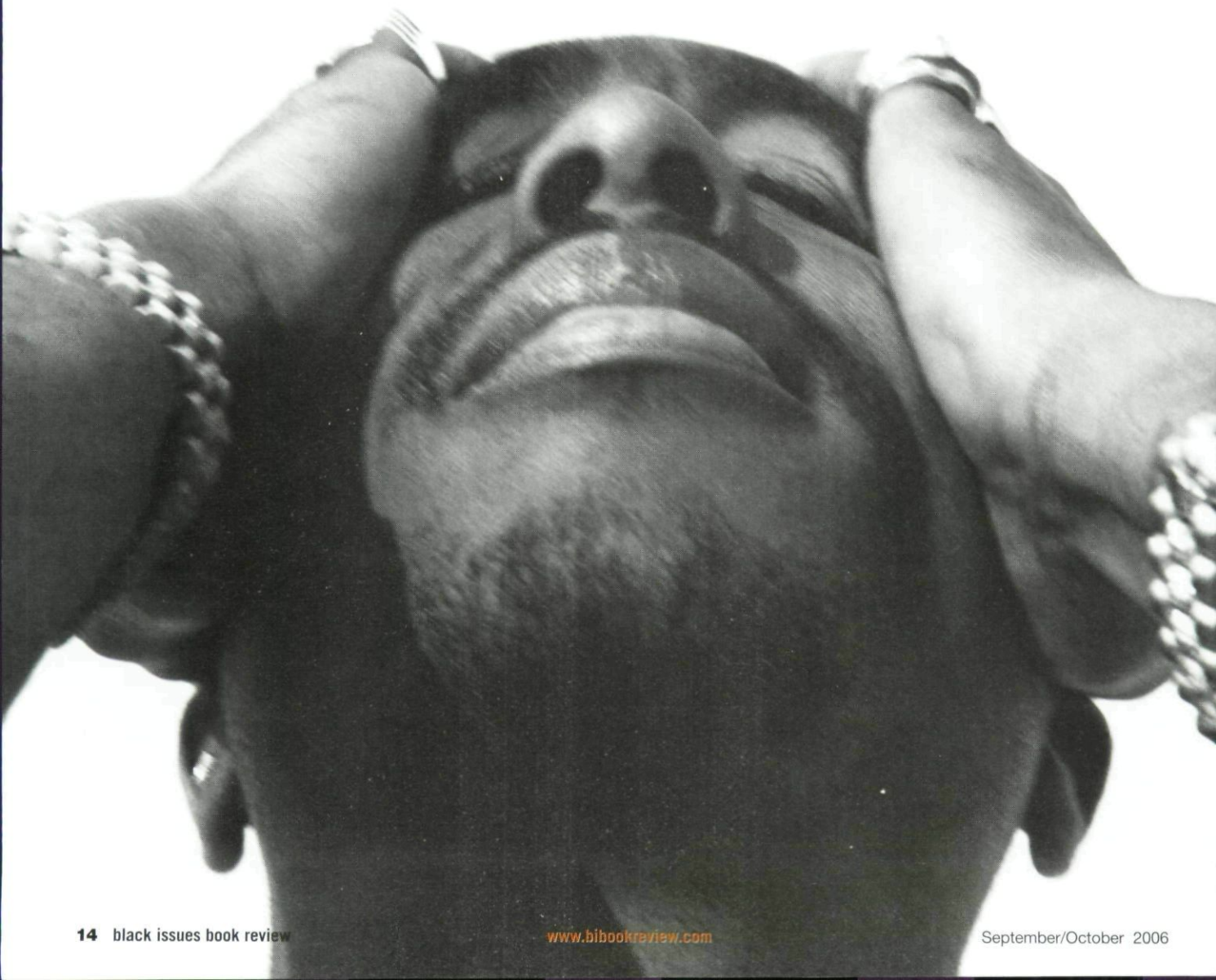
TUPAC

Life Goes On

Why the rapper still appeals to fans and captivates scholars a decade after his death.

