

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: THE LIFE & RHYMES OF JAY-Z, AN
HISTORICAL BIOGRAPHY: 1969-2004

Omékongo Dibinga, Doctor of Philosophy, 2015

Dissertation directed by: Dr. Barbara Finkelstein, Professor Emerita,
University of Maryland College of Education.
Department of Teaching and Learning, Policy
and Leadership.

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the life and ideas of Jay-Z. It is an effort to illuminate the ways in which he managed the vicissitudes of life as they were inscribed in the political, economic cultural, social contexts and message systems of the worlds which he inhabited: the social ideas of class struggle, the fact of black youth disempowerment, educational disenfranchisement, entrepreneurial possibility, and the struggle of families to buffer their children from the horrors of life on the streets. Jay-Z was born into a society in flux in 1969. By the time Jay-Z reached his 20s, he saw the art form he came to love at the age of 9—hip hop—become a vehicle for upward mobility and the acquisition of great wealth through the sale of multiplatinum albums, massive record deal signings, and the omnipresence of hip-hop culture on radio and television. In short, Jay-Z lived at a time where, if he could survive his turbulent environment, he could take advantage of new terrains of possibility. This dissertation seeks to shed light on the life and development of Jay-Z during a time of great challenge and change in America and beyond.

THE LIFE & RHYMES OF JAY-Z, AN HISTORICAL BIOGRAPHY: 1969-2004
An historical biography: 1969-2004

by

Omékongo Dibinga

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Barbara Finkelstein, Chair
Professor Steve Klees
Professor Robert Croninger
Professor Derrick Alridge
Professor Hoda Mahmoudi

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Purpose & significance.....	1
Research questions.....	5
Literature review.....	6
Methodology.....	13
Limitations.....	16
Chronology and chapter outline.....	17
Chapter 1: prelude to a hustler (1969-1982)	19
Chapter 2: The evolution of a hustler in search of community (1983-1994).....	43
Chapter 3: Regrets on the road to riches (1995-2000).....	76
Chapter 4: The hustler meets the human being in search of the American Dream (2001-2004).....	115
Conclusion.....	156
Bibliography.....	176

The folks from the suburbs and the private schools so concerned with putting warning labels on my records missed the point. They never stopped to worry about the realities in this country that spread poverty and racism and gun violence and hatred of women and drug use and unemployment. People can act like rappers spread these things, but that is not true. Our lives are not rotten or worthless just because that's what people say about the real estate that we were raised on. In fact, our lives may be even more worthy of study because we succeeded despite the promises of failure seeping out from behind the peeling paint on the walls of every apartment in every project.¹

-Jay-Z²

Introduction

In the shadows of the lives of many rappers who grew up in impoverished communities in the 1960s, lie stories of creativity and despair born from a struggle against the force of adverse circumstance: the struggle for attention in an overcrowded classroom; the struggle to find a unique and authentic voice and form of expression; the struggle to develop a talent and a capacity to rescue families from the ravages of poverty. In the shadows of the lives of platinum-selling and no-hit rappers lie untold stories worth telling. No living rapper casts a bigger shadow than Jay-Z. His life story is replete with tales of joy and pain, poverty and wealth, and life and death. Shedding light on the shadow that is Jay-Z's life illuminates a rich lived experience that has gone unnoticed and untold by many scholars, music critics, political figures, clergymen, and law enforcement officials.

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the life and ideas of Jay-Z, arguably the most powerful rapper in history. It is an effort to illuminate the ways in which he managed the

¹ Dyson, M.E. (2007). *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip Hop*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, pp. x-xi.

² Michaels, S. (2013, July 19). Jay-Z to become Jay Z in massively disrespectful move against hyphens. *Theguardian.com*. retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/jul/19/jay-z-drops-hyphen-from-name>. While it is true that Jay-Z currently spells his name "Jay Z" without the "-", this dissertation utilizes the spelling "Jay-Z" because Jay-Z did not drop the "-" from his name until 2009-10. This dissertation covers his life up until 2004.

vicissitudes of life as they were inscribed in the political, economic cultural, social contexts and message systems of the worlds which he inhabited: the social ideas of class struggle, the fact of black youth disempowerment, educational disenfranchisement, entrepreneurial possibility, and the struggle of families to buffer their children from the horrors of life on the streets.

Jay-Z lived in a time when classrooms in underfunded schools were so overcrowded that many public schools became glorified and sometimes violent daycare centers. It was a time when young black inner-city males were predicted to either be killed or incarcerated before the age of 25 as victims and soldiers of The Crack Epidemic. It was a time where a job as a drug dealer was just as easy, if not easier to find than a city-sponsored summer job. It was a time where a generation of many black youth in a post-Civil Rights Era world had to fend for themselves with lack of supervision from elders and excessive supervision from law enforcement. It was a time where the American government itself was soul-searching in the aftermath of a decade (the 1960s) where the fundamental notion of who could have access to the American Dream was in question.

In short, Jay-Z was born into a society in flux; a society that was, like the days of Jamestown in the 1600s, charting a new path for those deemed to be labeled “citizen.” He was born just four years after the 1965 passing of the Voting Rights Act so he grew up in a time where there was greater access to political and economic opportunities for African Americans. He was born four years after the creation of affirmative action programs, where disadvantaged communities received more opportunities for economic and educational advancement. He was born when the content of popular culture was changing and the presence of black performing icons became more visible. During Jay-Z’s toddler years in the 1970s, black music’s popularity grew exponentially through artists like Marvin Gaye and The Jackson 5, led by a young Michael

Jackson. By Jay-Z's adolescent years, black athletes such as Michael Jordan had become global icons and America called Bill Cosby "America's Father" due to the success of his sitcom *The Cosby Show*. By the time Jay-Z reached his 20s, he saw the art form he came to love at the age of 9—hip hop—become a vehicle for upward mobility and the acquisition of great wealth through the sale of multiplatinum albums, massive record deal signings, and the omnipresence of hip-hop culture on radio and television. In short, Jay-Z lived at a time where, if he could survive his turbulent environment, he could take advantage of new terrains of possibility.

Notwithstanding the fact that hip-hop music has had a significant and powerful impact on both the entertainment and political worlds for almost forty years, the real lives of creative artists like Jay-Z are relatively unexplored, their connection to the historical spirit of African American resistance in America unattended. The study of the lives of hip hop artists can reveal new ways of studying the music, the culture, as well as the artists. Deeper portrayals and studies of hip-hop artists in particular are needed in order to develop an holistic understanding of the hip-hop cultural aesthetic as a form of resistance, empowerment, and resistance *as* empowerment. As Alridge and Stewart have written:

Over the past three decades, Hip Hop has developed as a cultural and artistic phenomenon affecting youth culture around the world. For many youth, Hip Hop reflects the social, economic, political, and cultural realities and conditions of their lives, speaking to them in a language and manner they understand. As a result of both its longevity and its cogent message for many youth worldwide, Hip Hop cannot be dismissed as merely a passing fad or as a youth movement that will soon run its course.³

Jay-Z's life reflects the struggles and triumphs of black inner-city youth from the late 1960s up until the present. His chosen medium of expression, hip-hop, evolved from a casual

³ Alridge, D. and Stewart, J.B. (2005, summer). Introduction: Hip Hop in History: Past, Present, and Future. *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 90, No. 3.

form of expression for black inner-city impoverished teens to a global multi-billion dollar commercial entity heard and purchased by millions. Going beyond basic descriptors of album sales, lyrics and media incidences, this dissertation will use the life of Jay-Z to explore not only the *what* and *who* of hip-hop, but the *why* of hip-hop i.e. why does hip-hop exist in the first place? What conditions led to its creation? Why has it grown and not disappeared since its creation in the mid-1970s? Since Jay-Z witnessed hip-hop from the beginning, his life affords a powerful lens by which to view challenges post-Civil Rights Era, black inner-city youth faced in the crime, drug-infested, jobless communities they inhabited that led to the development and growth of hip-hop.

Using Jay-Z's life as a micro entrée into an holistic study of hip-hop opens the door to a heightened understanding of hip-hop in the macro. As Alridge and Stewart explain in underscoring the importance of hip-hop, it "must be taken seriously as a cultural, political, economic, and intellectual phenomenon deserving of scholarly study, similar to previous African American artistic and cultural movements such as the Blues, Jazz, the New Negro Renaissance, and the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Arts Movements." A deeper analysis of hip-hop can indeed help us "understand the elusive cultural politics of contemporary black urban America...the language, dress, music, and dance styles rising out of the ghettos, as well as the social and economic context in which styles are created, contested, and reaccented."⁴ Conducting studies of hip-hop on the level Alridge and Stewart suggests allows us to go deeper in understanding of black youth culture, which Dimitriadis also advocates:

Popular culture provides 'the narratives that young people are drawing on to deal with the issues and the concerns most pressing in their lives, from the general (day-to-day survival) to the specific (the Klan)...without such an understanding of young people and their lives, I maintain, we will always be limited in our

⁴ Ibid.

analyses, diagnosing the condition of the young in largely unsubstantiated ways, in ways that reinforce our political predilections... There remains a dearth—indeed, all but absence—of studies of rap music in the daily lives of black youth. Textual analyses of rap lyrics—analyses removed from specific contexts of use—have dominated discussion wholly, all across the political spectrum. The discourse surrounding hip hop (specifically) and black youth (generally) remains overwhelmingly out of touch with the wants, needs, fears, and desires of young people and their uses of culture.⁵

This dissertation will use biography to focus on the origin, evolution, and substance of Jay-Z's life as a creator of intellectual, entrepreneurial, political, social, racial, and innovative ideas, which derived from a spirit of resistance, nonconformity, *and* desperation in a society he saw as oppressive. This dissertation is designed to provide a critical analysis of Jay-Z and the choices he made throughout his life, as well as attempt to place him in the complex historical context in which those decisions were made.

Research Questions

This study explores the ways in which Jay-Z navigated the world he inherited and the structures of opportunity that awaited him. The following questions will guide this study:

1. Through his life and music, how did Jay-Z translate the determinacies of cultural traditions, political arrangements, economic forms, social circumstances, educational processes, and opportunity structures available to him and other rappers into new social possibilities?
2. How did Jay-Z's perception of opportunity structures presented to young African-American inner-city youth influence his utilization of hip-hop as a form of empowerment and later socio-political medium?
3. How over time did Jay-Z's perspectives on the socio-economic political aesthetic evolve?
4. How has Jay-Z navigated notions of revolution and capitalism as his economic and political status changed over time?

⁵ Dimitriadis, G. (2009). *Performing Identity/Performing Culture: Hip Hop as Text, Pedagogy, and Lived Practice (Intersections in Communications and Culture)*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, pg. 120.

To understand fully the complexities of the life and work of artists like Jay-Z, it is important that scholars, critics, and fans alike, go beyond narrow descriptions. Indeed, the work of hip-hop scholars has typically emphasized matters of context rather than voice; and structure rather than agency. Only a few—scholars such as Derrick Alridge, Michael Eric Dyson, Tricia Rose, Mark Anthony Neal, and James Braxton Peterson for example, have made attempts to get into the minds, hearts, creative processes, and lived experiences of rappers and explore what is at the heart of their often controversial, contradictory and aggressive lyrics and life styles.

A complete approach towards the study of rappers must take into account their life story in order to demonstrate to those who seek knowledge on rappers that they do not exist in a vacuum void of any connection to the contemporary context of the country they inhabit and void of a life story. A cursory view of rappers glosses over important highlights of their history that can elucidate their music at a deeper level. This literature review will examine those authors whose work does not prioritize life story and progress towards authors who better incorporate the life stories of rappers in their work.

Tayannah Lee McQuillar describes her book, *When Rap Music had a Conscience*, as the story of how those who grew to create hip-hop documented the world around them through their lyrics and activism.⁶ Her book, however, is more of a timeline of events that influenced rap music over a particular time period, rather than an exploration of the lives of creative rappers. For example, in speaking about Tupac Shakur, one of rap music's icons, she simply describes him as a “complex artist who defied categories in his music, his poetry, and on film.”⁷ There is no talk of the volatile upbringing as the child of a former Black Panther and crack addict or his

⁶ McQuillar, T (2007). *When Rap Music had a Conscience: the artists, organizations, and historic events that inspired and influenced the “Golden Age” of Hip-hop from 1987-1996*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, pg. xvi.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

passion for social change. There is only talk of how his music changed over time, and the change is described in less than two pages.

In his 2001 book *Can't Stop Won't Stop: a history of the hip-hop generation*, Jeff Chang, unlike McQuillar, explores the political and economic issues that led to the creation and eventual ascension of hip-hop, but he also adds a geopolitical dimension to his work, which is important for understanding how hip-hop artists came to be. He goes back as far as 1929 to show that the roots of hip-hop began with Robert Moses' plans of urban development of Manhattan at the expense of poor black and Latino communities who would be relegated to housing projects in the 1940s.⁸ In Brooklyn, the Marcy Houses (commonly referred to as the Marcy Projects) that became home to Jay-Z was constructed during Moses' time.⁹ From humbling inner-city and project beginnings, Chang documents how hip-hop expanded from the street corner to the corporate suite corner, and from a small voice of expression for some in impoverished ghettos to a powerful voice and vehicle of expression on the American and international landscape, but the life story of the rappers is not prominent in his work.

Nelson George's *Hip-hop America* provides more personal and historical insights into the evolution of hip-hop. He takes readers back to the 1950s and 1960s to draw similarities and contrasts between music icons of the Civil Rights Era such as Motown founder Berry Gordy and hip-hop pioneer record executive Russell Simmons. His book helps establish a continuum of hip-hop lyrics prior to the late 1970s. While Chang's work also documents hip-hop's history, George adds more of the personal experiences of rappers and those involved in hip-hop's expansion in relating the effects of crises such as the Crack Epidemic on the lives of those affected.

⁸ Chang, J. (2005). *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. New York: St. Marten's Press, p. 11.

⁹ New York Parks & Recreation Department. Retrieved from <http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/marcyplayground/history>

George also provides his readers with language that helps them understand the minds of rappers, but only at a surface level. For example, George ties much of the material excesses and misogyny expressed in rap music from the mid-1980s up to the mid-1990s to the economic plight experienced simultaneously and how many in poor working class communities either resisted or succumbed to the challenges before them. He argues that rampant poverty existed during this period, referred to by many as “The Crack Epidemic” and that “materialism replaced spirituality as the definer of life’s worth. An appreciation for life’s intangible pleasures, like child rearing and romantic love, took a beating in places where children became disposable and sex was commodified.” George contends that the trickle-down economics, corporate greed culture promoted under President Ronald Reagan did indeed trickle down to the streets but “stripped of its jingoistic patriotism and fake piety. The unfettered free market of crack generated millions and stoked a voracious appetite for ‘goods,’ not good.”¹⁰

George goes more deeply into the personal motivations of some of the rappers in his work but the voice of the rappers themselves is virtually unattended. George takes his readers on a journey into hip-hop’s history, but does not address the artists’ perceptions. He describes the albums, the themes, as well as the regions and reasons where and why hip-hop developed but the voice of the artists is generally missing until around the time they sign their record deals.

Marcus Reeves’ *Somebody Scream* takes readers closer to understanding the life story of the rapper. He focuses on aspects of their life story that defined the contours of their work. For example, he writes about the group N.W.A. or “Niggaz Wit’ Attitude,” as initiators of the gangsta rap era. He states that: “what N.W.A. planned was the shock and awe of hip-hop’s faithful with a fresh brand of reality rap; one that gave listeners an unfiltered, humorous, almost

¹⁰ Chang, 41.

cinematically exaggerated view of black urban life—all from the perspective of niggas, the ultimate ghetto dwellers.”¹¹ Reeves also explores aspects of their upbringing such as the occupations of the parents of rappers and the neighborhoods they grew up in but more is needed related to the life story of the rapper specifically.

The work of Tricia Rose adds a more sociopolitical context to the work of Reeves on the development of hip-hop in America. In Rose’s books *The Hip-Hop Wars* and *Black Noise*, readers learn not only about hip-hop history, but also how its history is inextricably interwoven within the American socio-political and socio-economic fabric. She refers to rap music as “a confusing and noisy element of contemporary American popular culture that continues to draw a great deal of attention to itself.” There are two main issues when one analyzes rap, according to Rose: rap’s role as an educational tool and rap as a tool for the expression of violent, misogynistic, drug promoting, and anti-white language.¹² Hip-hop’s dynamic ability to be both a tool for education as well as a tool for destruction, has led to continued debate in America on the influence and relevance of rap, complicated by the rappers themselves, according to Rose who writes that “if these debates about rap music are not confusing enough, rappers engage them in contradictory ways.”¹³

Rose’s analysis of contradictions in rap underscores the need to understand the life story of rappers. Her work takes rappers out of the vacuum and inserts them into a contextual American motif. She breaks down inconsistencies in hip-hop and uses the lyrics of rappers to accomplish that goal. One of her arguments is that rap music, like most other forms of music of the last 80 years, is inherently contradictory. On the one hand, she writes that the blues is

¹¹ Reeves, M. (2008). *Somebody Scream: Rap Music’s Rise to Prominence*. New York: Faber and Faber Inc., p. 94.

¹² Rose, T. (1996). *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. New England: Wesleyan University Press, p. 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

considered as a music form that critiqued racism. On the other hand, she writes that blues music contains “patriarchal and sexist ideas and presumptions.” British punk music, she continues, “offered a biting working-class critique of British culture and society in the 1970s, yet simultaneously perpetuated sexist ideas and social formations.”¹⁴ Rose expands on her theory of contradiction by going outside of the music industry in stating that feminists carved a powerful agenda for demanding women’s rights, yet “many women of color and working-class women have criticized leading white middle-class, feminist activists and thinkers for significant class and racial blind spots that have aided in the perpetuation of some inequalities as they attempted to abolish others.”¹⁵

Rose offers her analysis not to excuse hip-hop, but to put it in its proper historical and cultural context and help readers understand the lived experiences of rappers. She further contextualizes hip-hop by breaking down the lyrics of several popular rap songs and artists who have critiqued the American system of justice. While Rose’s work provides a depiction of the thoughts of rappers, her descriptions answer the question of the *what* of hip-hop; not the *how*, and most importantly for this dissertation, the *why*. Rose’s book provides historical accounts of issues such as the Crack Epidemic and the effects of Reaganomics on poorer communities that were summarized in certain rap songs but does not illuminate the personal experiences of rappers themselves.

Professor Karin Stanford’s article entitled “Keepin’ it Real in Hip Hop Politics: A Political Perspective of Tupac Shakur”, provides not only an analysis of his political upbringing but also an analysis of his lyrics and interviews. By doing so, she reveals more of the life story of the rapper. Tupac, for example, was referred to by many as a “gangsta rapper,” but Stanford’s work

¹⁴ Ibid., 104.

¹⁵ Ibid., 104.

on his life reveals a man who was a profound critic of the American political system.

Stanford writes: “Although he was murdered in a drive-by shooting at the early age of 25, the rapper-turned-actor was regarded as one of the most gifted hip hop lyricists. In life, Shakur was also well known for his charisma and warrior-like persona that challenged White supremacy, discrimination, and injustice.” From the age of 18 until his murder in 1996, Tupac “expressed the hopes, aspirations, worries, pain, suspicions, and experiences of young people living in disadvantaged communities”, according to Stanford.¹⁶

Ignoring Tupac’s political and revolutionary background makes it easy for him to be reduced to the title of a “gangsta rapper,” according to Stanford. For example, in October of 1993, Tupac was arrested in Atlanta, GA for shooting at two white policemen. She states that the media used the shooting incident as an example of yet another angry black gangsta rapper lashing out against authority.¹⁷ Few, according to Stanford, paid attention to the fact that the police did not identify themselves until *after* the shooting; that the officers were drunk; that they were allegedly harassing a black female motorist; and, by witness testimony, the officers were the aggressors. Eventually, the case was dismissed.¹⁸

Stanford’s work combines an analysis of Tupac’s political life, lyrics, and the conditions around him that created his political philosophy. True to the title of her article, however, Stanford only focuses on the political aspects of Tupac’s life, and not the pieces of Tupac’s personal life that led him to record some of the most revolutionary, uplifting, vile, violent, and misogynistic lyrics that hip-hop has ever witnessed.

Michael Eric Dyson’s book *Holler If You Hear Me: searching for Tupac Shakur* takes

¹⁶ Stanford, K. (2010). Keepin' It Real in Hip Hop Politics: A Political Perspective of Tupac Shakur. *Journal of Black Studies* 2011 42: 3, p. 3-4.

¹⁷ Ibid., 14.

¹⁸ Ibid., 15.

readers to a deeper analysis of Tupac by incorporating the socioeconomic, geopolitical, *and* the personal experiences of his life. Written five years after Tupac’s murder, Dyson asks two questions: “Who was Tupac and why does he matter so much to us?”¹⁹ Dyson focuses on the social and political context of Tupac’s life, which led to the development of his music. He starts before Tupac was born and explains how Tupac’s mother was both a member of the Black Panthers *and* a crack addict. He talks about Tupac’s mother being pregnant with him while in jail with famed Black Panther and godmother to Tupac, Assata Shakur.²⁰ He describes how Tupac grew up poor and was once homeless with only two outfits and a sheetless mattress when he moved to Baltimore. He recounts Tupac’s problems with law enforcement as early as high school when FBI agents consistently sought him out at school to inquire where members of the Black Panther Party could be found. Not meeting his birth father until lying in a hospital after the *first* time he was shot multiple times added to his sense of paranoia about his impending murder.²¹ Dyson writes about the constant battles Tupac had expressing and receiving love from women in his life starting with his own mother. He talks about a man carrying both the burden of being the son of a Black Panther and a thug poet who enjoyed all that capitalism had to offer. Lastly, he writes about Tupac’s deep passion as a well-read intellectual who had a “pedagogy of race [which] was equal parts Paulo Friere and John Dewey, based in a belief that morally literate citizens can help transform society.”²² Dyson accomplishes his extensive description of Tupac *before* he analyzes any of Tupac’s lyrics.

Dyson helps readers understand how Tupac’s upbringing led to some of the decisions he

¹⁹ Dyson, M.E. (2001). *Holler if You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, back cover.

²⁰ Creekmur, C. (2013, May 3). Hip-hop’s infatuation with Assata Shakur: It’s complicated. *The Grio*. Retrieved from <http://thegrio.com/2013/05/03/hip-hops-infatuation-with-assata-shakur/>.

²¹ Dyson., 52.

²² *Ibid.*, 55.

made in life and provides direction for how Jay-Z might be studied. The constant feelings of abandonment and betrayal by so many in his life, including his parents, led Tupac to “create brilliant art and to cry out for attention with his own brand of chaotic, self-destructive behavior.” Actress and high school best friend of Tupac, Jada Pinkett-Smith, revealed to Dyson that to his core, Tupac “didn’t feel he was shit.”²³ As one of his costars from the movie *Juice*, LaTanya Richardson stated: “I think that given a different time and a different space, he could have just gone off and acted and made music and been happy. If we had raised him.”²⁴

Dyson’s work shows that Tupac became an international star but was not raised in the right circumstances and rebelled against those circumstances. He describes Tupac’s upbringing in a way that helps us understand *why* he existed *in the way* that he did. His approach is significant because it reveals the backstory behind the artist, which can be lost in focusing solely on their lyrics, or select areas of their lives. This dissertation attempts to conduct a similar analysis of Jay-Z, who has not received the same type of scholarly attention as Tupac.²⁵ This dissertation will take into account the geopolitics of Jay-Z’s location, his upbringing, and his socioeconomic status that led him to drop out of high school, to sell drugs and to eventually sell records, which manifested from his desire to escape a world of poverty by any means necessary.

Methodology

Biography, as a form of historical inquiry will better help in understanding the *why* and the *how* of hip-hop artists. Indeed, in-depth biography or life history provides a unique way to understand the ways in which all forms of socioeconomic power affect the life outcomes and

²³ Ibid., 55.

²⁴ Ibid., 40-45.

²⁵ Stanford, 4. According to Stanford, “More than 20 books and hundreds of articles have examined Tupac’s complex life.”

perspectives of individuals. It is a form of scholarly endeavor that places an individual on center stage. Biography provides a unique lens to explore the emergence of new ideas, identify new forks in the road of history, to discover the ways in which individuals can balance the force of circumstance and terrains of freedom as they seek to make sense of the world.²⁶

Biography is useful not only as it reveals the ways in which individuals reflect and inform historical contexts, but also as it allows readers to explore the crossroads where human agency and social structures often meet, according to Finkelstein. Furthermore, Finkelstein writes that the use of biography has four other contributions to make in the study of history: 1) as a lens to explore new ideas; 2) as a window on social possibility; 3) as a way to analyze relationships between educational processes and social change; and 4) as a form of “mythic overhaul—a way to see through the inevitable over-determinacies of historical story-telling.”²⁷

In essence, biography can help readers understand the cultural complexities of an individual juxtaposed with a societal context—a concept that John Caughey develops in his work *Life History Methods, and Readings*. In it, he argues that “life history can help us understand the cultural dimensions of a topic...whether this involves media use, identity issues, or social justice concerns such as forms of oppression.” For Caughey, life history or historical biography has a “value and power in opening up our thinking, not only about the method itself and the specific issues we have focused on, but also about the cultural dimensions of the problems of life.”²⁸ The study of Jay-Z’s life can help readers understand why he “saw a fork in the road and went

²⁶ Finkelstein, B. (1998). Revealing human agency: the uses of biography in the study of educational history. From Kridel, C. (Ed.). *Writing Educational Biography: explorations in qualitative research*, (45-59). New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., p. 45.

²⁷ Finkelstein in Kridel, 46-47.

²⁸ Caughey, J. (2006). *Negotiating Cultures & Identities: Life History Issues, Methods, and Readings*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, pp. 91-92.

straight” as he says in his song aptly titled “Renegade.”²⁹ Moreover, Finkelstein states that biography serves as a reminder that the study of history is much more complicated than “our capacity to define and understand it.”³⁰ Hip-hop, as Jay-Z asserts in his book *Decoded*, is also more complicated than society’s attempt to define and understand it.³¹

The life of the rapper, like the life of any individual, is about intersections and forks in the road. Jay-Z’s life is composed of several intersections including intersections between poverty and power, present and absentee parents, racism and classism, and drug dealing as a youth and raising money for college scholarships as an adult. Biography fits for the study of Jay-Z because biography “enables education scholars to explore intersections between human agency and social structure.”³² A biographical study of Jay-Z has the capacity, as Finkelstein suggests, to reveal “the relative power of individuals to stabilize or transform the determinacies of cultural tradition, political arrangements, economic forms, social circumstances and educational processes into new social possibilities.”³³

In order to paint a more holistic picture of the life of Jay-Z, an array of primary and secondary sources will be utilized. Primary sources will include audio recordings, songs written by Jay-Z, his memoir *Decoded*, interviews with Jay-Z from others as well as those who knew and know him, original writings of Jay-Z, newspaper articles, photographs, and other video recordings such as concerts and press conferences. Secondary sources will include biographical works, commentaries and critiques about Jay-Z, songs written by others about Jay-Z, magazine

²⁹ Jay-Z. (2001) Renegade. On *Blueprint* [CD]. New York, New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings.

³⁰ Finkelstein in Kridel, 59.

³¹ Jay-Z, 55.

³² Finkelstein in Kridel, 46.

³³ *Ibid.*, 46.

and journal articles, critical reviews, and the array of documents that bear on his life. Attempts were made to get access to Jay-Z for a direct interview, but to no avail.

Lastly, Jay-Z's life was chosen for this dissertation because he has emerged as a leader in the world of hip-hop and beyond. One way to better understand diverse issues from a social movement to a music genre is to study its leaders. Leaders are the individuals that the participants of a movement or subculture have (usually) chosen to be an ambassador of their thoughts to the world. As such, leaders of a movement or subculture have more often than not presented more of their own thoughts out to the world and their life experiences are more likely to be well-documented by critics and supporters alike.

Limitations

Jay-Z is one of many rappers I could have chosen as the subject of this dissertation. A focus on an internationally known rapper such as Jay-Z provides only a *beginning* point in the development of a more comprehensive understanding of hip-hop artists who, as it happens, are diverse and differently situated. Before and since Jay-Z's arrival into the field of hip-hop, thousands of rappers have emerged across the globe with different languages, histories, and socio-economic experiences. Thus, the histories of rappers may evolve differently if, for example, they grew up in Senegal or France, Korea or Japan, in any number of Caribbean localities, or even another apartment in the Marcy projects of Brooklyn, where Jay-Z spent most of his childhood.

A second limitation is that Jay-Z is still alive. It is less complicated to write a biography about someone who is no longer living because, save for documents or film footage that may be unveiled after an individual's passing, their body of work or the changes in their lives are

complete. Writing about someone who still lives is a challenge because he or she can always add new ways of looking at aspects of their past. Though I have chosen to write about the life of Jay-Z from 1969-2004, I still find articles or hear interviews conducted after 2004 that shed light, or even outright contradict statements made about his life by others or himself that were said years ago. I also have to honestly scrutinize how much of Jay-Z's "livingness" may lead me to ignore features of his life that may be negative, hurtful to him, or incompletely understood by me.

A third limitation revolves around my own positioning within the universe of rap artists because I am also a rapper. Not only am I deeply committed to the development of rap forms that emphasize opportunity, social justice, political action, and non-violence, I have also been angered by the substance, perspectives, negativity, and violence embedded in the work of many rappers who, in my opinion, have succumbed to the pressure of corporate interests and emphasize violent, misogynistic, and intolerant lyrics in the corpus of their work. I admit to being discouraged, yet undeterred, by the relative difficulty of making a living as a rapper whose music does not contain misogynistic lyrics or lyrics that encourage the use of violence. It will therefore be important to stay aware of my own biases and dispositions that might color my interpretations of the life and work of Jay-Z.

A final limitation is that I have not interviewed Jay-Z. I have made several attempts to do so including telling him directly that he was the subject of my dissertation when I met him backstage at a concert but could not conduct an interview there or afterwards. I also attempted to interview his mother because I felt her perspectives on Jay-Z's upbringing would be more relevant to this biography than Jay-Z's words but I was also unsuccessful.

Chronology and Chapter Outline

I will examine Jay-Z's life in conjunction with events taking place within and outside of hip-hop. Chapter one (1969-1982) examines Jay-Z's first thirteen years of life. The traumatic experiences that Jay-Z experienced before his adolescent years affected his decisions well into adulthood. In chapter two (1983-1994), Jay-Z's teenage years are analyzed within a context of an America that was changing dramatically with the onset of crack cocaine and continued governmental policies of abandonment and benign neglect for inner city communities where hip-hop thrived. Chapter three (1995-2000) explores Jay-Z's ascension in hip-hop. As he grew in popularity, he had to learn to shed old ways of his past in order to fully embrace a new future in an industry that could make him a multimillionaire. Jay-Z straddles the fence during this time period, with potential inmate on one side of the coin and potential icon on the other side. Chapter four (2001-2004) chronicles the experiences that led Jay-Z to retire from hip-hop music. The chapter also examines the challenges to his personal growth due to unresolved issues from his childhood. The concluding chapter will briefly analyze aspects of Jay-Z's growth beyond 2004.

Chapter 1: prelude to a hustler (1969-1982)

*He arrived on the day Fred Hampton died
Civil Rights Movement dead, Black Power Movement alive
Black Arts Movement on the rise
But Jay was born into a home where music didn't reside
Left his granddad's home for a life in the projects
The first step to life that'd be hard to process
Discovered rap at a young age and started to shine
Did well in school but public schools were on the decline
A stellar student he could be when he wanted to be
But demons deep inside brought hostility
Crack on the rise poisoned his hood with crime
At age 11 his dad walked out for the last time
Momma worked too many jobs to keep an eye on Shawn
The street became his king, he became its pawn
Confused at a young age he liked rapping to beats
But to make money he chose to sell drugs on the streets*

S-dot. Young Hov. Jazzy. J-Hova. Hovito. Jigga. Young Vito. Just-the-facts. Jiggaman. Iceberg Slim. Lucky Lefty. Muhammad Hovi. Jay Guevara. Shawn D. Jay-Z. These are the names that Shawn Corey Carter used to describe himself throughout his first 44 years of life. From the pimp (Iceberg Slim) to the race rebel (“Muhammad Hovi” from boxing legend and activist Muhammad Ali) to the revolutionary (“Jay Guevara” from Che Guevara) to the mobster (“Young Vito” as in the young version of Vito Corleone from “The Godfather”), to the person with the weight of the world on his shoulders (“J-Hova” from Jehovah), the rapper known to the world as Jay-Z developed a plethora of personas to help him navigate the challenges that society placed before him, starting at a very young age.

Jay-Z's early years presented him with the types of contradictions and forks in the road that he would experience throughout his life. From the stable upbringing of his grandparents' home to his move to the tough Marcy projects, the chameleonesque qualities of Jay-Z emerged

out of necessity as the places and spaces he called home changed, often for the worse.³⁴ Before reaching the age of 14 years old, Jay-Z would lose his father to absenteeism, his schools to structural degradation, and his community to the onset of the Crack Epidemic. The discovery of hip-hop would help him find some solace in dealing with the challenges of his early life. He could not, however, engulf himself in hip-hop at first because the money made from drugs was needed to support his family as well as later provide the capital for him to launch his own record label. Forever pulled in opposite directions, Jay-Z would often have to make the choice to go neither right nor left, but straight through his obstacles to the best of his ability.

Jay-Z was born into a disenfranchised black American community and a greater American society in turmoil. Poorer communities were on fire in every sense of the word from the late 1960s to the late 1970s, and America overall was ablaze in its political, racial, and cultural spheres. Indeed, the day of Jay-Z's birth constitutes a powerful crucible in American history. He was born on December 4th, 1969, six years after the assassination of Civil Rights Movement leader Medgar Evers, five years after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, four years after the assassination of Malcolm X, and a year and a half after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Black Panthers' spokesman Fred Hampton was assassinated by the FBI in Chicago on the day of Jay-Z's birth.³⁵ Jay-Z was born into a society at war. Author Mark

³⁴ Ards, A. (2002). "Rhyme and Resist: Organizing the Hip Hop Generation." In Forman, M. and Neal, M. eds. (2011). *That's the Joint!: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, p. 312. Hip-hop music is generally accepted as starting in the mid-1970s, almost a decade after Jay-Z was born in 1969. According to Professor Angela Ards, hip-hop emerged during the 1970s as "black social movements quieted down, replaced by electoral politics." She states that "once the institutions that supported radical movements collapsed or turned their attention elsewhere, the seeds of hip-hop were left to germinate in American society at large—fed by its materialism, misogyny, and a new, more insidious kind of state violence." The changing American socioeconomic landscape was the backdrop that would change the direction of Jay-Z's life at a young age. Ards writes that the degradation of the South Bronx, for example, epitomized mid-1970s "urban blight the way Bull Connor's Birmingham epitomized American racism—and black and Latino youth in the [Bronx] made it difficult for society to pretend that it didn't see them."

³⁵ Beaumont, M. (2012). *Jay-Z: The King of America*. London: Omnibus Press, p. 4. Hampton was the chief of staff and spokesman for the militant Black Panther Party. He was in his apartment sleeping next to his pregnant girlfriend. He was drugged up on barbiturates by an FBI plant within the Black Panthers named William O'Neal.

Beaumont wrote that it “could be said that the seeds of 20th century rap music were sown in those dark bloody, early hours of December 4, 1969.”³⁶ Of Hampton’s assassination, Jay-Z would later write in his song “Murder to Excellence”:

*I arrived on the day Fred Hampton died
Real niggas just multiply.*³⁷

Jay-Z’s first 5 years of life were comfortable. He was the fourth and last child of Gloria Carter and Adnis Reeves, Jr., born into a “loving but strictly religious family.”³⁸ His brother’s name is Eric and his sister’s names are Andrea (known as “Annie”) and Michelle (known as “Mickey”). His family lived with his paternal grandparents on Lexington Avenue in Bedford-Stuyvesant (also known as Bedstuy), a subdivision of Brooklyn,³⁹ in a modest, three-story brick rowhouse along with extended family members.⁴⁰ Jay-Z’s maternal grandparents moved to Brooklyn from South Carolina in 1946.⁴¹ His paternal grandfather, Adnis Reeves, was a reverend at the Pentecostal Church of God In Christ and Ruby Reeves, who was a deaconess in the same church, was Reeves’ wife. Jay-Z’s father Adnis Junior (or AJ) and family grew up in a strict Christian household and spent most off time in church. His father sang in church.⁴² Adnis and Gloria Reeves were banned from playing popular music in Adnis’ parents’ home, but they still amassed a large collection of Motown, soul, R&B, and jazz records, which would have an

While still sleeping, he was shot twice in the head at point-blank range. At Hampton’s funeral, Reverend Jesse Jackson, Jr. stated that black people and decent people everywhere also bled. His guard Mark Clark was also killed.

³⁶ Ibid., 5.

³⁷ Carter, S., and West, K. (2010). *Murder to Excellence* [Performed by Jay-Z and Kanye West]. On *Watch the Throne* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records, Live Nation Records, and Def Jam Recordings.

³⁸ Beaumont, 5.

³⁹ Gordon, S.G. (2013). *Jay-Z: CEO of Hip-Hop*. Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, p. 6.

⁴⁰ Ahmad, F. (2012, April 21). *Jay Z Oprah 09 24 09 PART 1 + ringtone download*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sIL6ydufVLO>

⁴¹ Warren, T. (2012) “A Mother’s Blueprint: The Shawn Carter Scholarship Foundation” From *Perspectives in Philanthropy: Athletes and Entertainers Giving Back, Volume 9*. *Morganstanleyfa.com*, p. 12. Retrieved from http://www.morganstanleyfa.com/public/projectfiles/perspectives_in_philanthropy_volume_9/document.pdf

⁴² CREOLE B (2013, February 18). *Jay-Z on Howard Stern* [Video file]: Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HF9NGSdu-pM>

impact on Jay-Z's decision to pursue music as a career.⁴³ Jay-Z quipped that his parents were so serious about their record collection that they shared their children but did not share their records.⁴⁴



Jay-Z's sisters, Michelle and Andrea.⁴⁵



Jay-Z with older brother Eric.⁴⁶

⁴³ Beaumont, 5.

⁴⁴ CREOLE B. *Jay-Z on Howard Stern*.

⁴⁵ MacloimFlex (2015). "La Familia" lyrics. *Rapgenius.com*. Retrieved from <http://genius.com/1928585/Jay-z-la-familia/Like-my-mother-kids>

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*



Jay-Z's parents on their wedding day. The picture sits in Jay-Z's office⁴⁷

Jay-Z had an active life as a toddler inside and outside of his home. He attended church on a regular basis. At church he witnessed the “high-spirited drummers, passionate singers and congregation members beset with bouts of speaking in tongues or holy possession.” At home his family feasted on “cheap chicken...unaware it’d long since become the fast fuel of poverty.” Jay-Z also loved to play outside, when he was allowed to. For Jay-Z, playing outside afforded him the opportunity to escape his structured environment and escape into a different world by, for example, playing in an abandoned boat he and his friends discovered in his neighborhood⁴⁸, leading him to later write in his song “Do You Wanna Ride?”:

*As kids we would daydream, sittin on our steps
Pointin at cars like yeah that's our six⁴⁹
Hustlers, prophets, made our eyes stretch
So on some Dr. Spock shit, we STARTed our TREK.⁵⁰*

⁴⁷ Lewis, B. (2012, May 1). Jay-Z Tweets Out A Picture Of His Dad (PHOTOS). *Globalgrind.com*. Retrieved from <http://globalgrind.com/2012/05/01/jay-z-dad-parents-wedding-photo/>

⁴⁸ Beaumont, 5.

⁴⁹ “Six” is slang for a type of car with nice features.

⁵⁰ Carter, S. (2003). Do You Wanna Ride? [Performed by Jay-Z]. On *The Black Album* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records, Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rappenius.com/Jay-z-do-u-wanna-ride-lyrics>. Dr. Spock is a fictional character from the television show “Star Trek”, which ran on television from 1966-1969 and then in syndication for decades after its initial run.

