

Thinking outside the Woodbox

Fiddler on the Rise Dept.

By MATT TEMPESTA | March 17, 2010



As Daniel Bernard Roumain was growing up in Margate, a small city in southeast Florida with a large Haitian population, he felt playing the violin was "a calling." Now the Haitian-American Roumain has become one of the biggest names in contemporary classical music. This past year alone, he has been profiled on the *CBS Evening News*, played alongside Lady Gaga on *American Idol*, and most recently performed for a global audience in Vancouver for the 2010 Winter Olympics.

Perhaps "contemporary classical" is a pigeonholing that doesn't do justice to the wide scope of his talent — or his ambitions.

The dreadlocked composer, who now resides in the Dover-Sherborn suburbs west of Boston, has a dynamic range of influences, from Dizzy Gillespie to Bjork, from Jimi Hendrix to DJ Spooky. On his soon-to-be-released (March 30) third album, *Woodbox Beats & Balladry*, the radical-thinking Roumain has expanded the parameters of what listeners can expect from classically trained musicians.

"It's a big sound," says Roumain, who received a doctorate in music from the University of Michigan under the guidance of Pulitzer Prize-winning composer William Bolcom. "It has a real, almost darkness to it. It's a sound I'm really proud of, actually. There's a little bit of everything there for everyone."

Woodbox marries wailing electric violin, heavy drum beats, and screeching turntables. "Sonata for Violins and Turntables Part 1" features a percussion-driven dance mix; "Slowly Fooled" is a spacey, Pink Floyd-esque jam. Roumain can shred on his instrument like Jimmy Page or expertly deliver more traditional classical sounds. Want more cultural *mélange*? Roumain's first job was working as an assistant to Luther Campbell, the notorious Miami rapper and leader of 2 Live Crew.

Completed in August of 2009, *Woodbox* begins with the ominously titled "Spaceships over Haiti," a frenzied fracas of violins and drums with a bass solo straight out of a Beastie Boys album. Originally based on a novel by his father, in which aliens land in Haiti to share their technology, the song has taken on new meaning since the earthquake, which claimed as many as 200,000 lives, including several members of Roumain's family. But as news coverage of the disaster wanes, Roumain hopes to keep Haiti from becoming just another disaster, and has pledged to donate a portion of his solo-concert proceeds to raise both money and awareness.

"The fear now is for Haiti becoming a memory as it kind of retreats from the forefront of our consciousness," says Roumain. "I think my responsibility now is just to keep reminding people and to keep doing the things that I can to keep aid and assistance going into the country."

Roumain will play in Boston on May 14 at Northeastern University's Fenway Center and on June 20 in his debut with Boston Pops at Symphony Hall. For more information, go to dbrmusic.com.