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American Eclectic
From Philip Glass to Charles Darwin to his Harlem landlady, Daniel Bernard Roumain translates life into music.
by Eric Etheridge, BA'79

Toward the end of high school in Margate, Fla., a small strip of suburbia just north of Fort Lauderdale, Daniel Bernard Roumain managed to land two internships that prefigured his future musical career crossbreeding hip-hop and classical music. For a couple of summers in the late 1980s, he worked in the ticket office of the Florida Philharmonic, where during lunch breaks he could slip in to hear the orchestra rehearse. During the following school years, he worked for Luther Campbell, a promoter who managed and performed with the rap group 2 Live Crew, famously prosecuted in 1989 for releasing *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*, an album the state of Florida said was criminally obscene.

The Juilliard School and the Manhattan School of Music each offered admission to Roumain after he finished high school, but insufficient financial aid put both schools out of reach.

His father suggested Daniel consider Vanderbilt's Blair School of Music. Still mourning his lost chance in New York, Roumain said no, despite the scholarship money available. His father then insisted and, one visit later, Roumain decided to give Vanderbilt a try. Early trepidations soon gave way as he found himself, happily, among a group of musicians in Nashville all eagerly mixing genres, trying to bridge, as Roumain puts it, "what we saw weren't gaps at all."

After Vanderbilt came five years of graduate school at the University of Michigan, where he studied with Pulitzer Prize-winning composer William Bolcom and others. Then, in 1998, he moved to New York, specifically Harlem, where he had always dreamed of living.

His first professional decade seemingly has been one of nonstop ascent. He collaborates frequently with such partners as composer Philip Glass, choreographer Bill T. Jones, and hip-hop artist DJ Spooky, among others. He has enjoyed commissions from such diverse sources as the Orchestra of St. Luke's (*Fast Black Dance Machine*, which calls for the orchestra to add a drum kit), the *Lark Quintet* ("Rosa Parks," one of five string quartets collectively known as *A Civil Rights Reader*), and the University of Alabama (*The Tuscaloosa Meditations*, whose subject is Vivian Malone Jones, the student Gov. George Wallace tried to block from the university's doors in 1963). He's taught at the Harlem School of the Arts and teaches frequent workshops on the road, as he will this fall at his old elementary school in Margate. And he has his own eight-piece band, DBR & The Mission.

Roumain, says one critic, is a "force of nature."

This October, for the second year in a row, he debuted a new piece at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival. Last year Roumain created *One Loss Plus*, a multimedia work for violin, piano, electronics and video, including thoughts on loss solicited from the public and submitted via YouTube and MySpace.

"Mr. Roumain's eclecticism was wide-ranging as ever," said *The New York Times'* critic of *One Loss Plus*. "Early in the score a Minimalist section, built on a repeating pizzicato violin and piano figure, gave way to more raucous bowed fiddling with a flourish borrowed from Jimi Hendrix's 'Voodoo Child (Slight Return).'"

This year's composition is *Darwin's Meditation for the People of Lincoln*, which Roumain is creating with playwright Daniel Beaty and which he describes as a "quartet concerto based on the real and imagined relationship among Darwin, Lincoln, and the people of the United States born after the end of the Civil War." (Scientist Charles Darwin and President Abraham Lincoln were born within hours of one another Feb. 12, 1809.)

In August we sat down for an hour's conversation at a recording studio in Manhattan just north of SoHo.

What are you working on today?

I am finishing a CD of the sound tracks that I have written for the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company during the last 10 years or so. I hope to release it this year and start touring it with my group, DBR & The Mission, in 2009.

And I'm finishing up *Hip-Hop Studies & Etudes*, which is also recorded and performed by DBR & The Mission.

Don't you have a new piece debuting at the Brooklyn Academy of Music this fall—Darwin's Meditation for the People of Lincoln?

