The Dream Keeper
by Langston Hughes, 1925

Bring me all of your dreams,
You dreamer,
Bring me all your
Heart melodies
That I may wrap them
In a blue cloud-cloth
Away from the too-rough fingers
Of the world.

Harlem: A Dream Deferred
by Langston Hughes, 1951

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore--
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

The New World
by Amiri Baraka, 1969

The sun is folding, cars stall and rise
beyond the window. The workmen leave
the street to the bums and painters’ wives
pushing their babies home. Those who realize
how fitful and indecent consciousness is
stare solemnly out on the emptying street.
The mourners and soft singers. The liars,
and seekers after ridiculous righteousness. All
my doubles, and friends, whose mistakes cannot
be duplicated by machines, and this is all of our
arrogance. Being broke or broken, dribbling
at the eyes. Wasted lyricists, and men
who have seen their dreams come true, only seconds
after they knew those dreams to be horrible conceits
and plastic fantasies of gesture and extension,
shoulders, hair and tongues distributing misinformation
about the nature of understanding. No one is that simple
or priggish, to be alone out of spite and grown strong
in its practice, mystics in two-pants suits. Our style,
and discipline, controlling the method of knowledge.
Beatniks, like Bohemians, go calmly out of style. And boys
are dying in Mexico, who did not get the word.
The lateness of their fabrication: mark their holes
with filthy needles. The lust of the world. This will not
be news. The simple damning lust,
float flat magic in low changing
evenings. Shiver your hands
in dance. Empty all of me for
knowing, and will the danger
of identification,

Let me sit and go blind in my dreaming
and be that dream in purpose and device.

A fantasy of defeat, a strong strong man
older, but no wiser than the defect of love.

Nikki-Rosa
By Nikki Giovanni, 1968

childhood remembrances are always a drag
if you’re Black
you always remember things like living in Woodlawn
with no inside toilet
and if you become famous or something
they never talk about how happy you were to have
your mother
all to yourself and
how good the water felt when you got your bath
from one of those
big tubs that folk in chicago barbecue in
and somehow when you talk about home
it never gets across how much you
understood their feelings
as the whole family attended meetings about Hollydale
and even though you remember
your biographers never understand
your father’s pain as he sells his stock
and another dream goes
And though you’re poor it isn’t poverty that
concerns you
and though they fought a lot
it isn’t your father’s drinking that makes any difference
but only that everybody is together and you
and your sister have happy birthdays and very good
Christmases
and I really hope no white person ever has cause
to write about me
because they never understand
Black love is Black wealth and they’ll
probably talk about my hard childhood
and never understand that
all the while I was quite happy

Moon
by
Derek Walcott, 1970

Resisting poetry I am becoming a poem.
O lolling Orphic head silently howling,
my own head rises from its surf or cloud.
Slowly my body grows a single sound,
slowly I become
a bell
an oval, disembodied vowel,
I grow, an owl,
an aureole, white fire.

I watch the moonstruck image of the moon burn,
a candle mesmerised by its own aura
and turn
my hot, congealing face towards that forked mountain
which wedges the drowned singer.

That frozen glare,
that morsured, classic petrifaction.
Haven't you sworn off such poems for this year,
and no more on the moon?

Why are you gripped by demons of inaction?
Whose silence shrieks so soon?

**Juicy**
by
Notorious B.I.G.
1994

Intro:

(Fuck all you hoes) Get a grip motherfucker.

Yeah, this album is dedicated to all the teachers that told me
I'd never amount to nothin', to all the people that lived above the
buildings that I was hustlin' in front of that called the police on
me when I was just tryin' to make some money to feed my daughter,
and all the niggaz in the struggle, you know what I'm sayin'?

Uh-ha, it's all good baby bay-bee, uh

Verse One:

It was all a dream
I used to read Word Up magazine
Salt'N'Pepa and Heavy D up in the limousine
Hangin' pictures on my wall
Every Saturday Rap Attack, Mr. Magic, Marley Marl
I let my tape rock 'til my tape popped
Smokin' weed and bamboo, sippin' on private stock
Way back, when I had the red and black lumberjack
With the hat to match
Remember Rappin' Duke, duh-ha, duh-ha
You never thought that hip hop would take it this far
Now I'm in the limelight 'cause I rhyme tight
Time to get paid, blow up like the World Trade
Born sinner, the opposite of a winner
Remember when I used to eat sardines for dinner
Peace to Ron G, Brucey B, Kid Capri
Funkmaster Flex, Lovebug Starsky
I'm blowin' up like you thought I would
Call the crib, same number same hood
It's all good

Uh, and if you don't know, now you know, nigga, uh

Chorus:

You know very well who you are
Don't let em hold you down, reach for the stars
You had a goal, but not that many
'cause you're the only one I'll give you good and plenty
Verse Two:

