

Sidedoor: S02E13 – This One’s for Dilla

This is Sidedoor. A podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I’m Tony Cohn.

A few days ago, I saw this YouTube video and I can’t stop thinking about it.

[concert ambi]

At a small, concert venue in Paris, hip-hop fans came out to see the group Frank-N-Dank perform with their friend and collaborator J Dilla on their big European tour.

Frank Nitt: It was smokey and just cram packed; there were people everywhere.

That’s Frank Bush, also known as Frank Nitt. He’s clearly the “Frank” half of Frank n Dank.

Frank Nitt: Paris is always one of those places that when you're in Europe, and for underground hip hop, the hip hop we do, the crowds are always very passionate, and very into it, and basically lose their mind.

This crowd was especially excited to see hip-hop renaissance man J Dilla– a rapper, producer, musician, and beatmaker who’d worked with boatloads of big-name hip-hop artists.

Frank Nitt: They were just extra hyped like the anticipation, it was thick

Before Dilla’s even visible, Frank-n-Dank got on stage to hype up the crowd...

[Video: “Frank-n-Dank and J Dilla’s European Vacation”]

Frank Nitt: Make some noise if you’re ready!

...Not that they really needed it.

[Video: “Frank-n-Dank and J Dilla’s European Vacation”]

Frank Nitt: Say it, say it. Come on. Come on. Come on.

Frank Nitt: Before he has come into the room, it's just the energy in the building is already up to a thousand. And the way it was set up, you had to go through the crowd to get to the stage. So to get Dilla to the stage, he would have had to just walk through the crowd...

Except Dilla couldn't just walk through the crowd, because he was in a wheelchair.

Before the show, people had heard rumors that Dilla had been in and out of the hospital, but no one knew just how sick he was.

Frank Nitt: Like I didn't know he was going to be in a wheelchair until I saw him in London. It's crazy because it's you homie and he in a wheelchair and you know you don't never want to see that and never want to see that unexpectedly.

So even, before he touched the room, the room was already electric. But I will say that when he hit that room. Everybody bottled the electricity moves to the side. They parted like the red sea. I've never seen anything like that in my life. They really were very mindful; there wasn't no commotion; there wasn't any type of things when you try to move large crowds. No, perfect split.

And you can even see this in the video: two guys push Dilla through the crowd and then lift him up onto the stage, wheelchair and all.

Frank Nitt: And then when it happened, they took the cap off the bottle and man people lost their mind again.

[Video: "Frank-n-Dank and J Dilla's European Vacation"]

J Dilla: What up though? What up though?

Under the stage lights, the crowd could finally see him. Dilla was sitting in his wheelchair, covered in baggy clothes from head to toe; he could barely lift the microphone up to this mouth. But still, he showed up, he toured Europe, and he performed for his fans.

Frank Nitt: And that was that and then he rocked out.

In this episode of Sidedoor — we're talking about hip-hop. This is a story about love. And loss. And two surprising objects in the Smithsonian's care.

In other words, this is the story of J Dilla, the most legendary hip-hop producer whose name *might* ring a bell, but many of you probably don't know a lot about him. In a industry that's all about hype and self promotion – J Dilla the man stayed in the shadows while his music got all the attention. We think that should change. So stay tuned.

<<PRE-ROLL BREAK>>

Growing up, I had a lot of interests: tennis, skiing, and also musical theatre. And in case you were wondering, no I'm not a great singer. And no, this is not me trying to get a record deal out of this podcast; this is all to admit that I grew up listening to musicals... not hip-hop. Sure: I know, you know Kanye West, Eminem, Nicki Minaj — they're on the radio. And of course, I know the hip-hop musical, *Hamilton*. But if I was going to do a story about J Dilla, and I was gonna do it right, I had to learn a lot more.

Marcus Moore: My name is Marcus J Moore. I am a music critic and journalist at Pitchfork, NPR, The Atlantic, and The Nation magazines.

Tony: And how long do you think you've been listening to hip hop?

Marcus Moore: I've been listening to it— I'm 36, I've been listening to hip hop probably for 32 years

Marcus is obviously more than just a casual fan. He's made a career out of being a hip-hop expert and helped me to understand the most basic things.

Tony: What is Hip Hop?

