

# “THE CASE FOR KANYE” / alternative title “WHAT’S UP MR WEST?”

I love Kanye West the Artist.

The Artist, you see, has undeniable cultural importance: a creative visionary single-handedly responsible for seismic shifts in mainstream hip hop. There is a little bit of Kanye the Artist peppered across the sounds, shows, and video production of countless other artists and producers today, in part thanks to his ability to effortlessly transition between wildly different styles. Each album has its own mood, and, one after the other, they age beautifully. For me, the sonically brilliant *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, where bold melodies shift in and out of infectious compositions, is second only to the soul sample hip hop and self-aware rhymes of the *Graduation* trilogy that ended the era of gangster rap's chart hegemony.

Defending the Artist is easy. Making a case for the Public Figure, with his well-documented narcissism and divisive politics, is something else entirely. Even those who acknowledge his musical ability will discount it because it belongs to “an attention-seeker with an ego verging on God complex”, to quote a friend of mine. “He only says that stuff to stay relevant and keep his brand valuable”.

“Talented jerk”, shrugs another, who sees West as a kind of idiot-savant.

As I’ve watched him string one controversy after another, I can’t help but wonder how much of that is right. His cringe-worthy crashing of Taylor Swift’s acceptance speech in 2009 is often credited as the start of his transition from hip hop’s favourite underdog to the industry’s most loud-mouthed artist. Now, when it comes to egotistical babble, West’s cup truly runneth over. Take the tweet “I am Picasso. I am Michelangelo. I am Basquiat. I am Walt Disney. I am Steve Jobs”, for example, or the humbly titled track “I am a God” from his 2013 album *Yeezus*.

But for many, the tipping point was far more recent: his MAGA hat-touting ways and *that* conversation about slavery with TMZ last year.

In 2018 West's outspoken support for Trump put him at risk with both his audience and friends in the hip hop community. Not long after a stint in hospital for a "psychiatric emergency," the very same Kanye who once interrupted a live TV fundraiser for victims of Hurricane Katrina to exclaim that "George Bush doesn't care about black people" was pictured meeting up with the President in Trump Tower. Despite claims that he and Trump share the same "dragon energy", whatever that means, West failed to mention any tangible aspects of Trump's politics he actually supports. The whole fiasco was wrought with the sense that the newly anointed hip hop ambassador to the white house had no knowledge of what good or bad the President may have been doing in reality.

It is this impression of purposeful ignorance, this insistence upon imprecision and total unpredictability, that underscores much of what makes West both so frustrating and fascinating.

To some extent, West's misadventures are a failure of self-expression. Trying to understand him is like trawling a net through a bout of incoherent verbal diarrhoea hoping to catch a clue. Those notorious rambles are a disorienting experience, too often making me want to shout "I have no idea what you're saying!!" as I wave my hands at him from across an additionally problematic gulf of age, gender, race, background and belief.

"When you hear about slavery for 400 years. For 400 years? That sounds like a choice." West grins, and coughs. I wince. No matter how many times I hear it, it definitely doesn't sound right. Still, it isn't entirely out of keeping with his usual pattern of speech. Half-finished thoughts gleefully escape up the conveyer belt of his tongue, launched into the public consciousness before a PR team can polish them ten times over. Blunt sentences run amuck in rambles; each is a rough draft, an internal conversation prematurely spoken into existence. This makes him absolutely

incompatible with a media environment — his beloved Twitter is in fact the worst medium for him.

“It’s like we’re mentally imprisoned. I like the word ‘prison’ better because ‘slavery’ goes too direct to the idea of blacks... Prison is something that unites us as one race... the human race.” He later says, “the reason why I brought up the 400 years point is because we can’t be mentally imprisoned for another 400 years.”

It is possible that what West *feels* — despite how what he says might sound — is that despite it being 400 years since the first slaves came over to America, many of us, irrespective of race, are still mentally imprisoned by collective thought. Individualism is fiercely dear to West. One tweet from April 2018, amongst others in a similar Orwellian vein, reads: “express what you feel, not what you’ve been programmed to think.” This is the modern-day ‘mental slavery’ he believes we’ve chosen for ourselves: the slavery of thought. There is nothing wrong with this opinion; the problem is the web within which it is spun. You would think, being capable of masterful lyricism, he might’ve strung together a less offensive-sounding sentence. But West does not think with foresight, he simply *does*.

