

WIRED



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Milford Graves

Alan Licht meets
the master drummer,
rhythm doctor and
beat scientist

YOUNG ECHO

Simon Reynolds on

ROBERT HAIGH

Dan Wilson on the art of

PSYPHONICS

Ursula K Le Guin

Kate Carr | Neutral

Listen

To

For nearly 60 years
percussionist, herbalist
and educator

Milford Graves

has been feeding the pulse
of an international
brotherhood of free music.
As a new film explores his
life, **Alan Licht** meets him
to discuss medical
research, electronic sound,
and listening to the body.

Photography by **Andreas
Laszlo Konrath**

If you've ever chatted with a friend in your seats while waiting for a Milford Graves solo percussion concert to start, you may have unwittingly supplied a tonal starting point for the performance. "When I come to the concert, I take a quick look at the audience," Graves tells me, sitting in the basement laboratory/studio of his meticulously hand-ornamented home in Jamaica, Queens, a real anomaly on this block in the New York City neighbourhood where he's lived all his life. "I wanna get that so-called grand sound, the total sound of all the voices. I listen to all that and I say, what is the fundamental sound that's coming from underneath all of that? I don't want the harmonics, I want the fundamental. I come out on that stage man, that first sound I hear, I want to make sure that it contains the basic fundamental frequency that's going on. So in the solo I will try to create something off what I feel from the environment, not be coming out with some predetermined thing – if you come in there with some composition, it may have nothing to do with that kind of vibe that's in the audience there."

Finding the fundamental, musically or otherwise, is a Graves characteristic also manifested in the new film *Milford Graves Full Mantis*, made by Jake Meginsky – the Massachusetts musician who began assisting Graves with his archive in the 2000s – and film maker Neil Young Cloaca. An appropriately unorthodox, leisurely paced documentary that serves as a poetic portrait of its patently holistic subject, *Full Mantis* – which just received its premiere at the

International Film Festival Rotterdam, accompanied by a live performance by Graves – shows him at home, expounding on a myriad of interests and experiences. He talks about "going right to the source" by sidestepping a Chinese martial arts instructor in favour of studying the movements of a praying mantis; theorises that the origins of minor key melodies lie in tear ducts; and even applies electrodes to his chest to monitor his own heart rate.

The only clues in the film to Graves's long history with free jazz in the 1960s and beyond – of which he is considered a primary innovator – come from archival performance footage: a typically feverish early 70s concert with Hugh Glover, Joe Rigby and Arthur Williams, a rapturous encounter at a school for autistic children in Japan with Butoh dancer Min Tanaka from the early 80s, and some recent solo concerts.

His formidable control and highly fluid concept of polyrhythms, and the booming sound of his modified drum kit (by the late 60s he had discarded the snare and removed the bottom heads from his toms, resulting in a much heavier low end) set him apart from Sunny Murray and his few other predecessors on the scene. He appears on two landmark albums of the period – Sonny Sharrock's *Black Woman* and Albert Ayler's *Love Cry* (his brief tenure with Ayler also included a performance at John Coltrane's funeral), and collectors covet his self-released albums with Don Pullen (*Nomma*), Andrew Cyrille (*Dialogue Of The Drums*), and his trio with Hugh Glover and Arthur Doyle (*Bäbi*), plus *Meditation Among Us*, a 1977

your

Heart



Japanese release which teams him with legendary free players Kaoru Abe, Toshinori Kondo, Mototeru Takagi and Toshi Tsuchitori. John Zorn released two long anticipated solo percussion discs, *Grand Unification* and *Stories*, on his Tzadik label in the late 90s and early 2000s. Zorn has since played with Graves and others including Bill Laswell, Bill Frisell and even Lou Reed.

Now retired, he was a professor at Bennington College, a liberal arts institution up in Vermont for 39 years, and has been a herbalist, acupuncturist, martial arts instructor – the film contains scenes of him sparring from back in the day – and Kundalini yoga practitioner. Graves is anything but a dilettante. He approaches each field with rigour. “The different disciplines that I deal with cause me to be able to take my thought processes in all these different areas: acupuncture, or herbs, or whatever else,” he declares. “It takes deep focus. When I was working as a laboratory technician for a veterinarian, I was doing bacteriological work, doing antibiotic sensitivity testing. Trying to find different kinds of elements in the blood, the machinery I was using would require gas in there; I could have blown myself up in the lab. I had to focus on all that. That enabled me to develop my mindset, I’m taking my drumming just as serious.”

