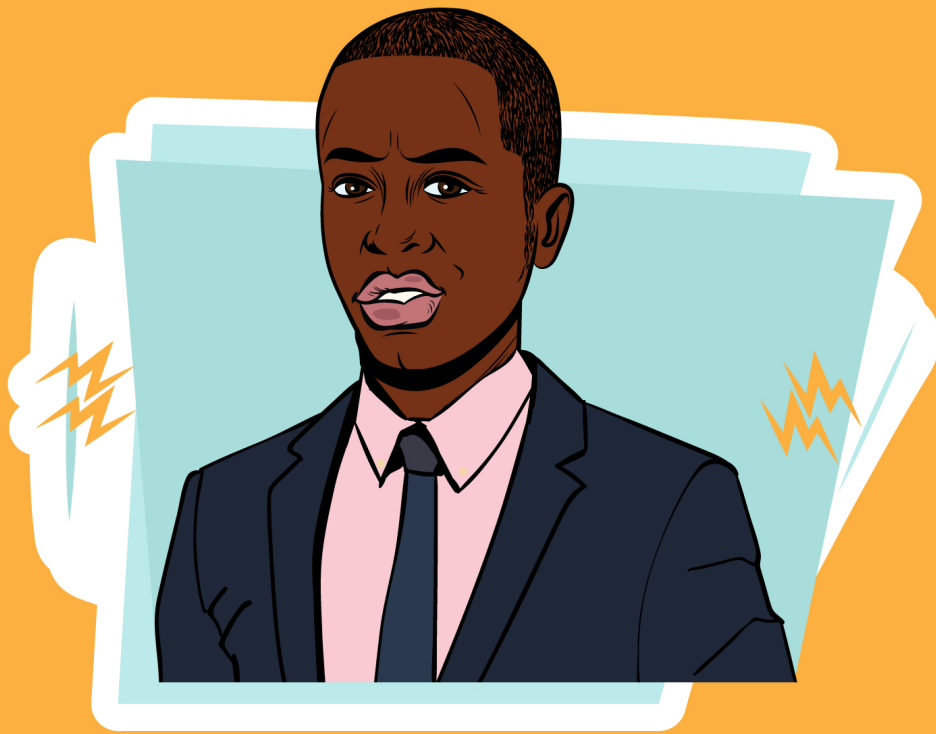


SUMMARY

JAY-Z MADE IN AMERICA

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON



Summary of “JAY-Z: Made in America” by Michael Eric Dyson

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Explore JAY-Z’s impact on culture, art, and music through this biography.

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Introduction

“What’s your favorite JAY-Z song?” has been an interview question in a variety of scenarios ranging from job interviews to Q&As with contestants on popular singing competitions like “The Voice.” That’s just how iconic JAY-Z is. But even though everyone knows his music, many people don’t know as much as they should about the man behind the music and that’s what Michael Eric Dyson wants to change. That’s why this book is devoted to exploring JAY-Z in his many underappreciated forms such as author, intellectual, and activist. Because if you thought he was just a talented rapper, it’s time to think again!

The Making of a Legend

Have you ever heard that old cliché that says “life is 10% what happens to you and 90% what you make of it?” Well, like most platitudes, it’s become trite for a reason: because it really is true. And nothing proves that truth more poignantly than the story of JAY-Z’s life. In many ways, his origin story is similar to that of many other young black men born in America. Because although we’d like to think we’ve evolved since the days of slavery and Jim Crow laws-- which claimed they kept black and white people “separate but equal,” but really just found new ways to discriminate against African Americans-- the truth is that we’re not quite as progressive as we think.

Thanks to generations of systematic discrimination, our nation’s system is still biased against black people in far too many ways and the far-reaching impact of slavery means that black people didn’t have the same opportunity to form generations of “old money” in the same way as their white counterparts, many of whom have a better start in life because they can draw on their family’s history of money or privilege or both. As a result of this intrinsic inequality, too many black kids grow up in homes where their parents are working multiple jobs as they struggle to make ends meet and this disadvantage often has a detrimental impact on their early lives. And JAY-Z was no different; he was one of four kids born to a single mom who was doing her best to provide for them all on her singular, limited income.

This disadvantage motivated a young JAY-Z to use his intelligence to help his mom and make money and he did so in the way that was most accessible to him at the time: by selling crack cocaine. This, of course, was a significant risk and JAY-Z was lucky in the fact that he avoided the fate of many of his young acquaintances who ended up in jail for doing exactly the same thing. And indeed, his story might have turned out very differently had it not been for one saving grace: his talent and obsession with music. This talent quite literally saved his life because he recognized that if he worked hard enough, it could take him places. So, he changed his focus and

poured all his energy into his music, pursuing it relentlessly until he crafted his first album.

