

Apr 20th, 3:20 PM - 3:40 PM

## Sing About Me: Kendrick Lamar in Posterity

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Apol, Brandon, "Sing About Me: Kendrick Lamar in Posterity" (2016). *The Research and Scholarship Symposium*. 16.  
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## Promise That You Will Sing About Me: Kendrick Lamar and Posterity

Sometimes it would seem that the quietest moments turn out to have the loudest repercussions. This would certainly seem to be a consistent case for twenty eight-year old Kendrick Lamar, whose career has been defined by surprise and unannounced publications of music that shortly afterward are spun wildly into massively respected works of art. With an album that no one anticipated going to the 2013 Grammy awards, an album that leaked a week ahead of schedule (and brought Kendrick 5 Grammys), and an album that was released with almost no warning whatsoever, Kendrick Lamar Duckworth makes headlines with his art; of this there is no doubt.

The question, however, as posed by Kendrick himself, is this: "And I hope that at least one of you sing about me when I'm gone; Am I worth it? Did I put enough work in?"<sup>1</sup> I would like to argue that Kendrick Lamar belongs in music history textbooks of the future because of his performance abilities, intellectual and lyrical content (particularly relative to his peers), musical push within the rap genre, and his position with critics and fans alike.

Kendrick Lamar Duckworth has been rapping since he was thirteen years old.<sup>2</sup> Born in Compton, California in 1987, Kendrick was raised by parents who moved to Los Angeles to escape gang-oriented neighborhoods in the native Chicago. Unfortunately, shortly afterwards, Compton turned into one of the most violent neighborhoods in North America, and Kendrick was forced to grow up in that environment. At school in Los Angeles, Kendrick discovered poetry in seventh grade, thanks to an English teacher.<sup>3</sup> He began writing profusely, and discovered he was good at it, too; as a rapper, he was good enough to get signed to a record label at the age of sixteen under the moniker "K-Dot." He began working with Top Dawg Entertainment in Los Angeles, producing music himself and rapping over tracks produced by Top Dawg

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<sup>1</sup> Duckworth, Kendrick Lamar, writer. Sing About Me/Dying of Thirst. Kendrick Lamar. Dr. Dre, 2012, MP3.

<sup>2</sup> Ahmed, Insanul. "Kendrick Lamar Interview: Turn the Page 2014 Cover Story | Complex." Complex.com. August/September 2014. Accessed February 17, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Eels, Josh. "The Trials of Kendrick Lamar. (cover story)." Rolling Stone no. 1231 (March 26, 2015): 40.

Entertainment's in-house production team, Tha Bizness. He remained relatively unknown for a while afterwards, though, until 2012, when he released his platinum selling album *Good Kid, m.A.A.d City* with Aftermath and Interscope Records.<sup>4</sup> His entire discography includes 2011's *Section.80*, 2012's *Good Kid, M.A.A.d City*, 2015's *To Pimp A Butterfly*, and this year's *untitled.unmastered*.

It was for this album that Kendrick was first known, but since then, Kendrick has become increasingly known as a performer as well. Having toured with a variety of other large artists before headlining on his own, Kendrick has shown up on a variety of stages in the last six months, including performances on *The Colbert Report*, *Saturday Night Live!*, the *Ellen* show, *Jimmy Fallon*, the BET Awards, and the Grammy Awards. He is considered to be one of the "Greatest of All Time" by Complex magazine<sup>5</sup> and one of the top ten rappers of all time by Billboard.<sup>6</sup> He's also Complex's Best Rapper Alive currently.<sup>7</sup>

As a performer, Kendrick is known for constantly giving a message, or have underlying meaning to his behavior. For example, in his 2015 BET Awards performance, he performed his Grammy-Award winning single "Alright" live on television. While the lyrics of the song are a cultural statement all by themselves, he performed atop a police car that was damaged. The statement was not, as *Fox News* anchor Geraldo Rivera stated, to "incite violence" but to draw attention to systematic racism and police brutality.<sup>8</sup> In 2016, at the annual Grammy Awards Show, Kendrick showed up on stage dressed in prison clothes with handcuffs on and performed

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<sup>4</sup> "Kendrick Lamar." Interscope Records. Accessed March 23, 2016. <http://www.interscope.com/kendricklamar/videos>.