BY MICHAEL ERIC DYSON



A FULL DECADE AFTER HIS DEATH, TUPAC SHAKUR HAS THE CULTURE IN A HEADLOCK. HE HAS RELEASED NEARLY TWICE AS MANY ALBUMS DEAD—EIGHT—THAN THE FIVE HE RELEASED WHEN HE WAS ALIVE. HIS POSTHUMOUS RELEASES OFTEN OUTSELL THE EFFORTS OF LIVING ARTISTS AND DEBUT AT THE TOP OF THE MUSIC CHARTS. AS RECENTLY AS 2004, TUPAC'S POSTHUMOUS ALBUM *LOYAL TO THE GAME* BESTED R&B SONGSTRESS ASHANTI'S THIRD LP, *CONCRETE ROSE*, AND WAS TOP IN SALES THE WEEK IT DEBUTED. (INTERESTINGLY ENOUGH, A COLLECTION OF TUPAC'S ADOLESCENT VERSE *THE ROSE THAT GREW FROM CONCRETE* WAS POSTHUMOUSLY PUBLISHED IN 1999.) WHEN HE DREW BREATH AND SPIT VENOM, TUPAC SOLD NEARLY 10 MILLION DISCS; IN DEATH, HE HAS SOLD AT LEAST 25 MILLION MORE. IN 2003, THROUGH THE MIRACLE OF TECHNOLOGY, TUPAC WAS THE LONE STAR OF *TUPAC: RESURRECTION*, A SUCCESSFUL AND MOVING DOCUMENTARY ON HIS ART AND LIFE. IN THE FILM, TUPAC NEARLY TOPPED MOSES' FEAT IN THE BIBLE OF DISCUSSING HIS DEATH IN A WORK OF ART CREATED AFTER HIS DEMISE.

Tupac was the subject in 2004 of a scholarly conference, sponsored by the Hip-Hop Archive at Harvard, that strained to explain his enduring appeal. In 2001, his life and death were explored in a play that debuted in New York's East Village entitled *Up Against the Wind*. He regularly appears on lists of the top money earners among dead artists, alongside Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, and Bob Marley. Tupac is widely regarded as the most influential rapper ever and one of the most important figures in music history. "I put Tupac beyond Shakespeare," says legendary rapper Nas.

Anticipating his legacy, Tupac once boasted to his early benefactor Leila Steinberg—who permitted the fledgling rapper to temporarily live with her family and who served as his first manager—that future generations would analyze his raps the way they do Shakespeare's plays. Tupac's words would prove more prophetic than anyone could have guessed; starting with a class at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1998, a slew of college courses dedicated to studying Tupac's body of work cropped up after his death. In the classroom, students probe every nook and cranny of his storied and controversial existence.

Rhyme and Reason

One of the reasons Tupac still resonates in the culture is his outsized literary ambition. When it came to the themes of his music, Tupac thought big, and often in stark binaries: life and death ("Life Goes On"); love and hate ("Hail Mary"); judgment and forgiveness ("I Ain't Mad at Cha"); joy and pain ("To Live and Die in L.A."); and heaven and hell ("I Wonder If Heaven Got a Ghetto"). He fearlessly, and poetically, explored dimensions of the male psyche neglected by his rap peers. (None of them had dared to, as tenderly or publicly, praise their mothers as Tupac praised his in "Dear Mama.") Tupac squeezed the various vulnerabilities of black life into verse without smothering its defiant hope. In "Unconditional Love," for instance, the narrator acknowledges the "urge to die" but reminds his listeners that "tomorrow comes after the dark / So you will always be in my heart, with unconditional love."

Tupac's language was inflamed with love for the desperately poor. He was a ghetto Dickens who explained the plight of the downtrodden in rebellious rhyme. But like the unconventional literary masters he brought to mind—think Jean Genet meets Sylvia Plath—Tupac was often smeared by critics and pundits who took his words literally. The vibrant imagination that fueled Tupac's gift was often dismissed, perhaps because it was too dark, too dangerous.

As with many of the "troublesome" artists who preceded him, it was Tupac's tolerance for life's gray zones that provided a constant problem for both his critics and those seeking to interpret his work. While he often decried racism and spoke about blacks and whites, he rarely thought in black and white terms. His eager embrace of ethical ambivalence came off to critics as mere hypocrisy. After all, how could the same artist—or, given the unwilling suspension of disbelief, the same man—encourage women to keep their heads up one moment and then quickly pelt them with harsh epithets? How could he proclaim peace while carrying a sword? Obviously, these critics weren't too familiar with the harsh personalities and dualities of the Old Testament. To be sure, Tupac leaned in his lyrics toward that epic tradition. It's clear that his moral codes and conflicts—and, yes, his self-destructive contradictions, too—were strictly biblical.

