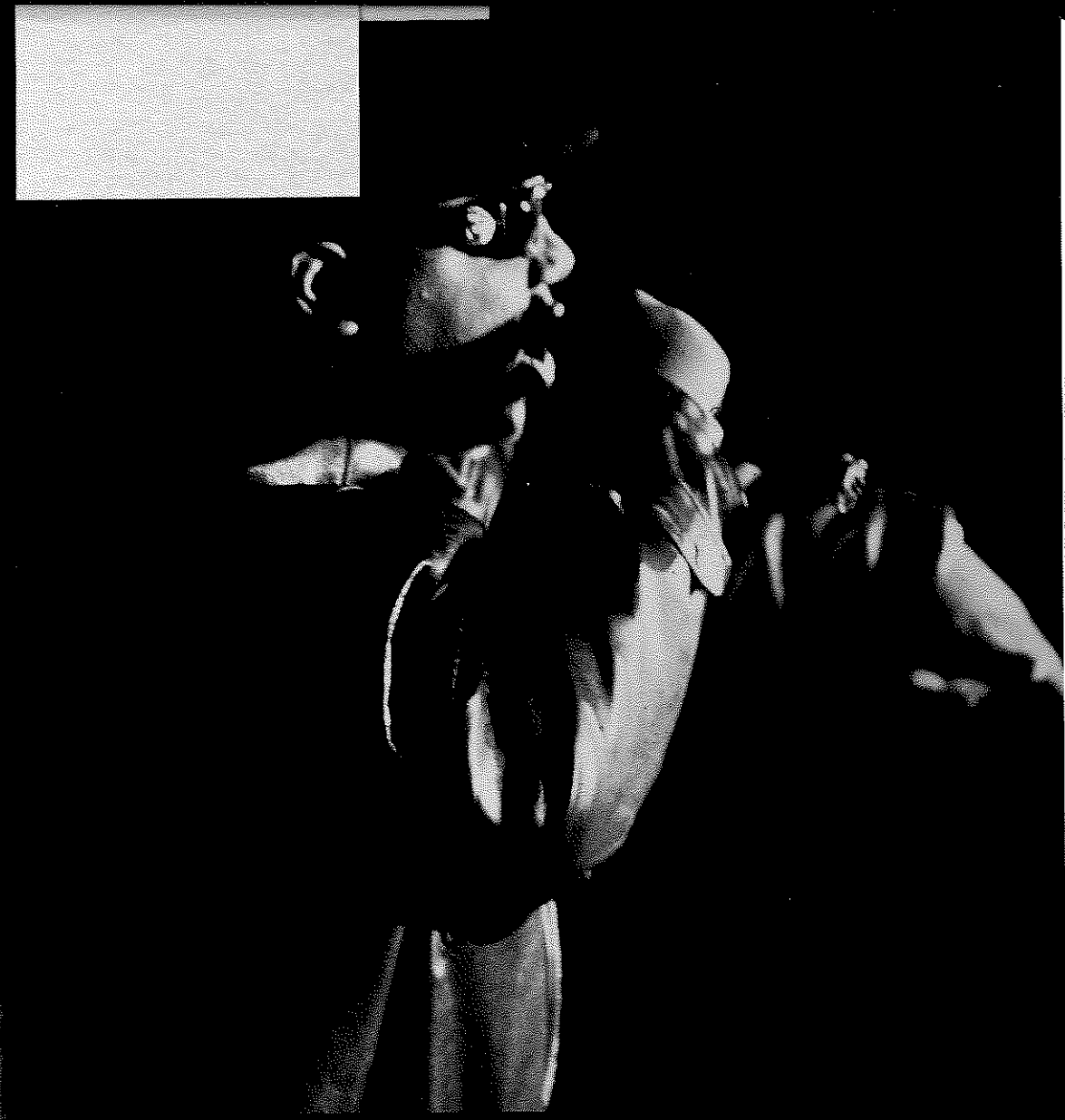


Chapter 6



**DOUBLE ALBUMS
ALL EYEZ ON ME,
LIFE AFTER DEATH**

2PAC

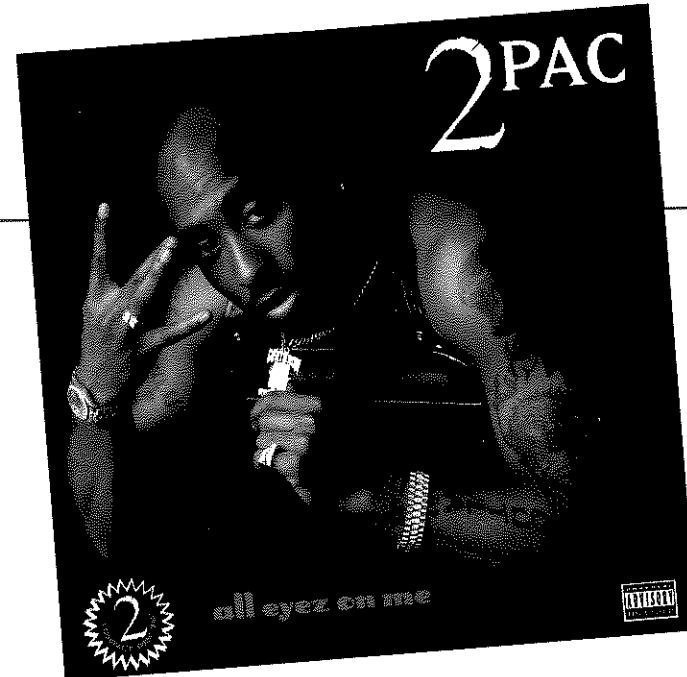
All Eyez on Me opens in the ring. A stand-in for Las Vegas boxing announcer Michael Buffer booms, "Let's get ready to rumble!" It had been building to this. *All Eyez On Me* is about taunting fate and talking shit, taking things to their final confrontation.

The double album exists because you cannot rein in your output. If 2Pac contained Whitman-worthy multitudes, his last album encompasses the complete stress and sprawl. He is the political firebrand of *2Pacalypse Now*, the ambitious rider of *Thug Life*, the warrior-strategist of *The Don Killuminati*, the poet of teenage Baltimore chaos, the pimp of "I Get Around." The pugilist. He is whatever you see in the mirror before you stagger and brawl in the night.

The arc comes straight from Joseph Campbell. This is the ancient hero with a thousand faces: the hero as warrior, lover, emperor, and tyrant, the possessor of the "magic ring of myth." But he is not the hero as triumphant world redeemer—not enough time was left. *All Eyez on Me* was released in February 1996. His last Las Vegas night was only seven months later.

The upstate New York penitentiary was Tupac's exile, and *All Eyez on Me* was his homecoming, conceived in prison and executed at Can-Am Studios in Tarzana in the San Fernando Valley. Death Row headquarters. A bivouac in blood red. Blood carpet. Blood walls.

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Cameras in every corner like a Panopticon. Corrupt cops from the Rampart District providing security and scare tactics. Suge Knight, the evil Goliath, smoked cigars and skulked like a reaper—feeding mice to the piranhas in his fish tank. He stood side by side with a pit bull named Damu, trained to kill on command.

This is what 2Pac entered into in October 1995, when Knight and Jimmy Iovine ponied up his \$1.4 million bail. Tupac was broke and Death Row/Interscope was his only hope for freedom while his sexual abuse conviction was being appealed. In exchange for a three-album deal, he was installed as the free agent superstar. His mother got a house. There were vacations to Vegas, Mexico, and Hawaii—cars, clothes, and an infinite galaxy of transgressions that Knight will take with him to his grave.