Marcus Moore: Hip hop to me is soul music. To me I feel like hip hop is a language; it's a culture; it's not just something that you turn on the radio and you hear. It's a lifestyle. For people like me and my friends, it was something that we came up with and we readily identify with it probably more so than anything else.

Hip-hop's origin is hotly-debated, but the main theory is that, starting in the 70s, people like DJ Kool Herc would take their parents old records – soul music and motown, Jackson 5 and Diana Ross – and give them a new spin... literally.

Marcus Moore: It was it was a movement that started in the Bronx with a series of block parties. And then you had people like Grandmaster Flash and you had Grandmaster Caz who would take these old soul records and they would take these old craftwork records and they would spin them into something new and danceable. They would take the best part of a song, whether it was like a repetitive drum pattern or some sort of noise sample or whatever...

[Music: "Rapper's Delight" by The Sugarhill Gang]

Marcus Moore: ... and they would loop that and turn it into a jam.

And then you had emcees who would introduce the DJs and keep the crowd hyped. The best emcees would talk and joke with the crowds, but at one point, they thought, "Why not talk and rhyme in sync with the music?"

Marcus Moore: And from there you had the first the first wave of MCs who were rap on those brakes.

[Music: "Rapper's Delight" by The Sugarhill Gang]

Marcus Moore: And it took off sooner than later.

So soul music evolved into hip-hop and rap... and then, it started floating across American airwaves westward from New York.

By the 90s, hip-hop was everywhere. On the east coast you had guys like Notorious B.I.G., A Tribe Called Quest, and Nas. And on the west coast you had guys Tupac, Dr. Dre, and Snoop Dog. But what was going on in between the coasts... like in Detroit?

Marcus Moore: At the time Detroit it was an untapped market.

Which is where J Dilla comes into the hip-hop scene... and into our story.

[Music]

James Dewitt Yancey, also known by his stage names Jay Dee, J Dilla, or just Dilla, was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1974. And his family was stocked with talent. His mom sang opera, and his Dad played bass and trained Broadway stars. Really, it was only a matter of time before some of that would rub off on James.

Tony: When did you first know that your son, J Dilla, was a man of talent?

Ma Dukes: Jeez, when he was two. Well, really before that. In his early months, before he was even six-months-old, he could match harmony, perfect pitch.

I got to sit down with J Dilla's mother, Maureen Yancey, or Ma Dukes as she's known by most people in the hip-hop community, at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African-American History and Culture. And I kinda felt like I was in the presence of royalty.

Tony: I'm so excited about this interview. So to begin with, you're a woman with many names. For this interview, what should I call you?

Ma Dukes: Your choice, I'll answer. You could call me Ma Dukes, Maureen, Ms. Yancey, Yancey-Smith... However way.

Tony: Can I have the honor of calling you Ma Dukes?

Ma Dukes: You most certainly can.

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Tony: I feel so honored. Ok...

Everyone who knows about J Dilla, and to an extent many who know hip-hop in general, know Ma Dukes... There’s even a song by Frank-n-Dank that’s dedicated to her. It’s called... what else?... “Ma Dukes.”

[Music: “Ma Dukes” by Frank-n-Dank]

Ma Dukes was around when there was no one else
Three kids in the crib, all by herself
And when things got bad, moms made it new
So I think it's bout time I start praising you

Hip-hop reporter Marcus J. Moore.

Marcus Moore: She was incredibly supportive of him and she just kind of let him discover his art on his own.

Yes, it’s great to have a parent who understands and encourages you. But there’s your typical engaged parent, and then there’s Ma Dukes. She did everything that she could to support Dilla’s career, including letting him transform their basement into a part-time music studio.

Ma Dukes: The basement of the house was as large or larger than the entire home upstairs. It had a huge room that had storage cabinets built into the ceiling around the entire basement, in which Dilla housed records, of course thousands, of records. I mean it went around the entire basement.

But during the weekdays, we had a pact. He used the basement from 6 pm to 6 am; I used the basement from 6 am to 6 pm because I had daycare. I would try to get my parents out of there, and we had to because Dilla would be on point, as if he was punching a clock. And even before that Eminem would be outside waiting.

You heard that right– Eminem, the real Slim Shady Eminem.

[Music: “The Real Slim Shady”]
May I have your attention please?
Will the real Slim Shady please stand up?
I repeat will the real Slim Shady please stand up?
We’re gonna have a problem here.

