

2018

Watching the Throne: The American Reception of Jay-Z & Kanye

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This article was written as part of the curriculum for the Bachelor of Music in Music Management and the Bachelor of Science in Music Industry Studies at University of the Pacific. Each student conducted research based on his or her own areas of interest and study.

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Recommended Citation

Lin-Cereghino, Ted (2018) "Watching the Throne: The American Reception of Jay-Z & Kanye," *Backstage Pass*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/backstage-pass/vol1/iss1/14>

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Watching the Throne: The American Reception of Jay-Z & Kanye

By: Ted Lin-Cereghino

In today's world, the two most well-known hip hop artists are arguably Kanye West and Jay-Z. Between the two, they have amassed 42 Grammys, 23 platinum albums, and 87 million albums sold.¹ Here are two incredibly successful African American music businessmen who do and sell the same things. Whether it's rap music, the tutelage of music's next superstars, corporate collaborations, or the clothing industry, Jay-Z and Kanye work the same markets. However, Americans receive them starkly different. To dive deeper into how these two artist businessmen are perceived by the public, this analysis will explore the differences in their business practices and the consensuses of the media and the African American community.

When it comes to principal roles, Jay-Z and Kanye are very much alike. Jay-Z and Kanye are most famous for their commercial success and critical acclaim as rappers, hip hop lyricists. Jay-Z, in particular, holds the record for the most number one albums by a solo artist on the Billboard 200, while Kanye is the only other musician, aside from the renowned Bob Dylan, to top the Pazz & Jop Poll four times (out of his first six album releases).² Their extensive vocabularies and catchy deliveries have resulted in extensive praise and numerous contemporary pop single guest features. It's tough arguing who is the more successful rapper. In fact, both of them have won exactly 21 Grammys apiece for their respective work.³ Both are considered revered record producers as they have

brought up and shaped the careers of many chart-topping contemporary musicians. Celebrities like singer-songwriter John Legend are the byproducts of Kanye's Getting Out Our Dreams (GOOD) Music, while people like singer/model Rihanna are the result of Jay-Z's Roc Nation. Legend, a studio session instrumentalist turned R&B singer-songwriter, has won an Oscar for Best Original Song and has become one of 15 people to receive the Hal David Starlight award for achievement in songwriting.⁴ Rihanna remains the only artist in the history of the Billboard Hot 100 chart to have a number one single for seven consecutive albums.⁵ Despite their similar successes in rapping and production, Jay-Z and Kanye have polar opposite upbringings.

I. Turn Back the Clock

Jay-Z is a prime product of the American dream: that anyone can climb the social ladder with the grit and work ethic the country was built on. Somehow Brooklyn-born Sean Corey Carter went from being a Marcy public housing projects crack dealer to arguably the most revered rapper of the late 90's to mid 2000's. Born Sean Corey Carter on December 4, 1969 into a fatherless home, Carter showed signs of brilliance and work ethic when he received straight A's in a near-hopeless school system plagued by high dropout rates. To the dismay of teachers, he did not graduate high school and by the mid 80's had fallen into the same trade many Bedford-Stuyvesant children get into: drugs. Before he broke on to the music scene, he had been shot three times – a souvenir of his drug-affiliated past.⁶ According to interviewer Dan Gennoe of *Blender*, a self-described “reluctant rapper,” Carter initially found more money peddling crack

cocaine than peddling rhymes as an adult. Among his hip hop peers, his rare ability to negotiate deals since his first distribution deal with Priority in 1996 has bridged the facets of the entertainment industry.⁷ For example, he secured all-star baseball player Robinson Cano a \$240 million dollar contract in December 2013.⁸ Prior to his Priority deal, Carter sold CD's out of his car and eventually accumulated the cash to jumpstart an independent label with his friends Kareem Biggs and Damon Dash. Out of respect for his friend and hip hop mentor Jaz-O, a 90's New York-based record producer and rapper, and Brooklyn's J/Z subway system, Sean Carter created his stage name and became "Jay-Z." The release of his now-platinum debut studio album *Reasonable Doubt* in 1996 lay down the framework for his style of material: some hard early life experiences mixed in with drug lingo and accentuated by an impeccable level of swagger.⁹ Gangsta rap, a subgenre of rap emphasizing the criminal lifestyle, was already the most popular and commercially accessible of hip hop in the 1990's, so Jay-Z fit the trend with his background and outperformed his peers in the same niche until the early 2000's when he temporarily retired and became the president of Def Jam Records in 2004.¹⁰ It was this niche that simply could not associate itself with the likes of Kanye.

