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BIRTH OF THE COOL

Unconventional in appearance and musical approach, violinist Daniel Bernard Roumain is giving classical a makeover. Vivien Schweitzer meets him

Many classical composers have integrated elements of jazz, rock and pop into their music, but until Daniel Bernard Roumain bounded onto the scene – cutting an unconventional appearance with his waist-length dreadlocks and nose ring – hip hop and classical music were rarely mentioned in the same sentence.

But Roumain – or DBR, as he brands himself – has changed all that. His chosen works adroitly combine his eclectic musical passions – ranging from concertos and orchestral works, some including turntables, to a recent disc featuring soulful chamber collaborations with musicians such as Philip Glass. A violinist with a highly charged stage presence, Roumain often defies convention, sometimes holding the bow in his mouth as he strums his instrument.

Roumain initially kept his musical worlds strictly separate, however. The friendly, down-to-earth 37-year-old grew up in Margate, a small town in south Florida, the son of Haitian immigrants. He began playing the violin at age five at his local primary school. 'There is a certain intelligence and intuition that one has when you are very young, naïve and innocent,' he explains. 'Somehow the violin started off as something that was very comforting and attractive and cool. It was hip to me, and then I quickly realized in middle and high school that it was none of those things to other people!'

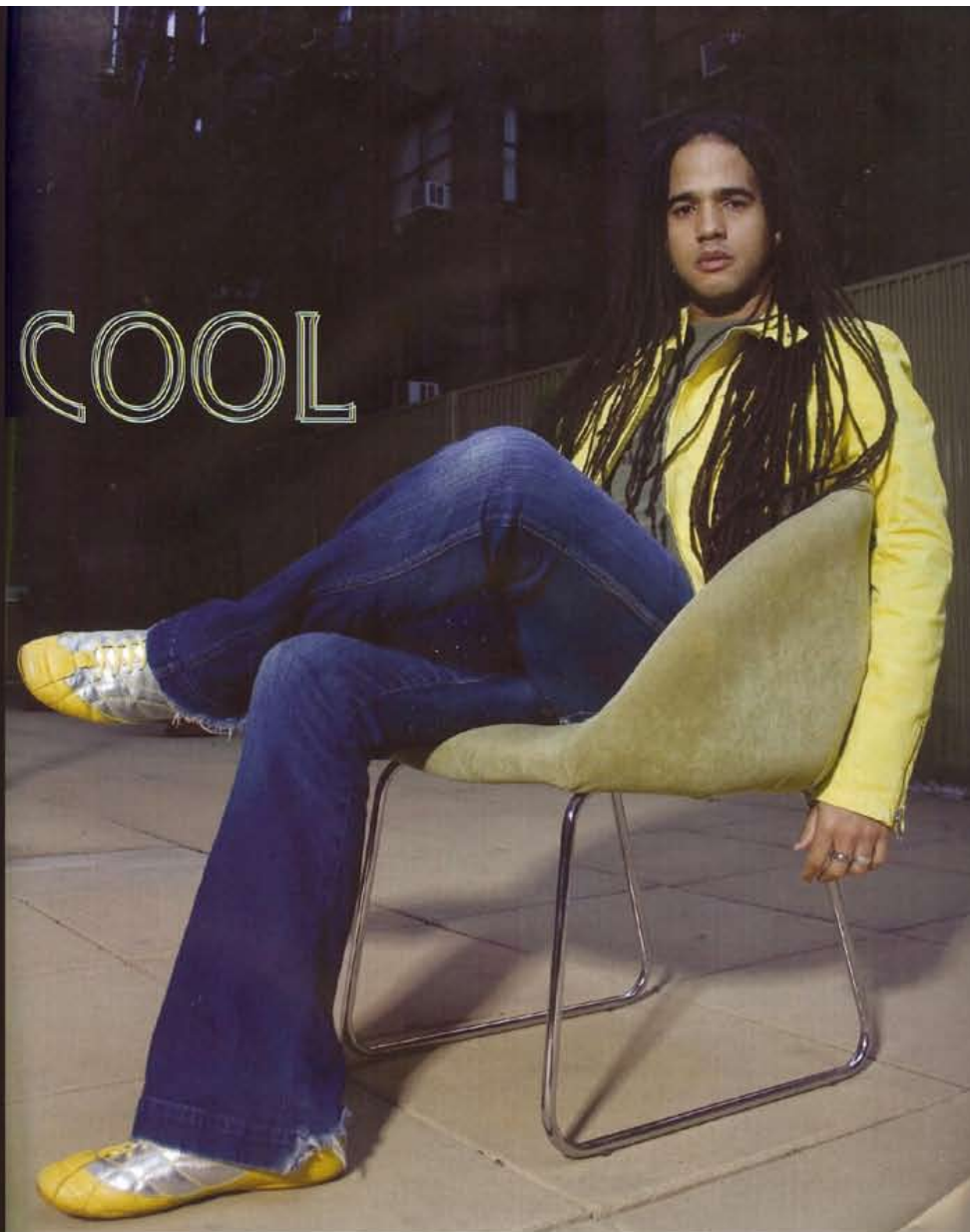
While Roumain was studying classical music, he also explored his interest in hip hop and other popular genres and in his late teens worked for Luther Campbell and the infamous rappers 2 Live Crew in Miami. But he segregated the two strands of his musical life. 'During the school year it was violin and the Margate strings and youth orchestras,' he says, 'and in the summer forget the violin, it was garage bands, hip hop and jazz.'

