

Underground Resistance: Electronic Warfare For The Sonic Revolutions The Quietus , December 10th, 2022 11:07

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In an exclusive extract from his new book *Assembling a Black Counter Culture*, DeForrest Brown, Jr. places the Detroit techno second-wavers in the context of US police brutality and European exploitation



DeForrest Brown, Jr. Photo: Joseph Frantz

In March 1992, the entire country watched footage of the LAPD beating an unarmed Rodney King, cornering him after a car chase. Riots erupted in Los Angeles, leaving 63 people dead, 2,383 injured, and over 12,000 in police custody. The officers were acquitted from charges of assault and excessive force, but the city of Los Angeles would ultimately be held liable for King's injuries and traumatic experience and pay him a symbolic reparative settlement of \$3.8 million. Eight months after King's victimization, Larry Nevers and Walter Budzyn, two plain-clothed police officers, approached thirty-five-year-old Malice Green outside of what was locally known to be a crack house in Detroit. The undercover officers reported that Green had refused to drop an object he was holding, prompting one to use his steel flashlight to beat the otherwise unarmed man into submission. As more police arrived to back up the engaged officers, Green lay bloodied on the ground, before eventually being taken into

medical custody. He died before reaching the hospital. In both cases, King and Green's literal humanity was called into question by state appointed authorities; the prospect of death is deemed rational, if not necessary, by the governing bodies.

Detroit's first Black mayor, Coleman A. Young – a former autoworker and Tuskegee Airman – condemned the assault, stating on national television that Green was “literally murdered by police.” Young's tenure as mayor from 1974 to 1994 – his anti-integrationist perspective, rooted in Black Power in the fallout of the race riots of 1967 and the subsequent white flight – has often been blamed for much of Detroit's decline. Yet he assumed this role after a decade-long economic crisis had swept through the country – a crisis from which Detroit struggled to reemerge to its former prominence. Meanwhile, the United States was still at odds with what kind of nation state it wanted to be, despite every political candidate lurching towards economic nationalism, or “mercantilism,” the system in which a government intervenes and regulates the labour of citizens and accumulation of capital as a hallmark of national identity.

In an interview with Michigan State University professors Joe T. Darden and poet Richard W. Thomas [around their 2013 book *Detroit: Race Riots Racial Conflicts, and Efforts to Bridge the Racial Divide*], Young spoke about his experience trying to integrate Detroit policing in an effort to correct the conditions that had led to the riots of '67: “When we emerged from what could have been even worse than 1967 without a single person being killed as a result of police action, or actions of citizens against police, that to me is significant. Because it involved people of all races and religions, it told me that Detroit had picked itself up.” Young's educational approach to community-building and direct action was credited with shifting the demographic and social empathy of the Detroit police force, subsequently lowering the number of complaints of brutality from 2,323 in 1975 to 825 in 1982. Malice Green's death unsettled confidence in the effectiveness of Young's managerial tactics throughout the 1980s, while he completed his fifth and final term as mayor. In 1993, Young was succeeded by Dennis Archer, a lawyer who served as the first Black president of the American Bar Association. Though crime and unemployment decreased during Archer's mayoral run, race relations in 1993 were not good. Unlike Young, Archer viewed racial separatism in Detroit as an economic disadvantage to both the city and the Black community: he began to reach out to the suburbs in an effort to regain the wealth and trust of the white population, which had upended its investments since the white flight of the 1970s, while trying to make Detroit appear to be multicultural. Archer implemented symbolic gestures, like erecting a new stadium for the Detroit Tigers, Comerica Park (named after Comerica Bank, which had changed its name from the Detroit Bank and Trust in 1982 to disassociate from the city after its collapse), and allowing the opening of three large casinos within city limits – an economic stimulus manoeuvre that Young had also favoured. In May 1999, a petition for Archer's recall garnered over 120,000 signatures. In the *Detroit Free Press*, Ernest Johnson, a truck driver for the city's water department, explained that “Archer was an elitist who won't listen to the

concerns of everyday Black Detroiters. ... You shouldn't have to have a college degree for the mayor to stop and pay attention to people. A real Black person wouldn't ignore Black people." Archer did not run for re-election in the 2001 mayoral race.

