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Greetings from Forest Gate: The Meteoric Rise of Ben Drew aka Plan B

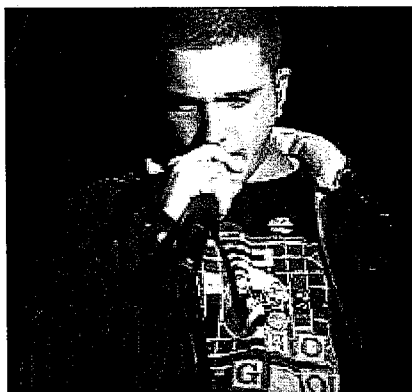
Christoph Reinfandt

Plan B – Ben Drew – hat sich vom *toughen* HipHop Sänger zu *everybody's darling* gewandelt. In seiner Musikkolumne verfolgt Christoph Reinfandt (Tübingen) Plan Bs Karriere und erklärt dessen Verwandlung.

Whoever turned on the radio in the summer of 2010 and beyond stood a good chance of being drawn into the finger-snapping infectious groove of Plan B's "She Said". As BBC reviewer Ian Wade put it in an early review, this highly interesting pastiche of Motown soul with integrated rap passages certainly seemed "a welcome addition to daytime radio"¹, even if, about a year later, the song runs the danger of outstaying its welcome due to heavy overuse all over Europe. What is perhaps most interesting about the song, however, is that the very same guy who croons in a sweet falsetto voice

*"She said, 'I love you, boy, / I love you so.' / She said, 'I love you, baby, oh oh oh ohh.' / She said, 'I love you more than words can say,' / She said, 'I love you, bayayayayaybayyyy'"*²

opened his debut record some four years earlier with "Yeah, / This is my time now ya get me? / Fucking cunts! / A'right, you best listen up yeah! Ay!" How do you get from harassing your audience to being (nearly) everybody's darling without losing your credibility? This is the astonishing feat that Ben Drew, born 1983 in Forest Gate, London, managed to (literally) perform between his critically lauded but commercially only moderately successful hip hop debut *Who Needs Actions When You Got Words* (2006), which was certified Silver by the British Phonographic Industry for selling more than 60,000 copies only in February 2010, and, four years later, his equally critically acclaimed concept album *The Defamation of Strickland Banks* (2010), which sold 68,173 copies in its first week in the UK alone and has



Ben Drew's image change: from hoodie-clad baddie to suit-clad goodie

since been certified platinum thrice (for more than 900,000 sold copies). What is more, this success story involves what is at first glance a complete change of image – from hoodie-clad baddie to suit-clad goodie, as it were (see above) – and should thus provide interesting insights into the mechanisms of pop authenticity.

Origins

A core ingredient of authenticity constructions of all kinds is, of course, a claim of unalienated continuity with one's origins or roots. While the occasional attack on Plan B's Strickland Banks persona as a mere sell-out questions just this claim, Ben Drew is quite clear about the fact that the seemingly authentic persona of a white Forest Gate hip hopper projected on *Who Needs Actions* is by no means the original while everything that follows is fake. On his homepage, he admits to Michael Jackson with his "artful blend of soul, funk and pop" being his "first idol", with jungle music, hip hop and punk coming only later, and he also admits that his first songwriting attempts were

modelled on "soul [...] classic Motown tunes [and] cheesy R&B acts":

*I just found I could sing that stuff naturally, so when I first started writing songs seriously, and teaching myself how to play guitar, it was soul song after soul song. Just pure love songs. I was 14, I'd never been in love, but I had a good understanding of what love might be. And almost every song had the word 'love' in its title!"*³

So it turns out that the seeming original of the hip hop persona was, in fact, plan B, which was only put into action (and called just that) when plan A did not work, while conversely the seeming sell-out can be seen as a return to the roots. As in all good constructions of authenticity, however, coming into one's own requires a certain degree of genuineness, which persists even if it takes its most important cues from idols and role-models. This is how the biographical sketch on the website presents this crucial moment in its characteristic third-person storytelling mode:

Ben wanted to be heard, but no one wanted to listen to a white boy from Forest Gate singing silly love songs. He began to rap, but that didn't fit either: "I went

down that whole route of just rapping about myself, saying my name and talking about how great I was – all that bravado rap. But it was shit. No one cares where Forest Gate is and all that. I don't sell crack, I'm not a pimp – who's going to be interested?"