But he didn't stop there-- his next challenge was finding someone who would offer him a record deal. But despite his determination, no one would support him. So, JAY-Z threw himself into beating one more hurdle by developing his very own record label and producing his first album by himself! Dyson asserts that this is the difference between a "blight hustler"-- someone who uses his combination of savvy and smarts to get by in a disadvantaged economy by selling contraband items like drugs-- and a "bright hustler"-- someone who uses those same skills to become a force for positive change.

And one of the best things about JAY-Z is his commitment to his roots. Rather than rejecting his former life or family in the face of national acclaim, he uses his past struggles to inform his current work and keep him humble, grateful, and determined to make the world a better place. Although there are multiple examples of this in JAY-Z's life that we could point to, perhaps one of the most heartwarming is his commitment to mentoring other young rappers. Because when artists like Drake and Lil Wayne were first starting out, JAY-Z recognized that they were in the exact same place he had been years ago and he used his position of influence to support and encourage other talented black men.

Making Your Message Accessible

As anyone who's ever listened to music knows, it can be tough to create hits that everybody wants to dance to that also have something important to say. That's because, unfortunately, well-crafted music with valuable messages about life and politics rarely make it to the list of Top 50 hits. This forces a number of artists to choose between remaining authentic and "selling out" in order to achieve fame. But JAY-Z somehow managed to do both! He accomplished this by deciding early on in his career that he wanted to create music people would enjoy and he wanted to connect with as many people as possible.

So, in order to achieve this goal, he decided to start with a baseline of party tracks that made people want to dance and establish himself this way first. But once he'd secured his reputation as an artist people liked, he knew he had given himself room to experiment and slip songs with messages that mattered in between the party hits. This strategy successfully gave him the opportunity to reach a wide variety of people and create music that stayed true to his values-- and he's only gotten better and better at it with time. For example, although it's hardly a feel-good dance tune, pretty much everybody is familiar with his song "Minority Report" which documents the treatment of the African American population in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and attacks our system's habit of privileging white lives. Similarly, one of his early hits "Young, Gifted, Black" investigates the struggle of succeeding in a culture that prioritizes white talent.

Rappers Are Poets Too

Have you ever noticed how gate-keeping and elitist ideology shape our education system? Sadly, it's the kind of logic that prioritizes what's considered "high literature" (think Shakespeare, Dickens, Keats) and classical music (Mozart, Beethoven, etc.) over other works that might be equally valid even if they're not accepted in the historically "acceptable" canon. This is precisely the attitude that keeps rappers from being considered as poets and discourages analyzing their lyrics alongside those of classical poets. But that bias needs to change and no artist provides a greater case for that than JAY-Z!

Because if you take a closer look at his lyrics, you'll realize the genuine intelligence and artistry that went into shaping them. You might notice, for example, that he uses metaphors which are every bit as poetic and valid as those of Homer and that his rhymes and wordplay ought not be dismissed as slang; instead, they're characterized by sharp political observations which are delivered in a culturally relatable way. And if that doesn't strike you as impressive enough, what about the fact that he not only spends hours perfecting his lyrics in his head, he never writes down any of them! The sheer intelligence and mental fortitude alone ought to earn him some respect from his detractors.

And in fact, his practices take on an even more poignant significance when you consider that he's actually continuing a long-standing African American tradition of oral storytelling. Because many black people were historically deprived of the right to read and write, they had no other method of conveying their stories, songs, and recipes to one another and thus, a lifetime of complex and heartfelt poetry was passed from generation to generation without ever being written on a page. So, with this in mind, we can consider that not only is JAY-Z a valid and talented artist, his practices have deep sociocultural significance as well.

One such example of his talent can be found in a line from his song “Public Service Announcement” in which he sings, “flyer than a piece of paper bearin’ my name.” Although it might sound like nothing more than casual slang, devoid of anything beyond surface meaning, in reality, it’s a complex metaphor carrying a variety of themes. For one thing, the paper flyers that promote shows are highly significant in hip-hop culture because in the early ‘70s, this visual artistry defined the budding genre’s aesthetic. So, on one level, JAY-Z is paying homage to the roots of his music and the artists who have come before him.

