

Tupac Shakur: Keeping it Real vs. Keeping It Right

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Introduction

Tupac Amaru Shakur is sentenced to up to four and one-half years in jail for sexual abuse charges. It is February 14th 1995 and he immediately begins serving his jail time in New York's Rikers Island penitentiary. Two months later, his third album, *Me Against the World*, is released and shoots to number one on *Billboard's* pop chart and earned him a Grammy award nomination for Best Rap Album.¹ The eight months Shakur spends in jail mark the close of the Tupac Shakur that shines through on this album. During the decade of the 1990s, Shakur personifies the life of the young Black male in America. His words are inspiration to a generation that has been forgotten by America. To study Tupac is to study the young Black male.

Tupac Shakur recorded three albums, *2Pacalypse Now*, *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.*, and *Me Against the World* before being sentenced to jail time. The message conveyed is similar: resistance, Black self-reliance, and Black power. His words resonated through inner-city dwellings across America; a ray of hope signifying someone is still fighting for them. "Keeping It Right," Tupac Shakur trumpeted the woes and inequities, trials and tribulations facing Black males across America, even though his fame could have insulated him from it all. His willingness to remember his people and write about the life he lived made him one of the most important emcees in history. Paradoxically, the Tupac Shakur that emerges from jail digresses from this description. We pick up the story here.

In October of that year, Suge Knight, CEO of Death Row Records, posts bond for Shakur and in return Shakur agrees to record three albums for Death Row.² The first of these albums is entitled *All Eyez on Me* and becomes the first double CD to be released by a hip-hop artist. The contrast between this album and his previous three will serve as the topic for this paper. In analyzing his first four albums, especially *Me Against the World* and *All Eyez on Me*, and the messages they communicate, the notion of "Keeping It Real" versus "Keeping It Right" will become apparent. This paper examines the concept of "Keeping It

Real" versus "Keeping It Right" and explains why spending time in jail induced Tupac Shakur to shift from one dimension to the other.

Background

Tupac Shakur was born on June 16, 1971. In his childhood, he spent time in the Bronx and Harlem (at times living in shelters), before moving to Baltimore at age 15. He attended the Baltimore School of Arts (BSA) where he studied ballet and acting. It was during this time that Shakur wrote his first rap under the name MC New York. In June 1988, Tupac and his family moved to Marin City, California. In 1990, he joined the hip-hop group Digital Underground (DU) as a roadie.

Tupac's first performance with the group was as a background dancer, using the skills he garnered at the BSA. Tupac first manager Leila Steinberg recalls, "He could have been a background person, [still] he out-shined everybody on every stage he was ever on." ³ Once Tupac was granted the opportunity to rhyme on the track "Same Song," his conscientious tones are in stark contrast to Digital Underground's philosophy. DU was more of a "party and have fun" group, while Tupac was much deeper than their "live for the moment" approach to life, "These jokers could easily waylay a young warrior's [Tupac's] more serious intentions -- or at least complicate them." ⁴ Tupac soon outgrew Digital Underground and was signed to Interscope Records as a solo artist.

In April of 1992, his first album *2Pacalypse Now* was released. Praised for his direct style and militant tone, *2Pacalypse Now* gained Tupac comparisons with Public Enemy⁵. So strong were the lyrics against the status quo and for resistance until a change occurs that then vice president Dan Quayle denounced *2Pacalypse Now* saying, "[it] has no place in our society." Without a doubt, this only made Tupac hungrier to keep creating music to stir up 'their' society.

Tupac's second album *Strictly for my N.I.G.G.A.Z.* was released two years later in February. During this hiatus, Tupac fought off legal woes as he was arrested for jaywalking (he later filed a \$10 million suit for police brutality) and involved in an altercation where a six year-old bystander was shot in the head;

additionally, his lyrics were accused of inciting the murder of a Texas state trooper. Tupac did not fare much better after his second release. He was: accused of beating up a limousine driver, fired shots at off-duty police officers, and was charged with sodomizing and sexually abusing a 19-year old woman in New York. ⁶

This sets the scene for his third album *Me Against the World*. It is easy to see how Tupac could relate to such a title after all he had been through. Moving from shelter to shelter as a child, finally settling in Baltimore only be relocated to California, Tupac never had true friends. Mutulu Shakur, his stepfather, was incarcerated, and his mother was a recovering crack addict. Released in 1995 *Me Against the World* captured the rage that filled most young Black men of that time. The L.A. Riots (April 1992) were still fresh on everyone's mind, the O.J. Simpson trial (October 1995) had just concluded, and despite a new president, things were still the same. Armed with this as ammunition, Tupac releases a verbal assault against mainstream America. The following section will examine the lyrics of these three albums, covering the period of time where Tupac Shakur was "Keeping It Right."