<sup>5</sup> Ahmed, Insanul. "The Best Rapper Alive, Every Year Since 1979." Complex. January 5, 2016. Accessed April 25, 2016. <http://www.complex.com/music/2016/01/the-best-rapper-alive-every-year-since-1979/>.

<sup>6</sup> Billboard Staff. "Best Rappers List | Greatest of All Time | Billboard." Billboard. December 11, 2015. Accessed April 25, 2016. <http://www.billboard.com/photos/6723017/the-10-best-rappers-of-all-time/1>.

<sup>7</sup> Ahmed, Insanul. "The Best Rapper Alive, Every Year Since 1979."

<sup>8</sup> Minsker, Evan. "Fox News Pundits Claim Kendrick Lamar's BET Awards Performance 'Incites Violence'" Pitchfork. June 30, 2015. Accessed March 21, 2016.

one of his untitled tracks from March's *untitled.unmastered*.<sup>9</sup> The goal was to display cultural bias and to fight against systemic racism.

Within hip hop specifically, Kendrick is not known for his music or message. Rather, he is primarily known for his lyrical prowess and depth in reflecting his daily life experiences in a relatable yet poetic way. Significantly, Kendrick has broken out of the hip hop world into the mainstream in a way that other rappers haven't, largely due to his lyrical capacities. This is made evident when one considers the fact that there are actual college classes, such as "Good Kids, Mad Cities" at Georgia Regent University, available to study 2012's *Good Kid, m.A.A.d City* as a literary work.<sup>10</sup> Kendrick is operating on a different level of poetic composition than his peers that allows audiences to handle his lyrics as analyzable poetry; the classes analyze his lyrics and compare them to literary works by James Joyce and James Baldwin.<sup>11</sup>

Beginning with his much less known debut *Section.80* from 2011, Kendrick Lamar has been making concept albums—each record is a full piece of art that tells a story. This is not a new thing—Kendrick is far from the first to make concept albums; the Beatles were one of the first rock groups to do so, followed famously by Pink Floyd (and preceded by every program symphony and opera before it)—but in terms of popularity, it has been since the 1980s that a concept album has done as well as *Good Kid, m.A.A.d City*. In addition, all of Kendrick's music is autobiographical, which makes it even wilder—his music not only reflects his life experience and philosophy, but it actually is his life experience and philosophy.

Kendrick's *Good Kid, m.A.A.d City* tells the story of his coming of age first and foremost. One of the many appreciable aspects of the album is the number of themes and stories Kendrick is telling at the same time with the record, and how they're all interwoven into a single

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<sup>9</sup> NPR Staff. "Kendrick Lamar: 'I Can't Change The World Until I Change Myself First'" NPR. December 29, 2015. Accessed February 17, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Jones, Jaleesa. "Georgia Students Study Kendrick Lamar for Class." USA TODAY College. September 01, 2014. Accessed February 17, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Stutz, Colin. "Kendrick Lamar Is Now the Subject of a College Course | SPIN." Spin. September 04, 2014. Accessed April 25, 2016. <http://www.spin.com/2014/09/kendrick-lamar-good-kid-maad-city-college-course/>.

metanarrative. According to Vice.com, *Good Kid, m.A.A.d City* is the story of how “K-Dot” grew up into Kendrick Lamar.<sup>12</sup> The acronym “m.A.A.d” stands for “my angry adolescence divided,” as well as “my angel on angel dust.” The first refers to Kendrick’s coming of age and the turmoil involved; the second refers to a bad drug trip Kendrick had (which he narrates in the album), leading to his disdain for and abstinence from drugs to this day.<sup>13</sup>

