



SPIT KICKER

Talkin' 'bout he's the best or *he's* the best, ask many rap fans and they'll say B.I.G.'s the best. One thing that is undisputed, however, is that the Notorious One's flow was second to none. **And we can prove it.**

w o r d s K R I S E X

"My rap flow's militant..."¹ ❖ Let's talk about the intangible. The undefinable, immeasurable stuff of it all—the ether, if you will. The way He was light on His tongue; how the words came out, unforced, unpushed, each taking its time or none at all, depending on what the situation called for. He was a master of that elusive dynamic called Flow. His fluidity was so unparalleled that if He were water, He'd not only have flowed in the Nile, He'd have carried Moses to the Pharaoh's daughter. ❖ There was a high ease to His speech. He simply found the right language and used it. He didn't need esoteric references, polysyllabic words, or über-lyricism to get His point across. To this day, lesser MCs string words one after the other, oblivious to the beat or any intrinsic musicality, but His voice was like the saxophone in the John Coltrane Quartet—the star instrument, but not at the expense of the whole. Take either version of "One More Chance," take "Hypnotize," take "Notorious Thugs," where He proved He could mimic Bone better than the braided Thugs themselves—Flow so nice it could curve straightened speaker wires and warp CDs.>>

1. "Victory" from *NO WAY OUT* by Puff Daddy & The Family, 1997







The Flow was at once godly and ungodly. There was something else to it—something beyond, something cosmic, mystical, some grand design, some supreme intelligence; as if His rhymes were waiting to be typed out, arranged, and beamed into outer space so the universe would know that there was waking life on this blue and green orb. That even in the deepest, darkest, most dilapidated and ignored corners of this globe, human beings possessed the gift of imaginative thought.

A serious nod of appreciation has to be given to Sean Combs' participation in the creation of the Flow. If He is the greatest MC hip-hop has ever seen, it's largely due to Puff's being the shrewdest capitalist the game has ever produced. Puff's incessant pursuit of pop fame and sales informed the choice samples of Diana Ross², Rene & Angela³ and Mtume⁴. And it was within such saccharine grooves that the Flow came to life. He conducted the Flow despite musical setbacks which would mire His so-called competition in trite observations about buckets of ice and nubile princesses in cordoned-off, elevated corners of the club. Oh, He did such things too. He just did them better: "Straight up, honey, really I'm askin'/Most of these niggas think they be mackin'/But they be actin'/Who they attractin' with that line, 'What's your name? What's your sign?'/Soon as he buy that wine I just creep up from behind/And ask what your interests are/Who you be with?/Things to make you smile/What numbers to dial/You gon' be here for a while?/I'm gon' go call my crew/You go call your crew/We can rendezvous at the bar around two."⁵

Puff's sonic choices caused, no, forced the Flow to be that much better. It also forced the content of the Flow to compensate for the fluff. When keys cascaded, basslines got slicky or things otherwise became too friendly to the ears, the Flow retaliated—"Remember when I used to play between yo' legs?/You begged for me to stop because you know where it would head/Straight to yo' mother's bed/Not the Marriott, we be lucky if we find a spot next to yo' sister/Damn, I really missed the/Way she used to rub my back, when I hit that/Way she used to giggle when yo' ass would wiggle"⁶—it got defiant, as if to say, "Play that on the radio."

When Puff wasn't around, things got worse. The Flow was untethered, the message unchecked, the anger unrepressed. "Biggie Smalls is the wickedest/Niggas say I'm pussy/I dare you to stick your dick in this/If I was pussy I'd be filled with syphilis/Herpes, gonorrhoea, chlamydia, getting rid a' ya."⁷

Or: "I'm hard/Jehovah said I was barred from the pearly gates/Fuck him, I didn't want to go to Heaven anyway. . . /Hail Mary, fuck her/I never knew her/I'd probably screw her/And dump her body in the sewer."⁸

