

Kendrick Lamar's "Alright": Transforming from Song to Anthem

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Kendrick Lamar's 'To Pimp a Butterfly,' was his third and most critically acclaimed album to date. Rolling Stone placed this chart topping work at number 19 on its current list of the 500 best albums of all time. The melodic jazz rap featuring a myriad of accompaniments by some of the industry's best jazz musicians including Terrace Martin, wound up receiving 11 Grammy Nominations including a win for Best Rap Album. This work was in many ways autobiographical for Lamar, who focused on themes of survivors' guilt, rap industry politics, capitalism, systemic racism and police brutality. The making of 'To Pimp a Butterfly' was described by Terrace Martin as, "An ongoing mediation of racial politics and black cultural experience," (Fulton 2015). The seventh track on the album titled "Alright," was released with a music video that visually focused heavily on the themes of police brutality and systemic racism. After the release of this track and its music video, "Alright" became an anthem for the Black Lives Matter movement in 2015. The purpose of this track as a part of the album was transformed into a major piece of a social movement following the release of the music video. While systemic racism and police brutality are certainly present themes in the original album context of "Alright," the production of the music video centralized these themes using visual elements to amplify the relevance to the current socio-political climate. This essay will analyze the transformative effect of hybridizing artistic elements in "Alright," and the role music plays when it reaches the grasp of social movements.

On the album, "Alright," is preceded by Lamar's track "U," in which he drunkenly berates himself from the perspective of his friends and family. A recurring line that's featured on multiple tracks on the album is, "I remember you was conflicted. Mis-using your influence. At times I did the same. Abusing my power, full of resentment. Resentment that turned into a deep

depression,” (Lamar 2015). This deep depression Lamar describes was a result of his crippling survivor's guilt. Having lived through the intense poverty and violence growing up in Compton, California, Lamar recognizes he was one of the lucky few to “escape,” but feels as though he’s abandoned his roots. This is a theme he investigates throughout “U,” with lines like, “Where was your presence? Where was your support that you pretend?// You ain’t no brother, you ain’t no disciple, you ain’t no friend.// A friend would never leave Compton for profit.” In lines like these, Lamar is expressing his regret and remorse for being lured into the capitalist machine that is the recording industry. He personifies the greed of the industry by assigning it a character he calls “Lucy.” The name Lucy was derived from Lucifer, but Lamar uses a woman’s name because of the seductive nature of promised fortune and fame. In “U” Lamar describes turning to substances as a way to handle the guilt he carries from feeling as though he sold out for a better life, “If this bottle could talk, I’d cry myself to sleep, bitch everything is your fault,” (Lamar 2015). This track displays the depth of the darkness he experienced through his journey of achieving success, and the blame he placed on himself for the unresolved chaos that continues to ensue in his home city. Understanding this context is important when analyzing “Alright” as it explores Lamar waking up from the drunken night that was, “U,” and looking to his faith to triumph over “Lucy”, and remind himself that he’s still the same Kendrick from Compton.

Lamar begins the first verse of “Alright,” with the lines, “Uh, and when I wake up, I recognize you lookin at me for the pay cut// But homicide be lookin at you from the waist down.” Lamar is speaking to the exploitative nature of the music industry with that first line, describing how they see him as nothing but another black face to profit from. The second line seems to be almost directed at the black people outside of the world of fame, where the same systemically racist forces that see Kendrick as a profit machine, profiles black Americans in a

way that results in homicides at the hands of the police force. This seems to be Lamar pointing out the way money doesn't allow you to escape the burden of being black in America. He then goes on to reminisce on his life in Compton before the fame, discussing the formative experiences he had that sunk his roots there in the first place. The chorus repeats the phrase, "If god got us then we gon' be alright," (Lamar 2015), which intentionally juxtaposes previous discussions of his battle with "Lucy," which shows him relying on his faith to absolve him of the sins he's committed by being swayed by "Lucy's" attraction. He includes a line at the end of the first verse, "Tell the world I know it's too late// Boys and girls I think I've gone cray// Drown inside my vices all day," (Lamar 2015), which seems to be a sort of cautionary tale to the youth, where he explains that he is accepting of his sins, and that it's in God's hands now to forgive him for his abandonment. In "U," and "Alright," Lamar plays with the themes of good and evil, God and the devil, and his experience navigating these pulling forces. The themes of systemic racism and police brutality are undeniably included in "Alright," as well as on every other track on the album. The release of the "Alright," music video directed by Colin Tilley, particularly focuses on these themes, making them central to the song, displaying "Alright," in a context that is more focused on the contemporary social justice movement than the context as it relates to the album.

