

## Interview mit Jeff Mills

?: Tonight you will play what is called „Soulful disco“ on the invitation flyer. If a techno DJ such as you all of a sudden decides to „go disco“, it makes you wonder if the techno period is over. It seems like a return to the basics of dance music...

Mills: Actually I am kind of embarrassed, that we had to call it soulful disco. It is just for the convenience of the people. I mean, anything can be soulful depending on who you are. Before there were loops, before we decided to create this kind of repetition, music was in a very song-based form, where you had the intro, and then the verse and the chorus, and then the breakdown, and then another verse, and then out. But techno, house music, most of the dance music that doesn't have these structures, we are listening to today, comes from disco. We were trying to make disco, in a way. They had killed disco in America, and up pops house music. We were trying to make things like MFSB and the Sound of Philly, and this New York-type, high energy dance music, and that's actually where house comes from, and techno comes from house. You may hear a lot of things tonight, that you are very familiar with from the kind of music that you would normally hear today, because it is all in relation.

?: But you used completely different equipment. Disco was the music with lavish string and horn arrangements, played by excellent musicians, who often worked together every day and therefore developed a very tight and sophisticated sound. Then there are all these great vocalists. You replaced all that with cheap off-the-shelf technology. Was that a political statement? Or an attempt to use contemporary technology?

Jeff Mills: Well, that came out of necessity, though. I think, we in Detroit would all have loved to have big studios and sound booths and expensive synthesizers and a lot of musicians. It just was that all this equipment wasn't available to us, so we had to use what we could afford. I remember, I wanted a Lynn synthesizers real badly at that time, but I just couldn't go out and buy one.

?: So would it be right to say, that the house and techno producers radicalized certain aspects of disco: the monotonous beats, the focus on repetition, the disco breaks...

Mills: Right, they only took the best parts, exactly... (laughs) And they repeated them over and over again, because they were the best parts. Before there were loops, the DJ would have to physically do it themselves. He would get two copies of the same record, and would repeat the part again and again. And then they came with samplers, that would actually produce the same effect, but perfectly, and that's where loops came from.

?: You were a DJ before you became a producer. What was your influence when you decided to work with loops?

Mills: My start with loops and cycles came from a more psychological aspect. I had made a few tracks in the early Nineties, that were very stiff and very minimal in form, because I needed those as a DJ. I was in a group called Underground Resistance, and my part in the performance was the actual DJ. Mike Banks was the keyboard player, and Robert Hood was the vocal. We needed to have something that I could DJ over and over again, that would be the bottom track for Robert to speak over and for Mike to play over. So I remember editing a track called „Beauty of decay“, physically editing it with tape, editing all the parts out that were changes, and just keeping the same repetition over and over and over again. That was mainly for me to use in the performance, and we released it on „Waveform“, which is the second release on Tresor. And it worked, and Djs actually

started to play it.

?: So in a way, that was a misunderstanding of the track, or maybe rather an appropriation...

Mills: Right, right. So the second time, I dealt with it, I was really into „Fuck fine arts“. I was really into minimalism in paintings and architectural structures. I don't remember exactly how I made this relation to music, but I thought that it would be interesting to put a collection of minimal tracks together, and I made a sample of it in the early Nineties, and started to DJ it, and I had begun to mix it with minimal Chicago house music, like Amando and things like that. And I almost immediately noticed that conditioning - that people were caught in as a result of listening to the same thing over and over again. It made them feel comfortable, because they knew what beat would come two, three or four measures from that point. They would actually get into that small loop much, much deeper. I was conversing with Robert Hood at that time, and we came up with the idea to create an album called „Minimal Nation“, which Rob ended up doing. That was the first, solid project that was really completely focused on minimalism. And then, you know, how to really make my sampler bold and create loops in a really different way. I was working with a label called PurposeMaker, which was mainly around loops and flipping and inverting loops, so it sounds completely different from the original sound.

?: „Minimalism“ is a very loaded term, it is attached to certain art forms. Did you have any artistic or theoretical influences?

Mills: No. I was doing research, and I had found some things on Pavlov's dog, which in the US was a very normal thing that we learned in college about. And I remember using that as a kind of format, you know, where you feed someone for the first time, and then you feed him a second time, and then you don't feed them a third time, but they are expecting the same thing to come again. I remember, we used that as a guide, actually.

?: But didn't you feel like you were manipulating people?

