



J Dilla's Donuts

Jordan Ferguson

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From a Los Angeles hospital bed, equipped with little more than a laptop and a stack of records, James "J Dilla" Yancey crafted a set of tracks that would forever change the way beatmakers viewed their artform. The songs on *Donuts* are not hip hop music as "hip hop music" is typically defined; they careen and crash into each other, in one moment noisy and abrasive, gorgeous and heartbreaking the next. The samples and melodies tell the story of a man coming to terms with his declining health, a final love letter to the family and friends he was leaving behind. As a prolific producer with a voracious appetite for the history and mechanics of the music he loved, J Dilla knew the records that went into constructing *Donuts* inside and out. He could have taken them all and made a much different, more accessible album. If the widely accepted view is that his final work is a record about dying, the question becomes why did he make this record about dying?

Drawing from philosophy, critical theory and musicology, as well as Dilla's own musical catalogue, Jordan Ferguson shows that the contradictory, irascible and confrontational music found on *Donuts* is as much a result of an artist's declining health as it is an example of what scholars call "late style," placing the album in a musical tradition that stretches back centuries.

J Dilla's Donuts Details

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From Reader Review J Dilla's Donuts for online ebook

Jesus Rodriguez says

Hopefully, this will be the first of many books to celebrate and discuss this album.

For anyone who is not familiar with who J Dilla is and wishes to start exploring one of the genius hip hop producers of all time, Ferguson's book is a great primer.

I'm always used to reading about music which I did not live at the time it came out so to read this book, for me, was pretty surreal. Ferguson does a great job on giving you background on who J Dilla is, where he came from and why his music touched so many. As with all works of genius, you will probably learn some new things regarding the making of "Donuts". Like with all people who are so talented, there's so much more to discuss, but I really do hope this gets the ball rolling for more scholarship and more in depth info on him.

I've been a big fan of Dilla for a long time, so this for me a great tribute. I read this in a couple of hours. I couldn't put it down. One my favorite from the 33 1/3 series so far.

Jon says

This is one of the better entries in this series that I've read in some time and I give major kudos to Jordan Ferguson for writing so eloquently about a record for which that is very difficult to do. With no lyrics to focus on, Ferguson still manages to do a fantastic job discussing how this plays. Even better is the context he delves into - not just Yancey's illness and death, but his troubled relationship with Detroit, the numerous label struggles he had and how Dilla managed to chance the production game completely.

Matt says

The 33 1/3 books have always struck me as a brilliant idea with somewhat spotty execution. The books generally follow the same formula: analyzing a seminal album in 100-200 pages of insight, interpretations, and/or the historical context of the work. Each book is penned by a different author with a different approach, so naturally there is considerable variation in quality. As someone who really likes to dig into albums deserving of such mental exertion, I much enjoyed the books where everything works (like Ben Sisario's excellent take on Doolittle) and was considerably disappointed by some of the more needlessly abstruse (OK Computer) or autobiographical (Wowee Zowee) installments. Thankfully, Toronto freelance journalist Jordan Ferguson's examination of J Dilla's 2006 album Donuts is a well-organized and illuminating read on one of the best instrumental hip-hop albums ever.

Donuts is a scattershot collection of beats that jumps from one idea to the next and pulls the rug out from the listener just when they are getting comfortable. It makes for a great listen, but thankfully Donuts the book is comprehensive and fully-developed. Ferguson follows the popular 33 1/3 format of beginning with historical background and the artist's career progression leading up to the album before delving into its actual content. Much of the first half of the book consists of an extended biography of Dilla and his development as an artist. The book draws from a wide array of interviews, articles, videos, and other sources on Dilla as well as the history of the Detroit music scene. The strongest point of Donuts is Ferguson's comprehensive research. Dilla fans may already be familiar with some of the anecdotes and interviews referenced in Donuts (which is

to be expected to some extent), but there is likely quite a bit of new material unless you have seen every YouTube video, Frank-N-Dank DVD extra, and read every random article on Dilla. The book greatly benefits from the fact that Dilla (and his mother, who is also featured prominently) was very revealing and engaging in his interviews. He goes into considerable detail on his craft, philosophy, and his personal history and artistic evolution. Ferguson also conducted some original interviews while writing the book. He got time with Eothen "Egon" Alapatt, the former general manager of Stones Throw Records who was instrumental in releasing Donuts as well as Stones Throw art director Jeff Jank. These provide additional insight into Dilla's personality and how Donuts came together.

Ferguson focuses on the album in the latter third of the book. He is a very attentive listener, pointing out small yet important details of the album. I've listened to the album countless times and I never realized that while the album concludes with a reprise of the introduction, there is a stutter that causes a jerky transition between the two. Ferguson goes on to explain how this plays into Dilla's affinity for samples with "mistakes" in them. Many hip-hop reviews turn into extended lists of sample sources possibly to flex their sampling knowledge muscles/Googling proficiency, and this risk is clearly elevated when dealing with an instrumental album like Donuts. There is a point to every sample Ferguson points out, whether it is to highlight Dilla's eclectic (I had no idea he was a Stereolab fan) musical tastes or his knack for seamlessly integrating disparate sources into his beats.

