018: DeForrest Brown, Jr.

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An interview with DeForrest Brown, Jr. + an accompanying mix, album downloads, and our writers panel on Nídia's 'Não Fales Nela Que A Mentes' and Arca's 'KiCK i'

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DeForrest Brown, Jr.

DeForrest Brown, Jr. is a New York-based theorist, journalist, curator, and artist. He's created work under his own name and as Speaker Music, and is a representative of the Make Techno Black Again campaign. His writings have appeared in Tiny Mix Tapes, Afropunk, Artforum and Hyperallergic. His upcoming book, Assembling a Black Counter Culture, is out this year on Primary Information. Joshua Minsoo Kim talked with Brown, Jr. on May 28th about his new albums and book, COVID-19, George Floyd, techno, and empathy. Photos by Ting Ding.

Joshua Minsoo Kim: Hello, hello.

DeForrest Brown, Jr.: Hey, how's it going?

Good, how are you?

I'm all right… you know?

Just all right?

Yeah, it's just one of those things… You know, the news. Hold on, I'm moving a big ass bean bag chair. (*moves chair*). I've been working on the book, but the book is kind of forming in my life right now, I guess.

What do you mean by that?

So my book, *Assembling a Black Counter Culture*, it starts at the gold rush and I'm trying to tell the history of America through techno and the Industrial Revolution, tying it all together. Between George Floyd and these protests and the economic collapse, it's kind of a weird thing to see the end of the book. The book wasn't going to go that far but…

It feels necessary now.

Yeah, it's weird. I guess I could be more specific.

You don't have to be if it's too much.

No, it's just that my thoughts are so scrambled from making this grilled cheese (*laughter*).

Let's *descramble* then (*laughter*). We don't have to go through everything in your book, obviously, but what was your goal behind it and can you walk through the timeline and tell me what the throughline is between the different periods?

Yeah, so it's kind of funny. I was actually approached to write the book. It wasn't my idea initially. James Hoff, who runs Primary Information, asked me. We were hanging out in a bar and we just talked about this book idea. I already knew how I was going to approach it. I found techno in the weirdest way—I actually found it through Alvin Toffler and his book *The Third Wave* where he writes about the transition between the Industrial Revolution over to the data-oriented one that we're clearly living in right now. The word techno pops up in that as a prefix for the word technocracy and Juan Atkins read that book in a class called Future Studies in high school and that's where he got the name.

The whole point of writing this book was to sort of dig into… I don't want to say the *deeper* meaning of techno because that's silly, but there's a lot of implications to a 19-year-old Black kid in a Future Studies class in Belleville, Michigan reading about the next stage of industrial

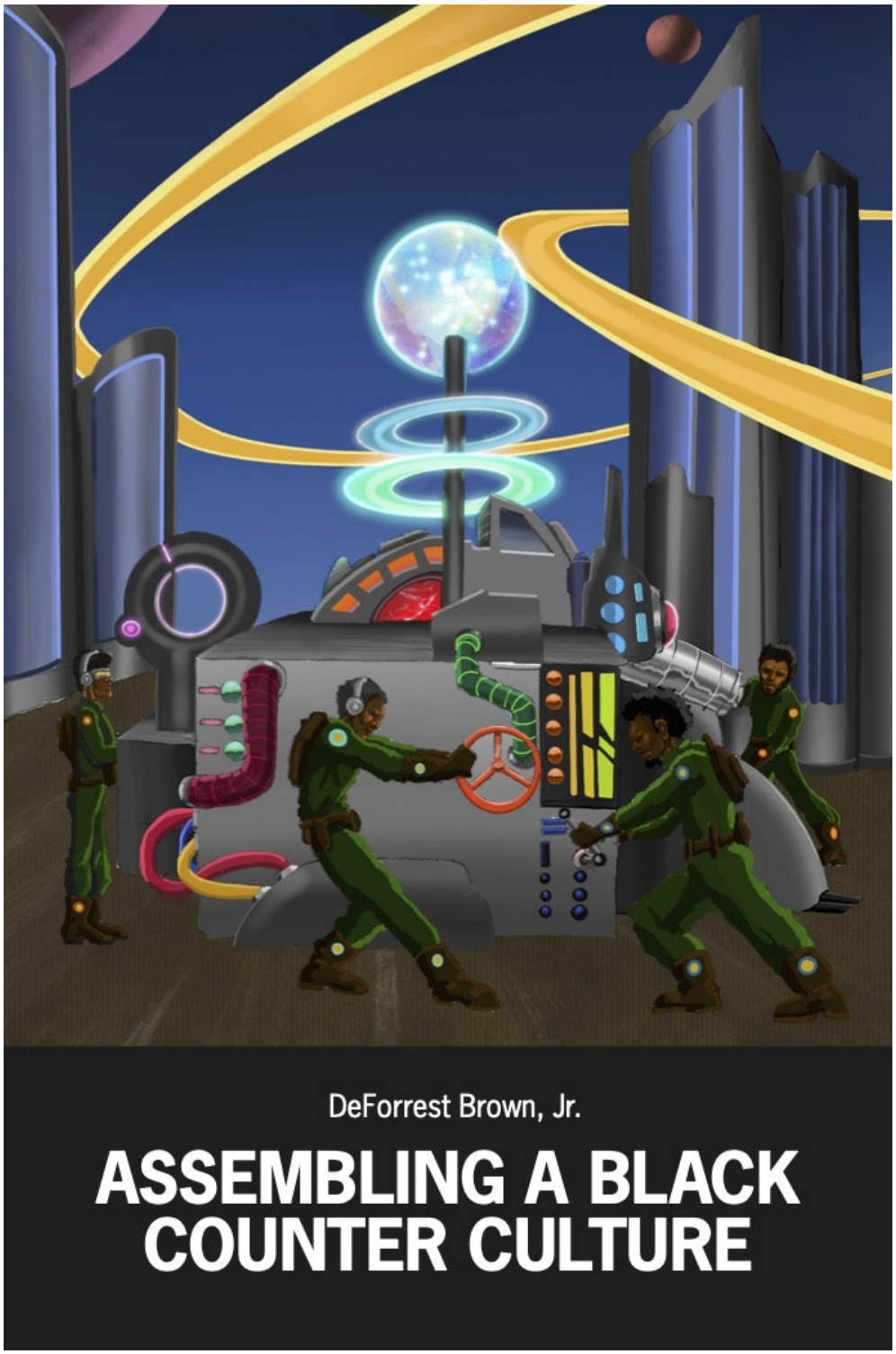
development in a city that has completely collapsed and has been the exact opposite of everything that American utopian futurism was supposed to present.