At a young age, Jay-Z learned that he loved attention and the spotlight. At the age of four, His uncle gave him a 10-speed, two-wheeled bicycle. He taught himself how to ride it by putting his leg through the frame instead of over it, while most of his peers were still on training wheels. He paraded through Brooklyn to the acclaim of his neighbors who crowded around him, leading him to receive the first of one his many aliases—the “Bicycling Baby.” Jay-Z admitted that he loved the spotlight, saying that the bicycling experience was his “first feeling of being famous”⁵¹ since his church upbringing taught him to be humble and modest, and to exercise restraint instead of showing emotion.⁵²

Jay-Z’s family moved from the stable surroundings of his grandparents’ house to the Marcy projects in 1974 when Jay-Z was five years old. The Marcy projects consisted of “27, six-story buildings on 28.49-acres with 1,705 apartments housing some 4,286 residents.” Most if not all residents were low-income, as is the case for housing projects in general. The Marcy projects were built in 1949,⁵³ the same year Jay-Z’s father was born. Jay-Z lived with his parents and siblings in apartment 5C. He shared a room with his older brother Eric. Their apartment was second from the top floor of the building.

⁵¹ Greenburg, Z. (2011). *Empire State of Mind: How Jay-Z Went from Street Corner to Corner Office*. London: Penguin Books, p. 13.

⁵² Beaumont, 6.

⁵³ New York City Housing Authority. *Nyc.gov*. Retrieved from <http://www.nyc.gov/html/nycha/html/developments/bklynmarcy.shtml>



The Marcy projects⁵⁴

Jay-Z was assigned to P.S. 168 in Brooklyn for elementary school because of his geographic location.⁵⁵ Located at 110 Throop Avenue, P.S. 168 was a 10-minute walk from the Marcy projects. P.S. 168 was a massive 5-story brick building, built in 1912.⁵⁶ While not in school, Jay-Z participated in Little League baseball teams, and played football and basketball.⁵⁷ His sister Michele recalled that he was competitive in sports and that in basketball, he always returned to the courts to challenge someone who beat him the day before.⁵⁸ Jay-Z enjoyed relative security during the early years in Marcy, but as he grew in age however, “Marcy would show [him] its menace.”⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Welcome to Brooklyn. *Brooklyn.com*. Retrieved from <http://brooklyn.com/faqanswer-79.html>

⁵⁵ The location of Jay-Z’s elementary school was confirmed by Jay-Z’s 6th grade teacher, Renee Lowden. She noted that in Jay-Z’s book *Decoded* that Jay-Z said Lowden was his teacher in the 6th grade at P.S. 168 but she said that was one of the feeder schools into her school, P.S. 318.

⁵⁶ Brooklyn Visual Heritage Project Chart. Retrieved from <http://www.brooklynvisualheritage.org/ps-168>

⁵⁷ Gordon, 4-5.

⁵⁸ Hiphopdocumentaries (2013, January 10). *The Rise Of Jay-Z | Full Documentary*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owvrMvfsYUo>

⁵⁹ Jay-Z, 20.



P.S. 168.

Jay-Z learned that he had to be wary of his crime and drug-infested surroundings, where tragedy was omnipresent. He once witnessed a talented baseball player named Benny get chased through Marcy as he played with his friends. They followed him and by the time they caught up to him he was shot dead.⁶¹ Crime became more of a constant presence in his community.

Beaumont describes the Marcy projects in 1974 as a “warren of red brick incarceration—once you were in, you rarely got out.”⁶² Jay-Z described Marcy back in 1978 as “‘huge islands built mostly in the middle of nowhere, designed to warehouse lives...the truth of our lives was still invisible to the larger country. The rest of the country was freed of any obligation to claim us.’”⁶³

Jay-Z continues:

Marcy sat on top of the G train, which connects Brooklyn to Queens, but not the city. For Marcy kids, Manhattan is where your parents went to work, if they were lucky, and where we’d yellow-bus it with our elementary class on special trips. I’m from New York, but I didn’t know that at [age] nine. The street signs for Flushing,

⁶⁰ The New York Digital Library Digital Connections. *Public Schools - Brooklyn - P.S. 168*. Retrieved from http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchdetail.cfm?trg=1&strucID=422516&imageID=732696f&parent_id=667226&word=&snum=0&s=1¬word=&d=&c=&f=&k=0&sScope=&sLevel=&sLabel=&sort=&total=4808&num=140&imgs=20&pNum=&pos=159.

⁶¹ Beaumont, 10.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 7.

Marcy, Nostrand, and Myrtle avenues seemed like metal flags to me: Bed-Stuy was my country, Brooklyn my planet.⁶⁴

Jay-Z also described Marcy as a place where the presence of drugs was everywhere visible. He spoke about the treatment of heroin addicts when he wrote that “heroin was still heavy in the hood, so we would dare one another to push a leaning [heroin] nodder off a bench the way kids on farms tip sleeping cows.”⁶⁵ Jay-Z lived in a world surrounded by drugs and crime. *New York Times* writer Trymaine Lee described 1970s and 1980s Bedstuy as a place where heroin was rampant and then followed by crack cocaine, which “turned parents into drug addicts and many of their children to young gunners and drug runners.”⁶⁶ Famed singer Billy Joel probably gave the most famous critique of crime-ridden Bedstuy in 1980 when he wrote: “I’ve been stranded in the combat zone/I walked through Bedford-Stuy alone.”⁶⁷ Bedstuy was a place where a child needed serious guidance in order to navigate its rough terrain. For Jay-Z, his father was his guide.

Jay-Z’s father AJ was instrumental in helping Jay-Z survive his dangerous and complicated surroundings. In later interviews, Jay-Z often describes his father as his childhood hero. His father taught him how to play chess and basketball.⁶⁸ Jay-Z said that his father was “crazy for detail.” AJ walked him and his cousin B-High through Times Square to observe the “pimps, prostitutes, dealers, addicts, gangs, [and] all the shit from the seventies that other people saw in the blaxploitation⁶⁹ flicks.” At restaurants like Lindy’s in Manhattan, they ordered “big-ass steak fries” and observed people through the restaurant window.

⁶⁴ Jay-Z, 3-4.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁶ Behring, N. (2009, May 8). “A Merchant Watches as Bed-Stuy Gentrifies.” *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/09/nyregion/09metjournal.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Gordon, 16.

⁶⁹ Stewart, 211. Stewart states that these films were created by Hollywood magnates and were designed to increase struggling Hollywood revenues by bringing more African Americans to movie theaters. In short, the moviemakers

AJ tested the observational skills of Jay-Z and B-High by having them do things like guess a woman's dress size. It was as if AJ was attempting to grow a child with an anthropological lens or feed an inclination towards anthropology that he saw in his youngest son. AJ taught Jay-Z the importance of understanding nonverbal clues to better judge one's character. In addition to helping them understand and observe people, AJ also taught Jay-Z to understand his surroundings. Jay-Z not only had to know where places were located, but also what was in them: "which bodega sold laundry detergent and who only stocked candy and chips, which bodega was owned by Puerto Ricans and which one was run by Arabs, who taped pictures of themselves holding AKs to the Plexiglas where they kept the loose candy." Through this process, a young hustler could be seen brewing in Jay-Z—he was made to know where to go in order to get the things he wanted or needed from candy to laundry detergent. AJ also made Jay-Z take the lead when walking to different locations, even though he was the youngest of his siblings. His role as the leader while they walked forced Jay-Z to always know where he was going. He learned to walk fast because his father taught him that walking fast was a great way to lose people who may be following him. Jay-Z writes that the training his father gave him helped him navigate his surroundings, as well as his life:

He was teaching me to be confident and aware of my surroundings. There's no better survival skill you could teach a boy in the ghetto, and he did it demonstratively, not by sitting me down and saying, 'Yo, always look around at where you are,' but by showing me. Without necessarily meaning to, he taught me how to be an artist.⁷⁰

'tapped into the growing frustration in black communities about persistent poverty and lack of access to public resources, and then disseminated a perverse political message glorifying conspicuous consumption, gender exploitation, and illegal activities, such as drug dealing, as elements of a viable strategy for 'getting over on the man.'

⁷⁰ Ibid., 218.

When AJ was not showing Jay-Z how to observe the streets and life, he and his wife Gloria taught Jay-Z about life through their shared love of music. Music was important for the pre-adolescent Jay-Z. For the dedication of his book *Decoded*, Jay-Z wrote: “*To Gloria Carter and Adnis Reeves. Without your love and love for music none of this would be possible.*”⁷¹ Artists who could be heard blasting through their house included “The Commodores, Curtis Mayfield, Stevie Wonder, The Four Tops, Isaac Hayes, Marvin Gaye, The Temptations, and the Jackson 5.” Gloria and AJ kept “hundreds of LPs (long-playing records) in metal milk crates in their apartment. The crates were stacked one on top of another, all the way to the ceiling.” Jay-Z described his house as “the house around the neighborhood that everybody went to because we had all the newest records, and we just had super cool parents...music filled the house with emotion and joy and feeling.”⁷² B-High described going to Jay-Z's apartment as the “freedom” house because it was so much fun.⁷³

Jay-Z also loved to dance during his prepubescent years. His sister Michelle said that whenever the Jackson 5 song entitled “Enjoy Yourself” would play, Jay-Z would be the lead dancer and singer and spin around dancing with his sisters playing the role of backup dancers.⁷⁴ Not unlike Jackson 5 leader Michael Jackson, Jay-Z took the role of the leader in their dancing performances, showing that he was indeed listening to his father and being a leader in whatever he involved himself in. During these dance and party-filled

⁷¹ Jay-Z, 10.

⁷² Gordon, 5-6.

⁷³ Hiphopdocumentaries (2013, January 10). *The Rise Of Jay-Z | Full Documentary* [Video file]: Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owvrMvfsYUo>

⁷⁴ Ibid.

days, Jay-Z would sneak out of his bedroom in his pajamas to his parents' parties with their friends. He said he thought his life would be like that—fun and great forever.⁷⁵

Music was at the center of everything positive that Jay-Z experienced in his home. The music was not only great for dancing, but it was also inspirational and aspirational and blended with the politics of the time. The music of the 1970s served as an incubator for hip-hop music and culture that Jay-Z would soon discover. Reflecting on the music and political spirit of the 1970s, Jay-Z wrote:⁷⁶

It was kind of a natural move, really. The 1970s were a time when black art in general was being used as a tool for social change, whether it was in the poetry of people like the Last Poets or in the R&B of Marvin Gaye or Donny Hathaway or in movies like *Shaft*. And politics had a real cultural angle, too. The Black Panthers weren't just about revolution and Marxism, they were also about changing style and language. Jesse Jackson recited poems like 'I Am Somebody' to schoolchildren of my generation. Art and politics and culture were all mixed up together. So it was almost obligatory that any popular art include some kind of political message. Some early rap was explicitly political, like Afrika Bambaataa's Zulu Nation movement.⁷⁷

The music of the 1970s was the music that held Jay-Z's family together for the early years of his life. As an offshoot of the music of the 1970s, hip-hop was the product of Jay-Z's generation, and a powerful tool to amplify their voices. Since impoverished youth did not have the means to get access to instruments, much less pay for music lessons en masse, hip-hop became an easy way for youth to express themselves.

⁷⁵ CREOLE B (2013, February 18). *Jay-Z on Howard Stern* [Video file]: Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HF9NGSdu-pM>

⁷⁶ Stewart, 207. In the early 1970s, right before the birth of hip-hop music, Stewart states that some R&B songs began to express frustration with the lack of gains from the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Songs such as Marvin Gaye's 1971 songs 'Inner City Blues (Makes Me Wanna Holler)' and 'What's Going On?' are examples of this disappointment with the movements along with Mayfield's 'If There's a Hell Below We're All Gonna Go' (1970) and the Temptations 'You Make Your Own Heaven & Hell Right Here on Earth' (1970). The year 1975, just two years before the birth of hip-hop music, saw such songs produced as the Isley Brothers' 'Fight the Power,' a title which would become a classic hip-hop song by the rap group Public Enemy just 14 years later. Other songs of this year included the O'Jays 'Give the People the Power They Want.' Later songs that became profound political statements included James Brown's 'Say it Loud. I'm black and I'm proud.'

⁷⁷ Jay-Z, 219.

Jay-Z discovered hip-hop in the summer of 1978 in the midst of American political unrest, high youth unemployment, a New York and American recession, high drug community infiltration, and music ripe with political themes. In the Marcy projects one day, he came upon a group of youth in his community standing around and clapping while one person performed in the middle. The activity of people gathering around and having one person rap in the middle would today be called a cipher, but back then, it was just kids in a circle performing. What Jay-Z saw transformed his life forever:

It was just a circle of scrappy, ashy, skinny Brooklyn kids laughing and clapping their hands, their eyes trained on the center...I shouldered through the crowd toward the middle...it felt like gravity pulling me into that swirl of kids, no bullshit, like a planet pulled into orbit by a star.⁷⁸

The “kid” at the center of this “cipher” when Jay-Z arrived was called Slate and Jay-Z was captivated by his performance, which he said went for at least thirty minutes without interruption. In the cipher, he saw Slate “transformed, like the church ladies touched by the spirit, and everyone was mesmerized.” Slate rhymed about everything, according to Jay-Z; from how nice his clothes were to how he was the best rapper around in and outside of New York. Jay-Z had two thoughts upon seeing this performance: “*That’s some cool shit*” and “*I could do that.*” On that day Jay-Z the rapper (though he would adopt that name years later) was born.⁷⁹

Jay-Z, as he recalled, started writing rhymes the same night he saw Slate perform.⁸⁰ He wrote anywhere he could, whenever a rhyme came to his mind. During the day and late at night, he wrote rhymes, filling “up every blank space on every page.”⁸¹ His sister Michelle said that she

⁷⁸ Ibid., 3-4.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 4-5.

⁸⁰ Hulu (2010, December 24). Charlie Rose _ A Rebroadcast of an Hour With Jay-Z. Daily Motion. Retrieved from http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x120v7c_charlie-rose-a-rebroadcast-of-an-hour-with-jay-z_news. In an interview with Charlie Rose, Jay-Z said that he began writing rhymes the day *after* he heard Slate perform, not the same night.

⁸¹ Jay-Z, 5.

and her family heard Jay-Z banging on the table late at night when everyone was trying to sleep. His grandmother Hattie White said that he would take to the table with a fork and spoon and bang beats to his rhymes. Seeing Jay-Z's early passion for music, his mother bought him a machine that made musical beats. His sister joked that when her mother bought the beat machine for him, they wanted to kill her.⁸²

Jay-Z, even as a preteen, was protective and proud of his work. When a friend looked inside of his rhyme book and started reciting Jay-Z's rhymes at school the next day, Jay-Z wrote smaller so that no one else could steal his lyrics. He stopped at traffic lights to write lyrics down, even if his friends continued to walk on without him.⁸³ Jay-Z later stopped writing rhymes down because he was always on the move and did not have time to write his lyrics down. Because of his skills creating and memorizing rhymes in his head, he never kept a journal of his early writings,⁸⁴ but one set of his childhood lyrics reminded him that even back then he wanted to be the best rapper alive:

*I'm the king of hip-hop
Renewed like Reeboks
Key in the lock
Rhymes so provocative
As long as I live.*⁸⁵

Jay-Z also loved to test his skills by battling other rappers, which is when two rappers recite often pejorative lyrics back and forth and the crowd picks the winner. Jay-Z writes that in the late 1970s and early 1980s, rappers were into the music for the love and sport of it saying that "I look back now and it still amazes me how intense those moments were, back when there was

⁸² Hiphopdocumentaries (2013, January 10). *The Rise Of Jay-Z | Full Documentary*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owvrMvfsYUo>

⁸³ Jay-Z, 5.

⁸⁴ Ahmad, F. (2012, April 21). *Jay Z Oprah 09 24 09 PART 1 + ringtone download*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sIL6ydufVLO>

⁸⁵ Jay-Z, 21.

nothing at stake but your rep, your desire to be the best poet on the block.”⁸⁶ Jay-Z did not want to just be the best rapper on his block, however. He actually believed he had found his voice by finding hip-hop. All he says he was missing was a story to tell.⁸⁷

From 1978 to 1981, Jay-Z had a bird’s eye view of the growth of hip-hop. Early rappers such as Melle Mel and Run DMC were part of the hip-hop soundtrack of his young life. There were still “ciphers taking place in Marcy and beyond, but now instead of little boom boxes playing music, there were DJs bringing eight-foot tall speakers and subwoofers that would make the project windows shake, according to Jay-Z.⁸⁸ In 1981, Jay-Z began to see hip-hop acts on national television shows. He saw the group The Funky Four Plus One More perform their song “That’s the Joint” on Saturday Night Live, the Rock Steady Crew on ABC Nightly News, and the Sugar Hill Gang on Soul Train (a Saturday family tradition for the Carter family⁸⁹). Jay-Z recalls asking himself: “What are *they* doing on TV?” Jay-Z was surprised more and more by how he found hip-hop everywhere from boom boxes to new radio shows like Afrika Islam’s show “Zulu Beats.” The omnipresence of hip-hop made Jay-Z realize that hip-hop “was gonna get bigger before it went away. Way bigger.”⁹⁰

As Jay-Z’s love for hip hop grew, his personal life began to fall apart. Jay-Z’s father left their home when Jay-Z was nine years old, and his parents divorced completely by the time Jay-Z turned 11.⁹¹ After the divorce of his parents, Jay-Z would not see his father for the rest of his childhood years and most of his adult life.

The split of his parents was a result of personal choices made in response to the

⁸⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 7

⁸⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁸⁹ Gordon, 8.

⁹⁰ Jay-Z., 8.

⁹¹ Ibid., 202.

neighborhood violence and drugs that ravaged their community. In 1980, Jay-Z's Uncle Ray—his father's younger brother—was murdered. Jay-Z writes that people knew who the killer was, but nothing was ever done about it. Inaction on the part of the police as well as a community that did not come forward to name the killer led to tension in Jay-Z's house. AJ became obsessed with finding his brother's killer and grabbed his gun whenever he heard his brother's killer was spotted. AJ's vengeful obsessions turned him to alcohol and heroin addiction and to, in essence, “lose his soul”, according to Jay-Z.⁹²

Jay-Z was fatherless (later calling himself a “half-orphan”⁹³) by age 11 and felt as though the weight of the world was on his shoulders. He also thought for a time that he was to blame for his parent's divorce as no official reason was given to him. Jay-Z was the youngest of his siblings, but felt responsible for all of their wellbeing. He told his mother: “Don't worry, when I get big, I'm going to take care of this” because he felt as though he had to step up.⁹⁴ He tried to manage his self-imposed burden, but he was torn apart inside. As he was discovering hip-hop, it was almost as if he was losing himself. There was one place where Jay-Z would find peace and also further develop his love of words—the classroom of his sixth grade teacher Rene Rosenblum-Lowden.

For middle school, Jay-Z attended Intermediate School 318 Eugenio Maria de Hostos, located at 101 Walton Street in Brooklyn. The school building was less than a 10-minute walk

⁹² Winfrey, O. (October, 2009). Oprah Talks to Jay-Z. *O Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.oprah.com/omagazine/Oprah-Interviews-Jay-Z-October-2009-Issue-of-O-Magazine>

⁹³ Carter, S. (2008). Brooklyn go Hard [performed by Jay-z]. On *Notorious* [CD]. New York: *Bad Boy Records*. Retrieved from <http://rappenius.com/Jay-z-brooklyn-go-hard-lyrics>.

⁹⁴ Winfrey, O. (October, 2009). Oprah Talks to Jay-Z. *O Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.oprah.com/omagazine/Oprah-Interviews-Jay-Z-October-2009-Issue-of-O-Magazine>



P.S. 318.⁹⁵

from his apartment in the Marcy projects. Lowden would have a transformative effect on his life.

In an interview with *Forbes Magazine*, Jay-Z describes his experience at P.S. 318 and with Ms.

Lowden:

Our classrooms were flooded. It was very difficult for teachers to give you one-on-one attention. And there was this one sixth-grade teacher named Miss Lowden. She must have seen something in me, and she gave me this attention and this love for words. It's funny how it works, just a little bit of attention. She also took us on a field trip to her house, which opened me up to the world. My neighborhood had been my world. It's the only thing I had seen. I saw a whole different world that day, and my imagination grew from there. I wanted that. I aspired to have that. The small things. She had an ice thing on her refrigerator. You know, you push it and the ice and the water comes down. I was really amazed by that. I was like, 'I want one of those.' It's true.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ New York City Department of Education. I.S. 318 Eugenio Maria De Hostos. Retrieved from <http://schools.nyc.gov/schoolportals/14/k318/default.htm>

⁹⁶ Upbin, B. (2010, September 23). Jay-Z, Buffett and Forbes on Success and Giving Back. *Forbes Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/forbes/2010/1011/rich-list-10-omaha-warren-buffett-jay-z-steve-forbes-summit-interview.html>



Renee Rosenblum-Lowden.⁹⁷

I interviewed Ms. Lowden for this dissertation. She said that she served as a teacher in Brooklyn from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s. She witnessed the challenges impoverished youth like Jay-Z faced as their communities deteriorated around them.⁹⁸ She said that the longer she taught, the worse the drug problem became for her students. When asked what type of world surrounded Jay-Z and his peers, her top three responses were “drugs, drugs, and drugs.”⁹⁹ Students from the Marcy projects in her classroom spoke about hearing gun shots on a daily and nightly basis in the crime and drug infested streets of Brooklyn, to such an extent that her students' ability to sleep was disturbed. Lowden often felt compelled to let students catch up on sleep in her class.

Violence was omnipresent in school and in the poorer communities of Brooklyn, according to Lowden. She revealed several experiences where she witnessed violence or its

⁹⁷ University of Maryland College of Education (2003, March 6). Author/Educator Renee Rosenblum-Lowden Offers March 19 Presentation on Classroom Management Strategies. Retrieved from <http://www.education.umd.edu/news/news2003/rosenblumLowden.wnr.html>

⁹⁸ Lowden granted me permission to be interviewed for the purpose of this dissertation and spoke more deeply to the challenges Jay-Z and his peers faced as children in Brooklyn in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

⁹⁹ Lowden's comments on drugs reminded me of an incident recounted in a spontaneous conversation at our children's playground by another former Brooklyn resident who lived there during Jay-Z's youth. He stated that at recess, they had to stretch their hands out until their fingers touched and walk across the playground and pick up any drug paraphernalia that was in their arm's length.

consequences inside and outside of school. Lowden said that Jay-Z and his fellow classmates observed fights outside the school on every corner. Inside the school, she said there were at least “four fights a day.” Lowden also recalled that there was little respect for some of the teaching staff and that she saw chairs get thrown at teachers. Inside her classroom, however, she experienced the best and worst of the world of her students, especially Jay-Z.

Lowden did have an oversized classroom, as Jay-Z claimed. She had 32 students in her classroom with Jay-Z and no teaching assistant. Almost every student in her class came from a single parent household. She recalls some students in her 6th grade classes having pagers to alert them of pending drug purchases. She recalls a student expressing pride because he was making \$2 an hour working at a shoe store. Another student boasted that he was making \$50 an hour selling drugs so making \$2 an hour was worthless. Selling drugs was a badge of honor for many students as well as a lucrative, though illegal form of working. She said that the constant violence students saw made them feel as if they needed to always be tough, which made them feel powerful. She also said that the “kids used to tease each other for being on welfare but most of them were on welfare.”

Parents, along with their students, also felt disempowered. Their sense of powerlessness derived in part because, according to Lowden (and confirming Jay-Z’s thoughts about his community), her school and many others like hers were abandoned by the New York City Board of Education (BOE). She said that the BOE had a policy of benign neglect, similar to the policies taking place at the presidential level under Ronald Reagan as it related to inner city communities. She recalled having to illegally photocopy books because they did not have enough for every student. She recounted how the school could not hire a female physical education teacher so the male teacher often went into the girl’s locker room for supervision. When parents complained,

no changes were made. Lowden holds firmly to her belief that the experiences of the parents and students led them to have a profound “lack of hope.”

Lowden took it upon herself to help bring hope to Jay-Z and his classmates. She believed that it was easy for students to feel abandoned or disrespected, especially by black teachers. Though most of the students were black and Puerto Rican, most of the teachers were white but the black students were really upset when they had black teachers who they did not feel were of high quality. She said the students wanted better from their black teachers. These same students, according to Lowden, also expressed frustration when black people left their communities and never came back. Lowden was pressured by some of her colleagues to teach in a more positive environment, but she felt compelled to stay. She attempted to instill hope and extract the potential for greatness she saw in all of her students, not just Jay-Z. Classroom activities included teaching her students to code-switch their language so that they would learn to not use slang outside of their social circles, which is a lesson Jay-Z would adopt as he grew as a businessman.

Lowden emphasized learning vocabulary. She put sentences on the board with words she knew the class was not familiar with, which forced the students to have to look up the words. For example she would ask: “What does a thespian do?” or “Do you like your teachers to be loquacious?” She said that they really enjoyed learning the new words but they did not realize that they were developing dictionary skills at the same time. Lowden also stressed reading. She did have them read Greek mythology, and she said she may have taught *Romeo & Juliet* but did not fully remember. She also assigned the book *My Darling, My Hamburger*, a love story by Paul Zindel, which was published in 1969, the year of Jay-Z's birth.

Lowden gave poetic writing assignments to her students as well. She was amazed that

“kids who weren’t that bright” were writing incredible poetry and then she realized that they were writing actual rap lyrics. She said that she thought students were getting help at home so she decided to give them an in-class assignment and that is when she confirmed that they were writing their own works of poetry—they were indeed rapping. “It’s the most brilliant art form”; Lowden stated about hip-hop after she saw how it inspired her students. Even non-readers were doing impressive work. It was still 1980 and hip-hop had not yet taken off, but Lowden was indeed impressed by their poetic ability.

Lowden recalled that the field trip Jay-Z recounts in interviews was a trip to the New York Transit Museum in Brooklyn Heights, which was where she lived. Lowden said in her apartment complex (she did not live in a brownstone as Jay-Z had suggested) she had a beautiful promenade where you could see a great view of New York. There were over 30 students on the trip, including Jay-Z. She said the students bragged about how they were going to “trash” her apartment once they got there but upon entry, it was a different story. She said the level of politeness the students demonstrated was exceptional. They tiptoed around her rug, afraid to step on it and get it dirty. She said that Jay-Z did not understand why she brought them there but he was fixated on the ice and water dispenser on her refrigerator door. He was so impressed by it that he asked if he could have some ice and water. The visit to Lowden’s home opened Jay-Z’s eyes to new possibilities as he stated in the *Forbes* interview.¹⁰⁰ Lowden felt that her students needed to have different experiences in order to expand what they thought was possible for their lives and that “the apartment was intimidating because it was different.”

Lowden recalls Jay-Z as a “sweet, skinny kid” who was “needy” and “often away” as in not always present in class. In retrospect she realized that she taught him around the same time

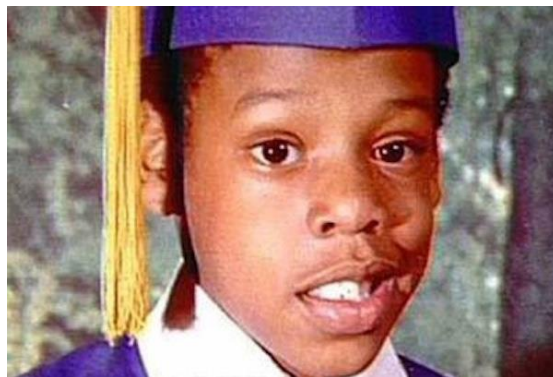
¹⁰⁰ Upbin, 2010.

Jay-Z's father left him. She said that Jay-Z was bright and his test scores were the highest in his entire class. She told him that he could excel if he agreed "to work his butt off." She still believes that "he did not realize how bright he was" and that she did not "remember one bad thing about him."

Jay-Z would probably disagree with the statement about him not realizing how bright he was. In *Decoded*, he says that school was just not difficult at all:

School was always easy for me; I never once remember feeling challenged. I have a photographic memory, so if I glanced at something once, I could recall it for a test. I was reading on a twelfth-grade level in the sixth, I could do math in my head, but I had no interest in sitting in a classroom all day.¹⁰¹

Jay-Z appears however to contradict himself because earlier in the book he said he started to realize he was smart *after* he received those reading test scores. He does, however, explain why he (and the other students) felt so uncomfortable in Lowden's apartment. It was at her apartment that he realized that he was poor. Before the apartment visit, he thought the way he lived was just the way it was for everyone.¹⁰²



*Jay-Z in middle school.*¹⁰³

Jay-Z's experience with Lowden was one of the few bright spots in his life during the

¹⁰¹ Jay-Z, 190.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 218.

¹⁰³ Lewis, J. (2012, May 21). Photos of Celebrities in Their Graduation Caps and Gowns. Retrieved from <http://flavorwire.com/291645/photos-of-celebrities-in-their-graduation-caps-and-gowns>

early 1980s. She, unfortunately for Jay-Z, would also leave his life as she left the school for a 5-year sabbatical after teaching his 6th grade class. Upon her return, she found a school where the founding principal, who handpicked Lowden and all of the original teachers, was forced out and many of the male teachers were miserable, having just returned from the Vietnam War and upset about what they had not accomplished in life. The environment was toxic and so she went to another school.

Lowden became emotional when asked what became of some of her students. She recalled that some students did manage to survive the turbulent environment of their Brooklyn community, but others were not so fortunate. She spoke about one student who killed a Macy's deliveryman and another student who was murdered, which almost brought her to tears during the interview. She remembers holding him in her arms. She said that a few of her students were indeed dead from violence.

Jay-Z spoke to Dr. Michael Eric Dyson via phone in 2013 to a class at Georgetown University where I was present. Jay-Z echoed the profound sense of hopelessness that Lowden spoke of among his peers. He recalled his mother telling him he could be anything, but the more he grew to understand the realities of crime and despair in Brooklyn, her words became hollow and seemed more like a cliché.¹⁰⁴ When asked about Jay-Z's life chances, Lowden said to "just look where he came from." Looking at the physical environment plus the personal loss he had to deal with, it may be easier to understand how as a boy he went from testing on a 12th grade level in the 6th grade to withdrawing mentally and physically from school after his uncle was killed, his father left, and his mother had to work multiple jobs to support her four children. In his 2003 song "December 4th" he spoke about the pain and loneliness he experienced:

I ain't perfect, I care

¹⁰⁴ Interview, April 2013.

*But I felt worthless cause my shirts wasn't matching my gear
Now I'm just scratching the surface cause what's buried under there
Was a kid torn apart once his pop disappeared
I went to school, got good grades, could behave when I wanted
But I had demons deep inside that would raise when confronted
Now all the teachers couldn't reach me
And my momma couldn't beat me
Hard enough to match the pain of my pops not seeing me, so
With that disdain in my membrane
Got on my pimp game
'Fuck the world,' my defense came.¹⁰⁵*

Jay-Z explained himself to talk show host Oprah Winfrey regarding his changing attitude after his father left:

When you're growing up, your dad is your superhero...Once you've let yourself fall that in love with someone, once you put him on such a high pedestal and he lets you down, you never want to experience that pain again. So I remember just being really quiet and really cold. Never wanting to let myself get close to someone like that again...I carried that feeling throughout my life.¹⁰⁶

In one of Jay-Z's more personal songs relating to his father's absence entitled "Where have you been?" he writes:

Jay-Z's sister Michelle said it was difficult for Jay-Z once their father left. She recounted in an interview that it was easier for her mother to raise the girls since she was a woman but she felt Jay-Z needed a male presence¹⁰⁷—a presence, which could not be filled by his older brother Eric who also turned to drug abuse like their father. In a seeming attempt to fill the hole left in his soul in the shape of his father, Jay-Z began to seek out mentors to help him navigate the potholes appearing on the often-detoured road that was his life.

Jay-Z documents the feelings of anger and withdrawal from school that he experienced

¹⁰⁵ Carter, S. (2003). December 4th [performed by Jay-Z]. On *The Black Album* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rapgenius.com/Jay-z-december-4th-lyrics>

¹⁰⁶ Winfrey, O. (October, 2009). Oprah Talks to Jay-Z. *O Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.oprah.com/omagazine/Oprah-Interviews-Jay-Z-October-2009-Issue-of-O-Magazine>

¹⁰⁷ HipHopdocumentaries (2013, January 10). *The Rise Of Jay-Z | Full Documentary*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owvrMvfsYUo>

after the departure of his father around 1980 in many of his later songs. There existed, however, another player in his decline in the interest of schools and withdrawal from mainstream society—the schools themselves. It seems as though after his sixth grade experience, his attitude towards school grew more pessimistic. Jay-Z did express an interest in learning in the sixth grade, but as he got older, he felt more and more that school was worthless so he had to figure out what he was going to do with his life. Was he to surrender and die as some of his own teachers predicted? It seemed that he used doubters to fuel him to succeed so that he would *not* be a failure or surrender. Part of the chorus of the song “So Ambitious” says: “The motivation for me is them telling me what I could not be.” Jay-Z said he simply refused to “surrender to a world that hated us”¹⁰⁸ and rebelled against circumstances by any means necessary. Jay-Z, like many other youth in his community, would make the decision to sell drugs as a means to reach economic stability.

¹⁰⁸ Jay-Z, 75.

Chapter 2: The evolution of a hustler in search of community, 1983-1994

*Life shattered, blood splattered on project walls
Father gone, mother longs to once again stand tall
But as she tries to stand a son feels abandoned
Cast out on the streets feelin stuck and stranded
Respect demanded, can't be a sucka on the streets
Predators on every corner just preyin' to eat
When you might become prey there's no time to pray
So Jay became a predator hustling yay¹⁰⁹
Found a family in the hustlers sellin' their drugs
Only love came from the hugs of thugs
He nearly died on the streets but never felt more alive
Until he almost went to prison for the rest of his life
Started seeing that the streets was a no-win war
Life wasn't over, wanted so much more
So he finally decides to step through raps door
And find new life through rap, a brighter future in store*

Jay-Z entered his adolescent years as what he called a “half orphan” because his mother never aborted him but since his father abandoned him, Jay-Z raps that his “poppa sorta did” abort him.¹¹⁰ His now broken and impoverished family represented the stereotypical image of the welfare family portrayed during the 1980s presidential administration of Ronald Reagan.¹¹¹ No more watching and dancing to *Soul Train* on weekend mornings cleaning the house as a family. No more watching sports with his father or playing basketball with him and his brother in the living room.¹¹² No more neighborhood parties at his apartment. No fatherly love and no more sense of protection.

¹⁰⁹ “Yay” is slang for cocaine.

¹¹⁰ Carter, S. (2008). Brooklyn go Hard [performed by Jay-z]. On *Notorious* [CD]. New York: *Bad Boy Records*.

¹¹¹ Stanford, 11. Stanford writes that Reagan cut education funding, made attaining public assistance more difficult, created more tax cuts for the rich, and maligned the character of the African American community. The discussion of welfare alone turned from being a “tool to support families in need to viewing its recipients as dependent, lazy, and looking for handouts.” The image of the welfare recipient was viewed as a poor black woman with no father in the home having multiple children in order to “pimp” the system.

¹¹² Jay-Z, 140.

Without the protection of a stable family unit or strong mentoring network, Jay-Z was cast adrift into a drug heavy, crime infested society ready to school him on the harsh realities of life. He was abandoned to live in a survival of the fittest, user's world where everyone wanted something at the expense of something...or someone else. From the shore of the stability of his family, it was now sink or swim, sell or be sold to, and kill or be killed, physically or metaphorically.

The absence of a familial safety net clouded Jay-Z's ability to see what possibilities a more sheltered life could afford him. Could he be a professional athlete? By his teenage years, he had not developed the requisite skillset to be an athlete. Could he be a doctor or a lawyer? He said that he never saw anyone rise to the heights of a college-educated profession besides teaching. If his fellow Marcy residents became legally successful, he never knew because he claimed they never came back to show him what was possible. Could he work a traditional job at McDonald's or elsewhere? He saw a traditional 9-5 job as surrender to a society that hated him and his community so his attitude was "Fuck waiting for the city to pass out summer jobs" since before he became a teenager, "everyone [he] knew had pocket money. And better."¹¹³ Though he spent his first five years of life in a pastor's home, by his teenage years he thought churches were "full of fake prophets and money-snatching preachers"¹¹⁴ so he wanted no part of church life. Jay-Z saw only two ways to become successful based on the role models who were left to idolize in his broken neighborhood: hustle drugs or hustle hip-hop. He believed there were simply no other options for him.

From 1983-1994, Jay-Z struggled to create meaning and reconcile an identity for himself. Absent of loving teachers like his junior high school teacher Renee Lowden, Jay-Z no longer saw

¹¹³ Jay-Z, 13.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 213.

an interest in school. Living in essence on the streets by the time he turned 13, Jay-Z adopted a “by any means necessary” mentality in order to survive his surroundings. His new mindset of survival at all costs transformed Jay-Z from the high achieving middle school student to a hustler who dropped out of high school in the pursuit of selling drugs to obtain riches and provide for his family. Jay-Z’s experiences from 1983 to 1994 had a profound impact on his life that he felt compelled to share with the world:

The feelings I had during that part of my life were burned into me like a brand. It was life during wartime. I lost people I loved, was betrayed by people I trusted, felt the breeze of bullets flying by my head. I saw crack addiction destroy families—it almost destroyed mine—but I sold it, too. I stood on corners far from home in the middle of the night serving crack fiends and then balled ridiculously in Vegas; I went dead broke and got hood rich on those streets. I hated it. I was addicted to it. It nearly killed me. But no matter what, it is the place where I learned not just who I was, but who we were, who all of us are. It was the site of my moral education, as strange as that may sound. It’s my core story and just like you, just like anyone, that core story is the one I have to tell. I was part of a generation of kids who saw something special about what it means to be human—something bloody and dramatic and scandalous that happened right here in America.¹¹⁵

Jay-Z moved further away from school and deeper into the streets as the 1980s progressed and he entered high school. He had no interest in school because he did not feel challenged, and he was still torn from his father’s abandonment, as he rapped about in his song “December 4th”. Furthermore, his high school was in a shambles and representative of the decay many inner city neighborhoods experienced in the diminishing quality of not only their education (which was also a problem in suburban areas),¹¹⁶ but the infrastructure that provided that education as well.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 18.

¹¹⁶ Garner, D.P., chairman, (1983, April). *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. The National Commission on Excellence in Education. Across America there was a noted decline in the quality of American education. A 1983 report entitled “A Nation at Risk” written by the National Commission on Excellence in Education summarized the educational crisis in America when it wrote: “We report to the American people that...the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments.”

Jay-Z attended George Westinghouse Career and Technical Education High School. He entered high school in 1983 but Westinghouse was the second high school he attended after his first high school, The Eli Whitney Vocational High School, gradually shut down between the years of 1986 to 1988, adding yet another complication in Jay-Z's quest for stability. A vocational school, Whitney High School was shut down due to over a decade of "waning attendance, failing grades and violence in its halls and classrooms."¹¹⁷ Westinghouse did not appear to be much better. According to Salvador Contes, a classmate of Jay-Z's at Westinghouse and later teacher there after graduating in 1988 (a year after Jay-Z would have graduated), his school was chaotic and violent. Contes said that going to the bathroom alone meant risking one's life... "you went into the boys' bathroom, there were no lights. You'd walk in there, pitch dark, and you knew things were going on in the bathroom, and you wouldn't have known who did it...so you did your best to hold it."¹¹⁸



George Westinghouse High School.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Rangel, J. (1986, March 6). A troubled high school in Brooklyn will close. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/03/06/nyregion/a-troubled-high-school-in-brooklyn-will-close.html>.

¹¹⁸ Greenburg, 19.

¹¹⁹ Morris, Montrose (2012, January 10). Building of the Day: 285 Jay Street. Retrieved from <http://www.brownstoner.com/blog/2012/01/building-of-the-day-285-jay-street/>.

