

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:14	Jesse Thorn	Host	[Music fades out.] It's <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm Jesse Thorn. [Music fades in.]
00:00:21	Music	Music	Before we get into my next guest this week, I wanna play a song. "Stakes is High" by De La Soul. "Stakes is High" from the album <i>Stakes is High</i> by De La Soul. <i>Stakes is high, you know them stakes is high</i> <i>We be talking 'bout vibe, vibrations</i> <i>Stakes is high, you know them stakes is high</i> <i>The Instamatic focal point bringing damage to your borough</i> <i>Be some brothers from the east with some beats that be thorough</i> <i>Got the solar gravitation so I'm bound to pull it</i> <i>I gets down like brothers are found ducking from bullets (word)</i> [Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]
00:00:45	Jesse	Host	It's a classic. The lead single from the album of the same name. A takedown of the state of hip-hop in the mid-1990s. And the producer on that track was a new guy named JD. Not Jermaine Dupri—the guy who invented Kris Kross. J Dilla. Dilla is—and I am not exaggerating here—one of the most consequential producers in the history of popular music. His career was brief, tragically. He started working in the mid-1990s and continued until he died in 2006. He worked with artists like the Pharcyde, Busta Rhymes, D'Angelo, A Tribe Called Quest. His solo album, <i>Donuts</i> , released just three days before he died, was an instant classic.
00:01:28	Music	Music	"Workinonit" from the album <i>Donuts</i> by J Dilla. <i>It's in, It's in, it's in...</i> <i>Get it, get it...</i> <i>J, g-get it..</i> <i>Tune up!</i> <i>Tune-</i> <i>Ooh</i> <i>Play me</i>
00:01:53	Jesse	Host	[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.] Dilla's music was iconic, genre redefining. He inspired dozens of other artists, countless imitators. And now, he's inspired a book. Earlier this year, my guest Dan Charnas wrote <i>Dilla Time: The Life and Afterlife of J Dilla, the Hip-Hop Producer Who Reinvented Rhythm</i> . Charnas has made a career out of covering the history of

hip-hop. In *Dilla Time*, we writes about J Dilla’s life, but he also writes about how Dilla revolutionized the genre. I’m thrilled to have Dan Charnas back on the show to talk about one of the great hip-hop artists of our time. Let’s kick things off with another classic from J Dilla’s catalogue. This one features J singing. It’s a cover of Donald Byrd’s “Think Twice”.

00:02:38 Music Music “Think Twice” from the album *Welcome 2 Detroit* by J Dilla.

Maybe we ought to think twice (oh)
Before we start something nice
No need to sacrifice the spice (uh)
In our lives (oo-oo-oo)

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]

00:02:58 Jesse Host Dan Charnas, welcome to *Bullseye*. It’s nice to have you back on the show.

00:03:00 Dan Charnas Guest Thank you for having me. Honored.

00:03:02 Jesse Host Nice to meet you in real life.

00:03:03 Dan Guest Indeed!

00:03:04 Jesse Host So... around the time that that album came out 20 or so years ago, I have this very vivid memory. I’m in my dorm room at UC Santa Cruz. I’m watching *106 & Park* on BET, which was the pop hit video countdown show on BET. AJ and Free are the hosts and their guest is Pharrell, from The Neptunes. And I remember, I think that they talked about if they could visit any city, what city it would be. And they all agreed on Miami so readily, as though it was the most evident thing in the world. I remember that. I was like, “Miami?!” I mean, Miami seems cool, but everyone is so on the same page about this! They’re all so confident the answer is Miami. It’s obvious!

And then, one of them asked Pharrell, “Well, who’s your favorite producer out right now? Who’s your favorite hip-hop producer out right now? And Pharrell says JD. And Free looks at him and says Jermaine Dupri? And Pharrell very graciously says, “Nah, JD from Detroit.” So, why was Pharrell—probably now we can say the most successful American pop music producer of the last 25 years—why was Pharrell so excited about the productions of a guy that the hosts of *106 & Park* hadn’t heard of and just thought he must really love Jermaine Dupri, the guy who produced “Jump” for Kris Kross? Well, Questlove—Ahmir—often says that JD, J Dilla, is the producer’s producer, the musician’s musician. And for me—you know, putting myself in Pharrell’s shoes for a minute—it is just—I think that JD—J Dilla—is the master of his craft, the master of his instrument. And his instrument was the drum machine. And his craft was the art of sampled composition. Right? Nobody in my mind did it better than him. I don’t like best lists. I never call him the best producer of all time. But I do feel that folks like Pharrell who were also master craftspeople really, really looked up to JD. Because he saw things and heard things that even they didn’t. And that’s the whole game when you’re doing sample composition. You’re finding bits and pieces of sound on records in other places and juggling

00:04:48 Dan Guest

them into a completely different collage but doing it with a certain musicality.

And that was something that JD—J Dilla—excelled at. So, it makes perfect sense to me that he said that.

00:06:12 Jesse Host

I think as good a place as any to start is with the drum machine, right?

[Dan agrees.]

