

RECORDING REVIEWS

The Roots, *Undun*. Def Jam 001628202, 2011.

Kanye West and Jay-Z, *Watch the Throne*. Roc-A-Fella/Roc Nation/Def Jam 001542602, 2011.

“Luxury rap” is a term that’s been bandied about in recent years to describe hip hop’s fascination with the finer—and pricier—things in life. The term suggests a step beyond the general desire for money and cars, as rappers have become increasingly sophisticated in their tastes and bent on finding rhymes for their favorite brand names. Whether clothing (Gucci, Louis Vuitton, and Burberry are old favorites), spirits (Cristal and Courvoisier have both been immortalized in song), or cars (Rick Ross’s Maybach Music is an entire record label named for the impossibly expensive German automobile), high-end items have festooned some of the hottest beats in the last decade.¹ From the heart of hip hop’s consumerist culture flows the 2011 Kanye West/Jay-Z collaboration *Watch the Throne*, the platinum standard of luxury rap.

When speaking of luxury, we might as well start with the throne. Jay-Z has long thought of himself as rap’s don, kingpin, and kingmaker, and Kanye seems the most eager of his protégés to inherit the empire. The two first collaborated on Jay-Z’s *The Dynasty: Roc La Familia* (2000), an album initially intended to showcase artists on Jay-Z’s Roc-A-Fella label. Kanye produced one song on the album (“This Can’t Be Life,” featuring his signature “chipmunk” sound, made by raising the pitch of and speeding up sampled voices) before being welcomed more fully into Jay-Z’s familia on *The Blueprint* (2001), for which he produced four tracks, including the lead single “Izzo (H.O.V.A.),” an anthem that became one of Jay-Z’s mainstays. Since then, Kanye has produced regularly for Jay-Z, who in turn has appeared as a guest rapper on several of West’s own singles.

The throne room where the duo reigns is dotted with luxury items. Jay-Z rides in a Rolls Royce Corniche (“No Church in the Wild”), presumably while wearing one or more of his many watches—Rolex (“Niggas in Paris” and “Otis”), Hublot (“Otis”), and/or Audemars Piguet (“Niggas in Paris”), perhaps. Of course, if he needs to go very far, he’ll probably just use his Gulfstream 450 private jet (“Otis”). Kanye has a private jet, too (“Gotta Have It”), as well as a Benz, an “other Benz,” and an “other other Benz” (“Otis”). And he’s graduated from his earliest days, when he couldn’t pronounce Versace (“Ver-say-cee” on *The College Dropout*’s “All Falls Down”), now dropping the haute of couture names—Margiela—on “Niggas in Paris.”

The album even sounds expensive. Although Kanye isn’t sole producer of *Watch the Throne*, it bears his distinctive mark, featuring the sampled voices of many well-known artists mixed into the gospel inflections of his hip hop sound. Because it’s a throne room, it isn’t surprising to hear the elite gather to take part: James

¹ For an excellent contextualization of cars in hip hop, see Adrienne Brown, “Drive Slow: Rehearing Hip Hop Automotivity,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24/3 (2012): 265–75.

Brown, Otis Redding, Nina Simone, and Quincy Jones all make appearances in sampled form. By rapping alongside such well-known artists, Jay-Z and Kanye further establish themselves as musical royalty. At the same time, they continue to flaunt their wealth, as the amount of music sampled combines with the notoriety of musicians heard on those samples to drive the price of licensing fees quite high.² In addition to the visual imagery of wealth provided by their lyrics, then, Jay-Z and Kanye also make sure that their wealth echoes across the sample-based soundscape, as well.

The price tags on these physical and musical luxuries could tax even the most loyal listener's patience, especially at the time of the album's release in August 2011, when the United States was still struggling through a deep recession while Congress bickered its way to a reduced credit rating from Standard and Poor's. But the high-ticket items exist within a larger framework. Both artists display an acquisitive nature from their earliest work, aspiring to own the sorts of expensive objects that would mark the ascension from hip hop's gutters to its highest echelons—a theme common across hip hop, in fact—and *Watch the Throne* reflects upon years of untold wealth and what it means to be a rich, black rapper in the United States.

The first handful of tracks on *Watch the Throne* (“No Church in the Wild,” “Liftoff,” “Niggas in Paris,” “Otis,” and “Gotta Have It”) contain the most explicit mentions of the duo's fortunes and are also five of the seven singles released for airplay. On the back end of the album, however, Jay-Z and Kanye meditate on the loss, violence, and desperation bred by economic stratification in the United States and the continued barricades that separate many Americans from the upward mobility promised to children (“Welcome to the Jungle,” “Who Gon Stop Me,” “Murder to Excellence,” and “Made It in America”). These final tracks bring the opening set into focus, as one realizes that even the most decadent songs on the album present each man's wealth as a mark that opens him to heightened criticism and surveillance. And although it's hard to feel sorry for these multi-millionaires, *Watch the Throne* makes an effort to tie the resentment of black wealth to ongoing racial inequality. Elsewhere, Kanye has twisted LL Cool J's line from “Illegal Search,” “Can't a young man make money anymore?” so that “man” becomes “nigga,” adding, as any skilled rapper would, a second layer of meaning to the question. On *Watch the Throne*, Kanye and Jay-Z suggest a double trap: because of their blackness, it's harder to make money, and once they get it, they face greater scrutiny than they otherwise would.

