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Tupac Shakur (1971–1996)

A THREAD

Tupac Shakur was an American rapper and actor who came to embody the 1990s gangsta-rap aesthetic, and who in death became an icon symbolizing noble struggle. He has sold 75 million albums to date, making him one of the top-selling artists of all time.

A sensitive, precociously talented and troubled soul, Tupac was gunned down in Las Vegas on September 7, 1996 and died six days later. His murder has never been solved. Tupac began his music career as a rebel with a cause to articulate the travails and injustices endured by

many African Americans. His skill in doing so made him a spokesperson not just for his own generation but for subsequent ones who continue to face the same struggle for equality. In life, his biggest battle was sometimes with himself.

As fate drove him towards the nihilism of gangsta rap, and into the arms of the controversial Death Row Records impresario Suge Knight, the boundaries between Shakur's art and his life became increasingly blurred — with tragic consequences.

2pac was born on June 16, 1971, in Harlem, New York. His mother, Afeni, was raising two children on her own and struggled for money. The family moved homes often, sometimes staying in shelters. They moved to Baltimore, where Tupac enrolled at the Baltimore School for the Arts.

Tupac was named Lesane Parish Crooks at birth. After joining the Black Panther party, his mother changed his first name to Tupac Amaru, after an 18th-century Peruvian revolutionary who was killed by the Spanish. Tupac later took his surname from his sister’s Sekiya's father.

Tupac's love for hip hop would steer him away from a life of crime (for a while, at least). At 17, in the spring of 1989, he met an older white woman, Leila Steinberg, in a park. They struck up a conversation about Winnie Mandela.

Steinberg would later recall "a young man with fan-like eyelashes, overflowing charisma, and the most infectious laugh." By the time they met, Tupac was obsessively writing poetry and convinced Steinberg, who had no music-industry experience, to

become his manager.

Steinberg was eventually able to get Tupac in front of music manager Atron Gregory, who secured a gig for him in 1990 as a roadie and dancer for the hip hop group Digital Underground. He soon stepped up to the mic, making his recording debut in 1991 on Same Song.

In August 1992, Tupac was attacked by jealous youths in Marin City. He drew his pistol but dropped it in the melee. Someone picked it up, the gun fired, and a 6-year-old bystander, Qa'id Walker-Teal, fell down dead. While Tupac was not charged for Walker-Teal's death,

he was reportedly inconsolable. (In 1995, Walker-Teal's family brought a civil case against Tupac, but settled out of court after an unnamed record company — thought to have been Death Row — offered compensation of between $300,000 to $500,000.)

In October 1993, Tupac shot and wounded two white off-duty cops in Atlanta — one in the abdomen and one in the buttocks — after an altercation. However, the charges were dropped after it emerged in court that the policemen had been intoxicated had initiated the incident.

What was portrayed as gun-toting "gangster" behavior by a lawless individual turned out to be an act of self-defense by a young man in fear of his life. All the while, Tupac's star continued to rise. Tupac did go to jail for 15 days in 1994 for assaulting the director .

Before Tupac released his third album, there was more trouble. In November 1994, he was shot multiple times in the lobby of a Manhattan recording studio, Quad, by two young Black men. Tupac believed his rap rival Biggie Smalls was behind the shooting, for which nobody has ever

been charged.(Smalls always denied he knew anything; in 2011 Dexter Isaac, a New York prisoner serving a life sentence for an unrelated crime, claimed he was paid to steal from Tupac by the artist manager and mogul James Henchman Rosemond, and shot the rapper during the robbery).

In June 1996, Tupac released a diss track, "Hit 'Em Up," aimed at Biggie Smalls and his label boss at Bad Boy Records, Sean "Diddy" Combs— ratcheting up the tension between East and West Coast rap.

Their rivalry was fast becoming hip hop's most famous — and ugliest — beef. Within three months, Tupac was murdered. In February 1995, Tupac was sentenced to between one and a half and four and a half years of jail time for sexually abusing a female fan.

The case related to an incident that had taken place in Tupac's suite in the New York Parker Meridien hotel in November 1993. While Tupac was in prison on rape charges, he was visited by Suge Knight, the notorious label boss of Death Row records.

Knight offered to post the $1.3 million bail Tupac needed to be released pending his appeal. The condition was that Tupac sign on to Death Row. Tupac duly signed. He was released from the high-security Dannemora facility in New York in

October 1995. Tupac's debut for Death Row,

the double-length album All Eyez on Me, came out in February 1996. With his new hip-hop group Outlawz debuting on the album, All Eyez on Me was an unapologetic celebration of the thug lifestyle, eschewing socially conscious lyrics in favor of gangsta-funk hedonism and menace.

Tupac died in Las Vegas on September 13, 1996, of gunshot wounds inflicted six days prior. His murder remains unsolved. On September 7, Tupac was in Las Vegas with Knight to watch a Mike Tyson fight at the MGM Grand hotel. There was a scuffle after the bout between a member of

the Crips gang and Tupac. Knight, who was involved with the rival Bloods gang, and members of his entourage piled in. Later, as a car that Tupac was sharing with Knight stopped at a red light, a man emerged from another car and fired 13 shots, hitting Tupac in the hand, pelvis