Kanye West comes from a very different world and did not follow the trajectory of a typical American rags-to-riches success story. Born Kanye Omari West on June 8, 1977 in Atlanta, Georgia, the young Kanye was a poet by age five and an avid video gamer by grade school. Following his parents' divorce at age three, Kanye was raised in a middle-class, Chicago household mainly by his English professor mother. The little time he was allotted to see his dad was during the summer.¹¹ He was not hardened by any

streets like Jay-Z, nor was he initially planning to make a living out of his rhyme schemes. An avid comic book reader, the backpack and braces-adorned Kanye fit into nerd culture growing up. By age 15, he dabbled in video game design, but found out he liked the musical score aspect of video games the most.¹² Even though his mother wished for him to complete his schooling, Kanye had other plans: become the greatest rapper- producer ever. With his sampler and keyboard, Kanye dropped out of the English program at Chicago State University at age 20 and moved to New York City to produce local artists.¹³ His inventive, soul music-sampling hip hop production earned him high regards from his clients and he eventually caught the attention of Jay-Z's Roc-A-Fella Records by the early 2000's. Kanye's initial collaboration with Jay-Z was in 2000 when he produced the beat for the track "This Can't Be Life" off Jay-Z's fifth album *The Dynasty: Roc La Familia*.¹⁴ By 2001, West's production contributions to Jay-Z's landmark album *The Blueprint* earned Kanye critical acclaim and Jay-Z saw that there was a need to keep Kanye satisfied at the label. Kanye, desiring to become a rapper, was signed to a contract by Roc-A-Fella the same year with the intention to keep him for his production abilities and ultimately shelve his rap career. It was not until February 10, 2004 that Kanye released his debut album *The College Dropout* to rave reviews and the hip hop world would be forced to deal with stardom for the next decade.¹⁵

From the mid-2000's to the present, Jay-Z and Kanye's lives continued to be intertwined for the better or worse. Before the release of *The College Dropout*, Jay-Z complimented Kanye as "a genius" at the start of his *Black Album* track "Lucifer" in November 2003.¹⁶ This initial adoration was not mirrored by Jay-Z's actions. That same

month, Kanye released the music video for his debut single “Through the Wire,” which he was forced to self-finance without any of the label’s support. By 2005, Kanye and Jay-Z were developing hit record chemistry by trading verses off Kanye’s James Bond-sampling single “Diamonds Are Forever.”¹⁷ On tape, they had a friendly tag-team chemistry that never paralleled the sheer instability of their own relationship. The closest the world got to hearing Kanye’s frustration with Jay-Z was on “Big Brother,” where West expressed some of his confusion with Jay-Z’s treatment on the 2007 track.¹⁸ Once Jay-Z decided to return to making albums, from 2006-2012, West stood at the forefront of producing Jay-Z’s hit material, including 2009’s smash hits “Forever Young” and “Run This Town.”¹⁹ Their working relationship hit a career high in 2011 when the two released the collaborative album *Watch The Throne* to a record-setting 290,000 digital sales from the iTunes store alone.²⁰ Inevitably, their stylistic approaches hit a rough patch in 2013 when Kanye openly disapproved of Jay-Z’s collaboration with Justin Timberlake “Suite & Tie.” To make matters worse, Jay-Z was reportedly embarrassed by Kanye’s decision to jump on the podium in retaliation to Beck’s Album of the Year acceptance speech at the 2015 Grammys.²¹ Two days prior to his psychiatric hospitalization in 2016, West criticized Jay-Z for not calling him in his time of need. Jay-Z finally struck back by deeming Kanye as “insane” off his album *4:44* in 2017, while Kanye announced his plans to sue Jay-Z and opt out of his contract with Jay-Z’s Tidal over unpaid royalties.²² What was once considered “rap’s greatest ‘bromance’ (brotherly romance)” has quickly become one of rap’s most entertaining soap operas.²³

