Essay Review: The Spatio-Temporality of J-Dilla’s Sound Aesthetic

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For contemporary artists and musicians like Pharrell Williams, Ahmir “?uestlove” Thompson, Robert Glasper, Jo-Vaughn “Joey Bada$$” Scott, and others, James Dewitt Yancey, also known as J Dilla has been a near-mythic figure since the mid-90s. J Dilla’s distinct grooves, harmonics, basslines, and overall sound movement as a DJ/music producer seem to have marked the qualitative height that the sampling aesthetic can achieve. Today, J Dilla’s near-mythic status seems to persist and grow seventeen years after his passing. J Dilla’s precise imperfection Domitille “DOMi” Degalle and James “J.D.” Beck (2022) recreated in the outro to the title track of their debut album, Not Tight, is a testament to his enduring legacy in today’s sound aesthetic. Dan Charnas’s Dilla Time: The Life and Afterlife of J Dilla, the Hip-Hop Producer Who Reinvented Rhythm (2022) dares to venture into the heart of the myth in his effort to present a life-size portrayal of J Dilla’s artistic genius as well as fragility.

The book is composed of two distinct themes. Half of the book is dedicated to reconstructing an enormous body of biographic information about J Dilla into a coherent narrative based on his family history, personal life history, and the social history of Detroit. The other half features the author’s in-depth exploration of J Dilla’s sound from a musicological perspective. The uniqueness of Charnas’ approach to the subject matter is the juxtaposition of the author’s past as a professional in the hip-hop music industry “as a talent scout, record executive, and beatmaker” and journalist and his more recent history as a professor at the Clive Davis Institute of Recorded Music at the New York University Tisch School of Arts (Charnas 2022, xii). This review focuses on the scholarly aspects of the book derived from Charnas’s current occupation as a professor of recorded music. The author is actively engaged in the musicological analysis of J Dilla’s music with the collaboration of Jeff Peretz and others at NYU-Tisch (Charnas, xiii). While the scholarly discussion of J Dilla’s sound aesthetic has been ongoing, this book is monumental in that it opens it up to a wider audience.

As the title suggests, the central thesis of the musicological analysis revolves around the unique time signature of J Dilla’s sample-based music or what the author calls “Dilla Time.” Charnas sees it as the third path to “straight time” and “swing time,” which invokes “a new, pleasurable, disorienting rhythmic friction and a new time feel” (Charnas 2022, xii). Since the discovery of J Dilla’s beats by Q-Tip of A Tribe Called Quest in 1994 facilitated by J Dilla’s mentor, Amp Fidler, his sound aesthetic has permeated into hip-hop, pop, jazz, and beyond. Charnas (2022, 9 - 32) breaks down the genealogy of “Dilla Time” in the historical development of Black Music from its African roots, blues, and funk in contradistinction to the Western musical tradition. Charnas also traces the genealogy through the development of “machine time” made possible by computer-based music production technology (Charnas 2022, 46 - 53). In this latter
genealogy of the technological interface, the author finally identifies the uniqueness of J Dilla’s time signature.

Except for Questlove’s description of J Dilla’s kick drum as if it were programmed by a “baby” on “two tequila shots” (Charnas 2022, 4), the author’s primary “evidence” for the existence of “Dilla Time” throughout the book boils down to the time feel of “rushed snare” in which the snare sound comes a bit earlier than one should expect. Charnas (2022, 142 - 146) demonstrates the position of the snare in a diagram as the physical “evidence” of the “rushed snare.” The author’s analysis is based on a quantized sonic ecosystem as indicated using quantized grid diagrams of a 1/16 notes sequence (Charnas 2022, 143, 150, 151). Quantization, in its original meaning, denotes the conversion of analog information into digital information. In the specific context of sample-based music production, quantization is a programming function that “automatically moves samples to the nearest appropriate beat within a scheme that the producers choose” (Schloss 2004, 140). The “scheme” varies from 1/4, 1/8, 1/16, 1/32, and 1/64 notes. Non-quantization, on the other hand, entails manual note inputs and manipulations outside of the schemes predetermined by the machine.