Since college, I've always said that Detroit was like a small-scale version of what America's collapse would look like, and to see it happening now as I'm finally documenting these thoughts has been a little unsettling. It's been interesting just listening to the music and going back through archival interviews and making these comparisons. A few weeks ago, I was reading an interview with Mad Mike. I think it was in *The Wire* with Mark Fisher. It actually wasn't a very good interview—Mark wasn't very good at interviewing (*laughter*). But Mad Mike talks a lot so it kind of works. There's a section where he's going on about being a kid in Detroit during the riots and talking about seeing tanks drive down the street. And so I followed that and found documentaries that had old archival footage of those riots and, I mean, those riots were completely necessary and still are now.

Of course.

I was watching the George Floyd protests last night from someone. I don't even know who it was. Someone was streaming it on Facebook Live and all the people around him were using their phones to push the cops back—it was like a weird episode of *Black Mirror* where 20 people were wielding phones at these cops and the cops were just, like, frightened by these screens.

There's just so much in the present moment. It's gotten me overwhelmed in a way that I haven't been in a long time, but I feel morally responsible to continue writing and to continue documenting this as America goes up in flames. Not to jump into all this.



No it's good. So you're seeing a parallel between what Mad Mike said in the interview and what's happening now… what do you feel is important about viewing all this through the lens of techno? What insight is there to be gained from this perspective that is ignored when viewing it from a different angle? What would people be missing out on if they only focused on other aspects?

Like techno as a sound?

Yeah.

What's really cool about techno actually is that I mean—. Okay, so again, you have this 19-year-old Black kid in a city that has just crumbled. Oil prices were dropping and Japanese and German companies were pumping out cars at faster and more efficient rates than Ford. That's what we're seeing right now where the entire economy and the supply and demand models are being ramshackled (*pauses*). Sorry, I'm actually still really emotional about everything.

It's okay, take your time.

When I think about Black music and being here from 1619 to the present, I see a long line of traumatic screams. It's kind of churned into various instruments, various formal types, various rituals that aren't necessarily perceptible to the modern music canon. Yeah, sure, people listen to rock music, they listen to jazz, but I don't think that any of the trauma that would be inside of a body that would make these sounds necessarily translates to a listener who buys vinyl to listen to in their study, or to stream on Spotify or whatever else.

What techno means for me in the larger scope of America is, again, this 19-year-old Juan Atkins getting a Korg MS-10 and making electronic music in his bedroom. And this is one of the first times in history when someone of his age and class demographic can actually touch some gear and express himself. That mode of isolated expression, that idea of touching this Japanese technology and putting feeling into it is something that is particular to what America has done to Black people and around Black people.

So I was saying that book started at the gold rush. A lot of that was to trace how America became its full united self, so when they brought in Texas and California through the Mexican-American War, and also the Underground Railroad that transferred a large number of Black bodies from the South to the North. So the gold rush fed into Detroit being able to build itself up as a financial center because there's four or five investors who ran out to California to grab some gold and ran back. But at the same time the Underground Railroad was dropping Black people off in Michigan.

I've been thinking so much about how at that time, the Union and the Confederacy were theoretically different nation states that were not abiding by the same cultural norms and rules, and suddenly the living inventory of the South pops up to the North and you have a border control issue but there's a lot of weird implications there, right? Where you have these people who are literally like commodities—it's kind of like smuggling in coke or something. But then at the same time, the North has all these cities and I've been thinking about Black people literally running to these cities and just literally popping up *in the future* and being like, "Oh my God, what's a car? What the hell is a vending machine?" Just having to confront these technologies which, I mean, have been around since—I think—the 1920s, but it's

something that class and… (*pauses*). There's so much disillusionment and disorientation just in general with a Black body being on American soil… then you add in the complexities of touching foreign technologies…

Techno is important to American history in a lot of ways. I don't want to say it pulls it all together, but it puts me in the mind of programs that would send Coltrane over to Europe to show that we had culture. When you have Derrick May going over to Europe in the late '80s, early '90s, that's part of this cultural exchange that Black people on the ground were maybe not necessarily aware of, but that's still the funneling of inventory, even still. It's this transference of bodies and sounds around to do this thing. Techno is one of the more advanced steps in positioning and moving Black bodies around and introducing us to European technological-centric ideas that normally would not have been a part of our lexicon. I think that's why techno didn't necessarily pick up in the Black community—it's too weird. Well, not weird. It's *abstract*.