While Ferguson rightfully heaps Dilla with a ton of (much-deserved) praise, especially with his gift for rhythm and drum programming, need for constant innovation, and disregard for the conventional rules of hip-hop production, Ferguson never enters mindless fawning territory, another common misstep in 33 1/3 books. He is refreshingly even-handed throughout, noting (also much-deserved) critical swipes at his rapping ability and some weaker moments in his discography. Ferguson's passion for his subject is evident throughout and he is clearly very knowledgeable about sampling and hip-hop music in general.

In Sum

Donuts is definitely one of my favorite entries in the 33 1/3 series and is a worthwhile read for any fan of the album. There are a few brief passages where Ferguson rambles a bit on critical theory but in general he held my interest throughout and offered a hefty bit of background on and more reasons to appreciate one of my favorite albums of the last decade.

8/10

Andrew Guthrie says

It was most appropriate reading Jordan Ferguson's "Donuts" back to back with this series' release about Miles Davis' "Bitches Brew", as both albums deal in part with the cross-genre classification of "Musique concrète", but obviously from two different and noteworthy angles.

"Donuts" became one of my favourite books in this series, but like all musical inclinations, there is probably a very subjective reason for this that at this moment I am unable to explicate beyond saying that I thought Ferguson displayed a touching sensitivity to the subject that had him talking to/interviewing some of the actual players while also deftly incorporating "high theory" or intellectual touchstones such as Kubler-Ross' "On Death and Dying".

Ferguson also gets down to it by identifying the source material (samples) for many of the tracks on "Donuts" while also detailing Jay Dee's unique production methods that set him apart (far apart) from his

competitors. In fact, we see that Jay Dee was quite willing to reverse direction, break the inherent rules of Hip Hop sampling and production (which, at one point, are nicely laid out by Ferguson), and eventually back off from "the mainstream" (where he was clearly headed with its attendant financial compensations) and reattach himself to "the underground".

The book (and Jay Dee's "Donuts") also carries a heavy dose of melancholy or remorse seeing as it will forever be attached to Dilla's demise (his death from a rare blood disease). Ferguson even posits the question as to "Donuts" ultimate value given this unavoidable reference point, but again, the author does this with much sensitivity which at once acknowledges his distance from the original source while nevertheless making it clear that he is deeply influenced by the music.

J Name says

4 1/2 stars. Very great essay. An easy read for a lot of good content in this book. I look forward to reading more 33 1/3 books.

Ethan says

I like reading 33 1/3 books because they're never straightforward, and just like the others I've read, this one took a roundabout way to get to this album. The first about 50 pages is a history of J Dilla, preceding a second half that has more to say about death and life and how Donuts related to that. There's also a great portion about the relationship between listener and creator that I thought was extremely relevant and interesting.

David says

I haven't read non-fiction in a while but I enjoyed this book. Although I'm a big fan of Stones Throw and instrumental hip-hop, I haven't listened to much Dilla. It really opened my eyes to the influence he had on hip-hop during his lifetime, and his story was really interesting. The book was short and to-the-point, and the writing was pleasant and direct. It doesn't get much better than that!

Ron Maskell says

A very good breakdown of Donuts and what was going on around Dilla at the time of his unfortunate death. Although I did find the book awfully short even at 33 1/3 standards. I just was expecting and wanting more. Don't get me wrong though, I'd recommend this book for all.

Carter K Delloro says

Took me forever to read because I kept turning to my Spotify account. I highly recommend putting down the book to listen to the tracks Ferguson talks about. Great read that goes beyond just music. I'll never hear this

album the same way again.

Jeff says

You can learn a bit of history of Detroit hip-hop, and a bit about J. Dilla's history, but that's about it. Most of this book is an exercise in intellectual self-gratification, using the Donuts album as fodder. Lots of pages that try to draw from philosophy, literature, psychology, and other fields in an attempt to explain Dilla's work . The author spends an entire chapter writing about himself, as he tries to justify writing a book like this.

If you're seeking to learn about J. Dilla's approach to sound and music, I don't recommend reading this book.

Ben Winch says

J Dilla is everything I love about hip-hop. *Donuts* is his gift to the hip-hop community, who'll be rapping over this for years. Dilla reminds us: anyone with a thorough knowledge of black American music in the 20th century has a great education in music. A golden age, which hip-hop, by recognising and celebrating it as such, manages to repurpose and perpetuate. *Donuts* is a genius *curation*: 1-2 minute potent edits, exquisite in themselves, that (a) suggest a future, and (b) send us back to the past. At it's best ("Two Can Win", "Stop", "Last Donut of the Night") it's thrilling, heartbreaking, exhilarating. This *happened* – the grassroots uprising of soulful virtuosity that brought us jazz, blues, soul, funk – it flourished and passed. But *Donuts*, a time machine, gives it back.

