

Still Shining

Karriem Riggins and friends pitch in to help J Dilla complete a posthumous masterpiece.

WORDS: JESSE SERWER

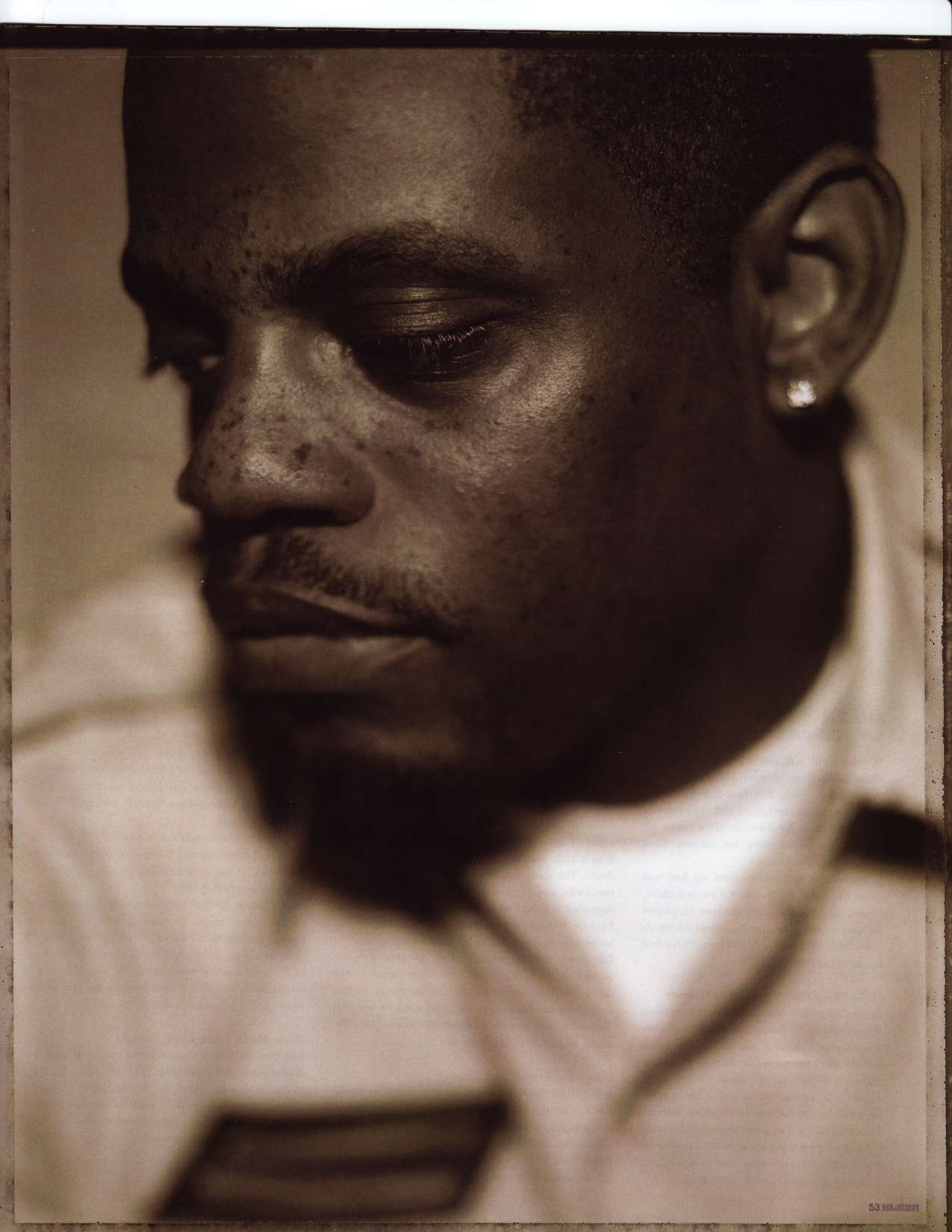
PORTRAIT: DREW REYNOLDS

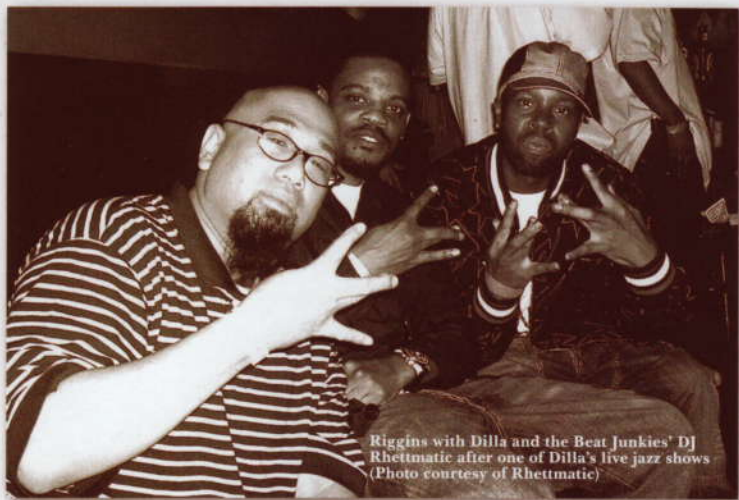
TYPE: DARREN BOOTH

From learning to operate a turntable while still in diapers in Detroit to recording his second LP in an L.A. hospital bed, James "Jay Dee" Yancey's life was consumed by music. Unsurprisingly, this deep-rooted connection colored the esteemed producer's death as well. Having lost his long-running battle with lupus just two days after his Stones Throw album, *Donuts*, hit shelves, it took only a day for Dilla's grieving mother, Maureen Yancey, to reach out to BBE Records and urge them to release *The Shining*, the LP Dilla had struggled to complete before his sickness took a turn for the worse.

Ms. Yancey and Eddie Bezael, US label manager for BBE and the A&R person on the project, entrusted the album's completion to Karriem Riggins, a friend of Jay's from Detroit who had relocated to the same L.A. neighborhood as Dilla; the pair had already collaborated on a series of live tracks that form *The Shining's* nucleus.

"We'd try to capture certain vibes from a record he'd dig up, and make it his," recalls Riggins, an accomplished jazz drummer who's backed Betty Carter, Roy Hargrove, and Diana Krall and produced beats for The Roots, Common, and Erykah Badu. He was also Dilla's main collaborator on 2001's *Welcome 2 Detroit* (BBE). "*Welcome* came from live instruments and we wanted to start this one like that. Jay always knew exactly what he wanted, and everything fell into place. Later on, he couldn't really walk anymore but even at that time, he was jumping on the





Riggins with Dilla and the Beat Junkies' DJ Rhettmatic after one of Dilla's live jazz shows (Photo courtesy of Rhettmatic)

“Jay always knew exactly what he wanted, and everything fell into place.”

—Kariem Riggins

DILLA'S THRILLERS

Key collaborators break down *The Shining's* standout tracks.

“Geek Down” feat. Busta Rhymes

Kariem Riggins: We were going to get Busta to rhyme on it but that beat just speaks for itself. It's samples of kazoos and voices mixed together—I think Jay did some of the voices. All Busta had to do was bring that cadence. They worked so well together.

J. Rocc: The last conversation we had was about this song. Every time I'd go over there, I'd ask him about it, from the time he played me the sample to the time Busta laid the vocals down. Dilla was probably thinking, “This fool needs to geek down.”

“Baby” feat. Madlib and Guilty Simpson

Guilty Simpson: I was in Cali with Dilla towards the tail end of the Pistons/Spurs series last summer, and we was hittin' the lab, smokin' good, and watching the games. It was very enlightening—we were able to talk about his music, his vision for my music, and the future. Being in the lab with him that last time was business as usual. He was always a mad scientist because he could see past vocals straight to the finished product—a true producer. He was more tired than usual but he always managed to smile and joke.

