

AGEIST

Paul D. Miller, aka DJ Spooky, 53: Endless Curiosity

Always exploring, be it digital media or Antarctica, Paul D. Miller inspires others with his brilliant approach to art and science. From researching the climate crisis with National Geographic to collaborating with artists from Steve Reich to Metallica, he is following his passions and encouraging others to do the same. But he never intended to have this sort of life.

By David Stewart
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Image by Janelle Pietrzak.

Paul Miller is a mind expander. We often write that our greatest handicap is our lack of imagination of what is possible; Paul is the sort of person who will, after just a few minutes' conversation, have you perceiving and imagining in a way that you had never before considered. Today, there is a lot of hype about us becoming less dynamic, less creative as we get older; don't believe it.

In trying to describe who he is, the word "creative" finds itself attached to words such as writer, musician, teacher, critic, performer, filmmaker — and the list could go on. What's more, in 2014, he was named National Geographic Emerging Explorer. He was Artist in Residence at Yale University Center for Collaborative Arts and Media(2022-2023, extended). He is a composer, multimedia artist, and writer whose work engages audiences in a blend of genres, global culture, and environmental and social issues. Plus, Paul has collaborated with an array of artists, including Ryuichi Sakamoto, Metallica, Chuck D from Public Enemy, Steve Reich, and Yoko Ono amongst many others.

His books include the award-winning *Rhythm Science*, published by MIT Press in 2004; *Sound Unbound*, an anthology about digital music and media; *The Book of Ice*, a visual and acoustic portrait of the Antarctic; and *The Imaginary App*, on how apps changed the world. Furthermore, his writing has been published by *The Village Voice*, *The Source*, and *Artforum*, and he was the first founding Executive Editor of *Origin* magazine.

It all began back in the '90s, when he held infamous parties in Paris, sometimes in the Catacombs, with a few of the more well-known pop stars of the time in attendance; that was when he was planning on a much more conventional career path. Plans change.

“Science and the arts need to have a much more powerful conversation about creativity”

You did work with Nat Geo on Antarctica. What was that like? And what was the process of doing it live?

I wrote a book in Antarctica based on my explorations of the climate crisis through the prism of how we can think about culture responding to science. One of the main problems of our time is that science and the arts need to have a much more powerful conversation about creativity. As humans, we have so many problems that are facing us: the climate crisis, geopolitical concerns, inequality at every level. Any of these issues could be approached with common sense solutions, but we are tied up with perspectives that lock us into the past.

Antarctica was a place of really powerful experiences for me. I wrote *The Book of Icethere* with Brian Greene from Columbia University, and Dr. Ross A. Virginia from Dartmouth College. When writing, it's important to me to always work with scientists from many fields. That's what inspires my work. Additionally, I took a studio to Antarctica to get a sense of the dynamics at work — data-driven analysis was turned into sound portraits of climate change. It's all in the book and on my site <http://www.djspooky.com/antarctica>

How is creating your work different for you now than 20 years ago?

Everything has gotten more robust. Where I would have had to carry an insane amount of equipment around 20 years ago, these days, most of what I do is portable and can easily do most things that would have taken a lot of processing power. I love seeing Moore's Law of Computing act out on our culture. What's more, as computers got more powerful, people went for incredible novelty and transformed the way we think about the arts in the 21st century. That's a good thing. I'm just glad to be alive to see the end result: ubiquitous computing. Is happiness connected to having a purpose? I guess the idea is to create systems, not goals.

“I use AI from time to time to try variations on riffs, beats, and editing processes”



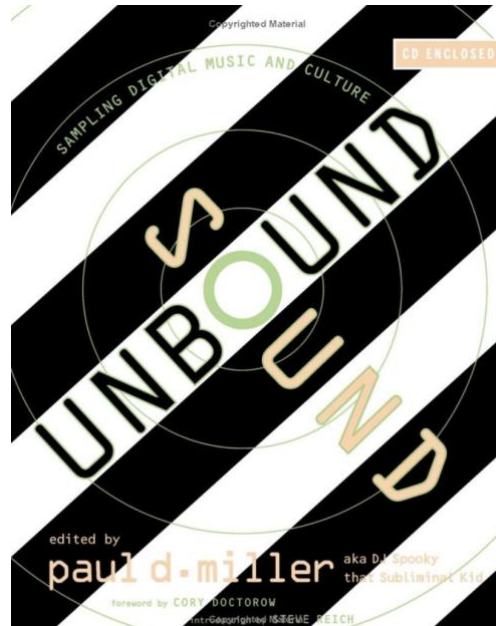
DJ Spooky's Arctic Rhythms | Nat Geo Live.

What is your day-to-day like in terms of your creative process?

I do many projects simultaneously. Some days I just read and research. Other days are spent editing and finding new equipment. One thing that is part of my everyday process is health. I walk everywhere and try as much as possible to do a minimum of 20,000 steps a day plus jogging every other day. Walking has helped me cope with an intense schedule. I was a bicyclist in high school, and a runner, and those two hobbies really helped me throughout life.

You have always used digital technology in the making of your works. How are you incorporating AI into your work?

I use AI from time to time to try variations on riffs, beats, and editing processes. Technology is a tool. I try to keep up with all aspects of what is going on with music, art, and technology. Furthermore, I'm inspired by Pythagoras and Johannes Kepler, and their use of tools to figure what we can imagine. Ditto with Gottfried Leibniz who invented calculus but was also an incredible philosopher. I guess you could say, for me, thought itself is a tool; technology just gives it an echo chamber to bounce off of.



What projects are you currently working on?

I'm finishing two books and gearing up for 3 art exhibitions in the autumn. Also, for fun, I bought a 120-year-old house in upstate NYC near Beaverkill/Livingston Manor; I'm doing renovations on it and learning how to fix up old houses. My books have taken longer to finish because I have needed time to reboot upstate.

