

THE BIG IDEAS

Hustling

Blight to bright.

Poetry

"I paint with poems."

The Craft

Nothing written down? Wow.

Politics

And making it.

"What's Better Than..."

One billionaire? Two."



JAY-Z

Made in America

BY MICHAEL ERIC DYSON · ST. MARTIN'S PRESS © 2019 · 240 PAGES

"The American creed has been defined by countless thinkers and activists and politicians since the beginning of the nation as a set of ideals that govern our existence—an appreciation for the individual, a thirst for equality, the demand for liberty, the quest for justice. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1963, six years before Shawn Corey Carter was born, stood in Washington, D.C., on sacred civic ground in front of the Lincoln Memorial on the National Mall and dreamed out loud about an America that one day 'will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.' Through all of Jay's hustling, versifying, and politicking, the American creed as King expressed it is what the self-proclaimed King of New York has in his own way sought to embody. It is the right time to gauge JAY-Z's stride toward freedom as a cultural colossus and to take measure of his profoundly American desire to rise to the top here and around the globe while never forgetting the place and people from whence he came.

In many ways, this is JAY-Z's America as much as it is Obama's America, or Trump's America, or Martin Luther King, Jr.'s America, or Nancy Pelosi's America, or Maxine Water's America or Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez's America. JAY-Z has given this country a language to speak with, ideas to think through, and words to live by. His lyrics have shaped the self-understanding of a culture that grapples daily with racial and social justice. He is an important thinker and consequential artist, and instead of looking at hip hop or his life through the lens of, say, civil rights, or social respectability, or mainstream politics, it is time to see America through JAY-Z's eyes."

~ Michael Eric Dyson from *JAY-Z*

"Jay loses none of his sophistication in his strategy to say smart things in an accessible fashion. He layers his lyrics with multiple meanings: he waxes philosophical and poetic while keeping the party lights on."

~ Michael Eric Dyson

I got this book after reading Robin DiAngelo's [White Fragility](#). Michael wrote the foreword to that book. It was fantastic. I Googled him. Got a bunch of his books and started with this one.

Now, I think we should probably start this Note with my disclosure that I am so *not* up to speed on all things pop culture that I didn't even know JAY-Z and Beyoncé were married. (Hah.) ("That's like me!")

And, I think the only song of JAY-Z's that I'd listened to (/video I'd seen) before I read this book was [Empire State of Mind](#). (Laughing. At myself. What can I say? I don't get out much. :)

So... Michael Eric Dyson is one of America's premier public intellectuals and the author of a number of *New York Times* bestselling books including *Tears We Cannot Stop*.

He's also an ordained Baptist minister who got a Ph.D. in Religion from Princeton. And, he is a Professor of Sociology at Georgetown where he's taught classes on "[the fusion of politics, hip-hop and race relations](#)" including "Sociology of Hip-Hop."

He's also been teaching classes on JAY-Z and his poetry for years. As per the inside flap, the book is the fruit of a "decade of teaching the work of one of the greatest poets this nation has produced, as gifted a wordsmith as Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, and Rita Dove. But as a rapper, JAY-Z is sometimes not given the credit he deserves for just how great an artist he's been for so long."

I really enjoyed the book for a number of reasons. First, Michael is a brilliant, captivating writer. Second, JAY-Z is an equally brilliant, captivating subject for Michael's analysis. And, finally, as a white man trying to open my eyes to the realities of the racial issues in our culture, I found this book to be a perfect opportunity to deepen my perspective while appreciating two genius artists at work. If that sounds like fun, I think you'll enjoy the book as much as I did. Get the book [here](#).

As always, I'm excited to share a handful of my favorite Big Ideas with an emphasis on some practical wisdom we can apply to our lives Today, so let's jump straight in.

HUSTLING: BLIGHT → BRIGHT

"JAY-Z's hustling is a two-pronged affair. First, Jay raps about his former days as a hustler, making his former illicit activity, and the ill-gotten gains from his illegal enterprise, the subject of his present hustle. If the Supreme Court can declare that corporations are people and money is speech, then Jay is right to demand that, 'We can talk, but money talks, so talk mo' bucks,' in recognition that

*I'm not a businessman; I'm a business, man!
Let me handle my business, damn.*

That is the Hustler's Credo in a cunning couplet.

Second, Jay has fully transitioned from underground to aboveground economies, and thus has redeemed hustling as a positive behavior for himself and others like him. Jay in his bright hustling mode has not only turned repeatedly to hustling for artistic inspiration. He has also served as gifted interpreter of blight hustling's harsh necessities. He has argued that such hustling can't help but occur in a country that sees its dark citizens as disposable. But he has been careful also to lament the fatal downside of hustling."

