



Hip-Hop album covers and their content

A semiotic analysis on some of Hip-Hop music's most beloved and controversial album covers and its content.

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<p>Sammandrag:</p> <p>Hip-hop är idag den största genren som folk lyssnar och konsumerar mest utav. Valen utav skivomslag är bland de sista och mest avgörande stegen en artist eller grupp måste göra. Det finns olika anledningar till varför vissa har mer kontroversiella eller visuellt tillgivande omslag och som även slutligen får både fansen utav musiken och konsumenterna att minnas ett specifikt album och dess omslag. Att ha ett bra skivomslag är något som kommer slutligen öka mer diskussion kring albumet och dess tema men även ge en sammankopplande och visuell upplevelse för det specifika albumet. Som underlag för denna analys används albumomslagen som grund, men även berättelser och intervjuer med fotografer, designers och artisternas egna synpunkter och inspirationer. Syftet med arbete är att förstå relevansen och varför dessa skivomslag valdes samt hur de relaterar till lyriken och temat kring hela albumet.</p>	
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<p>Abstract:</p> <p>Hip-hop is today the biggest genre that people listen to and consume. The choice of album cover is one of the last things that an artist and a group must do. There are multiple reasons as to why some covers are considered more controversial or visually striking and that gets both fans and the public to remember a specific album and its cover artwork. Having a great album cover is something that will in the end create more open dialogue and discussion surrounding the album and its theme or even multiple themes, but also gives a more sense of connection and visual experience for that particular album. As a basis for this analysis we are going to take a look at some specific album covers and its content and have that as a core throughout the thesis, but also having commentaries and thoughts from the photographers, designers and the artists themselves and their opinions and inspirations. The purpose of this Thesis is to understand and find out why these particular images or designs were chosen and finding the relevancy with the album covers and its lyrics and its content.</p>	
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2 FOREWORD

I've always had an eye for great design and visual storytelling. Combining that with my love and interest for Hip-hop music and its culture, I thought this would be a great way for me to express, analyze and find out more about these artists that I've specifically chosen for this Thesis. Album covers has had its controversies across all genres, for example, Ryan Moore mentions in his book "Sells like Teen Spirit, Music, Youth Culture and Social Crisis" (Moore, 2009). about Iron Maiden's mascot Eddie :

Eddie appeared against a background of urban slums on early album covers and singles, and he even became a subject of controversy when he was depicted knifing prime minister Margaret Thatcher on the cover of Iron Maiden's second single, "Sanctuary." So although Iron Maiden's music was always distinguishable as heavy metal, its imagery of urban decay, political violence, and "wasted youth" was initially quite similar to punk's depiction of social chaos.

The relevancy between Hip-hop album covers and its lyrics has always been there and it's being reflected and inspired by social conflicts and especially what's going in the U.S. society and throughout its history.

The development of the musical genre throughout the years varies immensely sonically, visually, within fashion, arts and creativity. That's what makes Hip-Hop in general very interesting to me as it never ceases to stop. There's always something to explore and finding different and new ways to express yourself.

3 INTRODUCTION

Hip-hop moves in different phases. From the early days of 1980's Hip-hop till today, in 2018. During the 1980's it was a lot about the lifestyle of Hip-hop culture, and moving into 1990's with more darker and grimier lyrics about living as a minority and in poverty, into early 2000's where Gangster Rap dominated the mainstream radio and music channels with their lyrics about cars, money, clothes, women, guns and drugs.

It has surpassed every other genre to becoming the most popular musical genre. Its history is deeply rooted within U.S history surrounding Afro-Americans struggle, success and comes from a culture of expression and lifestyle from a minority. While some possess the true talent and art form of expression, poetry, building visual images within your imagination while listening to their music, they also put the same amount of energy down to the final product which will end up in your hands. In an age of where music gets easily consumed and forgotten about the next day, having a striking design or album cover is one way of having a grip of relevancy but also opens dialogues between the consumers regardless what one or the other might think or say.

Nowadays the genre is so widely accessible from every corner of the world that it's even hard to pinpoint where Hip-hop is musically right now. No more does it matter where you're from, your skin color, your background history. As long as there is something for the listeners to grasp and hold on and relate to.

Album covers in Hip-hop has also changed throughout the decades. From Public Enemies famous photo when they're standing behind prison bars in "It Takes a Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back", to one of Hip-hop culture most beloved album and also regarded as the best hip-hop album of all time, Nas's "Illmatic". Where a photo of a 7-year old young Nas (Nasir Jones) is standing in front of his hometown area of Queens, New York, to Kendrick Lamar having a photo of himself as a baby surrounded by his two uncles, his grandpa, gang signs, beer bottles and who were at the time gangsters on "Good Kid M.A.A.D City" album cover.

In this Thesis I will take a look at the history, inspiration, visual and design properties of 3 significant Hip-hop albums that I love, but that also had a huge impact sonically and brought a lot of attention not only from the Hip-hop community but mainstream news media outlets for its content.

I'll start with The Roots "Things Fall Apart" album from 1999. Moving a few years later into 50 Cent's "Get Rich or Die Tryin'" and ending up with Kendrick Lamar's "To Pimp a Butterfly" from 2015.

3.1 Purpose and Questions

The purpose with this Thesis is to get a deeper sense of understanding and knowledge on why these three particular album covers were chosen and their history. As a student of graphic design, it's important for me on a daily basis to look for trends, colors, patterns, fonts and images that are being used in all platforms and not only in music even though it's a burning passion of mine. Combining my love for music and especially Hip-Hop culture, I want to combine these two and seek out more knowledge and learn more down the road as I study these album covers I've chosen for this Thesis.

As for my own growth not only professionally but also as a follower of Hip-Hop culture and it's musical expansion and diversity, I take into consideration that this is something that will expand my knowledge even more and get a better understanding of the usage of images and graphic design within the aesthetics of album covers and design in general, as that is the first thing our eyes catches on to. Having the deeper understanding of how colors, images, subjects within the image itself and such makes us feel and think, is a very important factor for both professionals and students within graphic design.

It's also important that we consider the impact these albums had on the culture of hip-hop and society.

I want to learn more about album covers and the design of covers. For instance: what does an album cover signify, for the designer or/and consumer? And, is there for example a relationship between the visual design, lyrics and the society in which the cover is created?

So my research questions are:

-How are hip hop album covers designed?

-What do they signify for the consumer of them?

- Is there a relationship between society and the visual design. And if there is how does a) the designer and b) society articulate/present/ understand/describe this relationship?

In these albums we find topics and themes in areas such as self-hatred, love, violence, politics, depression and success. Each and every one is from a different era and time in Hip-hop culture and also have a very strong relationship with current U.S politics and happenings during their each individual time frame.

It's important to understand how they resonate within their own time of release.

4 NARROWING IT DOWN

Hip-Hop has a lot of great album covers with different themes in its lyrics and content. Looking down on a 30 – 40 years of history within the genre, it's very hard to narrow it down to specific albums.

I've chosen these 3 particular albums for a few reasons. One of them being that these albums affected me in personal ways and they've had significant impact on the culture. They also touch upon different topics and themes and sonically sound different from each other, which makes the difference between these albums interesting and easier to digest. Secondly, they are also very known for their choice of album cover.

5 METHOD

My choice of method is by analyzing the covers from a visual perspective and their choice of colors, imagery etc. From there I will continue diving deep into the lyrics and finding connections between the album cover and its lyrics and themes.

To understand how we will utilize this to the fullest, I have chosen to tie in Image Analysis with Semiotic Analysis as well.

Semiology aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all of these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification" (Barthes, 1964)

Inspired by Richards Shustermans point of view and approach in his book “ The Fine Art of Rap “, I will attempt to dive even deeper into the lyrics and visual designs of the album covers and seek the relation to its content, lyrics and cultural history.

6 SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

Semiotic Analysis has its foundation in how we interpreted signs in different shapes and forms. Such as colors, textures and how the composition of a certain image is. It's a popular way to analyze popular culture and mainstream imagery.

To get a better focus point I have put these in terms below and their meaning with the help of Linnaeus University's theories and explanations.

Den moderna analysen har sin grund i semiotiken, dvs. läran om hur vi tyder och tolkar tecken av olika slag. När vi omsätter detta till bilder använder vi oss av två olika nivåer, det plastiska och det ikoniska skiktet.

In English

The modern analysis has its foundation in the semiotic, i.e. the learning of how we perceive and interpret signs in various shapes. When we turn this into imagery, we use two different type of layers, the Plastic and the Iconic Layer.

(Linnéuniversitetet, Unknown date)

- Plastic Layer – The essence of an image shape and color. How shapes, textures and colors are built up upon and how these affect our interpretation of the image itself.
- Iconic Layer – How we initially interpreted the content of an image. How it's parts are individually as well as how it affects us.

I will also assume the perspective of a consumer, as I am myself one as well, to not only see but listen as well to the albums and break it down into pieces which I then will analyze thoroughly.

To get the right amount of differences and information is why I decided to go with these 3 albums as they each represent a different time and era in Hip-hop culture and its history. After that I will finalize the results and try to see what makes these album

covers so great and how do they work in conjunction with the lyrics, but also what made them great in the beginning.

7 LITERATURE AND DIGITAL SOURCES

As music and Hip-Hop in itself is an ever expanding musical genre, I found it very hard to find any good and reliable literature source that had a good input and terminology surrounding the usage of images and graphic design within music in general and especially Hip-Hop.

When it comes to literature sources, I found that Richard Shusterman's book "The Fine Art of Rap" is a great overall explanation and look into the art form of Rap and Hip-Hop culture. It goes behind the art of sampling, lyrics. Poetry and how its status as one of the fastest growing genre of popular music, is still drowned under a flood of abusive critique from cultural elite and general public. (Shusterman, 1991)

Semiotic studies and analyses have a wider perspective of the usage of images, colors and its content. That is why I've chosen to rely more on electronic sources that has information surrounding Semiotics. This type of analysis and studying is always expanding and I felt that the literature sources are out dated and did not provide the necessary information or relevancy for my topic that I've chosen for this Thesis.

