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## **'You're Nobody Till Somebody Kills You': How Tupac Shakur Secured His Place in the Hall of Fame**

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## **‘You’re Nobody Till Somebody Kills You’: How Tupac Shakur Secured His Place in the Hall of Fame**

If Tupac Shakur were alive today, he would probably rather be dead. The defiant rapper with a sensitive soul — one of hip-hop’s most exciting and controversial figures until his murder in Las Vegas in 1996 — was always concerned with his legacy, and the murder ensured his status as a hip-hop martyr. Without it, Shakur probably wouldn’t have received the same level of adulation showered on him over the past 20 years, or, quite possibly, even his recent nomination for the Rock N’ Roll Hall of Fame.

Shakur’s voice has remained ubiquitous in hip-hop since his murder thanks to a steady stream of albums, verses, hooks, samples and remixes cribbed from the last two years of his life, when Shakur spent much of his time in the studio, smoking marijuana and laying down track after track after track — like a man obsessed with finishing a project, or, as Shakur often hinted in his songs, planning to die young, and anxious to record his words first.

None of the albums released after Shakur’s death, or even during his life, will secure him a spot in the rock hall on their own, but he deserves the honor regardless. Shakur was the rare hip-hop artist whose music was greater than the sum of its individual parts. For dedicated fans of hip-hop, who understand it as a culture and not just a style of music, Shakur was a living, breathing embodiment of everything good — and bad — about hip-hop. Even today, he is still the only rapper who can convincingly play all four of hip-hop’s great archetypes: the unrepentant gangster; the socially conscious rapper palatable to strict parents; the revolutionary; and the heavy-drinking, weed-smoking party rapper who lives for the club.

In his acting as well as his music, Shakur was a chameleon. He completely inhabited the psychotic “Bishop” in the 1992 film *Juice* and the sensitive love interest for Janet Jackson in John Singleton’s *Poetic Justice*. When Shakur went from the black empowerment themes of “Trapped” to the lurid violence of “Crooked Ass Nigga” and then back to the paternal concern of “Brenda’s Got a Baby” on his first album, *2Pacalypse Now*, hip-hop fans rode along with him, because each take felt completely authentic.

As contradictory as the themes of Shakur’s music were, they reflected his life. He rapped about female empowerment but was convicted for sexual misconduct; he advocated for peace and education in the

black community but espoused a gangster code called “thug life”; he claimed his music was an extension of the civil rights movement but picked fights often and glorified his own reckless, gun-toting behavior. Shakur saw himself as a son of the revolution — his mother Afeni was a prominent member of the Black Panthers — and a street-corner thug, and an artist with a love of high drama, all at the same time.

Shakur was a fan of Shakespeare; he called *Romeo and Juliet* “some real ghetto shit,” and felt a compulsion to make music that spoke to the full range of black, white and American life. If his music was confusing, violent or contradictory, it was, in Shakur’s view, simply a reflection of the world in which he grew up; one of poverty, violence, and constant shuffling between public housing and homeless shelters because of his mother’s crack addiction. Shakur often said he came from “the gutter.”

“I was raised in this society so there’s no way you can expect me to be a perfect person,” was one of his common refrains. “Fuck the world” was another.

Shakur’s ability to shapeshift ideologically and musically is what inspired such a deep fascination with him. There are three full-length biographies, around ten documentaries and hours and hours of archival footage posted on YouTube that explore the rapper’s life, and speculate about his still-unsolved murder. A 2014 Broadway musical starring Saul Williams, *Holler If Ya Hear Me*, named after a song on Shakur’s second album, was inspired by his music. Two more movies are planned for 2017. *All Eyez On Me*, named after Shakur’s fourth album, will focus on Shakur’s life, while *Labyrinth*, based on a book written with the detective who investigated his murder, will feature Johnny Depp chasing theories about who killed the rapper.

The work that attempts to explain Shakur is interesting for fans, but most of it ultimately fails because it’s hard to paint a subject who won’t sit still, or a chameleon who constantly changes colors. The contradictions he embodied in life remain with him in death. Shakur is, essentially, unknowable to those who never met him. The murder-themed books occasionally touch on relevant subjects — Russell Poole, the detective from *Labyrinth*, believes that the LAPD hampered his investigation because he found ties between the police department and L.A. gangs — but remain essentially speculative.