I made the change from a common thief
To up close and personal with Robin Leach
And I'm far from cheap, I smoke skunk with my peeps all day
Spread love, it's the Brooklyn way
The Moet and Alize keep me pissy
Girls used to diss me
Now they write letters 'cause they miss me
I never thought it could happen, this rappin' stuff
I was too used to packin' gats and stuff
Now honies play me close like butter played toast
From the Mississippi down to the east coast
Condos in Queens, indo for weeks
Sold out seats to hear Biggie Smalls speak
Livin' life without fear
Puttin' 5 karats in my baby girl's ears
Lunches, brunches, interviews by the pool
Considered a fool 'cause I dropped out of high school
Stereotypes of a black male misunderstood
And it's still all good

Uh...and if you don't know, now you know, nigga

Verse Three:

Super Nintendo, Sega Genesis
When I was dead broke, man I couldn't picture this
50 inch screen, money green leather sofa
Got two rides, a limousine with a chauffeur
Phone bill about two G's flat
No need to worry, my accountant handles that
And my whole crew is loungin'
Celebratin' every day, no more public housin'
Thinkin' back on my one-room shack
Now my mom pimps a Ac' with minks on her back
And she loves to show me off, of course
Smiles every time my face is up in The Source
We used to fuss when the landlord dissed us
No heat, wonder why Christmas missed us
Birthdays was the worst days
Now we sip champagne when we thirst-ay
Uh, damn right I like the life I live
'Cause I went from negative to positive
And it's all...

(It's all good)

...and if you don't know, now you know, nigga, uh
Uh, uh...and if you don't know, now you know, nigga
Uh...and if you don't know, now you know, nigga, uh

Representin' B-Town in the house, Junior Mafia, mad flavor, uh
Uh, yeah, a-ight
THE REVOLUTIONARY T-SHIRT

PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT
(THE BLACK ALBUM, 2003)

AMERICAN DREAMIN'
(AMERICAN GANGSTER, 2007)

EARLY THIS MORNING
(Unreleased)
Just Blaze was one of the house producers at Roc-A-Fella Records, the company I co-founded with Kareem Burke and Damon Dash. He’s a remarkable producer, one of the best of his generation. As much as anyone, he helped craft the Roc-A-Fella sound when the label was at its peak: manipulated soul samples and original drum tracks, punctuated by horn stabs or big organ chords. It was dramatic music: It had emotion and nostalgia and a street edge, but he combined those elements into something original. His best tracks were stories in themselves. With his genius for creating drama and story in music, it made sense that Just was also deep into video games. He’d written roundtracks for them. He played them. He collected them. He was even a character in one game. If he could’ve gotten bodily sucked into a video game, like that guy in Tron did, he would’ve been happy forever. I was recording The Black Album and wanted Just to give me one last song for the album, which was supposed to be my last, but he was distracted by his video-game work. He’d already given me one song, “December 4th,” for the album—but I was still looking for one more. He was coming up empty and we were running up against our deadlines for getting the album done and mastered.

At the same time, the promotion was already starting, which isn’t my favorite part of the process. I’m still a guarded person when I’m not in the booth or onstage or with my oldest friends, and I’m particularly wary of the media. Part of the pre-release promotion for the album was a listening session in the studio with a reporter from The Village Voice, a young writer named Elizabeth Mendez Berry. I was playing the album unfinished; I felt like it needed maybe two more songs to be complete. After we listened to the album the reporter came up to me and said the strangest thing: “You don’t feel funny?” I was like, Huh?, because I knew she meant funny as in weird, and I was thinking, Actually, I feel real comfortable; this is one of the best albums of my career. . . . But then she said it again: “You don’t feel funny? You’re wearing that Che T-shirt and you have—” she gestured dramatically at the chain around my neck. “I couldn’t even concentrate on the music,” she said. “All I could think of is that big chain bouncing off of Che’s forehead.” The chain was a Jesus piece—the Jesus piece that Biggie used to wear, in fact. It’s part of my ritual when I record an album: I wear the Jesus piece and let my hair grow till I’m done.

This wasn’t the first time I’d worn a Che T-shirt—I’d worn a different one during my taping of an MTV Unplugged show, which I’d taped with
the Roots. I didn't really think much of it. Her question—*don't you feel funny*?—caught me off guard and I didn't have an answer for her. The conversation moved on, but before she left she gave me a copy of an essay she wrote about me for a book about classic albums. The essay was about three of my albums: *Reasonable Doubt, Vol. 3... Life and Times of S. Carter,* and *The Blueprint.* That night I went home and read it. Here are some highlights:

> On “Dope Man” he calls himself, “the soul of Mumia” in this modern-day time. I don’t think so.

And:

> Jay-Z is convincing. When he raps, “I’m representing for the seat where Rosa Parks sat/where Malcolm X was shot/where Martin Luther was popped” on “The Ruler’s Back,” you almost believe him.

And, referring to my MTV *Unplugged* show:

> When he rocks his Guevara shirt and a do-rag, squint and you see a revolutionary. But open your eyes to the platinum chain around his neck: Jay-Z is a hustler.