Charnas explains how the rhythmic fluctuation or “flamming” of J Dilla beats is generated through a slight deviation from quantization where the hi-hat and kick are quantized while the snare appears a bit earlier, slightly off the quantized grid (Charnas 2022, 142). The early snare and kick together generate “swing time” in contrast to the “straight time” of the hi-hat (Charnas 2022, 143). The collision of “straight time” (hi-hat) and “swing time” (kick and snare) constitutes “Dilla Time” (Charnas 2022, 146). The author’s analysis here is strongly motivated by his desire to “demystify” the prevalent notion that J Dilla’s signature time feel is “exclusively the result of him playing freehand, without timing correct or ‘quantization’” (Charnas 2022, 146).

While J Dilla’s time signature may not be exclusively the result of non-quantization, as Charnas suggests, non-quantization is the prerequisite for the singularization of the sound aesthetic in the lifeworld of beatmakers. J Dilla himself reflected on this in his interview with P3 Soul in 2003, acknowledging Amp Fidler, a Detroit-based session musician who toured with George Clinton’s P-Funk, as his mentor on how to work the MPC or Akai Sampling Machine:

When [Fidler] taught me, he taught me how I would teach the next person. … He told me to (sic), “Don’t read books. When you get the equipment, say, just learn the machine and it will do what you will need it to do.” … If I were to read the book, I don’t think I would be, you know, on the same path as I am on right now. I think my music, my sound would be totally different. It might be quantized (P3 Soul 2018; italics added).

As the work of hip-hop ethnographer Joseph Schloss (2004, 43 - 61) demonstrates, the art of beat-making takes place in the community of cultural practitioners where the transmission of knowledge is relayed through mentorship or a peer-to-peer exchange of
technical information. Disregarding the manual and discovering the functions that suit an individual beatmaker’s aesthetic process is what sustains the transmission of knowledge and the evolution of sound. Thus, it is critical to note that J Dilla was trained from the beginning to operate in the non-quantized sonic ecosystem. Jordan Ferguson links J Dilla’s deviation from the prescribed functionality of the machine with a simultaneous pursuit of artistic singularity: “His early exposure to this laissez-faire approach, free from the prescribed intent and restrictions set by the manufacturers, working without rules, planted the seeds of a philosophy that would guide Dilla throughout his career…” (2014, 16).

In his attempt to debunk the “myth” of J Dilla’s use of non-quantization, the author introduces the dichotomy of “drummer” vs. “programmer” as the distinction between “non-quantization” and “quantization” due to the former’s manual operation: “The innovations of James Yancey bear the mark of a programmer, not a drummer. … James Dewitt Yancey … was the master of his instrument, and his instrument was the drum machine” (Charnas 2022, 148 – 149). Building upon this dichotomy of non-quantization and quantization superimposed on the identities of “drummer” and “programmer,” the author’s concluding argument for J Dilla’s use of quantization begins to assume more of a rhetorical tone:

And yet so much of the discourse around J Dilla heralds the MPC as his instrument while claiming that he didn’t employ the very feature that made it unique. They’re saying, essentially: The clock software of the MPC was so great that he didn’t use it! (Charnas 2022, 149; italics original).

Neither of these dichotomies, however, is operable in the lifeworld of beatmakers. In non-quantized sonic ecosystems, in particular, infinite options and possibilities naturally open up for beatmakers to generate a unique type of swing as J Dilla has done. As the author suggests, it is possible to keep the quantization for all but one sound element such as the snare. But there is a myriad of other options: One could make beats that seem quantized but slightly off-grid for any sound elements not limited to drums, that are in and out of quantization (Metisunz, pers. comm., November 24, 2022), or that align certain off-grid notes (e.g., bass and kick) as if they were “quantized” with each other.

Furthermore, the manipulation of timing can be done spatially by going back to the original sample, say the snare, to cut off or extend the space at the beginning of the sample to create subtle “rushed” or “dragged” nuances. What separates beatmakers from normative musicians is that the former is constantly and instantaneously operating in the space-time continuum, translating spatial matters into temporal matters and vice versa with the aid of technology. One of the episodes that demonstrates J Dilla’s operation in the space-time continuum is shared by Dave Cooley who was the mixer/engineer for J Dilla’s final stage of music production in Los Angeles: Jaylib, Donuts, and The Shining. It took place during the file transfer process of J Dilla’s sound files onto Cooley’s computer in which the compatibility issue led to the misalignment of the sound. Sitting on the couch, J Dilla instructed Cooley to fix the
misalignment: “You know, move the bass back two baby hairs. ... That’s good. Move the snare back one baby hair. Okay. Now the vocals. Move them all back three baby hairs” (Stüssy 2010).