Keeping It Right

Tupac Shakur's first three albums are a testament to his genius. Using music as his medium, he sends a message of upliftment to the Black community -- especially the young Black male. Each record is a snow globe, allowing the listener to start at track one and peer into his life until the final snowflake has rested on the last track. With *Me Against the World* being the foremost instance of this, we briefly examine how Tupac attempted to "Keep It Right."

"Words of Wisdom"

On the insightful track "Words of Wisdom," from the *2Pacalypse Now* album, Tupac captures the emotion and inquiry of today's youth as he questions

the attention always given to Martin Luther King Jr. and the "American Dream" which King believed in:

*No Malcolm X in my history text / Why is that? / Cause he tried to educate and liberate all blacks / Why is Martin Luther King in my book each week? / He told blacks, if they get smacked, turn the other cheek*⁷

Commenting on the "American Dream," the belief that hard work and an honest livelihood alone will be rewarded with financial gains and overall success:

*I don't get it, so many questions went through my mind / I get sweated, They act as if asking questions is a crime / But forget it, one day I'm gonna prove them wrong / Now every brother had to smother on the welfare line / The American dream, though it seems it's attainable / They're pulling your sleeve, don't believe*⁸

Before popularized by Spike Lee, Tupac embraced Malcolm X. Shakur has been compared to both he and Martin Luther King Jr.⁹ Philosophically, the resemblance to Malcolm X is stronger. Tupac's militant stance is due in part to his family ties to the Black Panther Party (BPP). His mother, Afeni Shakur, was involved with the "New York 21" Panthers, accused of planning to bomb public places.¹⁰ Before joining Digital Underground, Tupac was in a group called Strictly Dope, with fellow emcee Ray Tyson (Roc. T). On a track entitled "Panther Power," Shakur exclaims:

*As real as it seems the American dream / Ain't nothing but a calculated scheme / To keep us locked up shot up and back in chains / To deny us our future to rob our name / Kept our history a mystery, but now I see / The American dream wasn't meant for me*¹¹

It is undeniable that Tupac's pro-Black message was shaped by his close contacts with his extended Black Panther family. In an interview one year after his death, Afeni Shakur comments on her son's connection with the lack Panther Party, "Tupac was and remains and child of the Black Panther Party. I always felt that Tupac was living witness to the who we are, are and who we were."¹²

"Keep Ya Head Up"

"Keep Ya Head Up" was one of the first hip-hop tracks dedicated strictly to the sisters. Tupac touched a generation of females with his sincerity:

*You know it makes me unhappy (what's that) / When brothas make babies, and leave a young mother to be a pappy*¹³

Digging deeper into the schism between Black men and women he comments:

*I wonder why we take from our women / Why we rape our women, do we hate our women? / I think it's time to kill for our women / Time to heal our women, be real to our women*¹⁴

While many rappers have attempted to duplicate Tupac's ode to the Black woman, "Keep Ya Head Up" remains the greatest tribute record to the gender.

"Holla if Ya Hear Me"

The carry over of emotion is evident on his second CD where the song "Holler if Ya Hear Me" has the tone of a Black Power Movement rally in the 1960s. Although never released as a single, Tupac courageously bears his soul on this song, "[it] is the best track Tupac Shakur ever recorded"¹⁵. Just a sample:

*I guess cause I'm a black boy / I'm supposed to say 'peace', sing songs, and get capped on*¹⁶

Tupac was always aware that his pro-Black philosophy could get him in trouble much the way they did for his mother Afeni Shakur, his stepfather Mutulu Shakur, aunt¹⁷ Assata Shakur, and godfather Geronimo Pratt. He continues:

*Much love to my brothers in the pen / See ya when I free ya / If not, when they shut me in*¹⁸

In closing the song, Tupac proclaims his willingness to continue the struggle facing the young Black male regardless of his stature:

*Whatever it takes to make a stand / Cause nobody else will give a damn / So we live like caged beasts / Waitin' for the day to let the rage free / Still me till they kill me / I love it when they fear me / Holla if ya hear me*¹⁹

A Philosophy Outside of Music

Attempting to form a philosophy for his constituency to follow, Tupac with the help of Mutulu Shakur, contrived Thug Life. Another clever acronym, Thug Life²⁰ stood for: The Hate You Give Little Infants F*ck Everybody. These words were also emblazoned across his abdomen in block letters. An attempt to show that he lived for Thug Life 24/7/365. The principles defined in Thug Life serve as a guide for young Black males -- the group that Tupac cared about the most.

