

= Graduation ( album ) =

Graduation is the third studio album by American hip hop recording artist and record producer Kanye West . It was released on September 11 , 2007 , by Roc A Fella Records . Recording sessions for the album took place during 2005 to 2007 at Chung King Studios and Sony Music Studios in New York City and at Chalice Studios and The Record Plant in Los Angeles . It was primarily produced by West himself , with significant contributions from DJ Toomp , as well as Mike Dean , Nottz , Brian " All Day " Miller , Eric Hudson , Warrryn Campbell , Gee Roberson , Plain Pat and Jon Brion . It features guest contributions from artists , including Mos Def , Dwele , T Pain , Lil Wayne , DJ Premier and Chris Martin of Coldplay . The album 's cover artwork was designed by Japanese contemporary artist Takashi Murakami .

Inspired by indie rock and Chicago house , Graduation marked a movement away from the ornate , soul based sound of West 's previous releases toward a more anthemic style that would function well while he was performing in large arenas . Toward this end , West incorporated synthesizer sounds into his production and dabbled with electronic music , while sampling from a wider spectrum of sources . Lyrically , the album is more introspective in comparison to its predecessors , as West dedicated much of the album towards analyzing himself and exploring his ambivalent outlook on his newfound fame . It continues the education theme of West 's previous two studio albums , The College Dropout ( 2004 ) and Late Registration ( 2005 ) .

The album debuted at number one on the US Billboard 200 , selling 957 ,000 copies in its first week . It produced five singles , including the international hits " Can 't Tell Me Nothing " , " Stronger " , and " Good Life " . The coinciding release dates between Graduation and a fellow rapper 50 Cent 's Curtis generated much publicity over the idea of a sales competition , resulting in record breaking sales performances by both albums . The outcome of the competition marks a turning point in hip hop culture , when the dominance of gangsta rap in mainstream hip hop was brought to an end . Graduation received positive reviews from most critics and earned West several accolades , including his third Grammy Award for Best Rap Album . The album has sold 2 ,700 ,000 copies in the US and has been certified double platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America .

= = Background = =

Graduation is the third installment of Kanye West 's planned tetralogy of education themed studio albums , which West subsequently later deviated from due to the events surrounding the conception of his fourth studio album , 808s & Heartbreak . The album demonstrates yet another distinctive progression in West 's musical style and approach to production . After spending the previous year touring the world with Irish rock band U2 on their Vertigo Tour , West became inspired by watching Bono open the stadium tours every night to incredible ovations and sought out to compose anthemic rap songs that could operate more efficiently in large stadiums and arenas . In West 's attempt to accomplish this " stadium status " endeavor , West incorporated layered electronic synthesizers into his hip hop production , which also finds him utilizing slower tempos , being influenced by the music of the 1980s , and experimenting with electronic music . Kanye West was particularly influenced by house music , a subgenre of electronic dance music that first originated in his hometown of Chicago , Illinois in the early 1980s . West has stated that growing up , he would listen to hip hop music at home or in his car , but when he felt like dancing , he would attend a house club . While he rarely listened to house at home , he still felt it was an important part of his culture and background .

West further broadened his musical palette on Graduation by not limiting himself to his customary use of samples and interpolation from classic soul records and instead drew influences from a far more eclectic range of music genres . Along with house music , Graduation contains samples and music elements of euro disco , hard rock , electronica , lounge , progressive rock , synth pop , electro , krautrock , dub , reggae , and dancehall . Also , for much of the third studio album , Kanye West modified his style of rapping and adopted a dilatory , exuberant flow in emulation of

Bono 's operatic vocal stylings . West altered his vocabulary , he utilized less of the percussive , rhythmic consonants in favor of the more smoother , melodic vowel sounds . In addition to U2 , West drew inspiration from other arena rock bands such as The Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin for the melodies and chord progressions of his songs . In terms of lyricism , he simplifies some of his rhymes after touring with The Rolling Stones on their A Bigger Bang concert tour and discovering he could not captivate the audiences as well with his most complex lyrical themes .

West made a conscious decision to abstain from the widespread recording practice of excessive rap albums saturated with skits and filler and instead comprised Graduation with significantly fewer tracks . He also chose to scale back on the guest appearances , limiting himself to just one single guest rap verse on the entire studio album . The stylistic divergence and desire for a leaner , more economical studio album was a creative reaction that was brought on by the alternative rock and indie @-@ rock that West had been listening to around the time of the recording of his third studio album . West cites the rock bands The Killers , Keane , Modest Mouse , and indie @-@ pop singer @-@ songwriter Feist , whom he also looked towards for songwriting inspiration , for being among his favorite musicians and having considerably profound influence on the sound of Graduation . Largely due to all this and the inclusion of the layered electronic synthesizers , West believed that his record took hip @-@ hop in a different direction . But he also acknowledged the fact that the differences did not right away and without a doubt make Graduation a good album . However , he felt it was a representation of the music he was listening to at that time .

= = Recording = =

Kanye West began working on Graduation immediately after releasing his second studio album Late Registration . By late September 2005 , West had already completed three songs for the album , which he intended to contain a total of twelve tracks . Around the time of the recording of the third studio album , West would often listen to songs written by folk and country singer @-@ songwriters Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash in hopes of developing methods to augment his word play and storytelling abilities . The former musician had been recommended to West by multiple of his friends , including English disc jockey Samantha Ronson , all of whom claimed his music and the way he dealt with the press reminded them of Dylan . Kanye also listened to his most favorite alternative rock bands , including The Killers , Radiohead , Modest Mouse , and Keane , in order to gain new ideas on how to make his hip @-@ hop production style more stadium @-@ friendly . Additionally , West would often test his new songs on his iPod , in his office , in dance clubs and just about anywhere people might listen to his music . He would then make adjustments to the tracks based on feedback he received , repeating the process as many times as necessary .

