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## These Beats Work

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*Defying the wisdom that HipHop innovation equals ugliness, Timbaland's euphoric productions prove that experimental music doesn't have to wear a hairshirt*

It's raining furiously the night I visit Manhattan Center Studios for an audience with R&B/HipHop producer Tim Mosley, 26, aka Timbaland. The scene inside hardly resembles your usual HipHop session. There are plenty of young men milling around but there's no blunt smoke, and everyone's dressed in clothes their mothers would approve of. Timbaland's brother greets me warmly and passes me a soda, reaching over the head of someone getting a haircut from a man armed with electric clippers. No one has cursed and I've been in the room almost ten minutes.

We might be in New York, but Timbaland's "Dirty South", as he calls it, is the spiritual galaxy we presently occupy. For the duration of his sessions, Manhattan Center is transformed into an outpost of straight-up Southern black culture manned by folks who grew up doing equal time in church pews and jeeps pumping Tupac. After all, Virginia, Timbaland's home state, is right on top of DC go-go and just a car ride away from both New York's grimy HipHop and Miami's aluminium, hydraulic Bass Music.

At this aesthetic and geographical crossroads, Timbaland has recreated several musics at once with beats as stark as X-rays. Not only has he restored physicality to R&B, he has managed to reunite dance music and HipHop, which have been estranged for years. Timbaland is now his own genre, and his productions have created their own Weltanschauung.

After introducing himself in 1996, producing Aaliyah's sly, elastic *One In A Million* album, he unveiled his *Secret Weapon Number One* the rapper/singer/songwriter Missy 'Misdemeanor' Elliott, who rode Timbaland's weirdo beats to platinum success while wearing a black trash bag and appearing in videos as a Manga superwoman. Timbaland & Magoo's own platinum single "Up Jumps Da Boogie" simultaneously span suburban sentiments like "please, please brother, don't slam the car door", African vocal rounds and bubbling Electro spray without bursting at the seams. What do you call that? Timbaland's success is an object lesson that sometimes black pop geniuses are recognised while they're working. The home court is definitely rooting for him, even if he's mad that his team "doesn't get the props from the awards shows". In less than two years, Timbaland has racked up production credits on such Billboard Top 10 records as Ginuwine's "Pony", Total's "What About Us?", and this year's inescapable summer hit, Aaliyah's "Are You That Somebody?". His productions joyously exploit pop music's room for giddy euphoria with a sonic bravado that repositions black pop as the vanguard and exposes the grimfaced youngsters of Electronica for the one-trick ponies they are.

Timbaland calls his style "that ill, tight sound". His push-me-pull-you drum programs create a parallel, vivid universe of sound around the specifics of the track he's been hired to improve. His work is a living encyclopaedia of black pop, but with all the pages open simultaneously: cartoon sound effects, the sway of classic US 70s funk, the door-slamming kickdrums of Electro, the sharp attack and seismic decay of the Roland TR-808 drum machine, and the mouth-noise from the breakdown in Sly Stone's "Dance To The Music". His sounds, or "tricks" as he calls them, render his tracks identifiable within seconds, a quality that doesn't hurt a bit when you're out to sell records. Not surprising then, that Janet Jackson, Brandy, the multi-platinum Puffy Combs and a host of up and comers have suddenly developed an interest in waterlogged kickdrums, doorknocker snares and Gene Kelly hi-hats.

But tricks are easy to collect. Few have picked up on Timbaland's greatest strengths: space and contrast. For the former, simply listen to Missy's remake of "The Rain", which, compared to the multitracked ululations currently filling R&B's ravioli, comes over like a demo faxed from a Russian satellite. And his masterpiece, Aaliyah's "Are You That Somebody?", is full of holes, literally big half-second pauses between beats and voices that make the music sound like it's being shot out of a cannon over and over. Timbaland's tracks have the unique distinction

of stopping and starting more often than any other pop music. For contrast, he pitches smooth, harmonically tricky background vocals against humungous, low resolution beats. Check Aaliyah's "4 Page Letter", which morphs from ghetto crooning into a vocal solo that sounds like Mártya Sebestyén. Or Playa's "Don't Stop The Music", which sounds like The Dells in a soundclash with an Olivetti typewriter. Playa is the harmony trio featuring Steve 'Static' Garrett, who also wrote "Pony" and "Are You That Somebody?". I decide he's Secret Weapon Number Two, the Smokey Robinson of the team. He also wrote Ginuwine's "Final Warning", an astonishing sandwich of all the above, which Mosley is working on, volume pumped to the max, right now in the mixing room.