Confusingly, the album isn’t in perfect chronological order. It starts with an introduction and some backstory in *Sherane (Master Splinter’s Daughter)*, but begins to tell the backstory of where Kendrick grew up and how he lived with his friends in *B\*\*\*\**, *Don’t Kill My Vibe* and *Backseat Freestyle*. After that, it introduces us to the inciting event and begins the story with *The Art of Peer Pressure*. Along with that piece, *Compton* and *Sherane* are the real beginnings to the story, which adds to the confusion as they are the last and first tracks on the record, respectively. K-Dot transitions to Kendrick through *Poetic Justice*, *Good Kid*, and *m.A.A.D City*. Lastly, Kendrick completing the transition to adulthood through *Money Trees*, *Swimming Pools*, and *Sing About Me/Dying of Thirst*. He looks back on what’s occurred in *Real* and *Compton*, which has audio from a skit at the end of it that chronologically occurs before anything else in the entire album (which allows you to put the album on loop and listen over and over again).

Beyond just a powerful published product, Kendrick’s writing process as far as his raps are concerned is very different than other rappers. As a general studio rule, rappers precompose what they’re going to record, write it down, and then rap it. If they do not write it down, it is called “freestyling,” and they make it up as they go along. Kendrick is different, though. In the context of a concept album, Kendrick Lamar mentally composes each verse as a

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<sup>12</sup>Bassil, Ryan. "The Narrative Guide To Kendrick Lamar's 'good Kid, m.A.A.d City'." Noissey.Vice. April 27, 2013. Accessed April 05, 2016. [http://noissey.vice.com/en\\_uk/blog/the-narrative-guide-to-kendrick-lamars-good-kid-mad-city](http://noissey.vice.com/en_uk/blog/the-narrative-guide-to-kendrick-lamars-good-kid-mad-city).

<sup>13</sup> Martins, Chris. "Kendrick Lamar: 'm.A.A.d.' Stands For 'Me, an Angel on Angel Dust' | SPIN." Spin. October 19, 2012. Accessed April 05, 2016. <http://www.spin.com/2012/10/kendrick-lamar-maad-stands-for-angel-dust/>.

whole, raps the whole thing, and generally doesn't write any of it down.<sup>14</sup> In addition, his live performance often includes freestyling. Kendrick was actually signed to his first record label after he walked into the studio and freestyled for two full hours at the age of sixteen.<sup>15</sup> The closest comparable musical composition would be an improvised Bach organ fugue, where multiple threads of an idea exist in a variety of forms simultaneously and end regularly and cadentially. Kendrick's ability to compose in a manner that ties in with his overall theme, message, concept, or story while rhyming and fitting the music rhythmically is a similar action in terms of complexity, musicality, and art.

*Good Kid, m.A.A.d City* follows the lyrics and messages musically as a concept album. The main story of the album goes like this: young "K-Dot," as he is nicknamed as a child, wants to have sex with a girl named Sherane, whose cousins run in one of the two major Compton gangs, the Bloods or the Crips. When he arrives to get with her, the cousins shove K-Dot around and send him away humiliated. After he gets with his friends later, they rob a house, get drunk, and then decide to get revenge with a drive-by shooting. At the shooting, the cousins shoot back, and one of Kendrick's friends is killed. The boys drive away and begin to try and cope as the body is dealt with; musically and thematically at this point, Kendrick's mental processes move from boy to man. As they deal with the loss of a brother, a woman (voiced by Maya Angelou, internationally acclaimed author and civil rights activist)<sup>16</sup> who is one of Kendrick's wise neighbors tells the boys they need "holy water," and prays the sinner's prayer with them.<sup>17</sup> After this, Kendrick reflects on everything, having become a real man, and then

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<sup>14</sup> Ahmed, Insanul. "Kendrick Lamar Interview: Turn the Page 2014 Cover Story | Complex." Complex.com. August/September 2014. Accessed February 17, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Hopper, Jessica. "Kendrick Lamar: Not Your Average Everyday Rap Savior | SPIN - Page 3." Spin. October 09, 2012. Accessed March 19, 2016.

<sup>16</sup>Duckworth, Kendrick Lamar. "[Skit/Outro] Sing About Me/I'm Dying of Thirst." Genius. Accessed April 05, 2016. <http://genius.com/1147929>.

