

Vultures 1: Rapper Kanye West's ongoing romance with fascism

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Ye (the moniker of rapper-entertainer Kanye West) has released *Vultures 1* on his self-owned label YZY. The album, a collaboration with singer Ty Dolla Sign and released under the moniker “¥\$,” is the first piece of music produced following a series of reactionary, antisemitic diatribes in the fall and winter of 2022 that revealed West to be, among other things, an admirer of Nazi leader Adolf Hitler and a supporter of the fascist right.

In December 2022, for example, as we noted on the WSW, in an interview with ultra-right talk show host Alex Jones and accompanied by fascist Nick Fuentes, West asserted that the “Jewish media has made us feel like the Nazis and Hitler have never offered anything of value to the world ... But [the Nazis] did good things too. We gotta stop dissing the Nazis all the time.” He continued later, “Every human being has something of value that they brought to the table, especially Hitler.” West also insisted that the Nazi leader “didn’t kill six million Jews. That’s just like factually incorrect.”

Such statements resulted in numerous corporate sponsors momentarily abandoning West and media outlets speculating that it signaled the end of his career, or at least a loss of interest in his work in more “respectable” circles.

On *Vultures 1*, whose production and release West claims nearly bankrupted him, the rapper is unrepentant about his previous comments. In this regard, *Billboard* comments, “If you thought Kanye West’s time in the mainstream was done following his most recent and most impactful round of controversies ... the reception for new album *Vultures 1* should dissuade you of that notion pretty quickly.”

In fact, the media has been generally respectful and in so far as reviewers refer to the antisemitic ranting, they downplay or dilute it. The *New York Times*’ Jon Caramanica mildly asserts that West “often leans into odiousness” and refers obliquely to “past outbursts.” *Variety*, which regularly insists that opponents of Israeli genocide in Gaza are “antisemites,” blinks politely in the face of an *actual antisemite*, Kanye West, noting that many “of those who checked out on West’s music have found his repeated antisemitic remarks to be too toxic to stomach,” before adding that *Vultures 1*

isn’t the most groundbreaking album in his discography, but it’s the clearest vision that he’s presented in years. Its songs are mercurial yet intentional, each its own bizarre

sector of a larger blueprint, and the 16-song set is often musically great.

In any case, when *Billboard* refers to “reception,” it primarily has in mind commercial success. However, that and genuine musical and social value are two distinct things. What is the content and relative social weight of *Vultures 1*? It has none. The lyrics are principally vile, backward and selfish, and the music trite.

The hook on “Paid,” sung by collaborator Ty Dolla Sign, sums up the two songwriters’ philosophy: the chorus simply consists of the singer repeating “I’m just here to get paid” a half-dozen times.

“Crazy, bi-polar, antisemite / and I’m still the king!” Ye declares on the track “King.” West’s ludicrous, misplaced sense of importance, a grating feature of both his musical and media persona, has easily survived the brush with financial ruin.

When West isn’t stale and predictable (“Pullin’ up, drop top Porsche / This that glory” on “Stars”), he is simply profane and offensive. The album’s original artwork itself was taken from fascist black-metal group Burzum before being replaced by its current design: West’s wife, model Bianca Censori, almost entirely nude.

West’s attitude toward his recent statements, such as his online threats to go “death con” against Jewish people, is revealed throughout the album. “Keep a few Jews on the staff now / I cash out...” he also asserts on “Stars,” the introduction song. West relishes the subject elsewhere on the album with provocative and vulgar one-liners mixed in with the usual fare of obnoxious boasting.

West’s trivializing attitude also finds expression in a number of references to school shootings. “Pull up in the trenches like Columbine / Pull up with the rocket like NumbaNine,” raps Rich the Kid on the album’s single “Carnival,” a reference to the gunmen who shot a dozen of their classmates at Columbine High School in 1999. West makes a similar reference on “Vultures.”

The glibness and unseriousness of the lyrics are emphasized by the rappers’ deadpan and monotone deliveries. They seem hardly interested in the things they are saying, let alone the world around them and their impact on it.

Notably, elements of melancholy and even remorse do appear in certain keys, deep synthesizer pads or samples that are introduced (“Stars” comes to mind). Such instrumentals could form the

backdrop for a thoughtful and insightful artist.

The production on *Vultures 1* is dark-tinted and menacing for the most part. Heavily distorted or reverbed samples, hard to make out distinctly, float across deep and glitch-filled synths. In general, the production effectively creates the feeling of space and largeness. West has not failed to deploy the numerous producers and sound technicians credited on each of his songs.