The beat is minimal but weirdly huge, popping in and out around grimy digital horn stabs and silky harmony vocals that repeat in irregular, hypnotic intervals. Mosley dances furiously in his seat as he listens, gesturing with every vocal swoop and beat blast. When the song stops playing, he moves slowly, while a room full of people awaits his comments. He's wearing jeans, a red and white sweater, and diamond encrusted pendant, watch and bracelet, all very conspicuous.

Finally, Mosley indicates that our interview can begin by saying, "We call this the Cookie Factory. You can vibe." Then he unexpectedly tells Kym, his mellow and hardly obtrusive publicist, to leave. "Can't vibe with women, ain't that right?" Amazingly, she slips away. As I talk, Mosley stands at his Ensoniq ASR-10 keyboard (a keyboard station with built-in sampling and sequencing capabilities) and begins to work on rhythm tracks, while engineer Jimmy Douglass somewhat telepathically patches channels and reels up sounds for him. I ask Mosley what gear he works on.

"I always used Ensoniq. But this is not an ASR-10," he says, capily. "It says ASR-10 on it. That's what I want the people to think. But it's totally different. It's not an Ensoniq keyboard. I do use one keyboard and that's it. And I got my Legion Of Doom band, Dante, Nissan, Rapture, Craig and the man who makes it all come out and shock the world, Jimmy D, the Senator."

Douglass is definitely Timbaland's Secret Weapon Number Three. Full of energy, with trim shoulder-length dreads, Douglass has recorded 99 per cent of Timbaland's output. He is Conny Plank to Mosley's Kraftwerk, creating widescreen mixes that reach under your chair while projecting all of Mosley's synthetic moons and stars all over the wall in sharp relief. Douglass motions me over to a Macintosh. "Let me show you something," he says, bringing up a Website that lists his various production and engineering jobs: Dr John and The Meters, Roxy Music's Manifesto, The Rolling Stones' Love You Live, Slave, and holy cow! Gang Of Four's Solid Gold, the two bass beatdown that got my teenage butt in gear and on a mission.

After I stop hyperventilating, Douglass explains his connection with Mosley. "We met in 1993 or 94 while I was recording Jodeci at Pyramid Studios in Ithaca. We were like two musicians playing together, right from the start. This is my instrument," he says, motioning to the 48 track Neve mixing desk. Douglass stalls any further investigation into the Cookie Factory's equipment, so I turn back to Mosley and ask him about his musical heroes and inspirations. After some feinting and jabbing with general questions that get me nowhere, I bring up my other sampler hero, DJ Premier, and Mosley opens up, looking me straight in the eye for the first time. "Premier? His beats are the grimiest. He's the king of the street. Boy, that's one of my idols. Him and Dr Dre, Marley Marl, Pete Rock. I listen to everybody, musically, so I can't just pick a favourite." When I mention that he seems to be everybody's favourite, what with everyone copying his stuttering hi-hat patterns, Mosley cuts me off. "People use them clean ass hi-hats. My hi-hats are dirty and grimy. Nothing clean about that," he says, bringing up a hi-hat sample on the ASR-10 to back up his point. So who's taking his dirty-ass hi-hats to the cleaners? Mosley shrugs and claims not to care, forgetting he brought it up first. "How many songs you gonna hear on the radio sound like mine?" Mosley knows too well. With a little prodding, he's off on his longest tirade of the night.

"Somethin' For The People's "Your Love Is Shhhh" was the biggest bite. My engineer brought that to my attention. They bit the damn snare, they sampled it. I ain't mad at stuff like that. I think it's cool. Now it's like everybody who produces a big record is part of my production team: 'It don't sound like Timbaland, we can't put it out.' I said I was gonna change radio and I did that, but my sound ain't gonna last forever. People are gonna get tired of my sound, I know that. But I shut the whole world up with "Are You That Somebody?". I don't compete, but I feel, 'OK, you're trying to do something with my style, then I'm 'a show you how it's done'. And I did it raw on "Somebody" with the baby sound, everything. I'm just a little bit too creative for the average person. I think too deep."

OK, so he's not perfect. I switch tracks. Did he recently do a Janet Jackson remix? "Yeah. "Go Deep"."

I point out that it's hard to find.

"Good. I don't like it. It was a pop song. I mean, I don't mind doing a pop song, but if I'm 'a do a pop song, I'm 'a do a pop song. But if it's going to be pop it's going to be alternative. I wanna work with people like Alanis Morissette, Prodigy, Metallica. That's more my style because I'm so different, over the edge. Tricky, Björk. I'm into all that type of music. In this studio right here all the groups come downstairs [to the Hammerstein Ballroom] so one day I got inspired by Prodigy. Man, they came in here and made me do a hit, just watching their show."

