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KANYE WEST + DAFT PUNK

HOW THEY MADE THE SONG OF THE YEAR

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PHOTOGRAPH BY ALAN CLARKE

COLLABORATION OF THE YEAR

K.W. + D.P.

SEPARATELY, KANYE WEST AND DAFT PUNK PUSHED THEIR ART TO THE LIMIT. TOGETHER, THEY WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE YEAR'S MOST THRILLING SONG. HERE'S HOW IT ALL WENT DOWN.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
ALAN CLARKE



Thomas Bangalter,
Kanye West, and
Guy-Manuel de
Homem-Christo,
photographed for
Spin in Culver City,
California, October
28, 2007

THE FIREBRAND

Kanye West

By John McAlley

is not pissed; he's just in problem-solving mode. And right now, the problem is production costs. "I want to be the No. 1 artist," he says to a member of his technical crew. "How am I gonna do that with muthafuckin' bad lighting?"

It's a different backstage scene from the one that has haunted West since September, when a secretly taped tirade he threw at MTV's Video Music Awards lit up YouTube and deepened his rep as a sour-grapes hothead. In his dressing room at Boston's TD Banknorth Garden arena, West eschews scenery chewing for a bag of chips—fuel for tonight's show. He's topping an all-star lineup at Monster Jam, a radio station event that, the night after the Red Sox win the World Series, brings 17,000 fans to a fever pitch without a single note of "Sweet Caroline."

Not that West would be above biting that Neil Diamond hit. On *Graduation*, the 30-year-old producer turned rapper has sampled nearly a dozen superstar and indie-chic acts—including Elton John, Steely Dan, Michael Jackson, kraut rockers Can, and French disco giants Daft Punk—and spliced them into one of the year's best-selling albums, a genre-leveling tour de force of hard beats and whopping pop hooks. It's a calculated departure from West's career-making *The College Dropout* (2004) and *Late Registration* (2005), a blatant move to go mass.

The gambit seems to have worked. West came out on the winning end of his release-date showdown with 50 Cent when *Graduation* debuted at the top of *Billboard's* pop chart with sales of 957,000. That same week, *Graduation's* first three singles—"Can't Tell Me Nothing," "Stronger," and "Good Life"—were dominating the Hot 100, with "Stronger," West's muscular remake of Daft Punk's 2001 "Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger," in the peak position (see sidebar on page TK). An international smash, "Stronger" is the triumph West hopes will help fulfill his excruciatingly earnest dream to be "the No. 1 artist." The pouty flipside of that yearning gets exposed every time he is denied another career-validating moment on TV. His fantasy of pop glory, it seems, and his underdog's craving for respect won't be complete until he hoists an Album of the Year Grammy in front of his peers and a viewing audience of millions. He has lost in that category twice.

But even less coveted prizes have eluded him. At the 2006 MTV Europe Music Awards, West's ambitious "Touch the Sky" video lost top honors to a scruffy clip for Justice VS Simian's "We Are Your Friends." In reaction, West drifted onto the stage and began his now infamous "Oh, hell no" rant—a public embarrassment he partly exorcised by parodying it this past September on *Saturday Night Live*.

A little too late, it turned out. Three weeks earlier, his backstage outburst at the VMAs (10 F-bombs in a minute and eight seconds) may have irreversibly damaged his relationship with the network. It was motivated, he says, not by an ongoing denial of VMA love but by MTV's decision to relegate his on-air performance to a suite far removed from the show's main stage.

Getting his fix of high fashion and fine art on Boston's Newbury Street the day of Monster Jam, the "Louis Vuitton don" is anything but crazed—even though we first meet at the Martin Lawrence Gallery. In fact, he's unaffected

enough that virtually no one on the sidewalk recognizes him despite the five-strong posse and trailing black Suburban. He's perusing some of his favorite artists today—Marc Jacobs, Ralph Lauren, Andy Warhol, and Takashi Murakami, the Japanese visionary who did *Graduation's* cover.

In the Polo store, West slips into a \$700 wool-and-suede sweater. "Yo, don't buy that; you can have mine," says his perpetually texting co-manager, Don C. At a gallery up the block, West seriously considers a stunner from Warhol's *Marilyn* series. Price: \$185,000. He's rocked, too, by *Jules*, an eerily familiar Robert Longo piece. "Is that the picture they used in *American Psycho*?! Damn!"