Maya and Machiavelli

Tupac was enamored of literary creators and characters—from Maya Angelou to Sun Tzu, from Richard Wright's *Native Son* to Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*. They flashed regularly in his titles, lyrics, ideas and allusions. For example, *Still I Rise*, a posthumous album Tupac recorded with his protégés The Outlawz, pinched its ti-

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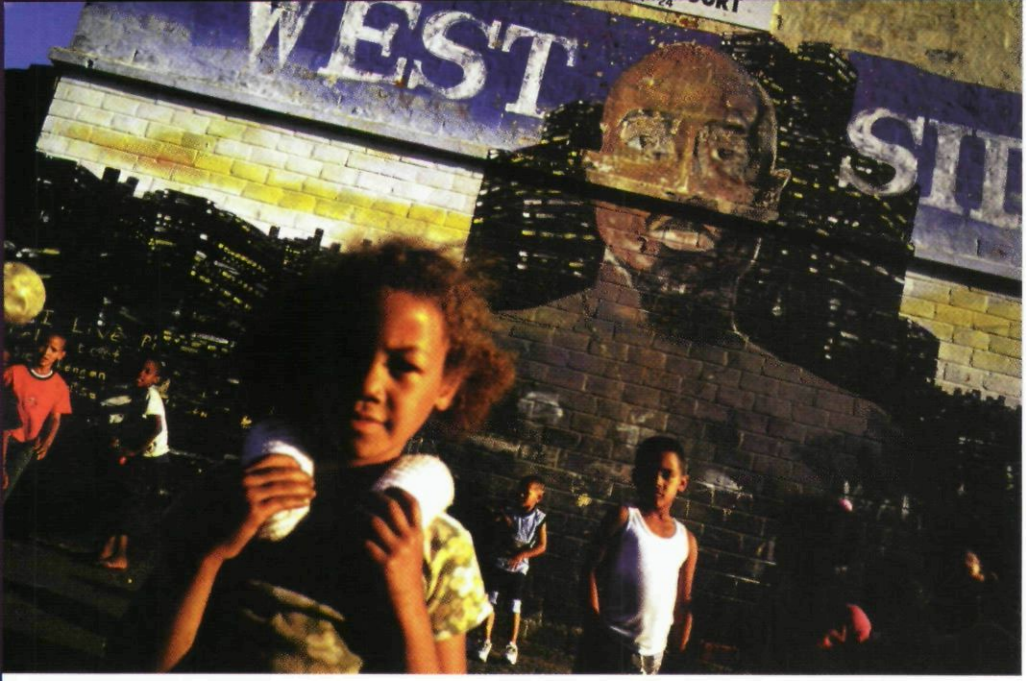

Children playing in front of a graffiti mural of Tupac Shakur in a gang area in Manenberg, outside Cape Town, South Africa, September 2002.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PER-ANDERS PETTERSSON/GETTY IMAGES

tle from Angelou's poem. Legions of Tupac's fans devoured her poetry after giving the record a listen. In Tupac's first posthumous album, *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory*, the protagonist's artistic alter ego is named after Niccolò Machiavelli. The album compelled millions to scour the Italian political theorist's revered work *The Prince* for signs of how Tupac might have faked his death to bolster his influence. Tupac not only got young folk to read; he got them to read classics that educational critics thought they ought to be absorbing. And they read them for the reasons anybody should read anything—to enhance the pleasures and thrills of learning, and to put their knowledge to good use in the real world. By referencing great works of literature, Tupac created the hip-hop version of Oprah's Book Club.

Tupac read books because he was deeply curious about the world around him. He agreed with Socrates that an unexamined life isn't worth living. His mother, a Black Panther, taught him to be skeptical about truth claims, especially where politics is concerned. Tupac's budding erudition only strengthened his suspicion of authority. It makes sense that when he chose to be a rebel, not just any kind of rebellion would do. Tupac didn't just become a thug—he became a metaphysical thug. He was a thinking man's verbal outlaw. It might be hard out here for a pimp, but it's even harder for a gangsta with a brain and half a conscience. In our day, the rapper Nas, arguably, has best carried forth Tupac's restless quest for broad literacy.

Keeping It Real

Of course, those who admire Tupac don't always understand him the first, second, or even third go-round. Many of them surely felt him before they grasped him. They didn't get all the references he spit in his charged soliloquies. But neither do readers of Rita Dove or William Butler Yeats. That may be precisely the reason Tupac remains alive—his future is utterly literary and knowledge-intensive. The more you learn, the more you get what Tupac is up to. That inspires you to keep listening in order to keep hearing what Tupac keeps saying. It spurs repeat listeners to revel in decoding esoteric allusions. (Did a generation weaned on crack and *The Cosby Show* immediately get the reference to murdered Panther Bobby Hutton on "Ghetto Gospel"?)

