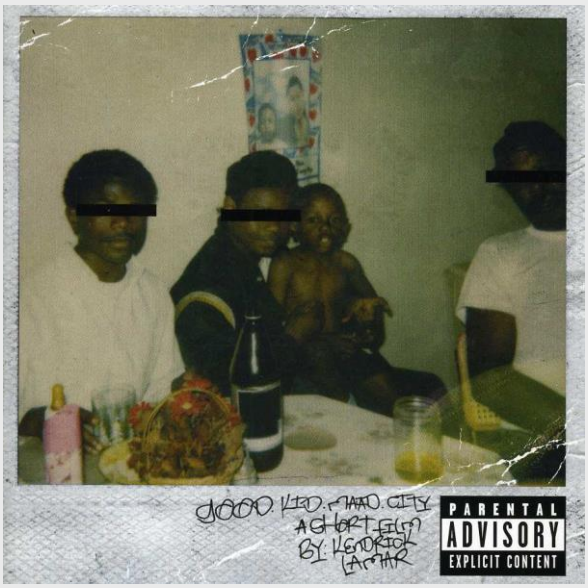
Kendrick Lamar – Good Kid, m.A.A.d. City



The themes dealt with in Kendrick Lamar's debut commercial album are immediate: on the album cover, we see a real photograph of Kendrick as a baby sitting on the lap of someone who is presumably an older relative. His baby bottle, a symbol of childhood purity and nurture, rests next to a 40oz, the very representation of the vices that tempt one in the process of coming of age. This juxtaposition of virtue and vice is nothing new concerning Kendrick (the cover of his previous album, *Section.80* , included a desk cluttered with ammunition and prescription pills, with a Bible just barely making it into the frame) but the difference here is how much larger of a role this contrast plays in *Good Kid, m.A.A.d. City*.

Among the first sounds we hear on this album is a repentance speech recited by Kendrick and his peers, followed by a child's cry, distorted to the point of uneasiness, which in turn is followed by a recount of Kendrick, on his way to meet Sherane, wildly fantasizing about what they will do together. The concept of the album revolves around this particular night, which serves as a microcosm of Kendrick's experience growing up in Compton. One of the two definitions of the titular acronym refers to the aforementioned dichotomy; "m.A.A.d." stands for "My Angry Adolescence Divided," and the album concerns itself with exactly that – torn between the street life of his peers and the life his parents envision for him, Kendrick struggles to survive his adolescent years with his sanity and his moral compass intact.

Nowhere is this struggle more prevalent than in the aptly-titled, “The Art of Peer Pressure,” in which Kendrick details the story of how his friends and he broke into a house and were chased by the plice. In this track, we find Kendrick explaining his uncharacteristic behavior when he’s with the others:

“Rush a nigga quick and then we laugh about it.
That’s ironic, ‘cause I’ve never been violent, until I’m with the homies.”

While this track is not the centerpiece of the album, it is the first and most direct in explicitly addressing the effect that such an environment has on the malleable youth that call it home.

Another important aspect to note when analyzing this album is to understand the role that the few included features play. The first feature we come across is label mate Jay Rock. He provides more of the crucial contrast that defines this album; Jay Rock plays the Doughboy to Kendrick’s Trey. That is, at the end of “Money Trees,” which ingeniously flips a Beach House sample into an airy-yet-hard Cali beat, Jay Rock delivers a verse that illustrates the same situations that Kendrick describes, but from the view of someone who actively lives the gangster life.

“Pots with cocaine residue, everyday I'm hustling.
What else is a thug to do when you eatin' cheese from the government?
Gotta provide for my daughter n'em, get the fuck up out my way, bitch.
Got that drum and got them bands just like a parade, bitch.
Drop that work up in the bushes, hope them boys don't see my stash.
If they do tell the truth, this the last time you might see my ass.”

