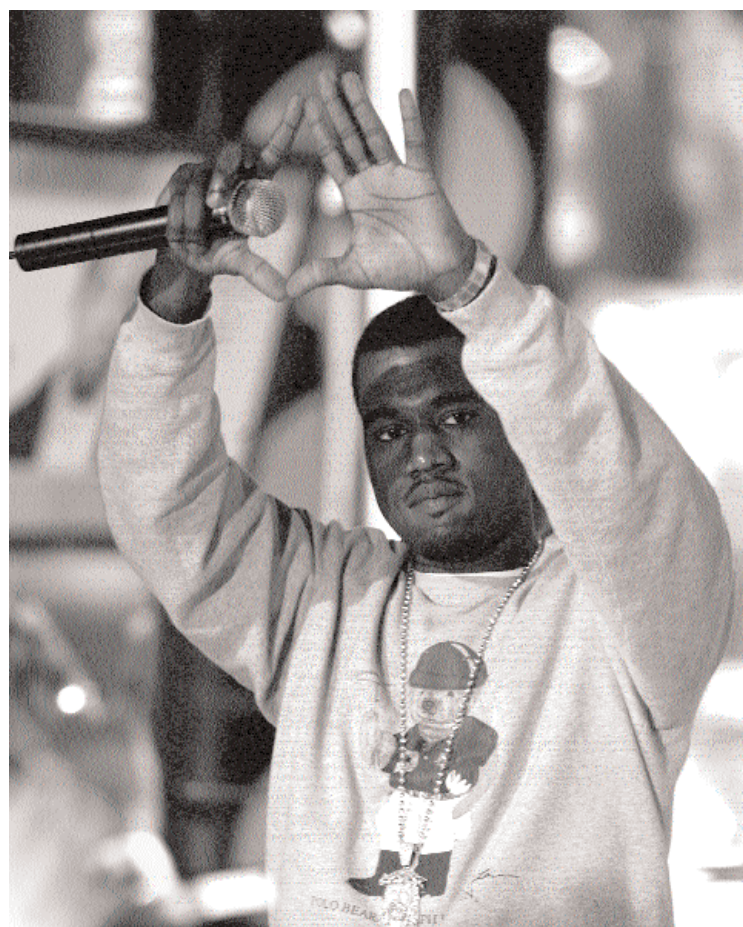


# OFF THE CUFF

BY MARK RUMBLE



## KANYE WEST *Rapper*

In October 2002, ascendant Chicago rap star Kanye West was leaving a Los Angeles recording studio when he crashed his car in a potentially fatal accident that left him not only shaken, but with a fractured jaw. Just a few weeks later—jaw still wired shut—West was back in the recording studio laying down rhymes for his debut album, *The College Dropout*, released in February. The album's first single, wryly titled "Through the Wire," caught listeners' attention with its sincere but bitingly funny lyrics, including one in which he laments not being able to clear airport security because of the plate in his chin. The song's video—in which West is shown in a hospital bed with his face swollen to twice its normal size—was a favorite on MTV and helped trigger the success of *The College Dropout*, a critically acclaimed effort that went platinum inside a month.

West's success as a performer is icing on the cake: He's long been a sought-after producer for an array of hip-hop and pop stars, receiving national acclaim for his work on Jay Z's 2001 anthem, "I to the IZZO" and arranging beats for Grammy-winner Alicia Keys, rappers Talib Kweli, Dilated Peoples and Mos Def, and even pop princess Britney Spears.

Born in Atlanta and raised on the South Side, West joins a growing club of Chicago rappers who've made it big in the industry—and, subsequently, ended up cutting deals, hobnobbing and recording follow-up albums in New York and Los Angeles, hubs of the rap industry. Compared to the majority of popular rap albums, though, West's debut is distinguished by cerebral and socially conscious lyrics, a slick sense of irony and unabashed infusions of soul and gospel. In one track, he raps about being a straight-A student who ends up working at the Cheesecake Factory; in another, he complains about the lack of after-school activities for children in poor neighborhoods. In his hit single, "All Falls Down," West admits his own shortcomings as he raps, "I got a couple past-due bills / I won't get specific / We all self-conscious / I'm just the first to admit it."

**In light of your success and that of other homegrown rappers like Common and Twista, do you think Chicago can become a rap mecca like New York and L.A.?** I definitely think so, and Atlanta, too. I really think that's the movement right now.

**Do you find it ironic that hip-hop has been co-opted by mainstream society—from corporate America to white suburban teenagers—given its urban, black, activist roots?** I don't think hip-hop is rooted in black activism. It was something made up to get the party started, and then it grew into an outlet for people's political views.

**Do you think rap has the potential to become the most potent form of political dialogue among the general public, here and around the world?** I feel like people put too much responsibility on rappers and entertainers. That's what we are—entertainers, not politicians.

**What are your top five favorite rap albums of all time?** Puff's *No Way Out*, Tupac's *Me Against the World*, Pharcyde's *Bizarre Ride II The Pharcyde*—that's my favorite of all time, *Midnight Marauders* by A Tribe Called Quest, and Jay Z's *Blueprint*.

**Which artists have you enjoyed working with most during this past year?** This year, I finally got to work with three artists I've been trying to work with my entire life: me, myself and I.

**If you could take one thing with you from Chicago while you're on the road, what would it be?** I'd bring the whole 'hood with me, so they can stop callin' me, talkin' 'bout, 'Man, why don't you bring me nowhere?'

**You've been called "The Louis Vuitton Don." How important is fashion to you, and what labels are your favorites?** I've always loved clothes. Since the first day of school, I never let my mother dress me. I like to wear Polo, Louis Vuitton, Yves Saint Laurent, Dolce & Gabbana and Paper Denim & Cloth.

**Where do you take out-of-town guests when they visit you in Chicago?** Harold's Chicken.