In comparison to previous albums , Graduation features fewer guest appearances from other recording artists . West elaborated that it was a fully conscious decision to keep his guest vocalists at a minimum , saying that , " When I hear the records of my favorite bands ? The Killers or Coldplay ? you only hear one voice from start to finish . " R & B singers T @-@ Pain and Dwele , New York rappers Mos Def and ALBe . Back , and famed hip @-@ hop record producer DJ Premier are featured in individual tracks primarily to deliver hooks and refrains . However , though he originally intended for Graduation to be completely devoid of guest rap verses , West decided to invite New Orleans rapper Lil Wayne on the track " Barry Bonds " . At the time , the two MCs had been working together , with West contributing to the production of Lil Wayne 's sixth studio album Tha Carter III . As for the absence of skits , West explained , " There 's just serious songs , hooks , chords , and ideas . No special effects or antics ... and no fake Bernie Mac ! " West instead decided to record two earthy musical interludes in place of the hip @-@ hop skits . He incorporated African sounds and polyrhythmic percussion into both . However , for unknown reasons , the two musical interludes were omitted from the studio album .

Many songs on Graduation contain background vocals provided by Connie Mitchell of the Australian dance music group Sneaky Sound System . The collaboration came about when West met her bandmates Angus McDonald and Daimon Downey at a diner in Sydney while touring the country with U2 around November 2006 . Seeking musical inspiration , West asked McDonald for

ideas , who in turn suggested that he be introduced to Mitchell . Upon meeting Mitchell after she arrived at Studios 301 where he was recording music during the tour , West had her sing over a vocal track and quickly took a liking to her voice . U2 singer Bono and guitarist The Edge also complimented Mitchell 's singing while visiting the studio . Some time later , Mitchell received a call from West who asked if she could travel to The Record Plant in Los Angeles to begin recording tracks for his third studio album . Mitchell later admitted that while she previously didn 't know who Kanye West was and never really cared for hip @-@ hop music , the collaboration has changed her views .

During an interview with Billboard , West revealed that he had worked with Chris Martin , the lead singer of the British alternative rock band Coldplay , on a song entitled " Homecoming " , and that it just might possibly be released as the lead single for Graduation . The collaboration occurred the year before when Kanye West and Chris Martin met one another during an impromptu jam session at the Abbey Road Studios in London , England . West had just finished performing at a show that had been held at Abbey Road and the band just so happened to be recording their music in the recording studio at exactly the same time . The song in itself is actually a re @-@ vamping for " Home ( Windy ) " , a track that originated from a demo tape dating back to the year 2001 . It was made available two years later under the new title " Home " on West 's 2003 mixtape Get Well Soon ... and also on the advance copy of West 's debut studio album The College Dropout , which due to a leak was never released . This original version possesses Kanye West 's once trademark classic soul vocal sample production style , with singer John Legend on the chorus , which contains lyrics that are different than Martin 's . This is due to the fact that Chris Martin asked Kanye West to change the song 's lyrical content .

Widely considered by music critics and listeners alike to be the most radio @-@ friendly track on Graduation , West defines the studio album 's third single " Good Life " as the song with the most " blatant hit @-@ recordness " . The track features vocals from R & B singer T @-@ Pain , who utilizes the voice audio processor technology of Auto @-@ Tune . West had previously experimented with the technology on his debut album The College Dropout for the background vocals on the songs " Jesus Walks " and " Never Let Me Down " . During his brief stay in Sweden , West sent through sixteen different mixes of " Good Life " over to their recording studio for the audio mastering process . West admitted that he actually did not really care for the single , but he was pressured into releasing it by his record label Def Jam Recordings . However , West has since clarified that he doesn 't retain any lingering animosity whatsoever towards his record label in regards to this .

Graduation started taking definite form around the time of the filming of the music video for its second single " Stronger " , whereas prior West had been " aimlessly making songs . " The music video was directed by famed music video director , film director , and screenwriter Hype Williams . The sci @-@ fi imagery of music video inspired West to take his album in a more futuristic direction . After the filming of the music video , which began before West had even written the song 's second verse , he returned to the studio to redo parts of " Stronger " and various other tracks he recorded for the album , watching films such as Total Recall for more ideas . West mixed the track seventy @-@ five times , as he could not seem to get the kick drum to sound precisely the way that he wanted it to , amongst other issues . He worked on " Stronger " with eight different audio engineers and eleven different mix engineers around the globe and recorded over fifty versions of the track . Still feeling dissatisfied after hearing the number @-@ one hit single inside a club compared alongside Timbaland 's 2007 single " The Way I Are " , which was his favorite hip @-@ hop beat at the time , West enlisted the record producer to assist him in redoing the drum programming .

The third studio album also sees the return of composer and multi @-@ instrumentalist Jon Brion ? who had played an integral role as the co @-@ executive producer on West 's previous studio album Late Registration ? for the track " Drunk and Hot Girls . " Kanye claimed that one day , while listening to " Sing Swan Song " by the German experimental @-@ rock band Can , he heard the words " drunk and hot girls " rather than the actual " drunky hot bowls " lyrics . Rather than rap , West instead slowly sings along to the sinister song 's dreary original melody with warbled vocals . Kanye features vocal harmony during the chorus with guest artist Mos Def , who just after his voice

experiences a four @-@ second audio delay , also delivers the song 's reverb @-@ filled bridge . In comparison to other tracks on the album , " Drunk and Hot Girls " was taken much less seriously during the time of its recording sessions . Mos Def can even be heard laughing in the background after a quite playful West abruptly makes a ridiculous , unhinged one @-@ liner joke that intentionally doesn 't even actually rhyme with what he said before .

More than any other song on the entire studio album , the epic stadium @-@ rap power ballad " I Wonder " was the most influenced by U2 . Kanye West cites it as one of this top three most favorite songs from Graduation . Kanye imparted that he had sought out to make the hip @-@ hop variation of the rock band 's " City of Blinding Lights " . West reportedly heard the snare drum which was used for the track while shopping for furniture at Moss and spent many weeks working on it . Kanye has also said that he wrote the song while thinking of performing it onstage in front of an audience of over 50 @,@ 000 people . With this in mind , he placed a significant amount of concentration on speaking at high volumes with fewer wording and initially delivers his defiant lyrics in an intense staccato vocal style . West raps the song 's three verses using single and double @-@ time rhyme schemes . He stresses each syllable in each word in the minimalist first verse . West then transitions to a faster , more fluid flow for the more intricate second and third verses . West considered the release of " I Wonder " as the album 's fourth single . But he instead chose " Flashing Lights " , which he refers to as the " coolest " track from the studio album .