Cooley was stunned to see how one minute later “everything was time aligned” (Stüssy 2010). As Cooley observed, this episode demonstrates J Dilla’s extraordinary sense of timing with stunning accuracy (Stüssy 2010). It also sheds light on the space-time continuum of beatmakers’ operation in non-quantized sonic ecosystems. In other words, the modus operandi of beatmakers in non-quantized sonic ecosystems is inherently non-linear and non-dualistic. Then it begins to unravel that Charnas’ pursuit of J Dilla’s singularity solely in temporality is perhaps the source of his dualistic frameworks – swing time versus straight time, quantization versus non-quantization, drummer versus programmer - imposed upon the interpretation of J Dilla’s works and, by extension, the beatmakers’ lifeworld he dwelled in.

But before stepping into what lies beyond dichotomies, let us assume that Charnas’ concept of “Dilla Time” does exist. But its existence applies largely to the “Jay Dee” phase of J Dilla’s career in the mid-90s and early 2000s, which ended up churning out copycats including those that are in good faith. The author enlists such “copycats” in good faith: Questlove’s conscious shift to “Jay Dee Time” in his drumming; D’Angelo and Questlove’s creation of J Dilla-like beats during the Voodoo Session, Kareem Riggins’s beats for Slum Village and Dwelve, and Robert Glasper’s tribute to J Dilla (Charnas 2022, 158 – 159, 176 – 177, 237, 367). In the lifeworld of beatmakers, however, these examples are none other than imitations, albeit with good intentions and deep respect for J Dilla’s artistry. J Dilla responded to this phenomenon by consciously destroying his “Jay Dee Time.” For example, in his Ruff Draft, J Dilla (2007) states the reason for his new phase: “There is a whole lotta imitating going on.”

In the aforementioned interview with P3 Soul, J Dilla gives more substance to the new phase where he would be “chopping up directly, instead of putting layers and layers, taking it straight from the record … and making beats with.” J Dilla’s last work, Donuts (2006), abolishes any inclination of “Jay Dee Time,” or “Dilla Time,” as his method shifts from sample-based to loop-centric where the drum placement is dictated by the alignment of loops, rendering quantization completely irrelevant.

The underlying tension between the lifeworld of beatmakers and the author’s dualistic analytical framework deployed throughout the book comes to a rupture when Charnas (2022, 237) explains his disagreement with J Dilla’s presumed guardedness of “his own take.” The author sees the manifestation of J Dilla’s guardedness in an episode in which J Dilla admonished Kareem Riggins, his close associate and collaborator, for producing J Dilla-like beats for Slum Village and Dwele. J Dilla confronted Riggins by saying “You have all this talent. You can do things I can’t possibly do. Why would you want to sound just like me?” (Charnas 2022, 237; italics original). Charnas interprets J Dilla’s attitude as an indication of beatmakers’ “small thinking”:

James’s question made sense coming from hip-hop, where developing one’s signature sound was vital. James thought like a beatmaker: All I know how
to do is work the MPC. But this was small thinking. The bigger the idea, the 
more people would it influenced. ... The reason James didn’t understand why 
all these people sounded like him is that James still didn’t know that he 
wasn’t simply a beatmaker, nor did he grasp how big of an idea he had 
cultivated (Charnas 2022, 237).

Did J Dilla’s confrontation with Riggins stem from the former’s “small thinking” as a 
beatmaker who happened to possess a “bigger idea” shared by the larger musical 
community as Charnas claims? Or does Charnas’ analysis reflect his dualism of “small 
thinking” versus “bigger idea”? As I mentioned, the key to unlocking Charnas’s 
problematic dualism may lie in his near-exclusive focus on the drum beat and 
temporality in deciphering J Dilla’s sound aesthetic. Robb Cappelletto, a guitarist for 
Re.Verse, an instrumental hip-hop band, cautions us of the limitation of the 
drum-centric approach to the “flamming” and urges us to direct our attention to the 
multidimensionality of the sound-making demonstrated by beatmakers:

It’s like they’re trying to make the sound of the whole track only on the 
drums. ... It’s kind of like an aural illusion that when you hear the way keys 
and the bass are laid over it, there is this kind of swing that’s created by the 
instruments flaming against each other and the beat. But no one 
instrument is creating that by itself (Quoted in Stadnicki 2017, 272).

