

Kanye West's *Yeezus*: Blocking out the rest of the world

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Yeezus (Def Jam/Roc-a-Fella Recordings) is American rapper/producer Kanye West's sixth major label album. Released June 18, it is the artist's fifth album to debut at number one on Billboard charts in the US. Since his solo debut with the 2004 release *College Drop Out*, West (born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1977) has sold over 30 million digital songs worldwide, making him one of the most successful artists to use the Internet to sell records.

The latest album, *Yeezus* (a play on West's nickname, Yeezy, and Jesus), sees West attempting to adopt a controversial stance. The album, released without obvious media fanfare ("Black Skinhead," the album's "lead" single, was released nearly two weeks after the album's debut), is largely an effort by the artist to bank on his popularity, as well at times to openly provoke the listener. Provocation is not a bad thing—but, in this case, to what end and to what effect?

Though West is often presented as an artist of some intellectual substance, capable of making biting, or at the least ironic, social commentary, the roughly 40 minutes that make up *Yeezus* are filled with tame criticisms of society mostly reflective of the concerns of the relatively well-off layer that West himself comes from. (The charge that West is being "sacrilegious" by the reference to Jesus is not worth responding to.)

Of particular note are several songs that address questions of race. "New Slaves" and the aforementioned "Black Skinhead" have been treated in the media as highly controversial works that hold a mirror up to American society and its unhealthy relationship with African-American celebrity.

Taken up in a serious, self-critical manner, this would not be an unworthy, albeit limited subject. However, that is not the approach adopted by West. "Black Skinhead" is a fairly typical example of self-pity and

self-promotion ("They see a black man with a white woman/ At the top floor they gone come to kill King Kong"), as the millionaire artist presents himself as persecuted by "Middle America," "Catholics," "conservative Baptists" and others.

"New Slaves," however, has the dubious honor of putting forth the most clear-cut defense of the rapper's own privileges, along with identity politics. Again, the performer is a victim, like his poorer black brothers ... only slightly differently: "You see it's broke nigga racism/ That's that 'Don't touch anything in the store'/ And there's rich nigga racism/ That's that 'Come in, please buy more,'" raps West, who then continues: "'What you want, a Bentley? Fur coat? A diamond chain? All you blacks want all the same things.'" What can one say? Derisive laughter might be the most fitting response.

West's lamentation about being hounded by jewelry store owners (!) inevitably brings to mind G.V. Plekhanov's comment in *Art and Social Life* (1912) that a maiden may sing for her lost love, but a miser cannot sing about his lost money, "because ... his song would not move anybody." Only other millionaires with his particular set of worries are likely to be affected by West's pet peeves.

The musical arrangements contained on *Yeezus* are for the most part a departure from the artist's rhythm and blues-influenced instrumentation heard on other albums. Replacing that is a 'stripped-down,' heavily synthetic affair, carrying the stamp of the album's renowned executive producer Rick Rubin, the Def Jam founder and recording artist.

The industrialized musical backdrops, perhaps intended to "shock" the listener with their apparent lack of cohesion and melody, and even rhythm in some cases, also introduce a seemingly unintended element

into the work. The dearth of instrumentation tends to give West's vocals an isolated and almost distant sound, while the musical accompaniment appears abrasive and foreboding, perhaps symbolizing West's own relationship to reality.

By the time in "Blood on the Leaves" when West begins quoting lyrics from the 1937 anti-lynching song "Strange Fruit" in order, apparently, to shed light on his own hardships, one can't help thinking to oneself, "Who is he kidding?"

Through inappropriately (and indecently) borrowing substantial portions of Nina Simone's rendition of "Strange Fruit," West sets out to depict his difficulties with the opposite sex. "Let's take it back to the first party/ When you tried your first molly/ And came out of your body ... Running naked down the lobby," sings West in the song's refrain.

Simone's version, which conveys palpable (and legitimate) sorrow and horror, punctuated by somber piano chords, is a heartfelt tribute to the thousands of African-Americans who lost their lives in the Jim Crow-era American south.

What is one to make of West's apparent butchering of Simone's moving work? Why would an artist knowingly lift the vocals from such a piece in order to transplant them into a work possessing none of the social weight of the former? Is it simply the "irony" of sampling musical works from the past, which hip hop has long been known for, or is there something more to it? Self-absorption, ignorance and the harmful impact of celebrity and wealth all come into play.

One may perhaps find further answers in the critical reactions to West's work throughout the media, mainstream and "independent."

The comments of Alex Petridis in the *Guardian* have to be cited at length to be fully appreciated. Petridis notes that in "Blood on the Leaves," West samples "Strange Fruit" in order to portray "how awful it is that [the artist] has to sit in a different part of the VIP area at a basketball game from his ex-girlfriend ... a situation he compares to ... apartheid."

Petridis goes on to reject as overly "straightforward" the interpretation that "West is an idiot, so mired in a fog of narcissism and self-delusion that he doesn't realise the full implications of what he's saying." Instead the *Guardian* critic concludes that, "West knows exactly what he's doing ... It all feels intended,

which gives further lie to the notion that [Yeesuz's] maker is either dumb or nuts. Perhaps he just understands better than most of his peers that musical stars are meant to be extraordinary, provocative, divisive, controversial figures ... Yeezus is the sound of a man just doing his job properly." Artists are doing their job properly when they behave like narcissistic idiots?

Similarly, David Jeffries of Allmusic considers *Yeezus* to be "groundbreaking hip-hop," stating that West presents his material "as if civil rights and booty calls were equally noble quests."

West and the groveling critics who praise the content of *Yeezus* are speaking for a layer of the upper-middle class far removed from the daily struggles of millions of working people. The sort of social struggles that helped produce works of beauty such as *Strange Fruit* are not gone from society, but will require more than the insincere posturing of self-involved individuals such as West to expose them for all to see.



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