The hip @-@ hop beat for " The Glory " was originally made for West 's GOOD Music associate , close friend , and fellow Chicago hip @-@ hop artist Common , whose seventh album Finding Forever was being produced and recorded by West simultaneously with Graduation . As was the case with both their previous albums , certain tracks that West originally crafted for Finding Forever that Common declined eventually ended up on his own studio album . " Everything I Am " was yet another song intended for Common but was passed on , a fact which West addresses within the opening lines . The record features turntable scratches contributed by famed hip @-@ hop record producer DJ Premier . After West had played the demo for " Everything I Am " over the phone for DJ Premier and asked him what he thought of it , DJ Premier then replied that he enjoyed the lyrics and the innovative beat and offered to scratch over it . When working on the track , and while following the numerous instructions that were supplied by West , DJ Premier took seven different styles of scratches , including drum breaks , then cut all of them up into different rhythms , and scattered them all throughout the track , providing West with many different ideas to choose from .

While written by West , who envisioned its concept and chorus while riding an elevator , the soul @-@ baring Jay @-@ Z dedication " Big Brother " stands as the only song on Graduation that he didn 't produce . The production of the track was instead handled solely by Atlanta record producer DJ Toomp . According to West 's cousin , soul singer Tony Williams , Jay @-@ Z became quite emotional after West played a part of " Big Brother " for him in the studio for the very first time . During an interview with Rolling Stone , Kanye West himself recalled that it was " a very serious moment . " When asked for his opinion , Jay @-@ Z replied that he considered " Big Brother " a fair portrayal from a little brother 's perspective . Jay @-@ Z went on to say that he also thought that the song was " brilliantly written " and believed that it was West 's best song since " Jesus Walks " as far as structure and emotion .

Although " Bittersweet Poetry " appears as a Japanese bonus track on Graduation , it was actually one of the very first songs crafted for Late Registration . After seeing the 2004 biographical film Ray together , Kanye West and blues @-@ rock musician John Mayer decided to collaborate on a record and immediately went back to a recording studio to compose the song " Bittersweet . " This wasn 't the first time West and Mayer collaborated with one another . The two previously worked together to make " Go ! " , the third single from Common 's sixth studio album Be , which came about when Mayer went to visit West at The Record Plant in Los Angeles . In the end , because Kanye West felt that their song did not coincide well into the overall soundscape of his second studio album , it was subsequently unincorporated .

= = Composition = =

= = = Music and style = = =

With *Graduation*, Kanye West made a departure from the warm soul samples of *The College Dropout* and the lush baroque @-@ pop orchestration of *Late Registration*. Motivated by stadium impulses, West ventured towards a more atmospheric soundscape imbued with arena rock elements that explores electronic music. The musical progression arose from West touring the world in 2006 with the rock bands U2 and The Rolling Stones. The change also came about from listening to music that encompass genres such as alternative rock, indie @-@ rock, and especially house music. House music is a subgenre of electronic dance music whose origins can be traced back to Kanye West's hometown of Chicago, Illinois. The productions of the tracks on *Graduation* are also unique in that they brandish European musical influences. According to Jayson Green of *Stylus Magazine*, West had developed a fascination with Euro @-@ disco, a European form of electronic dance music that branched off from American disco in the 1970s. Going further, a columnist for *Slant Magazine* claims that the album's hip @-@ hop beats would be "European @-@ club @-@ worthy" were they stripped of the vocals. Most importantly, Green perceives that Kanye West had developed an affinity with electronic synthesizers. Chicago Tribune music critic Greg Kot comments on the incorporation of synthesizer sounds. From a musical standpoint, he views *Graduation* as "an album steeped in keyboard tones, in all their richness and variety." Mark Pytlik of Pitchfork Media surmises that the album exhibits a new production style, one replete with corrosive rave stabs, acerbic synth patches, and modulated electronic noises. By contrast, AllMusic's Andy Kellman argues, "Though the synthesizer use marks a clear, conscious diversion from Kanye's past productions, highlights ... are deeply rooted in the Kanye of old, using nostalgia @-@ inducing samples, elegant pianos and strings, and gospel choirs."

West retracted much of the rich live instrumentation that had characterized his previous studio album *Late Registration*. He had them replaced with heavy, layered electronic synthesizers with Gothic tendencies at loud volumes throughout *Graduation*. West injected distorted synth @-@ chords, rave stabs, house beats, electro @-@ disco rhythms, and a wide array of audio @-@ effects into his articulate hip @-@ hop production. All the while, West buried his signature kicks and snares deep beneath the decomposing layers of synths into the bottom of the mix. *Graduation* contains an eclectic variety of vaguely familiar samples that were artfully manipulated by West. Though he continues to use vocal samples, West now gleans them before also pushing them underneath the synths, causing them to "sound like voices trapped in a huge machine, not like organic, subliminal connections to a mythical black @-@ music past." As always is the case with his productions, West neither relies nor settles simply on samples alone. Instead, there lies a discernible sense of multi @-@ layered grandeur evident within each track. Even in new, unfamiliar musical surroundings, West retains both his self @-@ assurance as well as his close attention to sonic detail. Hence, the album contains a plethora of random, semi @-@ audible sounds that are challenging to notice during the first few listens. The sounds range from keyboard arpeggios to crowd cheers to hard rock guitars and act as a supplement for the atypical samples and the layered electronic synths. West filled the corners of *Graduation* with enough subtle instrumental flourishes and studio embellishments to warrant a repeated, close, and careful listening experience. According to Ann Powers from the Los Angeles Times, the album's subtly dark tone was a byproduct of the inevitable toll placed on West as an artist, "an innovator in a genre that he must at least partially destroy to renew", torn between his devotion to hip @-@ hop tradition and his "restless artistic drive":

*Graduation*'s intricate musical environments take a while to comprehend, and at times they seem at odds with West's confrontational lyrics. But this contradictory music makes sense when heard as an attempt to express an internal struggle? between the Kanye West hip @-@ hop made and the West who can't be contained by it or any other genre. It's hard to stop running with the crowd, even for a trendsetter. But West is on the verge, and moving forward.

