

**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

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VOLUME 1

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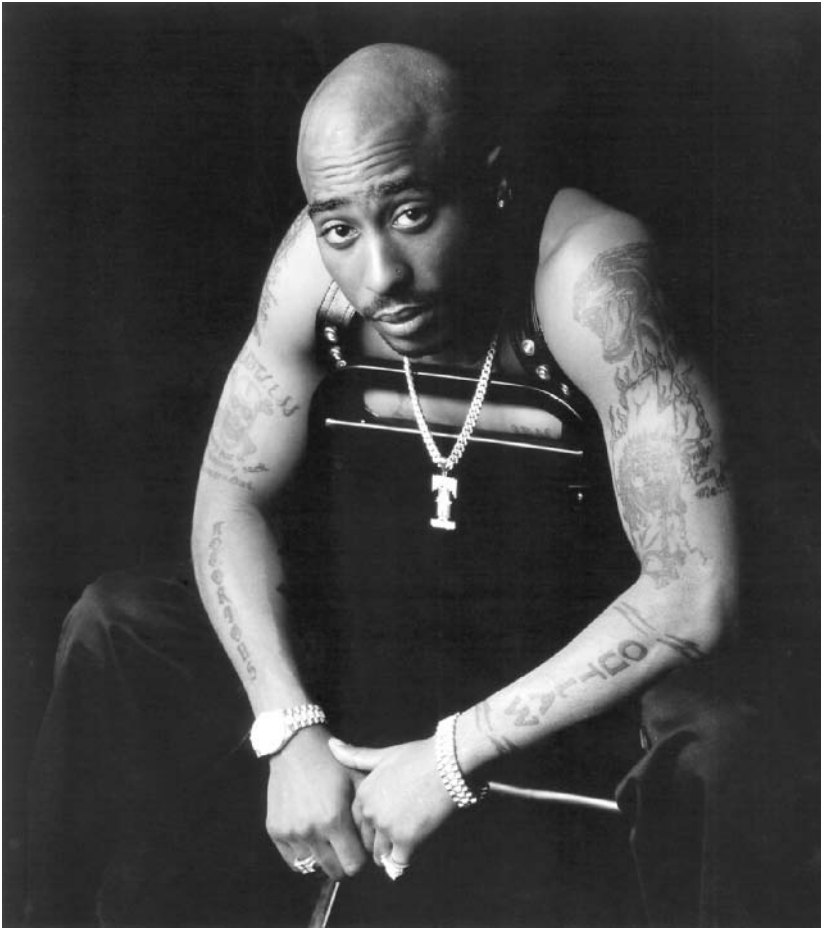
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group ever to win in the category. (Eminem won for “Lose Yourself” in 2003.)

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.

# Tupac Shakur

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*Carlos D. Morrison and Celnisha  
L. Dangerfield*

Rapper. Actor. Poet. Dancer. Thug. Rival. Change agent. Icon. No one can deny the complexities of the late Tupac Amaru Shakur. While he was respected by many for his thug anthems, he was equally loved and hated for his lyrics about women (some inspiringly positive, others dreadfully negative), his willingness to speak his mind, and his ability to share his lived experience

through the eloquent imagery evident in his music, in his poetry, and even in his movie roles. Tupac lived a life that exemplified contrast and, even in death, the contradiction that is Tupac Shakur continues to raise questions and fuel debates about his actions and choices in life. After his death, Tupac has managed to increase his fan base as loyal listeners have shared his music with others and introduced a new generation to Tupac through his poetry and his posthumous music releases.

There is something about Tupac that lives on. His murder could not destroy his music, and that truth lies in the fact that he became bigger than the East Coast–West Coast feud he helped to create (see sidebar: East Coast versus West Coast), bigger than his music and his personal style, even bigger than

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### East Coast versus West Coast

*Carlos D. Morrison and Celnisha L. Dangerfield*

Although Tupac was born and raised on the East Coast, he had strong allegiance to the West Coast. In fact, in many ways he became the face of the West Coast with songs such as “California Love” and “To Live and Die in L. A.” In addition, Tupac managed to become the unofficial representative of Death Row Records (especially after the departure of superproducer Dr. Dre). It should not have been a surprise then that a feud between Tupac and Biggie would evolve into a feud between Death Row Records and Bad Boy Records, and eventually create a binary split between hip hop music on two coasts. While rivalries among hip hop artists have been a part of the culture since its inception in the 1970s, none captured more attention than the East Coast–West Coast feud that began as a personal beef between Tupac and Biggie. Many speculate that the media coverage played a large part in hyping the growing feud, but in any case, the East Coast–West Coast feud would be felt by hip hop heads worldwide.

On November 30, 1994, Tupac was shot five times at a New York recording studio. He publicly blamed Biggie Smalls and Bad Boy Records for the shooting. The two record labels, Bad Boy and Death Row, were thrown into conflict as a result. This feud escalated after Suge Knight taunted Sean (Puffy) at the Source Awards in August 1995. Biggie added fuel to the fire with the song “Who Shot Ya,” while Tupac retaliated with “Hit ‘Em Up” and “Bomb First (My Second Reply).”

On September 7, 1996, Tupac was shot several times as he rode in a car with Suge Knight in Las Vegas; he died seven days later. About six months later, on March 9, 1997, Biggie was shot and killed in California. Both murders remain unsolved, and numerous theories have surfaced about what happened to each of the slain rappers. Some propose that Biggie had something to do with Tupac’s death, while others believe that someone from Tupac’s camp killed Biggie as payback.

While the East Coast–West Coast feud ended with the death of two grand contributors to hip hop, one of the positive legacies that remain from the feud is the determination to keep other artists from trudging down that same negative path. Since the days of the feud, artists such as JaRule and 50 Cent and Nas and Jay-Z have had beef, but they have managed either to squash their differences or, at the very least, confine their squabbles to the lyrics of their songs.

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hip hop. How else can one explain how a dead man can release eight albums and sell millions after his passing? This unusual feat has put him in the ranks of deceased stars who inspire conspiracy theories and a belief that, like Elvis, Tupac still lives. Although it has been ten years since his death in Las Vegas, Nevada, Tupac lives on as a mythic figure in the minds and hearts of hip hop heads worldwide. While some simply viewed him as a one-sided individual, in reality Tupac—especially as analyzed after his death—has proven to be a compartmentalized being that, when studied in totality, demonstrates a life filled with contradiction. Through an exploration of his formative years, his contributions to hip hop, his influence on society at large, and the contradictions in his nature that made his name a household word, one gets a glimpse of the factors that have led to his iconic status in popular culture.

### **TUPAC SHAKUR: THE FORMATIVE YEARS**

While Tupac would later claim allegiance to, and love for, the West Coast, his earlier life centered on the East Coast. Tupac was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1971 to Afeni Shakur, who, at the time of her son’s birth was a member of the Black Panthers. She named him “after an Incan chief, *Tupac Amaru* [which] means ‘shining serpent,’ referring to wisdom and courage. *Shakur* is Arabic for ‘thankful to God’” (Powell 22). As a young man, Tupac lived in a poor, female-headed household. He was exposed to crime and criminals, even within his own household. Yet despite the challenges he faced, at the age of twelve Tupac began to work with a New York acting guild. The young thespian would continue to sharpen his acting skills when the family relocated to Baltimore, Maryland, in 1986.