Wow. I could’ve just dismissed her as a hater; I remember her going on about “bling-bling,” which was just too easy, and, honestly, even after reading her essays I was mostly thinking, “It’s a T-shirt. You’re buggin.” But I was fascinated by the piece and thought some more about what she was saying. It stuck with me and that night I turned it around in my head.

### WE REBELLIOUS, WE BACK HOME

One of Big’s genius lines wasn’t even a rhyme, it was in the ad lib to “Juicy,” his first big hit:

> Yeah, this album is dedicated to all the teachers that told me I’d never amount to nothin, to all the people that lived above the buildings that I was hustlin in front of that called the police on me when I was just tryin to make some money to feed my daughters, and all the niggas in the struggle.

I loved that he described what a lot of hustlers were going through in the streets—dissed and feared by teachers and parents and neighbors and cops, broke, working a corner to try to get some bread for basic shit—as more than some glamorous alternative to having a real job.
He elevated it to “the struggle.” That’s a loaded term. It’s usually used to talk about civil rights or black power—*the seat where Rosa Parks sat / where Malcolm X was shot / where Martin Luther was popped*—not the kind of nickel-and-dime, just-to-get-by struggle that Biggie was talking about. Our struggle wasn’t organized or even coherent. There were no leaders of this “movement.” There wasn’t even a list of demands. Our struggle was truly a something-out-of-nothing,
do-or-die situation. The fucked-up thing was that it led some of us to sell drugs on our own blocks and get caught up in the material spoils of that life. It was definitely different, less easily defined, less pure, and harder to celebrate than a simple call for revolution. But in their way, Biggie’s words made an even more desperate case for some kind of change. Che was coming from the perspective, “We deserve these rights; we are ready to lead.” We were coming from the perspective, “We need some kind of opportunity; we are ready to die.” The connections between the two kinds of struggles weren’t necessarily clear to me yet, but they were on my mind.
THE RENEGADE, YOU BEEN AFRAID

The day after the listening session, Just finally played a track for me. It opened with some dark minor organ notes and then flooded them with brassy chords that felt like the end of the world. It was beautiful. When a track is right, I feel like it's mine from the second I hear it. I own it. This was the record I'd been waiting for. I spit two quick verses on it—no hook, no chorus, just two verses, because we were running out of time to get the album done and mastered and released on schedule. I called it “Public Service Announcement.”

The subject of the first verse wasn't blazingly unique. It's a variation on a story I've been telling since I was ten years old rapping into a tape recorder: I'm dope. Doper than you. But even when a rapper is just rapping about how dope he is, there's something a little bit deeper going on. It's like a sonnet, believe it or not. Sonnets have a set structure, but also a limited subject matter: They are mostly about love. Taking on such a familiar subject and writing about it in a set structure forced sonnet writers to find every nook and cranny in the subject and challenged them to invent new language for saying old things. It's the same with bragga­dacio in rap. When we take the most familiar subject in the history of rap—why I'm dope—and frame it within the sixteen-bar structure of a rap verse, synced to the specific rhythm and feel of the track, more than anything it's a test of creativity and wit. It's like a metaphor for itself; if you can say how dope you are in a completely original, clever, powerful way, the rhyme itself becomes proof of the boast's truth. And there are always deeper layers of meaning buried in the simplest verses. I call rhymes like the first verse on “Public Service Announcement” Easter-egg hunts, because if you just listen to it once without paying attention, you'll brush past some lines that can offer more meaning and resonance every time you listen to them.

The second verse for “Public Service Announcement” was almost entirely unrelated to the first verse. I wrote the second verse, which opens with the lyric, I'm like Che Guevara with bling on, I'm complex, as a response to the journalist. When someone asked me at the time of the Unplugged show why it was that I wore the Che T-shirt, I think I said something glib like, “I consider myself a revolutionary because I'm a self-made millionaire in a racist society.” But it was really that it just felt right to me. I knew that people would have questions. Some people in the
The hip-hop world were surprised by it. There are rappers like Public Enemy and Dead Prez who've always been explicitly revolutionary, but I wasn't one of them. I also wasn't a Marxist like Che—the platinum Jesus piece made that pretty clear.

Later I would read more about Guevara and discover similarities in our lives. I related to him as a kid who had asthma and played sports. I related to the power of his image, too. The image on the T-shirt had a name: Guerrillero Heroico, heroic guerrilla. The photo was taken after the Cuban Revolution and by the time I wore the T-shirt, it was probably one of the most famous photographs in the world. Like a lot of people who stumble across the image with no context, I was still struck by its power and charisma.

