Deantoni Parks on learning to be expansive

November 15, 2016 - Deantoni Parks is the founder of the band KUDU and works with Nicci Kasper as the writing duo We Are Dark Angels (he and Kasper are also in the band Bosnian Rainbows). He played briefly in Mars Volta and has collaborated extensively with John Cale and Flying Lotus, among others. Since 1998, he's taught at a variety of schools, including Stanford Jazz Workshop, The Drummer's Collective NYC, and Berklee College of Music. His most recent solo offering is *Technoself*. He and Kasper soundtracked the Nicolas Cage/Willem Dafoe film, *Dog Eat Dog* as We Are Dark Angels.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2447 words.

Tags: Music, Culture, Beginnings, Process, Inspiration.

How do you go about teaching music?

This is a big thing right now in Western educational reformation. We're trying to find answers to old questions. Is going to college worth the money? Is it worth the the debt involved? When I teach, there are a lot of things I'm playing off of and noticing. For instance, the connection between education and the financial world. The person that runs Berklee College of Music now, the President, comes from a financial background. You see a literal shift—in basically looking at students as customers. There are a lot of issues out there. I feel like I've seen almost every side of it. I've been involved in different schools that are prestigious like Stanford University, some of the oldest ones, like Berklee. I have a lot of thoughts on it.

I want to start my own school. Even when I worked at Berklee I was writing my own curriculum, and I want to take that further. The world's changing so fast for these students. I mean, goodness, in the year since I've been there it's changed so much. But they're teaching things in a similar way. To me, it seems like there should be more discussion, more talking. Obviously, we have to play, you have to perform, but there's much more involved.

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It comes down to information. We're post-Julian Assange now, you know? I want departments to come together. I have curriculum that brings Engineering Departments together with the Music Department. Why are they separate? I have a whole "music is a sport" concept that draws from industry; it involves how I see musicians versus athletes, especially on high school and collegiate levels. The difference in how musicians are treated and how athletes are treated, when they are doing very close to the same thing.

This is the kind of information I want to bring about. Like, this vocal, the amount of wind pressure involved in it, or what their heart is doing during this operatic solo. To break it down to an Olympian numeric position is my goal. Because, at the end of the day, it's self help, as well. When you know your numbers, it gives you footing. It's not just, "Oh, I'm not as good of a singer as Maria Callas," or "I'll never be the drummer that John Bonham was." It removes it from the comparisons to really getting on your own path, and appreciating it. So when you bring it up to students who may have never thought of it like that, it's an eye opening experience. Even just the concept.

Is your goal to open your own school then? Or to have your curriculum exist within a pre-existing school?

I have done basically "rogue" workshops in schools and in people's clubs, that I knew, in the daytime. I'm very interested in getting together with people. Just from using social media, I've been able to do that, almost secretly. But the people that I've interacted with understand. It's something that is going to grow.

I did it, for instance, in Atlanta, over a period of a month. A few people showed up, and it wasn't heavily marketed; it was really like going fishing, seeing what you can bring in and bringing them information, and it became a great time. One time we couldn't get into the venue so we ended up standing around my truck listening to music and talking. I was playing them some things before [my album] *Technoself* came out. I was playing them pieces from that. Literally, let's hang out and talk, and let me just see where your head is on this stuff. I'm sure you're a decent player. That's mostly up to the individual how far you want to take that.

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I'm more interested in how they're thinking about it because that has a greater impact on your practice, theories, and patterns of execution. I'm really interested in bringing that about, and I'm prepared to do it completely independently or in conjunction with some of my hand-picked schools. Right now I'm talking to USC, I'm talking with Stanford University—I used to do jazz workshops there when I was at school at Berkelee—and of course Berkelee. I'm starting there to see if they are willing to bite, because obviously that would give me a head start to use those networks.

You started playing drums when you were two. When you're two-years-old you're just kind of banging on the drums and figuring things out as you go along. So what was your first actual formal training?

My first formal training was from Dr. Doug Moore. He taught at the college nearby in Georgia, where I grew up, and he also taught at the high school that I would go to in the future. My folks contacted him and he was like, "listen, that sounds cool, I'm sure he's great, but I don't teach kids," basically. But my mother is a banker, so she talked him into something; she's good at that. She got him to meet me, and basically when he met me and heard me play, he was like, "alright, cool, we start Monday." It was one of the best time periods of my life. I mean this is pre-kindergarten, ok? I'm four years old at this point. I would sit there with him, and it was the classic learning model. When you have that person who's giving a lecture, and someone's receiving the information in real time, in the same room—it's so powerful. We're still reeling from it today. That's the very real point of what college can offer. And that hit me at that point.

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He basically taught me how to read, and the rudiments; I was lucky because he wasn't just a percussionist, he was a multi-instrumentalist. So this is a person who played woodwinds, read bass clef, treble clef, he literally knew it all. He gave me the theory of music. I got really lucky with that. From that point it wasn't just drumming, it was all of it. He gave me a good foundation in all of those different places. In particular music theory, which would later lead to all the compositional confidence and freedom that I kept secret for so long.

I was watching the videos around *Technoself*, and I was thinking about that record and how complicated it looks to play the music. As someone who has become virtuostic at an instrument, are you trying to write music that challenges yourself?