That's from Chapter #1: "I'm the Definition of It." Definition of what? *Hustling*.

Michael walks us through Jay's evolution from "blight" hustling to "bright" hustling. His "blight" hustling phase featured Jay selling crack cocaine while his "bright" hustling has featured him selling millions and millions of records en route to becoming the first hip hop billionaire (and the fifth wealthiest African American).

His story of overcoming near impossible odds is, of course, *epically* heroic.

And, as I read his story, I was struck by the astonishing parallels between JAY-Z and Adam Brown—another American hero we featured in the last book I read: *Fearless*. As we discussed in that Note, Adam Brown is one of the most highly-regarded heroes in Navy SEAL history. He, too, overcame impossible odds to achieve his legendary status. He didn't *deal* crack. He *used* it.

You know how they BOTH overcome those odds to give the world all they've got? HUSTLE.

In this chapter, Michael takes some time to chat about LeBron James and how he overcame equally staggering odds to establish himself as the greatest basketball player alive and another leading figure in social justice.

He tells us: "And even though one comes from hoops and the other from hip hop, LeBron's and JAY-Z's careers reveal a sublime convergence. They show the best way out of the ghetto is to use God-given talent and heroic hustle to relentlessly fight the inequality that holds back so many black folk."

He also tells us: *“There is little illusion, however, that their success offsets the vicious blowback to black progress. Nor does it singlehandedly counter deeply rooted racial injustice. To be sure, the bulk of poor black folk remain trapped in circumstances where poverty, social dislocation, shrinking government welfare, gang warfare, and other forms of chaotic violence persist. The heroic achievement of hip hop and athletic stars alike—and the reason their arcs of emergence and escape are similarly celebrated—is public recognition for their talent. And the recognition of their talent leads to a recognition of black talent in other arenas. Those who are in a position to hustle, to climb and strive because of education, find hope and inspiration to excel in their realms of pursuit because of LeBron and Jay’s narratives of success. Those who are left behind in poor neighborhoods project their desires and pin their hopes on those who escape.”*

As I read that, I wrote this in the margin to the left: [“Self-Efficacy 101.”](#)

As we’ve discussed, there’s a science to having belief in ourselves—what researchers call “self-efficacy.” There are a number of things that can boost that belief including past personal success, positive words/support from a coach or other mentor and your underlying physiological health.

And... Seeing someone else achieve the thing you want to achieve. That’s one of the reasons why heroes are so important. And why we need YOU to be a Hero for your family and friends and community and country. TODAY.

POETRY

“As strange as it may sound, JAY-Z is an underrated rapper. Yes, he is recognized for his swaggering self-confidence and astonishing verbal gifts. But he is not nearly as celebrated for his vivid and extremely sophisticated romp on poetry’s playground of metaphor and metonymy, simile and synecdoche. He is Robert Frost with a Brooklyn accent, Rita Dove with a Jesus piece.

Jay is a past master of American poesy. He composes in the recording studio with the tools of verse at hand. He is an architect of sound whose rhymes satisfy the ear. He is a painter of images whose visions flood the mind’s eye. He sketches verbal blueprints that map the black experience onto American rhetoric. As he makes his way to the recording booth, Jay stumbles over discarded stanzas, fumbles with multiple forms, trips on loitering tropes. He chisels away at the air until sound becomes sense and words are sculpted from mumbles. Meanwhile, Jay is ambushed by double entendres, and instead of turning them over to English authorities, he plays judge and jury and gives them long sentences.”

Those are the first words from Chapter #2 on “Poetry” called “I Paint with Poems.”

Note1: There are three chapters in the book. Chapter #1 is on “Hustling” and Chapter #3 is on “Politics.” Note2: As you can tell, Michael provides his own poetic genius to capture that of his friend JAY-Z—which is part of why this book is so good.

When I read that passage, I *immediately* thought of Stephen Pressfield and his book on [The Artist’s Journey](#) in which he shares his wisdom on the fact that, essentially, the creative process is all about connecting to our inner daimon— “shuttling” back and forth from the higher to lower levels as we create our art.

As he puts it: *“What exactly does an artist do? The writer, the dancer, the filmmaker ... what, precisely, does their work consist of? They shuttle from Level #1 to Level #2 and back again. That’s it. That’s their skill.”*

(As I’ve said many times before, if you’re an artist (and if you’re reading this you are), then I HIGHLY recommend all of Pressfield’s books on the creative process including [The War of Art](#), [Do the Work](#), [Turning Pro](#) and [Nobody Wants to Read Your Sh*t](#). We have Notes on all.)