00:06:34 Dan Guest

So, what was the tool that JD used to make beats? And why was that important? Why was it different that he did it with that and not with some other drum machine or with fruity loops or whatever else. Well, just to back up I think, for the audience—you know, sampled music—the idea that you could put different pieces of different songs together into a collage and make them into a new song—this wasn't a new idea. You know, it goes all the way back to musique concrète in the 1940s. The Beatles famously experimented with it with "Tomorrow Never Knows" in 1966. But it really—the idea of it didn't really come into full fruition until a DJ named Kool Herc created sort of a turntable juggling technique that he called the merry-go-round in the early 1930—uh, sorry [laughs] early 1970s! And really, it was about taking the breakdown sections, the instrumental sections of records and blending them into each other as a musical bed for him and others to rhyme over, to exhort to the crowd over.

00:07:29 Jesse Host

And this is a live—we're talking about a live performance technique, here.

[Dan confirms.]

00:07:47 Dan Guest

We're talking about two turntables, two copies of the same record, an instrumental breakdown in each one and playing the instrumental breakdown of one, then seamlessly fading it into the same breakdown on the other copy of the record.

00:07:48 Jesse Host

That's exactly correct.

To make a—so that you can make a loop, so that you can rap over an instrumental indefinitely. But we're not talking about tape loops being spliced together in a studio, yet. We're talking about something on a stage or in a park in New York City.

00:08:02 Dan Guest

That's exactly right. And really, when Sylvia Robinson got the idea that she was gonna make a record out of people talking over records, she didn't actually do that. The DJ had to take a seat. She had her studio band—her—you know, her session musicians replay the break that the DJ would've been playing. In this case, "Good Times" which was the bed for "Rapper's Delight" in 1979.

[Music fades in.]

00:08:39 Music Music

And that was rap music for the first—I don't know—five, six years? It was just rhyming over replays of these rap breaks. "Rapper's Delight" from the album *Sugarhill Gang* by The Sugarhill Gang.

*I said-a hip, hop, the hippie, the hippie
To the hip-hip hop-a you don't stop the rock
It to the bang-bang boogie, say up jump the boogie
To the rhythm of the boogie, the beat
Now what you hear is not a test: I'm rapping to the beat
And me, the groove, and my friends are gonna try to move your feet*

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]

00:08:54 Dan Guest Where it began to change was, oddly enough, with a producer by the name of Rick Rubin, who I used to work for around 1985, 1986. Rick, when he produced his records both for Profile and for his label, Def Jam, he began to bring the breaks, the actual breaks back into the recorded music. Well, not back, but it'd never been there before. Right? Only, as you said, in the parks. So, instead of just little scratching sounds, he would run an entire 21 seconds of Trouble Funk onto a record and have to perfectly time it with the metronome, the clip track.

00:09:35 Music Music "Rock the Bells" from the album *Radio* by LL Cool J.

Rock the bells

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]

00:09:45 Dan Guest This was also incredibly hard, and it required a lot of dexterity. What democratized this whole thing was the invention of the sampling drum machine. And one of the first sampling drum machines was made by E-mu. It was called a SP-12, which was followed quickly thereafter by the SP-1200. Then another company—Akai—created a rival drum machine, the MPC 60. So, it were these two drum machines—the SP and the MPC—that really defined what hip-hop composition would be for the next ten years. You know? From—even more than that. You know, from the late '80s through all the '90s. Those were the two main machines that beatmakers used to create these incredibly complex compositions.

00:10:48 Jesse Host And you know, JD—starting in around '93, '94, became a part of that—you know, that brotherhood, so to speak. So, if you think of a legendary hip-hop producer from that time—like Pete Rock or something like that—they're taking this drum machine that's essentially a little computer, a little solid-state computer but without much storage. And he's making—you know, "They Reminisce Over You" or whatever using these—you know, the recording abilities of this drum machine that can record little clips of sound.

00:11:13 Dan Guest Right. And sometimes larger clips. Right? That was the whole thing. When Roger Linn, the inventor of the MPC, when he first debuted his machine at a Consumer Electronics show, somebody came up to him and said, "Hey, can you get extra sampling time on this?"

And I think he said, "Yeah, you can boost it from, you know, 15 to 30 seconds."

00:11:50	Jesse	Host	<p>And the—you know, the interested party said, “Well, can I get more than that? How much more?” I don’t know one minute, two minutes. And Roger Linn thought why would—that’s crazy! Why would anybody need two minutes of sampling time? Linn himself—Because sampling, previously, had meant four bars or two bars of a song or mostly a sound. Like a drum sound.</p>
			[Dan confirms.]
			A kick drum or a snare drum sound.
00:12:03	Dan	Guest	<p>[Music fades in.] But what producers like Q-Tip and Pete Rock and Large Professor and, eventually, JD were doing was not just importing sounds but importing the silences between those sounds—what we call groove.</p>
00:12:18	Music	Music	“Stop” from the album <i>Donuts</i> by J Dilla.
			<p><i>You better stop and think about what you're doing</i> <i>You better stop and think about what you're doing</i> <i>You better stop and think about what you're doing</i> <i>You better stop and think about what you're doing</i></p>
			[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]
00:12:35	Dan	Guest	<p>It was about getting the human timing of these elements. And also, the human deviations. Right? And again, that’s a bad word to use when we’re talking about something that’s very intentional. But that was the game, to really bring the soul into the machine. And that is what late ’80s, early ’90s hip-hop innovated.</p>
00:12:57	Jesse	Host	<p>So, when we say drum machine, we might be picturing a synthesizer that makes drum sounding sounds. Right? Artificial drum sounds. But what we’re talking about are machines that enabled the composition of already existing sounds. Right?</p>
			[Dan confirms.]
00:13:21	Dan	Guest	<p>Taking existing sounds and putting them into a rhythm, into the structure of music. Right? And not just rhythm and noise, so to speak, but really what Q-Tip—of A Tribe Called Quest—beginning and around 1990 and Pete Rock and JD excelled at was bringing in harmony and melody. They had real musical minds. And a lot of that—their sample sources were from jazz records, because that’s where the richest harmony is. And that’s when a beat became [chuckles], you know, really exciting. And the tradition of crate digging—you know—really became a widespread phenomenon: going to record stores for hours on end looking for records to sample, looking at the musicians who played on those records because you know and you trust and you feel like there, you know, might be some good sounds there because of who they are and what they were able to do.</p>
00:14:14	Jesse	Host	<p>So, what is an example of a record from just before JD hit the scene. What’s an SP-1200 composed song? Maybe something that Q-Tip produced for A Tribe Called Quest or something. Or you know, Pete Rock or whomever.</p>