Yeah, him.

Ma Dukes: Gee, I mean he has sessions with all of the greatest artists right there in their basement

I mean, come on, “producer working out of his mom’s basement” seems like it’d be the butt of a joke. But no. J Dilla worked with the who’s who of the hip-hop world.

Here’s some of the stuff Dilla’s done that you might recognize...

There’s Common— one of his biggest hits is “The Light.” That song was nominated for a Grammy. And it was produced by Dilla.

Erykah Badu’s “Didn’t Cha Know.” Another Grammy nom. Another Dilla production.

“Dynamite,” by The Roots. You guessed it. Produced by Dilla.

So, you get the idea. Dilla worked with everyone. And he did a lot of it while Ma Dukes was trying to sleep upstairs.

Ma Dukes: Even though my head bounced off the pillow at night, because the basement speakers were under my head [laughs]. My bedroom was right there on top of it. And I could remember my head, like feeling like it was bouncing and even though I had to get up in a few hours to open that— have that door ready, and food hot and ready at 6 am, I knew that you know he was doing something that was good for him. He didn't have to be in the streets. He didn't have to worry about all of the other things that go on in deeply urban areas. He was safe.

Like I said... great mom. But J Dilla wasn’t producing for big names overnight. He cut his teeth around Detroit, working with groups like Slum Village and Frank n Dank, and it just went on from there.

Marcus Moore: He was doing it the old fashioned way like he just slowly was making beats in Detroit so... Dilla didn't have like a lightning bolt moment but he had a series of them where his praise sort of bubbled up by word of mouth.

And also, Dilla made a name for himself by working hard... like really, really hard.

Marcus Moore: He was a guy who just kind of kept his head down and just made beats.

James Poyser: He created beats and created music out of out of other records and scraps and things. He would just put it all together and he'd make a stew of sound that was like, “Wait a minute you did what? OK.”

That's musician James Poyser.

James Poyser: He was funky.

James Poyser is a three-time Grammy winner and a member of The Roots. The younger among us might recognize them as the house band for for NBC's the Late Show with Jimmy Fallon. But even before Fallon... The Roots were huge.

In the late 1990s, James Poyser, along with another member of The Roots, Amir "Questlove" Thompson, worked with J Dilla on Common's album, "Like Water for Chocolate."

James Poyser: I fly to Detroit with Common. We go to J Dilla's house. Again, the music that I knew of Dilla at the time was just these big heavy beats, just funky music. So I'm expecting like a monster of a man to answer the door, somebody 6'5" like, "Yo, what's going on?" And he opened the door... Tony: [Laughs]. This guy opened the door and I was like "Wait a minute, this is... this is the guy? Okay." [Laughs]. And you know we go in his basement and literally created like that same day three songs that that made it onto the album.

J Dilla wasn't like other producers. Just like DJs in the early days of hip hop, Dilla would chop up old records to make beats, except he had an incredible collection and would just sample *seconds* from each. And while most producers would then loop the samples with a program, Dilla would take his MP, or his drum machine, and play out the beats in real time. Then, he would add layers to his beats with instruments: the bass, or drums, or synthesizer.

James Poyser: It was technically wrong but something about it just made you move a certain way and it was like OK this feels like a live drummer.

He was just... it was always inspiring, watching him do what he does and trying to learn from him. Again, he was just a master of what he did.

In 2001, Dilla moved from Detroit to LA. And by that time, he had over 75 producing credits to his name: at least 4 of the albums he helped produce went gold, and 9 went platinum. And this guy was only 27-years-old!

At this rate, J Dilla could've become a Jay Z or a Kanye West. So... why didn't he?

More on that... after a break.

<<MID ROLL BREAK>>

Alright so let's review... And yeah... I'm gonna need a beat.

James Dewitt Yancey – better known as J Dilla – was a hip-hop producer and sometimes rapper working out of his studios in Detroit and LA. He collaborated with huge artists like Janet Jackson, Erykah Badu, A Tribe Called Quest, Questlove... all the quests... and he had a mom, Ma Dukes, who would literally do anything for him.

But then in 2001, he got sick.

Tony: Do you remember when you found... when you first learned that your son wasn't well?

