[Snap Judgment intro]

**Glynn:** You're listening to Snap Judgment Classic.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Okay, send everyone away so you can have some 'me' time. You deserve it. Today on Snap Judgment, we sent Snap producer, Pat Mesiti-Miller, on a quest to my hometown, Detroit City. Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

**Pat:** Meet Jeff. He runs a record store out in Detroit.

**Jeff:** I'm Jeff Bubeck from UHF Records. UHF is a 95% vinyl, good, old-fashioned record shop. I've collected my whole life. I started eight years old collecting records and now I have-- I mean, look around. [chuckles]

**Pat:** This place is covered.

**Jeff:** Yeah.

**Pat:** And talking with Jeff, I was asking him where he gets all his records. He told me he hunts them down, go buy from collectors, go to estate sales.

**Jeff:** I've gone to storage auctions long before and *Storage Wars* and *Pickers* or any of those shows that are out now. It's nothing like that, really. For the most part, there's garbage out there.

**Pat:** And then, Jeff told me a story about one of his best finds in his decades of collecting. It started off when Jeff got a call from a woman who owned a storage locker. Apparently, somebody was years behind on rent, and left behind a unit filled with records. So, Jeff went and checked it out.

**Jeff:** There were probably 6000 records in there. Tons of 70s jazz, really a lot of off-the-wall, obscure stuff. There was a little bit of everything in there. Boxes upon boxes stacked up. There was stuff that had gotten wet, stuff had actually had black mold growing on it. You know what I mean? It was a mess.

**Pat:** But in looking through all the records, he saw some stuff that was worth investing in and bought them and then paid to have them stored in the locker for a couple more months.

**Jeff:** And one particular day, I went to the storage bin to pick up some boxes, and I noticed a tub in the back of the storage bin. And I opened the tub, and it was just full of cassettes. It was just mix tapes, homemade tapes, and then there was some junk mail in there. All of the junk mail had the name Yancey on it, Maureen Yancey, and there were some pieces that said James Yancey. Didn't think twice of it. Another few days had passed and I have no idea why I did it. But I googled 'James Yancey'. The first thing that popped up was the Wikipedia page for J Dilla, producer extraordinaire.

[The Pharcyde - *Runnin'* playing]

**Pat:** If you're not up on J Dilla, the man is a legend. He was a producer behind tons of classic songs for artists like The Pharcyde, A Tribe Called Quest, De La Soul, Common, Busta Rhymes, Erykah Badu. In hip-hop circles, he's thought of as one of the greatest of all time.

[The Pharcyde - *Runnin'* playing]

**Jeff:** Basically, I just turned to Tommy, my partner, who's sitting next to me said, "Get the hell out of here. Do you know who I think this stuff belongs to?" Basically, holy [bleep], you know what I mean? "Wow. What are we going to do?"

The Pharcyde - *Runnin'* playing]

**Pat:** In 2006, Dilla passed away from complications from lupus. He was only 32. And since his death, people have been madly searching to find anything and everything Dilla related. So, to find Jay's personal record collection, it was huge, because in it, would be the records that Dilla had sampled and turned into hits.

[The Pharcyde - Runnin' playing]

**Jeff:** The phone started ringing, there were calls, it was like an instant backlash. Everyone wanted it. But then, they also had a problem with me. What business does he have selling J's stuff? You know what I mean? That's what it was. "Who the [bleep] are you?"

**Pat:** People were going crazy over Dilla's record collection. But remember how Jeff said that there was a bunch of cassette tapes?

**Jeff:** I opened the tub and it was just full of cassettes.

**Pat:** Some of those tapes, Dilla had recorded on. They had titles like "beats and rough ideas," hinting unreleased music. A beat tape from Dilla? That's gold. Private collectors, fans, people were offering him tens of thousands of dollars to get a piece.

**Jeff:** I was seeing dollar signs for a minute. Even if I didn't take the offer from them, I could have put a cassette at a time upon eBay, and probably made loads of money.

**Pat:** A record label called him.

**Jeff:** "We understand that you found tapes containing J Dilla's music. The content of those tapes is our property. You'll be compensated for it, but we're coming to get it." It wasn't cool. I mean, it was chaos and I wanted to do nothing but crawl under a rock. You know what I mean? Step back. I'm not taking calls. "Leave me alone. The collection's gone. It's no longer on the premises go away."

