

Rapper Phife Dawg from A Tribe Called Quest dead at 45

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Rapper Malik Taylor, a founding member of A Tribe Called Quest, died March 22 from complications related to Type 1 diabetes. He was just 45 years old. Taylor was diagnosed with the disease in 1990. A self-described sugar addict, he struggled with his health over the past two-and-a-half decades, undergoing a kidney transplant in 2008.

Taylor, born November 20, 1970, formed A Tribe Called Quest with childhood friend Jonathan Davis, later Kamaal Ibn John Fareed, in 1985. Both were natives of Queens, New York. Taylor chose the stage name Phife Dawg, while Davis became Q-Tip. They were joined by DJ Ali Shaheed Muhammad. Jarobi White left the group after their first album, although he occasionally rejoined the others.

At least three of Tribe's albums, *People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm* (1990), *The Low End Theory* (1991) and *Midnight Marauders* (1993), are considered hip hop classics.

They represented something different in the genre. The members of A Tribe Called Quest were more relatable than the superstar rappers who came before them—Run-DMC, LL Cool J—and more sensitive and intelligent than the backward lyricists of then-emerging gangster rap.

There was an easy, swinging quality to their rapping. They had a way of making written rhymes feel spontaneous. Their voices were a little odd, too; Phife rapped in a thin, husky voice while Q-Tip's voice was smoother and somehow grew increasingly high-pitched over the years. They complemented each other perfectly.

Adding to this, Tribe's music relied heavily on samples drawn from jazz fusion records of the 1970s, giving their work a sunnier and mellower sound than that of their contemporaries.

Among Phife's stand-out moments was "Buggin' Out" from *The Low End Theory*. The song begins with a lone upright bass, which gives way to the sudden smack of a snare drum, over which Taylor announces the beginning of his verse with the most perfectly timed and executed exclamation of "Yo!" in hip hop. The verse itself has been permanently etched into the mind of any hip hop fan in his or her late 30s or older: "Microphone check one, two what is this? The five foot assassin with the roughneck business ..."

On "Eight Million Stories" from *Midnight Marauders*, Taylor raps about the small embarrassments and disappointments of everyday life. He subverts the standard rapper-braggart personality to deliver one of the few self-deprecating songs in hip hop.

Phife and Q-Tip were considered "positive rappers" and "socially conscious." Tribe belonged to a musical collective called Native Tongues, made up of like-minded groups and performers such as De La Soul, the Jungle Brothers and Black Sheep. They were perceived as vaguely "left" and celebrated or ridiculed as "hippies" in the music press, depending on the author.

They certainly produced some of the more enjoyable hip hop music of the 1990s. They were musically innovative, confident, unpretentious and funny—especially Phife, whose lyrics were filled with punchlines (as well as the occasional sophomoric joke).

Just how "socially conscious" they were is another matter. In truth, there was not much social or political content in Tribe's music. Given the difficult political atmosphere of the early 1990s, this may have worked in their favor.

Perhaps more than other forms of pop music, hip hop lends itself to direct political statements. Racist attitudes are front and center in the more political music

of Tribe contemporaries like Public Enemy and KRS-One. The wrongheadedness of some of the lyrics, to say nothing of the strained self-importance contained in their delivery, can be difficult to take. Forgoing direct political commentary in favor of witty free-association and humor, Tribe mostly avoided such problems.

But to the extent that their music *was* political, their tendency was also to see the world in racial terms. Early in their career, they adopted the views of Afrocentrism and took to the stage draped in Kente cloth and the colors of the Pan-African flag.

It was a difficult time in which to find one's political and artistic bearings. Tribe's first albums appeared during a period of serious reaction and stagnation. Their first mature work, *The Low End Theory*, was released just one month prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the onset of a wave of capitalist triumphalism. What passed for the official political "left" had by that time cemented its shift away from a concern with the fate of the working class and toward identity and lifestyle politics.

On the single "Can I Kick It?" recorded in 1989, Phife rapped, "Mr. Dinkins, would you please be my mayor? You'll be doing us a really big favor." This was a reference to Democrat David Dinkins, who would become the first black mayor of New York City the following year. As it turned out, the Dinkins administration did not do working people any favors. It carried out strike-breaking actions and slashed thousands of jobs, and opened the door for right-winger Rudy Giuliani, demonstrating the bankruptcy of identity politics and what still passed itself off as Democratic Party "liberalism."

A Tribe Called Quest disbanded in 1998. Their final two albums, *Beats, Rhymes and Life* (1996) and *The Love Movement* (1998), were not as well-received as the previous three. *Beats, Rhymes and Life* is stronger than its reputation suggests, but not equal to the group's best work. *The Love Movement* is a disappointment. Tensions within the group had disrupted the sense of camaraderie evident in their best work. Their rapping was less inspired, and too many guest rappers were imported in an effort to make up the difference.

Following Tribe's break-up, Phife released just one solo album called *Ventilation* in 2000. Health concerns prevented him from recording more frequently.

Beginning in 2004, Tribe reunited periodically for a number of one-off concerts and brief tours. While their later recordings as a group and as solo artists were uneven, they continued to be exceptional performers.

They most recently appeared on the Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon in November 2015, where they performed "Can I Kick It?" with The Roots to celebrate the 25th anniversary of *People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm*.



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