

MORE THAN A GAME

Kendrick Lamar's Super Bowl Halftime Show Wasn't for Me—But That's Exactly Why It Matters

Kendrick Lamar's Super Bowl halftime show wasn't designed for me, and I don't say that with defensiveness or exclusion. It was for Black people—specifically those who have lived through oppression, who didn't need an explanation for its symbolism, who could feel its weight without a breakdown of its themes. But as someone who has benefited from a system that suppresses those voices, I believe my role is to listen, absorb, and ensure that the deeper meaning isn't lost in the spectacle.

The Clothes Make the Message

Kendrick Lamar is known for his layered storytelling, and his Super Bowl halftime performance was no exception. Every artistic choice—every symbol, every song, every movement—held multiple meanings, reinforcing the show's **THREE KEY THEMES**: reflections on his childhood and life experiences, commentary on American culture—exploring control, resistance, and Black identity—and sharp jabs at Drake amid their ongoing feud. The stark stage design invites viewers to dissect every detail, uncovering layered meanings that tie back to these core themes.

A Million-Dollar Message in Diamonds

Lamar's jewelry was as intentional as his lyrics. He wore Rahaminov's **Half Moon Sunset Diamonds** pin, adorned with over 100 round-cut diamonds, along with a **Marquise Cut Angel Wing** pendant. His black leather gloves featured Eliantte's **Diamond Eye** ring, believed to reference his *GNX* track, "Peekaboo." Some estimates put the total value of his jewelry at over **\$1 million**—each piece reinforcing the performer's deeper narrative.

Martine Rose designed the **vintage-style letter jacket**, adorned with patches referencing his **2024 GNX album**. The front featured "**Gloria**," a song from that album, while the sleeves displayed lyrics from "Man at the Garden" and "Not Like Us." While a "**G. National**" patch paid homage to both the album's namesake and the car in which he was brought home from the hospital after birth. The back showcased "**pgLang**," his creative company, along with "**Compton**" as a tribute to his hometown.

Kendrick Lamar Duckworth

Also known as: K.Dot (*KAY dot dot*)
Oklama (*oh KAY llama*)
Mr. Morale (*mister more-AL*)



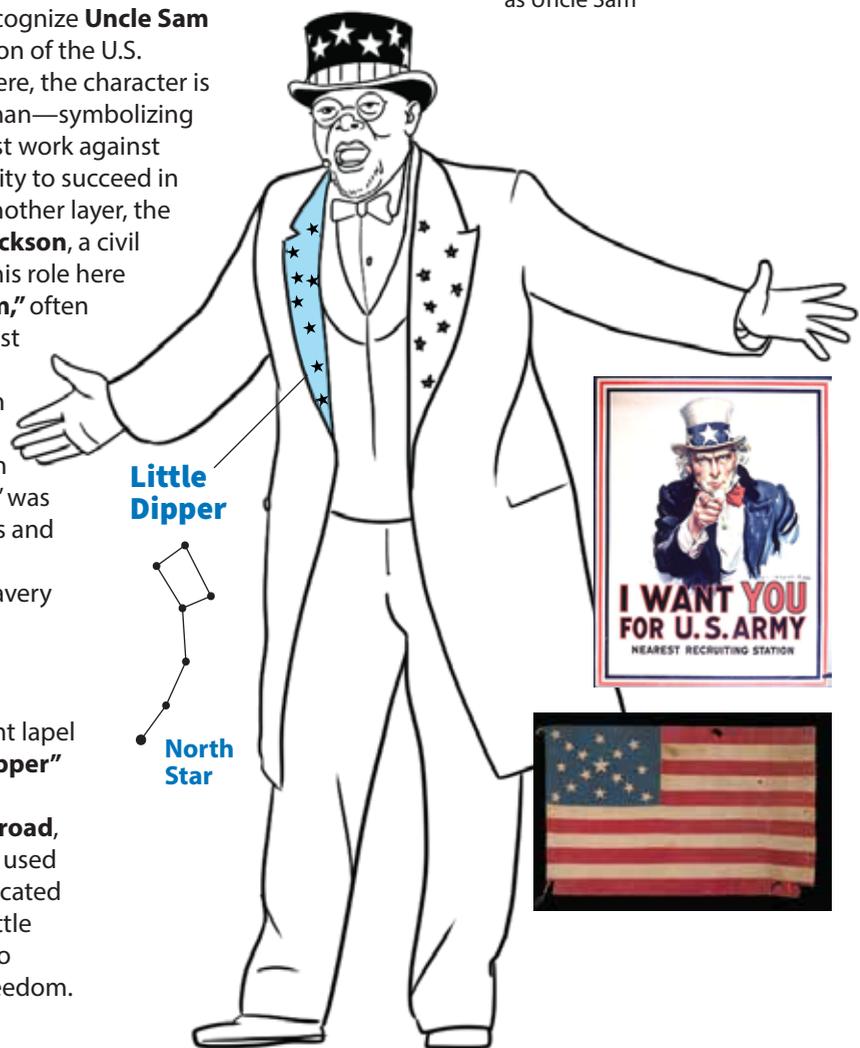
Uncle Sam or Uncle Tom? The Layers of a Look