The journalist was right, though. Images aren't everything, and a T-shirt doesn’t change who you are. Like I said in the song "Blueprint 2," cause the nigger wear a kufi, it don’t mean that he bright. For any image or symbol or creative act to mean something, it has to touch something deeper, connect to something true. I know that the spirit of struggle and insurgency was woven into the lives of the people I grew up with in Bed-Stuy, even if in sometimes fucked up and corrupted ways. Che's failures were bloody and his contradictions frustrating. But to have contradictions—especially when you're fighting for your life—is human, and to wear the Che shirt and the platinum and diamonds together is honest. In the end I wore it because I meant it.
PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

This is a public service announcement / Sponsored by Just Blaze and the good folks at Roc-A-Fella Records / [Just Blaze] Fellow Americans, it is with the utmost pride and sincerity that I present this recording, as a living testament and recollection of history in the making during our generation.1 / [Jay-Z] Allow me to re-introduce myself / My name is Hov, OH, H-to-the-O-V / I used to move snowflakes by the O-Z / I guess even back then you can call me / CEO of the R-O-C,² Hov! / Fresh out the fryin pan into the fire / I be the music biz number one supplier / Flyer³ than a piece of paper bearin my name / Got the hottest chick in the game wearin my chain, that’s right / Hov, OH—not D.O.C.⁴ / But similar to them letters, “No One Can Do It Better”/ I check cheddar like a food inspector⁵ / My homey Strict told me, “Dude finish your breakfast”⁶ / So that’s what I’ma do, take you back to the dude / with the Lexus, fast-forward the jewels and the necklace / Let me tell you dudes what I do to protect this⁷ / I shoot at you actors like movie directors [laughing] / This ain’t a movie dog (oh shit) / [Just Blaze] Now before I finish, let me just say I did not come here to show out, did not come here to impress you. Because to tell you the truth when I leave here I’m GONE!
1. This is Just Blaze's voice, although he recorded it in a way that made it sound older, like a political speech from the Black Power era captured on a distant tape recorder.

2. A simple double entendre of "Roc-A-Fella," our company, which we call the Roc, and "rock," common slang for crack because of the way the coke crystallizes when you cook it. I drop the "frying pan" into the next line to keep the comparison going. In the line after that I complete the connection between selling rock and selling the Roc, supplying the streets and supplying the music biz. Both take ruthlessness. In fact, the music industry is the fire to the crack game's frying pan.

3. The flyer/flyer homonym also carries the momentum of the fire/supplier rhyme for one more line.

4. The D.O.C.'s "No One Can Do It Better" was an early classic of the West Coast's golden age.

5. This line combines two separate pieces of slang—"check" means to collect, "cheddar" means money—to create a third piece of new slang—"a food inspector"—that only makes sense if you decode the first two phrases. "Check cheddar" is an alliteration that adds force to the image.

6. My friend Strict uses the phrase "finish your breakfast" as a way of saying that you need to finish your job up strong.

7. In these four lines I use five different variations on "do" and "dude" (plus "jewels," whose hard "j" sounds almost like a "d") to create a percussive rhythm within the beat.
And I don’t care WHAT you think about me—but just remember, when it hits the fan, brother, whether it’s next year, ten years, twenty years from now, you’ll never be able to say that these brothers lied to you JACK! / [Jay-Z] thing ain’t lie / I done came through the block in everything that’s fly / I’m like Che Guevara with bling on I’m complex / I never claimed to have wings on nigga I get my / by any means on whenever there’s a drought / Get your umbrellas out because / that’s when I brainstorm / You can blame Shawn, but I ain’t invent the game / I just rolled the dice, tryin to get some change / And I do it twice, ain’t no sense in me / lyin as if I am a different man / And I could blame my environment / but there ain’t no reason / why I be buyin expensive chains / Hope you don’t think users / are the only abusers niggaz / Gettin high within the game / If you do, then how would you explain? / I’m ten years removed, still the vibe is in my veins / I got a hustler spirit, nigga period / Check out my hat yo, peep the way I wear it / Check out my swag’ yo, / I walk like a ball-player / No matter where you go / you are what you are player / And you can try to change but that’s just the top layer / Man, you was who you was ’fore you got here / Only God can judge me, so I’m gone / Either love me, or leave me alone.

9. Just to amplify the connection I'm trying to make between revolutionaries and hustlers, I invoke Malcolm's famous "By Any Means Necessary" slogan.

10. A drought in the game is when the supply or demand starts to dry up—and that's when resourceful hustlers have to start getting creative. If that means getting violent, the "brainstorming" might just lead to someone getting wet, as in bloody, which is why you need to get your umbrella out, for protection. It's a dramatic, violent image to convey the way desperation and hunger can explode.

11. Here's where life gets "complex." I'm innocent because I didn't invent the game; the game came to the hood via a bunch of people from the outside: the big drug suppliers, the gun merchants, the corrupt officials who, at best, let it happen, or, at worst, were actively involved. And we—the hustlers at the street level—definitely didn't invent the poverty and hopelessness that drove a generation of desperate kids to start selling drugs. But then there's a point where I'm not so innocent anymore. It's when I "do it twice." The second time is not out of desperation to survive or to resist the status quo, but out of greed for the spoils of the game.