Before the first note of the "Alright" intro plays, the music video for the track shot entirely in black and white, displays imagery of poverty, protest, resistance, and police violence. The two minute video intro visually contextualizes the song around the themes of police brutality and the struggle for racial justice. Just before the song begins, an empowering image of Lamar and friends in a car that is being held up and carried by four police officers declares the message for the remainder of the video: that black Americans are unified in this struggle, and together will rise above the forces of oppression. The first chorus is accompanied by images of Lamar

driving his car in circles around people dancing on top of a police patrol car, again utilizing this imagery to challenge current societal strata. Lamar is literally floating above the ground for almost the entire video, which can be seen in a figurative way as elevating black voices, and creating a recurring visual theme of height and physical position to be analogous to the struggle for societal position. The video cuts to scenes of large gatherings of people around Lamar singing along to the lyrics in a way that ended up foreshadowing reality, when a month after the video's release a protest assembled in Cleveland in 2015 following the unlawful arrest of a young black man, at which protestors chanted the lyrics, "We gon' be alright!" in unison. The final minute of the video features Lamar atop a street light, almost falling off, but as though to explain that God's got him, is able to again find his balance. A police officer approaches the light pole, and shoots Lamar through the chest, sending him plummeting in slow motion down to the ground as he speaks out the last line of the song. The themes of "Alright," that connected more to the developing story created by previous tracks like "U," are indeed secondary to themes portrayed visually in the music video.

Tilley undoubtedly wanted to use lyrics from "Alright," like, "And we hate po po// wanna kill us dead in the street for sure," and, "But homicide be lookin' at you from the waist down," as the inspiration for the message he wanted to portray with Lamar's work. By keying in on the themes of systemic racism and police brutality that Lamar includes in the song, Lamar and Tilley together are able to transform Lamar's work into an anthem for a major social movement. By using these themes to portray "Alright," certain lyrics are able to emerge with a different meaning than they were originally intended in the context of the album. An example of this would be the lines, "What you want you, a house? You, a car? // 40 acres and a mule?// A piano, a guitar?// Anything, see my name is Lucy, I'm your dog." By taking these lines in context with

the album, it would be concluded that Lamar is explaining the way the exploitative music executives threw luxuries at him so they could make money off of his art, the very forces he would refer to as “Lucy.” However, the music video centralizing the theme of systemic racism brings the focus to the “40 acres and a mule” line, suggesting perhaps that these lines together could be the condescending words of the forces of oppression responding to demands for an end to racial inequality. Another example would be the lines, “I can see the evil I can tell it, I know it's illegal// I don't think about it, I deposit every other zero.” Analyzing these lines using the framework of the album, would suggest that Lamar is facing the reality that he’s being exploited by the music industry, but that he still takes and deposits their money anyway. These lyrics using the framework of the music video however, make more of a comment on those in privileged positions who are complacent in that they may acknowledge racial inequality, but ignore it and continue to thrive on an oppressive system. It could certainly be true that Lamar was aware of the many potential double meanings that exist within “Alright,” however the impact of this song as an anthem for social justice may have been lost if not for the coupling of the music video to assist in establishing the central theme of racial injustice.

Social movements and music historically have a strong connection due to the unifying affects of song. Within the framework of music of the Civil Rights movement exists an obvious connection to the music of Black Lives Matter and the contemporary fight against racial injustice. The music of the Civil Rights Era and its ability to remain timelessly associated with the movement suggests the scope of impact Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright” has and will continue to have as a modern day example of the unified black voice against oppression. Another modern example of work that accomplishes this feat would be Beyonce’s “Formation,” which “unapologetically focuses on black American experiences and comments on contemporary issues

of racial justice,” (Kehrer 2019). ‘We Shall Overcome’ can be seen as a historical parallel for what “Alright,” is today, in that “It proposed overcoming racism and segregation, instilled hope and maintained solidarity during active and collective protest” (Denisoff 1972; Flacks 1999; McLaurin and Peterson 1992) (obtained via Danaher 2010). The unified voices of those joined in song speaks to the collective interest and joint struggle, much like the crowds of people singing along with Lamar in the “Alright” video. Experts in the field of music and social protest would argue “...that music’s association with various social and political movements is not to be regarded just as window dressing, but rather as integral to those movements” (Street, Hague, Savigny, 2008). “Alright” projects a feeling of optimism that was present in the music of the Civil Rights Era, heard in Sam Cooke’s, “I Know Change is Gonna Come,” (Lutwick 2009). Martin Luther King Jr’s last sermon spoke to the same theme, “I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we as a people will get to the promised land” (Lutwick 2009).

The similarities in the messages delivered by Cooke and King Jr and other voices from over half a century ago to those delivered by Lamar expose the reality that the feelings and struggles surrounding the fight for racial inequality are relatively unchanged. The music of social movements elevates the voices of the masses and plays a significant role in identifying a unified consciousness. The hybridization of Kendrick Lamar’s song “Alright,” with the visual components of it’s music video transformed it into an integral part of the Black Lives Matter Movement and the fight for social justice. Emphasising the themes of systemic racism and police brutality through visual representations of protest, struggle, and police violence removed “Alright” from its original album context to encompass a greater meaning as an anthem for the modern day continuation of a nearly century long fight for equality. “Alright” is a prime example

of how a work can take on an enhanced purpose when met with another art form, in this case evolving an already powerful piece into a major part of a social movement.

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