At its apex, Death Row was the closest that a black-owned record company came to replicating Motown. And Knight clearly modeled the structure and vertical integration on the Detroit soul legends. When Tupac signed, it seemed to be the label's coup de grace. They had Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre, Tha Dogg Pound, Nate Dogg, and now, rap's ruling superstar. But tumult reigned beyond

the public perception, even after Snoop Dogg was acquitted on murder charges in late 1995. The money situation wasn't right, and Dr. Dre was quietly forming plans for his own Aftermath label—much to Knight's fury.

For all their success, the label had really only produced two truly iconic records: Snoop Dogg's *Doggystyle* and Dre's *The Chronic*. 2Pac's emergence immediately defibrillated them from their criminal stupor.

"Before 2Pac came, everyone at Death Row only got a verse or two or one song done per day. We'd just be partying, smoking, chilling. Pac came in with a military mindset. He taught us that it wasn't a game; it was about making as much music as you can," Kurupt told me in a 2009 interview. "We got into a pattern where we'd suddenly make two or three records a day. It was so much fun and it changed our entire mindset. 2Pac lit the fire at Death Row; he made us want to win the championship and make it really happen."

The story says that Tupac went straight from landing in Burbank to the studio. Forgoing sleep or sex, the fresh-out-of-jail rapper wrote "Ambitionz Az a Ridah," one of a half dozen songs he would allegedly record that first night. The initial song cut became the first cut on the double album. It's a mission statement. He whispers ominously: "I won't deny it / I'm a straight ridah / you don't want to fuck with me / Got the police bustin' at me / but they can't do nothing to a G." His first words on the lead single, "California Love," are, "Out on bail / fresh out of jail / California dreaming."

"I went from one to fourteen songs a day, just from fucking with him," remembered the West Coast rap legend DJ Quik, who engineered *All Eyez on Me*. "I'd been doing my thing for a long time at that point and I was like, 'Who is this fire starter to get me to change the way I did my business?' He really made me figure out the best usage of my available time, and got me on a wholly new personal clock directed towards constantly making music."

2Pac's artistic legacy doesn't rely on *All Eyez on Me*, but his popular resonance does. The reason is simple: his success was built on tremendous reserves of strength, and its depths were never tested more.



California Love, by Cheryl Rae. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

The Death Row mafia clan was the tightest familial structure Pac had ever known. Unlike most stars of his era, he had never formally come up in a group. He was a sideline player in Digital Underground and quickly cast them aside as soon as he tasted real wealth.

The Bay Area guest stars on *All Eyez on Me*—Rappin' 4-Tay, Richie Rich, E-40, C-Bo, B-Legit—were all culled from the underground hardcore. Pac draped himself in the West Coast gangsta tradition with tracks featuring Dr. Dre and the twin G-Funk sample bedrocks: George Clinton and Roger Troutman. There is no room for Humpty Hump on *All Eyez on Me*. 2Pac wasn't fucking around in Burger King bathrooms. He had moved on to German cars, private jets, and premium liquor.

The album simultaneously inverts and reaffirms the promise of the Beach Boys and the sunshine mythos. It's California love, and it's the corrosion in the hearts of men. California remains the frontier for reinvention and freedom, but there is a darker undercurrent. 2Pac unintentionally assumes the noir-light dialectic that has played out since Philip Marlowe. He is both Manson and Morrison, the killer and the shaman merged into the most charismatic gangster since Bugsy Siegel hobnobbed with studio heads and Italian countesses. To prove it, he attended the Grammys and started dating Quincy Jones' daughter (even though years earlier, he had disparaged the music legend for dating white women).

THE TEN BEST 2PAC GUEST APPEARANCES

1. SCARFACE FT. 2PAC: "SMILE" FROM *THE UNTOUCHABLE (RAP-A-LOT, 1997)*

The greatest Southern rapper meets the greatest West Coast rapper in between yellow tape and chalk outlines. The video appeared months after Pac's death and featured the crucifixion of a man who looks suspiciously like Makaveli. The "still alive" speculation increased and Scarface got his only solo gold single.

2. DIGITAL UNDERGROUND: "SAME SONG" FROM *THIS IS AN EP RELEASE (TOMMY BOY, 1991)*

2Pac's introduction to the game, complete with *Coming to America* theme, kufi, and emperor's rickshaw. Girls used to clown 2Pac, but no more. He's a star. Humpty Hump amiably mugs as the rap Groucho Marx, but 2Pac steals the cigar. Bonus points for being on the soundtrack of a John Candy vehicle (1991's *Nothing But Trouble*).



2Pac with Digital Underground, 1990. PHOTO BY RAYMOND BOYD / MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES / GETTY IMAGES

3. EDDIE F. AND THE UNTOUCHABLES FT. NOTORIOUS B.I.G., GRAND PUBA, HEAVY D, & 2PAC: "LET'S GET IT ON" FROM *LET'S GET IT ON (MOTOWN, 1994)*

The single from a rarely remembered producer's compilation. "Let's Get It On" is a rarely remembered golden-age classic. It's also the only time that Biggie and 2Pac recorded in the same studio at the same time. Biggie buries the competition—reminiscing on his swinger days when he drove a Caddy and his "bitch sported finger waves." Grand Puba and Heavy D were also '94 all-stars, if not hall-of-famers, but Biggie only got out-rapped once in his career (See also: Method Man, "The What").

4. BONE THUGS-N-HARMONY FT. 2PAC: "THUG LUV" FROM *THE ART OF WAR (RUTHLESS, 1997)*

When I was in high school, I had a friend named Ron who drove a Honda Civic with a cassette player. There's never all that much to do during

sixteen-year-old summers, so we'd drive around Westwood and bump this song at deafening volume and start fistfights—mostly with each other. He and I were a couple of assholes. I blame "Thug Luv." Between the rifles being loaded and the raps that sounded recorded by runaway convicts on PCP, we had no choice. This song could incite Mitt Romney to murder.

5. NATE DOGG FT. 2PAC: "ME & MY HOMIES (BREAKAWAY, 1998)

In an ideal world, 2Pac and Nate Dogg would still be alive and they'd spontaneously unite to make a sleazy old-man rap classic. Instead, we have the gangsta melancholia of "How Long Will They Mourn Me" and "Me & My Homies." Even now, hearing these two together creates Proustian remembrance, the madeleine replaced by malt liquor.

6. MC BREED FT. 2PAC: "GOTTA GET MINE" (WRAP, 1993)

Maybe 2Pac's best back-and-forth collaboration. It's like a bizarre-world "I Get Around," where Flint and Oakland link up to wave guns, sip 40s, and count money by poker tables and pools.

7. ABOVE THE LAW FT. 2PAC: "CALL IT WHAT U WANT" (RUTHLESS, 1992)

This single from the largely overlooked G-Funk pioneers helped introduce 2Pac to hardcore audiences. It was a stamp of credibility. Above the Law were allied with Eazy-E's Ruthless Records and helped pioneer the G-Funk swing. 2Pac sets up his shift from party rapper to gangsta icon. He'd clown around with Digital Underground, but now that he was rolling with the Black Mafia, he'd drop you.