The definition Tupac gave for a thug was different than the colloquial interpretation. In an interview he mentions that his rhymes are for thugs and gangstas -- not killers and rapists. He continues, "When I say thugs, I mean niggas who don't have anything they dressed liked the killers and the thugs but they have that talent, have that spark, whatever it is that can get them out, these are thugs"²¹. Tupac felt the responsibility to be their voice to the world. The album *Me Against the World* is probably the greatest evidence of Thug Life. The following section will examine this album in detail.

Still Keeping It Right -- Me Against the World

The title of this essay, "Tupac Shakur: Keeping It Real vs. Keeping it Right," was inspired by the seminal hip-hop group De La Soul. Their 1996 album, *Stakes Is High* offers advice to hardcore emcees who have been diluting the rap game. In this classic verse by Posdnuos from the song "The Bizness" he exclaims:

*You cried 'keeping it real', yet you should try 'keeping it right'*²²

In the hip-hop world, "Keeping It Real" has become the measuring stick for one's connection to the ghetto. It seems "Keeping It Right" never quite caught on

in usage or practice. To this day, "Keeping It Real" is championed by many in the hip-hop. In lauding the importance of "Keeping It Real", Michael Dyson posits, "The obsession for authentic blackness, for 'The Real,' is driven in large part by the need to answer narrow stereotypical, racist portrayals of Black life. The gestures, nuances, contradictions, complexities, and idiosyncrasies that define Black life . . . crowd the artistic vision of Black writer, performers, and intellectuals 'The Real' gets equated with 'The positive'." ²³ The sad reality remains that "Keeping It Real" often forces artists to portray a way of life foreign to them. Thus, the popular media representation embodies their impersonation of life in the hood (i.e. owning flashy cars, having a handful of beautiful women, outlandish jewelry, and the 'do what you gotta do' attitude). Conversely, "Keeping It Right" moves away from myth-hop (hip-hop which is marred by fictional tales of thuggery and male bravado) and focuses on actual conditions in urban America and offers solutions for change. Hip-hop emcee Prodigy is one of the few artists who personify this modus operandi. In the song "Quiet Storm," he begins with the stirring verse:

I put my lifetime in between the paper's lines ²⁴

Prodigy²⁵, like Tupac, is unafraid to speak the truth, and for this true hip-hop fans love them. Other notable 'conscious' emcees in hip-hop include Common, KRS-ONE, Mos Def, M1 and Stic. (of Dead Prez), Talib Queli, Bahamadia, and Black Thought (of the Roots). While the Roots won a Grammy Award in 2000 for *Things Fall Apart* and Common's most recent album *Like Water for Chocolate* went platinum, their success has not reached the masses. Their message of self-reliance and a communal approach to change, while a sound solution, has not garnered the attention that Tupac demanded.

During his career, Tupac vacillated between "Keeping it Real" and "Keeping it Right." In the time before he went to prison, Tupac was "Keeping It Right." He rapped about the social injustices in the community and attempted to

change them. In a 1992 interview with Los Angeles based journalist David Cook (better known as Davey D), Tupac offers, "I'm still down for the young Black male. I'm gonna stay until things get better. So it's all about addressing the problems we face in everyday society."²⁶ In his songs, Tupac would address issues such as police brutality, poverty, unemployment, insufficient education, Black on Black crime, teenage pregnancy and crack addiction. Later, when asked how he addressed these problems and if he had any solutions, Tupac responds, ". . . I show us having the power and in some situations I show how it's more apt to happen with the police or power structure having the ultimate power. I show how it really happens and I show how I wish it would happen."²⁷ It is during this time that Thug Life was borne and Tupac lived it everyday.

