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Chapter 1: Portraits of the Artists as Young Men

TUPAC

From the womb

JEFF WEISS

to the tomb, Tupac Amaru Shakur was both royalty and outlaw. His first screams shattered no calm on June 16, 1971—one month after his Black Panther mother was acquitted of conspiring to murder New York City cops and dynamite five Midtown department stores, a police precinct, six railroad rights of way, and the New York Botanical Gardens. Even in utero, his soundtrack was the slamming of cells and the yells of the dispossessed. During his embryonic phase, his world was a desolate hollow of hunger pains and pounding gavels.

Black Panther Convention at the Lincoln Memorial, 1970. PHOTOGRAPH BY THOMAS J. O'HALLORAN AND WARREN K. LEFFLER. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Shakur's birth certificate originally read Lesane Parish Crooks, but within thirty-six months he'd been renamed for the last Incan emperor—a rebel beheaded by the Spanish, before thousands gathered in the center of Cuzco in modern-day Peru. The fact that they met similar ends was no accident of irony. From birth, 2Pac was bred for resistance—though not necessarily for the thug life. In fact, 2Pac's rap sheet didn't begin until long after he'd already been famous. Yet his embrace of the outlaw myth was practically chemical instinct. So it goes when your godfather was Geronimo Pratt and your godmother was Assata Shakur, both prominent activists and Black Panthers. While less celebrated than many of her would-be revolutionary peers, Afeni's $100,000 bail was partially footed by Leonard Bernstein and Jane Fonda.

This was the uptown Manhattan of "Radical Chic." The utopian ideals of the '60s had hardened into active resistance in the wake of the assassinations. With Richard Nixon in the White House, Afeni Shakur bounced from job to job and apartment to apartment, initially living off of speaking fees at universities (including one engagement at Harvard). Though she may have briefly burnished the pseudo street cred of the uptown elite, as the '70s progressed Afeni fell prey to hard drugs and empty bank accounts. For all of his identification with the wide-open west, 2Pac spent his formative years in the New York crucible, compressed between couches, in roach-infested apartments and homeless shelters alongside his mom and young sister.

Malcolm X. PHOTOGRAPH BY MARION S. TRIKOSKO / LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Like Biggie, 2Pac was raised in the cradle of hip-hop, during the genre's chief years of gestation. It was the sound of the New York city streets, and young 2Pac was obviously immersed in the 4/4 rhythms and brittle electronic drum machines of the old school. However, it was Blank Panther philosophy and the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* that really galvanized his consciousness. Later on, he claimed that growing up, "Black Power was a lullaby."

Listening to 2Pac's catalog is like staring at an X-Ray—it reveals an astonishingly complex architecture but two-toned coloration. 2Pac leaves no room for equivocation. Holler if you hear him or he will fuck you up. He derives his power from being able to inspire passion in the normally stolid. He is a rap

> "We talk a lot about Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., but it's time to be like them, as strong as them. They were **mortal men like us** and everyone of us can be like them."
> — 2Pac