The family moved to Charm City because of the promise of better job opportunities for Afeni Shakur. While living there, Tupac attended the Baltimore School for Performing Arts, where he developed a greater appreciation for the arts, poetry, ballet, and jazz. He continued to hone his skills as an actor and was exposed to great literature including the work of William Shakespeare. Tupac was highly driven and showed promise at the school. He also developed a lasting friendship with another young student and budding thespian, Jada Pinkett. Both Pinkett and Shakur were highly driven, very opinionated and passionate about their work to the point that they often bumped heads. Nevertheless, Shakur and Pinkett developed an admiration and respect for each other's talents and abilities that would have a lasting effect on their lives. Jada would go on to work on the television series *A Different World* and star in several movies, including *Jason's Lyric* (1994), *Set It Off* (1996), *The Nutty Professor* (1996), *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), *The Matrix Revolution* (2003), and *Collateral* (2004). She married actor-rapper Will Smith in 1997; the couple have two children and are raising Will's son from a previous marriage. Jada is now a member of the music group Wicked Wisdom and serves as an executive producer for the sitcom *All of Us*, a show loosely based on the experiences of her family.

Even though Tupac thrived at the performing arts school, he was unable to finish his training due to mounting concerns at home. Although Afeni Shakur moved to Baltimore to find stable employment and support her children, her battle with drug addiction created great tension between her and Tupac. The mounting violence on the streets of Baltimore also contributed to Tupac's inability to stay focused on his work and to stay out of trouble. Given the severity of the situation, it was now time for Shakur to leave Baltimore and the East Coast. Yet the events that precipitated this move would be revisited later in his life as content for some of Tupac's songs. In work such as "Dear Mama," Tupac dealt with his childhood poverty and his mother's drug addiction. However, Tupac's deep respect for his mother's achievement in raising two kids on her own, and without the benefit of much money, surpass the negative memories of his mother. In fact, "Dear Mama" is a tribute to her and a testament to her strength. In the song's lyrics, Tupac tells his mother "You are appreciated" (see sidebar: The Mama Complex).

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### The Mama Complex

*Carlos D. Morrison and Celnisha L. Dangerfield*

Even the hardest gangsta rapper could rhyme about shooting someone fifty times and still show reverence for his mama on the next track. Yes, the mama complex is in full effect. She is often the only woman that a rapper may seem to care about, for in the face of adversity the mother figure often stands as the



only representation of security, order, and strength. It is no secret that African American households are disproportionately headed by single females. Often, African American women find themselves in situations where they must be both mother and father. The struggles that the African American mother must endure to ensure that her children's needs are met are apparently never forgotten. All of the attention is thus given to the mother-head and she becomes an eternal symbol of love.

The lyrics to Tupac's "Dear Mama" support the notion love for one's mother can supersede the hard knocks experienced during childhood and can even be used to pay tribute for the good that came as a result. Tupac states that he can never pay her back for her struggle in raising him. The children also recognize that the absence of the African American male in the family household puts a strain on the mother. When the mother overcomes these stresses, it seems that her children take pride in her. In his song "Hey Mama," Kanye West (2005) thanks his mom for all of her support in spite of the stressful situations she had to endure in his upbringing. The mother holds an important role in the hip hop community because she represents strength, persistence, and courage, values embraced by even the hardest thugs.

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Tupac left Baltimore and headed to Marin City, California, in the Bay Area, to live with Linda Pratt, wife of Black Panther Elmer "Geronimo" Pratt. Nicknamed the Jungle, Marin City is an impoverished community across the bay from Oakland where Tupac began to sell drugs and learn even more about the streets. Tupac arrived in Marin City at the height of the crack cocaine explosion of the late 1980s and early 1990s, a period of death and destruction to the lives of a multitude of young people living in the urban areas of California. The crack cocaine explosion paralleled the rise of hip hop in the Bay Area. As a result of the onslaught of drug- and gang-related violence, rappers and songwriters responded to the urban crisis in a variety of ways. Drugs and gangs were becoming common topics for songs such as the crossover hit, "The Ghetto." This song from Too \$hort's 1990 release *Short Dog's in the House* painted a gloomy and dark picture of urban America. R&B artist Tony! Toni! Tone! went a step further with their 1988 song "Little Walter," a ballad about a drug dealer shot when he opened his door. With this new surge of West Coast hip hop, artists and groups like MC Hammer, Ant Banks, Capitol Tax, and Digital Underground became famous in the late eighties and early nineties. Although Hammer and Digital Underground were more focused on dance music and party music than exposing social conditions, Tupac drew material for his music from the poverty, drugs, and crime he witnessed in California. He would later use his lyrics to speak to the raging drug scene in Marin City and in the poor black communities across the country.

## THE WORLD WILL NEVER BE THE SAME: ENTER TUPAC SHAKUR

Tupac got his start in the music industry with Digital Underground (DU), one of the most eccentric hip hop acts of the early nineties. The group, which consisted of main members Shock-G, MC Humpty Hump, Money-B, and DJ Fuze, also included a bizarre host of revolving group members such as DJ DOT, Esenchill, Dungeon Squad, Saafir, and Big Money Otis. The group's sound blended samples of Parliament/Funkadelic, Bootsy Collins, and Jimi Hendrix to create classic singles such as "The Humpty Dance" and "Doo-wutchyalike," which were included on their 1989 Grammy-nominated album *Sex Packets*. These self-proclaimed "Sons of the P," as they would title their second full-length album, were the inheritors of the P-Funk tradition. They scored another hit with *This Is an E.P. Release* in 1990. The album included the hit "Same Song," which introduced the world to Tupac Shakur.

Tupac recorded his first verse for "Same Song," which was also featured on the *Nothing but Trouble* soundtrack, but he began his career with Digital Underground as a roadie and dancer. The role of dancer can serve as a point of entry into the music business for some hip hop artists (e.g., the Pharcyde and Jennifer Lopez). This strategy certainly worked for Tupac, who worked as a dancer for only about a year. This helps explain why even though he enjoyed being able to "clown around with the Underground," as he rhymes in "Same Song," Tupac had more to say and could not remain in the shadow of DU. He decided to venture out as a solo artist, but Atron Gregory, Tupac's manager at the time, was unable to convince Tommy Boy Management that he had what it takes to be an independent, financially viable artist. Interscope Records, however, signed Tupac and financed his debut album.

Interscope Records released *2Pacalypse Now* in 1991; it was the boost Tupac needed to propel him out of the shadows of DU and into the realm of hip hop stardom. The album included songs such as "Rebel of the Underground," "Trapped" (featuring Shock-G), and "Young Black Male." However, it was "Brenda's Got a Baby" that truly caught the attention of the hip hop community. In the song, Tupac's Brenda is a dope fiend who gives up her newborn for drugs and sex and is later found dead. The song is a powerful testament of the grittiness of life in urban America, which Tupac witnessed in Baltimore and later in Marin City.

