

Jay-Z's 4:44: A further display of hubris and self-absorption

Nick Barrickman
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Shawn “Jay-Z” Carter’s *4:44*, released June 30 on his Roc Nation label and available through Carter’s streaming service Tidal, is the rapper and entrepreneur’s thirteenth studio album.

Carter (born 1969 in Brooklyn, New York) has had a successful musical career spanning more than two decades now. He has put out platinum-selling albums and numerous collaboration albums and received 21 Grammy Awards. He was recently inducted--the first rap musician so honored--into the Songwriters Hall of Fame. Jay-Z has sold over 100 million albums worldwide, making him one of the most successful recording artists in history.

In addition to his music, Carter has been associated with multiple business ventures, including partial ownership of the National Basketball Association’s Brooklyn Nets, as well as considerable stakes in film and clothing lines, real estate, beverages, etc. The music streaming service Tidal, on which his latest album has been exclusively released, is his latest and most lucrative.

With tens of millions of dollars pouring in from Carter’s various endeavors (he is reportedly worth \$900 million) and presumably many financial and other decisions to be made on a daily basis, one might feel safe in asserting that Jay-Z is more about business than art these days.

It would seem inevitable that music for such an individual is merely a secondary consideration--one of many vehicles used to accumulate wealth. And one might further assume that the music such a corporate entity as Jay-Z creates, like a Hollywood studio, would bear the marks of the “blockbuster” phenomenon. Such a figure, with major business requirements weighing him down, cannot permit himself either experiment or the possibility of commercial failure.

New Yorker magazine contributor Howard Rosenberg noted recently, Carter “is arguably more relevant to the tabloids and to the business pages than to the cutting edge of hip-hop.”

The subject matter Carter chooses to rap about on *4:44* (named after the album’s title track, a self-absorbed love song dedicated to Carter’s wife and fellow performer, Beyoncé Knowles-Carter) serves as a graphic exposure of the *complacency* and cultural decay of the affluent social circles in which he travels, a social layer that includes multimillionaire celebrities of different backgrounds and, at least tangentially, a former president of the United States.

In the past, Carter has lent his name to various political causes. Some, at least potentially, such as opposition to police brutality, have been worthier than others. However, in recent years, Jay-Z has become a significant endorser of Democratic Party politicians. As a near-billionaire, he maintains close personal relations to US political and business power brokers, having campaigned for both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton.

Obama recorded a video message congratulating Jay-Z on his entry into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in June, referring to the rapper as “a friend of mine.” He further noted that he was “pretty sure I’m still the only president to listen to Jay-Z’s music in the Oval Office.”

On Jay-Z’s new album, braggadocio and money-flaunting at its most obscene join forces with navel-gazing and a preoccupation with the most mundane details of his personal life. “F*ck livin’ rich and dyin’ broke/I bought some artwork for 1 million/2 years later, that sh*t worth 2 million/Few years later, that sh*t worth 8 million,” raps Carter complacently on “The Story of O.J.” The latter is indicative of much of the album as a whole. (One has to ask: how many other

songwriters in the Hall of Fame ever boasted so crudely, so ridiculously, about their own wealth?)

4:44 has been referred to as a “political” album due to its overt embrace of racial politics. That such supposedly anti-establishment views find themselves resting comfortably alongside references to Rolls Royce automobiles, trips to Paris and million-dollar art collections is not ironic in the least, nor the result of some misunderstanding.

Hsu in the *New Yorker* comments that “when previous generations of African Americans made a cause of ‘black-owned’ businesses, the phrase spoke mostly to local operations and to middle-class hopes.”

“But one of hip-hop’s legacies,” he continues, “is that, in the age of personal brands and finance capital, Jay-Z can wield the term to describe Tidal and his ownership stake in the champagne brand Armand de Brignac.”

This connection is sharply brought home in the song “Legacy.” After a brief introduction in which Carter’s daughter is heard asking, “What’s a will?,” the rapper launches into what may be described as a family wealth plan in song form. “My stake in Roc Nation should go to you/ Leave a piece for your siblings to give to their children too/Tidal, the champagne, D’USSÉ [Jay-Z’s “cognac of choice,” according to the *Wall Street Journal*], I’d like to see/A nice peace-fund ideas from people who look like we,” he raps.

What accounts for Jay-Z’s success as a *musician*? Unquestionably, he has certain abilities. Carter possesses a self-assured, witty demeanor that is a change from the more blatantly anti-social currents in rap music. Additionally, Jay-Z has an undoubted talent for song composition, with his strong instrumental backings, often soulful 1960s/70s-inspired loops, provided by production veteran No I.D. (Ernest Dion Wilson, born in 1971 in Chicago).

Speaking generally, rather than the mindless gangster rap stereotype, Jay-Z offers the more *conscious*, calculating entrepreneurial mentality. (“Please don’t die over the neighborhood that your mama rentin’/Take your drug money and buy the neighborhood...” he raps, again on “The Story of O.J.”)

In any event, the glimpse one obtains on *4:44* of the social milieu Jay-Z belongs to and its outlook is not a pretty one: tiresome wealth glorification, status seeking, social climbing, petty gossip, selfishness,

racial politics. There is nothing here that sheds light on present realities, nothing that might provide insight into the social and economic crisis wreaking havoc on so many lives.

The upheavals to come will no doubt disturb the complacent offerings and musical “empires” of the various multi-millionaire entertainers and careerists.



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