

# Blackalicious lyricist Gift of Gab dead at 50

**Nick Barrickman****28 June 2021**

On June 18, the death of celebrated California-based vocalist and lyricist Gift of Gab (born Timothy Jerome Parker, October 7, 1970) was announced in a statement. “Tim peacefully departed this earth to be with our ancestors ... He is survived by two brothers, one sister, many nieces and nephews, countless friends, and fans across the globe,” noted a Quannum collective press release.

While the exact causes of Parker’s passing have not been provided to the media, the rapper had been suffering from kidney failure for a number of years and receiving dialysis. In January 2020, Parker received a transplant, which allowed the rapper to perform a final time before live venues were shut down by the COVID-19 pandemic. “[Parker had] been going through a lot physically for years and [we] hope there is some sort of peace for him now... Another sad loss...,” commented independent hip hop label Mello Music Group, with which Parker had been associated, on Twitter.

Parker was a founding member of the San Francisco Bay Area-based Quannum (formerly Solesides) collective in 1992. Parker-Gift of Gab was one-half of alternative hip hop group Blackalicious, which released a string of critically acclaimed extended play (EP) and long-playing (LP) records in the mid-late 1990s-mid 2000s. Chief among these releases are *Melodica* (1994, Mo’ Wax), *A2G* (1999, Quannum Projects) and the LPs *Nia* (1999, Quannum Projects) and *Blazing Arrow* (2002, MCA/Universal). The latter album in particular introduced Gift of Gab and Blackalicious to a wider audience. In addition, the rapper has several solo albums to his credit.

Gift of Gab-Blackalicious’s best work exudes a free spirited and unpretentious quality: While the group’s skill level would have been more than adequate to maintain a presence in the music industry in any number of formats, and to rest on their laurels, so to

speak, Blackalicious consistently experimented and evolved their sound without taking themselves too seriously.

This quality comes through strongly in the first decade of the group’s career in particular. Each song has a quality and sound distinct from every other in the group’s initial period, 1994-2002. In addition to Parker’s experimentations with wordplay and cadence, producer Chief Xcel deserves credit for constructing densely layered, upbeat and cinematic atmospheres in which the rapper performs.

On 2002’s *Blazing Arrow*, for instance, *Pitchfork* reviewer Chris Dahlen remarked that the group “crams in so much sound and so much life that listening to it is like going to a block party [or an] all-day concert.”

In terms of sheer verbal facility, Gift of Gab lived up to his moniker. A 2009 comment in *Pitchfork* termed him “technically astounding,” capable of delivering “hyperspeed tongue-twisters” with an almost preternatural ability to remain confidently atop any beat of his choosing. Often enough, the production duties of keeping up with Parker were more than adequately handled by partner Chief Xcel, with whom Parker had been collaborating since the two attended high school in the Sacramento area together.

Parker’s ability as a vocalist can best be experienced by listening to 1999’s “Alphabet Aerobics.” The Gift of Gab rhymes with finesse over a minimalist piano loop, beginning each word with a designated letter in the alphabet, all while keeping pace with a gradually fluctuating tempo. While this concept in rap has been tried before, and Blackalicious regularly reprises such themes in later releases, one will not find this idea more ably executed than on “Alphabet Aerobics.”

This combination of talent and playfulness means that even eccentric numbers, such as “Cliff Hanger” (on 1999’s *Nia* ) which stood out at the time, remain enjoyable today.

By all accounts, Parker was a humble and compassionate individual. Commenting on his colleague's death, manager Brian Ross remarked: "He was one of the most positive human beings I have ever known and always looking toward the future. He was endlessly brimming with new ideas, philosophical perspectives, and thoughts about the future. He was always ready to learn, grow and engage in a deep conversation about things he was less familiar with."

However, one should not get too carried away. Much of Blackalicious's output and Gift of Gab's solo work in particular suffer from a certain narrowness and shallowness that mar the hip hop genre as a whole. By the mid-2000s, a perfunctory quality was detectable in the rapper's music. Already in 2004, it was possible for critics to remark that, while all of his music was "pretty nicely constructed... more interesting and fun production can be found virtually everywhere else across the hip-hop spectrum, and neither Gift nor the Chief seem very interested in exploring that" (Matt Cibula, *Popmatters*).

More was involved, however, than simply a lack of "fun" or a certain staleness. In the post-9/11 and Iraq war era, significant social and political processes were at work that required a more elevated, thoughtful artistic response. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted following the death of a similarly celebrated hip hop contemporary of Gift of Gab-Parker, MF Doom (Daniel Dumile), "for such topics to be tackled effectively, a degree of social perspective is necessary."

For Parker, efforts to comment on social reality usually rose no higher than generalized discontent translated into references to racial discrimination, as well as appeals to "faith" and religion. Inevitably, his musical and artistic conceptions wore thin.

On 2015's *Imani* (literally the Swahili word for "faith"), Blackalicious's first album together since 2005's *The Craft* (ANTI-), the group reveals genuine chemistry in performance, while the music is skillfully crafted. However, the latter all seems to revolve in familiar circles, with precious little added to what has come before.

This inability to substantially address events during these years, the endless wars and invasions, the attacks on democratic rights, the corporate criminality, was by no means a failing of Parker or rap music alone. After the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, numerous artists

and cultural figures retreated, either in resignation or accommodation.

The distorting and disorienting role of identity politics, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial meltdown and the election of Barack Obama, the first African American President and the supposed apostle of "change," cannot be overlooked either. While never having commented directly on these events, Gift of Gab-Parker was inevitably affected and shifted by them.

In any case, Parker will chiefly be remembered as a consummate hip hop vocalist, as well as a sensitive musician who contributed significantly toward expanding the music's forms and aesthetic. Below is a selection of some of his more memorable work:

Blackalicious – Swan Lake (*Melodica*, 1994)

Blackalicious – Alphabet Aerobics (*A2G*, 1999)

Blackalicious – Deception (*Nia*, 1999)

Blackalicious – Make You Feel That Way (*Blazing Arrow*, 2002)



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