

**Icons of Hip Hop:
An Encyclopedia of the
Movement, Music, and
Culture, Volumes 1 & 2**

*Edited by
Mickey Hess*

Greenwood Press

ICONS OF HIP HOP

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An Encyclopedia of the
Movement, Music, And Culture

VOLUME 1

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group ever to win in the category. (Eminem won for “Lose Yourself” in 2003.)

2006 Lil’ Kim gets a five-mic rating from *The Source* magazine for her album *The Naked Truth*. This is the highest rating for an MC. Kim begins a prison term for lying to a federal grand jury about a 2001 shooting.



Courtesy of Photofest.

Notorious B.I.G.

James Peterson

The Notorious B.I.G., also known as Biggie Smalls, was born Christopher George Latore Wallace on May 21, 1972. His mother, Voletta Wallace, was intermittently estranged from his father, Selwyn Latore, who was at least twenty years her senior. Voletta immigrated to the United States from the West Indian island of Jamaica. Selwyn was also from Jamaica, but migrated to the United States after living in London, where he kept his primary family during his courtship of Voletta Wallace and through Biggie's formative years.

Voletta Wallace was Christopher Wallace's primary caregiver and certainly the person who knew Biggie the best and the longest. Voletta's childhood in Jamaica consisted of humble beginnings informed by a powerful familial and communal set of ethics with deep, abiding aspirations to and appreciation for education and religious piety. As a little girl she dreamed of America through the imagery in travel brochures and *Ebony Magazine*. Once her opportunity to come to America presented itself, she quickly took advantage. When she arrived in the United States at age seventeen, the streets of New York City were a radical departure from the America she had envisioned from her home in Jamaica. "I was disappointed but still hopeful. I knew there had to be more in this big country. I just needed time, money and a plan" (Wallace and Mackenzie 19).

Voletta Wallace got herself a plan in 1969 when she came to America. It involved an indefatigable work ethic and an uncompromising commitment to economic independence. This plan did not include her relationship with Selwyn Latore. By 1971 she had decided to stay in the United States no matter what happened. In her first job, she assisted a psychiatrist for just eighteen dollars a day. She met Selwyn after being coaxed into attending a friend's party. She was immediately drawn to him because he showed flashes of the father figure she had missed from her upbringing in Trelawny, Jamaica. Selwyn whisked Voletta off her feet, wined and dined her; he showed her New York City in ways she had not previously experienced, and eventually Christopher Wallace was conceived.

After Wallace's birth, Voletta committed herself to the upbringing of her son. Selwyn was already married and ambiguous about his newborn son. He was essentially out of the familial picture during Wallace's toddler years. Voletta committed herself to contributing the energy and resources of at least two parents in order to raise her son. It wasn't long before her nurturing had a direct impact on the young Christopher Wallace. Voletta admits that her son earned the name Biggie even as a young boy because he was well fed in her household. "If I had it to do over again, that's one area where I would have done things differently. I would not have fed him so well. But during that time, the mindset was that the bigger the child, the healthier and happier he or she is" (Wallace and Mackenzie 51).

Biggie's mom also stressed education in their home, a two-bedroom apartment on Brooklyn's St. James Place between Fulton and Washington streets. If there was an undying conflict between them, the value and importance of traditional education would be the battleground. Because Voletta grew up in Jamaica where education was private and strict with physical disciplinary consequences, she attached great value to the public educational opportunities in the United States. When Biggie was just a toddler, Voletta also embarked upon her career as an early childhood educator, thereby underscoring her childhood experiences with education. Biggie, on the other hand, grew up in Brooklyn and although he did attend private school early on he

eventually demanded to be in public school for social (and safety) reasons. It was not long thereafter that this conflict between mother and son over Christopher's commitment to his own education began to erupt. When Voletta was informed of Biggie's truancy and blatant disrespect of the educational process, she quickly challenged him. This confrontation played itself out repeatedly, especially during Biggie's high school years. From Biggie's perspective, he could make more as a garbage collector than as an educator. Thus his mom's insistence essentially fell on deaf ears. But this was only part of the reasoning behind Big Poppa's aversion to traditional education. According to his mother, Biggie was always an inquisitive and intellectually gifted child. But by the mid to late 1980s, Biggie's teenage years, Brooklyn was caught up in the crack cocaine epidemic that plagued much of urban America at that time. Substance abuse was not the challenge faced by Biggie or his mom, but the economic allure of the drug game was the centerpiece of the street life within which Biggie Smalls, the legendary freestyling MC, was to hone his skills and live the experiences about which he would spend his short career rhyming earnestly.

BEFORE HE WAS BIGGIE: THE FORMATIVE YEARS

Before Biggie became Biggie Smalls, he chose the name Cwest as his first MC moniker (see sidebar: Big Time MCs). He and his DJs, the Techniques, would meet after school and work on their craft. They would also meet with jazz

Big-Time MCs

James Peterson

At close to 400 pounds, Christopher Wallace called himself Biggie Smalls, an extraordinary oxymoron. Wallace's physical stature and his sensible marriage of that stature with his artistic designations (Biggie Smalls and eventually Notorious B.I.G.) follow a powerful and entertaining legacy of larger-than-life MCs who made similar decisions. As far back as the Fat Boys (circa 1985), oversized MCs have used their weight as a gimmick or for artistic capital. The Fat Boys made hit records and hip hop history by starring in the campy film *Disorderlies*. Heavy D hit it big with a single whose refrain reminded fans that "the overweight lover's in the house." Heavy D has since shed some pounds and parlayed his career as an MC into acting and producing.

Fat Joe, representing the Bronx like no other MC since KRS-One, has quietly become one of the most stable, long-lasting, and successful MCs in hip hop history. Fat Joe (aka Joey Crack/Don Cartagena) paired himself with an enormous and enormously talented MC by the name of Big Punisher, who passed away from complications having to do with his weight. Before his death, Big Pun sought medical treatment in an effort to shed some of the extra

weight. Gone from the popular hip hop landscape but not forgotten is the enigmatic Chubb Rock, whose "Treat Me Right" single is a club classic. All of these Big MCs have made lasting impressions on their hip hop audiences by writing classic lyrics, selling millions of records, and challenging traditional conceptions of masculine body image and sex appeal.

saxophonist Donald Harrison, who encouraged all three of the boys to think beyond the postindustrial confines of their neighborhood. He allowed them to hone their craft on his equipment and he traded tidbits of knowledge about jazz in return for the same in rap and hip hop.

