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Redemption: A Deep Dive Into the Magnum Opus That Saved Kanye's Career

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Redemption: A Deep Dive Into the Magnum Opus That Saved Kanye's Career

By Graham McLaren-Finelli

My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy was a turning point for Kanye West. His previous album, *808s & Heartbreak*, had shaken the music community to the core, and now West was faced with the daunting task of topping it. On top of this, West's chilling balladry and cinematic composition on *808s* had been fueled by the grief he felt regarding the recent death of his mother. Critics argued that in order to even touch his previous achievement, West would have to tap into an emotion

more potent than that brought upon him by the loss of his mother. 'Ye was on an unofficial hiatus, citing exhaustion as the reason. After the 2009 VMAs incident with Taylor Swift, West had fallen from grace, to an extent. Now, he would have to deliver something breathtaking to recapture the spotlight that his previous releases had brought him. Anyone who knows his discography, or his personal history, will tell you Kanye West was never one to play it safe. His debut track was recorded with his mouth wired shut, he reinvents his sound over and over again with each album release, and he never shies away from controversy or unpopular opinion. So it only makes sense that rather than releasing a project with a familiar sound, West had decided to reinvent himself yet again. Gone were the dance-inspired drums and ice cold synths from *808s*, and in their place came electric guitars, magnificent string sections, and rap drums for oldheads



and new-wave listeners alike. West's maximalist, egotistical, magnum opus saw him rapping with a new fury, each syllable brimming with emphasis, masking all emotions with a charismatic, undeniable confidence.

"Dark Fantasy" is the first track on the album, and opens with Nicki Minaj's delivery of a poem in a British accent over some vocoded humming from West. The track then opens up into a gorgeous piano, vocal, and string arrangement, all punctuating the phrase "Can we get much higher?" The track continues on, switching to a boom-bap groove, over which West raps about himself. A common thread throughout the album, West crams as many bars about himself as humanly possible into every verse across this album. On this track though, West's rapping sets the stage for the sumptuously cinematic album that follows. "Gorgeous," the next track, features Kid Cudi on the hook, and Raekwon providing a gritty verse at the tail end of the track. Cudi sings along with some crunchy electric guitars, which begins to establish the rock motif that runs through this album. West raps through what sounds like a guitar amp on this track, but the end result is quite pleasing, as this allows West's vocals to mesh with the electric guitar quite nicely. His frustration with the media comes through heavily on this track as well, "It's not funny anymore, try different jokes/tell 'em hug and kiss my ass/X and O's." West delivers hilarious and cutting jabs at anyone who would like to see him fail, announcing that, "The same people that try to blackball me forgot about two things/my black balls."

The next track, "Power," was a promotional single for this record. This track is a work of sampling magic. It features a chant taken from "Afromerica" by Continent no. 6, a very well placed sample of King Crimson's "21st Century Schizoid Man," and crunchy, militarized drums

taken from “It’s Your Thing” by Cold Chills. Overall the track comes together wonderfully, painting a picture of West’s egoism like never before, as the song’s refrain is, “No one man should have all that power,” but nonetheless, he still does. Approximately five minutes, four verses, a bridge, and an orchestral outro later, “Power” concludes. “All of the Lights,” the next song, was so cinematic West felt it needed an introductory orchestral track, entitled “All of the Lights (Interlude).” Of course, this track does not disappoint, and features a triumphant brass riff, bombastic breakbeat drums, and features galore. Kid Cudi, John Legend, Ryan Leslie, Charlie Wilson, Alicia Keys, Fergie, Elly Jackson, Rihanna, The-Dream, Tony Williams, and none other than Sir Elton John are all featured on this track, and their vocals are all layered together to create the very unique texture of the chorus. Interestingly enough, Fergie’s verse on this track isn’t even all that bad. In this album of heavy collaboration, West somehow ensured everyone brought their A-game to fulfill his twisted fantasy.

“Monster” follows and ranks as my personal favorite from the album. The track opens with a heavily distorted Kanye moan-singing a brief few phrases, before the instrumental begins with screaming and animal noises, as well as an outrageous verse from Rick Ross. Heavy 808s, a loud distorted snare, and a haunting synth riff characterize this instrumental, and Ross’s opening verse sounds as though he’s recording from his studio in the jungle, with a gorilla as his engineer. West delivers an equally outrageous verse, in which he asks, “Have you ever had sex with a pharaoh?” Jay-Z’s verse is ice-cold on this track as well, but the real showstopper comes with the final verse delivered by Nicki Minaj. Minaj screams, yelps, does various voices, and switches her flow too many times to count in her iconic, two-minute verse. With each syllable, Minaj sounds as though she’s stomping her heel into the listener’s windpipe, begging them to

question her ability. Next up, “So Appalled,” features a refrain from Swizz Beatz, and verses by RZA, Jay-Z, Pusha T, and Prynce Cy Hi. A G.O.O.D. Music posse cut, each rapper delivers entertaining verses with an overwhelming amount of clever wordplay from all parties. The beat is sprawling, and languid, with twittering synths, crunchy snares, and a velvety liquid string section.

