgia Music*, *ArtsGeorgia*, *ArtsATL*, *High Performance*, and *Art Papers*.