

<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/23/arts/music/23WEST.html>

A Trinity of Videos for One Religious Rap

By LOLA OGUNNAIKE

Published: June 23, 2004

Mel Gibson, it turns out, is not the only entertainer with a passion for Christ. Before a small gathering of music-industry insiders and record executives on Monday night at the TriBeCa Screening Room, Kanye West, a popular rapper, held a premiere for the three music videos (yes, three) that he plans to release with "Jesus Walks," the third single from his multiplatinum debut album, "College Dropout."

As of yesterday, the first video will play on MTV, the second one on MTV 2 and the third on MTV.com. Damon Dash, the co-founder of Roc-a-Fella Records, Mr. West's label, said MTV was reluctant to play the second video, the most controversial, in light of the outcry over Janet Jackson's breast-baring Super Bowl stunt.

"The Janet Jackson incident had nothing to do with where we put these videos," said Graham Fuller, an MTV spokesman. "The label gave us three different versions of the video, and we asked them where they wanted them to be played."

In keeping with the song's religious overtones, the first video takes place largely in a church. Scenes of a jovial choir and of Mr. West dressed as a preacher are juxtaposed with images of urban blight: cracked sidewalks, dilapidated buildings, downtrodden city dwellers. "God show me the way because the devil's tryin' to break me down," Mr. West raps while standing at a pulpit.

Later in the song he rhymes: "I ain't here to argue about his facial features/Or here to convert atheists into believers./I'm just tryin' say, the way school needs teachers,/The way Kathie Lee needed Regis,/That's the way y'all need Jesus." By video's end, sinners (a prostitute, a drug dealer and a drunk), all seeking repentance, find their way back to the Lord's house.

Mr. West refused to describe himself as religious. "Religion just means that you do something over and over," he said. "I will say that I'm spiritual. I have accepted Jesus as my Savior. And I will say that I fall short every day."



Keith Bedford for The New York Times
The rapper Kanye West with fans in TriBeCa before a screening of three versions of a music video to his song "Jesus Walks."

Far from wooden pews and velvet-lined collection plates, the second "Jesus Walks" video is set in the deep rural South. Vivid black-and-white shots of a chain gang working barren land are spliced with images of a dedicated Ku Klux Klansman toiling with all the sweat his beefy brow can muster to build a giant cross. Also featured in that video is a Bonnie-and-Clyde-like pair of drug traffickers. Just as federal agents are carting them off, the cocaine stashed in the trunk of their car morphs into a flock of doves.

"That's like a drug dealer's dream, for a trunk to open and some birds to fly out," Mr. West joked about the second video, which is "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" meets "Birth of a Nation," sprinkled with a pinch of "Traffic." During a question-and-answer session after the screening, Mr. West, dressed dapperly as usual, seemed to delight in decoding the video's symbolism. When it begins to rain on the Klansman and his burning cross, "it's sort of like a baptism," Mr. West said excitedly, as a collective light bulb went off in the screening room.

The third video is as literal as the second is metaphorical. A Jesus figure in a flowing white robe, sandals and a wreath of thorns trails Mr. West throughout his day. No food in the refrigerator? Jesus taps the door and, quicker than you can say "FreshDirect," the fridge runneth over. A man on crutches is given the ability to walk (and dance). Jesus and Mr. West roll around town in a vintage Cadillac, bobbing their heads to the beat. Of the three efforts, the 'hood-friendly third video is the most comical — and economical.

"It cost us about \$50,000 to put the whole thing together, shooting, editing, everything," said Chike Ozah, who, along with his partner, Coodie Simmons, and Mr. West directed the guerrilla video in Chicago, Mr. West's hometown, in one day. The partners also directed Mr. West's "Through the Wire" video.

The Monday screening was not the first time in recent months that a premiere has been held for a hip-hop video. In April the video for Jay-Z's "99 Problems" made its debut in the same screening room. But Mr. West said that even before Jay-Z's screening, he also held a small screening for "Through the Wire," which uses Polaroid snapshots to capture Mr. West's life after a car accident that nearly killed him.

After the screening, Mr. West, a self-professed perfectionist, said he needed more than the usual four minutes (the average length of a music video) to capture his song's message.

"Every time I did one, it would have a lot of good elements, but I felt like it was missing something," he said. "Now that I did the third one, I feel like I got all the ideas that I needed to get out."

Mr. West dipped into his pockets to finance the second and third videos.

"I always advise my artists not to spend a lot of money on videos," Mr. Dash said, "but I don't think Kanye does everything for business. He does things for the art of it, and it's hard for me to knock him for that."

While the screening audience seemed to favor the second and third videos evenly, Mr. Dash strongly favored the third. "And it was the cheapest," he said. The first video cost \$650,000, he said, while the second had a \$500,000 budget. In keeping with record-industry practice, the label is responsible for only \$75,000 of the cost.

Mr. West made it clear that he considered the expense worthwhile. "If ever there is a time to spend, it's on something like this," he said. "Even if we don't make the money back financially, we'll make it back spiritually."