

A Personal Remembrance of Milford Graves, 1941-2021

Another terrible loss: the great Milford Graves. A unique and amazing soul. Nobody played like him, nobody thought like him, nobody sounded like him. A true original.

Milford (or “The Professor,” as he was called by many of us who knew him) did everything his own way. His music, his sound, even his physical drum set, were like no one else’s. Refused to play a snare drum, feeling that snares got in the way of the natural sound of the drum. Wouldn’t use bottom heads on his drums either. The shells, and even the heads, were custom hand-painted... no factory finishes for Milford Graves!

Professor Graves was an artist, thinker, philosopher, scholar, sculptor, teacher, writer, healer, scientist, herbalist, and more, as well as a creative musician of the highest order who played and recorded with many of the giants. He was a devoted family man, married to his dear Lois for 61 years. He created his own martial arts discipline, and founded his own school to teach it. He had an amazing garden in which he grew his own herbs, from which he concocted his own medicines and potions. He had a Laboratory devoted to research on a variety of subjects, especially heart rhythms, with which he had a particular fascination. His decades of work and study on heart rhythms, and heart rate variability in particular, informed his playing style and his way of life. His work in this area, done outside of the scientific establishment, paralleled that of my longtime colleague Julian Thayer, but in reverse: Dr. Thayer has worked in this area from within the science world, while maintaining a musical life as a bassist outside it. More on that in a moment.

I first heard Milford Graves when I was in high school, and immediately realized his drumming was something quite apart from anyone else’s. Listening to the rapid-fire crackle and intensity of his music was like being connected to an electric current, a stream of mental energy... a *flow*. I came to realize that this person was as powerfully brilliant as he was under-recognized. There were not many chances to hear him live; he seemed to spend most of his time either teaching up in Vermont or working in his own Jamaica, NY laboratory. In the 2000s people began to take more notice of him, and when I saw the premiere of the film “Full Mantis” (with Professor Graves in attendance, and taking questions), I actually wept to see such an incredibly beautiful film about this master, all in his own words. Finally, someone had made a film about our music that *wasn’t* about drugs, alcoholism, suicide or murder (generally, in creative music, you have to satisfy at least one of those conditions to get a film made about you).

In 2015, after many years of thinking about it, I finally got up the nerve to invite Professor Graves to my own Laboratory (ScienSonic) to record a project. I’d spoken with him a few times, but never followed through before. We came to an understanding about the session, and certain conditions about how it would be done (the drums were to be recorded from *below*, not from above, for example). I recruited two other saxophonists I’d worked with previously, both masters of the creative music world: Marshall Allen and Roscoe Mitchell. Turns out that Roscoe had never played with either Allen or Graves, so it was a first-ever meeting. I am extremely grateful and proud that we were able to make this record (*Flow States*, released last year). Milford pronounced it “historic,” and I believe it may be his last studio album. Despite this, it seems to have been overlooked in the press (other than a four-star DownBeat review), and I’ve seen no mention of it in the many recent articles and tributes to Milford Graves.

A couple of years ago, I introduced the Professor to Dr. Thayer at an event produced by my friend Pheeroan akLaff (himself a great drummer), and they hit it off. Since then, Jules has presented Graves’

work at a scientific conference in Boston, and will shortly publish a paper on it. The four of us had a couple of meetings at the Professor's home to talk about a collaborative project: a presentation of the published paper, combined with a set of creative music by the quartet. These get-togethers were unforgettable occasions with lively discussion, hand-drumming demonstrations which held us spellbound, and amazing food served up by Lois and the Professor. Just being in that house with its hand-decorated exterior, biomorphic sculptures, and walls full of cassette tapes and jars of herbs, is an incredible experience.

Now, sadly, our collaborative performance will not be able to happen the way we had hoped... but an event did take place in November which may serve as a template for the future. Milford had put me in touch with Mark Christman of Ars Nova Workshop in Philadelphia, because he wanted *Flow States* to be included in the major exhibit that they were mounting of his life and work. After some discussions, the "aRT" trio (akLaff, Robinson, Thayer) was brought to Philadelphia to do a videotaped performance, interview and science talk. Milford was not well enough to travel anywhere; however it occurred to me that perhaps he *could* be present, in a way, if we were to have some of the amazing recordings he has made of his own heart rate and breath data, which he translated into musical sound, to play with. Mark spoke to Milford about this, and the next day I received a trove of ten of these recordings from the Professor, with his blessings. It was quite a sensation to play along with these sounds, feeling the presence of Milford Graves in the room. I will always be grateful to him for this incredible experience.

It seems that neither this video, nor *Flow States*, were ever presented or used in conjunction with the exhibit. Now the exhibit has closed, and Milford Graves is gone from us. Nonetheless I feel incredibly fortunate to have had these opportunities to collaborate with the astonishing Mr. Graves -- and I feel sure that, in some way, this collaboration will continue...

Scott Robinson, Feb. 2021



