



Spring 4-16-2023

## **Genius Amidst Tragedy- Wu Tang, Nas, Biggie, Jay-Z and Tupac's Poetic Portrait of Inner City America in the 1990's**

Mark Naison

## **Genius Amidst Tragedy- Wu Tang, Nas, Biggie, Jay-Z and Tupac's Poetic Portrait of Inner City America in the 1990's by Professor Mark Naison**

"Genius amidst tragedy" is an apt description of some of the great hip hop artists who burst onto the popular music scene from 1992-1996. During that time, when the crack epidemic was peaking, when murder rates in many cities reached an all-time high, and when governments were responding with police practices that would push US incarceration rates to the highest in the world, a group of artists would come up with music that would turn hip hop into great art, leaving us with an unforgettable narrative of life in a time of danger and hardship for young people of color living in communities stripped of resources. Multiple books films and documentaries have been produced about the artists in question- Wu Tang Clan, Nas, Tupac Shakur, Biggie Smalls, and Jay-Z- but as an historian, and as the parent of children who were in their teenage years when these brilliant rappers launched their careers, I want to put their music in a deeper historic context than is often presented in popular culture.

This task is all the more important now, in 2023, when many of the communities they lived and produced music in have been gentrified and look nothing like they did in the 1990's. When you see music videos of Biggie surrounded by crowds of tough looking young black men on Fulton Street in Fort Greene, or Jay Z posing for video shoots with formidable looking project residents in Bed Stuy's Marcy Houses, it important to remember that such scenes could NEVER be duplicated right now- when both neighborhoods are filled with upscale bars and restaurants, patronized by a growing population of hipsters and young professionals, and when police break up any gathering of young men deemed "threatening" to the affluent new arrivals.

Jay-Z, now a billionaire, has been, in recent years, both an architect and a beneficiary of the transformation of once tough, dangerous Brooklyn neighborhoods into hip, upscale communities, but it is important not to forget the world that shaped him as both a hustler and an aspiring rapper, The second verse of one of his most powerful biographical songs "Where I'm From" vividly captures what the Marcy Houses were like in the late 80's and early 90's, before police practices were imposed which:

Made once frightening neighborhoods safe for a growing army of gentrifiers

I'm from the place where the church is the flakiest

And niggas been praying to God so long that they atheist

Where you can't put your vest away

And say you'll wear it tomorrow

'Cause the day after we'll be saying

"Damn, I was just with him yesterday"

I'm a block away from hell

Not enough shots away from stray shells

An ounce away from a triple beam  
Still using a hand-held weight scale  
You're laughing, you know the place well  
Where the liquor stores and the base dwell  
And government? Fuck government! Niggas politick theyselves  
Where we call the cops the A-Team  
'Cause they hop out of vans and spray things  
And life expectancy so low we making out wills at eighteens  
Where how you get rid of guys who step out of line, your rep solidifies  
So tell me when I rap, you think I give a fuck who criticize?  
This world of drug deals and shootouts, of shortened lives, of fortunes made and lost by people still in their teens, is one all the artists I mentioned depicted, with a power rarely equaled by novelists or journalists.

### **Wu Tang Clan**

The first lyricists I will highlight were members of Wu Tang Clan, a group spawned in the housing projects and Black neighborhoods of Staten island, a team of brilliant rappers held together by one of the most talented beat makers and producers in hip hop history, RZA (Robert Fitzgerald Diggs). Many of the rappers in Wu Tang, the best know of whom were Method Man, Raekwon, Ghostface Killa, GZA and O'l Dirty Bastard, had connections to the drug economy and to a black nationalist group with a strong following in New York prisons called The Nations of Gods and Earths and their songs presented poetic narratives of the hardships of poverty and the perils of street life with a dazzling lyrical flow

Their masterpiece, still perhaps the best single window we have to New York in the crack years, was called C.R.E.A.M, and its chorus proclaimed “Cash rules everything around me, CREAM get the money, Dollar Dollar Bill, Y;all.” All of their songs display lyrical virtuosity, and their videos display are filled with a sense of menace, recalling a moment in New York’s history when young men from the hood still ruled the streets in their own neighborhoods and inspired fear in other parts of the city--before police forces were expanded and empowered to take the streets back.