It's a rare few hours of relaxation in what has been a frantic week of globetrotting (a *Spin* photo shoot and Murakami opening in L.A. the night before, a concert in Dubai three days before that). Frantic would turn to tragic less than two weeks later, when West—in London preparing for a series of U.K. shows—got the devastating news that his 58-year-old mother Donda West had died reportedly from complications during cosmetic surgery. Even casual fans know the story of Kanye's upbringing in his beloved Chicago under the care of his single-parent mom, a career academic whose dreams of success for her son got gently teased but ultimately fulfilled with the release of his three pointedly titled albums. Given the closeness of their relationship and the emotionally naked way in which West, an only child, lives every day and every thing, it's difficult to imagine how he'll get through—except to become, well, stronger.

We talked backstage at the Garden, before his world got turned upside down—or, more accurately, when it was a just whirl of the usual Kanye-isms: enthusiasm and ambition, candor and combustibility, and a mix of bluster and uncertainty that makes him the awards-show irritant most worth rooting for.

What's been your proudest accomplishment this year? The breadth of music on *Graduation*. It's my favorite album to date.

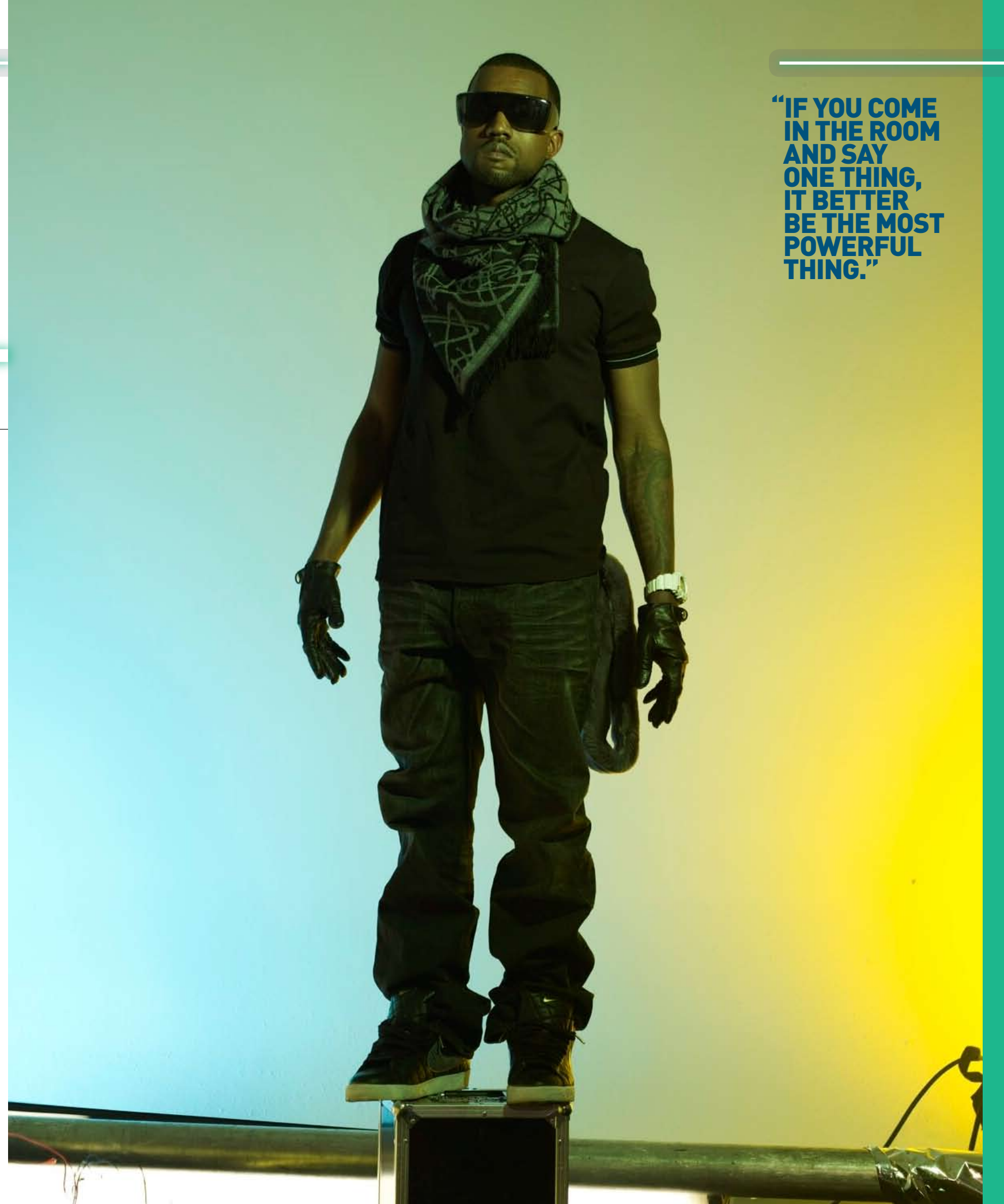
Why? I applied a lot of the things I learned while on tour [in 2006] with U2 and the Rolling Stones, about songs that rock stadiums. And they worked!