I'll admit to getting *Donuts* kind of late. In England in 2010, someone I loved recommended it, but I never quite settled into it. Maybe my life was too slow; I preferred to luxuriate in Coltrane's *Crescent* or *Bitches' Brew* outtakes on the endless-seeming winter busrides through Wythenshawe to my job at Manchester Airport. But now, with new relationship, 3 stepkids, studies, writing, music all bubbling at once on the stove of my attention, the 2-minute salvos of *Donuts* suit me to the ground – little shots of love and adrenalin and wide-eyed possibility that, maybe, could only have come from a guy about to be dead. (Check his plethora of other instrumentals, mostly released since his death, and see if you can find anything that breaks the rules like this does.)

It's a bag of seeds, barely cultivated, whatever he could gather in a hurry, but worked with skilful vigour so it suggests near-infinite outgrowths. Composed – so legend has it – in a hospital bed with a turntable, a sampler and some 45s gifted by his friends, *Donuts* is state-of-the-art love of music and community. Dilla, Detroit son of an opera singer and a jazz bassist, with perfect pitch at 2 and his own turntable at 4, is a musical *appreciator* of genius. Why did Dilla make *Donuts*? Love of music, plain and simple. A more authentic work of deep reverence and respect I doubt you'll find. RIP, Jay Dee. Two Can Win. We all can.

(Re the book, it's informative, told me a lot I didn't know and was glad to learn about Detroit hip-hop. It didn't say a lot about the making of *Donuts* but there may not be much to say. If you love Dilla I recommend it.)

Chris says

This is not the book I expected. Though, honestly, I don't quite know what I expected.

My favorite part about the 33 1/3 series is that each one is so drastically different that it's hard to get a "bead" on how the series will work.

This one focuses quite a bit on the general context and history of the artist J Dilla, aka Jay Dee. That, of course, wraps up much of it with the history of modern hip hop, which was perfect for me. (I recently finished HIP-HOP EVOLUTION on Netflix and wished it had carried into more modern times. This book seemed to pick up, in many ways, where that series left off.)

I didn't know much about Dilla or this album. I'd tracked it down and listened to it a few times prior to reading this book, but nothing struck me as "amazing" or particularly noteworthy. However, Ferguson provided the appropriate context and discussed the life of this artist, which truly gave weight to the album itself.

That being said, there isn't much about the album itself. There are a few references here, and one of the last chapters does a nice job analyzing the mood and style of the various tracks in comparison with Dilla's life. So, if there is one complaint, it's that it really is more about the artist than the album. Those looking for a huge focus on DONUTS will be disappointed.

For those like me, though, who didn't know much about J Dilla--or, honestly, much about hip-hop's recent history--this makes for a great read about an extremely talented artist whose life was cut too short.

Emily says

somewhat surprisingly, given my propensity towards arcane trivia about the music i love, this is the first 33 1/3 book i've actually read, despite being aware of the series for some time now. the simple, defining factor of the series is that anyone can submit a proposal - all you need to show is that you have the knowledge and critical skill to deal with a great piece of music. and, obviously, as a result all the books are written by different people. all i can say is that if they're all as comprehensive, well-researched and critically intelligent as jordan ferguson's take on dilla, then i need to pick up some more of these.

the book is nominally about "donuts", and whilst ferguson does an excellent analysis of the record itself, examining it as a response to dilla's illness and in the context of his peers, it's just as much a potted history of j dilla. and by extension, a brief look at the artists and detroit culture that nurtured him. the handling of the musical analysis itself is deft, pithy - it would be so easy to slip into purple prose, to make it about ferguson, but he never threatens to cross that line. it's tactful and honest.

ferguson just absolutely nails it, a perfect balance of meticulous backstory and analysis, acknowledging the fact that the man himself would never look back in this manner, but all the same - *what if?*

Kaleb Miears says

An interesting read for any hip-hop fan. Jordan Ferguson does a good job of recalling the life of arguably the most iconic person in hip-hop's most iconic album. As a Dilla fan, I appreciate some of the insight on his life and the things that he did for the music industry. I'd recommend to any audiophile.

Ian Mathers says

It's possible if I'd come to this knowing more of the details about Yancy's life, career, and art, or about *Donuts* specifically, this might have been four stars for me. But knowing just the basics it felt like a complete home run, a lovely tribute and reaffirmation of his genius, hard work, and (well deserved) status. Ferguson absolutely does not avoid the fact that his story had the kind of end that feels pointlessly cruel, but this still felt much more like a celebration of life and art than any sort of lamenting.