You mentioned this idea of Black music being this series of traumatic screams, and obviously those who have been in charge of establishing canons or talking and writing about music have not been Black. They're largely white.

There's actually a book that I got some years ago called *Free Jazz* by Ekkehard Jost from 1974. I think a lot about this German guy sitting down with a bunch of free jazz artists. It's a cool but really idiotic book where he's sitting down with Archie Shepp solos and trying to chart the improvisations and is like, "Where are the improvisations? *Where is it*?" like he can really put this on a line. And there's stories of Kraftwerk sampling and trying to isolate rhythms from Isley Brothers songs and what they come up with is *Computer World* and they just got it all wrong.

I guess it's a problem with empathy, right? Where, sure, what they're seeing with this Eurocentric view of sound and music composition is systems—they're seeing nodes in a system moving along a linear path for satisfying or not satisfying rises and falls and conclusions—when what's actually happening is a sort of speaking in tongues. Even with techno where there's a four-on-the-floor beat, there's all this keyboard work happening over it. There's Derrick May using a knife to cut up tape reels and glue them together. There's a lot of physicality to the music that's not being calculated by the Eurocentric understanding of how music should be presented, expressed, played—all that jazz.

Cornelius Harris from Underground Resistance was giving a talk about a year ago in a space called Performance Space with some other members of Underground Resistance and Kevin Beasley. He started talking about picking cotton and how Black people in a line would pick cotton in a rhythm and it would become this communal, efficient thing and they'd be singing slave songs as this would happen. There's this communal rhythm that, from Cornelius's perspective, was replicated on the assembly line at Ford plants and all.

That's what I mean about the trauma. When you're working for your life, a different sound comes out when you open your mouth and can't speak the English language because it's not your native tongue and you're not allowed to read. Expressions mean a totally different thing when you're able to read. That's something that's been striking me as I've been writing—just marveling at the fact that I can speak the English language and marveling at the fact that I can type on a QWERTY keyboard. I've been thinking so much about Paul Gilroy and W. E. B. Du Bois's double consciousness idea of having to acclimate to these technologies that are presented to me as normal but are actually manipulating. Like, I have to really adapt to it.

I think there's just a huge lack of understanding of what is required, or even what is happening when *a Black music is happening*. Amiri Baraka writes about this in '66 when he's talking about Unity Music and how the jazz of Coltrane but also the funk music of James Brown are all just one thing. It's all this one sound of trauma and bodily agitation that comes out in various forms. And it's not really helpful for anyone to separate James Brown from Coltrane.

We should think of the entire accumulation of emotions and events that led to James Brown singing something like "I used to dance." There's this song where he goes on about how he used to dance and can't dance anymore but at the end he says, "Now watch me!" That's always been a real penultimate song for me for what would go into techno, this idea of *dancing anyway*. And not dance music in the sense of having fun but, like, David in the Bible where he would dance for God—where he danced so hard that he danced out of his clothes. It means a different thing for us. If you've ever seen me perform—wait are you in Chicago?

I am but I didn't make it out to your LAMPO show, unfortunately.

That's probably for the best (*laughter*). It was a good show, it was just a funny thing where you stand in front of an audience and realize there's not really a lot of empathy for me there (*laughs*).

Is that because a lot of people at LAMPO shows are old and white?

Yeah, but it was strangely a kind of diverse crowd. It was at a performance space in South Side Chicago called Green Line Performing Arts Center, which I guess used to be an old jazz joint owned by a boxer [Joe Louis]. There was all this history and I was so excited because I used to spend my summers in Chicago and there's house music and all that but I got there and I had my iPad and Kepla was on piano and it was just the two of us battling this black box theater where I'm like (*laughs*) telling my life story and playing drones on an iPad.

I eventually just threw my iPad down and started yelling at the audience about McCarthyism and how Americans are worthless spectators who refuse to interact and engage in an empathetic way, though we're maybe seeing a change right now with the protests. The show ended with the entire crowd leaving the stands and joining us on the floor and dancing, and

then I yelled at them some more (*laughter*). I'll send you the recording at some point but it's some dark Gil Scott-Heron techno shit. It was at a time in my life where I had a shitton more venom than I have right now.

You've mentioned this idea before, of people not listening to music with empathy. You actually mentioned that on Twitter after the writers on Tone Glow reviewed your album, *of desire, longing*. What does it look like for someone to listen to music with empathy?

To be honest with you, I've not really seen anyone do that in a really long time. Actually, there was one person—Tayyab Amin—who was moderating this panel I was on at Unsound and we were going to various performances together and I saw him close his eyes and just kind of start flailing in this way—it was kind of spiritual. We talked for 20 minutes on the dancefloor about letting loose and (*sighs*).

I don't know, in college I would tell people all the time about the music I was into and would be like, "Yeah I was really crying at this one part and it really got me" and people would be like, "Why are you crying? It's just music, man." And I was like "No, you're *damn lucky* to be listening to this person *expressing*." If you listen to someone like Pharoah Sanders, he's really giving it to you for like 20 minutes. Or Rick James, or anyone! They're really putting some shit out there.

I guess I don't know what it would necessarily look like for someone to feel empathy but… oh shit, is it seven? This is when people start clapping in Manhattan. Goddammit.

