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Jay Z's "The Blueprint": A Model Of Self-Pride

Jay Z's sixth studio album "The Blueprint" is an autobiography, redefining what society assumes about him in their misconstrued interpretations of his lyrics and painting him as a controversial public figure. The album was coincidentally released on September 11, 2001, the same day as the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. On the same day, Jay was in LA filming a music video for a hit off of the album "Girls, Girls, Girls." In a way, this juxtaposition fits with the underlying themes of his album, talking about the conflicting relationship between enjoying a luxurious lifestyle and the cycle of crime and violence he was born into. Jay Z's self-made empire, through drug dealing as well as success in music, is the blueprint for anyone, particularly young black men from similar circumstances, to aspire to. This album gives them permission to take pride in *themselves*, not necessarily their work (specifically drug dealing). Like Jay Z, they can separate themselves - the positive qualities and unique strengths that make them successful in negative work - from the work itself and instead attach blame for the nature of their work to cycles of poverty that they were born into. Furthermore, the album explores Jay's relationship with his wealth that is distinct from that of even other rap artists who achieved a similar level of fame and wealth due to his independent and entrepreneurial come up.

With three out of thirteen track titles on the album being some form of his own name or nickname and only one feature on the album, Jay Z himself is a central theme of the album. More specifically, he uses this album to tell the world who he is and correct society's assumptions

about him. This theme is also underscored by the fact that Jay was facing two criminal charges at the time the album's release. He addressed this both on the opening track, "The Ruler's Back" and on the first single released from the album, "Izzo (H.O.V.A.)". On the first track, Jay dismisses the situation entirely by speaking comically about it. He compares himself to the English pop group Right Said Fred (famous for their 1991 hit with the ridiculous lines "I'm too sexy for my car ... too sexy for my hat"), rapping "I'm too sexy for jail like I'm Right Said Fred". Jay compares himself to the "untouchable" mafia figures, both with the lines in this opening track and through the album cover image modeled off of a photograph depicting an English mafia leader. He also ridicules the people suing him, saying "what's a couple dollars to me?" as well as the District Attorney who suggested that he might flee, saying that he is too famous to be able to hide anywhere. He speaks more on his pending criminal charges on "Izzo (H.O.V.A.)," an upbeat track sampling the Jackson 5, produced by Kanye West, that served as a hugely successful first hit to be released off of the album. In the chorus of the song Jay raps, "Not guilty, y'all got to feel me," less asking for his listeners to believe him than confidently speaking to a group of followers who he knows are on his side.

In addition to clearing his name in the face of criminal charges, Jay also talks about a different main intention pertaining to the people he hopes to benefit. The intro track, "The Ruler's Back" specifies the particular audience the music was intended to serve, while the audience he was intending for it to reach was much larger and explicitly included his enemies. The audience he intends to serve is declared in the beginning of the first verse in the first track: "Yo, gather round hustlers – that's if you still livin'". This line is interpolation of the line used in the song by Slick Rick of the same title, which inspired this song. This is fitting, because the audience of "hustlers" he is addressing here are men who can relate to his story, and

he himself relates to Slick Rick in the same way. He continues, “Here's a couple of jewels to help you get through your bid in prison,” further clarifying this particular audience of those incarcerated. This also points to the further narrowing of this audience to those who can relate to him in being born into poor circumstances, inevitably getting involved with dealing drugs and violence. Also, this reflects the typically dichotomous path of fate for individuals like himself born into poverty, prison or death, by assuming that if they are still living then they are likely in prison.

As with other forms of autobiography, “The Blueprint” gives the listener insight into how Jay Z sees himself. The fact that Jay views himself as the best in the rap game is a theme throughout the album, with the possible exception of his late friend Notorious B.I.G. who he says if he is not better than, then at least he is the closest. He mentions many different personal strengths that specifically set him apart from both his enemies and competition in the rap game, as well as individuals who come from the same circumstances as he did but remain doomed to the fate that society predetermined. Jay cites, above all, his intelligence and persistent hard work as the reason for his spot at the top, both in rap and in his exceptional escape from the cycle of poverty.

When it comes to his view of himself above other rappers he was beefing with at the time, Jay sinks to less mature levels of insult while still exhibiting masterful lyricism. On his MTV Unplugged performance of Takeover, he defines “The truest essence of hip hop - the battle.” Takeover, the second track on the album is legendary not only in the relentless lyrical attacks, but the masterful production by Kanye West (at the time unknown to the world). The deep bass is highlighted with electric guitar and rock vocals sampled from The Doors’ “Five to One,” as well as selected phrases from KRS-ONE’s “Sound Of The Police” and David Bowie’s

“Fame” inserted throughout. The result is a truly ruthless track behind a hurl of deeply constructed and complex insults towards rappers he was beefing with at the time: Nas and members of Mobb Deep. Though he talks about the rap feud potentially coming to violence in real life in lines like “”, it is notable that unlike the 2-Pac / Notorious B.I.G., East Coast vs. West Coast rivalry that cost both artists their lives, Jay Z’s beef with Nas never came to violent consequences. However, Jay could be reminding both his enemies and his audience of this particular incident in history and recognizing the real threat. He mentions Notorious B.I.G. at multiple points throughout the album, whose loss was felt deeply by Jay Z as the loss of both a friend and idol in rap.

