

Shawn Corey
Carter, a.k.a. Jay-Z,
London, 2001



PERFORMER

JAY-Z

THE ICON AND GLOBAL MUSIC SUPERSTAR HAS STAKED HIS CLAIM IN UNPRECEDENTED SPACES FOR A HIP-HOP MC.

BY JASON KING

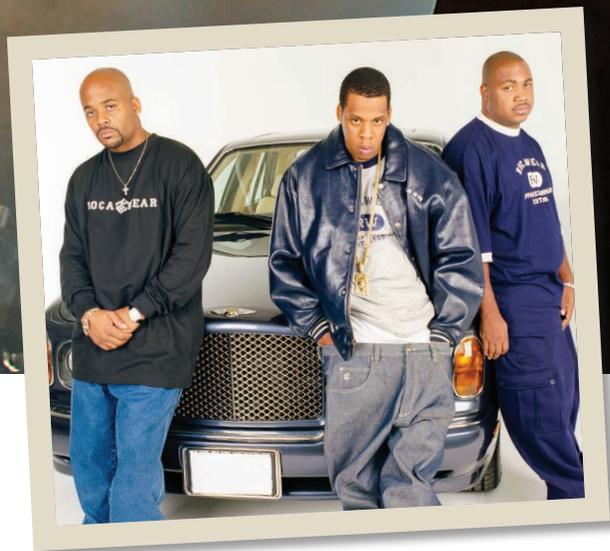
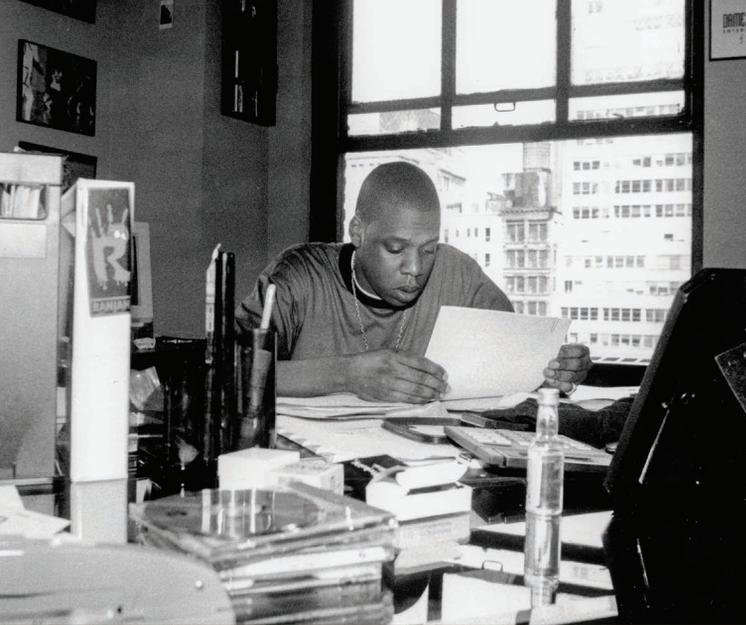
The American Dream has always been a mirage for all but the elite. It's especially inaccessible to those of us who are, as Curtis Mayfield once sang, darker than blue. From chattel slavery to Jim Crow to the prison industrial complex to gang warfare and other horrors, the game has long seemed rigged against Black people. Whether it's the noose around our neck, or the knee pressed against it, it seems that Black folks ain't supposed to die a natural death or make it out of here with our sanity intact. That's especially true if the zip code where we live, or where we are born, is in the 'hood. The nation's enduring tragicomedy of systemic racism and exclusion is what makes Jay-Z's rags-to-riches story both a confirmation and repudiation of the American Dream mythology.

Through talent, savvy, and sheer will, Jay-Z emerged out of a life of early poverty and crime to become one of the most commercially successful rappers of all time. He's scored more Number One albums than Elvis and Bruce Springsteen; only the Beatles amassed more. Beyond music, Jay-Z has pushed the envelope of Black achievement to its outer limits: He's a shrewd entrepreneur, philanthropist, author, activist, and confrere of former President Obama. On his way to the top, Jay-Z has been branded (and has branded himself) Young Hov, Jay-Hova, and Hova – names that suggest he's rap's Jehovah or messiah. Jay-Z is quick to clarify that those nicknames are connected to his talent, not his attempt to couch himself as God. But his willingness to claim his

own cosmic value in the face of centuries of establishment programming that has tried to suggest Black lives don't matter serves a deeper purpose: It's provided millions of people with a powerful lesson in the power of radical self-worth and self-determination.

