

PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: CORNEL WEST

A candid conversation with the scholar and TV pundit about corporate greed, our lack of love and his second thoughts about Barack Obama

Not since Albert Einstein has Princeton, New Jersey had a high-haired intellectual sensation like Cornel West. Although his official academic appointment is Class of 1943 University Professor of African American Studies and Religion, West has a string of informal titles: prime-time pundit, bluesman philosopher, socializing social critic, not to mention author, hip-hop artist, actor and sartorial savant (rain or shine, West's jet-black three-piece suits, with scarves and watch chains, are as much his trademark as his poofy Afro and gap-toothed smile).

Unless you're an academic type, you probably know West from his frequent media appearances. He practically has a chair on permanent reserve on *Real Time With Bill Maher*, *The Colbert Report* and the Tavis Smiley show. West played a council elder in two of the *Matrix* movies. He's made spoken-word and hip-hop recordings with John Mellencamp, André 3000 and Prince. Last year his teachings on race, gender and class in America inspired a hip-hop album by a group called, naturally, the Cornel West Theory.

Though he has a shelf full of best-selling books, like the landmark *Race Matters* and his recent memoir, *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud*, co-written with David Ritz, West divides his critics. Liberals, most notably Leon Wieseltier of *The New Republic*, have charged him with shoddy scholarship and say

he's got more flash than intellectual rigor. The right thinks his views on the "invisible" poor and black oppression amount to little more than socialist whining and that he embodies affirmative action gone awry. Still, West is arguably the most sought-after, cited and influential black scholar in America.

The grandson of a Baptist preacher and son of a civilian Air Force administrator and a schoolteacher, West was born on June 2, 1953 in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He grew up middle class, mostly in Sacramento, California and was a schoolyard bully until some loving teachers and a track coach turned him onto reading. When he wasn't running 4.09-minute miles, he found his meaning somewhere between Arthur Schopenhauer, James Baldwin and Marvin Gaye. West earned degrees from Harvard and Princeton and was a full professor at Harvard until a highly publicized dispute in 2001 with the university's then-president Lawrence Summers. Summers accused West of missing classes and inflating grades and said the professor's hip-hop album was an embarrassment to the school. West decamped to Princeton, where the professor has been ever since. Married and divorced three times and with two children, West faced a prostate cancer scare but has as much energy today as the 19-year-olds who flock to his standing-room-only lectures.

David Hochman flew to Princeton for a spirited dialogue with Brother West, as he's often called. "Some people speak in sentences," Hochman says. "Cornel West speaks in libraries. Once he gets rolling, he weaves and bobs from Homer and James Joyce to Frederick Douglass, Mahalia Jackson and Pearl Jam. I came to think of it as academia as gospel-infused performance art."

PLAYBOY: We have a black man in the White House, but the topic of race still has a third-rail quality in America. Why is that?

WEST: Race generates the most visceral kinds of responses. Always has. Even in the most progressive circles, people's attitudes and fears about race are deeply rooted. We've been working on this for 400 years in our country, but we still have a way to go. Some would like to believe we live in a post-racial society, but that's completely false. You've got to acknowledge race. Little kids notice it from the time they're six or seven. "Dang, Jamal is darker than Johnny over here. What does that mean?" Some people will try to say, "It doesn't mean anything. We're all the same." That's wrong. That's denial. We are different because of race, and we need to learn to embrace the differences,



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"When you read the business pages in the past three years, it's just gangster activity, people getting away with anything they can—looting the Treasury, scandal. We're feeling the aftershocks of moral bankruptcy."



"Brother, you don't have to be a rocket scientist to eliminate poverty. There are no poor people in Sweden. Given our wealth, we could create a society with no poverty. We could do it."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID ROSE

embrace the whole person—culture, body, nose shape, lip shape, hair, whatever it is—just as we need to accept differences in gender and sexual orientation. Then again, we have to make sure our awareness of our differences doesn't translate into a hierarchy of how you treat people.

PLAYBOY: How would your life be different if you were born black in America today?

WEST: Oh, qualitatively different, for better and worse. Better because there's more possibility. Black people today have unprecedented opportunities—materially, academically, culturally. We've got a black middle class that's stronger. We've got a black upper class that's growing and of course a black president. Unprecedented. Magnificent. Symbolic consequences heard around the world.

PLAYBOY: What would be worse?