There’s an anecdote he relates about teaching himself to play two rhythms at once with two sticks in one hand. When he showed the technique to a drummer friend, “he was trying to figure out, how did you get that, man? Was it your martial arts, your training? He was trying everything in the world. I told him very simple, it was determination, man. I worked my *butt* off, to separate this stuff. It was something I wanted to do, not to show you some dexterity of something I can do, there’s a reason why I wanted to do that. Sometimes I’ll do it on a gig, I’ll play a little bebop with this here hand, but this hand is free jazzing over here.

“Look, why are the bebop dudes fighting free jazz guys, man?” he continues. “I’m showing you that it is possible for us as individuals to get together and act like my right hand and act like my left hand.”

The mysterious quasi-lingual vocalisations Graves does while playing – heard throughout *Full Mantis* as well as on many of his records – are remarkable for their additional layer of improvisation over the ever shifting polyrhythms he’s playing with all four limbs. It’s a culmination of many years of investigation into speech in different cultures. “Years ago,” he remembers, “I started to be part of a group of guys here who wanted to learn how to speak the Yoruba language. I said, I don’t think I’m gonna spend a lot of time trying to speak Yoruba per se, but the language I like, the tonal shifting they were doing... and when I was in Nigeria in 1977 I heard some old people speaking. I said, when you hear Nigerian people speaking it, they don’t sound the same. There’s one time I was in New York Chinatown, and I was in this store, and I heard these voices coming from the back, I thought it was a little quartet singing. I said, they’re speaking! They were like the older folks in Nigeria.

“They’re really making those pitch changes,” he explains. “And the way the Yorubas do it, for me, has a little more dynamics than the Chinese language. I’ll take some of the Yoruba thing, then I’ll take some of the Bantu language... I’m not thinking of

language per se, I’m thinking of the international phonetics, because I studied all that stuff. I see how natives speak, all their consonants, their vowels. I’m saying, anatomically, what areas are they utilising? So if they’re in the nasal area, I say what is the neuromuscular relationship to singing something that’s nasal, that’s dealing with your lips or the tip of your tongue? I try to think not of the actual meaning of the words but how singing is manipulating my whole nervous system, the whole cranial system, and when I finish it feels good! They [the audience members] say, ‘What were you saying?’ I say, ‘Well, what did you feel?’ ‘Well, I liked it but I don’t understand what you’re saying.’ I said, ‘That’s good enough.’”

Milford Graves’s drumming style likewise developed through a similar process of intermingling and synthesis. “From Brazil to Trinidad to Jamaica to Haiti to Puerto Rico, I heard all of that stuff,” he says, “and it could be from playing Afro Cuban, to some of the voodoo stuff to calypso, you name it. From all those cultures, I found that what really turned the people on was the rhythms. So I said, this is interesting – suppose you take a samba and you mix it with this kind of thing from this culture, that culture, you’re gonna come up with something that’s much more powerful than staying in that one little closed set.”

The New York City borough of Queens itself is famously multicultural, and *Full Mantis* spends quite a bit of time with Graves in his backyard’s “global garden”, which sheds light on how this approach is ingrained in his environment and lifestyle. “The way I grow my plants,” he explains, “they’re all mixed up, they’re like the neighbours – I got Jamaicans here, I got Chinese here, Puerto Ricans here, the whole nine yards, they come from all over. I can grow one little patch, and that may be a soup – four, five or six different varieties of something, all growing right in there, together. My kitchen is an international kitchen – I got spices and herbs from all over the place. So sometimes I have gatherings here and I make my soup, my favourite peanut butter soup, everyone says, ‘What do you have in there?’ I got the *world* in there, Alan, I fix that stuff up. I may use some Native American stuff, some Moroccan stuff, some Indian stuff – I put that in, they don’t realise.

“Hispanics may come and see the house, some people from Asia may come, and they’ll look at the house, and it reminds them of something back home,” he adds. His place is filled with objects from decades of travelling, from books and statues to martial arts ephemera. “I get people from the Hindu temple, because of all my bamboo I got back here, and they’ll say, ‘Oh your house looks like in South India, where are you from?’ I’ll say I’m from right here, right here in South Jamaica. I’ve travelled around a lot and I got inspired, that turned me on.”

Graves entered jazz in the early 60s, a time when musicians from John Coltrane to Yusef Lateef were beginning to incorporate influences of music from India, Africa and elsewhere. But unlike others in the burgeoning free jazz movement, he didn’t come from a bebop background. A conga player from the age of eight, he became adept on timbales and by his late teens was leading and playing in Latin/Afro Cuban ensembles in Queens (at one point alongside a young Chick Corea). By 1962, his group was playing in New York on bills alongside Cal Tjader and Herbie Mann.

