

The Enigma of Kanye West

BY CANSU MIA KILIC



A prodigy gifted with a musical brain and knows it. As respected as his music is to some, he is not as respected as an individual. From public outbursts to offensive statements, Ye Omari West, widely known as Kanye West, is a big name when it comes to changing the future of hip-hop. Starting as a producer for other local artists, he also used his innovative mind and molded himself into a successful rapper. He remains self-aware while releasing his inner, unfiltered opinions about the world, figuratively through his music and directly on social media. Each album reflects his current emotions, experiences, and mental state in that chapter of his life. A raw outlet for his peculiar behaviors and ideology transformed into art.

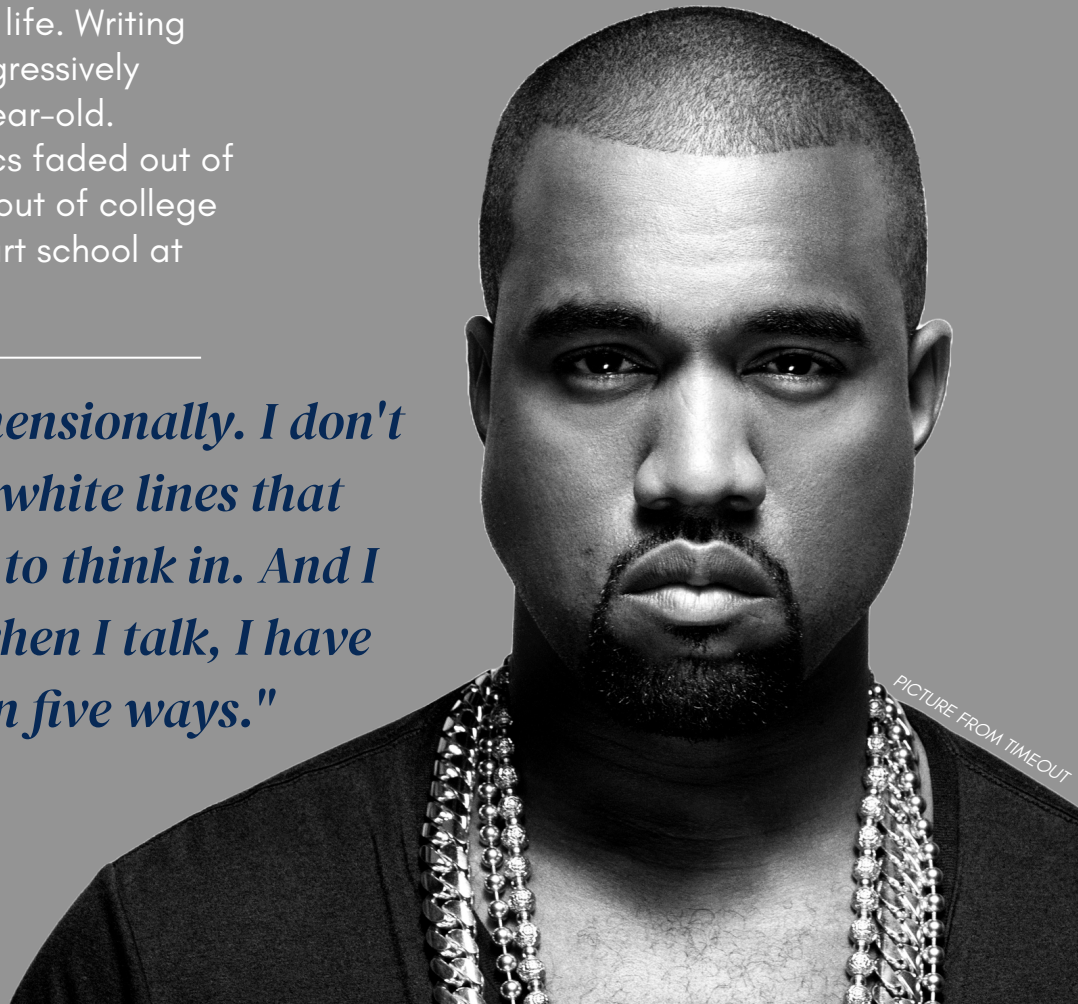
Born on June 8th, 1977, in Atlanta, Georgia, and later raised in Chicago, Illinois, Kanye always had an ear for music. His parents divorced when he was three but played prominent roles throughout his life. Writing poetry and rap songs was progressively becoming his forte as a five-year-old. However, eventually, academics faded out of the picture as Kanye dropped out of college after completing one year of art school at Chicago State University.