Jay-Z also lost interest in school because he believed that his teachers did not believe in him. He found the streets more appealing than the classroom. Deep cuts to afterschool program budgets and the lack of youth employment opportunities from the 1970s-1980s¹²⁰ led many youth of Jay-Z's generation to pursue athletics or music as a legal means of success, or turn to illegal means of earning money through selling drugs and crack cocaine more specifically, which replaced heroin as the drug of choice for his generation.¹²¹

Jay-Z lived in a community held hostage by drugs and crime. Crack was so ubiquitous and destructive that it became the subject of numerous hip-hop songs. Many rappers including Jay-Z believed that the Reagan administration was behind the proliferation of crack in their communities. Rappers were not alone in their suspicions about President Reagan and the crack explosion.¹²² American politicians such as then Senator John Kerry explored the Reagan

¹²⁰ Buck, R. (1980, September 9). How am I Doing? An in-depth look at Mayor Koch's Record. New York Magazine. Retrieved from <https://books.google.com/books?id=u-UCAAAMBAJ&pg=PA18&lpg=PA18&dq=1980s+brooklyn+budget+cuts+after+school+jobs&source=bl&ots=ZkUWyt8k23&sig=mEse6Gk0 fsPishMvFcaA1Iyws8&hl=en&sa=X&ei=buo-VYz9DLT-sATomoDoBg&ved=0CE0Q6AEwCA#v=onepage&q&f=false>

¹²¹ Kerr, P. (1986, September 13). Growth in heroin use ending as city users turn to crack. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/09/13/nyregion/growth-in-heroin-use-ending-as-city-users-turn-to-crack.html?pagewanted=1>. Several factors led to crack surpassing heroin as the most popular street drug, but one of the main reasons crack surpassed heroin was because it could be smoked instead of injected intravenously. Sharing needles to inject heroin increased the cases of AIDS across America, thus cocaine was seen in one regard as a safer drug. Inner city impoverished communities across America became hostage to not only addiction to crack cocaine, but the increased levels of violence that came along with selling the drug.

¹²² Sabato, L. (1998). The Iran-Contra Affair—1986-1987. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/clinton/frenzy/iran.htm>. Though crack cocaine primarily penetrated inner city communities, cocaine does not grow in those communities. According to Sabato, a 1987 Associated Press (AP) article reported that the Reagan administration was linked to drug trafficking during the Iran-Contra affair, when senior “Reagan administration officials secretly facilitated the sale of weapons to Iran, the subject of an arms embargo.” Based on this, one may see the proliferation of crack cocaine in America as a part of the United States geopolitical interests. Some U.S. officials also hoped that the arms sales would secure the release of hostages and allow U.S. intelligence agencies to fund the Nicaraguan Contras.” Then Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North was a member of the National Security Council and helped create this plan. The problem was that, under the Boland Amendment, Congress was prohibited to further fund the Contras, who were the so-called anti-communist rebels in Nicaragua, thus came the need to bring Iran into the picture.

administration's connection to crack cocaine.¹²³ New York Senator Chuck Schumer recounted in 1984 that “crack was headed east across the United States like a Mack truck out of control, and it slammed New York hard because we just didn't see the warning signs.”¹²⁴

Jay-Z writes that “No one hired a skywriter and announced crack's arrival in the early 1980s. But when it landed in your hood, it was a total takeover. Sudden and complete. Like losing your man to gunshots. Or your father walking out the door for good. It was an irreversible new reality.”¹²⁵ Cocaine was well-known in its powdered form primarily as a drug for recreational use at private parties, according to Jay-Z. The hardened form of cocaine called crack was less expensive and easier to access. Jay-Z recalled that crack users or “crackheads” smoked anywhere—playgrounds, hallways, or train stations. No place was off limits. The “crackheads” were “former neighbors, ‘aunts’ and ‘uncles,’ but once they started smoking, they were simply crack addicts, the lowest on the food chain in the jungle, worse than prostitutes and almost as bad as snitches.”¹²⁶

Crack was different from other drugs because it provided an immediate high but the high did not last as long as drugs like heroin. After approximately 15 minutes, the high disappeared, according to photographer Eugene Richards, who documented his experiences living in crack-infested communities in photos in his book *Cocaine True, Cocaine Blue*. Richards wrote that addiction became so strong that parents smoked in front of their own children. He says that

¹²³ Grim, R. (2009, June 21). Kerry: CIA Lied About Contra Contra-Cocaine Connections. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/05/21/kerry-cia-lied-about-contra_n_206423.html. According to Grimm, the role of the CIA and the Reagan administration was further exposed after an investigation by then Massachusetts Senator John Kerry who concluded that members of the CIA were not honest in their role in drug trafficking. Members of the CIA such as Alan Fiers, Jr. (head of the CIA's Central American Task Force) and Duane Clarridge (chief of CIA Contra support operations) were indicted for their actions but later pardoned. Fiers, Jr. was pardoned by President Bush in 1992.

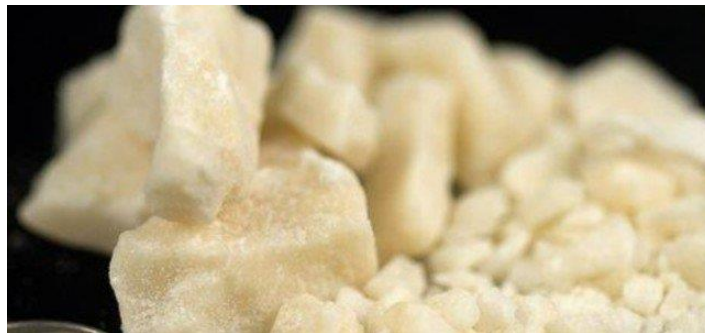
¹²⁴ The Crack Epidemic, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crack_epidemic

¹²⁵ Jay-Z, 12.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 12-13.

addicts were also known to “chicken out” which is when people could seem completely normal but in the next instant drop to the ground and start licking the floor in an attempt to lick up any crack that they thought spilled. From Philadelphia to New York, Richards recounted horrific experiences with crack¹²⁷:

A couple times, we were tempted to call the police, like when we once saw a drug counselor scoring drugs. A lot of times people would laugh at the police when they’d bust somebody because they knew they would be back on the street before the cop finished his shift. But in Philadelphia, it was very tenuous, working on the streets and with the police. At one point, I was constantly finding dead people. In doorways, on the streets, in cars. Without exaggeration — you’d just come across a car, and there’d be someone dead in it.¹²⁸



Crack cocaine.¹²⁹

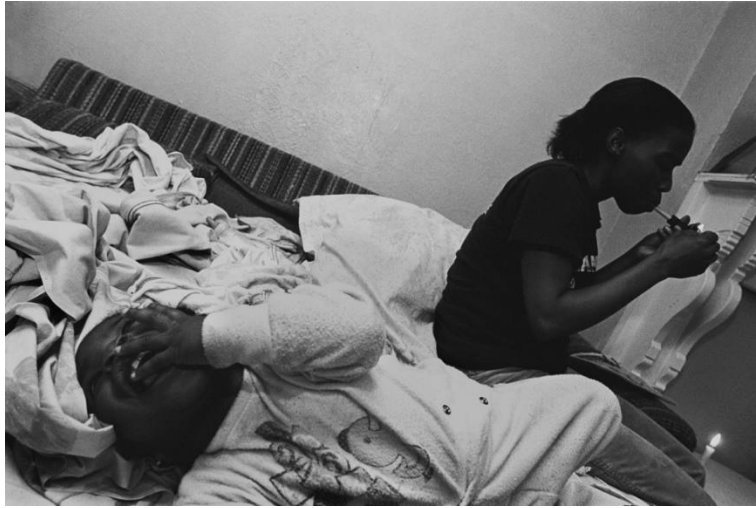
The short high that crack provided is a main part of the reason that crack vials were everywhere present. One former Brooklyn resident named Benjamin Sand recounted an experience with crack cocaine as a Brooklyn student. He told me that as a child in school in the 1980s, before they played at recess, they had to stretch their arms out in a “T” formation and touch fingers. As they walked with their hands touching, each student had to pick up any crack-related paraphernalia that they found in their path. Jay-Z was indeed correct when he said that

¹²⁷ Wallace, V. (2014, March 23). Documenting the ravages of the 1980s crack epidemic. *Aljazeera America*. Retrieved from <http://america.aljazeera.com/multimedia/2014/3/documenting-the-ravagesofthe1980scrackepidemic.html>

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ *Recovery.org*. Retrieved from <http://www.recovery.org/topics/choosing-the-best-inpatient-crack-cocaine-recovery-center/>

crack was an unescapable new reality.



A mother smoking crack in front of her 1-year old child.¹³⁰



Two Brooklyn men guarding their territory in 1988. The man to the right is holding an Uzi semiautomatic weapon, a weapon of choice in the inner city during the 1980s and 1990s.¹³¹

Jay-Z writes that the power dynamic in his community changed because the crack addicts or “fiends” were the same age or younger than his parents, and it was young people his age who sold crack to the older generation. According to Jay-Z, the adults in his community abdicated

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

their leadership responsibilities:

Authority was turned upside down. Guys my age, fed up with watching their moms struggle on a single income, were paying utility bills with money from hustling. So how could those same mothers sit them down about a truant report?...across the country, teenagers wore automatic weapons like they were sneakers. Broad-daylight shoot-outs had our grandmothers afraid to leave the house, and had neighbors who'd known us since we were toddlers forming Neighborhood Watches against us.¹³²

The parental abandonment of poorer communities was highlighted by rapper and Jay-Z friend

The Notorious B.I.G., who first met Jay-Z at Westinghouse High School:

*Back in the days, our parents used to take care of us
Look at em now, they even fuckin' scared of us
Callin' the city for help because they can't maintain
Damn, shit done changed.¹³³*

Dynamics within families changed and Jay-Z's family was no exception. His older brother Eric became addicted to cocaine and began to steal from their family. At the age of twelve¹³⁴, Jay-Z shot his brother who was high on drugs and had stolen some of his jewelry. Though Jay-Z said it was more of an accident, Greenburg writes that the incident "revealed a striking similarity between the adolescent Jay-Z and his absent father: an inability to control vengeful impulses."¹³⁵ Just as his father AJ lost his own family in search of his brother's killer, Jay-Z showed that no one was going to get in his way or endanger his family. His brother, however, did not press charges, possibly out of his own sense of guilt.¹³⁶

Violence was omnipresent and Jay-Z felt as though he put his life on the line everyday by just *living* in his community. Jay-Z's world was an environment where one "could get killed just

¹³² Ibid., 13.

¹³³ Wallace, C. (1994). Things done changed [Performed by The Notorious B.I.G. On *Ready to Die* [CD]. New York: Bad Boy Records. Retrieved from <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/notoriousbig/thingsdonechanged.html>

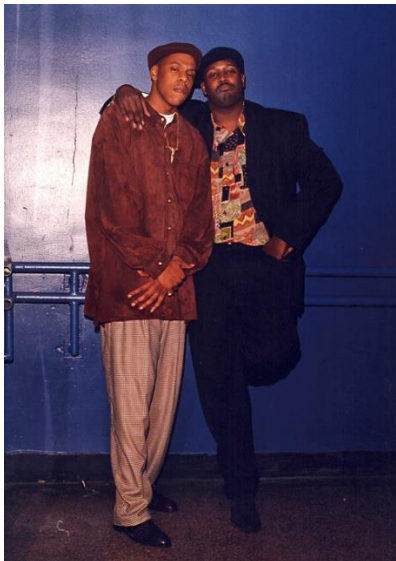
¹³⁴ Beaumont, 2. According to Beaumont, there is confusion as to when Jay-Z shot his brother. It was reported that Jay-Z shot his brother at the age of 12 (as Jay-Z told Howard Stern in 2013), but given that he said he ran to Jaz-O's house right after has led to confusion because Jay-Z did not meet Jaz-O until he was around 15 years old.

¹³⁵ Greenburg, 16-17.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 16-17.

for riding in the wrong train at the wrong time.” He decided that if he was going to risk his life anyway, he “might as well get paid for it.”¹³⁷

Jay-Z continued honing his rap skills during his early teen years at the very least to keep his sanity in a world for him that quickly became insane. New York rap legend DJ Clark Kent (birth name Rodolfo Franklin) first met Jay-Z in 1984, when Jay-Z was 15 and trying to navigate through the troubled Marcy projects. He heard Jay-Z rap in the Marcy projects and thought back then that Jay-Z was incredible: “Whenever he rapped with anyone, he outclassed them so bad that I knew it was only a matter of time.”¹³⁸ Kent, who was also abandoned by his father at a young age, said that the desire to get out of poverty led Jay-Z to focus on drugs: “When you grow up in the hood, fast money is all you can think of because of the pressure. You’re in a building with five hundred people when you could be in a house with four. You do whatever you can to get out.”¹³⁹



DJ Clark Kent with a young Jay-Z, date unknown.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Ibid., 15.

¹³⁸ Greenburg, 12.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 15.

¹⁴⁰ Westcheddar (2011, November 11). Brooklyn’s Finest. Retrieved from <http://westcheddar.com/2011/11/21/brooklyns-finest/>

Jay-Z also met Jonathan Burks, whose rap name was Jaz-O in 1984 and he became a mentor to Jay-Z after hearing Jay-Z rhyme in a rap battle that was set up between them. Jaz-O, also known as “Big Jaz” and “The Jaz” lived on the 6th floor in the Marcy projects¹⁴¹ but on the other side of the projects, according to Jay-Z’s sister Michelle.¹⁴² Jaz-O was considered the best rapper in Marcy projects when Jay-Z discovered hip-hop. It was with Jaz-O that Jay-Z would do his first recording as a rapper on a “heavy-ass tape recorder with a makeshift mic attached.” When he first heard his recorded voice he recounts seeing it as an opening. He says it was “a way to re-create myself and reimagine my world”; a world truly in need of reimagining if Jay-Z was to have a chance of surviving it. Recording songs gave Jay-Z the opportunity to shapeshift. He became excited hearing his voice over and over again as he wrote and recorded new rhymes. Whenever he had something to write, he said he just “had to get it out.”¹⁴³

Jay-Z did not have a proper stage name when he started working with Jaz-O. At first, he adopted the name “Jazzy” and later “Jay-Z”. Some say it was because of his smooth demeanor that the name Jazzy was chosen. Others have said it is a recognition of the “J” and “Z” New York trains, and others say it was a tribute to Jaz-O. No story has ever been substantially verified by Jay-Z¹⁴⁴ but just the attempt to discover the origins of the name “Jay-Z” alone demonstrates that Jay-Z learned early to give different meanings to different people based on what fit the situation at hand. He was an oral shapeshifter. Jaz-O provides his own opinion on where Jay-Z crafted his name and gives us yet another alias for Jay-Z—Shawny D.

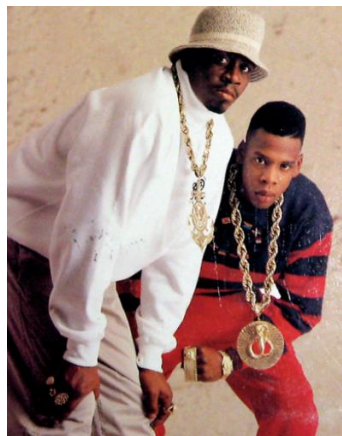
¹⁴¹ Diamond K Show (2012, April 6). *JAZ O on @TheDiamondKShow talks beef with Jay-Z teaching him to rap calls him a user*. [Video file]; Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hm7q9yKFidc>

¹⁴² Hiphopdocumentaries (2013, January 10). *The Rise Of Jay-Z | Full Documentary*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owvrMvfsYUo>

¹⁴³ Jay-Z, 5.

¹⁴⁴ Daly, M. (2009, December 15). Story of origins of Jay-Z's name may be myth - but unfortunately MTA cuts are not. *New York Daily News*. Retrieved from <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/story-origins-jay-z-myth-mta-cuts-article-1.435344>.

Jaz-O said that in the Marcy projects, people used to call Jay-Z Shawny D. When he first met Jay-Z he asked him what his stage name was and Jay-Z said he did not really have one. At this time (mid 1980s), many rappers were adding “D” or “Dee” as part of their stage names along with other letters of the alphabet such as Kool Moe Dee, Heavy D, Busy B, Schooly D, Jaz-O, and Ice-T. Jaz-O said he heard Jay-Z tell others that he got his name from an offshoot of a DJ named Jazzy. Jay-Z's cousin B-High said that the first person Jay-Z saw rapping in that “cipher” named Slate gave him the name Jazzy.¹⁴⁵ On the name “Jay-Z” however, Jaz-O believes that, since Jay-Z did not start using the name until after they met, the name “Jay-Z” was chosen as a compliment and sign of respect to him.¹⁴⁶



A young Jaz-O and Jay-Z, circa 1980s.¹⁴⁷

Jaz-O stated that he taught Jay-Z “basic poetic license, metaphor, simile, onomatopoeia...I taught him that in order to be the best, you don’t have to outwardly hone your craft. But in privacy, hone your craft.” Jaz-O recounted that the Jay-Z he met in 1984 was in a very “dire” situation and would frequently come over to Jaz-O’s house and other friend’s houses

¹⁴⁵ Hiphopdocumentaries (2013, January 10). *The Rise Of Jay-Z | Full Documentary*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owvrMvfsYUo>

¹⁴⁶ Diamond K Show (2012, April 6). *JAZ O on @TheDiamondKShow talks beef with Jay-Z teaching him to rap calls him a user*. [Video file]: Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hm7q9yKFidc>

¹⁴⁷ JES7. (2015). (2)Deep: The Jaz – It’s That Simple f. Jay-Z [1991]. *2dopeboyz.com*. Retrieved from <http://2dopeboyz.com/2010/09/04/2deep-the-jaz-its-that-simple-f-jay-z-1991/>

for food and other “basic necessities.”¹⁴⁸ Jaz-O also showed Jay-Z how to record his voice on a tape recorder with a microphone attached to it. Jay-Z said that once he heard his voice played back to him, he became obsessed with recording because he saw it as a way to escape his daily problems.

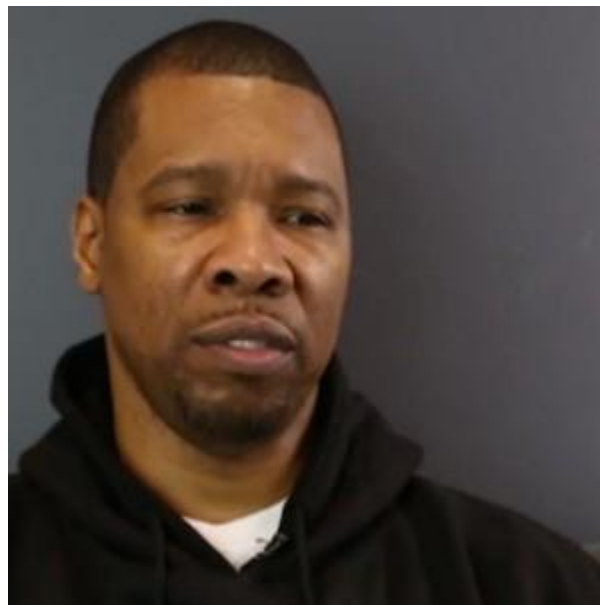
Jaz-O was Jay-Z’s mentor in rap, but Jay-Z also sought out mentors to help him rise as a drug dealer. Like many youth in his community, Jay-Z looked up to the drug dealers because they seemed economically independent at a time when he was not. One of the biggest drug dealers in New York, Danny Diamonds, operated out of the Marcy projects. His drug empire was so strong that, at his peak, he brought in over \$1,000,000 every two weeks.¹⁴⁹ Jay-Z wanted to work for Diamonds. Danny’s older brother David recalls seeing a young Jay-Z approach him and Danny. Jay-Z started rapping for the brothers. David was rushing Danny to get on to their next meeting but Danny was amazed by Jay-Z and kept listening. At the end of his rapping, Jay-Z asked Danny Diamonds to work for him but Danny went in his pocket, pulled out some money and gave it to Jay-Z. He told Jay-Z to take the money and “go make a record.”¹⁵⁰ Though David believes Jay-Z took that money and bought his own drugs to sell, the interaction between Danny Diamonds and Jay-Z speaks to the complex dynamic that existed with drug lords and their community: drug lords were a terror for most but also a source of inspiration and real income for others. David said that he felt Jay-Z was too young to work for them but even at such a young age (not yet 16 years old), Jay-Z straddled the rap and drug worlds and they often collided, almost costing Jay-Z his life.

¹⁴⁸ Greenburg, 15.

¹⁴⁹ Complex (2014, July 1). *Calvin “Klein” Bacote Talks About His Former Drug Kingpin Days & History With Jay Z* [Video file]: Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLkvrwT8KN8>

¹⁵⁰ jay zee (2014, August 15). *Real Marcy Don “Danny Diamonds” Brother Sheds Light On Jay Z Drug Exaggerations and Lies* [Video file]: Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cU6_roznLoQ

David was right. Jay-Z did venture out to sell drugs without Danny Diamondz. In 1986, Jaz-O and Jay-Z got caught selling drugs in Danny Diamondz' territory. Diamondz called his partner and notorious stickup man Calvin "Klein" Bacote to come and kill them. Bacote arrived with guns drawn. The only reason he did not kill them instantly was because he was at a distance and could not make out who they were. By the time Bacote got close enough for the kill, Jaz-O had diffused the situation and Diamondz told Bacote to put his guns away. Jaz-O told Diamondz and Bacote that they did not want to try and sell in Danny's neighborhood on a real heavy level. In those few minutes, Jaz-O and Jay-Z went from imminent murder to rookie members of the Danny Diamondz "family" and later working for him through Bacote.¹⁵¹



Calvin "Klein" Bacote.¹⁵²

Bacote had just been released from prison on a murder charge when he started working with Jay-Z in 1986. Bacote was notorious for robberies. He boasted once of sticking up an entire

¹⁵¹ Bacote, C (2014-02-25). *Neighborhoods Under Siege: Memoirs Of A Brooklyn Don* (Kindle Location 5880). Pree Publishing. Kindle Edition.

¹⁵² Hernandez, V. (2014, June 18). Calvin Klein Bacote Explains Relationship With Jay Z, Wants Chris Brown For His "Neighborhoods Under Siege" Movie. *Hiphopdx.com*. Retrieved from <http://hiphopdx.com/news/id.29292/title.calvin-klein-bacote-explains-relationship-with-jay-z-wants-chris-brown-for-his-neighborhoods-under-siege-movie>

park of people at Possoms Boulevard.¹⁵³ Bacote says that once he partnered up with Danny Diamondz as a drug dealer, he became rich almost instantly. He said that he and Danny were so serious about their business that they wanted to make the *Forbes* list of wealthiest people as drug dealers. Jay-Z became Bacote's employee but he continued rapping. Jaz-O also worked under Bacote after his near-death experience but only for a short period of time, according to Bacote.¹⁵⁴

Jay-Z's expanding network in hip-hop helped him maintain mental stability during his time as a drug dealer, but drug sales constituted his main source of income. By the age of 16, Jay-Z was a hustler and "couldn't even think about wanting to be something else."¹⁵⁵ Working for Bacote helped Jay-Z grow as a drug dealer. He would not let himself "visualize another life."¹⁵⁶ Drugs brought him money, but rap brought him peace of mind and helped him maintain balance in his overlapping worlds. Jay-Z writes that "it's not an accident that rhyming kept me sane in those years when I was straddling so many different worlds. The rhymes brought me back to something basic in me...And when I started writing about my life and the lives of the people around me, the rhymes helped me twist some sense out of those stories."¹⁵⁷ The persona of "Jay-Z" grew as Shawn Carter used the "Jay-Z" moniker to explain the world around him to himself:

Rap was the ideal way for me to make sense of a life that was doubled, split into contradictory halves...Rap is built to handle contradictions...rhymes created a path for me to move from one life to another. Because I never had to reject Shawn Carter to become Jay-Z. Shawn Carter's life lives in Jay-Z's rhymes—transformed, of course: Flesh and blood became words, ideas, metaphors, fantasies, and jokes. But those two characters come together through the rhymes, become whole again. The multitude is contained. It's a powerful magic.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵³ Complex (2014, July 1). Calvin "Klein" Bacote Talks About His Former Drug Kingpin Days & History With Jay Z [Video file]: Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLkvrwT8KN8>

¹⁵⁴ Thisis50 (2014, May 15). Calvin Klein on Danny Diamondz; Neighborhoods Under Siege [Video file]: Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRvrLIQCZfY>

¹⁵⁵ Jay-Z, 245.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 245.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 245.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 239, 245.

Jay-Z later wrote his thoughts about the contradictory nature of rap and how it became his reflective escape. While he was in his teens and early twenties, however, rap was an escape from the drug world in not only a mental sense. Jay-Z started to see rap as a serious way out of the drug life because he saw rappers he knew become more successful such as The Notorious B.I.G. Furthermore, his cousin B-High and Kent attempted vigorously to get him to stop selling drugs and try rap music full time. Whenever Jay-Z returned to Brooklyn after long stretches in different states selling drugs, his cousin B-High refused to talk to him because he felt Jay-Z was wasting his life away selling drugs. Kent approached Jay-Z whenever he came home and would say “Let’s do this music.” Jay-Z recounted that during his exchanges with Kent, he literally had the stench of cocaine production on his clothes but Kent did not care. Jay-Z credits Kent with continually encouraging him to try rap when he was “halfway gone” in the drug world.¹⁵⁹

The close relationship Jaz-O and Jay-Z had allowed Jay-Z to learn about the hip-hop industry. He closely followed the career rise of Jaz-O to see if he too could make an entrée into the music business. Jaz-O was the first rapper to be signed to the British record label EMI in 1988. He received an advance of almost half a million dollars, something Jay-Z had never seen before.¹⁶⁰ Jay-Z described Jaz-O’s advance as “R&B money”, meaning it was a large amount.¹⁶¹ Prior to Jaz-O’s deal, Jay-Z saw artists get signed for a car or a few dollars, but the accurate perception among street youth was that more could be made selling drugs.

Jay-Z’s drug and rap music worlds expanded and collided at the same time as the 1980s progressed. The years 1988-89 became a pivotal time for Jay-Z. Jaz-O was a rising hip-hop star,

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 237.

¹⁶⁰ Hip-Hop Wired (2014, May 5). Jaz-O Tells How He Got On Before The Digital Age [Video file]: Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3rM5PD1eZQ>. Jaz-O said in this interview with Hip-Hop Wired that the deal was actually \$275,000.

¹⁶¹ Jay-Z, 76.

but Jay-Z's childhood and now teenage close friend DeHaven Irby became a star selling drugs in New Jersey. DeHaven introduced Jay-Z to selling drugs in New York before DeHaven and Jay-Z started working for Bacote. DeHaven then moved on to Trenton, New Jersey. Jay-Z and DeHaven lived on the same floor in the Marcy projects and they went to elementary school together. When they travelled together as teenagers on the train into Manhattan, they took turns holding the one gun they had in their possession.¹⁶² When DeHaven took Jay-Z to rap battles, they were introduced as brothers.¹⁶³ Referred to as "Hill"¹⁶⁴ in his book *Decoded*, DeHaven left his life as a high school basketball star to sell cocaine.¹⁶⁵



DeHaven with daughter and Jay-Z. DeHaven says Jay-Z is her godfather.¹⁶⁶

In 1988 Jay-Z decided to follow DeHaven to Trenton to further expand their drug selling activities. He lived with DeHaven's aunt and uncle for a time. They were so eager to make money that when their supplier (referred to as Dee Dee in *Decoded*) was found with his penis in his mouth and shot execution-style, Jay-Z and DeHaven continued selling drugs with no concern

¹⁶² Jay-Z, 15.

¹⁶³ jasirix (2009, March 25). *60 Seconds-Did Wise Intelligent Ether Jay Z?* [Video file]: retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8niYBgoc4c>

¹⁶⁴ Jay-Z, 15. Jay-Z writes her that he used several fake names in his book in his words, "to protect the guilty."

¹⁶⁵ Beaumont, 20-21.

¹⁶⁶ Tumblr.com (2014, May 26). Retrieved from <http://aintnojigga.tumblr.com/post/86864143255/so-fuck-dehaven-for-caving-thats-why-we-dont>

over suffering a similar fate as Dee Dee.¹⁶⁷ Bacote had just returned from a murder acquittal and brought Jay-Z and DeHaven into his network, which he took over after Danny Diamondz died in a car crash. Bacote said that once DeHaven and Jay-Z started working for him, they “started seeing some real major money.”¹⁶⁸ Jay-Z still rapped, but hustling crack came first because of its immediate financial reward, but it once again almost cost him his life in 1989.

While on a trip in Maryland in 1989 with Bacote and DeHaven, Jay-Z became involved in a brawl at a party. He fled with Bacote but they were arrested later that night and charged with attempted murder, assault, possession of a deadly weapon, and several other charges. The prosecutor wanted to incarcerate both Jay-Z and Bacote for forty years. Jay-Z told Bacote that he could take the rap for both of them and offered to be the one put on trial and set free the man who nearly killed him a few years prior. Bacote thought about Jay-Z’s promising music career and convinced the plaintiff to take \$50,000 and only charge Bacote, not Jay-Z. He asked Jay-Z to go back to New York and arrange his bail money and Jay-Z followed his orders.¹⁶⁹ Jay-Z was supposed to testify at Bacote’s trial but hip-hop intervened.

Whenever he took a break from selling drugs out of state, Jay-Z and Jaz-O visited each other’s apartments and wrote rhymes for hours. They locked themselves in a room “with a pen, a pad, and some Apple Jacks and Häagen-Dazs.”¹⁷⁰ It was in their intense sessions that they developed new rhyming patterns, and improved on their “speed, delivery, and composition.”¹⁷¹ Their closeness is part of the reason Jay-Z admits that he secretly hoped for Jaz-O to get a big record deal but the other reason was that he would gain hope for the possibilities of his own

¹⁶⁷ Jay-Z, 31.

¹⁶⁸ Bacote, C. (2014-02-25). *Neighborhoods Under Siege: Memoirs Of A Brooklyn Don* (Kindle Location 7015). Pree Publishing. Kindle Edition.

¹⁶⁹ djvld (2014, May 12). *Calvin Klein Bacote on Getting Arrested With Jay-Z* [Video file]: *Youtube.com*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OIIb_5q93Y

¹⁷⁰ Jay-Z, 76.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

music career. Jay-Z remained calm on the outside, but on the inside he “was doing backflips and shit” when Jaz-O was signed because he thought this was their ticket out of the ghetto. EMI flew Jaz-O to London to work on his new album and Jaz-O took Jay-Z with him. Besides his drug-related travel between New York and Maryland, Jay-Z had never traveled anywhere so getting a passport and flying across the ocean was a surreal experience. Several of his drug colleagues disapproved of him leaving at a time when they were doing so well and literally told him: “rappers are hoes...they just record, tour, and get separated from their families, while some white person takes all their money.” Jay-Z wanted to see for himself because, deep down inside, he wanted to “make it as a rapper too.”¹⁷² Because of their trip to London, Jay-Z faxed in his testimony for Bacote’s trial, which led to a reduction in Bacote’s sentence.¹⁷³

Jay-Z was indeed excited about the possibilities of rap music for him with Jaz-O’s deal, but his drug dealing colleagues except Bacote did not share his excitement and told him he was a fool for thinking about leaving the drug life to rap. Maybe the drug dealers believed that or maybe they wanted to continue using Jay-Z as their drug mule. In a user’s world, it was difficult for Jay-Z to decode their full intentions. Jay-Z, however, recounts his frustration with the attitude of his colleagues towards him rapping in his song “So Ambitious”:

*I had to lace up my boots even harder
Father is too far away to father
Further-more all the kids either smoke reefer
Or either move white¹⁷⁴, there's few writers in my cypher
So they made light of, my type of
Dreams seem dumb, they said wise up
How many guys-a, you see makin it from here
The world don't like us, is that not clear?
Alright but I'm different, I can't base what I'm gon' be
Offa what everybody isn't, they don't listen*

¹⁷² Ibid., 76.

¹⁷³ Bacote, C. (2014-02-25). *Neighborhoods Under Siege: Memoirs Of A Brooklyn Don* (Kindle Location 7059). Pree Publishing. Kindle Edition.

¹⁷⁴ “White” is slang for cocaine.

*Just whisperin behind my back
No vision, lack of ambition, so whack!*¹⁷⁵

In the EMI meetings, Jay-Z expanded his knowledge about the operating practices of the record industry. At the end of the London trip, Jay-Z learned two lessons. The first lesson was that Jaz-O's album with EMI sounded just like the demo he created prior to EMI signing him. The only new song was "Hawaiian Sophie", which was more of a pop-type rap song designed to garner more radio play like EMI successfully accomplished with rapper Will Smith. The second, and more important lesson for Jay-Z was the realization that there was no loyalty in the music business. After Jaz-O's album flopped, EMI stopped returning his calls and they tried to convince Jay-Z that *he* should sign a record deal with them behind Jaz-O's back. Jay-Z refused and thought to himself: "This business sucks":

No honor, no integrity, it was disgusting. In some ways it was worse than the streets. Jaz's debut album, something he'd been dreaming about his whole life, did come out, but in the end it was nothing more than a tax write-off for a giant corporation...after the way EMI handled Jaz, I buried my little rap dreams. If I had any pent-up resentment, I took it out on the block.¹⁷⁶

Watching Jaz-O's failure with EMI was the first time that Jay-Z as an adult began to have a fear of failure for his own life and career as a rapper.¹⁷⁷ He learned from the EMI experience that there are parallels between the rap and drug worlds, the first lesson being that both communities were user's worlds. Jaz-O was only useful to EMI until he stopped selling records in large numbers. He also noticed that in both fields, one worked tirelessly for little money.¹⁷⁸ From armed confrontations with rival drug rings in the parks of Trenton to working sixty hours

¹⁷⁵ Carter, S. (2009). So Ambitious [performed by Jay-Z]. On *The Blueprint 3* [CD]. New York: Roc Nation Records and Atlantic Records. Retrieved from <http://rappeni.us.com/Jay-z-so-ambitious-lyrics#note-1367946>

¹⁷⁶ Jay-Z, 76. "Block" is slang for the streets.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 75. In *Decoded*, Jay-Z cites the authors of the book *Freakonomics*, who wrote that the leader of a drug ring earned about \$66 an hour around the time of their 2005 publication. The street vendors of crack made about \$3.30 an hour. In Jay-Z's mind, this meant that to be involved in the drug world meant to risk one's life to move up as high on the ladder as possible.

straight to recover lost crack product when he got arrested for trespassing in New Jersey at DeHaven's high school, Jay-Z believed that taking risks for higher riches was better than pursuing a rap career or surrendering to a 9-5 job at McDonald's. Though Jay-Z understood in retrospect "how much courage it took" to work at McDonald's, to walk through the streets "past rows of hustlers wearing that orange uniform", it represented submission. As he rapped in his 1996 song, "D'Evils":

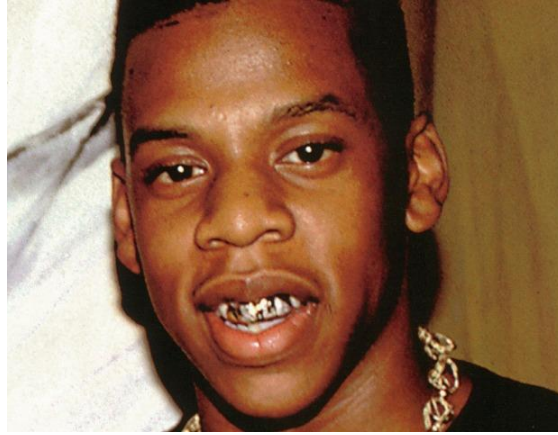
*This shit is wicked on these mean streets
None of my friends speak, we're all tryna win but then again
Maybe it's for the best though cause when they're saying too much
You know they're trying to get you touched¹⁷⁹
Whoever said illegal was the easy way out, couldn't understand
The mechanics and the workings of the underworld, granted
Nine to five is how to survive, I ain't trying to survive
I'm tryna live it to the limit and love it a lot.¹⁸⁰*

Jay-Z's drug career became lucrative but it was rife with hardship: sleepless nights cooking crack, selling it on the coldest of winter nights, and shootouts with rival dealers all made for a dangerous lifestyle. The possibility of living lavishly from his drug income drove Jay-Z but he was also driven by the opportunities that selling drugs created for him to help his family survive their own economic hardships, demonstrated most by his mother who had to work multiple jobs. Jay-Z visited his mother and siblings for no more than a weekend at a time when he returned to Brooklyn on occasion during his hustling days. He showed up each time wearing a big gold chain, diamond-studded earrings, and gold teeth. He said his mother never talked to him about what he was doing, and even if she did, he said she was in no real power to stop him.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ "Touched" is slang for "shot."

¹⁸⁰ Carter, S. (1996). D'Evils [performed by Jay-Z]. On *Reasonable Doubt* [CD]. Retrieved from <http://rapgenius.com/Jay-z-devils-lyrics#note-7267>.

¹⁸¹ Jay-Z, 267.



Jay-Z in 1987 with gold teeth and gold chain.¹⁸²

Jay-Z documented his frustrations with his mother's predicament in several of his songs.

On his song "Soon You'll Understand" he rapped:

*Co-workers saw me on the corner slinging Larry Love¹⁸³
Meanwhile, you working hard, like 2 or 3 jobs
Trying to feed me and my siblings, makin an honest livin
Who am I kiddin'? I call myself easin' the load?
I made the load heavy, I need money for commissary
Try to understand, please.¹⁸⁴*

On the remix of Talib Kweli's song "Just To Get By" Jay-Z rapped:

*I'm a poster for what happened seein your moms
Doin five dollars worth of work just to get a dime.¹⁸⁵*

On his song "Brooklyn Go Hard" he rapped:

*Fatherless child, mama pulled double shifts
So the number runners was the only one I hanged widith.¹⁸⁶*

¹⁸² *Black Enterprise* (2012, December 4). <http://www.blackenterprise.com/lifestyle/jayz-fashion-transformation-style-photo-gallery/>

¹⁸³ "Larry Love" is another slang term for heroin.

¹⁸⁴ Carter, S. (2000). Soon You'll Understand [performed by Jay-Z]. On *The Dynasty: Roc la Familia* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings Retrieved from <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/jayz/soonyoullunderstand.html>

¹⁸⁵ Carter, S. (1997). You Must Love Me [performed by Jay-Z]. On *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rapgenius.com/Jay-z-you-must-love-me-lyrics>

¹⁸⁶ Carter, S. (2008). Brooklyn go Hard [performed by Jay-z]. On *Notorious* [CD]. New York: *Bad Boy Records*. Retrieved from <http://rapgenius.com/Jay-z-brooklyn-go-hard-lyrics>

Jay-Z continued rapping while he sold drugs. He focused his attention on whatever made him the most money. He chose hustling drugs over music because in the 1980s, Jay-Z saw rappers as extravagant with over-the-top outfits without over-the-top money. When he heard the lyrics of legendary 1980s hip-hop group RUN-DMC and saw how they dressed in more street attire with jeans and sneakers, he started to see a different side of what hip-hop was going to be:

It was going to be raw and aggressive, but also witty and slick. It was going to boast and compete and exaggerate. But it was also going to care enough to get the details right about our aspirations and our crumb-snatching struggles, our specific, small realities...and our living-color dreamscapes. It was going to be real.¹⁸⁷



RUN DMC.¹⁸⁸

Jay-Z felt that RUN-DMC represented street culture more than other rap groups, but they were not telling a complete story in his opinion:

A story was unfolding on the streets of New York, and around the country, that still hadn't made it into rap, except as an absence. We heard Melle Mel's hit 'The Message,' with its lyrics about broken glass everywhere, and we heard about Run's big long Caddy¹⁸⁹, but what was missing was what was happening in between those two images—how young cats were stepping through the broken glass and into the Caddy. The missing piece was the story of the hustler.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Jay-Z, 10.

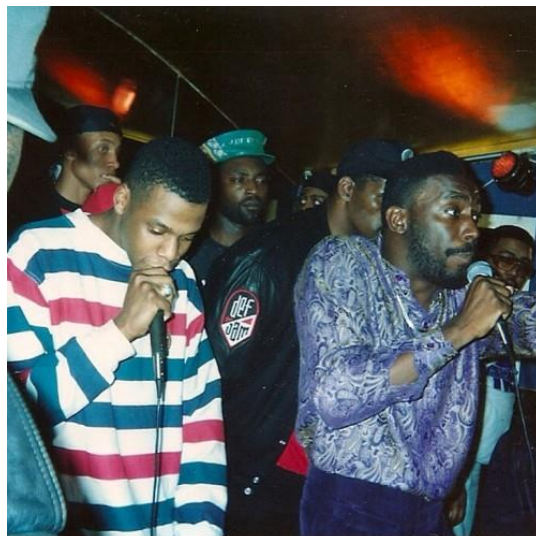
¹⁸⁸ Turbo-Wikia. *Turbo.wikia.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.turbo.wikia.com/wiki/Run%E2%80%93DMC>

¹⁸⁹ "Caddy" is slang for Cadillac.