Biggie went to Westinghouse High School in Brooklyn, New York. Both Jay-Z and Busta Rhymes attended the same school. He dropped out of school at age seventeen, much to the chagrin of his mother, who is on record as stating that she and her son were not destitute or even poor by inner-city standards. Thus Biggie's affinity for street life and hustling did not derive from economic lack in his own home. Essentially, Biggie lived a double life as a teenager. In the home he was his mother's child, essential to her existence, polite, loving, respectful, and dearer to her than any other human being in her life. In the privacy of his room, or, better still, in the streets, on the corners, or in the basement studios of aspiring producers, he was Biggie Smalls, dreaming of becoming a rapper just like those superstars he was avidly reading about in *Word-Up Magazine*. LL Cool J, Run-DMC, and especially Big Daddy Kane were all powerful career and artistic influences on Biggie Smalls. But these dreams did not have the promise of the quick money crack trade, especially once Biggie realized that he could make even more money even faster if he trafficked his Brooklyn products in the South. It was in North Carolina that Biggie actually settled on the MC moniker Biggie Smalls. He came to this conclusion with one of his hustling partners, while they were hustling and watching Sidney Poitier and Bill Cosby's *Let's Do It Again*. Biggie Smalls was a gangster in the film and hence the appropriate fit. It is ironic and worth noting here that Biggie borrowed his name from a minor character in a hugely popular film from the 1970s. He eventually brought more popularity to this oxymoronic name than that character or even the film itself were able to achieve. Unfortunately, although he popularized the name Biggie Smalls, he did eventually have to forego it (due to legal complications) for the less-catchy Notorious B.I.G.

Biggie's DJs, the Techniques, didn't last long beyond the Harrison phase, but eventually a pair of DJs, DJ 50 Grand and DJ Mister Cee, worked together to create a demo tape for Biggie Smalls. 50 Grand was aware of Biggie's potential from a basement session where Biggie ripped some freestyles over classic breakbeats, including the breakbeat sampled for Big Daddy Kane's classic, "Ain't No Half-Steppin'." 50 Grand implored DJ Mister Cee (who was on tour with Kane) to listen to Biggie Smalls. 50 Grand knew that Biggie was

destined to be big in the rap game. Mister Cee was skeptical at first, but once he heard the tape, he knew that a more professional demo would have to be created and he knew exactly who to give it to.

In the early 1990s, *The Source* magazine was considered a bible of hip hop culture. Its reputation for covering the culture and informing its broad readership was impeccable. At that time, a young man from Washington, DC, edited a now famous column titled “Unsigned Hype.” Matteo Capoluongo or Matty C had already introduced several rap stars to the world through this small column in hip hop’s most important journalistic venue. He felt so strongly about Biggie’s demo that he actually played it for a young up-and-coming A&R guy named Sean Combs (see sidebar: Sean Combs and Bad Boy Records). Sean “Puffy” Combs, now known as “Diddy,” needed no convincing when it came to Biggie’s artistic potential. Biggie was exactly what Combs was searching for. Combs created Bad Boy Records as a home for hard-core hip hop with mass marketing appeal, and Biggie fit the bill perfectly. Combs

Sean Combs and Bad Boy Records

James Peterson

Sean Combs has changed monikers several times over the course of his extraordinary career as a promoter, A&R person, record executive, artist manager, recording artist, fashion designer, and music television star. But from Puffy to Puff Daddy to P-Diddy to Diddy, he has always been about an indefatigable work ethic and a natural penchant for success by all means necessary. After leaving Howard University without his degree, he returned to New York where he continued to promote parties and events. One such event at City College ended in disaster (nine people dead and dozens injured), when the venue was oversold and concertgoers became trapped and trampled as more fans tried to push their way inside the doors. But eventually Combs became Andre Harrell’s star intern at Uptown Records. As he moved up the ranks at Uptown Records, he became more and more instrumental in the careers of some of the hottest up-and-coming acts in the music business, including Mary J. Blige and Jodeci. The brain child known as Bad Boy was a collection of slogans and some T-shirts at that time but as Combs began to take more credit for Uptown’s success and aspire to running his own recording company, he was fired by his mentor and boss, Harrell, in the summer of 1993. Several tracks from *Ready to Die* had already been recorded. He was devastated by this, but his desire for success was (and still is) unmatched. He somehow brokered a meeting with Clive Davis, who promptly advanced him \$1.5 million, total creative control, and distribution. Bad Boy was officially born. But the core executives—Combs, Harve Pierre, and Derric “D-Dot” Angelette (holdovers from the Howard University days)—had already been hard at work in Bad Boy’s original studio and office, located in Diddy’s mother’s house. The support from Clive Davis merely helped to catapult the

Bad Boy brand into the stratosphere. After selling tens of millions of records with Biggie, Craig Mack, Total, 112, Mase, and himself, Combs went on to star in movies and TV shows, start clothing companies (Sean John and Bad Boy), and open a restaurant (Justin's).

immediately put Biggie on the remix for Mary J. Blige's hit single, "Real Love." This song was essentially Biggie's introduction to the world, although he had already appeared on a few lesser known singles and posse cuts (songs with multiple rappers on them). A rough and relatively unknown Biggie was a natural fit for the up-and-coming queen of hip hop soul. And even though "Real Love" aspired to be an upbeat love song, it ended up being a club banger, most certainly due to the sixteen-bar verse delivered by Biggie Smalls.

Technically speaking, Biggie's solo debut is a track titled "Party and Bullshit" on the 1993 soundtrack to the film *Who's the Man?*. Although this isn't the first time we hear Big, it is the first time that a solo recording of his enjoys a major release. "Party and Bullshit" is obviously an early Biggie recording; notice his higher-pitched, faster-paced vocals. However, the content of these rhymes, which essentially chronicle a night out partying, walks that ever-troublesome line between having a good time, drinking, rapping to women (i.e., the party), and having to deal with the sometimes violent realities of inner-city living (i.e., the bullshit). Hence, Big's narrator in "Party and Bullshit" is having a great night out but he also has "two .22s in his shoes" in case anyone is looking for trouble. There were two other collaborations that year. One was the "What's the 411?" remix with Mary J. Blige and the other was one of the earliest dance hall-hip hop collaborative concoctions, "Dolly My Baby." On "Dolly My Baby," Biggie coined one of his most famous and most often sampled lines: "I love it when you call me Big Poppa."

