

Rapper Kendrick Lamar wins the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for Music

By Hiram Lee
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Rapper Kendrick Lamar was awarded this year's Pulitzer Prize for Music in honor of his 2017 album *Damn*. He is not only the first hip hop musician to win the award, but also the first musician from any genre other than classical or jazz to win.

Considerable hyperbole surrounds Lamar at this point. The 30-year-old Compton, California-born rapper has been called a "genius" and a "once in a generation" talent. When he referred to police killings of unarmed youth in his 2015 song "Alright" and the accompanying music video, he was celebrated as a political or "socially conscious" rapper.

Barack Obama provided a further boost to Lamar's career when he named the latter's song "How Much a Dollar Cost" his favorite of 2015, and "Humble" one of his favorite songs of 2017—not surprising, since Lamar brags in it about his relationship with the former president. Their mutual admiration was cemented when the two had a sit-down in the Oval Office in 2016.

Recognizing Lamar's music was an unexpected move by the Pulitzer Prize board, which has given out an award for music virtually every year since 1943. Past winners include "classical" composers such as Aaron Copland, Charles Ives, Samuel Barber, Elliott Carter, Morton Gould, Gunther Schuller, Virgil Thomson and John Adams. Jazz musicians Wynton Marsalis, Ornette Coleman and Henry Threadgill have also been recognized.

One is not obliged to accept the Pulitzer Board's authority as an arbiter of musical taste; many significant works have been overlooked, and others overrated. But when considered against the achievements of these composers and musicians, Kendrick Lamar's musical contribution seems so slight that it becomes almost absurd to make the comparison.

The jury overseeing this year's music selection included jazz violinist Regina Carter; composer David Lang; Metropolitan Opera dramaturg Paul Cremona; as well as David Hajdu, music critic for the *Nation*; and Farah Jasmine Griffin, Professor of English and Comparative Literature and African-American Studies at Columbia University. Griffin called the decision, "very important for hip-hop and very important for American popular culture and African-American culture but it's also very important for the Pulitzer."

Pulitzer's choice to recognize the rapper cannot be viewed as anything but a nod to identity politics and the Democratic Party. The Pulitzer board declared Lamar's *Damn* "a virtuosic song collection unified by its vernacular authenticity and rhythmic dynamism that offers affecting vignettes capturing the complexity

of modern African-American life."

These are fairly sweeping claims. A more sober analysis of Lamar's music seems in order.

Damn presents us with a picture of the inner turmoil of the young rapper, which he tends to pose in religious terms. He wants to walk the righteous path but fears his own wickedness or weakness will get the best of him. He is conflicted. Like so many of his rap contemporaries, Lamar wants to "get money" and "bitches." But he feels bad about it.

While the content of Lamar's lyrics leaves a lot to be desired, musically the album is an unorthodox mixture of hip hop, jazz and rock elements. There is more musical variety here than can be found on most of today's hip hop albums—commercial or underground. A gloominess or sense of resignation creeps into much of it, at least in those moments when the drums aren't charging forward in a self-aggrandizing cadence.

Lamar's delivery is also more varied than is common in hip hop. He often begins rapping in a familiar, straight-forward style before suddenly stopping to go against the grain with another rhythmic pattern—angular and unusual—that sits much differently in the beat. Lamar makes interesting use of repetition at the beginning of his verses. He often gets a running start by repeating the first few words of his first lines in extended anacrusis (pick-up bars) before the true verse begins. He knows how to generate excitement. He is a capable technician. Unfortunately, his particular brand of introspection does not get him very far.

On the song "DNA," Lamar raps about all the positive and negative qualities that are a part of him. Somewhere high above the bass and drums, the rapper declares in a thin monotone: "I got millions, I got riches buildin' in my DNA/I got dark, I got evil, that rot inside my DNA..." This battle with his inner demons sinks into self-pity when Lamar laments on "Feel" that, "Ain't nobody prayin' for me."