II. Business Practices: The Cold & The Calculated

Kanye West and Jay-Z have very different approaches to business. These approaches are reflective of their personalities. To Kanye, innovation is never blending in with the status quo. He has made shoes in screaming pigments of scarlet and in dull shades of gray. His recent Adidas-backed *Yeezy Season* clothing lines have been mocked by numerous detractors like Jessica Iredale of *Women's Wear Daily* as resembling “the product of an abusive relationship.”²⁴ The word “abusive” can be attributed to his purposely tattered garments, resembling the attire of a vagabond. It should be known that Kanye treats all of his business like his music. Considering Kanye has never made one of his albums without being at least a co-executive producer, he likes to have a lot of creative control on design.²⁵ He even stopped doing collaborations with Nike Air when he was not given his desired amount of input in designing high top sneakers. His creativity comes at a risk as he is prone to using up financial resources and valuable time. The first notable example was when he failed in launching his self-backed clothing brand *Pastelle* in 2008. By 2011, his first heavily panned women's wear line, known simply as *Kanye West*, never made it off the runway to the consumer.²⁶ Likewise, West's first video game project *Only One* has still not been released since being announced in 2015.²⁷ His collaborations with business tend to be on the higher end as his fashion collaboration record spans the likes of A Bathing Ape, A.P.C., Louis Vuitton, Jeremy Scott, Pyrex, and Adidas Originals.²⁸ So when Kanye went over budget on his fashion business schemes and lost a self-reported \$16 million on the *Yeezy Season 1* alone in 2015, there must be some mismanagement on his part in handling money. In 2016, he claimed he was \$53

million dollars in debt from multiple failed business ventures.²⁹ This has led to West's numerous Twitter begging sprees for \$1 billion in investment capital from tech giants like Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and Apple CEO Tim Cook.³⁰ In the end, Kanye ultimately cares about influence and his place in history as he once claimed on the radio show *Sway in the Morning* in October 2013 that his artistry made him this generation's "Warhol" and "Shakespeare in the flesh."³¹ When he succeeds with creating a new style, he heavily influences fashion culture. Ever since the viral Yeezy Boost shoe came out, companies like Sketchers and ZARA have produced very similar designs and color schemes.³² As stated before, Kanye's fashion correlates with his musical tastes. When Kanye released *The Life of Pablo* and *Yeezy Season 3* simultaneously in February 2016, the unfinished nature of the initial mastering of the album coincided with the acid-washed, partial segments of shirts his models wore.³³ Now people continue to buy his faded \$1000+ sweatshirts that look like they came from a giveaway bin. By attempting to start trends, Kanye makes himself more susceptible to more criticism from the American public. It's the artistry and place in history that conquers money for Kanye, yet money is the strongest motivator for Jay-Z.

Jay-Z does what is popular and remains more conservative than West, both financially and stylistically with his approach. If a style is not a proven seller, Jay-Z is not going to risk devoting his time and money to it. For example, when Jay-Z put his name on a Reebok shoe he knew the inspiration for the model, the "Gucci 84" tennis shoe, was already a popular seller.³⁴ It was also known that a younger 18-29 age group of less-affluent consumers was steadily growing in the early 2000s and could be exploited.³⁵

