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On Kanye and Pitchfork and Existentialism

This is not an album review. This is a story about a conclusion. A conclusion of a time, a time in history – my history – brought on by an album review. This is not an album review.

With a word, it's Kanye. The one to end it all. He Who Shall Be Named. And why shouldn't he? The man is only the second coming of Jesus Christ Himself fused with the powers of Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader combined. Apparently.

Our reality ends with a fantasy: a beautiful, dark, twisted one at that. And a number: 10.0. Remember the “point-zero” (in this world, worth is determined in tenths), because Pitchfork, the most powerful music blog in the country (dare I say it, the world?), believes heartily in generating album reviews with figures past the decimal, hell bent on accuracy.

This is the reason why on November 22, 2010, Pitchfork ceased to be cool.

* * *

SCENE: Discovery!

TIME: Present day

LOCATION: West Michigan

CAST:

KENDEL: Twentysomething undergraduate writing student at a relatively small Division II public university. Quirky, fun, arrogant.

JAMES: Boyfriend. Awesome. Doesn't “dig” the entity known as Pitchfork Media.

WEREWOLF KENDEL: The murderous manifestation of quirky/fun/arrogant Kendel.

[LIGHTS UP. KENDEL and JAMES, *dead tired after a late-night homework session, are packing away their computers in a typical collegiate bedroom. Large scale Pink Floyd album cover drapes one wall, second tribal print sheet cov-*

ers the other . Bed is a futon, there are McDonalds bags piled in the garbage. Both sit, slumped on the bed.]

JAMES: Thanks for revising that essay for me again. I'm digging the perks of dating a writer.

KENDEL: Oh, well, I do love to do it. It's a weird energy, like Michael Jordan before he nails a three-pointer – in between the decision to shoot and the moment when the ball goes in the hoop, that intense fixation on something you've practiced over and over again? That will eventually lead to satisfaction? It's like that. Especially when determining where to properly place punctuation!

JAMES: Well, that's cool...

KENDEL: It's whatever... [*looks at phone, incredulous*] What...the...fuck...

[*KENDEL rises from her seated position, shoulders hunched then rolled back, staring at the phone in her hand.*]

JAMES: What?

KENDEL: I just got a Tweet from HipsterRunoff. Kanye's new album – that *Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* garbage – got a TEN on Pitchfork.

JAMES: So...what?

KENDEL [*slowly begins to pace*]: ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?! Is "Runaway" on this album?! CHRIST. It IS. MOTHER FUCKER. A FUCKING TEN?!?

JAMES: Why is that so bad?

KENDEL [*to JAMES, sharp*]: BECAUSE NO ONE GETS A TEN. NO ONE. That fucking...my God. They're probably in the midst of sucking Kanye's DICK right now...

[*KENDEL begins scratching at her neck, her arms – starts to aggressively massage her hair, her ponytail elastic falls out.*]

JAMES: Why don't you calm down?

KENDEL: Why don't YOU calm down, JAMES?! YOU FUCKING ASS-HOLE! You're in on it too, right?! RIGHT?! AREN'T YOU?!

[*SFX: "Tiny Cities Made of Ashes" by Modest Mouse. KENDEL lets out a throaty, carnal scream and begins destroying the room; tearing down the posters and overturning the futon. JAMES backs away.*]

KENDEL (CON'T) [*approaching him, screaming*]: That MOTHER. FUCKING. Piece of SHIT. THE MOON AND ANTARCTICA GOT A 9.8 AND *THAT* ALBUM IS FLAWLESS, JAMES. FLAWLESS.

JAMES [*backing away*]: I'm getting the fuck out of here.

KENDEL [*following him offstage*]: OH, NO YOU'RE NOT.

[*SFX: Offstage, male screaming and gnawing/gnashing/gnarling of teeth. pause. KENDEL reenters as WEREWOLF KENDEL, transformed into a werewolf covered in blood, with James's head in one hand.*]

KENDEL [*screaming*]: WHY PITCHFORK?! WHY KANYE?! WHY... WHY...why...

[WEREWOLF KENDEL *drops to her knees and begins to weep.*
LIGHTS OUT.]