"It Ain't Easy"

Tupac Shakur never admitted to the crime he was sentenced to jail for. Much like his good friend Mike Tyson, he claimed his innocence and believed he was being punished for his success. On the track "It Ain't Easy" Tupac laments:

*Gettin calls from my nigga Mike Tyson, ain't nuttin nice / Yo 'Pac, do something righteous with your life / And even though you innocent you still a nigga, so they figure / Rather have you behind bars than triggers*²⁸

"Me Against the World"

On the title track "Me Against the World," Shakur relates his personal philosophy. During his childhood, Shakur moved from New York City to Baltimore to Marin City, California. He never had the opportunity to have true friends, "Because I was from everywhere, I didn't have no buddies that I grew up with"²⁹ -- hence his hardened attitude towards outsiders:

*No one in the world loves me / I'm headed for danger / Don't trust strangers / Put one in the chamber / Whatever I'm feelin' is anger / Don't wanna make excuses / Cause this is how it is / What's the use? / Unless we're shootin / No one notices the youth / It's just me against the world*³⁰

Shakur also found ways to incorporate observations about contemporary America. He saw himself as an extension of his family and took his role seriously as the next Shakur to be an agent of change:

*They punish the people that's askin' questions / And those that possess / Steal from the one's without possessions / . . . / In a position to make a difference / Politicians and hypocrites / They don't wanna listen*³¹

"F*ck the World"

Analogous in title to "Me Against the World," Tupac vents his anger at the world as it relates to his pending court case:

*Who you callin' rapist? / Ain't that a bitch / you devils are so two faced / wanna see me locked in chains / dropped in shame / and gettin' socked by these crooked cops and game / fuckin' with the young black male / tryin' ta stack bail*³²

Without question, Tupac Shakur was at his best on this album. His fan base was increasing just as his rhyming style was maturing. Shakur vividly painted a picture easily understandable and recognizable by a generation of Black youth, "The message was especially relevant to the young urban brothers who felt Tupac gave voice to their struggle, a struggle that gets lost in the mainstream media's demonization of the young [B]lack male"³³. "Keeping It Right," Shakur captivated the minds of a generation and was impacting change in the community. Inopportunately, it is at this point Shakur is sent to jail.

Jail Time

Once in jail, Tupac had a lot of time to think. For the first time, he was away from the fast life that he lived and he had a chance for solitary introspection. Tupac comments on being in jail, "I was sitting in a room, like there was two people in the room, evil and good. Then I started seeing my situation and what got me here. Even though I'm innocent of the charge they gave me, I'm not innocent in terms of the way I was acting"³⁴. Tupac was referring to his

days of partying, smoking, and womanizing. Tupac would go on to reveal that those days were behind him . . . including his championing Thug Life, "That's why Thug Life to me is dead. I wanted to keep it real, and that's what I thought I was doing. I was Thug Life. I was the only nigga out there putting my life on the line. I did it, I put in my work, I laid it down. But now that shit is dead." ³⁵

The turnaround Tupac made seems unthinkable when prefaced with his pro-Black message and lifestyle evident on his earlier records. However, Tupac felt burned by his own people. He could not understand why people were poisoning his name and trying to bring him down while he was in jail. I present three cases which support my theory:

1. *The lack of support he received from Black women during and after his trial.*
When Tupac released "Dear Mama," it was the first hip-hop song to pay homage to mother's around the world. Other singles such as "Brenda's Got A Baby," "Can U Get Away," and "Keep Ya Head Up" were also songs that were filled with encouragement and praise for the Black woman. When the rape charge came up, Tupac could not believe that anyone could think he was guilty after hearing these tributes, "I felt like it should have been women all over the country talking about, 'Tupac couldn't have done that.' And people was actually asking me, 'Did you do it?'" ³⁶ The one exception to this is the song "I Get Around." Released on his first album, Tupac teams up with Shock G from Digital Underground on a song that is best described as a "thank you" for helping me get this record deal. Shock G and the "party now think later" lyrics that are revealed in "I Get Around" would never grace a "Keeping it Right" Tupac record again. Tupac's music exhibited a level of respect and affection for Black women rarely seen in hip-hop; he would soon join the masses.
2. *The betrayal of those around him in the rap game. Me Against the World* was already complete when Tupac went to jail. However, while in jail, Tupac saw the formula he created used by other rappers, namely Notorious B.I.G,

without Tupac getting the recognition, "Doesn't Biggie sound like me? Is that my style coming out of his mouth? Just New York-tized." ³⁷ After doing so much for Biggie and other rappers, Tupac was stunned that so few of them came to visit or kept his name alive on the radio. Emcees vanishing once being imprisoned is not a new phenomenon. Slick Rick, arguably the best storyteller hip-hop ever knew, but once he went to jail, people soon forgot about him. It is not a stretch to suggest that Tupac did not want to meet the same fate.