Fans searching for the true Shakur would be better served exploring his own words, available on the four albums released during his life, the 20-or-so posthumous records that featured him, and his book of poems, *The Rose That Grew From Concrete*. Much of the material his biographers used is also available, such as Vibe magazine’s 1998 compilation of Shakur articles, *Tupac Shakur 1971-1996*. It remains one of the best portraits of the rapper because the journalists who covered Shakur when he was alive were not compelled to justify his contradictions. The “lost” prison interview conducted when Shakur was an inmate at Clinton Correctional Facility in 1995, and another by Ed Gordon for BET in 1994, show the rapper at his most introspective, discussing his desire to be part of the civil rights movement, rationalizing his “thug” persona and lamenting the lack of creative spirit he felt in prison. They can both be found on YouTube.

Watching Shakur reflect on his life can be eerie. He speaks eloquently about racism, police brutality and social problems in the black community, all of which feel as relevant today as they did in 1996. It’s easy

to picture Shakur creating an anthem for Black Lives Matter, or an anti-Donald Trump rap. His music still speaks to hip-hop fans because the struggles he rapped about still exist. And while Shakur certainly inspires nostalgia for what fans call “golden era” hip-hop — 1988-1995, when emcees could really spit and fans thought hip-hop would change the world — nostalgia alone won’t get anyone into the Rock N’ Roll Hall of Fame. For that you need musical excellence, and musical influence. Shakur can certainly claim both.

It was Shakur who solidified the idea in hip-hop’s public consciousness that rappers had to be “real” — to show some tangible connection to the life they rapped about — to be taken seriously. Shakur didn’t just say “fuck the police.” He actually sued the Oakland Police Department after he was slammed to the ground by two of its officers, and in Atlanta, Shakur pulled off the road when he saw two off-duty police officers harassing a black motorist and fired his gun at them.

Even Shakur’s rap battles became real. He started the greatest hip-hop feud of all time with his former friend and protege Christopher Wallace, who released albums as Notorious B.I.G. but rapped as Biggie Smalls. The “beef” was ridiculous — it stemmed from Shakur’s obsession with the idea that Wallace had set him up for a robbery in which he was shot five times — but it magnified Shakur’s reputation as a character beyond his records. Shakur taunted Wallace on albums and in the media for years, with antics so insulting that Wallace’s refusal to respond led to him getting booed at concerts. The men were murdered within six months of each other. Both killings remain unsolved.

As for excellence, Shakur is definitely among the most memorable, charismatic rappers of all time, but he faces a high bar for entry into the Rock N’ Roll Hall of Fame. Very few hip-hop acts — five out of 310 inductees — receive the honor. Previous hip-hop inductees had a more direct influence on hip-hop music — how it sounded, the subjects it addressed, etc. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five were hip hop pioneers and the first inducted into the rock hall. The Beastie Boys laid the groundwork for the rock/rap sound. Public Enemy brought “conscious” hip-hop to the mainstream. N.W.A. turned gangster rap from an obscure fringe element to the style that dominated hip-hop for almost 20 years.

Shakur can’t claim any such musical accomplishments. His political works echoed rappers like KRS One and Chuck D. His gangster side was reminiscent of The Geto Boys and Dr. Dre. Shakur’s largest influence on the music itself was his ability to show the softer side of a hardcore persona on songs like “Dear Mama” and “Keep Ya Head Up.” In terms of technique, Shakur was an excellent rapper, but he wasn’t the best of his generation, nor was he particularly versatile. His flow only had two memorable settings: rapid-fire, with lyrics spat out fast, like bullets from a passing car, and contemplative, where the words dragged on a half-beat longer to show off his deep voice. He couldn’t conduct a high-speed lecture and keep each syllable clear like KRS One, ride in and out of a slow funk beat like Too Short, or flip styles so fast he could play two rappers — convincingly enough to fool a casual listener — the way Wallace did on “Gimme The Loot.”

But what Shakur lacked in technique, he made up for with pure emotional exuberance. Shakur understood how to draw from his acting background to create believable characters. When he rapped to young black women that “Tupac cares, if don’t nobody else care,” it felt genuine. Shakur could play a modern-day

version of Malcolm X or Huey P. Newton on his records — both of whom the rapper admired and referenced often — but when he got to the party tracks, Shakur sounded just like someone you would meet at the club.