<sup>17</sup>Duckworth, Kendrick Lamar, writer. Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst. Kendrick Lamar. Sounwave, THC, Terrace Martin, 2012, MP3.

decides that he's going to give back to the community of Compton with what he gets as a rap artist, be it financially or in terms of wisdom.<sup>18</sup>

As previously mentioned, when put in chronological order, the album musically follows the lyrical content in terms of musical color. The tracks *Compton* and *Sherane* are much lighter musically than much of the rest of the album, though *Sherane* is in a minor key, showing foreshadowing of what is to come and nodding to Kendrick's past. *B\*\*\*\**, *Don't Kill My Vibe* and *Backseat Freestyle* reflect a high school lightheartedness and naïveté with their simpler, repetitive beats and catchy, singable hooks. Things start darkening in *The Art of Peer Pressure* and intensify in *Good Kid* and *m.A.A.d City*. Those songs have some of the darkest sounds on the album. Perhaps the darkest part of the record is *Swimming Pools*, which is where Kendrick is dealing with his actions and is on the way to the drive-by shooting where his friend is shot and killed. Particularly interesting is the ending on the album version of the song; the extended version includes an extra verse. The transition to that verse however, includes a washy, reverb-laden, interrupted interlude where a disjointed, chopped up voice says the name "Sherane," several times, embodying everything young Kendrick desires but that is wrong for him to desire as Kendrick realizes what's wrong as the hook of *Swimming Pools* continues playing without ever completing. Kendrick is about to be rudely awakened to the problems in his life. It is at the end of this verse that the drive-by shooting occurs and Kendrick's friend is shot.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps the most important thing to look at is current critical acclaim of Kendrick Lamar's music when discussing his longevity and influence. Both *Good Kid, m.A.A.d City* and *To Pimp A Butterfly* have been called instant classics by a variety of sources.<sup>20</sup> He's performed on a host of shows and stages. He's also one of very few rappers to go platinum in the last 15

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<sup>18</sup>Duckworth, Kendrick Lamar. *Good Kid, m.A.A.d City*. Los Angeles: Interscope & Aftermath, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Duckworth, Kendrick Lamar. *Good Kid, m.A.A.d City*.

<sup>20</sup> Ahmed, Insanul. "The Making of Kendrick Lamar's "good Kid, m.A.A.d City"" Complex. October 23, 2012. Accessed March 14, 2016.

years, having been certified platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America for both *Good Kid, m.A.A.d City* and *To Pimp A Butterfly*.

The final defining factor in an artist's influence and longstanding status as a creator of music is the artist's interactions with culture and reactions with posterity. In the case of Kendrick Lamar, it is too soon to see what posterity makes of his music. However, current culture can be observed, and culture has definitely taken his music strongly. Several examples of this can be seen recently, in particular since Kendrick has grown increasingly political with his lyrical content.

Before delving into this political commentary of Kendrick's, keep in mind his background. One of Kendrick's first concrete memories about growing up was the Rodney King riots of spring 1992.<sup>21</sup> Young Kendrick grew up in a city that was filled with chaos because of police brutality, and those are the lenses he sees the police through. His lyrics have been political for a long time on a variety of levels because he's seen so much of the consequences and repercussions of political decisions firsthand.

The start of his cultural commentary began on 2011's *Section.80*, continued on *Good Kid, m.A.A.d City* and blossomed on 2015's *To Pimp A Butterfly*. Among others, *Section.80* included a track entitled "F\*ck Your Ethnicity," which opened with this lyric: "I recognize all of you. Every creed and color. With that being said... f\*\*\* your ethnicity. You understand that? We gon' talk about a lot of s\*\*\* that concerns you. All of you." On *To Pimp a Butterfly*, the track entitled *The Blacker the Berry* was the first really deeply political piece of Kendrick's, as it was Kendrick's response and reflection on the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012.<sup>22</sup> Released ahead of *To Pimp A Butterfly* as a single, the song, like many of his culturally oriented commentaries, is more oriented around how he personally has handled and thought about topics such as racism

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<sup>21</sup> Eells, Josh. "The Trials of Kendrick Lamar. (cover story)." *Rolling Stone* no. 1231 (March 26, 2015): 40. MasterFILE Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed February 17, 2016).