Most Americans recognize **Uncle Sam** as the personification of the U.S. government, but here, the character is played by a Black man—symbolizing the ways some must work against their own community to succeed in America. Adding another layer, the actor, **Samuel L. Jackson**, a civil rights activist, but his role here nods to "**Uncle Tom**," often used as a slur against someone seen as betraying their own race, though the original character in "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was morally courageous and played a key role in inspiring the antislavery movement.

The stars on his right lapel form the "**Little Dipper**" a reference to the **Underground Railroad**, as enslaved people used the **North Star**—located at the end of the Little Dipper's handle—to navigate toward freedom.

Samuel Leroy Jackson

Actor and Civil Rights Activist as Uncle Sam

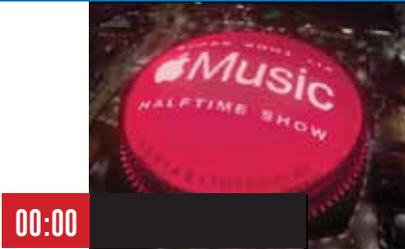


An unexpected star of Kendrick Lamar's Super Bowl halftime show was a pair of **Celine jeans**. The \$1,200 "**flared surf jean in summer dazed wash**" are reminiscent of the rebellious spirit of 1960s and '70s protests. My take is that it's a nod to that era's cultural divide and a call for grassroots activism.

There are **16 stars** on both lapels (and again around the band of his hat). A number that holds significance for Lamar personally, having lost **16 friends**. That number also references the mid-19th century **16-star flags** that were used by U.S. Naval ships during a time when they actively pursued slave traders. Since there were **16 Free States** between 1850 and 1858, it has been theorized that such flags deliberately excluded the Slave States.

OPENING: SETTING THE STAGE

The show began with a striking visual—the exterior of the arena illuminated as a massive red button, a likely response to Drake’s cryptic “red button” post amid his lawsuit against Universal Music Group.



Entering the arena, the viewer sees a black platform with iconic triangle, circle, cross, and square buttons lit up in sequence designed to resemble a PlayStation controller. This framing suggested Lamar was stepping into a predetermined system, forced to play by its rules.

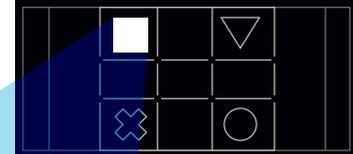


00:21

Salutations, it’s your Uncle Sam, and this is the great American game.

From the very beginning, Lamar’s set was rich with subtle jabs and layered commentary: Lamar fist appears squatted on the hood of a **Buick GNX**, the same car featured on the cover of his most recent album. The GNX, released in 1987 (the year Lamar was born), was nicknamed the “supercar killer” because it could outperform Ferraris—one of which Drake, Lamar’s rival, is known to own. Enzo Ferrari, founder of the luxury car brand, was even nicknamed “Il Drake.”

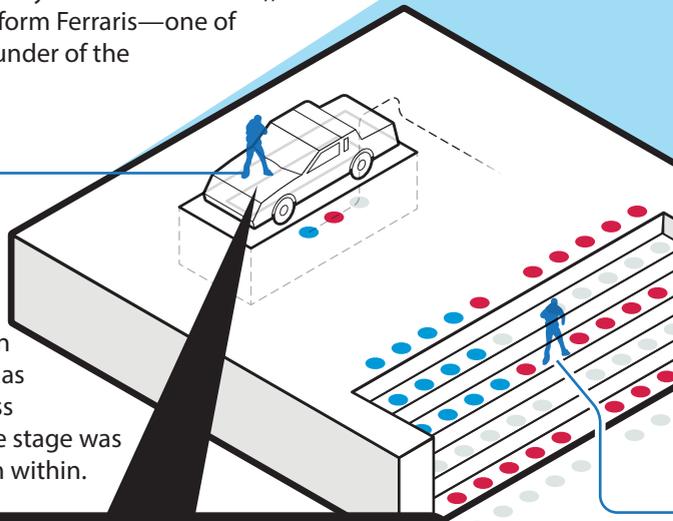
THE FIELD SETUP STAGE: LEVEL 1



Lamar stood alone while others bowed—a striking parallel to **August Landmesser**, the German man in the famous 1936 photograph refusing to salute the Nazi regime.