Even with this flurry of remixes, singles, and guest appearances, Biggie was still not satisfied with the pace of the cash flow from the music industry. He still didn't have any advance monies on the recording deal that was supposed to come to fruition through Puffy and Andre Harrell at Uptown/Bad Boy. To make matters worse, Big's ex-girlfriend, Jan, was pregnant with his first child. When he broke this news to his mother, Voletta Wallace reminded him that although he had been talking about this so-called record deal for weeks, no material evidence of such a deal existed. The pressures of impending fatherhood combined with the sluggish compensation schedule of the entertainment industry convinced Biggie that he better get his hustle back on in the streets for real. He returned to North Carolina because he was higher up on the hustler's food chain in Raleigh than in Brooklyn, but also because in North Carolina he thought his activities would not be subject to Puffy's or the label's scrutiny. He was wrong. When the various deal points were finally sorted out, Puffy contacted Biggie in North Carolina and expressed his disappointment in where Big was and what he was doing at that time. His record deal was in New York City

waiting for him. This couldn't have happened soon enough. Biggie left for New York on a Monday morning and that Monday evening his illicit establishment in North Carolina was raided. He, of course, took this as a sign.

Back in New York with his low-level record deal in hand (\$125,000 advance and recording budget) Biggie went to work on his first major label release, *Ready to Die*. It was fitting that one of the first tracks that Big worked on was "Party and Bullshit," produced by Easy Mo Bee. Easy Mo Bee was the last producer to work with Miles Davis and the first to work with Biggie Smalls on a solo record. Mo Bee is a touchstone for Biggie's impending iconic status. Surely, Easy Mo Bee, through the cheerleading efforts of Mister Cee, 50 Grand, Matty C, and others, was preconditioned to Biggie Smalls's greatness even before he was able to work directly with him.

There are, however, several lesser known contributing reasons to Biggie Smalls's status as an icon within hip hop culture. Some of these factors and reasons were in place even before he began work on his first major recording with Bad Boy/Uptown. Big's flow, voice, persona, and experiences—those things that constitute his artistic production—are at least partially a result of his upbringing and the various regions or neighborhoods with which he made himself familiar. First, he is from Brooklyn, New York, a borough with extraordinary cachet in the hip hop world. Even though hip hop started out in the Bronx, Brooklyn had, by the early 1990s, taken its place as the premier borough of New York when it came to hip hop culture. Some of this stems from the number of famous rap artists who hail from Brooklyn, but much of it also stems from Brooklyn's international reputation as one of the toughest, most culturally diverse cities in the world—especially when it comes to violent crime, drug dealing, and other illegal activities. So Biggie is from Brooklyn, an icon from an iconic town. But more lurks beneath this surface.

Although Biggie was born in Brooklyn, his Jamaican heritage is of extraordinary significance to hip hop. First, certain language undertones in his milky flow remind us of a peculiar Jamaican-Brooklyn patois. But more importantly, Biggie shares this heritage in common with the founding father of hip hop Culture, Clive Campbell, also known as the legendary DJ Kool Herc. Herc immigrated to the United States in 1967. He and his sister started throwing the first hip hop jams in the mid-seventies in the Bronx. This was the beginning of hip hop culture—Jamaican-born youth finding their voices and various outlets for artistic expression in postindustrial New York City. Although we never hear Biggie big-up Jamaica as his homeland (he was born in the United States, after all), it still must be acknowledged that his parental heritage and cultural domestic upbringing reflect that of the founding family of hip hop culture. This heritage informs his iconographic status almost invisibly, but the vocal influence is audible, especially early in his career (listen to the "Dolly My Baby" remix with Biggie, Puff, and Supercat, for example).

Once we combine his Jamaican parentage and Brooklyn upbringing with his hustling experiences in the South, then an accurate portrait of the artist as

black American hip hop icon emerges. Although Biggie never actually lived in North Carolina, hustling crack anywhere other than where you live is probably the closest one can get to hard-core ethnographic investigation. Biggie's trips to North Carolina were most assuredly lucrative, but they must have also exposed him to southern black America, an extraordinarily representative group when one considers the folk experience so central to nearly all of hip hop culture's artistic narratives and historical legacies.

So Jamaican American, Brooklyn-bred Christopher Wallace returned from Raleigh, North Carolina, to officially begin his recording career as Biggie Smalls. The preproduction sessions for Biggie's first album literally took place in that very same bedroom in which he first envisioned himself as an MC. In his tiny bedroom in his mother's apartment, Big would sometimes have all of his boys jam-packed in for inspiration and general grimy creative energy. "The 'One Room Shack' that Biggie would later refer to in the song 'Juicy' was Wallace's bedroom—funky yellow walls, a bed, a chair, clothes and assorted junk all over the place, a TV with a VCR, and two big party-size speakers. It was in that room that Biggie Smalls, the rapper worked out his rhymes" (Coker 79). This room, along with his vast array of urban lived experiences, functioned as the incubator for *Ready to Die*, Biggie's classic debut album.

Ready to Die was released in September 1994. In order to fully understand the impact and significance of this momentous debut, we must also understand the state of hip hop at that time. Two years earlier, Dr. Dre had released *The Chronic*. This multiplatinum G-funk-inspired West Coast gangsta rap record crystallized the dominance of West Coast artists on the international rap landscape. New York City, the birth place and mecca of hip hop culture, hadn't produced a multiplatinum star in years. West Coast-style gangsta rap dominated the culture and industries of hip hop. "The final testament to the power of Biggie is the types of songs he made. He single-handedly shifted the musical dominance back to the East Coast. From 1991 to 1994, the West Coast style of rap was the dominant force in Hip-hop. Biggie, with the guidance of Puffy, used familiar melodic R&B loops, combined with his voice texture and rhyme skills, and caused a Hip-hop paradigm shift" (Kool Moe Dee 264). In many ways, the New York/East Coast audiences were given to believe that the center of the hip hop universe had shifted to Los Angeles. But "in just a few short years the Notorious B.I.G. went from Brooklyn street hustler to the savior of East Coast hip-hop" (Huey 359).