00:14:31 Dan Guest I think it's one that you mentioned earlier: "They Reminisce Over You" by Pete Rock. That was composed as all of Pete Rock's songs were, on the SP-1200. Sometimes with an outboard sampler for a little bit more sampling time. Bits and pieces from the drums from James Brown's—I believe "Say It Loud".

[Music fades in.]

Then also bits of harmony and ambient sound from Tom Scott's remake of Mamas & Papas song, "Today". Beautiful, ethereal, magisterial. Just a wonderful composition. And almost the apex of what that kind of composition could be.

00:15:11 Jesse Host Let's hear a little bit of it.
00:15:13 Music Music "T.R.O.Y." from the album *Mecca & The Soul Brother* by Pete Rock & CL Smooth.

*This one's a girl, let's name her Pam
Same father as the first, but you don't give a damn
Irresponsible, plain not thinking
Papa said, "Chill" but the brother keep winking
Still, he won't down you or tear out your hide
On your side while the baby maker slide*

*But mama got wise to the game
The youngest of five kids, hon here it is
After ten years without no spouse
Momma's getting married in the house*

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]

00:15:36 Jesse Host We have more to get into with Dan Charnas after the break. When we come back, we'll talk about Dilla's illness and death and the immeasurable legacy he left behind. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

00:15:49 Music Transition Thumpy rock music.

00:15:53 Jesse Host It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Dan Charnas. He's a writer and lecturer who specializes in the history of hip-hop and rap. His latest book is called *Dilla Time: The Life and Afterlife of J Dilla, the Hip-Hop Producer Who Reinvented Rhythm*. In it, he covers the life, work, and death of Dilla and why his work still influences countless musicians today. Let's get back into our conversation.

I wanna play one of the first records that was a hit for JD, and we're talking relatively speaking. [Chuckles.] This was a single that became a beloved classic hip-hop record, but "hit" even seems pretty—had a—had a popular music video? This is a song by The Pharcyde called "Runnin'", from their second album. And The Pharcyde had had this sort of game changing first record called *Bizarre Ride to the Pharcyde*. You know. Huge record. It was like, oh, LA can do something other than make gansta rap. Like this is this crazy, alternative, funny—and their producer quit. So, they're trying to figure out what their second record is, and they end up being connected with JD.

00:17:19 Dan Guest He makes this beat and they're recording this song. What is it about this song [chuckling] that leads the members of The Pharcyde to get into an actual fight—a physical, punching fight in the studio? Because JD is doing something very foreign to hip-hop. He is using that first technique we talked about, playing freehand. He's—the kickdrum is basically the thing that delivers that downbeat that we count on in popular music. Usually comes—we feel it on the one and the three. But—

00:17:36 Jesse Host Right. It's the boom of boom bap in rap music.

[Dan confirms.]

00:17:41 Dan Guest Like booom—bap! Boom, boom—ta! Boom.
Right! And in hip-hop, we count on those things to come in very regular places. But JD's kickdrum was not coming in where we expected it to and coming in where we didn't expect it to. And that unnerved Fatlip, who was one of the four members of The Pharcyde. So, while the rest of the band and JD went to go get some food, they came back to the studio and they found out that Fatlip had not only changed the kickdrum to something that—well, rerecorded it to something that was straight, but he had erased JD's work. Like, the kickdrum track that was already there. And you know, the Pharcyde were legendary for their in-studio throwdowns, and this provoked yet another one. And JD has to sit there and watch as his favorite crew fight over his rhythm.

But Tre, from The Pharcyde, who was the advocate—sort of the main advocate for JD—he said, “We're gonna keep this the way you originally had it. That's your signature.” You know, I remember Tre telling me this story and thinking that is so astounding for that vocabulary to be used—“signature”—for a hip-hop producer.

[Music fades in.]

00:19:16 Jesse Host And so vociferously. And it really—I think it really in many ways—because it was one of JD's first professional experiences, certainly his first trip to LA, it showed him that what he had was special and that what he had was worth fighting for.