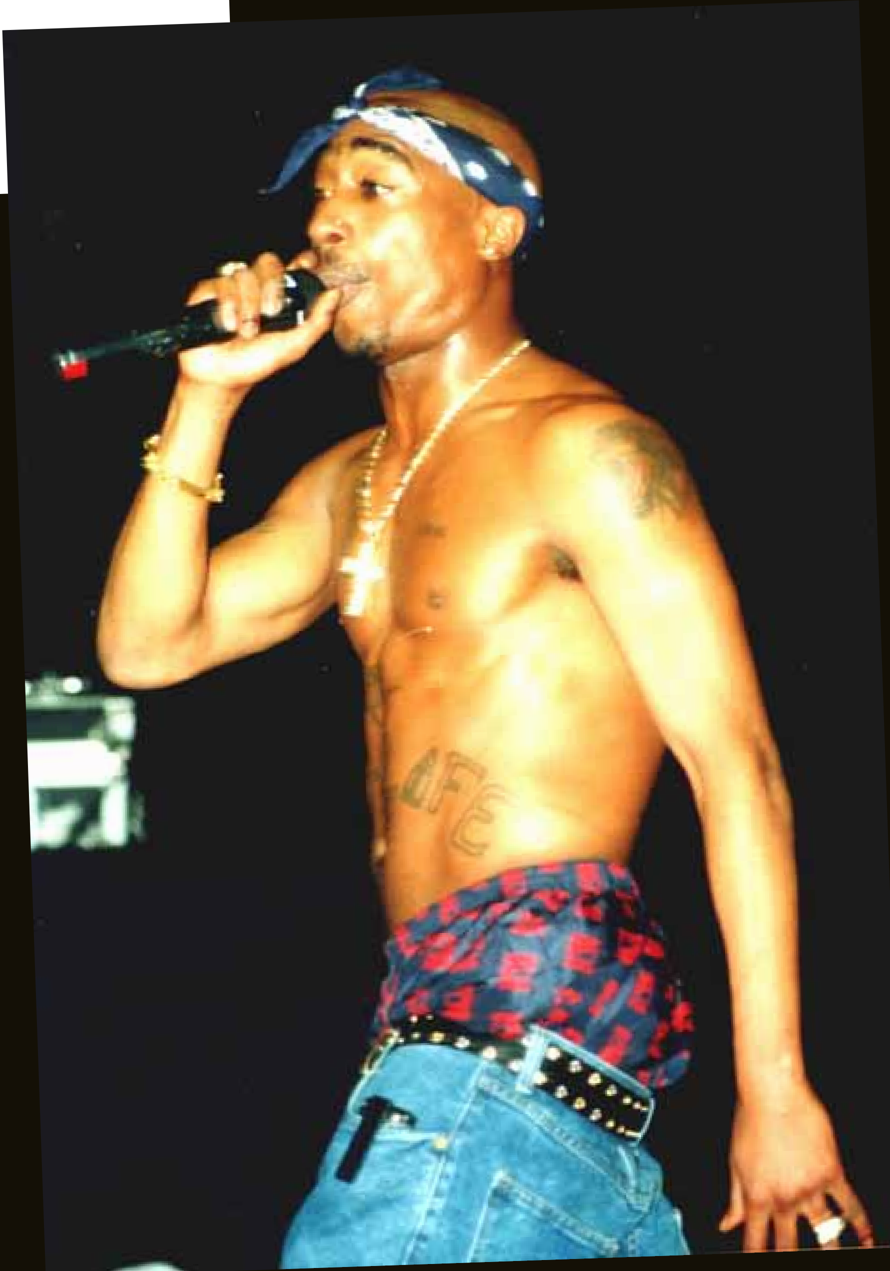
wedge issue, the archetypal sensitive thug, an intellectual who wanted peace and violence and always fell victim to blunted damned paranoia. He could be everything or nothing—whatever angle you want to approach from. So from Venice Beach to sub-Saharan Africa, his face is on t-shirts at every tacky souvenir shop, permanently stained in the pop culture firmament like Jim Morrison, Tony Montana, or Kurt Cobain. Live fast, die young, and leave a gangsta-looking corpse, bullet-riddled for the paparazzi age. He subliminated the struggle of his race, but simplified his message to make it accessible to anyone alienated, isolated, or angry. No one has ever channeled fury quite like 2Pac. He exists not as the patron saint of one region, but as a populist revolutionary, martyred for muddled causes.

Before the self-destruction, there was the vulnerable child with a large smile and long eyelashes, one who loved poetry and theater and learned to cook and sew. His cousins chided him for his delicate features and lack of athletic ability. 2pac was raised in the hood,

but he wasn't a street dude. He was the product of an impoverished and infamous elite: his stepfather Mutulu Shakur was an eccentric radical aligned with the Weathermen, who operated something called the Black Acupuncture Advisory Association of North America out of a brownstone deep uptown.

Eventually, allegedly, Mutulu graduated to robbing armored cars and banks, under the auspices of a criminal organization known as The Family. After five years on the run as one of the FBI's Ten Most Wanted, Shakur was nabbed in 1986. Tupac was fifteen and had been frequently haunted over the last half-decade by visits from federal agents attempting to know whether or not he'd seen his stepfather. His next father figure, Legs, was tied to the powerful gangs of Nicky Barnes, immortalized in *American Gangster.* The shy, quiet boy absorbed the loaded dice swagger of the uptown drug runner, until he too was imprisoned, on charges of credit card fraud. Legs died a few years later in prison, an event that reportedly severely impacted the mercurial 2Pac, who claimed that the "Thug Life" side of his personality came from having refracted the diamond-studded cool of Legs.