One book is called *Digital Fictions: The Future of Storytelling* and is about the way algorithms have shaped and molded contemporary narratives. It's a broad-brushstrokes kind of book. The other book is a bit more playful; it's called *The Future of the Future of Food* and it uses AI to generate and explore new approaches to how we think of molecular gastronomy. Your gut is your second brain! I want to write for that second psychology of mind, body, and food. We need to eat far healthier, and smarter.

"I think art has an incredibly important role to play in this time, precisely because we need to renew our imagination about what is possible"



DJ Spooky/Novara Jazz Festival.

What is the biggest challenge you are facing now, either creatively or otherwise?

I keep thinking about extinction. Our species. Every species. Omnicide is the term. The problem of thinking about “deep time” is that you realize all species go extinct. There’s a great initiative at Cambridge University called The Cambridge Center for Existential Risk that looks at how civilizations collapse. It’s an intriguing premise — we need to really take a sober look at the problems humanity has created.

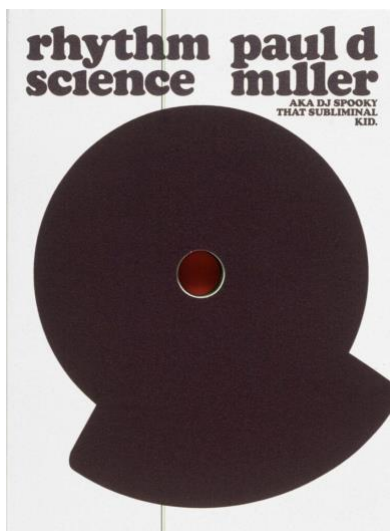
Eerily enough, because of the controversy that surrounds the idea of “the anthropic principle” of human agency causing the climate crisis, we’ve been pounded by a multi-trillion-dollar narrative that humans haven’t caused the problems we are grappling with. Such a twisted and bizarrely brazen idea. Very little surprises me with this stuff. The global “security paradigm” is unraveling as wars in Ukraine, Yemen, Gaza, Sudan, Ethiopia, and potentially Venezuela, Iran, and Taiwan are as fragile as a house of cards in a wind tunnel. Lastly, the climate crisis will add fuel to this insane fire. I think art has an incredibly important role to play in this time, precisely because we need to renew our imagination about what is possible.

What is your biggest fear for the future?

Short term thinking. See above.

What is your greatest hope for the future?

My motto is basically that the imagination is the ultimate renewable resource. It needs renewal and it needs information about what we can think is within the range of what is needed. We need to go beyond that and try new ideas, new approaches. That’s my greatest hope at the moment.



“I really like movies from the viewpoint of politics, science fiction, or how they tell us something new about the world around us”

What are a few of your favorite films?

Where to begin? I really like movies from the viewpoint of politics, science fiction, or how they tell us something new about the world around us.

These are some of my favorite movies, in no particular order: *Ghost in the Shell* – Mamoru Oshii – 1995; *Memento* – by Christopher Nolan, 2000; *Blade Runner* – Ridley Scott, 1982; *Holy Mountain* – Alejandro Jodorowsky, 1973; *Within Our Gates*– Oscar Micheaux, 1920; *Dune* (both the David Lynch version and Denis Villeneuve versions), 1984, 2021; *The Parallax View* – Alan J Pakula, 1974; *The Prisoner* – by Patrick McGoohan, 1967-1968; *Space Is the Place* – Sun Ra, 1972; *Interstella 5555* – Daft Punk, 2003; *Tenet* – Christopher Nolan, 2020; *Get Out* – Jordan Peele, 2017.

What are your thoughts on the future of cinema?

We will all be making our own movies within 5 years because of AI.

You have worked with a wide range of artists including Ryuichi Sakamoto, Yoko Ono, Metallica, and Chuck D from Public Enemy. How do you approach these collaborations?

Each collaboration is a different personality. I have to deal with many many many different personalities. At the moment, I’m not really doing collaborations. I’m writing and editing a film script over the summer. Probably next year I will start doing more collaborations again.

“Life is short. Do something meaningful and engage your passions”

What was your time in Paris like?

I lived in Paris after I graduated from Bowdoin College. I had wanted to take a break and was thinking about going to Georgetown University for graduate school in diplomacy and foreign policy. But I thought it would be good to take some space before diving back into academics. Both my parents were professors, so I kind of planned on following their footsteps. Also, my father was Dean of Howard University and my mother was a renowned historian, so I had some big shoes to fill. I needed to pull back and get some perspective. Personally, I had never thought being a DJ would be so successful and global for me. I guess I did a different kind of foreign policy...

What is it that pulls you to upstate?

I have lived in Tribeca for many years but needed a break from the city. I always try to challenge myself, and many artists have been leaving the city to find bigger space upstate and, well, that’s what happened for me.

What are the 3 non-negotiables in your life today?

Three things that really stand out for me after being a global DJ for the last 20+ years is this:

- 1) Life is short. Do something meaningful and engage your passions. Living a dynamic and creative life, that is non-negotiable. I was never normal. I have no intent on being normal in the future.
- 2) As Maya Angelou once said, “When someone shows you who they are, believe them.” When people are petty, spiteful, stupid, and jealous — just keep moving. I have zero tolerance for stupid crap from people. That has earned me a lot of haters, but so be it. I love to see people spread their wings and fly. So many people are small-spirited and petty. I hate that stuff.
- 3) Use your imagination. People who can’t think outside the box — I don’t have time for that. Looking forward, I want to see the world be a better place. Part of that entails getting back to things like critical thinking as part of the basic way we live in a data driven society.