

I'm fooled by the rocks that she's got:
An investigation into social mobility within celebrities.

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Introduction

The accumulation of wealth is often met with an assumed advancement in social class. While those who have generational wealth may be referred to as ‘old money’, the ‘new money’ are no less in the upper class playing field, the main differences seen in design tastes and financial priorities. The main exception to this rule, however, is when the accumulator of wealth’s identity is based in their social class. Many celebrities’ success stems from a sense of relatability; their fan bases include people who come from similar socio-economic backgrounds, but that want to remain hopeful that they too could achieve what their idol has achieved – the so called ‘American Dream’.

Celebrities such as Jennifer Lopez, Kanye West, Eminem, Oprah, etc often share their experiences having come from low income backgrounds, which sets them apart from the elitist culture of family dynasties that permeates celebrity culture. However, to what extent can these celebrities claim their relatability, while amassing a level of wealth few will ever come to know. Can a celebrity, whose identity is firmly based in their social class, still claim to be of that social class when their wealth, housing situation, cultural values and sometimes even education level all seem to amount to social mobility.

In contrast, many celebrities accrue fans based on ‘relatability’, but that eventually gets proven to be a farse. The rise in ‘Industry Plants’ – those who benefit from the appearance of being self-made or having come from low income backgrounds but that actually come from privilege – gives an even greater sense of confusion; people appearing as relatable, but who already come from wealth, and accumulating further wealth based on that relatability. A paradox is created in which the rich get richer based on their costume of the working class.

In this essay I will explore social mobility within celebrities, the extent to which someone from a working class background can still claim that identity after amassing wealth, and the rise of Industry Plants as an example of social mobility for the already privileged.

Section I

I'm Fooled by the Rocks

*Don't be fooled by the rocks that I got
I'm still, I'm still Jenny from the block
Used to have a little, now I have a lot
No matter where I go, I know where I came from.¹*

The above lyrics, taken from Jennifer Lopez's *Jenny from the Block*, seem to attest to the idea that an artist can retain their socio-economic identity despite the accumulation of wealth. At the time of the release of *This is Me*, the album featuring said song, Lopez's net worth was between \$12,136,522 and \$51,234,332.² The first figure is credited as her 2001 net worth, while the second is her 2006. Based on these figures, as well as *This is Me* having sold approximately 6 million records, we can assume that her net worth increased during the year of 2002 and that a significant portion of that increase was due to both that album, and it's most successful single, *Jenny from the Block*.³

2002 was a monumental year for the star, with the release of the aforementioned album, the ground-breaking film *Maid in Manhattan*, and her relationship to Ben Affleck capturing the hearts (and paparazzi shots) of the world. *Maid in Manhattan*, a film which many (myself) would argue is her best work, contains similar themes to *Jenny from the Block*, with connotations of rags-to-riches, the American dream, class identity and wealth disparity. Lopez was paid approximately \$9 Million for her role as a maid in a luxury New York hotel. The average salary of a maid or housekeeper working in Manhattan is currently \$16.49 per hour.⁴ If that maid works full time (45 hours per week), and works 52 weeks per year, then it would take the average maid in Manhattan **233 years** to earn as much as Jennifer Lopez accumulated for her role. This isn't taking into account the fact that 20 years ago the average wage was significantly lower due to inflation, so this is a generous estimation.

¹ Jenny from the Block – Jennifer Lopez. Genius Lyrics. <https://genius.com/10293805> (accessed 25.03.2022)

² Jennifer Lopez Net Worth: A Glowing Career, Tom Gerencer, Money Nation. <https://moneynation.com/jennifer-lopez-net-worth/> (accessed 25.03.2022)

³ Jennifer Lopez Album and Song Sales. <https://chartmasters.org/2018/06/jennifer-lopez-albums-and-songs-sales/> (accessed 25.03.2022)

⁴ Housekeeper Salary in Manhattan, NY. <https://www.indeed.com/career/housekeeper/salaries/Manhattan--NY>

Both *Jenny from the Block* and *Maid in Manhattan* portray Lopez as a working class woman who is struggling with her new found middle to upper-class identity. This forms a paradox, however, seeing as how it is because of these business ventures that she is able to mobilize between social classes. Struggling with class identity is a common issue within the Western world, many having to come to terms with social mobility when attending university, moving to a new neighbourhood, or when going on holiday abroad. But how many of accumulate wealth based on this struggle?

20 years on, J-Lo now has a net worth of over \$150 Million, with some estimating it to be as high as \$400 Million, which signifies more than just some 'rocks that (she's) got'.^{5 6}

⁵ Inside The Half Billion Dollar Fortune Of A-Rod And J.Lo, Maneet Ahuja, FORBES.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/maneetahuja/2021/04/16/inside-the-half-billion-dollar-fortune-of-a-rod-and-j-lo-how-the-breakup-will-affect-their-business-empires/> (accessed 25.03.2022)

⁶These Days, Jenny Could Buy the Block! Jessica Sager, Parade.
<https://parade.com/1205079/jessicasager/jennifer-lopez-net-worth/> (25.03.2022)

Conclusion

Bibliography