It isn't a new idea, but the two rappers present it in an intriguing manner. Because Kanye and Jay-Z not only lead with their most audacious tracks, but also ensure that those same songs are the ones with which casual listeners—radio listeners—will be most familiar, they open themselves to exactly the sort of criticism they lament.

² Joanna Demers discusses the changing nature of hip hop sampling over the last two decades in the “Duplication” chapter of *Steal This Music: How Intellectual Property Affects Musical Creativity* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006). Joseph Schloss's *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004) is an important contribution to the understanding of the technique as well.

Listeners must make an effort to find buried tracks like “Who Gon Stop Me” and “Murder to Excellence” in order to access the context that explains “Otis” and “Niggas in Paris.”³ The first five tracks prove a true gambit, then, where Kanye and Jay-Z offer up their pawn—luxury rap—to the critics and listeners who are only interested in a shallow listening, preserving the throne for those ready to engage in a deep play.

There may be no less likely face of luxury rap than the Roots, whose latest album, *Undun* (2011), moved a fraction of the copies that *Watch the Throne* did. But *Undun* would be impossible without the luxuries the iconic hip hop band enjoys. Since 2009, the Roots have performed as the house band for *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*, where they provide intro and outro music, accompany guest singers, and accommodate musicians who sit in with them for a night. The daily rehearsals, impromptu jams, and steady money have allowed the band to mature at an astonishing rate. Although most of the band’s musicians maintain side projects, the consistency and financial security of the *Late Night* gig means the members spend more time playing and being together than would otherwise be possible with such a large group.⁴ The steady paycheck means less pressure to generate hits, allowing the group the freedom to generate a relatively low-selling album with little worry that their wallets will suffer.

Undun is a tragedy, the story of Redford Stevens, who dies in the opening tracks and whose tale is told in reverse over the course of the album, ending with his birth. Redford turns to crime as a way out of poverty, briefly ascending to a luxurious lifestyle (“to a king from a pawn,” as rapper Truck North puts it in “Kool On”) before his inevitable fall. It doesn’t exactly seem like the stuff of mainstream hip hop and pop, but drummer Questlove moves things forward with his signature boom-boom-bap as the rest of the band drifts through catchy blues, jazz, and rock riffs. *Undun* and *Watch the Throne*, in fact, sound as if they’re made by musicians who grew up on the same Motown, gospel, and soul sounds. But whereas Kanye and Jay-Z assemble these musical elements into a string of standalone tracks built on layers of sampled and digital loops, the Roots work these genres into a cohesive, arched narrative, weaving in and out of styles and sometimes wading through free-form atmospherics as they relate *Undun*’s story from back to front and from death to birth.

Because *Undun* proceeds in reverse, the first track, “Dun,” is really the outro, the end of the story. Indeed, the first sound the listener hears is evidence of Redford’s death, a flatline surrounded by ambient noise, before the album rolls back into the final moments of his life with the gradually emerging thump of a heartbeat. Each of the three acts contains three tracks, and from “Dun” proceeds Act III,

³ The title of the song “Niggas in Paris” itself carries potential connections to the history of black intellectuals and artists who have expressed greater acceptance in Europe—especially Paris.

⁴ Jennifer Ryan explores the benefits and stigmas of being a house band in “‘Beale Street Blues?’ Tourism, Musical Labor, and the Fetishization of Poverty in Blues Discourse,” *Ethnomusicology* 55/3 (2011): 473–503. Ryan’s study focuses on the blues, but her conclusions warrant extrapolation to other genres, especially one as closely related to the blues as hip hop. The desire of musical tourists to hear impoverished musicians is directly related to the problems of luxury, race, and poverty explored in *Watch the Throne* and *Undun*.

where Redford comes to grips with the fact that he's dead ("Sleep," part lullaby, part dirge), dies ("Make My"), and realizes that all of his money still leaves him wanting ("One Time"). Act II culminates in the life Redford thought he wanted. "Kool On" is the most radio-ready track on the album, a liquid blues riff featuring a series of toasts to his own greatness, a handful of boasts about his rise to the top, and the closest Redford ever comes to feeling invincible. The rest of Act II tells how he arrived at invincibility, with "The OtherSide" trying to justify the means to Redford's material gains and the relentless march "Stomp" relaying the resolve required to kill and crawl over similarly impoverished in his climb to the top. Finally, Act I ("Lighthouse," "I Remember," and "Tip the Scale") is a three-part meditation on the desperation of poverty. We find Redford returning time and again to the idea of suicide as he reflects on the string of petty crimes that have led him to kill. In place of suicide, Redford chooses more homicide—the "Lighthouse" that he thinks will save him from drowning.

