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Milford Graves, Singular Drummer and Polymath, Dies at 79

His free-jazz drumming style was unlike anything heard before, but his explorations and inventions went far beyond music.

By Giovanni Russonello

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By the time Milford Graves took up the jazz drum kit, in his early 20s, he had spent years playing timbales in Afro-Latin groups. But on the kit he was confronted with the new challenge of using foot pedals as well as his hands. Rather than learn the standard jazz technique, he drew from what he already knew.

In the Latin ensembles, "we'd be doing dance movements while we were playing," he remembered in a 2018 profile in The New York Times. "So I said: 'That's all I'll do. I'm going to start dancing down below.' I started dancing on the high-hat."

The resulting style was unlike anything heard before in jazz.

Mr. Graves mixed polyrhythms constantly, sometimes carrying a different cadence in each limb; the rhythms would diverge, then vaporize. He removed the bottom skins from his drums, deepening and dilating their sound. Often he used his elbows to dampen the head of a drum as he struck it, making its pitch malleable and introducing a new range of possibilities.

But he wasn't a drummer exclusively, or even first. Mr. Graves, who died at 79 on Feb. 12 at his home in South Jamaica, Queens, was also a botanist, acupuncturist, martial artist, impresario, college professor, visual artist and student of the human heartbeat. And in almost every arena, he was an inventor.

"In the cosmos, everything — planets — they're all in motion," Mr. Graves said in "Milford Graves Full Mantis," a 2018 documentary film directed by his longtime student Jake Meginsky.

"We've got so much cosmic energy going through us, and the drumming is supposed to be very related to the intake of this cosmic energy," he added. "That's the loop that we have with the cosmos."

His life had taken one last poetic turn. In 2018, seemingly at the start of a late-career renaissance, Mr. Graves learned he had amyloid cardiomyopathy, a rare heart disease known as stiff heart syndrome. He was given six months to live. But since the 1960s he had been studying the human heart, focusing on the power of rhythm and sound to address its pathologies. So he became his own patient, using remedies and insights that he had developed over decades. He lived for over two more years.

His daughter Renita Graves said his death was attributed to congestive heart failure brought on by amyloid cardiomyopathy.

Mr. Graves said of his diagnosis: "It's like some higher power saying, 'OK, buddy, you wanted to study this, here you go.' Now the challenge is inside of me."

Milford Robert Graves was born on Aug. 20, 1941, in Queens and raised there in the South Jamaica Houses, a public-housing development. His mother, Gonive (William) Graves, was a homemaker, and his father, Marvin, drove a limousine. (Early in Milford's career, Marvin Graves would drive his son to performances in the limo.)

By the time Milford could read, he was already drumming. The first band he put together, in junior high school, was a drum-and-dance group, and he was soon at the fore of his own Latin music ensembles, including the McKinley-Graves Band and the Milford Graves Latino Quintet.

By the mid-1960s he had found his way to the avant-garde, at first through collaborations with the saxophonist Giuseppi Logan. He then joined the New York Art Quartet, whose 1964 debut album prominently featured Mr. Graves's elusive drumming; it has since become part of the free-jazz canon.

Mr. Graves, on drums, playing with his frequent collaborator Giuseppi Logan in 1965 at the opening of a Manhattan bookstore. Eddie Hausner/The New York Times

Meanwhile he undertook a serious study of the Indian tabla while continuing to push his style toward the brink. In a 1965 column for DownBeat magazine, the poet and organizer Amiri Baraka enthused that Mr. Graves's drumming "must be heard at once."

"Graves has a rhythmic drive, a constant piling up of motor energies, that makes him a distinct stylist," Mr. Baraka wrote.

Mr. Graves joined the band of the saxophonist Albert Ayler in 1967; its historic performances included an appearance at John Coltrane's funeral. That same year Mr. Graves won the DownBeat critics' award for the brightest young talent.

He began to appear more often as a leader, or in duos, and embraced a full-body approach to performing. He vocalized more from behind the drum set, usually in a babble or a rhythmic cry. As his career went on, his performances came to include philosophical, humorous lectures in roughly equal measure to the music.

Mr. Graves performing in 2013 on opening night of the Vision Festival in Brooklyn, where he was honored. Ruby Washington/The New York Times

With Black Nationalism gaining steam, Mr. Graves helped lead the way for a cadre of musicians seeking self-determination in the industry. He started the Self-Reliance Project record label to release his own albums and became involved in actions on behalf of student protesters and revolutionary groups.

For much of the 1960s he lived with his wife and children in the East New York section of Brooklyn, then returned to his old neighborhood in 1970, moving into the South Jamaica house where his grandparents had lived.

They had once used the house's basement as a neighborhood speakeasy, but when Mr. Graves moved in he converted it into a dojo, where he practiced and taught Yara, a martial art of his own creation. Its name is the Yoruba word for agility, and its practices mixed East Asian traditions with West African dance, as well as insights from Mr. Graves's close study of live praying mantises.

The basement eventually became his laboratory, where he focused on cardiology, acupuncture and herbalism. He also worked in a veterinary lab during the 1970s, where he set up and ran clinical tests to investigate new medicines.

In the house's garden, he mixed plants from all parts of the world. "I have a global garden," he said in the documentary. "My garden's not like people. You've got all these people of different ethnicities, they all hang out in their own communities. This don't work like that. They all hang out together."

In addition to his daughter Renita, Mr. Graves is survived by his wife of more than 60 years, Lois Graves; three other daughters, Kim, Monifa and Lenne' Graves; his son, Kevin; and grandchildren.

At the invitation of Bill Dixon, a trumpeter and organizer, Mr. Graves joined the faculty of the Black Music Division at Bennington College, where he taught for 39 years, traveling to Vermont once a week for classes.

But he also ministered to musicians who traveled from afar to seek him out and to a devoted following of men living in the neighborhood who respected him as a community elder. For decades he hosted martial arts workshops, herbalism clinics and salons that doubled as drum lessons. To all the participants, he was known simply as Professor.

Mr. Graves often demanded that visitors submit to recording their heart beats for research purposes. Initially he worked with analog tape recorders, attaching speakers to people's chests. After receiving a Guggenheim fellowship in 2000, he bought a full suite of computers and loaded them with the LabView application, which he programmed to measure and document the wide range of sonic frequencies created by the human heart.

He programmed computers to measure and document the wide range of sonic frequencies created by human heart. George Etheredge for The New York Times

He then created a kind of electronic music out of the frequencies and sought to use this music to strengthen the natural heartbeat. In recent years he developed a partnership with Carlo Ventura, a cardiologist at the University of Bologna, doing research that demonstrated, they said, that his heart music could be used to stimulate stem cell growth as well.

Late in life, Mr. Graves began creating sculptural works inspired by his research into the heart, and he was quickly embraced by the visual art world. In the months before he died, he was the subject of a far-ranging and well-received retrospective exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in Philadelphia.

In a 2009 interview for All About Jazz, Mr. Graves said he had always sought to treat every second of the waking day as a chance for inquiry.

“Don’t tell me how many years you’ve been doing something,” he said. “I want to know how completely you’re filling that time, how you’re spending each nanosecond.”