Digital sources are mainly hip-hop culture based networks and media outlets such as Complex, as they have a big impact on culture today with their articles, news, multiple YouTube channels and overall understanding, knowledge and appreciation for hip-hop culture.

8 MATERIAL

The material will be mostly taken from the core of the album lyrics and its content. To get a deeper understanding and wider perspective I will also have insight and commentary taken from articles and interviews around the web with the photographers,

designers and artists themselves about these album covers. Some are written while others will be based on videos uploaded on to YouTube.

For example, Mass Appeal, which is a New York-based Hip-hop related media and content company has a video on YouTube called ‘ ‘ Kendrick Lamar Explains ‘To Pimp a Butterfly ‘Album Artwork ‘ ‘.

I rely mostly on Hip-hop related sites as I see these as the most valid and reliable sources of material and insight.

9 CENTRAL CONCEPTS

Bars – The length of a verse and its content. One sentence usually counts as 1 bar.

Bars is something that people also want to hear. If you can deliver great lyrics and bars it will strengthen the music itself and showcases of how good of a rapper you are.

Beat / Beats – The music itself.

To get a sense of depth in the music we also need to have great beats that’s both great and sounds good and makes us feel a certain way. Even though it can be subjective to how a listener might perceive a beat as either good or bad, it’s important for us to understand the quality and cohesiveness sonically.

Emcee / MC – A term used for the one who’s rapping over a beat.

Emcee or MC stands for Master of Ceremonies and he or she is the one who can not only write great lyrics but also knows how to make a great show when performing live and get the crowd going. This term is mostly used with rappers who has released great albums, been doing music for a long time and also showcased their lyrical skills and done great live performances.

Flow – The way an Emcee is rhyming over the beat in a skillful way.

When talking about how good or bad someone’s flow is, it’s usually regarding a rapper’s ability to have a rhythmic, using complex pattern rhyme schemes and having the ability of skillful delivery when it comes to vocals.

10 HIP-HOP IN GENERAL

Last year, 2017, was the 44th birthday of Hip-Hop culture and its movement. Going back to South Bronx in New York City in the 1970s, it was DJ Kool Herc who started the whole movement. Perceived as an expression of urban youth with its fashion, art, dance and music, it soon became a tool of celebration but was also used during protests and in times of inequality. (Stolworthy, 2017)

It wasn’t until the early 1990’s that Hip-Hop and its culture became a pop culture phenomenon and from that raised artists such as Tupac, Nas, Jay-Z, Biggie, Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg. Going through the 90’s into early 2000 and forward, the genre reached even more commercial success and from that we got some of the biggest names in modern times in Hip-Hop such as Kanye West and The Neptunes (Pharrell Williams & Chad Hugo).

(Brooklyn Radio, Unknown date)

11 THE ROOTS – THINGS FALL APART

The legendary Roots Crew, as The Tonight Show host Jimmy Fallon likes to call them, released an album in 1999 which many fans consider their Magnum Opus. While the

average viewer might only know about The Roots because of their association with being the House band at The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon, they had already been doing music and releasing albums for the past 15 years before joining The Tonight Show around 2009. The name ‘‘ Things Fall Apart ‘‘ is taken from Chinua Achebe’s novel of the same name.

4 years later, in 2013, 14 years later after its initial release back in 1999, ‘‘ Things Fall Apart ‘‘ was certified Platinum with 1,000,000 sold albums. (Complex, 2013)

With Things Fall Apart, The Roots had opened a new path in their career and the song ‘‘ You Got Me ‘‘ won a Grammy in 2000 for Best Rap Performance By a Duo or Group and went head to head against Eminem for who would take home the Best Rap Album Grammy. All though Eminem’s ‘‘ The Slim Shady LP’’ took home that award, The Roots won for their newfound appeal and staying true to their sound which fit the masses. (The Couch Sessions, 2016)

Marcus J. Moore mentioned this on his article on Pitchfork ‘‘ *Pitchfork Sunday Review: The Roots – Things Fall Apart* ‘‘ (Pitchfork, 2016)

Looking back on it now, this record feels like both a love letter and a fond farewell to the Roots’ early days, acknowledging that they needed to evolve to stay relevant. And some of the album’s continued relevance is painful. Its closing poem, ‘‘The Return to Innocence Lost,’’ details the fate of a young man seemingly doomed to fail since birth. He dies tragically, leaving nothing but thoughts of a life that could’ve been. Nowadays, black men are dying at the hands of police with alarming frequency, and we’re left to mourn the dead in hashtags and shared articles, wondering what’s next—or who’s next—in this seemingly endless war. Things Fall Apart imparts a similar tone, even if the band didn’t address those issues directly. The black and white cover art, taken in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn in 1965, depicts a young black woman running from a waiting police officer, her face twisted in fear. The scene is sadly familiar 50 years later. As the Roots teetered between fame and purgatory, virtue and failure, Things Fall Apart captured the intensity of a group with everything to lose and the world to gain.

Marcus J. Moore’s thoughts on Things Fall Apart and how its lyrical content and evolution was needed to stay relevant are interesting. As The Roots grew only bigger after this particular album and ended up being the House Band for one of the biggest talk shows is both an achievement but also acknowledging the effort, time and work Black Thought and the rest of

The Roots had put down on their music throughout the years and what they want to bring out to the world.

11.1 The multiple album covers for Things Fall Apart

Back in 1999 during its initial release date, 4 limited edition album covers were released. Each depicting and surrounding theme of society, culture and politics collapsing and failing. Art Director Kenny Gravillis worked together with The Roots and used these photography's to display humanity in its darkest hours. (Complex, 2014)



Figure 1. Multiple album covers for Things Fall Apart (Genius, Unknown date)

Starting off with what would become the official album cover and most recognizable, called ‘ ‘ Woman Running ‘ ‘.

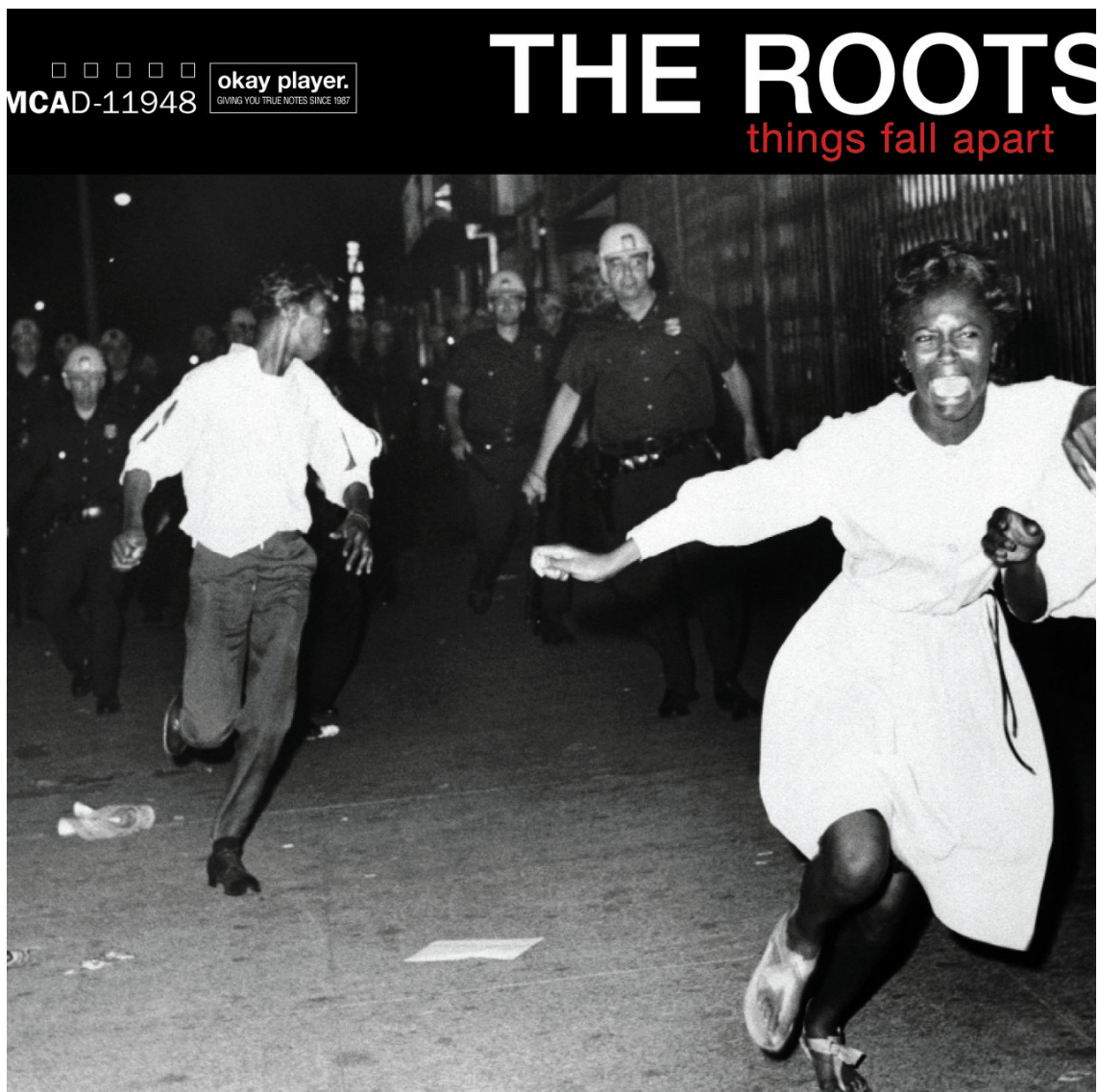


Figure 2. Woman Running. (The Couch Sessions, 2016)

This image was taken in 1960s, in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. It depicts two black teenagers running away from the police during a riot. Kenny Gravillis mentioned to Complex in 2014 :

This became the main artwork for a few reasons. The cover felt like the urban community could really relate to it. Seeing real fear in the woman's face is very affecting. It feels unflinching and aggressive in its commentary on society.

