

G.O.A.

HIP-HOP HEADS LOVE DEBATING. YOU THINK 2PAC WAS THE GREATEST MC OF ALL TIME. YOU THINK HE WAS AN AVERAGE RAPPER WITH LIMITED SKILLS. WELL, YOU'RE BOTH RIGHT. WAIT, WE CAN EXPLAIN. *words kris ex*



When most of us took notice of Tupac Shakur for the first time, he was sitting in royal fashion, rocking African garb and flowing like a b-boy ("Now I clown around when I hang around with the Underground. . .") in the video for Digital Underground's "Same Song." He was at once who we were—badasses of movement, rhythm and words; and who we believed we were—kings and queens of

history, science and knowledge. With the Black-rage-against-the-machine and power-to-the-people leanings of his debut, *2Pacalypse Now*, 'Pac fit the spirit of the times without falling to overbearing pedagogy, condescending militancy, or outright corn. He railed against the evils of AmeriKKKa with a proud Black fist and sagging jeans, talking unity with the same mouth that downed 40's and puffed blunts.

Truth be told, for most of his career, 'Pac was a marginal lyricist. He largely eschewed the use of simile as a creative device. When he did go that route, the results were elementary.

T.



was the embodiment of a picture that would later appear on the inside jacket of Ice Cube's *Death Certificate*. With G's as oversized black gear chilling on one side and a rap-dressed FDI standing sentinel on the other, Cube stood in the middle reading *The Final Call*; the paper's headline read "Unite Or Perish." In the days when 2Pac emerged, Cube was still in his *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted* phase. The nigga we loved to hate had just parted ways with N.W.A, was still rocking a greasy jheri curl, and made a record where he pondered on kicking a girl who may have been pregnant with his child in the belly. Understandably, 'Pac became hip-hop's shining Black prince.

Truth be told, for most of his career, 'Pac was a marginal lyricist. He largely eschewed the use of simile as a creative device. When he did go that route, the results were elementary—he "hustled like a crack fiend," "hit switches like I was fixed with hydraulics." He could never hang with the Holy Trinity of rhyme: Biggie, Jay-Z and Nas. He didn't have Big's ability to construct interlocking rhyme schemes laden with hidden corridors; was no rival for Jigga's deceptively simple wit or word-play; couldn't conjure Esco's sage observations and unique rhyme couplets. For the craft of the matter, the Hot Boys are better line-for-line MCs. Fabolous, who's yet to drop an album, has more inventive



He [2Pac] was strictly about flow, almost to the exclusion of all other tools in the MC arsenal; more about mood and emotion than analogy and imagination. He made rhymes without similes like the Israelites made bricks without straw.



bon mots in his résumé than 'Pac.

Take "Hit 'Em Up," 'Pac's scathing Biggie/Bad Boy diss, for instance. It's one of the most searing, titillating, memorable diss records of all time. But its indelibility lies in the shock value of its name-calling and hits below the belt. Stylistically, it lags leagues behind the studied precision of Common's "Bitch In Yoo," anything in Eminem's war on White rappers, Jay-Z's shots to Ma\$e and Harlem World's Meeno, or Mobb Deep's retaliatory "Drop A Gem On 'Em."

None of this means that 'Pac may not be the greatest MC of all time. As LL Cool

J proved, that crown doesn't necessarily go to the "best" MC; it goes to the one who can make the best argument for wearing it. Think: Would the words of DMX, Ghostface Killah or Noreaga be so damned inviting if those guys weren't X, Ghost and Nore? And, if you ask anyone without a backpack, Canibus is weed, Black Thought is what Malcolm X was on, and Ras Kass is that Ethiopian King Ithi that started dreadlocks? The only MCs with technical skills out the anal and the record sales to match are Biggie, Jay-Z and Eminem.

In terms of hip-hop, 2Pac was



There are parallels for 'Pac's success in other genres of music. In rock 'n roll, The Ramones became heroes through attitude not skill—but are still revered as fathers of punk rock. In R&B, no matter how many ingenues-of-the-moment come and go, Mary J. Blige remains the Queen of Hip-Hop Soul, not by being the most accomplished singer, but because she's, well, just Mary.

Yet 'Pac was turning an artistic corner before his death. He began spitting "spiritual lyrics like the Holy Qu'ran" and moving towards surreal imagery that cooked the Bible in a cauldron under a street lamp. "Have you ever seen a crackhead?" he asked. "That's eternal fire." He drank so much he "swore I saw the Devil in my empty glass of Hennessy." And, while the gun-as-girlfriend exercise "Me And My Girlfriend" lags behind earlier gun metaphors like Nas' "I Gave You Power" and Organized Konfusion's "Stray Bullet," it was a move towards higher creativity.

Given his vigorous work ethic during the last months of his life, 2Pac was experiencing growth in leaps and bounds. With as little as another half year at the rate he was going, he may have well had that greatest of all time title locked down. ♦

As opposed to slick turns of phrase, 'Pac relied on adages, aphorisms, and arrogance. He used vagueness to tap into universal human needs like an accomplished motivational speaker or a great ad campaign. Plan your goals. Just Do It. Ride on your enemies.

(and still does have) big bank—enough to escape scrutiny for his avoidance of time-honored hip-hop staples. Not to say he wasn't talented. He was prodigious. Gifted. He didn't just flow, he roared like whitewater rapids; rained like Exodus 9:23-25. But he was strictly about flow, almost to the exclusion of all other tools in the MC arsenal; more about mood and emotion than analogy and imagination. He made rhymes without similes like the Israelites made bricks without straw.

He tapped into a small garden of ever-green topics and rarely strayed outside of its confines. His early work revolved around loyalty, honor and duty (and women—wayward or otherwise); his later stuff dealt with loyalty, honor and betrayal

(and women—wayward or otherwise). But he mined those sentiments for all they were worth and served them up with verve and spirit. He talked like he believed every word that came out of his mouth. Moreover, he made you believe it and made you believe he believed it. He radiated a sense of concentrated self and indomitable will that infected you. Listening to him was beyond catharsis like ejaculating is beyond urinating.

As opposed to slick turns of phrase, 'Pac relied on adages, aphorisms, and arrogance. He used vagueness to tap into universal human needs like an accomplished motivational speaker or a great ad campaign. Plan your goals. Just Do It. Ride on your enemies.

