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BOOK REVIEWS

DILLA TIME: THE LIFE AND AFTERLIFE OF J DILLA, THE HIP-HOP PRODUCER WHO REINVENTED RHYTHM, DAN CHARNAS (2022)

New York: MCD and Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 458 pp.,
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A careful, comprehensive portrayal of the life and work of one of hip hop's most innovative and influential producers, Dan Charnas's *Dilla Time* (2022) offers a much needed contribution to the literature on rap music. But the book also aims to instigate a wider appreciation of James ('Jay Dee'/'J Dilla') Yancey's signature approach and historic import. In Charnas's estimation, 'Dilla time' is, indeed, bigger than hip hop, for Yancey's unique approach to beat programming served to 'fundamentally change the way so-called traditional musicians play' and inaugurated a 'radical shift in how musicians perceive time' (xii). These are big, bold claims, and in making them *Dilla Time* represents something more than the most diligent portrait of a hip hop producer to date. Charnas mounts a compelling case that Dilla's trademark time-feel is better understood as a profound contribution to the musical world writ large – a revolution in rhythm on the order of Louis Armstrong's impeccable swing or James Brown's straight-sixteenth funk.

Hip hop scholars and enthusiasts should be familiar with Charnas as the author of *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop* (2010), an epic chronicle of how artists and entrepreneurs, labels and moguls, and even scrappy journalists and 'A&R men' like himself, transformed hip hop from DIY local culture into a billion-dollar global industry. (Questlove called it 'the hip-hop Bible' when hosting Charnas on his podcast.) Or perhaps they know his work through VH1's *The Breaks*, a series inspired by *The Big Payback* (and co-written by Charnas). Beginning his writing career at *The Source* in the early 1990s with cover stories on LL Cool J, Ice Cube and Public Enemy, Charnas spent the 1990s and early 2000s promoting and producing rap records for

such labels as Profile and Rick Rubin's American Recordings before returning to journalism. Charnas interacted professionally and directly with Yancey way back in 1999, travelling to Detroit to line up a collaboration between the producer and Chino XL. Since 2013, he has taught classes on popular music history and writing – and since 2017, an entire class on Dilla – at the Clive Davis Institute at New York University.

For his latest book, Charnas leverages his experience as a teacher and producer, extended industry network and formidable journalism chops honed at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism after leaving the music business. The product of four years of research and nearly 200 interviews, *Dilla Time* is rigorously reported, including an appendix of over twenty pages of 'Reporter's notes and sources' (401–22). At 450+ pages, even with a readability that puts most academic writing to shame, the book may frustrate attempts to read or teach it, and the author's admirable efforts to adjudicate various disputes over credit and ownership can distract from more central threads. Charnas makes the task of navigating the tome a little easier by partitioning the narrative, with some chapters more focused on Yancey's biography and others explicating Dilla's musical gifts to the world. While a slimmer volume might have done Yancey's legacy equal justice, Charnas reports this one all the way out to highlight the contexts, communities and circumstances that shaped Dilla's trajectory. What emerges is a commitment to portraying James Yancey not simply as a pioneering producer but as a complicated human being whose *sui generis* musical voice was forged in social, cultural and personal history. In this sense, *Dilla Time* belongs in the company of such monumental biographies of musicians as Robin D. G. Kelley on Thelonious Monk (2010), John Szwed on Sun Ra (1997) or David Katz on Lee 'Scratch' Perry (2000).

What will no doubt resonate in music studies and among musicians and students is Charnas's bold contention, argued thoroughly and fairly persuasively, that Dilla developed a new sense of musical time, a new rhythm for the people very much of its own zeitgeist: i.e., the age of (drum) machines. *Dilla Time* acquaints the reader with Yancey as the studious, deliberate programmer of his trademark time-feel, collaborating with the clocks of the digital samplers he used to produce rhythmic textures that beguilingly mix straight time, swing and microscopically shifted accents in ways that no humans (or machines) had done before. Debunking the common trope, celebratory as it may be, that Yancey achieved his distinctive style simply by turning off quantization and playing by inspired 'feel', Charnas shows how Dilla's sound is, in fact, one that purposefully exploits quantization – such as the ability to assign different degrees of swing to each track – in order to produce music that sounds at once machinic and organic. Throughout the book Charnas depicts musical concepts, technical features of drum machines and Dilla's distinctive arrangements using simple, clear illustrations. Produced in tandem with NYU colleague Jeff Peretz, the figures look more like the grids of audio sequencing software than traditional notation and seem less likely to obfuscate what they aim to illuminate. A snare shifted by a hair or a kick swinging slightly harder than a hi-hat are more easily visualized and read on a grid. Some charts are accompanied by clap-along exercises that can help readers get into the musical nitty-gritty. These lightly pedagogical moments include lessons on syncopation, swung time vs. straight time, swing percentages and the intricacies of MPC programming.

