

Rapper Kanye West on the cover of *Time*: Will rap music shed its “gangster” disguise?

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The image of Kanye West crouching down with one hand on his head—clad in designer clothes and sneakers—and the contrived facial expression of one who wishes to be considered a deep thinker adorns the cover of the August 29 issue of *Time* magazine. The headline of the article reads: “More GQ than gangsta, Kanye West is challenging the way rap thinks about race and class—and striking a chord with fans of all stripes.”

West is probably best known for blurting out “George Bush doesn’t care about black people” during a live concert fundraiser on NBC for victims of Hurricane Katrina. West and Mike Myers—of *Austin Powers* fame—were live on TV reading a canned summary of events when West, who appeared to be on the verge of tears, stopped reading from the cue cards.

On the East Coast, audiences heard him say: “I hate the way they portray us in the media. You see a black family, it says, ‘They’re looting.’ You see a white family, it says, ‘They’re looking for food.’ And, you know, it’s been five days [waiting for federal help] because most of the people are black. And even for me to complain about it, I would be a hypocrite because I’ve tried to turn away from the TV because it’s too hard to watch. I’ve even been shopping before even giving a donation, so now I’m calling my business manager right now to see what is the biggest amount I can give, and just to imagine if I was down there, and those are my people down there.... We already realize a lot of people that could help are at war right now, fighting another way—and they’ve given them permission to go down and shoot us!” He followed this with the comment about Bush, which was edited out for the West Coast broadcast.

The comments are a confused mix of truths (about the treatment of the poor and the black poor, in particular), reactionary nationalist phrase-mongering and sincere or insincere self-criticism that underscores West’s own tenuous effort to balance himself between various social layers.

Coincidentally, his new album was released within days (August 30) of the disaster in New Orleans.

Since the comments, West has become something of a media sensation, appearing in magazines, news shows and MTV nearly every day over the last few weeks.

According to *Rolling Stone* magazine, Kanye West’s new album, *Late Registration*, has sold over a million copies in its first two weeks. Only gangster rapper 50cent, whose latest album, *The Massacre*, has sold 4 million copies, has had more success this year. 50cent’s success is based on a time-tested formula of the

American culture industry: sex, violence, aggression, etc. But Kanye West has a novel sales pitch for rap’s young fans. Banking on the street credibility created by figures like 50cent, West wants to create a new and improbable hip-hop genre: life through the eyes of a black yuppie (“Buppie”).

In the *Time* article, West details his tortuous rise to hip-hop fame. “It was a strike against me that I never hustled or sold drugs...but for me to have the opportunity to stand in front of a bunch of executives and present myself, I had to hustle in my own way. I can’t tell you how frustrating it was that they didn’t get that. No joke—I’d leave meetings crying all the time.”

On the issue of social class, West told *Time* he felt as though he was being discriminated against because he was from a privileged background. He says of the “discrimination” he felt, “Black people can be the most conservative, the most discriminating.”

Those months of rejection and “discrimination” were over after West’s debut album, *The College Dropout*, almost went triple platinum, earned 10 Grammy nominations and “made rap accessible to audiences that hadn’t paid attention in years,” according to *Time*.

One song, “All Falls Down,” slams what West refers to as “the single black female, addicted to retail.” He mocks a fictional, young, black college student by rapping, “She has no idea what she’s doing in college, That major that she majored in don’t make no money, But she won’t drop out, her parents will look at her funny.”

Although West locates the root of this struggling student/parents’ troubles in her overspending and financial mismanagement, he warns black consumers of the supposed real source of society’s ills when he raps “and the white man get paid off of all of dat.” A truly false and reprehensible remark!

Another single on the album called “Jesus Walks” complains that the US cultural machine discriminates against Christians! This little tune begins, “We need to recruit all the soldiers, All of God’s soldiers, We at war, We at war with terrorism, with racism, and most of all we at war wit ourselves (Jesus Walks), God show me the way because the Devil’s trying to break me down.”

Encouraging other rappers to “fight the system” by speaking up about their love for Jesus, West raps, “They say you can rap about anything except for Jesus, That means guns, sex, lies, video tapes, But if I talk about God my record won’t get played, Huh?”

Co-author of the song Che Smith told *Time* he had doubts about the song’s message: “When he wrote, ‘to the hustlers, killers,

murderers, drug dealers/ even the strippers/ Jesus walks for them' I said 'Wait, it doesn't matter what you do at all? Don't we need to take a stand?' and he (Kanye) said, 'It's about imperfection. Everybody can relate to that.' Damn, if he wasn't right."

