

Conversations between Artists, Writers, Musicians, Performers, Directors—since 1981

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Milford Graves by Aakash Mittal



When I stepped into the Artist's Institute at Hunter College in Manhattan this past fall, I didn't know what to expect. Milford Graves was premiering a new work titled *Beyond Polymath*. I've studied music with Graves since 2015, seen him play drums with various musicians, and attended gatherings at his home in Queens. At these informal meetings he draws connections between his work in biology, martial arts, music, and acupuncture, all while telling stories of his experiences as a drummer in the 1960s. *Beyond Polymath*, however, was unique in that it was his first work of sculpture. The installation was a three-dimensional expression of Graves's "biological music" concept. The density of this sculpture struck me—its medical and cultural symbols intertwined with brightly colored veins, their shapes and lines creating a sense of movement between static objects. A human skeleton was connected to four separate computer monitors, each

displaying various expressions of the human heartbeat. The effect was simultaneously ancient and futuristic.

Graves has dedicated his life to understanding how people vibrate, creating works that resonate within us. This inquiry has led him to pursuits beyond any single discipline and to settle into a number of diverse communities. Some know him as a musician, while others regard him as a martial arts instructor or herbalist, but he seamlessly combines all of these interests. Rather than work within any specific idiom, Graves mines the creative process to engineer new works out of the components common to each subject.

A few days after his lecture/recital at the Artist's Institute, we met at his home in Queens, where I found him deliberating on the gallbladder and what sort of medical advice to give a friend in need.

—Aakash Mittal



MILFORD GRAVES If not in terrible pain, he probably has a little time to rectify his health situation. Most people feel some pain and go right in, taking hard pharmaceuticals or getting cut up. Then other problems settle in.

AAKASH MITTAL There's no going back once they cut an organ out.

MG Once they do that, there ain't no regeneration.

AM Even an easy surgery is a risk, so why put your body through that if you don't have to?

MG Andy Warhol and Tony Williams both had gallbladder surgery and suffered massive heart attacks. There's a linkage between those two organs, man. This ain't alternative medicine; it's straight out of cardiopathy. There's a small blood vessel connecting the gallbladder to the heart. I told my friend to make sure they monitor it.

AM So you were suggesting he ask for a cardiologist?

MG Doctors get uptight when you tell them what to do, but you have to bring things to their attention in a very peaceful, diplomatic way.

AM Every time I come here I learn about a new connection between the heart and the rest of the world.

MG In traditional Chinese medicine they've been talking about this for ages. There's the meridian clock. Each of us has two hours of maximum energy flow for the heart, between 11 AM and 1 PM. The gallbladder is just the opposite, between 11 PM and 1 AM. The ancient Chinese saw something going on, probably just from observation. They said the kidneys control the bones. How is that possible?

AM I don't know.

MG Well, there's a hormone in the kidney—erythropoietin. The blood goes through the kidneys, and they monitor it, excreting out what they don't want but returning electrolytes and stuff back into the flow. But check this out: this ain't no machine. It's a human organ that can figure out the number of red blood cells you have! And when they're too low it releases this hormone, which triggers the marrow to produce more. The ancients knew about this relationship, just not about erythropoietin. Now we learn its molecular structure and synthesize it, then put it in a pill or injection. But the bottom line is that you might not always have the scientific language, but the relationships are there. So you can't sleep on this old stuff, man! You've got to go back centuries and ask what these ancients were talking about. They were so tuned in. They talked about

their deities, and today we have church as big business. Turn on that TV and see them preachers dressed up. They're entertainers, and people are dousing them with bucks! People are into their talk, feeling them high spirits, but in the old days they *really* felt forces inside. They were very open and had none of our machines. They paid attention to their own biology and let nature speak. When we get stuck, we should go back and ask what the heck they were talking about.

AM It's easy to forget that people were able to exist for thousands of years without the machines we use today. So your study of the ancients deals with energy systems?

MG Their whole thought process, man!

AM Having known you for the last few years, one thing that really strikes me is that some people only know you as an herbalist, while others only know you as a martial artist or acupuncturist. They might not even know you play drums. Are you leading multiple lives?