Then Eminem came along, and taught him it was OK to be himself, to rap in the voice of a white boy from London's East End.⁴

And this is where *Who Needs Actions* comes in: as a first step in the process of converting Ben Drew into the public persona of Plan B, just like Marshall Bruce Mathers III turned himself into Eminem some years earlier.

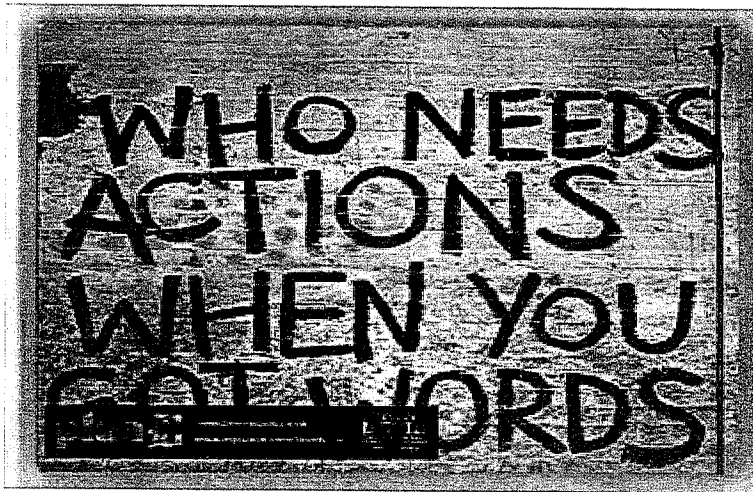
"That's the mentality of kids today"

While there are tracks on *Who Needs Actions* (see above) which lend themselves to straightforward autobiographical readings – in fact so much so that at least one critic suggests that

[f]ive minutes worth of freshman Freud helps to synopsise all of side A, during which castration fear abounds [while] [t] he second half wakes up from a dream-state to analyze it; the speaker wonders aloud at his subconscious reasons for his behavior⁵

– the lyrics indicate a degree of formal self-consciousness quite unusual for the genre. The very first song, "Kidz", for example, begins with the direct listener address (or abuse) mentioned above, which might take the listener aback or, quite contrarily, create a sense of community or even provide an identification potential, which in turn may be taken either literally or more or less ironically, swaggering being part of the game (if it is a game).⁶ It is, however, very clear that the track is not a direct autobiographical statement but a character-based song drawing on the notorious death of the ten-year-old Nigerian-born school-boy Damilola Taylor in South London in 2000. While the four verses unfold an appalling panorama of violence, sex-

ual abuse and crime through the eyes of a perpetrator, the choruses provide a summary in a strange dual voice which moves beyond this perspective: while four lines provide the cues for each of the four verses in reverse order, thus repeatedly returning the listener to the first verse which takes its cue from the Damilola Taylor case, they are answered by the mantra-like line "That's the mentality of kids today" which creates an observer-position not fully amenable to the speaker of the verses:



Ben Drew: Who Needs Action

Pick up an AK and spray [> verse 4]

That's the mentality of kids today

Fuck a girl and get her pregnant underage [> verse 3]

That's the mentality of kids today

Even when I got dough I won't pay my way [> verse 2]

That's the mentality of kids today

Stabbing you in the leg down an alleyway [> verse 1]

That's the mentality of kids today

The emergence of this strange double consciousness can actually be observed at the end of the last verse when the speaker comments on himself in a highly implausible way and provides the buzzword for the chorus: *See that kinda shit impresses me / Cos I got an ignorant mentality / The way I see, is the way to be / So arrogant, nothin' will ever get through to me*

Given this double-voiced discourse, the track as a whole can by no means be taken to endorse the violence which it depicts, but it nevertheless puts itself in

the somewhat paradoxical position of "talking tough shit about being sick of people talking tough shit"⁷ – and possibly even acting tough against people acting tough.