It's okay! I can still hear you.

I saw someone tweet the other day asking about the exit strategy for this clapping thing (*laughter*). They haven't figured it out in my neighborhood yet. It's funny—it fluctuates. Every other day it's riveting or everyone's half-assing. I actually really like my neighbor but he's really into it so I try to not be seen. It's one of those things like in the show *Home Improvement* where you can't see the neighbor's face.

Is that your neighbor playing that right now?

Yeah there's like air horns and shit, it gets pretty rowdy.

Yeah that's pretty loud considering how loud it is just through my phone speakers (*laughs*).

I live in the East Village and I have this deck where I can go out onto the roof and it's facing the back of the building, which is facing another building's back. Because of that, all the sound of everyone clapping funnels straight into my apartment. To sit with your question,

I'm kind of conflicted about all this because I'll listen to this clapping—if I'm playing music I'll pause it—but I haven't figured out what to do morally—(*sounds start getting louder*) oh they're really getting into it today (*laughter*).

Well it's also just something to do because there's not a lot to do right now.

Yeah, totally. It's a funny thing because they don't give a shit about the pandemic. I've talked with my neighbor and they don't care. I don't really know who this is for because the hospital is twenty blocks up the road. It's this college drum circle thing where I see one neighbor is making eyes with another neighbor and then this one ISSUE Project Room lady over here brings out an actual drum and then a Hispanic band is somewhere too, it's like a full band.

Oh wow, people are really into it.

Yeah totally. I'm trying to be, like, culturally respectful because this is a cultural thing that is happening, even if it is facetious. I may have said this to you before but I've gotten this sense that Americans don't really like music. Like, they just don't like expressive music. They love it manufactured—it has to be verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-chorus with some punchy lyrics about some bullshit that's supposedly universal. But then I hear people out here doing this pots-and-pans symphony and I haven't figured out what to do with it yet.

Do you think that your neighbors doing this is evidence that they *do* care about music?

I haven't figured out if this is music for them or not. The thing would be to talk with people but that doesn't really happen either. It's a weird thing—I've really been wrestling with this. The clapping thing was also like a PR company's stunt. My partner [Ting Ding] was like, "No, we're not doing this" because of that fact (*laughter*).

With Black people making up 13% of the population and making up a disproportionately large number of the deaths. So it's one of those things where I join in for the sake of my own personal grieving, but then do I offer that to the frat boy thing that's happening? You can go out to the parks in the city and people are sunbathing—they're maskless, shirtless… they're having picnics! It's like, the majority of people dying from the pandemic is Black, and then there's all these people who are like "Cool, Coachella day in the city." And then they clap like this at 7PM so I don't know.

Speaking of urban industrial cultures, I've been thrown off by the fact that you can hear bird sounds all day around the city. I've been recording them because it's been so spatial. The new sounds of birds singing together and all these people having a Wes Anderson jerk off session—it's not the city that Steve Reich lived in (*laughter*). Or maybe it is! Maybe *this* is the city where "It's Gonna Rain" came from. (*sounds continue playing*). Towards the end they get more Sonic Youth with each other and really start jamming. *(sound gets louder*). It's sounding a bit like Stomp right now (*laughter*).

You were talking about people being worthless spectators. What's the dividing line between someone being one versus someone doing something with empathy? And obviously this doesn't have to be just about music.

The dividing line is really complicated because we live in a country that's kind of like Disney World—it's a big ass resort for people who make enough money, and everyone else is in service to the people making the money or are visiting. I don't know how empathetic an American can be based on what this country is.

One of the main reasons people are out sunbathing on a Saturday in the park is because they *have* healthcare and know that there's someone in the healthcare world who will be there to service them and nurse them back to health. And most of the essential workers, the delivery workers, the nurses and medical workers—if they're *mostly* of color then you see this system where people of color are robots serving people their frosés, their pizzas.

There's a Shake Shack around the corner from here and there's literally a bunch of Black workers using iPads to take orders. I took a picture of that and just cried because it's like, these Black teenagers are just here to be literal touchscreens to people in the middle of a global, deadly pandemic in the world's epicenter. And this is what Shake Shack thought was a responsible thing to do after taking a $10 million loan.

When you have systems like that, whoever is consuming and able to pay for that stuff isn't necessarily caring; if we lived in a caring country, the whole thing would be shut down and we'd all get two or three thousand dollars a month and see where the economy goes and figure that out later. When you're living in a country where moneyed people are leaning that hard on the disproportionately unfortunate, there's going to be a kickback effect. And that's what I'm seeing in this book with techno.

One of the main things about the book is this guy named James Boggs, an autoworker from the '50s, who was a communist and involved in unionizing the auto workers. He wrote a lot about Black people in automation and this service assembly line labor and predicted the eventual classless state that America would come to with unions being busted up and companies paying people the lowest they could while someone like Ford would still make his cars affordable enough for his workers to buy so they could essentially sip the Kool-Aid of the thing they were making. In the present day, we're reaching the points that he's talking about where everyone's unemployed except those who would call themselves fortunate.

With empathetic listening, America's clearly not listening—they're not listening to anything, be it music or people's cries. I saw people talking about how the Target in Minneapolis shouldn't have been burned and it's like, *fuck it*! Burn every Target down if that's what it takes for people to listen for the first time ever.

Do you think listening with empathy requires—at least in part—for people to approach music, or other people or whatever else as something beyond its function in servicing them?

