WRA

Chase Davis

Music and religion are similar to each other in the sense that both aim to target one’s innermost soul. Those who specialize in the art of music focus on the significance of empathy and aim to appeal to one’s most intimate emotions. They do so by targeting topics that tend to be consistently significant to people, emotions that people experience when they are at their height points in life, and their lowest lows, common examples are love, heart break, money, happiness, success, failure, and persistence. Religion uses the concepts of love and spirituality to guide those that follow it, and one’s life with a sense of purpose. Plato was well aware of the connection between music and spirituality which he displays in this quote: “Music is a moral law. It gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and charm and gaiety to life and to everything”. This quote shows that the relationship between music and spirituality (a significant factor of religion) is not a new one, thus it is important for us to look at what form this relationship assumes in modern society and how we are influenced by it. Additionally, according to Forbes' Julie Watson, there are an estimated "45 million hip-hop consumers between the ages of 13 and 34"(Watson, "Hip-Hop: Billion-Dollar Biz"). Modern pop artists have learned to leverage this connection between music and religion to develop an image of otherworldly musical prowess. With hip hop attracting such a large, broad, and young audience, this is an extremely important topic to discuss as popular artists have the potential to influence how young listeners grow up viewing religion, and ultimately how the conversation of religion among youth is dominated. Through an analysis of rap music, this paper will assess how and why music artists, particularly Jay-Z and Kanye West, use hip hop music as a platform to establish god complexes in their persona. This will be done specifically by looking at both Kanye West and Jay-Z's personal relationships with religion along with an analysis of how they use religious imagery in their music. This paper will critically analyze interviews with both of the artists along with how Kanye West and Jay-Z establish themselves as gods in their music in the hopes of addressing both the social and musical egos of the modern Hip Hop artist.

From Tupac’s *Ghetto Gospel*, to J. Cole’s *Land of the Snakes*, religion has held a strong a position in Hip Hop since its inception in the early 1970’s. In fact, for Kanye West, many consider religion to be a defining attribute in his music. In an article Noah Kim, writer for the Huffington Post, wrote about Kanye West’s most recent album, *The Life of Pablo,* Kim actually discusses the legitimacy of *The Life of Pablo* as a gospel album, which Kanye West attempts to market the album as: “[Kanye West] was a narcissistic heretic whose self-obsession peaked as he declared “I am a God” on his last album” (Kim). This brings rise to a term which will be referred to as the God complex for the purposes of this paper. The God complex is the common phenomena among modern Hip Hop artists where they, for a variety of reasons, feel the need to proclaim themselves as gods among men and other artist in their music. There is validity to Kim’s reservations of *The Life of Pablo* being a legitimate gospel album when one considers the fact that Kanye did, in fact, refer to himself as god in a variety of tracks on *The Life of Pablo*. However, later in his article, Kim addresses the fact that Kanye’s work on *The Life of Pablo* reveals that Kanye does still seek the acceptance of God and wish to praise God through his music: “[Kanye’s] interspersed profanities and images of gluttony reveal that he knows he hasn’t always been the most obedient Child of God. Still, He doesn’t give up on West, so West won’t give up on Him” (Kim). This quote illuminates a common trend among Hip Hop artists. Because of their profession, there is some pressure to remain profane and callous in their music, however, there is a sense of inner struggle between one’s commitment to Hip Hop music’s audience and one’s commitment to their own religion. *The Life of Pablo* is Kanye’s way of exposing this vulnerability to his listeners and showing the world that though it may not always be evident through his music, religion is the most important thing to Kanye. It will be important for this essay to assess this balance that Kanye must hold, how he goes about maintaing it, and any strains that the intersection of Hip Hop and religion may have on his conscience.

