

# MAGAZINE SECONDS

**SECONDS #49, 1999 • interview by George Petros**



**Photos by Wendy Idele**

*It comes out of Ambient but it's not smooth. Out of Hip Hop but not rough. It's Jazz but it isn't (but it is). It draws on Minimalism but is very complicated. It's Black and it's White too, but not too grey or brown or blue.*

*DJ SPOOKY's music is the current sound of America — "America" being two parallel Americas that coexist and interbreed but remain separate and unequal. Dark and light, like day and night, these worlds oscillate from top to bottom to top again depending on the time of day, the neighborhood, and the prevailing police presence. The parallel Americas are a series of ever-changing interlocking societies, each unique and self-contained, simultaneously occupying the geographical U.S.A. They are all hostile towards one another. They are all dependant upon one another. They are all ruled by the same rulers and turned on by the same pornography. Yet they all march to different music. There are a few places where it all blends together. Paul D. Miller, like those two-headed mythological characters who wear contrasting facial expressions simultaneously, walks the line. Go Spooky!*

## D J SPOOKY #2

**SECONDS:** *What audience relationship are you looking for?*

**SPOOKY:** My whole thing is to be a focal point — or a sight reflector, so to speak. Have you ever put two mirrors facing one another and you get this infinite corridor of regress going in either direction, in reflections of weird crystalline light? I think about that as a metaphor — mirror to mirror: the crowd is a mirror, I'm a mirror, and things just go from there. Sometimes you can have foggy breath, and the image isn't so hot.

**SECONDS:** *What do you think makes for a good crowd?*

**SPOOKY:** Openness. Most people are trained to respond to the unitary narrative of the stage. I try and deal with the entire space as an environment. My vibe is usually "Fuck what you heard, this is what you need to hear."

**SECONDS:** *And the audience isn't always up to the task.*

**SPOOKY:** Yeah; then on the other hand there's that old James Brown-Bobby Byrd line: "I know you got soul or you wouldn't be in here!"

**SECONDS:** *Can you find Soul under any veneer?*

**SPOOKY:** Yeah. I swear to god it's everywhere. Music is one of the few things that most human cultures deal with well. Of that weird, translatable code, DJing is the overcode of the moment. But I'm not New Age-y in any way, shape or form. I hate that whole "music as a unifying factor" vibe. Say for example in Balinese culture they have what they call "Shadow Theater," where they have certain music played for shadows appearing on walls as part of this weird theater rituals, or in ancient Hebrew culture where they had different rituals going on about reading passages of the Bible, I had this conversation with Steve Reich — there's execution music, there's music for torture, there's music for whatever fucking type of psychosis can come out of the human brain. I feel like there's so many lost people out there, and in a way music is a reflection of that, a sense of loss of social reflection. People don't see themselves as a reflection anymore; it's all way too abstract.

**SECONDS:** *So music become a substitute for socialization — is that what you mean?*

**SPOOKY:** Yeah. Most people I know take more meaning from their records than they do from political processes at this point.

**SECONDS:** *Isn't language really musical, and we just don't feel the music because we're so used to speaking it?*

**SPOOKY:** We feel it; if you can understand something then that's music right there, you know? It's been streamlined and made utilitarian.

**SECONDS:** *So the pattern of speech is music, and we're just doing our own version of what the birds and the frogs do.*

**SPOOKY:** Definitely. I think man is the obsessive animal. Marilyn Manson called it the "Mechanical Animal."

**SECONDS:** *Do you like him?*

**SPOOKY:** I like his theater.

I'm not into that whole Satan shit; I think Satan's old news. I don't believe in dichotomies, you can't have good and evil in a world where everything's a distributed network. I used to play Dungeons & Dragons as a kid, and that's all about a series of degrees — either shit is ill or it's not ill when it comes down to it.

