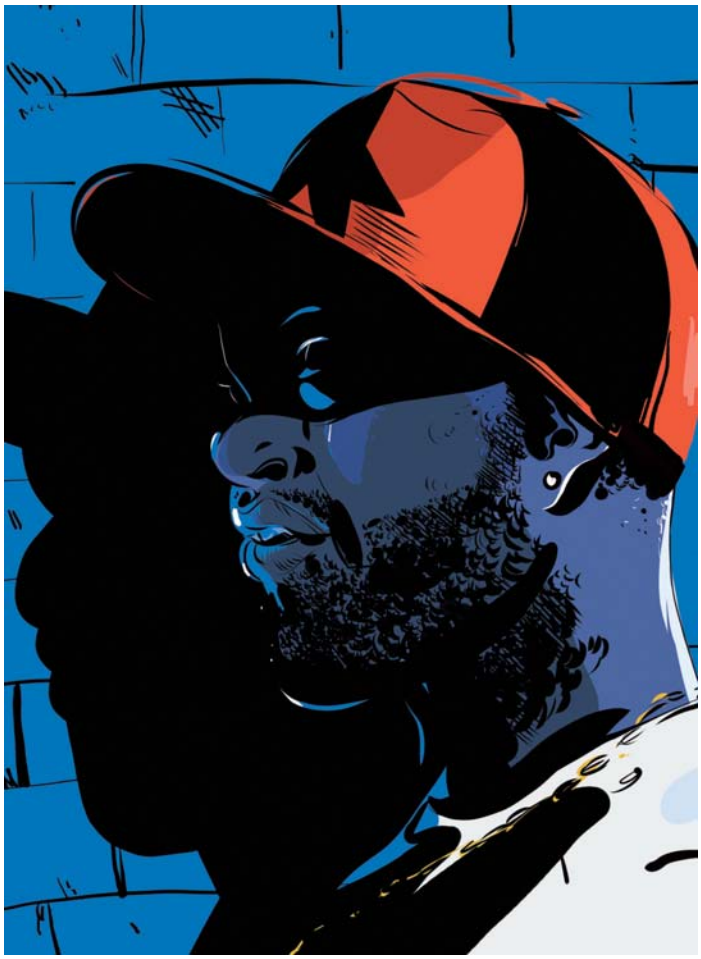
POP MUSIC

LIFECHANGER

A posthumous release complicates J Dilla's legacy.

BY HUA HSU



Among J Dilla's unreleased music, "The Diary" has always been the holy grail.

In December, 2005, the Detroit producer and rapper James Yancey played a series of shows in Europe. Yancey, who went by the names Jay Dee and, in later years, J Dilla, had been battling a rare blood disease, and was repeatedly forced to postpone the tour. He had lost an unsettling amount of weight, and fans on message boards described him as looking emaciated and weak, requiring assistance to move about, and rapping while seated in a wheelchair. Some commenters questioned the wisdom of his playing the shows at all. A German d.j. called Deckstarr read these threads as he prepared to open for Yancey in Düsseldorf. He had been waiting years for the chance to see Yancey live and wanted to express his gratitude, so he had a T-shirt made that read "J Dilla Changed My Life."

The Düsseldorf show was one of Yancey's final performances. The following February, on his thirty-second birthday, he released "Donuts," a patchwork of short, bewitching instrumental sketches built on familiar soul samples. Three days later, he died, of cardiac arrest. The coincidence cast a spooky aura over "Donuts," which was reinforced by the album's restless, desperate energy. Songs changed speeds for no apparent reason, giving the impression of someone trying to tame the ebb of time. Yancey wrestled with a tiny fragment of a sample until he had wrung all the soul from it. The last track looped a few words about becoming "a better man," from "When I Die," a 1969 hit by the rock band Motherlode. "Donuts" seemed to be Yancey's final stand against an inevitable fate.

Yancey also left behind hundreds of hours of unreleased music. For fans, these unheard beats have great importance, giving insight into their hero's creative process. But for his family and his former collaborators the trove has posed practical questions. There have been contentious battles not only over the material but over the legal rights to use the Dilla name. In the decade since his death, Yancey has become even more renowned. To meet the growing demand of fans—and to stanch the flow of bootleggers—there has been a steady stream of posthumous releases, some of which promise little more than deluxe packaging. Portions of Yancey's record collection were sold on eBay, accompanied by certificates of authenticity signed by his mother. Every year, his birthday is marked by "Dilla Day" celebrations around the world, featuring doughnuts. A consensus has formed around Yancey's exalted place in the hip-hop pantheon, thanks largely to an international fan base that holds him up as a symbol of purity, consciousness, and craft. You can now buy your own version of Deckstarr's shirt from any number of Dilla-themed Web sites.