*2Pacalypse Now* reached number thirteen on the R&B charts and was certified gold in 1995. However, the lyrics on the album became the center of a national debate. Vice President Dan Quayle brought attention to the album during his bid for reelection, noting inappropriate lyrics, specifically Tupac's comments about killing cops on "Soulja's Story." Tupac was not the first rap artist to let his fantasies of revenge on police officers play out in lyrics. N.W.A. got the FBI's attention with "Fuck tha Police," Paris recorded "Coffee, Donuts, and Death," and perhaps most infamously, Ice-T's heavy metal group Body Count was boycotted by a Texas police group after they

released the single “Cop Killer.” Body Count ultimately was forced to remove the song from their album.

Tupac’s notoriety grew with the release of his second album, *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.* (1993), his third, *Thug Life* (1994), and his fourth, *Me Against the World* (1995). Yet it was Tupac’s 1996 album, *All Eyez on Me*, that sparked his rise to iconic status. This record would become hip hop’s first double CD, with twenty-eight cuts, including “California Love” and “How Do U Want It.” The album finished number one in the R&B and pop category and was certified platinum seven times. It was with the release of this album that Tupac became a major player at Death Row Records, the label founded by West Coast gangsta rap legend Dr. Dre, and former gang member and NFL player Marion “Suge” Knight.

The prison imagery conjured by the name Death Row fits Tupac when one considers his numerous run-ins with the law. Tupac was accused of shooting two police officers in Atlanta, but the charges were dismissed. He served time for assaulting directors Allen and Albert Hughes. However, one of his most significant cases came in the form of sodomy and sexual abuse charges in November 1993. Tupac and his friends were accused of sexually assaulting a twenty-year-old woman. The woman alleged that she had consensual sex with Shakur before the incident in question, but when she went to visit his hotel room for the second time, she was sexually abused by members of Tupac’s entourage. Even though Tupac maintained that he was asleep when the incident occurred, Tupac was formally accused of sexual abuse and sodomy and tried in a court of law. On November 31, 1994, the day before the jury would deliver its verdict, Tupac was shot five times in the lobby of a Manhattan recording studio. The next day, against his doctor’s orders, Tupac arrived at the courthouse bandaged and in a wheelchair. He was found guilty of sexual abuse, and served eleven months in jail. It was while he was serving time for this crime that the album *Me Against the World* was released. In October 1995, his case got an appeal and he was released on bond through money supplied by Suge Knight, with the condition that Tupac sign to his label, Death Row.

Less than a year later, on September 7, 1996, Tupac would be shot five times in a drive-by shooting as he rode in a car with Knight. He died seven days later, on September 13, 1996.

### C. DELORES TUCKER: TUPAC’S CENSORSHIP NEMESIS DURING HIS LIFE AND AFTER DEATH

One of the most vocal opponents of Tupac Shakur’s gangsta rap lyrics was C. Delores Tucker, the founder and chair of the National Congress of Black Women and the first black woman to serve as Pennsylvania’s Secretary of State (1971–1977). Tucker and Dan Quayle were critics of Tupac’s music,

particularly the controversial album *2Pacalypse Now*, which was released in 1991. While Tupac billed the recording as a socially conscious album that addressed the plight of young black males in America, political leaders and law enforcement officers denounced the album for its violence against the police. The fury over the album increased after it was reported that the song “Soulja’s Story” allegedly inspired a young man to kill a Texas state trooper. This incident led former Vice President Quayle to suggest that the album “has no place in our society.” Pac would later sample Quayle’s statement on his follow-up, *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.*, where he dedicates the songs “Point the Finger” and “Souljah’s Revenge” to responding to his critics.

In 1994, criticism of Tupac Shakur and other gangsta rappers’ lyrics would culminate in congressional hearings on gangsta rap in Washington, D.C. Tucker, along with conservative Republican William Bennett and U.S. senators Joseph Lieberman and Sam Nunn, began a four-year crusade to rid society of a genre of music they deemed to be “pornographic smut.” Snoop Doggy Dogg’s *Doggystyle* and Dr. Dre’s *The Chronic* came under heavy scrutiny by Tucker and her cohorts during the hearings sponsored by the Committee on Energy and Commerce’s Subcommittee on Commerce, Competitiveness, and Consumer Protection. Tucker was particularly critical of Tupac, and Tupac responded in kind in his lyrics. Nearly a year after Shakur’s death in 1996, Tucker filed a defamation lawsuit against Tupac’s estate accusing the slain hip hop artist of slander, invasion of privacy, and emotional stress. Nevertheless, the lawsuit was thrown out by U.S. District Judge Ronald Buckwalter in 1999; the judge wrote that while the statements were inappropriate, they did not qualify as slander (see sidebar: Hip Hop and Censorship).

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### Hip Hop and Censorship

*Jessica Elliott*

In 1985, after her purchase of Prince’s album *Purple Rain*, Tipper Gore, wife of then-Senator Al Gore, cofounded the Parents’ Music Resource Center (PMRC). They were responsible for the laws that required parental advisory warnings on records that were deemed inappropriate for young listeners.

By 1990, the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) announced that it had created a uniform parental advisory sticker that would appear on the covers of albums with explicit content. More hip hop albums received parental advisory stickers than any other music genre—some albums being labeled with warnings for no apparent reason. In the same year, *Newsweek* published an article called “The Rap Attitude” (Adler and Foote). Appearing as a cover story, this article was more editorial than news report, and mostly represented its authors’ views on rap music. While references were made to certain rock and roll groups, overall the article focused on classifying rap music as a negative influence promoting anger, stereotyping, and disrespect for authority.

The amount of attention drawn to rap music in 1990 by both the PMRC and *Newsweek* preceded the arrest and trial of Miami's 2 Live Crew. In June, a Florida judge declared that the group's album *As Nasty as They Wanna Be* violated obscenity laws. No other record in American history had drawn such a charge. Laws immediately went into effect that prohibited the sale of the album, and, later that week, three members of the group were arrested for performing songs from the album live at a local concert.

2 Live Crew was ultimately acquitted, and some jurors were even reported to have laughed during the hearing when excerpts from the group's album were played (Anderson 29). Yet the 2 Live Crew decision did not dissuade the PMRC from their attempts to censor hip hop, and the PMRC isn't the only group to promote such censorship. Dr. C. Delores Tucker, a feminist advocate against rap music, claimed in the 1990s that the lyrics in many hip hop songs both promoted violence against and were derogatory toward African American women. Her anti-rap activities included buying shares in Time Warner so that she could attend the shareholders' meeting and protest the company's production of hip hop albums. In 1994, she protested outside of the NAACP after they nominated Tupac Shakur for an Image Award.

Dr. Tucker and her husband, William Tucker, filed a lawsuit against the estate of Tupac Shakur for remarks made about her on his album, *All Eyez on Me*. Shakur's lyrics were a rebuttal of Dr. Tucker's protest of his Image Award nomination. In addition to Dr. Tucker's claims that statements in the album were slanderous and defamatory, Mr. Tucker took part in the lawsuit by claiming that Shakur's lyrics resulted in Dr. Tucker's lack of interest in sex. Dr. Tucker planned to use money from her lawsuit to pursue further censorship of hip hop music, but the court ruled in favor of Shakur's estate.