I remember going to Tower Records and seeing it huge; it was just so impactful. I'm not sure that it would work today. I give MCA respect for pushing it out at the time (Complex, 2014)

Second image shows us Giuseppe Masseria, a Mob boss whose body was found dead holding an ace in his hand after he was murdered in a restaurant by Benjamin “ Bugsy ” Sigel, Vito Genovese, Albert Anastasia, and Joe Adonis. Taken in April 15,1931. (Complex, 2014)



Figure 3. *Ace in the Hands*. (Complex, 2014)

” The hand holding the ace card shows great irony. It almost looks as if it was placed there. It’s amazing that this shot even exists! This cover feels more symbolic than the others. It shows that even if you get the ace, good things don’t always follow.” “

(Complex, 2014)



Figure 4. Church Bombing. (Complex, 2014)

In this photo we see a gang of firefighters inside a church which has crumbled down after it got bombed. One firefighter is walking down the aisle. Not much information can be found about this photo, there is no date, no location and cannot be linked to any moment in time, except that it got the name ‘ ‘ The Church Bombing ‘ ‘.

"We weren't specifically looking for bombings, but we came across this picture of the church, and it represented one of society's biggest failures. As a country, we have the freedom to worship. This image represents a huge violation of that right.

I really love the figure in the rubble and how it's centered under the remaining stained glass and arches. It still has a sense of spirituality, even in the burnt remains." (Complex, 2014)

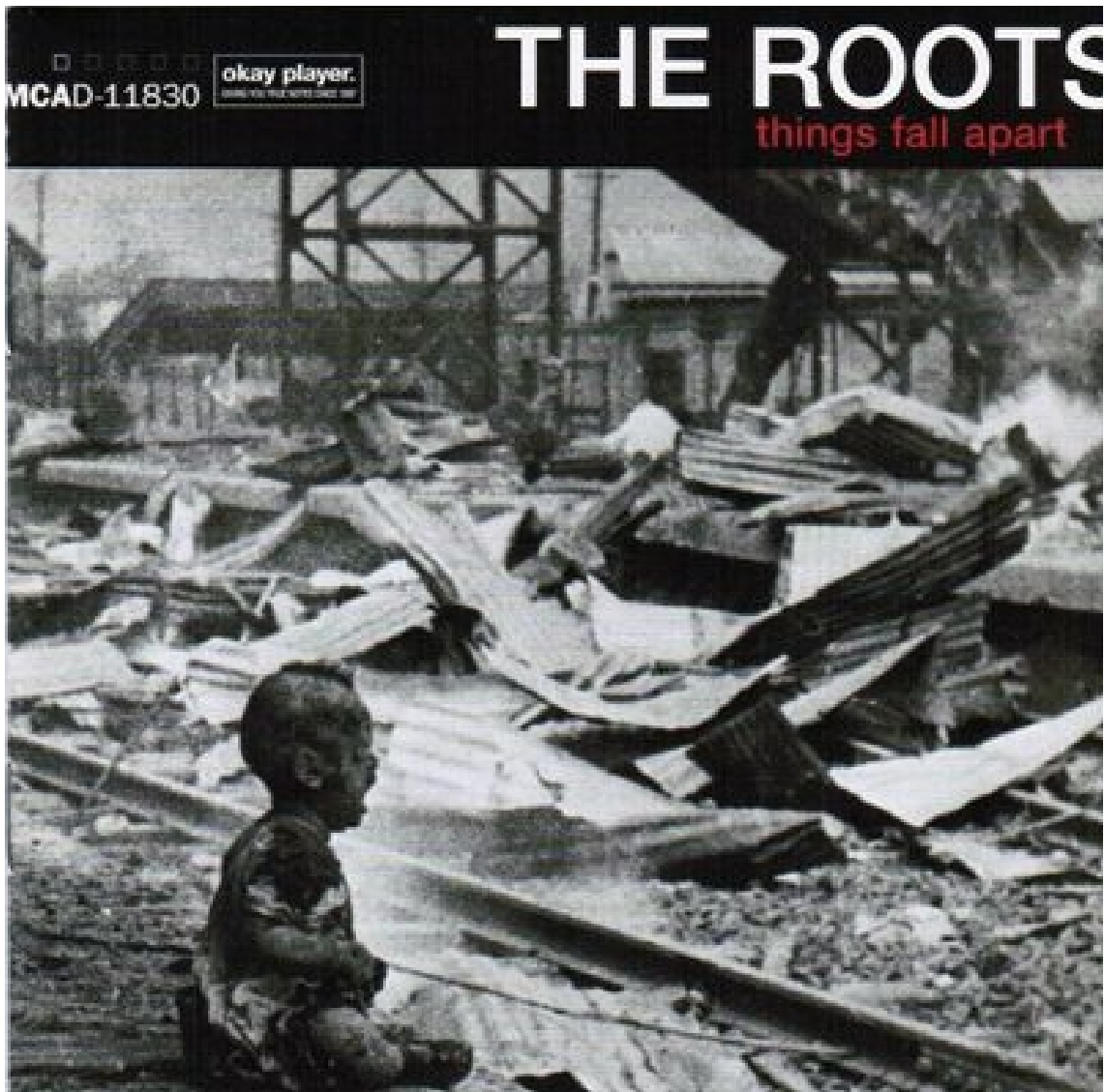


Figure 5. Baby in the Rubble. (Complex, 2014)

This photograph was taken August 28th, 1937 by H.S " Newsreel " Wong.

"Even if you are not a parent, this photo captures horrific social disruption. That iconic shot of the baby in the rubble is indicative of abandonment that's still occurring today."
(Complex, 2014)

Original name of the photo is called " Bloody Saturday ".



Figure 6. Bloody Saturday. (Time, Unknown date)

The same imperialistic desires festering in Europe in the 1930s had already swept into Asia. Yet many Americans remained wary of wading into a conflict in what seemed a far-off, alien land. But that opinion began to change as Japan's army of the Rising Sun rolled toward Shanghai in the summer of 1937. Fighting started there in August, and the unrelenting shelling and bombing caused mass panic and death in the streets. But the rest of the world didn't put a face to the victims until they saw the aftermath of an August 28 attack by Japanese bombers. When H.S. Wong, a photographer for Hearst Metrotone News nicknamed Newsreel, arrived at the destroyed South Station, he recalled carnage so fresh "that my shoes were soaked with blood." In the midst of the devastation, Wong saw a wailing Chinese baby whose mother lay dead on nearby tracks.

He said he quickly shot his remaining film and then ran to carry the baby to safety, but not before the boy's father raced over and ferried him away.

Wong's image of the wounded, helpless infant was sent to New York and featured in Hearst newsreels, newspapers and life magazine—the widest audience a picture could then have.

Continuing on the trail of the multiple album covers of *Things Fall Apart*, this might be the one that struck people the most. With crumbled buildings in the background, dead bodies, there is no one to be seen except for a baby, sitting and crying on the railway stations platform. Having to witness a child, and in this case a baby, who has not yet developed any understanding and ability to be aware of its surroundings and what is happening around in the world, to have his or hers only piece that connects them with their world as they know it, their mother, lay dead next to the child.

Viewed by more than 136 million people, it struck a personal chord that transcended ethnicity and geography. To many, the infant's pain represented the plight of China and the bloodlust of Japan, and the photo dubbed Bloody Saturday was transformed into one of the most powerful news pictures of all time.

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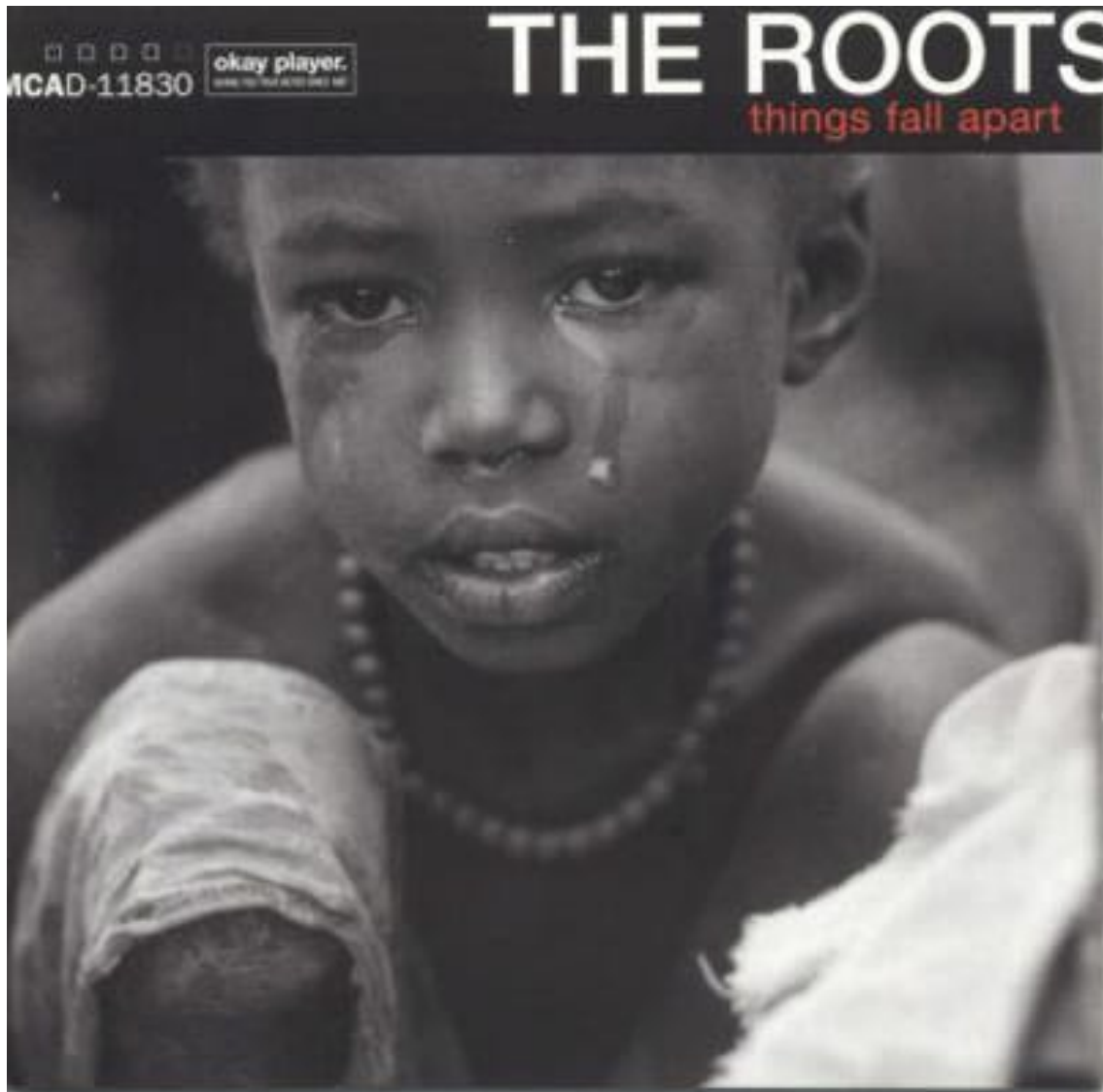


Figure 7. Child Crying. (Complex, 2014)

This image represents famine that affected Somalians from over a decade of civil war. In December 1992, the United States and other international support poured in with "Operation Restore Hope[...]"