**SECONDS:** *Is there something other than good or evil that one can ascribe to forces?*

**SPOOKY:** I think it all depends. At this point, considering how technology has so far outstripped our social machinery, we've turned into a strange cancer on the planet. In terms of our

consumer habits — pollution, lack of respect or even basic concern for our fellow human being — like how in West Africa in all these coup d'états are going on where the rebels won't even kill you, they'll just cut your limbs off and laugh at you and put cigarettes out in your blood as it flows out of your body — I see that as our future if people don't get their self-respect in check. You should look at other people as reflections of what you want to be treated as. There's a huge disjunction going on, and it's global.

**SECONDS:** *That's the real state of things.*

*Civilization is a glitch in the system.*



***“It’s all about your body as a frequency, and your mind as a distributive network unfolding into this space of the electromagnetic zone that we all live in.”***

**SPOOKY:** I think that electronic media offers us a way out. If people can somehow create empathy with their fellow person, that’s part of the ballgame. Musicians are the equivalent of people who write code. I don’t know what it’d take to remix the human psychology.

**SECONDS:** *Your audience says some good things about you and some bad.*

**SPOOKY:** It’s an interesting dichotomy because it usually comes down to me playing the game — what the Hip Hop kids call a “playa hata” — but for some reason I’m able to do it and I don’t necessarily need to exploit or rip people off. If I did that, I’d need a whole crew to maintain order and smash people’s heads. But I think these people look at themselves somehow and see that the reflection isn’t corresponding — self-respect implies respect for others. I can’t stress how important it is to me to just have basic humanism and be respectful to others and somehow just be chill. People are so used to being treated like shit by their fellow human beings for the most part — so when someone comes along who’s actually trying to be chill, that’s an unexpected variable. I find that I enrage people over the most trivial things, which means there’s a much deeper psychological resonance.

**SECONDS:** *Are people jealous?*

**SPOOKY:** The blunt description is jealousy. That’s part of it, but on the other hand, part of it has to do with identification of self and others — “This guy has something” or “I saw him when he was broke and starving.” People love to see others fail. Back when I was broke, I just wanted to write, so I worked for the *Voice* or *Artforum* — but it was always a struggle. I realized that these people just didn’t want me to be writing. If you go to their offices, there’s almost never any people of color, and in terms of being a heterosexual Black male coming along, talking about intellectual shit, they were like, “Forget it, bro —”

**SECONDS:** *Do you get more shit from Black or White folks?*

**SPOOKY:** The Black folks. The college crowd I get along with. The more urban, ultra-Hardcore street kids say, “Yo, this kid has knowledge, he’s cool,” but at the same time, I have this way of speaking college-style, which irritates people — admittedly so because college-style is a drag. It may have

to do with class. The Whites usually have this thing that I’m a charlatan who doesn’t know what I’m talking about.

**SECONDS:** *Don’t they often accuse you of obfuscation or over-philosophizing?*

**SPOOKY:** I don’t play any weird little games. In fact, there’s a strange directness to anything I do. I’m kind of an isolationist. When I get a resentful vibe, there’s a series of interpretations that come into place. I guess that’s a basic human thing, part of the power games that go on in any society. I call them “dominance games.”

**SECONDS:** *Does that hurt you?*

**SPOOKY:** No. For a while it did but at this point once I get the basic code I just access it and deal with it and move on. When I read my press, I learn more about the person who is writing it than anything about me. I know what’s going on with me far more than they do!

**SECONDS:** *How about you as a critic?*

**SPOOKY:** If I don’t like something, I don’t write about it; there’s only twenty-four hours in a day. That type of writing shows the writer’s really impotent, bitter and petty — and it doesn’t do anything. Do you think all those articles have actually damaged me? Do you think I’m not making more money than ever and chilling out and relaxing? The classic of all these articles is this guy Adam Heimlich. He wrote this article about “DJ Stupid” with a picture of me with big lips hanging from a computer like a puppet with some turntables. That was *New York Press*, who are a very Right Wing, ignorant publication. The other article was written by this guy Douglas Wolter who writes for the *Voice* — but that should be expected. It’s a game of textual poaching, people who feel their article will punish or kill some sort of rare animal. A lot of poachers will go off and kill certain creatures mainly because they think they’re gonna get the essence of that creature. Somehow, if their article makes a difference and kills me — which is not gonna happen — or it deletes me from the narrative and then they’ve somehow won.