Shawn Corey Carter was born on December 4, 1969 – the same historic day that Fred Hampton and Mark Clark of the Black Panther Party were shot and killed by police during a Chicago raid. Jay-Z grew up poor, abandoned by his father, and raised by his mother, Gloria, alongside his three siblings. He was raised in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, at the Marcy Houses – housing projects (near the J and Z subway lines, no joke) that he once likened to “huge islands built mostly in the middle of nowhere, designed to warehouse lives.” Carter switched high schools but never graduated; he claims to have shot his older brother in the shoulder for cribbing his jewelry; he sold crack cocaine to survive; and he was himself shot at multiple times. Carter might have been a statistic if it wasn't for his superior ability to compose and perform attention-getting rhymes. He generated early underground exposure by appearing on cuts by his mentor Jaz-O, with acts like Big L, and on Big Daddy Kane's “Show & Prove” (1994).

Jay independently sold tapes from his car, and he and business partners Damon Dash and Kareem Burke capitalized on their entrepreneurial savvy to launch independent label Roc-A-Fella Records in 1995. Jay-Z entered a distribution deal with Priority Records, and his debut, *Reasonable Doubt*, dropped in 1996. Featuring skillful



production by the likes of DJ Premier and Clark Kent, the album delivered four singles: "Dead Presidents," "Ain't No Nigga," "Can't Knock the Hustle," and "Feelin' It." As a lyricist, Jay-Z proved himself to be a cinematic storyteller capable of vivid, gritty narratives of hustling, betrayal, and revenge – like some sort of hip-hop answer to Peckinpah or Scorsese. *Reasonable Doubt* has brazen, hyper-literate wordplay to spare. In "Can I Live," Jay-Z wittily rhymed: "I stepped it up another

level, meditated like a Buddhist / Recruited lieutenants with ludicrous dreams of gettin' cream / 'Let's do this,' it gets tedious / So I keep one eye open like CBS – you see me stressed, right?"

Jay-Z's flow has always been impeccable, confident, and dexterous, and his Brooklynese intonation is clear, nasal, and smooth as Teflon. His rapping is conversational but clinically nonchalant. He sounds cocky and exacting – above the fray and yet full in it, too. Few rappers have ever summoned as much swaggering cool. While other rappers had to use their imagination to write lyrics conjuring up images of drug dealing and street crime, Jay-Z could draw from real-life experience. "It wasn't even like I was makin' music," Jay-Z told *Rolling Stone*

PREVIOUS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Entrepreneur in training, 1996; with his mother, Gloria Carter (right), and grandmother, 2001; in the spotlight, 2007; with Roc-A-Fella partners Damon Dash (left) and Kareem "Biggs" Burke, 1999. THIS PAGE: Onstage during the Black Album Tour, Palladium, Köln, Germany, 2003.



about making *Reasonable Doubt*. “The studio was like a psychiatrist’s couch for me.”

Jay-Z’s followup, *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1* (1997), went to Number Three on the *Billboard* chart; *Vol. 2 . . . Hard Knock Life* (1998) debuted at Number One, stayed there for five weeks, and won the 1999 Grammy for Rap Album. Produced by The 45 King, its sophomore single, “Hard Knock Life (Ghetto Anthem),” rocked a sample from the 1977 Broadway musical cast of *Annie*. A surreal juxtaposition of worlds in collision, the track remains one of hip-hop’s most creative deployments of a sample. Jay-Z’s lyrics turn the song into an exuberant anthem for anyone who’s ever been dispossessed.

