JAY-Z

In Conversation with Cornel West and Paul Holdengräber

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PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Good evening, good evening, good evening. Are we excited? No, are we excited? No, are we very excited? Yes! Well, I'm very happy that you're excited because boy oh boy am I am ever excited! My name is Paul Holdengräber, and I'm the Director of LIVE from the New York Public Library. You have heard me say that my goal at the Library is to make the lions roar. Well, guess what? Tonight my goal is to make the lions rap! Last time we were here we had Keith Richards here at the library. It's a great honor tonight to have Jay-Z, **(applause)** and as far as I'm concerned

there's a great—there's a great continuity here, partly because there is continuity, partly because Jay-Z has been around for twenty years and Keith Richards has stood his own as well. So the library is roaring, we're making it live, we're making it come alive. We're making the books dance, we're making a heavy institution levitate and as I always ask, I've asked now for six years, if anybody in this building knows how much this library weighs, please tell me.

I would like to encourage you all to join our e-mail list, to become members of the library, to find out what we have coming up, for instance on Thursday we have Siddhartha Mukherjee coming talking about a biography of cancer. On Monday we have Zadie Smith coming here, who I will be interviewing. And then we have Derek Walcott, and we end the season with a tribute to the *National Lampoon*. We begin the season in January with a tribute to Gypsy Rose Lee. We actually have the archives of Gypsy Rose Lee, so you're in for some burlesque. Finally, after the conversation tonight, Jay-Z will be signing his magnificent book, *Decoded*, so go to the back of the room and get it signed.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to quickly thank Jana Fleischman, Barbara Fillon, Julie Grau, as well as my producer Meg Stemmler for all they have done. **(applause)** A big round of applause and then, then, then, now. Cornel West, Cornel West, **(applause)** Cornel West is—I guess Cornel West is pretty popular. Cornel West is Class of 1943 Professor at Princeton University, my alma mater. His books include *Race Matters*, *Democracy Matters*, and most recently a book whose title I love. *Brother West:*

Living and Loving Out Loud. A self-proclaimed bluesman in the life of the mind, and a jazzman in the world of ideas, Cornel West has appeared in both *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions* as Counselor West, has released two spoken-word albums and is currently working on various, various books he'll be talking to us about. With Tavis Smiley he's the host of a newly launched public radio show, *Smiley and West*. Ladies and gentlemen, Cornel West.

(applause)

Ladies and gentlemen, Shawn Carter, Jay-Z, holds the record for the most number one albums by a solo artist, eleven, and has been honored with ten Grammy awards. He is a cofounder of Rocawear clothing line, Roc-A-Fella Records, and Roc Nation. The former CEO of Def Jam Recordings, Jay-Z co-owns various restaurants, a cosmetics company, and the New Jersey Nets. His new memoir *Decoded* is one of the most extraordinary books I have read in the last decade. I have to tell you this is a book of a great, major poet. He belongs at the New York Public Library. Jay-Z!

(applause)

Well, well, well, what do we now? Well, I'll tell you what we'll do now. What we do now is prove what I just said and the way we do it—the way we do it is by reading a passage:

“When I was a kid my parents had like a million records stacked to the ceiling in metal crates. They both loved music so much, when they did break up and get a divorce, sorting the records out was probably the biggest deal. If it was hot in the seventies,” you write later, “my parents had it. They had a turntable, but they also had reel to reel. My parents would blast those classics when we did our Saturday clean-up and when they came home from work. I loved all that music but Michael Jackson more than anyone. My mother would play “Enjoy Yourself” by the Jacksons, and I would dance and sing and spin around. I’d make my sisters my backup singers. I remember those early days and the time that shaped my musical vocabulary. I remember that music making me feel good, bringing my family together and more importantly being a common passion that my parents shared.

“The songs carried in them the tension and energy of the era. The seventies were a strange time especially in black America. The music was beautiful in part because it was keeping a kind of torch lit in dark times.” And finally, “I feel like we rappers, DJs, producers, were able to smuggle some of the magic of that dying civilization out in our music and use it to build a new world. We were kids without fathers, so we found our fathers on wax and on streets and in history and in a way that was a gift. We got to pick and choose the ancestors who would inspire the world we were going to make for ourselves. That was a part of the ethos of that time and place, and it got built into the culture we created. Rap took the remnants of a dying society and created something new. Our fathers were gone, usually because they just bounced, but we took their old records and used them to build something fresh.”

(applause)

JAY-Z: You made that sound really good. **(laughter)** I especially liked you saying "bounced." **(laughter)** With your accent, it was just really cool.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Tell me why, how would you say it?

JAY-Z: No, no, you said it perfectly. Better than I could ever.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So, this music—When your parents separated and we heard that song at the beginning before we came onstage, "December 4th." When your parents separated they separated the record collection. That record collection in a way was what bound your family and kept your family together.

JAY-Z: Yeah, my house was like the good-time house, I can just see knee-high right now having a great time over there… my cousin Brian is in the audience right now, he spent many days over there. My house was like the house around the neighborhood that everybody went to because we had all the newest records and you know, I just had super cool parents, which goes to show—like they had their names on their records—they shared kids, they shared a home, they shared food, but you know those records were something that were so dear to them that they had their names on the individual records of who bought what. **(laughter)** Yeah, it was a very pivotal part for me and it filled the

house with joy and emotion and feeling and it also gave me, very young, you know, a wide range of listening to different sorts of music so I don't have those sort of prejudices when it comes to music. I just pretty much like good music and bad music. You know, you look on my iPod, you know, it's everything—it's everything from Miles to Thom Yorke to Old Dirty Bastard, seriously.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You will lose me at times. **(laughter)** I approach part of this, I have to tell you, with a—no, no, I'm telling you—I approach part of this with the euphoria of ignorance.

JAY-Z: That's how we approach life.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And I have to tell you that is what was so striking about your memoir *Decoded* is it just—I—Jay-Z, I was just not ready to be bowled over the way I am. Partly because I grew up, you know, listening to various versions of *The Magic Flute*. **(laughter)** So our childhood is somewhat different.

JAY-Z: A little bit.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So I grew up with, you know, "Is Wilma Lipp the best?" and the reason I know about—

JAY-Z: You will lose me at times. **(laughter/applause)** I think at the core of who we are, we are human beings, if you take away the titles of who we are, black, white, male, female, you take away that, we all have the same emotions—who do you love? You love your mother, you know, you love your father, your father abandoned you, you feel hurt, it affectts your relationship going forward, your father wants you to be just like him, you can't be just like him, it builds some sort of insecurity inside you, so at the end of the day we're all human beings, you know, so these emotions and feelings inside this music, you know, is a conversation, and just like you said this book was necessary for me because I had that conversation with you.

I wrote this book in part—Me and Mr. West, Brother West, had a conversation at my dining room table one time, he came to my house with Brother Geoffrey Canada, who runs a children's' home up in Harlem and we had this beautiful conversation about language and the use of language in rap being more responsible for the things we say, and I try to explain it this way or why we say these things, because any of these things—any thing, any lyric or music without context is a lie, because if I tell you that NWA said "fuck tha police," you would look and say those guys are gangster rappers and they shouldn't be saying things like that until the Rodney King beatings, which gave it context, and you knew this was what happened in their neighborhood, it was police brutality, and it was an excessive amount of force, and they would take some gang members and drop them off in their rival gang members' neighborhood and tell them to get home. That was fun. You know, so without context, and now, not saying the decisions that we made were right or wrong, because we were young boys of sixteen—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, you're very honest.

JAY-Z: But it's honest, it's like "here what happened." Now, as a normal person you could decide what decision you would have made. There's a movie called *John Q*., that, you know, I used this as well. The movie is about this man's fight to save his son, you know. Here it is, there's this black man inside a hospital with a gun, if I told you that, you'd say there's no reason on earth why anyone should be in a hospital with a gun, but then, you know, given the context of his son is dying and he's trying to save his dying son, maybe you would say, well he didn't have to bring the gun, but given the context you could understand the reasons why people come to these choices that they make, good bad, or indifferent.

CORNEL WEST: And that was a wonderful discussion we had, and you were kind enough, as you recall, to come to Princeton, to my seminar.

JAY-Z: Kind enough? I was honored—I was in Princeton discussing Horace and Biggie.