As Schloss (2004, 162) accurately delineates, beatmakers’ signature sound 
develops in a dynamic process without a predetermined structure. The singularization 
of sound aesthetic, therefore, inevitably takes place in the sampling process as one of 
Schloss’s informants testifies: “Everyone has their own signature. I don’t care what they 
do; everyone has their signature, to the way that they put it down. ... Everyone’s 
pattern’s gonna be different, the way they program ‘em is gonna be different” (Schloss 
2004, 163). Particularly in the non-quantized sonic ecosystem, it does not make sense for 
any beatmaker to consciously duplicate somebody else’s signature when one has the 
absolute freedom to pursue infinite possibilities to express oneself. At the core of this 
singularization process is the producers’ relationship with the sound that is peculiar to 
the sample-based technological interface as Schloss aptly sums up: “The producer has a 
responsibility to the samples to organize them creatively” (Schloss 2004, 162; italics 
original).

For masterclass beatmakers like J Dilla and Otis “Madlib” Jackson Jr., however, 
the practice of organizing the sound enters the liminal zone of intentionality and 
happenstance. At the Red Bull Academy event with Jefferson Mao who asked him if the 
production session is a meditation for him, Madlib touched on this liminal state: “Yeah, 
I shut out from the world like it’s just something you can’t try to do it; it’s just something 
that happens” (Madlib 2016; italics added). J Dilla chimes in with Madlib in his interview 
with Frank “Y’skid” Sens in 2003. Asked if he had any “inspiration source” in the 
production process, J Dilla answered: “All records, you know, how I feel for the day. ... 
I don’t understand how the sh--t comes to me or when I feel the urge to work. It just 
happens” (Y’skid 2003; italics added). Thus, at the level of a masterclass, beatmakers are
able to let go of themselves and attune themselves to the self-organizing principle of sonic ecosystems rather than intentionally organizing the sound. Accordingly, as Madlib and J Dilla’s statements demonstrate, creativity comes from the shift of subjectivity from that of a beatmaker to that of a sonic ecosystem itself or “it,” allowing beatmakers to experience the “transcendental field” of consciousness (Deleuze 2005, 25 -33).

This “it” consciousness also manifests in the way beatmakers embrace aleatory elements such as accidents that are considered to be “mistakes,” “errors,” or “disruptions” in the normative and structured sonic ecosystem. It is founded upon the practice of “cut” in DJ techniques and the black music tradition in general as an attempt to “confront accident and rupture not by covering them over but by making room for them inside the system itself” (Schloss 2004, 138 – 139). Even in the lifeworld of seasoned musicians, the spontaneous incorporation of accidents and ruptures does happen perhaps in rare cases. A classic example of this pertains to one of the important lessons Herbie Hancock learned from Miles Davis during his tenure with the Miles Davis Quintet. In the Harvard Norton Lecture Series, Hancock (2006) relates to one incident where he accidentally hit the wrong key during their live performance. Davis quickly shifted his notes to the “wrong” key Hancock committed to, which turned Hancock’s “wrong” key into the “right” one. Hancock interpreted Davis’s act as his openness to an “unexpected” event without judgment. What Miles Davis and master beat makers like J Dilla and Madlib have in common is their embrace of the self-organizing nature of the sound that may be disloyal to the expectation based on the predetermined structure and order.

Diverging from the author’s claim, therefore, I see another world beyond the dualistic construct deployed in DILLA TIME. It is the world of transhuman consciousness that allows beatmakers to become active participants in the self-organization of (non-quantized) sonic ecosystems through the interface with sampling technology. The aforementioned “it” consciousness betrays its transhuman traits made possible by the technological interface as its emergence owes to the “technorganic” condition of an “increasingly blurred line between people, nature, and machine” (Butler 2020, 15). And yet, they are not simply a direct result of the technological interface even though it is absolutely indispensable for realizing the “it” consciousness.

The sampling technology functions as a means by which beatmakers enter the liminality between intentionality and happenstance where aleatory, random, and/or singular sound events become a vital source of inspiration and creativity. Thus, beatmakers attain the transhuman aspects of the “it” consciousness neither by becoming a machine nor by humanizing a machine, but rather by tuning into the self-organizing principle of sonic ecosystems. By becoming one with a dynamic and generative process of sonic ecosystems, beatmakers can transcend the confinement of “artificial” temporal and spatial constructs including “Dilla Time.”
Bibliography


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