3. *The level of jealousy he received from the people he felt he was representing.* Tupac's philosophy of Thug Life was based on never forgetting the brothers still in the hood -- those who had to live that gangsta life to survive. Tupac's rhymes were the quintessential example of one not becoming subsumed by success and forgetting their roots and who helped them along the way, "At their best, rappers [hip-hop emcees] shape the tortuous twists of urban fate into lyrical elegies. They represent lives swallowed by too little love or opportunity." ³⁸ When Tupac went to jail, he expected to be embraced by other inmates. Instead, he was rebuked. Shakur recalls, "When I got in [Clinton Correctional], all the prisoners was like fuck that gangsta rapper." ³⁹ Soon rumors began circulating about his being raped. All of this hurt Tupac emotionally. Inmates resented the fact that Tupac had so much going for himself yet still felt the need to be a thug. Tupac responds, "Damn, you know I don't wanna go to jail . . . I'm trying to live. On the other hand, I can't really take it personal because I'm a reflection of the community." ⁴⁰ After being rejected by part of his constituency, Shakur knew he did not want to be around them again. This essentially thwarted his will to live the life he spoke of in his music -- he no longer wanted to "Keep It Right." A few months after getting out of prison, he was quoted as saying, "You won't hear about me doing anything illegal." It is hard to believe that the Tupac Shakur who at age ten proclaimed, "I want to be a revolutionary," had vowed to behave. In an interview before he was jailed, Tupac acknowledges, "I want when they see me they know everyday, when I'm breathin', it's for us

to go farther. And even if I do get in trouble, ain't that what I'm supposed to do?"⁴¹ It is obvious that his experience in jail mellowed his activism nature. Tupac's days of "Keeping It Right" were now behind him.

Keeping it Real

Once out of jail, Tupac began recording the first of three albums that he owed Suge Knight. *All Eyez on Me* became rap's first double CD with a whopping 27 tracks. The Recording Industry of America has certified this album as going nine-times platinum. The sales from that album were more than all of his previous albums put together! Moreover, the content of this album was nowhere near that of his previous work. While using the same sense of urgency in his cadence and employing the 'straight to the point' lyrics that left no doubt what he meant in his songs, Tupac fell off message.

This change in character could be attributed, in part, to his new label: Death Row records. Recall, Tupac was always a loner. Outside of family, he did not have many friends. Death Row provided a vulnerable Tupac with protection, but moreover, he was the center of attention of Suge Knight -- a member of the Mob Piru Bloods gang who was known as the "wrong nigga to fuck with."⁴² However, the gangster lifestyle was foreign to Tupac. He had to adapt to this new persona, "Between the money, male ritualizing, and the perpetual spotlight, Death Row gave him the chance to actualize his fantasies."⁴³ His subsequent releases under Death Row would reveal his difficulty separating fantasy from actuality.

All Eyez on Me features countless collaborations with artists like George Clinton, Method Man, Roger Troutman, Dr. Dre, Snoop Dog and others. Outside of Richie Rich, none of the other artists had been on a Tupac song before. In trying to "Keep It Real," Tupac attempts to be someone that he is not, ". . . his songs creates a character and unreal persona that is not human in a three dimensional way but is simply a summation of contents of those songs."⁴⁴ He

convinces himself that the time he spent in jail has transformed him into a different person. Why would an innocent person want to change their ways? From the language, to the topics, to the art, the difference between *All Eyez on Me* and *Me Against the World* is astounding. Where *All Eyez on Me* is misogynistic and predictable, *Me Against the World* comes through as irreverent and provocative. Which do we prefer? Which is *really* Tupac? In an April 1996 interview Tupac explains, "I just put out a hardcore double album . . . and next I'm gonna put out an introspective album . . . it'll be like a *Me Against the World Part 2*." ⁴⁵ Fact is, his first three albums were of the same vein, it was only *All Eyez on Me* that made it necessary for him to 'go back' to this introspective genre.

All Eyes on Me

The title of Tupac's fourth album reveals his awareness of the world around him. Tupac Shakur embodied the life of the young Black male in America and with his emergence from prison, the world now had its first glimpse of his life in eight months. Holding back nothing, Shakur unleashes tirades against the media, Black women, and jealous people.

"Ambitionz Az a Ridah"

Tupac opens his album with a response to his time in jail. Much like the opening argument a lawyer would give during a trial, Tupac is setting the stage for his rampage against those who turned against him. In a theme that would be continued throughout the album, "Ambitionz Az A Ridah" has two main targets: females and anyone who is jealous of him:

Can't trust a bitch in the business / So I got with Death Row / Now these money hungry bitches getting' suspicious / Started plottin and plannin' on schemes ⁴⁶

He continues, turning his attention to males:

*It was my only wish to rise / Above these jealous, coward, motherfuckers I despise / Spittin at adversaries envious and after me / I'd rather die before they catch me*⁴⁷

"Wonder Why They Call You Bitch"

Tupac spent eight months in jail for a crime he said he never committed. Because of this, he had a vendetta against the type of women who would set a brother up. His close friend Mike Tyson went through it and now he experienced it firsthand. "Wonder Why They Call You Bitch" was a response to these females.

