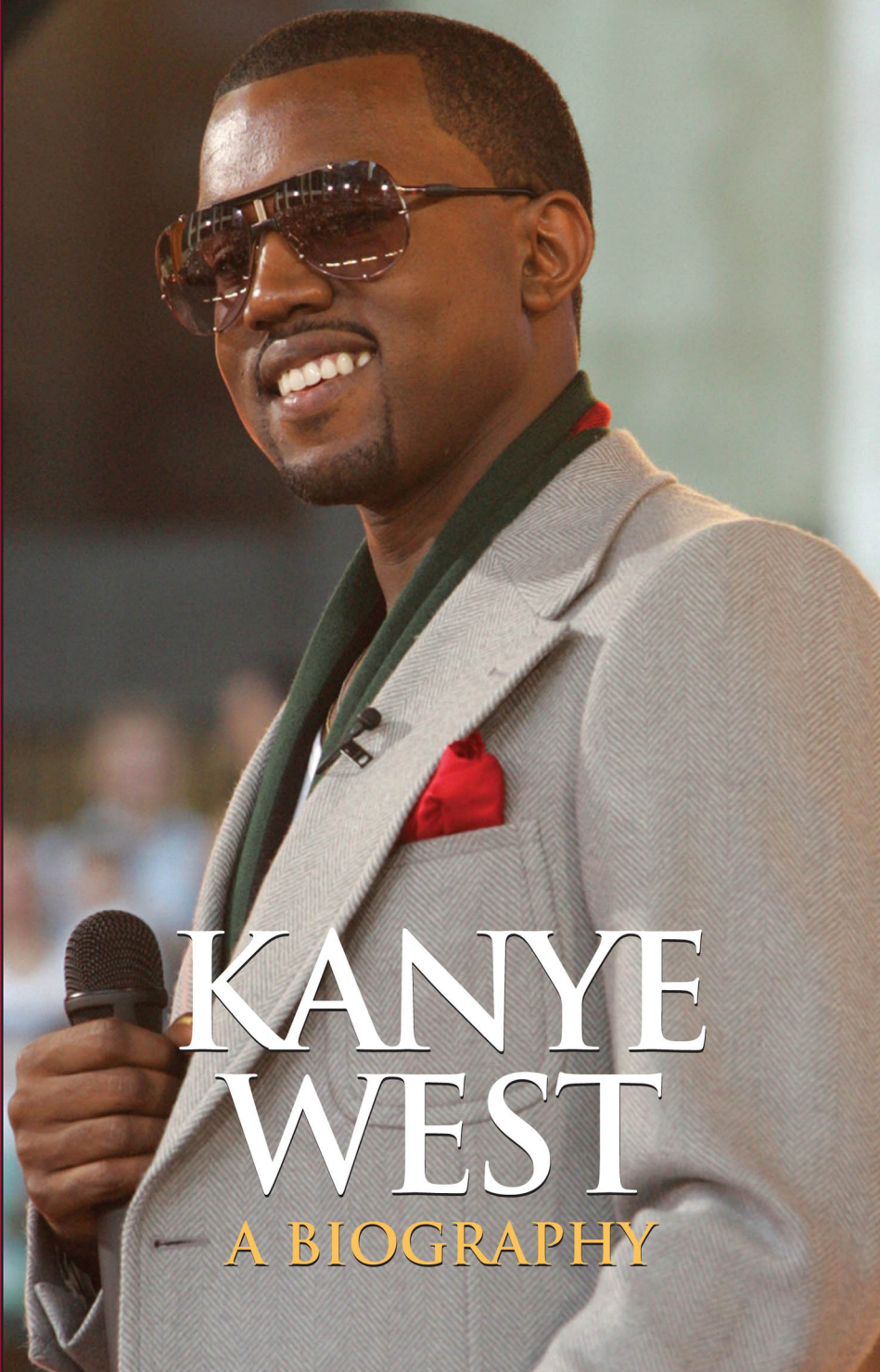


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SERIES FOREWORD

In response to high school and public library needs, Greenwood developed this distinguished series of full-length biographies specifically for student use. Prepared by field experts and professionals, these engaging biographies are tailored for high school students who need challenging yet accessible biographies. Ideal for secondary school assignments, the length, format, and subject areas are designed to meet educators' requirements and students' interests.