¹⁹⁰ Jay-Z, 10.

After his 1988 trip to London, Jay-Z hustled his way into touring with one of the biggest rappers of the late 1980s, Big Daddy Kane. Jay-Z had reportedly defeated Kane in a rap battle¹⁹¹, which led to a collaboration between the two. Kane then invited Jay-Z to tour with him. Several artists working with Kane became hip-hop legends such as Tupac Shakur, Notorious B.I.G., and Queen Latifah. For four months, Jay-Z had what Greenburg called the equivalent of an unpaid internship. His main responsibility on the tour was to perform for the crowd during Big Daddy Kane's intermissions. Though Jay-Z did well on stage, off stage, his financial struggles were obvious. One rapper on the tour, MC Serch, recounted seeing Jay-Z ask Kane for money to go buy a burger for dinner. From living the life as a street-rich drug dealer to riding on a tour bus and asking for money for food, Jay-Z was in search of direction:

Nearly twenty years old, he'd gotten a taste of the good life with Jaz-O in London, and he'd rubbed elbows with the biggest names in hip-hop on Big Daddy Kane's tour. But he'd dropped out of high school, and his own musical career hadn't gotten to a point where he could make serious money as an artist. So he picked up where he left off as a hustler.¹⁹²



¹⁹¹ Hiphopdocumentaries (2013, January 10). *The Rise Of Jay-Z | Full Documentary*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owvrMvfsYUo>

¹⁹² Greenburg, 22.

Jay-Z with Big Daddy Kane circa 1990.¹⁹³

Jaz-O believed that Jay-Z went back to hustling drugs in order to obtain funds to finance his rap career. He said that Jay-Z “‘chose to quite simply get money, as most of us did in our circle, we just chose to get money and get out of the hood any way we could.’”¹⁹⁴

Jay-Z was not impressed with the music industry, but he seemed even more frustrated with his hustling career. He would have a heavy burden to bear if he was to continue with hip-hop, and much of his opposition came from members of his parents and grandparent’s generation, whom he had lost respect for during the Crack Epidemic, which still impacted his community. Jay-Z saw that the rap industry was growing and the condemnation it received from diverse segments of American society such as Civil Rights Movement veteran C. Delores Tucker and senators like Bob Dole only made rap music more popular. Tucker, the founder of the National Congress of Black Women, was one of the more vocal protesters against rap music, once stating that:

We have never had a phenomenon where kids were planning their own funerals at thirteen and twelve...I am going after the record industry because they are the ones that are out of control...so what’s new? Nothing. They [gangsta rappers] are just the new Stepin Fetchits. Someone said Amos and Andy of the 1990s. We can’t say that they are just speaking of reality. The reality is that they don’t hate their people; they are paid to say that. So many of them have said that it’s the money.
*The money.*¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Cyclone (2013, September 30). Big Daddy Kane Talks Meeting Jay-Z And Why He Wanted To Help Him Early On. *Weuponit.com*. Retrieved from <http://weuponit.com/2013/09/30/big-daddy-kane-talks-meeting-jay-z-and-why-he-wanted-to-help-him-early-on/>

¹⁹⁴ Greenburg., 22.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.



C. Delores Tucker.¹⁹⁶

Tucker also referred to hip-hop as “pornographic smut” and along with conservative members of American society, said rap music was the reason why so many black children were “out of control.”¹⁹⁷

Despite the seemingly ubiquitous condemnation of rap music, no one was able to stop its meteoric rise and Jay-Z desperately wanted his opportunity to be involved in rap music at a high level. Groups like N.W.A. from the west coast became popular nationally with songs like “Fuck the Police.” Another west coast rapper, Snoop Dogg, grew in national stature as well. On the east coast, rappers like Nas and Jay-Z’s friend Notorious B.I.G. released their now classic 1994 albums *Illmatic* and *Ready to Die* respectively. Clark Kent successfully got Jay-Z to rhyme on some rap collaborations in 1992 but he went back to selling drugs after the projects were done. In his personal life, he writes that his girlfriend of several years suffered a miscarriage. The multiple worlds in which Jay-Z lived not only began to collide, they began to almost completely cave in. He recounts the challenges he faced from 1993-1994 in his 2000 song “This can’t be

¹⁹⁶ Toomer, S. (2012, June 6). C. Delores Tucker, You Were Right. What You Predicted Has Come To Pass. *Blackandbrownnews.com*. Retrieved from <http://blackandbrownnews.com/opinion/sharons-stoop/c-delores-tucker-you-were-right-what-you-predicted-has-come-to-pass/>

¹⁹⁷ Cepeda, 397.

life”:

*At any given moment Shawn could lose it, be on the news
Iron cuffs - arms through it, or stuffed with embalming fluid
Shit, I'm going through it - mom dukes too
Tears streaming down her pretty face, she got her palms to it
My life is gettin too wild
I need to bring some sorta calm to it
It's like '93, '94, bout the year
That Big¹⁹⁸ and Mack dropped and “Illmatic” rocked
Outta every rag drop, and the West had it locked
Everybody doing them, I'm still stretching on the block
Like "Damn, I'mma be a failure"
Surrounded by thugs, drugs, and drug paraphenalia
Cops, courts, and their thoughts is to derail us
Three time felons in shorts with jealous thoughts
It gets worse, baby momma water burst
Baby came out stillborn, still I gotta move on
Though my heart still torn, life gone from her womb
Don't worry, if it was meant to be, it'll be soon¹⁹⁹*

The success of other rappers, the fears his mother had over his drug activities, having a stillborn child with his girlfriend of 5 years²⁰⁰, and not knowing when his own demise would arrive as a result of his drug-selling ways proved too much for Jay-Z to handle. His fears came to a stark reality in 1994 when he was ambushed by a childhood friend. Jay-Z ran for his life and was saved when the gun fired at him jammed after three shots. Jay-Z considered retaliation, but Jaz-O and DeHaven said that they intervened to bring calm back to the streets.²⁰¹ Jay-Z recalled seeing his would-be killer weeks later at the parole office and laughing about the entire situation. The decision to get out of the drug world, however, was no laughing matter. Within the next year, Jay-Z’s drug hustling days would come to an end.²⁰²

¹⁹⁸ “Big”, “Biggie”, and “Biggie Smalls” were all nicknames for Christopher Wallace, aka The Notorious B.I.G.

¹⁹⁹ Carter, S. (2000). This Can’t Be Life [performed by Jay-Z]. On *The Dynasty: Roc La Familia* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rapgenius.com/Jay-z-this-cant-be-life-lyrics>.

²⁰⁰ Jay-Z, 247. Jay-Z writes in *Decoded* that he had a serious girlfriend in Virginia from 1989-1994.

²⁰¹ The term “supposedly” is used here because both Jaz-O and DeHaven take credit for bringing calm to the streets but neither explain exactly how they actually did restore order to the streets for Jay-Z.

²⁰² Beaumont, 38.

DJ Clark Kent introduced Jay-Z to a Harlem-based promoter named Damon “Dame” Dash in 1994. Kent believed that Jay-Z did not have the requisite skills as a businessman to navigate the rap world, but Dash had the brashness and arrogance to make waves in the music business. Jay-Z continued selling drugs, but he slowly became convinced that Dash could take him out of the drug life and completely into the music business. Dash started organizing mini tours with Jay-Z and other rap groups like Original Flavor primarily to keep Jay-Z occupied with rap and off the streets selling drugs. Rapping became more of a viable career possibility, but Jay-Z still had a “full-time” job selling drugs. He began to see, however, that there was no positive end to life as a drug dealer and wanted to quit.²⁰³



Dame Dash.²⁰⁴

If Jay-Z decided to stay involved in the world of drugs, his chances of incarceration (if he was not murdered) were high. Police crackdowns, President Bill Clinton’s 1994 omnibus crime bill, and the crack wars were turning black men in inner cities into an endangered species,²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Jay-z, 239.

²⁰⁴ Grant, A. (2014, May 20). Dame Dash & Diplomats Attribute Dipset Hiatus To Increased Independence. *Hiphopdx.com*. Retrieved from <http://hiphopdx.com/interviews/id.2404/title.dame-dash-diplomats-attribute-dipset-hiatus-to-increased-independence>

²⁰⁵ Chang, 388-390. Chang writes that the juvenile justice system was *supposed* to be a place where youth offenders could actually be rehabilitated. By the late 1980s and particularly after the Los Angeles riots after the 1992 acquittal of white officers who beat motorist Rodney King nearly to death, American politicians focused on making correctional facilities more punitive than corrective. Curfews were issued across America in police crackdowns of gangs, leading to the arrests for curfews to double between 1988 and 1997. In places like New Orleans, black youth were arrested at 19 times the rate of whites. These tough stances on crime were taken at a time where crime was

despite the fact that crime was on the decline. Jay-Z believed that the nation was at war with the youth of his generation. Speaking on prisons, for example, Jay-Z wrote:

statistics on the incarceration of black men...particularly men of my generation, are probably the most objective indication that young black men are seen in this country as a 'problem' that can be made to literally disappear. No one in the entire world...is locked up like black men are locked up in this country.²⁰⁶

Jay-Z then recalled the deep tension that existed between the government and his community:

deeper causes of the crack explosion were in policies concocted by a government that was hostile to us, almost genocidally hostile when you think about how they aided or tolerated the unleashing of guns and drugs on poor communities, while at the same time cutting back on schools, housing, and assistance programs. And to top it all off, they threw in the so-called war on drugs, which was really a war on us.²⁰⁷

Jay-Z, like many people in his community recalled only negative experiences with their local government. The government was not seen as a provider of schooling or public assistance through welfare. The government was seen as the reason *why* they needed welfare and better schools in the first place:

We're aware of the government from the time we're born. We live in government-funded housing and work government jobs. We have family and friends spending time in the ultimate public housing, prison. We grow up knowing people who pay for everything with little plastic cards-Medicare cards for checkups, EBT cards for food...we stand for hours waiting for bricks of government cheese...We get to know all kinds of government agencies not because of civics class, but because they actually visit our houses and sit up on our couches asking questions. From the time we're small children we go to crumbling public schools that tell us all we need to know about what the

actually on the decline. In California, for example, crime was lower in 1994 than in 1980 but they still passed a crime bill called Proposition 184, followed by ending affirmative action in 1995, creating fewer opportunities for youth. These actions led to California by 1996 spending more money on prisons than on higher education, an act other states would follow. The government was on a regular basis denying opportunities for youth and younger adults to turn themselves into productive citizens. President Clinton, for example, had a \$30 billion plan for job creation and economic development for urban America. Congress turned it into a \$5 billion distribution, which was mainly used for unemployment insurance. At the same time, however, congress passed a \$30 billion crime prevention bill, which included 6 new death penalty offenses, \$8 billion in prison construction, and federal "three strike" laws, which put offenders away after three offenses.

²⁰⁶ Jay-Z, 161.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 158.

government thinks of us. Then there are the cops.²⁰⁸

Despite the consistent interactions with local government Jay-Z claimed that guns “were easier to get in the hood than public assistance.”²⁰⁹ He recalls teens in inner cities “having “Uzis, German Glocks, and assault rifles [and] accessories, too, like scopes and silencers.”²¹⁰ He literally lived in a warzone. Jay-Z perceived that “racist” government drug laws made penalties more severe for the possession of crack cocaine (found more in poorer black and Latino communities), versus powder cocaine (found more in white suburban communities). He cites the three strikes laws that “could put young guys in jail for twenty-five years for nonviolent crimes.” He believed that the disease of drug addiction was treated like a crime, leading arrest rates to rise dramatically and recounts rampant police corruption from their own involvement in the drug trade leading them to gun down young black men for the “lightest suspected offenses” or die in custody under suspicious circumstances. Many of his beliefs on crime and black men were validated by scholarly research.²¹¹ Jay-Z does not, however, deny the role his community played in the drug and crime crisis when he acknowledged that “we were [also] killing ourselves by the thousands.”²¹² In reflection, Jay-Z saw rap music as the response to the degradation taking place in inner-city communities:

...here came rap, like the American nightmare come to life. The disturbing shit you thought you locked away for good, buried at the bottom of the ocean, suddenly materialized in your kid’s bedroom, laughing it off, cursing loud, and grabbing its nuts, refusing to be ignored anymore.²¹³

Jay-Z rapped more frequently in the early 1990s but kept a foot in the drug world. Some

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 154.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 158.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 158.

²¹¹ Alexander, M. (2012). *The New Jim Crow. Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press.

²¹² Jay-Z, 158.

²¹³ Ibid., 158.

who knew Jay-Z believed that in addition to his involvement with drug selling, Jay-Z did not realize how talented he was as a rapper. In rap sessions, Jay-Z composed rhymes on the spot after only hearing the beat a few times. He did not write words down, a skill he honed as a child. A producer named Patrick Lawrence said that Jay-Z did not take rap seriously because he thought if rap was so hard, it would not be so easy for him to create his rhymes.²¹⁴ With the success of other rappers, however, Jay-Z became more interested in getting a record deal, but the record industry was still not ready to sign him. Jay-Z felt that his time was running out.

Jay-Z experienced fear when he fled his would-be murderer in 1994, but he had a greater fear, which he alluded to in his song “This can’t be life”—the fear of failure. In a 2000 *Washington Post* interview where he was asked about why he left the drug world in the mid-1990s, he said “‘You can’t run the streets forever. What are you going to be doing when you’re thirty years old, or thirty-five or forty? I had a fear of being nothing—that pretty much drove me.’”²¹⁵

Jay-Z had another reason to quit the drug world. He began to feel guilty for his role in selling crack to people in his own community. On his song “Streets is Watching”, Jay-Z rapped:

*Then hard times fell upon us
Half of my staff had warrants
The other half in the casket lay dormant
I felt like life was cheating me
For the first time in my life I was gettin’ money
But it was like my conscience was eating me
Was this a lesson God teachin’ me? Was he saying that
I was playing the game straight from Hell from which few came back?
Public apologies to the families of those caught up in my shit
But that's the life for us lost souls brought up in this shit²¹⁶*

²¹⁴ Greenburg, 26-27.

²¹⁵ Harrington, R. (2000, January 2). Jay-Z’s Rhymes of Passion, *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/WPcap/2000-01/02/058r-010200-idx.html>

²¹⁶ Carter, S. (1997). Streets Is Watching [performed by Jay-Z]. On *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1*. [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rappenius.com/Jay-z-streets-is-watching-lyrics>

In a verse to his mother in another 1997 song, “You Must Love Me”, Jay-Z rapped:

*All you did was motivate me
“Don't let 'em hold you back”
What I do I turned around
And I sold you crack
I was a bastard for that
Still I'm drowning in shame
Just remember one thing now
You're not to blame
You was newly separated
Tryin' to escape ya world
And through my thirst
I didn't help you
I just made things worse
I hated me and everybody
That created crack
Had me thinkin'
The newest kicks and the latest gat
Still haven't apologized
So please play this back
While I try to come to terms
With such a heinous act
You know in more than one way
Cocaine numbs the brain
All I did was think about
How the funds once came
Then I ran across this memory
And it stung the brain
How can you ever destroy the beauty
From which one came
That's a savage you're the reason
Why me and these beats make a marriage
Why I rhyme above average and
I ain't shit
Glad you got yourself together
No thanks to me
Strong and beautiful the way things should be
You must love me²¹⁷*

Jay-Z began rethinking his drug selling ways while he was in the midst of selling:

The nights were freezing. I mean, so cold that your nose couldn't even run. And in that bitter cold, folded into the crevices of a project wall, hundreds of miles

²¹⁷ Carter, S. (1997). You Must Love Me [performed by Jay-Z]. On *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1*. [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rap Genius.com/Jay-z-you-must-love-me-lyrics>.

from home, I sold crack to addicts who were killing themselves, collecting the wrinkled bills they got from God knows where, and making sure they got their rocks to smoke. I stood there thinking, 'What the fuck am I doing?'"²¹⁸

Jay-Z admitted to feeling his "consciousness shifting."²¹⁹ In an interview with Oprah Winfrey in 2009, Jay-Z said that he began to see the long-term effects of his life in the drug world in the 1990s including seeing his friends get killed or go to jail, and women he once considered beautiful looking decimated by the crack *he* sold them. He told Oprah that the "light slowly came on. I was like, 'This life has no good ending'...I started to realize that I couldn't be successful [in music] until I let the street life go. That was a leap of faith for me. I said, 'I have to give this everything.'"²²⁰ DJ Clark Kent created the opportunity for Jay-Z to leave the violent world of drugs for good and Jay-Z would indeed give it everything he had.

²¹⁸ Jay-Z, 78-79

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 207.

²²⁰ Winfrey, O. (October, 2009). Oprah Talks to Jay-Z. *O Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.oprah.com/omagazine/Oprah-Interviews-Jay-Z-October-2009-Issue-of-O-Magazine>

Chapter 3: Regrets on the road to riches (1995-2000)

*Still rappin' still drug selling, worked every hustle
And found new mentors like Def Jam's Russell
Simmons it was given that a change was needed
But Jay couldn't get a record deal, felt defeated
Cheated, depleted cause he wanted to rhyme
And to keep selling drugs would lead to death or jail time
Tired of waiting for a label, tired of the hurt
Started his own label with Dash and Burke
As he rose to great fame his high would soon go low
When he lost his best friend B.I.G. after a show
Killed in cold blood after stepping off stage
Jigga thought revenge but spiraled into rage
Had to refocus his life, refocus his soul
Confrontations with the law had him losing control
Chasin' lovely women had him living carefree
Women were just tools for triumph and trophies
No real interest in love, no interest in marriage
But one affair ended soon after a miscarriage
A true period of life and death
A tough period that put Jigga to the test*

By 1995, Jay-Z teetered on the edge of possibilities as a world previously unavailable to him began to reveal itself. In order to navigate the new streams of opportunities and pitfalls before him, Jay-Z needed to be led as his father once led him through the streets of New York. He needed mentors who possessed the same level of integrity as his closest drug dealing colleagues like Calvin “Klein” Bacote and DeHaven Irby. Jay-Z’s negative experience with Jaz-O’s record deal made him more cautious of the music industry. A new network of hip-hop associates could only manifest itself if Jay-Z trusted his instincts enough to form a comfort zone with them. He needed new associates, but he also needed an old associate, DJ Clark Kent, to help him figure out which path to follow. The anthropological eye that his father created in Jay-Z helped him determine who would be the most beneficial to his success in the short and long term.

Jay-Z positioned himself to take on hip-hop full-time, thus the mid-late 1990s served as a period of intense and fast-paced transition for him. His hunger for a better life created a fearless

individual in full pursuit of fame and a new kind of fortune but in order to be successful, he had to decide what values from his upbringing would benefit him and what could harm him. Prior to 1995, the choices Jay-Z made were due to circumstances that were out of his control such as his father's abandonment of him or living in a crime and drug infested community. Jay-Z now faced decisions based on circumstances *he* created: continue selling drugs or sell music; or be a role model or a model thug for all to see as he was catapulted from obscurity to an international stage that manifested from his music. He established new comfort zones as his old comfort zone—selling drugs—became his danger zone after being shot at three times. Remaining a drug dealer had no positive ending. Life as a full-time rapper brought new possibilities but its own set of dangers, as hearing news about a rapper murdered or dying from other causes during the 1990s was commonplace.²²¹

To be a successful artist, Jay-Z had to choose which style of music to create—more mainstream hip-hop that over-referenced sex, drugs, and violence, or music that spoke more to social responsibility. He faced on multiple occasions choices that could either destroy his life or enhance it. He was ready to be a different example for his community but had not fully developed the requisite maturity to do so. The years 1995-2000 were years of multiple crossroads and forks in the road. The crossroads and new horizons he faced were documented in his first four albums from 1995-2000. The albums represented the meeting place between his life of old and his life anew. The first album was entitled *Reasonable Doubt*, released in 1996. Jay-Z said that the success of *Reasonable Doubt*, which he thought would be his only album on his road to becoming a record executive, “was just the beginning of something. That something was

²²¹ Montgomery, O. (2008, November 11). Slideshow: Rappers who were gone too soon. *The Grio*. Retrieved from <http://thegrio.com/2011/11/08/slideshow-rappers-who-were-gone-too-soon/#:heavy-d-dead-at-44-slide-jpg>

the creation of the character Jay-Z.”²²² It is as if Shawn Carter needed to create and dwell on an entirely new person to navigate his new path ahead of him. *Reasonable Doubt* created the foundation for the new Jay-Z:

It’s the foundation of everything that I’ve done...the foundation of me leaving one life to another life. It was the foundation of me telling a story of that life...it’s the foundation of my career as a recording artist...it’s the foundation on which everything was built.²²³

His next three albums were called “*Vol. 1*, *Vol. 2*, and *Vol. 3*, with subtitles—*In My Lifetime*, *Hard Knock Life*, and *Life and Times of S. Carter* respectively. The volume series was meant to emphasize the connection between the albums, that each was a continuation and expansion of the same basic story.”²²⁴ The same basic story was a story of evolution and unfortunately, regression for both Jay-Z as well as Shawn Carter.

Rejected by major record labels, Jay-Z co-founded his own. Since he was in essence self-employed since his teenage years, it was preferable for him to continue as an entrepreneur and be his own boss. He was intent on using the lessons learned as a drug dealer and applying them to hip-hop²²⁵, but how could he redeem himself externally when he had demons to reconcile with internally? Jay-Z’s temper, which he says he inherited from his father, got the better of him on several occasions between 1995 and 2000 and almost cost him his life. The anger he still harbored towards his father caused him to never get emotional in relationships to avoid getting hurt once again. A more guarded Jay-Z rapped about and enjoyed the life of a player, even seducing the fiancée of a legendary hip-hop artist who became his greatest rival.

Jay-Z was a product of his choices—choices that were not entirely based on emotions

²²² Classic Albums Tube (2011, October 6). *Jay Z Reasonable Doubt* [Video file]: Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PNbguRYk9s>

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Jay-Z, 135.

²²⁵ Jay-Z, 87.

from 1995-1999 but more so what or who brought him the greatest utility. By 1996, Jay-Z had to quickly transition from a life where an anonymous persona worked to his advantage as a drug dealer, to an internationally recognized persona with the continued success of his music. He lived a double life as he worked to keep his private life separate from his public persona. There was Shawn Carter and then there was Jay-Z. He wrote that the “core of [the rapper’s] character had to match the core of the rapper himself. But that core gets amplified by the rapper’s creativity and imagination.”²²⁶ So in essence, Shawn Carter used a burst of creativity and his artistic imagination through the character Jay-Z in order to impose himself—both selves—on the world. He could not have chosen a better time to speak to the world.

Jay-Z’s rise to musical prominence was buttressed by the explosion of black popular culture in the 1990s. From *The Cosby Show* and media mogul Oprah Winfrey to basketball and music icons Michael Jordan and Michael Jackson respectively, black culture was on full global display. Rap stars LL Cool J, Will Smith, and Tupac also transitioned into acting and drew more attention to hip-hop.²²⁷

Hip-hop’s growth, however, led to increased opposition from multiple facets of American society from Civil Rights Movement veterans to United States Presidents²²⁸, which caused Jay-Z to respond politically through his music to injustices he saw facing his community. Where some saw controversy in hip-hop, Jay-Z, forever the hustler, saw opportunities for profit. Amidst the rapid expansion of hip-hop, however, tragedy befell the hip-hop community leaving it in search of leadership. The unsolved murders of Tupac and Jay-Z’s best friend The Notorious B.I.G.

²²⁶ Ibid., 291.

²²⁷ LL Cool J starred in the sitcom *In the House* (1995-1999) and Will Smith starred in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996) in addition to his global hit movie *Bad Boys* (1995). Smith’s *Bad Boys* costar was comedian Martin Lawrence, who had his own self-titled successful television run from 1992-1997.

²²⁸ Rose, T. (2008). *The Hip-Hop Wars*. New York: Basic Books.

between 1996 and 1997 led many in the hip-hop community on a soul-searching mission. Jay-Z searched for solace as yet another positive man in his life was ripped away more abruptly and unexpectedly than his father. Rather than choose one direction to follow at the crossroads he faced, Jay-Z blended aspects of the multiple directions and made his own path. His path was made in part looking backwards instead of completely forward, thus he was not exactly sure where the new path would lead him, only where it would lead him away from—the life of a drug dealer.

Jay-Z and Dame Dash experienced constant rejection in 1995 in their search for a record deal in part because, according to DJ Clark Kent, Jay-Z's lyrics were too complicated for record executives. Another reason, according to entertainment lawyer Donald David was that many record labels did not want to produce records they thought promoted violence due to the growing so-called rap war between east and west coast rappers, where rappers on their respective coasts traded vicious lyrical assaults with the media fueling the rivalries. Label executives had reason to be concerned.²²⁹

In 1995, the only way to achieve mainstream success as a rapper was to be signed by a major record company such as Sony, Arista, Def Jam, or Columbia, and have them produce,

²²⁹Greenburg, 32-34. While hip-hop was growing in popularity outside of New York, tensions began to rise between rappers who lived on the east and west coasts of the United States. Some have argued that these were real tensions stemming from west coast rappers trying to get respect from New York, the birthplace of hip-hop. Others argued that this tension was created by seemingly incessant media coverage of incidents involving rappers, some of which were violent. Still others argued that record labels manufactured this “beef” to sell more records, given that some rappers who were battling were signed under the same record label. Lastly, some argued that this tension was nothing more than a battle between two popular rappers: west coast rapper Tupac Shakur and east coast rapper and friend to Jay-Z, Notorious B.I.G. also known as Christopher Wallace. Wallace and Tupac were also friends too at one point, even sharing the stage together before tensions rose. Coastal feuding was covered in the 2003 documentary entitled “Beef.” The documentary points to sensational coverage by the media of any lyric or incident involving rappers. Many rappers such as Jay-Z interviewed in the documentary said that it got to a point that every interviewer was asking them about east vs. west coast beef, often when these rappers were not engaged in a verbal or physical battle with someone on another coast.

manufacture, and distribute the albums for the artist. Without a major record deal, rappers faced relative obscurity. Jay-Z had to choose to either conform to the demands of the record industry or risk failure as an independent artist. He chose to “dumb down for [his] audience to double [his] dollars.”²³⁰ This meant that he chose to emphasize themes related to sex, drugs, and violence because he knew that would sell more records than politically uplifting music, but he remained independent and unsigned. He admired the executive prowess of Def Jam Records co-founder Russell Simmons. He saw Simmons as a powerful mentor to add to his network of associates but it was through Dash that Jay-Z learned valuable lessons about the music business and marketing worlds. Together they crafted a plan to break into the record industry.

According to Kent, Jay-Z and Dash needed each other because Jay-Z was talented but lacked the “determination and forceful personality that would get him a worthy deal in a music industry swarming with curs and cut-throats. And Dash had the business bullishness needed to break an act big, but needed the greatest rapper on the planet to back up his barks.”²³¹ Jay-Z garnered more attention from guest appearances on albums with groups such as Hi-Five, Mic Geronimo, and rap stars like Big Daddy Kane while Dash developed the business aspects of a music label. Simmons said that Dash was the one who thought up the entire business model for the record company.²³² Along with a third partner, Kareem “Biggs” Burke, they created a company in 1995 called Roc-A-Fella Records. According to Greenburg, the name Roc-A-Fella was chosen:

to signify wealth on the level of John D. Rockefeller, the world’s first billionaire, and to evoke images of the Rockefeller family’s enduring dynasty...in the typically ironic fashion that Jay-Z has become known for, the name of the record label

²³⁰ Carter, Shawn (2003). Moment of Clarity (Performed by Jay-Z). On *The Black Album* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records, Def Jam Recordings.

²³¹ Beaumont, 34.

²³² Classic Albums Tube (2011, October 6). *Jay Z Reasonable Doubt* [Video file]: Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PNbguRYk9s>

founded in part with Jay-Z's cocaine-dealing profits was also a clever jab at New York's draconian Rockefeller drug laws.²³³

Constant rejection by the music industry became Jay-Z's *bête noire*. He recalled learning from watching Russell Simmons that it was possible to make a profitable life in the music industry as an artist. Though Simmons was not an artist, Jay-Z saw that Simmons' artists, such as Run DMC, were successful financially from their work. He saw that the days of artists getting signed for cars or small bonuses was changing. Watching Simmons allowed Jay-Z to see the possibility of executive leadership for himself one day, which was unimaginable when he was a drug dealer. As Jay-Z sat across from Simmons negotiating a deal for Roc-A-Fella records, Jay-Z recalls thinking "*I want to be this nigga, not his artist.*" Jay-Z, Dash, and Kareem Biggs were eventually signed to Simmons' label Def Jam, but were able to keep control of their record label.²³⁴



Dame Dash, Jay-z, and Kareem Biggs.²³⁵

The Jay-Z that co-founded Roc-A-Fella learned from his experiences in the music and

²³³ Greenburg, 34. According to Mann, the Rockefeller drug laws, named after Nelson Rockefeller in 1973, made it so that selling two ounces of cocaine would lead to a minimum 15-year stint in prison.

²³⁴ Jay-Z, 82.

²³⁵ Nicholson, R. Roc-A-Fella Records. *Hiphop.sh*. Retrieved from <http://hiphop.sh/rocafella>

drug worlds that he needed to be independent if he wanted to live life on his terms. Deeper than the experiences of drugs and music, the abandonment by his father taught him a harsh lesson about life, choices, and the potential power of the hip-hop generation:

We came out of the generation of black people who finally got the point: No one's going to help us. So we went for self, for family, for block, for crew—which sounds selfish; it's one of the criticisms hustlers and rappers both get, that we're hypercapitalists, concerned only with the bottom line and enriching ourselves. But it's just a rational response to the reality we faced. No one was going to help us. Not even our fathers stuck around. People who looked just like us were gunning for us. Weakness and dependency made you a mark, like a dope fiend. Success could only mean self-sufficiency, being a boss, not a dependent. The competition wasn't about greed—or not just about greed. It was about survival.²³⁶

The realization that he had to save himself drove Jay-Z. The feeling of self-reliance coupled with his need to impose himself on the world through his art and no longer through drug sales is what he credits for saving his life. He wanted to take the lessons learned from his criminal past and redeem himself through hip-hop.²³⁷ He started on his journey to redemption by applying his drug-selling expertise into the music world—he chose to hustle his CDs like he hustled crack. Looking back at his decision to sell music instead of drugs, Jay-Z rapped in Kanye West's 2005 remix of “Diamonds from Sierra Leone” that:

*I do this in my sleep
I sold kilos of coke, I'm guessin' I can sell CDs
I'm not a businessman
I'm a **business**, man
Now let me handle my business, damn.*²³⁸

The Roc-A-Fella team, including Jay-Z, went everywhere possible to push their product out of the back of their trunks: barbershops, supermarkets, bars, venues known to be hangouts for

²³⁶ Ibid., 86.

²³⁷ Ibid., 87.

²³⁸ Carter, S. and West, K. (2005). Diamonds From Sierra Leone (the remix) [performed by Jay-Z and Kanye West]. On *Late Registration* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rapgenius.com/Kanye-west-diamonds-from-sierra-leone-remix-lyrics>. Bold print mine.

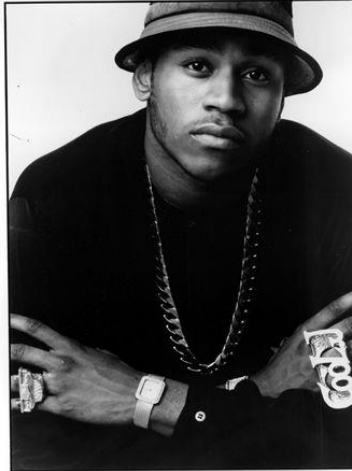
gangsters, and nightclubs. The CD sales brought in less money than selling cocaine at first, but selling CDs plus the small tours he undertook with other rappers gave him a natural high and pushed him to go further. Jay-Z also performed with other famous rappers of the mid-1990s including Ja Rule and DMX. Each appearance on another rapper's album built more popularity for him. In order to get to the next level, however, he had to battle a rapper who was at the top of the hip-hop world. From 1994-1995, that meant James Todd Smith, known to the world as LL Cool J and one of Russell Simmons' first artists under Def Jam.

LL Cool J had sold over 10,000,000 albums in the mid-1990s so he made for a formidable opponent.²³⁹ Dyson recounted that when Jay-Z first started rapping and shared his music with one of his uncles, his uncle told him that he would never be as good a rapper as LL Cool J.²⁴⁰ Jay-Z would not back down from a rap battle, especially if it meant a chance at stardom and the opportunity to leave the drug world for good so he put LL Cool J in his lyrical crosshairs. The Roc-A-Fella street team stalked LL Cool J and alerted Jay-Z whenever he was spotted. Almost as quick at confrontation as his father was when he got the call that his brother's killer was seen, Jay-Z rushed to meet and battle LL Cool J. According to entertainment lawyer Reggie Ossé, Jay-Z always won the battles but LL Cool J always crushed Jay-Z's spirit by mentioning that his next album was due out in a month and then asked Jay-Z where his album was, knowing Jay-Z only had a few singles to his name at the time.²⁴¹

²³⁹ Beaumont, 42-44.

²⁴⁰ Dyson, August 28, 2013. Georgetown University.

²⁴¹ Beaumont, 45.



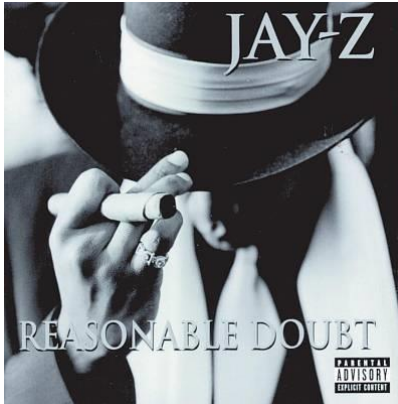
LL Cool J, circa 1994.²⁴²

By 1995 however, Jay-Z generated the substantial buzz needed to launch his first album. Radio play and music videos increased his popularity as well. Because of his experience as a drug dealer, Jay-Z understood the importance of money and used money to help build the popularity he did not yet have from multiple albums. Kevin Liles of Warner Music Group recalls Jay-Z entering his office with bags of money. He told Liles that the money was to “help” Liles get radio play for Jay-Z. Liles was shocked but Jay-Z told him that Roc-A-Fella does not believe in letting people work for free. Jay-Z’s colleague Pain in Da Ass who appears on multiple albums said that Jay-Z and his colleagues were like superheroes with their money. He said Jay-Z would give \$1,000 to a security guard at a nightclub or \$1,000 to a bartender for “keeping the ice warm.”²⁴³ Money was his means to an end, as well as *the* end he sought. Jay-Z’s actions made him a draw for crowds before he took the stage. With his music playing on the radio and the popularity generated from his live performances, Jay-Z launched his first album.

²⁴² Jimmy (2011, September 13). LL Cool J – “The Year Of Hip Hop (’94)”. *Quitmumblng.com*. Retrieved from <http://quitmumblng.com/2011/09/11-cool-j-the-year-of-hip-hop-94/>

²⁴³ Classic Albums Tube (2011, October 6). *Jay Z Reasonable Doubt* [Video file]: Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PNbguRYk9s>

Reasonable Doubt was released in June of 1996. It was an album 26 years in the making, which is why Jay-Z often cites it as his favorite album. He said that he poured his entire life into *Reasonable Doubt*.²⁴⁴ The album and accompanying videos capture a man at a crossroads. He stated that: “[the] fork in the road, [the] way you go defines your life” so he used *Reasonable Doubt* and the videos created from the album to define his life in 1996.



Album cover for *Reasonable Doubt*.²⁴⁵

For example, in the video “In My Lifetime”, Jay-Z and his entourage are seen on yachts in the Caribbean riding speedboats and sipping on Cristal champagne with half-naked women everywhere often bathing in the champagne. The video shows that Jay-Z had one foot in drugs and one foot in hip-hop. Boasting about a connection to the drug and gang world helped add street credibility to rappers and increased their record sales in the 1990s. On his 1996 song “Dead Presidents II”, Jay-Z raps:

*Without rap, I was crazy straight
Partna, I'm still spending money from '88.*²⁴⁶

Jay-Z’s rhyme from “Dead Presidents II” is a reference to him still spending money that he accumulated through drug sales in the 1980s. He said that he and his associates (like DeHaven)

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Huey, S. (2015). Reasonable Doubt. *Allmusic.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.allmusic.com/album/reasonable-doubt-mw0000181538>.

²⁴⁶ Carter, S. (1996). Dead Presidents II [performed by Jay-Z]. On *Reasonable Doubt* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rappenius.com/Jay-z-dead-presidents-ii-lyrics#note-7213>

owned the items seen in the video, which makes it feasible that the items were purchased with drug money since Jay-Z had not yet become rich through rap music in 1996. Though the song did not make the U.S. pop charts, Jay-Z was ready to pursue music full time based off of the popularity of the album.

The abandonment of his life as a drug dealer and newfound popularity as a rapper created a burst artistic creativity, which led to his release of four albums in four years. He remembered a lesson from his mother, who told him that whatever effort he puts into something is what he will get out of it so it was time to put in work in the music industry full time. He recounts his decision to do rap full time in his 2003 song “December 4th”:

*I'm getting ahead of myself, by the way, I could rap
But that came second to me moving this crack
Gimme a second, I swear
I [would] say about my rap career
Til '96 came, niggas I'm here
Good-bye to the game, all the spoils, the adrenaline rush
Your blood boils you in the spot, knowing cops could rush
And you in a drop²⁴⁷, you're so easy to touch
No two days are alike
Except the first and fifteenth, pretty much
And 'trust' is a word you seldom hear from us
Hustlers, we don't sleep, we rest one eye up
And the drought will define a man when the well dries up
You learn the worth of water without work, you thirst til you die, yup!
And niggas get tied up for product
And little brothers' ring fingers get cut up
To show mothers they really got em
And this was the stress I lived with til I decided
To try this rap shit for a livin'
I pray I'm forgiven
For every bad decision I made
Every sister I played
Cause I'm still paranoid to this day
And it's nobody's fault I made the decisions I made*

²⁴⁷ A “drop” is slang for a convertible automobile.

*This is the life I chose, or rather, the life that chose me*²⁴⁸

In “December 4th” Jay-Z claims responsibility for his past as he seizes upon his future. He had to choose what type of music to create. In the mid-1990s, hip-hop’s popularity put the genre at a crossroads. While the concerns of some record labels over violent images in rap were legitimate, mainstream hip-hop albums with violent lyrics and sexual references were the norm, often at the expense of more political raps or raps designed to empower the black community. In speaking of the late Tupac Shakur for example, Chuck D of Public Enemy said that when Tupac “said things that were pro-black and militant, people were not paying any attention to what he was saying so he decided to go more and more into the darkness... The more he played the ‘bad boy’ or ‘rude boy’ image, the bigger and bigger he got.”²⁴⁹ Tupac’s approach was validated by the fact that his 1995 album *Me Against the World* reached #1 status on the billboard charts while he sat in prison on a sexual assault charge, making him the first artist to debut at #1 while in prison.²⁵⁰

Tupac’s method of record sales did not go unnoticed by other rappers, especially Jay-Z the hustler. Following Tupac’s example, *Reasonable Doubt*, speaks about violence, sex, and drugs, but also contains lyrics that speak to the ills that have plagued his community because of drugs. Attorney and MSNBC contributor Ari Melber stated that Jay-Z’s albums have several political themes: turning to crime because of poverty, the law as an unjust means of control, hip-hop as crime, money as the road to freedom and power, and structural racism.²⁵¹ The themes Melber mentions are indeed present on *Reasonable Doubt*, but the latter two themes of freedom

²⁴⁸ Carter, S. (2003). December 4th [performed by Jay-Z]. On *The Black Album* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rappenius.com/Jay-z-december-4th-lyrics>

²⁴⁹ Chuck D, 5.

²⁵⁰ Beaumont, 76.

²⁵¹ Melber, Georgetown.