Look here Miss Thing / Hate to salt your game / But you's a money hungry woman / And you need to change

*Still lookin for a rich man / You dug a ditch / Got your legs up / Tryin to get rich*⁴⁸

Using this type of language about women was a definite departure from the demeanor Shakur exhibited on previous albums. Other songs on the album including "How do You Want It" and "Skandalouz" reiterate Tupac's distaste for certain scandalous women. In "How Do U Want It" he makes no qualms about his lust for other females. Make no mistake, Tupac did not cease his relationship with all females:

*Your body is bangin' baby I love it when you flaunt it / Time to give it to daddy nigga now tell me how you want it / How do You want it*⁴⁹

"I Ain't Mad At Cha"

"I Ain't Mad At Cha" is Tupac Shakur's prophetic statement about his own death. In the video for "I Ain't Mad At Cha," Tupac walks in heaven with legends like Sammie Davis Jr. and Red Foxx. More than any other song on the album, Tupac allows the poet within to shine, finally giving the listener a break from the hardcore bravado which plague the album. One of Tupac's greatest skills was

his ability to cover a large amount of material while using very few words. Here he recounts his rise to glory and his 'predicted' demise:

*He went from a nobody nigga / To the big man on the block / He's mister local celebrity / Addicted to move a key / Most hated by the enemy / Escaping the luxury / See, first you was our nigga / But you made it / So the choice is made / Now we gotta slay you*⁵⁰

Tupac was also very conscious of what other people felt about him, especially those from the inner-city. He was determined not to be labeled a crossover or a sellout. In his heart, he knew he was still representing, or "Keeping it Right", for the 'hood,' regardless of what others were saying:

*So many questions / And they ask me if I'm still down / I moved out of the ghetto / So I ain't real now? / They got so much to say / But I'm just laughin at ya / You niggas just don't know / But I ain't mad at cha*⁵¹

Interestingly, "I Ain't Mad At Cha" was the last video Tupac Shakur recorded. Similar to Martin Luther King's "I May Not Make It There With You" speech, Tupac brings closure to his crusade in this song by telling all of his enemies and critics: "I Ain't Mad At Cha."

"Only God Can Judge Me"

While some of his lyrics may not reveal it, Tupac Shakur was religious. He prayed every night unless he was physically unable to do so.⁵² In his critically acclaimed book of poetry *The Rose that Grew from Concrete* he has a poem titled "God." In the first stanza, he proclaims:

When I was alone and had nothing / I asked 4 a friend 2 help me bear the pain / no one came except . . . God⁵³

On "Only God Can Judge Me," Tupac once again relates his distrust for his own people:

*And they say it's the white man I should fear / But it's my own kind doin' all the killin here*⁵⁴

He then unleashes on the media. Outside of Kevin Powell who wrote for *The Source* and later *Vibe* magazine, Tupac was very particular when it came to talking with the popular media.

*Don't Get caught up in the media mix / cause the media is full of dirty tricks / Only God can judge me*⁵⁵

The lyrics on *All Eyez on Me* cast Tupac in a completely different light. He is more self-centered and less communal with his thoughts. Willing to brag about every sexual conquest he's had, Tupac seems indifferent towards the women who are the co-stars of his anecdotes. "Keeping It Real" is much easier to do than "Keeping It Right," probably one of the reasons he was able to write 27 songs. However, life for the young Black male is anything but easy. Tupac Shakur forgot this simple fact. Just as he forgot about the audience that he once stood for.

Conclusion

To analyze Tupac Shakur is to explore the life of the young Black male in America. Tupac exemplifies the defiant attitude prevalent among Black males as they try to carve out a niche in a land that was not created with them in mind. Yet, when the figure of resistance meets mainstream success, something has to give. The dichotomous character of Tupac Shakur begins to emerge once the glamour and glitz envelops him, "Tupac experienced his 'ever twoness' as he tried to explain the contradictions of severing ties with Thug Life in jail and re-igniting its brutality on Death Row [Records] upon his return to society."⁵⁶ In his attempt to espouse Thug Life, Shakur instead became the world's most famous gangsta rapper -- turning tales from the hood into made for radio narratives.