**Pat:** And during all the madness, Jeff had something else on his mind.

**Jeff:** Honestly, the first thing I thought of was that Wikipedia page, "Due to Dylan's debt, the family receives no income from projects. Dilla's children are being supported by the social security from their mothers. Likewise, Ms. Yancey still lives in the same Detroit ghetto, also in tremendous debt." After reading that, it says it right there. It's like, "Okay, where's the money?" Here's Maureen and his family in the same place they were back in the beginning.

**Pat:** But how? How could it be that the mother of a platinum-selling producer would be in debt? I mean he made hits. He was award winning. So, I called up Dilla's mom, Maureen, and she invited me over for a talk.

[door creaks]

**Maureen:** Good morning. Good to see you.

I'm Maureen Yancey. J Dilla is my son. He is the most genius beat maker that ever existed. Although he's passed on, his work still lives.

Welcome to my humble [chuckles] abode. [crosstalk] -get a black coffee in a minute.

**Pat:** [chuckles] Okay. [crosstalk]

A visitor at her home, the same house that Jay grew up, in deep in Detroit in Conant Gardens.

**Maureen:** The neighborhood here is very, very urban, to say the least. It resembles in some places, a warzone like Iraq, [chuckles] as you know. A lot of people have moved away because of the conditions in the city, the lack of support in our area, as you can see. But then, there are those that are dedicated to the community that try to keep it moving and that are proud to be here.

**Pat:** Maureen told me that the last couple of years of Jay's life were mostly spent in the hospital, fighting his illness. Maureen stayed with him, help nurse him. But while he was in the midst of all this treatment--

**Maureen:** A payment was late, and the insurance company did not honor it. And even though it might have been a day late, it didn't matter. Being an insurance company that's in it for profit, they dropped him because it been like four years' worth of this sickness going on. He was so ill, of course, they didn't want to pay for every hospital stay that he had. The last 9, 10 months, everything's out of pocket. Every hospital stay, each bill averaged quarter of a million dollars. That was a bimonthly bill.

**Pat:** That's $250,000, twice a month. And that's not including flying out specialists or doctors or prescriptions. Dilla's illness was very expensive, and soon he fell into debt. When Dilla's funds were gone, Maureen stepped up.

**Maureen:** I didn't care what it was. I was going to sign my life away for them to give him all the care that he needed, and which I did in certain instances because when he didn't have insurance, I signed off on a lot of that. And they say, "Well, you know you'll be responsible." I did not care. I say, "Well, if I had to scrub hospital floors to [chuckles] work it off," you know.

**Pat:** So, you [unintelligible [00:09:11].

**Maureen:** Oh, yeah. Had to. He's my son.

**Pat:** Maureen gave up near everything. She sold her house, closed down her business all the while hoping Jay could beat the sickness and get back to the work he loved. He lived for music. I mean the man was a powerhouse. Even when his health didn't improve, Maureen with some friends set up music equipment right in his hospital room and he worked. It was there that he created his last album, *Donuts*.

[J Dilla - *Time: The Donut of the Heart* playing]

**Pat:** It was released three days before he passed.

[J Dilla - *People* playing]

**Maureen:** There to date has been no compensation from the estate to any of the heirs.

**Pat:** And six years after Dilla had been gone, Maureen was still struggling. And when Jeff, who had found himself sitting on a potential goldmine of music heard about that--

**Jeff:** That struck a chord with me. I just felt, it was just such an injustice. I'll be damned if I'm giving it to any record company. In the moment, I just was trying to do the right thing. You know what I mean?

**Pat:** Jeff got in touch with Maureen. She drove across the city, and they met at the storage facility.

[unlocks the storage door]

**Maureen:** And he unlocks this, like a garage door.

**Jeff:** Went back into the bin and pull the tub out from the back.

**Maureen:** He just shows me the bins. They were too heavy to lift, and so I'm looking, I'm like, "What in the world?"

**Jeff:** I popped open the lid. It was silence for a few minutes. And that moment, it's like she's seeing him again, you know what I mean? Just the silence there, it was like-- [sighs] This is heavy.

**Maureen:** When I saw my son's handwriting, God, that was something profound. He wrote notes in there about things that he wanted to do for me. To see those notes and to hear his voice, as I read them, I could hear him saying it. It just touched my heart to no end.

[upbeat music]

**Jeff:** That was her son's stuff. I told her, "Take it with you. It's yours. Take it." I gave her a hug. She was thrilled. It felt really good that she had it together. It was like, "Yeah, back in the right hands."

[upbeat music]

**Pat:** And though some of them look like they'd have some of Dilla's music on them, most of the cassettes, well, they were just regular tapes, like you used to be able to buy at the store. Today, you probably wouldn't pay 10 cents for them at a flea market. But in talking with one of Dilla's close friends--

**Maureen:** [unintelligible [00:12:53] had suggested, "I think you better listen to them because your son hid a lot of music in his tapes."