WEST: What's worse is there's less available love in black America. If I were born today, I'd have a soul sickness. I think that's true for the country as a whole. I see it with my students, certainly. Black, brown, white, red, no matter—4.0 GPAs, 800 Board scores, sharp as can be, on the way to Harvard Law. But if a friend died tomorrow, they'd be in crisis and catastrophe with hardly any way of dealing with it. They haven't experienced love in any deep sense. They don't know how to love themselves or one another in a way that empowers or nourishes the spirit. They're used to more fleeting interactions, stimulations, titillation rather than deep nourishment.

PLAYBOY: So as the song goes, where is the love?

WEST: Hey, man, it went to the market. It was devoured by corporate strategies and tactics that caught fire in the Reagan administration and continue to burn in the age of Obama. It's driven by the insatiable desire for personal pleasure, property, power, ego satisfaction. But the quest for those things consumes the truth. It's easy to get pleasure. Just go to a strip club. *Billppp!* You get pleasure. There's a place and time for that, Lord knows. *[laughs]* But real joy? True connection? Personal integrity? Those things require patience and tending and cultivating. All across this culture I see a yearning for quality relationships, a yearning for integrity, a yearning for spirituality. But people—young people in particular—are manipulated by many forces to believe that what matters in life is something else: money, materialism, short-term gain, power and the kind of show that goes along with it.

PLAYBOY: Hasn't the economic downturn of the past couple of years changed people?

WEST: Good question. I hope so. But if you look at, say, the black working class, it's devastated. Black poor—it's catastrophic. Okay, we broke the glass ceiling at the top, but you've got all these folks in the basement. Again, it's not just black; it's all poor people.

The problem is, we've lived in a kind of ice age these past 30 years or so, and that's hard to rise out of. The age of Reagan began in 1981. The idolizing of the market, the unleashing of the market, the promotion of an unregulated market started even earlier, with Carter in 1977. The fiscal conservatism and deregulation. But of course Reagan just took it to a whole new level. Between 1981 and 2009 you got the undercutting of the Glass-Steagall Act [which prohibited commercial banks from engaging in the investment business]. Suddenly, commercial and investment banks were coming together solely to generate funds and gains and profits. Simultaneously there was an elimination of certain types of welfare. Under Clinton we got the three-strikes laws [which mandate additional time in prison for three-time felons], sparking the rise of America's prison-industrial complex. So you end up with 30 years of blanketing every nook and cranny of the culture with free-market fundamentalism. Buying and selling. Lives of the rich and famous. To be human is to live in the lap of luxury and luxuriant status. Meanwhile, the

Tea Party folk are not crazy people. They're just misguided. The Tea Party might look a mile wide on Fox News, but it's only a few inches deep.

poor are forgotten, rendered invisible or sent to jail. What does that saturation do to the hearts, minds and souls of people? It depletes it all. Love, justice, trust, integrity—all that stuff is then gone. What we're left with is moral constipation.

PLAYBOY: Moral constipation?

WEST: When you know what you're doing is wrong but the good is stuck inside you and can't come out. We're morally constipated and wrestling with spiritual malnutrition. What happens is you end up with ethical evisceration, when you do anything in order to get by. That's why we're seeing this financial gangsterism.

PLAYBOY: In other words, moral constipation leads to Bernard Madoff and Goldman Sachs?

WEST: Yes, and the folks at Enron and Lehman and all the others. You see, humans have always had the propensity to be gangsters like that, but for much of the past century you had sanctions in place. You had regulation. You had a stronger trade union movement. You had some balance between the rich and the poor. More of the wealth was distributed to working people. But what is it

now? CEOs in the 1950s made around \$25 to every \$1 for an average worker. Now it's about \$275 to every \$1, and the CEOs say, "No, we deserve it. We're working harder." That's a lie. They're getting away with more by holding on to a larger percentage of the profits. CEOs in the 1950s were brilliant; they were sharp; they worked hard. But they got only \$20-something an hour for every dollar for the worker. And of course that's still the case in other parts of the world. CEOs work hard in Japan, where it's still roughly \$11 for the CEO and \$1 for the workers. And even there the workers are upset. They would never get away with it in Korea because Korea has one of the strongest organized working-class movements. Shoot, Korean workers would go on a general strike in a minute if a CEO suddenly started making too much money. *Pow!* Can you imagine a general strike in America because a CEO was making too much? *[laughs]*

PLAYBOY: Good luck with that. This is America!

WEST: Well, if we don't change something, we won't be an America anyone recognizes. We are already a grand empire in relative decline. The good news is America has bounced back before. Between 1898 and 1929 greed ran amok; there was social chaos. As a country we were engaged in imperial expansion in California, Texas, Mexico, the Philippines, Guam, Cuba and so forth. It was a mess. But we bounced back, and after World War II we became the greatest empire of the 20th century. After that, we outlived the Soviet empire, Europe's empire and the Cold War, and we survived those nuclear warheads we had pointed at one another.