Once Reebok changed the color scheme, priced it significantly lower than the Gucci model (\$100) and branded it as the “S. Carter,” the shoe grossed \$1 million in its first week of release in April 2003.³⁶ Rocawear, the clothing line started by Jay-Z, functions like an H&M or Forever 21, offering popular consumer trends at affordable prices. Jay-Z’s clothing line slogan says that it “continually reinvents what’s hot, as it defines a lifestyle for today’s young, hip consumer.”³⁷ This is ironic as Rocawear currently produces items that are already popular, thus allowing lower research and development costs to occur. When this method yields more consistent profits (\$204 million of Jay-Z’s \$810 million net worth) than the volatile earnings of West’s experimental fashion, it becomes easier to commend from a business perspective.³⁸ Comparatively, Rocawear items remain sub-\$100, thus becoming more affordable to a younger group of purchasers, while the Adidas-backed Yeezy Season items remain sub-\$10,000 for a more elite consumer.³⁹ It is no surprise that Jay-Z’s trend-riding preferences would make it to other markets aside from clothes and shoes. After Spotify and Apple Music developed significant followings, Jay-Z bought an internet music streaming platform and rolled out the artist-owned Tidal as a competitor.⁴⁰ Tidal is one of many examples where Jay-Z has utilized his stardom in some way to create interest in a product.

Jay-Z is an expert at leveraging his superstar-status in order to make business deals with widely accessible brands like Best Buy, Samsung, and Sprint. For example, Best Buy remains the largest consumer electronics specialty store among American retailers, so it is relatively common for people to have a local Best Buy. Combining accessibility with exclusivity, Jay-Z and Best Buy agreed to have the deluxe version of

Watch the Throne exclusively sold at Best Buy locations for the album's first two weeks of release. The album was certified gold by the RIAA within these two weeks.⁴¹ According to Zach O'Malley Greenberg, a senior editor at *Forbes Magazine*, in an article published by *Complex Magazine*, "Jay Z often does deals with underdog brands because they have more ground to gain from a connection with him."⁴² In the case of Samsung, he was able barter his own star status as a way of bolstering the South Korean company's reputation to Americans in exchange for offering a copy of his *Magna Carta...Holy Grail* album on their new Samsung Galaxy phone. As a result, Jay-Z secured a million copies sold before the album was released to stores.⁴³ He succeeded with a similar stunt with Sprint, where users were given a voucher code to a free download off Tidal before his *4:44* album became available elsewhere. In exchange, Sprint also bought a million copies from Jay-Z in 2017.⁴⁴ Believing Jay-Z is an underdog is a complete fallacy, but the fact he can benefit already-established companies is a proven theory. Jay-Z's quiet genius as a businessman extends over to his moderation as a public figure, making him more likable to the average viewer. His attention-craving counterpart Kanye does not fair as well due to his flair for controversy and ill-spoken persona.

III. The Media Magnate & The Media Megalomaniac

To say that media has scrutinized Kanye West is an understatement. Kanye West continues to be vilified by the mainstream press for his antics. Even though music reviewers praise his albums, his outlandish personality and misuse of language seethes through his genius. His presentation problems can be observed in his first televised

meltdown in 2005 when he chose to take a stand at NBC/Universal's "Concert for Hurricane (Katrina) Relief" on live TV.⁴⁵ Parts of Kanye's outspoken testimony to U.S. viewers said: "I hate the way they portray us... They've been given permission to go down and shoot us... George Bush doesn't care about black people."⁴⁶ West's word choice of "hate," "care," and "shoot" are so strong in implication, that when he provides no hard evidence, it becomes more difficult for the viewers to believe his claims. Having used the word "portray," Kanye is implying the existence of an unseen falsehood – a bamboozlement to viewers. Similarly, when president Jimmy Carter told people in his Malaise Speech in 1979 that they had not come together to solve the nation's problems, he was scorned.⁴⁷ If there's anything history has proved, Americans hate being told they're wrong. In hindsight, Kanye's point ended up being true as certain media outlets like Fox News were labeling images of scavenging blacks as "looters" and scavenging whites as "looking for food."⁴⁸ The underlying discrimination was there, but the presentation was not. By saying the word "us" Kanye is attempting to align himself with the rest of an African American community that shares little identification with him (full explanation in part III). Kanye's presentation does not follow the most common technique of public policy making: cause & effect. Cause and effect is a benchmark of comprehension in America, so when he presents the effect (African Americans being shot for no reason) and then the cause (Bush), it was inevitable that he would incite confusion and aggravation.⁴⁹ George W. Bush, shocked by the Kanye's accusation of racism, considered this the "all-time low" of his presidency and took an immediate disliking to the brash Kanye.⁵⁰ Having criticized the most powerful man in the world, the media

