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J Dilla Reflective Biography

On February 7th, 2006, James "J Dilla" Yancey released his third solo LP titled, *Donuts*. That same day, he also celebrated his 32nd birthday. What's amazing about the songs on that album —aside from being great in their own right— is that Dilla made most of *Donuts* while in the hospital battling Lupus, a condition that affects the body's immune system, allowing it to become hyperactive and attack healthy tissue. Three days later while at home with his mother, J Dilla would pass due to cardiac arrest. Although he passed at a young age, Dilla's impact on the hip-hop community was seismic. Having already worked with the likes of Common, Erykah Badu, Busta Rhymes, A Tribe Called Quest and many more, he had solidified his place among the greats by the time of his passing. J Dilla was simply, a genius taken too soon.

When asked to describe J Dilla's genius, DJ Jazzy Jeff puts it plainly, "When radio was a freer space and played music that people liked instead of what people paid for, the music that we heard was created by somebody in their basement being a mad scientist. Jay is a throwback to that time. He's the guy in the basement."

That, "Guy in the basement" was born James Dewitt Yancey on February 7th, 1974, in Detroit, Michigan, to Beverly and Maureen "Ma Dukes" Yancey. He would be the oldest of three children. Dilla's family had deep musical roots, his mother was an opera and classical music aficionado and his father Beverly was a bassist, vocalist, and 25-year performance and recording veteran. Dilla's parents raised him on jazz music, so much so that it became his lullaby and the only thing that allowed him to sleep at night when he was younger. Growing up in the rough

Conant Gardens neighborhood of Detroit, Maureen had to find a way to keep her son safe and out of trouble. Thus, James Yancey was enlisted into formal lessons on piano and cello. This training allowed him to learn music theory, *the* language of music. Years later, upon attending Davis Aerospace Technical High School, Dilla would meet Joseph "Amp" Fiddler, a local producer and musician, who would take Dilla under his wing and eventually introduce him to Q-Tip. Through his sessions at "Amp's Camp," a nickname for Amp's studio, Dilla would learn about sampling, quantizing, swing, drum machines and programming, eventually influencing his turn to the now legendary Akai MPC. The Akai MPC series, were basically sequencer/sampler machines that held whatever you sampled into them. Through the machine, not only could you chop samples 16 different ways thanks to the 16 pads, you could add different sonic textures depending on what kind of effects were assigned to each knob. J Dilla would not only expand on these ideas on his MPC3000 (a bigger version of the original MPC60), his method of using this machine actually *humanized it.*

It was Dilla's style, use and methodology of his MPC that would become instantly recognizable so many years later. Normally, what most producers would do at the time was use a tool called quantization. Quantization is a technology that allows notes originally performed off-beat, to sit tightly in the correct beat value. For example, a song in 4/4 time with drums played digitally and then quantized, would ensure that each drum sound hits precisely on each beat. This often gives digital drums a robotic feel, lacking in natural swing or groove. J Dilla banished the idea that the drums had to be played in this way, instead insisting on the imperfect timing, and often off-kilter patterns found in many of his beats.

In fact, the way he played his MPC single handedly changed the way The Roots' legendary drummer, Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson played. Hearing Dilla's drums was "…the most life-changing moment I've ever had," remarked Thompson in an interview with Red Bull Music Academy. His loose drumming style paved the way for other producers to let go of the limitations of quantization, and allowed for a more off-kilter, groovy style of playing. A perfect example of this is on the song, "Runnin'" by The Pharcyde from their *Labcabincalifornia* album. Aside from the drums being the classic off-kilter, lo-fi vibe we all have come to expect, legend has it that if you listen closely enough to the drums on that song, the pattern doesn't repeat in any specific structural fashion. This leads one to assume that Dilla played those drum samples all the way through the song, instead of just looping it. I get chills just thinking about it.

Another signature of Dilla's production was what he did with each sample's sonic palette. He could manipulate frequencies to create different sections of a song, most notably, his use of low end frequencies for verses. In order to be more efficient with a sample, Dilla would take out the higher frequencies of the sample to make way for the vocals, which usually occupy the mid to higher ranges, leaving only the low end. Once the song came back to the chorus, he would restore all frequencies. This was a simple, but memorable trick. One that was admired by both rappers and producers alike.

J Dilla was respected for the way he used his MPC and his tasteful use of textural structure, however it was the way he chopped his samples that garnered him praise, and made him one of Hip Hop's most revered producers. A lot of producers chop their samples according to the top melody of the song. This usually consists of a four bar phrase played by a piano, guitar, strings, etc. J Dilla himself often abided by this technique too, however there are instances of

Dilla's genius escaping all formulaic processes. Take for example the song, "Don't Cry," off of *Donuts*, his aforementioned third solo LP. Instead of taking the top melody from the sample and rearranging that, Dilla did something completely unexpected. He took different kicks and snares from throughout the song and rearranged them into this rhythmic, cohesive collage of sounds. The result was a game changing, dreamlike experience, the likes of which has been often replicated by other producers.

Whereas many musicians and even producers see their instruments as tools of their profession, J Dilla saw his as tools of expression, as extensions of *himself*. Dilla never had any smash hits, he never won any Grammys (though he was nominated on a few separate occasions), and he wasn't an overnight rap superstar the way Nas was when Illmatic came out. J Dilla's legacy can be separated by his incredible humility, his aversion of politics within the industry, and his warrior-like work ethic. J Dilla was quietly prolific. Even now, his estate has released hundreds of previously unreleased beats from the vault. I chose J Dilla not because he's instantly polarizing in the way Kanye West is, not because he's flashy and demands part of the spotlight the way Diddy did in all those Bad Boy videos. I chose J Dilla because he was unassuming in the praises that were heaped his way. He kept a tight circle of close friends and confidantes. One common Dilla notion was, "Dilla didn't fuck with a lot of people," and he didn't. He influenced countless producers after him, from Pharrell to Kanye West. Of all the people who felt his influence, Questlove gave Dilla some of the highest praise you could bestow on an artist. Questlove was quoted as saying Dilla is, "The music god that music gods and music experts and music lovers worship." With the kind of mythical, almost superhuman genius that J Dilla possessed, it's kind of hard to argue with that one.