So... You know who Pressfield uses to make his point? JAY-Z.

He tells us: “We said a few chapters ago that the artist’s skill is to shuttle from the material sphere to the sphere of potentiality and back again. Each one of those trips is a hero’s journey. Jay-Z in his studio may complete ten thousand hero’s journeys in a day. You do too. Ordinary World to The Call to Refusal of Call to Threshold to Extraordinary World and back again. Watch yourself today as you bang out your five hundred words. You’ll see the hero’s journey over and over.”

Back to YOU. How’s your shuttling? Here’s to the micro-Hero’s Journeys we get to take all day. Every day. ESPECIALLY TODAY.

THE CRAFT

“Jay’s sublime attraction to poetic and literary devices has been fed by thousands of hours of exercising his craft. That befits his admiration for Malcolm Gladwell, who popularized the notion that mastery is achieved with at least ten thousand hours of practice. Although he told Oprah in *O* magazine in 2009 that English was his favorite subject in high school, and that Homer’s *The Odyssey* left him feeling dreamy about life partnerships and the concept of returning home, Jay has had little formal training in the craft of writing poetry. His practice, still, has almost always been intentional, a reference to another of his favorite books that explores the spiritual dimensions of intentional living, Gary Zukav’s *The Seat of the Soul*.”

That’s also from the chapter analyzing JAY-Z’s poetry.

First, as I said in the intro, I’ve never listened to JAY-Z’s music. So, I found it especially striking to be exposed to his poetry for the first time in this format—on paper. It’s astonishing.

Here’s one of my favorites: “Son said, ‘Hov, how you get so fly? / I said: ‘From not being afraid to fall out of the sky.’”

And, here’s something else that’s astonishing: “As a writer, I find it astonishing that JAY-Z does not write down his lyrics. He does not impress paper with ink in order to impress his hearers with complex rhymes. He does not so much as scribble his thoughts on paper or type them on any surface or screen. Given the huge quantity and high quality of his oeuvre, his work is all the more remarkable.”

Pause and reflect on that for the moment. JAY-Z, arguably one of the best poets of all time, DOESN’T EVEN WRITE DOWN HIS LYRICS. (Wow.)

Michael also tells us: “Orality is a defining feature of black culture. The oral tradition of crafting and transmitting African American folktales was inherited by enslaved Africans from their continental forebears. These oral stories were designed to make sense of the brutal conditions foisted on black souls in the New World during the long siege of transatlantic slavery. Folktales from the African oral tradition seeped into the fabric of black expression and performance.”

You know what other epic prose was passed on via oral tradition? JAY-Z’s favorite: *The Odyssey*.

P.S. Check out our Notes on Malcolm Gladwell’s [Outliers](#)—the book in which he popularizes the “10,000 Hour” idea of mastery. And, check out our Notes on Anders Ericsson’s [Peak](#) for even more on the subject of tapping into our potential—straight from the source of the research.

Remember: “... the clear message from decades of research is that no matter what role innate genetic endowment may play in the achievements of ‘gifted’ people, the main gift that these people have is the same one we all have—the adaptability of the human brain and body, which they have taken advantage of more than the rest of us.”

<- In other words, they HUSTLED.

POLITICS

“On the 2010 song ‘Shiny Suit Theory,’ made by rapper Jay Electronica, who is signed to Jay’s Roc Nation record label, JAY-Z guest starred and flipped the tables on the therapeutic profession: instead of culturally incompetent shrinks treating black children, Jay puts psychiatry itself on the couch and gives it a rousing psychoanalytic read. Jay’s narrator sets the scene with a therapist receiving a report about Jay that concludes he is delusional for believing that he, a boy from the hood, could share a cover with Warren Buffett, as Jay did on Forbes magazine in 2010.

*In this manila envelope, the results of my insanity
Quack said I crossed the line ’tween real life and fantasy.*

... Clearly the psychiatrist represents white America and its attempts to convince black folk that we are loony for wanting to make it in America. ...

The therapist ‘scribbled a prescription for some Prozac,’ he said, ‘Take that for your mustard,’ since ‘you gotta be psychotic or mixing something potent with your vodka / It takes a lot to shock us but you being so prosperous is preposterous.’”

That’s from chapter #3 on “Politics” in which Michael walks us through a range of challenges JAY-Z has tackled through his art and entrepreneurship and philanthropy and activism.

That’s from a section addressing the overmedication of black kids.

