

25 years since the murder of rapper Tupac Shakur

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13 September 2021

On September 13, 1996, in Las Vegas, rap superstar, actor and poet Tupac Shakur (born Lesane Parish Crooks in New York City, 1971) died from internal bleeding and complications related to a shooting that occurred late on September 7. Shakur and several in his entourage had been involved in a physical altercation earlier that evening while attending a boxing match at the MGM Grand.

Shakur's murder was one of several high profile deaths of hip hop artists that took place within the span of 12 months. Multiplatinum New York-based rapper Christopher Wallace, known as the Notorious B.I.G., was killed in a drive-by shooting in Los Angeles on March 9, 1997.

The circumstances surrounding the two unsolved murders of artists who were at the height of their respective musical careers have led to much speculation. The pair have been appraised as perhaps the most influential rappers in the history of the genre. In 2019, Shakur was the first solo rap act inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Shakur was a highly prolific and multi-talented artist. According to *Entrepreneur.com*, "in a period of five years from 1992-1996 he created a dozen albums, eight feature films, countless commercials, music videos and even two books of poetry." A 2011 article in *Forbes* noted that "Shakur has sold over 75 million records worldwide, with the bulk of that coming after his death." Capitalizing on his continued fame and following, associated music labels were able to produce seven 2Pac albums posthumously.

The anniversary of Shakur's untimely death provides the opportunity to briefly assess his social and artistic significance. Shakur was born Lesane Parish Crooks in 1971 in East Harlem, New York City. His mother, Afeni Shakur Davis (born Alice Faye Williams in January 1947), a member of the Black Panther Party, changed the child's name at an early age to Tupac Amaru Shakur. Afeni Shakur later described the name change, after the 18th-century Peruvian rebel Tupac Amaru who revolted against Spanish rule, as honoring and carrying forward "the name of a revolutionary... I wanted him to know he was part of a world culture and not just from a neighborhood."

For a time, Tupac Shakur maintained an interest in left-wing politics. While living in Baltimore in his late teens, he became a

member of the Young Communist League, the Stalinist youth movement. According to the *Baltimore Sun*, Shakur was "attuned" to "injustice and the plights of the underserved, especially poor black communities in Baltimore."

He attended the Baltimore School for the Arts, where he studied theatre, poetry, jazz and ballet. According to Donald Hicken, former head of the BSA's theater program, in comments to the *Sun*, Shakur had "a very special gift" for acting. His first role in the program came in a production of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*.

The *Sun* noted that "what the often gregarious Shakur didn't share with everyone were his problems at home. Bills were a struggle to pay, Afeni's addiction to crack cocaine worsened and Shakur often slept at friends' houses."

Shakur developed a definite talent as an actor, as he later revealed in his brief film career. Hicken commented that "I watched him do it in class. ... You could see him disappear into a role." Shakur's best acting is characterized by a commanding screen presence. Although he usually depicted hardboiled characters, he displayed emotional intelligence and even nobility.

By the late 1980s, Shakur had relocated to Marin County, in the San Francisco Bay Area, and begun to gain media attention for his rapping skills. Shakur's first professional musical appearance was on Digital Underground's 1991 single "Same Song," from the soundtrack of the Chevy Chase-Dan Aykroyd film *Nothing but Trouble*.

Shakur's debut album *2Pacalypse Now* (1991, Interscope Records) is far less upbeat than his debut with the Digital Underground would suggest. While the production, comprised for the most part of dated and uninspiring funk melodies and stilted drum programming, fails to stand up, Shakur (now rhyming as 2Pac) is engaging, with a strong, confident vocal presence and a gift for timing and imagery.

A particularly moving characteristic of his earliest music was his focus on the plight of the most oppressed layers of the inner-city population. On "Brenda's Got a Baby," about a teenage mother forced to abandon her newborn child due to harsh social realities, Shakur is at his best:

No money, no babysitter, she couldn't keep a job
She tried to sell crack but end up gettin' robbed

So now, what's next? There ain't nothin' left to sell
So she sees sex as a way of leavin' hell
It's payin' the rent, so she really can't complain
Prostitute, found slain, and Brenda's her name
She's got a baby ...