But even here, West the producer seemingly cannot get out of his own way, introducing chaotic and discordant samples and refrains; the truncated “beg forgiveness” choral refrain which punctuates the chorus of “Beg Forgiveness”; or the insufferably repetitive “Hood Rat” sample.

Some hip hop producers have a gift for introducing sonic imperfections and “grit” into their work that give the music character and depth. In West’s case, the effect is to make the songs’ feel more opaque and less accessible. (Writing about West’s sonic backdrops in 2013’s *Yeezus*, for example, the *World Socialist Web Site* suggested “the musical accompaniment appears abrasive and foreboding, perhaps symbolizing West’s own relationship to reality.”)

The character of the album, including its “appeal,” speaks to some of the current difficulties in popular music and culture generally, and why West’s work continues to meet with success despite its debased and even pornographic qualities.

In February, the album debuted at number one on the Billboard Top 200. According to industry statistics, *Vultures 1* grossed over \$1,000,000 in its first week, nearly \$900,000 from streams and \$150,000 from sales. This is the equivalent of 168 million individual streams and 18,000 whole-record sales. Additional profits in the millions have been netted through various “listening parties,” a more exclusive style of concert put on by the performer.

Commentators, like the *Variety* reviewer referred to above, have grown increasingly desperate in their efforts to separate Ye-West, the so-called “artistic genius,” from his offensive public behavior and demeanor in a hope to preserve and continue profiting off the entertainer.

This effort carries on. “Ye’s production prowess remains God Level and is one of the reasons why he skates through the controversies,” exclaims a typical comment in *Billboard*.

The *Times*’ Caramanica seeks to separate West’s present course from previous, more “palatable” (for some) incarnations of himself. The music critic laments that a listen to older West music “is like being allowed out into the sunshine after enforced confinement in the basement.”

Certain social, political and artistic conditions have favored West’s rise and ongoing success. His behavior and appeal do not exist in a bubble. Nor do the degraded, repugnant lyrics come out of the blue. Encouraged and manipulated by corporate and political interests, rap, by and large, has proudly come to identify itself with social backwardness and the most toxic individualism and social indifference. Rap blossomed in the period of the decline and decay of the civil rights movement and 1970s radicalism as a whole, taking the new hedonism and obsession with money to new heights.

Notwithstanding many who listen to West’s latest music out of curiosity, the entertainer’s unrepentant attitude in the face of

public condemnation and even his doubling down on his foul behavior have struck a chord with some unable at this point to articulate in a socially coherent form their feelings of disgust with the current order. West plays upon the present confusions and offers himself as some sort of persecuted “rebel” or “contrarian,” in conflict with the often sanitized and bland work (i.e., Taylor Swift, etc.) of the music industry.

In this sense, West’s own perseverance in the face of official media condemnation “echoes” that of the fascist Republican Donald Trump, whose support partly derives from a perceived ability to persist in the face of myriad investigations and lawsuits for his various transgressions. There is nothing remotely “rebellious” here. On the contrary, only the confirmation and endorsement of capitalism and all the social misery it inflicts.

The pandemic, the ongoing escalation of the United States and NATO’s war against Russia and China, the Israeli government’s genocide in Gaza—funded and backed by the US and NATO—have shaken American society deeply. A powerful radicalization is taking place among young people in particular. At the same time, in the absence of a broad-based progressive alternative to the capitalist order, many people are at sea, left on their own to grapple with the consequences of the crisis, in culture and in life.

In popular music, which touches on the most personal moods and feelings of people, the situation is largely dire at this point. The WWSWS commented that this year’s Grammy Awards ceremony, amid a sea of human suffering beyond the walls of the celebration, was “a miasma of self-congratulation and jockeying for industry clout and celebrity.” The various honors celebrated largely empty works, treated as major cultural achievements often primarily due to the gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation of the individual receiving the given award.

West is aware of this distorted social resentment, and has pitched his tune to it. (“Without the deals, I guarantee I’m still n---- rich,” he states on “Problematic,” implying his financial tribulations stemming from his reactionary views are in some way associated with anti-black racism).

West’s continued invocations of identity politics in order to justify his own racism, fundamentally refutes the idea that such positions are in any way associated with egalitarian or “progressive” views. They remain diseased forms of self-promotion for layers of the upper-middle class on the make. It is not for nothing that the *Times*’ Caramanica lauds what he calls “glimmers of an older Kanye” in moments such as these!



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