Absolutely. At this point I'm looking for a lot of solutions in one big gulp. Compacted solutions is what I'm into. This does a lot things that I needed to happen. I needed a new way of composing. Sure, writing out the notes is great, but that feels more like I'm writing a book—it's such a narrative thing, and it takes away from the moment of now, because you can't write that book in the time of now. That takes time. So I needed something where I could take the least amount of time to get to that inspirational place, and to also have it locked in carbonite when I'm done and then I can move on, forget about it, but also go back and listen to it as a layer of wood but that didn't take a year. This project nails so many different things for me.

I want a project that sounded like it was done in post, there were overdubs involved, producers involved. So having the samples and the drums at the same time was a big part of that. It tricks your brain into thinking like, "Let me have fun, and guess what's going on." Because it's very hard to tell. Obviously, I'm not doing things to metronomes and things like that; I'm basically mocking sequencers, which we've all been around for so long. Repetitive natures in our cultures. I mean, John Cage, Andy Warhol, most famously. But then all the repeating, sequencing software that's been around for awhile. So I find imitating that has given me a super cool disposition, and a meaning as a modern day musician.

Five influences:

Hamilton Bohannon
Tony Williams
Kraftwerk
John Cale
Prince

When you play these songs live are people dancing, or are they just watching, trying to figure out you're doing it? Or how do people respond to these compositions?

I've seen all kinds of responses. The one I see mostly, is that most people don't know the composition, and they're there for the ride. That's what I appreciate the most. I'm really looking for this to be a Grateful Dead kind of feeling for me. I want people to have to record every show, or come to every show—they don't know what they are going to get. They understand method: what I'm doing, and how's it's done. That's what I'm seeing mostly is that people just feel those rhythms. From that point on it's up to you. You can turn the movie into whatever you like.

I can take it wherever I want. I can go from a post J-Dilla feeling to a Yes drum solo if I want. The freedom of that is what I find to be invigorating.

I can play to the crowd, I can play against them. I don't have to consult with four or five other people in split seconds within the show to change. I can take it wherever I want. I can go from a post J-Dilla feeling to like a Yes drum solo if I want. The freedom of that is what I find to be invigorating, but I don't want to lose my audience. I want them to understand that I'm driving the ship here, and to trust me, basically. When I'm touring, I'm basically building trust with my audience. Sure, I don't have a hit song, I don't have a song that you know, but the hit song should be, essentially, the method, and the person bringing the method. You don't know what John Coltrane is going to play, but you go see him anyway. I mean, you know he's improv-ing, but it's always something amazing and new. The jazz world is something I really wanted to bring out in this as well, to find out how to do all those things.

You played briefly with The Mars Volta. For someone who thinks a lot about music, and composing, and writing music, is it a strange thing to come in and play in a band where the songs are already written?

Oh yeah. I had my own identity before I played with any bands that I later met, including Mars Volta, John Cale, or Sade, or whoever it was. It's never an easy situation, because these people have expectations. And that's what I don't like. I was honored, if anyone wants to work with me it is an honor. But I'm also my own artist, and I've never forgotten that. So even when I was working with other people heavily, was collaborating, I was vigorously trying to find my own vision for my own compositions at the same time. Those people pushed me; working with John Cale all those years, and still working with him, he's the most influential person on my art, period. You can easily see why.

I missed the 60s, but I got John. So I'm getting that Warholian work ethic. Which Omar from Mars Volta also has. But few people have that, like, "Let's get to work, let's make it fun, we are partying and having fun but we're getting work done as well." That's very important to me. Even with my project We Are Dark Angels, we have thousands of pieces. We remixed everyone from Nirvana's Unplugged performance on MTV to Phoebe Snow pieces and Stevie Nicks.

Expand your influences, and don't just have your influences be expansive, but also have your work reflect that kind of expansiveness.

It's our own pantheon of dead artists that we just glorify, and that's a way for us to be completely free with arrangement. Working with these people when they're alive may be difficult, but when they're dead it's a lot easier. That's kind of the concept, like, they're all understated now, they're quiet. Like, "do you mind if I do this," and they're like, "yeah, it's cool I'm dead it's cool I don't care, I don't know where I am." So it's been a cool process with that. It's lead to new ways of arranging, when it came to Bosnia Rainbows, and these other things. I'm practicing with the pantheon of who I perceive as the greats.

Where does your philosophy of music and teaching come from?

I would just say a lot of this has to do with the 80s art scene in New York City. Which rivals the biggest movements that have ever come before it. There's a lot for us there to look at. What Warhol brought to American art, to the American art scene was just an expansive view. I full on agree with that. It's beyond being eclectic, it's not just liking different things, it's bringing it into your work. Warhol covered things from various countries, from England to Africa. His interests were all over the place… world leaders, celebrities from different eras. I mean the timeline of his work and what it covers is incredible. So that's been a major inspiration, and that's really what I'm promoting, I have to say. Expand your influences, and don't just have your influences be expansive, but also have your work reflect that kind of expansiveness. Like, let me know you've been to Cuba, or you're into film. Let me know you've seen the movie *Yo Soy Cuba*. Let me know this in the work. I think that's very important and I think that's very new to the world of art… to be as expansive as Warhol was.

Name
Deantoni Parks

Vocation
Drummer, Composer, Actor, Teacher

Fact

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