Time gushingly approves, "Jesus Walks is one of those miraculous songs that you hear for the first time and immediately look forward to hearing on a semi-regular basis for the next 30 or 40 years." Despite West's predictions of an anti-Christian plot in the music industry, the song was a big hit with major play on MTV and most popular rap stations around the country last year.

Yet *Time* reserves its full moral approval, pointing out that West frequently contradicts himself. In one song, West raps, "Life too fast, gotta slow down, Girl ain't give me no ass, she need to go down." *Time* finds a major contradiction between lyrics that treat women like interchangeable pieces of meat and other lyrics that it finds to be very positive like, "My father been said I need Jesus, so he took me to church, let the water wash over my Caesar [haircut]."

West, like many other "streetwise" rappers, comes from relative privilege. Kanye—which in Swahili means "the only one"—was raised by his mother in the South Shore neighborhood of Chicago and spent summers with his father—a former Black Panther who is now a Christian marriage counselor. West went to good schools, received art and music lessons and spent a year abroad in Nanjing, China, when he was 10 years old. His mother says, "My plan was that he would get at least one degree, if not several." West did, in fact, enroll in art school and took English classes for a year at Chicago State University—where his mother works as chair of the English department—until he dropped out.

His mother, who recently retired from her post in the English department explains, "His music is about being human." She dismisses the mass of contradictions in West's lyrics with a rather meaningless quote, "It's like Walt Whitman. 'Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes.'"

Damon Dash, West's former boss and part owner of the multimillion-dollar hip-hop label Rockafella Records, describes West's music in less mysterious terms: "He combines the superficialness that the urban demographic needs with conscious rhymes for the kids with backpacks. It's brilliant business." In other words, Kanye West encourages social backwardness, while showing the more privileged and educated layers that he is really an upper-middle-class, Christian yuppie who knows better.

West revealed how his life of privilege and ease has spoiled him when he walked out of the American Music Awards because he lost the Best New Artist Award to country singer Gretchen Wilson. West said, "I was the best new artist of the year, so get that other bullshit [meaning Wilson] outta here!"

Not all of West's music is bad. In October 2002, West, reportedly exhausted from hours spent in the studio, fell asleep behind the wheel of his Lexus and nearly died in a car crash. In the aftermath, he wrote what was to be his first hit record, "Through the Wire," which refers to the wires used to hold his broken jaw together.

The song was an inspirational tale of his accident and a comedic account of his difficult recovery, but much of the credit for the

song should go to soul singer Chaka Kahn, from whom West lifted the beat and most of the chorus. This single created a stir among rap fans who anticipated a long-awaited departure from gangster themes.

Essentially, this is West's strategy. Rap fans are among the most loyal, but even the most die-hard have been tested by the cultural level of rap music in recent years. One can only stand so much posturing, before he or she changes the radio station. West has consciously played on these hopes for a change by challenging some of the superficial conventions of the genre.

For example, he doesn't dress like a "gangster" and his raps are about something other than his street resume. Yet, despite the change of clothes, we find an equally retrograde content: West endorses the war on terror, calls for a Christian cultural movement, criticizes the poor and working layers for being irresponsible and toys with identity politics.

Still, West has quite a few supporters, many willing to accept nearly anything he does. Darrel McDaniels, former member of one of the first popular rap groups, Run DMC, says, "He is trying to change this genre, and in order to do that he's got to get people to listen to his music. They've gotten so used to hardness, to stupidity, that he has to engage in a little of that to be relevant, so be it." Use hardness and stupidity to fight hardness and stupidity?

McDaniels talks about rap fans' love of stupidity as though the artists themselves have little to do with the phenomenon, as though rap music hasn't been in large measure a carnival of backwardness for the last 10 years. He is not alone in his views of West. *Time*, among others in the corporate media, paints West as some sort of prophet who will lead this sorry lot to a "higher" consciousness.

West embraces this role saying, "My mom's a teacher and I'm kind of a teacher myself. But the 'hood, the suburbs, MTV and BET [Black Entertainment Television] are my classrooms and I know how to talk to my class." His lyrics give a good indication of the curriculum.

After an intense session in the recording studio, West reportedly told his producer, "You know that saying 'you can't be all things to all people?' I want to be all things to all people." Like so many shallow pop artists, West may just manage to appear as though he is all things to all people, but in the end, West supports one essential constituency: the black petty bourgeoisie and its comfortable home in American society.



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