B.I.G. IN THE PLATINUM ERA

Ready to Die was East Coast rap's saving grace for many reasons. The cinematic intro to the album promised a fresh and gritty portrait of the urban underground hustler-turned-rap artist. The intro track on *Ready to Die*

features snippets of four previously released songs with various voiceover skits corresponding with key moments in B.I.G.'s life. The first scene is B.I.G.'s birth, featuring an ironically proud pappa (who isn't in B.I.G.'s life too much beyond his toddler years) coaxing B.I.G.'s mother to "push!" The soundtrack for this portion of the intro interpolates snippets from Curtis Mayfield's classic "Super Fly," released during the year of B.I.G.'s birth, 1972. The second scene begins with Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight," the single that inaugurated hip hop culture in the mainstream music industry in 1979. The voiceover here is an argument started by B.I.G.'s father, who finds out that his son has been caught shoplifting. Of course he wonders profanely why neither he nor B.I.G.'s mom can control the youngster. Note here that according to Voletta Wallace, Christopher Wallace actually was a model child until his high school years, when the allure of the streets simply overwhelmed her domestic influences. This music snippet is important because it provides listeners with a sense of where B.I.G. was when "Rapper's Delight" (and by extension modern popular rap music) exploded onto the American pop cultural landscape. The third and most powerful scene features B.I.G. in a heated conversation with an anonymous crime partner. B.I.G. challenges his partner in crime to "get this money" just as they are about to rob a New York City subway train. The musical snippet for this scene is the classic single by Audio Two, "Top Billin'," released in 1987. As "Top Billin'" fades out and then back in, B.I.G.'s shouts, gunshots, and screams from his victim flesh out this scene. The final cinematic scene of the intro track features an exchange between B.I.G. and a prison CO. As B.I.G. is leaving prison, the CO claims that he will be back: "You niggas always are." The musical snippet for this scene is taken from "Tha Shiznit" on Snoop Dogg's debut album, *Doggystyle*, released in 1993. Even though this particular sample bears no credit to Snoop in the *Ready to Die* liner notes, listeners can actually hear Snoop rapping in the background of the final piece of B.I.G.'s cinematic introduction. Moreover, Snoop's *Doggystyle* was an important model for *Ready to Die* because of its extraordinary success and its ability to straddle the hard-core gangsta rap tensions and a lighter sensibility with popular mainstream appeal. In many ways, *Ready to Die* mirrors *Doggystyle* even more than *The Chronic*. The remainder of *Ready to Die* realizes the power and complexity of this four-part introduction.

Several hit singles were released from the album: "Juicy," "Big Poppa," and "One More Chance." Each of these tremendously successful singles employed similar formulas by Sean "Puffy/Diddy" Combs and the Bad Boy production team. "Juicy" interpolates Mtume's "Juicy Fruit" to perfection with a rap narrative that chronicles a Horatio Alger-like rise from the grimy streets of Brooklyn to ghetto superstar status as a rapper. Many of the lyrics from this song have gone on to an unofficial lyrical hall of fame, but at least the following line warrants repeating here: "You never thought that hip hop would take it this far." This line captures definitive aspects of B.I.G.'s lyrical

appeal; a simple rhyme scheme betrays the complexity of the content. While “Juicy” is about B.I.G.’s unlikely rise to popularity, he is also very much aware of the fact that hip hop culture and rap music had by the early nineties stunned its critics and nay-sayers en route to becoming the world’s most popular music. In many ways, B.I.G.’s career (big, black, ugly, and utterly lovable) mirrors that of hip hop in terms of early questions about viability and ultimately achieving rags-to-riches success. “Juicy” captures these themes perfectly. More than any other rapper, B.I.G. ushered in the platinum era of hip hop culture.

Hip hop’s development can appropriately be broken down into several eras: First, the old-school era. From 1979 to 1987, hip hop culture cultivated itself, usually remaining authentic to its countercultural roots in the postindustrial challenges manifested in the urban landscape of the late twentieth century. Artists associated with this era included Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, the Sugarhill Gang, Lady B, Big Daddy Kane, Run-DMC, Kurtis Blow, and others.

Second, in the golden age, from 1987 to 1993, rap and rappers began to take center stage as the culture splashed onto the mainstream platform of American popular culture. The extraordinary musical production and lyrical content of rap songs artistically eclipsed most of the other primary elements of the culture (break dancing, graffiti art, and DJing). Eventually the recording industry contemplated rap music as a potential billion-dollar opportunity. Mass-media rap music and hip hop videos displaced the intimate, insulated urban development of the culture. Artists associated with this era included Run-DMC, Boogie Down Productions, Eric B. & Rakim, Salt-N-Pepa, Queen Latifah, De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, Public Enemy, N.W.A., and many others.

Third, in the “platinum present,” from 1994 to the present, hip hop culture has enjoyed the best and worst of what mass-media popularity and cultural commodification have to offer. The meteoric rise to popular fame of gangsta rap in the early nineties set the stage for a marked content shift in the lyrical discourse of rap music toward more and more violent depictions of inner-city realities. Millions of magazines and records were sold, but two of hip hop’s most promising artists, Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur, were literally gunned down in the crossfire of a media-fueled battle between the so-called East and West Coast constituents of hip hop culture. With the blueprint of popular success for rappers laid bare, several exceptional artists stepped into the gaping space left in the wake of Biggie and Tupac. This influx of new talent included Nas, Jay-Z, Master P, DMX, Big Pun, Snoop Doggy Dogg, Eminem, and Outkast.

B.I.G.’s seminal role in some of the most significant and powerful transitions in hip hop culture developed through the release of the incredibly popular singles from *Ready to Die*. Thus, the inaugural single, “Juicy,” covers a dizzying array of transformations and transitions from B.I.G.’s life as a petty

thief and hustler to his new life as a player, rapper, and finally an extraordinary storyteller. “Notorious B.I.G. is the all time greatest hard-core Hip-hop storyteller ever. Slick Rick is the overall king of storytelling, but for the rated-R, violent type of story, Biggie is the man” (Kool Moe Dee 263). Ironically, the singles from *Ready to Die* do not exhibit B.I.G.’s most compelling hard-core narrative abilities. He shows some glimpses, but most of the released singles are about flossing, partying, and sexing women.

“Big Poppa” garnered even more industry success than “Juicy,” sampling the Isley Brothers’ “Between the Sheets” perfectly (and almost in its entirety). Very few rappers can, as new artists, create singles that sample their own voices in the hook or refrain. B.I.G.’s voice was distinct enough and had been featured on so many singles even before his major label debut that the classic line from “Party and Bullshit”—“I love it when you call me Big Poppa”—almost instantly solidified “Big Poppa” as a mainstay on radio playlists and in club DJ repertoires. The classic Isley Brothers riff combined with B.I.G.’s classic rap aimed at women make this particular single a timeless testament to Biggie’s power as an artist. “Another testament to Biggie’s power was he was anything but your prototypical ladies man, and yet he made songs geared towards women, and had a huge female following” (Kool Moe Dee 264).