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The two songs on *All Eyez on Me* that mentioned Tucker were "How Do U Want It" and "Wonder Why They Call U Bitch." In "Wonder Why They Call U Bitch," Tupac discusses the promiscuity and gold-digging that, from Tupac's vantage point, leads certain women to be rightfully labeled bitches.

Furthermore, Tupac suggests that these women should instead get an education so that they can become financially independent. C. Delores Tucker's name is mentioned only at the end of the song. Notably, Tupac never calls her a bitch, but rather attempts to explain to Tucker why some women, but not all, are considered bitches. Gines asserts that "Tucker misunderstands Tupac; he is criticizing the unequal exchange of sex for money. He isn't attempting to reduce all women to bitches and hos" (94). Thus, it seems that Tucker had mistaken Tupac's social commentary, albeit vulgar, for an attack on her person.

However, in the song, "How Do U Want It," Tupac does in fact attack Tucker by calling her names and saying that she's out to "destroy a brother." Here, Tupac is employing a rhetorical strategy used by black revolutionists called vilification, which is "the use of harsh language against a single conspicuous leader of the opposition with the intent of belittling [her] before the community" (Smith 12). Having inherited a black revolutionary ethos from his mother, Afeni, it is not surprising that Tupac would use such a tactic in his lyrics to attack a woman who sought to censor his life's work. Gines further posits that what we also see in the lyrics of this song is "Tupac evoking the image of the *emasculated Black woman* who, despite any merits in her position is always . . . trying to pull brothers down" (96).

## TUPAC THE ACTOR

With sexual abuse charges looming, other court cases pending, and even in the midst of a bicoastal feud, Tupac managed to appear in several films during his short life. By the time of his death, he had starred in *Juice* (1992), *Poetic Justice* (1993), *Above the Rim* (1994), *Bullet* (1996), and *Gang Related* (1997). His last film was *Gridlock'd* (1997), which was released posthumously. Unlike many rapper-turned-actors, Tupac actually had training in dramatic performance. Tupac saw opportunities to act as more than a way to make money. Producer Preston Holmes, who worked with Tupac on the movies *Juice* and *Gridlock'd*, has suggested that Shakur was interested in getting black youths in particular to read and think critically about societal issues affecting them. However, this notion is juxtaposed with the fact that Tupac was kicked off the film *Menace II Society* because of an altercation with the directors, Allen and Albert Hughes. His contradictory nature becomes evident early on in that while he wanted to enhance the critical thinking skills of moviegoers, he could not maintain the self-control to stay out of a fight with the film's directors.

In many ways, Tupac's acting roles beg the question, "Does art imitate life?" His characters often possessed many of the same characteristics he did, or lived lives that were very similar to his earlier years. In analyzing Tupac's first movie role, one gets a clearer sense of how Tupac used his

acting career to reinforce the image he created initially through his music. His first movie role was Bishop, in the movie *Juice* (1992). *Juice* was the story of four young teens: Bishop, Q, Raheem, and Steel. The teens from Harlem, New York, skip school one day only to find that one of their old friends has been killed in a shootout at a bar. After learning of this tragic incident, Bishop tells his friends that they have no “juice” or respect. In order to get respect, the four teens rob a corner grocery store and Bishop shoots and kills the store clerk for no apparent reason. After the shooting of the store clerk, the four young black males run into an alley where Raheem tells Bishop to give him the gun. A fight breaks out between Bishop and Raheem, and Raheem is shot and killed. Since the other youths know what happened, Bishop seeks to get rid of them also.

From this synopsis of the movie, one can see that Tupac’s stage identity as an outlaw or thug played out in the movie roles he landed. In *Tupac: Resurrection*, Tupac states, “Bishop is a psychopath; the character is me, I’m Bishop. Everybody got a little Bishop in them” (85). Moreover, Bishop is the quintessential thug who embodies the nihilism that exists in many urban communities in America. In his book *Race Matters*, Cornel West posits that nihilism is “the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (more important) lovelessness” (4).

The streets of Harlem are a place where young black males such as Bishop learn to negotiate their survival among a variety of social vices such as illegal drugs and drug-related shootings, gang violence, illicit sex, and carjackings. In order for Bishop, as well as Q, Raheem, and Steel, to survive the streets of Harlem, they must embrace what social scientist Elijah Anderson calls the “code of the streets, which amounts to a set of informal rules governing interpersonal public behavior, including violence” (82). Anderson further suggests, “The rules prescribe both a proper comportment and a proper way to respond if challenged. They regulate the use of violence and so allow those who are inclined to aggression to precipitate violent encounters in an approved way” (82).

One of the informal rules on the streets of Harlem in the movie *Juice* is that those who are deemed vulnerable, such as a shop clerk, can and will be subjected to violence and may be killed in order for kids to earn respect. This was the case with Bishop and the store clerk. By killing the store clerk, Bishop’s own sense of selfhood was affirmed in his own eyes. Another informal rule is that if a person is challenged, he must avenge himself and his honor. This was also the case between Bishop and Raheem; Raheem attempted to try Bishop by taking his gun. This was deemed by Bishop as an attack on his person, the rationalization being that Bishop’s gun was an extension of himself. In the end, the killing of Raheem serves two purposes: Bishop’s honor is restored and juice (respect) granted—that is, on a societal level; and Bishop’s friends learn that he is not to be messed with, which in turn also grants him additional juice among his peers.

Tupac's role as Bishop in *Juice* is powerful because the character he plays is only an extension of the outlaw/thug identity portrayed in his lyrics. Thus, both Bishop and Tupac lived by the Thug Life mantra. In explaining the complex relationship between Tupac the rapper and Tupac the actor, Tupac stated, "I am real. The lyrics might be a story or they might be real. But I stay real. Even when I am playing a character I'm really a character at the same time. There is nothing fake" (*Tupac Resurrection* 85). There should be no question that Bishop and all of Tupac's other characters possess some of his own qualities. Undoubtedly, it was his realness that led him to be cast in so many movies where his thug qualities took center stage.

Tupac's acting career gave him the ability to work with notable actors and directors such as James Belushi, Thandie Newton, Samuel L. Jackson, Regina King, Janet Jackson, and John Singleton. While he never starred in a movie with his former classmate actress Jada Pinkett, their love for acting would serve as one of the links that catapulted their relationship to deeper levels. Despite physical distance after Tupac's move to California, incarceration, and whatever could have potentially ruined their bond, their friendship would stand the test of time and continue until Tupac's murder.

#### LITERACY AND THE DEBUNKING OF ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM IN RAP MUSIC

A major contribution that Tupac made to hip hop culture involved his role in countering the notion that illiteracy is commonplace within the hip hop community (Dyson 99) and enhancing the plausibility of an intelligent thug. For many, prior to Tupac's entry into the hip hop game, the idea of the intelligent thug was an impossibility, the thinking being that surely thugs do not read and have ideas rooted in deep philosophical thinking. Tupac changed this.