I'm working on that, too. [Laughs.] In the studio next door, one guy is mastering the Bill T. Jones CD and another is working on the hip-hop CD. At the same time, on my laptop, I'm composing the Darwin piece.

Darwin's Meditation for the People of Lincoln is a large work—a quartet concerto for four soloists and a chamber orchestra. Phrases from the libretto will be projected in English and Creole on a screen above and behind the orchestra, but there will be no coordination between what is seen and heard. That's a Glassian technique. I got the idea from Glass's opera *Satyagraha.* Also, in the middle of the work, the musicians stop playing for a seven-minute monodrama, an imagined conversation between Darwin and Lincoln, performed by Daniel Beaty.

As a child of the South, did you grow up with a strong sense of Lincoln?

The earliest memory I have of Lincoln is my Haitian father taking the family to Washington, D.C. Literally, he was awestruck by the Lincoln Memorial, as was I. I was about 6. This was the classic all-American family trip to D.C., but with my Haitian father, who had a very different understanding of Lincoln. And Darwin is, in fact, about understanding the ideas of Lincoln and Darwin through an island nation called Haiti.

Was Lincoln a hero for you?

Like many people, I think, I have struggled with Lincoln. What is his legacy? What were his intentions? My struggles with Lincoln started at Vanderbilt when I set the Gettysburg Address to music, for piano and baritone. When you're a young composer asked to tackle a legendary historical text, I think you tend to gravitate toward the sensational—I'd even say the controversial. The piece that I wrote, Abraham's Address, ended up being pretty innocuous, a pretty clear setting of the Gettysburg Address—actually, just fragments of it. I didn't really take a stance, and I'm glad I didn't. That was the right choice, the mature choice to make.

I remember thinking at the time that I might include text from Lincoln's contemporaries who in their letters to him were very clear in their sense of the South's right to secede from the Union. Lincoln would write them back, and he was always a diplomat. But it became confusing for me because I didn't realize his diplomacy was in no way a surrendering of his morality. It was his diplomacy. So that was the confusion. It would have been controversial and sensational to include excerpts from those letters, but for all the wrong reasons.

[*Darwin's Meditation* conveys] what I think about Lincoln now. Haiti had its first black president in 1804. It's a little more interesting to me to look at American notions of democracy and liberation and freedom and equality through the eyes of other countries. We have been dealing with the "threat" of a black presidency while other countries have had black presidents for years. The notion of a woman being president in this country is radical, yet women are leading nations right now in Germany and elsewhere. So to me there's something a little more informed about thinking of Lincoln and Darwin, not from North America or London, but from this island nation called Haiti.

So you're drawing from different cultures for perspective as well as music.

It's almost become a cliché to look at different styles and perspectives in musical vernaculars and integrate them into a musical language. But hey, I'm guilty of that, absolutely. I think I'm also a little more specific. I deal from African-American music and Haitian music almost exclusively. But there's a moment in *Darwin* where I suggest the sounds of Gregorian chant because my father talks about being a young boy in Haiti and only knowing the Catholic mass in Latin. If you were a young boy in Haiti in the 1950s, you learned the mass in Latin.

What drives me creatively is always about conversation. When you meet somebody for the first time, what will you say to them? I think the question for all of us is, Can we have great, substantive, amazing conversations with anybody? That's not an easy thing to do. So as a way of preparing myself for the conversations that are coming, I'm a voracious reader. I love to see movies. I try to have an understanding of the struggles that other people have had and figure out how I can create a musical portrait of their struggles.

You've lived in Harlem for 10 years now. Has it turned out to be the place you thought it might be for you?

Everything and more. My landlady, Mrs. Logan, whose voice appears in *Harlem Essay for Orchestra and Digital Audio Tape*, knew Ralph Ellison. She saw Josephine Baker at the Apollo. She talks about this on the tape that plays during *Essay*.