This was the last cover we picked. It represented hunger in different parts of the world. While it was the most obvious cover, hunger is such a widespread epidemic that we felt like it needed to be included.

(Complex, 2014)

11.2 What do we see?

A common thread through all these 5 album covers is it's tying to the destruction and failure that keeps on torturing societies and generations throughout the history of mankind and 19th century evolution. Each one is from a different continent and era. There is an emphasis on striking images and the choice of black and white images.

The choice of not using any graphical elements except for the upper bar which has the name of the record label, the group's name and the name of the album sets a minimalistic tone on the covers and wants you to focus on what you are looking at. By the looks of it, it can be hard for a consumer who is not much into Hip-Hop to be able to recognize any elements that might tie it in with either Hip-Hop or Rock music. The only thing a consumer might understand and get a feeling over is that this album has a heavy, dark and gritty theme surrounding politics, history and destruction.

The choice of using nothing else except for black and white imagery and graphics, but then choosing a darker red as the color for the album title gives a sense of seriousness. The darker tone of red in many cases connects to anger, violence and danger. Being combined with the black background it gives a sense of death and evil and something we may not want to be a part of.

Linnaeus University mentions the private associations, Denotation and Connotation one has with images. These are feelings, thoughts and emotions that we associate with an image or text on a personal level. Denotation is the way you perceive and see the image right on the spot. What is it that you see? What colors are being used?

Connotation is the opposite and goes into the association and your own interpretation, as in this case, an image. (Linnéuniversitetet, Unknown date)

11.2.1 Denotation and Connotation

We take a look of the last image of the Somalian Child crying, the Denotation of this particular image would be:

A child with broken pants

Black and White photography

The vast contrast in the exposure, bringing forward the child's facial expression

Sitting down, crossing his arms around his legs

The Connotation would be:

Hunger

Tears, giving us a sense of fear

Hopelessness

Starvation

Misery

11.3 The lyrics



Figure 8. "The beard is a reflection of both wisdom and royalty" (The New York Times, 2017)

The roots main vocalist and rapper, Tariq Trotter, also known as Black Thought, is known for his eclectic, multi-layered rhymes and verses that may confuse people at first, as his lyrics can be hard to decipher and understand on first listening. Regarded by many as an underrated rapper and one of the greatest lyricists of all time, Black Thought has a way of expressing emotions, thoughts and knowledge that few rappers can.

The album takes its title from the **Chinua Achebe** novel by the same name. Much like the novel, this album focuses on themes that may seem dismal to some but everyday to others. An apparent theme of the album is the uphill battle that people of color, specifically Black Americans, deal with in their day to day life. This projects synthesized a tone exemplified in Harlem Renaissance era poetry with the street styling specific to Philly rap.

The composition of this album is more than noteworthy. The combination of jazz, swing, soul, and Hip Hop were able to bring the lyrics to life and give each song a full body. The Roots instrumentation on this project is ground breaking.

(The Source, 2016)

11.3.1 Act Too, The Love of My Life

On the song ‘‘ Act Too.. The Love of My Life ‘’, Black Thought and Lonnie Lynn, also known as Common, describes their love for Hip-Hop music and its culture by disguising it as a metaphor of a woman and how in metaphorical terms She helped them through hard times living in poverty, finding inner peace and was getting abused by other men trying to use her and get money off of Her.

Black Thought mentions on ‘‘ Act Too.. The Love of My Life ‘’ :

But before the raw live shows

I remember I's a little snot-nosed

Rocking Cazal goggles and Izod clothes



Figure 9. ‘‘ Run DMC ‘’ (Random Rap Radio, 2013)

Izod clothes and especially Cazal glasses were big influence in the hip-hop scene when it came to the fashion in early 1980’s. This can be taken back to when Darryl McDaniels, also known as D.M.C from the infamous hip-hop group Run D.M.C used to wear Cazal glasses on many photoshoots and on stage.

Learning the ropes of ghetto survival
Peeping out the situation I had to slide through
Had to watch my back, my front, plus my sides too
When it came to getting mine I ain't trying, to argue
Sometimes I wouldn'ta made it if it wasn't for you
Hip-hop, you the love of my life and that's true
When I was handling the shit I had to do
It was all for you, from the door for you
Speak through you, getting paper on tour for you
From the start, Thought was down by law for you
Used to hit up every corner store wall for you
We ripped shit and kept it hardcore for you
I remember late nights, steady rocking the mic
Hip-hop you the love of my life

This is a thank you letter, wrapped into a metaphor of a woman that Black Thought has had by his side throughout all of his life. Giving thanks to when times were hard, falling for peer pressure and trying to survive. Hip-Hop music and its culture stood always by his side and he took care of it as much as he would if it was the woman of his life.

11.3.2 The Return to Innocence Lost

On another song, called "The Return to Innocence Lost", which instead of having Black Thought performing on it, they invited African-American spoken word poet Ursula Rucker to perform a poem while throughout the whole entirety of the song you can hear a child's toy being played over and over again in the background. This is an indication towards the title of the song, which tells the story of an African-American

baby, growing up to become a boy, into a man, and then suddenly face his death by getting killed by a gunshot wound.

How the horrors, actions and the sins of his father, gave his son demons that would continuously haunt him throughout his whole life. The sounds of his father punching his mother's stomach while being 7 months pregnant, exploiting her for sexual pleasure and calling her White Trash, became the first lullaby for their first born to hear.

Muffled sound of fist on flesh

Blows to chest

No breath

Air gasps

You ain't nothing but white trash, bitch!

With each hit, each kick, each...broken rib

Crack, Crack!

Bones are crying

Mommy's crying and bleeding

And pleading

And then...

Daddy wants to fuck

Dick hard, swelled with power rush

And as if all that wasn't enough

Mommy's seven months heavy with birth

As...Daddy grunts and cursed drunk nothings in her bloodied ear

This can also be an indication and inspiration taken from the "Woman Running" photo. As the photo itself is taken during a riot in the 1960's, living in urban areas and especially as African-Americans, life was not easy, and still isn't. Racism, hatred,

poverty and other negative aspects of life circled around in these areas, which in its core affected a lot of families and started a War inside of themselves against each other.

A vicious cycle that continues to affect families in different neighborhoods and countries. The song ends with the father understanding of what his choices and actions in life has done for not only him but his family as well. Hence the title ‘ ‘ The Return to Innocence Lost ‘ ‘ was him finally understanding his wrongs, but not being able to fill the lost void of a child being taken from him.

Mr. Hide and False Friend

Took final ride to suburban supplier

Shots were fired by the gray man

With shaky hand

But not shaky enough to miss...

Hit...Lost Boy in back

So-called Friend runs for door

Leaves First Son blood-born

Lying alone in blood on cold floor

Death was the cost of...

Returning to Innocence Lost...

Baby 'Sis awake for dawn on Christmas morn

To Mommy's sobs and shakes

Daddy's silhouettes of regret

All past, omitted, and absolved by lost

As they clung to each other

Knowing...

By the end of this song, the child's toy start playing again, indicating for us listeners that a new cycle is about to begin. This can be translated into the new cycle that The Roots were heading into as after this album, as their fan base and popularity grew immensely.

12 50 CENT – GET RICH OR DIE TRYIN'

This year, in 2018, marks the 15th anniversary of 50 Cent's major label debut album *Get Rich Or Die Tryin'*. Curtis Jackson, also known as 50 Cent, took over and shifted the Hip-Hop world with this explosive major label debut album back in 2003, completely reaching for the nr.1 spot and ended up selling 872,000 copies during its first week and is considered to be one of the greatest debut albums ever in Hip-hop history.

(Consequence Of Sound, 2018)

Before *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*, 50 Cent had already released mixtapes, bootlegs and had street buzz. He went after anyone he considered his Nemesis, from hit-maker and producer Timbaland, to other rappers such as Master P and to his most famous beef with rapper Ja-Rule.

Until one morning in May 2000, he got shot 9 times.

MTV reported:

50 Cent was wounded in a shooting which took place on Wednesday morning in Queens, New York, while the rapper was sitting in a parked car with an acquaintance, 22-year-old Curtis Brown.

The shooting took place on May 24 at 11:22 a.m. on 161st Street in the Jamaica section of Queens, according to a police spokesperson. 50 Cent, 24, was shot repeatedly in the legs and once in the jaw, while Brown sustained a hand wound. The men drove themselves to Jamaica Hospital after the shooting, where they were admitted.

Brown was released and 50 Cent was admitted for surgery Wednesday morning, according to Jamaica Hospital spokesperson Michael Hink. As of Wednesday morning, 50 Cent was in stable condition. Because of a family request that no more information be given to the press, his current condition is unknown.

(MTV , 2000)

Recovered from his gunshot wounds, he went on to release his next album ‘ ‘ Guess Who’s Back? ‘ ’. His efforts by him and his peers got the attention of Eminem and West coast legendary hip-hop producer and rapper Dr.Dre. He signed a \$1 million contract with them and got himself off the streets and landed in a major label record studio.

Get Rich or Die Tryin’ ended up being a massive success, and 50 Cent took the nr. 1 spot.