& power and structural racism did not receive as much attention as the lyrics that referenced sex, drugs, and violence.

On the song “Can I live II” for example, Jay-Z wrote about the degradation of his community and interactions with law enforcement:

*I got feds sending me letters
Cause I'm schoolin' the youth
But they can't lock me down
Cause my tool is the truth
Yeah I sold drugs for a livin'
That's a given
Why is it?
Why don't y'all try to visit the neighborhoods I lived in
My mind been through hell
My neighborhood is crime central
Where cops lock you up more than they try to defend you.²⁵²*

In his lines, Jay-Z directly and indirectly references the police brutality experienced in his community, in addition to a view by law enforcement (in Jay-Z's mind) that black people are guilty until proven innocent. The “given” degradation of his community led him in his eyes to have no choice but to sell drugs as a way to leave his environment.

On “Can I Live II”, Jay-Z addresses the East-West coast “beef” positively when wrote:

*[I] Don't even hate on those who hate me
I got Pac²⁵³ on.²⁵⁴*

Jay-Z used his song “Twenty-two Two's” to condemn what he called “Too much west coast dick lickin'” but also called for peace among all blacks when he rapped:

*To all my brothers it ain't too late to come together
Cause too much black and too much love, equal forever.²⁵⁵*

²⁵² Carter, S. (1996). Can I Live II [performed by Jay-Z]. On *Reasonable Doubt* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://genius.com/Jay-z-can-i-live-ii-lyrics>

²⁵³ Ibid. “Pac” is short for Tupac, who targeted Jay-Z given Jay-Z's association with rival Notorious B.I.G.

²⁵⁴ Carter, S. (1996). Dead Presidents II [performed by Jay-Z]. On *Reasonable Doubt*. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rapgenius.com/Jay-z-can-i-live-ii-lyrics>

²⁵⁵ Carter, S. (1996). Can't Knock the Hustle [performed by Jay-Z]. On *Reasonable Doubt* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://genius.com/Jay-z-cant-knock-the-hustle-lyrics>

His lines came just eight months after the historic Million Man March, which brought between 800,000 and one million black males to Washington DC in a spirit of solidarity.

Jay-Z made clear on the song “Can’t knock the hustle” that his goal with rap music was to exploit it in order to bring some form of equality for black people in America economically:

*At my arraignment screamin’
All us blacks got is sports and entertainment, until we even.*²⁵⁶

In a radio interview with Dyson, Jay-Z said that “Can’t Knock the Hustle” was actually about his own desire to want to be a full-time rapper when he was a drug dealer, though the song appears to be about selling drugs. Since the street hustlers made more money than the rappers, he was embarrassed to say how much he wanted to rap to his drug-dealing colleagues so he sold drugs but rapping was his hustle.²⁵⁷

Jay-Z, like Tupac and other rappers, felt disapproval from activists such as C. Delores Tucker for misogynistic lyrics, most represented in his song “Cashmere Thoughts” where he takes on the persona of a pimp:

*Life's short, so play hard and stick hard
And the only time you love them is when your dick hard
I gotta keep your tricks intact
Cause I walk like a pimp, talk like a mack,
I push hard on a trick: look
Fuck if your leg broke bitch, hop up on your good foot.*²⁵⁸

On *Reasonable Doubt*, Jay-Z constantly reflects on the dangers of the drug world.

Beaumont refers to *Reasonable Doubt* as “fact folded within a fantasy [that] trace[d] the hustler’s

²⁵⁶ Carter, S. (1996). Twenty-two Two’s [performed by Jay-Z]. On *Reasonable Doubt* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rappenius.com/Jay-z-22-twos-lyrics>

²⁵⁷ Dyson, M. (2010, November 18). Michael Eric Dyson and Jay-Z interview. *The Michael Eric Dyson Show*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-QTyamJcoE>

²⁵⁸ Carter, S. (1996). Cashmere Thoughts [performed by Jay-Z]. On *Reasonable Doubt* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rappenius.com/Jay-z-cashmere-thoughts-lyrics>

arc from being a cocky player on the rise to a paranoid maniac at the top of a tree.”²⁵⁹

For example, in the song “Politics as Usual” he wrote:

*Ain't no stoppin' the champagne from poppin'
The drawers²⁶⁰ from droppin', the law from watchin', I hate 'em
Politics as usual.²⁶¹*

In “Politics as Usual” Jay-Z shows that no matter how hard he celebrates his riches, the government is always watching, be it basic street police or federal narcotics agents.

In the song “Regrets” he writes:

*I sold it all from crack to opium, in third person
I don't wanna see them, so I'm rehearsin'
With my peoples how to G them
From a remote location in the BM²⁶²
Scoping the whole situation like, "Damn!"
Metamorphic, as the dope turns to cream
But one of these buyers got eyes like a Korean, it's difficult to read them
The windows to his soul are half closed, I put the key in
Pulled off slow, hoping my people fleeing
Chink tried to knock the only link that tied me in
Coppers was watching us through nighttime binoculars
This time they got us on tape, exchanging dope²⁶³ for dollars
Make me wanna, holla back at the crib in the sauna
Awaiting a call, from his kin not the coroner
Phone in my hand, nervous confined to a corner
Beads of sweat, second thoughts on my mind
How can I ease the stress and learn to live with these regrets
This time, stress, giving this shit up, fuck²⁶⁴*

In “Regrets” Jay-z recounts everything from shady drug deals and police surveillance to fearing news about murders of colleagues as he ponders leaving the drug world forever. When he says in the second line “I don’t wanna see them”, he’s referring to his drug clientele. He said in

²⁵⁹ Beaumont, 69.

²⁶⁰ The word “drawers” is a slang term meaning underwear, particularly women’s underwear in this line.

²⁶¹ Carter, S. (1996). Politics As Usual [performed by Jay-Z]. On *Reasonable Doubt* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rappenius.com/Jay-z-politics-as-usual-lyrics>

²⁶² “BM” is a BMW automobile.

²⁶³ “Dope” is slang for cocaine.

²⁶⁴ Carter, S. (1996). Regrets [performed by Jay-Z]. On *Reasonable Doubt* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rappenius.com/Jay-z-regrets-lyrics>.

an interview on the making of *Reasonable Doubt* that he was starting to have regrets about selling drugs so he sold them through his workers because he could no longer look at the faces of his drug customers. His guilt grew too strong. He says that “Regrets” is the closest he ever came to bringing Shawn Carter and Jay-Z together on the same song,²⁶⁵ which may be the reason why it is the last song on the album. In describing “Regrets” and Jay-Z’s lyrical delivery in general, filmmaker Barry Michal Cooper said:

[His style] was like real quiet almost everyday conversation about some of the most heinous things you can think of that happened in the streets along with a sense of regret and remorse and melancholy...He understands the price he had to pay. He understands that Faustian deal he had to make. He’s not happy with it but this is what it is...He brought angst and existentialism to the street. In terms of ‘I’m a hustler on the outside, I’m ice cold on the inside. I shouldn’t be doing this. I’m killing people. I’m killing myself. There’s stress...He always gave the consequences to the road to riches.’²⁶⁶

The surveillance by law enforcement is another constant theme on the album. In his song “Dead Presidents II”²⁶⁷ he rapped:

*Factions from the other side would love to kill me
Spill 3 quarts of my blood into the street
Let alone the heat²⁶⁸
Fuck em, they hate a nigga loving this life
In all possible ways, know the Feds is buggin²⁶⁹ my life.²⁷⁰*

In the first version of this song that did not make the album, Jay-Z explains the ups and downs and paranoia of the street hustler lifestyle:

²⁶⁵ Classic Albums Tube (2011, October 6). *Jay Z Reasonable Doubt* [Video file]: Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PNbguRYk9s>

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ The term “Dead Presidents” is a slang term referring to money, which features dead United States Presidents, with the exception of Ben Franklin, who appears on the \$100 bill.

²⁶⁸ “Heat” is slang for the police.

²⁶⁹ The word “buggin” is slang for annoying an individual but it also means “bugging” as in the FBI placing a wire tap or “bug” to listen in on conversations.

²⁷⁰ Carter, S. (1996). Dead Presidents II [performed by Jay-Z]. On *Reasonable Doubt* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rappenius.com/Jay-z-dead-presidents-ii-lyrics#note-7213>

Watch how I'm walking cause even the thoroughest niggas be narkin'²⁷¹
 Tryin' to strike a bargain hoping that they might get pardoned
 Shit I'm involved with got me on pins and needles
 And my cerebral breeds the wickedest evil thoughts that this sport'll feed you
 Peep facts, in the game so deep fiends could catch ya
 Freeze off my knee cap, can y'all believe that?
 There's heaven, then there's hell niggas
 One day you're cruising in your 7²⁷², next day you're sweating, forgetting your lies
 Alibis ain't matching up, bullshit catching up
 Hit with the RICO²⁷³, they repo your vehicle
 Everything was all good just a week ago
 'Bout to start bitching ain't you? Ready to start snitching ain't you?
 I'll forgive your weak ass; hustling just ain't you
 Aside from the fast cars, honeys that shake they ass at bars
 You know you wouldn't be involved
 With the underworld dealers, carriers of mac-millers
 East Coast bodiers, West Coast cap-peelers²⁷⁴
 Little monkey niggas turn gorillas
 Stopped at the station, filled up on octane
 And now they not sane and not playing, that goes without saying
 Slaying day in and day out with money playing, then they play you out.²⁷⁵

Beaumont writes that *Reasonable Doubt* “put on all the surface toughness and braggadocio of the very in vogue gangsta rap. Lavished with grotesque hustling detail [and] simultaneously undermined that very image with hints of fear, regret, desperation and humanity.”²⁷⁶ *Reasonable Doubt* only sold 420,000 units initially, which did not compare to the bigger names in hip-hop but the album was successful because it penetrated a new area of hip-hop culture. Filmmaker Barry Michael Cooper explained the significance of *Reasonable Doubt*:

He gave a very lurid depiction of what was going on in the streets like nobody before him. He was the voice of the crack generation...He gave it a very intelligent precise voice and in doing so he became like what Scorsese did with both *Mean Streets* and *Goodfellas* and *Scarface* and even a movie that I wrote like *New Jack City*...He became the articulate voice of this guy we looked at as the

²⁷¹ The word “Narkin” refers to working with narcotics units of the police in order to get a better deal with the courts.

²⁷² “7” is a reference to version of an automobile considered top of the line.

²⁷³ RICO stands for the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act.

²⁷⁴ “Bodiers” and “cap peelers” refer to murderers and shooters.

²⁷⁵ Carter, S. (1995). Dead Presidents [performed by Jay-Z]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records. Retrieved from <http://rappeni.us.com/Jay-z-dead-presidents-lyrics>.

²⁷⁶ Beaumont, 72.

bad guy. He was the first one to actually be bare naked and honest with the reality of what the streets can bring.²⁷⁷

Jay-Z made good on his promise to bring the voice of the hustler to hip-hop and he found that there was a willing audience to hear him speak so he needed to study the success of successful rappers to see how he could take himself to a higher level.

Hip-hop in 1996 belonged to the Fugees, Nas, Notorious B.I.G., and Tupac Shakur so Jay-Z analyzed their success. At the height of the so-called East-West coast feud, Tupac was the shining star of the west, looking to extinguish the light of anyone associated with Nas or Notorious B.I.G. Tupac was on track to becoming rap music's first international superstar. Other American rappers like Will Smith were always performing overseas, but between music and a growing film career, Tupac's popularity grew at a faster pace than other rappers and so anyone he targeted also grew in stature.

Notorious B.I.G. legitimized Jay-Z by appearing on *Reasonable Doubt*. Notorious B.I.G. was not just a rap colleague to Jay-Z. They were actual friends. They met at Westinghouse High School but did not connect. Jay-Z "distinctly recall[ed] passing him in the hallway and giving him the universal black-man-half-nod of recognition."²⁷⁸ They reconnected for *Reasonable Doubt*. When B.I.G. heard the beat for the song "Brooklyn's Finest," he told DJ Clark Kent that he *had* to be on that song. That same night, Jay-Z and B.I.G. went to a Bernie Mack comedy show and their friendship grew. Once Jay-Z developed a comfort zone with a potential colleague, he cultivated the relationship. B.I.G. took a break from his tour to be in Jay-Z's video. Though B.I.G. was a multiplatinum selling rapper, he helped newcomer Jay-Z not only with his album,

²⁷⁷ Classic Albums Tube (2011, October 6). *Jay Z Reasonable Doubt* [Video file]: Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PNbguRYk9s>

²⁷⁸ Jay-Z, 269.

but with career advice in general.²⁷⁹ Jay-Z had in B.I.G. a rapper-mentor who was more successful than Jaz-O so he respected B.I.G.'s knowledge on the record industry and learned from him.



Jay-Z and Notorious B.I.G., circa 1995.²⁸⁰

Tensions that existed between rappers were seen as a marketing tool for record label executives, who profited off of rappers creating a bad boy image. The corporatization of hip-hop significantly increased the earning potential for those involved in hip-hop, and Jay-Z prepared himself to take advantage of the new marketability of rap music, following in Tupac and B.I.G.'s footprints. Corporations that became involved in hip-hop exploited it by selling the image of the rapper as part of the American Dream. In *Business Week*'s article entitled "The CEO of Hip-Hop", the authors write:

There is hardly a major consumer company around that isn't trying to cash in on hip-hop's singular popularity, if not its edgy authenticity. Hip-hop music, and its signature style, rap...grew into an entire way of life, and today dominates youth culture. It's not about race or place. It's an attitude, a state of mind. Marketing experts estimate that one-quarter of all discretionary spending in America today is influenced by hip-hop. Coke, Pepsi, Heineken, Courvoisier, McDonald's, Motorola, Gap, Cover Girl -- even milk: They all use hip-hop to sell themselves. 'There has been a bona fide cultural shift,' says Marian Salzman, chief strategic

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 253-257.

²⁸⁰ ChasinDatPaper (2013, July 6). Producer D Dot Compares The Notorious B.I.G. Vs. Jay-Z's Studio Work Ethic "Jay Worked Faster. Big Took Longer Because He Wanted To Make Sure Every Line Was Memorable" [Video]. *Thisis50.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.thisis50.com/profiles/blogs/producer-d-dot-compares-the-notorious-b-i-g-vs-jay-z-s-studio>

officer at advertising agency Euro RSCG Worldwide. ‘This is the new mainstream,’ says Erin Patton, president of the Mastermind Group, marketing consultants. And, in truth, there is no easy way to fully calculate its impact on our clothes, cars, movies, music, commercials, our very language.²⁸¹

Hip-hop grew faster as its relationship with the corporate world grew at a rapid pace.

Watkins refers to the 1990s as a time when “the vibrant world of hip hop grew into a gold mine of entrepreneurial activity” and Jay-Z hustled his way into it. Watkins writes that in addition to “the vibrant music and magazine publishing industries, the gold rush in hip-hop produced a seemingly endless sea of opportunities in other industries like apparel, film, art, music video, and marketing.”²⁸² Jay-Z’s business mind that he developed as a drug dealer prepared him to take advantage of hip-hop’s rising popularity, but his user’s mind also prepared him to take advantage in 1996 of rapper Nas’ then-fiancée Carmen Bryan. Jay-Z struck up a relationship with Bryan in 1996. In 1996, Bryan had a two-year old child with Nas named Destiny. Only time could reveal if the relationship was created by Jay-Z out of genuine love, lust, or revenge against Nas for refusing to appear on the *Reasonable Doubt* album.²⁸³

²⁸¹ Berfield, B. (2003, October 26). The CEO of Hip-Hop. *Bloomberg Business Week*. Retrieved from: http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/03_43/b3855001_mz001.htm

²⁸² Watkins, S.C. (2005). *Hip-Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of the Movement*. Boston: Beacon Press, pp. 56-58.

²⁸³ Greenburg, 58. According to Jay-Z’s rap mentor Jaz-O, Jay-Z tried to get Nas to collaborate with him as far back as 1993, before either of them had released an album. Nas is recognized as one of the greatest rappers of all time, ever since his classic album *Illmatic* debuted in 1994, two years before the release of *Reasonable Doubt*.²⁸³ Jay-Z admits to respecting Nas as a rapper, but became furious when Nas and his rap colleague AZ never showed up for studio recording sessions to appear on *Reasonable Doubt*. With Nas continually dismissing Jay-Z’s requests, Jay-Z sampled Nas’ voice on his song “Dead Presidents II.”



Carmen Bryan.²⁸⁴

The autumn of 1996 brought more success for Jay-Z on the heels of *Reasonable Doubt* but the hip-hop world was struck by tragedy in when Tupac Shakur was shot on September 7th in a drive-by shooting in Las Vegas. He died on September 13th after his mother decided to discontinue his life support. Tupac, at the time of his slaying, had increased his attacks on Notorious B.I.G. and his associates including Jay-Z. Jay-Z performed a song at the Apollo Theater attacking Tupac but chose to never perform it again after Tupac was killed.²⁸⁵ Suge Knight, the CEO of Death Row Records (to which Tupac was signed) was in the car with Tupac but was only hit by bullet shrapnel. Knight blamed Notorious B.I.G., his manager and Bad Boy Records CEO Puff Daddy for Tupac's death, which immediately linked Jay-Z to Tupac's murder indirectly due to his relationship with B.I.G.

Jay-Z continued to work on new music in the aftermath of Tupac's death and deepened his relationship with Notorious B.I.G. Jay-Z said that after they connected on Jay-Z's song "Brooklyn's Finest", they spoke every day. By early 1997, Notorious B.I.G. was on top of the

²⁸⁴ Berrios, M. (2013, September 19). Nas' Baby Mama Carmen Bryan Tweets About Jay-Z Affair & Hating Kelis. *Hiphopwired.com*. Retrieved from <http://hiphopwired.com/2013/09/19/nas-baba-mama-carmen-bryan-tweets-about-jay-z-affair-hating-kelis/>

²⁸⁵ XXL staff (2006, October 30). Jay-Z: Countdown to Kingdom Come. *XXL Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.xxlmag.com/news/2006/10/jay-z-countdown-to-kingdom-come/3/>.

rap world and working on his second studio album, *Life After Death*. The title was symbolic for both B.I.G. and Jay-Z because it metaphorically represented the death of the drug dealer and the birth of the full-time hip-hop hustle for them both. Jay-Z learned from B.I.G., who was teaching Jay-Z what Tupac taught him when they were friends²⁸⁶:

Big was a genius poet and storyteller and an explosively charismatic character. And we were friends. But even more than that, for Brooklyn MCs like me, Biggie represented the dream fulfilled. We were peers, but he was the one blazing the trail from the streets to a place where he could support himself and his family through his art—and then beyond that to building new businesses, bringing his crew along, and conquering a world he'd only just started to discover.²⁸⁷

Unfortunately, the title *Life After Death* became much more than a metaphor for Notorious B.I.G. On March 9, 1997, Notorious B.I.G. was murdered just like Tupac in a drive-by shooting in Los Angeles after attending *The Soul Train Music Awards*. Rappers from New York were advised to not go to California because the state was Tupac's home but B.I.G. thought that he could be a peacemaker by going to Los Angeles to show that he loved the west coast and that the west coast loved him.²⁸⁸

Jay-Z spoke to B.I.G. the night of his murder. He said that B.I.G. felt unstoppable after delivering a strong performance at *The Soul Train Music Awards*. He said that B.I.G. believed the California fans embraced him and were never really against him in his feud with Tupac. Lastly, B.I.G. told Jay-Z that he felt *Life After Death* was going to be successful. The album actually included a song expressing his love for California.²⁸⁹ B.I.G. went to California to “spread love”, a term that became popular from his first hit song “Juicy.”²⁹⁰ For Jay-Z, B.I.G.

²⁸⁶ The Notorious B.I.G. on *The Wake Up Show* with Sway & King Tech [Video File]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-sW1kBUPViI>.

²⁸⁷ Jay-Z, 328.

²⁸⁸ The Notorious B.I.G. on *The Wake Up Show* with Sway & King Tech [Video File].

²⁸⁹ 100mackjones. *Legendary Jay-Z/Juan Epstein Interview* [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-WPOySrrfA>

²⁹⁰ Wallace, C. (1994). Juicy (performed by The Notorious B.I.G.). On *Ready to Die* [CD]. New York: Bad Boy Records.

was a conflict averse and peace loving person who had grand visions for himself. In reflecting on the murder, Jay-Z wrote in 2010:

For someone like that to get shot and killed the way he did tore me up. The whole Tupac beef was so pointless. [B.I.G.] just tried to avoid the whole thing. He never did anything wrong in that situation. His death was so senseless, so wrong, that it drove me crazy with rage and sadness.²⁹¹

Jay-Z, a pallbearer at B.I.G.'s funeral, released his frustrations through his music. He said that B.I.G.'s killing "destroyed [his] sense of a just universe."²⁹² The killings of Tupac and B.I.G. impacted Jay-Z not only as a friend to B.I.G. but also to his professional development as a rapper. Jay-Z said that he "always felt robbed of [his] chance to compete with Tupac and Biggie, in the best sense, and not just over first-week sales numbers." He compares himself to Michael Jordan not having a chance to battle NBA legends Larry Bird and Magic Johnson, who left the NBA just as Jordan reached his prime.²⁹³

Beaumont underscored the impact B.I.G. had on Jay-Z:

The man who'd encouraged [Jay-Z] to embrace a wider, more mainstream appeal by slowing his raps and recording with Puffy, and who'd invited him to contribute a typically cash-flashing verse to 'I Love the Dough' for his [final] album *Life after Death*...his big Brooklyn rock, had been snatched away.²⁹⁴

Jay-Z focused more on his music so he could take over for his fallen friend as the so-called "Rap king of New York." Jay-Z chose to be a leader in hip-hop as B.I.G. was a leader for hip-hop. In the same manner that his father let Jay-Z take the lead walking the streets of New York with his older siblings, Jay-Z was now ready to lead rappers in a new direction, however, B.I.G.'s presence would be felt in Jay-Z's work for the rest of his career, positively and

²⁹¹ Jay-Z, 287.

²⁹² 100mackjones. *Legendary Jay-Z/Juan Epstein Interview* [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-WPOySrrfA>

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 71. The comparison is accurate because Jordan did speak about not having an opportunity to compete against Magic and Bird because Bird retired as Jordan was reaching his prime playing years and Magic retired early after contracting HIV.

²⁹⁴ Beaumont, 78.

negatively.

Following B.I.G.'s pre-murder suggestion, Jay-Z worked with Puffy on his second album *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1*. He went for more of a pop feel than *Reasonable Doubt*. The album, released in November of 1997, was more of a *mélange* between the hustling life and the pop world, which reflected a Jay-Z who was “still transitioning to [his] new life [and] still trying to figure out how to balance all of the elements of [his] past and present.”²⁹⁵ His song “Rap Game/Crack Game” speaks to the similarities he saw between drug and music sales:

*We treat this rap shit just like handlin' weight
What they want we give it to 'em, what they abandon we take
Hit a rapper with consignment, let him know what's at stake
Put his ass in the studio, let him cook up a cake
When it's hot, get him a money spot in every state
Like the wiz of Camelot, the Mom and Pop's at the gate
But first we scope shit, advertise in every area
Let the fiends know hey, we got some dope shit
Gon' need a middle man, so we look to radio
Let 'em test the product, give 'em a promo show
Just a breeze, not enough to catch a real vibe
Then we drop a maxi single and charge 'em two for five
Ain't tryin' to, kill 'em at first just, buildin' clientele
So when the album drops the first weeks it's on sale
But when demand grows it's time to expand yo
You don't want no garbage papi it's ten grand per blow, fo' sho'
I got that uncut raw to make a fiend's body jerk
Got your whole block now, pumpin' my work
My CD's is like keys for you Willie's who
Like to floss my cassette tapes in sixty-two's
And my singles like jums, you know the treys
Get you high for a while but the high don't stay
You need another fix, you better cop these last two bricks
'Cause when this shit flip, I'ma get on some other shit
Never pitchin' for a label, Jigga's the hook-up
You know my shit is fish scale, y'all niggaz is cook up
Just blow up, scream my name from Brooklyn to Da-kota
They know my shit stretch without the baking soda
Went from an eighth, to a quarter, to a half a key
Priority's work wasn't right so I switched factories
Now I'm the new nigga, who figured I'd get the game locked*

²⁹⁵ Jay-Z, 329.

*Now watch how the prices of your Cocaine drop, ha ha*²⁹⁶

In “Crack Game” Jay-Z shows how he applies the same skill set to rap music that he did to selling drugs. From using radio as a middle man to planting rappers in specific areas to build their clientele or fan base similar to a crack street worker, Jay-Z uses this song to highlight his belief that both the drug and rap worlds function off of one fundamental human concept: supply and demand.

Puffy’s presence on several songs was the first instance of B.I.G.’s spirit on the album. The next would be Jay-Z’s tribute to B.I.G. on his second song, “The City is Mine”:

*What the deal playboy, just rest your soul
I be holding it down yo still love the dough*²⁹⁷
*Got these ladies on the cock now you know how we go
Got the whole world on lock down you know how we flow
Don't worry about Brooklyn I continue to flame
Therefore a world with amnesia won't forget your name
You held it down long enough, let me take those reigns
And just like your spirit the Commission*²⁹⁸ *remains
Niggas can cross the T's and, dot the I's
Now that I got too popular to cop them pies*²⁹⁹
*I'm takin this rap shit serious, to my demise
Jay shit's like cake mix, watch me rise
Basics in the basement, wasted
Asking my dog*³⁰⁰ *for advice so when he can't say shit
My hatred is, fueled just give me a sign
And I let the world know that the city is mine?*³⁰¹

In further tribute to B.I.G., B.I.G.’s mistress and fellow rapper Lil’ Kim raps on the song “I Know What Girls Like.” He also mentions B.I.G. in several other songs like “Friend or Foe

²⁹⁶ Carter, S. (1997). Rap Game/Crack Game (performed by Jay-Z). On *In my Lifetime*, Vol. [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://www.songlyrics.com/jay-z/rap-gamecrack-game-lyrics/>

²⁹⁷ “Love the dough” is a reference to the collaborative song on Notorious B.I.G.’s last album.

²⁹⁸ “The Commission” was a rap group B.I.G. formed, which included Jay-Z.

²⁹⁹ “Cop them pies” refers to selling drugs.

³⁰⁰ His “dog” being a slang reference for his friend, B.I.G.

³⁰¹ Carter, S. (1998). The City Is Mine [performed by Jay-Z]. On *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rappenius.com/Jay-z-the-city-is-mine-lyrics>.

'98.”

In “Lucky Me” he speaks about how fame is beginning to change his life:

*Y'all don't even know everyday I'm livin with stress
Got up out the streets you think a nigga could rest
Can't even enjoy myself at a party unless
I'm on the dance floor hot ass vest³⁰²
You think I'm freakin' these chicks right?
I try not to brush against they chest
You get a lawsuit for shit like that, I feel trapped
Swear to everything when I leave this earth
It's gon' be on both feet, never knees in the dirt
You could try me fucka but when I squeeze it hurts, fine
We'll lose two lives, yours and mines
Gimme any amount of time don't let Ms. Carter grieve
At the funeral parlor drippin' tears on my sleeve
Told the judge didn't budge it was him or me
And I ain't trying to be hard but I'm guilty as charged
Put my mercy on this court and my faith in God
And pray hard none of my nephews wanna be stars...Lucky Me³⁰³*

His collaboration with west coast rap legend Too \$hort was an attempt to quell some of the East vs. West Coast tension that was lingering. In their song “Real Niggaz” he wrote:

*Now peep, how sweet, niggas lives can get
Put beef aside, the East and Westside connect
If you want it, keep ballin, and if you jealous stop
I want Biggie to rest in peace, as well as 'Pac
How real is that?³⁰⁴*

Jay-Z continued to ascend with the growth of hip-hop in the late 1990s. Despite congressional hearings on hip-hop; protests by police and legends of the Civil Rights Movement; the condemning of hip-hop by a sitting U.S. President and several presidential candidates; and the deaths of arguably two of the biggest musicians of any genre in the mid-1990s, hip-hop's

³⁰² “Vest” is a bullet-proof vest.

³⁰³ Carter, S. (1998). Lucky Me [performed by Jay-Z]. On *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rappenius.com/Jay-z-lucky-me-lyrics>

³⁰⁴ Carter, S. (1998). Real Niggaz [performed by Jay-Z]. On *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rappenius.com/Jay-z-real-niggaz-lyrics>

influence continued to grow exponentially. Part of the reason hip-hop grew was its continued expansion into white American youth culture. The year 1998 demonstrated hip-hop's musical dominance and its influence on white America like no other time heretofore.

According to *Spin Magazine* writer Charles Aaron, by the late 1990s, hip-hop was no longer in the shadows and was no longer framed by racial confrontation. Its music topped charts and hip-hop slang became common language. After the death of rock band Nirvana lead singer Kurt Cobain in 1994, Aaron states that the "hip-hop kid—oversized clothes, syrupy slang, skateboard double parked outside—emerged as the nineties embodiment of youthful, white alienation."³⁰⁵ Jay-Z's second album, *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1* debuted at #3 on the Billboard top 200 chart, so Jay-Z was poised to take full advantage of hip-hop's rising popularity.

Jay-Z argued that 1998 was a significant year for rap:

It was two years after Pac had been gunned down, and just a year after Biggie was killed. DMX dropped two number one albums that year. [Southern rap group] Outkast released *Aquemini*...Mos Def and Talib Kweli had their *Black Star* album, one of the definitive indie rap records of all time. The prototypical 'backpack rappers,' A Tribe Called Quest, released their last album, *The Love Movement*. And the biggest album of the year in any genre was *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*...It was a beautiful time all around in hip-hop.³⁰⁶

Jay-Z quickly capitalized on his newfound star status and released his third album in 1998, *Vol. 2...Hard Knock Life*, less than a year after the release of *In My Lifetime, Vol.1*. His third album debuted at #1 on the Billboard charts. According to Jay-Z, 1998 represented a beautiful time for diversity in hip-hop, and the fact that his album *Vol. 2...Hard Knock Life* (part two of his album trilogy) was number one, followed respectively by rap groups Outkast, A Tribe

³⁰⁵ Aaron, 216. Aaron writes that by 1998, "millions of white kids [were] defining themselves through non-white culture." This was proven by the SoundScan reporting that 71% of rap music was purchased by whites in 1997 and R&B music (including rap) was the top-selling music genre in the same year. Teenage Research Unlimited reported in October of 1997 that baggy pants were the preferred style of 78% of white teenagers. Corporate America was cashing in on this as well, according to Aaron, stating that from "Nike to Sprite, sampling and selling black cool to white consumers is the get-rich quick scheme of the decade."

³⁰⁶ Jay-Z, 159.

Called *Quest*, and Lauryn Hill, was incredible for Jay-Z because the albums “together told the story of young black America from four dramatically different perspectives—we were bohemians and hustlers and revolutionaries and space-age Southern boys...funny and serious, spiritual and ambitious, lovers and gangsters, mothers and brothers...this was the full picture of our generation.”³⁰⁷ Hip-hop had something seemingly for everyone in 1998 and record sales proved it.

In the spring of 1999, Jay-Z focused on the creation of a more positive image for himself and hip-hop overall. His opportunity to do so came sooner than he, or the nation expected. On April 20th, 1999, high school students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold entered their high school, Columbine High School, and slaughtered twelve students and one teacher before killing themselves. The incident shocked the nation and led to a massive outpouring of support financially and emotionally to all of those affected.³⁰⁸ The massacre at Columbine did not go unnoticed by Jay-Z.



l-r: Ja-Rule, DMX, Jay-Z, and Beanie Sigel on the “Hard Knock Life Tour”, 1999. ³⁰⁹

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 159.

³⁰⁸ Toppo, G. (2009, April 14). 10 years later, the real story behind Columbine. *USA Today*. Retrieved from http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2009-04-13-columbine-myths_N.htm

³⁰⁹ 797 (2013, March 10). *Aintnojigga.tumblr.com*. Retrieved from <http://aintnojigga.tumblr.com/post/44977449302/jay-z-ja-rule-dmx-and-beanie-sigel-during-the>

Jay-Z and Roc-A-Fella Records, partnering with DMX and his group the Ruff Ryders, embarked in the spring of 1999 on a 48-city, nearly 3-month tour called the “Hard Knock Life Tour.” Featuring some of the biggest acts in hip-hop such as Ja Rule, Redman, and Method Man in addition to Jay-Z and DMX, the tour made over \$18,000,000. Every night turned a profit for Roc-A-fella Records except the concert in Colorado. Jay-Z and Dash decided to donate all of the proceeds from that night to Columbine High School. Thus in addition to the creation of one of the most successful tours in rap history where no artists dropped off and no incidents of violence were reported,³¹⁰ Jay-Z became part of an important humanitarian act all in the name of hip-hop. For Jay-Z, the man who once sold crack to his community now chose to help communities positively through financial contributions. The success of the tour plus the charitable gesture helped to shed a more positive light on hip-hop, as well as Jay-Z, whose name and brand would suffer later in 1999.

The plan for the Hard Knock Life tour was to show that hip-hop had emerged as a national force on its own. Promoters attempted to get Roc-A-Fella Records to add R&B groups to the roster in order to “soften the rough edges for the arena audience, but Dash had rejected their advances and, imagining a future where Jay played U2-style stadium tours across the globe to a wide and disparate audience”³¹¹, kept the tour roster full of hip-hop artists. Beaumont states that many thought the concert would fail given that rap concerts in the 1990s “were regularly being cancelled by police order due to rumours of gang violence and gunfire.” He also writes that riot police were present at some of the concerts.³¹² The success of the Hard Knock Life Tour Helped to provide a different narrative to the violent imagery often associated with rap music

³¹⁰ Z. (1999, October 1). Jay-Z Eyes New “Hard Knock Life” Tour. MTV News. Retrieved from <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1428187/jay-z-eyes-new-hard-knock-life-tour.jhtml>

³¹¹ Beaumont, 112.

³¹² Ibid., 112.

and proved that hip-hop could create successful tours of its own. Despite (or due to) the success of the Hard Knock Life Tour, issues of police and governmental forces tracking the movement of hip-hop artists including Jay-Z, increased.³¹³ Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s government and law enforcement surveillance was focused on civil rights and black liberation leaders, the new perceived threat to America came from rappers, mere musicians. It seems as if throughout American history, any group that featured charismatic black males was targeted for surveillance at the least and assassinations at most. Surveillance was in essence the inheritance of black rappers. One of the more infamous groups involved in hip-hop surveillance work was the New York Police Department or NYPD.

According to the documentary “Black & Blue: Legends of the Hip-hop Cop”, retired police officer Derrick Parker took credit for establishing the taskforce on rappers in New York. He told MTV that he “was the one who started the whole thing... The unit was created... When Biggie was buried here in New York, there was a lot of concern, there were a lot of threats made. The chief [of the department] wanted me to run this entire investigation for him and to report to him.” He told MTV that for over four years, he gathered intelligence on rappers’ movements and past criminal activity. Rather than an actual task force, Parker said that he basically operated within the Gang Intel unit.³¹⁴ For Jay-Z, however, the goal of Parker’s unit was not to protect

³¹³ According to the documentary, police in numerous cities across America began developing units to track the movements of rappers. While it is true that the black community has always been targeted for surveillance by the police, FBI, or other offices within the American government, these surveillance measures were primary created under the guise of monitoring political activity. Rappers, for the most part, were engaging in musical and recreational activities (such as drug use and rampant partying) so this came as a surprise for many. The documentary suggests that in the wake of the murder of Tupac and Notorious B.I.G., these surveillance departments opened. Whenever a rap concert was coming to a city like Miami or Los Angeles, task forces in these cities would do everything possible to learn about the rappers and their entourages, but it is not entirely clear if these departments were set up to protect rappers and their fans or entrap them.

³¹⁴ Century, D. (2007). Hip-Hop Cops: is the NYPD at war with Hip-Hop? MTV. Retrieved from http://www.mtv.com/bands/t/task_force/news_feature_020503/index.jhtml

rappers, but to entrap them.³¹⁵

Jay-Z recalls encountering Parker, the “Hip-hop Cop” at concerts saying that Parker “stayed outside the club I was in... at every club, every show.” For Jay-Z, the “Hip-hop Cop” and his taskforce was just another example of America’s problem with hip-hop and rappers, who continually “work under the preemptive suspicion of law enforcement.” Why? For Jay-Z, the answer was simple: “rappers are young black men telling stories that the police, among others, don’t want to hear... The fact that law enforcement treats rap like organized crime tells you a lot about just how deeply rap offends some people—they’d love for rap *itself* to be a crime.”³¹⁶

Jay-Z believed that his career as a rapper was under more scrutiny than when he sold drugs. He writes that he came to understand why police watched him when he was a drug dealer but as a rapper it did not make sense, except for America’s longstanding problem with black men. Jay-Z writes that when the “politicians can’t censor you and the industry can’t marginalize you, call the cops. The statistics on the incarceration of black men, particularly of my generation, are probably the most objective indication that young black men are seen in this country as a ‘problem’ that can be made to literally disappear.” Jay-Z holds that all types of people commit crimes from bus drivers to accountants. America’s disdain for rap and rich black men is what caused the problem for hip-hop artists in terms of over-surveillance, in his opinion. He notes that Tupac and Notorious B.I.G. were targeted by police and getting shot at *after* they became

³¹⁵ Dreisinger, B. and Kennedy, B. (2006). *Black & Blue: Legends of the Hip-Hop Cop* [DVD]. Los Angeles: QD3 Entertainment. The documentary shows that the binders of hip-hop intelligence were actually illegal because, dating back to 1994, the binders (shown in the documentary) showed everything from registered motor vehicles to criminal activity including cases that were supposed to be dismissed and sealed. There was also a racial profiling component to the taskforce because everyone in the binders was black. Groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and activists like the Reverend Al Sharpton targeted police departments for their alleged discrimination. Attorney King Downing of the ACLU said in the documentary that even the federal government was involved in rap investigations, given that the seal for the federal agency HIDTA: the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Unit, appears on many of the documents on rappers published in the binders. King refers to these acts as “surveillance without suspicion.”

³¹⁶ Jay-Z, 162-163.

famous. Tupac was not shot at when he drove around town and recorded police activity as a teenager³¹⁷ and Notorious B.I.G., according to Jay-Z, was not marked for death when he was dealing drugs.³¹⁸ Jay-Z's words may reflect a sense of paranoia, but statistics on incarceration support his comments.³¹⁹

Similar to the way some rappers felt the media exaggerated the so-called East Coast vs. West Coast rap wars, Jay-Z believed that the police crossed too many lines in their surveillance of rappers, notwithstanding Jay-Z gave them reason to pursue him on at least one occasion. Whether the police were right or wrong in their surveillance of rappers, Jay-Z's inability to let go of certain aspects of his past street life nearly cost him his career and his life. He had not learned that the choices he made as a lesser known artist would be magnified once he became famous.

On December 9th, 1999, while Jay-Z prepared to launch his fourth album, *Vol. 3...Life and Times of S. Carter*, he became irate after learning that his album was leaked (released without authorization). He approached the alleged album leaker, colleague Lance "Un" Rivera, and they engaged in a heated argument in which Jay-Z allegedly stabbed Rivera. Rivera went straight to the police and Jay-Z was charged with assault.³²⁰ The trial lasted two years.³²¹

³¹⁷ Stanford, 10.

³¹⁸ Jay-Z, 94.

³¹⁹ National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (2014). Criminal Justice Fact Sheet. Retrieved from <http://www.naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>. According to the "Prison fact sheet" of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the number of people incarcerated in America rose from 500,000 to 2,300,000 from 1980-2008. It states that though the United States is 5% of the world's population, it holds 25% of the world's prisoners. Racially speaking, the NAACP reported that African Americans, less than 14% of the American population, make up approximately 1,000,000 of the total 2,300,000 who are incarcerated, are nearly six times as likely to be incarcerated as whites, and along with Latinos made up 58% of all prisoners in 2008 though together they are approximately 25% of the United States population.

³²⁰ Jay-Z, 110-111.

³²¹ Greenburg, 42.



Lance "Un" Rivera.³²²

According to Jay-Z, rappers confronting people who leaked their albums was not new.