Ma Dukes: Yes. It would been his return home from UK tour. But I just thought it was not eating hot meals properly. And so I assumed that's what it was because he often had a cold like some of the guys do. They come back and they have to rest up. They get jet lag through the roof, and they need the mom's home cooking to get back. And I thought that's what it was.

But they quickly realized that this wasn't something he could sleep off.

Ma Dukes: He was feeling so bad he had come to my home in Detroit to stay because whenever he didn't feel good either I had to come to him and fix it or he's coming to me. And that was the kind of relationship we had.

A lot of his friends talk about how hard a worker he was – he'd often just forget to sleep or eat – so nobody really thought much of it when he'd get run down.

Here's Frank Nitt from Frank-N-Dank, who we heard at the beginning of the episode.

Frank Nitt: I just thought it was all part of him being a stubborn guy, and being a workaholic, and being in that basement or in that studio, and saying, "Alright man I'll eat in a little while." And a little while turned into tomorrow. Because that's what I knew. I knew the tough guy who would work till his fingertips blistered open and bleeding and he would tape them up with Band-Aids and keep working.

Dilla's diagnosis didn't come right away, but eventually they found out that he had Lupus, an incurable autoimmune disease that can affect everything from the joints and kidneys to the heart and lungs.

Over the next few years, Dilla's health was kinda like the needle of a record player — some days it held steady, but other times, it skipped and scratched, and landed him in the hospital for weeks.

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Ma Dukes: Three times during his illness he had to learn to walk again because... Every time his kidneys shut down, and the platelets went bad, and his fever couldn't be broken, he would come out of that episode after maybe a few days or weeks, but he had to learn how to swallow again. It was like he lost everything that he had been through.

And Dilla lived like this for years.

Ma Dukes: I was a nervous wreck most of the time because he was in such pain.

But still, through the pain, and the physical therapy, and the dialysis, and all of the other procedures he had to endure, J Dilla kept making music, including his solo album, “Donuts.”

[Music: “Last Donut of the Night” by J Dilla]

Here’s James Poyser.

James Poyser: In the hospital bed, when he got sick, he was still knocking out 10 beats a day. That was the type of person he was.

Ma Dukes even helped him set up a makeshift studio in his hospital room.

Ma Dukes: I'd try to get some more 45s and take it back up so he had something new to do and keep his mind stimulated because I knew that music is what made him exist. Nothing else.

[Music: “Last Donut of the Night” by J Dilla]

And remember that concert where Dilla was lifted onto the stage in a wheelchair? That was during a particularly rough patch of his illness.

Ma Dukes: At this time Dilla was not able to do anything for himself during that last tour. Nothing. I had to feed him, I had to cloth him, bathe him, everything.

Tony: Surely you must have an instinct to kind of shake him and say "J Dilla, take it easy."

Ma Dukes: No. I I tried to get him before that tour. I said, "Well, are you sure you want to do this tour? You know you could cancel it." He said "No." He said, "I promised my fans I was coming and I'm going." But I enjoyed it because it was the beauty of going to 14 different countries with him and the fact that he'd been sick for like 4 years.

That tour was in November, 2005. Two months later, on February 7, 2006, J Dilla released his solo album “Donuts.” It was just three days after that, on Feb 10th that J Dilla passed away.

[Music: J Dilla]

Today, Dilla lives on for different people in different ways. Obviously, his fans still cherish his music. In fact, Donuts has grown a life of its own: a book has been written about it, and on its 10th anniversary, there were dozens of articles analyzing its many echoes around the hip-hop world.

But even though Dilla is gone, his music hasn’t stopped. He was so prolific in his life, that nineteen albums have been released in his name since he died. Some have been collaborations with his friends. Others have been J Dilla solo efforts, releasing beats that he made years ago.

And then there are his instruments. Which are here, in Washington, D.C. at the National Museum of African American History and Culture

Timothy Anne Burnside: Do you want to see the synthesizer and then the MPC?

Ma Dukes: Sure.

Timothy Anne Burnside, is a museum specialist here at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African-American History and Culture.

On a recent trip to DC Ma Dukes visited Timothy and me to walk through the museum together. We stopped off in the Musical Crossroads exhibit where Dilla’s MPC and Moog are on display.

Voice 1: Have you seen this before?