(laughter

CORNEL WEST: It was a moment, we had Jay-Z here, and Toni Morrison, on my left, Phylicia Rashad on the left of Toni Morrison, and I was talking about Plato and Socrates and how Plato had decided on a deep sense of loss and mourning to make the world safe

for Socrates so that people would remember the name of Socrates forever and you said, "Well, I have been playing Plato to Biggie's Socrates," that hit all of us so hard, because it showed the degree to which your sense of history both in regard to another lyrical genius like yourself, both in regard to another artistic giant like yourself, part of the black tradition, the American tradition, the modern tradition, this contemporary postmodern, late modern, everyone, whatever term you want to use, but this issue of context is for me so very important because when I look at you and see your humanity, when I hear you and remain attuned to the genius I say to myself, "what a great tradition, what a great people," because the black musical tradition, as I understand it, is in part an antiterrorist activity.

It's the history of terrorism coming at black people, the history of trauma coming at black people, history of stigma coming at black people, and the response from spirituals unto slavery to blues unto Jim and Jane Crow, to Marcy Projects, and there's a lot of Marcy Projects in America, with the terror and the trauma and the stigma still there and the response is what? Unbelievable oratorical linguistic musical response trying to make sense of the world and of course it's going to be shot through with all kinds of blindnesses, because we all have our blindnesses and our own forms of ignorance—could be learned ignorance, quasi-learned ignorance, nonlearned ignorance, whatever it is we all have it, one way or another. But you have decided to keep this tradition alive in such a powerful way, little brother, and that's why for me I am always inspired as well as instructed when I'm in your presence.

But my question to you would be where you are now? After eleven albums, not just number one, but representing high levels, cause there's a sense in which quantity is important, but Curtis Mayfield never won a Grammy, and we know how great he is, so it's question of quality, because you're producing high quality, no matter how many you sell, but where you are now in your life in regard to this tradition and how you would want to try to speak to the younger generation.

We got brother Harry Belafonte right here in the front row. **(laughter)** Brother Harry Belafonte in the front row, and, you see, if you see these two brothers together, you can see this flow. You can see this flow, you see, brother had the first million copies sold of an album, but at the same time there's Paul Robeson in him, he has Du Bois in him, there's Ella Baker, there's Martin King in him, same way we knew that song that you came out on. I want to represent where Rosa sat, where Martin was shot, Marvin was popped, that spirituality, the musicality, but also that unbelievable sense of engagement in the face of the context that you were talking about. How would you characterize yourself right now in that regard?

JAY-Z: You know, in terms of this music and this form of music is the thing that literally saved my life. There's a good brother right there whose name is Emory, who's sitting right there, who I was with every single day of my life.

CORNEL WEST: Give this brother a hand, give him a hand.

(laughter)

JAY-Z: Who unfortunately got caught up into the circumstances of life and, you know, he went away for an extended period of time as a young kid, as a kid making these decision and I know absolutely without a doubt, a hundred out of a hundred, me and him would have been in the same place, exactly the same place, because we were together every single day so my job pushing the culture forward and leaving something that saved our life and saved my life in a better place and having a conversation with people what this music means to us and how we arrive at these decisions and why we make some of the decisions that we make is very important to me, more important than having eleven number one albums, although that's very fun. I really like it. **(laughter)**

And on a sidebar, I want to just say, Mr. Belafonte, I'm very happy that you're here today, and I'm very honored. I remember. I have this photo on my wall, I have this wall of photos of all my inspirations and people that inspired me in my life. There's this beautiful picture of Coretta Scott King, she, it's beautiful in the sense of you can see the stress on her face, but you could tell that there was turmoil happening, and brothers next to her with big shotguns and everyone's around and then there's you in the picture, like a protector of hers, and then I was like, "This guy's a musician, right, or a movie star, like, what is he doing there?" and that made me realize that musicians and movie stars and people we have a greater responsibility to the world as well. You were one of those inspirations for me, and I thank you.

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'm very inspired really and intrigued by this notion of context because one of the things that I was really not ready for in this book was to see you become the critic of your own work. It's as if you become the Ezra Pound to T. S. Eliot—you became the person who was reviewing and studying with extreme clarity your own work and so for those of you who don't yet know this book, and I would say that's probably everybody since this book is basically embargoed until tomorrow morning, but you're getting it tonight. I have news for you. There are about three dozen tracks of Jay-Z that are commented by Jay-Z nearly line by line nearly in a Talmudic way. **(laughter)** I mean it.

I was not ready for this, but you have—what you have done here, which is extraordinary, which is you have written down the history, you have set the record straight—perhaps that would be a way of putting it—set the record straight about these songs, made people understand that reading carefully is extremely important. Reading between the lines is incredibly important. Reading against stereotypes is incredibly important, and what is striking about this, to my mind, so I have many, many, many questions embedded in all of this. What is striking to my mind is that you are also known, I read, to be the only rapper to rewrite history without a pen. **(applause)** And yet and yet and yet you are immobilizing in some way these songs, given them structure and form and telling the people who are reading this book, "you better read me carefully, because if you don't,

you might to miss a lot," so you are interested in the virtues of difficulty and complexity and ambivalence.

JAY-Z: Yes. Thank you.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But do say more.

JAY-Z: I will. I am giving a little space and pause to what you said. For me, you know we all are complex human beings. Nothing is simply black and white. There are multiple reasons why we arrived at such decisions, any decisions made. You can't just say, "This person is from this particular part of a planet and he's that way." You know, it's impossible—again, it's impossible without context to tell a story, because you'll be telling some sort of lie, so, for me, it was just very important to give these stories context and not just, you know, give excuses to everything we've done. We've made bad decisions, we've arrived at bad decisions, we've done bad things. But, you know, without proper context it's very difficult to arrive at that decision. It was very important for me to have these conversations. In part, you know, Oprah Winfrey was a big reason I wrote this book.

She and I had another conversation, you know, about language and about the N-word and about things like that, and we walked away from that conversation—we actually walked

away from that conversation saying, “let’s agree to disagree,” but we walked away from the conversation with a better understanding of who each of us—who we were in this world, we had more things alike—we had more things alike than dissimilar, you know? We both come from very tough upbringings, and tough backgrounds and we both arrived at this book called *Seed of the Soul*, and it was like a breaking point for us.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And she was amazed that you should love this book the way she did. And that changed the way she perceived you. What did that change in her attitude to you based on you loving a book that she loved tell you about her?

JAY-Z: It made her realize again, the conversation made her realize, wait a minute, we do have similar things and we do search for the same things, and we all are looking for—you’re looking for that book, you’re looking for some answers—right? We’re looking for some sort of answers to why we are and what is our real purpose, you know, what is our greater purpose, how did we get here, et cetera, et cetera. And for me these things are just conversation. This book is another form—music was the conversation, is the conversation for us. We had a conversation together, and I mean people who listen to the music, and then there were people listening to the music and knowing the words, memorizing the words, but not knowing its deeper meaning, you know, and then hearing certain buzzwords, and saying “wait,” because you’ve got to figure from the beginning rap was dismissive—everything about rap was very dismissive—“rap is a fad, it won’t be here ten years,” that’s how it started, and then it’s like “it won’t last,” and then it’s “oh,

these guys only talk about this and that." That's so black and white to say, "they only talk about bitch and ho."

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And I must say that reading your book my vocabulary did expand. **(laughter)** But you had the analysis—

JAY-Z: And I'm a big proponent—not to cut you off, but I just to finish that last point. I'm a big proponent of people's actions and intent and not words and not language, so we remove language and that word means a—the N-word—means a whole entire different thing to Oprah Winfrey, you know, she comes from a generation that people were getting hung from a tree, and that's the last thing they heard—so she has a deeper connection.

CORNEL WEST: But the point that you did make to Oprah in the epilogue, was very importantly, namely that Oprah is an entrepreneurial genius, but she is subject to critique like all of us, **(applause)** when she sponsors a film like *Precious* there's a whole lot of derogatory things going on in that film, or even writers who use the N-word—why is it that that's all right for them to use the N-word, but when the hip-hop artists come along then she holds them at arm's length? She has to be more consistent in that regard. Now, if she's making a point about misogyny and homophobia and so forth, that's different, because she's got a lot of evidence in that regard, **(laughter)** but in terms of her being consistent, you came right back at her, and you had a Socratic exchange.

JAY-Z: And that's what I'm saying is she left that conversation with a deeper understanding and left this book, even this book, with a deeper understanding of who I was, and we all evolved as human beings and we all have to learn more about, you know, one another, that's life.

CORNEL WEST: One of the things I love about both of these towering artists is they have the courage to be themselves. You all have the courage to be yourself. When I first met you, it was clear to me—and I've met a whole lot of black folk in my life—it was clear to me the brother had the courage to be himself.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What did you say about your grandmother?

CORNEL WEST: What my grandmother told me a couple of weeks ago?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I loved that line.

CORNEL WEST: That the older you get the more you look like yourself.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'm going to use that.