In contrast to his later efforts that tended to revel in aggression, Shakur's writing is sensitive and thoughtful at this point. Other songs of this period, such as 1993's "Keep Ya Head Up," dedicated to "all the ladies havin' babies on they own," remain some of the most sincere and moving music in hip hop.

Shakur was also drawn to the plight of prisoners and the prison population in the United States. In a 1994 interview, Shakur spoke about this focus: "[M]y definition of thug comes from half of the street element and half of the Panther element, half of the independence movement... When I say 'thug' I mean, not criminal or someone that will beat you over the head, I mean the underdog."

While attempts to empathize with and humanize the more brutalized layers of the population were well meaning, the tendency to validate and justify the "street life" gradually turned into glorification. This became solidified as "gangster rap" in the early- and mid-1990s, provided wealth and commercial success, and significant layers in the entertainment industry embraced "entrepreneurship" and a selfish individualism.

Despite the heroic and "revolutionary" characteristics with which Shakur sought to endow gang culture, the image of the nihilistic thug figure has become an often-imitated and unhealthy staple of rap music in the years since his death. Unfortunately, his "leftism," a combination of black nationalism and quasi-Maoism, helped lend a certain radical veneer to very backward social tendencies.

Shakur increasingly oriented toward more criminal and lumpenized layers. In late 1994, Shakur was seriously wounded in a shooting in the lobby of Quad Studios, in New York. This was followed by a sexual assault conviction, in which Shakur was found guilty of raping a woman in a hotel, an act which he attributed to members of his entourage.

Upon his release from prison in late 1995, Shakur signed with Los Angeles-based Death Row Records, run by Marion "Suge" Knight, a known member of the Bloods street gang. Shakur's death less than one year later is believed to be related to his association with Death Row Records.

Bound up with the life, death and enduring influence of Tupac Shakur are questions of major social, cultural, political and historical significance. In 2015, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in commenting on the rise of gangster rap:

"The political-ideological climate at the time... was dominated by capitalist triumphalism eventually associated with the collapse of the Stalinist regimes, worship of the 'free market' and the celebration of the most rancid forms of individualism. The official civil rights movement, once animated by the ideals

of political and, to a certain degree, social equality, had degenerated by the mid-1980s into the promotion of identity politics, 'black capitalism' and the elevation of a small layer of black businessmen and political figures into positions of power...

"Whatever they may have been intending to do and despite all the noise and braggadocio, gangster rap artists ended up adopting a crude, quasi-lumpen version of the prevailing business ethos of the day (extending to the ridiculous and sometimes fatal feuding), unashamedly promoting the hustler's mentality. They became a specific sub-group of 'black entrepreneurs,' almost entirely indifferent to the poverty, unemployment and homelessness that were growing steadily worse in the inner cities."

Shakur, perhaps more than any other hip hop artist, reflected the contradictions and complexities of his period. Although he was aware of big social questions, including the fundamental injustice of the capitalist system, and sought to a certain extent to reflect them in his music, he was not capable of resisting the reactionary pressures at work or orienting himself toward the social force capable of solving those questions.

Shakur developed as an artist in a period when official politics in the US, and much of the "left," moved sharply to the right. American capitalism would respond to its systemic crisis with a volcanic eruption of militarism, which has not stopped in the 25 years since Shakur's death.

The political situation has changed dramatically, with the social terrain increasingly marked by open class struggle. In popular music and culture, anti-social tendencies have reached malignant levels, while more humane and healthier sentiments still fight to break through. Nonetheless, the conditions are being created in which the working class will be able to overturn the reactionary setup that Shakur struggled against and ultimately succumbed to. It is the task of present-day and upcoming artists to work along those lines.



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