Michael continues by saying: “*Wealth isn’t just the aspirational goal of the desperately poor, but speaks to a will to overcome, to resist, to rise from the back of the bus to hobnob with billionaires, to even believe that one might become a billionaire oneself someday. It is to combat racist forces that Jay asks how a ‘nappy headed boy from the projects / Be the apple of America’s obsession.’ Jay’s narrator doesn’t just fight back; he reverses the terms, underscores the racist rationalizations that deny black sanity and genius, and addresses the plague of overmedicating black kids. Certainly overmedicating children is a national concern as we address the side effects of drugs that accompany the diagnosis of psychiatric conditions. But the racial fallout is heightened when black kids, who are already victims of an unjust, resource-starved, two-tiered educational system, are subject to medical intervention apart from careful, compassionate, culturally aware talk therapy.*”

All of that is, of course, part of a *much* longer conversation. For now, high fives to JAY-Z and all those who have defied the odds as we remember this wisdom from John Eliot’s *Overachievement*: “*History, though, shows us that the people who end up changing the world—the great political, social, scientific, technological, artistic, even sports revolutionaries—are always nuts, until they’re right, and then they’re geniuses.*”

“WHAT’S BETTER THAN ONE BILLIONAIRE?”

“When white institutions and individuals ask for help (the request may or may not begin sincerely, but may evolve with more contact and better understanding), it is a good thing to supply it. Malcolm X once famously rebuffed a young white student who tracked him down in New York to ask what she could do to help the cause. His response took her aback: ‘Nothing.’ It makes for great theater and dramatic storytelling but it was the wrong answer.

Things are never ideal, and systems of white oppression co-opt us all: teachers, advocates, athletes, organizers. I don’t spare myself. I have spent nearly five decades—in speeches, books, and college courses—advocating for social justice. Yet I teach at Georgetown University, a school that sold 272 enslaved souls, including children, to bankroll its future. This is how the world works: All of us have blood on our hands and dirt beneath our nails, and we can scarcely afford to reject every institution we encounter as irretrievably tainted. The charge of being a sellout, and the instinct to ‘cancel’ people indicted in this way, often comes full circle. (Malcolm was

"Jay is teaching in a lot bigger classroom than I'll ever teach in . . . For a young person growing up he's the guy to learn from."

~ Warren Buffett

later deemed a traitor to his cause and murdered by members of his own group.) The language of betrayal cannot provide lasting moral satisfaction. Instead, as JAY-Z has amply provided, we need a vocabulary of moral accountability and social responsibility that is nuanced and capacious, giving us air to breathe and room to grow.

Jay's deal with the NFL represents a valid and potentially viable attempt to raise awareness of injustice to black folk, and to inspire the league to embrace just action for the black masses. Alongside scolding, resisting, protesting, and cajoling, there is a need for strategy, planning, listening, learning, and testing the application of principles embodied by people like Kaepernick.

The history of social justice advocacy is rich: King, Rosa Parks, the NAACP, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Freedom Riders, the Congress of Racial Equality, and a host of other organizations occasionally bickered over methods and messaging and strategy. But they were all motivated by grand ideals and good ends. Malcolm X, once he freed himself from his earlier narrow views, concluded that 'Dr. King wants the same thing I want—freedom!' So does Colin Kaepernick. So does JAY-Z. And so should we all."

Those are the penultimate words of the book—from the Epilogue: "What's Better Than One Billionaire?— in which Michael talks about Jay's decision to partner with the NFL. (btw: The answer to that question of "What's better than one billionaire?" is "Two (two) / 'Specially if they're from the same hue as you / Y'all stop me when I stop tellin' the truth.")

As I said in the intro, I got this book to not only soak up the poetic wisdom and hero's journey of one of the greatest poets/entrepreneurs/icons of all time, but to learn more about black culture.

As you can imagine, the book is densely packed with eye-opening insights into the white privilege I take for granted. The fact that Georgetown sold slaves to finance its operations is one of the many cringe-worthy, and heart-opening examples. The fact that a Jesuit school would own (and sell) slaves makes me shake my head in disbelief. I mean, the Jesuits are also known as "The Society of Jesus." Gah.

As a white man, I also very much appreciate Professor Dyson's fierce advocacy for social justice that invites constructive action from all of us to create the change we aspire to see in the world and I'm very much looking forward to reading more of his work. For now, here's to celebrating JAY-Z and the rise of a hero Made in America.

B

Brian Johnson,
Philosopher in Residence

About the Author of "JAY-Z"

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON



Michael Eric Dyson, named by Ebony as one of the hundred most influential black Americans, is the author of sixteen books, including *Holler if You Hear Me*, *Is Bill Cosby Right?* and *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King Jr.* He is currently University Professor of Sociology at Georgetown University. He lives in Washington, D.C.

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives so they can actualize their potential as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + practical tools. Learn more and optimize your life at optimize.me.

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