The most remarkable thing about Get Rich was the light 50 shined on himself and his hood. He wasn’t rapping from the viewpoint of an observer; he was the protagonist of each tale. His rhymes, drenched in anger and anguish, were ones that dudes still clawing their way out of the gutter could relate to. Just as he had years earlier on “Ghetto Quran,” 50 gave the listeners access to a world most people only read about or saw on the nightly news.

If “Many Men (Wish Death)” had been made by any other rapper, the words, “Homo shot me, three weeks later he got shot down / Now it’s clear I’m here for a real reason, ‘cause he got hit like I got hit, but he ain’t fucking breathing,” would be taken as nothing more than clever storytelling. But on Get Rich, everything was taken at face value. 50’s currency was realness, and he had it by the boatload.

(Complex, 2018)

While hugely successful hits like ‘ ‘ In Da Club ‘ ’, ‘ ‘ P.I.M.P ‘ ’ and ‘ ‘ 21 Questions ‘ ’ kept the top spot on radio, clubs and on MTV for months, there was an underlying and dark tone throughout the rest of the album that you could only experience by actually listening to it thoroughly all the way true. With very detailed lyrics, 50 Cent took you right into his point of view of the streets in a very cinematic experience sonically. On songs like ‘ ‘ Heat’ ’, Dr.Dre decided that every snare hit would be a gunshot instead and the sounds of drive-by’s going in the background gave you a deep sense of the brutal stories he was telling.

12.1 Get Rich or Die Tryin' album cover

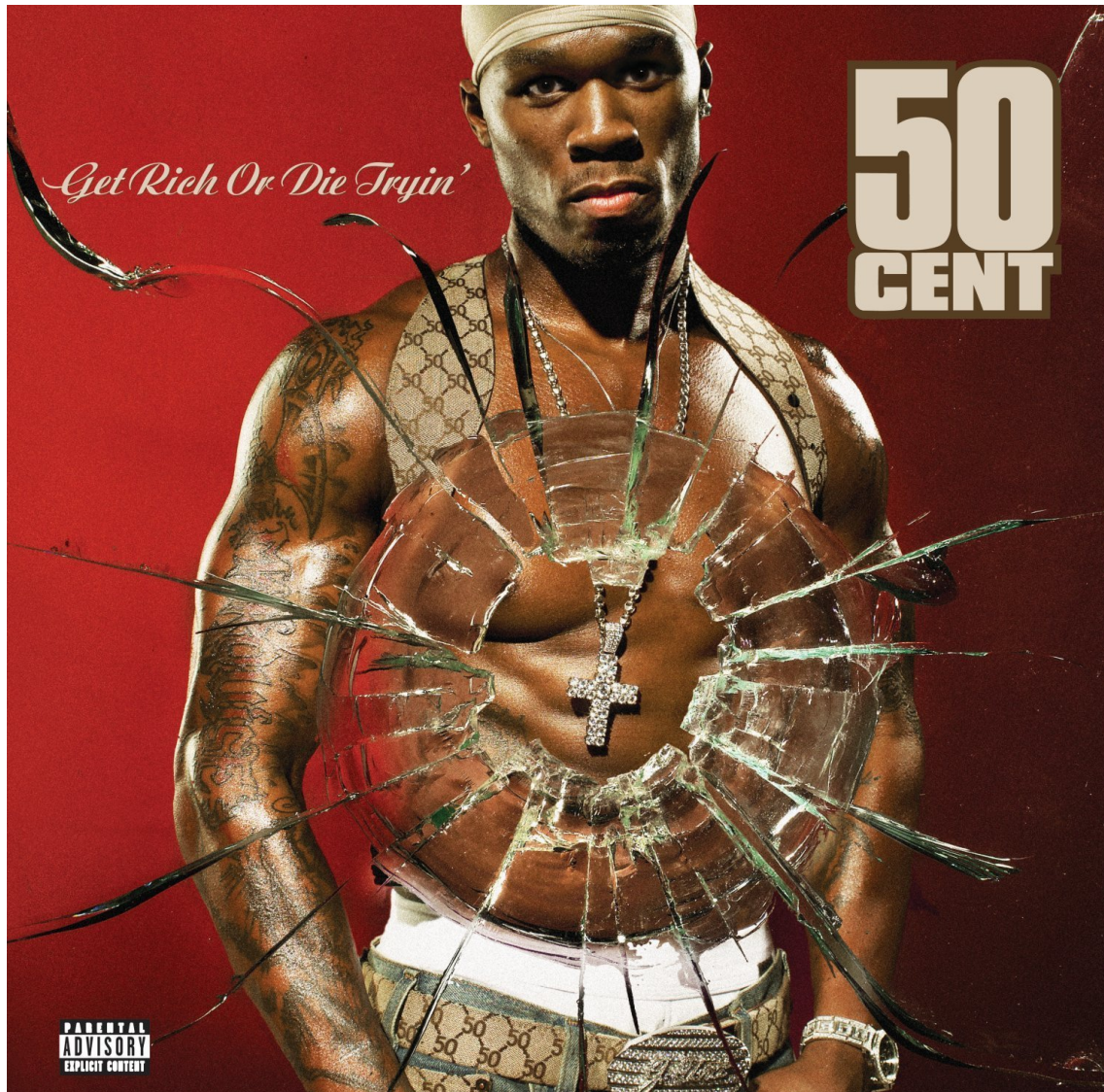


Figure 10. 50 Cent – Get Rich or Die Tryin' album cover, 2003. (Tidal, Unknown date)
Back in 2013, Art Director Julian Alexander, who had built a relationship with 50 Cent through Sony Music and also helped him on the previous 50 Cent album “ Power of the Dollar “, had an interview with Egotripland which he mentioned about the original vision for the album cover:

He wanted to have shattered glass. And I kind of envisioned it as a doorway — a shattered full glass door.

And what you would see was a bullet hole in the glass and you would see his hand leaning on the glass.

His posture would be kind of kneeling over – like he’s leaning on the glass for support. So you’d see this bullet hole, a shattered glass with a hand on it and there was gonna be blood drippin’ down from his hand.

You wouldn’t see his face, but you would see a slumped figure and blood on the hand. You would read that this person had been shot, but they’re still standing.

(Egotripland, 2013)

The initial idea changed though, as Julian felt that the original concept only represented the Die Tryin' part of the title and not Get Rich at all. He continues:

What we ended up with for the album cover I feel represents [the fuller story]. He's standing up, he's standing strong behind that shattered glass. Almost as if he's kind of bullet proof. Like he's kind of bounced back. And when you look at the center of the bullet hole, you see [that he's wearing] this diamond cross. He's got this Gucci holster on and diamond belt buckle. So to me that part represents Get Rich.

(Egotripland, 2013)

12.2 What do we see?

One of the first things we see on the cover is the shattered glass. It was supposed to be Plexiglas from the beginning with a hole drilled in the middle simulating the effect of a bullet hole, Julian and his Prop Stylist saw that the final vision didn't quite work out.



Figure 11. Photo session. Both 50 Cent and the bullet hole taken separately and with each other. (Egotripland, 2013)

Instead they went with the real deal, Julian mentioned:

[Hesitates] He tried. It's not like it was just some throwaway thing and he didn't put effort into it, but it wasn't what it needed to be. So I said, "Look, you gotta go shoot the glass." So he left. How he shot that glass was a mystery to all of us. If I remember correctly, he went to a gun range. He may have used a friend's gun, but it definitely wasn't provided by 50 or anyone else that was on set. When he came back with the glass, we didn't have much time to discuss it because we were shooting, I was just happy that he got it done.

(Egotripland, 2013)

The most striking thing on this album cover is its choice of color. In this case, with the choice of having a shattered glass with a bullet hole, gives a sense of seriousness and danger. By taking a closer look, you notice the facial expression, showcasing wealth with a Gucci belt and no shirt on. All this is indicating towards a new form of expression and the start of a new era in Hip-Hop. With this defining debut album, 50 Cent brought back the ideal image that a lot of people have of rap in general. In this case, the cars, clothes, women, drugs and violence were set as a standard in mainstream rap music that was being aired on the radio and shown on TV at the time.

12.2.1 Denotation and Connotation

Denotation

Red background

Handwriting

Glass shattered

Tattoos

Cross

Materialistic possession

Connotation

Fear

Violence

God

Faith

12.3 The Lyrics

Richard Shusterman mentions in his book “ The fine art of Rap “

One very prominent theme of hip hop is how the advertised ideal of conspicuous consumption-luxury cars, clothes, and hightech appliances-lures many ghetto youth to a life of crime, a life which promises the quick attainment of such commodities but typically ends in death, jail, or destitution, thus reinforcing the ghetto cycle of poverty and despair.

It is one of the postmodern paradoxes of hip hop that rappers extol their own achievement of consumerist luxury while simultaneously condemning its uncritical idealization and quest as misguided and dangerous for their audience in the ghetto community to which they ardently avow their solidarity and allegiance.

(Shusterman, 1991)

Get Rich or Die Tryin’ set the standard of how commercial hip-hop in the forthcoming years would sound like in the early 2000. (Konbini, 2018)

Even though Gangster Rap era and it’s lyrics had already before been very popular with groups such as N.W.A, 2Pac, Ice Cube and the whole West Coast movement during late 80’s and early 90’s. 50 Cent took the world by storm with his hits but also gained a lot of attention for voyeurism and objectifying women and glorifying the gangster way of living, even though it’s something that he himself has been through. New York and East Coast was again put back on top of the Throne thanks to him. (Vibe, 2017)

Despite of it all, 50 Cent had in its own way and expressions, brought the emotions, adrenaline and fear of the streets into 19 tracks.



Figure 12. 50 Cent posing for the camera. (Mass Appeal, 2014)

12.3.1 Intro / What Up Gangsta

Within the 6 seconds of the Intro of the album, we are hearing a coin falling on the table and a gun being loaded, making the listener ready for what's to come. With the second track "What Up Gangsta", 50 Cent is taking a stance against everyone and proclaiming his spot in the Hip-Hop world and culture. This can be taken back to the aggressive approach of the album cover with its blood red filled background, slowly fading into black on the right side.

I sit back, twist the best bud, burn and wonder

When gangstas bump my shit, can they hear my hunger?

