

Foreword

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As a contributor to Julius Bailey's inaugural book, *Jay Z Essays on Hip Hop's Philosopher King*, I'm proud to return and pen the opening verse on this sophomore project, which focuses on Kanye West. As was the case with the Jay-Z project, Bailey has done an excellent job compiling an array of scholars, teachers, artists, and practitioners who will help the reader navigate and dive deeply (and at times philosophically) into some of the most intriguing questions surrounding the enigma that is Kanye West.

The year 2013, at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, marks 40 years since Hip Hop's birth. And it's important that we study the music and culture of Hip Hop, especially because it's the most popular music form in the country and perhaps the world.

With respect to Kanye West, hate him or love him, it's critical we study this controversial Chicago native, who, with 21 Grammys under his belt, has more than made his mark as a producer, song writer, rap artist, film maker, and clothing designer. In a society that is seemingly all about celebrity worship and reality TV, Kanye West, like his mentor and label boss Jay Z, has come to understand that at the end of the day it's not only his artistic work that's a business but also Kanye West as a personality. Hence he underscores Jay Z's famous businessman mantra.

Kanye with his outspoken, cocky, brazen persona has established himself as the ultimate marketing tool. With each rant and over-the-top antic, like him bum-rushing the stage to interrupt country star Taylor Swift just before she receives an award or him scuffling with meddlesome paparazzi as he walks hand in hand with fiancé and reality TV star Kim Kardashian or him wearing a skirt (kilt) while performing or his latest antic to sell confederate flags to fans, the

Kanye West that I met is well aware of the value of kicking up dust. The result of Kanye's dust-raising is that people talk about Kanye. He is hunted down by a ravenous media who chronicle his every move and attempt to capture tidbits of his "private" life and splash it across the tabloids. Kanye's dust-raising keeps him relevant at a date and time when the currency for success is not so much about talent as it is about the length of time people keep your name on their lips.

I interviewed Kanye's long-time writing partner and childhood friend, Rhymefest, for this project and he described him best when he said that Kanye West is "living art." He is "living art" who is constantly creating and evolving within a society that is constantly watching, gathering information, and scrutinizing his and other Black artists' every move. Rhymefest suggested that Kanye is operating within the confines of a music industry that aggressively mirrors a society that is increasingly hell-bent on (de)magnetizing Black artists from the community and ultimately making them disposable. "The one thing that is most feared by governments is people coming together," Rhymefest asserted.

It's a stark reality that Kanye is fighting and the industry is resisting. "These artists are fighting the system and the system is bucking back", Rhymefest noted "They're fighting back through how they are presenting their art, and through fighting the corporate system. So what is the system doing? It's turning to younger artists now, and trying to manipulate them, with the last bit of money that it has.." Rhymefest added.

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