

**CARL CRAIG**  
STEADILY  
TRANSFORMS  
BLACK  
COMEDY  
INTO  
SUPERNATURAL  
FUNK

STORY EDWIN "STATS" HOUGHTON PHOTOGRAPHY MATT EICH



**BOOGIE MONSTER**

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But those are everyday terms that people use



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**T**he first word you might free associate with the name Carl Craig is “legacy.” Not only is he the direct heir of Detroit techno’s Belleville 3 pioneers—Juan Atkins, Kevin Saunderson and his own mentor, Derrick May—but in the last 15-plus years of his prolific and wildly eclectic output, he has reconnected techno to the wider spectrum of black music like no one else.

Soulful as often as it is synthetic, his major project has been taking the basic machine-funk approach of techno—a Detroit legacy that’s been around at least since bluesmen like John Lee Hooker incorporated assembly-line rhythms from the city’s auto factories into their boogie—to an ever-expanding range of sounds. Craig has produced space age remakes of the Stylistics’ “People Make the World Go Round” and Donald Byrd’s “Think Twice.” He’s found robotic precision in loops of Sun Ra Arkestra drummer Francisco Mora’s loose percussion breaks on their Innerzone Orchestra collaborations. He’s converted the organic elements of Cesaria Evora’s *sodade* and Hugh Masekela’s afro-jazz into electro-acoustic anthems and put down a Diwali-esque technohall remix for Zap Mama and Erykah Badu’s collaboration “Bandy Bandy.” He even started his 2005 set for the Fabric mix CD series by laying an acapella of the Ying Yang Twins’ “Whisper Song” over ethereal synth washes that build into the 4/4 of his own “Angel (Caya dub).”

But of late, Craig seems to be stripping down that diverse palette to darker and darker chromatics and minimal beats that are less about the improvisations of electric jazz and more about seeking out some autosadistic liberation within rhythmic slavishness. Talking to Craig makes it clear that a dark strain has always been in him somewhere, maybe just camouflaged beneath the foliage of warm fuzzy synths and almost-Latin syncopation. Speaking

by phone from Detroit, where he maintains his home studio in the Lafayette Park housing complex designed by Mies van der Rohe, he is at turns introspective and distracted by the pressure to finish a remix for the next Brazilian Girls single. “I can’t remember barely any times as a kid thinking of being in a field of roses or some warm, amazing feeling. I remember a Black Sabbath cover. I remember *The Exorcist*. The first song that really gave me an emotion as a child was ‘Papa Was a Rolling Stone’ by the Temptations. I remember that one really specifically because I remember the label, the darkness of that purple and gold label spinning.”

The process of bringing this strain to the surface is reflected in the evolution of personas and alter egos Craig assumes (and releases albums under) as much as anywhere. In 2006, he is less likely to exhibit the playfulness of Paperclip People or the experimentation of Innerzone Orchestra than he is to be dredging up the dirty disco of Tres Demented or focused on his Demon Days club residency. As his Demon Days partner Gamall Awad says, “Carl came up with that name—the idea was to comment on the times we’re living in. It has only become more and more apt, since things really do seem to be going in a certain direction.”

Craig’s own productions, like his childhood memories, have a darkness that is almost nostalgic. Even the Tres Demented typeface—a loosely-penned, art deco-meets-sci-fi font designed by Craig himself— thrusts you into the early ’80s so viscerally you can almost see it emblazoned on a Trapper Keeper, next to a badly-drawn Playboy bunny with a badly-drawn doobie, scribbly ballpoint smoke emanating from its tip.

Although this style fits with—and in some ways is probably a response to—the recent tide of dirty disco from Paris, Tres Demented is closer in sound to dawn-of-the-’80s cuts like A Number

of Names’ “Shari Vari,” punky proto-techno that laid the blueprint for every electroclash jam that’s ever sleazed across a dancefloor since. More than anything, Tres Demented seems to be a voice that certain tracks bring out of Craig. Mostly, this voice is limited to a vocoderized *Ha!* or a phased and reverbed *Ugh!*—bestial vocalizations best described as demonic gorillas in heat...making love...in the jungle...on PCP. On “SheZ Satan” the vocalizations finally break into full rap-song, exorcising devils of the blue dress variety in a slurred but not quite screwed baritone, somewhere between Freddy Krueger and the Electrifying Mojo’s deracinated drawl. Evil and funky in an “Atomic Dog” kind of way, spooky cowbells and lasery synths gel with the modulated voice as Tres D lays out a narrative like *Romeo is Bleeding* interpreted as a three-minute, 40-second cartoon. *You think the girl is dead/ Cops charge you with her death/ But she’s alive and gettin high on loads of coke and meth.... She’s Satan!* The rap is crude in a way that recalls the willfull ignorance of Ol Dirty Bastard (Craig’s favorite rapper), though it’s not like he consciously channeled ODB, but rather built Tres Demented from the same antecedents: Dolemite in *Petey Wheatstraw the Devil’s Son-in-Law* and the “Cold Blooded” funk of Rick James.