His verse lends a panoramic view of the different lives lived by the youth in Kendrick’s environment. Whereas the rest of the album might imply that Kendrick is a victim of the gang life around him, Jay Rock’s verse reminds us that the very gangsters who seem to threaten Kendrick are victims themselves. Jay Rock and Kendrick might walk different paths but they both live in the same struggle. The next feature on the list is Drake, who slides into his slot in “Poetic Justice” with ease. The role his verse plays is somewhat minimal and subdued but ultimately contributes to the false sense of security and comfort that the track provides the listener with before the skit that follows, in which Kendrick is assaulted by a gang of men outside of Sherane’s house.

The third and most crucial feature of the album comes from West Coast rap veteran MC Eiht, who plays a pivotal role in the two-song centerpiece of the album, “Good Kid” and “m.A.A.d. City.” In the former, Kendrick suffers a traumatic experience at the hands of police officers who ignore the fact that Kendrick is a “Good Kid” and treat him with all the same brutality that they would

a gang-banger. In the latter track, we hear Kendrick, fresh off of this humiliating experience, rapping more frenetically and aggressively than ever before. The taunting of the men who jumped him in "Poetic Justice" now serves as the hook that seems to be egging Kendrick on in this track. While, at face-value, the lyrics might appear to be par for the course for a high-energy gangsta-rap cut, his delivery is what renders this song an entirely different beast. The cracking of his voice indicates something very different from bravado: he's *terrified*. What we hear is a kid attempting to puff out his chest and act tough because that's what he believes will enable him to survive, but his tough-talk does not sound all that credible since he appears to be *sobbing* while doing this. His passionately unconvincing posturing in his first two verses is what causes MC Eiht's role to be especially important. "Wake yo' punk ass up!" snarls MC Eiht as he steps in, playing the role of the hardened gangster, schooling the young Kendrick to the ways of street life. At the same time, the instrumental switches from the frantic modern trap-influenced beat to one almost dripping with traditional G-Funk swagger; this could be seen as signifying that not only is MC Eiht the OG initiating Kendrick Lamar into gang life, but he is also the real-life West-Coast hip hop veteran welcoming Kendrick into the pantheon of California rappers. The song reaches its crescendo when, at the end of his second verse, Kendrick proclaims himself "Compton's human sacrifice"; it's not that we've never heard a rapper with a Messianic complex before, it's just that this is one of the few times where the rapper is portraying himself as the victim rather than the savior. As the track approaches its end, we hear Kendrick and Eiht trading lines that are melodically distorted to various pitches culminating in Kendrick declaring himself driven m.A.A.d. by Compton, "**M**aking [him] an **A**ngel on **A**ngel **D**ust." And as the instrumental dwindles down to its eerie conclusion, it certainly appears so.

Towards the end of the next major piece, "Sing About Me/ I'm Dying of Thirst," Kendrick and his friends finally find some solitude in this chaotic life of theirs. They are confronted by Kendrick's neighbor, an old lady, who sits them down and explains to them that they are *dying of thirst*, that they need holy water to cleanse them of the ills that Compton has inflicted upon them. She forces them to recite the repentance speech that we heard back at the very beginning of the album, and upon this moment of revelation, it seems Kendrick has finally achieved some sense of inner peace amongst the turmoil surrounding him. The narrative of the album cathartically concludes with "Real," in which Kendrick realizes that his reckless behavior from earlier that evening, and throughout his life, does not make him any closer to being a man. A man, says his father over the voicemail, is he who is responsible and takes care of his family, not he who risks his life under the illusion that a gangster façade will grant him acceptance.

Yes, we've had the conscious non-gangster archetype in rap played out by others in the past a la Kanye West and Black Star, but this album is so much more. *Good Kid, m.A.A.d. City* is a story of a youth guiding himself in a place where moral guidance is extremely difficult to find. It is a story of seeking righteousness in a place where sin appears to be much more rewarding. But above all, *Good Kid, m.A.A.d. City* is the story of pursuing self-preservation in an environment that breeds self-destruction.