00:19:22 Music Music Well, let's hear the irregular kick drum on The Pharcyde's “Runnin’”, produced by J Dilla.
“Runnin’” from the album *Labcabin-california* by The Pharcyde.

*Can't keep running away
Can't keep running away*

*I must admit on some occasions
I went out like a punk and a chump
Or a sucker or something to that effect
Respect I used to never get
Cause all I got was upset
Just used to be lots of
(What's, up fool!?)
I treat to sweat it, but like the Lip
For no reason at all I can recall, throwing Cs in my face*

Down the hall I'm kicking it in the back of the school

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]

00:19:49 Jesse Host

I mean, you can really hear it. Especially in the ba-duhduh-ss.

[Dan agrees.]

Like, there's that little bit of life to it. There's a little bit of the unexpected in there.

00:19:58 Dan Guest
00:20:06 Jesse Host

That is really what JD brought to us in the mid-1990s.

I had heard that song and I had heard the Tribe Called Quest records on which JD collaborated as a producer. But I think the first time that I really became aware of him as an individual and as a kind of musical force was the Slum Village album *Fantastic, Vol. 2*. And Slum Village was—is—a rap group from Detroit, where J Dilla is from. Tell me where this record came from and what mattered about it? What was special about it?

00:20:40 Dan Guest

So, *Fantastic, Vol. 2* is really the first full body of work that JD produces using that third technique—the displacement technique, where this way of relating to time, this third time feel, Dilla time—really becomes this central aesthetic of his work. One of the hallmarks of that sound is the rushed snare. The snare which carries the backbeat in our popular music comes in too early. Right? Again, where you don't expect it. And so, suddenly, it develops this long-short pattern with that downbeat. But the high hat, which is like the metronome, is completely straight. So, I describe it as sort of—it's like seeing a train derailing and righting itself repeatedly. Or it's like—you know, some drums are basically telling you, "Well, this tempo's gonna go 70 miles per hour." But then another drum comes in and says, "We're only gonna go 55."

And that tension keeps happening. And so, he uses this technique over the course of this album—which of course has plenty of other redeeming qualities showcasing, again, his really dual harmonic sense of bright and melancholy together, his use of instruments in his sample sources like the Fender Rhodes, his incredible—the whole group's incredible MCing in—which Jason Moran has a phrase for this: facing the beat. They face the beat in whatever song they're in. If the drums are going boom-bum-tap, a-boom-bum-tap, JD is gonna come in with some kind of rhyme scheme. And he goes, "You know you can't—can't stop, you can't—can't quit." Really engaging rhythmically in ways that a lot of MCs don't because MCs are often focused on the content, the words, what they're saying.

What Slum Village delivered was incredible rhythmic information, which to me is just as valuable. So, I actually think that *Fantastic, Vol. 2* is one of the most important albums in popular music of the last 100 years for sure because of that innovation, but also incredible anthemic songs that are—for people who are JD fans and fans of hip-hop, the song "Fall in Love"—you know, incredible. "Get Dis Money", which was on the *Office Space* soundtrack.

[Music fades in.]

Just a really important album that is made in '98 but doesn't come out until the year 2000, because of corporate restructuring and all that.

00:23:22 Jesse Host

Well, let's hear a little bit of "Fall in Love" from Slum Village's album, *Fantastic, Vol. 2*.

00:23:28 Music Music

"Fall in Love" from the album *Fantastic, Vol. 2* by Slum Village.

One, two

*Ladies loving my music is like some—yeah
Trying to grip up my mic like it's a—
Run around the corner to pick up the new—
Toss this in the deck so— can catch rep
I'm the— gripping the mic like it's a joke
Fall in love with the music like it's a hole
Put down your mic you lost your whole goal
You take it to seriously like it's a gamble*

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]

00:23:54 Jesse Host

The other thing that I remember when I heard that record was about the sound of the record. And I don't just mean the way the beats were composed. I don't just mean the swing of it. But I remember thinking like this is somehow simultaneously sounding like the—you know, great boom bap records of five years previous that I loved. Whatever—Q-Tip or DJ Premier or whatever was making it. It had that earthy, organic quality. You know, dusty old record store quality. But it also sounded like it was shiny and from the future. [Laughs.] Like, it sounded electronic and organic at the same time in a way that blew my mind. I like could not wrap my head around how it could be both of those things.

00:24:59 Dan Guest

So, what was it about those productions that managed to make it feel like machine music? Make it feel like something from the future and also feel like something from the dusty past? I think that's such a great way to put it, too. And I've never articulated it that way, but that feels absolutely right. I think the samples—right?—bring in the historicity for me. But I also feel, again, what JD is doing with that rushed snare—it is a very inhuman thing. So, that's also like nails on chalkboard for me, when people say, "Oh, J Dilla, he humanized the drum machine." Well, actually, what he did was he created a sound that—a rhythm that no human had ever made before. And that was what was so thrilling. It was from the future. But that's where our future comes from. It comes from Detroit. It always has.

00:25:39 Jesse Host

Yeah, I mean, it took 10 or 15 years for, you know, super genius jazz drummers to be able to recreate that feeling.

[Dan agrees.]

So, the thing that I remember on the message board of OkayPlayer.com were—rap producers would argue with each other

about drum machines and stuff. And you know, Questlove would come in and post six paragraphs of texts in one paragraph.

[Dan laughs.]