Harlem's history, its current gentrification and its future have all found a place in my music. I'm very much aware that when you live somewhere else, you're not only living with the people who are there. You're living with the people who were there and eventually died, all the things that they did, loved and felt. You kind of inhabit all the things they left behind.

For me that's incredibly important. I don't think it would be possible for me to have any sense of identity without being able to identify in a profound, meaningful, connected way not only with other people, but with their perspectives on life and loss.

And I cannot imagine being 37 years old and not having that sense of, What does it mean to suffer? Harlem, for me, is the people who are there. They suffer every day to eat, to get food for their children. Forget about real estate—they're just trying to pay the rent and make sure their kid doesn't get shot today. That's the reality for most of the people still on my block. At the same time there are very young black families there who have what they call "disposable income." There's the contrast.

I hate to say this, but I'm beginning to think about not being in Harlem. As a composer I travel a lot. I have fortunately been all over the world. The 10 years I've spent in Harlem have been very good for my craft. Now I need to spend 10 years somewhere else because I think it would also be good for my craft.

In the U.S. or elsewhere?

I've never wanted to live abroad, only because I've spent so much time traveling. I was just in Australia and Berlin. To me Europe, Asia and Australia are not foreign at all. They're places I go to regularly. It's a great honor and privilege. It's funny, but I want to live in Margate.

You want to go home?

I do. Margate, in South Florida, is going through some very tough times. Margate is doing its best not only to survive but to renovate itself. And my parents are getting older. I feel a sort of paternal calling kicking in, toward their care. I want to buy a home in South Florida, not too far from my parents, and make my peace with those ghosts, the ghosts of Margate.

Now—you see—that's how the title of a piece happens. *The Ghosts of Margate*—that sounds like a good one.

Wasn't it your dad who picked Vanderbilt for you?

Yes. I didn't want to go.

You didn't want to go to college, or you didn't want to go to Vanderbilt?

Both. [Laughs.] I have to be honest about that. I wanted to go to Juilliard. I got in, but my family couldn't afford it. I also got in the Manhattan School of Music, but we couldn't afford that, either. So at that point I thought, "Well, if I can't go to New York and study music, I'll just make a career on my own." I was working for 2 Live Crew, and I was 18 and I was just going to stay in hip-hop music and make great money.

My father persuaded me to go see [Associate Professor of Composition] Michael Rose [at the Blair School of Music]—it was through some sort of program that the Black Cultural Center had. I think it was called Black Student Weekend. They paid for minority students to come visit the school for the weekend, so I did.

Everything just happened very quickly. Professor Rose and my father came up with some sort of scheme where I would go for a semester and if I didn't like it, I could quit. Of course, I fell in love.

With Blair, with the campus, with Nashville?

I fell in love specifically with Michael Rose. I fell in love with [Joseph Joachim Professor of Violin] Chris Teal, [Associate Professor of Viola] John Kochanowski, and Dean [John "Del"] Sawyer. I fell in love with Chancellor Joe B. Wyatt, who was very supportive of my work as a composer and became a patron, literally, of a piece I wrote there, *Haitian Essay Orchestra*, using Haitian folk themes.

I fell in love with the Blair School, with the building, the atrium, Nashville. It was September. The leaves were changing. I'm from South Florida. We don't get seasons, so I wasn't accustomed to any kind of fall.

I was scared to go to Nashville. To me, Nashville represented rednecks and cowboys. I had no sense of the South versus the Deep South.

So Nashville was different than what you were expecting?

Totally different. I fell in love with [late music director and conductor of the Nashville Symphony] Kenneth Schermerhorn. He let me come to rehearsals at the War Memorial Auditorium. I rode my bike there. He'd see me there, and on a couple of occasions he let me follow along with the pocket score—really deep, heavy stuff for me at the time.

Did you go to Vanderbilt knowing you could get deep into that kind of music, hanging out with the Nashville Symphony and whatever else you could find in the city?

