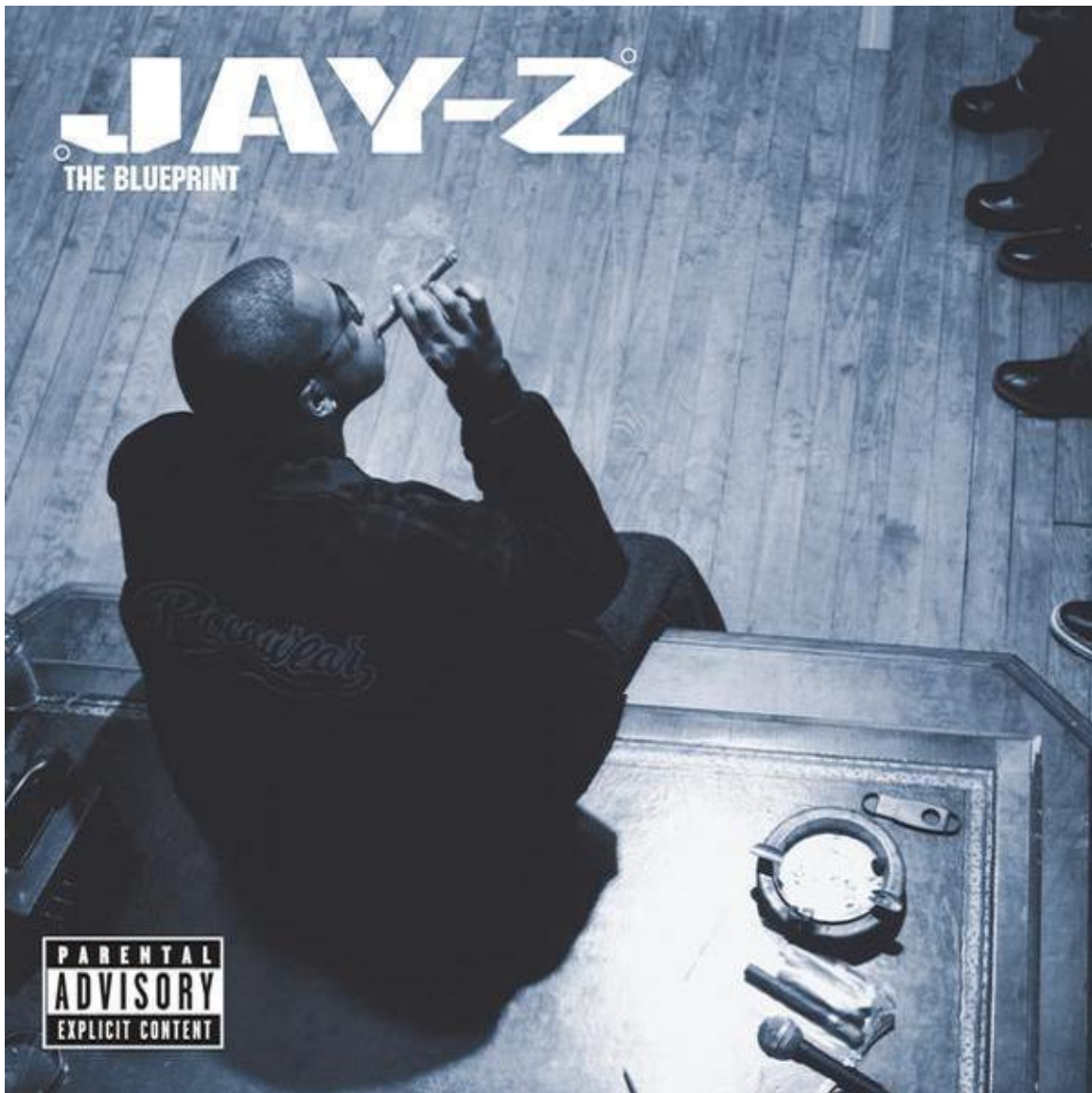


The Blueprint by Jay Z: Ten Years Later

By Joseph Manuel



“The Blueprint” is the most important album of this millennium.

