

Ten years since the death of hip hop artist James “J Dilla” Yancey

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February 10 marked 10 years since the passing of hip hop producer J Dilla (James Dewitt Yancey, born February 7, 1974 in Detroit) from complications relating to Lupus and Moschowitz syndrome, a rare blood disorder. A talented musician, Yancey is considered by many to have been among the greatest of all hip hop producers.

Even a small sampling of those with whom Yancey collaborated amounts to a who’s who of the more significant hip hop and soul artists of recent times: A Tribe Called Quest, Janet Jackson, Macy Gray, Four Tet, Amp Fiddler, DJ Cam, Tupac Shakur, Brand New Heavies, Common, Erykah Badu, The Roots and others.

In 2014, the Smithsonian Institution announced that the artist’s estate had agreed to donate his beat making equipment to the collection at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC. It will be on display later this year. In February came the announcement that a shelved album from 2002 would be released later this year.

Yancey was raised in a musical family on Detroit’s east side. His mother, Maureen, was a former opera singer and his father, Beverly, a jazz bassist. Yancey reportedly began collecting records as early as age two, becoming something of a musical encyclopedia in the years to follow.

His first attempts at making his own music consisted of songs with childhood friends Ronnie Watts, R.L. Altman III and Titus Glover (who performed under the stage names Phat Kat, T3 and Baatin, respectively). Some of Yancey’s most underappreciated production work was done alongside Altman and Glover when they formed the influential Detroit underground rap trio Slum Village.

A 2013 NPR comment described Yancey’s music

this way: “[It] has come to represent a major inflection point on hip-hop’s evolutionary tree. ... He recast the sample as a malleable component, rather than the monochromatic backbone it had seemed to be [in prior hip hop music].” The comment adds that he “injected a softened, swaggering humanity into the rigid slap of classic hip-hop drumbeats.”

His jazz and soul-tinged production style bore the unmistakable influence of early 1990s “conscious rap,” pioneered in New York City by groups such as De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest (ATCQ), Brand Nubian and others. However, Yancey’s music developed beyond these early influences in interesting ways.

The Roots’ drummer Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson called Yancey’s musical approach “drunken style” due to its unorthodox and “sloppy” syncopation. There was also the loosely structured and conversational style of Yancey’s rapping which stood out among the more intricate and dense lyrical patterns popularized by early 1990s “boom bap” hip hop.

Yancey’s work with ATCQ, The Pharcyde, De La Soul and others during the mid-to late 1990s is especially memorable. On The Pharcyde’s 1995 song “Runnin’,” Yancey combines a soothing Stan Getz and Luiz Bonfá Brazilian *samba* sample with stutter-stepping drums whose patterns never seem to land on the same beat twice. While the drums may sound like they are tripping over their own feet at times, they are not wrong. It is a feeling for rhythm that was unknown in hip hop up to that time. Yancey’s particular (maybe even peculiar) sense of swing changed the way hip hop and R&B music would be played for years to come.

Another high point was De La Soul’s 1995 hit “Stakes is High,” with its triumphant horn section over a sample lifted from jazz pianist Ahmad Jamal’s “Swahililand,” filtered down to only the muddiest bass

tones throughout rappers Posdnuos' and Dave's clever verses.

Some initially rejected Yancey's work. His drums were too "thin," they argued. He avoided the large and easily identifiable loops from old records common in those days in favor of mysterious swirls of Fender Rhodes piano. (This tendency was not entirely the product of Yancey's choice. A stepped up music industry crack-down on hip hop producers' prominent use of sampling from earlier records forced artists to seek other avenues in beat making).

Yancey's sound gradually expanded to include elements of electro funk and techno as well as live instrumentation. The artist's 2001 solo debut album *Welcome 2 Detroit* (BBE Records) showcased this development. Alongside the live instrumentation and swinging programmed drums on the Earth, Wind and Fire cover "Brazilian Groove" and "African Rhythms," sat the electro funk-laden "BBE (Big Booty Express)" and bouncier, mainstream-friendly tracks such as "Pause."

For all his abilities, there were also limitations to Yancey's music that should not be ignored. While Yancey and his collaborators in Slum Village delivered their lyrics in a playful, casual style that had tremendous appeal and posed new possibilities for hip hop, the actual content of those lyrics could be quite barren. Yancey was no "gangster," but neither were his lyrics free from the social backwardness and triviality common to so much hip hop music.

One gets the sense that Yancey, who produced music capable of appealing to the most sensitive listening ear and was often said to be an extremely humble man, knew better but was unable or unwilling to resist the pressure to conform to the backwardness dominating the industry.

Yancey's death at the age of 32 cut off his artistic development just as he seemed to be exploring more challenging terrain. His final release during his lifetime, *Donuts* (February 2006, Stones Throw Records), was an entirely instrumental work composed mainly of short "beat snippets." Songs such as "Waves" and "Don't Cry" captured Yancey's ability to creatively arrange and juxtapose vocal and instrumental samples while still maintaining a central theme and melody.

One wonders what Yancey would have accomplished had he been given more time and different social and

historical circumstances in which to work.

Other notable collaborations by the artist include:

Common—"The Light"

A Tribe Called Quest—"Ince Again"

Erykah Badu—"Didn't Cha Know?"

Q-Tip—"Let's Ride"

The author also recommends:

A tribute to James Yancey: Volumes 5 and 6 of Madlib's Beat Konducta series

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