Of course, such an endeavor includes a self-congratulating gesture: because Tupac is so smart, the more you know about what he's saying, the smarter you must be. The feeling that they are brimming with knowledge dares Tupac's fans to raise their game even more and to learn as much as they can. But in an era when prominent political figures parade their ignorance like Thanksgiving Day floats, the odds are that such learning is neither illusory, nor exaggerated, nor irrelevant. The same black youth culture that is frowned on for allegedly glamorizing dull thought—an allegation not hard to prove in the sort of hip-hop obsessed with materialism, machismo, and misogyny—has also made a hero out of a fallen poet who made deep thinking sexy. His calling card consisted of politics, history and race as much as it consisted of raunchy boudoir talk. And given the sheer volume of Tupac's posthumous output, and the growing catalogue of books about him—there are already more than a dozen in the marketplace, ranging from pictorials to academic treatises, including *Tupac Shakur: The Studio Years, 1989–1996* (Colossus Books, 2005) and the recently released *Tupac Shakur: Legacy* by Jamal Joseph (Atria Books, August 2006), an illustrated biography with rare memorabilia and a CD—Tupac's lyrical and literary immortality is secure.

But it's not just the volume of Tupac's work that makes him irresistible. His magnificent obsession (what it means to be young, black, male and poor in America) guarantees that his eloquent fury is as up to date as, say, the 2006 *New York Times* report that argues that—a drumroll should be inserted here, or better yet a funky drum-machine rhythm that is a staple of hip-hop's sonic force—black males are in crisis! That wasn't news to Tupac's fans. For a while, it was almost the only story they'd been hearing in one guise or another from their beloved griot. While the academic studies cited in the *Times*'s article argue that economic trends left black males behind even as others prospered, Tupac in 1991's "If My Homie Calls" identified one source of suffering—low-wage work without benefits: "My homies is making it elsewhere / Striving, working nine to five with no health care." Tupac took note in 1995 of the rabid incarceration of black men when he lamented in "F*** the World" the plight of "tha young black male / Tryin' to stack bail / And stay away from the packed jails." Though he often assailed racism—"Why do they keep calling me 'nigger?' " he queried in "White Man'z World"—he could be clear-eyed and pitiless in examining the black roots of black ruin: "And they say it's the white man I should fear / But it's my own kind doin' all the killin' here," he rapped in "Only God Can Judge Me."

Besides racism and the crisis of black males, Tupac addressed myriad problems that have tragically gone nowhere: economic inequality, police brutality, racial profiling, teenage motherhood, absentee fathers, false prophets, failed political leadership and state-sponsored violence. Because the issues he addressed are still around, so is the need for his biting commentary—supplying such commentary is a role few other rappers have fulfilled or even can. Tupac spoke of how the government found cash for war but not for the economically strapped, a criticism often directed at the war in Iraq and the lack of response following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

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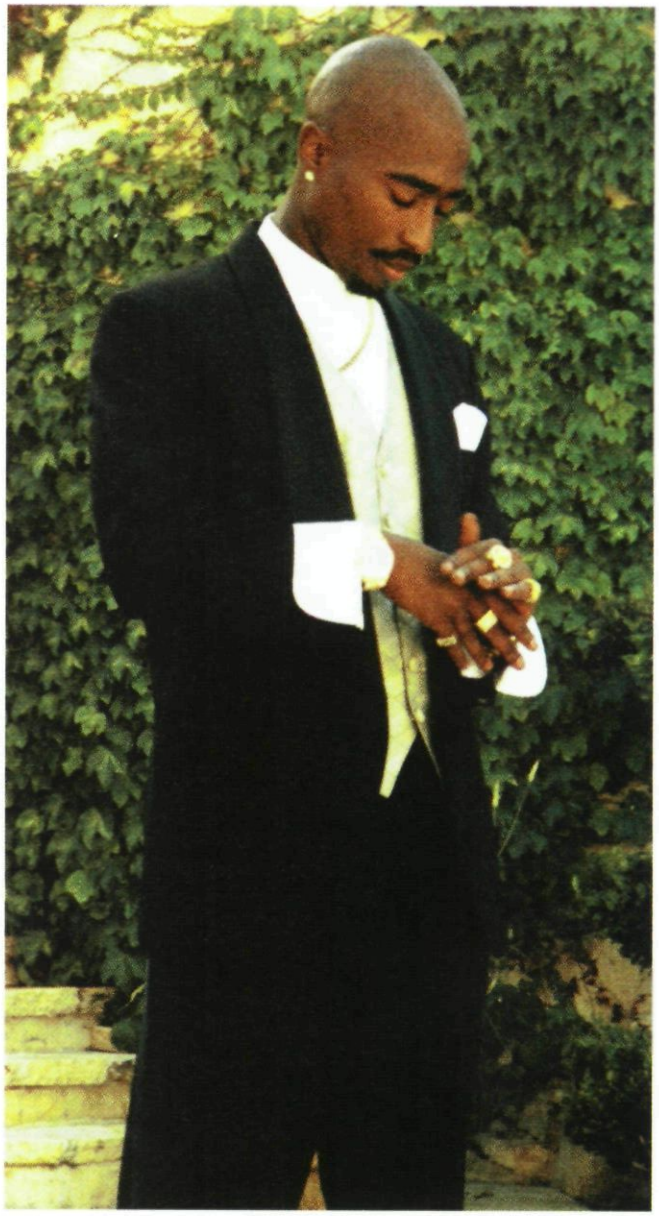
"You know it's funny when it rains it pours / They got money for wars, but can't feed the poor," he declared in "Keep Ya Head Up." And while he could spout deplorable misogyny, Tupac wasn't an uncomplicated sexist. He wavered between paeans to black women and ugly justifications of their degraded standing—or between "Baby Don't Cry" and "Wonda Why They Call U Bitch." As Tupac saluted and scolded black women, he channeled warring tendencies in black life that have hardly subsided. Even his flaws have traction and the potential to instruct. They are, after all, the flaws of the larger society and not just the fleeting preoccupations of a lone man.