8. E-40 FT. 2PAC & B-LEGIT: "MILLION DOLLAR SPOT" FROM *THA HALL OF GAME (JIVE, 1996)*

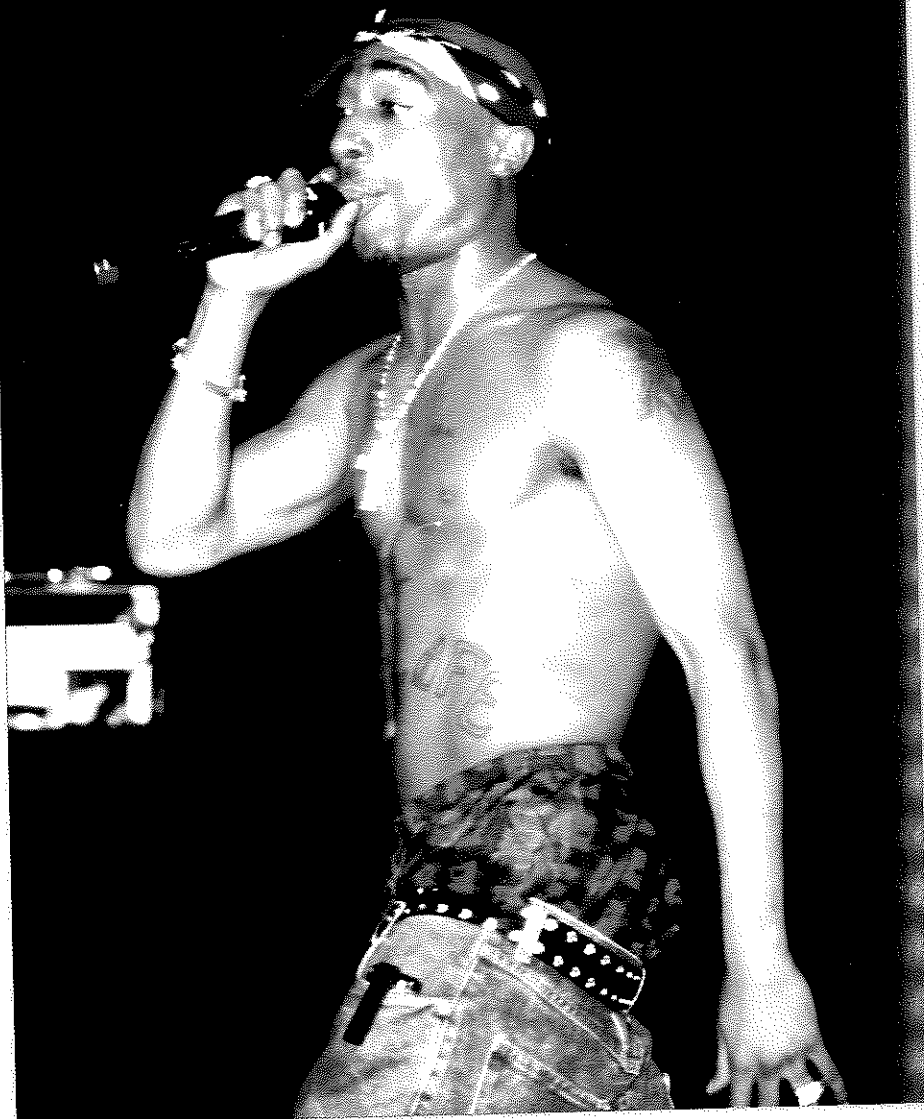
Think of this as the rap equivalent of "Million Dollar Bash" from Bob Dylan and The Band's *Basement Sessions*.

9. SPICE 1 FT. 2PAC: "JEALOUS GOT ME STRAPPED" FROM *AMERIKKKA'S NIGHTMARE (JIVE, 1994)*

If you had this at #1, I wouldn't blame you. Bay Area G-Funk doesn't get more savage than this.

10. TOO SHORT FT. 2PAC, MC BREED, & FATHER DOM: "WE DO THIS" (JIVE, 1995)

When the first musical description that pops into your head is "funky pimp shit," you're probably on the right track.



PHOTOGRAPH BY RAYMOND BOYD / GETTY IMAGES

That was the old 2Pac. The new 2Pac frolicked with K-Ci & Jojo and porn stars Heather Hunter and Nina Hartley in the "How Do U Want It" video. The song became the second number-one single from *All Eyez on Me*. The album's other ubiquitous radio hit was "2 of Amerikaz Most Wanted," the collaborative mafia fantasy with Snoop Dogg, where the latter even invoked Siegel. If "Mo Money, Mo Problems" found Biggie stressed and neurotic over the spoils of success, 2Pac glamorized those spoils with cinematic

histrionics. He relished the attention. But you already knew that from the album title.

All Eyez on Me is a fantasy, but like the most poignant fantasies, there's an undercurrent of truth. A black male born in 1991 in America has a roughly 29 percent chance of being imprisoned in his lifetime. African Americans make up 12 to 13 percent of the population, but 40 percent of the incarcerated. During long stretches of detention, the most natural tendency is to dream of the things you will do when you're free. *All Eyez On Me* is the barbaric yawp of freedom. Listen to the intro on "Hertz of Men," where he asks Suge Knight, "What did I tell you I was going to do when I got out of jail? / I was gonna' start digging into these niggas chest." Then he asks DJ Quik to pass him the binoculars.

Even at his most leather-clad and sleazy, 2Pac never forgot that he was raised to offer a voice to the voiceless. His prison time cemented his connection and street credibility. The stint was brutal and soul-crushing, but it allowed 2Pac to empathize fully in ways that had been heretofore impossible. His vision was no longer restricted to the ghettos going up in crack smoke as his images of hell. His images of being trapped were no longer figurative. Hell was here in the form of iron bars, a penitentiary jumpsuit, and sociopathic rapists. It was *Lord of the Flies* and as soon as he was out, he became a survivalist—even as his release was into the plush confines of a private jet to Cali.

You can see this applied on "Life Goes On." Where Biggie eschews the royal "we" for interior complexity, 2Pac addresses the congregation: "My niggas, we the last ones left." Even the use of *nigga* is pointed. His audience may have been heavily teenaged and white, but 2Pac targets his message for his thugs. Everyone else is incidental. He reminisces on buried homies and those sentenced to twenty-five to life, with no hope for burial. On the outro, he basically talks to his dead friend's ghosts and lets them know he'll "represent" for them. In return, he asks them to make sure that heaven is "poppin' when we get up there."

"I Ain't Mad At Cha" is equally emotional. 2Pac laments kissing his mom goodbye and "wiping the tears from her lonely eyes." He says, "I'll return but I gotta fight / the fate's arrived." Regardless of whether the narrative is fictional or not, 2Pac has earned his authority. The weight is leaden in the wounded bass of his voice. Few have ever sounded more plangent and sorrowful.

Nearly all of 2Pac's songs contain some indelibly quotable line or couplet, but it's rarely the clever turns of phrase that Biggie is remembered for. 2Pac's memorable phrasings are often rhetorical questions or off-the-cuff asides. They are murmurs of meditations that many silently consider. "Oh you a Muslim, now? No more dope games," he asks his ex-best friend gone straight. To the average listener, that means nothing. But to people in the hood, many of whom have seen friends and relatives convert in jail, the details ring true and linger long after the song ends.

For those who worship irony and abstraction, Biggie is the king. But for those who prefer the immeasurable flux of emotion, 2Pac has no peers. I once watched a room full of guys debate the greatest rapper of all time. The consensus choice was 2Pac, but no one could articulate why. They just pounded their chest with closed fists and said: he just hits you right here.

This is faith. 2Pac inspires belief in things you can only feel.

The cover of Biggie's *Life After Death* finds him in sepia tint in front of a hearse. It's a gothic depiction of death, the slow singing and flower ringing, everything but the embalming fluid. But 2Pac concludes *All Eyez On Me* with "Heaven Ain't Hard 2 Find," which presents the idea of heaven as embodied by the lust and love of a woman.

