

DEFORREST BROWN, JR. with S. David

BR brooklynrail.org/2021/03/music/Speaking-Music-and-More-DEFORREST-BROWN-JR-with-S-David

March 9, 2021



BROOKLYN RAIL

MARCH 2021

The ex-American theorist and musician DeForrest Brown, Jr. has waged what feels like a worldwide one-man guerrilla campaign, challenging the nature of globalized capital in the art and music industries through protest and presence. His latest project as Speaker Music, the album *Black Nationalist Sonic Weaponry*—released in 2020 by Planet Mu—drew praise for its uncompromising sonic and social vision, while his “Make Techno Black Again” collaboration with HECHA / 做—his partner Ting Ding 丁汀 and Luz Angélica Fernández’s apparel brand—has re-centered a necessary conversation about race in contemporary music.

Over the course of a charged and thoughtful dialogue, Brown leaned into his view of contemporary media, elucidating much about his process, life, perceptions, and work, as well as detailing what he calls his “revision” of the history of techno. What Brown perhaps understands best is the nature of history and its containment of contemporary moments. He himself is a man of many moments, both past and present.

S. David (Rail): You’ve mentioned before that your upcoming book, *Assembling a Black Counter Culture* (Primary Information, Summer 2021), starts chronologically with the Gold Rush, which is interesting, given the book is about techno. Could you explain why you choose to start in the 19th century?

DeForrest Brown, Jr.: I found myself, while writing about techno—and the calamitous economic conditions that necessitated techno—wondering why Detroit was even there in the first place. What I found is that Detroit, and Michigan as a whole, was financed by the Gold Rush. Local publications diverted attention from debate over slavery to events in California, encouraging people to go and come back and invest the money in Michigan.

But as I’ve been writing the book, I’ve actually pushed the beginning back even further, to 1619, to meet Nikole Hannah-Jones’s project with the *New York Times*, and again, both place why Detroit would be there, let alone why it would fall apart pretty quickly—not to mention why there would be Black people there. I found that drawing things back to Virginia was a way to show that Black people were the seed money for the next scam, which was the city of Detroit.

Rail: You mention the 1619 Project. Your latest release, *Black Nationalist Sonic Weaponry*, seemed to emerge at an apparently profound moment of cultural change. As a result, the institutional reaction—your profile in *The New Yorker*, for example—seemed to be somewhat charged by the politics of the moment. What was the timeline and process that led to the album? In some respects, it seemed to manifest both a continuity and rupture with your long-term project.

Brown: I think anyone with eyes, ears, and a heart could’ve seen George Floyd’s death coming from years away. In December [2019], I curated an art show at Artists Space around my first album, *of desire, longing* (2019), and my partner Ting Ding’s clothing brand, HECHA / 做. I was just trying to create a counter-cultural moment. Artists Space is, historically, economically free from some of the—I’ll be blunt—money laundering you see with places like the Whitney and the Guggenheim.

I wanted to take that time and that space to go, OK, after a decade of music magazines and alcohol companies and brands trying to gouge every last cent from counter-culture, what could the next step look like, if America were to have the balls to care about culture, about something other than money?

So, the timing of *Black Nationalist Sonic Weaponry* itself had everything to do with my own experience in New York, of being around a bunch of liberal white racists. If you see someone writing in a magazine, I don't care what magazine it is—I can point out George Grella at the *Brooklyn Rail* right now—there are a lot of liberal white people that want to think that they can do the right thing and put on the façade that they care about race.

Rail: I'm reminded of something you said during a show that was quoted in an interview you sat for with Tone Glow: "Americans are worthless spectators who refuse to interact and engage in an empathetic way." That's really powerful.

Brown: After Eric Garner, after Sandra Bland, I saw people go back to their normal lives. And after several Black Lives Matter leaders were assassinated by police—leading up to the two Breonna Taylor protesters who were killed recently—it was pretty clear to me that there was an attack, a militarized attack, on Black people. So when George Floyd happened, I was not only ready, I was already angry, from years of watching white people pretend like nothing was happening.

When the time came, I literally took some shrooms and laid out the structure for *Black Nationalist Sonic Weaponry* in a weekend and punched it out and had it out on [Planet] Mu by the next week. I say that to note it's not a stroke of genius to be relevant. It just takes someone having common sense and a heart—and America doesn't have it. The [500,000+ COVID] deaths kind of go to show America has no conscience and no reason to be.