Track by track, beat by beat, lyrically, culturally, and everything in between, Shawn Corey Carter's sixth studio album not only remains as his undeniable magnum opus, but one of the greatest hip-hop works of all-time. If each rapper was on trial to defend their claim of being the greatest ever,

Jay Z's "The Blueprint" would be his Exhibit A.

The album ushered in a brashly confident persona in Jay, one that didn't need to establish his street cred like "Reasonable Doubt", or question his hold in the game like "In My Lifetime Vol. 1". This was Carter at his finest, kicking in the door of hip-hop's grown man wave while simultaneously laying down tracks that were radio friendly but not hypocritical to rap's idiosyncratic image. It nurtured Kanye West, awoke Nasir Jones, paid dues to the old school, and paved the way for the future of rap -- smacking hos and peeling caps seemed like childish nonsense compared to the mature fumes of The Blueprint. Carter is humble and self deprecating at the right times, while also rearing his cocky and confident persona to reel listeners back to his demeanor. "Reasonable Doubt" is his first classic, "The Blueprint" is the classic of his classics.

The album isn't without its faults, as the whispers of Jigga being a biter originate here, and his claims of being better than Biggie are deemed as disrespectful. And there is also the matter of Eminem's mic sparking brighter than Jay's. Yet, the many strikes against "The Blueprint" are too ambiguous to be confirmed either way -- is Carter so extremely crafty in his line-dropping that the homages are wickedly subtle? The Biggie "Kick in the Door" line is a perfect example of this -- he borrows the lyric "Your reign at the top was shorter than leprechauns," but his use of it is without a doubt an homage, as he continues Biggie's message to the exact same person it was originally directed to, Nas.

As for the famous "Eminem murdered you on your own shit" opinion of "Renegade," this one is pretty easy, and is no fault of Jay's. To put it simply -- Eminem has lyrically murdered about ninety percent of every rapper he has collaborated with on their own shit, and this is more akin to Marshall's bravado than Jigga's skill. Compare the two emcees if you must, or take a wholesome approach and appreciate "Renegade" for what it is, which is two of the game's finest collaborating on an immortal track. Now if only Kanye had made the beat ...

"Faults" withstanding, the virtuoso of "The Blueprint" doesn't begin and end with "Renegade." Jumping ahead past the "The Ruler's Back," "Takeover" did so much for hip-hop that it doesn't really matter whether or not Jay or Nas won the battle. Without "Takeover," there would be no Nas molotov-cocktail of a retaliation in "Ether." Without "Ether," calling someone a "Stan" or saying they got Ether'd would be ghost. And finally, without "Takeover", Nas would still be stuck in hip-hop purgatory, balancing on the fine line of Rap God or misfit has-been, juggling his immortal debut "Illmatic" with the mediocrity of "Nastradamus".

As corny as it sounds, the winners of "Takeover" are us, the fans. Thank

God Nas responded with "Stillmatic", a classic in its own right.

As far as keeping it solid, "Izzo (H.O.V.A.)" is so good, such a departure from the still hustler-driven content of "Reasonable Doubt", and so catchy that it's one of those rare songs that is commercially spectacular without compromising its sound for radio play. Dealing drugs is for hungry hustlers, not million-dollar rappers, and Jigga makes it clear that he doesn't play that way like he used to. "Girls, Girls, Girls" is no "Keep Ya Head Up," but then again it's no "A Bitch Iz a Bitch" -- somehow, magically, and contrary to what seems like hip-hop's attitude toward females, "Girls, Girls, Girls" simultaneously keeps it "hard" without disrespecting women or going soft. The idea is almost a paradox -- there's the whole Ja Rule cornflake approach to hip-hop and women, and there's the playfully confident Jay-Z approach. The results speak for themselves -- ten years later, Jay's got Beyonce while Ja spends his nights with a guy named Bubba in Riker's Island.