The difference came when Jay-Z decided to turn himself in:

That's when I realized how serious things were, not because they threw me in the Tombs, but because they started setting up a press conference. The district attorney had his publicist on the phone, the cop that was assigned to do the perp walk with me was combing his hair and fixing his collar; it was a complete show for them.³²³

Jay-Z described the severity of the Rivera stabbing incident versus other incidents he and other poor blacks have had with police in his 2002 album *The Blueprint 2: The Gift & The Curse*:

*'In My Lifetime' I caught smaller cases, but I had capital
Hypocritic system let me right back at you
You better hope a rich rapper never attacks you
Not even that scratches you, 'specially if you black dude
They don't give a shit unless the accused just happen to rap
And they can look good by paintin him as bad news cause in my past,
I seen dudes get half of they views
Exposed to the curb and nobody said a word
So imagine how disturbed I was
When I seen how big they made my fight scene at the club
Let me explain exactly how this shit was
This nigga Un yo I scratched him, he went home without an aspirin
But it's cool cause we back friends,
It happened and it's over*

³²² Retrieved from <http://www.emirates247.com/entertainment/beyonce-jay-z-shock-secrets-scandals-2014-05-13-1.548945>

³²³ Jay-Z, 111.

*It's in the past and I'm glad, now I'm back to bein' Hova.*³²⁴

For Jay-Z, the incident with Rivera signified a problem that was bigger than him, as he chronicled in another incident with the police. Around the same time as the incident with Rivera (1999), Jay-Z recalled being pulled over on his way to a performance. The police searched and found a gun, which was licensed to his bodyguard. Jay-Z said he thought the entire incident was laughable until he got arrested. When the officer called in the stop, Jay-Z recalls him saying “‘I got Jay-Z’...with a sense of accomplishment...I was dumbstruck as they loaded me into the back of the cruiser like a prize catch.”³²⁵ What Jay-Z saw at the precinct added weight to the extra focus the police were giving to hip-hop:

When I got to the precinct for questioning, I saw a giant Peg-Board, the sort you’ve seen before in police television shows and movies. On the Peg-Board were organizational charts of rappers, like you’d have for a major crime organization, like the mafia. But for *rappers*. Once they had me, they made me do the perp walk...which meant dragging me in front of all the photographers outside the precinct. The charges were dropped, of course...But they made sure to humiliate me first. With my other case still pending, this would help paint the picture of me as a menace to society.³²⁶

According to Jay-Z, the incidences of surveillance happened at the same time that hip-hop producer Puff Daddy (Now P. Diddy) and his rapper Shyne were on trial for their alleged involvement in a shootout. Less than a block from their trial was the trial for those accused of the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. Jay-Z remarked that the World Trade Center trial was “a major trial, important to the city, the whole country,” but there was no media present, according to his recollection. At the same time, the Puffy trial was “swarming with cameras and reporters; the local papers were writing about what Puff’s mother was wearing to court. It was

³²⁴ Carter, S. (2002). I Did It My Way [performed by Jay-Z]. On *Blueprint 2* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rappenius.com/Jay-z-i-did-it-my-way-lyrics#note-250319>

³²⁵ Jay-Z, 162.

³²⁶ Ibid., 162.

un-fucking real.”³²⁷ Jay-Z saw the spectacle created of him and hip-hop overall and chose to settle for probation in the Rivera case because he decided he was not going to allow himself “to be a sideshow for the state.”³²⁸ He could have chosen to fight for his innocence and risk more damage to his reputation, but he settled the case so that he could move forward.

Jay-Z remarked ironically that when he was paraded in front of cameras for his “perp” walk for the gun arrest, the Rocawear (his clothing line) bubble jacket he wore “started flying off the shelves the last three weeks before Christmas.” The bubble jacket serves as an example of hip-hop’s popularity. Jay-Z’s interactions with the law increased his awareness about the choices *he* had to make in his life that could lead to success, jail, or even death. Jay-Z realized that there was no reason to put his “life on the line and the lives of everyone who depends” on him. He said that: “It sometimes feels like complete disaster is always around the corner, waiting to trap us, so we have to live for the moment and fuck the rest. I vowed to never allow myself to be in a situation like that again.”³²⁹ Jay-Z may have talked about making better decisions as it relates to interactions with the public and law enforcement, but could the same be said for his personal choices, more specifically his relationship with women?

In 1999, Jay-Z and Carmen Bryan, Nas’ fiancée, continued their now four-year affair. Bryan describes her relationship with Jay-Z as “the best friendship [she’d] ever had with a man” and that her time with him was a “vacation from reality” from her volatile, physically abusive relationship with Nas.³³⁰ She writes that during their affair she became pregnant with Jay-Z’s baby.³³¹ Bryan believed Jay-Z would be there for her until Nas called her and asked if she heard

³²⁷ Ibid., 113.

³²⁸ Ibid., 113.

³²⁹ Jay-Z, 113.

³³⁰ Bryan, 156-171.

³³¹ Ibid., 191.

Jay-Z's latest song. She had not. On the United Kingdom version of *Vol. 3...Life and Times of S. Carter*, there is a song entitled "Is that Your Chick?" Some of the lyrics include:

*Don't get mad at me
I don't love 'em I fuck 'em
I don't chase 'em I duck 'em
I replace 'em with another one
You had to see she keep calling me BIG
And my name is Jay-Z
She be all on my dick
Gradually I'm taking over your bitch
Coming over your shit, got my feet up on your sofa, man
I mean a hostess for my open hand
You coming home to beer shifts and there be soda cans
I got your bitch up in my Rover, man
I never kiss her, never hold her hand
In fact I diss her I'm a bolder man
I'mma pimp her, it's over man
Why you home alone, why she out with me?
Room 112, hotel balcony
How she say, Jay you can call the house for me?
There's no respect at all
You betta check her dawg
She keep beggin' me to hit it raw³³²
So she can have my kids and say it was yours
How foul is she? And you wifed her
Shit, I put the rubber on tighter
Sent her home, when she entered home
You hugged her up
What the fuck is up?
She got you whipped, got your kids
Got your home, but that's not your bitch
You share that girl, don't let 'em hear daddy Earl
It'll make 'em sick that his favorite chick
Ain't saving it, unfaithful, bitch!³³³*

To the uninformed listener, "Is that Your Chick?" was typical Jay-Z rapping about his sexual exploits. To Nas, it was a signal that his fiancée was having an affair. Nas asked Carmen if the song was about her and she confessed to the affair. Bryan called Jay-Z about the song and he said it was not about her and he would never do anything like that to their relationship.³³⁴ Nas

³³² "Raw" is slang for without the use of a condom.

³³³ Cox, M., Carter S., Elliott, M. (2000). *Is That Your Chick (The Lost Verses)* [Performed by Memphis Bleek, Jay-Z, and Missy Elliot]. On *The Understanding* [CD]. New York: Get Low, Roc-A-Fella Records, and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://genius.com/Memphis-bleek-is-that-your-chick-the-lost-verses-lyrics>. The song also appears on this album in addition Jay-Z's United Kingdom album release.

³³⁴ Bryan, 206.

was furious. As the year 2000 arrived, a thirty year old Jay-Z would spend the next decade of his life trying to be a better ambassador for hip-hop, but engulfed in personal feuds and unburied tensions that, when all brought together, would show if Jay-Z would sink or swim in a new world made of his own efforts.

The year 2000 brought more controversy but more music. Both of Jay-Z's trials generated negative attention. Despite the release of "Is That Your Chick", Carmen Bryan continued her affair with Jay-Z. Bryan was upset with Jay-Z but said she could not resist him³³⁵, particularly as her relationship with Nas became more unstable. While his affair with Bryan may seem miniscule, it became the fuel for one of the greatest rap battles in history at a time when Jay-Z was at the height of his music career.

Jay-Z used the year 2000 to build the Roc-A-Fella brand and showcase new artists. Musically, his slate of #1 albums continued with the release of *The Dynasty: Roc La Familia*. The album boasts much of Jay-Z's success, bravado, and sexual exploits but the last track is especially personal. While his song "This Can't Be Life" centers around the challenges he experienced in 1994 before he decided to rap full time, his song "Where have you been" is directed at his father. The song is Jay-Z's deepest condemnation of his father. Jay-Z writes:

*I wanted to walk just like him (remember?)
Wanted to talk just like him (word)
Often momma said I look too much
And I thought just like him (and I'd get happy)
Wanted to drink Miller nips
And smoke Newport's just like you
But you left me, now I'm goin to court just like you
I would say 'my daddy loves me and he'll never go away'
Bullshit, do you even remember December's my birthday?
Do you even remember the tender boy
You turned into a cold young man
With one goal and one plan
Get mommy out of some jam, she was always in one*

³³⁵ Ibid., 207.

Always short with the income
Always late with the rent
You said that you was comin through
I would stay in the hallway (waitin)
Always playin the bench (waitin)
And that day came and went
Fuck You! very much you showed me the worst kind of pain
But I'm stronger and trust me I will never hurt again
Will never ask mommy 'Why daddy don't love me?
Why is we so poor? Why is life so ugly?
Mommy why is your eyes puffy?'
Please don't cry everything'll be alright
I know it's dark now, but we gon' see the light
It's us against the world
We don't need him, right? (right)
Mommy drivin 6's now (yeah), I got riches now (yeah)
I bought a nice home for both of my sisters now
We doin real good
We don't miss you now
See how life twists around, fucker?³³⁶

Jay-Z entered the new millennium venting his frustrations at his past while looking to the future with the introduction of multiple new artists such as Freeway and Amil. Amil was the only female rapper signed to Roc-A-Fella Records in 2000, which is when she released her album entitled *All Money Is Legal (A.M. I. L.)*. On a song featuring Jay-Z entitled “4 da Fam”, Jay-Z rapped about having a child on the way, which could have been a reference to Carmen Bryan’s pregnancy.³³⁷ Another popular song from her album was entitled “I Got That.” The video, co-directed by Jay-Z marked the first time that Jay-Z worked professionally with then 18-year old Beyoncé Knowles of the R&B group Destiny’s Child. It would be the first of many collaborations between Knowles and Jay-Z and have a fundamental impact on the direction of Jay-Z’s personal and professional life, if he could find closure to the hurt he experienced early in

³³⁶ Carter, S. (2000). Where Have You Been? [Performed by Jay-Z]. On *The Dynasty: Roc La Familia* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rappenius.com/Jay-z-where-have-you-been-lyrics>.

³³⁷ Amil VEVO (2009, October 29). *Amil, Beanie Sigel, Memphis Bleek, Jay-Z - 4 Da Fam* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tosG9zVW4kg>

life that led him to hurt so many others, including himself.

Chapter 4: The hustler meets the human being in search of the American Dream (2001-2004)

*A new millennium brought a new Jay-Z
Started making sense out of a life so crazy
Hazy was his vision just conquering women
While happy that he was never sentenced to prison
His affair with Carmen over, make room for Beyoncé
If he learned to show emotion she'd be his fiancée
In order to be free his mom found his dad
Who Jay-Z hadn't seen since he was a lad
He forgave his dad for his desertion
Felt free to move forward, he was no longer hurtin'
Just searchin' for new ways to build legacies
To give back to people in his community
Retired from rap so he could chart new paths
Showed artists how they can write their own epigraphs
CEO of crack became Def Jam's CEO
For Jay-Z, he found a legal new hustle.*

Jay-Z turned thirty as he entered the new millennium. He had a new decade of life before him; however, he did not yet possess the requisite skillset to navigate through the multiple worlds he straddled. He was rich and no longer lived in “the hood” but believed he had to continue rapping about his life in “the hood” to stay relevant in the mainstream gangsta rap industry. He wanted to find love and settle down, but unresolved issues with his father led him to unhealthy relationships with women because of attachment issues. He no longer sold drugs, but songs about his drug and crime life sold more records than songs about community empowerment. He was on the verge of becoming a music icon but also on the verge of becoming a convicted felon for a stabbing. On any day he could become an icon or an inmate. The alleged criminal and prospective music mogul inhabited the same body. As a thirty year old rapper, he worked to stay relevant to a young rap audience while plotting new directions for rappers to pursue, since rappers rarely stayed popular into their thirties. Lastly, he preached loyalty to his “crew” no matter what, but disassociated himself from old friends as new mentors and opportunities to climb the social ladder arose.

Jay-Z learned to navigate his daily dichotomies by adopting a simple mantra: *do not do anything that will risk a return to the Marcy projects or a past life of poverty and destroy anyone who gets in the way of the rise to the top*. He constantly attempted to move forward but found himself still trapped by his pride, and the belief that his past would finally catch up to him and destroy all he had worked so hard to attain. Whenever Jay-Z felt that he, his family, his legacy, or his money was threatened by his past or his potential future, he responded with no regard for the feelings of those he offended. In 2001, Carmen Bryan became the latest victim of his wrath.

Nas' fiancée Carmen Bryan became collateral damage as Jay-Z depicted her as nothing short of an opportunistic whore after Nas lyrically attacked Jay-Z in a feud that many felt Jay-Z lost. Losing a competition of record sales could be a minor blow to Jay-Z's ego but losing a rap battle while the world watched could destroy his career. Throughout the history of rap, the rap battle was the true proving ground for any MC, which is why Jay-Z prided himself was intent on becoming the best battle rapper on the streets. With Nas, however, he attempted to show the *world* that he was the best. It was easy for Jay-Z to disregard Bryan because he was on to his next girlfriend in the persona of Beyoncé Knowles of the popular R&B group Destiny's Child. His relationship with Beyoncé could have suffered a similar fate as the relationship with Bryan if Jay-Z did not make peace with his father, whose desertion left Jay-Z unable to fully commit to a woman.

Jay-Z's absent father represented the greatest challenge to his growth. The ruthlessness he developed as a talented drug dealer and rapper grew out of the anger he felt towards his father and the tireless hours he saw his mother work to support their family. The rock of his life, Gloria Carter saw Jay-Z's anguish and reunited Jay-Z with his father. Jay-Z forgave his father Adnis Reeves for his abandonment. Once forgiveness was granted, Jay-Z felt liberated and focused on

his personal relationship with Beyoncé. His father, however, died just two months after they reconciled.

A more focused and established Jay-Z became eager to give back to his community as his status grew. At his mother's request, he started an educational foundation to help youth in his community have a better forecast for their lives than he had. He expanded his financial empire into clothing and restaurants in order to extend his reach beyond hip-hop. Forever in search of new mountains to climb and frustrated with what he believed was an artistic decline of rap music, Jay-Z retired from making albums and became the CEO of Def Jam, with the partial goal of showing artists what they can do beyond rap music. He entered 2004 focused on growing his legacy in part by cutting off ties with mentors and partners such as Dame Dash and Jaz-O in favor of new partners who could expand brand Jay-Z. Some argued that Jay-Z abandoned those responsible for his success, others argued that Jay-Z wanted to move forward while others regressed or just never moved at all. Regardless of the reason, Jay-Z positioned himself by 2004 to go from drug dealer to global icon, and he leaped head first into every opportunity to make that happen, no matter who or what was in his way.

As the year 2000 continued into 2001, Jay-Z's greatest challenge to his professional career—Nas—rekindled an age old practice of artistic competition—the hip hop battle. Rappers have battled since hip-hop's creation. Rap battles were how an MC earned his street credibility. Jay-Z earned his reputation as a fierce battle rapper before he became famous, but had never battled a rapper on an international platform. According to the documentary entitled "Beef", the rap battle is the latest iteration of artistic battles. From Da vinci vs. Michelangelo and Brach vs. Picasso to Brahms vs. Wagner and Byrd vs. Coltrane, artists have always been pushed by competition. Hip-hop battles were harsher because, as more money became available for rappers,

the opportunities to leave an inner-city life of poverty and crime became a real possibility so the harsher the rhymes, the more money and riches became possible.³³⁸

The earliest rap battle publicized over the radio waves, night clubs, and music videos began in 1981 when Busy Bee battled Kool Moe Dee, three years after Jay-Z discovered hip-hop. Since 1981, several battles have been etched into hip-hop history including MC Shan vs. KRS-ONE, MC Lyte vs. Antoinette, LL Cool J vs. ICE-T, Ice Cube vs. N.W.A., and Tupac vs. The Notorious B.I.G. After the deaths of Tupac and B.I.G., Nation of Islam Leader Minister Louis Farrakhan convened a peace summit along with former Black Panther Kwame Touré (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael). Rappers signed peace treaties at Farrakhan's event, but Jay-Z did not attend. Hip-hop feuds declined for a few years after the summit until the year 2000, when 50 Cent battled Ja Rule and Jay-Z battled Nas, resurrecting the classic hip-hop rites of passage for the world to see.

The key differences between earlier battles and battles from the 1990s onward was that the original battles attacked the other rapper's style, clothes, and other light issues whereas later battles blended gang elements of the streets with rap music. New battle rhymes boasted about not only killing the rapper, but killing the rapper's family, raping their children, decapitation and castration. Jay-Z and Nas entered their battle in full knowledge of the potential ramifications, but their careers would be destroyed if either backed down. As Jay-Z said in his interview with Dyson, the "forces of rap made us collide."

Jay-Z first publicly attacked Nas at a concert called Summer Jam in 2001 in New York,

³³⁸ TheHoodClassics (2014, February 14th). *BEEF – Documentary* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3NtWt5vKpF0>

threatening that Nas was scared to battle him. Nas responded with a radio attack³³⁹, and Jay-Z responded on his 2001 album *The Blueprint* with a song called “Takeover” where he rapped:

*[You] Fell from 'top 10' to 'not mentioned at all'
To your bodyguard's 'Oochie Wally's' verse better than yours
That's why your laaaaaaaame career's come to an end
It's only so long fake thugs can pretend
Nigga, you ain't live it, you witnessed it from your folks' pad
Scribbled in your notepad and created your life
I showed you your first tech³⁴⁰ on tour with Large Professor
Then I heard your album 'bout the tech on the dresser?
So yeah, I sampled your voice, you was usin' it wrong
You made it a hot line, I made it a hot song
And you ain't get a coin nigga, you was gettin' fucked in
I know who I paid god, Serchlite Publishin'
Use your braaaaaaaaain
You said you've been in this 10, I been in it 5
Smarten up Nas
4 albums in 10 years nigga, I can divide
That's 1, let's say 2
2 of them shits was due
I was 'nah,' the other was 'Illmatic'
That's the one-hot-album-every-10-year average
And that's so - laaaaaame nigga switch up your flow
Your shit is garbage, what you tryin' to kick knowledge?
Y'all niggas gonna learn to respect the king
Don't be the next contestant on that Summer Jam screen
Because you-know-who did you-know-what with you-know-who
But let's keep that between me and you (for now).³⁴¹*

In “Takeover” Jay-Z questioned Nas’ street credibility when he rapped that Nas “created” his life and that he never sold drugs. He also refers to Nas as a “fag”, a slang term for the anti-

³³⁹ Shado155 (2007, October 26). *Nas - H to the OMO (Jay-Z Freestyle Diss)* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gYPipNBcLs>.

³⁴⁰ “Tech” is slang for a gun.

³⁴¹ Carter, S. (2001). Takeover [performed by Jay-Z]. On *The Blueprint* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/jayz/takeover.html> and <http://rap.genius.com/Jay-z-takeover-lyrics>.

gay slur “faggot.” The last two lines are a threat from Jay-Z to Nas that he will tell the world about his affair with Carmen Bryan. Nas responded with a song entitled “Ether,” widely considered to be one of the harshest rap battle songs in hip-hop history. Some of the lyrics include:

*Fuck Jay Z!*³⁴²
(You been on my dick nigga, you love my style, nigga)
I am the truest; name a rapper that I ain't influenced
Gave y'all chapters but now I keep my eyes on the Judas
With 'Hawaiian Sophie'³⁴³ fame, kept my name in his music
Heard it when I was sleep
That this Jay-Z and Cock-a-Fella Records wanted beef
First Biggie's your man, then you got the nerve to say that you better than B.I.G.
Dick-suckin lips, why don't you let the late, great veteran live
I've watched you grow up to be famous
And now I smile like a proud dad, watchin' his only son that made it
You seem to be only concerned with dissin' women
Were you abused as a child, scared to smile, they called you ugly?
Well life is hard, hug me, don't reject me
Or make records to disrespect me, blatant or indirectly
In '88 you was getting' chased through your building
Callin' my crib and I ain't even give you my numbers
All I did was gave you a style for you to run with
Smiling in my face, glad to break bread with the god
Wearing Jaz chains, no tees, no cash, no cars
You a fan, a phony, a fake, a pussy, a Stan
I'll still whip your ass, you thirty-six in a karate class?
You Tae-bo hoe, tryna' work it out, you tryna' get brolic?
Ask me if I'm tryna' kick knowledge
Nah, I'm tryna' kick the shit you need to learn though
That ether, that shit that make your soul burn slow
Is he Dame Diddy, Dame Daddy or Dame Dummy?
Oh, I get it, you Biggie and he's Puffy
Rockefeller died of AIDS, that was the end of his chapter
And that's the guy y'all chose to name your company after?
Put it together, I rock hoes, y'all rock fellas
And now y'all try to take my spot, fellas?

³⁴² The words “Fuck Jay-Z!” were sampled from a Tupac song.

³⁴³ “Hawaiian Sophie” was a song recorded by Jaz-O. Jay-Z was featured in the video.

*And your man stabbed Un and made you take the blame
You a dick-riding faggot, you love the attention
Queens niggas run you niggas ask Russell Simmons
Shawn Carter to Jay-Z, damn you on Jaz dick
How much of Biggie's rhymes is gonna come out your fat lips?
Wanted to be on every last one of my classics
You pop shit, apologize, nigga, just ask Kiss.³⁴⁴*

“Ether” not only questioned Jay-Z’s past as a significant gangster and drug dealer, but it also questioned his sexuality, which in hip-hop is one of the cruelest insults a rapper could make towards another rapper. Jay-Z made homosexual references in the song “Takeover,” but not to the same level as Nas did with “Ether.” Furthermore, Nas questioned whether Jay-Z’s misogynistic tendencies stem from abuse he received as a child or taunts he received because of his black African features (full lips and wide nose). He also accused Jay-Z of not having a criminal past, which was an attack on to Jay-Z’s street credibility. Jay-Z responded with a mixtape song entitled “Supa Ugly.” In “Supa Ugly,” Jay-Z made true on his words from “Takeover” and rapped about his affair with Bryan.

At the Summer Jam concert, Jay-Z found pictures of another rapper and colleague to Nas named Prodigy in a leotard as a child and posted it on the mega screens. After “Takeover” emerged and Jay-Z admitted to having the pictures in the song, rumors spread that Jay-Z secretly recorded his sexual exploits with Bryan and would make those public as well. Jay-Z denied videotaping himself and Carmen and issued an apology to Bryan and her father via fax machine to the popular Wendy Williams radio show for the negative attention the rumors brought their family. Bryan said she knew there was no videotape because she believed that Jay-Z was not

³⁴⁴ Jones, N. (2001). Ether [performed by Nas]. On *Stillmatic* [CD]. New York: Columbia Records. Retrieved from <http://rappenius.com/Nas-ether-lyrics#note-8722>

bold enough to showcase himself in that light.³⁴⁵ Jay-Z was very confident lyrically, however, in thrashing Bryan and her reputation with the song “Supa Ugly,” which was released after “Ether” and included the following lyrics:

*Me and the boy AI³⁴⁶ got more in common
Than just ballin' and rhymin' Get it? "More-in-Carmen"
I came in your Bentley³⁴⁷backseat,
Skeeted³⁴⁸ in your Jeep
Left condoms on your baby seat
And since you infatuated with saying that gay shit
Guess you was kissing my dick when you was kissing that bitch
Nasty shit, you thought I was bonin' ³⁴⁹ Renette³⁵⁰
You callin Carm' a hundred times, I was bonin' her neck
You got a baby by the broad, you can't disown her yet
When do the lies end when does the truth begin?
When does reality set in or does it not matter
Gotta hurt I'm your baby mama's favorite rapper
And ask your current girl, she know what's up
Holla at a real nigga, Jigga (I don't give a fuck!)³⁵¹*

“Supa Ugly” was so vile to Jay-Z’s mother Gloria that she told him to apologize to Nas’ family for the song. Jay-Z said he was surprised his mother called him because not only did she never talk to him about his drug dealing, she, according to him, also never talked to him about his music so he had no choice but to “shut it down.”³⁵² At the height of his most intense musical

³⁴⁵ Bryan, 217.

³⁴⁶ NBA 2001 league Most Valuable Player, Allen Iverson.

³⁴⁷ Bentley is an expensive car.

³⁴⁸ “Skeeted” is a slang term for “ejaculate.”

³⁴⁹ “Boning” is a slang term for engaging in sexual intercourse.

³⁵⁰ Bryan, 155. According to Bryan, she and Jay-Z decided to tell Nas that Jay-Z was dating Bryan’s friend Renette in order to cover up their own affair.

³⁵¹ Carter, S. (2001). Supa Ugly [performed by Jay-Z]. New York: Rocafella Records & Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rappenius.com/Jay-z-sup-a-ugly-lyrics#note-301325>

³⁵² Storm, M. (2001, December 17). Jay-Z: Feud with Nas 'went too far'. *Hip-Hop DX*. Retrieved from <http://www.hiphopdx.com/index/news/id.591/title.jay-z-feud-with-nas-went-too-far>

battle, Jay-Z showed that the opinion of his mother still weighed more than any street credibility won or lost. Bryan, however, felt crushed by Jay-Z's song. She thought their relationship was more than casual, especially since they remained close after she miscarried their alleged baby. She felt used and discarded by Jay-Z.³⁵³ She was no longer of use to him, particularly as Jay-Z worked on his relationship with his new girlfriend, Beyoncé Knowles, who he started to date in 2001, around the time they both appeared on the cover of *Vanity Fair*.



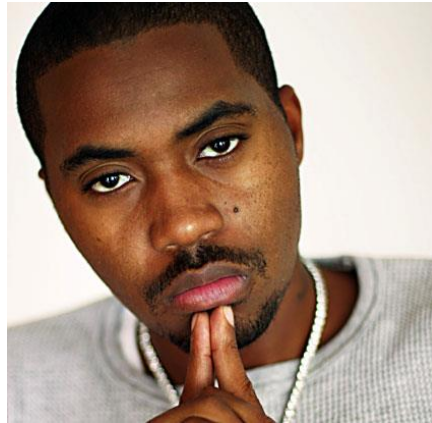
Vanity Fair, fall of 2001.³⁵⁴

In addition to his apology to Nas and his family, Gloria Carter made Jay-Z pull the song from the radio. In an interview on Hot 97 in New York, Jay-Z said that his statements were in response to gay references Nas made in the song “Ether”. Jay-Z said that he tried to keep the rap battle about professional careers but Nas made it personal so he did the same. When asked by New York Hot 97 DJ Angie Martinez if he would reconcile with Nas, Jay-Z said they would probably never speak again. He did say, however, that if they did see each other, he would not expect violence as was the case with other rappers (i.e. Tupac and Notorious B.I.G.) because both of them have “something to lose” at such a high stage in their careers. Martinez stated

³⁵³ Bryan, 225.

³⁵⁴ Robinson, L. (2001, November). The Sound and the Glory. Retrieved from <http://www.jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=688>

repeatedly that she hoped for a reconciliation.³⁵⁵



Nas.³⁵⁶

Jay-Z can blame Nas for the escalation of their rap battle, but in condemning Bryan the way that he did, he failed in his attempt to be a better role model for hip-hop and beyond in the wake of his pending criminal trials. Dame Dash said that he heard the song after a plane ride. He said that if he had heard the song before it was released, he would have advised Jay-Z to never release it, because a rap battle should be between and about the artists, in his opinion. He said that Jay-Z ultimately lost the battle because he reverted to gossip.³⁵⁷ Nas said Jay-Z broke the rule of “No women and children” when rap battling which proved to Nas how deep “Ether” affected Jay-Z.³⁵⁸

Another challenge to Jay-Z’s rap legacy that surfaced in “Ether” stems from the line: “How much of Biggie’s rhymes is gonna come out your fat lips?” While Jay-Z promised in songs like “The City is Mine” to make sure the legacy of his friend Notorious B.I.G. lives on, the

³⁵⁵ Coli3k. Jay-z Hot 97 Interview (Full) After Getting Ethered by Nas [Video File]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vi9N45cUrg>

³⁵⁶ Andreeva, N. (2014, February 11). Xbox Developing 1990s Music Series Based On Rapper Nas’ Life. Deadline.com. Retrieved from <http://deadline.com/2014/02/xbox-developing-1990s-comedy-series-based-on-rapper-nas-life-681025/>

³⁵⁷ Dee, C. (2015, March 17). Damon Dash Admits Nas won vs Jay Z. *Youtube.com*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=du1-808pFrw>

³⁵⁸ Jensya04 (2011, May 18). Nas Reaction to Super Ugly. *Youtube.com*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hFBRCGc6t8

continual usage of lines from B.I.G.'s songs, often done without crediting Notorious B.I.G. in his lyrics (as opposed to on the album liner notes), is considered sacrilegious to many in the hip-hop community. The use of another rapper's words is referred to as "line lifting" or "biting" in rap music. It is the equivalent of plagiarism in the academic community. Entire websites are devoted to the documentation of the number of times Jay-Z used lines from the Notorious B.I.G.' as well as the lines of other rappers'.³⁵⁹ Prior to the mid-1990s, it was disrespectful to copy another rapper's words or style, but "biting" became more commonplace as lyrical content of rap music became less important to catchy choruses and beats in the mid-1990s. The theft of Jay-Z's rhyme book when he first started rapping led him to write so small that no one could read his rhymes and then eventually just memorize his rhymes and not write lyrics down so he understood the significance of using someone else's lyrics.

Jay-Z defended himself against charges of line lifting by stating that he is not the only rapper that has used lines from other rappers. Lyrically he wrote:

*I'm not a biter
I'm a writer
For myself and others
I say a B.I.G. verse I'm only biggin' up my brother
Biggin' up my borough
I'm big enough to do it
I'm that thorough
Plus I know my own flow is foolish
So the rings and things you sing about
Bring em out
It's hard to yell when the bar-rel's in your mouth³⁶⁰*

In Jay-Z's verse defending himself, the last three lines come from a Notorious B.I.G. song.

While it may be true that he wants to keep the memory of Notorious B.I.G. alive, if there is no

³⁵⁹ Sims, B. (2005, March 28). The Trial of Jay-Z. *Hip-Hop DX*. Retrieved from <http://www.hiphopdx.com/index/interviews/id.395/title.the-trial-of-jay-z>

³⁶⁰ Carter, S. (2003). What More Can I Say [performed by Jay-Z]. On *The Black Album* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/jayz/whatmorecanisay.html>

credit given to him within the actual song, listeners who are new to Jay-Z's music and do not know Notorious B.I.G. would have no idea that some lines Jay-Z delivers may not be original.

Both artists took the attacks personally, but their popularity grew from the feud. As Beaumont stated: "The slugs swung, the profiles rose, the street menace edge was retained, the sales rocketed. The Nas versus Jay-Z feud was a masterstroke in public relations for both acts."³⁶¹ Beaumont also states that their feud served as a good distraction from Jay-Z's ongoing trial for the Rivera stabbing, because it was during the feud that Jay-Z admitted before a judge to stabbing Rivera and accepted a misdemeanor assault charge and three years-probation. Rivera received somewhere between \$500,000 and \$1,000,000 in damages. In essence, Jay-Z's feud with Nas helped him avoid "the media and government's latest high-profile scapegoat over a real-life assault."³⁶²

Outside of the potential marketing origins of their feud, Jay-Z respects the art of battling and saw his battle with Nas as an opportunity to test his skills as a true, yet older, MC by taking the age-old history of battling to a national stage. In an interview with MTV, Jay-Z said that his feud with Nas "is definitely going to bring out the best of me. He's gonna put me at the top of my game. I hope I do the same for him. It's like playing basketball with a guy. It's just verbal sparring—no one's fighting, it's just records."³⁶³

Jay-Z also admitted to feeling bored with rap when he verbally attacked Nas because he believed there was no rapper worthy enough to challenge him in the wake of Tupac and Notorious B.I.G.'s murders except Nas. Speaking of the late rappers and battling, he said:

I've always felt robbed of my chance to compete with Tupac and Biggie, in the best sense, and not just over first-week sales numbers. Competition pushes you to become your best self, and in the end it tells you where you stand. Battles were

³⁶¹ Beaumont, 160-161.

³⁶² Ibid., 160-161.

³⁶³ Ibid., 160.

always meant to test skills in the truest tradition of the culture...battling in hip-hop took the very real competitive energies on the street—the kind of thing that could end in some real life-and-death shit—and transformed them into art. That competitive spirit that we learned growing up in the streets was never just for play and theater. It was real. That desire to compete—and to win—was the engine of everything we did. And we learned how to compete the hard way.³⁶⁴

Jay-Z writes that he wanted to return to the hip-hop essence of battle rhyming, but he was keen to take advantage of the popularity of the feud, to such an extent that some speculated that Jay-Z created the feud as a marketing scheme to boost his popularity. MC Serch of Serchlite Publishing (who Jay-Z paid to sample Nas' voice on *Reasonable Doubt*) and half of the 1990s hip-hop group 3rd Bass, agreed with the marketing genius of Jay-Z, forever the opportunist:

What really became interesting about that battle is how Jay used it to create more popularity for his music and less popularity for the battle, and I think it was a very smart move on Jay's part...Jay used that opportunity to just put out great records after great record, and got with some of the hottest producers, and knew that every DJ in the country was spinning his records, and used that to propel everything he had in his catalog at the time.³⁶⁵

So what was it? Was the feud that became so vile lyrically just a marketing plan to boost Jay-Z's career as well as Nas'? Was it an attempt for Jay-Z to return to his adolescent years of battling rappers and earning his comeuppance on the streets of the Marcy projects? Both scenarios are possible, but there, exists, however, a third scenario that stems from Jay-Z's attachment issues with his father and in his insecurities about his looks.

It appears that Jay-Z developed a pattern of condemning whatever it was that he secretly desired. He wanted to settle down with a woman but called Carmen Bryan a slut over the airwaves. Furthermore, on the 2001 album *The Blueprint* where the song "Takeover" appears, there is a song called "Girls, Girls, Girls" where he talks about his sexual exploits with women of all ethnicities across the globe. The song is considered one of his most objectifying, misogynistic

³⁶⁴ Jay-Z, 71.

³⁶⁵ Greenburg, 60.

songs about women, yet it was written at the time he wanted to settle down. Some of the lyrics include:

*I got this Indian squaw the day that I met her
Asked her what tribe she with, red dot or feather
She said all you need to know is I'm not a ho
And to get with me you better be Chief Lots-a-Dough
Now that's Spanish chick, French chick, Indian and black
That's fried chicken, curry chicken, damn I'm gettin fat
Arroz con pollo, french fries and crepe
An appetitite for destruction but I scrape the plate
I got this African chick with Eddie Murphy on her skull
She like, "Jigga Man, why you treat me like animal?"
I'm like excuse me Ms. Fufu, but when I met your ass
you was dead broke and naked, and now you want half.³⁶⁶*

Rather than rap about settling down, Jay-Z, because of his attachment issues, rapped about women being expendable as he felt expendable to his father. The feud with Nas is yet another example of Jay-Z contradicting his own interests. Jay-Z admitted that he always respected Nas' artistry, but attempted to end Nas' career rather than collaborate. Jay-Z believed that both songs, "Takeover" and "Girls Girls Girls" would sell more records than songs about love for a woman or praise for another popular rapper. He said in his classroom call to Dyson that "the forces of rap made me and Nas collide."³⁶⁷ The statement means that in the new millennium, collaborations with rappers were not viewed as a way to make money so rappers adopted a "crabs in a barrel" mentality where whoever reached the top was pulled back down instead of all crabs pulling each other out together. The "crabs in a barrel" mentality was best manifested in the Tupac vs. Notorious B.I.G. where two former friends could not work together when they both became famous.

Jay-Z played into the narrative that was set for rappers because that led him higher up the

³⁶⁶ Carter, S. (2001). Girls, Girls, Girls (performed by Jay-Z). On *The Blueprint* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings.

³⁶⁷ Dyson interview.

hip-hop social ladder. Jay-Z's stature grew. He emerged triumphant in terms of record sales and exposure, and took bold steps to seize on his increased popularity, but at the expense of a close business colleague and friend, Damon Dash in favor of another businessman by the name of Steve Stoute.

In the documentary *Backstage* (a movie made about the Hard Knock Life Tour), there are moments where Jay-Z looks irritated with Dash's aggressive business persona. Their relationship began to deteriorate between 2000 and 2001 over disagreements in the direction of Roc-a-Fella music. Before their rift turned into a war for the Roc-A-Fella Records name, a real war erupted between the United States and Afghanistan that would affect the lives of all Americans, including Jay-Z.

The World Trade Center (WTC) was a "16-acre commercial complex in lower Manhattan that contained seven buildings, a large plaza, and an underground shopping mall that connected six of the buildings. The centerpieces of the complex were the Twin Towers."³⁶⁸ On September 11th, 2001 (referred to commonly as "911"), the entire complex was destroyed when members of the Islamist extremist group Al-Qaeda, led by Osama Bin Laden, flew hijacked planes into the buildings, along with planes crashed into The Pentagon in Virginia and a deserted area in Pennsylvania. Over 3,000 people were killed, representing 93 nations. 2,753 of those killed came from New York.³⁶⁹ The 911 attacks also occurred on the same day Jay-Z released *The Blueprint*.

According to Professor Paul Farber, Jay-Z developed a history with 911 that is "profound and complex."³⁷⁰ President George Bush encouraged Americans not to be scared and to go out and shop and Jay-Z's fans listened. *The Blueprint* sold over 427,000 units from September 11th.

³⁶⁸ 911 Memorial website. Retrieved from <http://www.911memorial.org/faq-about-911>

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Farber, P (2011, November 2). Jay-Z and 911 [speech]. Georgetown University.

September 18th, according to Farber. On September 22nd, 2001, Jay-Z performed a freestyle³⁷¹ at Hammerstein Stage in New York which contained the lyrics below:

*Bootleggers, bombers, Bin Laden I'm still crackin' I will not lose
I simply refuse
I dropped the same date as the Twin Towers
I show power
Still I show compassion for others, sent money and flowers
Devote hours
I live in the struggle
I'm addicted to the hustle
I'm conflicted cause dude
America, this land of mine
Is filled with prisoners with the same plans as mine
So I'm a walking contradiction
On one hand I love my position
But easily I could have been in that prison
And no, I'm not a Christian, though I believe in God
But I don't believe in the devil, my beliefs are odd
If we the people was given free will from God
How could He give us free will,
Without giving you E-vil?
We will, hold it together, believe in the Roc
Long after you leave the spot
Long after my breathing stops
My spirit remains vibrant, I will lead the flock
And that's just the tip of the iceberg
You might hear Christ's words in my scriptures
But I only write it for my niggas³⁷²*

The tragic events of 911 had a profound impact on Jay-Z, so much so that in his freestyle he becomes part preacher, part rapper. Though he does not espouse a full belief in Christian values in the rhyme (or in life in general), the song shows that the teachings of his pastor grandfather remained with him into adulthood so in essence, Jay-Z reached into the past of Shawn Carter to speak to the challenges Jay-Z and New York City faced.

911 stripped America of her sense of security. It was as if the entire country was reduced to a 10-year old Shawn Carter waiting on the bench for his dad who never showed. Jay-Z knew what it was like to be vulnerable after letting one's guard down. It is true that 911 increased Jay-

³⁷¹ A freestyle is an unrecorded song.

³⁷² Ibid.

Z's popularity, but it also brought him closer to a city—and a country—that he felt never cared about him in the first place. Jay-Z, however, a self-admitted hustler and opportunist, also saw 9/11 as an opportunity to grow his profile beyond hip-hop and improve hip-hop's profile overall through humanitarian gestures.

Jay-Z performed in a benefit concert for 9/11-affected families in October of 2001. Performing in a benefit concert for *all* New York families, firefighters, and Jay-Z's arch enemies, the police, was not something that Jay-Z anticipated as a younger drug dealer. The 9/11 benefit concert reflected a more mature Jay-Z; a Jay-Z who was ready to make a positive contribution no longer just to his family, but to his city, his country, and the world. He did not simply donate money to the Red Cross or some other organization, he became actively engaged for all to see. In fact, responses to 9/11 showed a greater maturity for many hip-hop artists in general³⁷³, but Jay-Z realized that because of his fame, he was no longer just a representative of the Marcy projects or Brooklyn. Jay-Z was now a representative of the American Dream, a dream in need of a serious morale boost in the aftermath of 9/11. His contributions in 1999 to Columbine High School differed from his 9/11 efforts because Columbine did not represent an attack on the American government but 9/11 did and Jay-Z stood up as an American patriot for the first time in his life.

