

Sunday! “Assembling a Black Counter Culture” by DeForrest Brown Jr.

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By Rufus F.



The Belleville Three

I remember a phrase in a New York Times opinion piece a few years ago that stuck with me: it argued that people had tired of living under “the doctrine of multiculturalism” that now dominates our lives. I don’t remember who wrote the piece- although it might have been Ross Douthat- which was replete with the fuzzy thinking of the greater punditocracy. It was also really *weird* – what exactly does this “doctrine,” which after all *dominates our lives*, state? Because, unless you’re living in an Amish village, multiculturalism is likely much more of a tangible reality than a matter of opinion. In NYC, talking about a “doctrine of multiculturalism” would be like talking about a “doctrine of gravity.” It matters not what you think on the subject.

Similarly, asking whether we should be “for” or “against” globalization seems a little insipid, since our civilization has existed with globalized trade and culture for, at least, five centuries. We’ve lived “under globalization” our entire lives. Admittedly, as labor and culture have been

deterritorialized and capital has sloshed around the globe, outcomes have been mixed. When even the IMF admits neoliberalism has its failings, it's sensible to have mixed feelings. Or, to put it another way, our lives are enriched by virtue of living in a global village; but, also, fuck U, pay us.

People from Detroit no doubt have mixed feelings about globalized trade and industrial technology and the idealized future that never came to be. Not to mention Black people were treated as a *commodity* in Atlantic/global trade starting four centuries ago and are still impacted by the legacy of that trade. Afrofuturism strikes me as an understandable effort to create an alternative futurism to escape the white future that already exhausted itself decades ago. There is a perennial argument made against the seductive dangers of "Utopianism," but I notice it's one always made by white people.

What's maybe more interesting about globalized culture are all the strange connections and cross-pollination that result. I've recently read DeForrest Brown Jr.'s dense and mind-expanding book *Assembling a Black Counter Culture*, which contextualizes and details techno music, a genre that many folks still don't know was born and originated in Detroit before it caught on in Europe, probably more than it ever did in the United States.

In the popular imagination, Detroit is associated with Motown and the auto industry in the 50s and rust belt decline since the late 60s. *Barbarian* is only the most recent film to depict modern Detroit as a sort of hellish Wild West ghost town. In fact, the problems took root some time ago: the population of Detroit started shrinking by the late 50s. Motown Records had relocated to Los Angeles by 1972.

And so, culture responded. *Assembling a Black Counter Culture* tells the story of young men rooted in a somewhat dystopian city creating the soundtrack for a slightly ersatz "future." Musical pioneer Derrick May once described Detroit techno as



The Belleville Three

“a complete mistake... like George Clinton and Kraftwerk stuck in an elevator, with only a sequencer to keep them company.”

May should know- along with Juan Atkins and Kevin Saunderson- the “Belleville Three”- he essentially created the genre. Belleville is a suburb about 30 minutes outside of Detroit, where the three teenagers were a little isolated, but still plugged into the world of music and what it can do through the visionary DJ Charles Johnson “The Electrifying Mojo” on WJLB, who by a happy accident came upon a *Kraftwerk* record in the studio and played it along with *Parliament*, the *B-52's*, and *Prince*. The planets aligned and began to rock.

Soon, the three teenagers started experimenting with synthesizers and drum machines- there has to be a history of the Roland TR808 by now- and recording music under different names and their own individual record labels. Electro and then Techno were born, and soon they were traveling to nearby Chicago to check out that nearby city’s “house” DJs. A revolution in musical consumer technology spurred a revolution in music. I’m admittedly a novice when it comes to this music, so it’s hard to understand why Atkins and Richard Davis’s *Cybotron* song *Cosmic Cars*, from 1982, is frequently called “electro” rather than “techno”:

Or, for that matter, why Afrika Bambaataa’s “Planet Rock” isn’t the first “techno” song.

But I think we can all get why this song is funky and futuristic and just plain fantastic.

DeForrest Brown Jr. knows the story inside and out and details an entire universe of musicians and songs and connections. It seems that the American music industry did *not* actually understand why this music was more fun to dance to than, say, *Guns ‘n’ Roses*, and basically missed the boat, while young people in similar post-industrial landscapes- particularly Berlin- got techno music right away. To some extent, all art is local- it’s created in conversation with a specific time and place- but it radiates outward. In the same way that hip hop escaped the Bronx, techno became a global musical form.

Along the way, there were all kinds of startling connections; for instance, how did European ravers discover ecstasy? Oh, they got it from the Osho Rajneesh cult (of *Wild Wild Country* fame), of course! Wait, *what?!*

DeForrest Brown Jr.’s book is full of startling connections replete with a lengthy soundtrack. (Here’s another) I’m still a novice, but by the end you can understand why a group of young Black Americans tried to assemble their own sci-fi cultural machinery to escape an exhausted vestigial future and travel to outer (and inner) worlds with better parties. As Emma Goldman knew, a revolution isn’t worth a damn if you can’t dance.

And so, what are YOU creating, pondering, playing, reading, watching, or dancing to this weekend?

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