“One More Chance” solidified B.I.G.’s appeal to his women listeners more than either of the two previously released singles from *Ready to Die*. “One More Chance” samples the Jackson Five’s “I Want You Back.” The album version and the single version are almost completely different from each other in sound and content, at least with respect to profanity. “Released in the spring of ’95, the ‘One More Chance’ remixes represented the apex of Biggie-mania in New York City. While Bad Boy’s previous strategy with singles featured one side for the radio and one for the streets, ‘One More Chance’ covered all bases by including two somewhat different instrumentals to accompany Big’s vocal track of entirely new (and somewhat sanitized) lyrics” (Coker 310). In order to fully appreciate the impact and significance of the single version of “One More Chance,” the music video must be taken into account. “The video for the remix of ‘One More Chance’ was a star-studded ‘damn I wish I was there,’ old-school house party. From Kid Capri to Miami’s own Luke, everybody was in this one. Mary J. Blige, Queen Latifah, Da Brat, the reggae artist Patra . . . Total sang the hook ‘Oh Biggie give me one more chance’” (McDaniels 335). The model, Tyson, Heavy D, R&B sensations Zhane and SWV, and of course Biggie’s wife, Faith, all make appearances. The video is a mid-1990s house party how-to manual in visual form. And the fact that so many well-known female artists were willing to make cameos (especially considering the lyrics of the original) was a powerful affirmation of Biggie’s irresistible sex appeal with women. The video also reifies for its viewers B.I.G.’s iconic status within the music industry itself. The people’s champ was also the executives’. His mass appeal had micro impressions as well; at this point in hip hop history the Notorious B.I.G. was being crowned

king both within the music industry and among millions of fans across the nation.

Although most of B.I.G.'s audience might associate *Ready to Die* with its overplayed radio-friendly club-smashing singles, the remainder of the album explores the much darker, somewhat less marketable themes of homicide and suicidal mentalities in the crack-infested inner-city environment. Consider the title track, "Ready to Die." It is almost as if certain songs like "Ready to Die," "Suicidal Thoughts," and "Everyday Struggles" are on a separate album from the singles "Juicy" and "Big Poppa." But it is all Biggie Smalls. "Ready to Die" chronicles the nihilistic inclinations of a crook who is trapped at the crossroads of lack and desire. This "crossroads of lack and desire" is originally connected to hip hop culture via Tricia Rose in *Black Noise* (1994), but the concept itself is crystallized in Houston Baker's *Blues Ideology and Afro American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1987). B.I.G.'s narrator obviously exists in a world where material wealth is ubiquitous; hence his undying desire. However, he lacks these resources and any legal means of obtaining them. The narrator on the album title track, "Ready to Die," captures the predicament of hundreds of thousands of inner-city youth who are jobless and alienated from social institutions like schools and churches; yet they must navigate one of the wealthiest nations in the world with little or no resources. They are therefore ready to die for the material assets that tease and evade them in a prototypical late capitalist society.

"Suicidal Thoughts" plays like a stream-of-consciousness rap in which B.I.G. contemplates taking his own life. In his suicidal reverie, B.I.G. explains why he prefers hell over a heaven filled with "goodie goodies" hanging out in a paradise where God's rules might be too strict. He does, in sincere tones, ask for forgiveness from his mother for being an evil son. But there is otherwise very little remorse in "Suicidal Thoughts." To B.I.G., death's call is comparable to the alluring call of crack cocaine for crackhead characters like Pookie from *New Jack City*—maybe the most famous cinematic crackhead for the hip hop generation. At one point in *New Jack City*, Pookie, played by a young, skinny Chris Rock, pleads with a dealer offering to trade sexual favors for a five-dollar vial of crack cocaine. Taking into account the manner in which B.I.G. dies, this analogy between crack/crack addicts and B.I.G. and death takes on an extraordinarily realistic tenor imbued with a sad seriousness of which most listeners in 1994 were hardly aware (see sidebar: Hip Hop's Culture of Death).

In "Everyday Struggles," Biggie's narrator exclaims that he doesn't want to live anymore. He hears death knocking at his front door. This song is the portrait of the low-level crack dealer, hustling to barely sustain himself on the violent streets of Brooklyn. Initially this narrator is barely surviving. He can't enhance his hustle through consignment with his supplier, and in general the community hates him. He contemplates taking his hustle out of state and finally starts to make some progress in the drug economy. The final verse

Hip Hop's Culture of Death

Carlos D. Morrison and Celnisha L. Dangerfield

Hip hop figures seemingly have a fascination with death. Artists boast about being shot or taking someone out. Bulletproof vests adorn the bodies of rappers in music videos, gunshots can be heard resounding on the tracks of CDs, and self-made prophecies of death are put to the rhythm of a beat and made to rhyme. Songs such as "Six Feet Deep," by the Geto Boys, "Gangsta Lean" by Dirty Rotten Scoundrels, "If I Die 2Nite," by Tupac, and "Goodbye to My Homies," by Master P featuring Silk the Shocker, Sons of Funk, and Mo B. Dick are dirges to the fallen soldiers in the killing fields of urban America. When gansta rap hit the mainstream, artists such as N.W.A. spoke of the atrocities that were commonplace in the hood. They gave many people a dose of reality. However, what was at first a verbal release of pain and anguish later became a trend.

For many artists in the gangsta rap era, in order to get signed, it became almost a necessity to have street credibility and a hard-core reputation. This included having bullet wounds, carrying guns, and wearing bulletproof vests. Rhyiming about death and murder became fashionable, and the violence spilled out of the lyrics and into the streets, with the murders of Tupac, Biggie, Big L, Freaky Tah, and Fat Pat, and the attempted murders of 50 Cent and the Game.

While 1990s gangsta rap certainly elevated the level of attention to murder and gun violence in lyrics, old-school hip hop also had its run-ins with death. DJ Scott LaRoc of Boogie Down Productions was stabbed to death in an altercation, and Slick Rick was sentenced to prison for attempted murder in a drive-by shooting. Yet even with this history, to say that rap lyrics influence or cause violence is to ignore the statistics that tell us that physical violence and murder occur at alarming rates in impoverished neighborhoods, particularly among young African American men. Rappers who capitalize on real-life ghetto violence, however, may find themselves, even as major-label recording artists, not that far removed from the perils of street life. In the film documentary, *The MC: Why We Do It*, several MCs, including Rakim and Raekwon the Chef, speak of the dangers of promoting violence and death in lyrics; people may hear these rhymes and test their veracity by turning their guns on an MC on the street. For some artists, this lyrical theme of death serves as a way of selling more records. Many opponents, however, point out that a lot of the artists that talk about death and violence really don't live the life they rap about in their songs. However, in the case of Tupac Shakur and fellow rapper Notorious B.I.G., they certainly lived the lives they talked about in their songs. The question becomes whether their rap personas were true to their persons, or if offstage they grew into the personas they created in their music. The legends of Tupac surviving five bullets and 50 Cent surviving nine shots, including one to the face, make these rappers seem invincible on their

records, and more hard-core than other artists; this hard-core image appeals to listeners. The music of the day represents the culture of the day and the current happenings within a society. Many rappers claim that they are confronted with death every day, but this situation is only heightened when violence, murder, and death become a point of marketing.

