

Book Review

Rhythm Science

Paul D. Miller (aka DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid)
 Cambridge, Massachusetts: Mediawork/The MIT Press
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 128 pages plus audio companion CD

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Paul D. Miller—better known as DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid—has created a manifesto of sorts for the digital age. Titled “Rhythm Science,” this book (his first) draws on a vast array of theoretical, historical, and autobiographical information in discussing the art of digital sampling and in broadly contextualizing Miller’s multi-faceted career as a DJ, conceptual artist, and author.

In my view, Miller’s book can be rightfully included in the burgeoning body of literature on improvisation for at least two reasons. Throughout *Rhythm Science*, Miller positions DJ culture in relation to a variety of improvisatory musical traditions associated with the African diaspora – traditions that might (after George Lewis) be referred to as “Afrological.” In a chapter entitled “The New Griots,” for example, Miller likens DJ culture to the African griot tradition of storytelling through music. “The best Djs are griots,” he asserts “and whether their stories are conscious or unconscious, narratives are implicit in the sampling idea. Every story leads to another story to another story to another story” (21). Elsewhere, he suggests that digital sampling returns us to the metaphor of the crossroads so prevalent in African American blues culture, “that space where everyone could play the same song but flipped it every which way until it became ‘their own sound.’ In jazz,” he continues “it’s the fluid process of ‘call and response’ between the players of an ensemble. These are the predecessors of the mixing board metaphor for how we live and think in this age of information” (24). Miller goes on to suggest that his recordings *Optometry* and *Dubtometry* represent a “strategic side-step into jazz,” noting that *Optometry* “plays with the historical mystique of the jazzman, remixed through digital media. The vibe on this is ‘sampling as a new form of jazz’” (53). He refers to sampled music as ‘cybernetic jazz’ several times throughout the book.

“Who speaks through you” Miller asks repeatedly. A remarkable number of voices speak through Miller, as he samples the work of theorists ranging from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Gilles Deleuze, from W.E.B. Du Bois to Paul Gilroy. “For the most part,” Miller reminds us, “creativity rests in how you recontextualize the previous expression of others” (33). To his credit, Miller seems to root his theoretical recontextualizations in musical examples drawn from the African diaspora, matching everything else to their rhythms and systems of logic. Miller seems to recognize, implicitly at least, that Afrological improvisatory forms—whether the African griot tradition, the blues crossroads, or jazz call and response—represent not only trenchant musical precedents, but also incisive theoretical models for digital sampling and for his own

creative work which itself routinely blurs the lines of distinction between theory and practice.

The other main connection that I see between *Rhythm Science* and improvisation relates to Miller's writing style which has, at times, a clearly improvisatory feel. In particular, the first chapter of the book, titled "The Idiot – A Freestyle," feels very much (as the title suggests) like the improvised freestyle of a hip hop MC, an impromptu flow of lyrics and rhymes delivered in a spontaneous manner. Take, for example, the following passage:

This book is a theatre of networks, of correspondences that turn in on themselves and drift into the ether like smoke-rings blown in an airless nightclub. This is a theatre of the one and the many, of texts that flow with the intensity of bullets. Heat death, entropy, cyclical turbulence. It's all here. Technical malice in my freestyle rips the threads holding the narrative together and we see the structure beneath the structure. The words within the words. Rhymes are social armor, waiting for bullets to test their integrity. (8)

At its best, Miller's improvisatory writing style is reminiscent of the poetry-inspired prose of Amiri Baraka and the lyrical work of contemporary poet, playwright, and author, Carl Hancock Rux. Compared to their examples, however, Miller's prose/poetry tends to fall a bit flat, to my mind at least. Nonetheless, the improvisatory writing style in *Rhythm Science* highlights Miller's laudable commitment to locate his written theoretical work in the Afrological musical practices exemplified by DJ culture. Later in the book, Miller is explicit on this point. "Dj-ing is writing, writing is Dj-ing" he asserts. "Writing is music, I cannot explain this any other way" (56).