Despite the predominant synthetic attributes and the overall electronic aesthetic, the emphasis placed on organic string arrangements that had accentuated *Late Registration* remained a

significant factor on Graduation . Similar to its predecessor , Graduation wasn 't restricted to the confines of conventional looping techniques typical of traditional hip @-@ hop production . Instead , West continues to implement sudden musical shifts within the multi @-@ layered song structures and express meticulously composed introductions , bridges , and codas . For his third album , West produced songs that combine hip @-@ hop beats with anthemic refrains and continues to employ his skill in layering keys , strings , and vocals to coax the melodies out of samples . According to Sean Comer of 411Mania , Graduation is an ambitious album that demonstrates West 's attentive ear to the blending of structure , melody , timing , evocative arrangement and their potential to exist comfortably alongside effective samples . Through acting as his own producer , West manages to maintain quality control over the album 's music to ensure that " his productions build momentum even when they revolve around a handful of repeated samples [ and ] nearly every song on Graduation is memorable for both its hooks and its overall sound . " And as the album progresses , its textures and the glossy sheen of its polished , synthesizer @-@ driven productions become harder and denser with every track . Under the belief that his sophomore effort had been far too indulgent , poorly arranged , and oversaturated with unnecessary sonic accoutrements , West took measures to streamline his third release . West fashioned Graduation to contain less ornate production , made the studio album completely devoid of hip @-@ hop skits , and sequenced the record in such a way that it produced a tighter , more cohesive package .

= = = Production = = =

Graduation opens on a sparse note with " Good Morning " , beginning with an echoed , metronomic cowbell beat and a thumping bassline melded with a simple , arpeggiating synthesizer drone . The drone is drowned by the music that arrives at the chorus , which is a conflation of ambient synths and an astral backing choir crafted from a non @-@ verbal vocal sample of " Someone Saved My Life Tonight " by Elton John . " Good Morning " eventually concludes with the voice of Jay @-@ Z reiterating lyrics from " The Ruler 's Back " , the rapper 's own opening track of his sixth studio album The Blueprint . The production for " Champion " features intermittent drops and 808 @-@ handclaps and expresses a slight jazz @-@ rock influence , eschewing guitars and trumpets in favor of breezy synths . During the verses , West raps over a constant loop of the words " their eyes " while the chopped @-@ up hook is formed from the question , " Did you realize , that you were a champion ? " Both phrases are recontextualized from a line lifted from " Kid Charlemagne " by Steely Dan . The song also sports a reggae @-@ inspired bridge delivered by Connie Mitchell in a distinct toasting vocal style . The soul @-@ fired track " I Wonder " starts off with its piano @-@ based refrain , which contains samples of " My Song " by British poet Labi Siffre . It then proceeds to morph into a myriad of interlaced synths that are impacted by distorted snare drum strokes and ethereal electronic keyboards . During the bridge , the chord progression changes and the song adopts a heavy string section that emulates the melody of its synths . The composition then enters an instrumental passage and finishes off with a sweeping string arrangement .

" Good Life " utilizes multi @-@ tracked , interlocking vocals that harmonize with guest singer T @-@ Pain 's Auto @-@ Tuned voice . The song 's melody is based on sampled keyboards from P.Y.T. by Michael Jackson , with the tempo slightly decreased and the pitch raised to the point its sound resembles squealing shrieks . " Barry Bonds " is built on a moaning bass line and Gothic organ , while punctuated by wailing sampled from " Long Red " by Mountain . " Drunk and Hot Girls " exhibits a sluggish waltz pitched with the rhythm of an Eastern European drinking song . It contains a mix of dark orchestration and detuned electronics with elements of " Sing Swan Song " by German progressive rock band Can . West claimed that while listening to their song , he heard the words " drunk and hot girls " rather than the actual " drunky hot bowls " lyrics . Rather than rap , West and guest artist Mos Def sing along to the song 's melody . Opening with a gradual , rising crescendo of symphonic strings , " Flashing Lights " emits synth twinklings before transforming into a moderately @-@ paced , synth @-@ driven beat . After the introduction , in which Mitchell 's processed vocals repeat the titular hook four times , West raps the two verses , each one followed by the chorus sung by Dwele coupled with the hook . Following a break , the song enters a passage where its heavily

manipulated hook echoes in and out before the coda draws the composition to a close . " Stronger " is built around a sample of " Harder , Better , Faster , Stronger " by Daft Punk .

By being composed using nothing more than a Rhodes piano , a vocal sample , and turntable scratches , " Everything I Am " stands as the third studio album 's most minimalistic production . West marries a down @-@ tempo beat to gentle piano chords which are accentuated by soulful cooing sampled from " If We Can 't Be Lovers " by Prince Phillip Mitchell . The low @-@ key track has a scratched hook by DJ Premier formed with the vocal sample , which contains the line , " Here we go again " , that is lifted from " Bring the Noise " by Public Enemy . With its thick , heavy bass @-@ line pattern , " The Glory " is an up @-@ tempo number which revisits the " chipmunk @-@ soul " that once defined Kanye 's early production style . It displays a sped @-@ up and high @-@ pitched vocal sample of " Save The Country " by Laura Nyro accompanied by uplifting strings , keys , and an all @-@ male gospel choir . Coldplay frontman Chris Martin sings the chorus and supplies a gospel @-@ style piano motif while West raps over heavy yet buoyant drums on " Homecoming . " The chatter of a noisy , cheering crowd can inexplicably be heard lurking in the background throughout the track . The Jay @-@ Z ode " Big Brother " begins with West uttering the words , " Stadium status ... " , backed by a string orchestra , pounding drums , a distorted guitar riff and plinking piano keys . Around mid @-@ verse , the track adopts synths that mimic the melodies of the string section . Before the second verse , additional instrumentation enters ; including a heavy bass @-@ line , metallic percussion , and 808 @-@ handclaps . The studio album 's final track " Good Night " exhibits the production characteristics of West 's next musical evolution . West juxtaposes the glitchy , mechanical sound of an 8 @-@ Bit beat with the more elegant , traditional sound of a classical piano .