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In New York, 1960: (from left) Pete Yellin, Chick Corea, Bill Fitch, Noel Carter, Milford Graves



“I wasn’t planning on playing no jazz, that was an accident,” asserts Graves. “A good accident. See, the reason Latin was turning me on was that a lot of times we’d get together, we’d have five or six drummers, and when I heard the jazz drummers, I said, I don’t know man, there ain’t enough rhythm stuff going on.” When Don Alias summoned him to Boston for a summer-long club residency in 1963, he met Giuseppe Logan and began playing informally with him and others at Graves’s loft. He also acquired a drum kit – his first – from pianist Hal Galper.

When the residency ended, Graves convinced Logan to move from Philadelphia to New York, and when Roswell Rudd and John Tchicai invited Logan to a rehearsal, he brought Graves along. He wound up playing with them for half an hour, astonishing Rudd and Tchicai, who promptly invited him to join what became The New York Art Quartet. “Next thing I knew, I was the new kid on the block, so to speak. I wasn’t thinking about no Kenny Clarke, Max [Roach], Philly [Joe Jones], none of them guys’ playing, all I knew was, I see some skins in front of me, and play them skins man, I’m trying to sound like the four or five guys, drums that I’m used to hearing.

“It was just being spotted,” he explains of his swift rise. “Paul Bley, Albert Ayler, all those guys started calling me to play in the band. What was great was those bands I was playing in, nobody was telling me what to do. I didn’t feel like no rules or regulations, because with Giuseppe nobody was telling me, ‘Hey man, could you give me some time,’ they just accepted what I was doing. And then I start reading that I’m this avant garde drummer and Amiri Baraka starts writing about me, all these guys, Nat Hentoff... I said I guess I’m doing something! And then I got compliments from Max, Roy [Haynes], Philly; these guys were showing up to some of the gigs I was playing. Because the word was around: ‘You gotta go check Milford Graves

out.’ They were talking about this guy, man, who don’t sit back there with no restricted time, it’s like he’s soloing through the whole doggone tune! He’s liberated, man! I said I know why Max and those guys like me, because those guys are saying, ‘That’s what I want to do too, I’m tired of being just some little time-keeper.’”

He was among the players in Bill Dixon’s groundbreaking concert series October Revolution In Jazz at the Cellar Cafe in 1964, and in 1965 he racked up several appearances on the first flurry of releases on the quintessential free jazz label, ESP-Disk’ (including sessions with New York Art Quartet, Logan, Bley and Lowell Davidson, and an album of percussion duos with Sunny Morgan called *Percussion Ensemble*, a testament to how early and persuasive he was in his advocacy of drums as a foreground instrument).

Indeed, ESP-Disk’ founder Bernard Stollman noted that Graves featured on more of the label’s albums than anyone else during its early years. Graves also appears on two 1965 Latin jazz outings, Montego Joe’s *Wild & Warm* (which Sunny Morgan also plays on) and Miriam Makeba’s *Makeba Sings!*. I ask what the transition was like for him between the two scenes. “It came quick, man,” he replies. “It was a very quick transition. One of the reasons why I made the transition, and this is important, is that unless you were Hispanic, the chances of getting a job with a Latin band playing congas, timbales was extremely difficult. You didn’t see that. And I think that still holds today, you don’t really see it. There’s like a *lock* on that, man.

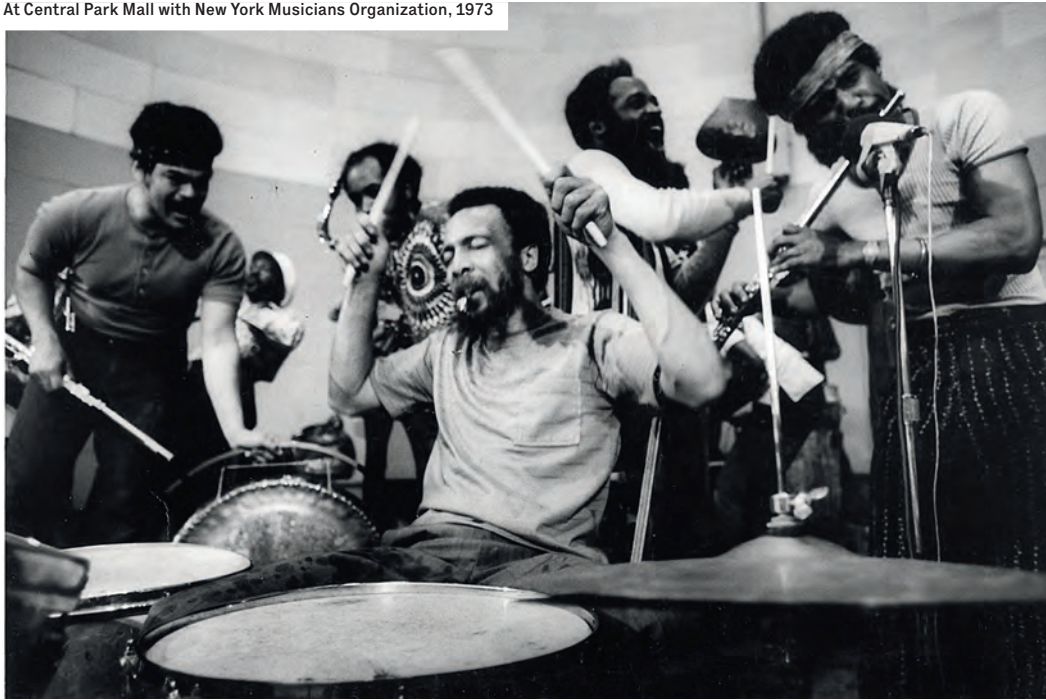
“The one thing I say about jazz, jazz is the most integrated music out of all the musics,” he declares. “All different kinds of people play jazz, man. I always tell, I call them my Latin brothers, y’all got to wake up, man. There’s a lot of non-Latin guys can play them skins, if you all want to change what you’re doing.