As is the case with any public figure, we have fashioned the character of Kanye West to some extent ourselves. His misadventures hold a mirror not only to a sensationalist media perspective but the rise of an oppressive ‘cancel culture’. It is a phenomenon born from the current climate of political correctness, whereby people ‘cancel’ — that is to say, completely withdraw their moral and financial support from — individuals they deem guilty of doing or saying anything unacceptable. In this high-pressure environment so much as a poorly worded comment from a lifetime ago can cost a vital career move, a-la-Kevin Hart effectively tweeting himself out of a job hosting the Oscars this year.

Such is the power of social media nowadays that the online masses are often compared to crowds bearing pitchforks. Clearly, a cancel culture is highly problematic. It does away with a culture of growth, instead replacing empathy with exquisite public shaming and ultimately preventing people who make mistakes —

aka, all of us — from learning.

West is no stranger to the darker side of fame and success. After the Taylor Swift incident, he experienced how quickly the tides of favour can turn. Similarly, he was considered ‘canceled’ following those tumultuous months of Trump and TMZ. Yet, he has managed to navigate this exceptionally well. Credit must be given where it is due, for West remains a relevant social and cultural force. Whether he realises it or not, he endures in a way others can only dream of. Why? He has done the seemingly impossible. He has created a physical franchise around *being* a problematic character. Each controversy is a springboard for an album, a clothing line, a new collaboration. He is a favourite of social media satirists who replicate his ego to the effect of comedy in memes such as ‘I love you like Kanye loves Kanye’. Of course, for those of us who love Kanye the Artist first and foremost, we don’t want to see his musical legacy overshadowed by internet cartoons.

Does West leave us any clues in his music? Absolutely.

‘Pablo’ dealt with the uncertainty of real affection, questioning friendships and intentions with tracks like ‘Real Friends’. ‘Ye’, released last summer and written in total isolation during a depressive episode, grants access to the mind of a troubled man. Despite the ongoing low point in his career at the time of its conception, he still managed to produce various other albums for other artists. He is dedicated to the professional growth of artists under his label GOOD Music, sharing his namesake and development skills with those such as Teyana Taylor and Kid Cudi.

There is meaning even where it isn’t overtly obvious. His music video ‘I Love It’ featuring Lil Pump seemed as deliberately silly as his gibberish whoopity-scooping in ‘Lift Yourself’, the track he released a week after professing his love for Trump. “Is this a fever dream?” One baffled comment on Youtube reads. “You can see how much fun he is having. Can’t help but smile.” Says another. It’s hard to reconcile the happy, goofy West on my screen — bopping around in a ridiculous suit and huge slides — with the one responsible for many a manic Twitter tirade. But then again — isn’t this alternation between mania and creativity, this state of being so multidimensional, a

direct reflection of the bipolar disorder he's been so candid about recently? Is it fair to call him crazy when he can't help but ricochet between the extremes of human emotion?

So far, West is having a modest 2019. His most high-profile appearance was on David Letterman's 'My Next Guest Needs No Introduction' this May; an interview in which he shows a surprising level of sensitivity. Sweeter and softer, thoughtful even, West discusses the loss of his mother, home and family life, and elicits laughs from the audience with quips such as "live-it, not diet". Letterman approaches some controversial topics such as the Me Too movement, but for the most part he is deferential to West and avoids probing into past mishaps. "I love people being the maximum version of their character," West says, smiling. "I love people being themselves."

In that moment, it all seems to make sense. Existence is absurd. Why not run up to the mic and say whatever you want?

West is mystifying, not malicious. Motivated by publicity, certainly. Misrepresenting his own ideas, more so. Even so, the end justifies the means — debate the nobility of it all you like, but there's no denying the empire he has managed to build around his personality. He changed the course of hip hop and defined a generation of music. Otherwise, consider him a case study for the arbitrary nature of language, the behemoth power of social media and the rise of a cancel culture.

Perhaps I, too, am wrong to categorise him. We are dealing with a three dimensional human being as fluid as any other, whose many facets gleam in many places: on Twitter, an egomaniac; on Letterman, a father, husband and son; in music, a benevolent mentor and distrustful superstar, struggling to reconcile the spotlight of fame with a serious illness.

"I'm in front of the joke," he insists. "The joke is on everyone else."

Well, name one genius that ain't crazy.