= = = Lyrical content = = =

In comparison to previous albums , which were largely driven by observational commentary on matters pertaining to social welfare , Graduation is more introspective in nature and addresses personal themes . West stated that he wanted to make inspirational music and placed more focus on individual perspective and experience that listeners could connect with in an attempt to create " people 's theme songs " . Dismayed that the messages behind his complex lyricism were frequently lost on listeners and didn 't carry well during live performances , West made an attempt to simplify his lyrics and use more skeletal rhyme schemes for more straightforward verses while concentrating on speaking volumes with sparser wording on Graduation . Having committed a significant amount of time towards elevating his storytelling abilities by listening to folk musicians , West manages to form a lyrical narrative within nearly every song on the album . West dedicated a majority of the album towards conducting an analysis himself and conveying his ambivalent outlook on his newfound wealth and fame . As such , West 's subversive songwriting fluctuates between playful self @-@ aggrandizement and critical self @-@ doubt . While confident , extroverted and celebratory at face value , many songs contained on Graduation were thematically distanced and retained melancholic subtext . Some music critics remarked that compounded with West 's urgent , emotive rapping style , the record sounded as if he were experiencing an existential crisis .

The free @-@ associative " Champion " is primarily composed of motivational lyrics , but West also briefly touches on the strained relationship he had with his father ? who divorced from his mother when he was just three @-@ years @-@ old ? eventually reaching the conclusion that even with their ups and downs , in the end , his father was a champion in his eyes . West described " Stronger " as an " emancipation " , as he uses the song to vent his frustration over mistakes he has made in the past . " I Wonder " carries an introspective tone , retaining a chorus about finding one 's dreams , while West uses the verses to describe the struggle a person experiences in determining the meaning behind their life and achieving those dreams . Inspired by watching Bono open stadium tours , West concentrated on speaking volumes without using too many words on the song and delivers his raps in an exuberant , staccato manner . Using the same vocal stylings , " Flashing Lights " tells the operatic narrative of man contemplating the complexities of a tragic relationship . " Can 't Tell Me Nothing " serves as West 's reflection on his fame and is characterized by bitter

remorse and defiant self @-@ awareness . West begins the song by expounding his conflicted feelings regarding wealth and desire , describing a compulsion to spend that overwhelms any and all other objectives in life . He ties this into his perceived overall inability to keep himself together even as he grows into an increasingly prominent figure in the public eye .

West regains his lyrical dexterity on " Barry Bonds " , a competitive , though friendly battle with Lil Wayne in which the two MCs exchange braggadocios rhymes . The song uses Major League Baseball player Barry Bonds as a metaphor for West 's ability to create music hits . " Drunk and Hot Girls " is a first @-@ person narrative that illustrates a man courting an attractive intoxicated woman in a club but gets more than what he bargained for . " Everything I Am " is a song of self @-@ examination , in which West attempts to confront his fallacies by surveying the consequences of his outspokenness ruminating over various ways people expect him to conduct himself . In the track , West addresses his indifference towards constructing a gangster persona , his refusal to dress and act like every other rapper , his inclination towards social commentary , and his lack of self @-@ restraint . West comes to the conclusion that while he will never be able to live up to people 's expectations and will always be disadvantageously flawed ; it 's all these imperfections and more that serve to make up who he is . When writing the song , West thought of a young girl in high school dealing with people coming down on her .

" Homecoming " serves as a heartfelt tribute to West 's hometown of Chicago , Illinois . Using an extended metaphor that personifies the city as a childhood sweetheart named Wendy , West rhymes about his love for Chicago and his guilt over leaving " her " to pursue his musical dream . The song 's opening lines lyrically paraphrase " I Used to Love H.E.R. " , a similarly metaphoric hip @-@ hop song made by West 's close friend and labelmate Common , who later appeared in the single 's music video . West dedicated " Big Brother " to Jay @-@ Z , whom he feels so close to that he sees him as a brother . Within the song , West dually details his love and admiration as well as his envy and antagonism towards Jay @-@ Z , metaphorically equating their relationship to that of a sibling rivalry . West also uses the song 's chorus as a subsidiary dedication to his mentor No I.D. , who first taught him how to produce music . Similar to its musicality , the songwriting characteristics of the album @-@ closing track , " Good Night " alludes to West 's next musical progression . The majority of song is composed of repetitive recitations of its choruses and bridges by Mos Def and Al Be Back . West melodically raps only one single verse in which he nostalgically reminisces over taking trips to the museum with his grandparents . As his verse draws to a close , West chastises that a person can 't dwell on the past , and charges himself with living his life like he has no tomorrow . In retrospect , with the death of his mother Donda West less than two months after the album was released in addition to the dissolution of his engagement with fiancée Alexis Phifer , the trace amounts of melancholy found scattered throughout Graduation would all but envelop West 's next studio album , 808s & Heartbreak .

= = Artwork = =

West collaborated with Japanese contemporary artist Takashi Murakami to oversee the art direction of Graduation as well as design the cover art for the album 's accompanying singles . Often called " the Warhol of Japan " , Murakami 's surrealistic visual art is characterized by cartoonish creatures that appear friendly and cheerful at first glance , but possess dark , twisted undertones . The collaboration between the two came about when West visited Murakami 's Kaikai Kiki studio in Roppongi Hills during a brief trip to Tokyo , Japan in the midst of touring the year before . The album 's artwork expresses colorful , pastel imagery influenced by Murakami 's affiliation with superflat , a post @-@ modern art movement influenced by manga and anime . Its production process took place over the course of several weeks , with West constantly visualizing new images and emailing the ideas to Murakami and his team . Bringing the educational theme expressed by West 's previous albums to a close , the visual plotline of the images contained within the liner notes lead up to a graduation ceremony that takes places within a fictional college institution situated within a futuristic metropolis called Universe City . Murakami explained the metaphor behind the artwork saying :

The cover is based on Kanye 's theme of student life . School . It 's a place of dreams , of



righteousness , a place to have fun . It 's also occasionally a place where you experience the rigid dogma of the human race . Kanye 's music scrapes sentimentality and aggressiveness together like sandpaper , and he uses his grooves to unleash this tornado that spins with the zeitgeist of the times . I too wanted to be swept up and spun around in that tornado .