"Jigga that Nigga" and "U Don't Know" are solid in retrospect, but "Hola' Hovito" stands as one of the higher points of "The Blueprint". Culturally, Jigga does best what so many rappers have done all right at -- drop some basketball knowledge in their lines. But his flow on "Hola' Hovito" stands out to this day as easily, and I mean easily, the greatest basketball lyric of all-time. It's unquestionable:

"I ball for real ya'll niggaz is Sam Bowie/And with the third pick, I made the earth sick/MJ, him Jay, fade-away perfect"

So spectacular is Jigga with the basketball line of basketball lines that he overshadows himself on the track with his later reference to hoops:

"If you haven't heard, I'm Michael, Magic, and Bird/All rolled into one, cause none got more flows than young/Or more flows to come"

Once again, greatest hoops reference in hip-hop, bar none ten years later.

"Heart of the City (Ain't No Love)" showcases Kanye West's genius before he fantasized about being beautiful, dark, and twisted, and, according to Yeezy himself off of "Last Call," is the beat that made Jay-Z take an interest in the eccentrically complex Chi-Towner. While "Never Change" and "Song Cry" are soulful, heartfelt accounts of life, love, and other related facets of emotion, Jay, like in "Girls, Girls, Girls", keeps the tone from getting too soft, yet cushions it just enough to make his points while maintaining his brazen hold.

"All I Need" comes and goes with more braggadocio, but it's the next track, "Renegade," that still impacts the game ten years later, and which may

never leave the minds of hip-hop heads and those who either love or hate Jay. Perhaps the hardest hitting line of "Ether" is a result of "Renegade", in which Nas carves out that Eminem "Murdered Jay on his own shit." For the haters, the claim speaks volumes -- the vocals of Marshall Bruce Mathers are the only ones heard besides Shawn Carter's -- meaning Eminem killed Jay on not only the song, but his own album. And while it is widely accepted that Em did indeed outshine Jay, the warped view casted upon by Nas regarding Jay's verse is warped indeed -- had Jigga not done Takeover, who knows how talked upon his performance compared to Em's would have been, even ten years later? The importance of "Renegade" may have upped the ante on rappers now trying to outdo each other on tracks, rather than simply collaborating and coming through with a song together. Its legacy will always be Eminem standing taller than Jay, which is unfortunate because its messages of media venom are some of the stronger aspects of the album.

The culmination of "The Blueprint" begins with "Blueprint: Momma Loves Me," and stretches yonder onto the hidden tracks of "Lyrical Exercise" and "Girls, Girls, Girls Part 2", making it technically a twelve minute outro to the album. The famous banana puddin' of Grandma Carter rears up ten years later on "Made in America" off "Watch the Throne", and "Lyrical Exercise" opens with a brief, but very important (and withstanding fact) testament to Jigga's rhyme process. "Girls, Girls, Girls Part 2" cements Kanye as a major contributor to the album, and rounds out the soulful splicings of the overall feel.

"The Blueprint" is without a doubt Jay Z's finest work, and unquestionably one of hip-hop's most essential, important, and influential albums. Its lasting mementos have forever altered the landscape of hip-hop history, whether it's the whole King of New York battle, the departure from gangsta rap, or the terminology which has lasted since its release. While "Takeover" may have been the hottest track of the time back in 2001, it's far from the only song with resonance to this day. "Hola' Hovito" has held onto the crown jewel of basketball lyrics for ten years now, and may forever stay at the top like Michael himself. And the effects of "Renegade" will never go away -- in fact, they seem to rear up almost unnoticeably and randomly (for instance, on Earl Sweatshirt's song "Couch"). Love it or hate it, "The Blueprint" has been around for ten years now, and in twenty years, when Jigga hangs it up, it will still be the gem of his catalogue. From lines like "Smarten up Nas," to the Ether retaliation of "Eminem murdered you on your own shit," once again, love it or hate it, whether you are Nas, or Kanye, or Em, The Blueprint did more than just result in Jay-Z's finest hour. It tied together four of hip-hop's finest emcees at the top of their games.