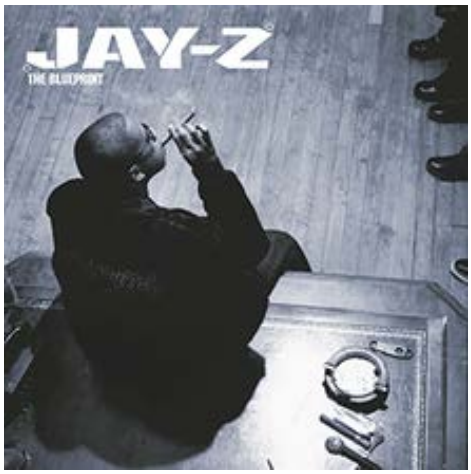
“The Blueprint”--Jay-Z (2001)

Added to the National Registry: 2018
Essay by Zack O’Malley Greenburg (guest post)*



Original CD cover

A son of Brooklyn’s notorious housing projects who became hip-hop’s first billionaire in 2019, Jay-Z is as close as it gets to the modern-day embodiment of the American dream. So it’s only fitting that “The Blueprint,” one of the most noteworthy albums of the aughts, is the first 21st century recording selected for the National Recording Registry.

Jay-Z’s sixth studio album arrived on September 11, 2001, and could have been lost amid the ensuing wave of national mourning. Instead, “Blueprint” ended up as a soundtrack of sorts--mirroring the heady mix of pride and paranoia that permeated the post-September 11th United States. A classic album in any era, fate deposited it just in time to mirror an American moment when wound-licking gave way to a defiant indomitability.

At the time, Jay-Z’s foes included a burgeoning roster of rival rappers, most notably Queens native Nas (a challenger for the King of New York crown) and the justice system, which had placed Jay-Z in legal limbo over the attack of a producer thought to have bootlegged his prior album (Jay-Z would eventually receive probation). He was also years into a prescient Grammy boycott—“Blueprint” would later be shut out at music’s biggest night despite vast critical acclaim.

Backed by a battalion of producers including Timbaland, Just Blaze and a young Kanye West, Jay-Z caps “Blueprint’s” opening salvo by pronouncing himself “God MC, me, Jay-Hova.” Though he slings a few barbs at Mobb Deep’s Prodigy, his real target is archrival Nas, who’d questioned Jay-Z’s underworld credentials in a radio freestyle that evolved into one of hip-hop’s most legendary verbal confrontations. Jay-Z responds on “Takeover,” calling his rival a “fake thug” and alluding to an affair with the mother of Nas’s child while undercutting his musical bona fides. “So yeah, I sampled your voice, you was using it wrong,” Jay-Z growls, referencing his track “Dead Presidents II”: “You made it a hot line, I made it a hot song.”

“Blueprint” may always be best known for that sort of unapologetic aggression, but the album packs a powerful range of topics and emotions into its 60-plus minutes. In its third and arguably most popular track, “Izzo (H.O.V.A.)”--as in, “H to the izzo”--Kanye West’s production combines a joyous sample of the Jackson 5’s “I Want You Back” with a rumination on changing perceptions of black wealth. “I do this for my culture,” Jay-Z raps, “To let ‘em know what a nigga look like when a nigga in a roadster.”

Jay-Z continues the braggadocio with “U Don’t Know.” Perhaps the most bombastic song on the album--if not Jay-Z’s career (“I will not lose, ever”)--it doubles as a financial history of his life, the closest “Blueprint” comes to making good on its title. He opens up about the wealth gathered as a drug dealer (“So much coke that you could run a slalom”) before explaining a musical revelation (“Could make forty [thousand dollars] off a brick, but one rhyme could beat that”) and offering an accounting of his millions--“Put me anywhere on God’s green Earth,” he explains, “I triple my worth.”

Much of the album finds Jay-Z locked in a perpetual state of steering a Bentley coupe with one hand while flaying opponents with the other, but “Song Cry” reveals a version of the rapper willing to show emotion and admit mistakes. In one line on the track, he presages his musical and matrimonial union with Beyoncé with a memory of the film “Bonnie and Clyde”; at another, he reminisces over a lost love, his voice crackling with partially-suppressed grief as he acknowledges the toll his infidelity took on the relationship.

“Blueprint” is also a transitional testing ground for one of Jay-Z’s favorite commercial tricks: rapping about his own products rather than those belonging to others. By 2001, he’d already launched his own clothing line, Rocawear, and had recently started promoting his short-lived Armadale vodka. Both brands appear frequently in the album, sounding more like natural boasts than cringeworthy product placement.

Jay-Z spent the first half-decade of his career in a delicate balancing act: trying to stay true to the hard-edged sound and subject matter that drew fans to his debut, while capturing new crowds with the glitzy production and pop hooks that characterized his second. Perhaps more than any album in his career--and certainly more than any to that point—“Blueprint” accomplished that feat. And Jay-Z knew it.

“Do you fools listen to music or just skim through it? See I’m influenced by the ghetto you ruined,” he raps on “Renegade,” a duet with Eminem, the album’s only featured guest. “I penetrate pop culture, bring ‘em a lot closer to the block where they pop toasters, and they live with they moms.”

“Blueprint’s” diverse set of influences was emblematic of the impending cultural expansion of Jay-Z’s brand. In the years that followed--as he claimed the all-time record for most No. 1 albums for a solo artist--his commercial interests expanded beyond rap music and streetwear to champagne companies and startup investments. As formidable as he was on war footing, he proved even more so in peace time.

“If Jay-Z’s a billionaire now, imagine what he’s about to be,” his frequent collaborator Swizz Beatz told me in a 2019 interview. “Because he’s only just starting.”

Zack O'Malley Greenburg is senior editor of media and entertainment at “Forbes” and author of several books on the business of music, including the Jay-Z biography “Empire State of Mind.” His writing has also appeared in the “New York Times,” “Washington Post,” “Billboard,” “Vibe,” “Sports Illustrated” and “McSweeney's”; he's served as a source for BBC, NPR, MTV and “60 Minutes,” and as a speaker at SXSW, CES, TEDx, Princeton and Harvard.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.