

Kanye West

Kanye West, 2006.**Kanye West** (born June 8, 1977, Atlanta, Georgia, U.S.) is an American producer, rapper, and fashion designer who parlayed his production success in the late 1990s and early 2000s into a career as a popular, critically acclaimed solo artist. One of the most controversial and influential celebrities of his generation, West attracted notoriety with a public persona that at times overshadowed his music.

Early life

West was the child of an Atlanta-based news photographer and former Black Panther father, Ray West, and a college professor mother, Donda (née Williams) West. His parents divorced when he was three, and West was raised by his mother mainly in the South Shore neighborhood of Chicago, where she began teaching at Chicago State University. When West was 10 years old, he moved with his mother to China for a year for an education exchange program in which Donda West taught at Nanjing University. West showed artistic ability at a young age, often winning talent shows as a child. He attended Chicago State University for one year before dropping out to pursue a career in music.

The College Dropout

Early on he demonstrated his considerable abilities as a producer, contributing to Jermaine Dupri’s album *Life in 1472* (1998) before relocating to the New York City area, where he made his name with his production work for Roc-A-Fella Records, especially on rapper Jay-Z’s album *Blueprint* (2001). West’s skillful use of accelerated sample-based beats soon made him much in demand as a producer, but he struggled to be allowed to make his own recordings (partly because of the perception that his middle-class background denied him credibility as a rapper). When he finally released his debut solo album, *The College Dropout* (2004), it was massively successful: sales soared, and critics gushed over its sonic sophistication and clever wordplay, which blended humor, faith, insight, and political awareness on songs such as “Through the Wire” and the gospel-choir-backed “Jesus Walks.” The latter cut won a Grammy Award for best rap song in 2005, and West also picked up awards that year for best rap album and best rhythm-and-blues song (as one of the songwriters of Alicia Keys’s “You Don’t Know My Name”).

Late Registration, Graduation, and 808s and Heartbreak



Kanye West
American rapper Kanye West performing at the 47th annual Grammy Awards, 2005.

Abetted by his flamboyant personality, West quickly rose to stardom. His second album, *Late Registration* (2005), repeated the commercial success of his first—with a number of hit singles, including “Diamonds from Sierra Leone” and “Gold Digger”—and earned West three more Grammy Awards. He also gained attention for his widely quoted assertion that the federal government’s slow response to the Hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans in 2005 demonstrated that U.S. Pres. George W. Bush “doesn’t care about Black people”—a comment that Bush later characterized as one of the worst moments of his presidency.

As his career as a performer took off, West continued to work as a producer, with credits including songs by such high-profile artists as Nas, Mariah Carey, and Beyoncé. He also founded the record label GOOD Music, an imprint of Def Jam Records. His third release, *Graduation* (2007), produced the hit singles “Good Life” and “Stronger” and garnered him four more Grammy Awards. In 2008 West released *808s and Heartbreak*, an album that dwelled on feelings of personal loss and regret. (His mother had died the previous year from a heart attack following cosmetic surgery.) Its sound differed radically from his previous releases, as West chose to sing (with the assistance of a vocal production tool called Auto-Tune) rather than rap his lyrics.

Taylor Swift incident at the VMAS and My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy

West spent much of late 2009 rehabilitating his image. He had rushed the stage at the MTV Video Music Awards, preempting Taylor Swift’s acceptance speech for best female video, to declare that “Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time.” Video footage of the incident quickly went viral on the Internet, and West found himself vilified in the media. A series of apologies, some of them appearing as a stream-of-consciousness narrative on West’s Twitter (rebranded as X in 2023) feed, soon followed.

The brashness that caused him such trouble in 2009 fueled a triumphant return to music the following year, with *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, a monumentally complex exploration of the nature of success and celebrity. With potent rhymes that were in equal parts boastful and self-effacing, instrumentation that ranged from tribal drums to soaring orchestral accompaniment, and a list of guest performers that included Jay-Z, Rihanna, Kid Cudi, and Chris Rock, the album represented some of West’s most ambitious work, and it was rewarded with a trio of Grammys. He followed it with *Watch the Throne* (2011), a *Billboard* chart-topping collaboration with Jay-Z that featured the Grammy-winning singles “Otis,” “Niggas in Paris,” and “No Church in the Wild.”

Yeezus

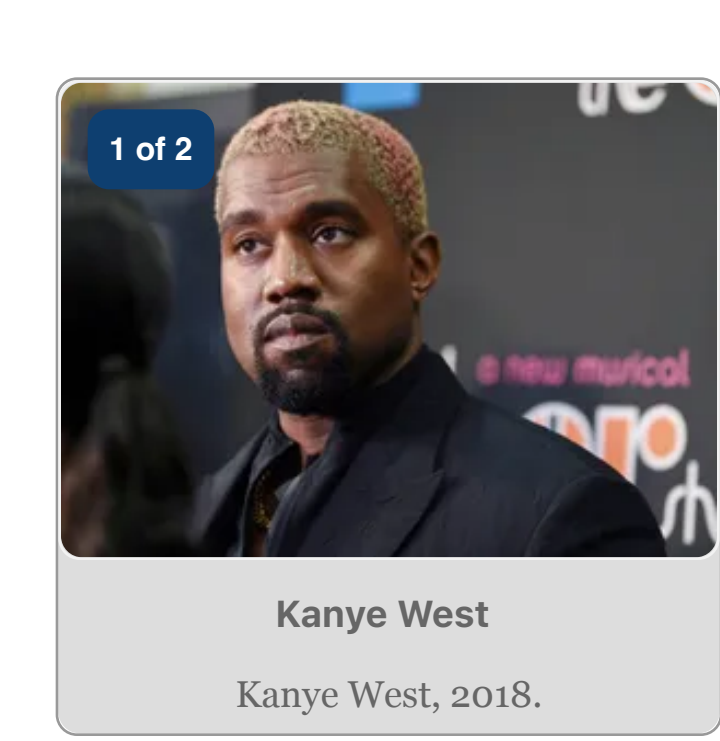
In 2012 West presented *Cruel Summer*, a compilation album featuring him and some of the artists signed to his GOOD Music label. A year later, on Yeezus (2013), West continued to explore the dark corners of his psyche, at times filtering his observations through the provocative lens of racial politics, as on “New Slaves.” In contrast to the extravagance of his previous solo efforts, the album found him rapping over jagged minimalist arrangements evocative of house and industrial music and embellished with spare samples of soul and dancehall vocalists. Its most successful single was “Bound 2,” in part because of its racy music video featuring West and his then girlfriend, the reality-television star Kim Kardashian. (The couple, who were frequently in the public eye, were married in 2014 and eventually had four children: North, Saint, Chicago, and Psalm. In 2021 it was announced that they were divorcing, and their split was finalized in 2022.)

