A critic with cred

Despite controversy, high sales and critical acclaim have revealed Kanye West as the right man at the right time.

By Geoff Boucher, Times Staff Writer

Controversy is a tricky current for celebrities to navigate, and sometimes it can push their career plans off course. The Dixie Chicks, for example, took a political swipe at President Bush in 2003 and were punished by a nasty backlash from fans and country radio. Or take Madonna and rapper Ludacris, music stars who lost lucrative pitch deals with Pepsi when their music was deemed too edgy to sell soda.

So how can Kanye West go on national television and passionately accuse Bush of not caring about blacks one week and still be riding high the next as a bestselling rapper and corporate pitchman?

The rapper, it turns out, appears to be the right man in the right place at the right time.

West has the No. 1 album in the country, his famous face is promoting Pepsi and the National Football League, and a Time magazine cover story recently declared him nothing less than "Hip-Hop's Class Act." But he is getting just as much attention for a startling rant against Bush delivered in the middle of an otherwise staid NBC telethon for Hurricane Katrina.

Jimmy Steal, program director for KPWR-FM (105.6), the high-rated Los Angeles hip-hop and R&B outlet, said West can walk the edge politically because his young fans see him as an independent-minded artist and, unlike the Dixie Chicks, his provocative words weren't viewed by his fan base as a betrayal of their sentiments.

"This is not a guy who is known just for making some hit music; this is someone who has value and credibility culturally," Steal said. "One of the reasons he has value to sponsors and fans — and even to society — is because he has an opinion and is willing to share it."
The response to the opinions he expressed last Friday was quick and furious from some quarters. Some viewers who watched the NBC telecast's abrupt left turn said they then phoned back and canceled their donations. Conservative pundits mocked or attacked West.

West's condemnation of the media coverage of Katrina ("If you see a black family, it says they're looting. See a white family, it says they're looking for food") and Bush's view of the calamity ("George Bush doesn't care about black people") have also found support.

On the Internet, there are already T-shirts being sold with the accusation of Bush's apathy, a line that West Coast viewers of the telethon did not hear because NBC excised it from the region's tape-delayed program.

The Rev. Al Sharpton has defended West; Democratic Party Chairman Howard Dean made a more oblique reference to aid disparity on Wednesday when he told members of the National Baptist Convention that "we must come to grips with the ugly truth that skin color, age and economics played a deadly role in who survived and who did not."

More interesting than who stood by him is who did not run away from him. ABC and the NFL kept West on the bill for a nationally broadcast and heavily advertised music event on Thursday night in Los Angeles that tied in to the football league's opening week hoopla.

The NFL is loath to drift into politics or controversy (the embarrassing memory of Janet Jackson's Super Bowl wardrobe malfunction is seared into the league's collective memory), but there was no public waver on the booking of West. The NFL did, however, double the length of the broadcast's time-delay to 10 seconds to help assure that viewers' attention would be on music, not politics.

West is also the pitchman of the moment for Pepsi, and the soda company seems unshaken by his politics. That's noteworthy because the corporation cut ties with Ludacris last year after the rapper's lyrics of sexual imagery and street escapades inspired TV and radio commentator Bill O'Reilly to call on his viewers to "punish" Pepsi for its choice of pitchman.

And back in 1989, the soda bottler scrapped a big-money deal with Madonna that included commercials and a tour sponsorship after her video for the song "Like a Prayer" was denounced by the Vatican for its weaving of religious symbols into a story line with some sexual themes.

Pepsi spokeswoman Nicole Bradley said the executives handling the advertising campaign featuring West were not available Thursday for comment, and as to his appeal as a pitchman to the company, she said, simply: "He's a very popular artist right now."

Outside observers say West's obviously impassioned comments were less calculated than the stirs made by Madonna or Ludacris.

"Pepsi wants him because he makes them seem edgy and young and exciting," said Kenneth Hirst, president of Hirst Pacific, a New York marketing company that has worked on fragrance lines bearing the celebrity names of Celine Dion and Jennifer Lopez. "But the risk you run is that sometimes the edgy person goes right over that edge and can take you with them. When that happens, the good news is there is another celebrity waiting to take their place, and the public has a very short memory."

West may not be done making memories when it comes to controversy and Hurricane Katrina. He will be on the air again tonight on two more telethons.

The "Shelter From the Storm" telethon will be broadcast on six major networks (including NBC, whose executives were incensed by West's ad lib last week), and West is among the scheduled speakers.

West is also slated for BET's "Saving OurSelves," a forum that may be especially open to the venting of frustrations felt within the African American community regarding the federal response to Katrina. When asked if the show might veer from charitable into the controversial, Reggie Hudlin, president of entertainment for BET, chuckled.

"Well," Hudlin said, "we do have Kanye on the show."

West will pop up yet again on Saturday on MTV when that channel hosts a fundraiser with the Rolling Stones, Neil Young, Paul McCartney and others. BET and MTV officials have made a point to say they will not caution or censor performers regarding political comment.

West himself doesn't seem to be taking the matter lightly, nor does he appear to be stirring up controversy for its
own sake. At a news conference for the NFL event on Tuesday, a reserved West described his recent ride as "a storm" and admitted to feeling a "lot of pressure for one human being."

The pressure does not compare to the cooker that the Dixie Chicks found themselves in in 2003, when lead singer Natalie Maines told a London concert crowd: "Just so you know, we're ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas."

As the comment ricocheted across the globe, the Chicks were lambasted in the country circles that previously had pushed them up to platinum albums sales and sold-out arena tours.

The difference between the Chicks and West, though, is that the country trio's politics were at odds with their Heartland audience. An unscientific poll on the MTV website showed Thursday that West was in step with his target listeners. Close to 60% of respondents thought that federal aid to Katrina-ravaged areas was slow due to the fact that the majority of its victims were black and/or poor.

As far as the music marketplace, West is on fire. His sophomore album, "Late Registration," sold 860,000 copies during its first week in stores last week, making it far and away the nation's No. 1 bestseller.

That's an "amazing total" in the current music marketplace's doldrums, said John Ivey, vice president of programming for Clear Channel Los Angeles, the radio collective that has eight stations in the market, including pop giant KLIS-FM (102.7). KLIS has been playing the West hit single "Gold Digger" for three weeks, and Ivey said West is poised for an "explosive" career jump.

"It's a little early to see how the [Bush comments] the other night will effect him, but everything that could be going his way seems to be going his way right now," Ivey said. "What helps, too, is that I don't think he was trying to take a poke at the president for political reasons. It came across that he was frustrated and emotional, and it all came out. If anything, he came off as someone who was really feeling what he was saying."