The artwork 's storyline centers around " Dropout Bear " , West 's anthropomorphic teddy bear mascot . The illustrations chronicle Dropout Bear overcoming various obstacles in an effort to reach his college campus in time for his graduation ceremony . The story begins on a rainy day with Dropout being awoken by his alarm clock and running out of his apartment to his car , modeled after a DeLorean . When the car 's engine dies , he is forced to find an alternative means of transportation . Dropout attempts to hail a cab but it speeds right past him , soaking him with puddle water . He then tries to get onto a metro rail but just misses it as it pulls away . Left with no other options , Dropout is reduced to pursuing his goal on foot . As he races down sidewalks , populated by multi @-@ eyed , living mushrooms , Dropout is pursued by a monstrous rain cloud that attempts to swallow him whole . Eventually , Dropout Bear arrives at the university and makes it to his ceremony just in time to stand before his colleagues , a wide variety of anthropomorphic creatures like himself . The visual story concludes with Dropout Bear being shot out of a cannon from the university into the sky into another stratosphere on the back cover . The cover art for Graduation was cited as the fifth best album cover of the year by Rolling Stone . The designs of the album artwork were later brought to life by Takashi Murakami through the use of cel @-@ shaded animation within a three @-@ minute animated music video for " Good Morning " .

= = Release = =

While hosting a listening session for his second studio album Late Registration on August 3 , 2005 at Sony Music Studios , Kanye West revealed that he wanted to schedule the release of Graduation sometime around October 2006 . Several months later , on March 28 , 2007 , West appeared on the Los Angeles radio station Power 106 . He said that he was working on his third album and Common 's seventh album Finding Forever and rapped a few lyrics from one of his songs in a cappella . On May 11 , it was announced that the release date for Graduation was September 18 . West debuted the album 's lead single " Can 't Tell Me Nothing " on the New York radio station Hot 97 on May 15 . He then released a free mixtape under the same name onto the Internet on May 27 . The mixtape features preview clips of songs that would appear on Graduation and showcases various artists signed onto West 's record label GOOD Music as well as collaborations with other unaffiliated musicians . It also contains " Us Placers " , the debut song of Child Rebel Soldier , a supergroup West formed with Lupe Fiasco and Pharrell .

At the end of May , Island Def Jam pushed forward the release date for Graduation up from September to an unspecified late August date , a decision that West first announced on the introductory track of his Can 't Tell Me Nothing mixtape . On July 19 , the album 's release date was changed once more and moved to September 11 , 2007 , the same US release date as rapper 50 Cent 's third studio album Curtis . When first presented with the proposal of his label moving the release date of his album yet again as well as the idea of a sales competition between him and 50 Cent , West initially expressed his indifference towards the thought , saying , " When I heard that thing about the debate , I thought that was the stupidest thing . When my album drops and 50 's album drops , everybody wins because you 're gonna get a lot of good music at the same time . " However , then Def Jam president and CEO Jay @-@ Z welcomed competition , feeling that it would be prosperous for hip @-@ hop and the date became permanent .

The album 's release generated much publicity over a sales competition with 50 Cent 's Curtis . Three months that were prior to the September 11 release date , West extended his gratitude towards 50 Cent for the enthusiasm and excitement the friendly competition had produced . Though confident that he would emerge victorious , West said that he would be perfectly fine with losing to 50 Cent , saying that he 'd rather , " be # 2 on that day rather than come out and be # 1 on a day nobody cares about . " In an interview for USA Today , 50 Cent expressed his view on the idea of a sales competition , stating " It 's great marketing ? for Kanye West . But I sell way more records than

Kanye West , and I generate way more interest than Kanye West . They think they can match us up , but they 'll find out when that week goes by and the sales come back . This is no rivalry . " On August 10 , 50 Cent confirmed during an interview with SOHH that he would end his career as a solo recording artist if Graduation were to sell more copies than Curtis in the United States . However , 50 Cent later retracted his statement within an MTV interview due to his contract agreements with Aftermath Entertainment and Interscope Records .

= = Promotion = =

West spent a significant amount of time promoting Graduation during his trip to the United Kingdom . On August 17 , West guest starred on the British comedy @-@ variety show The Friday Night Project . He played preview versions of the songs " Big Brother " and " Champion " from his forthcoming third album while making an appearance on DJ Tim Westwood 's radio show on August 18 . Later that day , West performed at V Festival in Chelmsford , England before an audience of over 50 @,@ 000 people and again played new material from Graduation as well as a tribute cover of Amy Winehouse 's hit single " Rehab . " He then held a secret concert with Barbadian singer Rihanna for an audience of over five hundred fans and invited guests at Westminster Central Hall in London , England on August 20 . The guests were greeted by staff members wearing graduation robes and mortarboard caps in reference to the title of West 's third studio album Graduation . At the end of the concert , a shower of silver confetti and ticker tape reading Touch the Sky fell from the ceiling onto the audience while the actual " Touch the Sky , " which was the fourth single from Late Registration , was played on the speakers .

After he returned to the United States , West joined 50 Cent onstage for a surprise performance before an audience of over 20 @,@ 000 people at a show held on August 22 in Madison Square Garden during Ciara and T.I. ' s Screamefest ' 07 tour . West performed for a benefit concert raising funds for and promoting higher education sponsored by his charity foundation on August 24 at Chicago 's House of Blues . At the concert , he provided live renditions of songs from Graduation and gave the audience a sneak peek of the early production stages of his fall Glow in the Dark Tour . On August 28 , West hosted a studio album listening session for Graduation at New World Stages in New York City . There Kanye West explained his influences and aspirations for the album and played songs over video clips taken from a variety of futuristic sci @-@ fi films , including Tron , Akira , 2046 , and 2001 : A Space Odyssey . Two days later , on the morning of August 30 , the clean version of the album leaked onto the Internet . In a survey conducted by Billboard , results displayed that an estimated 44 % of readers predicted that Graduation would sell more units over 50 Cent and Kenny Chesney . Projections for first week scans based on early store sales reports indicated towards the 575 @,@ 000 ? 700 @,@ 000 range for Graduation , while Curtis was projected in the 500 @,@ 000 ? 600 @,@ 000 range .