JAY-Z: There's a song called PSA where I say you are who you are before you got here, it's the exact same conversation, again, public service announcement, when we have these conversations, again we realize this language is—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I love the commentary you have on "99 Problems" and that one line which I can't quite say that everybody constantly misunderstood.

CORNEL WEST: The B-word, the B-word.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yeah. Help me out.

JAY-Z: For me it was like I was being—Because rap at some times is provocative as well, I was being provocative. I thought it was deeply funny that people hear certain words and just immediately hear white noise after that, it's almost like "I don't hear anything else, he's talking about *that*," it struck me as deeply funny—so I kind of did it on purpose.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And the word meant what? That sentence meant, in fact . . .

JAY-Z: The song is "99 problems but a Bitch Ain't One," and the second verse deals with this exchange between people. You have a guy who's in a car and he has drugs on him and he's all the way in the wrong, and he's going on the highway, and here you have this cop on the turnpike, and he pulls the car over not because they have drugs in the car,

but because the driver is black. Which happened a lot—if you look at the survey during those times, in between ’88 to ’96 there was a big investigation about that, “driving while black.” So this officer pulls—

CORNEL WEST: Or 2010.

(laughter)

JAY-Z: So this officer pulls, so they pull the car over, he pulls the car over, and they have this exchange. Both guys are used to getting their way. The driver knows he’s in the wrong, but he knows he hasn’t done anything to be pulled over, so, you know, the line in the song, “I was doing 55 in the 54,” there’s no such thing as a 54, I was actually doing the speed limit, and he pulled me over for no reason, so there’s small lines in there that say so much, so he pulls me over and say, “Are you carrying a weapon on you? I know a lot of you are.” That blanket statement tells you what sort of person he is. “A lot of *you* are.” “Are you carrying a weapon on you? I know a lot of you are.”

And this guy knows a bit about the law because he’s used to breaking it, **(laughter)** so he’s protecting himself, he knows, “you can’t go in my glove compartment without a search warrant and you can’t go in my trunk—you can’t go anywhere that your hands can’t see or reach, you can’t open a locked glove compartment unless you have, you know, the proper search warrant,” and the officer’s retort was, “are you some type of lawyer or something?” So it was this conversation between these two people, and he’s

waiting for a K-9 unit to come, a K-9 unit comes, we're all in trouble, because the K-9 smells the drugs, the car gets pulled over, boom we get locked up. But somehow the K-9 was on another call, and he couldn't hold us but for so long, so we pull off, and as we pull off, about five minutes down the road, we see a car screeching, lights blaring, and we look and we see "K-9 Unit" coming up the highway, so I have 99 problems, but *that* bitch ain't one. **(laughter)** That just struck me as deeply funny that I tell that story and people would think that it's about women in general. It's my sense of humor.

CORNEL WEST: For me it raises the question of what sits at the center of your artistic but also your social perspective. You say that the aim of the text is to establish that rap is poetry, that it tells a story, and that it connects with all of us as human beings, and that you found your voice even when you listened to other giants like Rakim and KRS-1 and all the great ones who came before, Big Daddy Kane and all of those folk are inside of you as part of your tradition. And you said "ah, my voice is going to be the voice of what's inside the mind of the hustler," it's almost like "Pusherman" of Curtis Mayfield, this notion of what it is to get inside the world, the mind, the soul of the hustler, given dilapidated housing, low-quality education, police always coming at you, the fear of capture and confinement, which is the experience of too many young brothers and sisters of all colors, poor, but disproportionately black, brown, and red. You said, "that's going to be the voice that I examine," and that has been the voice in these eleven albums.

JAY-Z: Absolutely.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Let's take a minute to listen to three.

CORNEL WEST: Is that Curtis? Oh, yes. There it is, there it is, there it is.

("Pusherman" plays)

JAY-Z: Feel free to snap your fingers.

CORNEL WEST: Curtis, I love you Curtis, but that notion of getting inside the hustler. What I've always wondered, wrestled with in your work is what is the relation between hustling in all of its varieties, the role of honor, respect, wondering who's coming at you, with the freedom fighter? What is the connection between the hustle and freedom fighting? How does a hustler become a freedom fighter, or how is a freedom fighter a kind of hustler that rechannels energy against institutions and structures as opposed to simply getting over? And I don't have an answer to this question. But I've been thinking about it.

JAY-Z: I think the hustler and the freedom fighter are similar in, you know, it's this anti, countercultural movement. One is it's about freedom and about having things and about improving your position, and then at some point it gets lost in that translation, and it becomes about greed, and it becomes about adrenaline and it becomes about the excitement—the excitement of getting away with something that you're not supposed to—I mean, if we're being honest about it, you know, at some point the excitement of

getting away with it, the excitement of driving fancy cars and things. And you know, that level, so the difference to me between a hustler and a freedom fighter is a level of maturity.

CORNEL WEST: Because on page seventeen, when you talk about Chuck D., you said there's conscious, or what we call politically conscious, "Minority Report," and other examples in your corpus, highly politically conscious ain't no doubt about that, but I thought you used the word conscious and anti-hustler—do you remember saying that in that sentence, anti-hustler, so I was thinking does that mean then that when we think about somebody like Curtis Mayfield, Gil Scott-Heron, somebody like Nina Simone, that they are anti-system but also antihustler, but are there hustling elements inside of them?

JAY-Z: Absolutely, because there are so many different meanings that have hustler, it's almost like "all good," you know, if someone passed away, "ah, man, it's all good," and it's not all good. But there's so many different meanings to hustler, what I meant in that particular instance I'm talking about a street hustler, and maybe I should have clarified that a little better, the street hustler, but, you know, Chuck D. was a magnificent hustler. Hustle also means to apply yourself, you know, to improve your position, to use things at your disposal and means to be successful in a society that's built for you to fail. You have to have some sort of hustle to overcome those odds. I mean, I've been to where Chuck D.'s from, he's from Long Island. It's a very difficult neighborhood, parts of it, not the Hamptons side.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You say in your book on several occasions, "hustler first, artist second."

JAY-Z: Yeah, my spirit and soul. You know, my spirit and soul was birthed out of that. I was born in Marcy Projects, you know, the opportunities that were afforded us there were very few. And we didn't have—even the people that made it out of there, we didn't have role models who would come back and speak to us and say, "Man, this is how you do it, and you have to have this sort of thing." The people that were speaking to us was the hustlers—they were the only ones who had a conversation with us on how to be men and how to be—have integrity and honesty and loyalty. That's what I mean it's complex—how complex human beings can be. Here's a guy who's basically selling destruction to his whole neighborhood, but he's telling you, you know, he's giving you things that help you become a man, so he's feeding new life at the same time he's destroying life.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And yet. And yet—the book begins in a most magnificent way after the dedication to your father, and we may talk a little bit, maybe, about your father and how—your mother and father, but your father who you reconciled yourself with just months before he died, and your mother, who we heard on that tape, and I love the fact that you can be naughty, right?—because you recorded your mother without her knowing that she would be recorded for this—

JAY-Z: No, no, no, that's a little too deceitful. What I did was it was her birthday and I knew she would be nervous if I told her I was going to record her, so I told her to meet me at the studio, we were going to have lunch for her birthday. And when she got there, I said, "Why don't you just talk on this record here, and see what happens." Once she got in the booth, she was just—I couldn't stop her.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: She had stories to tell about you.

JAY-Z: She told some stories we had to cut out.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Do you remember one? Do you remember one?

(laughter)

JAY-Z: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. **(laughter)** You don't want me to tell it. I took it off the record for a reason.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I think here there is something about you, with that "yeah, yeah, yeah" three times, because one of the things that I find magnificent about this book is that you create for someone such as myself a sense of "I know this man," a sense of

intimacy while creating and maintaining distance. And I find that very—that must be a very complex dance.

JAY-Z: Yeah, I think that again it speaks to the similarities of our emotions. Like some of our emotions, I mean, *most* of our emotions are pretty much the same, but it's told from a world far removed from who you are, so that's the distance that you feel between us, it's told from a world that you can't even imagine. You can't imagine seeing your first person get shot at nine years old and that being normal to you or your friend die the next week and then or even looking at some photos—when me and Ty who's in the audience, who's my childhood friend as well, we looked on some website, and we were looking at photos of, you know, kids that we grew up with and he was like, "man, I remember the day when he died and then he died the next week," you can't even imagine those sort of emotions, that didn't happen, so that distances who we are as individuals—what you feel, the intimacy that you feel is the emotion of what everyone feels—angst, anxiety, fear, aspiration, you know, all these feelings that are universal, once you take the labels off who we are as individuals.

