

**A THUG'S LIFE:
Tupac Shakur's Journey into Pioneering a New Form of
Gangsta Rap Music**

"dying on the inside but lookin fearless on the outside"-Tupac Shakur

M.P.
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September 13th, 1996, Las Vegas, Nevada. Notorious, well known rapper Tupac Shakur, leaves the MGM Grand Hotel after watching boxer Mike Tyson box and beat Bruce Seldon in less than two minutes. Tupac and the head of Death Row Records Suge Knight drive to Knight's home where they decide to go to one of Knight's clubs, Club 662. Tupac and Knight leave Knight's house in a black BMW around 10:30 PM. Tupac is sitting in the passenger's seat, Knight is driving.

They pull up to a stop light at the intersection of Flamingo and Koval. While Knight and Shakur are waiting for the light to turn green a white Cadillac pulls along side the passenger's side. From inside the Cadillac 14 shots are fired toward the black BMW. Tupac is hit four times, once in the arm, twice in the chest, and once in the thigh. Knight suffers minor injuries. Knight calls paramedics, they take Tupac to the University medical center. Tupac dies of his wounds on September 13th at the age of 25. During his short rap career, Tupac Shakur successfully changed the meaning of gangsta rap and put rap on a better path by showing that a gangsta rapper can live a thug's life and reflect a thug's life style in his music but at the same time show his vulnerable side.

In the 1970s the South Bronx was going through major changes. Urban impoverished black and Latino neighborhoods were being destroyed to make way for a new interstate and other structures. In response to years of oppression, discrimination and poverty, black residents in the Bronx, New York started to find ways to cope with the struggles of poor inner-city life. As music historian James Renfro says "rap is the poetry of the streets, directly reflecting and addressing the day-to-day reality of ghetto life."

This was their day-to-day reality: at the end of construction the south Bronx had lost 600,000 manufacturing jobs. By the mid-seventies, average per capita income dropped to

\$2,430, about half of New York's average and 40% of the nation's average. The youth unemployment rate went up to 60% (Jeffries xx). Slumlords took over control of the apartments and exploited the tenants. The people of New York City had abandoned the tenants of the South Bronx. To show the world that inner-city blacks had a voice and that they will not just simply be forgotten and to keep morale up during bad times, some people in the South Bronx created their own music genre. This is where hip hop was born, and from that, rap.

According to the article "Campbell, Clive/DJ Kool Herc", Clive Campbell (better known as DJ Kool Herc) was an aspiring DJ with access to a very powerful sound system. Born in Kingston Jamaica, Campbell moved to the South Bronx at an early age and was exposed to both American and Jamaican music. Influenced by soul, rock, funk, reggae and dancehall music Campbell hosted and dj-ed parties popular with the South Bronx youth.

Campbell did not so much invent hip-hop music but unearthed it. He realized that people did not want to dance to full songs but only certain parts, usually where the sole instruments were percussion. Campbell used two records of the same song and looped the parts that the crowd loved, creating the beatbreak, the background beats in modern day rap music. As he looped these beats, his crew of hype-men (people who helped get the crowd more excited) freestyled rhymes over the mic, creating the style of rapping. Without DJ Kool Herc creating the beatbreaks it would have been very difficult for rappers to have a song sample in the background on loop while they rapped. While DJ Kool Herc was learning how to create beatbreaks, another DJ was diving deeper in music manipulation.

Grandmaster Flash was the first DJ to mix with records by manipulating them backwards and forwards. Born Joseph Saddler, Flash lived in the South Bronx and studied electrical engineering, but his real passion was music. "His knowledge of audio equipment led him to an idea that would revolutionize the way he played music: the turntable would become his instrument" (PIONEERING THE DJ INDUSTRY

SINCE 1974).

Most DJs just used the tone arm, went to certain places and just played from there. Flash was essentially the first DJ to scratch. scratching is when the DJ manipulates the record with his hand to create a scratching noise in a pattern. He created the quick mix theory, which include the techniques such as the double-back, back-door, back-spin, and phasing.

Many artists used these techniques to make local rap songs, but the Sugarhill Gang was the first rap group to make a recorded rap track that was played on the radio. in 1979 they came out with the song was called “Rapper’s Delight” and it was a 14 minute single with the tune of the popular tv show *Good Times* in the background. The song was such a big hit that Sugarhill Gang was signed to a label. This was the start of rap being listened to beyond the Bronx area. Out of this sudden popularity for rap came multiple sub genres, including jazz rap , freestyle rap, and gangsta rap.