And because Shakur flipped styles and viewpoints so often, he left a legacy in each branch of hip-hop. Almost any rapper today could claim him as an inspiration. Rocky Rivera, part of an emerging scene of Bay Area female rappers who reject mainstream hip-hop and rhyme with an unashamed feminine power, cites “Dear Mama” and “Keep Ya Head Up” as proof that “Tupac was a feminist.” Drake’s sad, bluesy crooning was foreshadowed on Shakur’s most introspective album *Me Against The World*. Eminem’s theatrical videos were influenced by the short films Death Row Records made for *All Eyez On Me*, and Eminem has always credited Shakur for inspiring the “I don’t give a fuck” personality on his records.

Kendrick Lamar’s intense, prison-themed performance at last year’s Grammys owed as much to Shakur as Public Enemy, and Lamar ended his Grammy-winning 2015 album *To Pimp A Butterfly* by layering answers from an interview of Shakur conducted in 1994 over his own questions. The interview ended with hip-hop’s most haunting moment of 2015. Lamar read Shakur a poem about how caterpillars become butterflies — detailing the meaning of his album in the process — and then asked Shakur for his opinion, but no answer came.

“Pac?” Lamar asked, waited a beat, and then asked again — “Pac?” — only to be greeted with a silence that speaks to the surprising permanence of a sudden death, and the final, ultimate contradiction of Shakur: He’s been dead for 20 years, but feels as present in, and relevant to, hip-hop as ever, because, like the problems his music spoke to, he never really left.

Hip-hop fans have collectively refused to accept his absence. Shakur was the first rapper to have his albums released posthumously, the first rapper who people insisted was still alive long after his death and the first, and only, rapper recreated as a hologram for a music festival, as Shakur was at Coachella in 2012.

The question for hip-hop fans who thrive on the culture’s competitive aspects, though, has never been whether or not Shakur was a great rapper. It’s did he win the battle — was he better than Wallace? This one might depend on where you’re from. New Yorkers and Californians, no surprise, tend to differ. But the truth is: yes and no. Shakur won the battle, in the long run, but he wasn’t a better rapper. Wallace had him beat in terms of technique, wordplay and breath control. He could rap at high and low pitches; he could rap fast, slow or in between. In an old-school emcee battle with Shakur, Wallace would probably win. But in the larger music world, Wallace’s stature has faded — he’s rarely mentioned outside of hip-hop circles without the context of their beef — while Shakur’s influence has grown, because he wasn’t just a rapper. Shakur addressed poverty, oppression and racism in his music. All of those problems exist today, which gives his records a timeless feel. His music fit the 2000s and the 2010s as well as, possibly even better than, it did the 90s.

Shakur’s videos, particularly the Death Row-era videos dissing Wallace, would have been perfect for social media, where any type of drama is instantly amplified. His focus on output quantity fits today’s music market as well. In the 90s, rappers wanted to make cohesive albums that flowed together —

Common's *Resurrection*; Dr. Dre's *The Chronic*; Wu Tang Clan's *Enter the Wu Tang (36 Chambers)*. Shakur's records were more a conglomeration of songs, with a killer opener and a few classic tracks scattered throughout — that suits the Spotify era when no one cares if Kanye West keeps revising 2015's *The Life of Pablo*, as long as they can stream “Famous.”

It's hard to picture now, but during his life, Shakur was not treated by music critics as the hip-hop deity he's considered today. In a 1995 interview conducted from Clinton Correctional Facility in upstate New York by Frank Cooley, Shakur complained that *Me Against The World* — his best album, and the first hip-hop release to debut at No. 1 on the Billboard pop chart while its creator was in prison — wasn't winning any awards. Writing in *Vibe*, Cheo Hodari Coker called 1994's *Thug Life Volume 1* “more style than content” and “an excuse for white teenagers in the Midwest to pull their caps down low and throw up gang signs.” The Source's 1995 hip-hop music awards, held during the middle of the East Coast/West Coast feud, were a sweep for Wallace, who won lyricist, album and live performer of the year. *Rolling Stone* gave *All Eyez On Me* three out of five stars.

