



DAVID RAMSEY

I Will Forever Remain Faithful

How Lil Wayne Helped Me Survive My First Year Teaching in New Orleans

David Ramsey was a social studies and writing teacher in the Recovery School District in New Orleans when he wrote this essay, which first appeared in 2008 in the *Oxford American: The Southern Magazine for Good Writing*. He is currently a third-grade teacher at Victory Youth Training Academy in the city's Ninth Ward. His writings on both food and music have been published in magazines such as *Slate* and *Men's Journal* and anthologies such as *Best Music Writing* (2009), *Best American Food Writing* (2011) and *Cornbread Nation 5* (2010). Ramsey also writes fiction, and in 2010 one of his short stories won an award for fiction given by the University of New Orleans.

1.

Complex magazine: What do you listen to these days?

Lil Wayne: Me! All day, all me.

2. Like a white person, with blue veins

In my first few weeks teaching in New Orleans' Recovery School District, these were the questions I heard the most from my students:

1. "I gotta use it." (This one might sound like a statement, but it's a request — May I use the bathroom?)
2. "You got an ol' lady?" (the penultimate vowel stretched, lasciviously, as far as it'll go).
3. "Where you from?"
4. "You listen to that Weezy?"

I knew that third question was coming. Like many RSD teachers, I was new, and white, and from out of town. It was the fourth question, however, that seemed to interest my students the most. Dwayne Carter, aka



Lil Wayne, aka Weezy F. Baby, was in the midst of becoming the year's biggest rapper, and among the black teenagers that made up my student population, fandom had reached a near-Beatlemania pitch. More than ninety percent of my students cited Lil Wayne on the "Favorite Music" question on the survey I gave them; about half of them repeated the answer on "Favorite Things to Do."

For some of my students, the questions *Where are you from?* and *Do you listen to Lil Wayne?* were close to interchangeable. Their shared currency — as much as neighborhoods or food or slang or trauma — was the stoned musings of Weezy F. Baby.

The answer was, sometimes, yes, I did listen to Lil Wayne. Despite his ubiquitous success, my students were shocked.

"Do you have the mix tapes?" asked Michael, a sixteen-year-old ninth grader. "It's all about the mix tapes."

The following day, he had a stack of CDs for me. Version this, volume that, or no label at all.

And that's just about all I listened to for the rest of the year.

3. My picture should be in the dictionary next to the definition of definition

Lil Wayne slurs, hollers, sings, sighs, bellows, whines, croons, wheezes, coughs, stutters, shouts. He reminds me, in different moments, of two dozen other rappers. In a genre that often demands keeping it real via being repetitive, Lil Wayne is a chameleon, rapping in different octaves, paces, and inflections. Sometimes he sounds like a bluesman, sometimes he sounds like a Muppet baby.

Lil Wayne does his share of gangsta posturing, but half the time he starts chuckling before he gets through a line. He's a ham. He is heavy on pretense, and thank God. Like Dylan, theatricality trumps authenticity.

And yet — even as he tries on a new style for every other song, it is always unmistakably him. I think of Elvis's famous boast, "I don't sound like nobody." I imagine Wayne would flip it: "Don't *nobody* sound like me."