But there is also a conviction in Wu Tang's music, that escape from violence and tragedy is possible, and a hope that their example can inspire others in their neighborhoods to avoid violence and early death. Witness these lines from a song Wu Tang members did with DJ Tony Touch called "The Abduction:

The sound came outta rusted crates  
Surrounded by cobwebs  
Beat smooth enough to slide through like bobsleds  
On a cold white snow, plus with the right flow  
Wu-Tang niggas they shine and make the mic glow

### NAS

The next artist we will look at is Nasir Jones-aka- Nas, who, in 1993, at the age of 19 produced what many think is the greatest single hip hop album ever "Illmatic" Nas, whose father was the jazz musician Olu Dara, was never as deep in the underground economy as most members of Wu Tang, or Biggie and Jay-Z, but he was an unparalleled narrator of life a large NYC public housing project- The Queensbridge Houses- written from the vantage point of a project bench or his apartment window. as well as part of a neighborhood crew. With Beats often derived from jazz samples, Nas was a master storyteller of a world few who didn't live in it could ever imagine- using poetic language that some say resembles the Odyssey. Here are some lines from his classic "New York State of Mind" which describe the chaos around him in Queensbridge.

Inside information keeps large niggas erasin' and their wives basin'  
It drops deep as it does in my breath  
I never sleep, 'cause sleep is the cousin of death  
Beyond the walls of intelligence, life is defined  
I think of crime when I'm in a New York State of Mind

Nas was also one of the first rappers to write about the impact of mass incarceration on Black and Brown communities, which was slowly sweeping up participants in the crack epidemic in enormous numbers. This track "One Love" takes the form of a letter to someone from his crew who finds himself in prison:

What up kid? I know shit is rough doin' your bid  
When the cops came, you shoulda slid to my crib  
But fuck it black, no time for looking back it's done  
Plus congratulations, you know you got a son  
I heard he looks like you, why don't your lady write you?

Told her she should visit, that's when she got hyper

### Biggie Smalls

The next artist, Biggie Smalls, the son of a Jamaican immigrant school teacher who dropped out of high school to pursue life in the drug economy left us with a legacy of unparalleled songs describing what life looked like to someone inside the drug game, as well as the changes that crack wrought in the neighborhoods where it turned life upside down and inside out. His song “This Done Changed” may be the single best description we have in popular culture of how crack changed inner-city working-class neighborhoods like the one Biggie grew up in.

Remember back in the days when niggas had waves

Cazal shades and corn braids?

Pitching pennies, honeys had the high-top jellies

Shooting skelly, motherfuckers was all friendly

Lounging at the barbecues, drinking brews

With the neighborhood crews hanging on the avenues

Turn your pages to 1993

Niggas is getting smoked, G, believe me

Talk slick, you get your neck slit quick

'Cause real street niggas ain't having that shit

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Back in the days our parents used to take care of us

Look at 'em now, they even fuckin' scared of us

Calling the city for help because they can't maintain

Damn, shit done changed

Biggie also has songs, particularly “Ten Crack Commandments” and “Everyday Struggle” which show the unbearable tension experienced by those in the drug economy, a world where no one can be trusted and death is right around the corner, but even in his party anthems like “Hypnotized: and “Juicy” have a tragic element, suggesting that the joy of achieving wealth and fame against the odds is always accompanied by a sense of danger and doom, and in Biggie’s case, a prophetic understanding that he faced an early demise.

## Jay Z

The next artist we will look at is Jay-Z, a protege of Biggie who has produced an incredible body of work that begins in the mid 90's and continues to this day. Jay-Z, like Biggie, was deeply immersed in the crack economy and his first songs, like this one, "Can't Knock the Hustle" were narratives of the dangerous life of the dealer.