Rail: You wrote, in a piece in *Fact*, "Techno Is Technocracy," that technocracy "relies on the withholding and hoarding of information and resources to uphold standards." There are still a lot of people, Black people—and I talk to them all the time, my family included—who aren't completely aware of the history of techno, that it is in fact Black music. And so the question remains if you're reaching them.

Brown: I've tried my best to connect the historical dots in line with the liner notes or old interviews with Drexciya, Juan Atkins, and Underground Resistance, etc, to decode a specific story they were telling through the format of techno music for new audiences. Materially, the "Make Techno Black Again" campaign donates half of its revenue to Teen HYPE (Helping Youth by Providing Education), a Detroit-based youth arts nonprofit. Planet Mu also donated their revenue from my album to Movement 4 Black Lives and the Black Emotional and Mental Health collective. I get this drive and the idea to create decentralized community networks from my parents—my dad is a business/economic professor at a HBCU, and my mom works as a social worker and counselor, primarily caring for the living situations of Black youth in the Birmingham, Alabama metro area. I would say that my mom, in collaboration with my dad, has systematically raised hundreds of kids.

What I'm interested in, when it comes to techno, though, is realigning white American and European people's understanding of these last 30 years of globalization. It's basically been a psychotic break that a lot of them really need to think about. And maybe instead of clubbing

in Berlin, they should have been paying attention to the fact that a US President like Ronald Reagan went over to the Berlin Wall and threatened—

Rail: Another world war.

Brown: Right, to tear the Wall down. And so this whole clubbing thing to me is a sign of white people living within empire, living at the end of a colonial project. They're getting funneled through various drug escapades and money laundering schemes—and it's kind of pathetic.

I wouldn't have said it this coldly a year ago. But watching the entire dance music industry crying and begging for clubs—after this virus has wiped out a significant portion of the population—I don't really have much sympathy. It just goes to show that people were too addicted to money, to traveling, and flirting with suicide on the dance-floor.

So when I say Black people are fine, what I mean is, there's a lot of agency that Black people have right now that may not be appreciated. There were no Black people at these shows and clubs I was seeing. It wasn't Black people getting pimped out by *VICE*, or getting flown in from Amsterdam, strung around like cattle to promote a "New York club scene." It was all rich white kids. So my concern was never with Black people. Black people don't even *need* techno now—that's the joke.

Rail: With that said, where do you think your project—revising techno's history—naturally leads? Because at Unsound you said you don't see the solidarity.

Brown: From what I've seen, it basically leads to a bunch of white people going, *oh shit*, and then, instead of dealing with it, they jump ship.

Every industry is showing you what they think is right. *Time* putting a white supremacist like Joe Biden and someone like Kamala Harris—the person who was supposed to indict cops killing Black people—on their magazine cover is a white supremacist move that is a slap in the face of every Black person who has died. And these other publications have followed the exact same route.

So where we're heading is toward a bunch of people losing relevance fast. I don't even think I'm reaching Gen Z, honestly. I think Gen Z doesn't listen to music, they don't give two shits about history. In fact, Gen Z may be smarter than the rest of us, because they know all of these pageantries we call living in American civilization—it's over. They know to just sell their images for nothing on TikTok. So that's where we're heading, a total cash-out of every single industry and every single individual. I think about OnlyFans as the new SoundCloud, where you don't sell your beats, you sell your body.

Rail: When I've expressed similar sentiments, people will say something like, "How can you be so nihilistic?"

Brown: How can *they* be so nihilistic? As a person who's concerned about the legacy of slavery in America, especially as it relates to cultural production and expression, I'm worried people don't value themselves. They don't value culture and they don't value the future.

My book stops around 2010 when Clone [Classic Cuts], the Dutch label, starts reissuing Drexciya. In those reissues, there was no mention of the story of the Drexciyans, pregnant African women and children thrown overboard from slave ships and being forced to, in a fantastic way, adapt to the water and build civilizations and redesign their futures. There was no mention of the sort of Sun Ra-type/Afrofuturist things that James Stinson was trying to do with that project. And I think the book should end there.

Or perhaps it should end with Theo Parrish in 2016 when he posted on Facebook, "How can we be dancing to this music made by Black people when we're still hanging from the trees?" I'd rather not pretend the last decade was a decade of legitimate cultural expression, or even human intelligence. The last decade was a bunch of people selling themselves on social media. And the music reflected—and suffered from—that. So that's the future. It's worse than *Black Mirror*. Because it's real and we deserve it. We absolutely deserve everything that's coming. And if anyone denies that, they're not only lying—they deserve it even more.