Yeah, that's definitely it.

That's sort of what I'm seeing with what you're saying. When people listen to a piece of music, they often just approach it for—and evaluate it by—the enjoyment it can provide for them.

Yeah, whereas I've always thought of music as literally being a person who you can walk up to and say, "Hey, how are you?" Like, *really* listen to it. I had a friend who was DJing at a club in New York and this white girl comes up to them during the set and shows them their phone. The DJ looks up from the decks to read what's on the phone and it says "Thank you, next." That happened maybe three years ago, but I think about it all the time—this idea of telling a live person who is playing, ironically, other people's music and then asking for the next DJ to come on to play other people's music. I guess people do the same thing with Mark Zuckerberg and Jack Dorsey and Jeff Bezos, jumping between which daddy they like the best who can provide us with bullshit technology that can fill up our days. People aren't empathetic enough to just go outside and have fun.

That's something I think about with people consuming frosés on Memorial Day. Why does going outside have to involve consuming capital? Why can't it just be about observing the ruins of New York City. In a culture like that, it makes sense that music would be packaged on an app like Spotify for $9.99 a month. You can sell "all of music" for the meager fee of $9.99 and of course you're not gonna value any of that. They hardly value the human lives right in front of them.

Yeah, and we've seen that with Spotify's donation buttons and how they're not committing to paying artists themselves.

Yeah, exactly. And that sort of futurism isn't what I think Juan Atkins and Carl Craig and Derrick May and all of them were thinking of when they were making techno. I would like to think that they were imagining something more holistic and loving and fulfilling. You think about Detroit as a model city for America—what they wanted was a city designed for these cool things called cars, you could drive to the inner city and the outer city, you could drive everywhere. But obviously that's not empathetic for people who can't afford cars and what you see now is a bunch of people in Detroit with no cars. And in a city designed for cars, Ford is making cars for everyone but those in the city now? It all gets so tangled and fucked up.

I was going through Discogs and was on the Underground Resistance artist page and was listening to this artist called Alone. It was a newer release from, like, 2014. The album was called *Has God Left this City?* and the first track is an address. I plugged it into Google Maps and what I got was a church that was a block away from the hospital I saw on the news that was being overrun with COVID patients. And then you have Kevin Saunderson who had COVID, Mike Huckaby dying from COVID, I think Carl Craig's father had COVID. We know enough about Detroit to know it needs help, but listening to techno and making it a worldwide enterprise has not done anything to put money back into the city. Instead, Detroit is something that we think about in abstract and techno is something we just press a button and say, (*through laughter*) "Here's some boom-booms for a nice time, I took some molly, let's do this."

I think Moritz von Oswald has a house in Detroit and Tresor had these ideas about opening up a club in Detroit but in their heads it's all just a romanticized version of what Detroit is supposed to be. I don't even know if a full-scale Tresor club would take off in Detroit. When I looked at the Music Institute, the club that Derrick May was a resident at—the one techno club that existed in Detroit from 1988 to 1990 or so—the club was like the basement of a department store. They had one strobelight, there was nothing exciting about it. They didn't even tell people it was a techno party—they had to trick people into going. So it's one of those things where when people tell me they love Detroit and techno I'm just like, "No you don't." I can hardly say I love Detroit and I have family there. That's also the other thing: If you consume all this Black music and see George Floyd die, there should be a 1:1 understanding.

You have the Make Techno Black Again hats. Is a crucial part of "making techno Black again" about getting money back into Detroit? Obviously it has to also do with who gets coverage. I'm just wondering what the impetus and goals were for the hat.

It's a funny story. I always have to clear my throat before I say this (*laughter*). It's like I have to run through a script. (*in a joking manner*) It all started in 2016… (*laughter*). My partner runs a sustainable genderfluid clothing line called HECHA, and her business partner [Luz

Angelica Fernandez], who paints on the fabric of this clothing—each piece is original and made to order—she posted a meme around the Trump election that said "Make Techno Black Again" and I was not around at the time.

The hats were made as a side project for the line. Both my partner and Luz are like ravers. Luz works at various clubs and parties in New York, like the Unter party, and Ting lived in Berlin for five years and did the Berghain thing and is invested in club culture and counterculture. So that was their way of putting this thought out there, this culture jam.

A few years later, after this first run of hats sold out, I saw this hat again and was like "Whoa, this is really crass." But I was taken by this idea of what I knew about techno and it coming from the term technocracy, like "Okay, let's make technocracy Black again." It made a lot of sense—taking the entire technological, urban structure of America and reducing it down to slave labor.

There's a charity that is attached to the hat—10% of the proceeds go to an educational program in Detroit called Living Arts, and it's like in-school music and technology training for kids. We haven't met them but we get hand-written letters from them every now and then and it's been heartwarming to receive those messages.

The hat for me was also a distress signal. At the time I was down on my luck. I had been, let's say, blacklisted in the music industry as a music writer. It was a thing where the Resident Advisors of the scene would be like "Actually, no, we don't want you to write for us" and wouldn't give me a real reason why, but it would be coming from someone I had interned for years before. You'd be like, "okay maybe there are some mixed feelings there."

I had already gotten fired from Mixmag over questioning why they didn't cover more Black music, why they turned their whole platform to video after two months of the numbers going up—they didn't like that. For me, the hat was kind of a distress signal to send out messages. One of the first places I ended up wearing the hat to was actually Berghain, which is kind of a funny thing because it was the most Berghain night where Dixon and Ø [Phase] were on the main floor and all these people were like "Oh your hat!" and it was a whole thing.

