

My Creative Hero: James Dewitt Yancey

Sound designer Tom Pugh at Grand Central Recording Studio on how the American record producer has shaped the way he thinks



'Choosing a 'creative hero' is a fairly tough ask. There's a judgement of your choice by your peers, the pressure of people actually thinking you know what you are talking about (!) and in my case, my daily work means I interact with some of the greatest creative minds around - be it copywriters, directors or artists who have been massively influential in my career and who probably deserve a nod.

After some deliberation, I decided that I would pick someone who inspired me from an early age before the start of my career, as to me, the term 'creative hero' leans more towards someone who has helped shape the way you think creatively rather than an 'Idol' or 'Icon' who you may just respect and admire.

Q> Who would you say is your creative hero?

Tom> 'J Dilla' aka Jay Dee aka James Dewitt Yancey - an American record producer from Detroit, Michigan who was part of the rap group, Slum Village.

Q> How long has this person been important to you and what are your first memories of meeting them or coming across their work?

Tom> I didn't know I was a fan until it became apparent, I owned or liked a lot of his work without realising. I spent the majority of my London school life listening to underground dance music - predominantly UK Garage, then as I slowly extended my musical tastes through my teens, I started listening to a broader range of music and in 1998 I stumbled on the name Yancey who was credited as a co-producer of 'Find A Way', a song by 'A Tribe Called Quest'. I was talking to a friend about the track and he told me about Jay Dee, I went back through my record collection and found I had recently bought records by De La Soul, Pharcyde and Slum Village without realising that Dilla linked them all.

Q>If you don't know this person, how did you go about finding about them to learn more about them and their work?

Tom> Researching music used to be a lot tougher than it is today. In 1998, I knew I owned some of Dilla's work and that he was a good producer, but information wasn't as readily available and you would absorb musical facts, be it discographies or production credits in a slower way compared to now. Then, around

2002 I started some work experience at a recording studio and a friend at work lent me a copy of 'like water for chocolate' by Common and I saw the name Jay Dee on the credits. The internet had moved along in that time and when the song 'The Light' came on, I looked him up online. I couldn't believe 'The Light' sampled vocals by Bobby Caldwell and drums by a 1970s soul group called 'The Detroit Emeralds'.

I had no idea how the random, different elements of the record could come together so flawlessly and so I began spending hours ripping mixtapes of his work and obscure tracks from the internet and burning them onto minidisc - who remembers minidisc?!



Q> Why is this person such an inspiration to you?

Tom> The creative license 'Jay Dilla' took on his productions and on his songs is something that stood out to me. Traditional hip hop nearly always featured a four-bar loop, whereas Dilla was a fan of three, five, seven and eleven loops, bringing a jazz element and creative freedom to his arrangements whilst sampling obscure artists and songs. This helped me to start thinking about sound in a creative way.

I went off to university listening to UK garage and DJing in my spare time. In this time, Dilla inspired me to experiment with music and sound. I would DJ at student nights in Southampton and would drop a Jimi Hendrix sample just to get a reaction from the crowd. I would mix Big Daddy Kane into Nirvana to create some energy before dropping something cheesy to get everyone bouncing. By the time I left university, with some work experience under my belt, I had a passion for sound and a desire to become a sound engineer.

Dilla died in 2006 which was the year I finished university and the same year I started full time at GCRS in London which is where I currently work as a sound designer. I would go as far as to say that I may not be working in front of a mixing desk if it wasn't for Jay Dee.

Q> How does this person influence you in your approach to your creative work?

Tom> Although his productions are regarded as technical, they weren't always 'polished', it was the idea that was key, and the result was more about a feeling than anything else. This is a mantra that I hold close.

Q> What piece or pieces of this person's work do you keep coming back to and why?

Tom> His final album 'Donuts' is something I always put on. He made this record between his hospital bed and his home studio. It is widely considered a masterpiece and is full of hidden meanings.