“I refused to change my name,” he adds. “I knew another guy who falsified his information and changed his name. I said, I’m not gonna do that. And then when I was switching over to the traps, people would say you should play *jazz*, man, you know how to handle them trap drums. So I said, you know what – and this was really the deciding move – this way, at least I’m going to get a chance to perform with people. And if I *do* play Latin, I will bring in Spanish guys. I’ll hire them instead of them trying to hire me.

“When I did have my Latin jazz band I would hire guys. I hired Eddie Palmieri,” he notes. “I had all these different guys. I had an integrated band, based on people’s skill level, not because you’re this ethnicity or you’re that culture. I’m gonna hire you, I want you to be able to do the job.”

As the 70s began, many free jazz musicians found employment at universities, and in 1973 Graves was tapped for a teaching position in Bennington College’s Black Music Division, newly formed by Bill Dixon. He recalls some initial racial tension on both sides: “I got feedback from certain people in the African-American community wanting to know why I was going up to Bennington teaching these white kids. And then there was a little bit of suspicion going on up there about why I was up there with white kids. I went up there about a year before that, because Bill Dixon was there at that time, they were having a black music festival. We drove up and I remember going into the town of Bennington and saying, this little town looks like one of those towns in movies I saw as a kid, where aliens would come in a spaceship and land. It felt weird, something’s strange about this little town. Then we get on to campus, for this black music festival, and I’m saying, where are all the black students? I don’t see no black students. It was 1972, all through the 60s I’m in Bedford-Stuyvesant, I’m

At Central Park Mall with New York Musicians Organization, 1973



Practicing Yara martial arts, mid-70s

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Flyer for Bio Creative Institute of Intuitive Development project, 1975

With Andrew Cyrille at Columbia University recording *Dialogue Of The Drums*, 1974



Selling handpainted records with Don Pullen at Nation of Islam Bazaar, Harlem, 1967



With Min Tanaka, Hakushu, Japan, 1998

Courtesy Milford Graves

in Harlem, the Black Nationalist movement's going on, the Civil Rights movement's going on, everybody wants voting rights, it was a whole thing, you were very conscious of the black-white situation going on here. So for me to head up to Bennington, that was different, man.

"Let me tell you something, Alan – the students were laughing at me when I first came up there [to teach]. I had a shopping bag full of papers, I had notes on top of notes... I said, OK, we're going to start the lesson by blah blah blah. The students are looking at me – this is Bennington, they're so damn loose, and I'm trying to be this strict academician. I had to keep a dictionary because these white kids were talking some English language, they weren't talking no ghetto language, I had to say what the hell does this word mean," he laughs. "And they didn't know what the hell I was talking about! One day I said, 'They went up against their wig, man.' 'Oh they had a wig on?' 'Oh no, we're just talking about their head.'

"I was exciting to those kids," he continues. "I was loose with them and talked stuff, African stuff, Asian stuff, and I think they liked that. I got to know the kids, I became very popular, all the kids wanted to take my class. And I'm learning a lot from these kids too, we're both teaching each other. Then I start realising, this is what the damn problem is – everybody is so separate from each other, and we're told all this dumb stuff about each other, that we never get together and get down and hash this out, and we all come out with something. We improve our relationships. I told all those people who said I shouldn't be up there, I'm glad I made that move. Because I haven't lost any identity, I didn't go up there and try to be somebody I'm not. That was a hell of an experience, I met tons of people up there. And it's very rare that you will see teachers stay in contact with their students after 20, 30, 40 years – I have that."