Ting Ding, Deforrest Brown, Jr., and Luz Angelica Fernandez

I'm really surprised the hat has reached a lot of the right people, which has been really nice. Recently, King Britt—who teaches at the University of San Diego—had a class where myself, Ash Lauryn, Juan Atkins, Carl Craig, Waajeed, and Jenn Nkiru talked about techno and it was one of those cool moments where the hat had gotten into the face of the guy who made the music and we were able to have an actual exchange. The hat has been really good for gathering bodies, which is what the book is kind of expanding on. Like, now that there's an active audience or active interest in making techno and thusly "America Black Again," it's like okay how do I narrativize this history, how do I tie it all together for these people who aren't thirsty for this information, especially now that race tensions are high.

That's the thing the stay-at-home protestors are fighting, that's what the Jeff Bezoses are doing when they fire people like Chris Smalls—they want to keep the technocracy white. I think about Chris Smalls a lot, especially in relation to James Boggs because he's kind of like a modern day incarnation of them. He's a whistleblower who was on the factory floor saying, "You can't treat workers like slaves, you don't take away bathroom breaks, you don't have people work on the floor with sick people during a pandemic and not tell them."

When I think of techno I think about the business/economic hierarchy that developed in America. Boggs also talks about the sliding scale of labor from slave labor to a lower class or middle class worker, and then you have the middle class white that becomes the white collar worker in the 1910s when corporations start buying out all the businesses. It's this slow transition of plantation labor and plantation business organization to corporation and it's kind of 1:1. There's not much of a difference between a plantation and the Ford industry and Amazon—those are all three modes of extracting and Black people are at the very bottom of all of those groups.

I never take for granted that Jlin worked at a steel plant. She did an interview for Unsound at New York and talked about how music saved her life. I didn't realize she went to Purdue and studied mathematics and worked at a steel plant. There's nothing wrong with working at a steel plant, but I can imagine that if you get a degree in mathematics that you expect something a bit more glamorous. I really related to that and obviously related to the fact that we're on the same record label.

Making music was a similarly life-saving thing where when I was blacklisted from the music industry, *of desire, longing* quite literally fell out of me one night. When I saw the Make Techno Black Again hats I made it all in one night, or at least the skeleton of it. I looked at it and was like, oh God—all this anger got into this sound and I had to do something with it. We talk about empathetic listening and when I say the album came from that and then Resident Advisor reviews it saying that it's nice background music, that's not exactly empathetic.

It's one of those things where, like, you could've actually met the person who made the record, but we didn't talk and they didn't seem to want to talk—and that's not a judgment call on their personality—but the chance to commune was there but when the communion point happened with my product, it became a thing of… *is this music titillating and does it match what I think are his philosophies are today?*

I've become friends with a lot of people whose records I reviewed simply because they were like, "Wow, you really listened." That's how I met my publisher, I reviewed his album in 2014 and bumped into him at MoMA PS1 and he was like, "Let's go out for a drink, I really liked your review."

That's the PAN one, right?

Yeah, *Blaster*.

You had two releases earlier this year. One of them was built on stuff from *of desire, longing*, that was *processing intimacy*. And then you had *Percussive Therapy*. I don't want this to sound facetious, but what was "the point" of those releases, what did you want for people to extract from them?

There's always a point, which is a funny thing about me because I'm always paranoid about that.

About what?

About things being pointless. About things actually mattering in the world. I'm not really defensive about my music and how people approach it, but I am defensive of whether the point was gotten or not, and the cultural angle at which it's approached. Though I've played music since I was a kid, I never intended to make music. Now that it exists, it's kind of like bait that I lay out and I use it to review the listener without them maybe ever really knowing. And hopefully during the process of them listening, the music should be reviewing you.

What does that mean, for the music to be reviewing the listener?

With *processing intimacy*, that was actually two live sets. One of the writers who reviewed *of desire, longing* for Tone Glow actually was at one of the sets.

Oh yeah, Mark Cutler.

It was actually crazy to read that. It was a funny performance. Again—angry at the audience, angry at the guy who curated the whole thing (*laughter*). *of desire, longing* was meant to be a multi-part symphony that would encompass several releases on Planet Mu. The first live show at ISSUE was me presenting the coda of the album before presenting the album. The whole thing was botched though because of institutional bullshit.

Do you wanna talk about that?

Oh yeah, sure, why not.

Hold on, though. I have to go to the bathroom, is that okay?

Yeah, I'll just pace around.

[Kim goes to the bathroom as Brown, Jr. talks to his neighbors]

I'm communing with my neighbors as we watch a bird fly around.

(*laughs*). Nice. Okay, so what's the bullshit?

I used to curate at ISSUE Project Room but I guess we're fine now. One of my issues with the arts industry is the way in which this technocracy plays out in non-profits where it's run like a for-profit because white men typically don't know how to do something that does not make a profit (*laughter*).

Anywho, I get a phone call from the executive curator—the executive *whatever*—and he's like, "I wanna book Actress, do you think he's a good idea?" And I'm like "Sorry sir, that's a $500 consulting fee and also you stole that from my application for the curatorial fellowship four years ago so I also need a finder's fee, so that's $1000." (*laughter*). And he says no. And I know he's not privy to this kind of music because he's a classical music guy who was trying to replace George Lewis, and he wanted another Black guy who plays on the computer. And that's already a little dubious, but sure, *fine*, Actress gets to play at an institution and I wanted to book him.