Was touring with them a perspective-shifting experience? Life changing. I thought, "Oh, this is the real thing."

How did playing to those crowds change your approach to making *Graduation*? I way simplified my rap style on this record. [Those crowds] were looking at me like, "I don't know what you're talking about."

By simplified, do you mean fewer words or leaner rhyming schemes? Everything. Fewer words. If you come in the room and say one thing, it better be the most powerful thing.

STYLING BY LUKE STOREY; SET DESIGN BY DAVID ROSS FOR ARTIMIX BEAUTY



"IF YOU COME IN THE ROOM AND SAY ONE THING, IT BETTER BE THE MOST POWERFUL THING."



“ON CHRISTMAS, I DON’T WANT ANY FOOD THAT TASTES WHITE. AND WHEN I GO TO BUY A HOUSE, I DON’T WANT MY CREDIT TO LOOK BLACK.”

What else changed in your approach? Before, the music was more self-indulgent and now it’s more about *everyone*.

You’re talking about the lyrics? I’m talking lyrics *and* chorus-wise; giving them something to sing along with. Even a song like “Can’t Tell Me Nothing,” that’s a rock chorus over straight ghetto drums.

So your goal was to make the choruses bigger? “Jesus Walks” is no slouch. And *Late Registration* was loaded with hooks. I wouldn’t say loaded. “Gold Digger” was the biggest song on the record, and no other track had anywhere near the potential to be that big.

You made a conscious effort to take *Graduation* to the next level of mainstream success? It’s a conscious effort to take it to the next level in *every* form of success. More black people bought this album than any I’ve made.

Does that make sense to you? Uh-huh. Because I made the album blacker.

You think *Graduation* is blacker than, say, *The College Dropout*? Way blacker. “Can’t Tell Me Nothing”—how hood is that record? “Good Life” is straight Steve Harvey, all day long. “Flashing Lights”? I never had a record that was that black. But it’s white at the same time. Certain things are so good it doesn’t have to be white or black. That’s what *Graduation* is. Take “Harder Better Faster Stronger.” It’s a white sample, but everything I do to it is to make it as black as possible. So I’m making the bass as black as possible; I’m making the lyrics as intense as possible.

Are these choices strictly artistic, or are you thinking as a marketer, too? Can you separate those roles? I can’t. I’m a pop enigma. I live and

breathe every element in life. I rock a bespoke suit and I go to Harold’s for fried chicken. It’s all these things at once, because, as a tastemaker, I find the best of everything. There’s certain things that black people are the best at and certain things that white people are the best at. Whatever we as black people are the best at, I’m going to get that. Like, on Christmas I don’t want any food that tastes white. And when I go to purchase a house, I don’t want my credit to look black. [Laughs]

And what foods would fall into that category? White-people food? You know what it is. You never ate fried chicken and said, “This tastes white.” It’s America. People know the stereotypes. I play to the stereotypes. I believe in the stereotypes. And I submit to them. [Affects a black, Southern accent] “Man, black people sure can cook some chicken! And I’m getting some black chicken.”