Another insight into how Jay Z views himself is found in his nickname, used in variation throughout the album, “H.O.V.” The origins of this name are from referring to himself as “God MC,” calling himself “Jay Hova” referring to the Hebrew name for God “Jehovah.” In one of the songs incorporating this nickname into the title, “Holla’ Hovito,” Jay raps “Hoes, choose HOV,” both the surface meaning of picking up girls, as well as a play on the phrases like “Choose God.” This is precisely what self-righteous people who can’t relate to his message might tell women categorized as “hoes,” that they need God in their lives, or that they should choose God instead of their current lifestyle choices. However, Jay clarifies at the end of the album in the bonus track “Breathe Easy (Lyrical Exercise),” where he raps “With the weight of the world on my shoulder / That’s why they call me ‘Hova’ / I’m far from being God, but I work goddamn hard.” This shows that Jay doesn’t view himself as God, but he serves as a God figure specifically for individuals caught up in cycles of crime that make them feel unwelcome in any mainstream religion.

One of the key takeaways from the album, pertaining to both how Jay Z views himself as well as his “The Blueprint” of success, is his unique relationship to his wealth. The main element

of the equation of “being like Jay Z” is money, but it takes all of Jay Z’s other characteristics to be able to get rich in the first place as well as build and maintain his status of respect with the wealth. The track “All I Need” essentially declares that money can buy almost everything he needs to live a happy life – citing mainly expensive clothes, his own clothing brand, and women who are attracted to his money. This message of the song is put in perspective of the preceding track, “Song Cry,” which details his relationship with a former partner falling apart due to his fame and wealth. In this way, Jay’s relationship to his wealth is certainly more complex than simply the ticket to happiness, but he consistently emphasized it as his number one priority.

Izzo (H.O.V.A.) was the first single off the album, produced by Kanye West and sampling the immediately recognizable Jackson 5’s “I Want You Back.” Jay received some criticism for the lack of substantive lyrical content of the song, and its conforming to what would make the most money in the industry by appealing to a larger audience with the recognizable sample and easily digested content, at the expense of quality of the song. Jay would later rap on “The Bounce” off of “The Blueprint 2” about how he intentionally sprinkled albums with “hits,” saying: “But no, dummy, that’s the shit I’m sprinkling the album with / To keep the registers ringing.” This supports the notion that Jay identifies as a profit-driven businessman above all else – including his identity as a rapper.

Jay also talks about his luxurious style, brags about his house and cars, his sex life and all-around extravagant lifestyle on the song, “Jigga That N***a.” The sound of this track is distinct from the soulful feel of the rest of the songs, intentionally placed in the middle to break up the album. The beginning of the chorus is an interpolation of a line from Snoop Dogg’s iconic breakout single “Who Am I (What’s My Name)?,” in the lines: “(Hov) V is I, and I am him / (Jigga, Jigga, that n***a Jigga!) / Slim with the tilted brim on twenty-inch rims.” Similar to what

he did with the interpolation of Slick Rick's lines in "The Ruler's Back," he extends the line "Slim with the tilted brim" to add on another element of a luxury car, if not to one-up them then to personalize the lines by characteristically emphasizing his wealth. Jay could see himself as more characterized by his wealth because of the entrepreneurial and independent nature of its accumulation. Therefore, whereas speaking about their wealth and the accompanying lifestyle was already common for rap artists, it was a more significant part of Jay Z's identity than it was for others.

The symbolism of "The Blueprint" is more commonly associated with Jay Z's successful self-made career trajectory but could also be applied to the predetermined "Blueprint" of a life characterized by violence and crime that society systemically enforces on people living in poverty. In the latter interpretation, "The Blueprint" represents a certain future Jay Z was doomed to that he was able to escape. On the primarily upbeat hit single "Izzo (H.O.V.A.)," he sprinkles undertones of this darkness that he was able to overcome and avoid. He raps about the rarity of his situation, saying: "I've seen Hoop Dreams deflate like a true fiend's weight." Though people born in these circumstances might see a path for themselves through basketball, Jay says these dreams are often diminished like a basketball deflating due to getting involved in dealing or using drugs. He also uses imagery to compare a basketball deflating to a crack addict's weight disappearing after they start using - both the basketball and the person previously having potential and hope to break free from the cycle of poverty, now rendered useless without their weight. He shows that he was born into the same "Blueprint" of life almost predetermined for children born into ghettos and cyclical poverty, which his intended audience can relate to. However, he creates a third option other than the typical fates of prison or death to aspire for: to be like him. In the song that delves most seriously into these heavy topics on the album,

“Renegade,” Jay says: “No lie, just know I chose my own fate / I drove by the fork in the road and went straight.” This fork in the road represents the two inevitable fates, prison or death. Jay avoiding it entirely by driving straight is his way of saying that he created his own path - in no way was it laid out for him or even presented as an option.