He calls back and says, "How about you open for him?" and I said "Sir, that's blackmail, I'll take it!" (*laughter*). So I took it because I had a record coming out on Planet Mu and opening for Actress gives people a legible understanding of the music. It's this whole empathy thing again—you know, people need too many reasons to know why to listen to something so this was like, "Okay, Black man with computer, *another Black man with computer*." (*laughter*).

It's funny, there's Derrick May interviews from '92 where he says how Europeans are just not intelligent enough to listen to Black music without an assumption. I thought that was funny coming from Derrick for other reasons, but anywho—

I get ready to play the show and my partner does this thing with security cameras. She sets them up and uses them to interrogate the audience, but also to document the performances on our terms. We actually have on tape the executive director coming into the setup being like, "What is all this? Do you even need this?" He was doing the typical white man profiteering, auditing thing, being like, "Am I paying for this?" I don't know what I'll do with that audio besides tell you about it right now (*laughter*). He was all like, "What is all this shit? Is this gonna bother the donors?" So when it was time to perform, I was like "Fuck it!" What was supposed to be a very romantic, free jazz, Wagnerian show ended up being me blasting noise.

I do this thing where I move around the room and snap my fingers to get everyone together and in a rhythm. And when you move from the stage it also freaks people out because, you know, *difference* freaks white people out (*laughter*).

That show got really rowdy and I wanted to salvage the audio so I sculpted it over another live show I played at Fridman gallery in January. I originally wasn't going to release it because I didn't see the need, but then COVID happened while I was at the residency in Rauschenberg. I flew back and my partner and I started writing an essay called "Manufacturing Normalcy" to keep up with what the fuck was going on because her mom had sent us a video of a Wuhan citizen back in January who was talking about the virus. She and I had already been documenting and following the virus and we did not expect it to blow up like this; we were waiting for an economic crash but not a killer virus. So I took the recording and applied an essay to it and threw it out there. I wanted to see if people would read it. That's what *processing intimacy* was.

With *Percussive Therapy* I was working on it during the residency whereI was staying in Robert Rauschenberg's house on the beach in Captiva, Florida, and was working in the studio that Merce Cunningham had been using—it was a crazy, crazy thing. I was traversing all these spaces where Rauschenberg had made his works. His art's everywhere, and his picture is in the living room—he's smiling at you while you're eating your breakfast (*laughter*). I found my sound kind of changing. I was supposed to finish my book while I was there, but I was making music because they had stuff there.

Percussive Therapy came out of wanting to metabolize stuff we were talking about with the book into my own work as Speaker Music. It was also to test out the whole Bandcamp Day thing. I probably would've waited to release it on Planet Mu but with Bandcamp Day, I wanted to see how much I could make without a label. To be honest, I'm quite skeptical of Bandcamp Day.

I actually was planning to ask you about all that.

Well there you go, that's what *Percussive Therapy* was about, because I was curious too. I was like… a single company that has a monopoly on every single kind of independent music and is deciding what day to release music on? Again, it's technocracy.

Obviously Bandcamp has done a lot of good—

Yeah, it's a great platform.

But obviously if we're all just putting our eggs in this one tech company's basket…

Yes, they are still a tech company, whether we want to acknowledge it or not.

Yeah and despite everything that's good… it's like, these days are loss leaders for them and everyone is joining and just continually going to use Bandcamp. And then people are being pressured to get more music out, and all on the same day, like you said.

Everyone's asking for a tax cut, right? So we've all become independent corporate moguls looking for a tax break. That's an adaptive preference—teaching people to seek out tax breaks. It's sad because it's like a ten dollar release—we're getting a tax break on crumbs, and that's what everyone thinks is socially and empathetically acceptable.

I made about a thousand dollars. And I was like "Oh shit!" (*laughter*). That actually put a real wrench into things. Given the attendance I've seen at most clubs and art events, there's not enough money to go around to justify being a musician financially, so it's all kind of a weird rat race. What Bandcamp Day showed me is that people would rather buy all their music when they're told to rather than on their own accord.

It's one of those things where at this point, if people weren't willing to buy a $20 vinyl yesterday, I don't know why they'll suddenly want to buy it today. If it's under the guise of helping out musicians… well it's like the word "patronize" has different meanings, you know? You're also paying them but you're also, like, patronizing them—throwing petty cash at them that will result in a good that can sit on your harddrive forever. I don't quite like what that does to the musician. We become vending machines, spitting out music every month, hoping that the momentum of buying Bandcamp releases won't go down. I feel like by August everyone will be looking for an exit strategy.

There's no coordination from the magazines either. Resident Advisor puts up a long list of names but there's no, like, formal reviews of everything they're taking in. Which, of course, is impossible, but also shows an inefficiency of magazines and why they're all failing, how they don't have enough staffers. I'm seeing these full-system glitches. I mean, I got a grand, and I had to sit with what that meant.

Now is the time for people to really listen to music and think about where they're putting their money. I'm grateful that people bought *Percussive Therapy*—it seemed like a few people listened to it (*laughter*). That's the thing, you'll never know. I look at the stats every other day and out of the 900 people who listened to it, 53 people finished the first track, like 2 people finished the second. It's depressing.

Oh yeah, I've seen that with the one release I have on my own label. It's like, oh God—people are just skipping all these tracks (*laughter*). Though there are people who are downloading it and you don't know about them.