Jay-Z demonstrated his loyalty to America, but his contradictory nature also led him to use 9/11 as an opportunity to politically critique the United States government and compare U.S.

³⁷³ Ryon, S. (2011, September 13). Immortal Technique, Davey D Reflect on September 11. *Hip-Hop DX*. Retrieved from <http://www.hiphopdx.com/index/news/id.16850/title.immortal-technique-davey-d-reflect-on-september-11>. Popular radio host Davey-D reflected on the hip-hop responses to and post-9/11 and how more politicized members of the hip-hop community became. He wrote: "I remember I ran into Naughty By Nature, and they were doing some fundraiser for the firefighters [in New York], he said. 'I remember Canibus wanting to join up in the army. I remember when Eminem and Dr. Dre penned some words about Bin Laden, wanting to get him...[but rapper] Paris put out probably the first anti-war song 'What Would You Do?.' He wrote a 10-page paper breaking down all the politics around 9/11 foreign policy...he talked about something when nobody else was talking about it."

acts of brutality on black men to the acts of terrorism committed by Osama Bin Laden. His 2002 double album *The Blueprint²: The Gift & The Curse* represented *The Gift* on one album—typical party raps including his first collaboration with Beyoncé entitled “’03 Bonnie & Clyde” and *The Curse*—a darker album where Jay-Z was more introspective and reflective on issues facing him and his community. His critique on the government and Bin Laden appeared on his song “Ballad for a fallen soldier.” The brutality witnessed by a young Shawn Carter came out through this song when he rapped:

*Bin Laden been happenin in Manhattan
Crack was anthrax back then,
Back when
And the police was Al'Qaeda to black men.³⁷⁴*

The line “Al’Qaeda for black men” refers to issues of police misconduct experienced by black communities in the 1980s and 1990s. For many in black community, the *police* are seen as terrorists. Jay-Z used “Ballad for a Fallen Soldier” to draw comparisons between soldiers in war overseas and drug hustlers at war on the streets of America. Jay-Z began to see his prior role as a drug dealer as part of a larger system of oppression towards impoverished communities nationally and internationally, which was part of the guilt he felt near the end of his days as a drug dealer. In a 2003 song entitled “Beware of the Boys,” he went deeper on his connection of the acts of Bin Laden to the acts of the United States government:

*We rebellious, we back home,
Screamin', 'Leave Iraq alone!'
But all my soldiers in the field, I will wish you safe return
But only love kills war when will they learn?
It's international Hov, been havin' a flow
Before Bin Laden got Manhattan to blow
Before Ronald Reagan got Manhattan the blow
Before I was cabbini' it there back and forth*

³⁷⁴ Carter, S. (2002). Ballad for a Fallen Soldier (performed by Jay-Z). On *The Blueprint 2: The Gift & The Curse*. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rappeni.us.com/Jay-z-a-ballad-for-the-fallen-soldier-lyrics#note-582698>

*Raw*³⁷⁵ *we had it all day, Papi in the hallway*
*Cop want more consignment to give you more yay*³⁷⁶
Yea, but that's another stor-ay
*But for now, mami, turn it around and let the boy play (Jay).*³⁷⁷

Jay-Z explains some of the lyrics from “Beware of the Boys”:

Ronald Reagan got Manhattan to ‘blow’—slang for cocaine—through the whole Iran-Contra scandal, which got the United States involved in the drug trade that brought crack to the hood so they could finance the Contras in Central America. In the worst years of the crack epidemic—the late eighties and early nineties—there were literally thousands of homicides annually in New York. So juxtaposing Reagan and bin Laden isn’t as crazy as it may seem. This is a piece of our recent history that people like to forget or pretend never happened so they can maintain some fantasy of American purity—which is why I thought it was important to include it in this rhyme. It’s that same sort of historical amnesia and myth of America’s innocence that led us into the war in Iraq. In my little way, I’m trying to kill that myth by reminding people of the truth—because that myth is a dangerous thing for the whole world.³⁷⁸

Continuing on his thoughts on the invasion of Iraq, Jay-Z writes:

I was against the war, but wanted to be clear that I felt for the soldiers out there fighting. I know people who join the military, sometimes just because they didn’t have a better option, sometimes because they genuinely thought they were doing something good for the country. But soldiers in an army are like soldiers in the hood, to some degree—they’re really all fighting someone else’s war; they’re cannon fodder for men richer and more powerful than them. So I’m not going to attack the soldiers as a group, even if I think their leaders are idiots.³⁷⁹

Jay-Z was not known for *explicitly* rapping about political issues prior to 911 for one main reason—he did not believe that it was profitable financially. Indeed, as author Charise Cheney wrote in *Brothers Gonna Work it Out*, the main challenge for rappers who wrote frequently about revolution or political issues is that there is no movement for listeners to join to

³⁷⁵ “Raw” is a slang term for cocaine.

³⁷⁶ “Yay” is a slang term for cocaine.

³⁷⁷ Rai, R. and Carter, S. (2003). *Beware of the Boys* (performed by Panjabi MC and Jay-Z). London: PMC Records. Retrieved from <http://rappenius.com/Jay-z-beware-jay-z-remix-lyrics#note-12921>

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 212.

³⁷⁹ Jay-Z, 213.

follow up on the lyrics they hear.³⁸⁰ Rap was his new hustle and Jay-Z would do nothing to jeopardize it in the beginning years of his career. In the April, 2013 phone call to Dyson’s class, Jay-Z asked: “Why aren’t complicated lyrics selling 10,000,000 albums? If we truly like them, they should be selling 10,000,000 records...As much as we don’t want to admit it, we want to appeal more to our guilty pleasures.” He rapped about the lack of sales for politically conscious music in his 2003 song “Moment of Clarity”:

*I dumbed down for my audience
To double my dollars
They criticize me for it
Yet they all yell ‘Holla’
If skills sold
Truth be told
I’d probably be
Lyrically
Talib Kweli
Truthfully
I wanna rhyme like Common Sense³⁸¹
(But I did five mil)³⁸²
I ain’t been rhymin’ like Common since
When your sense got that much in common
And you been hustlin’ since
Your inception
Fuck perception
Go with what makes sense³⁸³
Since I know what I’m up against
We as rappers must decide what’s most important
And I can’t help the poor if I’m one of them
So I got rich and gave back
To me that’s the win, win
So next time you see the homie and his rims spin
Just know my mind is working just like them*

³⁸⁰ Cheney, C. (2005). *Brothers Gonna Work it Out: Sexual Politics in the Golden Age of Rap Nationalism*. New York: New York University Press, pp. 149-151. Cheney writes that “Political practices—grassroots and electoral—are necessary to effectively challenge the state-sanctioned domestic terrorism targeting black communities at the turn of the twenty-first century. Problems such as the ‘War on Drugs,’ welfare reform, the ‘three strikes’ law, and the increasing gentrification of urban areas will not be solved by the ‘prophets of rage.’” “Prophets of Rage” was a popular political rap song by Public Enemy.

³⁸¹ Talib Kweli and Common are considered to be “conscious rappers” or rappers who have more political-minded lyrics in their music.

³⁸² Referring to selling 5,000,000 albums.

³⁸³ Or “cents” as in money.

*(The rims that is).*³⁸⁴

As a student of black music history starting from his parents days of crate-filled music, Jay-Z understood the history of black musicians who attempted to speak to political issues in their music, hence the line “Since I know what I’m up against.”

Hip-hop represents for some a continued tradition of black musical expression to the socioeconomic and political conditions of the time in question. According to Stewart, in 1969, the year of Jay-Z’s birth, philosopher Alain Locke suggested that “changes in predominant African-American musical genres were closely correlated with major transformations in the sociopolitical and economic milieu for African Americans” and that African American music is “deeply ingrained in the American cultural fabric”³⁸⁵ dating back to the Negro spirituals and continuing on through rhythm & blues (R&B) to hip-hop. Stewart argues that one of the reasons some are skeptical about the presence of socio-political commentaries in black music is due to what Anthony Neal calls “hyperconglomeration”, where increasingly powerful radio stations choose what music will air on the radio and it is usually not socially conscious information that gets chosen. Stewart argues that in short, corporate-owned radio stations are not likely to play music that is empowering to the black community because it is not profitable. Socio-political messages are even less likely to be portrayed in music videos, which are subject to the same corporate controls. Lastly, according to Stewart, the continued marketing of black music to non-black audiences also makes it difficult to have music broadcasted that speaks to black empowerment or at least address issues facing the black community, leaving many artists to

³⁸⁴ Carter, S. (2003). Moment of Clarity (performed by Jay-Z). On *The Black Album*. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from: <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/jayz/momentofclarity.html>

³⁸⁵ Stewart, J. B. (2005). Message in the Music: Political Commentary in Black Popular Music from Rhythm and Blues to Early Hip Hop. *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 90, No. 3, The History of Hip Hop (Summer, 2005), p. 198.

communicate political messages through double entendre, a skill that Jay-Z would master, but dates back to the negro spirituals.³⁸⁶

The year 1975, just two years before the birth of hip-hop music, saw such songs produced as the Isley Brothers “Fight the Power,” a title which became a classic hip-hop song by the rap group Public Enemy just 14 years later. Other songs of this year included the O’Jays “Give the People the Power They Want,”³⁸⁷ which would become a theme for Jay-Z’s career, expressed when he rapped about dumbing down his lyrics.

Stewart’s explanation of the challenges of black political musical expression may explain Jay-Z’s conscious decision to give the audience what they want. What was also born in the 1970s led to the continual condemnation of Jay-Z and hip-hop music to this day—the Blaxploitation films, including the 1972 movie “Superfly”, a film about an African American cocaine dealer in New York trying to quit the drug business. One could suggest this movie in part was foretelling of Jay-Z’s life and he was not yet three years old.³⁸⁸

³⁸⁶ Stewart, 200-206. In 1965, just four years before Jay-Z was born, many R&B songs were released that highlighted the political messages and resistance that existed in some R&B songs. Songs such as Sam Cooke’s “A change is Gonna Come” and Curtis Mayfield’s “Keep on Pushing” are examples of the attempts made by R&B musicians to speak to issues facing the black community, according to Stewart. As would be the case in the past days of the Negro Spirituals and up to modern-day hip-hop, double entendre was used to convey different messages to different audiences. Stewart speaks of the “train” metaphor, which was used in many songs in the 1960s. The train, according to Stewart, speaks of being delivered from oppression to freedom. Songs such as “Friendship Train”, “Love Train”, and “People Get Ready” represent this idea.³⁸⁶ The lyrics to Curtis Mayfield’s “People Get Ready” highlight this notion: *People get ready, there's a train a comin'/You don't need no baggage, you just get on board/All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin'/Don't need no ticket, you just thank the Lord.*

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 207.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 211. According to Stewart, Blaxploitation films were “perhaps the most difficult challenge that writers and performers faced in seeking to maintain the role of R&B as a major source of political commentary in black communities.” He states that these films were created by Hollywood magnates and were designed to increase struggling Hollywood revenues by bringing more African Americans to movie theaters. In short, the moviemakers “tapped into the growing frustration in black communities about persistent poverty and lack of access to public resources, and then disseminated a perverse political message glorifying conspicuous consumption, gender exploitation, and illegal activities, such as drug dealing, as elements of a viable strategy for ‘getting over on the man.’” Stewart holds that these movies, which included “Superfly” and “Across 110th Street) (both released in 1972) created a “powerful combination of visual imagery and audio enhancement [and] had a much more pronounced effect on individual and collective sensibilities than traditional music stimuli.” Even with Blaxploitation films, R&B musicians like Curtis Mayfield still attempted to promote black political commentary even on the soundtracks to Blaxploitation movies.

The Curse album side of *The Blueprint²: The Gift & The Curse* represented many of the ideas that Jay-Z would never rap about explicitly on a solo album in his earlier days, so he made it a two part album. It is as if *The Gift* represents his gift as a highly skilled rapper but *The Curse* represents his conscience. The fact that he did not release *The Curse* as a solo album speaks to his insecurity about stepping out of his lane lyrically. For example, on the song “Some How Some Way”, he called on all of his fans in “the hood” to, like him, do whatever it takes to get out of their neighborhood to make a better life for themselves:

*Whether we dribble out this motherfucker
Rap metaphors and riddle out this motherfucker
Work second floors, hospital out this motherfucker
Some how we gotta get up out this motherfucker
Some day the cops will kill a motherfucker
I don't always want to be this drug dealing motherfucker
Damn
Wish I could take us all on this magic carpet ride
Through the sky I
Used to play the hall up fifth floor me and my boys we
All poor getting high I
Seen the worst of the worst I deserve every blessing
I received I'm from the dirt
I planted my seed on unfertile land Myrtle Park
Marcy, Flushing and Nostrand and
Still I grew some how I knew the sun will shine through
And touch my soul take hold of my hand
Look man a tree grows in Brooklyn.³⁸⁹*

Jay-Z used “Some How Some Way” to express his belief that in the most dangerous circumstances, there is still a chance for a tree to grow out of the most “unfertile land,” represented for him by the Marcy projects. Within the unfertile soil lies darkness, despair, death and detachment, represented best on *The Curse* by his song “Meet the Parents.” The song is about a boy who grows up fatherless. He becomes a gangster like his father and ends up

³⁸⁹ Carter, S. (2002), Some How Some Way (performed by Jay-Z). On *The Blueprint²: The Gift & The Curse*. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/jayz/somehowsomeway.html>

murdered in the streets—by his own father. The lines below pick up just as the boy is about to shoot the man who he does not know is his father:

*He clearly had the drop but the boy just paused
There was somethin in this man's face he knew he seen before
It's like, lookin in the mirror seeing hisself more mature
And he took it as a sign from the almighty Lord
You know what they say about he who hesitates in war
(What's that?) He who hesitates is lost
He can't explain what he saw before his picture went blank
The old man didn't think he just followed his instinct
Six shots into his kid, out of the gun
Niggas be a father, you're Killing your son
Six shots into his kid, out of the gun
Niggas be a father, you Killing your sons.³⁹⁰*

Jay-Z's deep-rooted issues with his father emerge in "Meet the Parents". He writes that in the song he is on the side of the abandoned boy. The boy freezes because "he's studied every face he's seen his whole life, looking for the face of his father. And now here it is." The song, in essence, is Jay-Z at age 33 still looking for his father. He then explains how deep his missing father affects him or any son missing his father:

The last two phrases are just slight plays on each other. In the first refrain it refers to this specific story, but in the second, it becomes more general, more generational. I never intended 'Meet the Parents' to be subtle. In my mind it was a morality play, a PSA for that generation of men who may as well have emptied their guns on their sons when they left their lives. The streets where Mike left his son to be raised are the same streets where he buries him.³⁹¹

Buried in the street is how Jay-Z felt his entire life after his father left him, even as he became world famous. Financially he lived the complete life but privately, he did not feel complete. Jay-Z took his private frustration and anger out on the music industry, vowing to neither let it exploit him as he believed it exploited other black artists nor exploit him as he felt

³⁹⁰ Carter, S. (2002). Meet the Parents [performed by Jay-Z]. On *The Blueprint 2: The Gift & The Curse* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://genius.com/Jay-z-meet-the-parents-lyrics>

³⁹¹ Jay-Z, 227.

exploited as a child by his father and his inner-city surroundings.

Jay-Z worked in the beginning years of his career to manipulate the industry as well as people for everything he could in order to serve himself, his family, and issues of importance to him. His mentality changed in the new millennium. Though Jay-Z never abandoned his lyrical references to sex, his drug dealing past, and threats of violence, he began to incorporate more themes of black resistance and black empowerment into his music. He used hip-hop as a way of obtaining his own form of reparations and not just for what happened to African Americans through slavery. In his song “44 4s” he writes “For every promise made that never saw the light/I’ll get my own forty acres give me four nights.”³⁹² This is a reference to the 40 acres and a mule that were promised to slaves by the American government after their emancipation.³⁹³ On his 2001 song “H to the Izzo” from *The Blueprint* he writes:

*I do this for my culture
To let 'em know what a nigga look like...when a nigga in a roaster
Show 'em how to move in a room fulla vultures
Industry shady it need to be taken over
Label owners hate me I'm raisin' the status quo up
I'm overchargin' niggaz for what they did to the Cold Crush
Pay us like you owe us for all the years that you hold us
We can talk, but money talks so talk mo' bucks³⁹⁴*

The verse was a reference to the pioneering hip-hop group the Cold Crush Brothers and one of its members Grandmaster Caz, who wrote some of the lyrics used by the Sugar Hill Gang for the first major rap hit “Rapper’s Delight” in 1979. No credit or compensation was given to Caz.³⁹⁵

Jay-Z’s rhyme highlights his belief that in a user’s world, the best way to use hip-hop was to take

³⁹² Carter, S. (2006). 44 Fours (Live From Radio City Music Hall, performed by Jay-Z) [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioKmt_1sbkI

³⁹³ Gates, H.L. (2013, January 7th). “The Truth Behind ‘40 Acres and a Mule.’” *The Root*. Retrieved from http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2013/01/40_acres_and_a_mule_promise_to_slaves_the_real_story.html

³⁹⁴ Carter, S. (2001). Izzo (H.O.V.A.) (performed by Jay-Z). On *The Blueprint*. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/jayz/htotheizzo.html>

³⁹⁵ Owen, F. (1994, December). Back in the Days. *Vibe Magazine*, Vol. 2, No.10, p. 68.

all the money it had to offer and build something for his community. It is a modern day version of Robin Hood: rob from the rich and give to the poor, which is the opposite of what he did as a teenager and young adult—rob from the poor and make himself rich.



The Cold Crush Brothers.³⁹⁶

Some like author T. Hasan Johnson, however, critique Jay-Z’s method of charity to his community. He writes that Jay-Z should go beyond simple monetary accumulation and use his influence to rap about topics directly related to social justice and less about greed.³⁹⁷ Author and rapper Toni Blackman wrote that Jay-Z possibly “would rather write Hallmark cards and get paid than write poetry and not get paid.”³⁹⁸ Johnson referred to Jay-Z as the “poster child for wanton materialism” who “symbolizes the hedonistic, self-preoccupied aspect of hip-hop aesthetic taken to the extreme.” Johnson suggests that rather than trying to appeal to a fan base that does not want to hear hip-hop with a social justice or “conscious,” Jay-Z should focus on what a “different fan base may want to hear.”³⁹⁹ For Jay-Z, however, appealing to a different fan base

³⁹⁶ McLeod, K. (2015). The Cold Crush Brothers. *Allmusic.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/the-cold-crush-brothers-mn0000775502>

³⁹⁷ Bailey, 85-94.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 85-94.

that was more interested in social justice meant fewer records sold, which was of no interest to him. Jay-Z's win-win was to (following Blackman's scenario) write the Hallmark Cards to get paid so that more people could hear his poetry.

Coincidentally, Jay-Z's political content grew as his interest in the music business from a rapping standpoint declined. Jay-Z may have felt more inclined to rap about political issues in his music because he contemplated a retirement from making albums. Maybe his developing business acumen helped him see that hip-hop albums were not as popular as before. Maybe his genuine love for hip-hop and his belief that its artistry was on the decline and that leaned him towards retirement. *New York Times* writer Kalefah Sanneh spoke about the decline of rap music in the 2000s:

the inevitable aftermath, perhaps, of the genre's vertiginous rise in the 1990s, during which a series of breakout stars—Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, Tupac Shakur, the Notorious B.I.G.—figured out that they could sell millions without shaving off their rough edges. By 1997 the ubiquity of Puff Daddy helped cement hip-hop's new image: the rapper as tycoon. Like all pop music trends, like all economic booms, this one couldn't last.⁴⁰⁰

On the future of hip-hop, Sanneh's writing is prophetic for Jay-Z's career:

Eventually, a (new?) group of executives will find a business model that doesn't depend on shiny plastic discs, or digital tracks bundled together to approximate them. But for now the major league label is starting to look a lot like the minor one. And in ways good and bad and utterly unpredictable, rappers may have to reconsider their place in the universe and their audience. Some will double their commitment to nonsense...some will merely revel in their own loudmouthiness...But if sales keep falling, more and more rappers will have to face the fact that they aren't addressing a crowd, just a sliver of one.⁴⁰¹

According to Steve Jones of *USA Today*, part of the decline in hip-hop was due to poor marketing, but he also stated that there were "signs that many music-buying Americans—particularly the young, largely white audience that can make a difference between modest and

⁴⁰⁰ Sanneh, 2006.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

blockbuster sales—are tiring of rappers’ emphasis on ‘gangsta’ attitudes, explicit lyrics and tales of street life and conspicuous consumption.”⁴⁰² Furthermore, Jones suggested that rappers such as Snoop Dogg and 50 Cent landing endorsement deals for sneakers and flavored water respectively, took some of the street credibility away from rappers. Rap pioneer KRS-ONE said simply the “music is garbage...What has happened over the past few years is that we have traded art for money...and the public is not stupid.” Allhiphop.com co-founder Chuck Creekmur said that “A lot of these albums now are looking to duplicate the success of whatever is hot at the moment...There is a lack of variety” with clever rhymes and creative storytelling being absent from the music today.⁴⁰³ Music consultant Tom Vickers summed up the issue facing Jay-Z and rap music, stating:

Rap has gradually degenerated from an art form into a ring tone. It's a hip catchphrase or a musical riff with a short shelf life. It has a novelty element that captures the listener's imagination, but it's not a song. It won't build a career. That's why we're seeing this backlash.⁴⁰⁴

Jay-Z, the ultimate chameleon, realized that it was time to make a career change once again. Not only did he ponder retirement from making albums, he also began to separate himself from Dame Dash. By 2002, one public incident between Dash and Jay-Z signaled their demise. While Jay-Z vacationed in the Mediterranean with Beyoncé, Dash unilaterally fired several Roc-A-Fella employees and hired his friend and rapper Cameron “Cam’ron” Giles to be vice president of the company. Upon his return from vacation, Jay-Z vetoed the move. The next summer, when Jay-Z put together a street basketball team with then NBA rookie LeBron James on the roster, Jay-Z asked hip-hop icon Fab 5 Freddy to make the documentary and not Dash, who had started

⁴⁰² Jones, S. (2007, June 15). Can Rap Regain Its Crown? Usatoday.com. Retrieved from http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/music/news/2007-06-14-rap-decline_N.htm?POE=click-refer.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

a film company. As the year 2003 continued, Jay-Z's break with Dash became permanent.

The year 2003 signaled several lasts for Jay-Z, but several firsts as well. For example, Jay-Z moved his partnership away from Dash in favor of marketing guru Steve Stoute. Stoute and Jay-Z's relationship grew from the late 1990s-early 2000s so there is no one more qualified to speak on Jay-Z's professional state of mind during the beginning of the new millennium.



Jay-Z and Steve Stoute.⁴⁰⁵

In 2011, Stoute visited Professor Michael Eric Dyson's class on Jay-Z at Georgetown University. I was present for Stoute's lecture. Stoute said he first met Jay-Z in 1996 while Stoute was with the legendary production company called Trackmasters. He was impressed by Jay-Z's work ethic and saw that Jay-Z was adept at ghostwriting, which is where a writer pens a song for another artist but stays anonymous in the album credits. When Stoute left Sony and went to Interscope, he continued to work with Jay-Z. They first focused on music, but Stoute had bigger aspirations for Jay-Z and hip-hop. They decided to expand their brand into shoes.

According to Stoute, urban clothing circa 2000/2001 was popular but shoes were not a big part of the industry. He stated that there were 5 clothing lines making over \$5,000,000 but

⁴⁰⁵ Lowkey (2011, August 27). Steve Stoute on Jay-Z Responding to Lil Wayne: "Jay is SO MUCH BIGGER Than Rap at This Point." *Youheardthatnew.com*. Retrieved from <http://youheardthatnew.com/2011/08/steve-stoute-on-jay-z-responding-to-lil-wayne-jay-is-so-much-bigger-than-rap-at-this-point/>

sold the same types of clothing. Stoute reminisced on the days in the 1980s when Gucci shoes were “every drug dealer’s dream.” He once bought a vintage pair on eBay for \$800. Stoute became part of the team that helped Reebok market shoes outside of athletics as more of a lifestyle. He also brought NBA star Allen Iverson over to Reebok as part of Reebok’s “Sound & Rhythm of Sport” campaign.

When Stoute brought his campaign idea of shoes to Rocawear in 2003, the Rocawear team (then still comprised of Dash and others) voted down the idea of the shoe but Shawn Carter still had the license for his stage name “Jay-Z” as well as his own name so Stoute and Jay-Z decided to launch the shoe as the “S. Carter Collection.” Stoute then stated that in the business world, “Jay-Z” and “Shawn Carter” are two different entities and that “you can’t just do a deal with Shawn Carter and expect to get Jay-Z.” It seemed that the business world fit the dichotomies that Jay-Z experienced. Once they had created the package, it was time to promote the shoe. Along with a mixtape album that came with the shoe, Jay-Z and Stoute visited several countries to announce its release. They painted a jet with Jay-Z’s face and “went to Heathrow, Paris, somewhere else and then back to New York.” Upon the release of the shoes in April of 2003, 10,000 were sold in an hour and showed the industry that “you could sell shoes that weren’t athletic,” according to Stoute. All half million pairs of the shoes eventually sold.⁴⁰⁶

Stoute attempted to get popular clothing brand Tommy Hilfiger to buy Rocawear, but said that Dash did not agree so the sale never occurred. Stoute said in retrospect that Jay-Z and Dash’s relationship deteriorated because Dash was overprotective and Jay-Z wanted to spread his wings, without fear of flying too close to the sun. According to Jay-Z, part of the problem was also that Dash’s brashness led them to be inefficient. Jay-Z stated that Dash is adept at project

⁴⁰⁶ Beaumont, 188.

creation, but gets in his own way after a certain point, leaving Jay-Z to have to go back and “fix” problems with potential business partners after Dash rubbed them the wrong way.⁴⁰⁷ Lastly, Stoute said that Dash’s temperament was tantamount to “an old man yellin’ at a garbage can...[he] was just mad at everybody” and that rubbed many people the wrong way.⁴⁰⁸ While the spring of 2003 represented the end of the relationship with Jay-Z and Dash, Jay-Z was about to have his entire world shaken by a reunion—with his father.

Jay-Z’s attachment issues after his father left made it impossible to attach himself to women. His relationship with Beyoncé was no different. Jay-Z and Beyoncé were first known to work together professionally on the A.M.I.L. project in 2000, and then as a member of the R&B trio Destiny’s Child, Beyoncé appeared in Jay-Z’s music video “Izzo” (also known as “H to the Izzo.” It is possible that they began their relationship as early as the year 2000, if one were to listen to Jay-Z’s lyrics from a freestyle song released by DJ Clue in December of that year. On this song from DJ Clue’s album “The Professional 2” Jay-Z raps:

*Niggas tryin' to break my will
You know that ain't my steel
I'm Destiny's Child, my fate's been sealed.*⁴⁰⁹

Jay-Z is prone to use double meanings in his lyrics, so this reference to Beyoncé’s group Destiny’s Child could have been a veiled reference to their relationship. True to Jay-Z’s self-contradictory nature, however, he shot down Destiny’s Child in 2001 with the following lyrics from Missy Elliott’s song “One Minute Man”:

*Look, I'm not trying to give you love and affection
I'm trying to give you sixty seconds of perfection*

⁴⁰⁷ Greenburg, 92.

⁴⁰⁸ Global News Hop (2011, September 15). Steve Stoute Speaks on Why Dame Dash is Broke (part 2). YouTube.com. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QF_d3KHFjk4

⁴⁰⁹ Carter, S. (2001). Jay-Z Freestyle (performed by Jay-Z). On The Professional 2 [CD]. New York: Desert Storm, Roc-A-Fella Records, and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rappenius.com/Dj-clue-jay-z-freestyle-lyrics#note-574691>

*I'm trying to give you cabfare and directions
Get your independent ass out of here, question?*⁴¹⁰

The lyrics made light of Destiny's Child's hit single "Independent Women," which started every verse with the word "Question?"⁴¹¹ Regardless of when they first started courting, by 2002, this unlikeliest of couples made music history with their multiple collaborations.

The term "unlikely" is no exaggeration. When they first met, Jay-Z was still on probation from the stabbing incident. He was still the self-proclaimed thug dressed in street attire. By 2003, he was a legitimate mogul with clothing and shoe lines, and a restaurant soon to open. Conversely, Beyoncé was raised as a devout Methodist in a two-parent household. She dated a fellow churchgoer and went to his prom. With her younger sister Solange, they grew up "in a four-bedroom mock-Tudor house in an upper-middle-class neighborhood of Houston, Texas." Her father had a successful career at Xerox and her mother owned a hair salon. She proudly proclaimed that she did not grow up poor and did not need music to lift her out of the ghetto, unlike Jay-Z. She attended private school, had nice cars and housekeepers. She was just a determined woman who was passionate about music and wanted it "so bad." She was pursuing her dreams to sing to the world since the first grade.⁴¹²

Destiny's Child landed its first record deal with Columbia Records in 1996, the same year Jay-Z released his first album. After many hit songs, tours, and a change in members from a quartet to a trio, the group split in 2002, leaving Beyoncé free to pursue her solo career as Jay-Z moved into a solo career as a businessman. In 2003, both were quiet about just their

⁴¹⁰ Elliott, M. and Carter S. (2001). One Minute Man (Remix) (performed by Missy Elliott and Jay-Z). On *Miss E... So Addictive* [CD]. Los Angeles: Elektra Records. Retrieved from <http://rappenius.com/Missy-elliott-one-minute-man-remix-lyrics#note-346984>

⁴¹¹ Knowles, B. (2001). Survivor (performed by Destiny's Child). On *Survivor* [CD]. New York: Columbia Records. Retrieved from <http://rappenius.com/Destinys-child-independent-women-lyrics>.

⁴¹² Greenburg, 138-140.

relationship.⁴¹³ In addition to Jay-Z's ongoing trust issues, he also had concerns with his own physical appearance—his black/African features of a full nose and full lips—confirmed by his former mentor Jaz-O.⁴¹⁴ In his song entitled “Song Cry” from *The Blueprint*, Jay-Z wrote:

*It was the cheese helped them bitches get amnesia quick
I used to cut up they buddies, now they sayin' they love me
Used to tell they friends I was ugly and wouldn't touch me
Then I showed up in that dubbed out buggy.⁴¹⁵*

In “Song Cry”, Jay-Z raps that women forgot how ugly they thought he was until they saw him get rich and drive nice cars. Beyoncé was already financially secure so she did not need Jay-Z's money and was not impressed by it so it took more than money for their relationship to grow. They chose to never speak publicly about their private relationship.

In separate interviews, they both admitted to challenges in finding a mate because of their intense schedules, but Jay-Z still had his father's abandonment hovering over any relationship he engaged in. By 2003, Jay-Z seemed to have conquered many of his demons and was ready for new ventures and humanitarian activities, but not ready for a serious relationship. While Jay-Z's success on the business side of life grew, Jay-Z mid-2003 was not whole because his father's absence still haunted him.

Jay-Z told Oprah that he was never told why his parents divorced so he did not know if he was to blame. He felt torn inside well into his thirties as he realized that he still could not commit himself to a woman. His mother sensed his frustration. He told Oprah: “My mom set up a meeting. And now I realize why—it makes all the sense in the world. I remember very distinctly that I had a conversation with her in my kitchen. I was saying, ‘You know, Ma, I've

⁴¹³ Ibid., 143.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 141.

⁴¹⁵ Carter, S. (2002). Song Cry (performed by Jay-Z). On *The Blueprint* [CD]. <http://rappenius.com/Jay-z-song-cry-lyrics>

really been trying to look inward, and maybe I'm just not meant to fall in love like other people do.' She just looked at me like, 'Hush up, boy.'”⁴¹⁶



Jay-Z on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.⁴¹⁷

In the spring of 2003, Jay-Z's mother Gloria set up a meeting and Jay-Z's father never showed, making Jay-Z remember his days as a young Shawn Carter waiting for his dad on a park bench only for him to not show up. After his father did not show up for their most recent meeting, Jay-Z told his mother that he is a grown man and no longer in need of a father. His mother persisted and set up a second meeting that ultimately changed the course of Jay-Z's life because his father actually showed up.⁴¹⁸

In their conversation/argument, Adnis told Jay-Z that Jay-Z knew where he was. Jay-Z told him that it was his responsibility as a father to stay in touch with his own children. It turned out that Adnis was only ten minutes away from Jay-Z the entire time at his mother's (Jay-Z's grandmother) house. Adnis accepted his responsibility and begged Jay-Z to forgive him. Jay-Z, to his own surprise, did forgive him and then learned the real reason his father left. When Jay-Z finally understood it was because of the unsolved murder of Adnis' younger brother (Jay-Z's

⁴¹⁶ Winfrey, O. (October, 2009). Oprah Talks to Jay-Z. *O Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.oprah.com/omagazine/Oprah-Interviews-Jay-Z-October-2009-Issue-of-O-Magazine>

⁴¹⁷ Walker, B. (2010, December 15). Oprah and Jay-Z's Australian Adventure. *Eurweb.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.eurweb.com/2010/12/oprah-and-jay-zs-australian-adventure/>

⁴¹⁸ Winfrey, O. (October, 2009). Oprah Talks to Jay-Z. *O Magazine*.

uncle), his father's departure and his drug and alcohol addiction made a little more sense. Jay-Z still was not satisfied with his father's abandonment, but he said he "pretty much" made peace with the situation after their conversation. Jay-Z told Oprah that forgiving his father freed him to fully commit to a woman and that if it had not happened, there would have been no deeper relationship with Beyoncé.⁴¹⁹ On forgiving his father, Jay-Z wrote:

I didn't know him that well. But at the same time, it was so important that we did meet up...It was important for me to hear him say he was sorry and for me to hear myself say, 'I forgive you.' It changed my life, really. I wish every kid who grew up like me could have the same chance to confront the fathers who left them, not just so they can lay out their anger, but so they can, in the end, let that anger go. That anger still stunts so many of us.⁴²⁰

Jay-Z told Howard Stern that one thing he respected about his father is that his father never asked him for any money. He needed Jay-Z's forgiveness, not his riches. A freer Jay-Z bought Adnis an apartment and had furniture ordered when his father passed away from liver failure just 2 months after they met and on the night of the grand opening of Jay-Z's 40/40 Club, in June of 2003.⁴²¹ Jay-Z rapped about his father's death in his 2003 song "Moment of Clarity":

*Pop died, didn't cry, didn't know him that well
Between him doin' heroine and me doin' crack sales
Put that in an eggshell, standin' at the tabernacle, rather the church
Pretending to be hurt wouldn't work
So a smirk was all on my face
Like 'Damn that man's face is just like my face'
So pop I forgive you for all the shit that I lived through
It wasn't all your fault homey you got caught
Into the same game I fought
That Uncle Ray lost
My big brothers and so many others I saw
I'm just glad we got to see each other
talk and re-meet each other
Save a place in heaven for the next time we meet forever!⁴²²*

⁴¹⁹ Ibid.

⁴²⁰ Jay-Z, 134.

⁴²¹ Greenburg, 51.

⁴²² Carter, S. (2003). Moment of Clarity (performed by Jay-Z). On *The Black Album* [CD]. New York: Rocafella Records & Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://genius.com/Jay-z-moment-of-clarity-lyrics>

With his father’s reconciliation behind him, Jay-Z told Oprah that he was “absolutely” ready for love and was “100 percent” freed in ways he hadn’t been before. Jay-Z found the inward strength needed to commit to Beyoncé full-time. In the summer of 2003, they embarked on a 2-week vacation to the Mediterranean.⁴²³ Jay-Z was so committed to this relationship that he did not appear at the rescheduled championship game for his star-studded street basketball team at historic Rucker Park; a team so popular that he was making their road to a championship into a documentary. His absence at the final game led to a forfeit and he scrapped the video project. It turns out that the man who popularized the phrase “Money over bitches” now put a woman first who was not his mother. He often said that his relationship with his mother was more like a husband than a son but now he had a new woman in his life.



Jay-Z & Beyoncé, 2002.⁴²⁴

⁴²³ Ibid., 143.

⁴²⁴ (2015). Beyoncé and Jay-Z: relationship in pics. *Marieclaire.co.uk*. Retrieved from <http://www.marieclaire.co.uk/celebrity/pictures/34348/20/beyonce-and-jay-z-relationship-in-photos-beyonce-and-jay-z-pics.html#index=1>

By the fall of 2003, Jay-Z was ready to retire from making rap albums. He launched his first world tour for his final album, *The Black Album*, but the tour had as many lows as it did highs. For example, Stoute said that with all of their popularity, they were not allowed to perform in China. Jay-Z was intent to perform anywhere possible in order to get back to his hip-hop roots. Stoute stated that in Korea Jay-Z went to a Korean high school to perform and got into an altercation with a Korean rapper at a nightclub. One highlight of the tour, however, was his sellout, star-studded performance at the historic Madison Square Garden (MSG), which was captured in a documentary entitled *Fade to Black*, produced by Marcy Projects Productions II and Roc-a-fella records and distributed by Paramount Pictures. Jay-Z is credited as executive producer.

The concert was so popular that it sold out in a day. Jay-Z stated that the concert was significant because, although other musical acts such as rock & roll easily sell out MSG, Jay-Z said in the documentary that for “hip hop we wasn’t even aloud in the building.” There had not been a hip-hop concert at Madison Square Garden since the days of RUN-DMC and LL Cool J in the 1980s, when Jay-Z was a drug dealing high school dropout. The documentary not only shows the concert, it also showcases backstage interviews and shows Jay-Z traversing the country in search of new and old producers to create the “magic” he desired for *The Black Album*, but there is one moment in particular that speaks to Jay-Z’s frustration with the music industry and his decision to retire from making albums.

In one recording session, Jay-Z counsels a young, frustrated rapper. The rapper says that he would love to rap about other subjects than guns and violence but he is concerned about not selling records, a problem Jay-Z once faced. Jay-Z says to America as he asks for the camera to be turned on him: “You see how rappers are now? See what the public...see what y’all did to

rappers? They scared to be theyself...niggas don't think that people are gonna accept them as theyself.”⁴²⁵ Based on the comments made by Stoute and Jay-Z's own lyrics in his song “Moment of Clarity” about his desire to sound like rappers Common and Talib Kweli, Jay-Z might have been speaking about himself.

Jay-Z's retirement concert was a success and all of the proceeds went to two charities, the Christopher Wallace (aka Notorious B.I.G.) Foundation and the Tupac Amaru Shakur Foundation. Both mothers of the slain rappers appeared on stage to receive checks from the newly formed Shawn Carter Foundation after Jay-Z gave a musical tribute to both rappers. When Tupac's mother Afeni Shakur hugged Jay-Z, she told him that any issues he had with her son were buried.⁴²⁶ At the request of his mother, Jay-Z started the Shawn Carter Foundation in order to provide underprivileged youth with scholarships, particularly those who come from single-parent households and have a minimum grade point average of 2.0.⁴²⁷



l-r: Dame Dash, Afeni Shakur, Jay-Z, and Voletta Wallace.⁴²⁸

By 2004, Jay-Z focused on building his legacy and a better legacy for hip-hop in general.

⁴²⁵ MOVIECLIPS (2012, May 23). *Fade to Black (6/8) Movie CLIP - They Scared to be They Self (2004) HD* [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NsNN1eHv7MU>

⁴²⁶ iJayZtv (2011, September 20). *Jay-Z Interview about 2Pac & Notorious BIG (Sway Interview)* [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vUoI78EY9_4.

⁴²⁷ Shawn Carter Foundation website. Retrieved from <http://www.shawncartersf.com/about/>.