His epiphany that his two seemingly disparate musical loves could be merged came in high school, when a teacher asked him to write a work for the school orchestra. Roumain brought in members of his band with a drum kit and electric guitar and performed the work for the school assembly. Students would sometimes loudly boo during orchestra performances, he says, recalling that he couldn't sleep the night before. 'I was already kind of an outcast at school and worried that this would push me out even further! High school students can be really malicious, which is all about insecurity. But they reacted very positively. It was a true revelation, as I was combining my two loves, classical and popular music, and doing it in an original composition for my peers. Right after that concert I stopped that separation. I plugged in and learned to play Mötley Crüe solos on my violin.'

'From that point on,' he continues, 'if I wanted a drum kit I didn't get a drum kit, I played it on the violin. My violin became a drum kit, bass, singer, two turntables and a microphone. I really made it a personal statement.'

The rest is musical history. Studies at Vanderbilt and the University of Michigan with Joan Tower and William Bolcom taught him how to effectively combine the two idioms. 'Both [composers]

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'PHILIP GLASS RESPONDED TO ROCK MUSIC IN HIS "LOW" SYMPHONY - I WANTED TO HAVE A SIMILAR COMPOSITIONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH HIP HOP MUSIC'

challenged me and in some ways rejected my natural impulses towards more popular music, even though both have done the same thing in their work. Both instilled in me a sense of rigor, discipline, craft and editing, and of being very self critical," he says.

"The first thing Joan said to me was "you are too impatient and you need to be more patient." Neither told me to stop dreaming, but said that the best things don't happen overnight. Both encouraged my use of hip hop, but wanted me to bring more sophistication to it and take it in a new direction.

Examples of that sophistication include *24 Bits: Hip Hop Studies and Etudes*, one in each major and minor key, written to teach the fundamentals of music to students at the Harlem School of the Arts. Roumain has played the work, whose instrumentation is flexible, as a solo violin piece, with violin and piano and with the Mission, his lively ensemble. "The same way that Philip Glass responded to rock music in his "Low" Symphony I wanted to have a similar compositional relationship with hip hop music," he explains.

Roumain has performed his rhythmically driven *Sonata for Violin and Turntables* with DJ Scientific. His *Voodoo Violin Concerto* reflects his Haitian

heritage and his *Fast Black Dance Machine* is scored for clarinet, violin, cello and piano, flute and drum kit.

Other recent works include *One Less Plus*, a multimedia reflection on 'what is gained when someone is lost'. The work incorporated submissions from the public via YouTube and Myspace and was performed for local schoolchildren. For Roumain, outreach efforts are a 'very integral and important part of what I want to do as a composer and human being. It's the best way to connect with the community, to understand their morals and values, and for a composer to introduce him or herself to a community where there may or may not be shared values. It's a way for me to keep my music relevant and fresh.'

Roumain is also dedicated to working one-on-one with young people. During a stint as composer-in-residence with the Orchestra of St Luke's, he nurtured budding composers whose works were then performed by Roumain and musicians from the prestigious ensemble.

"I have been given many wonderful opportunities and my Haitian mother taught me to give back and recycle those opportunities," says Roumain, who has also worked with the Florida Youth Orchestra, of which he was a member as a

boy. He hopes to restart the music program in his Margate primary school, which has been cut. In many such schools in Florida, he adds, if a student wants to learn the violin he or she has to wait until high school, which is "the wrong age, much too late. You are very well aware of the fact that it's not cool by then."

The value of classical music was instilled in Roumain at a young age by his family. Music education is, he reflects, important for many Caribbean and Haitian families, "who insist on music education being part of a total education. It's unfortunate that arts education is not a part of American culture." Roumain, whose two sisters also played an instrument, points out that Haitian culture includes elements of French and Spanish culture. He remembers his father playing Haitian music alongside Von Karajan's complete Beethoven symphonies.