Tim is back at the keyboard, punching and jabbing keys. Enough with the questions! He cues up a CD and says to me, "This is my favourite song, I vibe on this song". Björk's "Joga" begins to play and Mosley bobs his head, punching out a beat under the strings and voice. He knows the song well, switching beats as the song moves from section to section. In fact, he likes it so much he's sampled it twice: once recognisably on Missy's "Hit 'Em With Da Hee" remix, and most recently, cut-up and reversed in the midst of Total's "What The Dealio?".

In American pop, his moves are as radical as Martin Luther nailing his screed to the church door. While HipHop has had its two good wheels in a ditch, endlessly reworking a static, thumping 4/4 march and samples of moody strings and harpsichords (blame Mr RZA), Timbaland has plundered Bjork, Tom Jobim, "Mack The Knife", Yarborough & Peoples' "Don't Stop The Music", Al Green's ultimate click beat, "I'm Glad You're Mine" (several times), Portishead's "Numb", Krystal's early 90s dancehall hit "Twice My Age", TV themes from Knight Rider, Spiderman and I Dream Of Jeannie, a baby's giggle and a horse's whinny. These references suggest a childhood spent space travelling in front of the entertainment centre. Realness? Feh, his beats say.

"I was a DJ since I was like 12 years old," Mosley asserts. "I was a HipHop person. I had a little player with an AM/FM auxiliary tuner funk phono jack, and I used to cut the record on top of the stereo, using the knob, vikky vikky. When that Casio keyboard came out with a little sampler, that's when I started making tracks. I was like ten or 11."

Pinning him down on further details is near impossible but of this much we're sure: in the late 80s, Tim meets Missy through his friend Magoo. Missy meets Devante Swing from bigtime Swingbeat group Jodeci at a concert in 1992. Soon thereafter, Devante forms Da Bassment with Aaliyah, Timbaland, Magoo, Ginuwine and Missy Elliott. Elliott begins getting work as an R&B songwriter while shopping a deal for a vocal trio called Sista. In 1994, Sista releases one single, "Brand New", produced by Timbaland and Devante Swing. They make an album, but it is rejected and the group is dropped. In 1995, Da Bassment releases the brilliant "Love You Down" on The Nutty Professor soundtrack, but Swing is credited as sole performer, arranger and producer of the song. Odd, as it sounds like prime Timbaland: distorted kickdrums and skipping hi-hats pitched under a creamy vocal and strangled computer sounds.

"Devante did that," Mosley explains, "but that style came from me. That's my style. He put that style on Tupac's double CD too." Since then, nothing has been released under Da Bassment's name, though Mosley alludes to other songs in the can somewhere. He seems to have a lot in the can, appropriately enough for a pop workman. It's here that he diverges from the avant artists he may share sonic space with. Like Willie Mitchell, Leon Ware and Prince before him, Timbaland is breaking ground by trying for hits. If albums cohere from collecting the results, fine, and if not, well, whatever. His new album, Tim's Bio, is fairly whatever, settling for thumping, great dance music instead of reaching the soulful heights of Aaliyah or the goofy esprit of Magoo or Missy. It's the decidedly toughguy rhymes that do the album in, brutal boasts that feel out of place in Timbaland's titanium playground. His gruff asides mark a fine change of pace in the right setting (see Nicole's "Make It Hot"), but a whole song, never mind an album, of retrograde rhymes, like "Ritz is the crackers that I eat/Bitch is what man don't need", quickly wears out its welcome. But there's enough in Tim's catalogue to draw on for an alternate, superior Bio: 1997's "Money Talks", a thunderous combination of guitar funk and dancehall voiced by Lil' Kim and Andrea Martin; or the brand new "Why Do Fools Fall In Love?", a remake from the soundtrack of the same name that finds Mosley making a lighter and sweeter cookie than anything he's done before. While he bats away my questions about his affinity with Miami Bass Music, Timbaland gets his bassist Dante to plug in and start playing. Ten minutes later, he's added a lovely, two chord legato figure to a bridge that already sounded perfect and now sounds even better. Dante's out the door before I can ask his name, but Mosley has got the sample up on his keyboard, dropping it until Douglass says he's got it.

"Beats was not even in my thinking," Mosley concludes, sounding like he's working up an acceptance speech. "It's something I do just to do, like making cookies or baking a cake. I'm 'a try this recipe, see how my cake came out. This beatmaking is a God given talent. I thank God for everything. Ain't nothing I planned. Being a

DJ was planned. This wasn't planned."

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