CORNEL WEST: But that raises the issue, though, of the kind of chronic social neglect and political abandonment of poor people in this society, especially in the chocolate slices, because the stories that you tell are stories that have to do with the sheer barbarity of a society that would allow precious and priceless young children to live these kinds of lives given the riches that we have. That is an indictment of a certain sort, there's no doubt about that, and yet at the same time it's difficult to see what role the music will

play as a form not simply of reflection but of resistance to highlight that barbarity because one of the ironies is that a lot of time people listen to hip-hop and they think all the barbarity resides among the poor people themselves rather than the situation, the circumstances under which they have to live.

JAY-Z: Context.

CORNEL WEST: Back to context.

JAY-Z: That's going to be the theme of the night.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And yet the very beginning of the book is Jay-Z, age nine, and I'll read the beginning. I'll read it with my inimitable accent. "I saw the circle before I saw the kid in the middle. I was nine years old, the summer of 1978 and Marcy was my world. The shadowy bench-lined inner pathways that connected the twenty-seven six-story buildings of Marcy Houses were like tunnels we kids burrowed through. Housing projects can seem like labyrinths to outsiders, as complicated and intimidating as a Moroccan bazaar, but we knew our way around. Marcy sat on the top of the G Train," and then you go on and you talk about this cipher, this moment where this young man, young boy, I don't know how old he is, I mean, rapping and is rhyming and this is what you write, and I find it quite amazing.

“His name was Slate, and he was a kid I used to see around the neighborhood, an older kid who barely made an impression. In the circle, though, he was transformed, like the church ladies touched by the spirit, and everyone was mesmerized. He was rhyming, throwing out couplet after couplet, like he was in a trance for a crazy long time, thirty minutes straight, off the top of his head, never losing the beat, riding the handclaps. He rhymed about nothing—the sidewalk, the benches—or he’d go in on the kids who were standing around listening to him, calling out someone’s leaning sneakers or dirty Lee jeans,” and on and on it goes.

That was, in a way, an epiphany for you. That was a first moment where you discovered and you describe a bit later the importance and power of words and you say in the next few pages, you talk about going and reading the dictionary, reading the dictionary to learn new words, and here we are in the library and I think it’s important that we’re talking about the words that—words really saved you in some way.

JAY-Z: Absolutely. Absolutely. The power of words and how mesmerizing. You’ve gotta figure that was pretty much the first time someone was speaking our language, the records we were listening to were Prince and Michael Jackson and the Temptations and, you know, I mean Curtis Mayfield, and, you know, we enjoyed those records, but we didn’t—they wasn’t telling our story firsthand. Now this was a language, this conversation that being had with these words, it made language new. It took words that we knew every day, ordinary words, and gave them heightened meaning, different meaning, and we could tell our story in a way that had never been told before. You know,

rap is three decades old, it's fairly new as a genre of music, and this my first time hearing that, and I was just—I was mesmerized from that point on.

CORNEL WEST: Actually the galley that you sent me had on the cover Myrtle Avenue and Marcy Avenue, but also Reverend Dr. Gardner C. Taylor Boulevard and that hit me so hard, because Gardner C. Taylor is somebody I go see once a year, he's ninety-two years old, he's the greatest living Christian preacher of any color still alive, he was pastor of Concord Baptist Church for over forty-some years, and talking about the power of words, we got Gardner C. Taylor Boulevard, here comes Shawn Corey Carter, Jay-Z, and so forth, Jehovah and all the things you work out with, **(laughter)** and all those things you work out with, and both highlighting the power of words but keeping in mind again that August Wilson said, "black people authorize reality by means of performance," because what performance does for black people is voices, "Lift Every Voice," that's the anthem of black people, "Lift Every Voice," because when you lift your voice you can define your reality in the face of what other people are telling you is their reality imposed upon you, so that's the thing—"I'm going to sing my song, I'm going to find my voice, I'm going to be myself," be an original rather than a copy in that sense, so you've got Gardner Taylor, older generation, younger generation, Jay-Z, right there in that corner, accenting the power of words, and yet we say to ourselves, how do we keep this tradition alive and how do we pass it on to the younger generation?

I know Brother Lupe Fiasco is here somewhere, where's Brother Lupe at? There he is, there he is, there he is, Brother Lupe, **(applause)** good to see you, good to see you, little

brother, we were just talking together and saying, of the younger generation you've been very important in terms of Kanye and the other folk, but how do you see yourself in this continuum of ensuring that the power of words remains at a quality but also connecting it to the freedom fighting that we were talking about?

JAY-Z: Just by protecting the integrity of it, you know, first of all, and by pushing it, expanding it, and for me, you know, rap is entertainment at some point, you know, it's entertainment, but it's based on our realities, and we can take it anywhere we want in fantasy, but at some point it has to be some sort of truth, some sort of integrity, some sort of pride to making music. That's what I love about Lupe. I met Lupe, I'm going to say maybe ten years ago, I mean, I thought he was an extraordinary writer from—I executive produced his first album, so my role that I play in that is to expand it as far as I can, you know, make it—expand the genre of words and the maturity and the subject matter, the things we talk about, and try to stay closer to those truths and try to, you know, explain it as poetry—it should be taken seriously, 'cause it is poetry. Some of the things that are said are just mind-boggling. If you sit down and really listen to some of the things that this young man has said, it's like you can't believe it.

CORNEL WEST: You've got a wonderful reference to his song in the "Moment of Clarity," in the footnotes about remember the great song—

JAY-Z: Dumb it, dumb it down, I was explaining how hard it is to dumb it down, it's very difficult, just to show it in a positive light, as a, you know, ambassador for it, and to

push the genre forward and to encourage new artists to not be afraid to be themselves, to not be afraid to hear their voice, not just to imitate something that's popular or something that's, you know, on the radio or something that's working, you know, a formula that's working, but not be afraid to use their own voice, because, you know, if there's variety, there's variety in the music, you know.

CORNEL WEST: Given the recording industry, the video industry, the radio industry, which tends to homogenize, flatten things out, give us this little bubble-gum music that's thin and shallow and hollow. Do you see any tendencies that cut up against that and might begin to generate a new kind of—if not a golden era, certainly a better era?

JAY-Z: Yeah, it's called the Internet. The Internet was a way of the music business purging itself. It's too many artists. You know, one year we released fifty-seven artists on one label. There's not fifty-seven great artists in the world, let alone one year, no, I'm sorry, one label. So it was a way of purging itself. The consumption of music is at an all-time high, people are still consuming music.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But differently, they're getting it from different sources. You had some a passage about Napster, and I think that's very interesting.

JAY-Z: That was a way to—because in the beginning musicians performed because they loved it, we weren't high-paid businessmen, we just, you know, played on the corner for pennies and nickels and then it became profitable and then it became exploitive. So I

think the Internet is a way to bring it back, just a touch, bring it back to that core, and not to have a self-plug, but that's why I left outside the system of the music business to have the freedom to be an artist and take two years, people don't even believe in artist development anymore, it's very difficult, you put a single out there, and if it doesn't work you just move on. It takes time for people to find themselves or find their voice and know what they want to talk about.

You know, fortunately for me my first album came out, I was twenty-six. I was mature in that way that I knew who I was, I knew what I wanted to say, I had a wealth of life experiences that I could draw upon and still draw upon to this day and that shows you a career, a career built upon real-life experiences, real emotions that I can draw on at any given time. A lot of times, you know, an artist is not ready to be an artist, you have a great record, that's one.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It reminds me of what Charlie Mingus said that you have to improvise but you have to improvise on something, and so you need a life, but, you know ,you were talking about tradition and transmission. Sometimes tradition and transmission happens in the oddest way, as I was confiding to you earlier on, when I grew up I was listening to Louis Armstrong, as we heard, and *The Magic Flute*, but now I live in Brooklyn, in Fort Greene, and I have two young boys, and I took my older young boy, who is just about to turn nine, to visit his grandparents, who are not so well, in Europe, and my father was saying to me, "What's rap?"

He's ninety-two, left Vienna, spent the war years in Haiti, knows that there's rap, but doesn't really know what it is, and I said, "I'll ask Sam," and so Sam, and I brought this here, wrote a letter to his grandfather from the hotel. He was staying with me, but my father is hard of hearing, which is why I've developed a fairly boisterous voice, so that he would really hear me, **(laughter)** and so Sam wrote a letter to my father, and I'll read just a little small part of it, this is how tradition also happens. "Rap, for grand-père and grand-mère, November 2, 2010. Rap is a form of singing. In rap you can say just about anything you want. You have to be a very talented singer and be able to say lots of sentences in one breath. Rap doesn't necessarily need to be fast, rap expresses the energy of the street. Some rappers can come out of nowhere and be very talented and creative. One particular rapper I like is called Jay-Z. He was very poor growing up in Brooklyn and one day he heard a boy—because I'd read the book to him—of nine years old rapping and thought, 'I can do that,' and from then on he carried a notebook wherever he went and wrote raps and now he's very famous, but he really doesn't care about fame. He cares about the music. So you see that when you practice you can make your dreams come true."