YEEZY fashion debut and The Life of Pablo

In February 2015 West, in conjunction with German apparel company Adidas, unveiled the first “season,” or collection, of his long-awaited fashion line, YEEZY. YEEZY Season 1 featured men’s and women’s streetwear, including oversize sweaters, military- and surplus-inspired jackets, sneakers, boots, and more.

West’s fashion work continued leading up to the release of his eighth studio album, *The Life of Pablo* (2016); in fact, he debuted tracks from the album at his showcase of YEEZY Season 3 at Madison Square Garden in New York. The gospel-tinged album further demonstrated West’s inventiveness as a producer, but critics found it disjointed. In addition, the work itself was somewhat overshadowed by the unconventional circumstances of its release; after making an initial version of the album available online, West continued to tinker with it in the studio, calling it a “living breathing changing creative expression.” The tour supporting the album was abruptly canceled in November 2016, and West was briefly hospitalized. West’s fifth fashion collection, YEEZY Season 5, was released at New York Fashion Week in February 2017.

Social media controversies, ye, Donald Trump, and Donda



Kanye West
Kanye West, 2018.

West was uncharacteristically quiet for several months before provocatively reemerging on social media in April 2018. He notably defended a statement he had made in a televised interview suggesting that enslaved African Americans had cooperated in their enslavement. Later that year he released the chaotic and unsettling ye, on which he declared that he is bipolar. *Kids See Ghosts*, a collaboration with rapper Kid Cudi, followed shortly thereafter. Like ye, it focused on mental health but to much better effect; intense and spooky, the album was widely viewed as more interesting and rewarding than West’s solo effort. His next release, *Jesus Is King*, was a gospel album that reflected his

recommitment to Christianity; it later won the Grammy for best contemporary Christian music album. During this time West remained involved in fashion, and YEEZY Season 6 and Season 7 were released in 2018 and 2019, respectively, though neither was shown at New York Fashion Week.

In July 2020, less than four months before the U.S. presidential election, West announced that he was running for the office as a member of the so-called Birthday Party. He did little campaigning, but he released a platform that notably called for reforming the police and legal system, reducing student debt, and having prayer in schools. Republican Pres. Donald Trump and his followers supported West’s candidacy, believing that he could lure some voters away from the Democratic nominee, Joe Biden, in what was expected to be an incredibly close election. However, West ultimately garnered only 0.04 percent of the national vote, not enough to have any effect on the outcome. In 2021 he released his 10th studio album, *Donda*. Named for his mother, it features collaborations with such artists as JAY-Z and The Weeknd. He also opened a private Christian school in California called Donda Academy, though the school was soon beset with numerous complaints and lawsuits. Later that year Kanye West officially changed his name to Ye.

Continuing controversies and Vultures 1

While not a stranger to controversy, West faced particular backlash for objectionable behavior in 2022. During his YEEZY show at Paris Fashion Week in October, he and his models wore shirts emblazoned with “White Lives Matter.” Shortly thereafter West made a series of comments that were widely seen as anti-Semitic. Notably, he posted on Twitter that he was preparing to “go death con 3 On JEWISH PEOPLE.” Many interpreted the tweet as a reference to defcon, a U.S. military readiness system. This and other comments resulted in Instagram and Twitter locking his accounts and removing content. West subsequently announced that he planned on acquiring Parler, a conservative social media platform. However, the proposed sale never materialized. During this time a number of companies, including Adidas, ended their endorsement deals with West, and his booking agency, Creative Arts Agency, stopped representing him. It was also revealed that Def Jam Records had parted ways with West and GOOD Music, their contract having expired in 2021.

In December 2023 West posted an apology to the Jewish community on Instagram. Written in Hebrew, the statement read in part, “Your forgiveness is important to me, and I am committed to making amends and promoting unity.” Also in 2023 West teamed with rapper Ty Dolla \$ign to form the duo ¥\$. They released the single “Vultures” in November, followed by the album *Vultures 1* in February 2024. With no record label, West distributed the album solely through streaming services. It debuted at number one on the *Billboard* 200 album chart and earned more than \$1 million in its first week. Among those making guest appearances were Lil Durk, Freddie Gibbs, Playboi Carti, Travis Scott, and West’s eldest child, North West. Shortly before its release, West hinted that volumes two and three of *Vultures* would be released in early 2024.

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