And that's the thing, it's about trust. It's been about trust. But now we know that 53 people out of 900 people listen in full and now I don't have respect for people! (*laughter*). It's like, ugh don't tell me this. Even with "Manufacturing Normalcy" and the "Platform Capitalism" piece before that, that was me trying out Medium instead of Twitter despite them being started by the same people. And I've always seen Medium as longform Twitter except less accessible. I wanted to publish on my own and see what that would be like.

You get something crazy like 9% of people read the whole thing and it's like, okay… cool. I think I made $71 off of "Platform Capitalism" and $20 off of "Manufacturing Normalcy." So ultimately, was Medium worth it? Not at all. There were like 22,000 "reads" for the "Platform Capitalism" piece but it was mostly shared through email so it was all backend stuff. And that's what I'm seeing with Bandcamp. I'm seeing who's buying the record and it's, like, an editor from RA, an editor from The Quietus, and it's like "Oh shit, the money is just circulating in a small pool." Which is fine. I mean, that's community, but we also have to temper expectations about what the music industry is if all twenty people in the experimental scene are buying each other's music.

And there can be this perception that things are better than they actually are, because you see all those squares underneath all the albums!

That's scorekeeping. The squares make it so bad because then you're like, "Oh I don't have as many squares as so-and-so." (*laughter*). And now that Joe Rogan's gotten $100 million from Spotify—now that $100 million is on the line—I don't know what we're doing. I wanna start like a town hall meeting somehow but I don't know how to do that.

If anything, I'm releasing music to test out formats from artists who will benefit from it far more than me. My hope is that at 50 I'll start writing plays or some shits, or wearing capes—whatever shit 50 year olds do. I'm not trying to take up space, I'm just a critic. I'm not like Minor Science—I'm not a storied RA critic who at the end of his tenure decided to mix together everyone else's music I had shat talked and turned it into a fucking Beats headphones-like demo expecting pats on the back from my fellow critics (*laughter*). You know, if someone would've let me, I would've gone off, but no one accepts negative reviews.

I'm very disappointed by the lack of negative reviews everywhere.

And the thing is like, sure, you can write a bad review of my record, but I'll also roast your ass.

It's give and take.

There needs to be this reciprocity in general. When we talk about empathetic listening, it's about reciprocity. If I go to a club and everyone's on their phones, I know that they're not there for the music. I've been to bad basement shows where everyone's gotten into the music. It's fine if people don't like music, it's just that in the middle of a pandemic, at the end of industrial capitalism, at the end of post-Fordism business managerial models, at the end of tech bubbles bursting, at the end of startups, maybe we should finally say, "Hey, we don't care about music, that's why we're selling it for $9.99." And that's really all I'm ever trying to prove.

There's this book called *Generations* by William Strauss and Neil Howe where they view a history of America from 1584 to 2069. They follow the generational cycles and, while they don't acknowledge this, they sort of ask, "What do you do with a group of people who go to a new place they've never been before and murder the fuck out of everybody, enslave a group of other people—torture them, rape them, castrate them, all sorts of fucked up *Purge*-like shit—and then have kids for 400 years?" What do you do with that? And how does each generation handle this trauma? How does each generation respond to the previous generation? And then there's the accumulation of wealth across that whole spectrum.

It's two white guys so they don't get into the gruesome details of all that, but when I read it, as a Black guy, I see how the "American white" went from being various Europeans to a singular white in 1980 or so. I see that generational accumulation. For me, a millennial is a person who has grown up in an era where 24 hour television was around, global travel was the most accessible it had ever been, art was more accessible—millennials are the most perfect test subjects for the American experiment. Like all of it was building up to us. And the *Generations* book covers that idea, that we're the millennials because we're coming into our adulthood in the first decade of the new millennium, or what was essentially defined by America as the future that Juan Atkins and Toffler were looking for.

For me, a millennial—I'm thinking of Americans—is white kids who have accumulated all the wealth and privileges of all the previous generations, but also all the ignorance and being born inside this bubble and having to come to grips with the bullshit their ancestors have instilled upon Black people systemically, physically, and personally. We're seeing it now with George Floyd. This is a last stand in which, maybe throughout the past 30 years or so there's been a kind of silence on the race front. A sort of stalemate where after O.J. everyone was like, "Okay let's chill out for a little bit." The tech bubble's bursting, white millennials have proven to be subpar allies and are ignorant of the country's violent history, and now with George Floyd it's time to put up or shut up.

Joe Biden said that we're fighting for America's soul right now. But it's not a fight for Black millennials, it's a fight for white millennials to really consider all of it—to consider everything that led to them getting the nice job at the tech company in New York. And then, like, how do these same people take in music?

DeForrest Brown's work as Speaker Music can be found on Bandcamp. He has a new album (with accompanying zine) called *Black Nationalist Sonic Weaponry* out now. His book, *Assembling a Black Counter Culture*, is out later this year on Primary Information.

Every now and then, artists will provide a mix personally made for Tone Glow. Mixes will always be available for streaming and download.

> *Further Expressions of Hi-Tech Soul* is a live set inspired by Derrick May and Mad Mike Banks' understanding of techno as a form of hi-tech soul, funk, and jazz. I wanted to improvise a kind of rhythm and soul music using drum machines and keyboards on the iPad filtered through-composed stereophonic effects in Ableton.

-DeForrest Brown, Jr.