Things had changed considerably by September 2016, when *Rolling Stone* ran a piece titled “8 Ways Tupac Shakur Changed the World,” and everyone from NPR to *The New York Times* ran some kind of tribute piece pegged to the anniversary of his death. There was also a pop-up version of a “Tupac Café” in Fresno, California, a photo essay titled “I Shot Tupac” promoting a book of photos of the rapper and an announcement of a new release date, later quietly rescinded, for the Shakur biopic. Shakur, who dreamed in high school that someday people would study his work “like Shakespeare” received, in death, the critical acclaim he hoped for all his life.

How much of Shakur's enduring popularity represents his own legacy plans, and how much is an accident of history is impossible to say. But Shakur always openly pondered how people would see him after he died, and even recorded some verses that served as shout outs from heaven, and instructions for his funeral. He was well read, with a keen sense of history. From where Shakur was standing, in the booth, headphones on and a microphone in front of him, maybe a blunt or three blazing, it would have been obvious that death would make him more famous — particularly if that death was violent.

Whether Shakur planned for the specifics of a violent death or not, he clearly considered how and when it would happen during his time in prison for a sexual misconduct conviction — where he also stewed about Wallace's label Bad Boy Records, proclaimed his innocence to whoever would listen, and wrote a screenplay.

“This is my last interview,” he told *Vibe*'s Kevin Powell from Rikers Island. “If I get killed, I want people to get every drop. I want them to get the real story.”

After Shakur's release from prison, secured thanks to legal and financial help from Death Row Records CEO Suge Knight, he worked feverishly on his version of that real story. *All Eyez On Me*, hip-hop's first double album, came out within five months of his release. It was dense, and packed with violent revenge fantasies targeted at Wallace and Bad Boy Records. But, of course, the album featured a few classics,

including “California Love,” which is probably the most overplayed hip-hop song of all time, at least in California.

Shakur must have known that his erratic behavior after the release of *All Eyez On Me* — spitting on reporters, picking fights, heavy drinking, the constant taunts directed at Wallace — was dangerous and self-destructive. He surely realized that his boasts about sleeping with Wallace’s wife on *Hit ‘em Up* were foolhardy, and that physically attacking an L.A. gang member, as he did a few minutes after the Mike Tyson boxing match he attended the night of his murder, was the kind of behavior that would get anyone killed, famous rapper or not.

It’s possible that Shakur simply spiralled out of control under the bad influence of Suge Knight and too much alcohol, as family friend, former Black Panther member and Shakur biographer Jamal Joseph believes. But it’s also possible that Shakur recognized his most assured route to hip-hop legend status — and inclusion in future honors, like the Rock N’ Roll Hall of Fame — was death in a blaze of glory, and that he actively courted, or at least wasn’t afraid of, letting that happen. It’s possible that Shakur took a phrase made popular by his biggest rival to heart, and saw it in the context of his revolutionary heroes Malcolm X and Huey P. Newton. Biggie rapped it, but, maybe, it was Tupac who really believed it: “You’re nobody till somebody kills you.”

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## Should hip-hop acts even be included in the rock hall? Most definitely.

Some purists argue that rappers shouldn’t be considered for rock n’ roll honors. But the Rock N’ Roll Hall of Fame has never excluded inductees based on a narrow vision of long-haired rockers strumming high-pitched guitars. Aretha Franklin — the “Queen of Soul” — blues guitar legend B.B. King, New Orleans pianist Dr. John, pop-happy ABBA, and disco-saccharine sound purveyors The Bee Gees have all been inducted.

The origin story of rock n’ roll is very much the story of black music in America, on which modern popular music in America is based. Black musical traditions tend to emphasize improvisation and creativity over strict adherence to specific techniques — think of Little Richard’s bizarre yelping or

Thelonious Monk's off-kilter but brilliant piano solos. And rock n' roll was always something of a musical mutt anyway. It began as a slightly-off sounding version of the blues, which had roots in gospel, jazz and folk songs from southern plantations. There is not a single inductee in the rock hall who can't trace some piece of their musical roots back to Armstrong Park in New Orleans, where slaves gathered for the call-and-response improvisation sessions that led to the creation of jazz. Hip-hop, with its emphasis on lyrics kicked "from the dome," freestyle competition and audience engagement fits this tradition perfectly.

Or, as Ice Cube put it during the 2015 ceremony when he was inducted for his work with gangster-rap juggernaut N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude), "You goddamn right we rock n' roll."