**SECONDS:** *You know that old saying: “An artist becomes a critic in the same way that a person who can’t become a cop becomes a stool pigeon”?*

**SPOOKY:** To me, music is fun and writing is fun and I do both, and I have a good time

## D J SPOOKY #2

and I've never been in a bitter mindset. I think there's a lot of cool shit that I'd love to see written about, and when I do get a chance — which happens so infrequently, I want to write about it. To me, if you're not into something, just leave it alone and move on. There's so much other stuff that you may or may not be into — fuck it.

**SECONDS:** *In Hip Hop, a lot of writers are worried about getting their asses beat by those who they criticize. Of course Rock is the opposite — very few people are going to beat each other up in that world. Do you ever get in fights?*

**SPOOKY:** I did recently — and again it was this issue of resentful bitterness with a White guy with dreads from a band called We. Normally I'm not a violent person but when you get this continuous fucked-up energy from people — and I don't give it out — it's distasteful and annoying. It gets to the point where I just want these people out of the whole fucking mindframe.

**SECONDS:** *What happened?*

**SPOOKY:** Well, again, they're White and they have this sense of entitlement, like they're the only ones who are allowed to be artsy. If you're Black, you can't be — although they'd never admit that, which is typical for White liberal types. I went to school in New England. In the South, if you're Black they just say, "We hate you, nigger; get the fuck out!" which I find to be a refreshingly honest approach. But a lot of the New England vibe is this low-key subtle stuff, which is just another code which you learn to navigate, move through and move on. With these guys, they know I know what I'm talking about but there was always this weird, resentful bitterness. Yet they still want to be part of the things I'm part of.

**SECONDS:** *Do you like their music?*

**SPOOKY:** My way of dealing with bullshit energy is to delete it from your life altogether.

**SECONDS:** *Would you bury the hatchet if they came forward?*

**SPOOKY:** I don't see that happening. There's certain things you've just gotta leave alone, and just move on. It's a big world out there — I didn't get hurt. It took about ten people to break us apart. I felt murderous — it was an animal vibe where I really wanted to destroy this person.

**SECONDS:** *Did you enjoy that? Is that intoxicating?*

**SPOOKY:** Yeah, it's definitely an interesting adrenaline high. I'm curious — you talk to a lot of people — what do you hear?

**SECONDS:** *People call you "pretentious." Nobody's indifferent to your stuff. I try to explain that I think of what you do as Jazz.*

**SPOOKY:** I totally agree with that. Jazz to me is the African-American engagement of the urban landscape. Robert Johnson going down

to the crossroads to sell his soul — that crossroads was out in the countryside. After the African-Americans migrated north and moved to the cities, the music becomes more chaotic and fractured and schizo and accelerated. To me, I'm part of that continuum but through the new crossroads, which is electronic circuit patterns — the circuitry of the mind in the big city.

**SECONDS:** *Did you like working with Iannis Xenakis?*

**SPOOKY:** Yeah, he was a cool dude, very low-key — inquisitive, like a strange, exotic bird. Charles Bornstein helped put us together. Charles runs the ST-X Ensemble and he recently moved to France because the environment for doing experimental Classical Music in the U.S. has gone to shit. It seems that in the U.S., people who are idealistic or dynamic just get crushed out of the narrative — they either get outta here or become druggies or flip out or whatever.