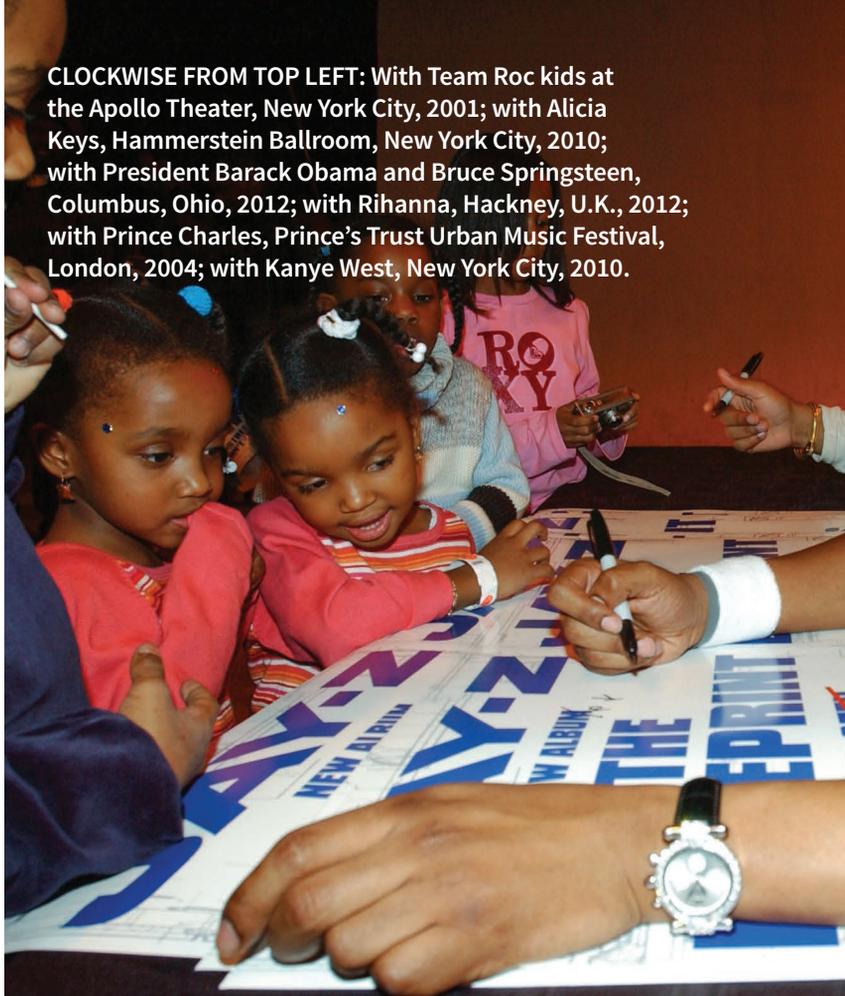
Jay-Z has long publicized his technical proficiency to freestyle complex rhymes in the recording studio without having to write them down. “What I have is a gift from God,” he’s said. “It can’t be explained.” But no need to exclusively characterize Jay-Z’s gifts as mystery or magic, nor to feed the stereotype of Black performance as pure feeling removed from skill or intellect. Jay-Z’s genius is the result of years of hard work and craft, and scientific study of his primary hip-hop influences like Rakim and Big Daddy Kane. Jay-Z’s masterful, synaptic rhymes are part of an intellectual tradition (and a literary one) as much as they are part of an emotional or metaphysical one. In fact, few rappers have ever seemed more deliberate and precise, more in control of their craft, of their body, of their mind.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Jay-Z became a central figure in what writer Kelefa Sanneh called the rise of “corporate rap.” “Many rappers have made money, and lots of it,” Sanneh expounded, “but none have rapped so eloquently about making money, or about the lure of wealth and ambition. Jay-Z has succeeded by treating hip-hop above all as a corporate enterprise, by embracing ruthless professionalism as his guiding aesthetic.” Even the name of Jay-Z’s record label, Roc-A-Fella, was a cheeky twist on acquisitive capitalism.

From 1996 to 2001, Jay-Z prolifically released five platinum or multiplatinum albums in the span of just five years, including *Volume 3 . . . Life and Times of S. Carter* (1999) and *The Dynasty: Roc La Familia* (2000). On tunes like “Big Pimpin’,” Jay-Z embraced bling materialism and a ghetto-fabulous, playa-tycoon lifestyle celebrating champagne, diamonds, and cars. But what has always given Jay-Z’s hip-hop its sonic currency is his ability to crest over a wide range of state-of-the-art beats, from the sample-based joints of DJ Premier and Kanye West, to the glossy club bangers of producers like Timbaland, the Neptunes, and Swizz Beats. In 2001, *The Blueprint*, yielding singles like “Izzo (H.O.V.A)” and “Song Cry,” topped the charts and critics’ lists. Jay-Z’s sinewy, back-to-basics rhymes and *The Blueprint*’s airtight production created a confident hip-hop classic that inadvertently came to symbolize New York City’s resilient spirit following 9/11. It also helped cement Jay-Z’s reputation as an album-oriented artist, as Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, and Marvin Gaye were in the sixties and seventies.