Ma Dukes: Yes, but you never get enough. Before it was like trying to squeeze your way through and peek. There were so many people.

Talking about her son, Ma Dukes seems proud. And a bit sad. But she says that she finds great comfort letting her son’s instruments have a second life on display at the Smithsonian, knowing that his story could inspire any number of the thousands of people who walk by.

Which is one of the many reasons why Timothy wanted to include Dilla’s music-making equipment in the exhibit. 5 years ago, before the museum was even open, Timothy flew to Detroit to ask Ma Dukes in person.

Timothy Anne Burnside: "Would you ever consider letting go of some of his belongings potentially for the museum?"

And Ma Dukes said... "I don't think so."

Timothy Anne Burnside: But that... I remember very, very distinctly, like very clearly, that moment of asking you that and watching your face change.

Ma Dukes: Wow.

Timothy Anne Burnside: Where it was like, the idea of letting go of those things was just like "Oh..."

Ma Dukes: Well you know what? I wish you could relay that... I didn't realize that I had been in mourning for 10 years before I even really cried, before I let out a real cry because Dilla was my backbone. He held me strong. He really did.

But eventually, Ma Dukes came around.

On display is Dilla's MPC 3000. The MPC is about the size of a pizza box and it has rectangular buttons all over the front. And then there's his mini Moog— some people say Moog. It's a synthesizer, which looks like a small, tricked-out keyboard.

Ma Dukes: The Moog was made by Bob Moog. He's passed away now. But each machine is different. No two machines have the exact same sound. He didn't do more than a hundred a year. And Dilla's was done specifically for him, so he treasured that more than anything else that he had.

It might seem surprising that the instruments of a producer who wasn't a household name, would be included in the Smithsonian. But stories like Dilla's *should* be told in museums. He deserves the recognition in death that he never quite got in life.

So on one level, the museum is telling Dilla's individual story: the story of a legendary artist who revolutionized hip-hop. But on another level, the museum is also telling the story of Detroit hip-hop, and all of the artists that J Dilla crossed paths with— from Frank Nitt to James Poyser.

James Poyser: At my home studio, I have a little wallet-sized picture of Dilla that I got from his funeral and I keep it on the wall in the back in the back of my studio, and every once in awhile, I'll turn around and the look on his face can either be "Nah, that's not good. Do it again," or "That's pretty good." So in a way he's still working with me.

J Dilla is still working with a *lot* of artists. You can hear him in Flying Lotus's beats, and in Kanye West and Pharrell's samples. J Dilla's influence is far-reaching.

James Poyser: You know, what's the saying? Imitation is the best part of flattery or something.

Tony: It's imitation is the highest form of flattery. I think...

James Poyser: Yeah that. [Laughs]

In one of the few interviews that exists of him, J Dilla describes his love for making music.

[Video: "Dilla Interview 2003 part 2 of 4"]

J Dilla: When I make my music I want people to feel what I feel. I want them to feel that energy... whatever it is. Yeah! That's all it is. Cause I make it straight from the heart.

Back at the museum, Ma Dukes takes one last look at Dilla's equipment.

Tony: How does it feel, Ma Dukes?

Ma Dukes: This feels wonderful. I love it.

<<CREDITS>>

You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

If you want to see J Dilla's MPC and Moog in person, you can find them in the Musical Crossroad's exhibition at the the Smithsonian's National Museum of African-American History and Culture.

We want to give a very special thanks to Timothy Anne Burnside and Dwan Reece at the National African American Museum of History and Culture for all their help in putting this story together.

And you may have heard the Smithsonian recently surpassed its ambitious kickstarter campaign goal to create the first Smithsonian anthology of hip-hop and rap. You can learn more about that project at si.edu/kickstarter.

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And we want to hear from you: tell us what you want us to dig stories up on. If there’s an artifact in the Smithsonian that *you* know about and maybe we don’t... give us a tip. Shoot an email to Sidedoor@si.edu. We would love to hear from you.

Our podcast team is Justin O’Neill, Rachel Aronoff, Jason Orfanon, Gabe Kosowitz, and Jess Sadeq, Greg Fisk, and Elisabeth Pilger. Extra support comes from John Barth, and Barbara Rehm. Our theme song is by Breakmaster Cylinder. I’m your host, Tony Cohn. Thanks for listening!