It's only on "Only God Can Judge Me" where the pair reveal how much opposites can have in common. 2Pac has fantasies of his family in a hearse. He eerily foretells his impending death: lying naked with a body full of bullet holes, unable to breathe, with something evil in his IV. Both double albums are obsessed with mortality and final judgment. Both rappers turn to God with trepidation for forgiveness of their wrongdoings. By now, both know where the bones are buried. And as the song fades out, 2Pac admits that his only fear is coming back to earth, reincarnated. But there could never be another 2Pac, although you can still see the vapors of him everywhere.



Harlem Blues, by Harold Smith. Mixed media on fiber board (oil and printed media), 2010. Collection of Mr. Louis Milano. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

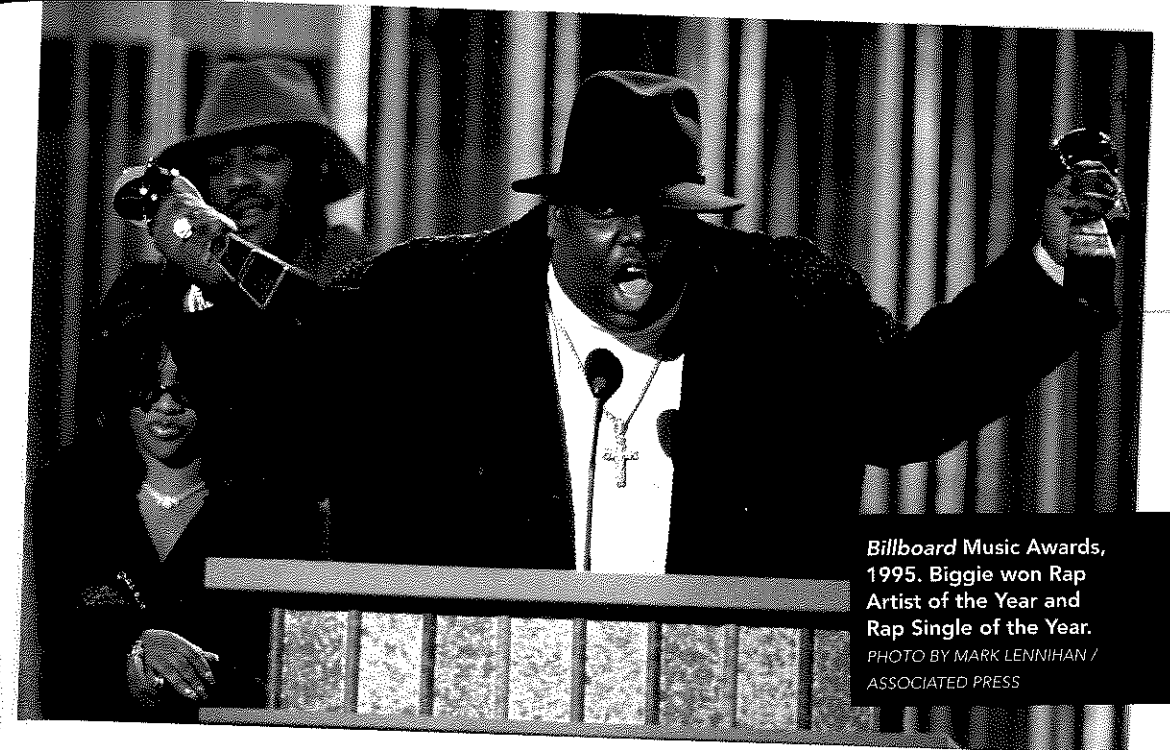
BIGGIE

The feature film resembles the novel. The EP provides the same taut, brief glimpse as the poetry chapbook. The contemporary cable TV season has the peaks, valleys, choral rounds, and solos of an opera.

The so-called double album stands a breed apart. It's at once a reflection of a medium's limitation (vinyl and tapes and CDs can only contain so much data) and of an artist's desire for ambition—which isn't quite the same thing as ambition itself.

The 1970s zeitgeist, the neo-natal me-me-me generation, gave the double album its formal aura. A musician wants a container for experiments in encyclopedic pop. A band wants an edifice for ambition and legitimacy. An artist can abide by the limitations of the two-sided twelve-track landscape no more.

PHOTO BY DES WILLIE / REDFERNS / GETTY IMAGES



Billboard Music Awards, 1995. Biggie won Rap Artist of the Year and Rap Single of the Year.
PHOTO BY MARK LENNIHAN / ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Notorious B.I.G. began recording his vocals for the follow-up to *Ready To Die* in the fall of 1996. His imperial performance at that year's *Source Awards* yanked the zero-sum spotlight of hip-hop power back from California to New York. The previous occupants of the spotlight's heat and light, Tupac, Suge Knight, and Death Row Records, were none too pleased. MCs like Jay-Z, Nas, and Wu-Tang Clan's Raekwon had retrieved the mafia DNA strands in *Ready To Die* and made a veritable cottage industry of Gambino shout-outs, Hackensack shoot-outs, and *Scarface* fantasies. The precocious, poetic Nas from *Illmatic* changed his entire persona for 1996's *It Was Written*, adding Escobar to his stage name and injecting a new strain of menace into his songs.

Ready To Die had gone platinum. Biggie's wife, Faith Evans, released her own debut not long after the *Source Awards* of August 1995. Junior M.A.F.I.A. was launched. If there really is a top of the hip-hop world, Biggie occupied it.

But it was the decay of his friendship with Tupac Shakur and Tupac's November 1994 shooting in New York, an attack that Pac believed Biggie help orchestrate in the midst of Shakur's sexual assault trial, that colored the next phase of his recording career. We covered some of the particulars in the last chapter—of how the rising tide of hate between Tupac and Biggie created songs, videos, and artistic legacies. But in discussing the

comparative merits and modes of Biggie's *Life After Death* and Tupac's *All Eyez On Me*, biography reaches its limits pretty quickly. It's rare that two already intertwined artists attempt the same feat in the same moment, and the different ways in which Pac and Biggie went about making a double album offer much more than any conspiracy theory.