would start a trend of skewering Kanye for his behavior. West followed his meltdown on NBC/Universal with similar outbreaks at the 2009 VMAs and a 2013 Zane Lowe interview. At the VMAs, he grabbed the microphone and interrupted Taylor Swift's acceptance speech to shout out Beyoncé's "Single Ladies" video as better art.⁵¹ Since this act of rudeness in 2009, Kanye's approval rating by the American public has never exceeded 25%.⁵² He even blasphemed "I just told you who I was – a god!" in a 2013 Zane Lowe interview, earning him more backlash as he was labeled "delusional" by several outlets like BBC.⁵³

Although Kanye has done things in-line with the views of Black Lives Matter before its very creation, Jay-Z did not donate to BLM (founded in 2013) until 2016 when the movement gained significant media exposure and white knight status.⁵⁴ Jay-Z likes to sit on the sidelines and wait for the necessity to preserve his image. Jay-Z does not take a stand on something unless it's good for his image. According to *Foreign Policy Magazine* writer Marc Lynch, Jay-Z is so calculated about his every move in the public light that he avoided firing back at Compton rapper The Game's disses in 2009.⁵⁵ Jay-Z understood if he called him out in public, he would just provide The Game with more publicity. More so, Jay-Z has become an ally to the papers. For example, in September 2017, Jay-Z worked with the New York Times to promote a collaborative video called "The War on Drugs is an Epic Fail," raising awareness for past drug laws serving as a route to incarcerate more African American youth.⁵⁶ When the time is right, he uses his companies like Tidal and Rocawear to sponsor philanthropic events. Most recently, Tidal is being used as a platform to donate 200,000 pounds of everyday necessities (water,

diapers, portable lanterns, batteries) to Puerto Rico's Hurricane Maria survivors.⁵⁷ The way Jay-Z carries himself is indeed important to public perception. The public persona of Jay-Z falls in line with retrospectively likable former president Barack Obama. Even, Obama has remarked that he "would like to think Jay-Z and I understand each other... We know what it's like to not have a father around. We know what it's like not come from much."⁵⁸ Both of them simply make great stories for the papers.

III. Black Backlash & Black Pride

To the African American community, Kanye is not relatable, nor does he identify with the same preferences that many African Americans choose. According to Chris Campion interview for *Telegraph Magazine*, Kanye said, "I went and bought a Benz today! The things that regular people go through."⁵⁹ One would think someone as rich as Kanye (a reported \$145 million thanks to his joint account with wife Kim Kardashian) would not necessarily be an average consumer, considering his car collection is mainly composed of a Mercedes-Benz's: a Maybach, an SLR, an S-Class, and a G-Wagon.⁶⁰ By saying he cashed out on a Benz with an exclamation point signifies he is expressing his thought with enthusiasm, meaning he is openly loud and celebratory about his purchase. When tracking automotive insider Auto Remarketing's statistics, African Americans' most popular choice of cars have been Toyota's and Honda's.⁶¹ Kanye's preferences don't even necessarily fit the scheme of affluent African American men as Lexus's and BMW's were significantly more sought after. The majority of African Americans take a strong affinity to affordable well-established Japanese brands as they are the most price-

sensitive minority. The majority of African Americans (86.4%) are middle class, working-class, or below the poverty line according to the US Census Bureau, so the act of flaunting lavish items might not sit too well with African Americans.⁶² Kanye's openness with his spending habits ultimately makes him stand as an anomaly to the average African American. He once experienced a middle class upbringing, something the largest part (38.4%) of the African American population could relate to, yet he no longer identifies with it by being publicly immodest about his lifestyle.⁶³ Kanye continues to repeat this pattern in instances where he bragged about buying \$3,500 coat for his daughter, paid \$4.5 million for an apartment, or rubbed everyone in the face with a \$100,000 jet excursion.⁶⁴ It is times of rudeness like this that even the mild-mannered Obama has labeled him a "jackass."⁶⁵ He further isolates himself by not sharing the same restraint in his spending and humbleness that many African Americans value.