Tupac Shakur began his career with the militancy of a Black Panther and the determination of a young Black male thirsty to make a difference for his forgotten peers -- "Keeping It Right." Upon his release from jail, Pac is introduced to a cast of characters: Suge Knight, Snoop Dogg and others, whose

philosophy's are foreign to him. While retaining the undertones of Black self-reliance and self-determination, Tupac allows their character to live through his music. The contrast is even evident in the artwork for his album. While *Me Against the World* finds a pensive Tupac complete with wire-rim glasses. Conversely, *All Eyes on Me* reveals Tupac in a leather vest flaunting the new jewelry given to him by Suge Knight and flashing the Westside 'W' as he crosses his two middle fingers with his pinky and index fingers pointed outward. This illustration is symbolic of Tupac's attempt to "Keep It Real" while among his new friends.

Sadly, because this album was his most successful to date, he is most remembered by his action during this period. His subsequent album, *Makaveli: the don killumanati theory*, marks the returns of the introspective, defiant, Tupac. With sales of over four million, his popularity did not decline⁵⁷ as he reverted back to "Keeping It Right." Tupac Shakur died on September 13, 1996, several weeks before *Makaveli* was released. The last image society had of Tupac were his futile attempts to "Keep It Real." This should not be his legacy. As Marc Antony remarked in *Julius Caesar*, "The evil that men do lives after them. / The good is oft interred with their bones."⁵⁸ Tupac Shakur spent the majority of his life as the icon of resistance for his generation. *All Eyes on Me* was merely a hiccup in his crusade. Tupac Shakur should, and will, be remembered for "Keeping It Right" . . . no one else embodied the struggle like Tupac. This will become more evident through the years as Tupac Shakur lives through the lives he has affected.

"I'm not sayin' I'm gonna rule the world, or I'm gonna change the world, but I guarantee that I will spark the brain that will change the world."

- Tupac Shakur

References

- ¹ Alfred James Robinson, "Tupac Shakur." *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African-American Experience*. Ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Basic Civitas Books) 1698-99. To date Tupac Shakur has had four albums reach number one on Billboard's Top 200 list: *Me Against the World*, *All Eyez on Me*, *Makaveli: the don killumanati theory*, and most recently *Until the End of Time*.
- ² Cathy Scott, *The Killing of Tupac Shakur*. (Las Vegas: Huntington Press, 1997), 83.
- ³ Armond White, *Rebel for the Hell of It*. (Thunder's Mouth Press: New York, 1997), 39.
- ⁴ Armond White, *Rebel for the Hell of It*. (Thunder's Mouth Press: New York, 1997), 40.
- ⁵ Shakur mentions Public Enemy as one of the groups that influenced him, he must have also noticed their album title *Apocalypse 91 . . . The Enemy Strikes Back*.
- ⁶ Editors of Vibe, ed. Tupac Shakur. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 29.
- ⁷ Tupac Shakur, "Words of Wisdom" *2Pacalypse Now* (Interscope Records, 1992).
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Michael Dyson's book *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King Jr.* provides an interesting comparison between Tupac Shakur and Martin Luther King Jr.
- ¹⁰ Armond White, *Rebel for the Hell of It*, (Thunder's Mouth Press: New York, 1997), 25.
- ¹¹ 2Pac, "1 in 21 A Tupac Shakur Story" Panther Power (AIM Records, 1997).
- ¹² Tupac Shakur Interview. 4 March 2001 <<http://www.daveyd.com/afeni.html>>
- ¹³ Tupac Shakur, "Keep Ya Head Up" *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.* (Interscope Records, 1992).
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Editors of Vibe, ed. Tupac Shakur. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 17.
- ¹⁶ Tupac Shakur, "Holler if Ya Hear Me" *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.* (Interscope Records, 1992).
- ¹⁷ Often confused by mainstream media with his mother Afeni, Assata Shakur is not Tupac's biological aunt. Through the extended Panther family, Tupac regarded her as his aunt. While in jail, Tupac spoke out against the Hughes Brothers superficial portrayal of Assata in their movie *Dead Presidents*. Assata Shakur also speaks highly of Tupac in her autobiography, *Assata: An Autobiography*.
- ¹⁸ Tupac Shakur, "Holler if Ya Hear Me" *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.* (Interscope Records, 1992).
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ Tupac would later have a short lived group called Thug Life and also released a compilation album entitled *Thug Life Vol. 1*.
- ²¹ *Thug Immortal*. Videotape. (Xenon Entertainment Group, 1997).
- ²² De La Soul, "The Bizness" *Stakes is High* (Tommy Boy Records, 1996).
- ²³ Michael Dyson "Black Culture and 'The Real.'" *tough love: Cultural Criticism and Familial Observation on the Life and Death of Tupac Shakur*. Ed. Michael Datcher and Kwame Alexander. (Arlington: Blackwords, 1997), 125.
- ²⁴ Mobb Deep, "Quiet Storm" *Murda Muzik* (Loud Records, 1999)
- ²⁵ Prodigy has sickle-cell anemia and among other topics is vocal about his battle against the disease and the need for Blacks to take care of their bodies -- a message not often heard in hip-hop.
- ²⁶ Tupac Shakur Interview. 4 March 2001 < <http://www.daveyd.com/pacinterview.html> >
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ Tupac Shakur, "It Ain't Easy" *Me Against the World* (Interscope Records, 1995).
- ²⁹ Editors of Vibe, ed. Tupac Shakur. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 25.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² Tupac Shakur, "Fuck the World" *Me Against the World* (Interscope Records, 1995).
When Tupac was convicted, he appealed the verdict. His bail was set at three million dollars. An amount he could not afford this. Suge Knight eventually put up 1.4M bond and Tupac then signed to Death Row Records and agreed to record three albums for the label.
- ³³ Michael Datcher. "Troubled Flight" *tough love: Cultural Criticism and Familial Observation on the Life and Death of Tupac Shakur*. Ed. Michael Datcher and Kwame Alexander. (Arlington: Blackwords, 1997), 35.
- ³⁴ Editors of Vibe, ed. Tupac Shakur. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 45.