Greenwood offers an extensive selection of biographies spanning all curriculum-related subject areas, including social studies, the sciences, literature and the arts, history, and politics, as well as popular culture, covering public figures and famous personalities from all time periods and backgrounds, both historic and contemporary, who have made an impact on American or world culture. Greenwood biographies were chosen based on comprehensive feedback from librarians and educators. Consideration was given to both curriculum relevance and inherent interest. The result is an intriguing mix of the well known and the unexpected, the saints and sinners from long-ago history and contemporary pop culture. Readers will find a wide array of subject choices from fascinating crime figures like Al Capone to inspiring pioneers like Margaret Mead, from the greatest minds of our time like Stephen Hawking to the most amazing success stories of our day like J. K. Rowling.

While the emphasis is on fact, not glorification, the books are meant to be fun to read. Each volume provides in-depth information about the subject's life from birth through childhood, the teen years, and adulthood.

A thorough account relates family background and education, traces personal and professional influences, and explores struggles, accomplishments, and contributions. A timeline highlights the most significant life events against a historical perspective. Bibliographies supplement the reference value of each volume.

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Thanks to my son, Garrett Paul Schaller, for turning me on to hip-hop; to Professor Shannon Bichard, PhD, at Texas Tech, for explaining celebrity branding to me; and to librarian Carrye Syma for research assistance. And my deep appreciation to super agent Bob Diforio and Greenwood editor George Butler for making me make myself a better, more patient, and more thorough writer.

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INTRODUCTION

His name, his style, and the way he conducts his own business is unique. Yet Kanye West's upbringing is notably different from the pioneers of the hip-hop industry, and his wardrobe is more akin to something out of 90210 than a rap video.

So even when Kanye West (pronounced Con-yay, not Can-yee) calls himself one of a kind, he might be more accurate than even he himself realizes. In fact, his mother said that his first name, in Ethiopian, means "the only one,"¹ though others have claimed that is the name's meaning in Swahili. No matter, "one" is a familiar number to West. He has ascended to the top of the hip-hop charts, often battling head to head with established hip-hop heavyweights and always coming out on top when it comes to sales and hit singles. He started as a producer for the likes of Beanie Sigel, Alicia Keys, Ludacris, and Twista, and when he worked on Jay-Z's smash album *Blueprint*, Kanye West already had his own plans for a career as an artist.

Though he distanced himself from higher education as quickly as he could, against his mother's wishes, by dropping out of both the American Academy for the Arts and Chicago State University, he keeps his sense of humor about it, and his education is constantly part of his songs. His first three album titles were *The College Dropout*, *Late Registration*, and *Graduation*, all college-themed, and the little bear that appears on all three CD covers and his Web site, and which will likely be a big part of his brand-building and promotion, is affectionately referred to by Kanye as the "Dropout Bear." His charity work has included a big push through the foundation he created to keep minority students in school through junior

high, high school, and college, and has done charitable events with hurricane victims, for environmental causes, and to help veterans of the war in Iraq who were having a hard time getting on their feet once they got back to the United States and tried to move forward with their lives.

Yet he is not, like a lot of hip-hop artists, from what might be called a rough upbringing. Indeed, West is articulate and thoughtful and does not subscribe to the various gang conflicts and hip-hop wars, which have included real bullets and resulted in some of the top stars of the craft being killed in their prime.

“I think I might have some problems with being accepted and just really fitting in because, you know . . . there is a lot of things that are different about me,” West said. “I just don’t fit into, like, the cookie cutter, you know . . . who you’re supposed to be as a rapper or who you’re supposed to be as a black man or who you’re supposed to be as an entertainer, who you’re supposed to be as a celebrity, you know? I don’t, I don’t just follow those rules.”²

West’s “rap sheet” has only lyrics, not felonies or misdemeanors. Yet West told Jamie Foxx in a Business Network interview that he has to be aware of the gang element in hip-hop.