2pac in 1990.
PHOTOGRAPH BY RAYMOND BOYD / GETTY IMAGES



The distrust and edge in 2Pac's music might have been amplified by his adult encounters with authority, but those qualities were instilled from day one. His early instability, radical surroundings, and constant transience lent him a tremendous sense of empathy. He understood how to act around intellectuals and high society, but endured a childhood of always being the new kid and forced to impress. By nature, his relationships were ephemeral; he had to be ready to move at any time. And his musical style reflects that: it's restless, rambling, and filled with as many impassioned run-ons as a Kerouac novel. For 2Pac, the writing is in service to the idea.

A chief bright spot of his early years was his apprenticeship in the 127th Street Repertory Ensemble, where he played Travis in a production of *A Raisin in the Sun.* It laid the groundwork for his high school years as a drama major in the Baltimore School of the Performing Arts. At heart, 2Pac was a chameleon, an actor able to assimilate any style or role. While in Baltimore, he rapped under the name MC New York, boasting an image diametrically opposed to the thugged-out rider killed on a broiling night in Las Vegas. In the mid-'80s, 2Pac rocked a high type fade and boho-hippie garb. His best friends were Jada Pinkett and a rich white kid named John Cole. When he was ten years old, 2Pac told a preacher that he wanted to be a revolutionary. By the time he was fifteen, his naturally theatrical instincts guided him to perform the plays of Shakespeare. He was essentially an art-school kid who might have found his way into a top-tier acting program had his mom not opted to leave the state upon receiving an eviction notice.

After 2Pac's death, a collection of poems from his early years surfaced, most of which were composed in Baltimore. Despite their relative lack of literary merit, the poems are a revelatory document of biographical import. In "In the Depths of Solitude" he's "trying to find peace of mind and still preserve my soul," a "young heart with an old soul." Even as a teenager, Shakur was grappling with the ideas of art vs. commerce and the importance of authenticity. They would be the same demons that he'd face after signing with Death Row—how to appease his inner revolutionary core while still living up to the Thug Life image that earned platinum plaques, the total respect of the streets, and enough scarred sensitivity to earn him a female fan base that even LL Cool J had to envy.

Later in the same poem, Shakur writes: "how can I be in the depths of solitude when there are two inside me/this duo within me causes/the perfect opportunity/to learn and live twice as fast/as those who accept simplicity."

By the time he was old enough to drive, 2Pac had knowledge of self. His destiny was already scribbled into an old notebook preserved through countless moves and perennial tumult. There are no analogues for 2Pac in rap who had literary aspirations but gained their gravity not by the words themselves, but through the weary baritone conviction shrouding their vocals. His closest musical antecedent is Jim Morrison, a mix of boorishness, brilliance, and unfiltered emotion.

If you don't believe 2Pac, you can't like 2Pac. If you buy the image, the attitude, and share an instinctual compulsion to smite your enemies in biblical fashion, 2Pac is likely to be your favorite rapper. Ask a group of 2Pac fans why he's the best and they will rarely give you a good answer. You can point to the complexity that has inspired college courses. You can point to the sprawling catalogue that continues to trickle out music even a decade and a half after his death. But the truth is that they have no one tangible idea. Loving 2Pac is like believing in a religion—you have to take a massive leap of faith and believe. His secret is that he hits people on a raw, primal level. His energy was enormous. When you listen to his songs, you know him; you feel his pain and understand the plot points of his story without having to have them spelled out.

Much of 2Pac's catalogue is short on tracks specifically grounded in the details of his upbringing. He's less interested in telling his story than in articulating universal themes of being trapped, vulnerable, vengeful. His story trickles out in asides and rarely through the involute narratives favored by Biggie. Yet many of 2Pac's most powerful songs are narratives, none more lionized than "Dear Mama," the Mother's Day rap anthem that was inducted into the Library of Congress National Recording Registry.