**SECONDS:** *Did you ever do drugs?*

**SPOOKY:** Oh yeah. I've done tons of acid, but I don't anymore. I might smoke herb every once in a while, but that's about it. I tried dope for a second, but it was like temporary death. I like something that's like —

**SECONDS:** *"Thinking drugs"?*



## ***“Everybody knows my music is too fucked up to actually sell out. It’s impossible.”***

**SPOOKY:** Yeah. I tried DMT, which was the most intense thing I ever did. When I was in Brazil, I tried this weird bark shit. I like dealing with modes of consciousness as a connoisseur of checking out different styles of how we think, but at the moment I can’t fuck around with that stuff because I’m so busy and because it just knocks me out. I’ve become hypersensitized to most substances; even coffee makes me feel really giddy.

**SECONDS:** *You don’t smoke cigarettes.*

**SPOOKY:** No; my dad died of lung cancer and pancreatitis when I was a kid. He taught law at Howard University; my mom ran a store called Toast & Strawberries. They both came out of this weird, bohemian, academic scene. My dad was involved in a lot of the late Sixties political trials, the biggest of which was Angela Davis.

**SECONDS:** *What was his name?*

**SPOOKY:** He was Paul E. Miller, I’m Paul D. Miller. He was a huge Jazz fan, and I inherited his collection of records, the best of which was the triumvirate of Count Basie, Duke Ellington, and Cab Calloway.

**SECONDS:** *Growing up, did you think of music in terms of Black and White?*

**SPOOKY:** No; actually I didn’t, not at all.

**SECONDS:** *Do you like the multi-ethnic aspects of Techno?*

**SPOOKY:** Part of the fascination I have with Electronic Music is the etherealization. It takes human characteristics and externalizes them, for better or for worse — turning the human mind inside out.

**SECONDS:** *Anyway, your music is very tough, very dense.*

**SPOOKY:** I’ve never made the claim that I’m Puff Daddy. Me and the knucklehead crowd just don’t get along; we rub each other the wrong way. I mean, I’m surprised me and Redman actually get along because he considers himself to be the ultra-hardcore rugged motherfucker. He’s one of my favorite MCs but I was worried we wouldn’t get along because I’m kind of chill while he rolls with a whole big crew all the time.

**SECONDS:** *What’s your take on Easy*

*Listening and its psychology?*

**SPOOKY:** Muzak — sound capturing spatial image. General George Owen Squier invented the formula, and he initially wanted to sell it to the federal government and the armed forces as a way of creating music and psychological environments for the troops and the office workers. DJ Culture has inherited that sense of music as acoustic wallpaper.

**SECONDS:** *You come out of Ambient.*

**SPOOKY:** I love Ambient, but a lot of it has this annoying New Age-y fluff quality and that’s a massive turn-off. I always see my music as a cross between J.G. Ballard and Ishmael Reid. There’s also these cyber writers, like Samuel R. Delaney —

**SECONDS:** *Is there any intellectual continuity between you guys?*

**SPOOKY:** Absolutely. The only weird critique I have of him is that he’s writing specifically from homosexual viewpoints, although he’s ultra-heterosexual and loves the ladies. But I do enjoy what he writes because it deals with technology and the human mind and how that filters down into sexuality and other desires.

**SECONDS:** *Is your music sexy?*

**SPOOKY:** I think so, and a lot of ladies I believe think so. That’s what I’m making it for. People have fucked to it. I’ve done it. It’s a pleasant experience, highly recommended.

**SECONDS:** *We were talking about resentment — you ain’t seen nothing yet.*

**SPOOKY:** Everybody knows my music is too fucked up to actually sell out. It’s impossible.

**SECONDS:** *So, what else do you want to say here?*

**SPOOKY:** Well, I’d just like to leave with a caveat, which is I come at this shit from a Dancehall Reggae angle, where it’s all about the mad bass. It’s all about your body as a frequency, and your mind as a distributive network unfolding into this space of the electromagnetic zone that we all live in. ●●●