This possibility is taken up by the second track, "Sick 2 Def", beginning with the opening lines of its chorus: "Real sick hearing these pricks talk shit / They get their throats slit cos they talkin' to me like I'm thick [...]" Here, however, the generic electronic beat of the opening track is replaced by a percussively strummed two-chord motif played on an acoustic guitar, that epitome of singer/songwriter authenticity (see picture on the next page). And strikingly enough, this is exactly the speaking position constructed in the course of the track. Beginning with "Listen... / I don't just talk the talk – I walk it / That's why my mouth's always comin' out with raw shit / My rap style's distorted", the speaker spits out a virtuoso rap in the first verse

which is largely propelled by the aural acuity of its opening chain of rhymes (walk it / raw shit / distorted / aborted / morbid / awkward / ignore it / sport it / bought it) and then succeeded by cos / no remorse / corpse / genital warts – even without the rest, the listener will probably get the point before the final rhyme (biscuit / wrists slit) comes up. Nevertheless, while the first verse suggests that the "rap style's distorted" and the "metaphors are twisted" in response to and defiance of a hostile reality, it also acknowledges in its final lines that there is an element of fantasy and wishful thinking in them ("I'm so sadistic so I fantasize about finding my mum's ex / Floating in a bath tub with his wrists slit"). The second verse then addresses the wrongs of the world more specifically, establishing a continuity between the speaker's extreme positions and the state of the world as mediated through TV with its popular (*Pulp Fiction*, *Reservoir Dogs*) as well as artistically more ambitious films (*Irreversible*, *City of*

God) and its depraved celebrities:

That's some nasty shit and still you wonder why I'm sick

When I see this shit and say exactly what I think That's some nasty shit and you don't ban it But you ban computer games. Summat round here really stinks.

The aggression, it seems, is primarily directed at the hypocrisy of contemporary culture at large, with its lack of moral standards and self-reflection. Nevertheless, the third and longest verse actually depicts a seemingly random murder committed by some "guy on the bench" reading a paper, who is turning into a "knife-wielding silhouette" and a "dark figure on the other side of the street" after cutting first his victim's ear and then stabbing him in the neck. Strikingly, though, the murder is described in reverse, possibly evoking for the high-minded a literary device as practiced in Kurt Vonnegut's famous depiction of the bombing of Dresden in his novel *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969) or more recently Martin Amis's fictional engagement with the holocaust in reverse in *Time's Arrow* (1991). The speaker, however, evokes a rap precedent and thus insists on his own rap credentials:

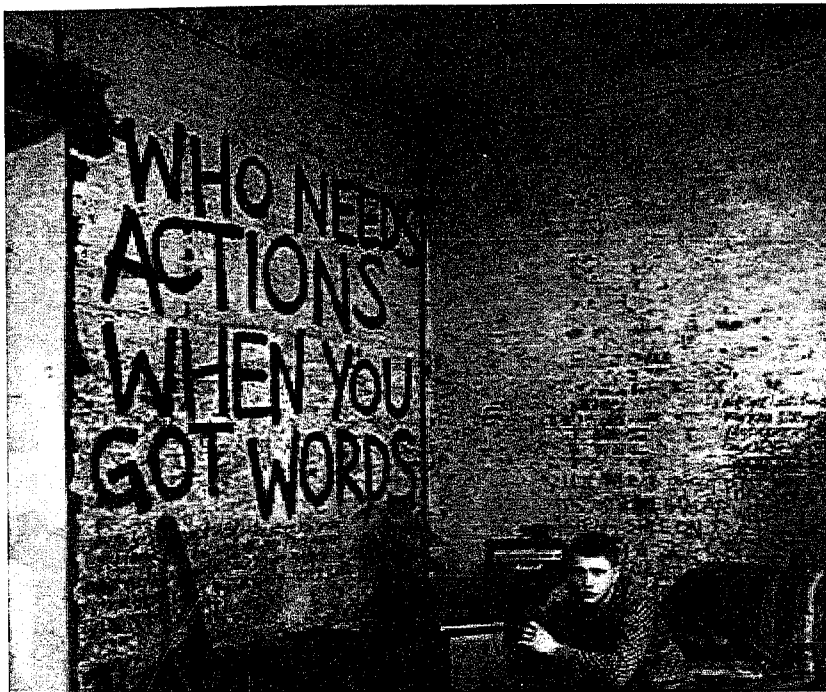
Check it...