Conversely, Jay-Z , the other artist that we will be observing in this paper, makes his stance against organized religion extremely apparent in his 1997 song *Where I'm From* when he states: "I'm from the place where the church is the flakiest / And niggas been praying to God so long that they atheist"(Jay-Z). Through these two lines Jay-Z displays his resentment toward the Christian faith and implies that Christianity as a religion is an unreliable and unrealistic resolution to one’s problems. Jay-Z’s resentment toward Christianity in his upbringing has led to his current stance on religion, one where Jay-Z is said to believe in a monotheistic God, but one unlike the Judeo-Christian God. He explicitly notes his stance on religion in an interview with Angie Martinez in 2010:

“For the record, I of course believe in god, but I believe in one god. If people must know my religious beliefs, I believe in one god. I don’t believe in religion. I don’t believe in Christians or Muslims. I think all that separates people. I think it’s one God. I think it’s all the same God, and I don’t believe in hell ”(Hot ‘97).

In *Religion In Hip Hop*, Miller analyzes Jay-Z’s *Where I’m From* verse and establishes the idea that Jay-Z uses the void of a god-like figure in his own life to fuel the transcendence of his-own self: “It’s as if he’s saying: I can’t hear, can’t feel a connection to the divine, and I don’t know where the voice of God is located, so I’ll locate it in my voice” (Miller et al.,59). It is through this development of Jay-Z that we can see the early signs of the development of HOVA, Jay-Z’s self-established moniker used to compare himself to Jehovah of the Old Testament, and ultimately the development of Jay-Z’s God Complex. According to Miller, the name Jehovah was specifically chosen as a result of its similarity to **Jay-**Hova (Miller 57). Such a choice raises more questions about Jay-Z’s choice of HOVA: is the name a slap in the face to the Christians that Jay-Z grew up resenting, did Jay-Z choose HOVA because of the similarity between Jay-Hova and Jehova, are HOVA and Jay-Z the same entity or is HOVA an alter ego that Jay-Z uses in music to share his religious beliefs with the world, or did Jay-Z choose the name simply to fill the religious void left in his life remaining from his negative experiences with the Christian faith growing up (the Miller theory). Regardless of Jay-Z’s purpose for naming himself HOVA, he ultimately makes the statement that he cannot find an established god to believe in, and until he can Jay-Z will establish himself as god, which further raises the question: what group of people does Jay-Z believe he is the god of? Is he the god of rap? Is he the god of American Society? Or does Jay-Z believe he quite literally is the god of everything? This is a question that will require further discussion later in this paper.

In contrast to Jay-Z, Kanye West grew up as a devout follower of the Christian faith. In an interview with Kris Jenner, Kanye West’s mother in Law, Kanye share’s the significance of his Christian values and how he hopes to pass them on to his children: “It’s important to me that I grow, and walk, and raise my family with Christian values” (West). Despite Kanye West’s evident devotion to Christianity, he, similarly to Jay-Z, has also established a distinctive God Complex. West often refers to himself by his stage name, Yeezus, a combination of the names Kan**ye** and Je**sus.** West developed this stage name during the production of his sixth studio album, titled under the same name. In an article with CNN, Monica Miller, author of *Religion In Hip Hop*, shares a perspective on Kanye West’s God Complex which starkly contrasts that of her perspective on Jay-Z’s God Complex displayed above: "I don't think (this Christian theological language) is creating a religion … He [uses] God to situate himself at the top of the game"(Cleveland). Miller views Kanye’s self-establishment as a god-like figure as almost a way of Kanye paying respect to God and establishing himself as dominant over the “rap game”. A measure that West finds appropriate as he views the Judeo-Christian God as the supreme being in life. Though West views God as such a high power, this self-proclamation as Yeezus implies that he is still a very close second; he conveys this through his second verse on *I Am a God* from his 2013 album *Yeezus:* "I just talked to Jesus/he said, 'What up, Yeezus?'/I said "Shit I'm chilling/trying to stack these millions'/I know he's the most high, but I am a close high" ” (West, “*I Am a God*”). Similarly, to Jay-Z we can see a development in Kanye West’s God complex. Kanye West is a devout Christian, whereas Yeezus serves as an alter ego of sorts where Kanye can assert his dominance over others while still maintaining his conscience as a Christian. Jay-Z and Kanye West both believe themselves to be God-like figures but they seem to construct their superhuman persona for vastly different reasons.