MG People can be polymaths, knowing about this and that, but they might not be able to integrate all that. When I needed a title for my recent show at the Artist's Institute at Hunter College, "Beyond Polymath" popped into my head—which, to me, means trying to see all this stuff as one happening, like the ToE (Theory of Everything) in physics. I'm dealing with the same things, though not, for example, light or gravity but with the sensory organs that detect them. I deal with the body, man! Not so much on the atomic or cosmological level but the anatomical level. With microscopes you can look all you want, but can you feel it?

AM Meaning inside your body?

MG Meaning how you react. We have excellent detectors that can observe particles colliding. With our machines we can observe. But what about Vodou in Haiti or further back than that, the Dahomey and Yoruba cultures? With possession you can see some incredible things—people crawling along then suddenly jumping up, doing unbelievable movements and chanting. All bubbled up through this apparatus of vocalization and drumming.

AM I was just in Haiti this past summer, hanging out with a Vodou drummer who showed me some rhythms. From a distance the rhythms seemed simple. I thought, I'm a musician and can learn this. But when it was my turn to play them I was blown away by the complexity of the time feel. Once I was able to play the rhythm, I was really struck by the trance-like effect and its deep symbolism. The drums themselves could only be made from the wood of a tree felled on a full

moon. He explained that this wasn't just music but something more. He was trying to vibrate on another level.

MG That's it! It comes down to vibration, which is motion. As human beings, if there's no motion, we're dead! (*laughter*) You can call it oscillations or whatever.

AM I want to say *intuition*, but that word carries a lot of baggage. I wonder if it's related to our gut neurons.

MG And this thing about machines replacing human biology is too far out. If you want to build a smarter machine, then you've got to feel the neuron. You've got to ride the neuron! In Vodou, when a spirit, or *loa*, possesses a devotee, they "mount the horse." You take that ride to understand what it's about. If you just watch, you don't get that. It's like the observer effect in physics, when the act of looking affects the results. You're a participant, and if you don't develop a strong belief system or convictions, you will never internalize.

AM I've always appreciated your thoughts on self-empowerment, believing in yourself when few others seem to. Your life and career emulate this, and so you're always ahead of the curve.

MG Do you know Connie Hawkins, the basketball player who just passed away?

AM No.

MG But you do know Michael Jordan and Julius Erving. Well, they came from Hawkins, since he revolutionized the game. Now that he's dead, the media is talking about him. We were actually classmates in high school, but not pals really. He was a playground legend here in Brooklyn. All-American in high school, got a scholarship to Iowa in 1960, but he was alleged to be associating with a gambler, a corrupt kind of guy, who got players to shave points. He lost his scholarship and was later banned from the NBA. It was a mess. So he played for the Harlem Globetrotters for years. He was later cleared of everything and hired by the Phoenix Suns. This guy didn't get a certain kind of recognition, and a similar thing has happened to me perhaps, though I didn't get banned for corruption.

AM Banned from avant-garde jazz?

MG Well, it was who and what I was associated with. I was told I would be blackballed for being revolutionary and too involved with the Civil Rights Movement. And because I started SRP (Self-Reliance Program) Records with Don Pullen, I was told the system was going to come down on me. But I really don't know what's true. I heard all kinds of stories. A white record

producer called me up in the '70s, saying, "If you were a white guy, you'd be a superstar." People connected me with Amiri Baraka, and I was in a book, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*, by Frank Kofsky, who at the time was a known communist. He said free jazz is socialist music. I was trying to organize musicians together, and people said, "Don't go up against the system." But I wasn't. We just couldn't keep waiting for the system to come to us. Some people in the media said we played "hate" music, anti-white music, which is amazing because the media never came to us, the musicians, to ask what we were doing. We weren't even thinking about that. It was the writers who made an issue of *it*—black writers! They labeled us, but we only wanted to play.

Do you know about H. Rap Brown?

AM I don't.