Another turning point came when Graves began more fully exploring how the heart works – a longstanding interest – and relating it to music. "There was always this connection between, metaphorically speaking, the drum and the heart," he explains. "People say, where does the drum come from, where does music come from – they say the heart, and they're just repeating what they heard, because most people probably never heard a heartbeat in their life. I was talking about this a lot, and when I started teaching at Bennington, I said, I'm gonna make this part of my course content. In 1975, one of my former students who had graduated a year or two before that, sent me an article that was in a journal called *Circulation*, they were talking about diagnosing the heart, in a different kind of way. It was saying that you have to listen to the *pitch* of the beats, not counting the number of cycles that you have per minute. They were talking about the opening and closing of the valves, the harmonics that are taking place in the heart muscle. I called one of the authors of it, we had a two or three hour conversation on the phone, and he was telling me he was trying to convince these doctors that they had to listen to the actual pitch, and it would give them more information than just making sure that your heart is contracting and relaxing."

An epiphany arrived with *Stethoscopic Heart Records Revised*, an album of clinical heartbeat recordings. Created by Dr George Geckeler, with

track names such as "Blowing Systolic Murmur With Low Pitched Early Diastolic Murmur", it was released in 1973 by Columbia Special Products, home to numerous compilations and spoken word records. "There are so many different kinds of heart rhythms," explains Graves, "all these arrhythmias, they're very similar to what we're doing with ritual drumming, this is amazing. This way, I don't have to worry about someone coming from a very closed culture, from Africa, or Cuba, or whatever else, and waiting around forever for them to show you the next pattern.

"It's so biological, it belongs to all of us," he declares. "Alan, it belongs to all of us! You don't own it because you're African. Maybe it developed there, but don't tell me you have a monopoly on this here, and that's the amazing thing about working and dealing with heart rhythms."

Graves went on to invite his musician friends over and recorded their heartbeats himself with an electronic stethoscope and a reel-to-reel tape recorder. His experimental findings invite a comparison with the microtonal intervals of Just Intonation, which is often touted as a more holistic tuning system than the commonly used equal temperament. "I'd say to musicians, 'What's the frequency, what's the note on there, man?' And we'd be sitting around trying to figure this out, and people would say, 'I don't know, I don't know what that one is, it's in between this note and that note.' And so that led me into getting some really sophisticated computer equipment."

The first thing you notice as you enter Graves's basement is a bank of a half dozen computer monitors, and one of the most indelible moments of *Full Mantis* comes when Graves demonstrates the electronic music he's made on computer via heartbeat recordings and sonifications of heart data. Breaking up each waveform into dozens of parts, he produces rippling sequences that could pass for classic modular synthesizer exercises. These also reveal that subdividing a heartbeat is strikingly similar to the time deconstructions of free jazz drumming. When I point this out to Graves, he exclaims, "I said the free jazz guys, we were really cardiac! We were really on the cellular level, you guys were on the muscle, you were playing motor music. I don't play in a symmetrical way – if you play it too metronomic, then it doesn't work, there's no life to it. It's too still, man. The so-called bar lines shouldn't be stagnant; they should be flowing back and forth, so you're going to have a time differential between the two.