“Devil in a New Dress” is a time capsule of sorts. Kanye revisits his roots, except this time he revamps them. The eighth song on MBDTF, “Devil in a New Dress” sees West rapping over a chipmunk-pitched soul sample; a style that he pioneered. But the track is so much more than just a soul chop, and features swelling strings, pianos, and of course, West’s signature clever wordplay. “We love Jesus, but we done learned a lot from Satan,” he reminds the listener, over the beautifully textured beat, which serves as the perfect canvas for West to paint his picture. “The crib Scarface/could it be more Tony/you love me for me/could you be more phony?” is another of the memorable bars in this track. After a few verses from West, and a dramatic guitar solo, Rick Ross delivers a final verse in which he does not disappoint. The next track, “Runaway,” opens with a single piano note, which repeats just long enough for the listener to question, “What am I listening to?” before the beat enters out of nowhere, in full force. The instrumental features crunchy Moog synthesizers, strings, piano, and some distorted vocal chops. “Runaway” also features some of the best singing of West’s career, and interestingly enough, some of the most cringeworthy bars of his career as well. “She find pictures in my email/I sent this bitch a picture of my dick/I don’t know what it is with females/but I’m not too good at that shit.” Still, what West’s lyrics may lack in class, they make up for in brutal honesty, “And I just blame everything on you/at least you know that’s what I’m good at,” West admits. The track

features an equally crass, but honest Pusha T verse. At the end of this seven minute epic, West displays some of his most innovative ideas to date. After a lengthy outro, the sounds of what could only be a guitar plugging into an amplifier can be heard, but it is later revealed to be West's voice, heavily processed through guitar amps and autotune. He goes on to "sing" a guitar solo, which closes out the track.

"Hell of a Life" is a rework of the Black Sabbath classic, "Iron Man." The track is about falling in love with, and eventually marrying a pornstar, and divorcing her by the end of the night. The instrumental features heavily distorted bass, relatively simple drums, and X-rated lyrics galore. A striking dichotomy to this hedonistic anthem is the next track, "Blame Game." This track features a melancholy piano beat, rattling drums, and guest vocals from John Legend, as West expertly navigates his way through the fights brought on by romantic relationships, which he characterizes as the blame games. West uses this track as a moment of self reflection on the impact he has on his relationship partner, and instead of leaning on the typical relationship-oriented rap cliches, he takes an honest route. "On the bathroom wall I wrote I'd rather argue with you than to be with someone else," West admits. The track features a bit of comic relief towards the tail end, coming in the form of a Chris Rock skit. Rock plays the role of the man Kanye's significant other is cheating on West with, as Rock rambles about how amazing this woman is. Every time he asks the woman how she got to be so breathtaking, her only answer is, "Yeezy taught me." "Blame Game" is a track that is sure to hit home with many, many listeners.

The penultimate track, “Lost in the World,” opens with beautifully icy and sparse auto-tuned falsetto vocal harmonies from West, before a piano, and eventually bombastic drums creep in. The drum programming seems to be a callback to *808s and Heartbreak*, but West quickly launches into a rap verse, reminding the listener that this is not the balladry they heard on *808s*. After his verse, the track concludes with beautiful vocal additions from Bon Iver, and eventually what sounds like a tribal drum breakdown, which fades seamlessly into the next track, “Who Will Survive in America.” This track is an extension of the previous instrumental, and features a powerful spoken word piece from Gil-Scott Heron, which wraps up the album very nicely.

As it turned out, *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* was everything Kanye needed it to be. The album was a smash hit, receiving a 5-star review from *Rolling Stone*, a 10/10 from *Pitchfork* magazine, a Grammy for best rap album of the year, and being ranked as the number one album of 2010 and the 64th most acclaimed album in history according to the Acclaimed Music statistics website. Needless to say, Kanye regained the spotlight, but things were a little off, as evidenced even more by his next release, *Yeezus*. But, regardless of concerns about his sanity, Kanye West’s *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* solidified his spot as a rap icon. This is an album that has withstood the test of time, and the staggering maximalism is something listeners will shake their heads at for generations to come.

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