MG He's in a federal prison right now because he wound up killing a police officer in 2000, though some say it was a setup. But in the '60s he was one of the leaders of SNCC and the one who instigated the Baltimore Riots, which we called the Baltimore Rebellion. So he was on the run, and a lot of people at the time were sympathizing with him and Stokely Carmichael, all those guys who were talking hard, saying peaceful marches aren't going to do it. A lot of artists were asked to play for these benefits. So they had this rally for Rap Brown at a brownstone uptown. Everybody came. I was surprised to see Papa Joe Jones, talking, *Balabba yabba zow, huh!* What in the world was he talking about? It turned out to be Buddy Rich. I was just so surprised that Papa Joe would be into any social movements. We started talking, and he said, "Young man, we was young once and wanted to play that way-out stuff, too." I thought, Damn, Papa knows who I am! I was just in my twenties. The older guys were checking us out. Max Roach made extremely positive remarks: "You're doing something different!" I was playing once and could see Elvin Jones smiling, eyes all open, bobbing his head. I was showing them I was a liberated drummer. They considered me bold, saying I was soloing throughout the piece.

Some guys couldn't deal: "Play time, man." They'd get uptight because they weren't generating enough information to keep up! I was just flying over the terrain. "Play simple, and stop sometimes." But I didn't come out for no sleepy set or cocktail hour. I was ready to go.

AM It's about the energy.

MG And music is, of course, just one form.

AM There's also martial arts. I remember you doing a demonstration of analog strikes versus digital strikes, relating each to vibration and motion.

- MG I used to do some very hard sparring, which might have contributed to throwing my hip out. Years of doing wicked kicks at all kinds of angles. I stayed in it too long and it twisted me out a bit, but it was an experience. Now I've got to do research to regenerate my own self back again.
- AM And you do this by sonifying the energy coming out of the body. Is that correct? I saw you do this with one of the people that meet here on Sundays. I think you were recording the electrical signal around the damaged hip and putting it through the software you coded to turn the signal into a melody.
- MG It's known that you can stimulate tissue regeneration through electrical stimulation, but there are other ways too. Did I only use electrodes or did I put acupuncture needles in him too?
- AM It was the needles.
- MG Yeah, I go deep down to where the joint is and apply specific frequencies relative to the body. I measure your electrical activity and transform that into a frequency, then convert it into a melody, as it has some sort of harmonics. That's where the musicianship comes in. People ask if I use spiritual geometry to do this, and I do make use of the golden ratio—that spiral shape in nature, in snail shells and pineapples skin, etcetra. But this is often isolated, dealt with as a constant. The heart, for example, goes through a spiraling motion, and there's coiling activity in the motion of the intestines and circulatory system. It's a dynamic design.
- AM At your performances you sometimes give a primer on your work, mentioning the stereotypical heartbeat sound—*ga-gunk ga-gunk*. What you're most interested in are the vibrations between beats that can't be heard without amplification.
- MG You enter a house through the front door and exit out the back, but what did you do inside? Most people just observe the valves opening and closing, but there are all these structures that make that happen, rotating all around, and never with the exact same motion. "Oh that's too chaotic, too random," some say. But if you walk down the street on a predetermined path, you're in trouble. "It's too chaotic the way you're walking, man." Sure it is, because I'm avoiding vehicles and people I may not want to run into! Your organs understand this variability and shift to, say, deliver more oxygen here or there. That's feedback. The circulatory system is bouncing, man.
- AM It sounds like you are dealing with biological feedback loops and improvisation rather than a rigid system. Do you feel people label things they don't understand as chaotic or random?
- MG Laypeople don't bother, but intellectuals and people who want control do. These controllers are very insecure because they feel they're in trouble, or they just don't know how to get liberated. When I first got to Bennington in '73, a lot of the students claimed they couldn't improvise, but it was a requisite course in the program. Improv scared the hell out of them. I would ask about their upbringing, and they might tell me they started violin and piano at age four with instructors. They'd never picked up an instrument without worrying about what's right or wrong, never got acquainted to see what it could produce. The most sophisticated improvised music in the world was done by an older generation of African Americans. They didn't have no schooling; they came up raw and rough, figuring out music on their own. Their disadvantage became a positive.
- But when I later did workshops with the African American community here, I had a problem. The discipline wasn't yet there. I had forty drummers the first class, then next week only four. "This is some heavy-duty stuff you're talking, man." But I didn't reduce it. I'd ask about the arithmetic of their rhythms, slow them down and make them count. It was the opposite with the white kids at Bennington. You've got to know both the structured and the so-called unstructured.
- AM What drove you to exist in both worlds?
- MG I was eighteen and playing timbales in Latin jazz bands. Some of those players would talk about an A at 440 Hz. I didn't know what they were talking about, but if you played a tune, I could remember that sucker. I was all memory, and I'm glad I came up that way. But not knowing bugged me, especially when we rehearsed with this bass player, and after he left they said he had been all out of tune. I thought he was great and couldn't understand what they meant, so I went to the library to read about who started all this stuff about the right and wrong notes. But, oh, it was just a human being who devised this convention, without any objective backing! It ain't absolute. If it were, all the music of Asia and Africa would be wrong! No way, man. How could those notes between the piano keys be wrong! This lead me to study acoustics and collect books like *On the Sensations of Tone as a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music* by Hermann von Helmholtz. I was on after that, baby!
- I will call you out. If you're playing a tempered scale, I'll ask: What's the twelfth root of two? How was that scale developed? Are you beholden to something you don't even know the history of? Maybe you are the one out of tune! And you do so because you want to build a keyboard? Fitting twelve notes into an octave, instead of thirty-two, is an industrial compromise! It has nothing to do with feeling in the body.
- AM I remember being in Calcutta, studying music. I was