“I’ll only speak about it as lightly as possible, but the gangstas are a strong element in hip-hop that controls a lot of it,” West said. “I definitely feel like I avoid a lot of problems because I am with Roc-A-Fella Records. But what’s so crazy about the gangstas is they got star power and ’hood power at the same time.”³

However, when it comes to demanding respect and commanding attention, West is in the spotlight, whether it is shining on him or not. He draws as much attention for his responses to real or perceived “disses” as he does for his top-selling songs, taking over the stage at awards shows when his nomination fails to reap the top prize. The media has a field day with Kanye’s rants of self-righteousness, claiming he is stealing the attention from those who deserve it. But that’s West’s entire beef in a nutshell: he believes he is the one who deserves it, and he speaks out because of what he believes is the oversight, insincerity, and injustice of those who vote for the awards.

“I really believed in myself,” West said. “And you know, I want to just apologize to everybody out there who says I’m arrogant. I apologize to everybody for believing in myself.”⁴

He is as much MTV’s artistic star as he is the music network’s conscience and nemesis, calling out the network for exploiting stars who are struggling with personal and legal problems. He bites the hand that feeds him, in other words, and does not apologize because his comments come from deep-seated beliefs, not the spur-of-the-moment antics as described

by some reporters. In addition to taking on the network that helped make him a star, he took on the president of the United States in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, using his platform to call attention to the plight of minorities and wondering aloud if the government would have offered such shoddy disaster-response measures if a community of white people had been the victims. He also took the unprecedented step of calling out the hip-hop community for its treatment of gays, a move requiring such verve and veracity that the expected icy response to West's call for tolerance and respect was muted.

West is as likely to be found on the cover of hip-hop magazines as he is *GQ*, his sense of fashion perhaps unparalleled not just in hip-hop, but in music at large. His Pastelle clothing line, which after years of delay is expected to be released in 2009, will bring colors not familiar to hip-hop, yet the line has even been worn by fellow rappers for photo shoots. Kanye is a showman much in the tradition of Elton John, or even Liberace, but unlike other diamond wearers, West has a social conscience that belies his flashy bling, even calling attention to the diamond trade that kills and exploits people in areas of the world many of his listeners could not find on a globe.

Kanye's big breakthrough as a producer, which put him with Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam's elite, was Jay-Z's album *Blueprint*. Four of Jay-Z's songs were produced by Kanye, including the top 10 Billboard hit "Izzo," which rose to number 8. Though in the song "Takeover," which Kanye produced and co-wrote, Jay-Z slammed Nas and Mobb Deep, with whom he was feuding at the time, Kanye ended up working with both of them, and he and Nas became particularly close, all while Kanye continued to be a sort of little brother to Jay-Z. Kanye has done nothing to feud with other rappers, and even while preparing do a release-date battle with 50 Cent, he offered praise to Fiddy's work and said he continued to be a fan of, and to even look up to, 50 Cent.

Equal parts Bob Dylan as a social protestor and Tupac or Biggie as a hip-hop innovator—and so involved and educated in fashion that he not only writes a fashion column for a magazine but also is teaming with a top designer to bring out his own line of shoes, with plans in place for a line of women's wear—the mercurial West is on the cusp of becoming one of the most influential entertainers of his generation. A talented producer, West as an artist shot to the top of the charts from the day he cut his first album, and his popularity has "touched the sky" ever since. Still, wherever he goes, whatever he does, he is the center of controversy in one form or another, and even "Touch the Sky" brought legal maneuvers from a previous generation's most outspoken daredevil, an issue resolved amicably.

NOTES

1. Donda West. *Raising Kanye: Life Lessons from the Mother of a Hip-Hop Superstar*. New York: Pocket Books, 2007.
2. Terry Moran. "Home with Kanye West." *Nightline*, ABC, September 24, 2007.
3. Jamie Foxx. "Kanye West." *Interview*, August 2004.
4. Kimberly Davis. "Kanye West: Hip-Hop's New Big Shot." *Ebony*, April 2005.