About [chuckles] some exciting sound he had just heard. The thing that I remember people flipping out over about JD was the way that he chopped and flipped samples. So, all this stuff about the way he composed rhythms was there. But the thing that I remember people being—was like, when people would figure out what the sample was and they'd say, "How did he get that sound out of that sample?" So, what's an example of a record that he made from another record where the transformation was particularly distinctive?

00:26:46 Dan Guest Oh my goodness! To even—well. One of my favorite examples of JD's dexterous sampling—I'll give you two examples. The first is a straight rhythmic one. Right? He took a song by James Brown, called "King Heroine", which is in waltz time—3:4 time—and he turned it into 4:4 time. He's amazing. But you know, if you know how to do it, it's pretty easy to do. It's just that he's the one who [chuckles] really kind of pioneered that feel. Made it look easy. One thing that he did was with a song called "Dream Suite" by this jazz fusion group from the early 1970s on Columbia records, called Dreams. "Dream Suite" is this loong [censored] song—I think it's 14 minutes long—and JD, he was a bionic listener. He just listened to things. He didn't needle drop, as we often do as producers. Just, ooh, try to find one little thing.

[Music fades in.]

He would have the patience to listen to an entire 14-minute song. And somewhere in the middle of this song, he finds this little, beautiful, descending dell figure. And it's going down. Like the whole time.

00:28:00 Music Music "Dream Suite: Crunchy Granola" from the album *Dreams* by Dreams.

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue before fading into the next song.]

00:28:10 Dan Guest What he does, is a beat that ends up on a song by Busta Rhymes, called "Enjoy da Ride". And he completely recombines those sonic elements into a new harmonic progression.

00:28:24 Music Music "Enjoy da Ride" from the album *Anarchy* by Busta Rhymes.

"Yeah, we gon' sparkle now"

"Yeah, we gon' shine and we are gon' sparkle now"

"Yeah, Yeah we going, ha"

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]

00:28:35 Dan Guest I have not been—what I like to do for my class at NYU, when I teach my Dilla class, is to deconstruct certain Dilla beats. And they're hard to do. This one was impossible for me. I don't know how he did it. But it's incredible. And it's more beautiful than the

original song, to me. Just what he saw and heard in it. I—you know, I could talk about this stuff for days. He really was the—again, the master of his instrument. And his instrument was the sampling drum machine.

00:29:06 Jesse Host

Let's hear a little bit of what might have been the biggest hit that JD—J Dilla—produced, which was a record for Common, called "The Light". This is a pretty straight song for JD. But what's special about it? What do you think made it pop?

00:29:29 Dan Guest

When I worked for Rick Rubin, he had a phrase that he liked to use when he really liked something that was just so bad and so wrong that it was great. You know? Like, when The Geto Boys used "Sweet Home Alabama" in one of their songs, just turning this sort of neo-racist song on its head. Right? He would say, "That's the worst [censored]." But you—it meant the best [censored]. Right? So, "The Light" comes from—the base of it is this Bobby Caldwell sample. A song called "Open Your Eyes", which is—

00:30:05 Jesse Host

From an album unironically titled *The Cat in the Hat*.

00:30:08 Dan Guest

Right. So, the beat is that sort of almost '60s British crotchet rhythm that the Beatles use. You know, dee-dee-dee, dee-dee-dee. Very, very straight. But then on top of that, he puts this super syncopated beat from an Ohio Players record. Or actually, it was a Detroit Emeralds drummer. You know. [Mimics the syncopated beats.] Super—so, he's got super straight conflicting with super syncopated. And then JD, for the chorus—like, for the verse, Common is—he writes this epistolary poem to a long-distance lover. And it's beautiful. And for the chorus, James is just scratching in pieces of Bobby Caldwell's vocal that—it's so natural to hear that, but to me that's the worst [censored]. It's like this ugliness contrasted with this beauty! And this straightness, you know, colliding with this syncopation.

[Music fades in.]

My god! I mean, is that—that's the best hip-hop, to me. That's what makes that song so musically interesting, to me.

00:31:20 Jesse Host

Let's hear it.

00:31:21 Music Music

"The Light" from the album *Like Water for Chocolate* by Common.

*It's important that we close
To the most, high
Regardless of what happen on him let's rely*

*There are times when you'll need someone
I will be by your side.*

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]

00:31:36 Jesse Host

Now, I will also say this about that record. I was, I think, 19 when that came out. Something like that. Went to some Common shows at the time. I'll just say it. Girls was flipping their lids.

[Dan chuckles.]

00:32:09 Dan Guest Absolutely. People were flipping out. [Laughs.] But it's that—it's that beauty that's full of these weird surprises. Right? It's that it is a beauty that catches you a little bit on the wrong foot.

00:32:32 Jesse Host That's exactly right. The wrong foot. It is a corporal music, but a different way to relate to the body. You know. A different way to move your body. JD didn't articulate his rhythmic sense the way that I'm articulating it. He basically just said it's the way I bob my head.

00:33:12 Dan Guest So, all politics and all rap music are local. Right? And JD was from Detroit. He was working in LA and New York and other places, but he's from Detroit. Detroit is famous, of course, for Motown—for soul music, for soul jazz—you know, in the late '60s and early '70s. It's also famous for techno and ghetto tech electronic music. Less famous for rap. So, what is it that JD grew up amongst that led him to this very unusual fusion of sounds?