Now that Jay-Z and Kanye West’s relationships with religion have both been well established, and some questions as to why they have found the need to create these god complexes have been risen, it is necessary to look at how both of these artists use their music and public image to further construct their respective God complexes. On August 21, 2001 Jay-Z released the second single from his album *The Blueprint* : Izzo. Izzo was a huge step for Jay-Z as it was his first top 10 single on the Billboard top 100 charts, and is often known by its chorus “H to the izz-O, V to the izz-A / For shizzle, my nizzle, used to dribble down in VA”(Jay-Z). This was the first time that Jay-Z had publicly referred to himself as H.O.V.A. through his music. In an interview with MTV, Jay-Z speaks of the creation of the moniker H.O.V.A., and alludes to the fact that he, himself, did not initially create the title: “I can make these songs in like five to seven minutes… that’s just like a gift, and then they just start calling me like Jay-hovah” (Jay-Z). Jay-Z views his ability to quickly create music as a god-like gift, something no other rapper is capable of doing, thus implying that Jay-Z’s title of H.O.V.A is used as a form of acceptance of this gift and establishes his dominance over all other rap artists in the “game”. When presented from Jay-Z’s perspective, the stage name H.O.V.A. almost appears to be a title that happened to be circumstantially bestowed upon him, and not actually a self-imposed symbol of pride and dominance over society. In order to remain an impartial audience, one must consider the fact that this explanation is coming from Jay-Z, himself, and though this first-hand interview does increase the credibility of the history between the creation of the name H.O.V.A., Jay-Z will always be partial to display himself in a positive light to his audience. Hip Hop is like a game, where the spectators to an extent control the show. The more avid followers one has, the more their sales increase and higher sales for an artist, translates to more money. With fortune often being an artist’s ultimate goal, it is important for Jay-Z to make large statements, such as referring to himself as Jehovah, in order to gain publicity, but only to an extent. If Jay-Z were to make himself appear to be radical in an interview, almost as if he had lost his mind or wished to say something socially inacceptable, that would be the end of his rap career and fortune. Thus, Jay-Z is forced to find an uncomfortable balance between apparent radical transcendence and the life of an average rapper.

Ironically, the main producer of Jay-Z’s *Izzo*, was none other than Kanye Omari West (Jay-Z). Kanye started out his career in the early 2000’s as a producer for Roc-A-Fella Records, a record company founded by Jay-Z in 1995. The release of *Izzo* predates Kanye’s debut studio album, *College Dropout* by almost 3 years but none-the-less the interaction between both artists existed, and Kanye West had been exposed to the fact that rap artists can be, and often are, perceived as otherworldly figures. Kanye makes his god-like position as a rap artists extremely apparent in an interview with *W* magazine when asked about his controversial song on *Yeezus*, *I am a God*: “Cause it’s like, Yo! Nobody can tell me where I can and can’t go. Man, I’m the No. 1 living and breathing rock star. I am Axl Rose; I am Jim Morrison; I am Jimi Hendrix” (Bagley). West goes on to speak about a recent trip to Paris Fashion Week where he had been invited to a runway show on the condition that he did not attend any other runway shows during the week. West did not appreciate the fact that others were trying to control him. By 2013 he had reached a mental state where others could not dictate his life nor tell him what to do, and when someone finally tried to control him, Kanye made a song about him being a god. West then proceeds to compare himself to other big musical artists like Axl Rose and Jimi Hendrix to emphasize his stature and show in the current era of music, there is no one that can outdo him; West quite literally puts himself above all others in the music industry and implies dominance over all people in general. This now exposes the perspective of Yeezus being much more than establishment of power through an alter ego. Yeezus was formed through events which personally effected Kanye, and thus serves as an entity of Kanye West, himself. This is distinguished from H.O.V.A., a bestowed on Jay-Z by others, as Kanye West establishes Yeezus himself as a source of dominance and control.

