Dilla Time: Dan Charnas and Fred Hosken, in conversation

Dan Charnas

NYU Tisch School of the Arts

dcharnas@nyu.edu

Fred Hosken

Butler University

fhosken@butler.edu

Journalist, producer, professor, and hip-hop storyteller Dan Charnas's 2023 book *Dilla Time: The Life and Afterlife of J Dilla, The Hip-Hop Producer Who Reinvented Rhythm* is a rich biography of James Yancey, a man who was the bedrock of a highly influential hip-hop sound and whose life and artistry has been sanctified and mythologized since his tragically premature death in 2006. Charnas sets the record straight in *Dilla Time*, providing a balanced account of a complex artist that is supported by rigorous and diligent interviews, told by someone who was a part of the scene and who cares deeply about the music. Intrinsically interwoven throughout this life story is an engagement with the *sound* and *craft* of Dilla's music. As an analyst of Dilla's music myself, I was very grateful when Dan accepted my invitation to have a conversation about the book with a focus on getting inside the music, hearing how someone close to the art and the people who made the art understands it.

Fred Hosken: *Could you introduce us to J Dilla and why his music and musical philosophy are so important?*

Dan Charnas: J Dilla was, on one level, a hip-hop producer, circa the 1990s and early 2000s from Detroit. He was, in many ways discovered by another producer/artist Q-Tip from A Tribe Called Quest in 1994. The way that I like to

think about hip-hop musicality and hip-hop production, from the late 80s, to the early 90s, is that they were kind of two schools: The primary school for a while was what I will call "beats plus noise," right. The idea of, you know, putting a track together, that was essentially a collage of different samples […] was to get rhythm, right, but also to play with noise and texture. It was Q-Tip really who helped to pioneer this other approach, which I'll call beats, plus beauty. Q-Tip's approach was more about incorporating samples that contain harmonic and melodic information, which is very much in contrast to say what The Bomb Squad were doing with Public Enemy at the time. Folks like Q-Tip, folks like Prince Paul, folks like DJ Premier to a certain extent, Jazzy Jeff […] and definitely Pete Rock were all part of this group of crate diggers. This is really when the whole term "crate digging" got started, you're not just digging for "hey, let's get some drums or drums and bass," or "let's use this really crazy saxophone sound that sounds like a siren." It really became about the musicality of it all. And that's when the catalog, the deep catalog of soul jazz, and straight-ahead jazz, and other kinds of music, in fact, begin to be really, really mined. And when Q-Tip found James [Yancey aka J Dilla], in Detroit in '94, that's what he heard in the initial demo that James gave him, sort of a kindred musical spirit. But as it turned out, James was taking this mode of music making even further, even in a more progressive direction. And obviously, what this is all leading up to is the fact that Dilla, more than any of his contemporaries, really wanted to play with time, and with the sound of error.

Fred: *What is your specific relationship to this music? What made you feel you needed to write this book?*

Dan: Well, anger mostly that there was a lot of writing about Dilla but none of it musically correct. As a musician and a beat maker, I knew the way that these machines worked. And I had listened enough to Dilla over the course of years, from working with him back in 1999, to know that it wasn't simply about him not quantizing or turning off the timing correct functions of the drum machine.
James as a producer, more than his contemporaries, devised ways to play with time and play with error, and the one that gets talked about the most is turning off the quantize function. But there were two other techniques that he devised: The second being to work with the timing of samples, and in particular, to decelerate his sample sources to evoke and bring out and magnify human error. And the third being the most important: He actually used the timing functions of the MPC machine [MIDI Production Center by Akai] to displace elements and set them in conflict with each other. All that is to say, the impetus that I had to write the book was that so much of the discourse about Dilla was "oh, he was a drummer who played a drum machine." And "he evoked a real humanity out of the drum machine." And "he just turned off the timing functions of the computer like Luke Skywalker turned off his targeting computer and Star Wars and just use the Force." And it's not true! It's just not true. He actually did use the machine to create a sound that no human had ever made before. And so, what started as the idea of writing a little science book, about Dilla's music morphed into a kind of grand biography of not just at him, but of rhythm, of Detroit, and all these things. But mostly because of that initial impetus,

like, you know, they're getting it all wrong, and I need to set it right. And maybe that's a bit of my Virgo nature.

