

2013 “Control” – Big Sean, featuring Kendrick Lamar and Jay Electronica

“It’s funny how one verse can fuck up the game.” –Jay Z, “Imaginary Player,” 1997

“Control” is a song by Big Sean, except it’s not a song, and it doesn’t belong to Big Sean.

It for sure arrived as a Big Sean song. He teased it on Twitter a few hours before *Hall and Fame* the album he was promoting became available for preorder. He said he was going to post it himself because it was a toss-away that he wasn’t able to include on the album due to sample-clearance issues. He said it was “straight rap” shit, that it was grimy, that it was seven minutes long, that “IT IS NOT no radio shit,” and he capitalized “IT IS NOT...” just like that. He was energetic. But I don’t know that anyone else was really as excited about it as his caps-locked letters were.

He’d already released three singles from the album and none of them was very interesting (or successful). There was “Guap,” which was about money, and he also talked about having sex with seventeen girls at once on it, and that seems excessive, but I guess that’s why they call him Big Sean and not Normal Sean. There was “Switch Up,” featuring Common, and that was probably the first time anyone had ever talked about R. Kelly and Charlie Brown in the same verse of a song. And there was *Beware*, featuring Lil Wayne and Jhené Aiko, and nobody had invented a time machine by then, which means it was 2013 Lil Wayne and not 2008 Lil Wayne, so you can imagine how well that went. Those songs, they were okay, but they were also very forgettable. And so again: I don’t know that anyone else was really as excited about “Control” as Big Sean himself seemed to be. But then he released it,

and then people heard it, and then, all at once, it felt like it was all anybody could talk about. And it had nothing to do with Big Sean.

Let me be clear when I say this, because this is a thing that should be clear: “Control” is Big Sean’s song, but only in the strictest legal sense, in that it’s his because he technically owns it, in that it is his property. But it’s not really a *Big Sean song*.

And let me also be clear when I say this, because this is also a thing that should be clear: “Control” *is* a song, but only in the literal sense, in that it’s presented as a song, in that it has production and some verses and some bridges. But it’s not a *song*. What “Control” is, at least what it’s known for now and will be known as forever, is a verse. And that verse belongs to Kendrick Lamar.

Kendrick’s verse on “Control” lasts just over 3 minutes. It’s 550 plus words, and they’re all packed together extra tight, braided together into the density of steel, or a black hole, or a black hole made of steel, if that’s even a thing.

Here is a very small example:

“Bitch, I’ve been juped before you put a gun on me | Bitch, I put one on yours, I’m Sean Connery | James Bonding with none of you niggas.”

His tone here, as it is throughout the song, is aggressive. The phrase “James Bonding,” smart in itself, is a clever way to say he’s not interested in making any new friends. Earlier in the year, Drake, a more powerful figure but less of a tactician, made a similar announcement on DJ Khalid’s “No New Friends,” except he presented it as a straight line rather than a

squiggle, singing, “No new friends, no new friends, no new friends no, no new...No new friends, no new friends.” And so on. It was nakedly enjoyable, as most Drake moments tend to be, but Kendrick’s execution of the idea was, to be sure, at a level higher, as his raps tend to be.

And we can unpack its levels even more: Consider that Kendrick prefaced the James Bonding line with “I’m Sean Connery”, who defined the James Bond character, and so he’s lowkey aligning himself with greatness, and so that’s two levels higher than the forthrightness of what Drake did.

And his opening bit, the thing about having a gun pulled on him, that’s a metaphor, so now we’re three levels higher. But it’s also a reference to the story of early Hollywood gangster Johnny Stompanato busting onto a movie set in 1957 and pulling a gun on Sean Connery because he thought Connery was sleeping with his girlfriend, and that puts us four levels higher. (That’s Sean Connery = Kendrick, Johnny Stomp = hating ass rappers, the gun = hate, and the girlfriend = rap).

Connery responded by grabbing Stompato by the hand + gun, torqueing it back until Stomp let go, then coldcocking him, and that’s the implied extension of the metaphor. We’re at five levels higher than normal.

So, the three lines from the song quoted above are twenty-seven words in length, and the two paragraphs it took to explain them took 355 words. That’s how his whole verse on “Control” is compressed. And, really, that’s impressive enough, but it was what followed the James Bonding that was so apocalyptic.

Kendrick uncorked all of his fury, and he presented it with zero camouflage, calling out the names of just short of a dozen of the most talked about new rappers. There's a whole chunk of destruction, but here's the heart of it.

*I'm usually homeboys with the same niggas I'm rhymin' with
But this is hop-hop, and them niggas should know what time it is
And that goes for Jermaine Cole, Big KRIT., Wale
Pusha T, Meek Mill, A\$AP Rocky, Drake
Big Sean, Jay Electron', Tyler, Mac Miller
I got love for you all but I'm tryna murder you niggas
Tryna make sure your core fans never heard of you niggas
They don't wanna hear not one more noun or verb from you niggas*

Almost instantly, it absorbed all of rap. Everyone knew it was a moment. 50 Cent had done something similar with "How to Rob," but that was more than two years before he'd released his album and become a champion. Kendrick did it AFTER, and so there was not misconstruing the message he was sending. To state it plainly: Fuck you, dudes

Saying names is a thing top-tier guys just don't do. War takes time. It's supposed to build. Jay Z and Nas danced around each other for six years before Jay finally fired a direct shot at Nas's forehead, saying his name in a song. (see page forty-two) Kendrick had no interest in that. He found the crowd of rappers who were waiting, all standing around chatting and glad-handing each other, then fired a bazooka gun into it.