Mills: Yes, and I loved it. Because in most people have no idea what is going to come next. And in most cases I don't even know what is going to come next. So as a result of working with these loops, it became easier to manage three and four turntables, because there were very few changes within the music, and mix it with drum machines. And then somehow a whole genre of electronic music came out of this stage.

?: Were you familiar with the music of composers such as Steve Reich, Terry Riley or Philip Glass?

Mills: No. I was just really into minimal art and architecture as a guide. I was buying books and looking at the figures and the slight movements. But I didn't really come into contact with Steve Reich and John Cage and all these things until much later.

?: Who familiar were you with the European „Industrial music“ and „Electronic Body Music“? This is a rather shrill and harsh sound, that seems to be a critique of industrial society with its repetitive work structures that are dictated by machines, by the assembly line. In an interview with the Industrial band Cabaret Voltaire, they say that they want to „expose the ideology of technology“. How do you think about that in relation to techno.

Mills: Techno embraced technology. And what it has become, if you listen to the music today, is that it has become the foundation for most of contemporary music. It is a very widely used application.

?: When you were in Underground Resistance using live loops from records. How was that different from being a DJ?

The difference was that Mike Banks was a musician, and he would actually play a lot of samples. So that made a lot of the music, that we were playing, different. There would be a keyboard, not a programmed loop, that would repeat and repeat again and again. He would give the samples a little more feel, multi-tempo-kind of effects, and he would actually create that 1989-sound on the keyboard.

Now we have reached a point, where most of the music is the work of a really good programmer. It's quite interesting to take loops and samples from other people's records and program them in a way, that is completely different. I am kind of mixed about it. It is a completely different world, and I tried to stay away from that, to really depend on different chords and different notes and different melodies, that I can think of myself, not so much on something that has already been done.

?: And how did you work with loops as a DJ?

Mills: As a DJ back in the eighties, it was actually a treasure to have a record that had bonus beats, because they were the extra dub beats that someone may have thought you can use when you are mixing. So the DJs used to treasure these things, and then through new technologies the ability came to us to create these things solely alone, and it was just irresistible. We had had the longing for something like that for a long time.

?: This music developed primarily in clubs. Most people wouldn't have and most likely still would want to hear that kind of sound in the afternoon at home?

Mills: Yeah, they would have said: „When is the song going to come?“, you know. But in the late Eighties, DJs became a little more skillful, to actually play these loops in a way that was digestible by the audience. And, again, that conditioning made people want to hear them more and more and more.

?: What does it say about the ninties that such repetetive music was so dominant in that period?

Mills: I think it was a sign of the time. During the Nineties people did not really mind if they didn't hear the personality or the hand print of the artist. It was a very tolerant, a very patient decade. But now, I think, we get very strong indication that people want more. So we need to somehow restructure the loops, that we are making, so that we can put more feeling into them, or forget about them altogether, and create completely different.

I've been trying to find a way to create something more abstract for a good three or four years now. But I haven't really managed to convince myself that I have discovered it yet, to find a way to sequence music in a way so it sounds like something that only I can do, so when people listen to it, they go: 'Wow, that sounds like him!' I haven't discovered it yet, but I am searching.

?: What exactly are you looking at?

Mills: My wife and I go to the spa a lot, because I have a really bad back from DJing for so many years. And at the spa, they have this terrible, Muzak-like music, you know, so I thought it might be interesting to make my own. So here's the album, I give it to you. Listen to this like you would take aspirin: every day, for a certain amount of days. It is sound therapy. It should make you feel different, that's all I can tell you. (laughs) That particular album works like lotion. If you apply it regularly, your skin becomes soft, like a baby's behind or something. (laughs) I am not quite sure, if

it works, so give a listen to it, and tell me what you think, so I know if I am onto something.

?: From what you are saying it sounds a little bit like ambient music...

Mills: It is not ambient music. It is music for people, who probably live in a metropolis like Berlin or London. I am using the ordinary sounds that he or she hears on a regular basis, but in a way that is therapeutic. So these are sounds, that sound kind of plug in, but in a very monotonous way, so that you can actually let go. It is not waves or birds, because you and me, we don't really hear waves or birds that much. I actually noticed that we don't see flys as much as we used to. It is using the surrounding, rehashing it, and putting it in a relaxing way. It is a wellness-type of music. The world is quite difficult, and especially we, who live in these big cities, are stressed out more than most. I think, we need a little bit a more, a stronger soundtrack to chill-out. I am working with some installation and video artists, who put this soundtrack up with some video installations, so you can see instead of just hearing.