Frustrated with the state of Detroit and the broken promises of a substantive career pursued in the newly erected European dance music industry, "Mad" Mike Banks retreated into the city and began to plan his retaliation. While his label and collective Underground Resistance received support from the Berlin label Tresor through the so-called "Detroit-Berlin Axis," Banks recognized that the US music recording industry was sidelining techno's success in Europe and the UK to get behind the rising popularity of rap music coming from both the East and West coasts. Without a major record deal in the US, Banks had to rethink his approach to releasing music; the structure in place operated on an optimized sure-thing principle and capitalized off of the inflated PR budgets of popular hits. Underground Resistance, which operated as an independent record label and audio production system, positioned itself against the dominant recording industry, both in alignment and in competition with European record labels and distributors, who mainly sold techno and other electronic dance music amongst themselves in a closed oligopolistic circuit and were unable to compete with the production budgets and mass demographic of the US market. Wedged between two closed circuit trade structures, Banks began to activate the remnants of the Detroit music recording industry, left behind by Motown and Old Hastings Street, into a self-run manufacturing venture that would spread the message of unheard "everyday Black Detroiters," straight from the source.

"I have often been accused of being difficult with European Record Companies as being racist or not liking white people. The truth is I would simply ask for something that would give back to our community from these people. A simple reciprocal deal," Banks reflected years after techno left Detroit in [a 2007 interview](#). Banks' words carry a sense of sadness and distaste. He asks why European record companies didn't start a charity with their initial releases, or engage in distribution and promotion within the American recording and radio market to help build Detroit and support the originators of techno sounds – though, when considering the relationship between Europeans and Africans across the five hundred years prior to Banks' statement, the request for mutual aid and community engagement now reads as simply too wholesome and humanitarian to have ever been a tangible reality. Banks describes being confronted with stereotypes and false equivalencies by European record labels when trying to divert the promotional planning to urban Black America, where he was living and where the music was being made: "Those people don't listen to techno music they only listen to rap don't they?" He wanted techno to retain its original audience – individuals ageing into their adult lives and facing several crises. He wanted economic mobility for this audience, while also diversifying the field and opening it to more global distribution: "It was and is still one of the most difficult aspects of making this music. It's as if we are smart enough to make this music but too fucking dumb to listen to it." By this point, Jeff Mills and Robert Hood had departed from the group to pursue careers overseas, leaving Banks at the

helm of Underground Resistance. “Unfortunately what they didn’t know was that European record companies not only lacked the interest, but they also lacked the muscle and experience to compete in the urban US market.” Despite some musicians and DJs gaining success in Europe, a frustrated Banks lamented that “they repackaged the shit and sold hundreds of thousands of records into the UK and Europe only! An easy sell market we had already established! Totally neglecting the States!” He added:

We need hi-tech dreams and thoughts in the hood even more now than ever because the technology gap is widening! I often wonder if any European artists hear me? Will they be as brave as their forefathers and try to establish their so-called “advanced music” into the hood? How advanced can it be if only one small group of people understand and enjoy it? To truly put your music to the test, see if people in varying environments think it’s as good. Like the great Euro electronic bands of the 70s & 80s did! Hopefully some will try or maybe they will all accept the stereotype “Oh they don’t listen to techno music”? I’m certainly glad the Detroit pioneers didn’t listen to the old bullshit stereotypes twenty years ago “Oh they don’t like music with too many beats in it” and “They can’t dance anyway” we would have all lost if they did.

Banks then turned to the inherent structural differences between US urban planning and abandonment schemes in contrast to the socialist-leaning capitalism in Europe, which integrated newly built architecture into hundred-year-old communities. He pointed out that “We need our city and manufacturing leaders to travel overseas and to realize what Mass Transit means to a city.” Imagining that the older continental empire was unaware of the modular, booming and busting financial risk-taking of the American experiment, Banks was keen to point out the nature of the international trade system. With Underground Resistance, he sought to reignite Detroit and techno music, mobilizing them to “drop code and hidden sonic clues in our ongoing electronic warfare with the Programmers who seek to contain our minds.” Banks’ words, he acknowledged, were coded “for those who know”: Underground Resistance couldn’t compete with either the American recording or European dance music industries, let alone with a global, capitalist, and colonial technocracy. But he continued on in faith:

You cannot buy soul, you cannot buy funk, you cannot buy life experiences, you can't pay people to dance when they don't feel it and you cannot copy our uniquely fucked up, warped perspective of this music. ... In the future even if we are dead and gone. We have been successful as our records will survive us and maybe on some old fucked up 1200 turntable a thousand years from now an unknown young warrior will drop the needle on an old scratched up UR record and the “Moor Horsemen” will ride again.