<sup>22</sup>Duckworth, Kendrick Lamar, writer. *The Blacker the Berry*. Kendrick Lamar. Dr. Dre, 2015, MP3.

and injustice. The song did fairly well on it's own when it was released, but didn't really snowball into much culturally.

Two months later, in March, the entirety of *To Pimp A Butterfly* was released a week before the scheduled release date. On that record, Kendrick released *Alright*, a song about hope amidst negative circumstances. It was released later for radio play on June 30, 2015, and ultimately was the most successful of any of Kendrick's singles from the album. The hook to the song goes, "I'm f\*\*\*ed up / Homie you f\*\*\*ed up / But if God got us we then gon' be alright / Nigga, we gon' be alright." This particular lyric has since been used in a variety of situations and locales as an anthem of hope and overcoming.

The first example of this occurred in late July of 2015.<sup>23</sup> At a Black Lives Matter event in Cleveland, Ohio, policemen removed a 14-year old kid from a bus and assertively put him into a police vehicle. The crowd surrounded the car and prevented the police from leaving. As they surrounded the vehicle, however, the crowd began to chant, "We gon' be alright, we gon' be alright, we gon' be alright."<sup>24</sup> A similar event transpired in Washington, D.C. at the 20th anniversary of the Million Man March. A crowd marching to make a political statement for racial equality among other things chanted the lines, "We gon' be alright," repeatedly as they marched.<sup>25</sup> Most recently, protesters at a Donald Trump rally in Chicago, Illinois repeated the lyrics, using them to make a statement about the character of Trump as well as those he represents.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Haltiwanger, John. "How Kendrick Lamar Is Proof Hip-Hop Can Influence Society In Big Ways." *Elite Daily* How Kendrick Lamar Is Proof HipHop Can Influence Society In Big Ways Comments. August 03, 2015. Accessed April 05, 2016. <http://elitedaily.com/news/politics/kendrick-lamar-hip-hop-black-lives-matter/1156751/>.

<sup>24</sup> Piffin, Blake. "Police Harassment Leads to Crowd Singing Kendrick Lamar's 'Alright'" YouTube. July 28, 2015. Accessed April 05, 2016. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUC\\_DOhfzwQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUC_DOhfzwQ).

<sup>25</sup> Rossignol, Derrick. "Crowd Chants Kendrick Lamar's 'Alright' At D.C. Million Man March." *Pigeons Planes*. October 10, 2015. Accessed April 05, 2016. <http://pigeonsandplanes.com/2015/10/kendrick-lamar-alright-million-man-march/>.

<sup>26</sup> Brown, Harley. "Protesters at Chicago Donald Trump Rally Chant Kendrick Lamar's 'Alright' | SPIN." *Spin*. March 12, 2016. Accessed March 14, 2016. <http://www.spin.com/2016/03/donald-trump-rally-chicago-kendrick-lamar-alright-video-watch/>.

To add to the substantial cultural interaction between audiences and Kendrick, United States president Barack Obama stated in December 2015 that Kendrick's *How Much A Dollar Cost?* was his favorite song of 2015.<sup>27</sup> Ironically, Kendrick called Obama out in his song *Hood Politics*, claiming that Obama was ineffectual while comparing the Compton gangs to Washington's political parties.<sup>28</sup>

Beyond his lyrics, Kendrick's musical capacities are truly what make him unique amongst rappers. Insanul Ahmed, journalist and editor for Complex Magazine and Genius.com, says in an interview:

"I think it's important to note that great rappers tend to have the worst influence. Kendrick—just like Jay Z and Kanye and Eminem and all the greats—is a gifted artist. But it's hard to emulate his incredible gifts as an actual performer, but it's always easy to copy a style. It's hard to rap as well as Jay Z, but it's easy to say you don't write your rhymes and throw in references to Cristal. It's hard to rap as well as Wu-Tang, but it's easy to just give yourself 12 nicknames. It's easy to get a Snapchat just because DJ Khaled is on it, but it's hard to be as entertaining as he is. And so forth. This is why Kanye is so influential; it's more than just the rapping, it's also the beats, the fashion, the worldview—all of which can be imitated. But for Kendrick, I think that's much harder because he's not really known for any gimmicks—he's all about the music and nothing else. Rapping like Kendrick? You have to be an A+ talent to get to his level, and even then it's hard. It's why, in the wake of Eminem, you see so many white rappers. But none of them even come close to Em on a lyrical and commercial level because it's just really