I’m trying to gauge if you’re being sincere or facetious. It is what it is. A lot of things that are funny have truth in them. So my music is a mix between some good Harold’s Chicken and...

A bespoke suit? A bespoke suit!

How do you find your samples—for example, the sample of Steely Dan’s “Kid Charlemagne” on “Champion”? One of my producers, Brian “All Day” Miller, made that track. I heard it and was overwhelmed. Me and my father’s relationship is a little strained. So when I started writing on [the track], something came out of me to speak on that, but to say, in the end, that my father was a champion in my eyes, even with our ups and downs.

Your parents divorced when you were three. But in the past, you’ve portrayed your relationship with your father as harmonious. Where were the rough patches? I ain’t gonna speak on that. But I will say that that is what got the sample cleared. I wrote a letter to [Steely Dan’s] Donald Fagen and

explained to him the importance of this song to me, and of expressing these feelings to my father. I think it’s what made the difference in getting the sample cleared. All of these living artists—I think they’ve learned to trust the Kanye brand. They know their sample is not gonna be placed with some quote-unquote booty video.

Some of the samples—Elton John’s “Someone Saved My Life Tonight,” Michael Jackson’s “P.Y.T.”—must not have been cheap. Could you have afforded them on the first two albums? I’ll tell you one thing, as a black person: We have no problem breaking ourselves for what we want. But it’s not just affording it; it’s getting people to *want* to clear something for you.

You were only seven when *Thriller* peaked. Was Michael Jackson on your radar when—[Stares incredulously] Was Michael Jackson on my radar?! I’m black. Michael Jordan, Michael Jackson, and Mike Tyson. Michael Jackson is my favorite artist of all time. Every time I hit the stage, every time I write a song, every time I write a rap, every performance I do, every time I pick out an outfit I think about Michael Jackson. Michael Jackson is synonymous with the greatest that you could possibly do in music.

Many artists would say that maintaining a healthy relationship with MTV is key to that kind of goal. Your backstage meltdown at this year’s VMAs cannot have helped. I didn’t have a meltdown. They call it a meltdown, but I don’t know why. Somebody caught me on tape backstage. I said exactly the kind of thing that goes on backstage all the time. It was a real moment. But, I guess, as a pop star you have a responsibility to not be real anymore.

The backlash probably wouldn’t have been as harsh if you hadn’t erupted the year before at the MTV Europe Music Awards. The European thing is



Strength in Numbers

IN THEIR FIRST JOINT INTERVIEW, KANYE WEST AND DAFT PUNK’S THOMAS BANGALTER DISCUSS THEIR ROBOTASTIC COLLABORATION

Whose idea was it to get you guys together?

WEST: It was their idea to come up with [“Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger”] and my idea to sample it. Just the way the song was put together, especially at the end. I’ve never accomplished that level of musicality—I think I’ve fallen short every time I’ve attempted to do something like it. But falling short of that is still way better than everything else in hip-hop.

BANGALTER: The challenge when you’re taking a sample is to make it fit your own universe. The interesting thing here is how he took our music and really made it his own in terms of his personality. That’s what we’re trying to do as artists—make universal the things that we want to express. That’s what Kanye does. He distorts the initial meaning of the song, and that’s what’s interesting.

It seems like such an apt collaboration given that you both play with the notion of celebrity and identity.

WEST: Like how I’m not on my album covers and stuff? These guys really stick with the whole not-showing-their-faces thing. Just amazing discipline—that’s straight martial-arts status.

Do you think the song has made hip-hop fans more interested in electronic music, or electronic fans more interested in hip-hop?

BANGALTER: I think we’re at a time when there’s less genre separation than before. There’s an open-mindedness on the part of both the musicians and the audiences. Things aren’t so segregated.

WEST: I faced some backlash when the single first came out. I think the electronic community was saying, “How dare you sample this holy grail?” And the hip-hop people were saying, “You have to always do what we’re used to you doing.” But I think hip-hop is about always being new and cutting-edge and coming up with a combination you haven’t heard. It’s bittersweet, because on one hand, you want to be influential, but on the other, you want other people to be original, too. We were really breaking new ground, and I can only imagine how long it took to make the original. [Turns to Bangalter] How long did it take to make the original?