It became obvious the first week that Nashville wasn't just about country music; it was about great musicianship and great musicians—like Mark O'Connor, Edgar Meyer, Béla Fleck, the Blair String Quartet, all the musicians on faculty at the Blair School. It was instantly clear that these were great musicians who could play just about any kind of music.

And they were very welcoming of what I call my youthful transgressions and experiments in trying to combine hip-hop music with classical music. For them it was more about experimenting with folk music. Mark O'Connor was trying to combine bluegrass with classical in a sophisticated, intelligent way. Edgar Meyer and Béla Fleck were doing that also with bluegrass music. A lot of musicians there were trying to bridge what we saw weren't gaps at all.

When my mother gets very mad, a sentence might begin in English, go into French, and end in really bad Creole. A lot of people have stories like that, and that's the thing: As a musician it was very easy for me to take Bach and give it a beat or give it an inflection.

That's what is so great about Nashville. It's so open-minded on so many different levels—culturally, racially and, of course, musically.

But being black at Vanderbilt and in Nashville must have also offered some challenges.

Of course. But I take responsibility for that. If I had wanted a deep, meaningful African-American college experience, I could have gone to Howard University. I chose to go to Vanderbilt, specifically to study with Michael Rose and others, and a happy accident happened—Nashville.

That is not to say there weren't moments of prejudice, moments of pain or feelings of segregation. Absolutely there were, but whether it's Miami or Nashville, that, to me, is part of the American experience, quite frankly. It has happened to me here in New York.

There were certainly bad days, but I'll say this: If it were not for Vanderbilt, I never would have ended up at the University of Michigan, and if not for the University of Michigan, I certainly never would have ended up in Harlem. I credit Vanderbilt University and Chancellor Wyatt with providing the tools and the equipment and the preparation for great success and great pain.

Coming from Miami, it would have been something less to have gone to Howard or even New York. It was important. Now I realize this. It was important for me to have that Southern experience.

You've studied and collaborated with an impressive range of talented musicians and performers. I'd like to go through a list and have you tell me, in a phrase or a sentence, what you think you've learned from them.

Philip Glass.

Never surrender. If you create original music, you must take responsibility for that music and for creating an audience to support it.

Bill Jones.

Never surrender. Life is wonderful and precious and brutal. Now, create a piece based on those ideas.

DJ Spooky.

Never surrender. Give me one record, and I'll give you a universe. Every sound is connected to every idea. Let me show you how.

William Bolcom.

Never surrender. Never surrender. Concern yourself with being a composer first, not a careerist.

Luther Campbell.

[Laughs.] Wow. If you have something to say, don't just say it—shout it over and over and over again. And never surrender.

One of the movements in your string quartet Rosa Parks is called "Klap Your Handz." You've talked in other interviews about the clapping in Rosa Parks and other of your works as being a communal sound for you.

I grew up Catholic, so I'm well aware of those ever-elusive communal experiences. As much as I love the Internet and my laptop, I'm well aware of those truly communal experiences when you can make community with one, when you can communicate with someone.

Is it trite to clap one's hands? Is it trite to do that in a string quartet? Well, even in that string quartet, it all had to be planned out. It's a little more sophisticated. With the clapping I am talking about the Baptist church and how that referenced Rosa Parks and her father and what she was thinking about in that moment when she was asked to leave that bus seat.

Now, it's one thing to hear Rosa Parks on a recording. But in an auditorium with 2,000 school kids, when unexpectedly the violinists start clapping—that's how the string quartet starts—and suddenly, all these children are clapping their hands in perfect time along with the music. And not so loudly that they can't still hear the music. It ebbs and flows and has a dynamic and a meaning, and they know that it's going somewhere.

There's a true collaboration going on and at the end of it, it's reflected in the ovation. The best knowledge, to me, can be implied and the best experiences, to me, can also be implied. I'm very much interested in translating those things that remind me of what it is to be alive, what it is to be connected with something much larger than anything I might do.

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