Within this archive of unreleased music, the holy grail has always been a solo album that Yancey recorded in the early two-thousands for the major label MCA. This week, his estate will finally release a version of the album, with the title "The Diary." The story of "The Diary" is a microcosm of Yancey's entire career, and a metaphor for his unusual sense of timing. Born in Detroit in 1974, Yancey grew up in a family of musicians and record collectors. He apprenticed with Joseph (Amp) Fiddler, a legendary local funk musician who inspired him to master the art of sampling. While Yancey was influenced by the resounding symmetry of nineteen-nineties East Coast hip-hop, everything he produced sounded a little off. He would chop up a sturdy bass line until

ILLUSTRATION BY WESLEY ALLSBROOK

it became gummy and woozy; his snares and kick drums came in a fraction of a second later than you expected. But rhythm could be found elsewhere: the speckle and dust of old vinyl, a hypnotically looped doo-wop refrain, even an occasional hit of silence. It's a tipsy style that demanded a willingness, on the part of the rappers he worked with, to sound slightly offbeat themselves.

Yancey's minimalist approach was initially divisive. But in the mid-nineties, at the behest of Fiddler, the m.c. Q-Tip, of A Tribe Called Quest, became a mentor to Yancey. It felt like an anointment, not just of Yancey but of his group, Slum Village. Fellow-producers found his style invigorating, but his influence on such beloved groups as Tribe and the Pharcyde confused many of their longtime fans. In the late nineties, a Yancey beat was like a litmus test: you either got it or you wondered where the rest of it was. After leaving Slum Village, Yancey eventually built a successful career as a freelance producer, making tracks and remixes for artists like Janet Jackson, Busta Rhymes, and Daft Punk. He also became a central figure in the earthy late-nineties scene known as the Soulquarians, which revolved around the Roots, D'Angelo, Common, and Erykah Badu.

It's not hard to imagine why MCA shelved "The Diary." Known for his production work with artists who seemed earnest and socially conscious, Yancey had made an album that featured his brash, fantastical raps over other people's beats. "Born and raised in the D and hold big fuckin' warrior balls," he boasts on "The Introduction," lagging a hair behind the producer House Shoes' sinister synth pattern. Throughout the record, Yancey seems bent on defying expectations. "Trucks" ranks among rap's great songs about aggressively showy cars, while on "The Shining Pt. 2" he riffs off an old N.W.A. lyric, rapping, "It's plain to see / You can't change me / Cause I'mma be this nigga with ice." Compared with the understated elegance of his work with the Soulquarians, the beats on "The Diary" are grimy and adventurous, from the funk thrash of "Drive Me Wild" to the spacey wobble of "Gangsta Boogie." The speeded-up vocal sample of "So Far" seems to anticipate Kanye West's early work. (West, who once likened Yancey's death to that of Steve Jobs, actually contributed to an early version of "The Diary.") The best moment is on "Fuck the Police," as Yancey, fed up with being stopped and frisked, sprints across a martial drumbeat, drawing a sense of desperate rebellion out of a seesawing early-seventies violin sample.

Overseen and, in the case of some songs, completed by Yancey's family and the revived Pay Jay label, "The Diary" adds texture to the musician's sensibility. Yancey has long been celebrated as a symbol of bygone values—as a purist victim of hip-hop's drift toward crass materialism. But the ethical division between a valiant underground and the bad, old mainstream was always exaggerated, and "The Diary" depicts a man who was as comfortable fantasizing about strippers and ice as he was losing himself in his basement full of old records. Put another way: Yancey heard the world differently.

MCA eventually released him from his contract, and Yancey moved to Los Angeles. Despite spending a significant portion of his final years in the hospital, undergoing treatment for kidney failure, he never stopped working. He set up a sampler next to his hospital bed and dispatched his mother to buy records for him at a nearby store. Friends who were on his European tour say that Yancey was so weak that he received dialysis between gigs. Otherwise, he was in his hotel room, making beats.

Maybe the quality we admire most in Yancey is his single-mindedness, his absorption in making music. We want to believe that if we were facing imminent death we, too, could disappear into the grooves of a record. That's what I'd like to think those T-shirts mean, and why the longest part of Yancey's Wikipedia page is the list of posthumous tributes, which range from Drake to a sixty-piece orchestra. We want to understand what Yancey heard. Anyone who's bashed away at a sampler trying to make a beat knows that it's fairly easy to find a fragment that might sound good as a continuous loop. But hearing the possibilities in mere haze and static? Hearing a future when you don't have one yourself? For Yancey, every song was an anagram, old words waiting to be rewritten into new myths. ♦