A tragedy told in reverse should yield at least a bit of optimism, but death haunts every corner of *Undun*. There is resurrection here, to be sure, but Redford doesn't rise to any life worth living. Even in Act II, where he ascends to the heights he imagined he wanted, the guest vocals of Greg Porn on each of those three tracks (the only three featuring Porn on the album) function as a Greek chorus might, so the sound of Porn's voice always points to Redford's imminent fall. The end of the album brings us to the beginning of *Undun's* reverse narrative, so upon completion of Act I, all that remains is the instrumental intro, a four-part suite that features a string quartet that offers only a modicum of solace and stands in for innocent days that Redford can't remember. The final sound of *Undun*—the sound that *opens* Redford's life—is a dissonant, low-register piano, marking this man for death in his first moments and closing the circle that began with the outro's flatline.

Ultimately, *Undun* and *Watch the Throne* are built of the same materials, as each album digests similar musical predecessors, questions the logic of acquisitive consumerism, and highlights the double bind that, on the one hand, makes wealth more difficult for a young black man to attain and, on the other, assures that he becomes the locus of abjection once he achieves it. And they do all of this while relentlessly tonguing the sore that is the poverty problem in the United States. The damning dissonance that ends *Undun* and begins Redford's life signals that he never had a chance; he was born into a system—a country—that would tip his scale toward death. And the final two (non-bonus) tracks of *Watch the Throne* suggest the same, even as they masquerade as patriotism and love. "Made It In America" wonders how it is that Martin Luther King and Corretta Scott, Malcolm X and Betty Shabazz (much less Kanye and Jay-Z), could possibly "make it" in America. Meanwhile, the infectious, soulful hook of the final track, "Ooooh, I love you so / But why I love you, I'll never know," becomes, in the scope of the entire album, a tortured love sickness (an infected soul) brought on by the duo's investment in a system that would rather see them broke(n). In this way, luxury becomes a dangerous game in the mouths of these artists, as *Watch the Throne* sounds more and more like Kanye and Jay-Z's version of *Undun's* "Kool On," that moment of success fraught with the hazards of succeeding in ways one isn't supposed to.

Watch the Throne and *Undun* offer a variety of entry points for the discussion of hip hop in the classroom. *Watch the Throne*'s double life of fun, sophomoric tracks juxtaposed with biting social critique embodies much of hip hop music and discourse. Although hip hop fans will argue over whether the genre should exist for the purpose of partying or for social and political critique, these two goals have always shared hip hop's sonic space. From Grandmaster Flash to Public Enemy to Nicki Minaj, the genre has exhibited an astonishing ability to offer barbed correctives in one measure and irresistible grooves in the next. *Watch the Throne* is no different: a salient critical agenda hidden inside a collection of catchy tunes built from the debris of greatest hits past. Meanwhile, *Undun* offers a more overt message without losing sight of the need to groove. The kind of grooving the Roots do, however, is the (still-emerging) product of more than two decades' worth of an experiment with one of the great novelties of hip hop: a band. Whereas on *Undun* the Roots occasionally refuse to settle into a protracted groove the way a looped beat might, the band resolutely continues to settle into itself, creating unique soundscapes in the world of hip hop. The dynamics of the band's interplay, combined with the conceptual narrative of *Undun*, suggest an album that would fit as neatly into a rock-oriented survey as it would a hip hop course.

It's this hybrid nature of *Undun* and *Watch the Throne* that reveals the gaps and overlaps between the two (whether as individual albums or as representations of the gapping and overlapping spaces occupied by the albums' artists in the hip hop world) as well as between the ideals and realities of life in the United States. Each album ultimately performs—in different ways—the idea it wants to convey, taking on the nature of that which it critiques in the hopes that its listeners will be willing to work and play at the same time.

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Jay Farrar, Will Johnson, Anders Parker, and Yim Yames, with lyrics by Woody Guthrie, *New Multitudes*. Rounder 11661-9129-2, 2012.

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie, better known to generations of folk music enthusiasts simply as “Woody,” would have turned 100 on 14 July 2012—if Huntington's Chorea had not prematurely ended his life on 3 October 1967. But the momentous occasion of his birth has been honored with celebrations, concerts, and publications focusing on the man and his music—including the CD compilation *New Multitudes*, which contains new musical settings of previously unrecorded lyrics. Here Guthrie's words come alive through the efforts of alternative-country/folkies Jay Farrar, Anders Parker, Yim Yames, and Will Johnson.

This legacy effort, however, did not start with Guthrie's centennial. For decades, various artists have strived to keep the songster's work in the public eye. One