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By Hari Kunzru

Jeff Mills is the prophet of Detroit Techno. Hari Kunzru spoke to him and tried to unravel the meaning of the city of electronic minimalism.

music is the message **A hard city:**

Detroit has long been a landmark in the sonic imagination. After slavery it became, like Chicago, one of the railheads of the black exodus Northwards. The railroads acted as cultural arteries, transmitting people and musical forms from the deep South of New Orleans and the rural Mississippi Delta, through the midwest and into the bright new urban world of the Great Lakes. In the process the acoustic sound of Delta Blues was exposed to the noise of industrial production lines, and mutated into the steam-train, factory-floor boogie of electric R'n'B. Basin Street Blues goes to Motor City Stomp. By the boomtime sixties, Detroit was synonymous with the hopeful three-minute soul-fictions of Motown, a label whose productivist ethic and mass market appeal was always an ironic mirror to the culture of Ford and General Motors that dominated the lives of its young black public.

Motown people may have started out dancing in the streets, but, as the seventies wore on, they were gradually reduced to living just enough for the city. During the bleak Reagan years Detroit seemed a dead zone, a symbol of the end of the old industrial order. But by the start of the nineties the decaying town, having absorbed the trauma of the oil crisis and world recession, had reinvented itself as the imaginary dark heart of a new global urban culture.

Detroit techno is the sound of the city. Not of city people, but the city itself. The humans, if they are still alive at all, have been coopted entirely by the urban machine, absorbed into its processes, their bodies disciplined by its unforgiving rhythms. It is no exaggeration to say that this style, with its bleak synthetic tones and hard four-four kick drums has probably had more influence on what music sounds like around the world than any single genre since the Blues.

Transmissions from the Future:

Detroit's synthesis of funk trance grooves and European disco futurism was accomplished by a surprisingly small coterie of producers, who started their experiments in the mid nineteen-eighties. The stories of Cybotron, Model 500 and the transition from disco to electro-funk to techno have been well-told elsewhere by writers like Matthew Collin [Altered State] and Kodwo Eshun [More Brilliant Than The Sun: Adventures In Sonic Fiction]. One of the pioneers was Jeff Mills who, as producer and DJ, has seeded the sound from Durban to Tokyo, and must bear no small responsibility for the fact that urbanites around the world now live in a media landscape where stripped-down electronic beats soundtrack everything from their shopping trips to their drug experiences to their nights home in front of the telly.

Mills is a quiet, bird-like man with a gaunt face and long fingers. When he deejays he uses three decks, rarely playing a record for longer than a minute, and often opening all three channels at once; filtering the sound so one deck is playing a bassline, the second the middle and the third the lead. His involvement with his machines is so intense, so concentrated that, as he darts from mixer to turntable, Mills the DJ seems self-evidently a component of a human-machine assemblage, a system which includes crowd, PA, the whole apparatus of record production, and the stylus cartridge whose sensitivity he has turned up so it produces an angry metallic treble buzz. It is unsurprising that when

Mills describes the experience of making music in a studio, he is preoccupied with the frustration he feels when 'the message' (for Mills music is always 'the message', or 'communication') is lost or degraded in transmission from mind to DAT.

"The producer has to transfer what he's thinking about to his hands and then to the machine," he explains. "The better the producer the clearer the picture will be. It's a translation from my hands to the machine. And that's usually where it gets lost." In a way this is a standard sentiment, a wish expressed by every artist since the Romantics began to lament the gap between inspiration and artefact. But Mills's wish for a closer symbiosis with his tools slides towards a desire for cyborgisation, for physical integration. "What I hope" he says "is for someone to create a sequencing program that relates from what you think to a keyboard or sound generator. A lot of ideas get lost because we can't make our machines do exactly what we thought about."

To a mainstream musical culture which is used to treating records as 'works', inviolate objects which contain some kind of artistic essence, Mills's conception of music must seem strange. "After you make the record" he says "you put the idea into the DJ's hands and it's up to the DJ to relay that message at the most opportune time or in the best way." He seems to think of musical work as process, as information flow, opening up a channel between producer and dancer.

Mills's language of messages, communications and communiqués is part of the guiding theology of Detroit techno: the story of the informational circuit that runs from future to present, from the Clear tomorrow of Drexciyan battlecruisers, UFOs ('you might see one fly...') and the rings of Saturn right the way back to the rotting streets of today. It is a circuit that channels energy through the body of the producer into his studio, energy that eventually exits via the PA and distributes itself over the dancefloor. Detroit itself is a satellite dish, collecting and amplifying the future-potential, sending it skittering over the rusting cars in the city streets...

Mills: "For me [my music is] about making people feel they're in a time ahead of this present time. Like if you're hearing someone speak in a language you don't understand, or you're in surroundings you've never seen before. It's about taking away your location, making the listener helpless."

Unlike some other producers, Mills's future isn't a pure chrome science-fiction dream. It's a *verfremdungseffekt*, the disorientation of pure potential. The Detroit drum attack is just a kind of softening-up, forcing listeners to open themselves to the message.
music is the message

From Bauhaus to... House:

"I'm trying to show my idea of what life will be like in the twenty-first century. Technology is going to shape the way we think. For example, as things get more expensive, space will be rare. I can see that happening already in London. So technology will create spaces in other ways. Virtual spaces. Sound spaces."