Kanye West's negative reception by other African Americans is linked to his bout with mental illness and his embrace of feminine practices. To this day, a lot of African Americans avoid psychotherapy due to social stigma. According to Dr. Monica T. Williams and her qualitative study, "Blacks who were already mental health consumers, over a third felt that mild depression or anxiety would be considered 'crazy' in their social circles."⁶⁶ So when Kanye certified his craziness by being hospitalized at UCLA's Ronald Reagan Medical Center for hallucinations and paranoia on November 21, 2016, there was more exodus than support for Kanye.⁶⁷ In a world where African Americans are afraid to be themselves and adhere to status quo, it is no wonder that the African American community has historically had a hard time dealing with sexuality. Donald G.

Nieman, a professor at Harpur College of Arts, observed that African Americans, having originally been brought into a system where others made decisions for them, resulted in them being more self-conscious as culture, tending to adhere to socially acceptable norms.⁶⁸ As a result of slavery, most African Americans were raised Baptist, so morally conservative Christian ideals has had a lasting effect in their traditionalist approach to gender traits. Kanye West is arguably the closest thing to rap's David Bowie, he reinvents himself sonically as he does visually. His stage gags have scraped an emasculated style to the extent where he has worn skirts, shawls, purses, and various tight clothes on tour, so it's no surprise that a lot of notable African American musicians like Chris Brown and Lord Jamar have made fun of him for his appearance.⁶⁹

Conclusion

Jay-Z's positive reception with the African American community correlates with his traditionalist role as a rapper and his political endorsements. Jay-Z has always had a masculine image and an immense level of grit when it comes to his work. He falls into a more respected traditional role of rapper that lifts up the community. As noted by University of Illinois professor Miles White, the traditional role of the African American rapper is "to popularize critical issues within their fractured urban locales and to stimulate a broad discussion about those issues that most affect their constituencies."⁷⁰ Jay-Z fulfills this informative archetype by having a tracks like "99 Problems" deal with racial-profiling by the police.⁷¹ Not only is being liked by your race is not just highlighting societal wrongs, but also political. One of the main

reasons Kanye does not receive the approval of the African American community is because he claimed he would've voted for Trump in 2016.⁷² Since being flired out to Washington to discuss race relations with Trump – a politician that has earned the approval of the Ku Klux Klan, more are siding with Jay-Z's claims that Kanye is crazy. Considering 88% of black voters supported Hillary Clinton and her promises of social welfare spending, it was ideal in Jay-Z hosting a Clinton benefit concert in 2016 to stay united with his race.⁷³ Even prior to that, being liked by Barack Obama, the president with the highest African American approval rate in history (95%), was indispensable in Jay-Z being a champion for African American prosperity.⁷⁴

Kanye and Jay-Z do the same types of work, but are received very differently. Much of this reception results from their business smarts. In the field of clothing, Kanye either creates a whole new trend or is ridiculed by everyone. On the other hand, Jay-Z sits back and rides the trend out by mass-producing at reduced costs. In the end, Jay-Z endures praise from reaping much larger monetary rewards while Kanye gets derided for the many risky investments that fall flat. One of Kanye's best qualities is also one of his worst qualities: he refuses to be silenced. Jay-Z refrains from sparring with the media and keeps a good public image through philanthropy and collaboration with the media. When it comes to acceptance by their own race, Kanye has a harder time relating by being more boastful about spending preferences, being more effeminate in his public appearances, having an association with mental illness, and endorsing of Trump. Jay-Z is more sympathetic to the African American community and picked the most optimal political choice for his public persona. Given the current hostility plaguing their relationship, who

knows where Jay-Z and Kanye's relationship will take them. One thing is for sure: people will keep watching the Throne.

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