* * *

As part of my introduction to good music/exit from the shitty music world (a time most pseudo-hipsters remember all too well), I was introduced to then Pitchforkmedia.com and Pitchfork.tv. Fall 2008. I was hesitant in expanding my musical horizons to such a subculture for fears of looking like a total n00b and for embarrassment over a lack of interest in salvia or dank weed. However, with elemental interests in The Strokes and Modest Mouse, I did not fancy myself a completely lost cause in the hipster music movement.

My buddy at the time, Peter – monotone and brilliant – was all about Pavement and Built to Spill, had seen Neil Young more times than I had watched *Mean Girls*, stood, stared and was awed at My Bloody Valentine (while they gazed at their feet.) Peter knew things, things about this “good music” that had eluded me until then. I remember first perusing this mystical “Pitchfork” that Jedi Master Peter so highly recommended.

It's pretty much the Mecca for good music. Just start searching around. But don't listen to HEALTH, they're a little raw.

And so I did and didn't.

- PETER! I heard some of The Thermals. “St. Rosa and the Swallows?” Really cool!
- Hey, Peter! You hear of Vampire Weekend? They're like, college kids! Oh...you have? Well, cool!
- Animal Collective? They were weird. I think I liked it. But it was *really* weird. But cool!

“Juan's Basement.” Music videos galore. And of course, the elitist and esoteric album reviews. What a discovery! I must have read something like, six a day or something that semester: ingesting the different writers' styles, learning words like, *echelon*, *epochal*, and *sinew*; understanding that you can put the word “post” in front of practically any word and create a music genre (post-punk, post-rock, post-Nirvana, post-popcorn.)

It was a stunningly new language and community I had never expected to experience. By allowing myself to be a nubile observer – ignorant to powerhouses like Blur, LCD Soundsystem, Spoon, or Yo La Tengo – I inherently gave myself permission to be totally uncool in this self-sustaining, underground universe that defined coolness from 0.0 to 10.0.

If Pitchfork said something was good, then it was good. And by taking shits on “popular” groups like Jimmy Eat World they only further established their status as the slick guy in the back, snapping wisecracks at the

lames like James Franco in *Freaks and Geeks*. If James Franco is cool, then Pitchfork is cool! From the same argument, by not liking anything you create a fantasy of exceptionality that kids like myself wish to exude. Plus, with the intellect that Pitchfork writers assert in their pieces, one is confident that these people are practically geniuses. I was all about it.

There are some albums that apparently floor the offices of Pitchfork and require a bow and a curtsy (*Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, *OK Computer*, and *The Soft Bulletin* all received 10.00, among nine select others) but overall? They think everything is crap. And that's what makes them cool. Mark Zuckerberg knew the power of exclusivity, so did Pitchfork.

I defended Pitchfork because I believed in it. I tested myself on whether or not I actually liked the high ranking music (by not checking the score before listening to the album) just make sure that I wasn't just another hipster-lemming. With my newly refined ears I strengthened my ability to piece together good hooks, lyrics, themes, rhythms, cultural significances. And sometimes I didn't agree with their assessments! We had a good, healthy thing going, Pitchfork and I: emphasis on the word "had."

* * *

Which brings us to Mr. West.

In an increasingly media savvy world, he gives us everything that one would want and to an extreme. Combine his hit-making ability with the highly political confrontations and just watch the world explode before your eyes (...someone doesn't care about black people...). His victims? Often lily white-bread female pop-country artists (and by "often" I mean once and he did apologize which was very gracious on his behalf even though Beyonce *did* have one of the best music videos of all time. Of all time.) Kanye is not just acutely strong, he, like any public figure, straddles two competing personalities. Both the genius and the bully, David and Goliath. Remember Muhammad Ali? Like that, but insecure.

Some of my high school memories are to the tune of Mr. West's work; cruising Midwestern suburbia in my 1997 Saturn, trying my best to memorize "Gold Digger," deftly maneuvering around the "n-word," or pre-game warm-up exercises with my varsity basketball team to "Work Out Plan." And even when it comes to his personality, I dug it! What a cool guy, you know – someone who stands up for what he believes and doesn't believe in "playing nice" just because he doesn't sugarcoat. I was on board. That is, until his music started to suck. *808s and Heartbreak*, not a fan. Scraping to keep up with new technologies and media, employing datamoshing in music videos – exhausting auto tune; I began to write him off as someone swiftly exiting the relevant music world. They say the brightest stars burn out fastest, right?

