

# Happy Birthday James Yancey

It's been four years already since James "J.Dilla" Yancey passed from a blood disease almost as rare as his talent. To those familiar with his music or knew him before he passed this day has become an industry and worldwide mantra to try to lift his status to where it could've been if he had more time. Media shy and a preference for workaholism took precedence over the pop star routine that a producer/rapper like Kanye, who calls Dilla a 'drum god,' could take on with stamina and a sense of humor. Dilla's fans worked to find him on chimerical releases like *Fantastic Volume 2* (minus the misogyny), Q-Tip's *Amplified* or his *Welcome 2 Detroit* solo piece. His conviction allowed him to produce tracks for lesser known rappers like Frank N Dank as well as Daisy Age legends like De La Soul with the same amount of gusto. There were bigger named artists who asked for his services but he declined simply because his visceral politics wouldn't concede in other words he just wasn't feeling it. Sometimes it is nice to see hip-hop producers work within the pop realm for Billboard darlings but it was inspiring to see someone with his acumen deny a project to maintain his artistic vision. Before Eminem had his fateful flight to go meet Dr. Dre and Interscope it was Dilla's subterranean subversion of beat science in the mid '90s that introduced a new wave of Detroit hip-hop and had Dr. Dre coming to [him](#). Common, D'Angelo, Erykah Badu, A Tribe Called Quest, Q-Tip, De La Soul, Dwele, Slum Village, Busta Rhymes, The Pharcyde, Pete Rock, Bahamadia, Janet Jackson and others benefitted from his touch which at it's best moments has an ecstatic quality that lays down the gospel of hip-hop with new tenets:

1. The producer CAN lay the tracks down after the rappers do their vocals. In most cases a rapper is handed a beat tape to rap over and return to the producer but Dilla could do it

backwards.

2. The producer CAN write his or her own raps and must be able to execute them off the cuff to make a hot verse or verses sound easy to do. Producers that rap usually have someone else write their lines for them. Dilla wrote his own and was more competent at it than the average full-time rapper.

3. The producer's production must have the aura and the practicum of an ancient chinese secret. As HouseShoes has said Dilla could mimic the styles of Pete Rock, Premier and Dre but no one can duplicate his work. Just Blaze openly admits that after a day spent trying to figure out how Dilla made a particular beat he just gave up. Dilla used samples but he could take them and make them unrecognizable within his creations. Other times when the beat was identified other producers still didn't know how he was able to rework it.

4. The producer needs to make a good living but greed should never outweigh creative integrity. When the majority of artists are willing to do whatever to make more money Dilla didn't try to flee from the underground he made people come to him on his terms.

5. Dilla was the first producer to do a collaboration album with another noted producer Madlib. Both of them rapped over the other's beats on the striking Jaylib *Champion Sound* project.

6. Slum Village was the first Detroit hip-hop group to get a deal on a major label with A&M Records. Shortly after signing their contracts the label's rap department closed and A&M was eventually merged into Universal Music Group.

Listening to *Donuts* one of a few post-mortem releases there is no doubt that Dilla had so much more to give but God had other plans. For many people who did not recognize him when he was alive the mention of his name is used for web hits and instant credibility in the hip-hop world. Unfortunately these people

and various media outlets really have jumped on a bandwagon with the oddest incident coming from Charles Hamilton last year who claimed to have contacted Dilla's spirit to produce his album. Yet others who have been introduced to him for the first time genuinely have affection for him and have realized the disservice from music publications that did not dig harder to find his genius and educate the public about him. 2010 holds more promise for his legacy because his mother Ma Dukes has been able to finally get his estate in order to run it as a business and not a war zone. And it is a bittersweet disappointment that he had to pass before he could really get the attention he deserved. Death has promoted him far beyond any PR he did or probably could ever do when he was living short of producing a record for Madonna. Perhaps it isn't such a bad thing considering the fact that James Brown had to wait until he became an old man to be appreciated and the Kennedy Center tribute still wasn't appropriate enough for an artist of his mastery and influence. Brown died the same year as Dilla and was one of Dilla's teachers and people haven't lauded him as much because of the media's unforgiving attitude for his highly publicized troubles. Knowing nothing more about Dilla than a general career history has helped his posthumous image tremendously by adding more mystique to his story. Yancey would've been 36 today and regardless of any celebrating he would have planned we can assume that sometime during the day he would be in his lab working on another cranial comforting track.