Further Resources

Bruno, Anthony. *Gangstas*. Courtroom Television Network LLC. 17 February 2006. http://www.crimelibrary.com/notorious_murders/celebrity/shakur_BIG/index.html.

of the song finds his crew surviving the perils of this violent underground economy even as he suggests that black criminals face limitations that white criminals (like John Gotti) do not. In the end though, even after some modicum of success, the refrain completes the song, and the struggle to live even with the desire to die for material wealth ultimately amounts to not living at all.

READY TO DIE: BIGGIE'S MUSIC AND HIS SHORT LIFE IN THE LIMELIGHT

Most of the tracks on B.I.G.'s debut album flip back and forth between two opposite themes. One theme is the celebration of success in the music industry. Partying, running through numerous anonymous women, and flashing (or flossing) newly acquired monetary resources dominate the content of these songs. On the opposite side of the spectrum, other songs are much more thematically aligned with album title. These rhymes reflect a pursuit of material sustenance and wealth that transcends relentlessness. These songs “express the futility of ghetto life in terms explicit and real enough to speak to the streets, but human enough to avoid myopia” (Mao 309). In each of these darker tracks, B.I.G.'s narrator is literally ready to die for material gain, but this preparedness is not glorified. It is not sexy or appealing. In fact, B.I.G. makes it clear that being ready to die for material things is, in many real-life cases, the equivalent of already being dead.

Ready to Die went on to sell millions of records. It was certified quadruple platinum on October 19, 1999. Along with several other debut albums from New York City artists (Nas's *Illmatic*, Wu-Tang's *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*, and Black Moon's *Enta da Stage*), *Ready to Die* recaptured the flag for East Coast hip hop. But most, if not all, of these artists avoided the ultraviolet pitfalls of overexposure that surely contributed to B.I.G.'s early and unfortunate death. “We nodded our heads in affirmation and then when

Biggie named his first album *Ready to Die* we all acted surprised when it happened. Word is bond, son. Plain and simple” (Williams 171).

Many artists with B.I.G.’s level of popularity would be criticized for taking nearly three years to release a sophomore album, but B.I.G. was extraordinarily busy between *Ready to Die* and the first of three posthumous releases, *Life After Death*. On the heels of the “One More Chance” remixes, B.I.G.’s Brooklyn protégées, Junior M.A.F.I.A. (featuring Lil’ Cease and Lil’ Kim), released *Conspiracy* on Undeas/Big Beat Records. Two powerhouse singles, “Player’s Anthem” and “Get Money,” “provide the prototypical soundtrack for ghetto fabulous aspirations; you can almost hear the Cristal bottles popping within their incessantly hooky productions” (Mao 314). *Conspiracy* has yet to be certified platinum, but the timing of the release of these two popular singles almost immediately following the last releases from *Ready to Die* further reinforced B.I.G. as the icon of hip hop culture. He also clearly targeted the heart of mainstream success in the music industry with as much relentless desire as those grimy narrators on the darkest *Ready to Die* tracks.

B.I.G. also had several minor single releases during that time. Some of these releases were live recordings (at the Palladium in New York and in Philadelphia) and or soundtrack singles (Def Jam’s soundtrack for the concert film *The Show*). In 1995, DJ Mister Cee released the *Best of Biggie* mixtape. “Lovingly compiled (in near chronological order no less) with little intrusive or extraneous cutting by the man who gave Big his first significant break in the music business, it is an essential document of the first half of Biggie’s career” (Mao 315). Again, this constant release of performances and singles provided audiences with a sense that B.I.G.’s artistry was boundless and that no matter how much we heard from him we still wanted to hear more. In 1996, B.I.G. collaborated with Jay-Z on “Brooklyn’s Finest,” a classic collaboration with his Brooklyn partner in rhyme. But probably the most important project that B.I.G. worked on (other than his own) was Lil’ Kim’s debut album, *Hard Core*.

There were a lot of women in B.I.G.’s short and extraordinary life. But very few of these women had a significant impact. His mother, Voletta, was, of course, a dominant force. She raised him and shaped his powerful personality in ways that only those engaged in strong mother-son relationships might appreciate. The mother of his first child, daughter T’yanna, was probably Big’s first young love (Florence “Jan” Tucker). His only wife, Faith, was a whirlwind of love, drama, and mother of Big’s only son, Christopher Wallace Jr. Yet among these powerful women who mothered children for him, Lil’ Kim clearly had a special place in B.I.G.’s heart. Artistically she continues to take her cues from him (nearly ten years after his passing), but while he was alive they were able to pour all of their illicit affection for each other into one of the most powerful and sexually explicit albums ever released in hip hop (by either a male or female solo artist), Lil’ Kim’s *Hard Core*. Purely out of respect for the Wallace family, Kim Jones, and Faith and her new family,

we should not make too much out of the love triangle: B.I.G., Faith, and Lil' Kim. But clearly they were all forced to wrestle with Big and Kim's indiscretions in some occasionally very public ways. In the music video for Junior M.A.F.I.A.'s "Get Money," B.I.G. and rap artist-model Charli Baltimore (another reported love interest of B.I.G.) act out a violent domestic disagreement between B.I.G. and a platinum blonde Charli Baltimore. Since Big was married to Faith and she at that time sported various platinum blonde hairstyles, the audience was invited to make the most obvious connections.

At the height of the East Coast–West Coast conflict, Faith made a record with Tupac Shakur and took a photo with him in the recording studio. This was all Tupac needed to start a vicious rumor that he had slept with Biggie's wife. Although Faith has categorically denied ever having intimate relations with Tupac, the public hashing out of these matters (between B.I.G. and Tupac, Kim and Faith, Faith and B.I.G., etc.) created one of the most volatile and potentially violent moments in hip hop and the music business in general. To B.I.G.'s credit, aside from the one-line jab at Faith on "Brooklyn's Finest" ("If Faith have twins she probably have two Pacs") and the video escapade with Charli Baltimore, he rarely responded to Tupac's incitement or any of his relentless dis records. He never responded negatively. Big clearly understood that because of his stature in the industry, any beef between him and Tupac could be blown completely out of proportion. He was, unfortunately, absolutely right.