When the fifth kick, duck quick, it sounds like thunder

In December I'll make your block feel like summer

The rap critics say I can rhyme, the fiends say my dope is a nine

Every chick I fuck with is a dime

I'm like Patti LaBelle, homie I'm on my own

Where I lay my hat is my home, I'm a rolling stone

12.3.2 Patiently Waiting

Third track ‘ ‘ Patiently Waiting ‘ ‘ has 50 Cent mentioning how he has been waiting for that one track to become a big hit and letting people know who thought he wasn’t going to make it had it wrong. This brings back the theme surrounding of this near-death experience and how he was doing music and performing before all of the commotion started.

I been patiently waitin' for a track to explode on

You can stunt if you want and yo' ass'll get rolled on

If it feels like my flow's been hot for so long

If you thinkin' I'ma fuckin' fall off, you're so wrong

50 Cent mentions multiple times throughout the album the surrounding theme of Heaven & Hell. In this part of the song, he mentions being innocent, like a baby born dead. Babies are not mentally developed until at a much later stage or years ahead, giving us an indication of how you cannot be accountable for committing a sin if you cannot separate and distinguish between good and evil.

I'm innocent in my head, like a baby born dead

Destination heaven

Sit and politic with passengers from 9/11

Get Rich or Die Tryin’ was released 1,5 years later after the 9/11 attack on World Trade Center. Releasing the album post 9/11, during a time where suspicion, racism and hatred grew immensely towards people from the Middle East and with non-American values, non-white skin color and culture, he mentions sitting on a plane with the passengers on that very day and talking politics.

Meaning that both the victims of the terrorist attack and the suicide bombers share the same fate that ended their life and with both sides wanting to go to heaven. This technique is used within Islamic Terrorism and their view of their religion in order to recruit suicide bombers and telling them that they will end up in heaven. Giving us a

black and white, good and evil perspective on it even though both sides want to end up in the same place no matter how good or evil a person might be.



Figure 13. 50 Cent sitting on a bench in a church. (HmusicK, 2009)

13 KENDRICK LAMAR – TO PIMP A BUTTERFLY

Kendrick Lamar released his major label debut album Good Kid M.A.A.D City In late 2012 which was met with critical acclaim and was considered by many an instant classic. With his newfound fame, many considered Kendrick the greatest of all time, comparing him to the likes of 2Pac and Nas, which in their primetime had a massive impact on hip-hop and shifted the culture. With its hard-hitting beats, lyrical greatness, themes and cinematic feeling it gave to its listeners, Good Kid M.A.A.D City would become his Magnum Opus.



Figure 14. Kendrick Lamar – Good Kid M.A.A.D City album cover (Amazon, Unknown date)

Throughout the album we follow stories from Kendrick's childhood and history to his hometown of Compton, Los Angeles. We get to hear stories of love, crime, growing up in Compton, life and death.

Justin Hunte mentioned in 2012 on HipHopDX review of Good Kid M.A.A.D City :

With *Good Kid, m.A.A.d. City*, Compton's flag bearer unveils a group of songs equally potent individually and collectively, meeting the mainstream and rabid fans in the middle, improbably touching that thinnest slice between mass appeal and mass respect. "I'm tryna keep it alive and not compromise the feeling we love," K-Dot kicks on that previously mentioned track-to-be Tee. "You're tryna keep it deprived and only cosign what radio does..." This isn't just a debut album. This is a shot at history.

(HipHopDX, 2012)

2,5 years later , in 2015, his second major label album *To Pimp a Butterfly* was released. The past few years were a hectic and stressful time in the U.S. Black Lives Matter were marching in the streets, racism has been growing, police brutality was at an all-time high and President Barack Obama did not have many years left until his second term would end in 2017.

Kendrick had been touring around the world after the release of *Good Kid M.A.A.D City* and would be crowned as one of the greatest rapper of all time, comparing with both dead and alive rappers.

Dealing with celebrity lifestyle, anxiety, depression and being black in America during that particular time, Kendrick took all of his past experiences from releasing his first major label debut album *Good Kid M.A.A.D City*, becoming famous, earning a lot of money, gaining new friends and enemies in the music industry and coping with his new lifestyle, into the second album.

Earning the nr.1 spot on many websites and media outlets as the album of the year in 2015, Kendrick had yet again convinced and showed his relevancy in both the music industry and culturally.

13.1 Kendrick Lamar – To Pimp a Butterfly album cover

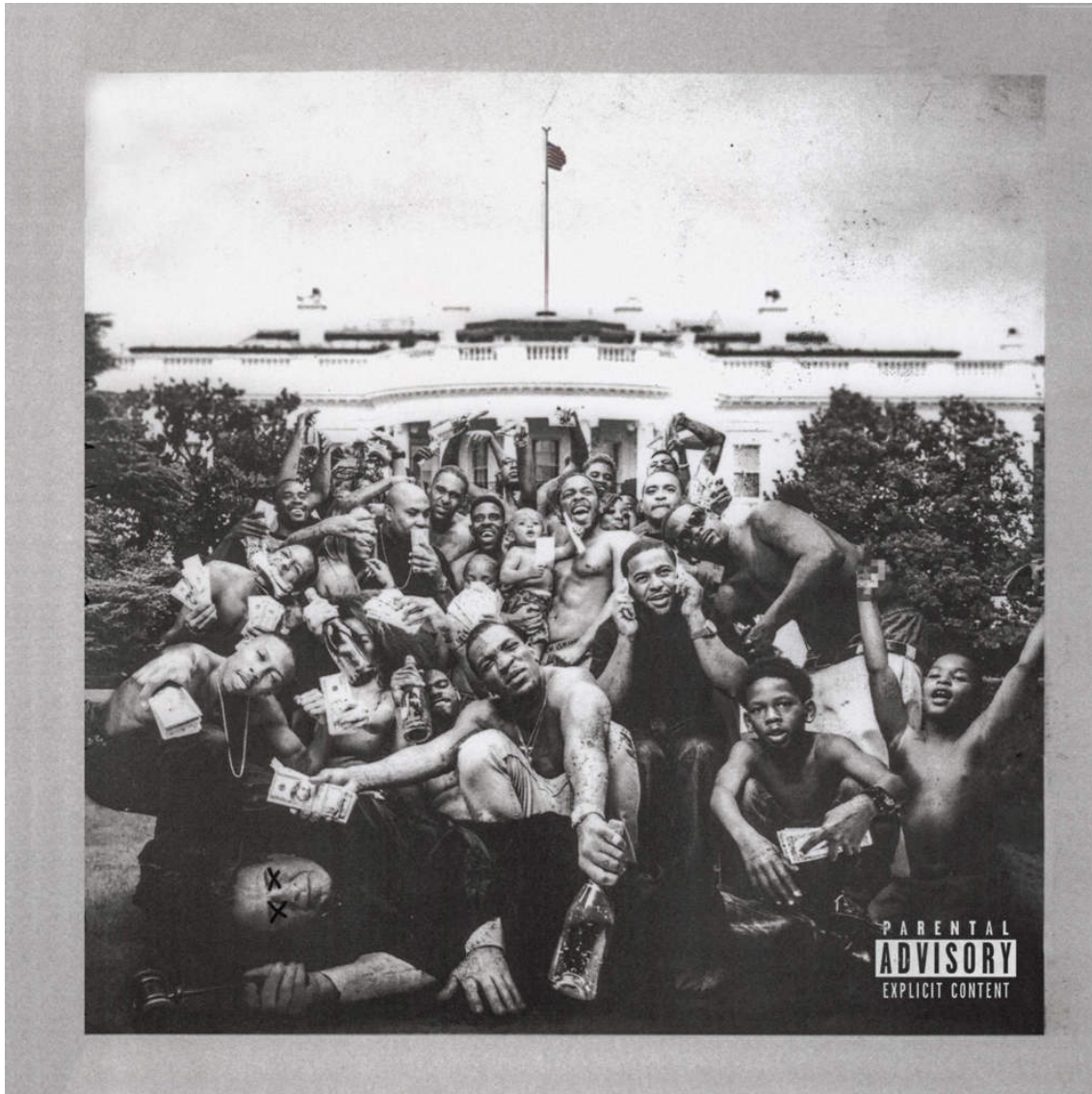


Figure 15. Kendrick Lamar – To Pimp A Butterfly album cover (CDON, Unknown date)

In a YouTube interview with Mass Appeal, Kendrick Lamar mentions the inspiration and story behind the album cover:

It's me and my homeboys in front of the White House. It's really taking, you know, people from my neighborhood and taking them around the world and letting them see things that I've experienced. People I grew up with since Elementary all the way up to now, a lot of individuals that I talk about in Good Kid M.A.A.D City is on this cover, it all spins around full circle when you really digest it.

That's a judge laid on the ground. You look at these individuals as bad people or menace to society, but they are actually good people, you know, just a product of their environment. And the one person that always represents they're not-lives negatively is the judge, you know, only god can judge these individuals here.

(YouTube, 2015)

13.2 What do we see?

The first thing a lot of listeners will recognize is the background, which is a very famous perspective shot taken of the White House. In front of it stands Kendrick with his friends, all posing and showing gang signs. After a close look we start to see the stereotypical and materialistic viewpoint a lot of people have of being black and living in poverty in America. Chains, money, expensive watches and alcohol is being shown.

By standing in front of the White House, this might indicate an evolution in American history towards black people and its history in Slavery. While most of them are without any piece of clothing on their upper body and wearing chains, this shows that no matter how far ahead America has gone since its era of Slavery, the Slave mentality is still there in this modern era and throughout all the generations that has come since.

The usage of black and white imagery brings out the details in each and every one, with their tattoos, scars and facial expressions. While some show joy, others show an expression of confidence and being tough, being a product of their own environment and being raised in a tough neighborhood, i.e. this behavior and expression comes to them in a natural way no matter how far away you are from home.

The Iconic Layer of this image shows us the hard contrast between the black and white, as this image might have been taken with an old film-camera or digitally manipulated in post-processing.

