

33 1/3

J DILLA JAY DEE DONUTS



DONUTS
by Jordan Ferguson

B L O O M S B U R Y



DONUTS

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Sigur Ros: () by Ethan Hayden

and many more ...

Donuts



Jordan Ferguson

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Track Listing

1. "Donuts (Outro)" (0:11)
2. "Workinonit" (2:57)
3. "Waves" (1:38)
4. "Light My Fire" (0:35)
5. "The New" (0:49)
6. "Stop" (1:39)
7. "People" (1:24)
8. "The Diff'rence" (1:52)
9. "Mash" (1:31)
10. "Time: The Donut of the Heart" (1:38)
11. "Glazed" (1:21)
12. "Airworks" (1:44)
13. "Lightworks" (1:55)
14. "Stepson of the Clapper" (1:01)
15. "The Twister (Huh, What)" (1:16)
16. "One Eleven" (1:11)
17. "Two Can Win" (1:47)
18. "Don't Cry" (1:59)
19. "Anti-American Graffiti" (1:53)
20. "Geek Down" (1:19)
21. "Thunder" (0:54)
22. "Gobstopper" (1:05)

D O N U T S

23. "One for Ghost" (1:18)
24. "Dilla Says Go" (1:16)
25. "Walkinonit" (1:15)
26. "The Factory" (1:23)
27. "U-Love" (1:00)
28. "Hi." (1:16)
29. "Bye." (1:27)
30. "Last Donut of the Night" (1:39)
31. "Welcome to the Show"(1:12)

Contents

<i>Track Listing</i>	v
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	viii
<i>Foreword</i>	ix
Welcome to the Show	1
The Diff'rence	7
Hi	12
Waves	24
Stop!	38
The Twister (Huh, What)	43
Workinonit	67
Two Can Win	78
Geek Down	83
The New	100
Bye	106
<i>Endnotes</i>	114
<i>Works Cited</i>	127

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Foreword

I first started working with Dilla in '97. I'd heard about him through a mutual friend, DJ Houseshoes, who worked at a record store in Detroit and had ordered an LP that I produced in 1994 called *Peanut Butter Breaks*. Houseshoes would always tell me about this DJ from Detroit named "Jay Dee" who also made beats. One day, Shoes told me that Jay Dee was now managed by Q-Tip and that he had tracks on the upcoming Tribe Called Quest album. He went on to tell me about remixes Jay Dee did for popular rappers like De La Soul and Busta Rhymes that were done on spec, but got shelved because the labels weren't interested. He asked if I was interested in pressing it up on vinyl and we pressed 1000 copies. I had ties to Japan so we shipped them ALL to Japan.

If you listen to Dilla's early stuff from the mid to late 90s, it was all cohesive. Soulful, stripped down, boom bap. He had a formula down. Filtered basslines with punchy, programmed drums and live Fender Rhodes on top. The "Jay Dee sound." I think part of the reason he developed this formula was to try to avoid relying too heavily on samples because by that time in hip hop, it was

too difficult to clear them. Songs based around samples on major labels were getting scrapped left and right due to the legal implications. Madlib's Lootpack and Quasimoto projects, on the other hand, were made on a much smaller budget for a much smaller fan base and thus were more experimental: all over the place musically and chock-full of samples. Those two albums, Lootpack's *Soundpieces* and Quasimoto's *The Unseen*, would never have come out on a major label.

When Madlib and I flew to Detroit in 2001 to work on Dilla's (soon to be shelved) album for MCA, the two super-producing MCs were each at the top of their beat making game, yet each brought something different to the table. Dilla's tracks were done in a pro studio and Dilla himself was a scientist of sonics, whereas Madlib was a self proclaimed "caveman and a beast" who didn't care for separating his tracks in the recording process and his stuff was much looser and thus sounded much less "professional." Yet surprisingly, when they worked together on a full album for the first (and last) time under the name Jaylib, Madlib chose energetic, almost commercial sounding tracks from Dilla to rap over and Dilla chose raw sounding, sloppier ones from Madlib for his easel. After Dilla moved to LA, their production styles seemed to meld into one. And after seeing them as a new crew of sorts, I felt like for the first time, they each had a true collaborator as "genius" as themselves and were collectively on to something bigger and more original than anyone else in hip hop. Unorthodox bohemians. Then Dilla's sickness progressed and his level of output regressed. He was supposed to produce Common's album *Be*, but ended up only producing 2

songs out of 11, with the other 9 produced by Kanye. He spent a year in the hospital.

One day in 2005, he called me to go record shopping and I dropped all my plans that day and picked him up. He gave me a CD to play and the rest was history.