In an interview with Ebony magazine, he explained, "I dropped out of school because I wasn't learning fast enough... I learned from real-life better."

This real-life consisted of moving to New York in 2001 and giving his music career a risky shot. Hip-hop artists like LL Cool J and Run-DMC's styles in expression and rhythm inspired him. Using layered sounds, sampling in unconventional ways, and merging genres evolved into his experimental production style. Some of Kanye's songs hold the power to make each beat vibrate deep within your chest and brain, all due to the intricate production process of giving high value to detail and time. In the Joe Rogan Experience podcast, Kanye underlines how he firmly believes his out-of-the-box ideologies cannot be compared to anyone else. He believes that when he hears music, he sees sonics as the colors in his mind.

"I think very three-dimensionally. I don't think in the black-and-white lines that I've been programmed to think in. And I think in full color, so when I talk, I have to describe a thought in five ways."

- Kanye West



PICTURE FROM TIMEOUT

ONLY THE BEGINNING

ILLUSTRATION BY TAKASHI MURAKAMI



After gaining fame in the early 2000s by working on JAY-Z's album "Blueprint" (2001) with Roc-A-Fella Records, he officially commenced his solo artist journey.

Slowly entering the rapping world, he faced challenges like obtaining social acceptance after being a producer. Unfortunately,

not long after, a car accident broke his jaw, resulting in his mouth wired shut. This tragedy ignited an eruption of inspiration inside Kanye's imagination. The collision nearly killed him but somehow revived his musical mind. "The College Dropout" (2004) was born, where hit songs like "All Falls Down" acknowledged self-esteem problems and opened up the conversation about insecurities society struggles with. A pivotal point that contained lyricism of his wit and ambitious mental state at the time. Overall, underlining his challenges in pursuing a music career over a college education and proving to everyone his agile ability as a rapper.

A year later, his second studio album, "Late Registration" (2005), was another step to making Kanye a creative power in the industry. His cinematic usage of the orchestra and live instruments was rich, where instruments of soulful strings and brass caused instant goosebumps to surface. The juxtaposition of something as classical as the orchestra intertwined with R&B is a unique type of Kanye production.

Songs like "Gold Digger" and "Touch the Sky" touch socio-political issues and criticize fame and materialism. Juxtaposed against the "Hey Mama" track, dedicated to his mother, Donda West, His appreciation translates into an upbeat and warm song that almost feels like a hug full of unconditional love. Kanye's vulnerability and rawness resonated with many fans, resulting in him and this album taking home three Grammy awards.

From "College Dropout" to "Graduation" (2007), Kanye came a long way in those three years, and this album conveys it all. Genres of electro and house crossed paths, featuring artists like T-Pain, Lil Wayne, and Chris Martin from Coldplay. The album cover, designed by Japanese artist Takashi Murakami, had elements of free-spirited and colorful art that positively presented itself in the songs. As Kanye has expressed himself openly in the fashion world since 2009, the animated character represents his shutter shades era and backpack to go with the school theme. Despite the upbeat energy of his songs, he continued to address his challenges and holler at those who doubted him. For instance, in the song "Can't Tell Me Nothing," he sings, "Excuse me, was you saying something? Uh uh you can't tell me nothing" as a declaration of independence and separation from all the criticism he faces. Kanye may have dropped out, but he indeed graduated from needing to prove himself to the world, emphasizing an evolution of maturity as an artist.

"I HATE BEING BI-POLAR, IT'S AWESOME"

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JERRITT CLARK FOR ROC NATION



THE TURNING POINT

The big smile on stage radiating his pride slowly faded as Kanye entered one of the darkest phases of his life. Two months after "Graduation" came out, his mother suddenly passed away. This tragic death took an extreme emotional toll on him as a human. The deep grief, almost impossible to put into words, was translated straight onto the "808s & Heartbreak" album (2008)—an album of pure rawness, trauma, and pain with a splash of robotic and autotuned style. With more shifts in his persona came the perpetual public opinion. The following year, at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards, the Taylor Swift and Kanye West feud conquered the internet. All this conundrum later circulated the media, where he received plenty of backlash for his out-of-pocket behavior.

