

Biz Markie, pioneering hip hop entertainer, dies at 57

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On July 16, Biz Markie (Marcel Theo Hall, born in New York, 1964) died in a Baltimore, Maryland hospital after a long bout with diabetes.

Rumors of Hall's death circulated among hip hop fans earlier this month although they proved to be false. The entertainer was hospitalized in April 2020 due to his medical condition and later placed in a rehabilitation clinic after suffering a stroke while in a diabetic coma. "It is with profound sadness that we announce, this evening, with his wife Tara by his side, Hip Hop pioneer Biz Markie peacefully passed away. We are grateful for the many calls and prayers of support that we have received during this difficult time," explained a press release by Hall-Markie's manager, Jenni Izumi.

Biz Markie was a founding member of the late 1980s-early 1990s, Queens-based Juice Crew. The hip hop collective formed a loose-knit "supergroup" around the production of beat maker Marley Marl (Marlon Williams, born 1962) and the rap label Cold Chillin' Records. Markie's first album, *Goin' Off* (1988), was the label's second commercial release following *Down by Law*, a 1987 hit for fellow Juice Crew member MC Shan (Shawn Moltke).

Markie, noteworthy for his charismatic and down to earth personality, was not primarily a "lyricist." The *New York Times* describes his "often mundane lyrics," delivered in a sloppy and stilted drawl, as winning him recognition as "the resident court jester of the Queensbridge-based collective."

The rapper described in an interview how he became associated with the Juice Crew by first receiving assistance in writing and rhyming from other members. Then, when "I felt that I was good enough, I went to Marley Marl's house and sat on his stoop every day until he noticed me, and that's how I got my start."

In addition, being a rapper, Markie excelled as a human beat boxer. He used this talent to maximum effect on his records, producing memorable robot-like sound effects and turns of phrase that are instantly recognizable to fans of the genre, particularly in the decade following his first releases.

While his vocals were not outstanding, Biz Markie brought a relatable quality to his records that stands out. A *Pitchfork* review of his 2003 Tommy Boy Records album *Weekend Warrior* commented that it was "precisely [his] illusion of stupefying averageness that has made Biz Markie one of hip-hop's most treasured and wholly original emcees. In a genre that often takes itself too seriously (the murders of Scott La Rock, Biggie, 2pac, Big L, etc. [with] wildly dualistic stereotypes (Benz or backpack), Biz Markie's easygoing persona seems to exist outside all popular hip-hop caricatures."

Biz was at his self-deprecating best on the 1989 hit single "Just A Friend" The song, which caused the *Times* to dub him "the father of modern bad singing" (a compliment, in this case), features an instantly recognizable piano loop and chorus lifting lyrics from the 1968 Freddie Scott song "(You) Got What I Need."

Biz proceeds to narrate a story of how a romantic interest (named "Blah Blah Blah"!) broke his heart after the he discovers the various male "friends" that his girlfriend acknowledged happen to be more than that.

Markie described the song's inspiration in a 2019 *Entertainment Weekly* interview. "I was talking to this girl—the first girl I ever talked to. And every time I would call out to California, a dude would pick up and hand her the phone. I'd be like, 'Yo, what's up [with him]?' She'd say, 'Oh, he's just a friend...' I came out there a week early just to surprise her, and she's tongue

kissing somebody—and I caught her! So instead of me fighting, I put the pain into the pen and wrote it out.” Despite its everyday subject matter, the song is amusing and humanly relevant.

In 1989, *The Biz Never Sleeps* (Cold Chillin’/Warner Brothers) reached the Billboard Top Ten. The single would go on to sell millions of copies and continues today to be featured on the soundtracks of light-hearted television and film.

The follow up album, 1991’s *I Need a Haircut*, sold poorly in comparison to its predecessor. In a backhanded reflection of Markie and rap music’s growing influence, the rapper was sued by Irish singer Gilbert O’Sullivan for sampling the latter’s 1972 hit “Alone Again (Naturally)” for the single “Alone Again” without permission. The controversy led to the formal institution of sample “clearing” (gaining approval) in rap music. Following the fiasco, Markie named his fourth album *All Samples Cleared!*

Biz Markie also made a number of appearances, mostly cameos, on sitcom television and in lighthearted comedy films.

The charming aspects of the Biz Markie persona aside, the limitations of Hall’s approach to music are also instantly recognizable. Always reliable for lighthearted amusement, Markie seldom ventured into more controversial or “difficult” subject matter.

“My Man Rich,” from 1989’s *The Biz Never Sleeps*, is a “different type of dedication/to a guy who was a different kind of inspiration.” The song references the hardships and difficulty of a good friend, who ...

Wasn’t your typical case of fast livin’
Anything he was makin’ he was givin’
To his moms, pops, his brother and his girl
‘Cause they meant the most to him in this
world

Markie narrates his difficulty finding gainful employment (“everywhere we went they said they’d call us back”) until the eventual turn toward “a job that wasn’t safe” and tragedy. Although not explicit, the song can be seen as a rebuke to the “law and order” atmosphere being stoked by the United States political establishment in the 1980s. In 1988, the presidential

campaign of Republican candidate George H.W. Bush invoked racist images in his ads to attack his Democratic opponent for being “weak on crime” while the Republican Reagan administration initiated a reign of heavy-handed policing in inner city neighborhoods.

Unfortunately, beyond this there is not much one can point to in Biz Markie’s discography that delved meaningfully into the world and society. The *World Socialist Web Site*, in a 2015 review of the Detroit-based rapper Red Pill, commented that the latter’s “everyman mentality,” while relatable and relevant, still made one “wish that the music and lyrics went deeper and farther.”

“The first responsibility of an artist,” we said, “is to be truthful about his life and times... to deal straightforwardly with the conditions he sees and feels. However, the truly important artist does more than simply reflect conditions and pass along [what] he experiences around him. He or she digs into the present state of things and brings out its more profound truth. That inevitably involves studying history and determining how the present ‘depression’ (economic and psychological) came about, and also what might blow apart those immediately existing circumstances.”

While amusing, endearing and even in some ways ground-breaking, the *quality* of Biz Markie’s musical and cultural impact was decidedly narrow. This does not take away from what he did accomplish. He will be missed, not only by his relatives and friends, but multitudes of fans, collaborators, admirers and musical artists who have been influenced by his various contributions and talents.

The author recommends the following songs from Biz Markie:

Make The Music With Your Mouth Biz (*Goin’ Off*, 1988)

Nobody Beats The Biz (*Goin’ Off*)

Vapors (*Goin’ Off*)

Just A Friend (*The Biz Never Sleeps*, 1989)



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