To Pimp a Butterfly from rapper Kendrick Lamar

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1 June 2015

To Pimp a Butterfly (released March, 2015 on Top Dawg/Aftermath/Interscope Records) is the third full-length studio recording by American rap artist Kendrick Lamar (b. Kendrick Lamar Duckworth; 1987 in Compton, California).

Lamar has accumulated a considerable following. *To Pimp…* has sold nearly 600,000 units, while his previous album, 2012's *good kid, m.A.A.d City*, has gone certified platinum, selling over 1,400,000 copies in the US. The latter was nominated for numerous awards, including five Grammy nominations for Album of the Year, Best Rap Album, Best New Artist, Best Rap/Sung Collaboration and Best Rap Performance.

Lamar is often portrayed as an unusual musical talent who, despite achieving personal success, has no use for the rap genre's more tiresome musical formulas. Instead, goes the media version, Lamar focuses on musical quality, using his fluid vocal delivery to weave narratives focused on social reality. He focuses especially on life in the impoverished, gang-ridden slums of his hometown, Compton, California (the city, in southern Los Angeles County, has been the birthplace of a number of hip hop entertainers, including Andre "Dr. Dre" Young and Eric "Eazy-E" Wright).

The name of the new album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, according to an interview with Lamar in *MTV News*, was inspired by "the brightness of life" and the rapper's struggle not to be "[exploited] by the industry through my celebrity." The vulgarity of the title aside, this is a legitimate subject. This interesting initial idea, however, gives way to misguided—and, unfortunately, terribly predictable—conclusions in the end.

Despite the album's billing as socially-conscious "political rap" by certain critics, the focus of *To Pimp…* is largely on the rapper himself and his personal experiences in the music world. To the degree that Lamar does address broader social issues—often to the music's considerable detriment—his new album focuses on themes of identity politics and race.

In "Wesley's Theory" (featuring Funk legend George Clinton), the opening song of the album, the musician laments the exploitative nature of the music industry:

"What you want you? A house or a car?
Forty acres and a mule, a piano, a guitar?
Anything, see, my name is Uncle Sam, I'm your dog
Motherf---er you can live at the mall
I know your kind (That's why I'm kind)
Don't have receipts (Oh man, that's fine)
Pay me later, wear those gators
Cliché and say, f--- your haters
I can see the borrow in you
I can see the dollar in you
Little white lies, but it's no white-collar in you"

The cutthroat nature of the entertainment industry is not a myth, as countless exposés and ruined careers can attest, and Lamar manages to depict some of the foolhardy enthusiasm of artists such as himself who recognize too late the pitfalls. However, anger at this situation is directed not at capitalism and the attempt to commodify art, but at a music industry and popular culture supposedly dominated by whites.

"You hate me don't you?/You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture/You're f---in' evil, I want you to recognize that I'm a proud monkey/You vandalize my perception but can't take style from me" Lamar raps on the almost unlistenable "The Blacker the Berry." Later in the song he asks, "So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street? When gang banging make me kill a nigga blacker than me? Hypocrite!," in reference to the Florida teenager

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gunned down by an armed vigilante in 2011, a killing that sparked widespread protests against right wing law-and-order policies.

Unsurprisingly, Lamar's appeal to identity politics has won rapturous plaudits from the self-absorbed types within the mainstream media. "What I admire most and enjoy most about this album is that it addresses African-Americans straight up and leaves the rest of the hip-hop audience to listen in if it wants," states a typical commentary from Robert Christgau, the veteran music critic, on the website *Medium.com*. Christgau compliments the album for making a "strong, brave, effective bid to reinstate hip-hop as black America's CNN." Christgau should be ashamed of himself for celebrating this kind of backwardness.

On "Mortal Man," which features an extended mock-interview with the late rapper Tupac Shakur, Lamar has the deceased performer explain that "I see myself as a natural born hustler, a true hustler in every sense of the word. I took nothin', I took the opportunities, I worked at the most menial and degrading job and built myself up so I could get it to where I owned it. … I changed everything I realized my destiny in a matter of five years you know what I'm saying I made myself a millionaire. I made millions for a lot of people now it's time to make millions for myself, you know what I'm saying."

This is nothing but an attempt to perpetuate myths about the "self-made man" and the discredited American Dream, in the face of the poverty and social misery experienced by wide layers of the black, white and immigrant working class population.

As these selfish views have become more pronounced, Lamar has largely dispensed with the efforts earlier in his career to take a look at the broader society, in favor of songs centered on himself. This concern is captured in song titles such as "i" and "u;" the latter song in particular takes self-pity to a disconcerting level. But many of the album's songs operate in this general vein.

Artistically moving and sincere moments do occur. On songs such as "Institutionalized" and "How Much a Dollar Cost," Lamar seems to decry the corrupting nature of fame and wealth. He describes the grasping mentality of the many hangers-on surrounding him, as well as his own growing disillusionment with his current situation.

Many of the album's instrumentals have an immersive and nostalgic feeling to them, working to create an expansive backdrop for the rapper, whose dexterous flow works to fill the entire canvas. "King Kunta," "Complexion (A Zulu Love)," "These Walls" and the aforementioned "u" and "Mortal Man" stand out in this regard, although none are entirely satisfying pieces from an artistic standpoint.

Kendrick Lamar's perspective expresses something about the current state of affairs in the US, with the official fixation on "personal success" in a society dominated by the wealthy few. Despite the tiresome posturing by rap artists like Lamar, aimed at persuading audiences that they are independent and anti-establishment, the new album proceeds along lines (racialism, selfishness) that are entirely acceptable to the powers that be.

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