PLAYBOY: So how does a jazzman deal with, say, the Tea Party movement?

WEST: That's not a movement. Social movements are rare. And these days you've got to distinguish between grassroots organizing versus Astroturf networking that appears deep only because of televisual disruptions. The Tea Party might look a mile wide on Fox News, but it's only a few inches deep.

PLAYBOY: Should the left just ignore it?

WEST: No. Here's why: Tea Party folk are not crazy people. They're just misguided. They're deeply conservative people who see the corruption of government. They're right about that. But they react by being antigovernment. They're wrong about that. They see the need for individual initiative and entrepreneurial possibility. They're right about that. But then they affirm a corporate agenda and don't realize corporations are a big part of the problem. I don't want in any way to fetishize or ascribe magical powers to them. They're much weaker than people like Glenn Beck think they are. But I'll fight for the right of Glenn Beck to express his opinion. Even he has a right to be wrong, which he is most of the time.

PLAYBOY: Beck recently called *African*

American a “bogus PC made-up term” and added, “That is not a race.”

WEST: Nobody ever said African American was a race. We’re a people, a very distinct people that includes Kenyans, Nigerians, Ugandans and black folk in Peru. So distinct, in fact, that Glenn Beck appears to have a certain preoccupation with black folk. Why is he so obsessed with black people? I notice he doesn’t give the Amish that much attention. *[laughs]* In all seriousness, though, we cannot allow vociferous right-wing criticism of the Obama administration to silence principled criticism from the left. We just can’t. We need to distinguish our criticism from theirs, but we still have to put pressure on.

PLAYBOY: What’s Obama doing wrong?

WEST: Well, Brother Barack came at a time when we needed to bring the age of Reagan to a close. We had to. Instead of greed, he said, let’s talk about fairness. Instead of differences, let’s talk about compassion. Instead of fear, let’s talk about hope. And while he’s made some good, positive changes, I don’t think he’s a messiah or even a very progressive politician. It turns out when you talk about hope, you have to be a long-distance runner.

PLAYBOY: Say more about that.

WEST: It’s already getting late for him, when you have a chance to speak to jobs, homes, infrastructure and you end up bailing out investment bankers. They’re too big to fail? They’re too big to be managed! And what do you do? You allow them to get bigger! So you’ve got the same conditions in place that will reproduce the same catastrophe from which we’re still cleaning up from the Bush years. And you don’t speak to jobs, you don’t speak to homes, and again the poor remain invisible.

PLAYBOY: Won’t there always be poor people in America?

WEST: It’s hard to say. There are no poor people in Norway. There are no poor people in Sweden. It depends on how your society is organized. Yes, we’ve got a huge society. But we’ve got a rich society, too—richer than Norway’s, richer than Japan’s, richer than all those other countries’. Given our wealth, we could create a society with no poverty. We could do it.

PLAYBOY: How?

WEST: Brother, you don’t have to be a rocket scientist to eliminate poverty. Make it a priority. You allocate assets for everyone’s basic needs—housing, food. There will still be inequality. I’m not saying I want Jay-Z to have the same amount of money I do. He’s more talented than I am in certain things and can generate income and wealth to a much greater extent, God bless him. We’re talking about a social floor below which no one can ever fall. No matter how poor, physically challenged, ill or otherwise disadvantaged someone is, there has to be a safety net. We may have to march on Washington in the name of poor and working people; otherwise we won’t be heard. The poor are the barometer of how a country

treats its citizens, of what its values are. The same is true for our gay brothers and lesbian sisters, bisexuals and transgender folk. There’s a willingness to have antidemocratic policies toward them, so they become the canaries in the mine. If the canaries are treated this way, that’s going to be the first indicator of how other groups are going to be treated. That’s why in many of my speeches since we took three steps back with Proposition 8 [the successful antigay-marriage initiative] in California in 2008, I’ve had to say, quite explicitly, “I am gay, lesbian, transgender and bisexual” in terms of my identification.

PLAYBOY: Which means?

WEST: It was like after 9/11, my response was, “I’m an Arab American.” I felt our Arab brothers and sisters weren’t being treated well, and in that context I gave many speeches in which I spoke out as an Arab. People said, “Aw, Negro, you ain’t Arab American. You’re a black man.” Yeah, and Jesus loves a free black man, that’s right! But I’m an Arab American, just as I’m now a gay American in terms of my solidarity, because they’re the ones you have to keep track of, you see?