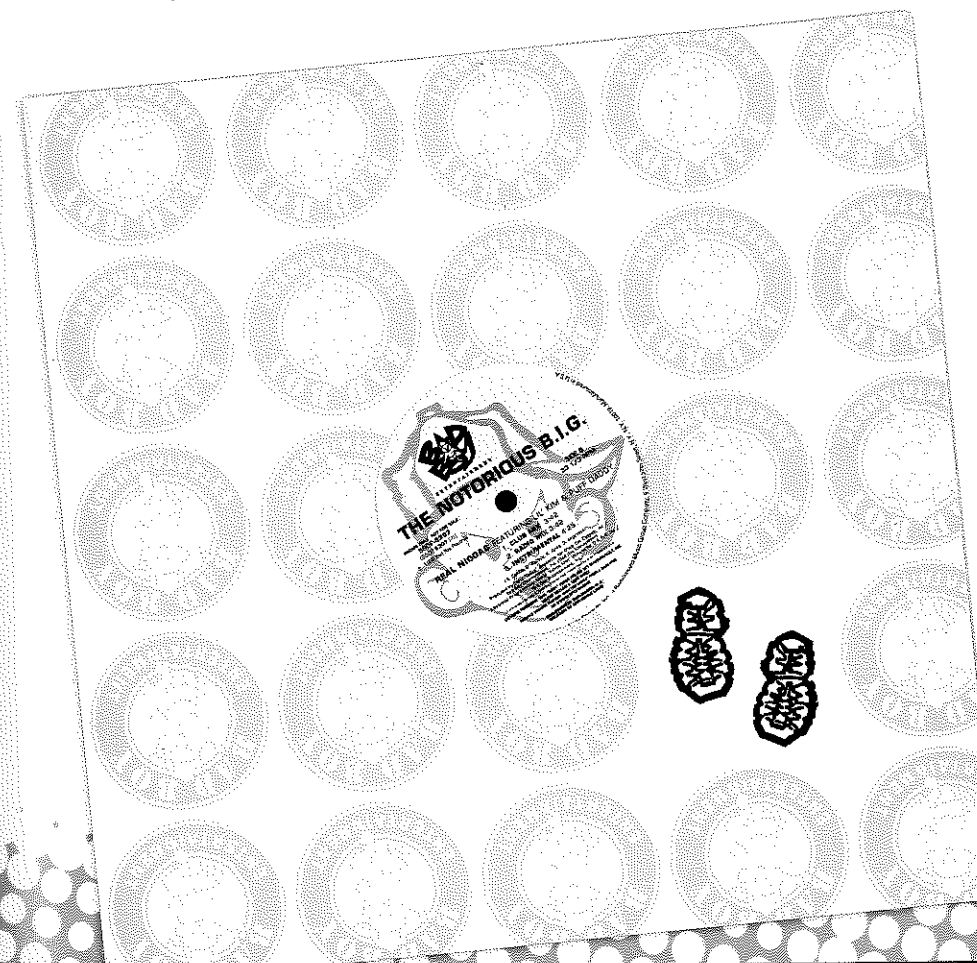
The pressures that come with recording the follow-up to a smash debut are enough. Biggie had recorded parts of what would become *Life After Death* in the closing months of 1995, according to a 2003 XXL roundtable with key players in the recording of the album like Combs, Lil' Cease, and producer Easy Mo Bee. The eighteen-month-long process would span recording studios in Trinidad, Los Angeles, and New York. It would encompass key events in Biggie's life: the immobilizing September 1996 car accident that made him dependent on a wheelchair and then cane, and, of course, Tupac's death.

The Notorious B.I.G.'s life in 1996 calcified into a claustrophobic, fatalist, black-on-black-on-black shell. The conspiracy theories around Tupac's death and the mythos surrounding the tragically young MC-actor-pop-philosopher infused the gritty commerce center of hip-hop with a note of the existential. Death was now a thing. It had taken one of the brightest stars of a generation. It supplied a new public reverence for Shakur's art, as death does for all artists taken young. But death gained a new tangibility in rap. Schoolly D, Ice-T, and Scarface rapped frequently about violence and death. But rarely, if ever, were the rappers the victims. Tupac's death turned the specter of violent death against the 1990s MC. The lyrical impetus transformed from "I will kill someone" to "Someone is trying to kill me."

Life After Death begins with the aftermath of Biggie's lyrical suicide at the end of *Ready To Die*'s album-closing "Suicidal Thoughts." Puffy prays over Big's presumably comatose body in the hospital, sounds of a ventilator heaving in the background. Minor-key piano notes and the sounds of rain segue into the album's first song, "Somebody's Got To Die."

The transition from intro to first proper song gives the album a central mystery. Are these a totally imagined set of lyrics, narrative, and monologues from the mind of an unconscious speaker near death? Are these songs a young man's last testaments?

Big's first words on the album—not counting the lyric echoes in the intro—detail a dream: "I'm sittin' in the crib dreaming about Learjets and coupes / the way Salt 'Shoop,' and how to sell records like Snoop." As ever, Biggie's devotion to the image is matched only by his ability to omit unnecessary or flat detail. He doesn't say he's asleep, flat in bed; he says he's sitting, not totally awake. The contents of his dream list desires: private transport, famous women, and commercial success. The specifics of these details dig deeper into Biggie's personal experience. After the dingy caravans of *Ready To Die* and his car crash, the thought of secure, professional, ultra-private transport thrills. If his old, dead rival would taunt him about sleeping with his singer wife—Tupac's "Hit 'Em Up"—then he would dream about another singer. If Death Row would outsell him, he'd hide no envy.



The narrative of the song unravels and descends from the couch. Biggie and his accomplice hunt their friend C-Rock's killer, "some kid named Jason, in a Honda station wagon." In the second verse Biggie tells us, then recreates, the events surrounding the murder. Jason, an eager albeit small-time hustler, joined C-Rock's "clique / a small crew." Jason had the crack, C-Rock the money. One night, after C-Rock went home, Jason was stuck up. Furious, Jason "figured Rock set him up, no question."

Misunderstanding anchors the song. At various moments Biggie has to pause to find his way through the narrative as they stalk Jason. Biggie's accomplice interrupts him, and Biggie has to remember where he left off. He clarifies what weapons were used and when. When they finally locate Jason in the third verse, Biggie gets "a funny feeling" as he aims his pistol at Jason's back.

He's right to be apprehensive. After he kills Jason he realizes that Jason was holding his infant daughter.

"Somebody's Got To Die" establishes the spectacle of *Life After Death*. Though *Death* moves from cinematic narratives to the freshest dramatic monologues this side of Robert Browning to two of the biggest commercial rap singles ever, the album radiates nihilism. It gives us the sound of a star collapsing into a black hole. There's light shimmering in the album's audacity, but the light travels into the dark singularity of death. A giddy tryst becomes a robbery; a refreshing visit to California fades into just another work trip; more money breeds more problems.

The album's sense of impermanence blends with encyclopedic hip-hop, R&B, and pop arrangements. Orchestrated by Puffy at the peak of his executive producing powers, the album relentlessly satiates and stimulates the listener. The sonic field of clattering snares and taut sampling from *Ready To Die* expand into new shapes. Surprisingly, Puff and Bad Boy used many of the same song producers again. Easy Mo Bee, D-Dot, and DJ Premier returned. RZA and Mobb Deep's Havoc, two new producers hired for a song each, worked with a sound and production style largely recognizable to Bad Boy and Combs. But the songs themselves touched new bases. D-Dot constructed the



bass line for "Hypnotize" from Herb Alpert's 1979 disco-jazz "Rise" before welding an interpolation of Slick Rick's classic "La Di Da Di" onto the chorus (a song that had already been sampled by the Beastie Boys and LL Cool J). The Dramatics' 1971 song "In The Rain" supplied the isolated, fizzy guitar strum for "Somebody's Got To Die."

Puffy glazed the samples into a Hollywood sheen. The scraping edges of sound that made *Ready To Die* reminiscent of the grind of a corner hustler were buffed and lacquered. The samples on *Life After Death* are as well selected as those on *Ready To Die*, but Puffy and Bad Boy's production team transformed them into silky, luxurious stuff. They pile up like so many sports cars and blunts in The Notorious B.I.G.'s newly rarified air. They touch new territories of sound too. "Goin' Back To Cali" evokes a pre-Death Row 1980s Cali bop in its vocoder; "Mo Money Mo Problems" memorably employs the disco-dance glitter and giddy horns of Diana Ross' "I'm Coming Out."

Two double albums that *Life After Death* resembles in its smorgasbord of perfected sonic products are Prince's *Sign "O" the Times* from 1987 and Donna Summer's *Bad Girls* (1979). In hindsight, both albums, like *Life After Death*, contain a decade's worth of sound—Prince warps the possibilities of R&B and Summer perfectly captures 1970s disco fever. Prince's genius, of course, was that he could play the roles of both Puffy and The Notorious B.I.G., arranging and writing and performing his songs all himself. The incredible tempo control in *Sign "O" the Times* resembles *Life After Death's* "The Ballad of Dorothy Parker" and "Starfish & Coffee" help break up the frenetic up-tempo jams on *Sign* in the same ways that "Goin' Back To Cali" and "Sky's The Limit" relieve the vice-grip fatalism of the back half of *Life After Death*.