00:34 **Bodies**

The first song was an unreleased track, and as dancers emerged from the GNX like a **Trojan horse**, the symbolism was impossible to ignore. Historically, a Trojan horse represents something that subverts from within, a deception hidden in plain sight. The metaphor extended further—just as a Trojan horse in technology disguises malware as a harmless program, Lamar suggested that his presence on this massive stage was not merely for entertainment but to disrupt the system from within.



03:33

Standing atop the square button, Lamar transitioned into a track that, ironically, is often misinterpreted as a call for modesty rather than a critique of the industry’s attempts to control Black artists. Dancers dressed in red, white, and blue formed a distorted American flag, a visual commentary on a divided nation built on the backs of Black labor.

01:22

The revolution is about to be televised; You picked the right time but the wrong guy.

This was a direct nod to **Gil Scott-Heron’s “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,”** a critique of media’s tendency to ignore systemic racism. Scott-Heron’s message was clear: true change requires action, not passive observation. Lamar’s addition of “the wrong guy” led to speculation—was this a direct challenge to Trump, who was in attendance? While Trump had gained the support of artists like Lil Wayne and Kodak Black, Lamar had consistently criticized him, notably in “The Heart Part 4” and “XXX.”

01:34 **Squabble Up**

The energy grew more defiant. Just when the momentum had built, Uncle Sam interrupted:



The system demanded compliance. The warning was clear: **conform, or face the consequences.**

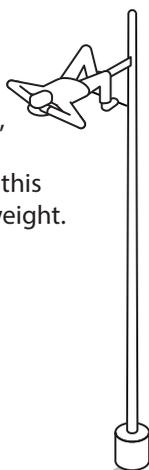
02:47

No no no no no! Too loud, too reckless—too ghetto! Mr. Lamar, do you really know how to play the game? Then tighten up!

03:04 **HUMBLE.**

05:26 **Man at the Garden**

A particularly poignant moment unfolded during “Man at the Garden” as Lamar stood beneath a lone streetlight, surrounded by a doo-wop choir. Unmasked, gold teeth gleaming, he was flanked by figures in white—symbolizing the friends he’s lost. Many believe this scene represents a cemetery, adding to its emotional weight.



The man resting on the light pole subtly nods to a pgLang video and resembles the Hanged Man tarot card. Despite its name, the card symbolizes perspective, sacrifice, and endurance—seeing the world differently by pausing, letting go, or thinking beyond the norm.

04:43 **Euphoria**

04:12 **DNA**

The performance pivoted to “DNA,” another crowd favorite. But then lights in the audience lit up to spell: **“WARNING WRONG WAY.”** Lamar took the cue and swerved. Instead of playing into expectations, he launched into “Euphoria,” a diss track aimed at Drake. This shift took place in the middle of the stage—a space resembling either a prison yard or a neighborhood block.

PLAYING THE "GAME" WRONG

At the conclusion of "Man at the Garden," Uncle Sam pops back on screen with a cryptic directive:

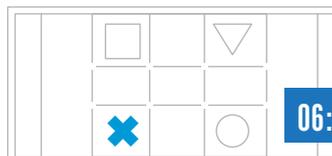


06:00

Oh, I see you brought your homeboys with you—the old culture cheat code. Scorekeeper, deduct one life.

This line is layered with meaning. On the surface, it references video games, where losing a "life" serves as a warning—refusing to play the game of conformity means being punished. On a deeper level, it speaks to the historical suppression of Black leaders. **When a movement gains momentum behind a powerful voice it is often dismantled by eliminating that leader.** The irony is sharp: Uncle Sam, the antagonist, is played by a man who once served at MLK's funeral.

STAGE: LEVEL 2 THE "X" BUTTON



06:11 Peekaboo

Another take on "deduct one life" ties to the "X"-shaped stage—an intentional nod to "Peekaboo" lyrics that fuel speculation about Drake's link to XXXTentacion's murder.



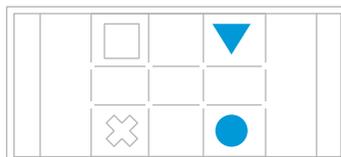
07:00

I wanna make a move. I wanna perform they favorite song, but you know they love to sue.

