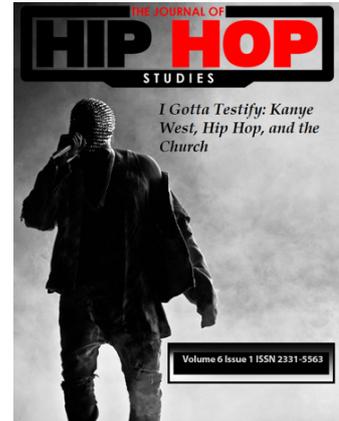


"How Great:" Reflections on Kanye's Best Prodigy, Chance the Rapper

Joshua K. Wright

Journal of Hip Hop Studies, Special Issue *I Gotta Testify: Kanye West, Hip Hop, and the Church*
Volume 6, Issue 1, Summer 2019, pp. 125–127
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34718/mhwj-v184>





“How Great:” Reflections on Kanye’s Best Prodigy, Chance the Rapper

Joshua K. Wright

“I miss the old Kanye, straight from the ‘Go Kanye.

Chop up the soul Kanye, set on his goals Kanye.

I hate the new Kanye, the bad mood Kanye.

The always rude Kanye, spaz in the news Kanye.” Kanye West, “I Love Kanye” (2016)

When Kanye West debuted his seventh studio album *The Life of Pablo* on *Saturday Night Live* (February 14, 2016) few people were expecting to witness a passing of the torch. Halfway through Kanye’s performance of “Ultralight Beam” Chance The Rapper, stepped on stage with a mic in hand and not so quietly announced to the world that a new king was here to watch the throne. Fans who have been alienated by the recent profane direction in Kanye’s music, his erratic behavior during concerts, his confounding pro-Donald Trump tweets, and ignorance about American slavery and institutional racism, no longer have to recite the lyrics “I miss the old Kanye.” Chance The Rapper, affectionately known as Kanye’s best prodigy, is the embodiment of Kanye’s best musical qualities and the promise that he once gave Hip Hop enthusiasts to shift paradigms on Christian masculinity, faith, and spirituality with the release of his debut album, *The College Dropout* (2004). Chance performed at Kanye’s Easter gospel concert at the 2019 Coachella Music Festival. While critics were skeptical of Kanye’s sincerity and motives, as he was moved to tears, there was little doubt about Chance’s faith.

Chance The Rapper, born Chancellor Bennett in 1993, like Kanye is a native of Chicago’s South Side whose entry into Hip Hop defies the stereotypical origin stories. He was raised in a two-parent middle class household. His father Ken was an aide to Chicago’s first black mayor Harold Washington before working with then-senator Barack Obama. Ken currently serves as the deputy chief of state to Mayor Rahm Emanuel. Chance grew up listening to jazz, soul, and his grandmother’s gospel albums. Kanye’s *The College Dropout* introduced Chance to Hip Hop and inspired him to rap. Chance recorded his first mixtape, *10 Day* (2012) while he was suspended for having marijuana in school. *10 Day* addressed his struggles and some thoughts about God on songs “Missing You” and “Long Time.” The following year, Chance caught mainstream media’s attention with his sophomore mixtape, *Acid Rap*, which questioned why God’s

phone dies every time he calls upon him. Chance was still at odds with his faith; however, there was an intellectual curiosity about religion that was starting to shine through his music. Then came "Sunday Candy," an ode to the praying grandmother who kept his butt in church and instilled in him "the faith of a pumpkin-seed-sized mustard seed." The tender track, appearing on Donnie Trumpet and The Social Experiment's 2015 album *Surf* was a prelude to his career-defining mixtape, *Coloring Book* (2016).

During an interview with Apple's Beats 1 radio host Zane Lowe, Chance gave testimony on his spiritual evolution. During a five-month stay in Los Angeles in 2014, he felt like he was losing touch with God. So he began blasting gospel tunes from Kirk Franklin, Fred Hammond, and Byron Cage from his speakers daily at 6:00 AM. He was having "a four-hour praise dance every morn." Chance did not set out to make his next mixtape a gospel album, more so an album deeply rooted in his faith. It was "music from me as a Christian man," says Chance. "Before I was making music as a Christian child." *Coloring Book* is not purely gospel in the traditional sense. Only eight of the 14 tracks have strong spiritual themes. He may rap the scriptures in one verse and then talk about Harry Potter or roller skating in the next verse. The mixtape has profanity and does not shy away from "worldly" topics like sex and drug use. However, *Coloring Book* is the best "secular" rap album, that heavily promotes religion and spirituality, of all time (earning Chance a Grammy for Rap Album of the Year and Best New Artist). *Coloring Book*, with its themes of faith, a Christian-centered marriage, fatherhood, and redemptive joy, is the "gospel album" that Kanye West promised fans *The Life of Pablo* would be, but was incapable of making. "Coloring Book makes Kanye look like a Christmas and Easter Christian," wrote music critic Madeline Orr.

Chance's Christian raps are deeply rooted in gospel music, church hymns, and the scriptures. "Sunday Candy's" ode to grandma puts 2 Timothy 1:5 about the faith-filled grandmother Lois to a rap beat. "How Great," which samples Chris Tomlin's gospel hit "How Great is Our God," is one long sermon. After Chance's cousin, Nicole Bennett, sings the Tomlin anthem he begins with a verse coded in Deuteronomy 32:3, Psalm 34: 1-3, and Philippians 2: 5-11 which say "Praise God who Reigns above" and "Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together." Chance weaves in Matthew 17:20 which alludes to the faith of a mustard seed. The track "Blessings" opens with vocalist Jamilla Woods singing a hook that is reminiscent of the gospel anthems "Praise him," "When Praises Go Up," and "For Every Mountain" and the hymns "Count Your Blessings" and "The Lord is Blessing Me Right Now." Chance's verse eludes to the goodness and blessings of God found in Isaiah 40: 28-31 and Psalm 103:1.

Chance, unlike his mentor Kanye, lives by the teachings of James 2:14-26 which says "faith without works is dead." Rather than going into debt to launch an overpriced high-end fashion label, he uses his platform to fight gun violence in Chicago and donated one million dollars to Chicago public schools. Furthermore, Chance is not shy about using his music to *minister* to his listeners. Check out his performance of "Finish Line/Drown" on the 2016 Christmas episode of *Saturday Night Live*. As Chance performed with a choir and live band, he repeatedly recited "Happy birthday Jesus. Jesus, it's your birthday."

He told his choir “I like when you say his (Jesus) name on network TV like that.”

Another example is his televised performance at the 2016 White House Christmas tree lighting. Cameras showed 16-year-old Sasha Obama and her friends singing “Rain down Zion, it’s gonna rain” from the hook to “Sunday Candy.” And finally, there was his rousing performance of “How Great” and “All We Got” with Kirk Franklin, Tamela Mann, and a church choir at the 2017 Grammy Awards Ceremony.

Tyrell Jemison is one young man who has heard the word of God in Chance’s music. The 25-year-old preacher’s son shared a moving story in *Abernathy* magazine about his battles with depression, mental illness, attempted suicide, and disillusionment with the church. Listening to *Coloring Book* has helped him remember that God is the source of his strength. Jemison has found total praise during the time of his storm. “My Coloring Book consists of ways to engage who we are as individuals and how to use that to help the world around me. I believe I’m ready for my blessing,” says Jemison. While many fans hate the new Kanye, as a Christian I pray that Kanye’s evolution – no matter how ugly and toxic it may appear to be at times – is in line with God’s ultimate path for his life. But in the short term, we as fans of Hip Hop music no longer need the old Kanye because we have a much better version in the form of Chance The Rapper.