Death also mirrors the commitment to commercial pop excellence in Summer's *Bad Girls*. "Juicy" from *Ready To Die* is a felt, personal single. "Big Poppa" (also from *Ready to Die*, and Biggie's first top-ten hit) is a sweltering, memorable after-hours jam build around a perfect Isley Brothers sample. But neither is a club hit.

By contrast, "Hypnotize" and "Mo Money Mo Problems" have ignited dance floors from the Tunnel in NYC (New York's barometer for hip-hop marketability in the '90s) to contemporary suburban sweet sixteen's. With Reagan babies of all colors and classes now entering their thirties, *Life After Death's* two smash singles have become time-capsule classics like

Summer's "Bad Girls" and "Hot Stuff." Though darker than the beats behind Summer, the pop impulse behind Biggie's album buoys the lyrical content and mood of the songs. On the deep album cut "Niggas Bleed," throbbing beeps give the song a forward-looking electronic surface that almost masks the clomping snares that echo like boots on a hardwood floor. The clomps—even, methodical—sound like an unseen stalker walking up behind the listener. This is delightfully complex pop, where the studio choices give new meanings to the music.

The voice on the record sounds transformed as well. Wearier and heavier than in his early twenties, Biggie's voice doesn't trill the high, tense vowels it did in the early recordings. The deliberate, iambic, one-two flow from *Ready To Die* that sounded like a counterpunching middleweight jabbing each stress has morphed into a lumbering, phrase-driven tenor. Though still capable of the outrageous metric flourish (his verse on "Mo Money Mo Problems," his final verse on "I Love The Dough"), Biggie's line stays closer to natural speech patterns on the album.

The new vocal tricks that Biggie does provide illustrate his willingness to adapt to different, regional styles. Both Tupac and Biggie did a song with then red-hot, Cleveland-based Bone Thugs-n-Harmony on their respective doubles. The cyclonic, speed-rapping style, associated mostly with Midwestern acts like Twista and Bone Thugs, provides an incredible challenge. Hard to imitate without reducing lines down to piecemeal phrases with a Dr. Seuss rhyme scheme, the style requires impeccable breath control and a flexible syntax. Big had both in abundance. His effort on the disc two opener, "Notorious Thugs," captivates.

He doesn't try to match Bone Thugs' particle accelerator flow but instead sidles into a quixotic, waltz-ish meter: "We just sittin' here trying to win, tryin' not to sin / high off weed and lots of gin / so much smoke need oxygen, steadily countin' them Benjamins. / Nigga you should too, if you knew, what this game'll do to you / been in this shit since '92 / look at all the bullshit I been through / so called beef with you know who."

He modulates the stress, often emphasizing the third syllable in a chain—"too / knew / game / you / been / shit / two"—to lend the lines an integrity that the song demands.

In other guest appearances on the album, he switches his cadences to match the languid, totally phrase-driven R&B ("Fuckin' You Tonight" with R. Kelly) and to revisit gully, one-two New York City boom-bap ("Last Day" with

The Lox). He out-references the MC who would go on to become the king of references, Jay-Z, when he trots out various seafood delicacies, gambling results, and drug-czar real estate agents on "I Love The Dough." Biggie hadn't just matured as a man; his flow had grown wiser and more adept.

All these changes in technique and production make the desperate, existential darkness of the album as a whole far more complex. The album is drenched in materialism; any quick listen could tell you that. Biggie makes himself a don, and the attendant objects around him have been upgraded as well. The champagne on *Ready To Die*'s "Juicy" still felt like a special occasion. On *Life After Death*, Biggie does not get out of bed for less than a private jet bound for a private island.

Like every other successful double album, the two discs of *Life After Death* feel separated by mode and mood. The big, brassy singles all come from disc one. Cars are wrecked and replaced, bleach gets thrown in the eyes of non-believers, button men disappear and "come back speaking Spanish." Biggie has separated himself from the material life of the struggling young thug, but the energy remains. He sounds motivated. He raps about motivating situations and motivated people.

In disc two the tone plummets. Every single song on the disc sounds resigned. Songs whose titles or ostensible content should reflect anything

"Up in restaurants with mandolins, and violins / We just sittin' here tryin to win, tryin' not to sin / High off weed and lots of gin / So much smoke need oxygen, steadily countin' them Benjamins"

— "Notorious Thugs"

THE FIVE BEST NOTORIOUS B.I.G. FOOD LINES

The Notorious B.I.G. charted his own maturation as "getting larger in waist and taste." Here are five of his best food-related lines, from the embellishments of a working-class childhood to pop-star worthy five-star meals.

1) "JUICY": "REMEMBER WHEN I USED TO EAT SARDINES FOR DINNER."

According to interviews with his mother, Big's childhood wasn't quite this bleak. But this sensory image from *Ready To Die*'s lead single—oily, brackish, cheap—lingers like tin fish.

2) "BIG POPPA": "ON THE WAY TO THE 'TELLY, GON' FILL MY BELLY: T-BONE STEAK, CHEESE EGGS AND WELCH'S GRAPE."

Every New Yorker knows that no big-city seduction is complete without drunk food.

3) "I LOVE THE DOUGH": "RIDE AND DECIDE: CRACKED CRAB OR LOBSTER? / WHO SAY MOBSTERS DON'T PROSPER?"

Ah, the choices over which the newly rich get to agonize. On this song from *Life After Death*, Biggie trades luxury lines with the debutant Jay-Z and demonstrates just what, exactly, the spoils of the game taste like.

4) "SKY'S THE LIMIT": "NIGGAZ BOUGHT ME MILKS AT LUNCH / THE MILKS WAS CHOCOLATE, THE COOKIES: BUTTER CRUNCH."

Life After Death's most introspective track gives Biggie a chance to revisit his childhood. These lines become more exact as they go—he clarifies what kinds of snacks his friends gave him. In a song, not to mention an album, fueled by the putting away of childish things, Biggie supplies a moment of tenderness.

5) "MY DOWNFALL": "EATING SHRIMP A LA CARTE WITH SOME BITCHES FROM BRUSSELS / EATIN' CLAMS AND MUSSELS."

Food that would have revolted the Biggie of "Big Poppa" now delights him. From working-class black Brooklyn to some unnamed European bistro with some presumably fetching young women to keep him company, Biggie has dined his way full circle.

but death have darkness pouring in at their seams. Puffy's leering whispers in the backing track of "Nasty Boy" would be creepy enough, but Big sounds positively clinical when rapping about sex. No more flirting at the bar and coy meet-ups at the diner. Unflinching conditionals rule this Biggie's sex drive, "Don't take 'em to the crib unless they bonin'." Words like *work* and *trauma* infect the graphic sex story.

2Pac's *All Eyez On Me* is essentially a public album. He rages against figures as specific as civil rights activist C. Delores Tucker (who was vocal in her opposition to Tupac's explicit lyrics) and as general as racist police. He turns every emotion into theater—triumphant and angelic in bloodstained white clothes as his enemies plot his end.

Life After Death looks inward. The first disc sounds more public than the second, and it is, but think about disc one's detachment in contrast to *Ready To Die*. There he just did things. He just took loot, struggled, scoped the club. On disc one of *Life After Death* he hesitates, describing actions in the general or potential ("What's Beef?," "Niggas Bleed") before acting. Violence is considered, and that's a deeply personal act. Violence is public, and in the end, impulsive, but talking about violence, planning violence, and reflecting on it requires some dialogue with the self. Biggie was always introspective, but in the first disc he begins a sustained psychological self-examination.