The last verse is just as bad as the first But compared to the second, yo, it's definitely worse

Cos this is about a guy getting chauffeured in a hearse

Let me do what [US rapper] Nas did and tell that shit in reverse.⁸

All the details of the murder in reverse suggest that it is the kind of aggression envisaged in the chorus ("Might have to do it Reservoir Dogs style / Slice off their ear") and now finally perpetrated by the speaker. And yet the reverse telling undoes the murder in words, and the speaker only crops up explicitly again before the deed is done (or after



the deed is *undone* in reverse). He thus clearly puts a distance between himself and the murderer, commenting enigmatically:

Who's that guy on the bench? I'm reading his paper / Takes the snail he stepped on back from its creator, / Only to be killed again when I fast-forward this shit later.

Before the promised fast-forward, however, the killer, still in re-wind mode, returns home where the link with the speaker is finally established and, at the same time, the distance confirmed: *Back in his house, now back in his bed / He un-listens to a CD and un-bops his head / Takes the CD out the player and puts it back in its case, / Which has my name on the cover along with my face.*

And this in fact turns into the easy solution of the case, which is spelt out in a coda which breaks away from the re-wind mode of presentation and brings on the promised fast-forward:

Fast forward there's been a murder and the police know who's done it

Not lookin' for a motive cos they don't know why he done it

Sure enough it don't take that long for them to find a reason

And they publicly state it on TV that evening

A couple of months later this shit gets banned

Like it was me who put that switch in his hand and told him to kill that man

Like this whole song was some kind of sickly devised plan to hurt some poor cunt

I don't even know and I've never met before in my life

The words whoever said 'The pen is mightier than the sword' was right So you better think twice before you step to me and pick a fight.

This final insistence on the precedence of words which are to be taken in their own right (and power) because they operate at a distance to reality runs through the rest of the

album and tends to re-surface in those tracks which construct a direct speaking position for the rapper/singer (Plan) B: "No Good", the third track on the album, for example, elaborates on the persona established in "Sick 2 Def" in typical in-yer-face manner ("I'll stab you in the eye, yo / With a fucking biro / The same fucking biro / You used to sign your giro") and goes on to praise his very special qualities in drastic language

("Live-o, I'm live-o, sideshow, I'm psycho / Bad, but not in the same way as Michael / I'm archetypal [...] I'm an angry little man with a plan who just don't give a damn [...] I'm representing rap like it's supposed to be [...] You can't cope with B [...] Just gimme one mic stand / One guitar for me to strum with my right hand / The same right hand that'll pick up a knife and start to slice mans").

On the other hand, however, the rapper comes up with slightly incongruent images ("The best thing since sliced bread, my lyrics, them are wholesome") and ends his rant with a partial retraction and an insistence on the mere musical context: "Although I'm only spraying shit for the sake of saying it [...] Da da da ding Da da da ding my name's Plan B and I rap 'n' sing sing sing [repeat]." And the same goes for the title track of the album, which closes the proceedings with a similar emphasis,

combining an electronic beat with an acoustic guitar line and a melodious chorus:

*When trouble comes knockin' I'll be ready
alright*

Put my fist up ready to fight

*But I ain't gonna put my fists up every
time*

Who needs actions when you got words?

*And I ain't gonna pull the heat like here
we go*

*And I ain't gonna lose my head like years
ago*

Woah wo woah wo (who needs actions)

Here we finally have the synthesis and the completed frame of the album, installing a Plan B persona who has "signed this record deal" and feels confident in his talent which is focused on words, words, words ("Well, don't believe the hype, well, that's all it is and nothing else / But I don't need the hype; the words I write do sell themselves") as his sole means of wielding power ("Cos the words are written from the heart that's why they're felt / And you'll be eatin' yours, when mine are flyin' off the shelf").

Here the formal self-consciousness discernible in earlier tracks re-asserts itself in the rap verses' inventory of earlier motifs, and in the process the physicality of the images is transformed into rhetorical acts. "That ain't afraid to get physical," the speaker asserts from the beginning, "It's just that I hit harder when I spit on the verse / Cos I'm a sick spitter, spit so sickly it hurts / So sick at spittin', I can even spit in reverse," which is obviously alluding to "Sick 2 Def" and again obliquely indicates the danger of spit backtracking on to the speaker's face.

