

Everything is Love? Beyoncé and Jay-Z flaunt their wealth

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R&B superstar Beyoncé and her husband Jay-Z, among the most recognizable names in hip-hop, released the surprise album *Everything is Love* earlier this month. The album recorded under the couple's family name, The Carters, raises to new levels the obsession with wealth and power already so prevalent in rap music.

While it's really no concern (and not of any great interest) to anyone else, Beyoncé and Jay-Z have been the subject of considerable gossip in recent years, owing to Jay-Z's admitted infidelity. Both musicians have addressed the matter in recent solo albums, including Beyoncé's *Lemonade* (2016) and Jay-Z's *4:44* (2017). *Everything is Love* is considered by its admirers to be the final piece in a trilogy comprised of these works, in which the couple unites to prove they have overcome the difficulties in their relationship—love conquers all. But those who find a testament to true love amid the album's bombastic vanity are kidding themselves.

Everything is Love might better have been titled *Money is Everything*. The only song on the album that could even be described as “loving” is its opening track, “Summer.” It is a sultry, 1970s soul-styled song in which Beyoncé sings romantic overtures to Jay-Z. With this out of the way, the album gets down to business.

For the rest of the time, the music industry power couple celebrate nothing so much as their own financial might. Beyoncé and Jay-Z are exceedingly wealthy. *Forbes* magazine's 2018 list of “Hip-Hop's Wealthiest Artists” put Jay-Z in the top spot with \$900 million. Their 2017 list of “America's Richest Self-Made Women” estimated Beyoncé's net worth at \$350 million.

The lyrics found on *Everything is Love* come across

as little more than a running list of all the couple's fancy objects. This inventory check is accompanied by soul samples and trap music, the subgenre of hip hop built around the drug culture of the southern US. Several songs fall into this routine: a single droning bass note is sounded and answered by digital handclaps on the backbeat. The gaps are filled in by ripples of synthesized hi-hats. The style of rapping associated with this genre delivers its lyrics in short bursts of a few words at a time, tossed out in an indifferent tone. For much of the album, Beyoncé's singing voice is restricted by rapping in this style or by autotune or similar vocal effects used to create the electronic warble so much in vogue with singers in recent years.

On “Boss,” Beyoncé raps, “My great-great-grandchildren already rich/That's a lot of brown children on your *Forbes* list.” Jay-Z raps, “Hundred million crib, three million watch, all facts.” In Jay-Z's world, “invoices separate the men from the boys.” With a complete lack of self-awareness, he raps in the same song: “Pride always goeth before the fall.”

On “713,” Jay-Z begins, “Cash, hit deposit, 24-carat faucets, Louis V and Goyard trunks all in the closet.” He raps in his usual self-satisfied manner. His voice has always contained a kind of chuckle of contempt for those beneath him financially. “Black Effect” contains one of many references to luxury watches. Jay-Z raps: “Got the Richard Mille all colors, might hit you with the Rose Gold all summer.”

How does one begin to address such lyrics? It is doubtful that even the cleverest melody could render such ugliness beautiful. If there is one elementary theme running through much of the world's greatest artwork it is that the single-minded pursuit of wealth is a soul-destroying and self-defeating enterprise. But the Carters can only sing the praises of such a pursuit.

Their lyrics pile up like the expensive objects in Charles Foster Kane's warehouse, which is full of things, but utterly empty.

Nothing on the album is more obscene than the song "Apeshit," and its accompanying music video. It was filmed in the Louvre in Paris, the world's largest art museum, which the Carters rented for an undisclosed (presumably vast) sum. They pose for the video cameras in the otherwise empty museum, with the Mona Lisa and the Venus de Milo all to themselves. Ordinary museum goers are forced to contend with large crowds and lengthy wait times to catch a glimpse of these historic works. The Carters can turn the museum into their own personal parlor for a day—and they want you to know it.

Crouched in front of the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*, the famed Hellenistic sculpture from the second century BC, Beyoncé demands even more money. She raps, "Give me my check/Put some respect on my check/Or pay me in equity/Watch me reverse out of debt." (One breathless media commentator informs us: "Beyoncé outshines the iconic statue by donning a wedding dress by Stephanie Rolland worth a cool \$138,748. She tops off the outfit with a structured, ruffled cape from Alexis Mabille Haute Couture.")

"He got a bad bitch, bad bitch," Beyoncé raps about Jay-Z and herself, "We livin' lavish, lavish/I got expensive fabrics/I got expensive habits." The music is infused with ego. Even the bass notes seem to pulsate with a complacent swagger. In fact, there is something pathetic and laughable about the entire effort.

Everything is Love and the video for "Apeshit" in particular have been widely celebrated in the press.

Writing for the online music journal *Pitchfork*, Briana Younger called the album "a celebration of resilient black love and proud black extravagance." She hailed Beyoncé and Jay-Z, writing, "The quintessential power couple has reemerged to stunt on everyone—haters, mistresses, America itself—while serving up a spectacle of romance and opulence like make-up sex on a bed of money." Younger adds, "The Carters remain billionaires who are not interested in leaving their blackness behind, and that, in some ways, is renegade—even if capitalism isn't salvation."

Taylor Hosking writes in *The Atlantic*, "In 'Apeshit,' which is set in Paris's Louvre Museum and rife with centuries-old images of conquest, the Carters present

themselves as a modern kind of royal family—one that's not helmed by a patriarch, but by two equal partners."

Writing for the *New Yorker*, Doreen St. Félix comments that with this video "the Carters are their own protagonists in a grand narrative of establishing a black elite." St. Félix describes the "primal political thrill" she got looking at the album cover in which "the 'Mona Lisa' is shown blurred in the distance, while in the foreground a black woman uses an Afro pick to freshen a man's hair." "Apeshit," for St. Felix is "a gospel of acquisition." This worshipful attitude toward wealth runs through all such commentaries.

Billionaires are "renegade," progressive—as long as they possess the right identity. Extravagance, as long as it is black, is to be admired. Modern royalty is acceptable, so long as there are more people of color, more women, more gender identities who can also be crowned. Here we find exposed the real class orientation behind racial and gender politics, which seeks to cultivate an elite layer out of these various "identities" at the expense of working people of all identities.

With *Everything is Love*, these upper middle class commentators have found an appropriate soundtrack for their campaign.



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