12. And it's not just the material spoils that keep you going: You start getting addicted to the thrill of it, the adrenaline rush of going to see your connect in a small building in Harlem in a lobby that you've never been in, where you go in with a bag of money and come out with a bag of work. Or the feeling when you come around the corner back home and all eyes turn to you because everyone knows who you are—you represent something successful and free and dangerous, all at once. You have the best car, the best jewelry, the whole package. You taste a strange kind of fame. It's as addictive as the shit you're selling, and just as deadly.


14. You can put a new shirt on your back, slide a fresh chain around your neck, and accumulate all the money and power in the world, but at the end of the day those are just layers. Money and power don't change you, they just further expose your true self.

15. Elizabeth Mendez Berry wrote in her essay: "Squint and you see a revolutionary. But open your eyes to the platinum chain around his neck: Jay-Z is a hustler." No doubt. It's a simple truth, but complex, too. Identity isn't a prison you can never escape, but the way to redeem your past is not to run from it, but to try to understand it, and use it as a foundation to grow.
Hiphop has always been controversial, and for good reason. When you watch a children's show and they've got a muppet rapping about the alphabet, it's cool, but it's not really hiphop. The music is meant to be provocative—which doesn't mean it's necessarily obnoxious, but it is (mostly) confrontational, and more than that, it's dense with multiple meanings. Great rap should have all kinds of unresolved layers that you don't necessarily figure out the first time you listen to it. Instead it plants dissonance in your head. You can enjoy a song that knocks in the club or has witty punch lines the first time you hear it. But great rap retains mystery. It leaves shit rattling around in your head that won't make sense till the fifth or sixth time through. It challenges you.

Which is the other reason hiphop is controversial: People don't bother trying to get it. The problem isn't in the rap or the rapper or the culture. The problem is that so many people don't even know how to listen to the music.

**ART WITH NO EASEL**

Since rap is poetry, and a good MC is a good poet, you can't just half-listen to a song once and think you've got it. Here's what I mean: A poet's mission is to make words do more work than they normally do, to make them work on more than one level. For instance, a poet makes words work sonically—as sounds, as music. Hip-hop tracks have traditionally been heavy on the beats, light on melody, but some MCs—Bone Thugs 'N Harmony, for example—find ways to work melodies into the rapping. Other MCs—think about Run from Run-DMC—turn words into percussion: cool chief rocha, I don't drink vodka, but keep a bag of cheeba inside my locka. The words themselves don't mean much, but he snaps those clipped syllables out like drumbeats, bap bap bapbap. It's as exciting as watching a middleweight throw a perfect combination. If you listened to that joint and came away thinking it was a simple rhyme about holding weed in a gym locker, you'd be reading it wrong: The point of those bars is to bang out a rhythmic idea, not to impress you with the literal meaning of the words.

But great MCing is not just about filling in the meter of the song with rhythm and melody. The other ways that poets make words work is by giving them layers of meaning, so you can use them to get at complicated
truths in a way that straightforward storytelling fails to do. The words you use can be read a dozen different ways: They can be funny and serious. They can be symbolic and literal. They can be nakedly obvious and subliminally effective at the same time. The art of rap is deceptive. It seems so straightforward and personal and real that people read it completely literally, as raw testimony or autobiography. And sometimes the words we use, nigga, bitch, motherfucker, and the violence of the images overwhelms some listeners. It’s all white noise to them till they hear a bitch or a nigga and then they run off yelling “See!” and feel vindicated in their narrow conception of what the music is about. But that would be like listening to Maya Angelou and ignoring everything until you heard her drop a line about drinking or sleeping with someone’s husband and then dismissing her as an alcoholic adulterer.

But I can’t say I’ve ever given much of a fuck about people who hear a curse word and start foaming at the mouth. The Fox News dummies. They wouldn’t know art if it fell on them.

**BILL O’REILLY YOU’RE ONLY RILING ME UP**

“99 Problems” is almost a deliberate provocation to simpleminded listeners. If that sounds crazy, you have to understand: Being misunderstood is almost a badge of honor in rap. Growing up as a black kid from the projects, you can spend your whole life being misunderstood, followed around department stores, looked at funny, accused of crimes you didn’t commit, accused of motivations you don’t have, dehumanized—until you realize, one day, it’s not about you. It’s about perceptions people had long before you even walked onto the scene. The joke’s on them because they’re really just fighting phantoms of their own creation. Once you realize that, things get interesting. It’s like when we were kids. You’d start bopping hard and throw on the ice grill when you step into Macy’s and laugh to yourself when the security guards got nervous and started shadowing you. You might have a knot of cash in your pocket, but you boost something anyway, just for the sport of it. Fuck ‘em. Sometimes the mask is to hide and sometimes it’s to play at being something you’re not so you can watch the reactions of people who believe the mask is real. Because that’s when they reveal themselves. So many people can’t see that every great rapper is not just a documentarian, but a trickster—that every great rapper has a little bit of Chuck and a little bit of Flav in them—but that’s not our problem, it’s their failure: the failure, or unwillingness, to treat
rap like art, instead of acting like it's just a bunch of niggas reading out of their diaries. Art elevates and refines and transforms experience. And sometimes it just fucks with you for the fun of it.