= = Commercial performance = =

On the first day of its release , Graduation sold over 437 @,@ 000 copies . The album debuted at number one on the US Billboard 200 chart , grossing a total of over 957 @,@ 000 copies in its first week in the United States alone . Graduation became West 's second consecutive studio album to top the Billboard 200 and also debuted at number @-@ one on the album charts in the United Kingdom and Canada . It was within the very same week that " Stronger " topped the Billboard Hot 100 , selling over 205 @,@ 000 digital downloads and giving West his third number @-@ one single . Upon its release , Graduation achieved the highest first week sales week for any album in 2007 , topping Linkin Park 's Minutes to Midnight , which sold 625 @,@ 000 copies . The album was also West 's highest first sales week to date , surpassing the 860 @,@ 000 opening week of his previous album Late Registration . It registered the best first @-@ week sales totals of any record released within the last two years , with the last being West 's own Late Registration .

Additionally , Graduation became ranked as the 15th highest sales week for an album since Nielsen SoundScan began tracking data in 1991 , as well as the highest sales week at the time of its release

for an album since 50 Cent's *The Massacre* ( 2005 ) . It also set the record for the largest week of an album digitally downloaded , registering over 133 @, @ 000 paid downloads , beating Maroon 5's previous set record of 102 @, @ 000 for *It Won't Be Soon Before Long* . *Graduation*'s first week sales of 957 @, @ 000 and Curtis's first week sales of 691 @, @ 000 marked only the second time ever since the inception of Nielsen SoundScan that two albums debuted within the same week with totals surpassing 623 @, @ 000 copies in the United States . The first occurrence of such an event was in September 1991 , when Guns N' Roses conjunctively released *Use Your Illusion I* , which sold 685 @, @ 000 copies , and *Use Your Illusion II* , which sold 770 @, @ 000 copies . The first week sales totals of *Graduation* and *Curtis* have outsold the first week sales totals of Guns N' Roses' two albums . 50 Cent showed graciousness in regards to his defeat . In a statement released to the Associated Press , he said , " I am very excited to have participated in one of the biggest album release weeks in the last two years . Collectively , we have sold hundreds of thousands of units in our debut week . This marks a great moment for hip @-@ hop music , one that will go down in history . " After years of slumping sales , the album competition between the two releases and the resulting record breaking performances both albums demonstrated was considered to be a " fantastic day for hip @-@ hop " .

In its second week on the Billboard 200 , *Graduation* slid to number two with the release of Reba McEntire's *Reba : Duets* , selling 226 @, @ 000 copies while maintaining its dominance over *Curtis* , which sold 143 @, @ 000 . The next week , with the releases of over 40 new albums , *Graduation* dropped three spaces to number five and registered 133 @, @ 300 , reaching a cumulative total of 1 @. @ 3 million copies by October 3 . Selling 92 @, @ 400 copies , the album descended two spots the following week to reach number seven . During its fourth week on the chart , *Graduation* experienced a slight rebound and rose from number seven to six on October 17 , selling 71 @, @ 000 copies . The following week , the album began to descend once more , selling an estimated 54 @, @ 000 copies and dropping three places to reach the ninth position on October 24 . By year's end , *Graduation* was the third most @-@ downloaded and best @-@ selling album of 2007 on iTunes Store . *Graduation* became West's third consecutive studio album to sell over two million copies in the United States , and it was certified double platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America ( RIAA ) on October 18 , 2007 . As of June 14 , 2013 , Nielsen Soundscan reported that *Graduation* has since grossed over 2 @, @ 700 @, @ 000 copies in the United States .

= = Critical reception = =

*Graduation* received widely positive reviews from critics . At Metacritic , which assigns a normalized rating out of 100 to reviews from mainstream publications , the album received an average score of 79 , based on 32 reviews . Pitchfork Media critic Mark Pytlik complimented the accessibility of West's sonic experimentations , finding it impressive and innovative how he assembled seemingly disparate elements on the songs . Greg Tate , writing in *The Village Voice* , dubbed him " the most genuinely confessional MC in hip @-@ hop today " and said , " bouts of narcissism aside , *Graduation* contains killer pieces of production " . *Stylus Magazine*'s Jayson Greene said it " serves as a document of West's maturation " and , " musically , at least , it's the most accomplished thing he's ever done . " In *Rolling Stone* , Nathan Brackett wrote of West's evolving and increasingly experimental , genre @-@ bending production and said although he lacks Jay @-@ Z's " formal mastery " , West has " grown as a writer ... given the lousy year hip @-@ hop has had , the music needs his spazzed @-@ out , neurotic creativity more than ever " . Josh Tyrangiel from *Time* wrote , " West plunders the best [ samples ] and meticulously layers every track with enough surprises that there are thrills and discoveries a dozen listens in . "

In a less enthusiastic review for MSN Music , Robert Christgau deemed *Graduation* a " minor success " in which " every single track offers up its momentary pleasures ? choruses that make you say yeah on songs you've already found wanting , confessional details and emotional aperçus on an album that still reduces to quality product when they're over " . However , he felt West spent too much of the album rationalizing his obsession with his fame in sketchy fashion and occasionally awkward rhymes , " little stuff like his failure to convert ' this ' - ' crib ' - ' shit ' - ' live ' - ' serious ' into

a rhyme " on " Champion " or " ' at bay at a distance ' into an idiom " on " Big Brother " . Dorian Lynskey from The Guardian said West often " undercuts rap cliches with wit and ambivalence " , but observed some disappointing lyrics such as on " Can 't Tell Me Nothing " , which he said revealed his limited perspective . Slant Magazine critic Eric Henderson found West 's lyrics " only transparently expressive " and said the songs ' hooks " grab your ear on the first listen ( notably bypassing your brain ) " . Dave Heaton from PopMatters felt the album is ordinary and lacks the epochal feel of Late Registration , with songs that " aren 't as richly dressed , and he doesn 't seem to be trying as hard " .