**Pat:** Maureen sat down, loaded up the tapes, pressed play, and--

[cassette playing]

**Maureen:** I was blown away, my mouth dropped. From the very first one, it was stuff on it that we had never heard before. I didn't expect to hear his voice in any of the music.

[Dilla rapping]

**Maureen:** He's not sick, he's not suffering, and he's just alive to his fullest capacity.

[Dilla rapping]

**Pat:** On the hundreds of cassettes that Maureen now has, Dilla had left music and lots of it.

**Maureen:** The material is-- Oh my. It was overwhelming. There are in the high hundreds of tracks.

**Pat:** Hours and hours and hours of unreleased Dilla music was found on the cassettes, and along with some studio master reels, Maureen says there's enough material for never-before-heard music to be coming out for years.

**Maureen:** These are *Lost Scrolls*. [chuckles] It's *Lost Scrolls*. The reason for titling it *The Lost Scrolls* is because it has a spiritual meaning. It's like the Ark of the Covenant for me. [laughs]

**Pat:** I was invited to hear the coveted *Last Scrolls*. Now trust me, these recordings are well guarded but Maureen let me record a small piece of our time listening together.

[*Lost Scrolls* music playing]

**Pat:** So, how does it feel to be listening to this music?

**Maureen:** I feel simply wonderful listening to my son's creations. It's none like it. He is the master, and my heart is happy, my ears are happy. I can feel his soul in music. Dilla was my backbone, my support, because we had a bond that was so special, with our love for music and our desire to help the other one get to where they wanted to be in this world. We already were close and then the nursing home in California we would more one than ever. So, when he left, I was standing alone.

I never mourn normally, not knowing whether to be angry or to cry. I couldn't cry. I hadn't shed a tear. At his funeral, I didn't cry. People were waiting for me to break down, which I didn't even understand why no tears. I was in denial of everything. I just had this void. Then through the heart of a good man, Jeff Bubeck, God would open up a door and give me pieces of my son back. It was held, held back for this time it wasn't meant for me to have it before now. It brought back what Dilla said to me in California, he was in a wheelchair, he grabbed my hands, both of them, and he said, "I want to thank you for all that you have done. And I want you to know you're going to be all right, I promise you. You're going to be all right." [sobbing]

**Pat:** How are you doing? You okay?

**Maureen:** I'm fine. It's the first tear. I guess I needed that. I think it's the first one since he passed.

[somber music]

**Maureen:** Thanks for that, letting me turn that water faucet on.

[laughter]

[somber music]

**Maureen:** He has proven to me that he's looking out for me. And I'm looking at him, he's looking at me right now, saying, "Lady, I told you, you would be all right."

[J Dilla - *U-Love* playing]

**Glynn:** Maureen Yancey has begun releasing the music found on the tapes *The Lost Scrolls*. She continues her work with the J Dilla Foundation to raise awareness about lupus and inspire young people around the world. Maureen is also working on a book and a film by Dilla's life and legacy. We'll have links to all of these great projects on our website, *snapjudgment.org.* A huge thanks to Maureen Yancey and Jeff Bubeck for sharing their story. And special thanks as well to Jonathan Taylor and Tate McBroom for their help. And if you listen to this show at all, you know we owe a debt to Dilla himself. That piece was produced by Pat Mesiti-Miller.

[Yancey Boys - *The Throwaway*]

Where else? Nowhere else. And more Snap [unintelligible 00:18:56] journey is awaiting. Just subscribe to the Snap Judgment podcast and instantly become the most interesting person your enemies know. Even better, you can rock a Snap Judgment t-shirt, available right now at *snapjudgment.org*. Snap was brought to you by the team with impeccable music taste, except for the uber producer, Mark Ristitch, he's listening to *Baby shark doo doo doo* right now. Pat Mesiti-Miller, Nancy López, Anna Sussman, Renzo Gorrio, Shaina Shealy, Teo Ducot, Flo Wiley, John Fecile, Marisa Dodge, Regina Bediako, [unintelligible 00:19:34] Bo Walsh, David Exumé, and Annie Nguyen.

[Yancey Boys - *The Throwaway*]

Well, this is not the news. No way this is the news. In fact, you could purchase Wu-Tang's secret album for $2 million, only to have someone release it for free on YouTube. And you would still, still not be as far away from the news as this is, but this is PRX.

[Yancey Boys - *The Throwaway*]