This is another place where the art of rap and the art of the hustler meet. Poets and hustlers play with language, because for them simple clarity can mean failure. They bend language, improvise, and invent new ways of speaking the truth. When I was a kid in New York and the five Mafia families were always on the front page of the newspaper, the most intriguing character wasn't John Gotti, it was Vinnie Gigante. I'd see him in the New York Post under a headline like THE ODDFATHER, always in his robe, caught on camera mumbling to himself as he wandered around the Village. His crazy act kept him out of the pen for decades. He took it all the way, but every hustler knows the value of a feint. It keeps you one step ahead of whoever's listening in, which is also a great thing about hip-hop art. And it makes it all the more gratifying to the listener when they finally catch up. Turning something as common as language into a puzzle makes the familiar feel strange; it makes the language we take for granted feel fresh and exciting again, like an old friend who just revealed a long-held secret. Just that easily your world is flipped, or at least shaken up a little. That's why the MCs who really play with language—I'm talking about cryptic MCs like Ghostface who invent slang on the spot—can be the most exciting for people who listen closely enough, because they snatch the ground out from under you, and make the most familiar shit open up until it feels like you're seeing it for the first time.

**RIDDLE ME THAT**

So, "99 Problems" is a good song to use to talk about the difference between the art of rap and the artlessness of some of its critics. It's a song that takes real events and reimagines them. It's a narrative with a purposefully ambiguous ending. And the hook itself—99 problems but a bitch ain't one—is a joke, bait for lazy critics. At no point in the song am I talking about a girl. The chorus really makes that clear if you bother listening: the obvious point of the chorus is that I wasn't talking about women. It almost makes my head hurt to think that people could hear that and twist its meaning the full 180 degrees. But even as I was recording it, I knew someone, somewhere would say, "Aha, there he goes talking about them hoes and bitches again!" And, strangely, this struck me as being deeply funny. I couldn't wait to release it as a single. My only mistake was that I accidentally explained the joke in an early interview and that defused it for some listeners.
The phrase has become one of my most often repeated lyrics, because it works on all those levels, in its literal meaning, its ironic meaning, and in its sonic power (the actual sound of the words but a bitch ain’t one is like someone spitting out a punch). And the joke of it is still potent: during the presidential primaries in 2008, some Hillary Clinton supporters even claimed that Barack Obama was playing the song at his rallies, which would’ve been hilarious if it was true. It’s hard to beat the entertainment value of people who deliberately misunderstand the world, people dying to be insulted, running around looking for a bullet to get in front of.

But if you get caught up in the hook of the song, you miss something. Because between the incendiary choruses—on top of the guitar and cowbell Rick Rubin came up with—is a not-quite-true story. The story—like the language used to tell it—has multiple angles. It’s a story about the anxiety of hustling, the way little moments can suddenly turn into life-or-death situations. It’s about being stopped by cops with a trunk full of coke, but also about the larger presumption of guilt from the cradle that leads you to having the crack in your trunk in the first place. But forget the sermon: This isn’t a song written from a soapbox, it’s written from the front seat of a Maxima speeding down the highway with a trunk full of trouble.
99 PROBLEMS (VERSE 2)

The year is '94 and in my trunk is raw / in my rearview mirror is the motherfucking law / I got two choices y'all, pull over the car or bounce on the double put the pedal to the floor / Now I ain't trying to see no highway chase with jake / Plus I got a few dollars I can fight the case / So I pull over to the side of the road / And I heard "Son do you know why I'm stopping you for?" / "Cause I'm young and I'm black and my hat's real low / Do I look like a mind reader sir, I don't know / Am I under arrest or should I guess some mo?" / "Well you was doing fifty-five in a fifty-four / License and registration and step out of the car / Are you carrying a weapon on you, I know a lot of you are" / "I ain't stepping out of shit all my papers legit" / "Do you mind if I look round the car a little bit?" / "Well my glove compartment is locked, so is the trunk and the back / And I know my rights so you go'n need a warrant for that" / "Aren't you sharp as a tack, some type of lawyer or something / Or somebody important or something?" / "Nah I ain't pass the bar but I know a little bit / Enough that you won't illegally search my shit" / "We'll see how smart you are when the K-9's come" / "I got 99 problems but a bitch ain't one" / Hit me
1. This is based on a true story, but ultimately it’s fictional. Our hero here is riding dirty, road-tripping down the turnpike from somewhere farther north, which is how things worked back in the eighties and early nineties. New York guys had better connections and opened up drug markets down the I-95 corridor. It was one of the factors that made coke money so thick in New York during that period, and the competition turned the game bloody from Brooklyn to Baltimore to D.C. to the Carolinas.

2. The car might’ve been a Maxima, which were big on the streets in ’94. In the real-life version of this story, the trunk wasn’t raw, it was a compartment in the sunroof that doubled as a “stash.”

3. Jake is one of a million words for the boys in blue, but it’s particularly dismissive and used mostly in New York, so it works as a way of establishing the character of the narrator. He’s a slick New York kid.