(applause)

JAY-Z: That's beautiful.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And I can't say—my son is sitting there—I can't say that—

JAY-Z: You have a poet.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I can't say that my father completely got it, but he began to understand, and he began to understand the interest. Do you still have that notebook?

JAY-Z: No, lost that. I wish, sadly.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You carried that notebook around everywhere. And you describe in the book, and I think it's a wonderful description, of how the notebook was covered—every inch was covered.

JAY-Z: It was sort of like this page here, so it didn't have lines—it was like a makeshift. My Moms made it with these little binders and it was like holes, and it wasn't a very traditional notebook, in the sense that it was just a bunch of pages. So there was sometimes the whole story would be crooked like this—the whole page, the entire page, was just filled. I wrote on the side, wrote anywhere.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And you describe in those pages that you could find yourself literally in the middle of the street and have to stop and quickly write down whatever it was that was going through your head. And this still happens to you now.

JAY-Z: Yeah, except I don't have the notebook, so it's very—You know, the further away I got from that notebook, you know, those ideas, with anything, you know, it's like

an exercise, if you're writing almost obsessively. I would write and write, and if you write that many hours and you're away from that thing, you're just outside, your mind still hears these words, these words still come to you, you know, whether you're sitting at the table or not, your location moved, you're the same person, your body is the same, so these words would come to me, and I had to retain them until I got back to that notebook to dump them. So with any exercise, doing that so many times, I was able to retain so much material, I would have four or five songs that I hadn't even written down just in my mind.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'm curious now, in writing this book and in reviewing with such care and with such patience your own lyrics and commenting upon them with such precision, have there been revelations for you? Did you discover things in the songs that you didn't know were there?

JAY-Z: No, not really, I'm pretty much, you know, in touch with, well I try to be, in touch with the emotions of what I went through and, you know, everything that's coming out in these words, I live them all the time, so I pretty much know everything that's in there. Some things when you read on paper are more profound than others. You know, "Big Pimpin'" is not profound at all. **(laughter)** It's very fun, it's a great time, try it around the house, you take a song—some songs that's complicated. Like you take a song like "Run This Town," you know, I just think it's a hit record, I didn't think it had any deep meaning, but if you look at the words, "feel it coming everywhere, screams from everywhere, I'm addicted to the thrill, it's this dangerous love affair." You know, when

you look at those words, you know, it takes on a more profound meaning than what it really was. So it works both ways is pretty much it.

CORNEL WEST: One of the things that comes through in the book is your willingness to be vulnerable, now that's also true in some of the lyrics of later albums, where it's clear that, like my generation, you know, we said, "Ain't Too Proud to Beg," that's the Temptations, and they harmonized it together on the mike. You made the profound point, hip-hop you don't have collective harmonizing on the mike together, so you miss the dramatic stylistic main ingredients to whispers, all those folks that mean so much to me, because in harmonizing together they don't have to be as—what would be the right word, big and bad, you know what I mean, and there's something about vulnerability, maybe I'm just getting old, little brother, there's something about vulnerability that is closer to one's humanity and therefore it allows one to kind of reflect on not just radical inadequacies but also radical yearnings that can result only when one is vulnerable, opens oneself in that sense, and I think that's part of the critique of the old school and new school, where is the vulnerability, because usually if people are not vulnerable, then they're hiding certain insecurity in order to be big and bad.

JAY-Z: Absolutely, absolutely. On my first album, the last song on there is a song called "Regrets," "I was young you used to hold me, told me I was the best," you know, this is a very vulnerable moment, but again I was twenty-six, so for the most part when people—when artists, you know, you're signed at eighteen, seventeen years old, you haven't matured to that level, you know, as a kid you're indestructible, you know, you feel you're

indestructible. And, again, you don't want to deal with those sort of emotions, it's not a comfortable place to say that, you know, that you're scared, and it's not a very—

CORNEL WEST: None of us want to do that. Want to acknowledge it, though we know it's real.

JAY-Z: Especially at eighteen. You know, so it's just a level of maturity, and that's really—for rap, for so long, it was the hot spot, that was the hot—you know, they say, "rap is for kids, rap is for the younger generation," it's really not, it's for everybody as we're starting to see as it grows, but that was the white-hot spot for rap, so people even when you got older, you're thirty years old, you're still trying to record like you're eighteen years old, so that when you're doing that you're missing that element of vulnerability and of honesty and maturity and, you know.

CORNEL WEST: But did you feel the pressure of the market to not want to deal with those more mature sensibilities and feelings because the market is so eager for the more simplified, flattened out?

JAY-Z: Yeah, but I think those, again, are short remedies. The intelligent person, you know, a Lupe Fiasco will have a much longer career. Those vulnerable moments don't sell four million copies typically.

CORNEL WEST: But he can have the industry coming at him because he's maturing so early.

JAY-Z: And for ten years he can slowly build to—

CORNEL WEST: I hear you. There's a moment in there that hit me so hard, it was in a footnote. But I'm thinking about your grandfather being a pastor in the Church of God in Christ and the role of religion in your life, and you had said that the death of Biggie just radically not shattered but *unsettled* your sense of justice in the world, and even a just God, a kind of theodicy as it were, and I'm wondering where you are on that issue.

JAY-Z: I think all people—I mean, I think we all as human beings, you know, we are in search of what no one can be sure of—we are in search of what's after, and what effects religion play in our lives. You know, I mean, I believe in God, and I believe in things happening for a reason, and then when certain things happen in life it kind of shakes your foundation of what you believe, like a baby being killed, you know, it's like what possibly could have an innocent child have done to the world to affect it in such a manner that it has to be taken away from here? There is no real justification for that. So you start to question, you know, everything you're told, and I don't think that's against religion or blasphemous or anything. I think you have to question everything about life. You know, because that's the only way we're going to understand it. For deeper understanding, we have to ask the question and, you know—

CORNEL WEST: You still hold on to religious faith, though, you think?

JAY-Z: I believe in God. And I believe that, you know, for me, you know, different religions, whether it's Muslim faith or Christianity, Baptists, everything, we're all praying to the same God, pretty much saying the same thing in every book.

CORNEL WEST: Do you think the Ku Klux Klan is praying to the same God that you and I are praying to, miscommunication taking place?

JAY-Z: Yeah, I think at its core, yes, I think there's a certain ignorance that's in people in organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, and, you know, hatred in their heart, but I think they are praying to the same God, they are praying to a Creator, you know, this doesn't work like this without a Creator, your body is such a perfect thing, you cut you scab, I mean, I don't know if that can be created by science, I'm just not a believer in that. But I think that, you know, as far as religion, you know, I take things that ring true to me. I guess I don't have a denomination, I guess, is that how you say it? You know, I've read things in the Muslim faith that rang true to me. I read things in, you know, different religions. I just believe in God. Sorry.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Don't apologize.

CORNEL WEST: Those are deep thoughts.

JAY-Z: The song you were referring is a song called "Lucifer," and it was dealing with the devils within, you know, these sorts of feelings, someone gets killed and you have this feeling like "man, you know, there can't be a God, I loved him too much, why would a just God take them away for no reason?" Biggie, who was the most charismatic person, he wasn't a troublemaker at all, he was just a funny, charismatic guy, and for him to die so senselessly in LA, I spoke to him that night, and he was so happy to be in LA, you know, after the whole East Coast/West Coast thing he felt like he finally was back in LA and everything was finally where it was supposed to be, he loved being in LA, and he just had this sense of "everything is great," and we see this happen in movies like when everything is just fine, you know, we hung up the phone and then one hour later he's no longer with us, you know, it's just—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I have so many questions—one of them has to do with—fame and expectation. Your book brings again and again this whole notion of what is expected of you and also what it means to become famous, and I'm reminded—each time I read the word "fame," I'm reminded of a German poet who once said that fame is but the collection of misunderstandings that gather around a new name. Here you are, you know, you've become world famous, globally famous, expected to do so many things, and I'm wondering if this feels to you sometimes like a burden?