Detroit techno is architecture. That is why there is no narrative progression, no chord changes, no unfolding of themes, no counterpoint. Sound spaces, not sound travelling through time. "So few people understand that" says Mills, talking about minimalism, "how to just let it play..."

The cars and buildings have dematerialised in response to the pull of the future. "We are almost out of the phase of the territorial" says Mills. Detroit, the first portable city. Its inhabitants virtualised it a long time ago. "This is what a lot of people used to do in Detroit. We would create a track just for the ambience, just for the location where you live, and let it run throughout the day. This is not music you're eventually going to put on DAT and sell. It's just for living in."

Machine Evolution:

It's noticeable when listening to Mills that although he thinks of his music in concrete terms (strings "melt into the body" like "turning a heater on"), sound often seems to be just signal for him, just a vehicle for the message. So does this message have a content? The groundbreaking Detroit act Underground Resistance, which Mills founded with Mike Banks, used to plaster their sleeves with manifesto-like language, preparing their audience for some undefined sonic revolution. So I wonder if 'the message' is political.

"Oh no," says Mills. "It's abstract. It's what you're trying to say." Well, that told me. Mills is totally unforthcoming about content or inspiration for the sounds on his records. There doesn't seem to be a clear aesthetic or social agenda. But he has some unusual organising principles. "I think of a concept and maybe put it in some kind of colour scale," he tells me at one point. "I need a very clean feel with some amount of drama, so maybe I pick green. In my mind I have this idea of what green sounds like. Green is the frequencies which are much lower, not subsonic, but midrange." Then he confusingly glosses this by saying "it's just like if you take a keyboard and start from white and go all the way to black."

Mostly Mills talks about himself as the originator of the message, using the usual romantic vocabulary of the artist, the creator. But he is a creator with a peculiar relationship to his tools. "Often I get half-way with a sequence and then just let it run. I'll go out, leave it running for up to twenty-four hours. The machines fluctuate. Over time the sequence changes slightly. The machines mould themselves, giving their own character to a track. We did that a lot with UR. Sometimes we would let the sound run for days at a time. It would evolve into a very fixed state."

Techno, self-evidently, is music of and about technology. Producers are intimate with their studio kit and the imagery of flight decks, control panels and instrumentation ("and now... I throw this switch") which has always peppered samples and track titles signs their affinity with technicians of other kinds. Detroit, as the imaginary site where an older generation of industrial machines is giving way to information machines, flows speeding up and dematerialising, is where human relationships to technology are being reconfigured.

Jeff Mills goes out to the cinema and leaves the machines to evolve their sequence in the studio, and in doing so makes perhaps the most eloquent commentary we have on a cultural shift in all kinds of production, artistic and otherwise. It's a tension which has long been felt in pop music, well expressed in the grumpy Indiekid teeshirt slogan from a few years ago: 'faceless techno bollocks.' (Elsewhere other teeshirts riposted 'fuck Britpop'). These days the rock idol, Liam Agonistes, every inch the trad-artist, alone and romantically suffering onstage, is in mortal combat with something distributed, shifting (Mills is x102, UR, Axis...) and not altogether human. Sometimes Mills calls himself 'Purposemaker' and the listener finds the following (unattributed) statement on an inner sleeve: "only the consciousness of a purpose that is greater than any man can seed and fortify the souls of men." It's too easy to identify the purposemaker as the artist and the power as God. In Detroit the power that is greater than man, that is seeding and fertilising his soul, is inorganic, nameless, silicon-based.

Fear

"Sometimes when I think of a rhythm" says Mills "I think of a machine that is - walking somewhere, some type of movement, and I try to vividly create that type of motion." Robot tanks, assembly lines, colonising the imagination, articulated as hard drum tracks pounding the bodies of the dancers. Who is originating this rhythm? Us or them? Trace the process back. Which came first? Artist or machine? The idea of the machine in the mind of the artist? What placed the idea there? Infinite regress...

Detroit techno is also scary music, scary precisely because its unforgiving repetition reminds us of our immersion in remorseless mechanised, computerised systems. Detroit fetishises this relationship: take drugs, jack your body to the rhythm of the machines - it's no different from what you do at the office every day. Perhaps you feel like a lab rat pressing a lever for doses of endorphins. At least at 3am in a warehouse as you come up on another pill you know you're an honest lab rat.

This is everything we are supposed to forget about our lives. Aren't we expected to maintain the fiction that we are bounded, single and free? The fascination of Detroit lies in the way it links horror and a guilty vertiginous pleasure. What would it feel like to give in, to stop worrying about your precious individual identity? To stop fighting, struggling, choosing and just get fucked up on the beat? In a culture driven by an ideology of individualism, which slyly encourages the subject to express its supposed uniqueness through hyper-regulated acts of consumption, surrendering the self is a complex act. Either it's a form of (underground) resistance, or a perverse celebration of one's slavery. Refusal of choice as the last valid revolutionary gesture? Or just another consumer suicide? Are you sure you want to shut down now?

Techno is invisible in America, perhaps because it reveals so much about the hollowness of American individualism. Yet it is not a closed statement, not a condemnation. For all the horror and darkness, the trapped feeling of so much of this music, there is still the voice of Jeff Mills, murmuring into my tape recorder, "we're on the verge, something's coming, something's coming, something's coming..." music is the message