13.2.1 Denotation and Connotation

The Denotation:

Money

Alcohol

Chains

Laughter

Black and White photography

The Connotation:

Success

Desperation

History

Pride

Future



Figure 16. "President Reagan, with Nancy Reagan, signing HR 5210 Anti Drug Abuse Act of 1988 in East Room. 11/18/88. " (The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, Unknown date)

Take an even closer look at the album cover, and we notice the Judge lies dead on the grass and you might claim that it is Ronald Reagan. On October 14, 1982, President Ronald Reagan declared a " War On Drugs " and started to put in massive amounts of time, money and effort in trying to finish of what Richard Nixon initially started. Focusing on tough sentences for drug offenders for crack and not powder cocaine, meant that a large amount of the people going to prison were predominantly black and brown.

(Timeline, 2017)

Kendrick was born in the late 1980's, yet he and his friends had already seen the destruction, racism, brutality and separation that this policy had done to the neighborhoods around him and destroying families.

13.3 The Lyrics



Figure 17. Screenshot from Kendrick Lamar – For Free? (Interlude) Music Video (YouTube, 2015)

The overall theme surrounding *To Pimp a Butterfly* is about depression, racism, politics, being black in America and the self-hatred that a lot of people deal with. Each song has a dark underlying tone which gives the listener a serious point of view of certain aspects of life for an Afro-American and being a famous musical performer and rapper which Kendrick Lamar is and have to deal with on a daily basis. How his life has changed since his first major label debut album became an instant classic and put pressure on him, the money and greediness, how friends and family at home blames him for leaving them behind and not giving the fulltime support that he promised.

Later on as the album progresses, things turn around and have a more positive end results. Lyrics turn into self-love, acknowledging and knowing your inner strength, gift and inspiration that not only helps you but helps other people as well, and letting you know that no matter how dark times may be, it's always going to turn out good.

The album takes on a more acoustic sound and brings in experimental jazz while still holding on the hip-hop aesthetic.

The Jazz influences throughout the album is a throwback to the history of Jazz music and its influence on hip-hop music and being a genre of which mostly black musicians had the freedom to express their creativity musically.

Kendrick Lamar speaks on the message behind *To Pimp a Butterfly*:

The overall theme, for me personally, for this album is really leadership. How can I use it for better or for worse? With money and with my celebrity, how can I use it? How can I pimp it? Can I pimp it negatively or can I pimp it in a positive way? Positive for me, is showing what I go through with “u” and how I bring it back with “i” and saying ‘I still love myself at the end of the day.

(HipHopDX, 2015)

13.3.1 Institutionalized

On the song “ Institutionalized “, Kendrick is still coping and struggling with a lifestyle of fame and celebrity, while having friends and family back in the ghetto trying to survive as good as they can.



Figure 18 - Kendrick Lamar is interviewed by Zach Goldbaum in “Noisey” (Vice)

(Eurweb, 2016)

On the second verse of the song, Kendrick mentions bringing his friend from the ghetto to a B.E.T Awards Show :

Fuck am I 'posed to do when I'm lookin' at walkin' licks?

The constant big money talk 'bout the mansion and foreign whips

The private jets and passport, presidential glass floor

Gold bottles, gold models, givin' up the ass for

One more sucker wavin' wit a flashy wrist

My defense mechanism tell me to get him

Quickly because he got it

It's a recession, then why the fuck he at King of Diamonds?

No more livin' poor, meet my four-four

When I see 'em, put the per diem on the floor

Now Kendrick, know they're your co-workers

But it's gon' take a lot 'fore this pistol go cold turkey

What Kendrick's friend is telling us here is a checklist for wealth, power and having a flamboyant lifestyle to flaunt with. Looking back at the album cover we notice the gold chains and expensive watches on some of the characters, even though they come from a background of petty crimes and bad neighborhoods and might still be stuck in the ghetto, the attraction of a wealthy and rich lifestyle is still present there as a reminder.

13.3.2 Alright

One of the biggest musical anthems of that year and on this album was a track called ‘ ‘ Alright ‘ ‘. Its purpose throughout the whole song is to give the listener an understanding and feeling of that everything will indeed be alright, no matter what you have or are going through right now in your life. As the song progresses we can look back at our own failures but also be optimistic about the future. The message is built upon struggle and pain, but rather than dwelling on that, Kendrick uses it as a way of building a purpose within ourselves and have that awareness as a driven motivation. The song was heavily used in Black Lives Matter activists and marches, chanting ‘ ‘ We gon be alright ‘ ‘ as they walked down the streets of America and sending a message of justice and bringing awareness of not only recent police brutality within the black community but also tackling down racism. (Rolling Stones, 2016)



Figure 19. Kendrick Lamar performing "Alright" on B.E.T Music Awards 2015. (Slate, 2015)

The bridge before the chorus goes:

*Wouldn't you know
We been hurt, been down before
Nigga, when our pride was low
Lookin' at the world like, "Where do we go?"
Nigga, and we hate po-po
Wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho'
Nigga, I'm at the preacher's door
My knees gettin' weak, and my gun might blow
But we gon' be alright*

13.3.3 Mortal Man

Throughout the album we hear bits and parts of Kendrick Lamar putting together spoken word poetry. The longer the album progress, the more lines we get to hear, until ending up with the track on the album called Mortal Man. Kendrick ends up telling the whole poetry in front of west coast legendary rapper Tupac, who was shot and killed in 1996, and considered by many as one of the greatest rappers of all time. This 12-minute long track features Kendrick telling his opinions and thoughts of devotion, spiritual enlightenment, depression and power. (Los Angeles Times, 2015)

Do you believe in me? Are you deceiving me?

Could I let you down easily, is your heart where it need to be?

Is your smile on permanent? Is your vow on lifetime?

Would you know where the sermon is if I died in this next line?

If I'm tried in a court of law, if the industry cut me off

If the government want me dead, plant cocaine in my car

Would you judge me a drug-head or see me as K. Lamar

Kendrick has realized throughout the years that both fans and mainstream culture is considering him one of the greatest rappers of all time. With that comes a lot of pressure for having to stand up and being a voice for a new generation of people growing up in the same circumstances and sharing the same thoughts, pain and emotions.

Or question my character and degrade me on every blog

Want you to love me like Nelson, want you to hug me like Nelson

I freed you from being a slave in your mind, you're very welcome

You tell me my song is more than a song, it's surely a blessing

But a prophet ain't a prophet til they ask you this question:

When shit hit the fan, is you still a fan?

Mentioning Nelson Mandela, Tupac and other important leaders for black people and their identity, Kendrick knows that his time on earth is limited, thus he must lead this

new generation of children, teenagers and adults, growing up in today's society and guide them and being a voice of a generation in the same way as Kurt Cobain and Tupac was.

14 KENDRICK LAMAR FIRST RAPPER TO WIN PULITZER PRICE FOR MUSIC

Recording released on April 14, 2017, a virtuosic song collection unified by its vernacular authenticity and rhythmic dynamism that offers affecting vignettes capturing the complexity of modern African-American life. (Pulitzer, 2018)



Figure 20 – Kendrick Lamar has been awarded the 2018 Pulitzer Prize in Music for ‘DAMN.’ (Twitter, 2018)

In 2018, Kendrick Lamar became the first Hip-Hop artist in history to earn a Pulitzer Prize for his contribution to music for his 2017 album “ DAMN. “. It took over 5

decades before the judges recognized music outside and beyond of the European classical traditional music. By granting Kendrick Lamar a Pulitzer Prize not only makes the Pulitzer Prize relevant again, as it has been criticized before for losing its prestige in literature and journalism and being irrelevant. (The Guardian, 2018)

15 THE COMPARISON

The timeline of when these albums were released are big. 16 years and in between each of the album's release there has been changes both sonically within Hip-Hop music but also socially and politically within the U.S. and globally. To get a better overview of what these three albums themes and messages are, I've pin-pointed it down below:

The Roots – Things Fall Apart

Themes surrounding mostly on a global scale, not only within the U.S.

Keywords: Spirituality, Love, Fear, Knowledge and Wisdom

50 Cent – Get Rich or Die Tryin'

Themes surrounding mostly within the U.S, as a lot of the references he mentions are rappers and pop culture that are mostly known from there.

Keywords: Fear, Survival Instincts, Ghetto, Luxurious lifestyle and Anger

Kendrick Lamar – To Pimp a Butterfly

Themes surrounding mostly within the U.S. Mentioning of slavery, being young and black in America, mental health, depression, fear and love.

Keywords: Slavery, African-American, Fear, Mental health, Love, Spirituality and History.

In context, Things Fall Apart and To Pimp a Butterfly are almost under the same category of themes and messages, while Get Rich or Die Tryin' is standing for something else and lives and breathes on its own.

One of the problems people might have especially with *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*, is how it's lyrics, visuals and messages is relating back to stereotypes and the misleading image of being black in America. However, as many of the themes and stories 50 Cent is rapping about can be put into real life situations that people might have or are going through, it's harder for the general mass of the people to relate to it, yet at the same time it gives them a better understanding and knowledge about a certain type of lifestyle which they might not be that familiar with in the first place. This can be problematic for some, as this type of music only fuels more racism, racial and stereotypical profiling of African-Americans.

The Roots expanded on their sound and themes with *Things Fall Apart*, however, with their main vocalist and rapper Black Thought's wordplay, lyrics and storytelling, it can be hard for some to understand fully what he is talking about, and it will require multiple listens to digest it fully. The acoustic sounds of the album give the album more sense of depth and might only be appreciated by people willing to put time and effort into listening.

Kendrick Lamar touched new grounds and a new generation of people living under oppression, being a minority and coping with day to day life. As his fame only grew stronger, so did his messages and songs. Thought provoking lyrics and themes that many can relate to no matter what your own background and history is. The strong emphasis of being black and proud, but also understanding one's own weaknesses and strengths gave people a lot of inspiration to stand up for themselves and channeling their own internal conflicts and turn it into something good.

16 CONCLUSION

Hip-Hop album covers and its context goes hand in hand. However, this doesn't have to generally apply to every artist and their work. As the Internet has grown immensely, more people have been able to use that tool for their own art. With that in mind, people of the younger generation tend to rap more about things that teenagers and young adults of that generation might be dealing with and connect through that. While on the other

hand, the older generation or people who grew up with Hip-Hop culture and music in the early 80's has a different viewpoint of the culture and where it's social context should be and what its strengths and weaknesses are. Whereas the younger generation as of today tend to have more materialistic viewpoint on their album covers and also the inclusion of drug usage, specifically Xanax and Codeine Promethazine also known as Lean, the older generation have a more politically loaded and socially constructed imagery on their artwork and dates back to Civil Rights movement and the struggle of being black in America.