I like to think that *Donuts* was Dilla's quirky, totally creative record specifically made for Stones Throw which expanded upon the blueprint of Madlib's *Beat Konducta Vol 1* EP that I had released as vinyl-only the year before.

To say that *Donuts* is merely Dilla's take on the Madlib sound would be a discredit to the things that make it unique from Madlib productions. The way he used technology to change hip hop makes it feel like the miracle of the pyramids. As a former hip hop beat maker myself, I can't figure out what the fuck he did on some of that record, almost 10 years later, even though technology has now made it easier to do what was then not achievable in music production. And yet it's not cerebral to the point of losing the funk or the soul or human feeling. His use of technology is only to accentuate the emotions of the music, not overpower them. It sounds simple until you hear the original samples that were used. Then you really appreciate Dilla's craft at creating and in general, the art of sampling to make original music.

We were set to release *Donuts* in October of 2005, but we missed the production deadline and the distributor warned us to wait til the following year cuz it would get lost in the Christmas rush competing against records like Destiny's Child and Madonna. This record was never expected to do much of anything but sell to the Stones Throw audience according to everyone in the industry

that we pitched it to. I heard things like “instrumental hip hop records don’t sell” and I’d respond with, “don’t think of this as a traditional instrumental hip hop record. Think of it as more of a DJ Shadow-*Introducing*.” When we missed the deadline to release it in 2005, we decided to push it back all the way to February on his birthday. I originally envisioned Dilla DJing at the release party, but again his health deteriorated. I thought it was a temporary thing so we came up with the idea of J Rocc and I doing a whole night of spinning NOTHING but Dilla music for the record release party and hopefully he’d be better by that time come and watch us, even if he wasn’t gonna perform.

By the week of release date, we were not focused on the music or the promotion of the album. We were all focused on his health, which had drastically gotten worse. The release of *Donuts* was our little distraction from dealing with what we didn’t want to accept was happening. Dilla was dying. I had no idea it had gotten that bad until his birthday, when his mom arranged for us to come visit him at home. None of us were prepared for what we saw that day. I pulled his mom aside and said “you have to check him back into the hospital” and she told me, “I promised him he wouldn’t spend his birthday in a hospital like he had to last year and that’s what we’re doing.” Looking back, I realize the hospital released him to let him spend his final days at home in hospice.

His mom was there for him more than anybody during those final months. She moved from Detroit to LA and spent every minute with him, sleeping in a cot in his hospital room. The love I witnessed from a mother towards her son was something I’d never seen that

intensely before. When we finally lost Dilla, everyone's concern switched to Ma Dukes. But she showed strength and adversity more than any of us. She was the rock that held Dilla's family and friends together the day he died, the day of the funeral, and for months after losing him.

Halfway through the book, Jordan asks a question that's been on many a mind: "Would *Donuts* be a classic had Dilla survived?" Songs like "The Factory," "Lightworks," and "The Twister" are great in and of themselves, but take on an even more powerful feeling when you listen in the context of what he was dealing with. They give a sense of unrest and claustrophobia which makes me wonder if it was his way of sharing the chaos and uncertainty he went through faced with death around the corner. And "Last Donut of The Night" and "Don't Cry" are just blatant tear jerkers when listened to with consideration that it was his final days. But even without the circumstances surrounding the creation of the album, it's considered a defining moment in Stones Throw's history for me. I feel that way because I remember the feeling it gave me when I heard the early incarnation of it a year BEFORE he got sick again; BEFORE he went back to the hospital; and BEFORE the world lost him three days after the release of the finished version. I'll never forget what it did for me that day I first popped the rough version of the CD in my car riding with a then relatively healthy Dilla in 2005.

I realize that the majority of people heard it for the first time after he passed away, and for those, there's no way for them to hear it without any consideration of the circumstances surrounding it. I remember the feeling it gave me again in February 2006, a week after he passed away as I drove up the coast of the 101 Freeway

from LA to SF to DJ what was supposed to be a release party, but turned into a memorial that we had originally cancelled until Ma Dukes asked us to go through with it. The album sounded so different in those polar opposite contexts, yet in both cases, to me and my circle of friends the album was a work of art. It was an instant classic before it was ever an “official album” and a classic before anybody including Dilla knew that he would get sick again. It was talked about amongst us, heralded and praised or whatever, and more importantly, on repeat in my car and that’s always the best test. When he first gave me *Donuts*, Dilla didn’t describe to me or explain what it was. It was just given to me to pop in the ride.

—Chris “Peanut Butter Wolf” Manak, March 2015

JORDAN FERGUSON

Raise it up for Ma Dukes.

Caitlin MacKinnon did the work.

Nicole Bryant kept the faith.

Sarah Jacobs saw it through.