On disc two you hear walls closing in around Biggie. His gift as an MC is his blurring of the boundaries between external detail (which he documents compulsively) and internal state. What makes the final disc of Biggie's career so haunting is that the border between external physical details and the internal psychic state has collapsed. The opulence of his criminal wealth peaks right alongside his nihilism. Outside of Joy Division, I don't know of a more psychologically harrowing stretch of pop music.

The end of disc two echoes the last song on *Ready To Die*, "Suicidal Thoughts," but expands the bleakness into three songs: "My Downfall," "Long Kiss Goodnight," and "You're Nobody (Til Somebody Kills You)." Biggie underscores what sacrifices he's made to achieve his elevated rank in hip-hop. On "My Downfall," he raps, "We been around the world twice, all we got is mo' ice / And mo' nice. . . ." He doesn't specify what "nice" thing they've gotten. The abstraction chills: does the specificity of a thing even matter anymore?

Biggie matches his eye for detail with a frightening sense of equivocation in the next lines. He offers a cool tradeoff, "sacrifice your heart / Lexus with

the automatic start." It's a chilly pitch. He doesn't say "get" or "earn" or "if" or use any kind of conditional, transactional language. Biggie makes the kind of implicit offer that happens in a dark room in a beautiful house. The kind you can't refuse.

The last song on the album, "You're Nobody (Til Somebody Kills You)," amplifies the paranoia though a final shift in point of view. While the first two verses deepen the bleak tone of *Life After Death's* final movement ("nigga decease . . . may you rest in peace"), the third raises Biggie's voice to a higher plateau. He shifts perspective from first person to second and then to a distant third.

The third verse opens in the second person, "You can be the shit, flash the fattest five / Have the biggest dick, but when your shell get it / You ain't worth spit, just a memory." The imaginary life of a criminal becomes aphorism. The use of *you* carries the instructional thread of the album—think "Ten Crack Commandments"—to a final, existential conclusion. The implication sounds something like: you can follow my instructions; you can follow my model of craft and business. But you're dying too.

Biggie needs to show you that he's not just rapping about his death. He's rapping about death. Period.



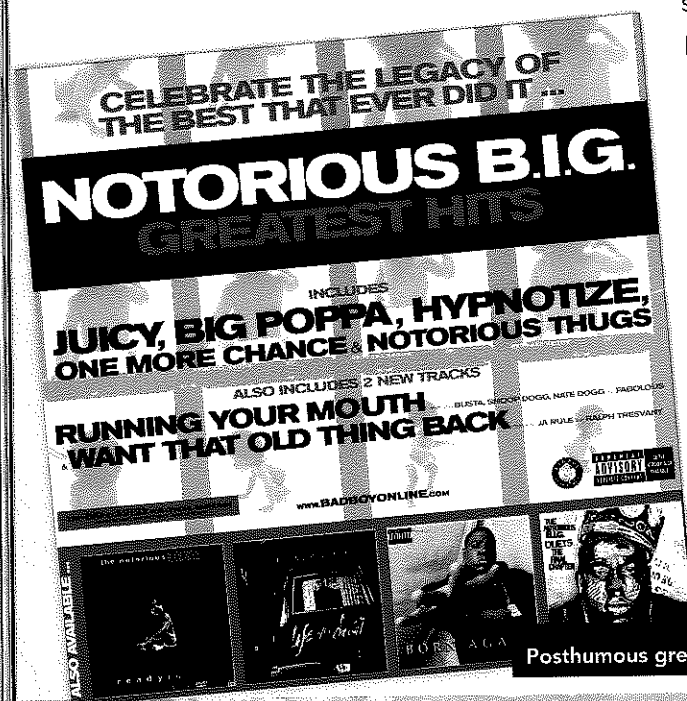
The final shift to third person gives an even more jarring perspective. The listener becomes privy to the speech of some distant observer, someone who knew how this mafia don lived and died:

Remember he used to push the champagne Range
Silly cat, wore suede in the rain
Swear he put the G in Game. Had the Gucci frame
Before Dana Dane, thought he ran with Kane

I can't recall his name, you mean that kid
That nearly lost half his brain over two bits of cocaine?
Getting his dick sucked by crackhead Lorraine?
A fuckin' shame, dude's the lame, what's his name?
Dark-skinned Germaine, see what I mean?

It begins with synesthetic opulence, mingling the paint of a Range with the almost metallic chill of champagne. The product of one sense—the seen silky half-silver half-tan color of the car—blurs and becomes another: the tasted effervescent edge of bubbly. Wearing suede in the rain haunts—it's a

surefire way to ruin a presumably gorgeous piece of clothing—but the act itself seems so casual, almost confident. This unnamed person can, and probably does, buy a lot of suede loafers and jackets. The figure then becomes a logo himself—as the speaker commemorates him, he “put the G in the game.” The genius of Biggie’s flow here allows us to mingle “Gucci” with the “G in the game”; they occur in the same line. But the grammar (“before”) of the line pushes the luxury brand mention toward Dana Dane (a Brooklyn rapper), a move that pulls the line out of objects and towards a human history.



Posthumous greatest hits release.

Notice how quickly it goes from those two august hip-hop references—Dana Dane and Big Daddy Kane—to grimy, base speculation. Biggie supplies a dialogue of lapses where names, even violently famous ones, get forgotten in the rush of streets and deals. Slimy stories hang around longer than triumph. The last action we hear about is bought sex from a drug addict.

Then the subject of discussion gets a name: Germaine. The association with Jermaine Jackson gives the name a sweaty, second-banana-ish vibe. That doesn't sound like the name of a Biggie speaker. Are we really talking about someone else? Is the dead guy not a well-constructed Christopher Wallace avatar? Is this just another memory of a murder?

It's one of the most thrilling moments in hip-hop, one filled with self-knowledge and existential wit. If we imagine the speaker between the two studio albums as internally uniform, not a stand-in for Christopher Wallace but an avatar of him, the final lines of “You're Nobody (Til Somebody Kills You)” tremble. Biggie gives us a vision of a version of himself, a what-if scenario in which the MC sees more of himself in this forgotten scrub than he wanted. By talking about the guy, Biggie can reveal things about himself he's too terrified to say otherwise.

Tupac always knew that a spiritual life lay behind this material one. Biggie's music provides a record of him considering that boundary, even nearing it. But at the moment that he's closest to the other side, he, ever the businessman, the craftsman, the materialist, can only consider the physical world behind him. He imagines what the living will do without him. How he will be remembered.

