A View of Black Speculative Past and Future

An Interview with Tim Fielder

Julian Chambliss
chambl91@msu.edu

In February 2022, The Carnegie Hall Afrofuturism Festival brought together a variety of Afrofuturists in a citywide celebration. While Carnegie is known for its musical performances, this festival involved visual artists, a direct result of the curatorial council for the event attempting to engage with the dynamic nature of black speculative practice. One of the featured artist was Tim Fielder. Fielder is an Illustrator, concept designer, cartoonist, and animator born in Tupelo, Mississippi, and raised in Clarksdale, Mississippi. He describes himself as having "a lifelong love of Visual Afrofuturism, Pulp entertainment, and action films." Fielder draws inspiration from figures such as Samuel R Delany, Octavia Butler, Pedro Bell, and Overton Loyd. As a comic artist, his work linked directly to Mark Dery's definitional essay on Afrofuturism. Dery argued that Afrofuturism percolated in "black drawn and black written comics." Fielder's published work would seem to capture this reality. His Glyph Award winning novel, *Matty's Rocket*, chronicles the adventure of an alternative future African American

aviatrix making her way in the aftermath of a War of World type invasion of earth. His most recent graphic novel, *INFINITUM: An Afrofuturist Tale*, was published by HarperCollins Amistad in 2021. *INFINITUM* is a tale of immortality, power, and identity told through a distinctly Afrofuturist lens.

Fielder has been described as an "OG Afrofuturist," and his long history in the New York art scene inspires my desire to talk with him for *Third Stone*. Fielder has engaged with the community of artists and thinkers who defined "Afrofuturism" since the beginning. "Black Metropolis," his career retrospective show presented during the Carnegie Hall Afrofuturism Festival, highlights not only his career as an artist but provides a kind of rough time capsule to explore the visual culture of Afrofuturism. For this issue, we dig into Fielder's artistic biography to highlight some foundational narratives associated with Afrofuturism. Dred Dawg, the work featured here highlights the core consideration of black speculative practice captured by the word "Afrofuturism."

What is the story of Dred Dawg? It was never published, but what was your thinking?

Narratively, Dred Dawg was a very simple premise. The story featured a drifter (called Dred Dawg) who reluctantly becomes a revolutionary in a battle between elites and the underclass. Conceptually, I wanted to take every standard depiction of Black characters in comics and turn them on their heads. For example, I intentionally made Dred Dawg a light complexioned Black man because in comics it was rare that characters of color were anything other than the standard brown. Since I am a light complexioned Black man in real life, I wanted to reflect that reality.

Further, comics for decades have been notorious for showcasing negative stereotypes of people of color. Thus, I wanted the underclass to be all of the racial stereotypes (minstrels, coons, white lips, etc.) typically shown. Will Eisner's 'Ebony White' was a major influence. Even a comic innovator like Eisner could not free himself from that view of blackness. So, this story is essentially a push back against all of that casual visual racism.

To such an extent that Dred Dawg's real name is 'Red Brown'. Imagine those racial stereotypes rising up intellectually and violently to fight for their rights to exist? I even went so far as to showcase LGBTQ characters and mixed in many Yoruba religious concepts that I ultimately felt too much for the times and me. Who was going to publish this fully rendered, freakish work in 1991? Particularly when the digital advancements of manufacturing and distribution were years off? Likely no one. I remember showing these pages to Moebius and Joe Kubert at a NY Comicon. They were not impressed. Such is life.

Dred Dawg originates from an aborted Parliament-Funkadelic project. You've talked about imagery by Overton Loyd as an influence in the past. Can you talk briefly about how this piece builds on his aesthetic and how you tried to do your own thing?

Overton Loyd and Pedro Bell, for me, are the originators of Visual Afrofuturists in my eyes. They showed how these ideas would look. In 1990, I worked as a concept designer on the aborted 'Mothership Connection' project by the Hudlin Brothers. The idea was the film, done in live action, would feature all of the major players in Parliament Funkadelic. George Clinton, Bootsy Collins, Sir Nose Devoid of Funk; all were players in the film. When that project fell apart due to lack of funding, I found myself frustratingly full of unused ideas in that PFunk vibe that needed to get out. Where Jodorowsky and Moebius created INCAL as a reaction to the failed Dune project in the 1970s, Dred Dawg was my answer to The Mothership Connection.

In your retrospective show Black Metropolis, Dred Dawg is placed in conversation with several pieces inspired by the city's rock and hip hop culture.

Can you talk a little about what it was like working and creating at that moment as a visual artist?

The first apparent thing is that I was there, in some cases, literally in the room, or I was around the corner from the room. The world back then was there could never be more than a handful of visual operators in the hip-hop and cartooning space. I operated within the 'Black Rock music" community, doing many of the early Black Rock Coalition flyers and graphics and music editorial cartooning images for the Village Voice weekly alternative magazine. It was a fascinating yet soberingly revealing experience being around those musical movements. There is nothing like seeing the lily-white editorial staff and black writing royalty in an uproar because Stanley Crouch and Harry Allen have come to blows. Early ascendant Hip-Hop supplanted Jazz as the intellectual standard-bearer, and Black Rock was the neglected nerdy sibling in the corner. I'm proud to say I did several of those images. I was young. Very young.

You have been labeled an "O.G. Afrofuturist" in some media stories about you and your work. What do you think your work says about black futurity? What visions of the future speak to your artistic vision? Has the current Afrofuturist moment changed your approach to this work?

So thankful to the NYU Gallatin School of Individual Study curator for putting on Black Metropolis and generating that moniker for me back in 2016. I've done this work for a very, very long time, since roughly the age of 12. But, due to my naiveté, I didn't realize that if you don't tell your story, someone else will tell it for you or, more insidious, totally erase or ignore it. Black Metropolis tells that story, particularly in the most recent variant during the Carnegie Hall Afrofuturism Festival in early 2022. I no longer consider myself obscure.

Futurity? We Live, We Love, We Die, We Exist **IN THE FUTURE**. I don't have to overly pontificate about it because there are folks far more scholarly and academic about such matters. I will say for those other afrofuturist graphic novelists, filmmakers and visual artists out there, if you don't release, the archivists and historians won't record your contributions.

As a lifelong practicing Afrofuturist, I've shown the modality of black culture and science fiction in many different ways. My skill set resides in showing what it looks like, what it reads like, AND letting everyone on the planet Earth know it. Thank God for The Internet.


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