07:08 ~~Not Like Us~~



STAGE: LEVELS 3 & 4 GIVE THEM WHAT THEY WANT

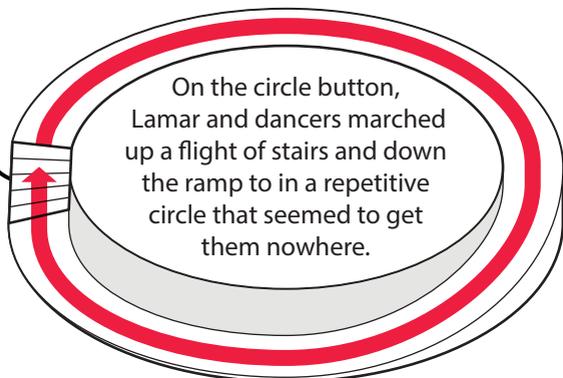


Both the stage setup and the sweatsuits worn by dancers echoed themes from Netflix's **Squid Game**, a dystopian series where the marginalized are manipulated for entertainment, highlighting systemic inequality.

07:20 Luther

08:31 All the Stars

Lamar and SZA (one of Drake's Exes) performed tracks that were more commercial and widely accepted, appeasing the system—for a moment.



On the circle button, Lamar and dancers marched up a flight of stairs and down the ramp to in a repetitive circle that seemed to get them nowhere.

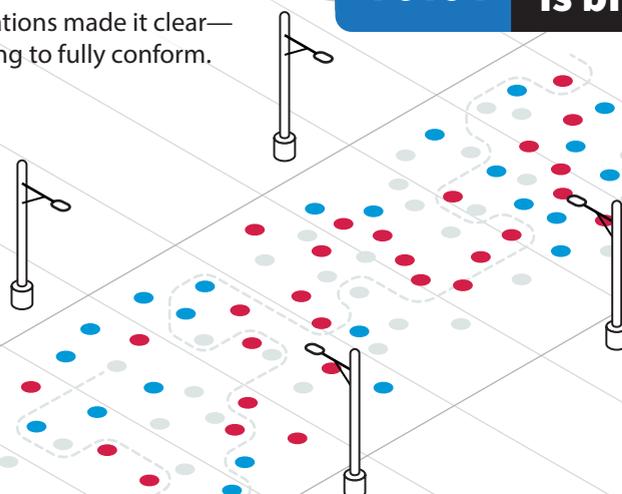
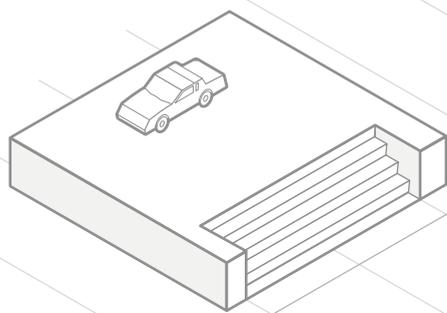
09:49

Yeah. That's what I'm talkin' about. That's what America wants! Nice and calm. You're almost there, don't mess this...

Uncle Sam is cut off by insistent music and Lamar snaps back with a sharp sequence of lyrics. This direct reference to the broken promise of reparations made it clear—he was never going to fully conform.

10:01

40 acres and a mule—this is bigger than the music.



10:15 Not Like Us

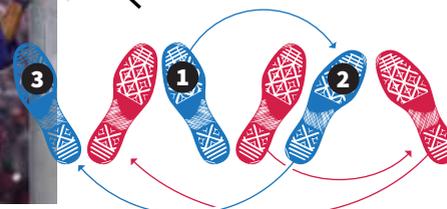
Then, the moment everyone was waiting for—"Not Like Us." Just as Uncle Sam tried to steer the show back into safe territory, Lamar cut him off. Uncle Sam(uel) leaves the frame, exasperated, symbolizing the rejection of control.

Unlike the earlier rigid formations, where dancers were divided into color-coded groups, they now moved freely. **The strict game board structure had collapsed. Lamar had broken the system.**

11:28 Serena Cameo



With just five seconds of screen time, **Serena Williams'** cameo carries a deeper story. As Drake's ex, she's dancing in the biggest anti-Drake anthem. More notably, she revives the **Crip Walk**—the move that sparked backlash when she performed it after her Olympic gold win—this time reclaiming it as a celebration of Black culture.





Kendrick Lamar closed his halftime performance with “**tv off**,” a song that tackles police brutality, revolution, and the importance of staying informed. Lamar’s famous producer, **DJ Mustard** joined him briefly, dancing while holding a football—a fitting nod to both the event and the song’s deeper themes.

CONCLUSION: REWRITE THE RULES

Watching this unfold, I had to confront my own instinct to seek immediate understanding. This wasn’t a performance designed for easy consumption. It was built on references, history, and lived experience that I don’t share. But that doesn’t mean I can’t engage with it. In fact, it meant the opposite, that I need to do the work to understand.

Note

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Lamar turned one of the world’s biggest stages into a platform for a story many would rather overlook. If we’re serious about amplifying these voices, we can’t just watch—we have to listen. And more importantly, we have to keep the conversation going long after the lights fade.

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