The importance of literacy in Tupac's life was inherited from his mother, Afeni Shakur. As a Black Panther during the 1960s, Afeni read the literary works of Langston Hughes, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and August Wilson. She also read classical works such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Like his mother, Tupac was an avid reader and believed that knowledge and learning were critical to the intellectual growth and development of an individual or a people. Since the aforementioned works were in Tupac's environment at an early age, the writers and their works had a tremendous effect on the man, his song lyrics, and his poetry.

In addition to inheriting a love for reading from Afeni, Tupac was also influenced by Leila Steinberg, a cultural critic whom Michael Eric Dyson describes as Shakur's "literary soul mate" (92). Steinberg, a writer and producer in the music industry, conducted multicultural educational programs and afterschool workshops in the public schools of Marin City and Oakland, California. She first met Shakur in 1989 during an afterschool workshop on



writing, literature, and performance. Impressed by his love for learning as evidenced during these workshops and programs, Steinberg invited Tupac into her home for further study. The two spent many hours reading and critically reflecting on the works of various writers from a variety of disciplines. Tupac read historian William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, as well as George Orwell's cryptic novel, *1984*. In addition, Robert M. Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*, and Jack Kornfield's *Teachings of the Buddha* were also part of Tupac's reading list.

Tupac also read works in the African American literary canon. For example, Tupac read Alex Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *Roots*, Maya Angelou's *I Shall Not Be Moved* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folks*, Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography*, and Nathan McCall's *Makes Me Wanna Holler*. Tupac was as eclectic in his approach to literature as he was in his approach to knowledge and learning. His love for reading and ideas were influenced and heightened by his interest in a variety of topics including history, spirituality, philosophy, feminism, politics, and education. In addition to reading various literary works, Tupac also participated in weekly writing circles conducted in Steinberg's home, where he developed his skills as a literary artist and poet. One of the first poems that he wrote there was "The Rose That Grew from Concrete." This particular poem would later have a lasting impact on hip hop culture and in academia as it would be the lead poem in a book of poetry written by Tupac and compiled by Steinberg after his death. The collection *The Rose That Grew from Concrete* was published by Pocket Books in 1999. Other poems in the book include "Life Through My Eyes," "The Shining Star Within!," "Black Woman," "I Know My Heart Has Lied Before," "2 People with 1 Wish," "The Sun and the Moon," "The Promise," and "Nightmares." Out of Tupac's poetry flows the very heart of a man that is complex and deeper than could ever be determined by listening to his rap lyrics alone. In poems like "Jada," he speaks about his platonic love for his dear friend Jada Pinkett, and in "UR Ripping Us Apart!!! (Dedicated 2 Crack)," Tupac not only speaks to his hurt over his mother's struggle with crack but also demonstrates his view of Afeni Shakur as his hero, weakened as she may have been. The complexity that is Tupac becomes increasingly apparent as his sometimes misogynist lyrics are contrasted with his odes to women in some of his songs and poetry. Today, colleges and universities across the country are using Tupac's collection of poetry in their literature courses. The University of California at Berkeley, Harvard University, and the University of Washington are but a few of the schools that have created classes that study Tupac's work from an intellectual perspective, dissecting the writings that influenced him as well as highlighting how Tupac's writings and lyrics have influenced others.

Both reading and writing informed Tupac's critical consciousness. In his lyrics, hints of Tupac's reading list emerge. In some cases, the references are

obvious, such as in the example of Shakur assuming the name of Makaveli and foreshadowing his own death on the album, *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory*. The album was an homage to Niccolo Machiavelli, a military theorist, playwright, historian, and diplomat who spoke of staging one's own death in his book, *The Prince*. So while in some cases the listener could clearly identify the inspiration for Tupac's lyrics, the listener may not have been as aware of his influences in cases like references to the writings of Shakespeare. There is no doubt, though, that Tupac was very inquisitive and he not only analyzed the ideas of others but processed them and (re)presented them in his music.

Tupac's intellectualism had a profound impact on his rap lyrics. He was interested in using the power of rap music to educate as well as entertain members of the hip hop community. As a result of his position on educating others, his love for reading, learning, and knowledge ultimately translated into two lasting contributions to hip hop culture: Tupac further shattered the notion that hip hop culture is anti-intellectual, and Tupac encouraged youths in the culture to read and think critically: "Tupac's profound literacy rebutted the belief that hip-hop is an intellectual wasteland. [Shakur] helped to combat the anti-intellectualism in rap, a force to be sure, that pervades the entire culture" (Dyson 99). Tupac's influence can be seen today in the thought-provoking lyrics of hip hop artists such as Erykah Badu, Common, Jill Scott, and Kanye West. These artists all evoke thoughtful consideration of their lyrics. For example, in the song "Bag Lady," Erykah Badu encourages women to consider the negatives that come with bringing along baggage from past relationships. Hip hop producer/recording artist Kanye West brings attention to the mining and sales of conflict diamonds in the song "Diamonds from Sierra Leone."

Tupac wanted the hip hop community to become knowledgeable and informed. He clearly understood the power of ideas and the ability of those ideas to have great influence over others. He earnestly understood that the ideas expressed in Machiavelli's *The Prince*, for example, could, despite the passing of time, have a lasting impact on the hip hop nation. He proved this to be true with the posthumous release of the film *Gridlock'd*, and the album *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory*.

#### **DON KILLUMINATI: THE SUPPOSED MUSICAL CONCLUSION TO THE LIFE OF TUPAC SHAKUR**

Tupac's assault on anti-intellectualism in hip hop stands as a lasting contribution to the culture. However, it would be his release of *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory* that would further solidify his icon status. Produced by Tyrone "Hurt M Badd" Wrice and Darryl "Big D" Harper, the album was recorded in August 1996 at Los Angeles's Can-Am Studios. Twenty songs

were initially recorded during the sessions; however, only twelve songs, such as the hip hop classics “Hail Mary,” “Toss It Up,” and “To Live and Die in L.A.” made the cut. Released November 5, 1996, the album went to number one on both the R&B and pop charts. It was later certified platinum five times. It would be the last album recorded by Tupac before his death, and demonstrated a marked improvement of his rhyme styles from early in his music career. His rhyme style, which had earlier incorporated an upbeat tempo on songs like Digital Underground’s “Same Song” and his own “If My Homies Call,” was now slowed down. The keyboards, synthesizers, and bells used in those early songs were replaced with stringed instruments to give *Don Killuminati* a darker and less pop sound. On “Hail Mary,” Tupac elongates syllables to draw out words like “me” and “see” at the end of each line of the chorus. His voice sounds slower and deeper, almost anticipating the sluggish, slurred speech that Houston’s DJ Screw would later popularize in his screwed and chopped mixtapes.

Tupac’s last album is controversial for several reasons. To begin with, it was made during the height of the East versus West Coast tension and during internal conflicts at Death Row. Second, the album was released as the first of several posthumous records. What made this even more controversial is the fact that it was this album that introduced Tupac as his alter ego, Makaveli, a truth that would serve as the catalyst for the “Tupac is alive” conspiracy theory. Finally, this album marked Tupac’s return to making social and political commentary.