JAY-Z: Yeah, but more a challenge than a burden, the challenge of you know I said something to Kanye in his "Power" remix, I asked him, "Do you have the power to get out from up under you?" Because every artist, you know, you're compared to your first album, your first work, or your greatest work, or your greatest album, and everyone wants you to make that album eleven times, and it's just impossible—you have to move forward, you have to move forward in a way that you do so with integrity and greatness, and you move away from that, and for me it's more so a challenge, you know, and it's acknowledging that challenge and acknowledging, you know, what's out there is what I tend to do.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And they want you to make the same album again and again, a recognizable style, nearly a stereotypical style. I've told this story before from this stage, but I just have to tell it once more. A friend of mine who knew Miles Davis fairly well was going to a concert of Miles Davis and he ran into Miles Davis, and Miles Davis said, "Is there anything I can do for you Michael?" He said, "Yes, I have a friend who's in town, I need a second ticket." He said, "That's fine." He said, "Is there anything else I can do for you?" He said, "Yes, my friend loves My Funny Valentine," and Miles Davis said to my friend, "Tell your friend to buy the record."

JAY-Z: It sounds like "On to the Next One." I kind of thought back to—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I told you you would lose me from time to time.

(laughter)

JAY-Z: It just dawned to me that the phrase is just like a phrase, as well as a song. The song that I made is called On to the Next One, in the song I said, what did I say? **(laughter)** "You want my old shit, buy my old album." Where were you thirty seconds ago? **(laughter)** Did you just get here? Thank you.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I love your story in your book about the "Hard Knock Life," and *Annie* and how I misspoke early on speaking about how you recorded your mother without her knowing, but for *Annie* you played a nice trick. I read that to my son yesterday—

JAY-Z: A feint. A true magician has to learn the value of a feint, right? That's what they say.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: That's one way of putting it.

JAY-Z: Yeah. I lied.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'm worried also, I'm wondering if you're worried, when the executives read—

JAY-Z: No, it was for good, it's all for the greater good, and he loves it, you know—Charles—I can't pronounce the last name, he loves the song, and he loves the translation of the song, and he actually spoke about it and spoke about how he wanted to make that song—we're talking about that Little Orphan Annie theme song how he wanted to make that song and he read the liner notes on "Hard Knock Life," and how I took this song about an orphan, a red-headed orphan from somewhere, and related it to, you know, our culture because you know at the foundation of that song is a feeling of abandonment and a feeling of not being recognized by the society, "instead of treated we get tricks, instead of kisses we get kicks," and I took something so beautiful, these beautiful notes and these chords, and I just told this real gritty story on top of it, and, you know, when you first hear that without the proper—you know, really, without the proper context—I'm almost tired of saying that word, but it's just true—without the proper context, he dismissed it immediately at first, and then I wrote him a letter of how, you know, *Annie* affected my life. But I saw it on TV, I didn't go to the play, you know, in the note I told him we had an essay at school, but nobody's ever going to believe me anymore after this—but I told him we had an essay at school, and I won the essay, and I went to see *Annie* on Broadway and it affected my life.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It did affect your life.

JAY-Z: The last part was true. It did affect my life. The truth is my sister her name is Andrea, but we call her Annie, but when this show *Annie* came on TV I was immediately drawn to it, I was like, what is this about, I watched the movie, and I'm like, "This is how we feel, this is about us, this is how we feel," and then so years later when I was on tour and Kid Capri had played this instrumental that DJ Mark the 45 King had made it stopped me in my tracks, I was actually walking off stage after performing, and he played this song as like an intermission before the next act went on, and I heard this sound with these drums and I said wait, and I told everybody, "wait a minute," and I went around to the DJ booth and I was like, what is that? And he told me that Mark had made it, and Mark is notoriously hard to find, and we found him in Maryland somewhere, and I recorded the record and, you know, it was all for the greater good.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And interestingly enough in the book there is a line that is a direct quotation, "it is the best of times and the worst of times," and so you're consciously I think quoting Dickens, and you're quoting someone who is writing in a very different context, but writing about a problem whether it is the problem of orphanages or the problem of doom and gloom, and it is a story that can touch you and can touch anybody.

JAY-Z: Yeah, again, we're all built of all these emotions, after you take away all the titles, and you know, the best of time, the worst of time, can relate to a great sonnet, to a conversation had on the corner of, you know, Nostrand and Marcy.

CORNEL WEST: I'm just reminded of the last line of In Defense of Poetry by Shelley, "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world," as a poet, what does Jay-Z's world look like? What would it look like and how would it hit up against the world in which we find ourselves?

JAY-Z: It would be an honest portrayal of what the world is today. It's what it is today, its filled with complex human beings who are in search of something, in search of something great and in search of a greater purpose, what is my purpose, why I am here, what is the vibrations I'm going to leave for future generations and how I am I going to affect the world in such a way that when I'm gone it's a better place? It's pretty much those are the truths without all the complication of politics and lies and trying to be something you're not, and all these other things that we cover—that we put out there to cover our insecurities or to cover our deceit—bad deceit, not like the *Annie* deceit—and, you know, it would look like what the world is—it's full of complex human beings. I find human beings extraordinary—I love to have the conversation. I love to find that *thing*, that *thing* that we have in common that we can spend hours speaking on. You know, those sort of new experiences for me—when you took me up to Princeton, I mean, it was just a new, beautiful world to me, you know. This conversation tonight. You know, your son's understanding of rap music. I think rap is powerful in that way.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And what is powerful to me here is that it's an inversion. I'm learning from him.

JAY-Z: And a child shall lead.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'd like to play tune number five, if we could.

("To Zion" by Lauryn Hill plays)

JAY-Z: Very powerful.

CORNEL WEST: We were listening to that driving here from Princeton. Of all places, from Princeton.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: When I put this on, you said, "Have you heard this album?" And I said, no, I mean, I now have heard it because of you.

CORNEL WEST: That's a classic.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What in this song in particular struck you so powerfully?

JAY-Z: That words—how words can be so powerful. You listen to this song and then you really get a deep understanding of who she was at the time. I've been fortunate enough to meet Zion, and as soon as I met him, the first thing I thought about was this song. I loved this song years before he existed, before he came into this world, you know, as a female recording artist, and she's pregnant at the time and people are telling her—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: People are saying don't follow your heart, but follow your head.

JAY-Z: Right. You know, they're telling her to abort her child and she didn't. She chose to have her child in the music business, you know, and she went on to have, you know, one of the most successful albums ever and just for me for me it reminded me of just how fortunate we were, when we went to every label they just told us no, to have our own label because we had a sort of creative control that other people didn't have. Because it's not enough to just have talent, you have to have control of your career as well, because this is one album, you know, we would love to have had ten albums from her, you can see that a problem right here was such a huge problem that wasn't going to go away. You know, if someone is arrogant—maybe bold—if someone is bold enough to tell you to abort your child so you can sell records, then they're going to tell you all kinds of things and we can see that come to fruition with her career. It just meant so much for me—it was one of those moments where music can be so powerful.

There's another moment that I've had—I've had many, but another moment that I had that's in the book is with Scarface, who is a rapper from Houston, Texas, and we were doing a song called "Can't Be Life," and we're sitting in the front room and we're talking before we're going to record and his phone rings and he's like, "Naw, man," and you can see something's happening on the other line I don't know what it is and he's saying no, and then he gets on the phone again, and he calls his wife and he asks, "how's little Brad,

how's he doing?" he wanted to check on his children, and he got off the phone and he told me that one of his friend's kids was in a house fire and had passed away, and we were doing a song that night and I'm like, "ah, man, I'm so sorry to hear that," and I tell him, "man, we can do this another time," and he called me Jig, and he said, "Naw, Jig, naw, man, I'm good, man, I'm got you, I'ma do it now," and he sat in the corner and he rocked sort of like that, and he wrote this song—and he wrote the song about the whole experience, and on the song he's like, "As I walked into the studio to do this with Jig, I get a phone call from one of my nigs, he said, my homeboy Reese, he just lost one of his kids, and when I heard that, this powerful thing that he took this experience, this powerful and very sad experience and he turned into this most, this powerful art that was—it almost had me embarrassed about my verse, it was that powerful, you know, because he ends the verse by saying, "I could have talked about my own life in this song, but heaven knows that would have been wrong, it wouldn't have been life, it wouldn't have been love," and the song is called "Can't Be Right," and I'm just saying like, "man."

CORNEL WEST: That's powerful, but it raises the issue of the role of love and compassion in certain kinds of art, and that's a little different than just the quest for truth, though, which you can find your voice and reflect about conditions and so forth, but love is a leap of faith, and that leap of faith requires that vulnerability again and the intimacy, and then being willing to share that with the world and I wonder, I think of your song "Ain't No Love in the City," with Bobby Bland singing and I love that you bring the blues artists in too, you see, that's very important, with Bobby Bland singing, but you were echoing Roberta Flack and Donna Hathaway with "Where is the Love?" in 1972,

where is the love? Now, is the legacy of love and especially the legacy of black love, alive in a serious way for you or is it declining and waning, because I look at all the player-hating coming at you, the jealousy, the envy, all of those are drumbeats in your music as well, from the very beginning. I mean, part of that is because you're talking bad, so they're going to come at you, you know. But you do execute, you execute, you do execute.