BANGALTER: A long time. We’d work on a track and let it rest for a few months, then go back to it. And I completely agree with what you’re saying about being influential—what you want is for the next generation to destroy what you’ve done and start from scratch. It’s good to take risks when you’re nobody, but it’s more exciting and important to do it once you’re exposed.

Kanye, what did you think of the Daft Punk live show?

WEST: Ah, man, it sucked. [Laughs] It was very breathtaking and awe-inspiring. I still don’t quite understand how they were able to do it.

Do you see yourselves collaborating in the future?

BANGALTER: We won’t speak about it.

ridiculous. I was joking around. I was like, “Oh, hell no. Man, they doing it to me again. Fuck it.” And it came off as if I was extremely upset.

In the YouTube clip of the incident, you do look like you’re having fun with it. Duh. MSN had clips that made it look like I was bitin’ this baby’s head off. But backstage at the VMAs, I was upset. Not just because of the ridiculous [snubs year after year]; it was more because they made me perform in that suite and told me I didn’t want to perform on the main stage. They told me Justin [Timberlake] wasn’t performing on the main stage, either.

Which turned out not to be the truth. The thing is, the people at MTV *know* where I’m trying to go. And I feel like, “Why do you not want me to reach my full potential?” If I’ve got a record like “Stronger,” which is blowing up all across the world, call an audible! It’s like, “Yo, let’s let him take over the fuckin’ world the way we helped Justin take over the world.” Because, at the end of the day, if Justin can charge, like, two million for a private event, I think, partially, it’s because MTV helped make him the No. 1 artist. Okay, now I work my fuckin’ ass off—first to fight back from the all the awards-show backlashes—then to have the No. 1 song in the world. And a [hard-rocking] song like that as a black man? That is next to impossible. Yet, you’re gonna open the show with *Britney* and close with *Justin*?! To me, you’re saying, “We don’t want another Michael Jackson, we want *Elvis*!”

Have you talked to MTV? I tried. I had a meeting with them and we were supposed to squash it, but they never played “Good Life.” I had “Good Life” as Video of the Week, and half way into the week they took it off and put up 50 Cent and Robin Thicke. How credible is that? I apologized to them for my spazzes. But I think it’s fucked-up that I had a meeting with them and they still didn’t play my video. My thing is, you gotta let me know, “Yo, by the way, Justin is performing on the main stage.” And this is the thing: I love Justin. To me, he is the pinnacle. Black people like him, white people like him, girls like him, gay people like him. Do you know how hard it would be as a black artist to get to that point? [Sanguinely] I know that the right thing to do would have been to not say anything to MTV, because that’s just made it harder for me. And I honestly think they felt that they were giving me a [quality] moment. But it’s just so—my biggest thing is impatience. Maybe God is saying, “It’s not your time yet.”

[Ed. note: According to an MTV rep, the network offered West the choice of performing in a suite or on the main stage, denies conferring with West on Timberlake’s performance, claims that no deals were made with West after the blow-up, and points to mainstage appearances by Rihanna and Chris Brown as evidence of MTV’s colorblindness.]

You’ve been through a lot this year. Do you have a sense of how you’ve changed as a person? Every year I learn more. Times are still scary, but I got to sit down with Daft Punk and Madonna, and with a lot of incredible individuals and learned from them. I’m gonna keep making music so that ten, 20 years from now I’ll be able to be where Mick is. Where Bono is.

The 2008 Grammy nominations will have been announced by the time this story comes out. What would you like to have happen this year? Um, I want to have the most nominations of all time? I was always the kid who, when asked how much money do you want, said, “Thirty trillion dollars!”

So your mind has been on the awards. Yeah, I’m thinkin’ about it. I’m thinkin’ about what I would say in a speech if I did win. Because, at this point, I know there’s a lot of people who know I should win.

Who do you think your Album of the Year competition is? That’s what I’m saying, there is no competition! [Laughs]

And what will you do if, God forbid, you don’t get nominated in the major categories? [Long pause, then a look of total vulnerability] Man! Do you think I should be worrying? I mean, really, do you think that’s even possible? ☹