One of the main difficulties that I have with the text is the author's tendency to generalize, substituting his own experience for that of DJs generally. For example, he states that "[a] deep sense of fragmentation occurs in the mind of a Dj" (21). It seems to me that this statement runs the risk of essentializing the minds of all DJs. How does this statement fit, I wonder, with the incident that Miller describes involving himself and Japanese turntablist, DJ Krush? Just prior to a show they were doing together in Tokyo, Miller recounts, "Krush's wife walked in and handed him a samurai sword before his set, and everyone in the room was... ummm... kind of silent" (104). Miller goes on to describe Krush as "...a Japanese kid who prayed with his family and was into Shinto Buddhism chants before he went on stage to do turntable tricks" (105). This scenario (one of my favourite anecdotes in the whole book, incidentally) does not, in my view, suggest the deep sense of psychological fragmentation that Miller describes as "the mind of a Dj." Perhaps an even more dangerous tendency in *Rhythm Science* lies in Miller's apparent assumption that access to digital culture and the effects of digital culture are universal. "The web is the dominant metaphor for the

way we think” he writes (24). I am inclined to raise questions about the “we” in statements such as these.

In general, the parts of *Rhythm Science* that I find most compelling are the sections in which Miller discusses his own experiences as a successful contemporary DJ as well as the experiences that have shaped his artistic development. In the chapter entitled “Districts,” Miller goes a considerable distance in answering a question that I often have in reading his work (and in listening to his music for that matter), namely “where is Paul D. Miller in the mix?” In “Districts,” Miller discusses his upbringing in Washington D.C. We learn that his mother has run a successful imported fabric and apparel store there for several decades. The fabric store, which Miller describes as “a cultural landmark where poetry and culture mingle with fabric,” seems an apt metaphor for Miller’s music which constantly weaves diverse musical threads into a complex sonic tapestry. In contrast, Miller recalls of his father (a former dean of the Howard University School of Law who passed away when Miller was just three years old): “One of my earliest memories is of a piece of newspaper my mom clipped out of the *Washington Post* of [my father] during the Black Panther trials of the early 1970s right before he died. [. . .] The photo of the bound and gagged Panthers in the courtroom is seared in my memory” (37). To my mind, this autobiographical detail provides a very interesting backdrop for some of Miller’s more overtly political work as exemplified, for example, by his recording *Live Without Dead Time*. Released in conjunction with the May/June 2003 issue of the politically charged Canadian magazine, *Adbusters*, this re-mix features a range of political voices (including those of Martin Luther King Jr., Saul Williams, Sun Ra, and many others) combined with dense sonic textures and intense grooves. Together, the tracks on the recording offer a powerful condemnation not only of consumerist ideology, but also of U.S. foreign policy, the Bush administration, and social injustice generally.

Miller/Spooky’s musical direction on *Live Without Dead Time* is in evidence on the excellent audio CD that accompanies *Rhythm Science* as well. On this recording, Miller has created a series of remixes (33 in fact) using recordings drawn from the Sub Rosa label as source material. We hear the voice of Antonin Artaud mixed with Nuuk Posse, James Joyce reading excerpts from *Finnegans Wake* alongside Oval vs Yoshihiro Hanno, William S. Burroughs set against the music of Scanner, and more. My favourite track features the voice of Gertrude Stein mixed with DJ Wally Zeta. In this context, Miller’s comment that “Dj-ing is writing, writing is Dj-ing” seems highly resonant. In the *Rhythm Science* CD, as throughout the text, Miller reminds us that, for him, theory *is* practice and practice *is* theory.

In conclusion, I’d like to discuss briefly the innovative design and format of *Rhythm Science*. According to its back cover blurb, the book was “designed for maximum visual and tactile seduction by the international studio COMA.” The book references the form of vinyl and compact disc recordings through its front cover image, an image that gets repeated—and rotated—throughout the book. A hole cut through the center of the book reveals a circular red foam button that holds the book’s audio companion in place inside its back cover. Like a vinyl record, Miller has divided the chapters of the book into an “A-Side” and a “B-Side” with the audio companion forming a “C-Side.” In keeping with the

A-Side/B-Side dialectic, the pages of the book that contain Miller's text alternate with pages containing images and short bits of text sampled from Miller's work. The paper stock that the book has been printed on is similarly double-sided – the text side is fairly coarse while the image side is glossy. One of the effects of this pairing of rough and slick pages is that when one casually flips through the book, one sees only text – the slick pages containing the graphics tend to stick to one another. As always, Miller encourages the reader (or the listener as the case may be) to look between the pages, to read between the lines, and to examine the liminal spaces between received cultural categories and idioms.

Works Cited

DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid. *Dubtometry*. ThirstyEar, 2003.

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