⁴²⁸ @actheplug (2012, March 9). *Jay-Z 'The Black Album Tour' Live at Madison Square Garden – Show*. *Kissdetroit.hellobeautiful.com*. Retrieved from <http://kissdetroit.hellobeautiful.com/3264862/remembers-christopher-notorious-b-i-g-wallace/jay-z-the-black-album-tour-live-at-madison-square-garden-show/>

As he told Oprah Winfrey, he wanted to leave hip-hop in a better place than he found it.⁴²⁹ He felt more complete and ready to climb new mountains. He was in consideration to become the CEO of several music labels. He was offered a three-year deal to run Def Jam by the president of Island Def Jam, legendary music producer Antonio “L.A.” Reid. He then received an offer from Warner Music Group to “oversee all of the company’s labels at a salary higher than the one offered by Def Jam, plus a substantial cut of Warner’s upcoming initial public offering.” What Warner (and Universal who also courted him) could not offer Jay-Z, however, were the masters to his recordings. For Jay-Z, the choice was obvious—he chose Def Jam stating that the opportunity to pass his music on to his future children or nephews and say “‘Here’s my whole collection of recordings. I own those, they’re yours’” could not be passed up.⁴³⁰

Throughout African American music history, ownership of the music created by African Americans has been a source of contention and few ever obtained the right to own their own music. While some may have thought he was a sellout by taking a corporate position (which he called “The makeover”), Jay-Z believed that it represented the purest essence of hip-hop and growth:

The ‘makeover’ wasn’t just about rearranging chairs. It was about changing the orientation and spirit of the business. That’s what hip-hop has tried to do whenever it gets into the boardroom. It’s not about sitting behind the same desks and doing work the same way as the people that preceded us. Our goal is to take what we’ve learned about the world from our lives—and what we’ve learned about integrity and success and fairness and competition—and use it to remake the corporate world.⁴³¹

The opportunity to lead Def Jam made him the boss of his Roc-A-Fella cofounders Dash and Biggs because Def Jam had purchased a \$10,000,000 stake in Roc-A-Fella earlier in 2004.⁴³²

⁴²⁹ Oprah interview.

⁴³⁰ Greenburg, 90.

⁴³¹ Jay-Z, 132.

⁴³² Greenburg, 90.

Jay-Z informed Dash over dinner that he was going to become the head of Def Jam and that it was “just business.” Jay-Z offered Dash and Biggs the opportunity to fully run Roc-A-Fella in exchange for his exclusive rights to the masters of their first album, *Reasonable Doubt*. Dash and Biggs refused and after Jay-Z took the mantle as head of Def Jam, Dash and Biggs went on to form the Damon Dash Music Group under Universal. Jay-Z then bought Dash’s stake in their clothing line Rocawear for \$22,000,000, which severed their remaining business ties.⁴³³

As CEO of Def Jam, Jay-Z now had an opportunity to show the world, and Dash specifically that he truly was a businessman, since some like hip-hop executive Russell Simmons attributed the early days of Jay-Z’s success to Dash. Part of Jay-Z’s motivation to become a CEO could also be that he did not see or need any more mentors from the rap world who could take him to new heights so being an executive of a major record label represented a new frontier. Jay-Z spent much of his time with Dash in their early days learning his business moves and how to improve upon them, much to Dash’s surprise. Dash recounted an elevator encounter they had after their business ties dissolved:

If I were ever to write a movie, this would have to be either the end of it or the serious point when you know things have changed...[Jay-Z] had on a suit with shoes and a trench coat. And I had on my State Property [shirt] and my hat to the side. Our conversation was brief, wasn’t no malice, but we honestly were two different people. He was not the same person I had met. I would never expect him to wear a trench coat and shoes. It can just show that two people can go in two totally separate directions.⁴³⁴

Jay-Z had a tertiary aspiration when he took over Def Jam—to show artists what they could do beyond music. He said that his assuming control of Def Jam “shows that artists can ascend to the executive ranks and not just go away or be on ‘where are they now?’ specials. I’ve always been an entrepreneur, I have my own companies, I just thought it was time to show artists

⁴³³ Ibid., 91.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 92.

a different thing.”⁴³⁵

The split between Dash and Jay-Z signified a bigger issue for Jay-Z. As Jay-Z grew more as a rapper and businessman as the millennium continued, at each new level of growth, Jay-Z severed ties with people who played an integral part in his pre-*Reasonable Doubt* life. It appeared that Jay-Z took his mother’s advice to mean more than just music when she told him that whatever he chose to do, he needed to be fully committed to it. Specifically, in attaining his goals, Jay-Z cut ties with Dash and Biggs, DeHaven who introduced him to selling drugs, and Jaz-O, his former mentor since his teenage years who helped him hone his rap skills. Jay-Z would say his splits with former colleagues were about business. Others like Greenburg say it reveals Jay-Z’s true character: one who uses people and then discards them once they are no longer of use to him.⁴³⁶ When Jaz-O was asked about Jay-Z’s loyalty, he said that Jay-Z is only loyal to his money.⁴³⁷

Jay-Z considered himself to be loyal to growth and he took his “survival of the fittest” mentality from his past drug life into the music and corporate worlds. Now that he had survived his tough environment and attained his American Dream, he wanted to be a different type of role model for his community:

I didn’t have a lot of other choices. I was born into a community that this country was trying to make disappear; was born at a time when drugs and guns were everywhere and jobs and education were much harder to find. In that sense, it was a life that chose me, a life I never would’ve pursued if I’d been born in different circumstances⁴³⁸...I want to represent hip-hop culture positively. No one in my family is wanting for a meal right now, so that part is done. Rap is what took me out of my situation, and now I must care for it. I have to leave it as I found it—or better—for the next generation of kids. Then maybe they can change their

⁴³⁵ Beaumont, 218.

⁴³⁶ Greenburg., 93.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 94.

⁴³⁸ Jay-Z, 319.

situation like I did.⁴³⁹

⁴³⁹ Winfrey, O. (October, 2009). Oprah Talks to Jay-Z. *O Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.oprah.com/omagazine/Oprah-Interviews-Jay-Z-October-2009-Issue-of-O-Magazine>

Conclusion

Why is the story of Jay-Z important? What does putting his life in an historical context do for America? It is too easy to say that Jay-Z is just a common thug who became rich from his drug exploits and exploited the most dangerous of black stereotypes to become richer. It is too easy to follow the words of 2016 presidential candidate and former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee who stated that Jay-Z is simply a pimp actively pimping out his *wife* Beyoncé before the public.⁴⁴⁰ It is too easy to dismiss Jay-Z as just a rapper. In fact, it is too easy to summarily dismiss *any* rapper as just a rapper.

One of the goals of this dissertation was to show that rappers are not only worthy of study, but worthy of study at the deepest level. In studying the life trajectory of rappers who come from impoverished, marginalized communities, we can find stories of urban decay & neglect, drug abuse & addiction, unemployment, under employment, domestic violence, physical & sexual abuse, high crime, police misconduct, parental abandonment, and crumbling schools. People who survive disenfranchised communities like the Marcy projects often do not have the opportunity to speak to the world about the ills their communities faced. Black youth who grew up during the Crack Epidemic in the inner-city faced possible incarceration or death before the age of 25, according to some scholars, politicians, and media personalities. Somehow, *some* rappers managed to crawl out from their urine-infested project shadows and into the public eye, influencing millions along their way to stardom.

The study of Jay-Z should force critics of hip-hop to no longer first condemn the rapper or the rapper's lyrics but to first condemn the conditions that *created* the rapper. To condemn

⁴⁴⁰ Howell, K. (2015, January 9). Mike Huckabee: Jay-Z 'pimps' Beyoncé, exploits wife's sexuality. *Washingtontimes.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jan/9/mike-huckabee-jay-z-pimps-beyonce-exploits-wifes-s/>

Jay-Z for rapping “I sold crack for a livin’, that’s a given” and not condemn the policies of the American government that allowed (or facilitated) cocaine to be shipped across America in the first place is disingenuous. To condemn Jay-Z as a “gangsta” rapper without condemning the music industry that made it impossible for rap music that promotes family, staying in school, and peace to also become platinum is to not be honest. To condemn Jay-Z for “celebrating” life in the projects as a drug dealer but not talk about the work of World War II-era “master builder” Robert Moses for his grand government-funded plan to create project warehouses for poor people of color so that Manhattan could be reconstructed into a commercial mecca is misguided.⁴⁴¹ To condemn Jay-Z for writing “teacher said I was a lost cause ’cause I used to roam the halls”⁴⁴² but not condemn an underfunded, overcrowded school system with underqualified teachers and little to no academic resources ignores the terrible state of educational crises that poor communities of color experience on a daily basis. Lastly, to cast Jay-Z as only a misogynist is to ignore America’s continual misogynistic ethos as part of “our equality-loving-but-hard-pressed-to-fully-realize democracy”⁴⁴³ not as a way to excuse his misogyny, but rather to understand that it does not exist in a vacuum.

By using Jay-Z as a point of departure, America’s story of the forgotten emerges, particularly the story of inner-city, impoverished black youth who are part of what ironically came to be called Generation X—the generation of people born between the early 1960s and early 1980s. It is ironic because the letter “X” usually represents the undefined or unknown quantity. Only in understanding the challenges Jay-Z faced as explained by his sixth grade

⁴⁴¹ Chang, 11.

⁴⁴² Carter, S. (1999). NYMP [performed by Jay-Z]. On *Volume 3...Life and Times of S. Carter* [CD]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from: <http://rappenius.com/Jay-z-nymp-lyrics#note-231558>

⁴⁴³ Sharpley-Whiting, T.D. (2008). *Pimps Up Hoes Down: Hip Hop’s Hold on Young Black Women*. New York: New York University Press, pp. 86-87.

teacher Rene Lowden can we understand what made Jay-Z drop out of high school to sell drugs though he tested on a high school senior level on state tests as a *sixth* grader. In a wealthier suburban setting, a student testing six years above his grade level would be placed in programs for the gifted and called a child prodigy. For a child in the Marcy projects, however, a demonstration of heightened academic ability earned a student the distinction of further marginalization by jealous students so many children simply hid their intelligence in order to “blend in” to a culture of low expectations and self-doubt.

Beyond using Jay-Z as a tool to further analyze America’s discarded populations, Jay-Z’s life represents a story of survival, redemption, and ultimately growth. Jay-Z could have earned his millions and completely abandoned his community but he gave back and worked to build bridges with groups he considered to be his oppressors, namely law enforcement. In his interview with Oprah, as well as in his lyrics, Jay-Z said he wanted to advance hip-hop culture and that he aspired to take hip-hop to the next level. He realized that hip-hop’s ascension did not always mean financial success, so he focused more on charitable endeavors beyond his foundation. Jay-Z also understood the importance of not only putting his proverbial money where his mouth was, but also putting his image where his mouth was. Jay-Z engaged in several acts in more recent years of his career that have helped to cast black people in a more positive light. No act was more important, however, than his marriage to Beyoncé Knowles.

Jay-Z & Beyoncé’s married on April 4th, 2008. It is no exaggeration to state that a good portion of their respective music catalogues contained lyrics that degraded women and men. Both often sang pejoratively regarding the opposite sex, yet they married each other and actively promoted their marriage in song and performance. In a nation where 72% of black households

are led by a single parent⁴⁴⁴, Jay-Z made a point to parade a successful marriage—something that he only witnessed for the first nine years of his life—for all the world to see. Furthermore, they married on April 4th, which was significant because it occurred forty years to the date that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, and it was the birthday of a great poet who Jay-Z respected—the late Maya Angelou. Jay-Z raps about his birth on the same day Black Panther leader Fred Hampton was assassinated and marries on the same day another Civil Rights Movement leader was slain. It is almost as if Jay-Z is linking himself to past generations of community leaders. While an intentional link to King and Hampton has yet to be revealed, the symbolism is there. The marriage was a positive step for hip-hop because many mainstream rappers are not known to promote marriage as a viable lifestyle in favor of the fast life. Jay-Z's increased involvement in further humanitarian efforts also helped paint a more positive picture of himself as well as hip-hop, which is often condemned for promoting the accumulation of riches but not promoting community service and charity.

Jay-Z continues to improve upon the relations between hip-hop and law enforcement. On September 11, 2009, Jay-Z held a benefit concert on the 8th year commemoration of the 9/11 attacks. All of the proceeds from the “Answer the Call” concert went to the New York Police and Fire Widows' and Children's Benefit Fund. The show started with the Pledge of Allegiance.⁴⁴⁵ In the past, Jay-Z only pledged allegiance to Marcy projects, his drug colleagues, his family, Brooklyn, and his rap entourage. The “Answer the Call” concert was one of many opportunities Jay-Z used to embrace his elusive American-ness and bridge the gap of misunderstanding

⁴⁴⁴ News One Staff (2011, April 27). 72 Percent Of Black Kids Raised By Single Parent, 25% Overall In U.S. *Newsone.com*. Retrieved from <http://newsone.com/1195075/children-single-parents-u-s-american/>

⁴⁴⁵ BBC staff (2009, September 12). Jay-Z plays 9/11 tribute concert. *BBC.com*. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/8252403.stm>

between members of the hip-community and everyone else.

From 1969 to 2009, Jay-Z went from expressing solidarity with Black Panther leader Fred Hampton to having the Pledge of Allegiance recited at *his* concert...a hip-hop concert. For a man who said that America hated him, Jay-Z seemed to have come full circle in his belief that he actually is a part of the greater American landscape. As a young man, he probably never envisioned that one day he would be actively raise money for New York police officers, who he referred to lyrically as “Al Qaeda for black men.”⁴⁴⁶ This transformation did not go unnoticed on Jay-Z. In an interview with MTV for the concert he stated:

I'm humbled by this whole entire process...Just my whole evolution coming to this place. It just all worked out this way. The first [*Blueprint*] album came out on this exact day. I was in Los Angeles and couldn't help out physically. For it to come full circle and us to be here and play Madison Square Garden and 100 percent of the proceeds going to [the charity]. I'm just humbled by the experience.⁴⁴⁷

At the press conference, a woman gave Jay-Z a bracelet that belonged to her brother, a police officer, who died in the 9/11 attacks. Upon receiving her gift, Jay-Z became emotional:

This makes it real... Someone really lost their brother, he sacrificed his life for others. You're humbled by those acts of heroism. You only hope to live up to that type of courage and strength. I'm doing a concert, I'm entertaining. At the end of the day I'm doing a great thing, but it's not what this guy has done.⁴⁴⁸

The year 2009 was also the year that Jay-Z sat on the inaugural stage to watch Barack Obama, the first African American President of the United States, get sworn in and he did so with his wife Beyoncé sitting next to him after she sang the National Anthem. While many in the black community warmed up to the possibility of “President” Obama only after he won some

⁴⁴⁶ Carter, S. (2002). Ballad for a Fallen Soldier [performed by Jay-Z]. On *The Blueprint 2: The Gift & The Curse*. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://rappenius.com/Jay-z-a-ballad-for-the-fallen-soldier-lyrics#note-582698>

⁴⁴⁷ Rodriguez, J. (2009, August 31). Jay-Z Talks About His 9/11 Benefit Concert. *MTV.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1620447/jay-z-talks-about-his-9-11-benefit-concert.jhtml>

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

primaries, Jay-Z knew early on that he was going to support Obama over Hillary Clinton because Obama's background was closer to Jay-Z's. Jay-Z stated that Obama came off as a "young uncle or an older brother"⁴⁴⁹ who had real experience working in the projects in Chicago and working as a community organizer before going to Harvard Law School. In essence, he lived and worked in a similarly marginalized community as Jay-Z did but worked to make it better, even against drug dealers and criminals similar to Jay-Z. Obama's past made Jay-Z feel a deeper connection to him:

He'd seen me—or some version of me—in those Chicago streets, and we lived around a lot of the same kinds of things over those years, although obviously from very different angles. I could see he wasn't going to be one of those guys who burned hip-hop in effigy to get a few votes. He even had the guts to tell the press that he had my music on his iPod.⁴⁵⁰

And though Jay-Z said he actually liked Obama's policy ideas, his color *did* matter to Jay-Z:

He was black. This was big. This was a chance to go from centuries of invisibility to the most visible position in the entire world. He could, through sheer symbolism, regardless of any of his actual policies, change the lives of millions of black kids who now saw something different to aspire to. That would happen on the day he was elected, regardless of anything else that happened in his term. No other candidate could promise so much.⁴⁵¹

Working for Obama's nomination gave Jay-Z a real chance to put forth someone who could show young black children an alternative realm of possibility for their lives than the one he had. In several songs such as "HOVA", he talks about having to sell drugs to become successful so that future generations would not have to. In Obama, he felt black children had something to look towards as opposed to only looking for something to run away from, which is why Jay-Z said that the day Obama was elected, the gangster became less relevant.⁴⁵² Through his

⁴⁴⁹ Jay-Z, 182.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 182.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 182.

⁴⁵² Beaumont, 272.

foundation and other work, Jay-Z also wanted to help children from similar circumstances as his make their way to college.

When Jay-Z came to Washington, DC for the inauguration he felt the aura of hope that Obama campaigned on. “Unlike anything” he ever felt, he saw “people of all races and ages just thrilled to see each other. The inaugural crowd was vastly different from the Marcy projects, where Jay-Z said no white people lived.”⁴⁵³ In the elevator with his lifelong friend and former drug dealing partner Ty-Ty, Jay-Z remembered an older white woman straightening Ty-Ty’s tie in a way that Jay-Z felt was not “patronizing”, but “as comfortable as if we were family.”⁴⁵⁴ In the turbulent crack-infested 1980s, the older white woman in the elevator may have clutched her purse and not entered the same elevator as Jay-Z and Ty-Ty.

Jay-Z went into the crowd to watch Beyoncé perform at the Lincoln Memorial. He also performed at hip-hop clubs where people in the audience waved American flags, something he had never seen at a hip-hop show before. He enjoyed seeing his friends, some of the biggest names in hip-hop over the years such as P. Diddy and Mary J. Blige “sharing in this rite of passage, one of America’s grandest displays of pageantry.” Jay-Z watched the inauguration from the seats given to him unexpectedly for the event. When Obama finally took his oath, Jay-Z was emotional: “that was when it hit me the hardest. We’d started so far outside of it—so far from power and visibility. But here we were.”⁴⁵⁵ Jay-Z then related just how important Obama’s win was not only for him, but the next generation who, with his win, could see greater possibilities for their lives than he saw for his own given that a former drug seller and former drug user, both from fatherless households, sat on the world’s biggest stage:

I wanted Barack to win, so [black] kids could see themselves differently, could see

⁴⁵³ Jay-Z, 176.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 182.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., 170.

their futures differently than I did when I was a kid in Brooklyn and my eyes were focused on a narrower set of possibilities. People think there's no real distinction between the political parties, and in a lot of ways they're right. America still has a tremendous amount of distance to cover before it's a place that's true to its own values, let alone to deeper human values...if he'd lost, it would've been an unbelievable tragedy—to feel so close to transformation and then to get sucked back in to the same old story and watch another generation grow up feeling like strangers in their own country, their culture maligned, their voices squashed. Instead, even with all the distance yet to go, for the first time I felt like we were at least moving in the right direction, away from the shadows.⁴⁵⁶

It took Jay-Z 40 years to, even if for a moment, feel like he was part of American society, but what would Jay-Z's life had been like if he was born into a society that embraced him and his community from the beginning? Could Jay-Z have become Professor Carter or Reverend Carter? President Carter? Bank CEO? Though we can never be sure, we have seen what Jay-Z accomplished working with the options he believed were available to him. He told Howard Stern that anyone could have become Bill Gates if they had his same level of access to computers that Gates did⁴⁵⁷ but their immediate access was to drugs so they mastered that. A study of Jay-Z should encourage us to diversify options for *all* youth for the sake of the future of America because the country grows stronger when *everyone* can contribute positively to it, as Jay-Z now demonstrates.

With the election of President Obama, Jay-Z felt a sense of triumph not only for his life, but for his community, which he no longer saw as just New York or the rap world. When he performed a free show for ten thousand Obama supporters the night after the inauguration, he proudly shouted “If you're proud to be an American, put your hands up now!” He said that “proud to be an American” are words he thought he would never say because like many who come from marginalized communities, he had written off America, at least politically. In his

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 170-71.

⁴⁵⁷ CREOLE B (2013, February 18). *Jay-Z on Howard Stern* [Video file]: Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HF9NGSdu-pM>

opinion, up until Obama's inauguration, America's political history was "a travesty. A graveyard. And [he] knew some of the bodies it buried." Until Obama's nomination, Jay-Z was clear about how he thought America felt about him—it "hated [his] black ass."⁴⁵⁸

But while Jay-Z basked in the election of the first African American President, has he taken advantage of his relationship with the President to speak on issues that really affect the African American community from which he came? The African American community was the base support group for both Obama and Jay-Z so did Jay-Z have a responsibility to go beyond celebration and into activism for his community? Hip-hop historian Davey D wrote that Jay-Z was not at the crucial meeting with Minister Farrakhan and other leaders in hip-hop in 1997 after Tupac and B.I.G.'s murders. He was also absent from a hip-hop summit in 2001, which was organized by Jay-Z's mentor Russell Simmons. Davey D questions whether Jay-Z was truly interested in speaking to the challenges facing his community when he was face to face with the President after the campaign:

Did the two men talk about how to improve the high unemployment rates in and around Jay-Z's childhood home Marcy projects in Bed-Stuy Brooklyn, which...may have been hovering around 15 percent to 16 percent? Did Jay-Z holler at Obama about two high profile police brutality cases including the Justice Department refusing to prosecute the police officers who saw fit to shoot 50 bullets into a car killing an unarmed Sean Bell...the night before Bell's wedding?...Did Jay-Z speak to [affordable education] and voice those concerns?⁴⁵⁹

While it is true that there is no proof of what Obama and Jay-Z discussed, Davey D states that since there were no public statements on substantial challenges facing the black community, both Obama and Jay-Z played safe with their relationship in the public eye. Davey D asks if being safe is "what's needed during a time when many in our community are in dire need? Have we so little power we can't even speak to the issues of the communities that helped

⁴⁵⁸ Jay-Z, 170.

⁴⁵⁹ Bailey, 56-60.

get President Obama into office?” Jay-Z’s lack of a vocal presence led Davey D to hope that Jay-Z is not “President Obama’s only connection to that black underclass”⁴⁶⁰ because, in essence, Jay-Z no longer represents that underclass. He no longer walks the streets to see how white women still clutch their purses when black men pass them. In recent years, however, has Jay-Z proven Davey D and his critics wrong?

Jay-Z, at least since 2008, has become vocal and present on issues facing the black community. He is not the only commercial rapper who has become active, in part because of failures experienced by the black community on behalf of the George W. Bush administration, such as Bush’s abysmal response to Hurricane Katrina. According to Ogbar:

There is the black conscious rebel authenticity that had been largely relegated to the margins of commercial hip-hop until war and worsening urban conditions emerged under the administration of the second president Bush. Commercial rappers like Jadakiss, Ludacris, Jay-Z, and The Game have been political in ways that were virtually absent in commercial hip-hop between 1994 and 1992. They have all expressed a black consciousness that was pervasive a decade earlier, during hip-hop’s “golden age.”⁴⁶¹

Jay-Z has become particularly vocal on unarmed killings of black males by law enforcement and other entities. In 2008, while he may or may not have spoken to President Obama about the killing of Sean Bell, he did set up a trust fund to pay for the education of the children of Sean Bell, an African American man who was killed by police after his bachelor’s party on his wedding day. Jay-Z featured Bell’s fiancée Nicole Paultree Bell in his “I Will Not Lose” campaign for his Rocawear clothing line.⁴⁶²

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁶¹ Ogbar, J. (2007). *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap (Cultureamerica)*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, pg. 39.

⁴⁶² Edidin, D. (2008, May 3). Rapper Creates Trust for Sean Bell’s Children. The New York Times. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/03/arts/music/03arts-RAPPERCREATE_BRF.html



Nicole Paultree Bell in Rocawear campaign.⁴⁶³

On his 2010 album with Kanye West entitled *Watch the Throne*, he dedicates his song “Murder to Excellence” to Danroy Henry, a Pace University student killed by police in 2010. In some of his concerts in 2012, Jay-Z dedicated his song “Forever Young” to Trayvon Martin, who was slain by George Zimmerman in Florida. Both Jay-Z and Beyoncé attended a rally in New York organized by The Reverend Al Sharpton of the National Action Network.



L-r: Beyoncé, Jay-Z, Sybrina Fulton (mother of Trayvon Martin), and Reverend Al Sharpton.⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶³ Nicole Bell in Rocawears ‘I Will not Lose’ Campaign. *Whudat.com*. Retrieved from http://www.whudat.com/newsblurbs/more/nicole_bell_in_rocawears_i_will_not_lose_campaign_1680214083

⁴⁶⁴ Staff. Just for Trayvon Rallies Held in 100 Cities. *ABCnews.go.com*. Retrieved from <http://abcnews.go.com/US/photos/justice-trayvon-rallies-held-100-cities-19724260/image-19724358>

After Civil Rights Movement activist and singer Harry Belafonte chastised Jay-Z and Beyoncé for not caring about social justice issues⁴⁶⁵, Jay-Z rapped on his 2013 album *Magna Carta...Holy Grail* that his presence alone is charity and that the highest form of giving is anonymous. He stated that Belafonte and others have no idea how much he does for the community. In May Of 2015, his co-writer for his memoir *Decoded* dream hampton⁴⁶⁶ wrote that Jay-Z and Beyoncé secretly bailed out arrested protesters in Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland over the police killings of Michael Brown and Freddie Gray respectively. hampton wrote that Jay-Z asked her not to say anything but she was angered over continued comments about Jay-Z not caring about his community. She also stated that he and Beyoncé gave considerable money to help build the infrastructure of the Black Lives Matter organization.⁴⁶⁷

In addition to Jay-Z's financial contributions to black movements for social justice, Jay-Z also has no hesitation expressing his love for black revolutionaries and speaking out against racism. On January 14, 2014, I attended a Jay-Z and Kanye West concert in Washington, DC. I was expecting a performance of his classic songs plus new songs but was surprised by what I witnessed. During the performance of their song "Made in America", the mega screens displayed images of not only Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who is accepted among all races as a great leader, but also Malcolm X, a revolutionary who is celebrated by select pockets within the black community who believe in black empowerment first and foremost. Jay-Z and Kanye also showed video footage of a young white boy attending a Ku Klux Klan rally and made the point that hate is taught at a young age. Jay-Z did not voice such strong sentiments on black power early on in

⁴⁶⁵ Demby, G. (2013, July 30). Harry Belafonte, Jay Z and Intergenerational Beef. *NPR.org*. retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/07/30/207068455/harry-belafonte-jay-z-and-inter-generational-beef>

⁴⁶⁶ dream hampton does not capitalize the first initials of her first and last names.

⁴⁶⁷ Jaurgui, A. (2015, May 18). dream hampton: Jay-Z And Beyonce 'Wired Tens Of Thousands' Of Dollars To Bail Out Protesters. *Huffingtonpost.com*. retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/18/dream-hampton-jay-z-wired-tens-thousands-bail-out-protesters_n_7306678.html

his career but he is at a point in his career where he no longer hints at black empowerment as he did on his first album.



Jay-Z and Kanye salute Malcolm X during their Watch the Throne tour.⁴⁶⁸

Though I did not get a chance to interview Jay-Z, I did meet him backstage at the Washington, DC concert and informed him that he was the subject of my dissertation. He seemed surprised by my announcement, demonstrating the same reserved humility his teacher cited as a sixth grade student. Though reserved backstage, his onstage persona is indeed that of a revolutionary. But even in Jay-Z's newfound public black nationalism, there still lies a contradiction, a fork in the road for Jay-Z is a proud capitalist but identifies with the revolutionary leaders who condemned capitalism such as Malcolm X and Fred Hampton. For Jay-Z, who described himself as "Che Guevara with [jewelry] on...complex" there is no contradiction—the revolution today is economic for him more so than political.

⁴⁶⁸ Jay Z Kanye West Watch the Throne Review #8. *Cherryloia.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.cherryloia.com/picgisi/jay-z-kanye-west-watch-the-throne-review/8>



Backstage with Jay-Z.

Jay-Z is relatively silent about his financial contributions to individuals and political causes. Farber states that this reflects his influence from Jewish culture and the concept of Maimonides that the highest form of giving is anonymous.⁴⁶⁹ Jay-Z is more comfortable however, speaking at concerts about political issues and appearing at rallies to support causes that matter to him. In the first half of his rapping career. As he noted in his interview with Dyson, songs that spoke about racial injustice or inequality were not seen as a method of accumulating riches for rappers so he shied away from politically charged music. For example, in a 2-day concert in May of 2015 that Jay-Z organized to promote his new music streaming service Tidal, Jay-Z made it clear that he is no one's slave, that black people have been brainwashed to support everyone else but themselves, and that there is a continued pattern of isolating or killing black men who represent revolution or a threat:

*So I'm the bad guy now I hear, because I don't go with the flow
Don't ever go with the flow, be the flow
And I don't need no middle man to talk to my niggas
I understand if you don't understand, I figure I'm Jigga
That's where we differ
I take what's mine, you accept what they give ya
I don't take no checks I take my respect*

⁴⁶⁹ Farber, November 14th, Georgetown University.

*Pharrell even told me go with the safest bet
Jimmy Iovine offered a safety net
Google dangled around a crazy check
I feel like YouTube is the biggest culprit
Them niggas pay you a tenth of what you supposed to get
You know niggas die for equal pay right?
You know when I work I ain't your slave right?
You know I ain't shucking and jiving and high fiving
You know this ain't back in the days right?
But I can't tell, like the way they killed Freddie Gray right?
Shot down Mike Brown how they did Tray right?
Let them continue chokin' niggas
We gonna turn style, I ain't your token nigga
You know I came in this game independent right?
Tidal, my own label, same difference
Oh niggas is skeptical on their own shit
You bought 9 iPhones and Steve Jobs is rich
Phil Knight worth trillions you still bought those kicks
Spotify is 9 billion they ain't say shit
Lucy you got some splaining to do
The only one they hating on look the same as you
Thats cool, I know they trying to bamboozle you
Spending millions on media trying to confuse you
I had to talk to myself, Hov you used to
It's politics as usual.⁴⁷⁰*

The concert was held on the same weekend a rapper by the name of Chinx was murdered, which led Jay-Z to call for an end to black on black crime as he urged black people to remember that they are kings and queens.⁴⁷¹

So the question that can be asked is simple: Is Jay-Z an incredible innovator on the level of Henry Ford with all the complexities that come along a creator of great ideas or a new millennium black revolutionary? Author Miles White writes:

⁴⁷⁰ Hamp, A. (2015, May 17). Watch Jay Z's Epic Freestyle About Tidal Critics & Others at Intimate B-Sides Concert. *Billboard.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/the-juice/6568559/watch-jay-zs-epic-freestyle-about-tidal-critics-others-at>

⁴⁷¹ Markman, R. (2015, May 17). Jay Z Salutes Chinx, Makes A Plea For Peace At B-Side Concert. *MTV.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.mtv.com/news/2162943/jay-z-chinx-b-side-concert/>

Jay-z is a curious mash-up of Jack Johnson and Muhammad Ali, at once repugnant and heroic, egomaniacal and generous of spirit...[He] portrays himself as an entrepreneur whose beginnings as a street corner crack dealer are the stuff of Horatio Alger, no less part of the mythical American Dream than corporate robber barons or big city crime bosses...In making the leap from nefarious to legitimate largely on his own terms, Jay-Z, like Muhammad Ali in the 1960s and 1970s, transformed not only his representation of himself but constructed a compelling new model of black masculinity that may have begun in brute acts but ultimately transcended them, unapologetically and with his dignity intact. Like Ali, Jay-Z escaped the 'prison writ large' that polices and contains black male subjectivities by staring down white patriarchal hypocrisy and the limitations of American democracy. And, like Ali, he has lived long enough to see history stand with him.⁴⁷²

Between 2014 and 2015, Jay-Z released several songs urging his black listeners to break their slave mentality, much like Muhammad Ali. When critiqued about his relationship with the high-class shopping store Barney's after an incident of racial profiling⁴⁷³, Jay-Z rapped about how he used his relationship with Barney's to take a stand against "Stop & Frisk" or what Reverend Al Sharpton called "Shop & Frisk" policies that led to disproportionate searches of black and Latinos in New York by police and how he funneled Barney's money back into the black community and likened himself to an African king:

*Devil want these niggas hate they own kind
Gotta be Illuminati if a nigga shine
Oh we can't be a nigga if a nigga rich?
Oh we gotta be the devil that's some nigga shit
You seen what I did to the stop and frisk
Brooklyn on the Barney's like we own the bitch
Give the money to the hood, now we all win
Got that Barney's floor lookin' like a VIM
Black hoodie, black skully
Bravado like Mavado, boy I'm that gully
Gettin white money but I'm still black
All these niggas claiming king but I'm still that*

⁴⁷² White, M. (2011). *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap, and the Performance of Masculinity*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, pp. 81-85

⁴⁷³ Mukherjee, A. (2013, December 16). Jay Z, Barneys, and the Shop-and-Frisk Problem. Newyorker.com. Retrieved from <http://www.newyorker.com/business/currency/jay-z-barneys-and-the-shop-and-frisk-problem>

*King Hova, Mansa Musa
From a lie, the devil is a lie, I'm the truth, yeah.⁴⁷⁴*

At a concert in New York with “conscious” rapper Jay Electronica, Jay-Z again challenged the slave mentality of black people:

*Hop off the slave ship
Popped off my chain and took it to Jacob, I got it gold plated
Walked in that bitch like “Nigga we made it!”
I own my own masters
You know I ain’t missin’ no royalty statements
Y’all hella jealous of my melatonin
I could black out at any given moment
I’m God, G is the seventh letter made
So when my arms & feet shackled I still get paid
All praises due
I’m ready to chase Yakub back into caves
These are the last days, but do I seem fazed?
You’re blind, baby
Blind to the fact of who you are maybe
My bloodline’s crazy
Kings and queens and Michael Jordan rings.⁴⁷⁵*

Jay-Z seems to feel free to speak his mind. He is still a hustler but no longer a chameleon...unless his new freedom to publicly address black empowerment at a deeper level is his newest disguise. In fact, his former partner Dame Dash suggested Jay-Z condemning corporate groups and record companies is Jay-Z’s latest hustle because Jay-Z is the “most commercial person” he knows and that “Whatever is winning is what Jay-Z’s gonna embrace.” Therefore, “if bringing awareness to being robbed as a culture is what’s now in style,” Jay-Z will do that, according to Dash, who referred to Jay-Z’s actions as “commercial independence.”⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷⁴ Roberts II, W. and Carter, S. (2014). The Devil is a Lie [performed by Rick Ross and Jay-Z]. On *Mastermind* [CD]. New York: Maybach Music Group, Slip-n-Slide Records, and Def Jam Recordings. Retrieved from <http://genius.com/Jay-z-tidal-freestyle-lyrics/>

⁴⁷⁵ Carter, S. and Thedford, T. (2014). We Made It (remix) [performed by Jay-Z and Jay Electronica]. Retrieved from (<http://genius.com/Jay-z-we-made-it-freestyle-lyrics>

⁴⁷⁶ Robertson, I. (2015, May 23). Here’s What Jay-Z Thinks Of Jay Z’s B-Sides Concert Freestyle. *Youtube.com*. retrieved from <http://www.vibe.com/2015/05/dame-dash-jay-z-b-side-freestyle/>

Commercial or personal (or personally commercial), the black militant lyrics from recent songs never appeared in substantial levels on albums made by Jay-Z before 2010. He does not care what anyone thinks. He wears jewelry representing the 5 Percent Nation, considered by some to be a black supremacist group, front row at NBA games.⁴⁷⁷ On his first album, *Reasonable Doubt*, Jay-Z wrote: “At my arraignment screamin’/all us black folks got is sports and entertainment, until even.” Jay-Z, who wealth-wise represented the very bottom of the 99% as a toddler, used entertainment to get “even”, get his “own 40 acres”, and his own piece of the American pie. He no longer acts as a chameleon masking his beliefs. He has found what he was in search for all of his life—the freedom to just *be*—be married, be an artist, be a humanitarian, and most importantly, a father.



Jay-Z and Beyoncé at basketball game.⁴⁷⁸

The birth of Jay-Z and Beyoncé’s daughter Blue Ivy in 2012 allowed Jay-Z to come full circle—from rebel to embracer of his American-ness; from drug dealer to dealer of hope through his foundation; from crack house to White House; from living on the margins of American society to embracing his presence as a global citizen; and from fatherless child to fatherhood. He

⁴⁷⁷ Hailey, J. (2014, April 7). White People Outraged by Jay Z’s Five Percent Nation Medallion. *Theurbandaily.com*. Retrieved from <http://theurbandaily.com/2014/04/07/jay-z-five-percent-nation-chain/>

⁴⁷⁸ Sanders, S. (2014, April 7). AM BUZZ: Mama Joyce Shades Kandi and Todd’s Wedding; Rapper Caught In Lie and More... *Atlantadailyworld.com*. Retrieved from <http://atlantadailyworld.com/2014/04/07/am-buzz-mama-joyce-shades-kandi-todds-wedding-rapper-caught-in-lie-more/5/>

decided to support the gay community by endorsing gay marriage though it is still unpopular to be gay in mainstream hip-hop culture.⁴⁷⁹ He made peace with his greatest rival Nas so that a more positive story about hip-hop can be told.⁴⁸⁰ He used his influence not to promote other “gangsta” rappers, but to promote artists who are college graduates like J. Cole (as opposed to Kanye West whose first album was called *College Dropout*). He also connected his “mainstream resources to grassroots mainstream creative products” as Johnson suggested by becoming a producer for the musical “Fela” about Fela Kuti, the late Nigerian activist and singer, and for a film about the life of former Black Panther Angela Davis. After co-producing with Will Smith a 2014 adaptation of *Annie* with an African American actress as the star, Jay-Z is currently co-producing (with Will Smith) a miniseries about the life of Emmitt Till, the African American boy who was murdered in 1955 at age 14 for allegedly whistling at a white woman.⁴⁸¹ For the video for “Otis” (named for Otis Redding who did not earn the respect he felt he deserved from the music industry while living) from the *Watch the Throne* album in 2010, he and Kanye destroyed a Maybach vehicle, auctioned it off, and sent the proceeds to help children in East Africa on behalf of the organization Save the Children.⁴⁸²

Jay-Z’s life is a life that some would say could only happen in America. Regardless of the veracity of that statement, Jay-Z’s story *did* happen in America. In studying Jay-Z’s life, it is possible to understand how certain neglected communities within American society navigated through the psychological ramifications of urban neglect, and even oppression by its own

⁴⁷⁹ Rolling Stone staff (2012, May 15). Jay-Z Supports Gay Marriage. *Rollingstone.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/jay-z-supports-gay-marriage-20120515>

⁴⁸⁰ Lopes, J. (2012, October 5). Throwback: Nas And Jay-Z – Beyond The Beef BET Interview. *Thewordisbond.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.thewordisbond.com/74215/throwback-nas-and-jay-z-beyond-the-beef-bet-interview-2006/>

⁴⁸¹ Begley, S. (2015, July 25). Jay Z and Will Smith Are Producing an Emmett Till Miniseries. *Time.com*. Retrieved from <http://time.com/3972215/emmett-till-miniseries/>

⁴⁸² Markman, R. (2012, March 12). “The Throne’s ‘Otis’ Maybach Now A \$60,000 Work Of Art.” *MTV.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.mtv.com/news/1680899/otis-maybach-auction-watch-the-throne/>

government. Through an analysis of his life it is possible to understand the possibilities of anyone who does eventually believe that the American dream can be available to them. It provides a lens by which to begin to reconstruct a society where no Shawn Carter can be born into and feel less of worth whether in an inner city project or trailer park.

While it is true that Jay-Z has culpability in the decisions he made to “raise hell” in the communities he inhabited, it is also true that he has spent the majority of his adult life attempting to atone for his decisions and uplift not only the community from which he came, but all communities that he encounters where he sees suffering. His vehicle to give back to his community *is* hip-hop, a musical form that Stoute said “contemporized the American dream for the next generation.”⁴⁸³ His life is a case study for a rebel living in the tumultuous transitions that have taken place in American society from the Civil Rights Era to the election of the first African American President of the United States and *that* is indeed worthy of study.

⁴⁸³ Stoute, 2011.

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