“Jungle Love” feat. MED and Guilty Simpson

KR: Jay would scat out rhythms to me and say ‘Flip this on the drums.’ The bass drum pattern is the whole song—there's nothing melodic but keys that come in and out. There's no snare or bass drum, either: I flipped over a 16-inch floor tom and used it as a kick, and he EQ'ed it up like a concert bass drum. The snare sound is me hitting the hi-hat with two sticks, and Jay Dee on the tambourines. Jay was supposed to rhyme on it, but he never got the chance. I got Guilty to lay a verse where Jay's was supposed to be because that was one of his favorite rappers.

GS: It was very important for me to write with the mind-state that Jay was still here, rather than letting my heavy heart compromise the chemistry of the song. I wrote that rhyme in 15 minutes. It was like the beat helped co-write that shit, that's how easy Dilla tracks make spittin'. Pure genius!

“Over The Breaks”

KR: We did about five tracks like this where Jay would throw a breakbeat on and we'd just play keys over it; this was just the one I chose for the album. I forget where the drums are from. We used the Al Green break from Eric B and Rakim's “Mahogany” on one, but we didn't want to have sample issues.

keys, running around to stores and diggin' for records to get inspired by,” notes Riggins.

At the same time, Dilla was making beats on his MPC at the house he shared with his mother and Common, and sporadically hooking up with fam like Busta Rhymes, Pharoahe Monch, and D'Angelo. On two tracks, “Baby” and “Won't Do,” he even took well-executed stabs at singing. By the time he passed on February 10, Dilla had completed approximately 85% of what would prove to be his last fully realized full-length statement. (*Jay Love Japan*, another LP due out later this year on Operation Unknown Records, is a compilation of unreleased collaborations).

Far from attempting a 2Pac-style Pro Tools resurrection, Riggins and Bezael recruited Guilty Simpson, a recent Stones Throw signee and good friend of Dilla's from Detroit, and The Roots' Black Thought to record *The Shining's* final verses. Dilla's favorite engineers, Bob Power and Dave Cooley, were brought in to mix the tracks down.

“Karriem was really in tune with Jay's concept from the beginning,” recalls Cooley, who recorded some of the album's initial sessions and also mastered the album. “I get the feeling that Jay is still [watching over] this record, making sure everything's coming out cool.”

While *The Shining* has a haunted quality (the title references the Steven King novel and film of the same name), it also brims with life and an overall message of love (four songs have “love” in the title). With 12 songs in 36 minutes, it's straight and to the point, like his classic one-minute gems with Slum Village.

“I couldn't think of a better word to describe the energy he gave off than ‘love,’” says Guilty Simpson. “People who didn't really love rap music, who just liked it, aren't really inspired by J Dilla. But music lovers, as soon as you hear him, he influences your whole life.”

The Shining is out August 22 on BBE. www.j-dilla.com, www.bbemusic.com

“Body Movin'” feat. J. Rocc

KR: This reminds me of a 2006 *Wild Style* theme. We did it live in the studio with J. Rocc on the cut and just added a few keyboard touches. He told me to take a solo on the Korg.

J. Rocc: The studio didn't even have a 1200, just some old school turntable and I laid down some cuts over the drums. It was crazy hearing the way he freaked it after it was mixed down.

Dave Cooley: He had that full understanding of the talents of the people he worked with. He'd choose people, then sit back and let the project have a mind of its own. Also, he'd never do things twice. He knew in his head how he wanted it sound in advance and would really never “try” anything in the studio. He would only “do”...hardly a drop of wasted energy.

“Love Movin'” feat. Black Thought

KR: You know how disco records speed up, and the drums turn into something else? We were listening to this disco joint where the drums sound like some crazy shakers and we decided to do our own version of that. That's Jay on the guitar and electric bass—that cat was an all-around musician.