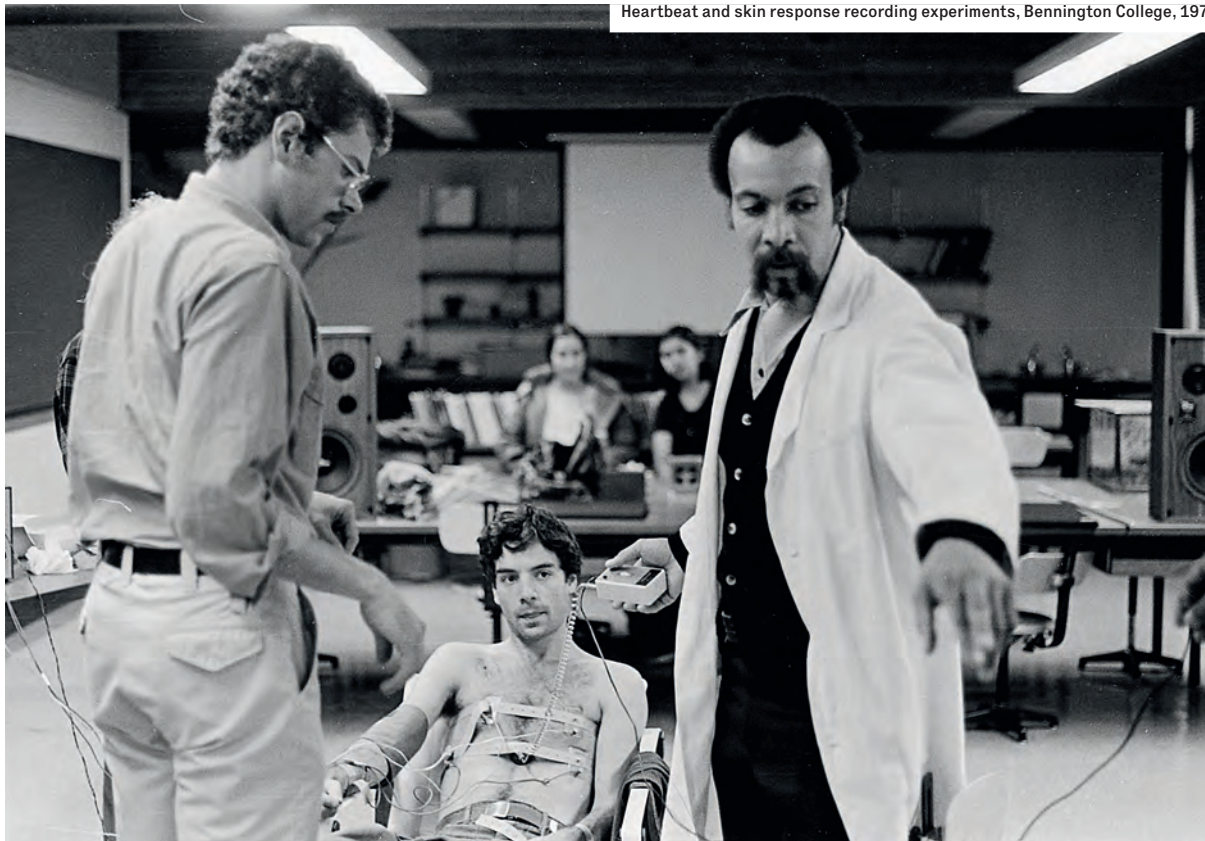
"And that's how the heart works," he stresses. "I tell everybody, you don't need no digital machine to tell you the time value, all you gotta do is feel your wrist pulse, and start counting, and you're gonna find yourself at times counting a little faster and a little slower. You're not gonna have a steady beat. If you have a steady beat, that's dangerous. *Extremely* dangerous. They know that now. They didn't know that years ago. Any hospital you go to now, if they do EKGs they have to measure the heart rate variability. When they chart out the time values, it should be a wave. The more it begins to be a flat line, you're in trouble, man!"

A more recent project of Graves's extends his research even further out to stem cells, in collaboration with Italian cardiologist and

"All the kids took my class, and I'm learning from these kids. This is the damn problem, everybody is so separate we never get together and hash this out"



Milford Graves's medical models and equipment



microbiologist Carlo Ventura. “Basically I just supply them with a series of frequencies, a very short – just under four seconds – melody that I was able to extract from this person’s heart sound that was going through a crisis, that I thought was at the particular point that the body was trying to respond in a very positive way. So they started working, converting that sound into a vibrational component in the medium that stem cells were growing in, and they took to them, and they started differentiating. That was a real power sign. So we tried to stimulate the stem cells and they seemed to really show some power, man. That was enough to give them a general idea of growing them down on a deeper level, to use sound to stimulate the body or use a mechanical motion to stimulate the body to deal with the regeneration of damaged tissue, instead of injecting stem cells into the body, to get the body to create their own stem cells. They said, ‘Probably the way you play, you’re stimulating the stem cells anyway.’ I said, ‘I *feel* that.’” Their collaboration led to a 2017 research paper, “Cell Melodies: When Sound Speaks To Stem Cells”, as well as a number of talks on the subject.

At the age of 76, Graves has taken on other unusual projects. In the last year, he has added drums to folk musician Sam Amidon’s *The Following Mountain*, and created the sculpture *Beyond Polymath* as part of a fellowship at the Artist’s Institute at Hunter College. The Amidon session came about through multi-instrumentalist Shahzad Ismaily. “They were fans of mine, they worked it out. I could sit back here and say, ‘Well I’m Milford Graves, man, who is this guy Sam, I don’t know who this guy is’ – I said, you know, I wanna work with some of these young people. What the heck. It’s a little different, he’s doing all that folk. I said this is great! If I can

play some loose style to this guy doing this folk that’s pretty neat, huh?”

The sculpture, meanwhile, is almost a portable version of Graves’s basement set-up, combining a skeleton, an acupuncture dummy, heart monitors, electrodes, stethoscope, drum and a tangle of wires. “The curator Jenny Jaskey came here, she checked everything out and she asked if I could do something that would demonstrate the way I think and what I do. I just started hooking things up, instead of writing it out and doing diagrams. I said, why don’t I do a piece of sculpture, do something a little different. It’s truly an art-science piece. I’m working on my second piece now... New things are starting to develop for me right now. Which is great, I thought maybe I’ll cool out, take some vacations, but it’s hard, man. Seems like my mind is just getting more creative and innovative than it’s ever been.”

