

## The Tragedy of J Dilla

Lead:

J Dilla was a well-respected record producer and rapper in the 90s and 2000s...

But sadly, it wasn't until TRAGEDY struck that his name was held up as one of the most important in the genre...

And you'll never believe what happened to him...

Main script:

J Dilla was born James Dewitt Yancey in Detroit, Michigan in 1974...

Being born in a city with such an INCREDIBLE musical history was probably a good start for J Dilla...

Coupled with the fact that his parents were both musicians, it looked like his eventual music career was kind of inevitable...

His mother was a former opera singer and his father was a jazz bassist...

J Dilla's mom actually said that he could match pitch-perfect harmony before he even learned to talk...

So, music was in his life from day one...

One of the many genres that interested him was rap...

This is how he befriended classmates T3 and Baatin, with whom he would go on to form the rap group Slum Village...

Around this time, J Dilla also started to teach himself how to make beats with a simple tape deck in his basement...

He spent many hours alone as a teenager, trying to hone his craft...

Eventually, he came to the attention of keyboardist and producer J Amp Fiddler...

Amp acted as a mentor for J Dilla, and even let him practice his skills on Amp's own MPC workstation...

Amp later said that J Dilla learned how to use the sampler AMAZINGLY quickly...

He apparently loved discovering every new technique that Amp showed him...

It was through Amp that J Dilla first met Q-Tip... And this would lead to the first big break in his career...

J Dilla showed Q-Tip a demo CD that he'd made with his friends from Slum Village...

And because of this, just a couple of years later, Q-Tip asked J Dilla to join his production collective *The Ummah*...

Before then, J Dilla actually started making his own way in music...

He produced The Pharcyde's Labcabin-california album in 1995...

This follow-up to the group's debut was a slight commercial disappointment with some mixed reviews...

However, in the years since its release, it's actually received critical acclaim...

And honestly, that was how it was for a lot of J Dilla's work...

He continued to make music that was well known in the alternative hip hop community...

And he even worked with some of the most celebrated artists of the era...

... including Erykah Badu, D'Angelo, Common, De La Soul, and Busta Rhymes...

All of his work on their respective albums was met with high praise for its unique style...

But he rarely broke through into mainstream success...

His view on this, however, may be SURPRISING when compared to other producers and rappers...

He always cared more about the music than any fame it might bring him...

As The New York Times put it years later, he loved abstract, smudgy basslines, woozy samples, and tricky rhythms...

Which led him to work with rappers less likely to put out smash radio hits...

Famously a perfectionist, he would work tirelessly on a beat to try and find that balance in the rhythms of the samples he layered over his tracks...

And one of his most enduring innovations was his removal of the quantize function on his MPC workstation...

This function was used by producers to make sure all their samples could be tied to the beat of the underlying track...

J Dilla would borrow from a wide array of genres, like jazz, soul, and funk, and play them over his hip hop beat...

And he would DELIBERATELY not allow the quantize function to keep his varied rhythms stuck on the beat...

Music critics have described this as producing a uniquely warm and retro quality in the sounds he created...

Drum kicks and hats would arrive sooner or later than expected, making them sound kind of off-kilter...

But that's not to say that J Dilla didn't put them EXACTLY where he wanted to...

He was, again, a perfectionist, and would do whatever it took to get the precise sound he wanted on each track...

Even if his methods sometimes seemed a little CRAZY...

In a 2012 interview with XXL, Questlove talked about one unusual sight he'd witnessed...

When he looked at a drum kit J Dilla had recorded with the night before, he said it was the dirtiest kit he'd ever seen...

It was worse than second-hand, according to Questlove... It was missing some screws and was even broken in places...

It actually looked like something from the junkyard...

And his drumstick was broken and re-tied with rubber bands and TOILET PAPER...

But J Dilla did all of this on purpose to give him the exact sound he wanted on his recording...

Which is honestly an INSANE level of thought that most musicians just wouldn't put into their work...

The new millennium actually brought more success to J Dilla...

Together with Slum Village, he released their first major label album, *Fantastic, Vol. 2*...

This was a redo of an album that had been well known in hip hop's underground scene since 1997...

He was also one of the founders of the experimental *Soulquarians* collective...

As part of this, he also worked on albums for Common, D'Angelo, and Erykah Badu...

His work on Common's album *Like Water For Chocolate* helped bring him to the masses...

And J Dilla was actually nominated for 2 Grammys in 2001 and 2002...

One Grammy was for Common's hit single *The Light*, and the other one was for Erykah's song *Didn't Cha Know*...

His second nomination came in February 2002 at the 43rd Annual Grammy Awards...

And it should have been a happy time for J Dilla...

But just a month before the awards, a HEARTBREAKING story was starting to take shape...

J Dilla came back from a gig in Europe in January 2002 with what he thought were flu symptoms...

Instead of going home, he decided to stay with his mother in Detroit...

When his symptoms worsened, she took him to the emergency room at Bon Secours Hospital...

And what the doctor told J Dilla was DEVASTATING...

A specialist had to be brought in to find out what was wrong with him...

J Dilla was diagnosed with a rare blood disease called TTP, which causes a low blood platelet count...



A healthy person should have a count of between 140 and 180...

J Dilla's count was less than 10...

Essentially, his healthy blood cells were being eaten away...

He was told that there was no cure...

Over the next 4 years, J Dilla would be in and out of the hospital, sometimes staying there for WEEKS...

But even through this HORRIBLE suffering, J Dilla was still focused on music...

He left Michigan for LA in 2004, where he stayed with Common while working on another album...

The album would eventually become known as *Champion Sound*, which he made in collaboration with Madlib...

It was very well received, and it even made it onto SEVERAL end-of-year lists...

And it was also voted one of the best indie hip hop albums of ALL TIME...

After this, however, J Dilla's declining health slowed down his musical output...

As well TTP, he'd also been diagnosed with lupus...

And by 2005, he was using a wheelchair...

Up until this point, he'd tried to deny the rumors that he was sick...

But by this point, the financial burden of his lengthy hospital stays was starting to become INSANE...

According to a 2006 article in the Detroit Free Press, each extended visit came with a bill topping \$200,000...

His mother took over the responsibility of paying for J Dilla's treatment...

However, he showed no signs of improvement...

But even with things looking so hopeless, J Dilla had one more thing he had to finish...

On his 32nd birthday, February 7th 2006, he revealed his last album, *Donuts*...

It was a compilation of some new instrumentals he'd made using his record player and sampler...

Almost all of the tracks were recorded in J Dilla's hospital room...

He passed away just 3 days later...

Since then, everyone's been praising and celebrating J Dilla and his work...

His fresh approach to sampling and production has been called the most innovative influence on rap and pop music in a generation...

And the industry's biggest names all list him as an inspiration...

He's influenced A LOT of artists... from Kanye West to Pharell Williams...

And his friend Questlove considered him the world's greatest drummer, and said he invented what we call neo-soul...

His estimated 150 unreleased tracks have led to a CRAZY number of posthumous albums keeping him relevant...

And they also contributed to him being credited as the godfather of lofi hip hop...

His legacy and cultural significance are UNDENIABLE...

But the tragedy of what more he could've done had he had more time will stay with us forever...

Anyway, what do you guys think?

Did you know how much influence J Dilla had on hip hop?

And what's your favorite album of his?

Let me know in the comments below...