4. “Driving while black” was usually a sufficient reason for the police to stop us. The first offense wasn’t the crack in the ride but the color of the driver.

5. When we did work out of state, we would have everything planned down to the finest detail—but then get caught by a cop for no good reason, like “driving fifty-five in a fifty-four.” Of course, the sarcasm in the speed limit being fifty-four is another way of saying that we’re being pulled over for no good reason.

6. “A lot of you are” is another statement with racial undertones that he and I are both aware of.

7. This dialogue is about the tension between a cop who knows legally he’s dead wrong for stopping someone with no probable cause other than race, and a narrator who knows legally he’s dead wrong for moving the crack. But legality aside, they both think they’re justified—and the fact is they’re both used to getting away with it. So they’re playing this cat-and-mouse game, taking sarcastic shots at each other, arguing over the law. The confrontation is casual and consequential all at once and shows how slippery language is, depending on which side of the conversation you’re on.

8. In every verse of the song I use the word “bitch” in a different way. In this verse, the bitch is a female dog, the K-9 cop coming to sniff the ride. When I was living my version of this story, we got away—the K-9 was late, and the cop let me go. We were back on the road again, hearts pounding, crack still tucked untouched in the stash, when I saw the K-9 unit screaming up the highway, going in the opposite direction. It would’ve changed my life if that dog had been a few seconds faster. We had a strange kind of luck, some kind of rogue angel watching over us. But in the song I left the outcome ambiguous—does he get away or not? That’s the writer in me. I like ambiguous endings, like Shane staggering off into the sunset at the end of the movie. Does he die or does he live? And the larger question: Should he die or live? I leave it to the listener to decide.
Che Guevara has had an interesting decade. Since his image became part of Rage Against the Machine’s logo twenty-five years after his death, popular music has given the Argentine communist more exposure among impressionable youth than his armed struggle ever did. And Rage was just the beginning. At the June 20, 2002, New York party in honor of Andre Harrell’s latest protégé Thicke, Jay-Z sported a white T emblazoned with Che’s visage—perhaps a case of game recognizing game, but that night it could’ve been either a tribute or a diss. A diamond-encrusted Roc-a-Fella pendant hung around Jay-Z’s neck, and as he moved among a bevy of models, it banged against Guevara’s forehead with every step. The image is audacious but unsurprising. Jay-Z dominates hip-hop, and he’s even smacking Latin America’s most famous revolutionary upside the head with his philosophy: Can’t knock the hustle. Would Che roll over in his grave if he knew that one of capitalism’s most devout spokespeople was accessorizing his image with bling that probably cost children in Sierra Leone a few limbs? Probably. But he might also be captivated by Jay-Z’s ability to make superficiality seductive. Either way, Che would have to listen up. Jay-Z has ghetto blocks hanging on his every word, the types of impoverished communities that Guevara and Fidel Castro tried to liberate through revolution in Cuba.

There’s been much debate about Shawn Carter’s street career, the personal mythology that has added kilos of weight to Jay-Z-the-rapper’s sordid tales. But regardless of Carter’s actual criminal exploits, Jay-Z raps like a kingpin: he’s articulate, ruthless, in control. While most young MCs are hungry, on his debut, 1996’s Reasonable Doubt, Jay sounds sated. From Grey Poupon to Dom Perignon, his
The trademark top-tier tastes are already in evidence here. The (do) rings to richer story that rappers tell after they go platinum was his before he sold his first record. On “Dead Presidents II” he claims, “I doubled in crazy weight / Without rap, I was crazy / Straight / Former, I'm still spending money from eighty-eight.”

Both an apologia for his lifestyle and a defiant defense of it, Doubt is interesting because it isn’t a blind celebration of criminality—it’s an unflinching, intelligent one. His unapologetic manifesto, “Can’t Knock the Hustle,” glamorizes its topic, but also alludes to the deeper roots of gangstas’ middle-finger mentality: “All us blacks got is sports and entertainment, until we even? Thieves, as long as I’m breathing / Can’t knock the way a nigga eatin’—fuck you even.” Is it society’s fault that Jay-Z’s a hustler? This question resurfaces throughout his career, often invoked as a convenient excuse for his behavior, but sometimes presented with such perceptive socioeconomic analysis that one wishes he’d rap to George W. on hi. native Marcy Projects’ behalf. He certainly knows what’s going on there. Whether he cares or not is much less clear.

Jay’s not bad meaning bad, he’s bad meaning morally conflicted. Doubt’s “Regrets” documents one of the riveting moments of ambivalence that make his persona intriguing, ending with a poignant dedication to a deceased friend: “I think I’m touched / This whole verse I been talkin’ to your spirit, a little too much.”

The pregnant pause—more than just a comma—between the word “spirit” and “a little too much” betrays a rare waver.