Jay-Z followed *The Blueprint* with more winning releases, including *The Blueprint 2: The Gift & the Curse* (2002), *The Black Album* (2003), *Kingdom Come* (2006), *American Gangster* (2007), and *The Blueprint 3* (2009), which became Jay-Z’s eleventh Number One album, breaking the record he’d tied with Elvis. Given Jay-Z’s enduring status as a live concert juggernaut act and subsequent releases like *Watch the Throne* (2011) with Kanye West and *Magna Carta . . . Holy Grail* (2013), Jay-Z helped turn hip-hop into the billion-dollar business it is today. Through his diverse

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: With Team Roc kids at the Apollo Theater, New York City, 2001; with Alicia Keys, Hammerstein Ballroom, New York City, 2010; with President Barack Obama and Bruce Springsteen, Columbus, Ohio, 2012; with Rihanna, Hackney, U.K., 2012; with Prince Charles, Prince’s Trust Urban Music Festival, London, 2004; with Kanye West, New York City, 2010.



SELECTED DIS@GRAPHY



Reasonable Doubt
1996
(Roc-A-Fella)



In My Lifetime, Vol. 1
1997
(Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam)



Vol. 2 . . . Hard Knock Life 1998
(Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam)



The Blueprint
2001
(Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam)



Watch the Throne
2011
(Roc-A-Fella)



4:44
2017
(Roc Nation, UMG)





“

JAY-Z'S
GENIUS IS
THE RESULT
OF YEARS
OF HARD
WORK AND
CRAFT, AND
SCIENTIFIC
STUDY
OF HIS
PRIMARY
HIP-HOP
INFLUENCES.

”

Jay-Z and Beyoncé,
onstage at the BET
Awards, 2006





collaborations, hip-hop crossed over and became mainstream pop music: Those collabs include hip-hop figures like Missy Elliott and DMX; pop soul singers Mariah Carey and Alicia Keys; bhangra performer Panjabi MC on “Beware”; and rockers Linkin Park. Jay-Z appeared in several films, and, like Frank Sinatra in the sixties, he announced his early retirement from the music business at the height of his success in 2003. And, like Sinatra, Jay-Z’s retirement predictably didn’t last long. In 2009, Jay-Z struck gold with the anthemic single “Empire State of Mind” featuring Alicia Keys. Buoyed by lyrics celebrating New York’s plucky spirit, “Empire State of Mind” became a glowing tribute to the pluckiness of his embattled city – and the nation – in the aftermath of 9/11 and the global financial crisis of 2008.

Jay-Z also transformed himself into a branding cash cow with a seemingly endless list of partnerships and ventures. From 2004 to 2008, he served as president of Def Jam Records, where he helped launch the careers of superstars like Rihanna (with whom he also performed the global smash “Umbrella”). He became an owner of a nightclub franchise and signed branding and investment deals with companies including Carol’s Daughter, Reebok, Budweiser, Duracell, and Samsung. He became a co-owner of the New Jersey Nets, a published author, a video game entrepreneur, founder of management company and label Roc Nation, founder of sports agency Roc Nation Sports, and a champagne brand owner, among other endeavors. He also pursued philanthropy, including his launch of the Shawn Carter Foundation, focused on helping low-income and disenfranchised students to pursue college education by offering grants and awards. Jay-Z even owned his own mainstream streaming service, Tidal. True to his own lyrics – “I’m not a businessman; I’m a business, man!” – he has fully embraced the controversial notion that corporate capitalism can be a rewarding path to personal liberation.

At age 52, Jay-Z is one of the few veteran hip-hop artists who continue to sell out stadium venues. Part of the credit for his sustained career goes to his better half: In 2008, he married Beyoncé Knowles. From their blazing-hot 2003 single “Crazy in Love” to *Everything Is Love* (2018), their full-album collaboration as the Carters, as well as their global world tours, Beyoncé and Jay have taken the concept of husband-and-wife musical collaboration further than any other couple in recent musical history – and they’ve redefined the Black power couple along the way. Now a father of three, Jay-Z is evolving as an artist, demonstrating more maturity, empathy, and emotional vulnerability. His most recent album, *4:44* (2017), brought introspective lyrics on songs like “Smile,” featuring his mother, and intimations of a searing social conscience on the single “The Story of O.J.”

Jay-Z’s legacy is everywhere, particularly in the work of hip-hop storytellers like Kendrick Lamar and Rapsody. By doing it his way, Jay-Z has come to embody success itself, the very possibilities for Black achievement under the existing terms of capitalism. An American icon and global music superstar, Jay-Z has created his own blueprint and staked his claim in unprecedented spaces for a hip-hop MC – from starting his own concert festival, Made in America, to visits to the Obama White House. In Jay-Z’s vision of the American Dream, Black folks have no glass ceilings and anything is possible. And there’s seemingly no stopping Jay-Z’s empire-building state of mind. Given his long history of winning, it seems the best is yet to come.