

**“Made in America”**

**By: Watch the Throne ft. Frank Ocean**

“Made in America”(originally titled “Sweet Baby Jesus”), a song written by Jay-Z (Sean Carter), Kanye West, and Frank Ocean (Christopher Breaux) for the 2011 collaborative album Watch the Throne, is a beautiful ode to the American Dream from the perspective of 3 black men from unique backgrounds. The lyrics are as follows:

And he'll bring out the, out the darkness  
Sweet King Martin, sweet Queen Coretta  
Sweet Brother Malcolm, sweet Queen Betty  
Sweet Mother Mary, sweet Father Joseph, sweet Jesus  
We made it in America, sweet baby Jesus, ooh  
Oh sweet baby Jesus, we made it in America  
Sweet baby Jesus, ooh, oh sweet baby Jesus,  
We made it in America  
I told my mama I was on the come up  
She said "you going to school I'll give you a summer"  
Then she met NO ID and gave me his number  
Ten years later she driving a Hummer  
Niggas hustle every day for a beat from Ye  
What I do? Turn around gave them beats to Jay  
And I'm rapping on the beat they was supposed to buy  
I guess I'm getting high off my own supply  
Downtown mixing fabrics trying to find the magic  
Started a little blog just to get some traffic  
Old folks'll tell you not to play in traffic uh  
A million hits and the web crashes, damn!  
South Park had 'em all laughing  
Now all my niggas designing and we all swaggin'  
Ignore the critics just to say we did it  
This ain't no fashion show, motherfucker, we live it  
Sweet King Martin, sweet Queen Coretta  
Sweet Brother Malcolm, sweet Queen Betty  
Sweet Mother Mary, sweet Father Joseph, sweet Jesus  
We made it in America, sweet baby Jesus, ooh  
Oh sweet baby Jesus, we made it in America  
Sweet baby Jesus, ooh, oh sweet baby Jesus,  
We made it in America  
I pledge allegiance, uh, to my Grandma  
For that banana pudding, our piece of Americana  
Our apple pie was supplied through Arm and Hammer  
Straight out the kitchen, shh don't wake Nana!

Built a republic, that still stands  
 I'm trying to lead a nation, to leave to my little man's  
 Or my daughter, so I'm boiling this water  
 The scales was lopsided, I'm just restoring order  
 Hold up, here comes grandma, what's up YaYa?  
 What's that smell? Oh I'm just boiling some aqua  
 No papa, bad Santa  
 The streets raised me, pardon my bad manners  
 I got my liberty, chopping grams up  
 Street justice, I pray God understand us  
 I pledge allegiance to all the scramblers  
 This is the Star Spangled Banner  
 Sweet King Martin, sweet Queen Coretta  
 Sweet Brother Malcolm, sweet Queen Betty  
 Sweet Mother Mary, sweet Father Joseph, sweet Jesus  
 We made it in America, sweet baby Jesus, ooh  
 Oh sweet baby Jesus, we made it in America  
 Sweet baby Jesus, ooh, oh sweet baby Jesus,  
 We made it in America yes we did  
 Sweet baby Jesus, ooh, oh sweet baby Jesus,  
 We made it in America  
 Sweet baby Jesus, ooh, oh sweet baby Jesus,  
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Jay-Z, Kanye West, and Frank Ocean represent three contrasting images of America. Jay represents the ghetto rags-to-riches story, Kanye represents the 'misunderstood genius', and Frank represents the reclusive gay man with incredible artistic prowess. They all have two things in common: they are black and they are men. This experience obviously exists on a spectrum, but that ideal of the 'American Dream' means something very similar to those who are ascribed these two identifiers. Genius.com offers a concise synopsis of the lyrical content of the track, "Here we have Kanye, Jay, and R&B crooner Frank Ocean collaborating on a number that sums up the superstars' feelings about black history, America, Jesus, and revisiting their respective rises to fame."(*genius.com*). In the chorus Frank explores figures who he has looked to for inspiration in his rise. He mentions Malcolm X, Corretta Scott-King, Martin Luther King Jr., and most notably, Mary, Joseph, and "Sweet Baby Jesus". This lyrical exploration of the impression left by these prominent black figures serves to bolster the importance of the name he mentions after all of them: the name of Jesus. What is it about a man born thousands of years before them, in a country on the opposite side of the planet that has inspired Frank, Jay, and Kanye's aspiration to the American Dream? How can they possibly relate?