All this indicates that the intervening tracks should not be taken too literally, but rather as part of an elaborate set-up which assesses contemporary reality in a variety of modes, from the (seem-

ingly) straightforward autobiographical or confessional about family and other personal relations and growing up in a violent neighbourhood ("Mama (Loves a Crackhead)", "Charmaine", "I Don't Hate You", "No More Eatin'", "Couldn't Get Along") in a closely observed setting ("Where Ya From?" with the lines

*It's a ghetto state of mind / Except where
I'm living I can't see no ghetto / This ain't
America, it's England, where we live ain't
nothing special / You can take anywhere
and call it a ghetto*



Plan B: *The Defamation of Strickland Banks*

and "Missing Links" beginning "Look out my front door, what do I see") through character songs ("Dead and Buried" with rap verses by "Jack", "Alex" and "can't tell you my name for legal purposes" who realize that they are the living dead) to one outright story song ("Tough Love", which begins "Let me tell you a story / It's called 'Tough Love' / Once upon a time there was a girl called Sinita" and proceeds to describe a brutal honour killing of Sinita at the hands of her loving parents) and a most melodious track called "Everyday" which finds the singer/character (?) waking up blind in a manner not unlike James Kelman's Booker Prize-winning novel *How Late It Was, How Late* (1994), which triggers a confession and an insight: "I can only blame my-

self / It's me who's bad for my health."

Amazingly, then, it turns out that the hard-hitting Plan B persona is a moralist at heart, who elaborately stages excesses of violence verbally in order to hammer one point home in various guises: "Knowledge is power, guns just make you feel lucky" ("Where Ya From?"). Or perhaps the improper "Romantic idealisms" the singer ascribes to children "in love with the idea of being a gangster [...] producing hot jism like a wanker" (*ibid.*) has here finally been directed into a proper direction? Throughout B's

fairly unflinching depictions of dereliction and brutality, there is, in spite of the personal involvement of the speaker, also a sense of distance which is commented upon by his opponents in various tracks and finally assimilated into the artist persona which establishes a gap between Plan B and the world of action: "I won't ruin my career just cos you said some shit" is one of the final lines he raps on the album.

"Someone tell me I'm dreaming this all up in my head"

In fact, this is exactly the scenario that is unfolded on *The Defamation of Strickland Banks* (see above), and while Plan B changes genres from hip hop to Motown soul and image from hoodie to suit, there is a strong sense of continuity: many features of the elaborate set-up of *Who Needs Actions* are in fact reproduced on *Defamation*, such as the careful sequencing of tracks, a fairly dense network of leitmotifs linking the tracks throughout the album, and the careful orchestration of voices. The one new element in addition to the switch of genres and image is that this time round the record establishes an explicitly fictional concept and eschews the mixture of direct and indirect authenticity staged on *Who Needs Words*. That this is

no fundamental change of approach is indicated by Plan B in a BBC television interview when he answers the question "How would you describe your music?" with "It's storytelling, and I use different genres of music to tell stories." So now, Ben Drew aka Plan B establishes the fully fictional persona of Strickland Banks, whose fare of highly successful if slightly bland Motown-inspired soul love songs is indicated by the first two tracks of the album, "Love Goes Down" and "Writing's on the Wall", which were both also issued as the fairly successful singles #5 and #6 from the album. However, the actual story begins with the third track, "Stay Too Long", which also came out as a first single before the album came out and marked Plan B's first Top Ten hit. Catastrophe hits Strickland at just the moment when, spurred on by his "peeps", he falls back from the height of stardom achieved by singing soul tunes into his old ways which are presented as being similar to the ones staged on *Who Needs Action* in two extended, ever-intensifying rap passages culminating in the lines "But do I care? Do I fuck! / I'm on a roll! Yo!" It turns out that on this roll Strickland ends up with a woman whom he rejects after having second thoughts about his girlfriend and who then falsely accuses him of raping her as a consequence. This is what amazingly transpires in the central rap passages of the otherwise lyrically bland but idiomatically very correct mega-hit "She Said" (track 4, single #2), which turns out to take place in court:

*So now up in the courts
Pleading my case in the witness box
Telling the judge and jury
The same thing that I said to the cops
'I'm innocent,' I contested
'She just feels rejected,
Had her heart broken by someone she's obsessed with
Cos she likes the sound of my music,
Which makes her a fan of my music,
That's why Love Goes Down makes her lose it
Cos she can't separate the man from the music."*

Here, the separation of the world of words and artistic practice from the world of action established in *Who Needs Actions* fails, and the resultant double coding which combines an all-purpose hit song with its onomatopoeic abandon in the soul passages with an overarching real-life problematic spanning all of Plan B's work so far is quite an achievement.