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<sup>27</sup>Gordon, Jeremy. "President Obama Says Kendrick Lamar's "How Much a Dollar Cost" Was His Favorite Song of 2015." Pitchfork. December 9, 2015. Accessed April 05, 2016. <http://pitchfork.com/news/62469-president-obama-says-kendrick-lamars-how-much-a-dollar-cost-was-his-favorite-song-of-2015/>.

<sup>28</sup>Duckworth, Kendrick Lamar, writer. Hood Politics. Kendrick Lamar. Tae Beast, Sounwave, Thundercat, 2015, MP3.

hard and Em is just a really special artist. I think Kendrick falls into that Em/Nas category where it's just hard to be like him."<sup>29</sup>

Ahmed is saying that while these other artists are all incredible rappers, they all also have some sort of quirk or style that rappers can look up to and imitate. For example, Kanye is a multifaceted public figure; not only is he known as a producer and rapper, he also has a huge social media presence, clothing line, and is married to actress and model Kim Kardashian. Eminem was a great rapper, but his quirk was that he was white; after he went big, a host of other white rappers tried their hand. Ahmed is saying that Kendrick is different because he doesn't have personal quirks or cultural phenomena that contribute to his musical success like the other names listed do. Kendrick's success stands solely and squarely on his music alone.

Labelmate and fellow rapper Ab-Soul remarks of Kendrick's early projects: "[Kendrick] was recording full songs with hooks and bridges and melodies and things to keep the crowd. He was not just interested in being the best rapper, he was making songs that the world could sing."<sup>30</sup> Kendrick's music has progressively grown as he has grown, reflecting his maturing as both a rapper and human being. On *Section.80*, Kendrick's music follows much more regular schematics and structures, often consisting of an introduction of some sort, some rapping, a hook, more rapping, a revisiting of the hook, a third verse, and a final reiteration of the hook. *Good Kid, m.A.A.D City* began visiting more of his now signature style, where a variety of style changes, instrumentational rearrangements, subtle jazz influences, and pieces that are split into what sounds like two separate songs on one mp3 track appear. On *To Pimp A Butterfly*, these stylistic aspects become further developed, as Kendrick employs swung rhythms, extraneous jazz instrumentation, augmented song structures with multiple tempo and style changes in each piece, and spoken word sections. He also samples substantially less on *To Pimp A Butterfly*

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<sup>29</sup> Insanul Ahmed, e-mail message to author, April 13, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Hopper, Jessica. "Kendrick Lamar: Not Your Average Everyday Rap Savior | SPIN - Page 3." Spin. October 09, 2012. Accessed March 19, 2016.

than he does on either of his previous records, and doesn't sample at all on *untitled.unmastered*.

One reason Kendrick doesn't sample as much on newer recordings is because he relies more heavily on his producers to write music, who include Sounwave (whom Kendrick has worked with for years and has been part of Kendrick's label's core group of producers since Kendrick first signed with Top Dawg Entertainment), Flying Lotus (Alice Coltrane's grand-nephew), and even young Egypt, the five-year-old son of Alicia Keys and Swizz Beats.<sup>31</sup> In fact, the production crew for *To Pimp A Butterfly* includes a host of producers; again, Sounwave, Flying Lotus, saxophonist Terrace Martin, Columbus Smith (aka Rahki), Pharell Williams, Taz Arnold, Thundercat, Tae Beast, and LoveDragon.<sup>32</sup> On top of this, a variety of musicians were hired for the jazz sections; tenor sax star Kamasi Washington, bassist Thundercat, funk legend George Clinton, Grammy-award winning jazz pianist Robert Glasper and drummer Robert "Sput" Searight all make appearances across the album, and producer and creative contributor Terrace Martin adds multiple parts of horns and alto saxophone. It is worthwhile to note that, perhaps symbiotically, Kamasi Washington, Thundercat, and Flying Lotus have all managed to garner substantial attention as successful neo-jazz artists in the last two years.<sup>33</sup> Kendrick's success has certainly helped launch their careers to new levels; for example, Kamasi Washington was a relatively unknown saxophone player in Los Angeles until he played with Kendrick Lamar, and his 2015 triple-record *The Epic* was NPR's top jazz album of 2015.<sup>34</sup> Flying Lotus already had a successful career as a producer, but his collaboration with Kendrick