Sexuality is such a precious gift, but it does take on a life of its own. Increasingly, I sense this conquest mentality in which sex becomes almost another thing to acquire.

PLAYBOY: Incidentally, what’s the state of sex on campus these days?

WEST: It’s funny. I was asked to speak to a group promoting abstinence on campus here at Princeton, and I told them, “I’m not the most exemplary figure.” *[laughs]* Sexuality is such a precious gift, but it does take on a life of its own. I see people who fall down the path of lust, seduction and temptation, and increasingly I sense this conquest mentality in which sex becomes almost another thing to acquire. How many women can I satisfy myself with? It’s a form of pathology, and it’s a sign of our deep spiritual malnutrition.

PLAYBOY: Did you see that with Tiger Woods?

WEST: Good God almighty, absolutely! I thought Brother Tiger would be the last brother to get caught in that kind of mess. But as I considered it, it made sense. Man has all the money in the world, all the success, and yet he never displayed an ounce of political concern, never showed any real interest in the problems of poor people, oppressed people. Not a mumbling word. Okay, fine, some people go through life that way. But he had cultivated a certain

image—so cleaned up. There’s no air there, no reality, no humanity. Problem is, when you live in such a deodorized space, your funk needs someplace to go. So what happens? The brother’s funk just starts seeping out. It was bound to happen. Suddenly everybody’s thinking, Oh, Tiger, you’re just like us! But he’s worse because he tried to hide the funk. I’m telling you, you can’t hide your funk! *[laughs]* What’s interesting is Obama also has this kind of image: cleaned up, deodorized, airtight.

PLAYBOY: You’re not suggesting...?

WEST: Well, no, I don’t think he’s got a Tiger problem, but you *know* the brother got funk! *[laughs]* Where’s he hiding it? I don’t know. I mean, he’s a human being, after all. There’s this image with men like Brother Barack and Brother Tiger—some call them postracial figures. They say they’ve transcended X and Y and can be everything to everyone. But you wonder. Anyway, Sister Michelle’s the one with funk in the family.

PLAYBOY: How so?

WEST: I think she’s got a lot of Malcolm X in her, a lot of Ella Baker. But she’s had to contain it in a very intense manner to conform to the first lady image. Somebody of her brilliance, somebody of her vision, somebody of her courage confined to keeping gardens at the White House, reaching out to military families, highlighting childhood obesity. I think she could be a great force for change if she could only set herself free. She can’t, though. Black sister exercising her power, willing to take a stand, would be too much of a threat. Michelle’s been shaped by the whole history of enslaved peoples, of Jim Crow and Jane Crow, discrimination, South Side of Chicago, whereas Obama’s been more rootless—Hawaii, Indonesia, then L.A., New York, Cambridge, Chicago. Loving white mother, brilliant African father. But he doesn’t have that righteous indignation or the black rage that can actually be a service.

PLAYBOY: Do you wish Obama were somehow more black?

WEST: Well, it’s difficult in the age of Obama for the angry black man to have any visibility, any credibility, because Brother Barack Obama has laid out this paradigm of the smile. And rage always has to be hidden and concealed. I also get frustrated with the whitewashing within his administration. What happened to the black elites inside Obama’s campaign, Valerie Jarrett, John Rogers and Eric Whitaker? They’re practically invisible or gone. Instead Obama has a savvy political team—Brother Axelrod, Brother Plouffe, Brother Gibbs, Brother Emanuel—who are experts at PR. Here’s some money for the traditionally black colleges. Oh wonderful. But it’s just PR. Black folk can’t be blindsided by Obama’s pigmentation and historical symbolism. What I’m saying is I wish he could be more Martin Luther King-like. Set an agenda that at root is a black agenda, and it would also be the

best agenda for the nation and the world. King did that. His concern for civil rights was also the best agenda for the country, just like Frederick Douglass's agenda to abolish slavery was the best agenda for democracy at the time.

You see this all the time with black musicians. Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Curtis Mayfield, Aretha Franklin—they're singing black music, but it becomes universal. Next thing you know, Eric Clapton picks up on it and it hits the so-called mainstream. Well, same goes for politics. Fix the problems of the black poor and you fix what's wrong with the country. But by necessity, Obama has had to downplay his blackness to appease the white moderates and independents and speak to their anxieties. He knows black folk will support him anyway, so he doesn't need to spend too much time on the chocolate side of town. But we have real problems, deep problems, affecting not just black, white or brown folk. I get upset when I think about my red brothers and sisters on the reservation. And it's true in Afghanistan. The drones going in there and in Pakistan, killing innocent people by way of joysticks in Arizona—that's our tax money being used. Good God almighty! These were issues we had hoped would be resolved under Obama, but in fact these things have gotten worse.