The overarching goal of making Dilla's conceptual innovations more accessible to readers is one of the book's great strengths and something all

hip hop books should try to do: to appeal as widely as the music does. In this way, *Dilla Time* belongs to a special class of engaging, deeply informative hip hop histories written by journalists whose research is informed directly by dozens if not hundreds of interviews: Brian Cross's *It's Not About a Salary* (1994), Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop* (2005), Brian Coleman's *Check the Technique* (2007). At the same time, Charnas is right to situate the book's central musical claims within ongoing and growing musicological discussions of 'microtiming' and other rhythmic nuances that have been too often overlooked. Offering a brief genealogy of the academic literature, Charnas cites composer and musicologist Olly Wilson, whose concept of 'rhythmic contrast' (1974) as an African American aesthetic ideal makes space for 'Dilla time', as well as ethnomusicologist Charles Keil, who theorized that subtle 'participant discrepancies' (measured in milliseconds) are what produce our sense of groove (1987). Charnas also queries more recent work on 'microrhythm' by Vijay Iyer (1998), who grounds the aesthetic in collective participation, and Anne Danielson (2006, 2010), who brings the concept to analyses of the grooves of James Brown and D'Angelo. Ironically, Charnas notes that Dilla's legacy looms large in Danielson's 2010 volume, though Yancey's name appears only in a footnote – an echo of the erasure that surfaces in the book's account of the producer's struggle to be recognized for his innovations as admiring peers swiftly embraced and absorbed them. Subsequent musicological work has already begun to acknowledge Dilla's increasingly mythical (and mystified) role as the progenitor and popularizer of so-called 'off-grid' and 'lo-fi' beats (D'Errico 2015; Winston and Saywood 2019). Notably, these pre-*Dilla Time* studies tend to reproduce the misleading 'free hand' theory of Yancey's approach, while other recent attempts to make sense of Dilla time involve such notation-friendly abstractions and approximations as 'septuplet swing' (Ludlow 2018); Charnas's more precise catalogue of Dilla's time-warping techniques offers a corrective that should better guide future research.

If musicological scholarship has tended to dismiss or misinterpret certain rhythmic nuances, have we been attending closely enough to know how 'new' Dilla time really is? The nod to Iyer's work on microtiming in African American music, which cites all manner of pre-Dilla examples, both buttresses and complicates Charnas's contention about Dilla's place in the pantheon. Key to the claim, of course, since there is little under the musical sun that is never been done, is that Dilla time – at least initially – required machines, if ingeniously programmed ones, to make. Dilla's genius lay in the way he could fashion a radically new feel by combining already established approaches – swung and straight time, flams and shifts, contrasting degrees of swing – in a way that no one else yet had. Charnas does not shy from the evidence of various time-wise forebears, but instead uses them to split important musical hairs. Erroll Garner did not have such machines, for instance, but Charnas notes that the pianist was known for his ability to drag behind the beat with one hand while pushing it with the other. Prince did have such machines, notably Roger Linn's LM-1 (the predecessor to Dilla's beloved MPC), and Charnas explains that Prince would hybridize his own music's feel by adding subtly swinging percussion over the drum machine's rigid stomp. But none of these equations add up to Dilla time, and when virtuosos like Questlove and Robert Glasper were inspired by Dilla's beats to try playing live with other musicians in this new way, the style was neither easy to learn nor immediately understood by colleagues.

Ultimately, Charnas does not flinch in crowning Dilla 'the Producer who Reinvented Rhythm'. Whether readers, scholars and musicians are persuaded, the book offers plenty to consider and to appreciate. To place Dilla's achievements into context, Charnas offers excellent primers on the social and musical history of Detroit, early hip hop, and among other crucial topics, the technical specifications of Roger Linn's popular drum machines. One mind-blowing gem from that potted history is when Charnas reveals that the original clap sample on the LM-1 is a recording of Tom Petty and his band, done as a favour to Linn during some studio downtime. The author reminds us that those claps, detuned to the max, became a sonic signpost for Prince – or in Charnas's more poetic turn: 'Few besides Roger Linn knew that when they heard that trademark "Prince clap sound", they were really hearing Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers put their hands together in slow motion' (85). Over the course of telling Yancey's story, and especially in the final chapter ('Descendants/disciplines'), Charnas also illuminates the producer's wide and expanding sphere of influence, moving outward from hip hop to R&B/neo-soul to all manner of jazz, pop and electronic music. The list is long, even when abbreviated: The Pharcyde and A Tribe Called Quest; D'Angelo, The Roots, Erykah Badu and the Soulquarians; Robert Glasper, Jason Moran, Karriem Riggins, Berklee's 'Dilla Ensemble'; Flying Lotus, Jacob Collier, Hiatus Kaiyote, Kendrick Lamar; and the endless, practically anonymous 'lo-fi beats' that seem to issue directly from YouTube's algorithmic soup. The remarkably broad resonance of Dilla's tricky time-feel is another reason the book feels right on time.

While making room for research that reaches into realms well beyond the world of rap music, *Dilla Time* gives hip hop studies plenty to build on. Even accepting that Yancey's achievements are extraordinary, there are countless producers whose life stories and distinctive approaches merit their own exegesis. *Dilla Time* stands at once as an archive and argument in its own right and as a model for how others can contribute – not just to a greater understanding of this thing called hip hop, but to hearing big questions in the little details of all the beats, rhymes and life. Hip hop artists, fans, journalists and scholars have long argued that the genre cannot be judged according to external musical standards but must be evaluated on its own terms. *Dilla Time* cleverly flips the script, proposing that hip hop's own native tongues can shift the global conversation.

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