Fred: *But I hear that frustration. And I think what this book does so nicely is it interweaves biography, with musical analysis. It really does get its fingers in the crates and into the sounds. You wrote your analysis with the help of Jeff Peretz. Can you talk a little bit more about that collaboration and what roles music analysis plays in telling this story?*

Dan: Yeah, Jeff and I are colleagues at the Clive Davis Institute [of Recorded Music at NYU Tisch]. Jeff is in charge of the musicianship area. So he is the person who coaches every student who comes through on their playing. He's a master of music theory, but one of the reasons I like his pedagogy is that he's able to really help young people, any people, understand music theory in the simplest terms. And even before I taught my course on Dilla, when I started teaching the concept of "Dilla Time" in my pop music history course in like 2015/2016, I would talk to him. We just had conversations and he really validated that stuff, and helped me to understand how he perceived what Dilla was doing from his music theory background. And so, these conversations happened while I was teaching the course. And then, when I decided to write this as a book, the way that Jeff portrayed rhythm on the page is using the sort of blocks of time that were really evocative. And the idea of using blocks and grids to sort of show the difference between straight and swung, that's Jeff. What I did was took that system and used it to create diagrams that would be evocative and portray what was really going on, rhythmically. And then Jeff, in the course of writing the book, you know, read everything and basically helped validate some of the research, some of the things that I was thinking and observing. And that enabled me to be much more accurate about what I was doing with that.

Fred: *Just to add a little piece of context, I am pursuing my own research project analyzing J Dilla's collection of beats called* Another Batch. *I'm doing computational analyses of each rhythmic aspect of it to really get deep into the weeds of these details. And it's beautiful reading this book because there's this synergy. But also, it shows the multiplicity going on. So, for example, when I've done computational analyses, I have found that the snare drum back beats are the anchor of most of his grooves, they are cracking out beats two and four, really holding down the fort. In your book, however, you actually refer a lot to rushing snares. I don't think either of us are wrong. I think this shows the sort of beauty and dynamicity of listening to this music: We can align ourselves differently to the music, we can experience it as pushing, pulling, dragging, limping, etc., depending on which layers of the track we're actually aligning ourselves to. And you actually get into some of this towards the end of the book when you draw on work by people like Anne Danielson and the Norwegian RITMO crew.*

Have you had much reader engagement with the more music theoretic aspects? Because this is more of a piece of public musicology or public music theory. How have you threaded the needle of engaging the public while being specific and technical?

Dan: Well, I think part of it is just being a good academic and a good journalist, right? I think the most important thing is to read and to try to understand, and to report, and to speak to people. I spoke to and read Danielsen's work and really tried to understand where her work sat in the larger field of what came to be called "microrhythm," and really was actually able to trace it back to Vijay Iyer of all people as sort of the first known use of the term "microrhythmic." And it was kind of lovely to see this understanding grow. But also to know that there were gaps in the knowledge. It's okay, it's great to analyze *Voodoo* and to analyze Common, and Karriem, and The Roots, but to not know where this stuff actually came from, that was the part that was missing. So, what I am mostly is a synthesist, right? I can take diverse pieces of information, and weave them into a narrative. So no, I'm not a musicologist and this wasn't a work for musicologist, but I felt like I had the duty and I guess the ability to speak to both of those audiences, because I don't underestimate my reader. Nor do I feel I have to speak in jargon to speak to professionals in a discipline.

Fred: *I think that's so real. I think it's important to trust your reader, isn't it?*
Just thinking of the technical aspects that you go through, you gave that list of three components that sort of build up Dilla Time, but do you think it's actually possible to replicate Dilla Time? You know, you give us this sort of extended recipe at one point in the book (153), and then you in your history, you talk about people like Questlove, D'Angelo, the Soulquarians etc., playing instruments in ways that were heavily inspired by him. And you also follow the threads to the future where we've got artists like Hiatus Kaiyote, who really studied these records are created their own takes. But do you believe it's a case where we can only get close? There's a sort of authenticity piece. And to get a bit wild with it, in a world of machine learning, do you think we could get a "DillaGPT"?

Dan: Well, it sounds like you're talking about two different things, but I want to tease those two things apart. When you talk about replicating Dilla Time, you started by talking about musicians replicating it. Human beings. But then you shifted back to the machines. So, I want to be clear, yes, it is definitely possible to replicate Dilla Time on a machine because it is machine native. There actually are formulae that he used. I've seen the actual programming that he did on MPC discs. And there were things that he did with the hi-hats, some things that he'd do with the snares that come up again and again. So it was very clear that people could do that, because people started doing it almost as soon as he started doing it. Hi-Tek figured out how to do it. And Ivan Barias. And the folks at Jazzy Jeff's studio in Philly figured out how to do it.