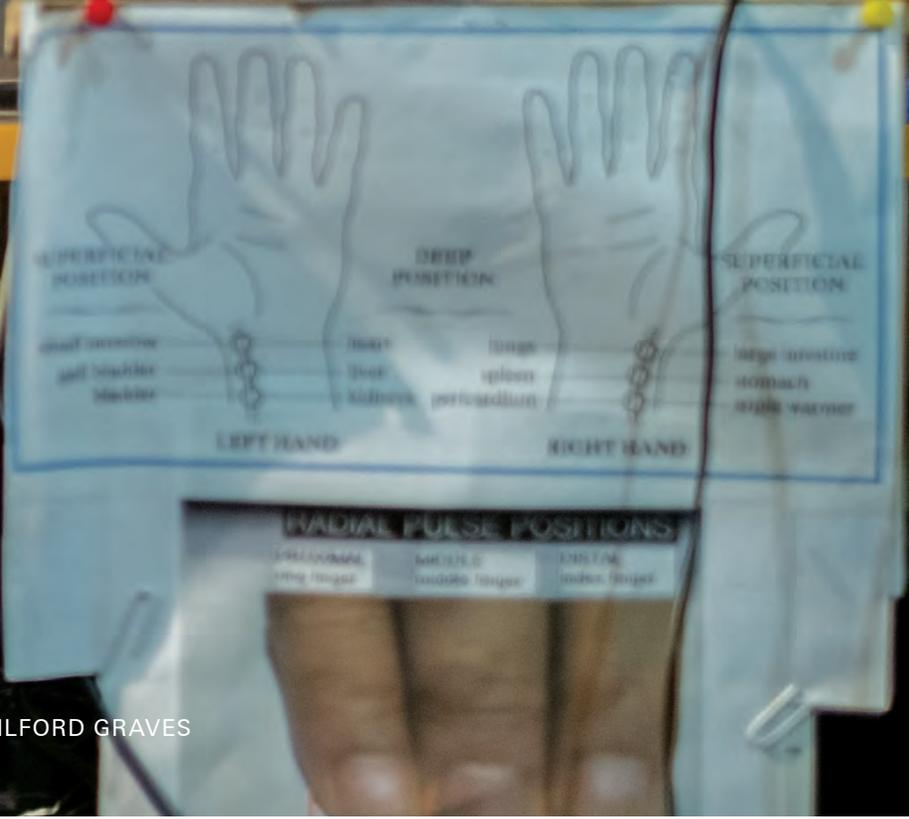
38 Milford Graves in Jamaica, Queens, 2017. Photo by Andrew Bourne.

The Singularity is an era in which our intelligence will become increasingly non-biological and trillions of times more powerful than it is today—the dawning of a new civilization that will enable us to transcend our biological limitations and amplify our creativity.

