

## Print Run

New music books

Diving deep into sociopolitical history, **DeForrest Brown, Jr** makes the case for techno as the Black-led folk music of industrial and post-industrial society. By **Joe Muggs**

### ***Assembling A Black Counter Culture***

DeForrest Brown, Jr

Primary Information Pbk 432 pp

The New York based Alabamian DeForrest Brown, Jr is already a familiar voice in electronic music discourse. This may be his first book, but he has already built up a substantial body of work through many articles (including writings in *The Wire*) and an excoriating presence on social media as the man behind the "Make Techno Black Again" campaign. He's also a fearsome critic of club and experimental music institutions. Never letting leftists, underground scenes or anyone who thinks themselves right on off the hook, his rigorous critiques are often furious, bordering on despairing, at the micro and macro structures that the music industry and platform capitalism maintain to protect their whiteness. But his writing also continues to vividly celebrate his life experience in Black music.

As a musical practitioner, Brown walks it precisely as he talks it: his Speaker Music alias exerts a startling level of control over a cascade of elemental fury and joy blending techno, free jazz, footworking and samples of preachers, poets, police and politicians. Commentary and creativity often collide, never more so than on the 32 minute "On Bloodthirst And Jungle Fever" on *Black Nationalist Sonic Weaponry* (2020), which provides a visceral narrative of some 200 years of Black ecstasy and musical ritual, with noise, rhythm and voice bringing the torments and frenzies he describes vividly to life.

Here, significantly, he's on more measured form. *Assembling A Black Counter Culture*, despite its bright sci-fi cover by Abdul Haqq, the Detroit artist

known for his work with Underground Resistance as well as the recent *Book Of Drexicya*, is put together and formatted like an academic treatise. Assembled from pre-existing primary sources – academic books and papers, treatises and manifestos by musicians themselves, and the (mainly British) music press – he tells the story of Detroit techno and its relationship to the rest of the world.

This is given a weighty sociopolitical framing. The book starts with a history of slavery, industrialism, the music industry and labour relations as experienced by Black communities: not as an introduction, preamble or background colour, but as a fundamental part of the story of Detroit and its music. Likewise, later, when military and outer space imagery in the work of UR is under discussion, it includes factual information about American imperialism and the military-industrial complex, again, not as context but as part of the material conditions from which emerged the music and art under discussion.

What follows is a history which as well as covering the emergence of the techno sound in Detroit and the thinking and ideologies behind it, goes deep into its creators' relationships with the scenes in the UK, Germany, Belgium and farther afield, and the compromises, losses and victories that went with this. The book takes deep dives into UK street soul and Jamaican dub in order to set the scene for techno's interaction with jungle and drum 'n' bass, and extensive descriptions of key interactions of Detroit techno with the white-dominated music industry – for example, the relationship of techno to the post acid house establishment in the UK, Berlin's Tresor label

and club, the rise of Richie Hawtin, the EDM explosion, institutions like Beatport and Resident Advisor and so on. It's a detailed read that will stand alongside the late Dan Sicko's *Techno Rebels: The Renegades Of Electronic Funk* (1999, revised and updated 2010) as an essential textbook on techno. His critiques of institutions are forensic, and, unusually for a text with such academic weight, the music itself shines through.

Its greatest flaw, however, is a reliance on the music press as a source, meaning that the most white press-friendly figures in music – Goldie, Derrick May, the Balearic boys of UK dance, etc – are sometimes centred at the expense of others. May's belligerent self-mythologising, for example, leads to other first wave Detroit figures like Blake Baxter, Anthony 'Shake' Shakir and Chez Damier getting less space than they deserve. Also, the history as written by the London/Manchester victors of the origins of UK acid house culture is reductive to say the least.

None of which is fatal by any means. This book deserves to be very widely read. Its critiques not only bear repeating, they deserve to be answered. The thought of young EDM-curious students or academics reading Brown and stumbling on understandings of techno as "an advanced vibrational technology" is particularly invigorating. Any omissions or elisions – inevitable in a subject so broad – should be seen as a call for more interrogations of the primary sources and the myths they propagate. Most powerfully, the book's most potent running theme – techno as folk culture of industrial and post-industrial society – encourages the continuation of that investigation. □



Cover illustration by Abdul Haqq for *Assembling A Black Counter Culture*