You ain't having it? Good, me either

Let's get together and make this whole world believers

At my arraignment, screaming

All these blacks got is sports and entertainment, until we even

Thieving, as long as I'm breathing

Can't knock the way a nigga eating

But Jay-Z, an honor student in elementary school, child of a single mother in Bed Stuy's Marcy Houses, soon expanded his repertoire to include portraits of his entire community, including children trapped in a world they never made with a narrative skill that approached the heights achieved by Nas and Biggie. As he proclaimed in:

“Hard Knock Life”

We live in hard knocks, we don't take over we borrow blocks

Burn 'em down and you can have it back, daddy, I'd rather that

I flow for chicks wishin', they ain't have to strip to pay tuition

I see you vision mama, I put my money the longshots

What made Jay-Z unique, among all his peers, was a relentless determination for success, and an entrepreneurial skill that allowed him to build a music empire, all the while telling stories that recalled where he came from. Jay-Z always saw himself as speaking for those in his community who didn't have his luck or his gifts, that the rest of the society feared and held in contempt, as this brilliant track "Renegade" made with Eminem reveals:

"How you rate music that thugz with nothing relate to it,

I help them see they way through it

Not you, can't stand in my pants, can't walk in my shoes,

bet everything you worth you lose your tie and your shirt

Remember the "you" in this song. It addresses all the people who saw hip hop as vulgar, divisive, violent, a perversion of African American musical and cultural traditions. Jay Z, though perhaps

not as great a poet as Nas, or storyteller as Biggie, has probably done more to ensure that hip hop is recognized as the most powerful youth art form we have as any person living or dead.

### Tupace

The final artist we look at is Tupac Shakur, who to this day casts the longest shadow of all the great artists we are considering. Tupac, the only artist in the group who came from a family of Black Revolutionaries, had a depth and complexity to his music, rooted in a sense of vulnerability rare among his peers, that has made him a global symbol of advocacy for the poor and voiceless comparable in influence to Bob Marley. Tupac, to this day, is revered around the world by everyone who loves hip hop. Globally, he is viewed as hip hop's great martyr figure, seen in almost Christlike fashion, as someone who died to give voice to suffering of the worlds' poor.

Tupac's musical legacy is not uniformly uplifting, nor is his life story. Born to a mother who was a Black Panther, a talented actor and poet who attended art school before dropping out, he was plagued by accusations of rape and sexual assault, of participation in violent altercations and involvement in a deadly feud with Biggie Smalls that ended fatally for both. But though Tupac has plenty of bumping party anthems and songs exalting his sexual prowess and wishing harm to his enemies, he also has songs which describe the suffering of families and communities under duress with unmatched compassion and sensitivity. No rapper has ever tugged at people's heart strings the way Tupac does in these songs like "Dear Mama," "Brenda's Got a Baby" and "My Block," aided by brilliant background beat making.

But the Tupac song that breaks me up every time I hear it, because it captures his divided soul, and the sense of impending doom that hung over him the way it did Biggie, is "Changes." Here, Tupac, sampling a great Bruce Hornsby song, expresses his fear that despite his love for his people, that the changes he hopes will take Black people and the whole country, out of the twin plagues of racism and inequality may never happen, and his conviction that, if they do, he will never live to see it. There is no song like this in the corpus of the other great artists. They never are willing to reveal their fears and doubts the way Tupac does:

I see no changes, wake up in the morning, and I ask myself

Is life worth living, should I blast myself?

I'm tired of bein' poor, and even worse I'm black

My stomach hurts, so I'm lookin' for a purse to snatch

And still I see no changes, can't a brother get a little peace?

There's war in the streets and war in the Middle East

Instead of war on poverty, they got a war on drugs

So the police can bother me

In closing, I just ask you to get some photos of Tupac, whether from videos or album covers, take a close look at Tupac's face, look into his eyes, and think about what you see. And perhaps you will understand why he has become a Global icon, not only to hip hop fans, but to many who long for a more just and equal world.

As someone who saw the ravages of the Crack Epidemic in Brooklyn and Bronx neighborhoods, I will close with this thought: Hundreds of years from now, when people want to understand what life was like in the US in the 1990's in the nation's poorest neighborhoods, they will turn to Wu Tang, Nas, Biggie, Jay-Z and Tupac. At least thus far, we have no books on the era as hard hitting, poetic and insightful as their music.