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- ³⁵ Editors of Vibe, ed. Tupac Shakur. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 51.
- ³⁶ Editors of Vibe, ed. Tupac Shakur. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 50.
- ³⁷ Editors of Vibe, ed. Tupac Shakur. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 80.
- ³⁸ Michael Dyson. *Between God and Gangsta Rap*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 177.
- ³⁹ Editors of Vibe, ed. Tupac Shakur. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 45.
- ⁴⁰ 2Pac. *In His Own Words*. Tupac Shakur and David Cook. (Mecca Records, 1998).
- ⁴¹ Armond White, *Rebel for the Hell of It*, (Thunder's Mouth Press: New York, 1997), 59.
- ⁴² Editors of Vibe, ed. Tupac Shakur. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 71.
- ⁴³ Editors of Vibe, ed. Tupac Shakur. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 132.
- ⁴⁴ Angelo Antwone Williams. "Crossroads Traveler." *tough love: Cultural Criticism and Familial Observation on the Life and Death of Tupac Shakur*. Ed. Michael Datcher and Kwame Alexander. (Arlington: Blackwords, 1997), 57.
- ⁴⁵ Shakur, Tupac. Interview. *Sway*. 4 March 2001 <<http://www.daveyd.com/pacwestin.htm>>
- ⁴⁶ Tupac Shakur, "Ambitionz Az A Ridah" *All Eyez on Me* (Death Row Records, 1995).
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid*.
- ⁴⁸ 2Pac, "Wonder Why They Call You Bitch" *All Eyez on Me* (Death Row Records, 1995).
- ⁴⁹ 2Pac, "How Do U Want It" *All Eyez on Me* (Death Row Records, 1995).
- ⁵⁰ 2Pac, "I Ain't Mad At Cha" *All Eyez on Me* (Death Row Records, 1995).
- ⁵¹ *Ibid*.
- ⁵² Vibe Online. "Inside the Mind of Shakur" *Editors of Vibe* 97-102.
- ⁵³ Tupac Shakur, *The Rose that Grew from Concrete*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 33.
- ⁵⁴ 2Pac, "Only God Can Judge Me" *All Eyez on Me* (Death Row Records, 1995).
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid*.
- ⁵⁶ Angelo Antwone Williams. "Crossroads Traveler." *tough love: Cultural Criticism and Familial Observation on the Life and Death of Tupac Shakur*. Ed. Michael Datcher and Kwame Alexander. (Arlington: Blackwords, 1997), 55.
- ⁵⁷ Since *All Eyez on Me* was a double CD, the artist is awarded one unit for every CD sold. Therefore, the nine million units sold translates to about 4.5 million albums, roughly more than the four million Makaveli Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory tallied.
- ⁵⁸ Shakespeare, William. *Julius Caesar*. Act 3.1.12-13. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).