But Puff was around a lot. The Svengali behind *Ready To Die*, the auteur behind the legend from whence the Flow would come, Puff crafted the picture which made Him wholly human. He came to us broken, battered, hungry and lost. Unlike other gangstas who were introduced to us successful out the blue, His was a story of determination. We rooted for Him because there was an emotional

investment; we cheered for Him when He made it big because we knew where He came from. "On the drug scene, fuck a football team/Riskin' ruptured spleens by the age of sixteen/Hearin' the coach scream at my lifetime dream, I mean/I wanna blow up/Stack my dough up/So school I didn't show up/It fucked my flow up/Mom said that I should grow up/And check myself/Before I wreck myself, disrespect myself/Put the drugs on the shelf?/Nah, couldn't see it/Scarface, King of New York, I wanna be it/Rap was secondary, money was necessary/Until I got incarcerated—kinda scary."⁹

Puff may have packaged the legend, but the Flow made it real. As a storyteller, He was detail-oriented and emotional, with a keen understanding of the human condition. He could paint a picture with little more than particulars and props. "I can hear sweat trickling down your cheek/Your heartbeat sound like Sasquatch feet/Thundering/Shaking the concrete/Then the shit stop, when I foil the plot/Neighbors call the cops/Said they heard mad shots/Saw me in the drop/Three and a quarter/Slaughter/Electrical tape around the border."¹⁰

With the Flow, it wasn't so much the earth-shattering events, but the little things that happened along the way, and the way those things make you feel. "One day, she put 911 on the pager/Had to call back, whether it's minor or major/No response, the phone just rung/Grab my vest, grab my gun/To find out the problem/When I pulled up, police was on the scene/Had to make the U-turn, make sure my shit was clean/Drove down the block, stashed the burner in the bushes/Stepped to police with the shoves and the pushes/It didn't take long before the tears start/I saw my bitch dead with the gunshot to the heart/And I know it was meant for me/I guess the niggas felt they had to kill the closest one to me/And when I find 'em you life is to an end/They killed my best friend."¹¹

While most of His murderers had somewhat noble motives—mouths to feed, vengeance to mete out, homes to protect—He could play the Flow against itself, creating idiosyncratic characters as memorable as Vincent Vega and Jules Winnfield.¹² From walk-on extras to starring roles, His murder narratives are filled with loose cannons whose being unhinged only made them that much more dangerous and likable. Bit players like dark-skinned Jermaine¹³ and Two Tecs¹⁴ only existed as devices to push the Flow to an end—their misfortunes would serve as catalysts to set the Flow in motion. "He tells me C-Rock just got hit up at the Beacon/I opens up the door, pitiful/Is he in critical?/Retaliation for this one won't be minimal/'Cause I'm a criminal/Way before the rap shit, bust a gat shit/Puff won't even know what happened/If it's done smoothly/Silencers on the Uzi/Stash in the hooptie/My alibi, any cutie/With a booty that done fucked Big Pop/Head spinnin', reminiscin' about my man C-Rock/Somebody's gotta die."¹⁵

As for His marquee actors, the fact that they emerged from their debacles unscathed was usually a mix of stupidity and chutzpah. There was Arizona Ron, the R&B-loving thug who

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2. "Mo Money Mo Problems" from *LIFE AFTER DEATH* by The Notorious B.I.G., 1997
 3. "I Love The Dough," *IBID.*
 4. "Juicy" from *READY TO DIE* by The Notorious B.I.G., 1994
 5. "Big Poppa," *IBID.*
 6. "Fuckin' You Tonight" from *LIFE AFTER DEATH* by The Notorious B.I.G., 1997
 7. Freestyle by The Notorious B.I.G., Mister Cee, 1994
 8. Freestyle by The Notorious B.I.G., Doo Wop, year unknown