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<sup>31</sup> Genius. "Untitled Unmastered. by Kendrick Lamar." Genius. 2016. Accessed April 25, 2016. <http://genius.com/albums/Kendrick-lamar/Untitled-unmastered>.

<sup>32</sup> Genius. "Kendrick Lamar – To Pimp a Butterfly [Credits]." Genius. 2015. Accessed April 25, 2016. <http://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-to-pimp-a-butterfly-credits-lyrics>.

<sup>33</sup> Weiner, Natalie. "Way Out West: How Flying Lotus, Kamasi Washington, and Brainfeeder Are Bringing Jazz Back to the People." NOISEY. July 29, 2015. Accessed April 25, 2016. <http://noisy.vice.com/blog/brainfeeder-jazz-flying-lotus-kamasi-washington-thundercat>.

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.npr.org/sections/world-cafe/2015/12/14/459356360/david-dyes-top-10-albums-of-2015>

on 2014's *You're Dead!* led to substantial attention for him as well.<sup>35</sup> This all goes to show that Kendrick is both musically unique and fluid, as not only is he independently able to succeed and make distinctive music, but his session musicians are competent and successful cutting edge composers in their own respective genres. Additionally, Insanul Ahmed states that "I will say, in my personal experience, after *good kid* came out, every time a rapper would come to the Complex office to play me their album, for a while they'd ALWAYS mention *good kid*. Like, 'you know albums are wack these days, except for *good kid*' or 'I would compare this album to like Kendrick's *good kid*.'"<sup>36</sup> Kendrick is clearly musically influencing his posterity and building a legacy for himself.

All of this is fine and well, but from the perspective of one looking to prove that Kendrick Lamar specifically is worth remembering, none of this is terribly relevant unless one takes into consideration the degree to which Kendrick collaborates with his producers and musicians on his projects. In an interview with Insanul Ahmed, Kendrick Lamar says of his writing process and involvement with producing tracks: "I'm very hands-on [with producers] and that's why my projects come out so cohesive. I don't just go out there and just find a bunch of instrumentals and rap over them. I have a specific sound in my head I want to convey. I really sit down with producers, I come up with ideas, and give them ideas. Truthfully, I should get some co-production on these tracks."<sup>37</sup> Kendrick is known to work abnormally closely with his musicians and producers and draw musical inspiration from a variety of locations when sampling. According to Top Dawg Entertainment's in-house producer J-Hen, "Kendrick started out in the background working with producers and doing hooks so he already developed himself as a producer in his own right. When we get with him, he'll tell you what sounds he likes, what vibe

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<sup>35</sup> Weiner, Natalie. "Way Out West: How Flying Lotus, Kamasi Washington, and Brainfeeder Are Bringing Jazz Back to the People." NOISEY. July 29, 2015. Accessed April 25, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Insanul Ahmed, e-mail message to author, April 13, 2016.