But the term “flyer” also reaches back through the ages, invoking the reverence of flying away and this concept’s role in African American culture during a time when slaves dreamed of being free like birds, able to soar above the plantations that imprisoned them. And lastly, it moves forward to connect with contemporary audiences by invoking the modern connotation of the word “fly” which means to look cool. As you can see from this brief analysis, lyrics that can incorporate three different meanings and generations in one line are clearly nothing more than pure artistry!

Artist and Activist

Culture cycles through a wide variety of fads and in our day and age, being kind is one of them. Whether it's by spreading love and acceptances through movements like body positivity or devoting yourself to a social justice cause, it's cool to be kind right now. And while kindness is a fantastic fad to have, it's unfortunate that many people don't "put their money where their mouth is." Instead, in keeping with their overall tendency to follow the masses in whatever the latest craze may be, many people-- celebrities included-- only make a display of kindness because it's "cool," pretending to care about endangered sea turtles or impoverished children when they're primarily concerned with their efforts getting likes on Instagram.

But that's not JAY-Z. Instead, he stands out from the crowd by practicing what he preaches in his lyrics through a genuine and tangible commitment to social justice. In this respect, he sets an example for other celebrities by using his power and influence to connect with fans through social media and draw their attention to the causes that matter to him. And he's continued to use his talent for the written word to make people sit up and take notice by writing opinion pieces for major publications like the New York Times to raise awareness about racial profiling discrimination in the criminal justice system!

These examples already set him apart from many who fail to use their platforms to promote change, but JAY-Z continually takes his commitment to excellence one step further by achieving tangible results for good. For where many are content to simply spread their ideas without actually getting involved with a cause, JAY-Z isn't content to pay lip service to the causes that matter to him. Instead, he's channeled his passion for criminal justice reform into concrete results for young black people who have been unjustly profiled. That's why he founded the Shawn Carter scholarship for black youth who have been incarcerated at one time or another and who now want to attend college. This initiative directly attacks one of the most

insidious inequalities at play in our criminal justice system because many teens who pass through American correctional facilities are simply spat out onto the streets years later with no money and even fewer resources available for improving their lives.

And in addition to his work with this scholarship, he has also funded and produced a documentary dedicated to raising awareness about the story of Kalief Brown. If that name isn't familiar to you, Kalief Brown was a black teenager who was held without a trial at Rikers Island for three years after he was accused of taking a backpack. Brown could not afford bail and so he was remanded for over one thousand days. During those three years of incarceration, Brown spent almost two of them in solitary confinement. He was only sixteen years old. Although the devastating effects of solitary confinement are well documented, the United States prison system has not yet discontinued this treatment as a form of punishment. But as barbaric as solitary confinement is for an adult, its effects on a young life can be even more horrific, as Kalief's story shows only too well.

After he was finally released from prison, he struggled with debilitating mental health problems, even though he had no history of depression or any other form of mental illness prior to his incarceration. Although he was determined to continue his education (which had been so brutally disrupted), the confined spaces of his community college classroom triggered panic attacks that caused him great distress. And after years of systematic abuse at the hands of guards and other prisoners alike, he was left jumpy and paranoid, even throwing out his new TV because he worried it was "watching him." Tragically, one day, it all got to be too much and Kalief made the decision to end his life.

No teenager should ever be forced to deal with that kind of trauma when it is completely preventable. And certainly, no young life should end in that way. JAY-Z recognizes that and so he used his significant resources and creativity to highlight the abuse Kalief suffered and craft a documentary that demands criminal justice reform. Combined with his other forays into philanthropy like providing housing for people affected by Hurricane

Katrina or securing attorneys for arrested members of the Black Lives Matter movement, it's readily apparent that JAY-Z is a powerful force for good who has left an indelible impact on our culture.

Final Summary

Gatekeeping and elitist attitudes often bar rappers from being critically analyzed as artists and activists in our society. But fortunately, our new generation of scholars-- which includes authors like Dyson-- are campaigning to change that. By conducting a critical analysis of JAY-Z and his contributions to culture, music, and politics, Dyson advocates for a holistic representation of the artist, one that encourages readers to appreciate him for his varied talents and impacts.

From this portrayal, we can see that JAY-Z is far more than “just a rapper.” He’s a gifted and talented man who perfected the art of the hustle and used his combination of determination and talent to forge a place for himself and for other black artists. In addition to crafting multi-layered lyrics and complex rhymes, JAY-Z has maintained a commitment to the life and people who shaped him and used his position of power and influence to advocate for social justice and black rights.



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