While the Makaveli album did extremely well once it was released, it was recorded amid a great deal of strife and controversy between East Coast and West Coast rappers, as well as the strife and controversy at Death Row Records. The East-West conflict between Tupac and New York rapper and Bad Boy recording artist Christopher Wallace, better known by those in the hip hop community as Notorious B.I.G., had been boiling over for months. Each of these rappers took turns disrespecting the other on their albums and in person. Moreover, New York rappers, particularly Biggie Smalls, were still brooding over Shakur’s “Hit ’Em Up” anthem, which suggested that Tupac had sex with Biggie’s estranged wife, R&B artist Faith Evans. Tupac’s song had been in response to Biggie’s “Who Shot Ya,” a song Tupac interpreted as comments about him being shot, and the suggestion that Biggie was involved in the shooting. This growing feud gave Tupac, the Outlawz (Shakur’s friends and family members who debut on the Makaveli album), and music producers Wrice and Harper a sense of urgency about the making of *Don Killuminati*; it took only seven days to make. Some of those close to the making of the album, and some of his staunchest fans, believe that Tupac sensed that his life was going to be cut short; he worked feverishly with the understanding that in all likelihood, he was running out of time.

In addition to the East-West conflict, there were also internal rivalries at Death Row Records that were created as a result of artistic differences and

inflated egos. Dr. Dre, Death Row's in-house producer, left the company in part because of differences with Tupac, including Tupac's suggestion that Dre did nothing more than take credit for the hard work of others. In addition, Tupac was highly critical of Dr. Dre's decision not to testify in court on behalf of Snoop Doggy Dogg in his murder trial.

Despite tension inside and outside of Death Row Records, Tupac became even more driven and determined to produce an album that would have a different sound and feel than his previously released *All Eyez on Me*. The recording sessions that took place in the Can-Am studios would, in the end, yield an album with far-reaching impact, especially after Tupac's death.

### *DON KILLUMINATI* AS SOCIAL AND POLITICAL COMMENTARY

Tupac's *Don Killuminati* is a very dark, passionate, and intensely dramatic work that captures the rapper at his best. For Tupac, the album heralds a return to the social and political commentary that he became known for in previous recordings. In the song, "Bomb First (My Second Reply)," Tupac goes on the attack by dissing his East Coast rivals such as Nas, Jay-Z, Puffy, and Biggie Smalls. "Bomb First (My Second Reply)" is a song about a street soldier or "capo" (Tupac) maintaining respect in the face of his enemies by fighting them lyrically. Undoubtedly, Tupac's street credibility was greatly enhanced in the eyes of fellow West Coast thugs for the barrage of comments that he directed toward his East Coast adversaries.

In the song, "White Man'z World," Tupac also provides a sociological critique of black life behind prison bars. While writing to his mother and sister from prison, Tupac discusses the complexities of both prison life and street life, and he reflects on the challenges of being black in a world that doesn't seem to care about the plight of the urban poor. Moreover, the song addresses such political issues as reparations, Black Nationalism, and class.

In "Life of an Outlaw," Tupac and the Outlawz, Death Row's up-and-coming rap group, provide strong social commentary on the daily struggles and hardships of an outlaw on the streets of urban America. The rappers paint a gritty picture of what it means to be a minority caught up in a web of street violence, retaliation, and nihilism. Moreover, the song demonstrates that the political nature of the outlaw is "ride or die." This kill-or-be-killed mentality is revealed in the strategic and calculating choices the outlaw makes to survive in the urban killing fields or war zones of America.

In "To Live and Die in L.A.," Tupac shows love and admiration for the "city of Angels." While there are differences, the song is reminiscent of Tupac's "California Love." Socially, the song describes the people of Los Angeles and discusses their lived experiences in the city. Politically, the song makes reference to the LA rebellion of 1992 and Governor Pete Wilson's conservative practices.

Yet the most popular (and socially significant) song on *Don Killuminati* is “Hail Mary.” In the song, Shakur, assuming the alias of Makaveli, paints a dark and gloomy picture of society’s thugs contemplating a nihilistic existence and shrouded in religious symbolism—the same religious imagery also present on the track “Blasphemy.” “Hail Mary” became an instant classic in hip hop culture. “Hail Mary” was one of Tupac’s favorites, and the song had a lasting effect on him. Tyrone “Hurt M Badd” Wrice recalls Tupac’s reaction to “Hail Mary”: “Pac was loving every song. But when they played *that* song, he just went through a thing. . . . He threw his hands up in the air like he ruled a nation” (Matthews 112). Digital Underground still covers “Hail Mary” in concert as a tribute to their fallen friend.

The duress Tupac was facing inside and outside of Death Row Records served as a catalyst for the thought-provoking commentary on *Don Killuminati*. Tupac wanted listeners to think critically about the social and political conditions affecting black people and other people of color and their communities, and then work to change those conditions. Through “Hail Mary,” Tupac also reminds the hip hop nation that their conditions are capable of changing, but a belief in God and an active prayer life (i.e., “Hail Mary full of grace”) may be necessary in order to do so.

#### TUPAC’S *DON KILLUMINATI*: THE BEGINNING OF LIFE AFTER DEATH

One of the most significant contributions that Tupac’s *Don Killuminati* album makes to hip hop culture involves the development of Shakur’s alter ego, Makaveli, which in turn established the basis for theories that Tupac faked his death. The creation of the album, coincided with the development of a new identity for Tupac. Having read *The Prince*, Tupac saw utility in the thinking expressed by the fifteenth-century political strategist. Machiavelli was interested in using the thinking promulgated in *The Prince* to gain a political edge. In the rap game, Tupac understood that this same advantage could come by faking his own death or by outselling his competitors. In one of his last in-depth interviews, as an answer to questions about the album and why he chose to name himself after a fifteenth-century politician, Tupac stated, “It’s not like I idolize this one guy Machiavelli. I idolize that type of thinking where you do whatever’s gonna make you achieve your goal. I’m gonna change the rules in this rap game” (Marriott 125). Shakur was referring to the album *All Eyez on Me* in this interview, but the sentiment would evolve as he moved on to a new project. He used the philosophy espoused in *The Prince* to change the rap game through this album: It was hip hop’s first double CD, and also hip hop’s most expensive CD. Taking Tupac’s cue, artists such as Wu-Tang Clan would subsequently release double albums. In 2006, GM Grimm would take things further to release a triple album.

However, raising the bar by releasing a double album belied the deeper impact of the political philosopher Machiavelli on Tupac. Thus, while *All Eyez on Me* changed the rap game concerning album structure and record sales, *Don Killuminati*, more than anything else, perpetuated the belief that Tupac Shakur had either anticipated his own murder or was in fact not dead. The symbolism that fuels these conspiracy theories is most obvious in the album's title and cover. In the cover art, the five holes in Tupac's crucified body match the exact number of bullet wounds that killed him. Because of the album's title, *Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory*, hip hop heads would come to believe that Tupac, after reading *The Prince*, wanted to gain a political edge in the rap game by faking his own death. Also of interest to fans was mysterious subtitle *The Seven Day Theory*; the number seven resounds in many statistics surrounding Tupac's death. Tupac died seven days after he was shot. He was twenty-five, and two and five added together equal seven. Similarly, Tupac's time of death was 4:03, which again adds up to seven. The theory that Tupac, having assumed his alter ego Makaveli, had faked his own death became widespread among hip hop listeners. Some speculated that the reason that his body was supposedly cremated was so that no one would be able to confirm his death by producing his body.