<sup>37</sup> Ahmed, Insanul. "The Making of Kendrick Lamar's "good Kid, M.A.A.d City"" Complex. October 23, 2012. Accessed March 14, 2016. <http://www.complex.com/music/2012/10/the-making-of-kendrick-lamars-good-kid-maad-city/>.

he's looking for. That's what inevitably made him so big. The fact that he's been able to create his own sound even with all the producers that he has worked with, he's been able to get his sound out of them. With us, with some of the songs we worked on prior to having this one selected for the album—they're all across the board. He's starting to nitpick exactly what he wanted from us so we gave it to him."<sup>38</sup>

A last musical aspect of Kendrick's work in more recent time has been his imitative style on *untitled.unmastered*. When I first heard the record there were a couple times where I felt as if Kendrick was mocking or imitating the styles of other rappers, particularly Drake and Chance the Rapper. Kendrick and Drake have had a competitive relationship for a long time as they are both currently considered to be the top rappers in hip hop right now, and it totally makes sense for Kendrick to take a subtle dig at Drake. It is unclear, however, if Kendrick is mocking Drake or simply displaying superior ability by mastering one of Drake's signature musical moves. Drake has a tendency to move upward in pitch and increase in volume abruptly to fill out his sound and emphasize his music, holding the range and dynamic for an extended period of time. Musically, this augments longer raps, allowing Drake to keep musical interest for a longer period of time. In *untitled.02 (06.23.14)*<sup>39</sup> at two and a half minutes into the track Kendrick jumps up and sounds distinctly like Drake does on pieces like *Worst Behavior* or *6 God*.<sup>40</sup> It has been debated as to whether or not Kendrick was mocking Drake directly; the track was made in June of 2014, after *Worst Behavior* but before *6 God*, which has the most similarities to *untitled.02 (6.23.14)*. However, regardless of Kendrick's intentions, he did manage to master that sound. This act of displaying musical capacity and, at worst, equality with Drake's work proves that Kendrick is either superior to Drake or on par with him in terms of creativity.

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<sup>38</sup> Ahmed, Insanul. "The Making of Kendrick Lamar's "good Kid, M.A.A.d City."

<sup>39</sup> Duckworth, Kendrick Lamar. *untitled.02 (6.23.14)*. Kendrick Lamar. Yung Exclusive, Cardo, 2016, MP3. 2:30.

<sup>40</sup> Staff, Noisey. "Here's Everything We Know About Kendrick Lamar's 'untitled Unmastered.'" NOISEY. March 04, 2016. Accessed April 25, 2016. <http://noisey.vice.com/blog/heres-everything-we-know-about-kendrick-lamars-untitled-unmastered-on-one-webpage>.

Musically, *untitled.unmastered* is more varied than previous records. A compilation of apparent b-sides from the sessions for *To Pimp A Butterfly*, Kendrick expands even further with his musical draws. Similarly to Stravinski, Handel, or other great composers, Kendrick has a way of ingesting musical styles and making them his own, constantly pushing the envelope of sound. On *To Pimp A Butterfly*, Kendrick Lamar displayed propensities for both free-jazz and funk on *For Free? (Interlude)* and *King Kunta*, as well as more conventional hip hop styles on *The Blacker the Berry* and *Alright*. On *untitled.unmastered*, Kendrick covers a blend of soul and bossa nova (*untitled.06*), more funk (*untitled.04*), trap (*untitled.02*), and the unique groove young Egypt came up with on *untitled.07*. It is also worthwhile to note that on tracks such as *untitled.07*, there is what feels like contemporary classical influence, especially at the very end of the song.

In conclusion, Kendrick Lamar deserves a spot in music history textbooks because of his capacities as a performer, his concept albums and the depth with which he tells his story, his impact on culture, and his proven ability to push the sounds of a genre. Kendrick is exploring the boundaries of hip hop in a host of ways; culturally, he is being absorbed and engaged by political and social movements in incredible ways. Musically, he is influencing those who come after, as rappers are looking up to *good kid, m.A.A.d City* as the new record to beat and *To Pimp A Butterfly* as line-defying. Additionally, he has brought neo-jazz to a podium it hasn't previously seen, sending careers of individuals such as Kamasi Washington into the stratosphere. His performance capacities have earned him international stages, television appearances, and arena-filling tours. And as a rapper, Kendrick's concept albums are reaching unparalleled popularity, the sweetheart of critics and fans alike; he's gone platinum and reached status with critics as the greatest. His influence, as presented here, will surely continue to push those who come after to fight for creativity within the vein he has created for himself.

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