When working with young musicians Roumain hopes to chip away at the romantic notion of the starving artist. A recurring theme is how one can make a living creating music or dance.

"For me," he explains, "it was very difficult to reconcile my need to compose with my wanting a home, a 401(k) and a mortgage. I had a wonderful education, but I didn't have anyone saying to me "It's okay to need and want those things". I had a teacher say to me once, "You should be a starving artist, you should enjoy that appetite".

"A career needs to be approached and experienced and pursued as one's shadow, it needs to be that personal. I pattern my career on Philip Glass and Ani DiFranco. I studied them year by year to see how they did it. >>>



'IT'S UNFORTUNATE THAT ARTS EDUCATION IS NOT A PART OF AMERICAN CULTURE'

composers and other musicians consider knowing the history of great artists' careers," he continues, "not just the results of the career and the records, but understanding their trajectory and then coming up with your own plan. Your career will be as big or small as you would allow it to be."

The Internet is a vital element in Roumain's career and his website links to his MySpace page, iTunes and clips on YouTube. Roumain, whose works are available on his site, says "I self publish most of my music proudly." His debut release with Thirsty Ear Records, an independent label, was *Etudes for Violin & Electronics*, in 2007. He is also developing a relationship with the sports channel ESPN.

Roumain, who is enjoying the financial rewards of his success, is buying a house in Margate. "There was a time when I was a bit embarrassed to be from a small town but now I embrace it. I used to say I was from Miami or Fort Lauderdale, but I'm from Margate," he says proudly, emphasizing the name of his hometown. "I don't want to ever forget where I come from, which is very easy to do in New York. Margate is the only place to me where everything is utterly familiar."

But living in Harlem - where Roumain moved in 1997 with money awarded from the American Composers Orchestra's Whitaker Commission for his *Hip Hop Essay for Orchestra* - has become equally important for him. "As an African-American, a Haitian-American composer it was kind of my Zion. I needed to be around the places where Duke Ellington, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston were. I needed to be in a place where there were great writers and the ghosts of great writers. My landlady knew Ralph Ellison!

"I think that as much as Margate was important in my musical development, Harlem is the place that is pushing me forward," adds Roumain. Harlem is also where he began identifying more as a Haitian American composer than an African American composer.

"Much as there is gentrification," he says, nibbling a chocolate croissant at Settepani, the upscale Harlem bakery where we meet for the interview, "I'm proud to say that Harlem is still a ghetto and I mean that in the best sense. It has retained those human aspects of struggle and survival and family and a sense of the world, a presence, a pride, which are the things you find a ghetto. It doesn't matter how high the condos get, I don't think that Harlem will ever lose its soul. My music is proudly affected by the streets and rhythms of my Harlem neighborhood."

Roumain's music has also been influenced by his various mentors, such as Philip Glass, now also a friend. Sometimes he tells Glass, "I don't want to get too close! I love being a friend, but I love being a fan!" Glass's monumental opera *Satyagraha*, recently staged at the Metropolitan Opera, has influenced Roumain's current work, *Darwin's Meditation for the People of Lincoln*. He describes it as an "imagined conversation" between Lincoln and Darwin, a "quartet concerto" scored for orchestra and four soloists.

"I have a very loose definition of the word mentor," continues Roumain, who has also been inspired by dance legend Bill T. Jones, frequent collaborator DJ Spooky, the conductor James DePriest and "virtually every dancer I've ever worked with." Then, he continues, "there are those kind of cosmic mentors, like Nina Simone and Bob Marley."

Dance has been an integral part of Roumain's compositional development. He initially made a living in New York performing as an accompanist in modern dance classes. "For me, the history of American modern music is tied to modern dance," he says. Roumain, who frequently composes for and collaborates with dance groups, found the experience invaluable, but he told himself, "I am only going to do this for three years. If I'm not a composer in three years I'm out of New York." It took him three years. With the help of Bill T. Jones, Philip Glass and a small management company, Roumain eventually got enough performances to work as a composer. "One by one I was getting fired from my accompanying jobs. Juilliard fired me, as I missed too many classes," he chuckles.

He had plenty of tough times along the road to success, however. At one point, "a very sad time," Roumain felt "very discouraged. I felt like a failure, I felt as though I wasn't good enough." But he never gave up. He recently received a message from a young woman who wrote that she didn't want to live unless she could make music for a living. She concluded her email with "Can you help me?"

"You get a question like that in an email and you have a heightened sense of responsibility," says Roumain. "My response to her was actually an essay titled *What one must do*, recently published in a compilation of essays by DJ Spooky."

"It was a late night response to this late night question. I'm happy to say that once she received that essay from me, she felt as though she had some sense of direction. I think about her and that feeling. I know that I'm a composer because I was more afraid not to be one."