Not only did "Dear Mama" mint a veritable sub-genre of rappers making songs about how much they love their mothers; it remains the gold standard by which all of them are judged. The song plays like a more linear version of his poetry set to music. The rhyme scheme is blood-simple: AABB. The lyrics are direct and uncomplicated, and the story is little different than millions of others. And admittedly, it can be saccharine in its straightforwardness, but it also derives an immense power from this same forthrightness.

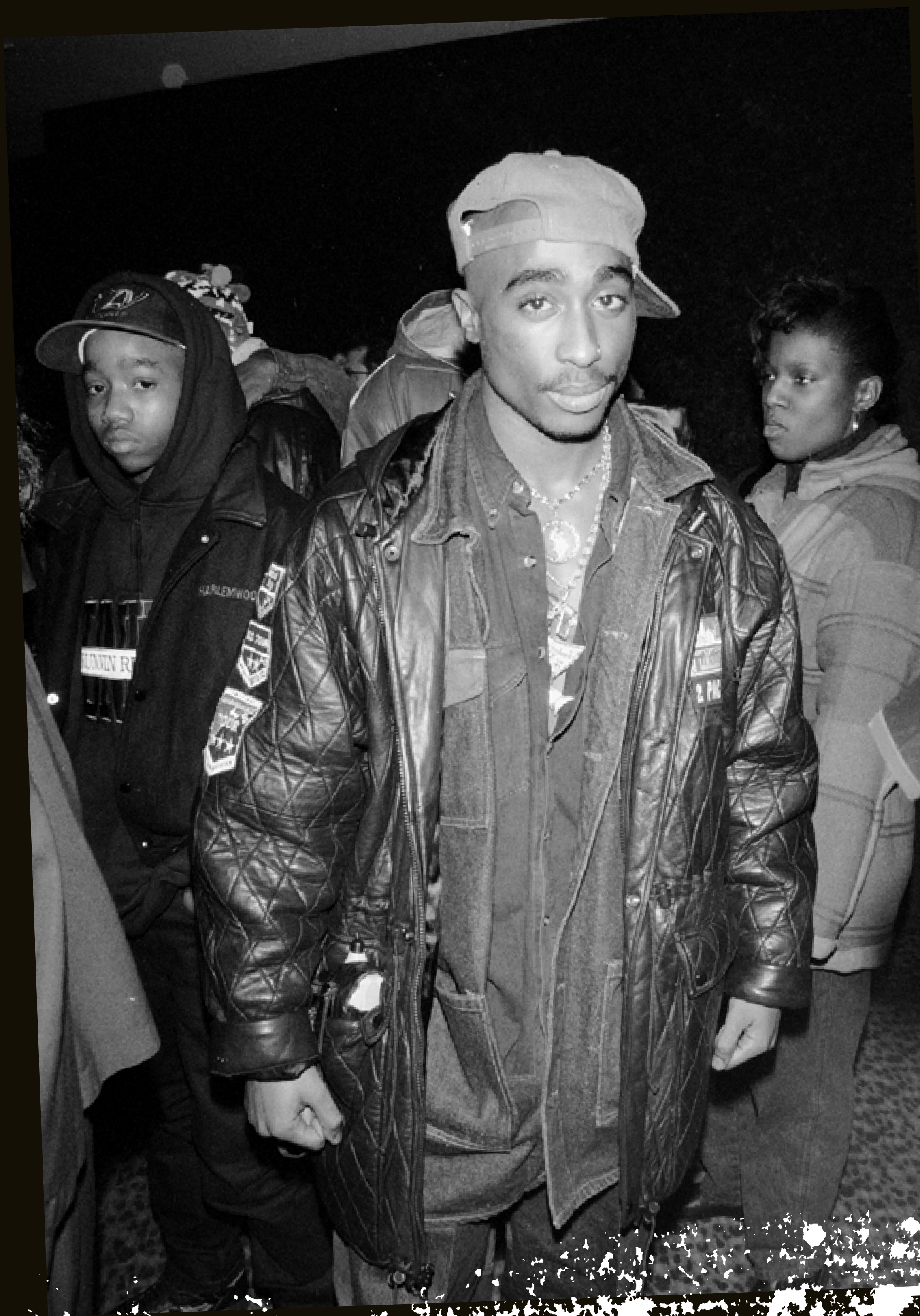
In "Dear Mama" 2Pac is seventeen and fighting with his mom. She kicks him out. She provides for him in spite of her debilitating crack addiction. He recognizes his debt can never be repaid. But it's the way in which he almost sings each bar, hanging on the last syllables like he's tattooing his mom's name on his abdomen—it's a silly but sweet gesture that may seem overwrought, but unlike humor and irony, sincerity and straightforwardness can easily transcend generational ticks and trends.