Kanye kept dropping albums left and right in the following years like a machine. From "My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy" (2010) to "Yeezus" (2013). The Yeezus tour earned around \$95 million, making it the highest-grossing hip-hop tour ever. Amidst all the traveling and performing, he kept his controversial figure on the internet as he continued to make comments on topics like slavery, interracial relationships, support for Donald Trump, and sporadic Twitter rants. Some believed his claims had narcissistic qualities, especially after he rapped and stated in interviews, "I Am a God." The man speaks his mind on any occasion, usually without thinking or caring about others.

Although his song "Runaway" (2010) signifies a wake-up call as he realizes he hasn't been the best person. Apologizing and taking the blame for everything he has done, he still feels unable to change himself due to the way he is. The words "Look at ya" repeated in the background express his frustration by taking ownership of his actions. Most importantly, the outro's usage of the vocoder is a metaphor for how the media distorts his words and often makes him the villain. Some consider this piece one of the most introspective songs Kanye has ever put out there.

Beyond music, his side hobby as a fashion designer kept altering the fashion language and world. Initially created in 2009, the Yeezy brand had its official debut and collaboration with Adidas. The big launch occurred during New York Fashion Week in 2015, generating \$2 billion in annual profit. Kanye then released "The Life of Pablo" (2016), which mirrored issues he faced with the rest of the world. This was also the year he got diagnosed with bipolar disorder after being hospitalized for a psychiatric emergency, later having a whole album dedicated to it. All of this potentially explained his mood swings and depressive lows on the internet, causing some people to approach his behavior more empathetically.

"I AM A GOD"

- Kanye West "Yeezus"

Despite the vulnerable lyricism in previous albums, "ye" (2018) was the epitome of being confrontational about his mental illness. The cover even says, "I hate being bipolar. It's awesome". As concerning as it may sound, the opening track is called "I Thought About Killing You," which suggests killing the other side of his personality that causes manic episodes and abrupt mannerisms. Topics of psychological isolation are seen in the song "Ghost Town," as the chorus sings, "and nothing hurts anymore I feel kind of free," suggesting numbness and detachment. Feeling like a ghost in the world with a sense of disconnection but letting go. In the meantime, "Violent Crimes" shows a shift in his perception of women as he is a father to two daughters with his ex-wife of six years, Kim Kardashian. With regret about how he used to treat women, his lyrics suggest an effort to protect his daughters from their future transitions from innocent kids to women in a dangerous world. This era ended with Kanye's impulsive decision to run for the U.S. President in 2020 against over 1,000 candidates. Somehow, he collected approximately 60,000 votes across 12 states with his presidential campaign tweets.

THE FINAL DESTINATION

Lastly, "Donda" (2021), named after his mother, explored faith, family, and the discovery of another Kanye. The album starts with the "Donda Chant" as the opening track, a tribute to Donda West. Many believe Donda is said 58 times, alluding to the age at which she died and the fading rhythmic pattern of her last heartbeats. Another loss was added as Kim and Kanye filed for divorce after their rocky relationship.



PHOTOGRAPHED BY RICH FURY FOR VANITY FAIR

However, his current relationship status has changed from single to married with Bianca Censori, an Australian architect. In 2022, his antisemitic hate speech spiraled through the media, impacting both the Jewish community and his own. On The Alex Jones Show, he declared, "The Jewish media has made us feel like the Nazis and Hitler have never offered anything of value to the world." The consequences of his actions once again led to another fallout in his community, where Adidas decided to drop the Yeezy brand deal due to their intolerance for hate speech. At the moment, after a few shows for Donda, Kanye seems to be quiet within the chaotic uproar of social media as he is busy traveling, designing, and writing more music.

Under constant pressure, Kanye is a complex character waiting to be psychoanalyzed and judged by society after every outburst or music release. As West claims he is God, he is ultimately one of the world's best-selling music artists. Like kings and gods, he has been sitting at the apex of success with his 24 Grammy Awards. Despite every move, every remark, every song he has made, his music is the one thing that still manages to overpower and tune out every single voice. Contrary to popular beliefs, negative or positive, Kanye West will continue to leave people dumbfounded due to another album drop or impulsive comment about the corrupt world. We'll never know his next move, but we will still watch him in awe as his legacy may inspire future generations. Welcome inside the mind of Kanye West, where he is a musical genius but a mystery waiting to be solved.