Listening again to “Intuitive Transformations”, the longest track on 1998’s *Grand Unification* a few days after our meeting, I notice a certain correspondence between Graves’s drumming and his conversational style. In the piece he establishes a rolling rhythm and then for the next 12 minutes constantly sets up instantaneous variations, fills and accents around it. During our interview, he makes many associative digressions, pulling examples from his various activities to illustrate a point he’s trying to make, not rambling but letting his thoughts flow, never losing sight of the underlying question to be answered (when I asked about how he approaches group playing versus solo performance, he makes analogies to self-defense instruction, basketball and food). Whether he’s playing or talking, he’s showing you the correlative way his mind works; what’s unusual is

how much his playing also springs from an instinctive grasp of internal physiological workings, not just motor skills. His music seems to be a deep-seated extension of both his intellect and his body.

A figure whose skill and deep knowledge commands awe among free jazz aficionados and players, Graves has also been intimidating to some – John Tchicai has written that original New York Art Quartet bassist Don Moore “became so frightened of this wizard of a percussionist that he decided that this couldn’t be true or possible and therefore refused to play with us”. Graves occupies far more sonic space than most drummers do, which perhaps led to the solo performances. “I never thought about just going out and doing a solo, people were *asking* me to do solo,” he says. “Some people straight out: ‘You know what, I would rather hear you do a solo than play with other people.’” It has also sometimes been derided as an ego trip by either critics or fellow musicians.

But Graves’s intent has been to set a new template for the drums in a group format, not simply to gratify himself. “I tell drummers, y’all shouldn’t be disliking me and hating me, I’m trying to get us to play all liberated, be respected in the band, man. All I’m saying is take the instrument and stop being pushed aside to the back and disrespected because they’re saying you’re not a musician, you’re a drummer.

“That’s my mission. I’m the one who’s making the sacrifice, getting less gigs. Lots of guys don’t wanna call me. They say, ‘Oh man he’s doing too much stuff, playing too much stuff, man, you gotta play something basic so we can groove! He’s making me work, man.’ So I’m aware of all of that. But I get younger people coming through that’s more inspired, and this is gonna improve the music.” □ For more *Milford Graves Full Mantis* screenings, see fullmantis.com

Julian Cowley presents a guide to Milford Graves's key recordings, from the crucible of free jazz through his boundary crossing collaborations



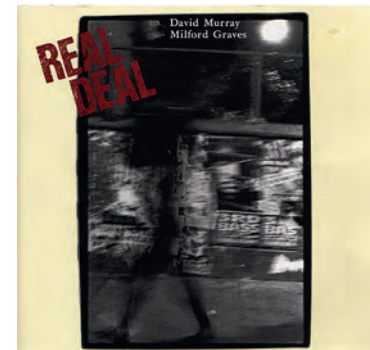
New York Art Quartet, *New York Art Quartet* (1964)



Andrew Cyrille & Milford Graves, *Dialogue Of The Drums* (1974)



Milford Graves, *Babi* (1977)



David Murray & Milford Graves, *Real Deal* (1992)

New York Art Quartet

New York Art Quartet

ESP-Disk' LP 1964

Graves has spoken of the 1960s as a laboratory for testing limits and cultivating personal strengths, without undue concern for mistakes made in the process. Improvised music could declare itself Art while taking unprecedented risks. In this energetic and adventurous quartet Graves was a perfect match for the unconventional eloquence of trombonist Roswell Rudd, saxophonist John Tchicai and bassist Lewis Worrell. His agile and unpredictable shifting of rhythmic focus brings an air of creative eccentricity as well as buoyancy to their collective sound, while his sensitivity to inflections of pitch and tone marks him out as a listening percussionist and responsive musician.

Milford Graves & Don Pullen

In Concert At Yale University

SRP LP 1966

Nommo

SRP LP 1967

Before becoming a trap drummer Graves was deeply involved with African and Caribbean percussion, and his knowledge of drumming practices in the wider world is extensive. This is reflected not only in his awareness of shading and colouration but also in his physical mobility at the kit. Even while seated he seems to be dancing. These two complementary recordings from a single concert are especially fascinating because they pair a percussionist who transcends the regular drummer's role with a pianist whose approach to the keyboard was emphatically percussive. Pullen's performance is pugnacious and full-on; Graves nurtures detail and pursues oblique trajectories. They meet beyond expectations and converge with dynamic freedom.