00:33:20 Jesse Host Sure. JD was a child. He was born in 1974, so he's really a child of the '70s and '80s Detroit.

00:33:26 Dan Guest Now, I just wanna say, when I say less famous for rap, all apologies to The Insane Clown Posse.

[Dan laughs.]

00:33:26 Dan Guest Go ahead.

00:35:11 Jesse Host Alright. So, he is growing up with the ghosts of Motown, which left Detroit two years before he was born. Growing up with the ghosts of the jazz scene, there. And when I say ghosts, I mean literally the neighborhood that gave us all of those Motown musicians, where all the nightclubs were, where—you know—Elvin Jones and other jazz players played. It was eradicated to build what? A freeway. And so, he grew up in this land of the broken grid. And the land where machines were taking over the jobs of folks like his father, who were the Ford line. So, Detroiters had an affinity for the machine. And also, a very tense relationship with the machine. And that is what births techno in the mid to late 1980s. But Detroit was already defiantly weird. They had an incredible DJ by the name of Electrifying Mojo, who played an ecumenical mix of music. He played rock. He played soul. He was the first—one of the first DJs in the country to play Prince.

00:35:11 Jesse Host And—oh, and I have to mention P-Funk was there, in the '70s and '80s as well, sort of articulating a very Afrofuturistic—you know—update of what James Brown on one hand and Stevie Wonder on the other had been doing. So, James grows up in this milieu. Very little of it is hip-hop oriented. Most kids are listening to techno and doing techno dances, like the jit. You have to sort of go to certain smaller spaces to get your doses of hip-hop.

[Dan agrees.]

I mean, it's not until the early '90s—early to mid-'90s that hip-hop is the kind of ubiquitous that we think of it as being now.

[Dan agrees.]

I mean, I'm 41 years old and I grew up listening to KMEL, in the Bay Area. And it wasn't until I was 25 that I learned that other people my age—not that old. You know, I'm not original hip-hop generation.

I'm 20 years from the original hip-hop generation. But like, other people grew up in major cities that didn't have rap music on the radio! [Chuckles.]

00:35:48 Dan Guest Incredible. I mean—

00:35:49 Jesse Host Until, you know, Hammer and Vanilla Ice or whatever.

00:35:51 Dan Guest Right. That's exactly right. And Black radio in Detroit wasn't even playing—you know, hip-hop as it was, really. Not much of it anyway in the rest of the country. So, what happens is a young clothing designer from Detroit—Maurice Malone—he goes to New York to sort of start his career as a designer. Experiences a really cool, groovy hip-hop club in New York, called The Soul Kitchen, and comes back to Detroit to start his own version of it—The Rhythm Kitchen. That becomes the place that the people who we begin to know and love in Detroit hip-hop begin to coalesce. He will expand The Rhythm Kitchen into something called The Hip-Hop Shop.

That is where a young, White rapper named Paul Rosenberg will meet another young, White rapper named Marshall Mathers. Paul will become the attorney for Marshall—and manager for Marshall Mathers, who we know now as Eminem. It is where JD first gets his start and begins to produce local artists. JD really is actually, before Eminem, the first real hip-hop—you know, hip-hop figure to come out of Detroit. But once Eminem comes out, the floodgates open and you get Proof and you get D12 and you Royce da 5'9", and you get Guilty Simpson, and you get Fat Cat, and obviously Slum Village and Elzhi. Detroit has its own flavor, which is actually—it leans a bit more to the east coast than the west.

00:37:22 Jesse Host When did J Dilla get sick?

00:37:24 Dan Guest J Dilla returned home from a quick tour—DJ tour of Europe in January 2003, felt very ill. And he'd never been quite that sick before. His mother took him to the hospital. And the physicians at the hospital found that he had almost no platelets. Which is the element of the blood that allows for clotting. And so, if he didn't get a blood transfusion, he could literally—if he bruised himself, he could bleed out. The question was why? Why was this happening? And so, they ran a battery of tests on him and diagnosed him with this very rare blood disease, called TTP. And TTP is a blood clotting disease that essentially makes the blood clot too much in the small organs of the body.

And it had already ravaged his kidneys. So, he needed to go on dialysis. And this diagnosis in early 2003 changes his life the way that having to have regular dialysis changes your life, the way having to have regular bloodwork and transfusions would change one's life. And he is still in Detroit, but quickly his closest creative collaborator is Common and Karriem Riggins, who are already in Los Angeles—suggest that he move to LA for the weather, for better doctors, to be plugged in more to the business, to sort of revitalize his career as well and just to be around people who loved him. Because LA loved him in a way that no other place really did.

00:39:03 Jesse Host One of the things that people talk about who are music makers who admire J Dilla is that like he had this thing that, you know, maybe his sometime-collaborator, Madlib, is also known for—which is like just a capacity to just only make music—just make music and make

music and make music and make music and make music and make music. And it seems like knowing about how finite your life is gives that quality in a person an extra charge.

