

CRITICAL BEATDOWN



THE WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS REVIEWS

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118
**Three
Times
Dope**

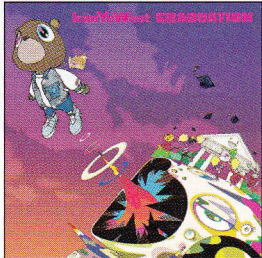
THE JUMP OFF

Kanye West

Graduation

ROC-A-FELLA/DEF JAM

S M L XL XXL



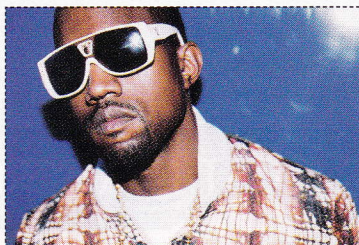
Let's start with the facts: This issue went to press in mid-September, before the SoundScan numbers for Kanye West's and 50 Cent's latest albums came in. So by

the time you read this, the "winner" of the 9/11 showdown will already have been declared.

Also, by the time he finishes this sentence,

Kanye will be disgusted by the letters lingering above the image of his album cover at the beginning of this review. He was expecting three letters (again), but he only receives two this go-round. But what's more important than sales and ratings is the music.

It's a given that West is one of this generation's greatest talents—a beat maverick responsible for countless genre-defining hits and a musical mastermind far beyond his years.



So, as expected, the Chicagoan's third offering, *Graduation*, is leaps and bounds beyond much of the material released in the "Hip-hop is dead"

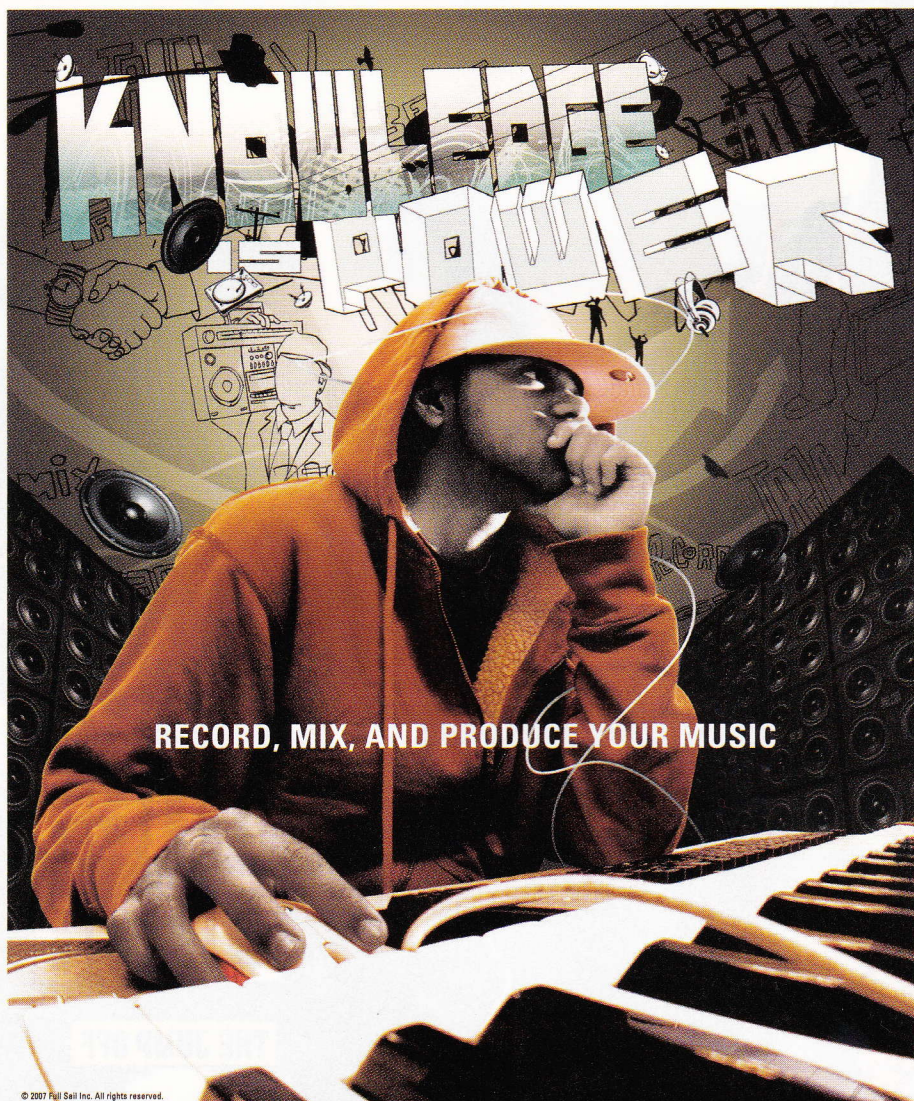
era, but the plateau 'Ye resides on has a population of one, making his true competition himself. With that in mind, going up against two classic albums is a tall task, even for Mr. West.

The ghost of Jay-Z frames West's third chapter, as Hova's voice is spliced into the closing refrain of the moody opener, "Good Morning," and the disc concludes with an open letter to Jigga dubbed "Big Brother." The premature tribute is an honest self-analysis that details Kanye's journey from bashful fan, to overlooked underling, to praised peer ("Big Brother saw me at the bottom of the totem/Now I'm on the top, and everybody on the scrotum"). Another reflective moment comes on the piano-driven "Everything I Am," where the new Preemo enlists the scratching services of the old Preemo to defend his flamboyancy and briefly discuss his hometown's growing murder rate, before announcing, "My 15 seconds up, but I got more to say/That's enough Mr. West, please, no more today."

Therein lies Kanye's critical conundrum. Unlike his previous efforts, which contained several songs layered in political ("Crack Music" and "Diamonds From Sierra Leone") and social ("All Falls Down" and "Heard 'Em Say") commentary, *Graduation* features only a peppering of message music. Instead, the Louis Vuitton Don offers up heavy doses of swagology. While the Lil Wayne-featured "Barry Bonds" thumps like Sasquatch's feet, it's an example of undeniable style over substance. Then there's the creepy Mos Def collabo "Drunk and Hot Girls," which comes off like a date rapist's lullaby, as Kanye slurs, "Please don't fall asleep, baby, we almost back... Oh, now you sober, how'd I know you'd say that?"

All is forgivable, however, for one overriding reason—the orchestration here is remarkable. *Graduation's* production arch runs the gamut from futuristic synth pop to bold brews of churning bass and bursts through the speakers like aural fireworks. Proof of this excellence of execution lies in inspirational anthems like the Daft Punk-samplin' "Stronger" and the looming "Can't Tell Me Nothing." Nevertheless, Kanye himself brings up the need for more mental darts on the uplifting "Champion," where he ironically quips, "Lauryn Hill said her heart was in Zion/I wish her heart still was in rhyming/'Cause who the kids gon' listen to, huh?/I guess me, if it isn't you."

After setting a precedent for kickin' the truth to the youth, 'Ye squanders the opportunity here by opting to make his third dissertation basic, resulting in more bark than bite. While the G.O.O.D. Music orator undoubtedly crafts a collection of great compositions, great, unfortunately, doesn't always equal classic. —ANSLAM SAMUEL



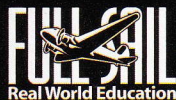
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