Ben Drew's performance of "She Said" at the Brit Cult Awards 2011

From here, it is basically all downhill on the album, with Strickland Banks's conviction and a fairly clichéd if musically assured depiction of prison life ("Welcome to Hell", "Hard Times", "Traded In My Cigarettes" including the lines "Someone tell me I'm dreaming / This all up in my head", tracks 4, 5 and 8). Strickland is also expressing his longing for freedom ("Free", "I Know a Song", tracks 11 and 12) in the soul idiom, including the third single culled from the album, "Prayin" (track 9), which catches his desperation and feelings of guilt after he has been forced to commit a murder in self-defence and been saved by a prisoner with a life-sentence (whom Strickland calls retrospectively "the angel") committing a second

murder and taking both murders upon himself in order to save our hero. However, this melodramatic turn of events is somewhat compensated for in those tracks which incorporate Strickland's existential anguish in intense hip hop passages modelled on *Who Needs Actions* once more. Here the isolation and alienation only vaguely hinted at on the earlier album and somewhat blandly

expressed near the centre of that record on "Everyday" is much more extreme: "The Recluse" (track 7, single #4), for example, marks the exact middle of *The Defamation*. On the plot/soul level, it refers to the nickname that Strickland Banks got in prison for staying in his cell, but the existential fear behind this only comes out in the rapped verse towards the end, in which Strickland tries to instill a sense of self-sufficiency in himself, only to reach the conclusion:

I ain't cut out for this shit / I'm a coward I admit. / I've never been no big ting, / The thought of killing makes me sick, / But I don't wanna be no victim, / No way, not Strickland. / So I stay in my cell like I'm bricked in / And hope that stops me from getting kicked in / Even if it earns me this nickname in prison.

And after the murder and the cliché-ridden "Prayin", "Darkest Place" (track 10) clearly marks the emotional climax of the album in

cascading, orchestra-enhanced harmonies in abrupt rhythms contrasting the generic soul chorus

(I'm in the darkest place / I think I've ever been / You can see from the scars on my face / I'm not where I'm supposed to be / All alone / Why have you forsaken me? / All alone / You make it hard to believe)

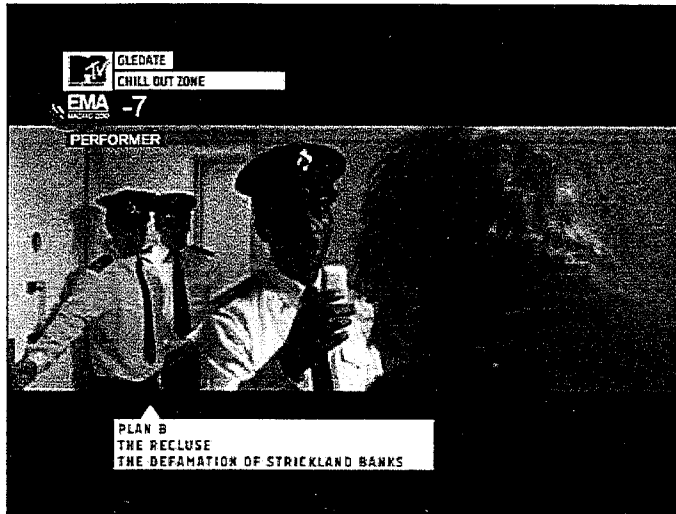
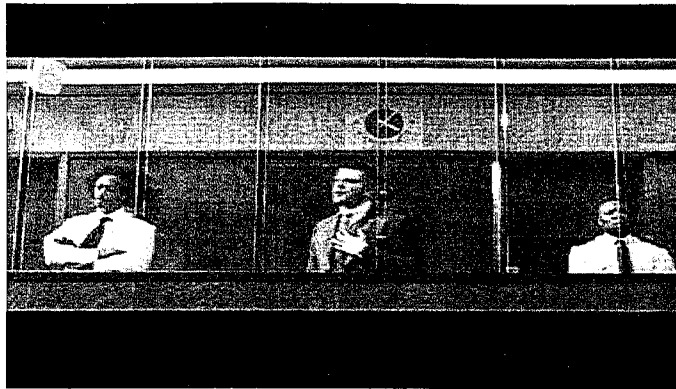
with radical metaphysical speculation in the hip hop verses which, after an anguished summary of the story so far turns the earlier prayer into an open refutation of God

(That's how I know you're a fake / That's how I know you're a lie / That's how I know you're a made-up fictional character that / Lives in the sky / Yeah it's all just a con / It's all just a scam / God ain't real / It's just a sham).