While the Sugarhill Gang was on the fast track to popularity, Grandmaster Flash came out with the first popular gritty rap song. “In 1982, Grandmaster Flash recorded “The Message,” which was the first rap song to paint a realistic, dismal and graphic picture of life in the slums of America. Up until now, most rap music contained upbeat, perky and fun messages. This was a landmark recording which paved the way for social and political commentary in rap music” (Rappers Delight). they did a excellent job of painting the picure of ghetto life: “People pissin' on the stairs, you know they just don't care...The bill collectors, they ring my phone And scare my wife when I'm not home Got a bum education, double-digit inflation Can't take the train to the job, there's a strike at the station.” (rapgenius.com)

When “The Message” came out people outside the slums started to realize what was happening in the slums and projects of the South Bronx. Then people within the slums, especially rappers realized that they could use rap music to show others how life is in the

projects and slums. It was also an opportunity for rappers to express their struggles and how they somehow survived a life of poverty, crime and drugs. "Admittedly, [gangsta] rap has its violence, its raw language, and its misogynistic lyrics. However, it is an art form that accurately reports the nuances, pathology and most importantly, resilience of America's best kept secret... the black ghetto" (Jeffries 3).

As Gangsta Rap evolved, the core of gangsta rap, the emotionless and misogynistic views, became more well known to the public and was starting to become a public issue. This is where Tupac enters the scene.

Tupac Amaru Shakur did not have a close to easy childhood. Tupac was born in 1971 in New York City, to Afeni Shakur who was a member of the Black Panther Party. Tupac was literally born in jail while his mother was there on bombing charges. In 1986 Tupac's family moved to Baltimore, Maryland where he enrolled in the Baltimore School for the Arts. When Tupac was 15, he wrote his first rap under the stage name M.C. New York. Things were going good for Tupac until his family moved out of Baltimore and into a small city outside of Oakland, California. Not long after moving to California, around 16 years old, Tupac moved in with his neighbor and started to sell drugs to make money. Tupac was a very troubled child. One of the things that hurt him most was his mother being addicted to crack cocaine and his step-father going to jail for 60 years for his involvement in an armored car robbery (Jeffries xx).

To escape the troubles at home and with himself, Tupac joined the Grammy-nominated rap group Digital Underground in 1990 as a roadie. During Tupac's job as a roadie he worked very hard and eventually it payed off and he was able to do a song with Digital Underground. After that he started to make his own music. After realizing how much he loved to rap he decided to go solo. His first album went public in 1991 called *2pacalypse Now*. The album

mostly showed his gangster side like in the song “Crooked Ass Nigga”; “I got a 9 millimeter Glock pistol... so make your move and act like you wanna flip, I fire 13 shots to pop another clip ... The more I shot, the more muthafuckas drop, and even cops got shot when they rolled up.” most of the songs were about sex, money, drugs and violence but he did start to show his soft side and rap about regrets of the life he lives like in the song “Trapped”; “Over the years I’ve done a lot of growin up, gettin drunk, throwin up... Then I said I had enough, there must be another route, a way out to money and fame, I change my name, play a different game, Tired of being trapped in this vicious cycle, if one more cop harasses me I just might go psycho.” pretty much from the beginning Tupac shows the desire to leave the ghetto and do good with his life.

In 1995 Tupac recorded more songs and came out with a multi-million dollar selling album called *Me Against the World*. After having such a successful album, Tupac released his 4th solo album called *All Eyez on Me*, the album was number 1 on billboard album chart, the album sold five million copies.

Tupac’s thug life style finally caught up to him and on September 7th 1996 Tupac was shot and killed in a drive-by shooting in Las Vegas after leaving a boxing match. Although Tupac was killed he changed rap and especially gangsta rap forever.

Before Tupac most rappers rapped about money, drugs, girls. There was very little emotion in rap. You were considered a wimp and un-thug if you were to talk about things like crying over someone. Thugs DON’T cry. Tupac showed the people that a thug still has feelings and a thug DOES cry.

Tupac was not afraid to show others his soft side. In the song *So Many Tears*, Tupac raps; “so many tears, I’m suicidal, so don’t stand near me, my move is a calculated step ta bring me closer to embrace an early death now there’s nothing left.”

Tupac states that he is depressed and even though he is a thug and lives a thugs life, he is still sad. He says that he crys and that everything he does just makes his due date for death come closer and closer and theres nothing he can do to change it. another example of this sadness is, “and fuck the world cuz im cursed, im having visions of leavin here in a hearse”(So Many Tears). Tupac says that he has a curse and he keeps seeing his death. Tupac really shows how he feels and does not care what people think about him. he raps about his emotions and his weaknesses but somehow he stays within the criteria of a thug. he acknowledges that he was born a thug, he lives like a thug and he will die a thug. It’s the only life he knows. For example, in the song *So Many Tears* he raps; “this life aint for me, I wanna change, but aint no future right for me, im stuck in this game.” At the same time Tupac reminds people that he is still a thug even though he shows his weak side as he states in a interview; “i mean like im not scared to say how i feel. part of being [a thug] is to stand up for your responsibilities and say this is what i do even though i know people are going to hate me” (Jeffries 89). Another example of Tupac thuggish side is his song “Me and My Girlfriend”. he raps;