In his book *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, Gordon Lynch offers an answer of sorts to the question of relating popular culture to Biblical ideals, he says: "...theology involves a process of negotiation between understanding of the absolute reference point for life,

and the particular concerns, aspirations, and practices of our particular culture and context.” (Lynch 98). It is this negotiation between what Jesus represents and the ideals and aspirations of the contexts each of the three artists was raised in, that gives meaning to the emphasis on Jesus’ name in the chorus. For Jay, Frank, and Kanye it would seem that the fame, money, and power, will always be drawn back to the constants that are their ancestral identity and their religious conviction. The three do differ, however, on the specific placement of this religious conviction. In an article published on hollowverse.com, Jay-Z is quoted discussing his personal religious views:

*“Church wasn’t a major part of my life growing up... But when you grow up in a place like Bed-Stuy, church is everywhere. So is mosque. So are a thousand other ways of believing.”*

And further:

*“For the record, I of course believe in God, but I believe in one God. If people must know my religious beliefs, I believe in one God. I don’t believe in religion. I don’t believe in Christians or Muslims. I think all that separates people. I think it’s one God. I think it’s all the same God, and I don’t believe in Hell.”*

It is important now to note that the God Jay-Z refers to in his verse when he says *“street justice, I pray God understands us”* is not the God associated with the Jesus Frank Ocean refers to in the chorus. Kanye West’s views on religion also offer up a bit of confusion as to the true purpose of the allusion to Jesus in the chorus. In an interview cited by hollowverse.com, Kanye had this to say about religion:

*“You’re not given a decision of what religion you want. Your parents just give it to you...I feel like religion is more about separation and judgment than bringing people together and understanding”*

He was later interviewed in New Zealand shortly after his controversial *Rolling Stone* cover in which he posed as Jesus. He had this to say:

*“No! I don’t wanna fuckin’ be Christ-like. I want to be me-like”*

For someone who makes rather consistent allusions to Judeo-Christian imagery and text, it would seem that Kanye West deviates rather vehemently from personal alignment with any of the teachings Jesus is commonly associated with. This point is worth returning to. The most elusive and complex of the three, much to no one’s surprise, is also the one with the most vague views on what religion means to him. Frank Ocean posted a poignant letter on the popular social media site, Tumblr, in response to the tragic Pulse Nightclub shootings (theatlantic.com). In the letter, he discussed homophobia and God. It reads:

*"I read in the paper that my brothers are being thrown from rooftops blindfolded with their hands tied behind their backs for violating sharia law. I heard the crowds stone these fallen men if they move after they hit the ground. I heard it's in the name of God. I heard my pastor speak for God too, quoting scripture from his book..."*

The letter reveals Ocean's church-going background, which is important to note. The tone of the message does seem to be a bit disdainful. There is an air of resentment in the way he describes his pastor's words that would suggest that he has immense disdain for both the Muslim and Christian God. So again, why does Jesus appear in the most repetitive portion of the song if none of these three artists align with his teachings? The answer lies in an analysis of what it is that Jesus *actually* represents to each of them.

The church plays a vital role in the black community. As referenced by W.E.B DuBois in his brilliant collection of essays *The Souls of Black Folk*, the "Negro Church" is the center of black social life. No matter what region or time period, if a person is raised black, they are more than likely in a church three to four days a week. This pattern holds true in the case of Jay-Z, Kanye West, and Frank Ocean. Each of them, regardless of where they are positioned on the religious spectrum today, was raised in very close proximity to the Christian church. Jesus, to them, represents a key fragment of their upbringing. It makes sense that Jesus would be mentioned in the same phrase as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Coretta Scott-King because these people were all icons in the communities that they were raised in...the communities where they were taught to aspire to the American Dream. Even beyond their personal convictions, Jesus represents something that transcends religion in the context of music and popular culture. In the same way that the black icons mentioned each personify the fervor and tenacity required to overcome insurmountable odds, Jesus represents the ultimate rags-to-riches story that has become the American Dream. There is a certain fascination with this story of a baby born in a lowly manger who grows up to be the savior of the entire universe. This same baby boy is then crucified and resurrected, thus, defeating death itself.

It comes as no surprise when taking into consideration the incredible life of Jesus Christ, that these three highly contrasting individuals would come together to create a song so influenced by his story. The presence of Jesus in the context of "Made in America" reflects a much deeper fascination imbedded in the fabric of our culture with the story of a "nobody" becoming THE "somebody". This theme inspires people, and will more than likely continue to serve as a muse for those who shape our culture the most.

## Works Cited

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We made it in America  
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She said "you going to school I'll give you a summer"  
Then she met NO ID and gave me his number

Ten years later she driving a Hummer  
Niggas hustle every day for a beat from Ye  
What I do? Turn around gave them beats to Jay  
And I'm rapping on the beat they was supposed to buy  
I guess I'm getting high off my own supply  
Downtown mixing fabrics trying to find the magic  
Started a little blog just to get some traffic  
Old folks'll tell you not to play in traffic uh  
A million hits and the web crashes, damn!  
South Park had 'em all laughing  
Now all my niggas designing and we all swaggin'  
Ignore the critics just to say we did it  
This ain't no fashion show, motherfucker, we live it  
Sweet King Martin, sweet Queen Coretta  
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We made it in America, sweet baby Jesus, ooh  
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We made it in America  
I pledge allegiance, uh, to my Grandma  
For that banana pudding, our piece of Americana  
Our apple pie was supplied through Arm and Hammer  
Straight out the kitchen, shh don't wake Nana!  
Built a republic, that still stands  
I'm trying to lead a nation, to leave to my little man's  
Or my daughter, so I'm boiling this water  
The scales was lopsided, I'm just restoring order  
Hold up, here comes grandma, what's up YaYa?  
What's that smell? Oh I'm just boiling some aqua  
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