00:39:48 Dan Guest Yeah, he was—JD, from the moment he had disposable income, he was a brother with Madlib in that sense is that he—all he really wanted to do was stay in that basement and make beats. He didn't wanna go on tour. He didn't even wanna go to New York and mix records. He just wanted to dig for records, make beats, take a break, go to the strip club, maybe eat something and come back again. He wasn't—for a guy who was so corporal in his rhythms, he really was not always in tune with his body. But yeah, one of the reasons that JD—J Dilla has such a [sighs]—a community of followers is that his life—the latter part of his life, especially the last two years that he's in Los Angeles—2004, 2005—what is one's disposition? When you see—most of our lives, we're chasing time. Right? We see time stretching out before us in an endless, inchoate, cloudy thing.

But when you get a diagnosis like JD's, suddenly you see the wall. It's the end. Like in *The Truman Show* when he finally gets to the wall. It's coming at you. And how do you respond to that? Do you curl up into a little ball and not do anything? Do you get depressed? His solution was to just be himself, to keep working, to redouble. That's an incredibly inspiring story, to think about what one's life is in the face of that. I think that is a big part of the overall myth and story of J Dilla and why people are so cathected to him over the years.

00:41:31 Jesse Host More talk about J Dilla with Dan Charnas in just a minute. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

00:41:39 Promo Clip **Music:** Upbeat music.

Jackie Kashian: I'm going first! It's me, Jackie Kashian.

Laura Kilmartin: Man! She's always this bossy.

[Jackie and Kyle laugh boisterously as Laura talks.]

Laura: I'm Laura Kilmartin. We're a bunch of standup comics and we've been doing comedy, like, 60 years total with both of us. But we look amazing. And uh, we're rocking out.

Jackie: We drop every Monday on Max Fun and it's called *The Jackie and Laurie Show*, and you could listen to it and learn about comedy and learn about anger management and all the things.

Laura: And Jackie is married but childless and I'm unmarried but childful. So, together we make one complete woman.

Jackie: We did it!

Kyle: [Laughing helplessly.] Is that just what's—that's what gonna—?

Jackie: Yeah! Yeah! And we try to make Kyle laugh just like that and say, “Oh my god,” every episode.

Kyle: It’s a good job. *The Jackie and Laurie Show*. Mondays, only on Maximum Fun.

00:42:30 Music Transition
00:42:34 Jesse Host

[Music ends.]
Thumpy rock music.
It’s *Bullseye*. I’m Jesse Thorn. I’m talking with Dan Charnas. He’s the author of the new book, *Dilla Time*, which covers the life and work of hip-hop producer J Dilla. Let’s get back into our conversation.

So, tell me about *Donuts*. Because *Donuts* is the record that—you know, for me based on the point where I was in my life—I was no longer a—I was a grownup adult by the time that happened. You know what I mean?

[Dan affirms.]

00:43:33 Dan Guest

I was no longer an adolescent obsessed with every sound that I heard. Right? I still love music and everything, but to me, *Donuts* is like a coda. Right? It’s like a—it’s a grace note on the end on an incredible career. But I think, in a lot of ways, it is the record that defines his legacy as capital G Genius, J Dilla. So, tell me where that record came from?

Donuts came out of a series of beat batches that he did in LA. So, the first beat batch he did when he was visiting a legendary record store called Aaron’s records, filled with all these sort of old ’60s soul sounds that ended up—he called it Dill Withers. People also refer to it as the Motown tape, because it had those sort of really groovy, ’60s soul sounds. After he gets out of the hospital—Cedars-Sinai that first time in early 2005—he starts shopping at Rockaway Records, in Silverlake, with Peanut Butter Wolf and Madlib. And very quickly, he turns around another beat batch which he calls *Donuts*. Very different from anything he’s done before. Not quite lo-fi. Right? It doesn’t sound like dusty cassette grooves.

It is high fidelity, but there are like little compositions. Very busy. Almost too busy for an MC to rhyme over, because they’re filled with jagged vocal samples that—to some people—seem to be saying something. In some way, people listening to them begin to think that he is actually speaking through those samples. This is just a throwaway for him. [Chuckles.] Like, it’s just another beat batch. But the folks at Stones Throw seize on this CD as something that they can put out for him while he’s convalescing. And they’re hoping that he’s gonna make it through this period. Sadly, *Donuts*, alas, would come out three days before J Dilla dies. It comes out on his birthday, February 7th, 2006. And he dies on February 10th.

But it’s this record combined with the news of his death that shows up in places that JD has never shown up before. *The New York Times*, for example. K Sanneh writes an obituary for him there. And all of the parties that are, you know, sort of set up to promote

Donuts then become these memorials for JD. And *Donuts* is the thing that people are clamoring to get as his sort of last message.

[Music fades in.]

That makes a lot of sense to me. And there is genius in it. It's just a different kind of genius than the earlier period. Does that make sense?

00:45:55 Jesse Host

Yeah! Let's hear some music from J Dilla's *Donuts*. This is "Don't Cry".

00:45:59 Music Music

"Don't Cry" from the album *Donuts* by J Dilla.