Throughout the early 1990s, Banks engineered a string of fiery releases through the Underground Resistance production line and the more accessible and collectible label, Happy Records: *Riot*, *Waveform*, and *Punisher* (all released in 1991, the latter produced by Mills) succeeded each other quickly, while *Nation 2 Nation* (also 1991) expanded techno

through inflections of jazz and ambient. Both structures fell under the Submerge Records operation, which established itself as a retail shop and museum to the Detroit sound in 1992. With his headquarters in place, Banks launched a global assault through the sub-label World Power Alliance, formed “somewhere in Detroit on May 22nd 1992 at 4:28 pm by various elements of the worlds underground legions.” The original trio of Banks, Mills, and Hood assigned themselves roles within their conceptualisation of the Rome-Berlin Axis Powers, composed of Germany, Italy, and Japan during their aggressive expansionist war campaign that had as its goal the “advancement of the human race by way of sonic experimentation.” The first salvo, ‘Kamikaze’ was released as a one-sided 12” vinyl by Banks, poised from the tactical vantage point of Japan, and dedicated to the “unmatched in history, young men sacrifice their lives for something they believe in.” Followed by a declaration of war, the vinyl’s inscription continues: “With bravery like that one can never be beaten. Somewhere over the skies of the world there flies one more zero, one more Kamikaze, be warned!!” Underground Resistance’s embrace of self-sacrifice for a greater cause co-opted the elemental, mythic force of the Kamikaze, the Japanese special attack unit, and adapted it to the needs and weaponized usages of Black communities living in the fallout of the United States’ fascist industrial system. Banks wanted Detroit and the utterance of the name Underground Resistance to become the stuff of legend, of horror even. Ironically, there are in circulation a number of mispressings in which Carl Craig’s breakbeat-styled track, ‘Free Your Mind’, replaces Banks’ ‘Kamikaze’.

Mills contributed the second sonic missile launch with the single track ‘The Seawolf’, named for the nuclear-powered German U-boat. The liner notes state that, “Somewhere in the depths of our vast seas lurks the seaman’s most feared nightmare, Seawolf.” Fast-paced TR-909 percussion against accentuated TR-303 acid licks mirror the submerged doppler effects associated with the submariner, while possibly referencing the 1989 Atari 8-bit game *Silent Service*, programmed by strategy video game designer Sid Meier. The game places players at the helm of the US Navy submarine force set in the Pacific Ocean within a simulated Second World War environment. Hood countered with ‘Belgian Resistance’, named after the decentralised armed resistance movement that arose during the German occupation of Belgium from 1940 to 1944. On the A-side of the vinyl, Underground Resistance inscribed a message of meaning and intent: “The underground rebel forces of Belgium fought relentlessly throughout the duration of WWII, only to be overcome by the fierce defence of the axis forces.” The active intelligence gathering, media distribution, and militant engagement that had occurred during Belgium’s resistance represented the measures that Hood and Underground Resistance deemed necessary for the survival of African Americans in the colonial republic of the United States. Underground Resistance’s tactical speculation and choreographed, model-scaled warfare became a weapon for the Black counterculture of Detroit to strategise and mobilise. Hood’s glitchy, rotating percussion and sequencer programming impresses a steady trajectory of shifting groove systems, for “unbeknownst to the inhabitants of the Planet Earth, an underground legion has been breeding and waiting in the dark, battle-scarred caverns waiting for revenge...”

Utilising the natural resources of sound and frequency, Underground Resistance hacked global music distribution channels and reprogrammed the minds of citizens mentally and emotionally enslaved by industrial capitalism and the rising data-driven information age. Underground Resistance declared, much like Ronald Reagan before them, that, “This wall must be destroyed, and it will fall.” Mobilising for electronic war, Underground Resistance wondered, “Isn’t it obvious that music and dance are the keys to the universe?” The group’s creed acknowledged both modern and ancient technologies, urging “all brothers and sisters of the underground to create and transmit their tones and frequencies no matter how so called primitive their equipment may be. Transmit these tones and wreak havoc on the Programmers!” Their call to arms was inspired by their own lives and growing pains.

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