JAY-Z: I'm a bad man.

(laughter)

CORNEL WEST: Because you're a bad man, ain't no doubt about that, you're a bad man, ain't no doubt about that. Like Muhammad Ali, yes indeed, and Richard Pryor.

JAY-Z: In that conversation, that's why Muhammad Ali is one of my heroes, because, for me, when he was saying, "I'm pretty," he was saying that to all of us, he made all of us feel like we were pretty, "I'm pretty, I'm a bad man, I'm pretty." You gotta figure at the time this was, there was a time when we were considered ugly, so he wasn't just saying that as a boast to walk inside the ring, he was saying that as a boast to all of us, "I'm pretty, you're pretty, he's pretty," you know what I'm saying? And that's what I felt, that's what I got from Muhammad Ali, and to answer your question, yeah, a lot of short-cuts are being taken because of the lack of proper artist development, the lack of

proper maturing, period, you need a certain level of maturation to experience this love and have these sort of feelings and the proper role models as well.

I think the generation that we went through was so emotionally scarring to us. Think about the time we grew up in was like the crack epidemic, the whole relationship between "it takes a village to raise a child" had split—it no longer existed. The people that were supposed to care for us were now running around the neighborhood, and crack is not a prideful drug, you know, you seen people in the hallways with no sense of self-worth and now the child was in charge, the child didn't even have any respect for his elders, he was was in a position of responsibility, and that thing is psychological, that's not going to go away and that sort of feeling and love—love for yourself and love for your elders and respect for people were gone. It was gone for—

CORNEL WEST: On page thirteen you talk about that moment with Biggie, where about something changed, "look at our parents, they're even effin scared of us." That is a different moment—because I wasn't scared of my parents.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You talk very movingly about both parents—your mother who gave you—

(crosstalk)

CORNEL WEST: Not at all, my parents were not scared of me at all.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Your parents were not at all.

CORNEL WEST: And that was a good thing. I didn't want Dad scared of me. My dad gave me enough room to resist him, because he loved me enough for me to find my own voice, but if I had grown up with my mother and father were afraid of me, which is your generation—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But your mother wasn't afraid of you. Your mother wasn't afraid of you. Your mother understood that things were happening in your life that weren't all good.

JAY-Z: She was very strong.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And she gave you—you say it many times. She gave you latitude, she gave you room, she gave you a boom box.

JAY-Z: Yeah, part of raising children is knowing your child. You have to know who you have to be more strict on and who you can give, you know, a longer leash. And she allowed me to—like he said—she allowed me to find my voice and she allowed me certain, you know, room that I really didn't deserve at such a young age, but I guess she knew something that I didn't at the time.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Before we speak a tiny bit about your father, you talk in the book a sentence that comes back again and again is "getting away with it." You talk about looking in the mirror, this image of looking in the mirror and who you see, something you're quite interested in, and also the fact that you've gotten away with things.

JAY-Z: Yeah, because, you know, again I was seeing such destruction on a regular basis that didn't make the newspapers, you know, it wasn't reported. All these things were happening, you know, every day, so every day that I was alive I was getting away with it in some sort of way. Every time that I tempted fate, I was getting away with it, you know, because this was a natural occurrence, you know, our friends, right next, you'd be with someone one week and, you know, and it was all good just a week ago, and all these things were taking place.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Your mother was instrumental in getting you together with your father. You were worried that your father actually wouldn't show up. And in fact he didn't show up the first time, and she pursued and said, "you have to meet him a second time." Your father left when I think you were eleven or twelve—eleven or twelve—and you always say "eleven or twelve," which itself, the incertitude, is interesting, that you're not quite sure, but he left and he didn't come back and you never really knew what it was that made him go away but discovered in your conversation—precisely *in a conversation* you discovered, and you discovered something that I find most amazing, that you were able to forgive him. Tell us what you discovered and who he was.

JAY-Z: As a gift I would love for our generation and all the people that grew up without their parents, whether you knew them early on or not is to have that conversation so you could let that sort of anger go, because that's the sort of anger that keeps you from love, right, it makes you put up walls and you don't let people get close to you, because you don't ever want to feel that feeling of abandonment or that feeling of hurt again, so you don't let certain people close to you, you know, so if I could give anyone a gift, I would give them that, the moment when I was able to have the conversation and let it go, and, you know, surprisingly forgive him, you know.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Once again, you discovered something in context. You discovered why your father left.

JAY-Z: Right. You know, growing up I just thought that he decided one day that he was tired of everything and walked out, and I didn't know the emotional circumstances behind what happened. So what happened when I was about eleven was his younger brother, whose name was Ray had got stabbed up in Sumner Projects, which is about fifteen minutes away from where we lived, and he died, and my father would go out at nights and look for the guy who killed him, and my mother would say, "man, you have a family here, how can you go out and risk, you know, these sort of, you know, risk your family—your family is here," and he's like, "no, that's my brother," so that dynamic of "my blood brother versus my family," you know, which should have been one thing, but it was like a pull to him and then he really got depressed and started drinking and doing

drugs and this and that, and then he just wasn't the same person who had been there for the first ten years of my life, and who had married my mom at a time when it wasn't popular, you know, and who was raising, you know, the four of us as a man, you know, something happened to him, So without that context, just him leaving, I had this anger, you know,but when I slowly got to know why I could understand a bit of what happened to him. He was sick, he wasn't who he used to be, he had changed as a person, he had been scarred, and he built up this wall that he couldn't get over, and then, you know, drugs made him go further away from his true self.

CORNEL WEST: One of the of the sublime moments in the text is when your father used to bring you here to Times Square, you would always walk around Times Square and point out all the details and so forth and then you end that paragraph and you say, "Actually, Dad taught me to be an artist, because you have to be very concise, precise, meticulous about the details, what you're seeing, the perception, being able to see things and see through things at the same time," but on the other hand, the haunting line that again hit me hard, little brother, when you said that at your precious father's funeral you were more intrigued than devastated.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yeah, you were not crying at your father's—

CORNEL WEST: That was really honest, again, you keep it real, little brother, I love that about you, but that hit me hard.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Hard to write that, hard to write that.

CORNEL WEST: I gave my father's eulogy, that's the most difficult thing I will ever do—everything else is downhill after that, you know what I mean, but we had a different kind of relationship, and I look at you, and I say, my brother, how did you get the strength without that kind of fatherly love after eleven or twelve, because you did have it before, and it's still in you now, but how you got that strength to still do what you do.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: A role model of a father—

CORNEL WEST: Not a role model, a role model's a little too abstract, somebody who just loves you in the flesh, in the funk, in the concreticity of who you are, that ain't a role model. That's the real thing—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, I understand, and I think the word "concreticity" is great. You wanted us to listen to this track number six, if we could do that.

("Brooklyn's Finest" plays)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Cornel—

CORNEL WEST: Keep that tradition alive—we got to keep the tradition alive and all the different voices. Because the truth of the matter is America is not going to make it

without the black voices—musically, politically, ideologically, whatever—without Frederick Douglass, Martin King, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Ray Charles, Stevie Wonder, John Coltrane, Aretha Franklin, Ella Fitzgerald, on and on, and I ain't even talking about Sarah Vaughn yet.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Or Louis Armstrong.

CORNEL WEST: Or Louis or Duke or Count, and these are not just entertainer, just like this brother here, this brother is part of a tradition of struggle for freedom, psychically, socially, politically, and artistically, but he's coming out of the underside of the American empire in the projects. The richest empire in the history of the world look what he had to deal with every day of his life—that's a shame, that's a shame.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And look at him now.

CORNEL WEST: That's a shame, look at you now, but at the same time, his life was inseparable from the brothers in the grave and the funerals we went to, so that's the tradition—he represents this tradition in his own way as a human being, but all of the visionary breakthroughs and artistic breakthroughs but also some of the criticisms that we're talking about in regard to gender and other issues that we know we have to wrestle with, and if America doesn't recognize that, we'll lose the best of it, I know you got a relation to Obama, I liked the section on Obama, we can talk about Brother Barack

Obama, because Barack needs to understand what we talking about **(laughter)**—I'm telling you. He's got to get some backbone in him.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: How did it feel to you when Obama, as it were, you know, quoted you?

