

A tribute to James Yancey: Volumes 5 and 6 of Madlib's Beat Konducta series

By Hiram Lee
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In 2006, American musician James Yancey died of complications from a rare blood disease called TTP. Yancey, who recorded under the names Jay Dee and J Dilla, was an influential hip hop producer whose skills as a musician rose far above the current low standard of artistry dominating the genre. He was a unique and important figure in hip hop and "neo-soul" music, and, while his work was never entirely free of the limitations and tendencies toward egoism that plague hip hop today, his talent was undeniable and his loss at such a young age is sorely felt. Yancey was only just beginning to come into his own as an artist.

Fellow hip hop producer Otis Jackson Jr., a musician with similar gifts who records under the name Madlib and who was Yancey's a close friend and collaborator, pays tribute to the late producer with his most recent album, comprising volumes 5 and 6 of his instrumental *Beat Konducta* series of recordings.

Madlib's album is in many ways a moving tribute to his late friend, though certainly not a flawless work. One can point to other recordings in Madlib's extensive catalogue of albums that are superior, including earlier entries in the *Beat Konducta* series. But at their best, volumes 5 and 6 capture, in their elaborate sample-based compositions, the sense of sadness felt for the loss of a young man—a young artist—whose life is cut short.

The work is entirely instrumental with the exception of occasional vocal snippets sampled from obscure records discovered by Madlib in used record stores around the world. Madlib avoids the bombastic drum programming commonly associated with hip hop production in favor of a softer sound, often with hand claps or the click of a snare drum played with cross-sticking on the backbeat. Loops of jazz guitar, keyboards and bass are blended with all the sensitivity

and expressiveness one usually finds in the artist's work.

In the song "No More Time (The Change)," a voice calls out sorrowfully, "There's no time now to change," as if to acknowledge that Yancey's growth had been suddenly interrupted, that the artist was on the cusp of something that would now be left a promise unfulfilled. And in the next song, "Do You Know (Transition)," a voice repeats, "Do you think it's fair?" It all works to communicate, by effective and economic means, the feeling of someone in mourning who simply cannot shake the thoughts of a tragedy. If this is not quite earth-shattering stuff, it's nevertheless moving and sincere.

The work isn't overwhelmed by melancholy, however. "Infinity Sound (Never Ending)" features driving percussion and synthesizers. The beat is forward-marching, and a voice calls out, "have no fear." Yancey is gone, Madlib seems to say, but his music will last.

Other highlights include "Lifetime (Lifeline)," with its exciting blend of percussion instruments, and "The String (Heavy Jones)," in which a sampled string section is subtly modified, looped and relooped to great effect as the song progresses.

But while there is much to like about the album, it is also not without its flaws. There are times when the work slips into the all too typical bravura and mercenary aims found in so much of this genre of music, such as in the dreadful "Get Dollaz 24-7." Songs like this, celebrating little more than making money, are entirely backward and out of place.

This is uncharacteristic of Madlib's work. Unfortunately, one could never say the same for James Yancey's music. Too often, in Yancey's recordings, with his group Slum Village and elsewhere, one sees

the most interesting and advanced sample compositions and vocal rhythms devoted to the least worthy lyrical material.

If, in paying tribute to Yancey's life, Madlib has felt himself obliged to approach this side of the musician, he has done so uncritically and to the album's detriment. Yancey himself appeared to be moving away from this kind of material on his final album *Donuts*, a remarkable instrumental work, which he completed from a hospital bed just before his death in 2006.

Madlib's own work has, for the most part, tended to avoid the ego-driven elements of the worst kinds of hip hop music, in favor of more sensitive and experimental work. Perhaps his most interesting and satisfying work has been his series of Yesterdays New Quintet projects. Yesterdays New Quintet is a jazz fusion "band" formed by Madlib in 2001. In reality, there is no band at all and the music is created solely by Madlib under various pseudonyms. The debut album released by the alleged quintet, *Angles Without Edges*, mixing samples with live instrumentation played by Madlib, including Fender Rhodes electric pianos and vibraphones, is Madlib at his best. One often forgets there is only one musician at work, as the "group" seems to interact and fuse together with great chemistry. Perhaps no other sample-based composer has created works that are so "alive."

Volumes 5 and 6 of the *Beat Konducta* series never match the intensity or complexity of the Quintet albums. But even with their limitations, which can't be ignored, these latest volumes stand out as unique and memorable contributions in hip hop. If they present a sincere tribute to an artist and friend that is ultimately more loving than critical, perhaps this is to be expected. But only up to a point. One can't help but feel that a great deal is left unsaid.

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