When I read the album review for and listened to his latest studio album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, I practically expected someone to punch me dead in the face and scream, “HAH! Just kidding! We know this album sucks! Don’t worry, Kendel. We’re still the same Pitchfork that you trusted with your nubile hipster heart.”

However, my face remains punchless and MBDTF remains a “perfect” album: a 10.0.

The first three tracks are *great* (earnest!) “Dark Fantasy” and “Gorgeous” are wonderful leads to dynamo “Power,” (which, in my opinion, is one of the best tracks of 2010). “Blame Game” is a strong one, too, but that’s because I like John Legend and Chris Rock. Outside of that, though? A smattering of insecurities and drug/sex/party reveals via Mr. West. It’s not even catchy. And yes, I understand that this is supposed to be some sort of “different” rap/hip-hop album. A *dark* one, dare I say it, *experimental*. Because he used an interlude. Like in classical music! Oh, Kanye! Please! Keep the daring nature alive (sarcastic!)

I listen to music, like any echo boom generation pseudo music aficionado, because it translates in my head as good. Because it’s constructed well, has an overarching theme that addresses a topic, societal issue or trend, peppered with the personality of whatever artist I’m listening to. I do not, however, listen to music to hear a spoiled, self-conscious, arrogant man complain about his self-created problems and conflicts with celebrity for an hour and eight minutes.

The day that I *personally* care about Kanye West as a human being is the day that I’ll agree with this 10.0 rating. Pitchfork gave a man a perfect score, not an album. It’s not art criticism, its patronizing appeasement. The album is not a piece of history or a call to humanity. It’s the musings of an American with a fleece Louis Vuitton blanket half-assing apologies, whining over the unfortunate hood-status of an estranged daughter.

But hey, what do I know? I’m no expert. Besides, I’d take *Son of Chico Dusty* over this lackluster *Fantasy* any day.

* * *

Which brings me to my final point founded upon bias and subjective study: Pitchfork is no longer relevant.

When you take the most recognizable music artist in the world next to Lady Gaga and give them a *perfect* score, an album that is very debatable in its “perfection,” you cease to be an accurate source of critique. The system is rendered obsolete. Many had seen this coming from a mile away.

There had been a trend in Pitchfork reviews across the collective musical fail that was 2010. Of the more hyped or talked about buzzbands, many received uncommonly glowing reviews, many in the 8.0 range. It was odd.

Myself and my Pitchfork reading friends were confused. Best Coast does not equal Wavves, neither Waka Flocka Flame to Washed Out.

But when it comes down to it, the most important rationale is also the most subjective rationale: personal taste. It is of no consequence what “important people” like Pitchfork like or don’t like. It just matters what the consumer enjoys. This is America, man; people will figure out what’s good and what isn’t on their own. Just like when they read *Twilight*: there’s an understanding that it’s not quality, it’s just for cerebral romantic prances. Or when whores are all about Keshha: they know they’re probably going to end up with herpes by the end of the track, but it’s curable (or not). It’s like what my aunts say, “If gay marriage is legalized, then people will start wanting to marry dogs!” Apply that same logic to priests: just because someone is a “man of God” doesn’t mean he won’t “diddle children.”

One doesn’t equal the other. Everything in life, including music, is subjective but will eventually get rid of the crap, like planet earth and humanity. Or at least I’m hoping. Maybe I should give the album another try. I do *like* Kanye. Maybe everyone’s right; maybe I’m just being an asshole as per usual. I do like interludes. And I did see his infamous penis photo on Hipsterrun-off: less Goliath, more David.

Well, shit. This takes the fun out of everything. The innocent fun of sipping musical Haterade has transformed into the burning, bitter aftertaste of licorice flavored Existenti-drink. I guess Proust would be proud.

Thanks a lot, Pitchfork. Go fuck yourself.

But please let me into your music festival in July.