

Jlin: Black Origami

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Jlin's *Black Origami* might be the most ambitious footwork album ever made. This is a producer whose hero is Stravinsky, who reaches back to great African historical figures like Hatshepsut and Mansa Musa for inspiration, whose refusal to sample anything but vocals is a point of dogma, who counts William Basinski among her bedfellows and Aphex Twin among her champions. What you think of *Black Origami* will probably correspond to your reaction to this quote from Jlin herself: "You made something 'cause it sounds good? You're not doing enough."

This is not music for the lazy. It's a commitment both in terms of what it does to you and what it gives you to chew on. Those more familiar with the classic Chicago strain of footwork embodied by RP Boo, DJ Rashad or DJ Roc (all of whom Jlin counts as mentors) might miss the sense of spontaneity and abandon with which those producers crack their snares and flex their samples. Jlin's style is calculated and strategic, with every sound in exactly its right place. *Black Origami* is a mechanized barrage of sound that proceeds in perfect sequence, like an obstacle course.

Footwork is really more of a disposable foundation for this music, which brings to mind anything that endeavors to evoke awe through the sheer power of percussion: drum corps, fife-and-drum blues, West African percussion, free-jazz drumming (is it any surprise she saw *Whiplash* and empathized with the teacher?) Melody is almost nonexistent, and the vocals she samples are harsh and violent: bits of war chant, distant dancehall toasting, echoed-out blurts and grunts.

It's a difficult listen to say the least, even for those used to out-there strains of regional electronic music might have a hard time getting through this. Allegedly the original mix was even more extreme, but Mike Paradinas at Planet Mu told the folks in the mixing department to turn it down, to soften the onslaught ever-so-slightly. It's a daunting prospect, but maybe if this thing becomes a classic and gets reissued down the road we can hear the mix as it was meant to be.

Should it be a classic? It's certainly an impressive achievement, and it's one of the first footwork albums that really demands you take it seriously and treat it as intelligent dance music. But it's given a lot of extra heft by how it wraps itself. Not to say its ambitions aren't sincere – they are, formidably so. It's just that if the cover art was Jlin drinking a beer or something and the tracks were all titled dumb shit about partying, it might just scan as an extremely out-there footwork album instead of as a scarily ambitious work of art. The ideas do a lot of the heavy lifting here.

The sound design is often astonishing, especially on "Hatshepsut," with its wobbly midrange floor of wispy synth, and the explicitly marching band-like "Challenge (To Be Continued)." But one can only do so much just with drums, and though the sounds are arranged in beguiling ways, none are particularly weird, and it doesn't twist its way around the brain the way an equally weird footwork record like Foodman's *Couldwork* might. It's heavy on ideas and light on animal pleasures, unless you like subjecting yourself to relentless and punishing sound.

Listening to *Black Origami* is an austere pleasure, and you can imagine someone with a mathematical or scientific brain enjoying it a lot more than one with a more lyrical brain. It's hard-working music, and those who don't find pleasure in perfectionism might see Jlin as irrationally conservative. But Jlin's clearly found liberation in limiting herself, and *Black Origami* still manages to pack in plenty of the most fascinating electronic music of the year so far.



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