Andrew Cyrille & Milford Graves

Dialogue Of The Drums

IPS LP 1974

Affirmation of African heritage is all-pervasive in this meeting of kindred

spirits. Cyrille, like Graves, has an expansive grasp of percussion techniques, and they share awareness of music's broader cultural significance in terms of health, communication and collective identity. During this concert, issued on the Institute Of Percussive Studies label they ran together, their instrumentation includes gongs, bongos, osi drums, agogo bells, balafon and temple blocks. Such varied percussion calls for different ways of playing. Both players carry that knowledge back to their kit drumming. They use their voices too, articulate bodies generating meaning within a vibrantly alive field of transmission, reception and exchange.

Milford Graves

Babi

IPS LP 1977

After four minutes of relentlessly incendiary fire music the New York audience reacts with a whoop that barely conceals a sharp intake of breath. A spell of incantatory glossolalia from Graves ushers in further strident eruptions from the horns of Hugh Glover and Arthur Doyle. As their wild screeches scorch the air, the drummer keeps step with incandescent gracefulness, cavorting on the rim of the volcano. For all its exhausting ferocity *Babi* is a joyful and involving record, due largely to the headlong inventiveness of Graves. By the mid-1970s fire music had hardened into a style and was lending itself to cliché. Graves and his group restore its suppleness and exhilaration.

Milford Graves

Meditation Among Us

Kitty LP 1977

On four occasions from 1977–88 Graves toured Japan with dancer Min Tanaka. During the first visit he made this recording with a quartet of local free players, including trumpeter Toshinori Kondo and percussionist Toshiyuki Tsuchitori. In this unfamiliar and high-spirited context Graves firmly establishes himself as the pivotal figure, driving the ensemble but

also acting as its steady hub, enabling the music to flow without fraying. "Together And Moving" bristles with the excitement of the occasion yet it remains taut and purposeful. On "Response" Graves plays piano, contemplative at first, then torrential. Less satisfying musically, but further evidence of his ability to bring direction to a group.

David Murray & Milford Graves

Real Deal

DIW CD 1992

Saxophonist David Murray turned up in a startling range of contexts around the start of the 90s. This studio session at New York's Power Station finds him sounding characteristically robust and self-assured. Aware that his duo partner would arrive with his own inner springboard and perform a set of dazzling aerobicic feats, Graves seized the opportunity to weave a series of imaginative percussive environments around the muscular twists and elegant turns of Murray's tenor sax and bass clarinet. Tumbling polyrhythms and rolling textures, arranged in real time, provide rich interactive settings. Murray feeds on the energy and responds to the fine detail.

Milford Graves

Grand Unification

Tzadik 1998

Although some audiences and fellow musicians have found his idiosyncrasies and self-possession daunting, Graves has always been prepared to adapt his creative impulses and inclinations when engaged in collaboration or performing in public. He respects the need of others for certain levels of support or stimulation. *Grand Unification* finds him in magisterial command, left to his own devices. Hearing him solo is like witnessing a shamanic ceremony, mysterious and packed with surprises yet totally coherent and rigorously crafted. Vocal incantation often accompanies the pulsating, swirling, scintillating flow as his limbs channel mature artistry, but also scientifically

informed insights through the skin, wood and metal. Graves tunes in to the essential vibrations – within, between, beyond.

Anthony Braxton/Milford Graves/William Parker

Beyond Quantum

Tzadik CD 2008

"As a musician you are schooling yourself to deal with some of the most sensitive things in the universe," Graves once told fellow percussionist Paul Burwell. "We're supposed to glow." *Beyond Quantum* finds Graves in suitably luminous form and in appropriately sensitised company, propagating waves with saxophonist Anthony Braxton and bassist William Parker. This beautifully balanced and astonishingly flexible trio operate on a shared frequency as they find ways to encrypt their conceptual subtleties, making music that aspires to recalibrate the cosmos. They achieve such refinement without sacrificing that necessary glow, being musicians of the brilliant kind Graves had in mind while speaking with Burwell, "brilliant in the sense of illumination".

Milford Graves & Bill Laswell

Space/Time • Redemption

TUM CD 2014

Laswell's enveloping bass bubbles, billows and booms. On "Eternal Signs" he pays melodic homage to Albert Ayler while Graves, who drummed on Ayler's *Love Cry*, simmers and fizzes tirelessly, an agent of fermentation within that saturated sound. For Laswell space is -scape; his take is widescreen with special effects. Graves moves through, touching and feeling from within. Their reciprocal activity is continuous and change is constant, a smooth continuum without a trace of mechanical repetition. Laswell's taste for melting forms suggests a new kind of challenge for Graves on this New York duo recording, but the affirmation remains the same as natural energy takes shape in sound. □