On September 13, 1996, Tupac Shakur died in Las Vegas from multiple gunshot wounds incurred immediately following a Mike Tyson fight earlier that week. When B.I.G.'s biographer, Cheo Hodari Coker, asked him where he was when he heard the news of Tupac's death, B.I.G. responded: "I got home and it was on the news, and I couldn't believe it. I knew so many niggaz like him, so many ruff, tuff mother fuckers getting shot. I said he'll be out in the morning, smoking some weed, drinking some Hennessy, just hanging out" (Coker 167). In other interviews, B.I.G. was similarly shaken by Tupac's passing. It must have been even more unnerving that he had to finish his much-anticipated second album and promote this album amid rumors that he or his label, Bad Boy Records, had something to do with Tupac's unsolved murder. "You be thinking that when a nigga is making so much money that his lifestyle will protect him; that a drive-by shooting ain't supposed to happen. He was supposed to have flocks of security; not even supposed to be sitting by no window" (167).

By the time the fateful 1997 Soul Train Awards were approaching in early March, B.I.G. had spent over a month in Los Angeles finishing his album, shooting the video for the first single, "Hypnotize," and promoting his upcoming release. On Saturday, March 8, B.I.G. should have been in London, England, promoting *Life After Death*. Instead he decided to cancel the promo tour. He was having a good time in Los Angeles and he wanted a break from his rigorous recording schedule. His sense about all of the tensions surrounding

Tupac's unsolved murder, his rumored involvement, and his impending prominence across the hip hop landscape was extraordinarily positive. He felt as if he would make all of the haters love him. He knew that he had crafted an album that could appeal to a mass audience as well as various niches and regional pockets of the hip hop world. He was excited about how West Coast listeners would respond to "Goin' Back to Cali," B.I.G.'s ode to the west side. He had also achieved a newfound peace with God. He commemorated this peace with a tattoo on his inside right forearm. The tattoo took verses from Psalm 23 (e.g., "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?").

On the night of March 8, just hours before B.I.G. was murdered, he and his entourage attended what was by most accounts the party of the century. *Vibe* magazine and Qwest Records sponsored an official Soul Train Awards after-party at the Petersen Automotive Museum. Since there were so many industry folk in town, as well as most of the key people from Bad Boy records, this after-party was essentially an unofficial release/listening party for *Life After Death*. The single, "Hypnotize," had already been released and the Bad Boy promotion machine was gearing up for its biggest project ever. As spectacular as this party was, it makes sense that it had to be shut down at 12:35 a.m. for being overcrowded. It was almost too good. As B.I.G. and the caravan carting his entourage exited the party, a car pulled alongside B.I.G.'s rented Suburban and seven forty-caliber nine-millimeter shots rang out (for a full, detailed account of this gruesome scene and the eerie events leading up to Biggie's murder, consult the film *Tupac and Biggie* or Cheo Hodari Coker's in-depth biography, *Unbelievable*). After the shooting, B.I.G. was rushed to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, but he never regained consciousness. At 1:15 a.m. on March 9, 1997, Christopher George Latore Wallace was dead at the age of twenty-four.

BIGGIE'S IMPACT AND LEGACY

Christopher Wallace's funeral was equivalent to his stature in hip hop culture. As a beloved son of Brooklyn, he was afforded a funeral procession through the streets of his neighborhood. This procession was attended by tens of thousands of people who were emotionally charged and distraught with shock at the murder of Biggie Smalls. The fact that it was a drive-by shooting and that the shooting took place in Los Angeles, so far from home for his homegrown Brooklyn audience, enhanced the tension in the atmosphere even further. As the procession came to an end, the mournful silence in the streets was interrupted by the blaring sounds of Biggie's new single, "Hypnotize." Journalists and various people who were present claim that the crowd erupted in joy and pain. Unfortunately, there were several clashes with police and at least ten people were ultimately arrested, a sad ending to hip hop culture's most poignant memorial service. But for Biggie there was literally life after death.

In many ways, the posthumous album *Life After Death* picks up exactly where *Ready to Die* left B.I.G.'s growing audience. But instead of B.I.G. dying in a suicidal rut, he recovers from a violent trauma to grace us with two albums' worth of the most powerful and appealing rap music produced to date. Considering the fact that the album was released just weeks after B.I.G.'s murder, the introductory track is just as eerie as the album's title. B.I.G. has indeed experienced an extraordinary life through his musical career even after his brutal assassination. *Life After Death* features tracks that are specific to various subcommunities within hip hop culture. In order to fully appreciate B.I.G.'s fluidity in almost every vernacular rap style developed in the United States, you must actually listen to the album with a good sense of the developments in hip hop culture and rap music since 1997.

The "B.I.G. Interlude" is modeled directly after Schoolly D's classic gangsta rap song "PSK (Park Side Killers)," which is as much an ode to Philadelphia as "Going Back to Cali" is to California. On "Notorious Thugs," B.I.G. assumes the popular staccato style of the (at the time) most famous rap act to hail from the Midwest: Cleveland, Ohio's Bone Thugs-N-Harmony. Collaborations with R. Kelly, the Lox, Mase, 112, and Puffy's near-ubiquitous presence were, amazingly, not overdone. And B.I.G. did not disappoint his base audience. "Kick in the Door" and "Ten Crack Commandments" are pure DJ Premier-produced street bangers, while "Hypnotize" and "Mo Money, Mo Problems" blazed the radios and clubs for months. "Never has an artist attempted to please so many different audiences simultaneously and done it so brilliantly. . . . *Life After Death* was nothing short of a gangsta rap *Songs in the Key of Life*, the stylistically diverse Stevie Wonder double album that made listeners wonder if there was anything Stevie couldn't do" (Coker 262–263). Narrative structure and detail abound on "I Got a Story to Tell," "Niggas Bleed," and "Somebody's Got to Die." Songs like these make *Life After Death*, and Biggie's lyrical prowess in general, unparalleled in hip hop even now, ten years after his death. *The Source* magazine gave *Life After Death* a five-mic rating. The mic rating system is a long-standing barometer for hip hop albums. Although, unfortunately, this ratings system, along with *The Source* itself, has been called into question, very few fans challenged the five-mic rating on B.I.G.'s second album. Even those purists who did not like the fact that Brooklyn's native son was as close as any rapper had ever been to authentic universality had to at least appreciate such an exceptionally skilled effort on record.