And finally, after the more soothing and hopeful tracks “Free” and “I Know a Song”, the album ends with a synthesis not unlike the final track on *Who Needs Actions*, the defiant and yet fatalistic “What You Gonna Do” (track 13) which combines the musical strands and prominent motifs from the preceding tracks for a re-enactment of the court scene in “She Said” with a new jury and an open outcome.

Storytelling Across the Genres

So Ben Drew indeed has stories to tell – about himself, about Plan B, about Strickland Banks. In telling his stories he has managed to produce one of the most striking instances of crossing over from sub-culture to mainstream culture in recent years, and he seems intent on extending his crossover ambitions both in terms of musical genres (he has variously announced a hip hop, reggae or punk record as his next project, and there are impressive pared-down acoustic live versions of some tunes available on the internet which illustrate his impressive musicianship¹⁰) as well as from music to film: Drew has a sideline in acting, and is currently engaged in directing a film of his own, *Ill Manors*, an episodic film set in Forest Gate and centred around a hip hop soundtrack. There have also been persistent rumours on the internet and in the publicity surrounding *The Defamation* that the album was to include a second hip hop CD suppressed by the record company who did not deem such a cross-generic 2-CD set commercially viable, and of a planned full-length feature film covering the story. None of this material has yet surfaced, but the sumptuously produced videos accompanying the various singles culled from *The Defamation* already make up a sketched out film and have been ordered accordingly in playlists on YouTube.¹¹ All in all, then, Plan B



Stills from the video clips “She Said” (above) and “Prayin” (below)

amounts to a phenomenon not unlike the rise of popular music in the 1950s and 60s: from defiant youth culture to mainstream success and an uneasy balance between corporate complicity and artistic integrity. And there is one element which seems to have been carefully elided in all this: the matter of race and the exploitation of black musical styles by white musicians ever since Elvis Presley. While things have certainly changed since Elvis Presley’s days, this is still a sensitive topic,¹² and I am not quite sure what to make of the two black wardens around the white Strickland Banks in the video clip accompanying “She Said” (see top clip still), later gleefully reproduced in his Brit Awards performance (see left), or of the representations of race in “The Recluse” and “Prayin” (bottom clip still). But this discussion is definitely beyond the scope of this column.

Notes:

1. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/music/reviews/cpq4>, last accessed 21 March 2011.
2. All lyrics are quoted as heard on the recordings with occasional cross-checks of various versions available on the internet.
3. <http://www.time4planb.co.uk/about/>, last accessed March 21, 2011.
4. *Ibid.*
5. <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/9537-who-needs-actions-when-you-got-words/>, last accessed March 21, 2011.
6. In this latter respect Pitchfork reviewer William Bowers does not fully appreciate the possible range of functions that such rhetorical acts perform when he comments quite wittily: “Expecting his audience to tolerate such abuse requires a wildly self-serving imagination; this rapper is like Shakespeare’s Richard III giddily wooing the widow of a guy he has just killed.” (*ibid.*)

7. *Ibid.*

8. Cf. Nas, “Rewind”. *Stillmatic* (2001).
9. BBC News – Five Minutes With: Plan P (5 February, 2011): <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-12369842>, last accessed 24 March, 2011.
10. See for example MTV.CO.UK/LIVESESSIONS: <http://www.mtv.co.uk/artists/plan-b/session/plan-b>, last accessed 24 March 2011.
11. Cf. Strickland Banks: The Story So Far: http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=A9277FD1F179A601, last accessed 24 March, 2011.
12. Interestingly, a recent novel by a black writer set in Forest Gate and depicting a violent urban landscape very similar to Plan B’s on *Who Needs Actions* also revolves around the possible solidarity of the disprivileged across racial divides. Cf. Peter Akinti, *Forest Gate*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2009.