PLAYBOY: Have you told Obama any of this?

WEST: He doesn't return my calls.

PLAYBOY: You're kidding.

WEST: I wish I were. I did 65 events for my dear brother Barack on the campaign trail but have not seen him since Martin Luther King Day 2008. During the campaign I would call him every three weeks just to say a prayer, but he never called back. I'll tell you the truth. I couldn't even get a ticket to the inauguration for my mother. Even the guy who picks the bags out of my car at the hotel where I stay in Washington, D.C. got a ticket. So while I would support Barack again, it's clear there are people he has no gratitude for in terms of their work for him. I'm not the only one. I think he has the kind of disposition where he just moves on. That's part of the sense of being a politician rather than a statesman. That's the frustration.

PLAYBOY: Let's shift gears. What's the best advice you ever got?

WEST: Good question. When Dad dropped me off at college at Harvard, it was the first time I'd been on a plane. I got there and looked around and felt completely out of my league. He calmed me down. "You got a history of towering figures coming through this place," he said. "But keep in mind, I'm less concerned about the grades you get than about the human being you become. I don't need you to be successful or get A's, but I want you to be great." I was blessed with gifted mentors inside and outside my family. For young people a lot of times the only person they can get it from is a coach or a teacher. That's good. It takes only one,

man, because once your soul is set on fire and your mind is piqued, the curiosity is deeply unleashed, your perplexity is accented and you're off. It's like a missile. Look at Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad. Just one.

PLAYBOY: How's your financial situation? In your last book you wrote about being broke.

WEST: Oh, still broke! [laughs] People don't believe I'm broke, but I am.

PLAYBOY: Even with all your speaking engagements and TV, music and movie appearances?

WEST: Good God, yes. Because I'm so far behind. You see, I've got debts that go far beyond description, having had three marriages and also keeping my commitments to my precious daughter. I've got to make sure she's taken care of. I don't make money on the CDs. I didn't make a lot of money from the *Matrix* films or other projects of that sort. If it weren't for my lectures—and a lot of those are free—I wouldn't be able to buy a hot dog. I'll put it this way: If I hit the lotto tomorrow, I'll break dance. I'll break dance out of joy because then I can do what I love just for

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fun and I wouldn't have the burdens on me psychologically.

PLAYBOY: Would you buy a new car? Isn't it true you've been driving the same old jalopy for a while?

WEST: Nineteen eighty-eight Cadillac, deepest ride on the road! I've had it for 23 years. So many miles on it, too many to count. But no, I'm going to die with that car, a black Cadillac with a lavender interior, listening to Luther Vandross, Curtis Mayfield and Aretha Franklin on the road.

PLAYBOY: Are your suits expensive?

WEST: Not too bad. I've got three of them. Well, four now. I just got a new suit from the Reverend Staples from Washington, D.C., head of the Temple of Praise. Very kind of him. But the rest come from Johnny, who's been my driver for almost 10 years. He brings the suits back from Pakistan when he goes. And my shirts are always white, always French cuffs, size 16/36. Mom buys all my shirts, and she buys my shoes, too.

PLAYBOY: Your mother buys you clothes?

WEST: Uh-huh.

PLAYBOY: You're 57 years old.

WEST: It's just a thing we do; we go shopping together. We enjoy it. But oh man, to wear this outfit! It's empowering, enabling, enabling. It's like Miles Davis and John Coltrane when they put on those sharp suits and played their instruments. Or Frederick Douglass himself. Man, I put this on, with the scarf to keep my throat for speaking engagements, and I'm ready to take on the world! It's like Ephesians, the sixth chapter: You put on the full armor of God. I've got my whole armor.

PLAYBOY: After your first divorce you lived in Central Park for a few days. What was that like?

WEST: I was there four or five days. It was strange, terrifying and also quite calming. Once you get over the fear, there's a certain kind of freedom living on a park bench. Come what may—*amor fati*—love of fate, you know what I mean? You need to go to those places sometimes to understand who you are.

PLAYBOY: After three marriages, do you want to get married again?

WEST: It's difficult to think it would happen. First of all I've had such high-quality love that if I were spiritually and physically barren for the rest of my life, I'd still have a smile, because I've been so blessed. But my calling is so difficult to render compatible with the time necessary for a sustained relationship, I just keep moving. That's not to say there's not something appealing about looking into the eyes of a special someone. The eyes are the lens of the soul, you know? **PLAYBOY** itself, for me, is a very important institution in this regard, because there's nothing wrong with looking at beautiful women. And because this is **PLAYBOY**, I'd like to say a few words about black sexuality.