Baby

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]

00:46:18 Dan Guest

What I wanted to add about that particular song, don't cry, is that a lot of folks like Ahmir—Questlove—saw *Donuts* almost as a manual that he was leaving behind for others in the sense that here's the sample. Right? He plays that song that the sample is from. A long bit of it. And then he shows you what he can do with it. And he does that in that order over and over again on *Donuts*. And then you have people sort of looking for messages. His longtime live-in girlfriend and the mother of his youngest daughter—Joylette—one of her friends rings her up after James dies and *Donuts* comes out and says, "You know, he says your name on there." And so, she listens to this song and there's this record that he samples from The Temptations and George Kirby—the comedian George Kirby—and one of the temptations says, "Okay, George." But it sounds like "Okay, Joy."

00:47:40 Jesse Host

[Chuckles.] That's exactly how it sounds! So, folks are hearing themselves in this. They're hearing messages. "Don't cry." "I can't stand to see you cry." He had broken up with Joylette, but perhaps he wanted to give her something on his way out. I think he knew. I think he had a sense of his mortality in that last year, especially. J Dilla didn't make a lot of hit records. He made some minor hits. And his music is, you know, one of the biggest influences on the world of contemporary jazz music—or at least contemporary American and English jazz music. Where else do we see the ripples of his work in music that—you know, we might hear on the radio or whatever?

00:48:12 Dan Guest

Sure! Well, it goes in waves. Right? There was a big wave in 2015 of music that really played in and out of Dilla time. Two great examples of this were Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*—and I credit Terrace Martin and Taz Arnold especially with bringing these elements in. And also, Robert Glasper, who was brought in on a number of things.

00:48:38 Jesse Host

I would encourage people to listen to Taz Arnold and Terrace Martin on past episodes of *Bullseye*, along with Robert Glasper. Go ahead.

00:48:44 Dan Guest

See? You know the time. *Bullseye* knows the time. It's right on target. So, that album—at least six or seven of the songs go in and out of Dilla time.

[Music fades in.]

Which is—you know, in the same way that like when we listen to Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody”, it went from straight to swung back to straight. Except, now we’re doing it with Dilla time, with this third time field.

00:49:11 Music Music

“Momma” from the album *To Pimp a Butterfly* by Kendrick Lamar.

*This feeling is unmatched
This feeling is brought to you by adrenaline and good rap
Black Pendleton ball cap
(West, west, west)
We don't share the same synonym, fall back
(West, west, west)
Been in it before internet had new acts
Mimicking radio's nemesis made me wack*

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]

00:49:27 Dan Guest

Then, halfway across and underneath the world, this group from Melbourne, Australia—Hiatus Kaiyote. Quite uncategorizable, but I suppose you could call them pop or funk or soul. But they put out an album, *Choose Your Weapon*, where half of the songs go in and out of this Dilla time field.

[Music fades in.]

What they call a jilted time field. Because again, at that time, there’s no name for this thing.

00:49:55 Music Music

“Swamp Thing” from the album *Choose Your Weapon* by Hiatus Kaiyote.

*Ooh no
Ooh*

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]

00:50:09 Dan Guest

My personal agenda, as an author and a journalist, was to really try to put language to what this was—to really position it in history. And so, more recently a British group—The 1975 that has a song called “Sincerity is Scary”, one of their singles which is completely in Dilla time but also very much influenced by *The Voodoo Sessions* and *Electric Lady*. So, we hear it all throughout our music. You know, anything glitch—right?—is in some way a descendant of what JD was doing. And we must understand that it’s much easier now to do the kinds of things that JD did back then and to replicate them. Because now, we have digital audio workstations with graphic user interfaces where you can see the waveform, like you were saying earlier, and shift is over to the right a little bit. And we know how that sounds. Or shift things a little over to the left to make them come in a little earlier.

			<p>The drum machines that we spoke of—the SP and the NPC—did not have these controls. They had little, tiny LCD screens and LED lights. It was a whoole world that was cultivated through experimentation and patience and craftsmanship.</p>
00:51:29	Jesse	Host	<p>Well, Dan Charnas, I'm always really grateful to have you on the show. Thanks for writing this great book and doing the great work you've done on hip-hop and also on mise en place. Thanks for representing for mise en place in your last book.</p> <p>[Dan laughs in delight.]</p>
00:51:45	Dan	Guest	<p>But especially for your hip-hip work. It's always great to get to talk to you.</p>
00:51:49	Jesse	Host	<p>Oh, thank you so much for having me, Jesse.</p> <p>Dan Charnas. His book, <i>Dilla Time</i>, is great. You can buy it at your local book shop or online. Nobody writes about hip-hop like Dan. About a decade ago, he put out a book called <i>The Big Payback</i> about the history of the hip-hop business that might be the best book about the history of hip-hop ever written. <i>Dilla Time</i> is an incredible chronical of an incredible artist.</p>
00:52:10	Music	Transition	<p>Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.</p>
00:52:13	Jesse	Host	<p>That's the end of another episode of <i>Bullseye</i>. <i>Bullseye</i>, created from the homes me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California—where, today at the metal shop across the street from my house, they were banging on something. We had to wait a little while to start recording. I do not know what they were banging on. You know, they're just doing their jobs.</p> <p>Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio, and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Tabatha Myers. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme music by The Go! Team. It's called "Huddle Formation". Thanks to The Go! Team for sharing it with us, along with their label, Memphis Industries.</p> <p><i>Bullseye</i> is also on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. Find us there, follow us. We'll share with you all of our interviews. And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.</p>
00:53:12	Promo	Promo	<p>Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.</p> <p>[Music fades out.]</p>