Through background, music, and interviews it is evident that Jay-Z and Kanye West have two very different relationships with God. Jay-Z does not share Kanye West’s sentiments of Christianity or belief in the Judeo-Christian God, though both artists do believe in the existence of one sole supreme being, with Jay-Z giving a less concrete answer as to who or what god he may believe in. Through their rise to success, both artists have developed objectively large egos, and have shown that they prefer positions of power over a position of being overpowered by others. Ultimately, both artists must understand that though they have influence over their listeners, in similar a respect their audience has influence over them. Failure to please their listeners results in lower album sales and lower album sales result in lower income, and it is this concept of money that seemingly makes these “immortal beings” mortal, a reality that both artists obviously realize. Neither artist wishes to lose control over the industry that they “run” or the listeners which view them so highly and thus feel pressure to maintain these God complexes to make their listeners view them as supreme beings who demand respect. It is also important to understand the derivation of both of their god-like monikers. With the inception of Jay-Z’s moniker, H.O.V.A. sprouting from his displeasure with the Christian church growing up, it seems as though H.O.V.A. was created as a “slap in the face” to the Christian community, in order for Jay-Z to first discredit the Judeo-Christian God while simultaneously establishing Jay-Z’s own supremacy as a rapper with a “gift” which he has accepted from those around him and demands be acknowledged. In contradiction to Jay-Z’s style, Kanye West persona, Yeezus is developed as a result of many influences. It first serves as an acknowledgement of the existence of the God Kanye praises and God’s role as is the highest being that there is, while simultaneously implying that Kanye is a close second to this God, which Kanye claims to “interact” with personally in his music. In the same respect, this close proximity that Kanye shares to God also implies his own supremacy over all other beings. This type of thought has proven to be problematic in Kanye’s interaction with others leading to conflict showing the dangers and potential consequences of the God complex. Through Kanye West and Jay-Z, one can introspectively see that though the development of the God complex in modern artists can provide entertainment for an artist’s audience, I can also be harmful to those that the artists interacts with. It also raises the question: if the young generation of Hip Hop listeners grow up watching artists like Kanye West and Jay-Z call themselves gods, how will young people then view religion? Will it be a topic discussed with less severity because those that we give so much attention to do not take it seriously, or will new religious perspectives and understandings be illuminated through the guidance of these artists? As current members of society as we go under this social reconstruction, it is our duty to observe these changes and promote a positive atmosphere of religion among our own communities.

Works Cited

Bagley, Christopher. “Kanye West, the Transformer, on his New Album Yeezus and Kim Kardashian” W Magazine, June 19, 2013. <https://www.wmagazine.com/story/kanye-west-on-kim-kardashian-and-his-new-album-yeezus>, accessed February 3, 2018.

Cleveland, Lauriel, “The Kanye God Complex” *CNN* entertainment, June 21, 2013.

Jay-Z. “Izzo”, *The Blueprint,* Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings, 1997.

Jay-Z. “Jay-z explains his name Hova, Jigga and Shawn Carter.” *MTV,* 26 August, 2009,<http://www.mtv.com/video-clips/f2xc28/jay-z-explains-his-name-hova-jigga-and-shawn-carter>

“Jay-Z interview with Angie Martinez on Hot ’97 In New York”. *Hot ’97.* New York, New York. January 17, 2010.

Jay-Z. “Where I’m From”*, In My Lifetime, Vol. 1*, Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings, 1997.

Kim, Noah. Is Kanye “West’s ‘The Life of Pablo’ Gospel Music?” Huffington Post, February 23, 2016. <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/noah-kim/the-life-of-pablo-gospel-music_b_9283766.html> , accessed February 3, 2018.

Miller, Monica R, Anthony B. Pinn, and B Bun. *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the Us.* , 2015. Print.

Watson, Julie, "Hip-Hop: Billion-Dollar Biz." *Forbes*, February 18, 2004. <https://www.forbes.com/2004/02/18/cx_jw_0218hiphop.html#ca2d80e672d8> , accessed February 2, 2018.

West, Kanye. *Interview with Kris Jenner,* Kris,August 19, 2013.

West, Kanye. “I Am a God”, *Yeezus,* Def Jam Recordings, 2013.