Crucial to the pride Jay Z shows in himself, and the permission he gives others involved in drug dealing to feel pride as well, is identifying the streets – as an entrapping setting constructed and reinforced by a racist society – as the root cause of criminal tendencies, not personal flaw. In light of his own pending criminal charges, a central idea presented by Jay Z was that nobody who didn’t personally live his experience was in a place to judge, or fully blame, him for crimes he committed in dealing drugs and those he was being accused of. Jay talks about the projects where he grew up in “U Don’t Know,” immediately following less substantive tracks “Girls, Girls, Girls” and “Jigga That N***a” bragging about his lifestyle. Switching tone, he immediately paints a graphic scene of drugs and violence, also introducing heavier themes of stereotypes and political corruption. As a dealer, he’s aware of the dramatic fluctuations in price during the crack-cocaine epidemic. He references the involvement of political corruption in the lines: “The coke prices up and down like it's Wall Street, holmes / But this is worse than the Dow Jones, your brains are now blown / All over that brown Brougham.” The blood splattered on the brown Brougham, a luxury car that’s release coincided with the height of the crack-cocaine epidemic and became associated with successful drug dealers, symbolizes the threat of imminent death that comes with this fragile lifestyle. Though he does not explicitly mention the corrupt acts by the government in smuggling drugs into America during the Reagan administration, he uses the Wall Street and Dow Jones comparisons to symbolize this higher force at play,

controlled by the rich while they never have to directly experience the impacts they inflict on poor communities.

While Jay Z takes pride in himself and his success, he by no means glorifies the circumstances that led to the lifestyle of drug dealing that defines the start of his career. Later in the same track “U Don’t Know,” Jay Z compares the streets to Hell, saying: “Welcome to Hell, where you are welcome to sell / But when them shells come, you better return 'em.” He details an alternate set of “laws” counter to those in mainstream society, possibly suggesting that the streets are a separate society altogether. This is a society of high-risk lifestyles, faced with life or death critical moments on a regular basis because of the nature of their business in selling drugs, where returning shots at attackers is necessary for survival. He also connects this to black-on-black crime in the lyric “chrome meets chrome,” often used as a surface level statistic to eliminate blame of white people from the systemic, underlying causes of the tragic death rates of black youth. Instead of a chorus, the dense verses are broken up with short variations in the pattern of an exchange between Jay Z and a sampled line “You don’t know what you’re doin’- doin’- doin’” from a soulful track entitled, “I’m Not To Blame” by Bobby Byrd - all in which Jay refutes this idea that he is at all blind in his actions. These all support a main thesis of the song, that conditions in the streets are constructed and controlled by corrupt, higher forces in power, and though he is involved in drug dealing he is not a pawn in the hands of these forces: he is more intelligent and intentional than society assumes him to be.

This idea is also applied to another central theme of his unique come up, independently creating his record company. Though he conforms some of his music to what appeals to a wider audience, he does this intentionally to accomplish his personal goals of maximizing profits. He is a businessman first, and music artist second, and shouldn’t be confused with him being

manipulated or controlled by the music industry. In the second iteration of the previously mentioned chorus pattern between the first and second verses of “U Don’t Know”, he uses his alternate nickname “Hov”: “I am Hov / You don't know what you're doin'— doin'— doin'— / Sure I do.” This line is reminiscent of the religious belief that God is all-knowing and always has a plan, connecting the false assumption that as a drug dealer he is blind in his actions to both his intelligence and superiority.

I understand the symbol of “The Blueprint” as dichotomous: both representing a blueprint for wealth and success, as well as the predetermined nature of the life Jay Z was born into and miraculously able to escape - poor circumstances, where violence and crime was inevitable and led to a certain fate, either prison or death. He prefaces the album as just his thoughts and stories, which come together to form a clear outline for a model of not just success, but of obtaining and maintaining self-pride as an individual painted as a monster by the rest of society. Returning to the population that he meant for the album to be of service to, it becomes clear that even his more personal, introspective tracks like “Song Cry” reflect a common humanity in the “hustlers” that society prefers to deny. Far from simply arguing that drug dealers have feelings too, Jay Z embodies an unfaltering pride and confidence necessary for survival in a world where he can’t be weak or admit to struggling with self-worth. He makes space for these individuals in society to be not only acknowledged, but respected, by humanizing himself and consequently all those like him.