

Forever: Rapper Phife Dawg bids us a posthumous farewell

Erik Schreiber
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The release of *Forever* (2022), the second solo album by rapper Phife Dawg (Malik Izaak Taylor, 1970-2016), is a bittersweet occasion for his fans. The album appeared on the sixth anniversary of the rapper's unfortunate death at age 45 from complications of diabetes. Although it is marked by Phife's generosity and good humor, the album also is explicitly a memorial. For better or worse, it belongs as much to his collaborators (who completed the album after his death) as it does to him.

Phife Dawg was a member of the popular hip hop group A Tribe Called Quest. Founded in 1985, the group belonged to a New-York-based collective called the Native Tongues, which also included De La Soul and the Jungle Brothers. Like the latter groups, A Tribe Called Quest emphasized positive messages and a lighthearted tone while simultaneously addressing social issues. These groups were a refreshing contrast to the blustering, macho rappers of the 1980s and the gangsta rappers of the 1990s (whose baleful legacy lives on today).

A Tribe Called Quest gained critical acclaim and a significant fan following with albums such as the jazz-inflected *The Low End Theory* (1991) and *Midnight Marauders* (1993). The group disbanded in 1998 because of internal tensions, but sporadically reunited in subsequent years. The group's final album, which had been recorded secretly, was released several months after Phife's early death. *We Got It from Here ... Thank You 4 Your Service* (2016) featured a contemporary sound and was well received by admirers and critics alike.

Throughout *Forever*, Phife recalls this history, taking stock of his life and career. Fans of A Tribe Called Quest will feel nostalgia as they listen to Phife's reminiscences about touring and about his relationship

with late producer and rapper J Dilla. But these parts of the album, which include the songs "Residual Curiosities" and "God Send," will likely have less meaning and interest for anyone unfamiliar with the group.

From the beginning, the album establishes a laid-back atmosphere. Lush strings, celesta and female choruses set a mood somewhat like the early '90s work of A Tribe Called Quest. Like much of that band's work, this album evokes the suburb more than the street corner.

Many of the songs focus on personal or autobiographical themes. "Fallback" is a meditation on the pleasures of an upper-middle class life. Phife calls himself the provider of his household and describes preparing food, raising a daughter and taking his family on vacations. He expresses pride without being boastful and notes, soberly and in passing, "I have no room to slip." The theme of maturity doesn't prevent the song from being fun.

But on "Sorry," Phife admits that he has, in fact, slipped. He confesses an infidelity and attempts to apologize to his wife, whom he "forgot how to respect." Whether the lyrics are autobiographical or not, Phife seems to show genuine contrition. But the song is more notable for its warmth and humility than its lyrical depth.

The '90s nostalgia is unmistakable on the spare, spacey "Nutshell Pt. 2," which features contributions from veteran rappers Busta Rhymes and Redman. The song is one of several occasions on which Phife's collaborators take the album away from him. Musically and lyrically, it is more aggressive than the rest of the album, but the boasting is good-natured. The reliably funny Redman brags, "It's rappers like me that piss off Oprah."

On “Dear Dilla,” Phife laments his late friend J Dilla, an influential producer who collaborated with many hip hop artists. Phife also humorously dismisses contemporary rappers as inferior to his friend. “Skinny-jean crooks, / Pre-K lyrics, / Boy, go on, read a book!” Phife vows that he will see J Dilla in the afterlife. During the chorus, Q-Tip, who rapped with Phife in A Tribe Called Quest, provides a jarring acknowledgment of Phife’s own death. Although intended as tributes to Phife, such moments take the focus away from him and cast a shadow over the album.

The most obvious example of this problem is “Round Irving High School.” Over accompaniment that includes sounds of the sea and gentle piano, Phife’s mother Cheryl Boyce-Taylor recites a poem dedicated to her son. Angela Winbush then sings her own farewell to Phife. These contributions are clearly heartfelt. Yet, regrettably, Boyce-Taylor’s oration is preacherly and self-consciously “poetic,” and Winbush’s song is a string of sentimental clichés. Would that the spotlight had stayed on Phife.

The end of “2 Live Forever” provides a glimpse of the intelligence and sense of responsibility that was evident on A Tribe Called Quest’s albums. In an apparent sample of an interview, Phife mentions hip hop songs that consist of little more than a catchy hook. He acknowledges that such music has a place but adds, “There’s more to life than just that.” Kids would rather listen to rap than to their teachers, he says. “Being that they’d rather listen to us, we gotta kick something else to them other than what kind of car I drive or how many chicks I brought home from the party last night. You know what I mean? Let’s give these youth something else.” These sentiments are certainly welcome.

But one shortcoming of *Forever* is precisely its lack of social themes and broader concerns. When Phife is not remembering good and bad episodes from his career, he is talking about his family or his personal life. The album thus feels sectioned off from the wider world, even insular. The personal focus might be an understandable reflection of Phife’s sense that his life was coming to an end.

But the momentous developments that have occurred since the album was recorded also separate it from us to some extent. Had the rapper survived, he might have addressed these issues, perhaps even with his old

partners. As an aside, *Forever* is noticeably less musically adventurous and lyrically immediate than the final Tribe album.

Despite its limitations, Phife’s posthumous solo album is an enjoyable effort. The care that he and his friends put into the songs shows through, as do Phife’s maturity and good nature. If the album does not win the rapper new fans, old ones will appreciate it. One can only speculate about how he would have responded artistically to the current tumultuous situation.



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