JAY-Z: I thought that was incredibly courageous of him. You know, many times people have hidden or used rap, you know, as part of their political campaign as this gangster music that people shouldn't be listening to, it's this scourge on America where we wasn't making this music, it was still happening in these neighborhoods. A lot of what we were saying was happening in the neighborhoods anyway. He wants to use rap as a tool, so I thought it took a great amount of courage for him to stand there and do that or even admit that he had rap on his iPod. It was like a new generation of president.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Meeting him for you must have been quite extraordinary. Thinking where you came from and now you were having some time with your president.

JAY-Z: Yeah, it was like an unbelievable feeling, yeah, I didn't think that would ever, happen, but I didn't think a black man would be president in America, either, so the two coupled together.

CORNEL WEST: That was true for most of us, we didn't think there would be a black man as a president in the White House.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The black man as a president, the wife of a rapper singing for the black man's inauguration. That was quite something. We spoke earlier about Oprah and her difficulty, generational difficulty perhaps with the N-word.

CORNEL WEST: But with Oprah it's not just generational. How many bluesmen and women have you ever seen on Oprah's show? Have you ever seen BB King on her show? **("Yes" from the audience.")** BB King has never been on Oprah's show. I just was with BB a few weeks ago and he wanted to get on the show, he couldn't get on the show. I don't know what you all are hallucinating over here. **(laughter)** BB hasn't been on the show. It's not just generational, Oprah's got her social constituency. And she's an entrepreneurial genius, she needs to be able to stay in business, I salute her business, and so forth, but at the same time it's not just generational, you see what I mean, it's a matter of the tradition itself—we've got jazz musicians like Marsalis, Christian McBride,

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What is interesting in the book as it ends with Oprah is that you are having a conversation—

CORNEL WEST: Cyrus Chesnut, Cassandra Wilson.

JAY-Z: You're going to set that brother off—

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'm trying to—

CORNEL WEST: I don't mean to interrupt my brother, you're making a very important point.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: This is what you write, "You know, hip-hop has done so much more for race relations, even with its ignorance, which by the way we do take some responsibility for. But even without directly taking on race we have changed things just by being who we are. It is difficult to teach racism in the home when your kid loves Jay-Z, it is hard to say that guy is beneath you when your kid idolizes that guy." I think that is incredibly powerful.

JAY-Z: Just rap in itself, without saying, we should all respect each other as human beings, you know, just the level of success and the penetration and the power in the words, you know, because that's where racism is taught, it's taught in the home, and it's very difficult to do that. So I think rap has done more for racial relations that, you know—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I must say to you as I'm discovering your work now. It's quite obvious, I think, to the people here tonight that I'm no expert in rap, but as I'm discovering your work and discovering this truly magnificent book, soul-searching,

deeply honest, candid, highly poetic, I mean we should, your archives should come to the New York Public Library at some point **(applause)** and I'll have shout-out here for the Brooklyn Public Library, if they want it—

CORNEL WEST: Schomburg—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Schomburg, as well, which is part of the Public Library, but truly it seems to me, now I lost my thought, yes, listening to your music over the last few weeks and having those CDs with that little label that says, you know, "sexually explicit" or "parental guidance" I decided that my parental guidance in part was to have my young boys listen to these words and to listen to them, because perhaps if they listen to those words and understand the intent and understand that it's part of our vocabulary and understand that words are only as bad as the intentions with which you use them, they will learn a lesson much more important than if I censor them. So in some way you have given me a great tool to teach them how to be more fully human.

JAY-Z: I applaud you.

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I applaud you.

JAY-Z: No, I applaud you. Again, you have to know your child to know that they can handle that level of profanity, and you have to instill something in them to say that exact same thing—words and intent—those two things go together, you know, without intent words are just a bunch of, you know, symbols, you know, strung together some sort of way.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We'll see how well they do.

(laughter)

JAY-Z: Well, you'll be surprised. I'm sure they've heard a couple of them, sorry to tell you this tonight. **(laughter)** I'm going to break this news to you, but they've heard every one of those words.

(laughter)

CORNEL WEST: They've heard them before.

JAY-Z: I don't want to snitch on the guys, but they may have said them.

(laughter)

CORNEL WEST: But the greatest poet in the English that we're speaking now was William Shakespeare himself, who retires at forty-seven, that wonderful moment in *As You Like It* where he says "all the world's a stage and all the men and women only players with their exits and entrances," and when he's talking about what it means to be a player, a playmaker, sometimes a player hater, a player helper, but all of us go through the stages from infant to oblivion, he's got seven of them in that speech, you'll recall, and of course for you player and being a player is fundamental to your whole worldview, the question is what kind of player are you going to be and what kind of playmaking will you enact. You see, Martin Luther King was a playmaker because he made certain moves and tried to, in the stages of his life, have a certain kind of impact.

He was an artist rhetorically, you're an artist musically and lyrically, but all of us have that challenge and that is what in the end Jay-Z and Shakespeare have in common. The centrality of raising the question "what kind of playmaking will you make in your move from womb to tomb?" because you're going to be dead just like Shakespeare is now and you're not going to be alive that long, will you leave a legacy, what kind of legacy will it be, not just artistically, but will your life itself become a work of art, in which your art is an element in your life as work of art? That's Shakespeare in *The Tempest*, that's his swan song. That's how he goes out, that's how he goes out, it's like the end of a James Brown concert, "you look in the rearview mirror, I'm gone, I've got to go," that's what we're talking about with his genius, this genius right here, that's what we're talking about—Lord, Lord, yes, and just forty years old, man, the Lord's going to use you in some mighty ways, man, and the struggle, lord have mercy, because the struggle's going

to escalate in the next few years, for all of us, for all of us, and the legacy that we're talking about and those select geniuses like Brother Jay-Z and a few others out there in their own way. I know the way you're critical of "be free," you always want to be free, but knowing that you have a role to play in the sense of the kind of playmaking that you've already made, you're making now, and you will make on into the future.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: If you were to have a son or a daughter . . . **(laughter)** if that were to happen, would—what kind of a world do you, do you—would you try to prepare them for?

JAY-Z: That's a great question. A complex world that at the core, at the core we all share the same feelings—just to try to find your voice and who you are, not to follow in any footsteps—what are the questions that you have, you know, what are you going to do to change the world, how do you feel? Just that sort of being an individual. You know, again, I'll point to my friends, because they're my greatest role models at times. At times, not. **(laughter)** But you know, my friend Ty-Ty over there, he let his son come out in pajamas, and I thought that was strange at one point, I was like "why is he letting him come out in pajamas?" And that's what his son wanted to wear, so he didn't impose on him you can't go outside in—not pajamas—some kind of costume.

He actually came to, like, a very important event with a costume on, **(laughter)** it was like a groundbreaking ceremony for the Nets and he was sitting in front of me, it was very distracting, **(laughter)** with his Batman suit on **(laughter)** or something and I was

thinking, “That is quite odd for a child who comes from a kid who used to live in the Marcy Projects to have on a Batman outfit at a groundbreaking ceremony,” but that’s the strength of his conviction, he let his son, that’s what he wanted to wear, he’s not telling him, “you can’t go out—you can’t wear that—you can’t do this.” He’s letting him have the freedom of making his own choices and figure out for himself that “maybe I shouldn’t be at the” **(laughter)**—because I’m sure when he sees the pictures it’s not going to be a bright spot for him, **(laughter)**, you know, especially when his first girlfriend comes over and his mother breaks out the pictures, and say, yeah, “This is River at the groundbreaking ceremony with a Batman suit on,” he’s not going to be very—it’s not going to be one of his best moments. But just, you know, letting him find his voice, letting him be an individual, you know, not telling him, “you have to do this, you have to do this, you have to dress like this, put this on,” let him be—that was the long of it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Let’s listen to track number eight in closing.

(“Empire State of Mind” plays)

CORNEL WEST: “Empire State of Mind.” “Empire State of Mind.” **(applause)** “Empire State of Mind,” I’m telling you! As an anti-imperialist I’ve always been suspicious of this “Empire State” talk, you know what I mean, I’m in deep solidarity with my indigenous brothers and sisters whose land they actually subjugated, but just on the

musical tip, **(laughter)** that's a beautiful song. Yeah, I love you brother, love you, it's true, love you and respect you.

JAY-Z: Thank you.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Cornel. A last good question coming from you to Jay-Z.

CORNEL WEST: I think I've asked my questions. I think that it's just been a marvelous night for me. I'm inspired.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'm inspired.

CORNEL WEST: I'm ready to go on and keep running, keep running, keep running. Jay-Z! Jay-Z! Jay-Z in the house!

(applause)