“I love finger-fucking you, all of a sudden I'm hearing thunder
When you bust a nut, niggas be ducking or taking numbers
Love to watch you at a block party begging for drama
While unleashing on the old-timers...
Talking loud when I tell you be quiet, you move the crowd
Busting rounds, activating a riot. That's why I love you so
No control, down to roll, unleash”

In this song he is using his girlfriend as an analogy for his gun. In the line “I love finger-fucking you” he is saying that he loves to shoot off his gun and that it “turns him on”. This also can be taken as how much he loves to pleasure his girlfriend. “all of a sudden I'm hearing thunder When you bust a nut” Tupac is saying that when he pulls the trigger of his gun it fires and makes a loud noise, this can also mean that when his girlfriend has a orgasm she screams

very loudly because it felt so good. “niggas be ducking or taking numbers”. He is saying that whenever he shoots his gun, other people (niggas) run away and don’t want to die. “Love to watch you at a block party begging for drama While unleashing on the old-timers.” This is just more of Tupac flaunting that he is looking for trouble and looking to start fights.

Tupac is very unique, some how he is able to balance both his sensitive side and show his hard thug side in his music. In his songs that are about social issues or personal issues that you wouldn't hear a gangsta rapper rapping about, Tupac is showing people his “real” side and the person he is and strives to be. If Tupac is such a sensitive nice guy why does he rap about violence, girls and drugs? This is because he is showing people how the ghetto is and what the ghetto is turning him into, he is saying that this is not who I was born to be or what I wanted to do with my life but it’s the way it is in the ghetto and this is why things need to change. let me try and give you a better understanding of Tupac as an average rapper by comparing him to one of the most famous gangsta rappers ever, 50 Cent.

In 50 Cents song “u not like me” he raps about how he is superior to everyone and that everyone wants to be like him but they will never compare to how awesome 50 is. “I teach niggas sign language, that ain’t deaf son, *click* *click* you heard that? That mean RUN”. 50 is ready to kill anyone who stands in his way. “Hoes be like "Fitty, you so witty". “You see me in the hood, I got at least two guns, I carry the Glock, Tony carry my M-1, Hold me down nigga, OGs tryin' to rock me”. Just like with Tupac, 50 doesn't respect og’s or original gangsters or as Tupac put it “old-timers”. To keep to the persona of a thug tupac raps about his disregard of the law.

.“thug life motherfucker crime pays!
let the cops put they lights on, chase me nigga
zigzaggin through the freeway, race me nigga
in a high speed chase with the law

the realest motherfucker that you ever saw”(Jeffries 92)

Tupac raps “thug life motherfucker crime pays!” stating that part of being a thug is having little to no regard for others, especially the cops and that if you fight the law and live a thugs life, you have to pay for it with usually your life or prison. “let the cops put they lights on, chase me nigga, zigzaggin through the freeway, race me nigga, in a high speed chase with the law.” In this line he reiterates that he doesn't stop for anyone, even the cops, just another part of being a thug. “the realist motherfucker that you ever saw.” Tupac then states that he is real and does not front or pretend to be someone he is not. He is saying that he is a thug and will always be a thug, that this is the way he lives and hes not afraid to tell people.

After Tupac's death rap music started to evolve back to its original state of emotionless extremely vulgar music but with the added purely profit gaining aspect. Because of Tupac there are still some mainstream rappers who show their vulnerable side and rap because they care about society and want people to see life in their shoes. Tupac's death actually helped spread his vision of mixing emotions and vulnerability while staying hard and thug. a lot of underground rappers still hold to Tupac's philosophy and purely rap about social issues and their soft side. What would rap be like if Tupac was still alive?

Rap would be in a better place. During Tupac's time is where you can find the most authentic, rap. The problem is that rappers are straying from Tupac's philosophies and are in the rap game just for the money which is corrupting the minds of a lot of inner city youth with thoughts of murder, drugs and seeing women as objects. This essay is meant to challenge the mind and make you think about rap on a more deeper level than just sex, drugs and violence.

Tupac showed a new, better, controversial, challenging side to the genre. Rap is not dead but it is dying. there are still a lot of rappers out there who have not given in to the music

industries and that don't care what the majority wants to here. They rap about what they believe in. Then there are the rappers who do sell themselves to the music industry and have no more meaning in their lyrics They rap to make money, nothing else. These are the rappers that are being played on the radio, these are the rappers that kids hear everyday. Is this what we want the next generation of inner city youth to be like?

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