PLAYBOY: Go right ahead.

WEST: Historically, white fear of black sexuality was always a basic component of white racism. Black bodies, white bodies bumping against one another—it's been one of the major forms of mobilizing white citizens. You may remember Dwight Eisenhower's response to *Brown v. Board of Education*—"We can't have these big black bucks sitting next to our pure little white girls." Brother Dwight, that's really not what the law's all about. But okay, he went right to the gut issue, to the central anxiety of white America. That fear is still there. Ancient associations still linger about the sheer touch of black body against white body, of being disgusting, dirty, repulsive. On the other hand, you also have this fetishization of the black body. The black body becomes exoticized, primitivized. Sexuality in a human being is a complicated thing, though, fortunately, a whole transformation is taking place.

PLAYBOY: How so?

WEST: Even though a great deal of residential segregation still exists in this country, the Afro-Americanization of the popular imagination—coming from television and

(continued on page 106)

CORNEL WEST

(continued from page 36)

through music and culture—has made its way deep into the vanilla suburbs, with white kids looking at Lil Wayne, looking at Kanye, looking at Beyoncé and so forth. I mean, you'll always have Hannah Montana and others doing their thing. [laughs] But so many major figures in popular culture have been black—Michael Jackson, Prince, the genius named Jay-Z. Of course it started earlier, with Louis Armstrong and jazz and then rhythm and blues, James Brown and so on, Motown. And in sports as well, from Jackie Robinson on. By the time hip-hop came along, that younger generation of white listeners was almost completely Afro-Americanized. Style, clothes, music, everything changes.

There's something about folk just wanting to be cool and hip and wanting to respond against certain staid realities in a deodorized culture, and there's nothing wrong with that. Funk is generally a good thing, no matter what form it takes, because it's just trying to be real, trying to cut through hypocrisy, inconsistency, the discrepancy between ideals and practice. And it takes a lot of different forms. It can be James Brown, it can be punk rock, it can be Pearl Jam, Leonard Cohen. They're all funky. They're trying to keep it real. Young people need some exposure to funk or they're going to end up completely socialized into hypocrisy in deodorized spaces. Now what does bringing the funk do for white folk? It helps create possibilities for an Obama to come along, right? You end up with young white people who are less fearful of black bodies.

PLAYBOY: What about black comedians and entertainers who play up clichés about black culture? Tyler Perry has almost single-handedly revived the stereotype of the black crack mother, the black ho and the big black mama.

WEST: Tyler can learn a lot from a towering figure like Spike Lee. Brother Tyler can mature. He can grow. I don't think he'll be enacting *Madea* when he's 65. What troubles me is that with all his power and influence—and it is mighty—he can do anything. So why can't he make a classic film, say, of the life of Zora Neale Hurston or James Baldwin? But that's a problem within the larger institutional framework of Hollywood. All the richness in black life right now, and the only thing Hollywood gives us is black pathology. Look at the Oscars. Even *Precious*, with my dear sister Mo'Nique, what is it? Rape, violation, the marginalized. Or else you get white missionary attitudes toward black folk. *The Blind Side*? Oh my God! In 2010? I respect Sandra Bullock's work, but that is not art. Trouble is, I ask my dear brothers and sisters in Hollywood, "When are you going to hit race in a serious way such that you can green-light films that display the humanity and diversity of black life?" And they all come back and say, "Can't make no money, Brother West."

PLAYBOY: Last year an incident involving your former Harvard colleague Henry

Louis Gates Jr. spurred the White House "beer summit" after he charges he was the victim of police racism. Does racism ever affect you personally?

WEST: That was a highly visible example of racism, but racism usually takes a more covert form. I mean, look no further than the academy itself. The leading journals in the country, they never review my books. Nineteen books. Nothing. *Race Matters* sold 35,000 copies a month. Nothing about it in the major journals. Nothing about Brother West either. But they reviewed Hulk Hogan's book that month! A huge review on the book by the guy from Letterman's band, Brother Paul Shaffer. I'm glad for Paul Shaffer, but he gets a whole two pages, and nothing for Brother West? My academic career is dismissed by means of invisibility. And I'm not the only one. If a martian came down to America and read *The New York Review of Books*, it would hardly know there were any black writers. There is a de facto segregation in the life of the mind in America, and black scholars, brown scholars, black intellectuals feel it every day. Now, I can't really complain. I'm a university professor at Princeton. I've done well academically. But it's like Wynton Marsalis. Wynton Marsalis is a jazz genius. You see him in *The New York Times* all the time. How many serious treatments of his music have you seen? None at all. How many times have you seen me in *The New York Times*? Too many times! Sometimes they're very kind to me. Other popular media, always. But I'm talking about serious treatment of my work.