Doubt’s solemn musical tone matches the gravity of Jay-Z’s words. DJ Premier’s melancholy “D’Evils” uses a minor-key piano sample to underscore Jay’s nefarious tales. Songs that could easily become brash bragfests, like “Can I Live,” are tempered by both Jay-Z’s low-key flow and their somber musical tone; in this case, producer DJ Lrv (now known as Irv Gotti) uses horns and subtle strings to frame Jay’s bittersweet tale of money and mayhem. The second version of the same track lacks that restraint, as Jay’s unrepentant boasting is matched by an equally exultant piano-tickled beat by K-Rob.

Reasonable Doubt was written when Shawn-Carter—the-hustler had barely been laid to rest. Recorded in the wake of the huge commercial success of 1998’s Vol. 2 ... Hard Knock Life, 1999’s cold-blooded Vol. 3 ... Life and Times of S. Carter showcases Jay-Z at his most menacing. The gangsta may have retired, but for Jay, the drug-related metaphors will last forever. Acutely aware of the jealousy he’s attracting, on “Come and Get Me” he snarls, “It’s only fair that I warn you, rap’s my new hustle I’m treatin’ it like the corner.” On Vol. 3 he
seems bent on confirming what the December 1, 1999, stabbing of Lance "Un" Rivera (which occurred four weeks prior to Vol. 3's release; Jay initially maintained his innocence regarding the incident before pleading guilty almost two years later) suggested: that his Billboard-bullying mobster persona represents a clear and present danger. On the bonus track "Jigga My Nigga" he raps, "I don't give a fuck if I sold one or one million/But I think you should.""Cause if I only sold one, then out comes the hood/All black in the club, the outcome ain't good."

But though he spends much of Vol. 3 intimidating potential victims and haters, Jay also illuminates the emotional life of a gangster. "There's Been a Murder," a vignette in which Jay-Z gets murdered by Shawn Carter-the-hustler, is a dynamic duet. As Carter he raps: "I held roundtable meetings so we could go on and discuss not only money but all the emotions goin' through us! Why we don't cry when niggas die, that's how the street raised him." Look in the air, say a prayer hopin' God forgave him/Cop liquor, twist it, tap it twice, pour it to the pavement." Jay-Z humanizes the hustler, revealing the shiver behind the swagger.

Vol. 3 is rich with captivating stories and intermittently great production, notably Timbaland's sparsely brilliant contributions, "It's Hot" and "Come and Get Me." But fame has begun to mess with the usually clear-minded rapper's head. On "Dope Man," a song in which Jay-Z goes on trial for selling drugs (a metaphor for his music), he calls himself "The soul of Mumia in this modern-day time." I don't think so. Vol. 3 is also marred by collaborations with the likes of Mariah Carey.

After years of walking the line between pop and rap, in 2001 Jay-Z released The Blueprint, an unfiltered portrait of the hustler in his prime consistent enough to be called Reasonable Doubt's sequel. Jay-Z's life may be filled with private jets, personal chefs, and high-thread-count linens, but don't let anyone accuse him of getting soft in the lap of luxury. The beats are hard, the rhymes are harder, and it's still all about cold hard cash. On the song "U Don't Know" he raps, "Could make 40 off a brick but one rhyme could beat that."

The Blueprint finds the rapper on top of the world and here, he takes the time to enjoy the scenery. Jay-Z skewers his inferiors with laid-back brutality (on "Takeover"), offers love to friends and family (on the title track). And after years of likeable and not-so-likeable lechery (with lines like "The only time you love 'em is when your dick's hard" from Doubt's "Cashmere Thoughts"), Jay-Z allows himself a rare moment of romantic vulnerability on "Song Cry." It's difficult to tell whether he's just throwing his female fans a bone (pun intended) after years of casual misogyny or if this...
is a genuine moment of introspection from the self-proclaimed groupie connoisseur. Either way, it's earned him love from the ladies.

Jay-Z is convincing. When he raps "I'm representin' for the seat where Rosa Parks sat/Where Malcolm X was shot, where Martin Luther was popped" on Blueprint's "The Ruler's Back," you almost believe him. When he rocks his Guevara shirt and a do-rag, squint and you see a revolutionary. But open your eyes to the platinum chain around his neck: Jay-Z is a hustler. It may be that he recognizes the sex-appeal-by-association of guerrilla garb. Or perhaps in the process of polishing his game till it gleams, it's begun to blind him. Asked why he wore Che's likeness on Unplugged, Jay-Z responded that he considers himself a revolutionary like Guevara because he's a self-made black millionaire in a racist society. But he misses the point that for Che, one more millionaire is no reason to celebrate. Guevara abandoned a cushy career in medicine to pursue his lifelong goal, the creation of an egalitarian society uncorrupted by decadence or deprivation, whereas Jay corrupted his community by selling street medication. Later, Che left the relative comfort of celebrity in communist Cuba to stir up revolution throughout Latin America, while Jay ditched dope-dealing for the relative comfort of Big Pimpin' rap. Che died trying to change the world. Jay lives large in the new world order. But even if you can knock Jay-Z's logic, you can't knock the hustle.