Algorithm

In mathematics, computing, linguistics and related subjects, an algorithm is a sequence of finite instructions, often used for calculation and data processing. It is formally a type of effective method in which a list of well-defined instructions for completing a task will, when given an initial state, proceed through a well-defined series of successive states, eventually terminating in an end-state. The transition from one state to the next is not necessarily deterministic; some algorithms, known as probabilistic algorithms, incorporate

... of instructions for solving a problem, usually ... that the procedure terminate at ... Specific algorithms sometimes also go by ... method, procedure, or technique. The word "algorithm" is a distortion of al-Khwārizmī, a Persian mathematician who wrote an influential treatise about ... methods. The process of applying an ... an input to obtain an output is called a



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working on raga Marwa, and the flat second is actually tuned much higher than where it would be on the piano. Instead of lining up with a tuner, you need to get a certain resonance between the major and minor second. I was also working on Malkauns, which has this sort of vibrato motion between the fourth and the flat third. At first it was hard for me to understand that it was about the constant change of the sound in that back and forth motion. It helped me understand that what matters is what you can do within the spectrum of sound we experience. It's not a fixed tuning system, which connects to what you've said about how older drummers talk about music in the heart. You take this well beyond the metaphor.

MG It's a total approach, down to your diet. In 1961 I was a street-corner bebopper, a jitterbug drinking *pluck*—the cheapest wine. We had a doo-wop group and partied all night, then ate at the worst Chinese restaurant and Fish'n'Chip in the so-called ghetto. The fried oil grease had been in there for months. Those free radicals were alive in us. A bad diet. I had friends die of cirrhosis, and I got an ulcer. I looked like I was walking sideways when walking toward you, ribs all showing. The local doctor said, "If you want to live, you got to stop drinking." I had a power deep inside though, a determination. I became a vegetarian and recalled my grandfather talking about herbs. Soon my friends noticed a remarkable improvement in my health and started asking what herbs they could use to correct their problems, so I became an herbalist, again going to the library to research the subject.

AM So people have been coming to you for health advice since you were first on the scene?

MG Oh yeah. I've talked to young people in the streets and at Bennington, who were dealing with various kinds of drugs. "Bro, that stuff you take? I've done it. And I almost took myself out of the equation!" Kids can feel sincerity. My classroom was a living room. It was hip. We had lessons, yes, but then we'd lock the doors and do martial arts. I'd throw them all over the room, and they loved it. I helped those kids, and they helped me. I got to see an element of society that I didn't pass through. It gave me a great feeling of balance. Kids up there had different problems, emotional ones. In some African American communities the gangs kill each other, but the whites are shooting at schools and theaters. What motivates that, man? Do they see life in a real way or as something artificial, make-believe?

Some might be given too much, with nothing to chase after, and the walls start to crash down. I see this on the planet right now. The Trump situation isn't really about Trump anymore. It's about the people that voted for him. We've got to help each other out. It ain't about the demise of white people. What if African Americans went into those so-called hard-racist areas and said, "We understand your situation. We've been kicked in the ass, made to feel we would lose everything we ever gained." We can all rise to the occasion and come out of the negative hole. Take the middle path. On the Buddha's path, you travel! You've got to feel what others feel regardless of pigmentation—that's compassion. We all hurt. The Civil Rights era was great because many whites had no idea. They saw how African Americans were treated on news television, and it pissed them off.

AM Did you ever feel your creativity was a political statement, or was it just coexisting at the same time as the Civil Rights Movement?

MG Like I said before, I was just playing at first. In the '60s a political awareness came. The Vietnam War was on. Women's rights. Black rights. It was a big time for this country. You couldn't imagine it today. I delved into American history from slavery on and, being a musician, got interested in how the drum was banned by white slave owners, how that music had to be underground, then about the so-called "darkies" in New Orleans, about being put in conservatories to learn to play music "correctly." There's more to slavery than labor; it's cultural genocide. Everything you did was invalid.

Nasty stuff took place, but what positive came out of it? To be stripped of your character and mental capacity, to be regarded as just bodies moving around? My parents couldn't help me with schoolwork, like I can with my grandchildren today. I had to work my butt off to try to figure out every little thing. You can get some brilliant minds out of that. After studying Zen Buddhism, I thought maybe the true practitioners were African Americans because they were stripped to a state of nothingness. You come out hungry! African Americans should be at the forefront in teaching people, all people, about what it is to be put down and how to pull yourself out. The way I play my instrument is my dedication. It's my way of saying, "I don't like the way the drum was treated."