At his worst, Lamar records verse after verse of standard rap braggadocio. On "Element" he raps about lifting himself out of poverty through rap and of his dedication to hip hop culture. With the celebrated "vernacular authenticity," he raps:

I'm willin' to die for this shit, nigga
I'll take your fuckin' life for this shit, nigga
We ain't goin' back to broke, family sellin' dope
That's why you maney-ass rap niggas better know

In another verse, Lamar ridicules his fellow rappers who brag about their wealth but have failed to accumulate millions in the double digits as he has:

I'm allergic to a bitch nigga, ayy
An imaginary rich nigga, ayy
Seven figures ho, that's slimmer than my bitch figure, ayy

Audiences are encouraged to live vicariously through such material, and Lamar knows how to sell it with his delivery and his music. When the rapper puffs up his chest to talk about his riches, listeners can almost feel their lungs filling with the same air.

"Humble" contains more of the same. It is built around a tense and brooding piano melody which almost seems to have an ego of its own. On the verses Lamar brags again about his wealth and sexual prowess. The biggest brag of all: "Obama just paged me." In the chorus, he reminds himself to be humble, rapping "Bitch, be humble. Sit down." Only rarely, however, does he heed his own advice.

In its celebration of Lamar's music, including its lyrics, the Pulitzer board has excused a real poverty of language and expression. Neither does his album take an especially broad view of life. The rapper is more than a little self-involved.

Moreover, the idea that there is anything that could be termed a distinct and unitary "modern African-American life" is a fiction. It is a term, like "black community," that conceals the deep class divisions which exist among African-Americans and every other ethnicity. In the past decade, social inequality among African-Americans has grown dramatically. As the WSWS reported last year, "the richest 10 percent of African-Americans own 75.3 percent of all wealth owned by African-Americans."

African-American billionaires such as media mogul Bob Johnson, Robert Smith, founder of the private equity firm Vista Equity Partners, and Oprah Winfrey, live in a completely different world than working-class African-Americans. Those workers have a thousand times more in common with the workers of every ethnicity and background than they do with African-American elites.

While Kendrick Lamar came from humble beginnings, *Forbes* magazine reported in 2017 that the rapper now has a net worth of \$30 million. That kind of wealth and the doors it opens, including the one leading to the Oval Office, often have a deeply damaging effect on one's outlook and the ability to create serious works of art.

Considering this "very important" moment for hip hop and Kendrick Lamar, it is worth giving some thought to the genre as a whole. Hip hop got its start in the early 1970s but did not become a commercial art form until 1979 or so. The music developed into a major cultural phenomenon during the 1980s and 1990s. This coincided with a period of intense reaction and cultural stagnation, during which the class struggle was largely suppressed by the pro-capitalist trade unions through their alliance with the big

business Democratic Party.

The wave of bourgeois triumphalism that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 convinced many that a major social transformation was impossible. Those voices who claimed to speak for the "left" abandoned social reformism in favor of identity and lifestyle politics. Black capitalism was promoted as the alternative to the poverty and hardship of the inner city. African-American musicians were encouraged to be as selfish and mercenary as possible.

When it began in the 1970s, hip hop consisted mostly of relatively innocent and entertaining competitions between rappers to find out who among them had the greatest gift of gab. But it didn't take long for the music to degenerate into something more sinister. A glorification of gangsterism and money began making its way into the lyrics and attitudes of some rappers in the mid-1980s, and came to dominate in the 1990s. Volumes of lyrics have been written promoting a sick, cut-throat individualism, often emulating the most criminal elements at the top of society. Many rappers fashioned an identity for themselves as the black-market version of black capitalism. Rapper Kanye West recently created a controversy with his statements in support of Donald Trump, but rappers have been identifying themselves with Trump for years. His name has been dropped in multiple rap songs, in which he serves as a symbol of riches and success to be idolized.

"Socially conscious" rappers have often come along to challenge their more violent, wealth-obsessed counterparts, only to promote cultural nationalism and a more nuanced black entrepreneurialism as an alternative.

Kendrick Lamar is not substantially different from what and those who came before him. Despite his religious handwringing, one finds in Lamar's work much of the same gratuitous sexual explicitness, the grasping after dollars and the egoism of rap. The more political or "conscious" lyrics celebrated by some critics, including his opposition to police violence, are few and far between.

Far from an important moment for American popular culture and the Pulitzer Prize, as Griffin put it, Lamar's award is another sign of the overall decline of cultural life during the past several decades.

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