The rumors and various conspiracy theories that developed after Tupac's death have helped catapult him into icon status. Moreover, rumors and conspiracy theories have the ability to alter our perceptions of reality, thereby becoming our reality, ultimately becoming the truths by which we live. The hip hop community needed to believe that Tupac, who existed as a solid representation of a generation of hip hop heads, was indeed alive. To accept any other truth was to suggest that a generation of believers was also dead: "If he is dead, then we [the generation] are, or could be, dead. Keeping him from dying, insisting on his bodily persistence in a secret location, forestalls that realization" (Dyson 252). Nevertheless, the real meaning of *Don Killuminati* lies in its ability to suggest that a generation of hip hop heads is in fact alive, well, and critically astute because one of their own, Tupac Shakur, is still with them. He may be nailed to the cross as the CD cover suggests, but like Jesus, he is resurrected for a generation to see and believe.

In addition to the Makaveli CD cover, Tupac has been resurrected in a variety of ways within contemporary black popular culture. Various posters, movies, books, and magazines bear the image of Tupac, further enhancing the suggestion that he is still alive, especially since many of these artifacts were issued after his death. The volume of posthumous release from Tupac inspired a sketch on Comedy Central's *Chappelle's Show* in which a DJ announces and plays a new Tupac song in a club. As Dave Chappelle dances, he begins to notice that Tupac's lyrics are referring to events that occurred after his death, such as George W. Bush's presidency and the release of the video game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. By the end of the song, Tupac is describing and predicting that night's events in the club, as if he is watching the scene from

beyond the grave. Beyond music, there is also a Makaveli clothing line and a performing arts center founded by Afeni Shakur that is dedicated to keeping her son Tupac's legacy alive. Further solidifying his icon status, a wax figure of Tupac was unveiled at Madame Tussauds wax museum in Las Vegas, Nevada, on April 5, 2006.

*Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory* played a major role in shaping Shakur's iconic status. The sociopolitical messages, the significance of Makaveli, and the foundation the album laid for the rumors that Tupac was alive contributed to the importance of the album in hip hop culture. In the context of the circumstances of Tupac's death, the album's lyrics and cover art seem to convey hidden messages through numerology. The message for hip hop heads seems clear: Tupac Shakur lives. The rumors are continually fueled by the reality that Tupac's murder remains unsolved.

### THUG LIFE: SHAKUR'S IDEOLOGY

Another major contribution to hip hop culture that further crystallized Tupac as an icon is his Thug Life ideology. Tupac suggested that Thug Life was "not an image, it's just a way of life; it's a mentality. Part of being [a thug] is to stand up for your responsibility and say this is what I do [hustle, challenge authority, and engage in illegal behavior] even though I know people are going to hate me" (Dyson 112–113). Moreover, according to Tupac, Thug Life was also an acronym that stood for "the hate you gave little infants fucks everyone." The Thug Life ideology rests on several tenets: (1) thugs must ride or die; (2) thugs must be able to embrace death; and (3) thugs must embrace a nihilist attitude about life. These tenets were apparent in Tupac's life and surfaced in his lyrics as well.

The Thug Life ideology revealed in Tupac's lyrics and in his lifestyle paints a view of the world where characters such as the outlaw or *ridah* engage in illegal behavior, violence, and gang warfare in the killing fields of urban America. These urban warriors, many of them young black men, are often at war with their communities and with each other. The anthem that they carry into battle is ride or die, which essentially translates into retaliate, kill, or be killed. In songs such as "How Long Will They Mourn Me," and "Death Around the Corner," Tupac's Outlaw persona faces revenge and retaliation against his enemies. Ultimately, the goal of an outlaw is survival at all costs, and not just survival, but survival with an added tinge of pride; this pride stems from triumphing over your enemy—or continuing to ride. Part of Tupac's allure was found in the fact that he not only defeated death when he was shot five times in the studio, but he lived in spite of his apparent enemies, which led to a cockiness about life that somehow erased his fear of death. Even in death, Tupac is still riding as his legions of fans continue to support the theory that he is not dead.

Another important tenet of the Thug Life ideology suggested in the lyrics and lifestyle of Tupac Shakur is the unrelenting embrace of death. In Tupac's worldview, the *ridah* or outlaw has no fear of death; at times, he welcomes it as a way of escaping the urban war zones. Tupac, like his outlaw persona, had a preoccupation with death that was reflected in such songs as "Lord Knowz," "So Many Tears," "No More Pain," "Bury Me a G," and "If I Die 2Nite" (Morrison 193). Tupac's obsession with death was rooted in at least two factors that were prevalent in urban black America: suffering and nihilism. "The readiness to die is characteristic of the thug [ideology] as much because of the intensity of the suffering [Tupac] observed and endured [in the streets] as the belief that [he had] squared [himself] with God. Suffering—as misery and unhappiness, as pain and evil observed—was a constant theme in Tupac's work" (Dyson 212). The *Makaveli* album exists as a testament to the fact that Tupac no longer had a fear of death; rather, he embraced it with the mindset that death was certain, and his death would probably come very soon.

In addition to death, nihilism was another tenet of Tupac's Thug Life ideology. His preoccupation with death was rooted in nihilism. On the streets, an outlaw or *ridah* doesn't care about his life or the life of others; his or her actions are the results of living and surviving in the American killing fields. Tupac often displayed a nihilistic attitude by throwing up his middle finger at the camera; he also had a tattoo across his upper back that said, "fuck the world," which further illustrates his nihilistic mentality, as well as his disregard for the media and their (re)presentation of his life, his behavior, and his music. This truth underscores the fact that not only did Tupac use his music and poetry to teach and speak out, but his very body became a canvas through which he espoused his beliefs, however grim they may have been at times.

Tupac's Thug Life ideology had a big impact on hip hop culture. To be thugged out, or even to be in compliance with the notion of being a thug, was quite popular within the culture. Rappers of various persuasions wore clothing and tattoos displaying "thug life." Dress and style make a particularly important contribution to hip hop culture, and Tupac certainly influenced hip hop styles of dress during his lifetime. For him, Thug Life was a worldview not only to be embraced mentally but also worn physically. Tupac's thug image was very popular in hip hop culture and in the media, but before engaging in an in-depth discussion, one first has to come to a realization of how this idea of the thug life is personified. Tupac wore common artifacts that, when worn together, constitute a typology of a thug. A typology is a symbol or representation of something else. Tupac's thug typology is defined as a rigid nonverbal costume that represents thuggishness and the hard-core image of a gangsta rapper. Horn and Gurel suggest that a "clothing symbol stands for something beyond itself. Symbolism in dress is often unconscious, but a symbol used consciously can be more powerful" (310–311). Whether Tupac consciously tried to personify the thug typology or not, his style of dress and his influence cannot be ignored.