Religious readings don't mesh with Biggie in the ways they do with Tupac. But finishing *Life After Death*, with its unremittingly fatal stretch of music, I'm reminded of the Book of Ecclesiastes. Like that book's speaker, Biggie sees the power of the world: material existence is fleeting and absurd, but it is all we have. The void, the afterlife, death, whatever you want to call it, is just that: a void. And no matter what you've done, or had done to you, it will not provide any answers. The void won't even talk back. So, Biggie, like the rest of us, is stuck talking to himself. His death didn't, and doesn't, resemble ours, but the conversation is just the same. *What have I left behind me? How will people speak of me? Did what I do matter?*

I'M CRAZY

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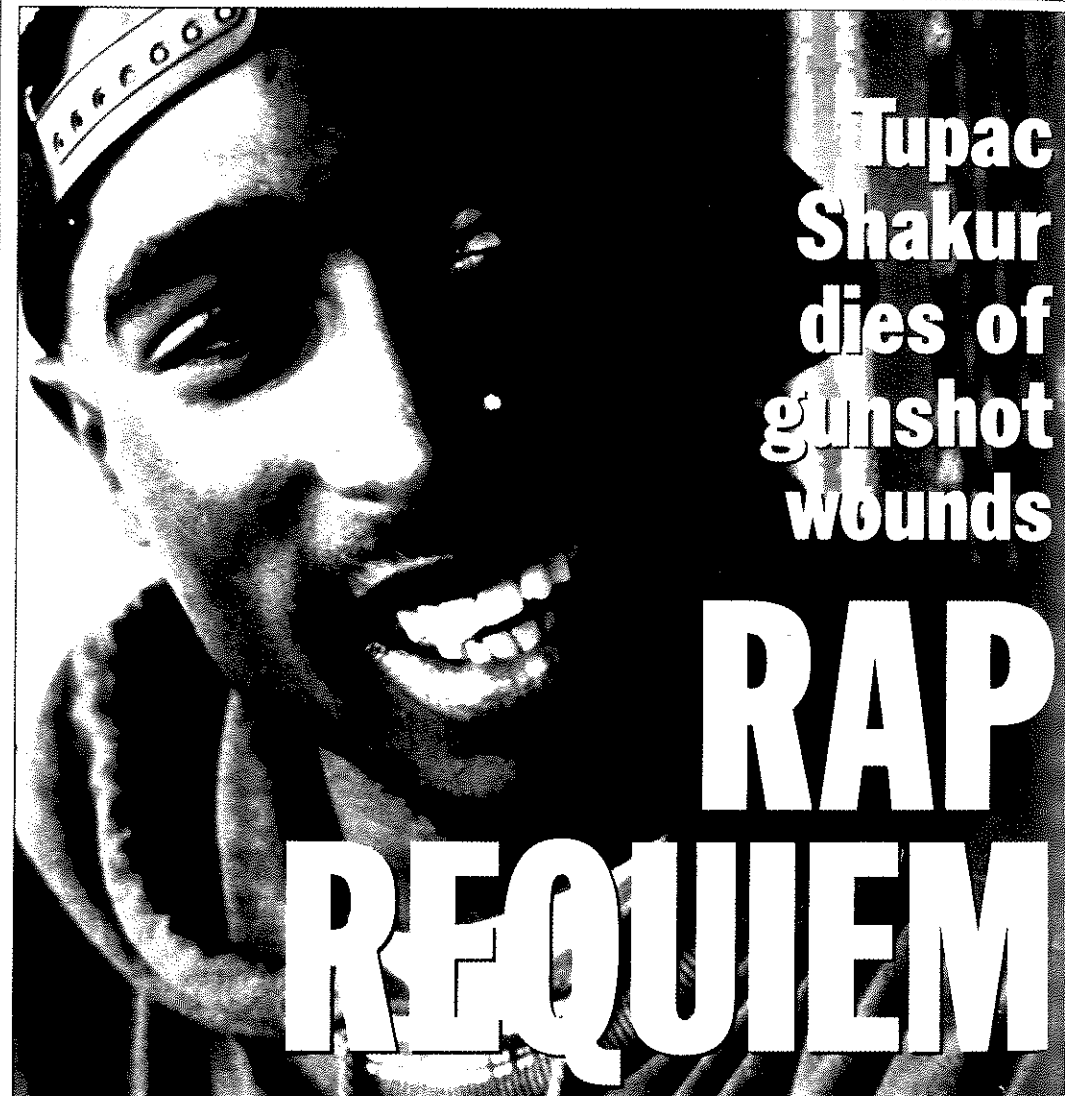
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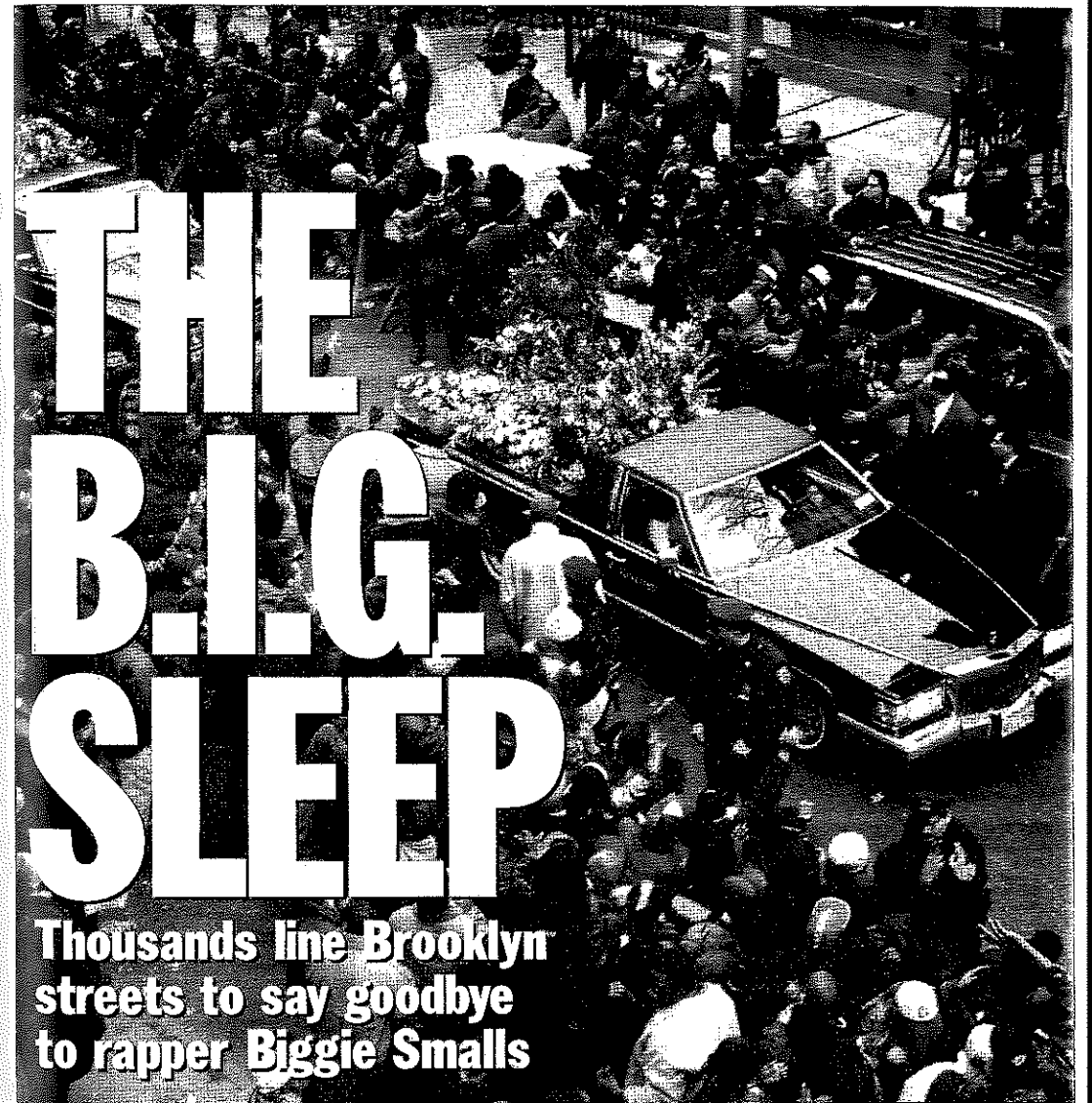
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