AM During one of your Sunday hangs you were talking

about the need to bring the drum back to a central role in music. The drum used to be regarded as the most important instrument, but in recent history, it has become diminished. And now at concerts you intentionally put the drums at the front of the band.

MG I don't allow myself to be a backdrop. To be taken to the back is a demotion. Do you understand what the drum was? *Ancient Text Messages of the Yoruba Batá Drum: Cracking the Code* by Amanda Villepastour—that's a good and recent book. The pressure effect they use on that drum, which goes beyond the Batá actually, leads to something else. People now talk about membranes instead of superstrings in quantum mechanics. "But that's not a drum, Milford." Come on now, it's a circle vibrating isn't it? Are we afraid to say that the closest thing to this scientific idea might be West African drumming systems?

Relatedly, when I play, I do more than vertical strokes. I'm not just *bah-bop bah-bop*. My thing is moving around, touching the skins, knowing about momentum and position at the same time.

AM In one of our lessons you mentioned that exploring all the sounds my voice can make and bringing them to my saxophone playing would develop my "feel" in the music. And I've heard you do a lot of vocalizing and singing while playing drums in your performances or to demonstrate a point in your talks. In John Zorn's book *Arcana V* you wrote an essay called "Music Extensions of Infinite Dimensions." In it, you mention something about how when we think of a sound our vocal cords are subvocalizing.

MG I work with phonetics, and I also do vocal stuff in the work. The pronunciation of different languages activates different parts of the whole vocal system. Phonetics is physiological. If I do a pharyngeal gag tone, anatomically it's like vomiting, which stimulates the medulla, which controls the parasympathetic nervous system—the Yin system.

Then there's subvocalization, which even NASA is researching. By putting these very sensitive receptors around the vocal folds they found that the larynx pre-vibrates with just a thought. When you think or hear something, you also silently speak it, imitating it. If that wasn't the case, you'd never learn to speak in the first place. I say "Hello!" You think, Hello! with just a little delay, also subvocalizing it in your throat. How interesting. So when people hear you play the horn, they are unconsciously singing along. You don't want to put people into a zone of discomfort, so you've got to know not to hold a note too long because people will get exhausted. You affect them, man.

The Yoruba turn speech to song. They can communicate in musical form, but without knowing their language I can use those same inflections. I put twists in there, like the blues: *Oh my gurl, mmmmm, she*

took the world awayeeee from me, mmmmm hmm. Those minor tones vibrate the sinus, hit the lachrymal area, which stimulates the tear ducts. Why do minor scales have that melancholic aspect? How do they make you feel a certain way? They stimulate those ducts, then the sadness starts coming. I don't know how the bluesmen knew this, but I figured that sucker out. When I want to bring things down, even my blood pressure, I just sing.

But back to the gag sound: Three types of people do it. Young children, because they are so relaxed. Junkies, who are also relaxed. And Batá singers, especially the Cubans and Nigerians. But you can do this on a drum. Muffle it, and go *bleh*. I hit that, and I can relax you, manipulate your yin and yang, keep you in balance, because remember, you sing everything you hear. Some musicians scream on their instrument, but they're wiping people out. What's your purpose? To show how loud and long you can scream? Are you in pain? Are you angry, man? No, we got to feed people vibrations.

Another thing about the power of relaxation: in martial arts, you learn to relax when you get pinned to the floor. Your routine choreographed moves will not save you. You have to relax. I would have one piece of advice for a fighter like Conor McGregor: You can train physically all you want, Conor, but you're in such a hyper state. You burn up. Against Floyd Mayweather, you came in, making that money, putting on a show. But you exhausted yourself. I'd take old Connor through some relaxed states, man. Cool him out.

When I would spar, I'd sing on people! Put them to sleep. Just like on the trap set, one hand goes this way, the other that way. They never knew what was coming. I was wicked, man. I was weird. That was my MO. They said, "You're unorthodox, unpredictable." That's the name of the game. I was having fun. I wasn't no pugilist. I was an artist. It made me learn how to make quick decisions, how to not panic.

When I come to my instrument, I am relaxed and can pull stuff off. When I was doing tai chi, I would bring that fluidity in. It's not just about practice; there are a lot of other experiences to have. In acupuncture, I can hit some dangerous points—bam! That's drumming.