Not only did Tupac wear these common artifacts that construct his thug typology, but more important, his fans, homies, and other rappers also wore the clothing. These basic artifacts are: boots, jeans or fatigues, black leather jacket or vest, do-rag, and hooded sweater. Boots are a major artifact in the construction of the thug typology. Boots symbolize dominance and defiance. Those who wear boots don't just step on their enemies; they crush and smash them while waging war. Denim jeans are also a part of the thug image. Tupac's jeans symbolized toughness and durability. Rappers such as N.W.A., 50 Cent, and Bone Crusher have popularized the wearing of jeans and jean jackets in their videos. The strapped black vest, popularized by Tupac, also communicates thuggishness and durability, not only of the clothes, but, more important, of the wearer. The hooded jacket or sweater is a very important artifact in the thug typology because of the hood's ability to conceal the identity of the owner. Tupac hooded up in the movie *Juice* and his homies were likewise concealed on the cover of his *2Pacalypse Now* album cover. The hood, which is the most distinctive aspect of the jacket, allows the owner to hide himself from interlopers; it is a cloaking device. Moreover, the hood, symbolically, represents an aura of mystery, intrigue, and in some cases death. Specifically in the case of Tupac, this aura of mystery, intrigue, and death could be seen as a prelude to what would come later with the advent of his alter ego, Makaveli.

The black leather jacket, which traditionally was associated with white Western culture, has found its way into Thug Life and hip hop culture. Traditionally, the black leather jacket has been a symbol of rebellion and badness. The black leather jacket reinforces the thuggishness of the wearer just as the do-rag, which Shakur was known for wearing, reinforces the image of toughness and what it means to be hard-core. The specific use of black clothing becomes important when one considers that color is important in creating meaning. The color black meant a great deal to Tupac and to Thug Life devotees. It has the power to create mood and can also reinforce other symbolic images. Tupac, in his thugged-out black outfits, symbolized danger, seriousness of purpose, and intrigue. Tupac's thug typology was the perfect way to mask his sensitive and caring side from those who might try to do him harm because the color black has historically been associated with gloom, darkness, evil, and despair. Notably, Tupac managed to present the positive images associated with black, such as dominance, defiance, and sophistication.

At least two other artifacts that are not related to clothes further construct the thug typology for Tupac and those within hip hop culture that embrace his ideology: weed and the forty-ounce. These artifacts add a great deal of credibility to the wearer: "Befitting the outlaw character of the hard-core rapper, ingesting huge amounts of legal and illegal substances amounts to a ghetto pass and union card. Getting high is at once pleasurable and political: It heightens the joys to be found in thug life while blowing smoke rings around the constraints of the state" (Dyson 239).

Tupac's thug typology contributed greatly to hip hop culture. Not only could hip hop heads embrace Thug Life from an ideological standpoint, they could and did embrace it from the standpoint of fashion. Choosing an artifact, its color, and how to wear it is also a political act. Today, rappers such as 50 Cent have constructed their public image by immersing themselves in Thug Life ideology and presenting themselves as the model of what it really means to be hard or to be a thug. 50 Cent has even been criticized for trying to mimic Tupac in attitude, dress, lyrics, and lifestyle. He is just one example of the influence of Tupac's Thug Life ideology, but it can be seen in the images of other rappers such as Ja Rule, Lil Wayne, and Young Jeezy. Clearly, the ideology influenced more than just the minds and hearts of hip hop heads; it also influenced the way they dress and their overall style.

### **THE LEGACY OF TUPAC SHAKUR: EXISTENCE AS A CONTRADICTION**

Tupac's life was filled with contradictions; he was a multifaceted individual to say the least. On the one hand, he embraced a revolutionary ethos inherited from his mother and uncle. Tupac had a strong desire to motivate change in the lives of his fans and in the community in which he lived. On the other hand, he truly embraced the whole Thug Life concept as an ideology, rather than as just a passing fad or phase. Tupac Shakur was a walking, breathing symbol of young black manhood existing in a contradictory state. In many ways, it was this contradictory state of existence that contributed to Tupac's iconic status.

In an examination of the competing realities of the life of Tupac Shakur, one finds that his complex existence was based in contradiction and carried over to his art forms. In songs such as "Unconditional Love," "Dear Mama," and "Keep Ya Head Up," Tupac's heart toward women becomes clear in his celebration of positive attributes and images of women. Still, it is impossible to deny that more often than not, Tupac wrote lyrics that were misogynistic and degrading to black women. Songs such as "I Get Around," "How Do U Want It," and "Toss It Up," as their titles suggest, present women as sex objects who exist mainly for the pleasure of men. He caught a lot of flack from the likes of C. Delores Tucker and others for such unwarranted sentiments. This again contrasts with much of his poetry, which provided significant insight into the more sensitive side of Tupac. The notion of contradiction, or more specifically double-consciousness, is reflected strongly in Tupac's lyrics, his poetry, and the tattoos on his body. While the notion of the contradiction existed before Tupac Shakur, the hip hop community, scholars of popular culture, and everyday lay people have become intrigued with the contradictions expressed in varied ways throughout Tupac's life. This has become especially true of scholars in the academy. Yes, it is a fair assumption

that many people were initially interested only in analyzing his poetry, but in any thorough analysis, one must understand the context in order to take a true assessment of a person's work. Upon inspection of Tupac's childhood, his relationships, his education, and his artistic creations (i.e., music, poetry, and movies), one begins to see how Tupac's thinking and experiences influenced everything that he did.

When one takes into consideration the sum of his existence, Tupac Amaru Shakur emerges as hip hop's greatest iconic symbol. From the beginning, the hip hop community was intrigued by him. Tupac's love for reading, learning, and knowledge, as well as his commitment to destroying the notion that hip hop culture embraces anti-intellectualism is probably his greatest contribution to the culture. The creation of *Don Killuminati* as a concept album and ideology will forever haunt hip hop as members of the culture continue to search for Tupac's whereabouts. Moreover, the Thug Life ideology, style of dress, and so on will continue to perplex hip hop heads as they struggle to understand their own dualities embodied in their notion of self. Tupac's contributions did not provide all the answers facing rap music and hip hop culture; however, he did, through his lasting contributions, give hip hop culture enough questions to ask about a lifestyle that many have felt, and others continue to feel, so passionately about.

Surely, Tupac is representative of the common, impoverished, broken folk; he is a thug in every sense of the word. Somehow though, he had an uncanny knack for communicating across race lines, social structure, and socioeconomic status. Very few can walk among thugs, yet be capable of building on the philosophy of political thinkers, and greater still, use these ideas to change hip hop forever. Tupac Shakur did just that. He made it acceptable to study hip hop as an art form. He brought hip hop to the forefront among the educational elite that represent academia. He made it possible that some individuals might look past the foul language and sexist remarks to truly understand the message behind a song or a poem. Tupac managed to make a huge impression in the twenty-five years of his life. More poignant is the realization that in the years since his death, people are still paying homage to his life, his music, his thoughtful insight into a world unknown to many and yet all too familiar to others.

*See also:* Notorious B.I.G., Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg, Nas, Eminem

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Courtesy of Photofest.

# Notorious B.I.G.

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*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

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### 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.

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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

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### 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).

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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

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## 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](http://www.crimelibrary.com/notorious_murders/celebrity/shakur_BIG/index.html).

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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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