“It’s like my idea of punk music,” says Craig. “Tres Demented is to say things that maybe I’ve never said before in music and that maybe other people won’t say. Maybe they’ll say, She’s a bitch, she’s a ho, she’s a freak, that kind of thing. But those are everyday terms that people use to judge women by. Saying that somebody is like the devil—that’s a really special person.”

The less vocal Tres D tracks—like “Brainfreeze” and “Demented (or Just Crazy)” — show Craig’s old genius for judging critical mass. The groove he finds within the dementia, just like the darkness found within a Temptations song, is the first inkling that what he’s up to is not

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totally alien to the Detroit legacy Craig has always upheld. Despite its immortal record of soul harmonies and good clean modernism, a certain fiendishness has always been there in the shadows of Motown. If it's famous for car culture and Aretha Franklin, Detroit is equally infamous for the arsonist rituals of Devil's Night, terrorcore rappers like Natas (who swears his name is not "satan" spelled backwards) and is just generally the kind of place where third grade hoodrats pass around dubbed copies of *Faces of Death* and watch slasher flicks, rooting for the slasher.

"I remember things that I saw as a kid more than I do things that I heard," Craig says. "Like in the *Poseidon Adventure*, when the cruise ship turns upside down and the guy is holding on to the table and can't hold on any longer and he just falls right through the multi-colored glass ceiling. I think that's really what brought me into listening to so much underground music, these dark visuals. Stuff like [Dario Argento's] *Suspiria*, 2001, *Blade Runner*, *Scarface*. Like in *The Untouchables*, where DeNiro beats that fool over the head with a bat at the table? When that happened, it was me and another guy sitting in the movie packed full, but it was only us two laughing."

This same Kubrickian drive, an urge to hold a mirror up to the dark side of human nature and leave it there for a nice, long, uncomfortable look, seems to inhabit Craig's recent tracks. On "Darkness," which he released under his own name, the visual traces seem so intertwined with the soundscapes that talking about them leads Craig to wax nostalgic again about the records in which he first discovered a similar feeling.

"'Angel Dust' by Gil Scott-Heron or 'For the Love of Money' by the O'Jays. All of them had this druggy kind of feel," he explains. "On 'For the Love of Money,' the technical tricks they did, the reverse effect that goes into the vocals—it's like walking in quicksand, it's like the slow motion part [in the *Chappelle Show* skit] where Eddie Murphy's brother kicks Rick James into the mirror. That feeling of being sunk into something and not being able to move." If it wasn't already floating around in the collective unconscious, the image of Charlie Murphy drop-kicking Rick James through the looking glass in slo-mo would be a perfect allegory for Craig's new ethos: the drugginess, the black comedy, the inherent violence, the '80s flashback, the surreality.

It's that drugginess, that altered state Craig talks about, that really connects Tres Demented



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and his other new material to the whole body of his recordings—and what has always separated him from other techno artists. Although he is an admirer—and in some sense a musical descendant—of Sun Ra, Parliament and Kraftwerk, Craig has never shared their mothership connections or futurist fantasies, as he's quick to tell you himself. The “scape” Craig has always been most effective in exploring is a mental one, his science fiction more about inner space—inner zones—than outer ones. This internal focus is where his compositions and his DJ sets get their power, their moodiness, their schizoid eclecticism. Carl Craig, after all, is simply the government name of the multiple personality disorder that comprises BFC, Psyche, 69, Innerzone Orchestra and Tres Demented, which may be the furthest exploration yet, a brave new world of diabolical impulses he's channeled into supremely satisfying dance music.

The conversation Craig began in the studio is winding up via cell phone from his Jeep, satellite tuned (is it any surprise he doesn't fuck with terrestrial radio?) to Shade 45 because his baby daughter loves the bass of crunk beats. When asked if the things we've discussed are an accurate reflection of what's on his mind as he contemplates rewarding the Tres Demented persona with an album project of its own, Craig professes to be most concerned with how his daughter is dozing off in her child-seat, neck slumped in a weird angle, guaranteeing that she will be stiff and cranky when she comes to. “I've been reading about David Bowie and his hijinks in the '70s, so maybe I should dream up some shit like that to make headlines...” and then in an altered voice he improvises, *I'm gonna make the New Revolutionary Vehicle. I'm gonna design a tank out of a Volvo to invade the suburbs. Burn 'em down, scare 'em all into moving back into Detroit.*

Craig is making fun of himself and of the pressure on him for sensational quotes, but even though he laughs manically throughout, at some point during his description of the tank's weaponized hubcaps flying off to decapitate people, the imagery he's conjuring up takes on a life of its own, and it's a toss up as to which is the real Carl Craig: the one gently nudging his daughter into a more peaceful sleep, or the one cracking up at a daydream of headless and terrified suburbanites fleeing in all directions. **F**