Albeit, those who have striking album covers and put more time and effort into its art form are generally more perceived with a higher notion of accomplishment and praise from the Hip-Hop community, news media outlets and Award shows. Not only do their lyrics connect with the people of all generations, ages and backgrounds, its artwork makes a statement from where they are coming from or where they might be currently, both creatively and spiritually.

As mentioned earlier, Hip-Hop and music in general today works in different ways than 10-20 years ago. Nowadays with music streaming platforms like Spotify and Apple Music, music comes and goes faster than ever and gets consumed quickly. I personally think that literature has a hard time getting on with how fast access and the speed of information and knowledge traverse through the Internet. That's why it was hard to find any literature that would have the relevancy and understanding of how it has evolved or is evolving especially when it comes to graphic design within music. Websites update within minutes if anything new happens and it's the same thing with our ways of consuming music, If I need to know something quickly and that is relevant because a specific album or artist might have released an album this year, the Internet became a much stronger tool for my Thesis in this case.

I had hoped to go deeper into more songs but as I did that I realized that it was easier to focus on a few strong ones rather a whole project or album. I hope this might inspire and give awareness and give readers a chance to take their time and listen through these albums, whether or not they are a lover of hip-hop music or not.

I think it's important to understand the connection and relevancy between different types of art forms, in this case graphic design within album cover design and then the artist's lyrics. There's more depth to these albums than I could ever write down and pin point to exact references, hidden meanings and themes. Picking out only 2-3 songs of each album was hard. I wanted to pick the songs that made most sense and that had a sense of depth to them.

When you understand this, I think it gives the listener a stronger experience both visually and sonically and makes you appreciate it in a unique way than the average listener or consumer.

16.1 Summary in Swedish – Sammanfattning av huvudsakliga punkter på Svenska

Genom arbetets gång har det jämförts mellan 3 olika Hip-hop albums från olika tidsperioder. Tidslinjen sträcker sig ut på 16 år från 1999 till 2015 och jämför de visuella arbetet och grafiken på album omslagen samt dess lyrik. Syftet och för att få en bättre förståelse för varför ett visst album, i detta fall de 3 jag har valt, har sitt specifikt utvalda omslag, måste vi förstå dess teman och samband.

The Roots – Things Fall Apart – Släpptes 1999

50 Cent – Get Rich or Die Tryin’ – Släpptes 2003

Kendrick Lamar – To Pimp a Butterfly – Släpptes 2015

Från början var det tänkt att inkludera även flera album, men med tiden började jag snabbt inse att det fanns varken tid eller nog med plats för att kunna få in så mycket information om dessa album samt analysera var och en, jämföra och diskutera.

Jag vill lära mig mer om dessa albumomslag och designen. T ex. Vad signalerar ett albumomslag, för designern samt lyssnaren? Finns det en länk mellan de visuella arbetet, lyriken och kopplingen till samhället eller kulturen?

Forskningsfrågorna lyder:

Hur är Hip-Hop omslag designade?

Va vill de uttrycka för lyssnaren?

Finns det en relation eller koppling kring samhället och de visuella arbetet. Och om det finns, hur gör och tolkar a) designern och b) samhället denna koppling eller dess förståelse?

Dessa 3 album skiljer sig musikaliskt men även visuellt från varandra. The Roots har en välformad och brett akustiskt ljud med texter som kräver att den som lyssnar tar sin tid och går igenom de flera gånger för att verkligen förstå dess mening och syfte. Gruppens huvudsångare eller rappare, Black Thought, tar sin tid med att utveckla rim och verser som är byggda på varandra med olika lager som klickar ihop allra bästa sätt. Hans sätt att bygga texter är både innovativt, intressant och kräver uppmärksamhet.

Medans 50 Cent är rak på sak och tar berättelser från hans liv innan han blev känd, där mycket utav texterna kringgår vapen, pengar, fattigdom och att låta de så-kallade gatan lära en om överlevnad. Texterna och musiken är lättare att förstå men 50 Cent hade en stark påverkan på hur Hip-Hop musiken skulle låta de närmsta åren samt att han hade stor framgång med många hits.

Kendrick Lamar tog all sin energi och kunskap genom åren efter hans första stora debutalbum Good Kid m.A.A.d City som sålde flera miljoner exemplar och blivit krönt som en utav de bästa rapparna någonsin i Hip-Hopens historia till att skapa To Pimp a Butterfly. Ett album som tar lyssnaren igenom berättelser om kändisskap, mental hälsa, depression, kärlek, hat och läran om att älska sig själv. Teman igenom albumet kringgår mycket med att vara mörkhyad i USA och dess rasistiska och blodiga historia genom tiderna och hur det än idag påverkar minoriteter och en ny generation.

Användning utav semiotisk bildanalys gav en djupare förståelse för grafiken och bilderna i sig samt hur vi uppfattar de. Jag hämtade inspiration ifrån Linnéuniversitetets bildteori och bildanalys och fick reda på olika termer, specifikt två stycked vid namn Denotation och Konnotation.

Denotation menas med vad du ser direkt på bilden, objektet mm. Vad används det för färger? Vilken typ av kläder har personen på sig? Från vilket hörn kommer ljuset ifrån? Mm.

Konnotation är vad du associerar bilden eller föremålet med. En bild på en röd ros kan t ex ge dig en känsla utav kärlek och värme. Och hur känslor och ansiktsuttryck kommer fram med användning utav svart och vit bild samt referenser till historiska ögonblick i bilderna som använts.

Kendrick Lamar använder sig utav stark svart och vit fotografi på omslaget till To Pimp a Butterfly. På bilden ser vi Kendrick och hans grupp utav vänner och bekanta framför Vita Huset. Denotationen i detta fall skulle vara smycken, alkohol, pengar samt att alla är Afroamerikaner.

Konnotationen kan variera väldigt mycket beroende på person till person. Då många har olika anknytningar och associerar vissa typer av föremål, objekt eller till och med personen i sig på bilden till något negativt eller positivt. Nyckelord för konnotation i detta fall kan t ex vara rädsla, glädje, historia, ras och slaveri. Läg extra märke till detaljen kring hur männen på omslaget är utan tröjor men ändå bär på sig smycken. Detta kan vara en referens till slaveri.

De som väljer att lägga ner mer tid och energi på det visuella och grafiska arbetet på sina albumomslag är oftast i många fall de som håller sig mest relevanta. Texter och låtar som påverkar folk och inspirerar till en hög grad är något som olika evenemang och prisutdelningar beaktar och därmed ökar artistens exponering till en bredare publik.

En blandning utav digital och litterära källor kom till användning. Eftersom Hip-Hop musiken är konstant en genre som utvecklas snabbt åt olika håll när det kommer till musiken och det visuella, likväl i all annan musik, så är Internet den starkaste källan för att ta reda på åsikter, tankar och diskussioner kring musiken. Jag förlitade mig mestadels på Hip-Hop relaterade nyhetssidor med tanke på att dom har mest erfarenhet inom genren och en viss annan typ av förståelse samt kunskap utav musiken och kulturen. Sidor som t ex Complex och HipHopDX kom mycket till god användning.

De litterära källorna vart jag har tagit inspiration ifrån hade mer information och kunskaper inom semiotiken. T ex. Roland Barthes beskriver i sin book Elements of Semiology:

” Semiotik siktar därför till att ta in ett system utav tecken, oavsett ämnen och gränser; bilder, gester, ljud, föremål och komplexa sammanslutningar av alla dessa, vilket skapar innehållet i ritual, konvention eller offentlig underhållning ”.

För att få en bättre helhet utav dessa tre album har jag satt ihop de mest konkreta teman och budskap de vill nå ut till lyssnaren. Tidslinjen från Things Fall Apart till To Pimp a Butterfly är 16 år. Mycket har hänt inom Hip-Hop musiken både musikaliskt och visuellt men även politiskt samt samhällsutvecklingen inom både USA och internationellt. :

The Roots – Things Fall Apart

Temat och budskapen kringgår för det mesta på en internationell nivå.

Nyckelord: Andlighet, kärlek, rädsla, kunskap och visdom

50 Cent – Get Rich or Die Tryin'

Temat och budskapen kringgår för det mesta inom USA då de flesta utav 50 Cent's referenser är relaterade till popärkultur samt rappare.

Nyckelord: Rädsla, överlevnads instinkter, ghetto, lyxig livsstil samt ilska

Kendrick Lamar – To Pimp a Butterfly

Temat och budskapen kringgår för det mesta inom USA. De nämns bland annat om slaveri, att vara mörkhyad i USA, mental hälsa, depression, rädsla och kärlek.

Nyckelord: Slaveri, Afroamerikan, rädsla, mental hälsa, kärlek, andlighet samt historia

Albumomslag och Hip-Hop kulturen samt dess musik går hand i hand. Men detta behöver inte i allmänhet gälla för alla. Med utvecklingen utav Internet och hur många som har tillgång till det så har det använts mycket som ett verktyg för ens egna sätt att uttrycka sin konst med. Nutida eller yngre generationen utav rappare har ämnen och budskap inom områden som de flesta tonåringar och unga vuxna går igenom i sitt liv, medans de äldre generationen hade en mer klar ton och budskap i sin musik med mycket referenser till samhället och levnad. Vad som har märkts under arbetets gång men även personligen vid sidan om är att en stark album omslag med kraftig budskap, bra design och visuellt behagligt att titta på är ofta de album som slutligen hörs mest och får mycket beröm samt visad uppskattning inte bara från Hip-Hop kulturen i sig

men även på olika prisutdelningar samt evenemang. Dessa album tenderar också även ha lyrik som kopplar till folk utav olika generationer, åldrar och bakgrunder, samt att omslaget i sig ger en stark referens och uttrycker vart artisten eller bandet befinner sig just nu kreativt men även spirituellt.

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