PLAYBOY: There have been critics who look at your media appearances and your presentation style and say you're more of a showman than a scholar.

WEST: Yeah. And the thing is, as a bluesman in the life of the mind, they are partly right. There is a theatrical and dramatic element to what I do and who I am. I just have to be true to that. The way I lecture does remind people of passionate orators, some would say preachers. But I'm not preaching. I'm speaking passionately. I'm still Socratic in terms of critically examining material. So in a sense, they're right. But then, of course, I send 'em back and say, "Well, take a look at the books, the teaching."

Others say, "Well, part of the problem is he does too much." I'm into music, in the movies, having fun with Brother Bill Maher and Brother Colbert and always giving speeches, hundreds of speeches, and writing a book every three years. "How in the world can you do all that and do it well?" Again, I think they've got good ground. Because as a bluesman, I follow Horace. Horace's definition of poetry is "delight and instruct." Or listen to Socrates, who said the learned should engage in *paideia*, which is my calling. Deep education. You unsettle minds, but you also touch souls, and you do it any way you can.

You know, Ralph Ellison used to say, "America is most American when it is theatrical." Yes. Or another fellow bluesman, August Wilson, said for black people reality is "authorized by performance." What he means is, during slavery, the only control we Africans had was over our voices and our bodies. We had no land, we had no

territory, no rights and no liberties whatsoever. So all this self-determination took the form of voice. "Lift Every Voice and Sing" is our anthem. Even when we had instruments, we made the instruments sound like voices. Listen to Coltrane, Miles. The voice is vital, in the moment. It's flexible, fluid, felt as well as heard. So it's part of a performance. And performance is not a marginal thing, because all of us perform in terms of how we interact all the time. But performance for black people carries this tremendous weight and gravity. It is who we are, and it allows us to see each other for who we really are. I feel blessed to be part of this great tradition. I'm in the academy, but I'm also a performer.

PLAYBOY: What was it like to record a song with Prince?

WEST: Lord have mercy, that man is a genius of unparalleled vitality, and going into the studio to record something for him was an extraordinary blessing. But I just love hanging out with the man. We were together in Montreux last summer. He did two shows one night, two hours of jazz—Coltrane, Charlie Parker—then came back with two hours of funk. Unbelievable. Afterward he said, "Brother West, did you sleep?" I said, "Well, I try not to." He doesn't sleep at all. He said, "Let's spend some time talking." First thing we did, we went on top of the hotel and watched some of Obama's speeches. Then we had dialogue for about an hour, then we started talking about music for another hour, and then we talked politics for another hour. We stayed up until 7:30, eight. He packed and jumped on his plane. Stayed up all night. And another time Brother Tavis Smiley and I took Michael Steele to see him.

PLAYBOY: You and the chairman of the Republican National Committee went to a Prince concert?

WEST: Oh yeah. Politics can't stop you from rockin' to a genius, man! [laughs]

PLAYBOY: So Steele has some funk?

WEST: A little funk. He's black Catholic [laughs] and black Catholics have a way to go sometimes. Yeah, they tight. You get mass every day for weeks. It just doesn't leave a lot of room in there for George Clinton, James Brown or Funkadelic, you know?

PLAYBOY: White Catholics don't handle their funk much better. Look at the Vatican.

WEST: Amen, brother! These are difficult times for the flock. But it's to be expected. Anytime you have people making claims of being virtuous, you have massive hypocrisy. That's just who we are as humans. I think hypocrisy ought to be built into every sermon preached at a church: "Sinner that I am" would always be a good way to begin. Nobody's perfect. Consider the brilliant words of my dear brother Samuel Beckett. He was a lapsed Protestant Christian, an atheist, but he had that Augustinian sensibility. He wrote, "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." Don't project purity or an image of being pristine because you end up falling on your face. Or worse, you end up projecting a face of hypocrisy, as we see with the Vatican—a gay sex scandal among the people who preach against gay marriage and other deeply important issues. Not right.

In the realm of public service, in my

opinion, you begin with the 25th chapter of Matthew, which says, "Keep the focus on the least of these." The orphaned, the widowed, the poor, the prisoner. And in our world it would be the physically challenged. It would be gay brothers, lesbian sisters. It would be Jews when anti-Semitism is coming at them. It would be Muslims when anti-Muslim sentiments are raging.