9. "Respect" from *READY TO DIE* by The Notorious B.I.G., 1994
 10. "Who Shot Ya" from "Big Poppa" 12-inch by The Notorious B.I.G., 1995
 11. "Me & My Bitch" from *READY TO DIE* by The Notorious B.I.G., 1994
 12. Marsellus Wallace's black-suited killers from Quentin Tarantino's *PULP FICTION*, 1994
 13. "You're Nobody (Til Somebody Kills You)" from *LIFE AFTER DEATH* by The Notorious B.I.G., 1997
 14. "Everyday Struggle" from *READY TO DIE* by The Notorious B.I.G., 1994
 15. "Somebody's Gotta Die" from *LIFE AFTER DEATH* by The Notorious B.I.G., 1997



couldn't seem to get his incendiary liquids straight. "Ron, pass the gasoline, the nigga passed me kerosene/Fuck it, it's flame-able/My hunger is unexplainable/Strike the match/Just what I expected/The dread kid ejected in seconds/And here come two, opposite sexes, one Black, one Malaysian/We in the hallway waitin' patient/As soon as she hit the door we start blastin'/I saw her brains hit the floor/Ron laughin'/I swear to God/I hit Maxi Priest at least twelve times in the chest/Spint around and shot the chink in the breast/She cryin', headshots put her to rest/Pop open the briefcases, nothing but Franklin faces."¹⁶

He used comedy—sometimes with inflection, often without—to calm you down, remind you that it was all just a story; or on the opposite end, as a spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down. "Stuck you for your stash and pissy mattress/Your mom's a actress/Didn't want to show me the safe/It's OK, she was old anyway."¹⁷ With inflection. Joke. "Heartthrob, never/Black and ugly as ever/However/I stay Coogi down to the socks."¹⁸ Medicine.

Lyricaly, He was supposed to represent. The Flow broke rhymes in half, played with numbers, dropped unexpectedly—like bird shit. "Frank White push the Six/Or the Lexus, LS, Four and a half/Bulletproof glass tints if I want some ass/Gon' blast squeeze first/Ask questions last/That's how most of these so-called gangsters pass/At last/A nigga rappin' 'bout blunts and broads/Tits and bras, menage-a-trois/Sex in expensive cars/And still leave you on the pavement/Condo paid for/No car payment/At my arraignment/Note for the plaintiff/Your daughter's tied up in a Brooklyn basement/Face it, not guilty/That's how I

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stay filthy/Richer than Richie, 'til you niggas come and get me."¹⁹

He routinely hopped between chastising opponents with His gangsta image and with His verbal superiority. "Conscious of ya nonsense/In '88 sold more powder than Johnson & Johnson/Tote steel like Bronson/Vigilante/You wanna get on, son, you need to ask me/Ain't no other kings in this rap thing, they sibilings/Nothing but my children/One shot, they disappearin'."²⁰

After the smoke clears, most competitors for the title of World's Greatest nix themselves by having marred their résumés with sub-par material. Nas, Rakim, KRS-One, Kool G Rap, Big Daddy Kane, Slick Rick and Ice Cube can all claim ownership to at least one less-than-stellar effort. (Kris and Rick possibly get passes—Kris has repeatedly played the martyr, sacrificing consumer acceptance in the name of uplifting hip-hop; Rick was behind bars for his two disasters.) The other runners-up have other legacies: Andre 3000 is the poster boy for all things weird and experimental; Black Thought is destined to remain the perpetual underdog; Big Pun is foremost a hero for Latinos; and Eminem, well, be real, he's White (Affirmative Action is a bitch). Jigga may not be better than Him, but he's the closest one.

Let's not forget that we're more comfortable lionizing the dead. 2Pac has easily secured the position of Favorite of all time, while He of the Flow is widely considered the Greatest. These are nigh-universal acknowledgments, extending even to the backpack elite, who were the harshest critics of the Flow and its bent toward millionaire lyricism when He was alive. But His remarkably short career didn't allow Him to get wack, or even to peak. He was on the ascent when the Flow was silenced. And the interlaced word labyrinths on some of His last works only prove He had more Flow to come.

The Flow is dead. Long live the Flow. ♠

16. "Niggas Bleed" from *LIFE AFTER DEATH* by The Notorious B.I.G., 1997
17. "Gettin' Money (The Get Money Remix)" 12-inch by Junior M.A.F.I.A., 1996
18. "One More Chance/Stay With Me" 12-inch by The Notorious B.I.G., 1995

19. "Hypnotize" from *LIFE AFTER DEATH* by The Notorious B.I.G., 1997
20. "Kick in the Door" from *LIFE AFTER DEATH* by The Notorious B.I.G., 1997