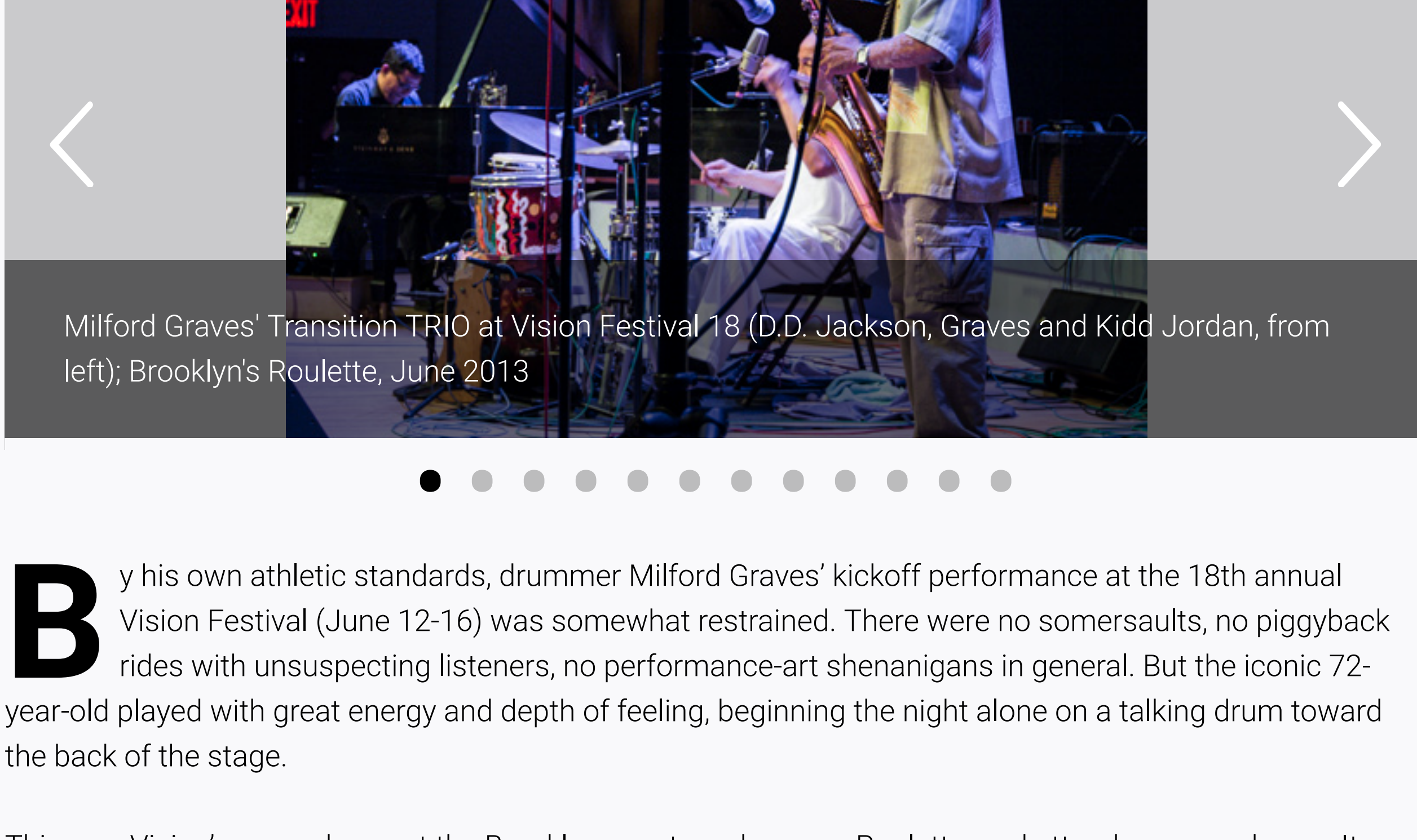


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Vision Festival 18: Milford Graves

A Lifetime Achievement showcase for the drum legend in Brooklyn

UPDATED APRIL 25, 2019 — DAVID R. ADLER



Milford Graves' Transition TRIO at Vision Festival 18 (D.D. Jackson, Graves and Kidd Jordan, from left), Brooklyn's Roulette, June 2013

This was Vision's second year at the Brooklyn avant-garde space Roulette, and attendance was heavy. It was Graves' turn to receive the customary honor for Lifetime Achievement, so opening night featured him with three ensembles, each representing a different facet of his career.

The first set highlighted Graves' early immersion in Afro-Cuban music. It was a reenactment, to paraphrase emcee Ben Young of WKCR-FM, of what Graves was playing around 1962 with the Milford Graves Latin Jazz Ensemble. The musicians didn't appear all at once, however. Graves switched to an African slit drum as he brought out percussionist Román Díaz, who stole the show for a bit with his strutting demeanor and impassioned Yoruba vocals.

After a time, Graves called upon pianist David Virelles, bassist John Benitez (standing in for Dezron Douglas) and alto saxophonist Román Filiu to complete the lineup. That Díaz and Filiu were key players on Virelles' 2012 breakthrough *Continuum* (Pi) added a layer of interest and a charge of the new. The first piece merged traditional *montuno*-type figures with hip, asymmetrical rhythms and wound to a tentative close. "That's what I used to do before I became an avant-garde drummer!" shouted a smiling Graves, now seated behind his unique hand-painted kit.

The set continued with what sounded like "A Night in Tunisia" and "Afro Blue," or improvisations based on riffs and fragments from those standards. At times Graves' playing got so loose and free that Virelles' left hand became the drummer, in effect. Graves sang wordlessly, danced in place, laid down clave patterns on cowbells and nudged the music as "out" as it would go.

When D.D. Jackson played solo piano with maximum atonality and physical force to introduce set two, the sound was oddly more familiar than what had come before. This was the Vision Festival's aesthetic home base, and all the more so when Kidd Jordan took the plunge on tenor sax, soon followed by Graves at full-tilt. We'd arrived at the Don Pullen part of the evening: Graves formed a notable duo project with Pullen in the late '60s, and he spoke of first meeting Jackson at the hospital, when the two were visiting Pullen shortly before his death.

Of the three bracing improvisations by the Graves-Jackson-Jordan trio, the latter two settled on clear tonalities (Jackson's left hand offered visual confirmation). The second, gravitating toward D minor, briefly referenced the spiritual "Wade in the Water" and conjured an atmosphere of mid- to late-era Coltrane. The third began as a demonstration of an "avant-garde calypso," in Graves' words, so Jackson chose the key of F as the trio worked toward a stormy conclusion.

Finally, the Milford Graves NY HeART Ensemble followed a plan much like the first quintet, with players emerging gradually. The lineup fused the classic NY Art Quartet (original members Graves, trombonist Roswell Rudd, poet Amiri Baraka) and the chordless power trio sound of Graves, bassist William Parker and saxophonist Charles Gayle. Baraka began quietly with just Graves behind him, but his second reading later in the set got drowned out by the fuller band (Gayle had switched from tenor sax to piano). Rudd's taut plunger-muted phrases and legato smears refreshed the sonic palette and helped end the night on a high.

Graves' two daughters and 12-year-old granddaughter came onstage for the final applause, surrounding the man of the hour with hugs and family pride. But the coming days would bring music from Roscoe Mitchell, Roy Campbell, Sonny Simmons, Hamiet Bluiett and many more. With three sets down, Vision Festival 18 was about to move on.

All photos by Peter Gannushkin. To see more of his work, including coverage of Vision Festival 18, visit his site, downtownmusic.net.

Originally Published June 17, 2013

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