A Rapper for Every Man

Perhaps it is Tupac's ability to reach a broad audience within and beyond hip-hop that separates him from most of his peers. He is the consummate all-purpose rapper; he appeals to backpackers and thugs, to the roughnecks and the ladies, and to those who like to party and those who hunger for political relevance. Only Kanye West has even begun to attract such competing constituencies within hip-hop. When he declared that George Bush's fatally slow response to the victims of Hurricane Katrina proved he didn't care about black people, West accepted Tupac's mantle of fearless truth-telling. And while Tupac reveled in extravagant toys and sexual trysts in his raps, he resisted through a Herculean work ethic the tyranny of commercial rap's holy trinity: broads, bling and booze. He relished all three, but he subordinated their pleasures to an artistic demon that drove him to feverish creation.

The reason there's so much to say about Tupac is that there are so many parts of Tupac to say something about. His raps are endlessly recombinant; mix-tapes, bootlegs and a seemingly unquenchable flow of new configurations of Tupac's lyrics testify to his seminal soulfulness. The mix-tape *2Pac: Rap Phenomenon II* features some of Tupac's best-known lyrics over updated beats from more recent rap hits. Most of the songs feature an original verse from current rap stars such as Busta Rhymes and 50 Cent. These pairings allow contemporary rap stars to associate themselves with Tupac's enduring legacy even as they assure that Tupac's canon is both classic and contemporary. Tupac's music can be readily copped on street corners or in corporate music stores—and on rural routes and distant shores—around the globe. He is the peerless ambassador of hip-hop to the world.

There are lots of reasons why Tupac continues to be even more popular in death than he was in life: his thug-revolutionary-artiste persona, which resonates in our occasionally barren pop-artistic epoch; his extraordinary handsomeness and perfectly sculpted physique, which embody his youthfulness and our vain adoration and envy of it; his diligent martyrdom, one that he predicted and thus, in part, precipitated, setting him apart from other fallen stars like Notorious B.I.G., who, despite his lyrics, fought his martyrdom like the plague; and his translation of epic religious ideas into secular eulogies and cautionary tales. Tupac even exacted a revenge of sorts on all those critics who charged him with pathology but lauded the genius of Eminem, a rapper who has carried Tupac's urgent and contradictory moral vision into the next generation.



PHOTOGRAPH BY GOBI

As gifted novelist Zadie Smith argues in her 2002 *Vibe* magazine profile of the rapper, Eminem's "music shares Tupac's obsession with truthfully representing a group of disenfranchised people." But for Eminem, as for Tupac, "being the truth-telling prophet to a generation is troublesome" because, as Smith contends, some "truths are hard and self-destructive" while other truths "are conflicting to the point of schizophrenia."

But what ultimately makes Tupac a legend is the way he made the music he created, and the way he made it easy for others—producers, DJs and rappers—to make something of the poetry he left behind. Even that may not satisfactorily explain his enduring appeal. Perhaps it is because he spoke straight from the heart that we recognized that a troubled prophet had risen to articulate a truth we couldn't possibly live without. While that is certainly not true for all of us, perhaps not even for most of us, it is true for enough of us. For folk like us, Tupac's searing voice is a siren of sanity.

Michael Eric Dyson is a scholar, ordained Baptist minister and author of many books, including Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster *(Basic* Civitas *Books, January 2006) and* Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur *(Basic* Civitas *Books, 2002).*