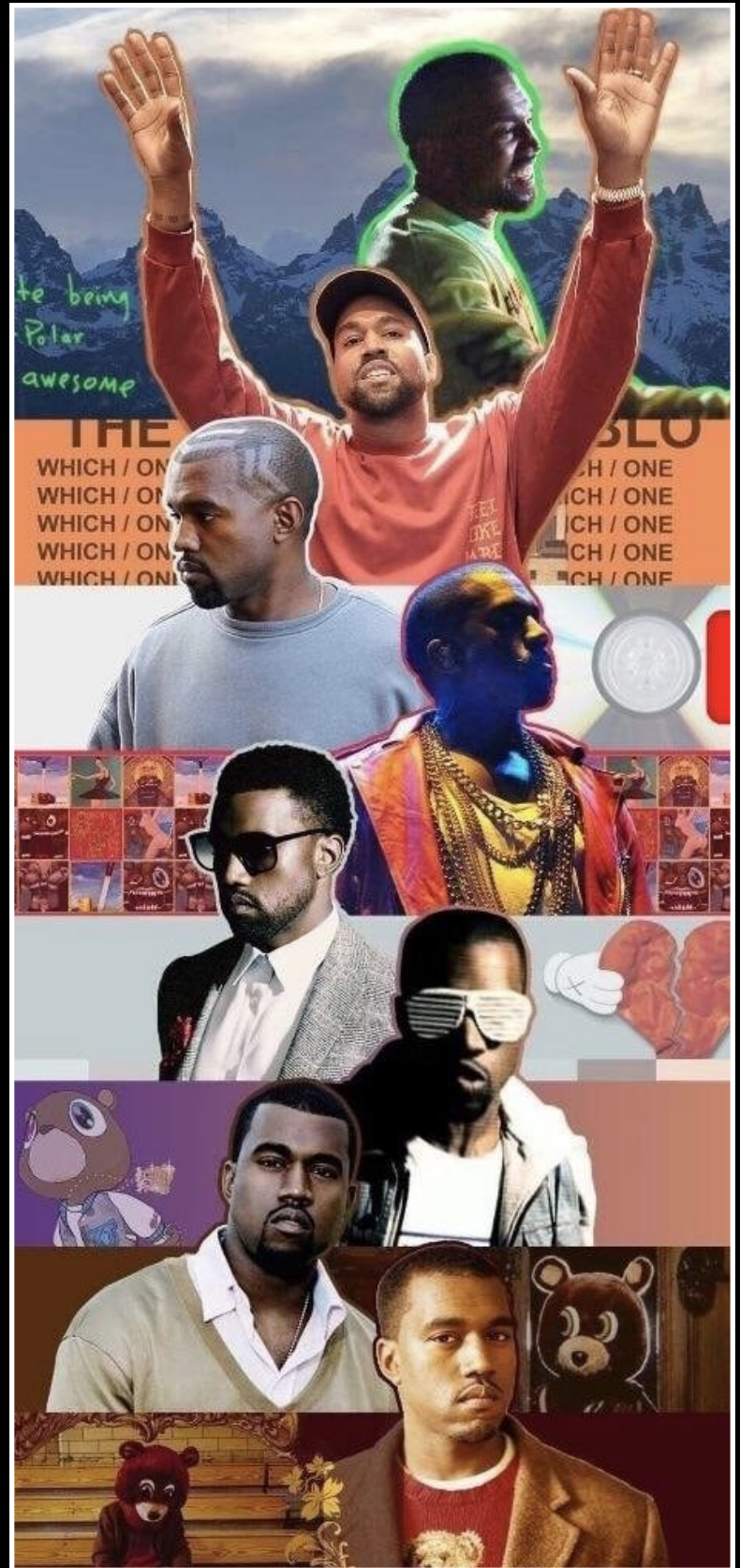


PHOTO BY PROJECT ON PINTEREST

"I AM WARHOL. I AM THE NUMBER 1 MOST IMPACTFUL ARTIST OF OUR GENERATION. I AM SHAKESPEARE IN THE FLESH."