= = = Accolades = = =

Rolling Stone placed the album at number five on its list of their Top 50 Albums of 2007 " . Graduation was listed at number nine on the Billboard Critics ' Poll . Time listed Graduation as the tenth best album of the year . A year @-@ end poll conducted by Entertainment Weekly cited Graduation as the best album of 2007 . It was also hailed as the best album of the year by USA Today , which wrote , " The Louis Vuitton Don may major in rap , but he liberally borrows from other music schools to create a much broader soundscape . " The studio album was listed as the fourth and eighteenth best record of the year by Spin magazine and Pitchfork Media respectively . PopMatters also listed Graduation as the fourth best album of the year . Graduation was listed at number thirty @-@ five by The Observer on its best fifty albums of the year . The Daily Telegraph ranked it number fifteen on its list of " Pop CDs of the Year " , writing , " Kanye West finally grew up on this album , delivering more inventive , precision @-@ tooled hip @-@ hop but wearing a much more furrowed brow as he explored his existential anxieties . Dark and addictive . " Pitchfork Media placed Graduation at number 87 on their list of top 200 albums of the 2000s . Graduation was cited as the second best album of the entire decade by Complex magazine .

At the 50th Grammy Awards , West led the field with a total of eight nominations , including Album of the Year , Best Rap / Sung Collaboration for " Good Life " , and Best Rap Song for " Can 't Tell Me Nothing " . West received the Grammy awards for Best Rap Solo Performance for " Stronger " , Best Rap Song for " Good Life " , and finally Graduation received the award for Best Rap Album . At the 34th annual American Music Awards , West received both the awards for Favorite Rap / Hip @-@ Hop Artist as well as Favorite Rap / Hip @-@ Hop Album for Graduation . However , West offered the former to Lil Wayne , who he felt was more deserving of the award due to his musical efforts in 2008 . Praising the artistic expression prevalent throughout Graduation , the success of the third studio album 's singles , and lastly the vivid imagination of its accompanying international Glow in the Dark Tour , MTV crowned West as the year 's # 1 Hottest MC in the Game on May 16 , 2008 .

= = Legacy and influence = =

Irish rock band U2 has asserted that touring with West on their Vertigo Tour had a significant effect on their own music as well in regards to the band 's twelfth studio album No Line on the Horizon . Bono elaborated that Kanye West 's rapping inspired him to utilize more percussive consonants for his songwriting and vocal performance . West 's third studio album Graduation , particularly with its two hit singles " Stronger " and " Flashing Lights " , has been attributed to not only encouraging other hip @-@ hop artists to incorporate house and electronica elements into their music , but also for playing a part in the revival of disco and electro @-@ infused music in the late 2000s . In addition , tracks such as " Everything I Am " have been cited as " the best example of the soulful and introspective atmosphere that came to dominate the rap world , from Drake to The Weeknd " . West has also received praise for his ability to appeal to diverse music audiences such as indie @-@ rock listeners and rave enthusiasts without alienating his hip @-@ hop audiences .

The outcome of the highly publicized sales competition between 50 Cent 's Curtis and West 's Graduation has since been accredited to the decline of the gangsta rap that once dominated mainstream hip @-@ hop . The Michigan Daily columnist Adam Theisen asserts that West 's win

once and for all " prove [ d ] that rap music didn 't have to conform to gangsta @-@ rap conventions to be commercially successful . " Ben Detrick of XXL cites West defeat over 50 Cent in sales as being responsible for altering the direction of hip @-@ hop and paving the way for new rappers who didn 't follow the hardcore @-@ gangster mold , writing , " If there was ever a watershed moment to indicate hip @-@ hop 's changing direction , it may have come when 50 Cent competed with Kanye in 2007 to see whose album would claim superior sales . 50 lost handily , and it was made clear that excellent songcrafting trumped a lack of street @-@ life experience . Kanye led a wave of new artists ? Kid Cudi , Wale , Lupe Fiasco , Kidz in the Hall , Drake ? who lacked the interest or ability to create narratives about any past gunplay or drug @-@ dealing . "

The competition between 50 Cent and West , when the two released their studio albums on the same day , was penultimate in a series of articles that lists fifty key events in the history of R & B and hip @-@ hop music , written by Rosie Swash of The Guardian . Swash wrote that it " highlighted the diverging facets of hip @-@ hop in the last decade ; the former was gangsta rap for the noughties , while West was the thinking man 's alternative . " Similarly , according to DJBooth , while Graduation is far from being West 's best studio album , it nevertheless is a great piece of work while the outcome of its competition with 50 Cent stands as a historical moment in hip @-@ hop culture : " Graduation isn 't Kanye 's best , it 's very few people 's favorite , but it 's an incredible body of art . He 's literally transitioning into stardom right before our very eyes and attempting to embody that moment in time . Kanye 's victory over 50 is the bookmark for when rap changed , it was no longer ran by the gangsters , the doors opened for Drake , Kid Cudi and J. Cole . Graduation is a monument , a hip @-@ hop treasure , a Kanye classic . "

= = Track listing = =

Notes :

^ [ a ] signifies a co @-@ producer .

^ [ b ] signifies an additional producer .

Sample credits :

" Good Morning " contains samples from " Someone Saved My Life Tonight " by Elton John .

" Champion " contains elements of " Kid Charlemagne " by Steely Dan .

" Stronger " contains a sample of " Harder , Better , Faster , Stronger " performed by Daft Punk .

" I Wonder " contains a sample from " My Song " by Labi Siffre .

" Good Life " contains a sample of " P.Y.T. ( Pretty Young Thing ) " performed by Michael Jackson .

" Barry Bonds " contains a sample of " Long Red " performed by Mountain .

" Drunk and Hot Girls " contains elements of " Sing Swan Song " performed by Can .

" Everything I Am " contains elements of " If We Can 't Be Lovers " performed by Prince Phillip Mitchell and " Bring the Noise " performed by Public Enemy .

" The Glory " contains elements of " Save the Country " performed by Laura Nyro , contains a sample of " Long Red " performed by Mountain .

" Good Night " contains samples of " Nuff Man a Dead " by Super Cat , " Wake The Town " by U @-@ Roy .

" Bittersweet Poetry " interpolates " Bittersweet " performed by Chairmen of the Board .

= = Personnel = =

Credits adapted from liner notes .

= = Charts = =

= = Certifications = =