As far as human beings, it's harder. Because drummers don't really count what they're doing in percentages, swing percentages. They can't step their right hand back three clicks in time. There's no time shift for your right arm. So they develop shortcuts. And one of those shortcuts is, for example, when Nate Smith tries to replicate that Dilla feeling, what he does is he counts in sevens: Onetwothreefourfivesixseven. Onetwothreefourfivesixseven. So septuplets. And he

puts both the kick and the snare back a septuplet against the hi-hat, which is essentially on beat. Ahmir Thompson, Questlove, conceives of in a different way. His is more feeling like "I'm playing 12/8, but I'm thinking 4/4." I don't know how Chris Dave does it. Now I'm kicking myself because I was with him about a couple of weeks ago, and I didn't ask. There are lots of different ways that drummers can approach how they do this. It will never actually be machine time because you're not machines. But absolutely AI can do it. And I know for a fact that there are people at Ableton, people who are doing plugins and things like that, "here's how to get your Dilla feel." And of course, the great thing about Dilla is that it wasn't just that, it wasn't any one thing that he did, he had lots of different techniques. And there was a humanity to what he did beyond a formula. But then there's the sort of "open-source code" of rhythm. I had kind of a debate with a friend about this the other day, like, so pissed that people started copying Dilla style. It's like, it's too big an idea. Yes, he was the pioneer of it. But once that rhythmic cat is out of the bag, it's just too big to own. What we can do as historians and academics is to source it, to point back to it. And I felt like that's what I needed to do especially for the musicology and ethnomusicology bunch. But also, even for, you know, people in the jazz world or you know, or in the production world who were just using words like "wonky grooves," it just felt very ahistorical. So I had no idea whether my book or that term would have any impact, but it took a real big swing, so to speak.

Fred: *Yeah, I completely agree. I think it is having that effect. There are countless YouTube videos of how to get your Dilla feel and what they do is they just select the snares and press the left arrow key three times and say "tada." But you do see commenters in the YouTube section being like "have you seen this book actually? They talk a bit more about because it is an element, perhaps a central element, but it is this multidimensional thing." And a to refer back to the Norwegian research group led by Anne Danielsen, they have showed the perceptual beginning of a sound, its "P-center," varies so much depending on context, depending on instrument. So to slap the left arrow three times will vary completely depending if you're looking at like a squelchy bass or a sharp snare sound, these things have completely different impacts on the holistic experience.*

Dan: Yeah. And I think it's filtering through to the next crop of musicians.

Fred: *At one point early in the book, you talk about Questlove calling Dilla "the musician's musician's musician" (xi), and you talk about how he creates a radical shift in how musicians perceive time. But what do you think your deep dive into Dilla and your challenge to the received wisdom does for the "normal" (in heavy quotes) listeners? And maybe to ground this, what have you seen in your students when you've taught them how to listen clearly to Dilla's music?*

Dan: You know, I wouldn't be teaching Dilla if it hadn't been for my students. In other words, the students asked for it, because the students are, and these are folks who were barely sentient when Dilla was still alive, they were very young. But a generation was sort of really adoring him and feeling him. And I think they understood, instinctively, that this was important, and sourced to him, but they didn't have the language or the analysis to do it. What I was able to do for them

was to put things in clear language, to help folks understand what this music was. And then over the course of these Dilla classes that we did, to really actually listen to how this stuff plays out. That's what happens when you give attention to something. You're also talking about a music that was made by somebody who had one of the most prodigious attentions, so to speak, of any musician ever. And I think that's why Questlove said what he said. I also think part of the reason Questlove languages it that way, is that, I like him, want to bring dignity to the programmer. A programmer is a musician, especially in the hip-hop context. And there are musicians who do not have 1/194th of a quarter note of the musicianship, and the musicality that Dilla had. If you ever listen to his remix of Carl Craig's remake of "People Make The World Go Round," you can hear how he thinks as a musician. And he thinks these beautiful thoughts. And he expresses them largely through the machine in ways that many creative people who work these machines even his mentor Q-Tip did not think to do. James was brave and relentless. I was a producer for many years and just never approached the courage that he had to break free, to pay attention like he did.

Fred: *To close us out, what's next for you? And what's next for your work on J Dilla?*

Dan: There's a documentary coming that I'm part of the creative team on [*Dilla Time*, produced by Questlove]. There is a dramatic interpolation coming as a film, I believe. And, you know, as far as the research is concerned, I hope to be working on a project that involves Dilla's actual code, like his actual programming.

References

Charnas, D. 2023. *Dilla Time: The Life and Afterlife of J Dilla, The Hip-Hop Producer Who Reinvented Rhythm*. MCD Picador, Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, New York.