Notorious B.I.G.'s second posthumous album, *Born Again*, was released in December 1999, almost three years after his murder. Unlike *Life After Death*, *Born Again* relied on previously recorded material, numerous guest appearances, and some production wizardry from Sean "Puffy/Diddy" Combs to make it whole. Guest appearances include Snoop Dogg, Eminem, Nas, Lil' Kim, Busta Rhymes, Redman, Method Man, Ice Cube, and Missy Elliott. Very few, if any, of these tracks stand out or grab the ears of listeners in

the same manner as B.I.G.'s earlier work. "Dead Wrong," featuring Eminem, conjures nostalgia for the early preconflict days; here producers sport a classic verse from early in B.I.G.'s career, evidenced by the higher pitch in his delivery. Finally, though, *Born Again* was (and is) completely incapable of satisfying audiences' desire to hear more of their fallen hip hop icon. The album itself was super-saturated with guest appearances and, in light of the amount and variety of posthumous material being released on Tupac Shakur (a comparison impossible to avoid, considering the ways in which these two were connected in life as friends, enemies, and murder victims), *Born Again* cannot shine as a viable album in Biggie's repertoire.

On what should be the last full-length album headlined by the Notorious B.I.G., *Duets: The Final Chapter*, executive producers Sean "Diddy" Combs and others were able to somehow come up with a formula that is remarkably similar to the template for *Born Again*, but with more effective results. They combine verses from Biggie with mostly contemporary rappers (except for Tupac and Big Pun) over contemporary hip hop production. Either we as an audience of B.I.G. miss him more than ever or these are just better songs, stronger musical productions, and more authentic collaborations. One of the album's standouts is the track "Living in Pain" featuring Mary J. Blige, Nas, and Tupac. By any standards, this is a legendary all-star lineup of artists. This may be the best work that Mary J. Blige has provided for a Biggie Smalls track since his much earlier work on "Real Love." Blige's vocals perfectly capture the pain and mourning that we feel hearing these kinds of posthumously produced recordings even as she soulfully captures the pain and nihilism of violent inner-city living that has claimed the lives of two of the three MCs on this particular recording. "Living in Pain" stands out among hip hop culture's posthumously produced materials. Three of the greatest MCs of all time—Biggie, Pac, and Nas—contribute classic verses over a modulating operatic track produced by Just Blaze. It is a shame that these three were unable to collaborate when they were all alive, but Nas clearly understands the pain of the lost opportunity and the burden he bears to promote the legacies of both B.I.G. and Tupac even as he lives and continues to create more music in their shadows. Other tracks, especially "Hustler's Story" featuring Akon and the legendary Scarface, "Wake Up Now" featuring Korn, and even "Ultimate Rush" featuring Missy Elliott all help to lift this album well beyond the results of *Born Again*.

Ten years after B.I.G.'s murder, the case still remains unsolved. The story and the controversy surrounding the unsolved murders of both B.I.G. and Tupac continue to make headlines. In September 2002, a *Los Angeles Times* business reporter, Chuck Phillips, wrote a story that directly implicated B.I.G. in Tupac's murder. "The *Times* reported that on the night of Shakur's killing a Crips 'emissary' had visited B.I.G. in the penthouse suite at the MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas, where the enormous rapper promised \$1 million on the condition that Shakur was killed with his gun" (Sullivan, "Unsolved Mystery," 140).

This article turned out to be so flimsy in terms of sourcing and actual new evidence that less than five days later Phillips published another article detailing proof provided by the lawyers of B.I.G.'s estate that B.I.G. had been in a recording session in New York City at the time that this alleged conspiracy to murder Tupac Shakur was taking place. Moreover, close friends of B.I.G. corroborated this and solidified that he was in New York, not Nevada, at those times. Still, the fact that the *Los Angeles Times* reported this thinly veiled attack on B.I.G.'s legacy and credibility was indicative of other major developments between the Wallace contingent and the city of Los Angeles.

Voletta Wallace hired attorney Perry Sanders to spearhead a wrongful death suit against the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). Although the case ultimately focused on the "deliberate indifference" of the LAPD with respect to the investigation of Biggie Smalls's murder, author Randall Sullivan and former LAPD detective Russell Poole had been piecing together one of the most extraordinary cases of police corruption and cover-up in history. Sullivan's book-length expose, *Labyrinth*, details Russell Poole's comprehensive investigations into the Rampart scandal and its overlapping connections to the murders of Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur. The Rampart scandal involves various LAPD officers who were part of the CRASH unit, which focused on gang activities. Several officers from this unit have been implicated in various illegal activities, including everything from planting weapons on innocent victims to selling narcotics. Detective Poole's investigations revealed several incredible facts: (1) Certain CRASH officers were in league with the Bloods gang; (2) a few of these officers, including Ray Perez and David Mack, also worked for Marion "Suge" Knight and Death Row Records at the time of both murders; and (3) the powers that be in the LAPD, the *Los Angeles Times*, and possibly the city of Los Angeles itself were extremely reluctant to cooperate with Detective Poole when he was leading these investigations or to accurately and fairly report on these matters as information became available. Poole believes that David Mack, employed by Suge Knight, conspired with Amir Muhammed to assassinate Biggie. Muhammed was the alleged trigger man and David Mack provided the drive-by vehicle and helped to case the party and security for B.I.G. immediately preceding the actual hit.

All of this labyrinthine mess came to a head when the Wallace estate's civil suit was declared a mistrial. The judge ruled that a detective (Steve Katz) in the LAPD had deliberately concealed a tremendous amount of evidence in the Biggie Smalls murder case. She therefore concluded that the department was attempting to conceal David Mack's involvement in the case. Although she did not find in favor of the Wallace family, the court clearly judged against the nearly nine-year cover-up. "After the mistrial, Wallace's lawyers were contacted by a number of political figures in Los Angeles—worried that this lawsuit might bankrupt the city" (Sullivan, "Unsolved Mystery," 142).

Surely these legal maneuverings and mistrials will not be the lasting legacy of Christopher Wallace, aka Notorious B.I.G. In fact, generations of Brooklyn

youth will know him better through the Christopher Wallace Foundation, managed by Voletta Wallace. The foundation's B.I.G. (books instead of guns) program provides support for students and schools in Biggie's neighborhood. Ultimately, this will be B.I.G.'s legacy: His impact on youth facing the same challenges he faced will sustain itself based on his short but incredible presence on the hip hop cultural landscape. "Biggie's legacy is different. Wallace's lasting imprint on hip hop is more musical than iconographic. He is a master of flow, of lyrical rhythm and technique—the Jordan to Rakim's Magic. While his catalogue of unreleased records isn't as large as Tupac's, the quality of many of the surviving freestyles is unsurpassed" (Coker 293).

See also: Tupac Shakur, Nas, Lil' Kim, Wu-Tang Clan

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