PLAYBOY: What's your position on Israel these days?

WEST: We have to recognize on the one hand that our precious Jewish brothers and sisters have been dealing with vicious forms of individual and institutionalized hatred for 2,000 years and that the Holocaust is no joke and not even an anomaly. It could happen again. The vicious attack on Jews for 2,000 years has been chronic. Therefore they have a paranoia. Therefore they need security, and that security is indispensable. At the same time, as they jumped out of the burning buildings of Europe, they landed on the backs of the Arabs. And they had a choice: co-exist, as Einstein called for, or dominate, as Jewish conservatives call for. And that battle has been going on in the heart of Israel for decades. But what we've seen more recently is wholesale occupation by Israel. Occupation of a people is always wrong, immoral, illegal. And people will resist to the last person. That would be true of Palestinian dominating Jew just as it is of Jew dominating Palestinian. From an American policy standpoint, we've fallen short in accepting that a Palestinian life has the same value as an Israeli life. If there is a massacre of 500 Israelis, yes, we've got to go in and protect them. But if there's a massacre of 500 Palestinians, we've got to go in and protect them, too. Problem is, for those of us who believe that, we're often viewed as not being pro-Israel. In fact, I'm more pro-Israel than almost anybody I know. Why? Because I have a deep love for Jewish brothers and sisters. But my love for Palestinian brothers and sisters is exactly the same.

PLAYBOY: Do you have any vices?

WEST: In Harvard, as an undergrad, I saw the best and worst of the 1970s. Drugs were certainly around, but I ran with some good fellows. You know James Brown, the great TV sports personality? We were roommates. I loved that brother. We never touched drugs at all. He was an athlete and I had no interest. I always liked cognac, though. If cognac were illegal, I'd be in jail. [laughs] No doubt about that. I know my brother Bill Maher talks about marijuana. He can have that stuff. I like my Courvoisier.

PLAYBOY: Is your health good? You had a cancer scare a few years ago.

WEST: Cancer's fine, man. It's under control. I'm the most blessed man in late modernity. I should have been dead a long time ago and feel I'm living on borrowed time, brother. Well, all of us in some sense are but especially since the cancer. Hallelujah!

PLAYBOY: What's your hope for America looking ahead? In the spirit of Martin Luther King Jr., what's your dream for the future of race relations in this country?

WEST: I think there is no serious dream that's not also wrestling with our nightmares. That's what people didn't understand about Martin King. King had just gotten out of jail when he gave the "I Have a Dream" speech. So he had the nightmare on his soul, like any bluesman. Can't sing about the hope if you're not wrestling with the despair.

You begin with the children. We've got about 35 to 50 percent of black children living in poverty. We've got 30 percent of brown. That's 20 percent of all our children. And with red, it's even higher. Start with them. That's the nightmare. To be young and poor, locked into poverty in a country that doesn't care about you. Ain't got nothing, no health care, hardly any food, worried about bullets. That's the nightmare. You think about them and you think about their needs. Education and jobs and health care first, housing and roads and bridges and infrastructure that help people get around. Again, it's not rocket

science to understand this. It's a matter of will, priority, vision. If we don't hit it head-on, chickens come home to roost. We can have all the short-term thinking we want, but we will reap what we sow.

When you read the business pages in the past three years, it's just gangster activity, people getting away with anything they can—looting the Treasury, billions of dollars made on speculation. Those people knew it was wrong, but it was short-term gain, scandal, preoccupation with the 11th Commandment: Thou shalt not get caught. The result is, we're feeling the aftershocks of moral bankruptcy, and it's going to hurt us for a long time.

PLAYBOY: That doesn't sound very optimistic.

WEST: I don't believe in optimism of any sort, but I'm a prisoner of hope. I'm hopeful that if we get a revolution in values, a revolution in priorities, a revolution in orientation—whether it's an actual kind of social and political revolution, I don't know. Marching, for sure. Standing up and being heard, yes. But once our priorities start to shift and the poor and the downtrodden are heard, who knows what's possible? We can bounce back, and we will bounce back. We heard so much about hope during the Obama campaign, and certainly there's been progress. But I still hope for more. To me that means as long as you can breathe, love, think, laugh and dance, you can bear witness. And as long as someone is bearing witness, as long as there is a cloud of witnesses, then there's hope. Because hope is about motion.

That's what it is to be a jazzman, and I want to be a jazzman until the day I die. To help keep that motion, momentum and movement going, for myself, for my students, for the people who hear me. Oh sure, some days you look around at this country and look at the evidence and think, Oh Lord, don't look good. But you keep moving. You gotta keep moving.

