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Music Review

Kanye West, *Jesus Is King*

US 2019, Def Jam Recordings

As any emcee should, Kanye West has developed and matured as a producer and lyricist since his 2004 triple-platinum debut project, *College Dropout*. West's Gospel project, *Jesus Is King*, is his ninth studio project and the follow-up to his June 2018 release, *Ye*. After delays, *Jesus Is King* was released on 25 October 2019. For West, openly talking about Jesus in his music is not new, for he rocked the mainstream hip-hop world in 2004 when he released the single "Jesus Walks", the final single to be released from *College Dropout*.

Jesus Is King features eleven tracks totaling 27 minutes and 4 seconds, which is short for either a secular or gospel hip-hop project.¹ Interestingly, significant changes were made to the track listing order on the album. Kim Kardashian-West announced the tracks and order in August 2019, but the listing and order released by Kanye West in October 2019 were markedly different.² Such a change could suggest an earlier lack of clarity on what the album was going to be. West did promise that *Jesus Is King* would be "fully immersed in religion [...] with lyrics about God, being saved, and minimal cursing".³

Jesus Is King employs several aspects of Black Christian worship, from mass choir to melodic organ. West takes the best of the Black gospel tradition, infusing it with his own lyrical genius to proclaim what God has done for him, which is best expressed on the track "God Is", a remake of the classic spiritual. West's version is still able to touch the soul while allowing you to ride the beat

1 See e.g. *Christology: In Laymen's Terms* (The Ambassador, Seventh Street Records/Cross Movement Records, 1999), 1:13:51; *Please Excuse Me for Being Antisocial* (Roddy Ricch, Atlantic/Dream Chasers Records, 2019), 43:18.

2 TMZ 2019.

3 TMZ 2019.

and nod your head. Additional themes that West touches on in the ten other tracks are judgement, baptism, and the experience of new life.

The song “Everything We Need”, for example, deals with divine sufficiency post-conversion and God’s ability to provide. West says:

We began after the storm inside
Lay the land (ah), it’s just the morning light (oh, yeah)
Switch my, switch my attitude
I’m so, I’m so radical
All these people mad at dude
This for who it matter to
What if Eve made apple juice?
You gon’ do what Adam do?
Or say, ‘Baby, let’s put this back on the tree’ ’cause
We have everything we need.

The storm inside is the tension between the life before and the life after conversion. After conversion, there is a realization of newness of life, “morning light”, that elicits a change in attitude, and it is because of this change in attitude provoked by the Gospel, West opines, that people are mad at him. For West, it seems that his recommitment to Jesus is an opportunity for a fresh start, evidenced by the line inquiring about Eve making apple juice and the listener doing what Adam did.

West talks about the purifying experience of Christian baptism in the track titled “Water”. The lyrics are simple and the verses are terse. West says:

The storm may come
But we’ll get through it because of Your love
Either way, we crash like water
Your love’s water
Pure as water
We are water.

It is unclear whether West has a sacramental imagination. It is possible that this track reflects his experience of watching his children being baptized at Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, Armenia’s main cathedral.⁴ While Kanye

4 Parke 2019.

West is not Orthodox, the Kardashians have ties to Armenian Orthodox Christianity.

The song “Hands On”, featuring gospel legend Fred Hammond, is a unique track conceptually. Two minutes and 30 seconds into the track, Hammond makes a life-giving intervention in what is otherwise an exceptionally bland song. West’s verse sounds more appropriate for spoken word or slam poetry. Conceptually though, the song tells of West’s experience of the light of Jesus and the perceived Christian rejection of him and his renewed faith. West asks several times: “What have you been hearin’ from the Christians?” It seems that West is wrestling with having to navigate between two distinct spaces with distinct audiences, the gospel audience and his mainstream secular audience. I wonder if in his attempt to navigate this complicated space, lyrical and musical creativity is sacrificed for fear of alienating Christian or secular fans. West’s other projects birthed certain sounds, but in the end, this project does not push the boundaries musically or lyrically, and “Hands On” is an example of this failure. *Jesus Is King* did well commercially. It is West’s ninth consecutive number one album. It reached the top of the Billboard 200 charts and stayed on the Billboard 200 charts for sixteen weeks.⁵ In addition, it topped the gospel charts. Controversial statements notwithstanding, the project was arguably West’s second subpar album in a row. Like *Ye*, *Jesus Is King* is short and lacks the musical and lyrical force displayed in *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* or *College Dropout*.

The court of public opinion argued strongly about the project because of West’s relationship with Donald Trump as well as West’s comment about slavery being a choice.⁶ Many would not touch anything that he was involved in. Maybe all publicity is not good publicity.

With the reinvigoration of his faith commitments, West has aligned himself with a socially and politically conservative Protestant Evangelical wing within North American Christianity. Broadly speaking, this brand of Christianity tends to understand the Gospel a-politically and a-historically. The alliance between West and conservative Protestantism is reflected in the album to the degree that West fails to see or connect with the political and social implications of his embrace of the Gospel. To me, the lack of political and social reflection, as it relates to Jesus, is the biggest shortcoming of the project. But

5 Each week, the Billboard charts record the relative popularity of songs and albums in the United States and elsewhere.

6 Kaur 2018.

this shortcoming should not come as a surprise to listeners in light of West's previous actions and statements surrounding Donald Trump as well as slavery in the months leading up to the album's release.

Personally, I would pass on the album. West's comments about slavery and Donald Trump are problematic. Furthermore, I am a product of the Black church, and I prefer the old-school gospel sound popularized by the late great Mattie Moss Clark. And a good lyricist tells a story, but I am not sure of the story that West is trying to tell in *Jesus Is King*. The delays with its release and the changes to what songs were going to be on the project cause me to question whether *Jesus Is King* was rushed in order to take advantage of the mushrooming popularity of West's "Sunday Service" concerts, which debuted at Coachella.⁷ I can imagine *Jesus Is King* being desirable among the most devout and dedicated Kanye West fans, those who are committed to him as a musical innovator and personality. Arguably, there was a time when West could be included in conversations about the greatest rappers of all time. I can also see this project being popular in Christian communities that might make an appeal to the potential in West (think of West's platform and audience, an audience churches have trouble reaching) to help evangelize and win "souls for Jesus" and/or in communities that buy into a brand of Christian formation and practice that elevates the inner and the spiritual over against the material and the political. *Jesus Is King* is the wholesome theological hip-hop that America has so badly desired since the gangster rap era of the early to mid Nineties.

Bibliography

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7 *Jesus Is King* was scheduled to come out a year earlier, under the name *Yandhi*. Coachella is an annual arts and music festival in Indio, California. The first public Sunday Service was held on 21 April 2019 at Coachella, to celebrate Easter.

Discography

Christology: In Laymen's Terms (The Ambassador, Seventh Street Records/Cross Movement Records, US 1999).

The College Dropout (Kanye West, Roc-A-Fella Records, US 2004).

Jesus Is King (Kanye West, Def Jam Recordings, US 2019).

My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy (Kanye West, Roc-A-Fella Records, US 2010).

Please Excuse Me for Being Antisocial (Roddy Ricch, Atlantic/Dream Chasers Records, US 2019).

Ye (Kanye West, Def Jam Recordings, US 2018).