There are some things you can't fake. Even at the height of their beef, The Notorious B.I.G. declared 2Pac "the realest rapper out." Eliding his revolutionary bloodline, it was 2Pac's sense of conviction that caused him his messianic appeal. When you listen to "Dear Mama," it triggers long-buried sepia home movies of you and your mother, the ones that were never filmed. Suddenly, your own shortcomings are bathed in an unflattering light—you remember a phone call never made, an opportunity only given because of a sacrifice your mother once made. 2Pac will keep you honest.

ANGELES

If you don't believe 2Pac, you can't like 2Pac. If you buy the image, the attitude, and share an instinctual compulsion to smite your enemies in biblical fashion, 2Pac is likely to be your favorite rapper.

LOS



1992.
TIME LIFE PICTURES / GETTY IMAGES

THE NOTORIOUS B.I.G.

First the Indians.

EVAN MCGARVEY

Then the Dutch. Then the English. Then the world. That, in brief order, is the list of New York's owners. And since the seventeenth century, when Peg Leg Pete Stuyvesant built the wall on Wall Street (originally for defense, quickly employed by local merchants as a trading post), each immigrant wave has brought its own heady mix of narratives and languages, of foods and clothes and, well, stuff, to the islands, inlets and parks of the five boroughs. Clichés? Yes. Canards? Hardly. There were decades when half the NYPD was Irish. When the WASP law firms thought "hostile takeovers" were uncouth for men of Exeter and Harvard, the Jewish firms, built by the children of Poland and Russia and Germany, filled that white-collar vacuum. The first generation arrives, labors and dies. It is the children—the children of Irish patrolmen, the children of Chinese restaurant owners on Ludlow, the children of Ghanaian shopkeepers south of Prospect Park—who rechristen the machinery of the concrete jungle each and every New York morning. The children get to live the dream of the city.

Voletta Wallace was born in Jamaica. In 1968, not yet twenty, she immigrated to New York. The country she left behind resembled so many other New York immigrants' homelands—newly independent from its colonial overlord, suffering from the throws of rapid class separation, violent crime and clamped-down social mobility. Yet the New York she found was undergoing changes of its own. MLK, Malcolm X and the Kennedy brothers: all dead. The Tet Offensive: ongoing. Hispanic and Afro-Caribbean immigrants who had arrived in New York since the dawn of the twentieth century had reshaped both the Bronx—

Brooklyn Bridge. PETER D. / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

1995, outside The Notorious B.I.G.'s mother's house (with Junior M.A.F.I.A.). PHOTOGRAPH BY CLARENCE DAVIS / NY DAILY NEWS VIA GETTY IMAGES

where Voletta first arrived—and Brooklyn, where she later settled. The surge of heavy industrial jobs, like those in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, which had employed so many of those men, waned. In Brooklyn, the Edith Wharton-era mansions stood around the corner from row homes and tenements. A better life was there but hardly guaranteed.

Christopher Wallace, son of Voletta and George Latore (also Jamaican-born, decades older than Voletta, harboring a second family in London), was born May, 21, 1972. On the opening track ("Intro") of his debut, 1994's Ready To Die, The Notorious B.I.G. renders his own birth as not just the literal labor pains of his mother (with, ironically enough, Sean Combs providing the voice of the cheerleading father) but through a sort of "dawn of man" soundtrack. The iconic bass ripples of Mayfield's "Superfly" give way to "Rapper's Delight," providing the background for the imagined split of Biggie's parents, a breakup whose envisioned drama does not, at least going off Voletta's interviews, expressly mirror reality. Then Audio Two's "Top Billin'," while Biggie and an associate discuss a soon-to-be disastrous train robbery, then "Tha Shiznit" from Snoop Dogg's already canonical Doggystyle, as Biggie emerges from a jail bid. Here he charts his artistic birth as borne from life experience. Unlike 2pac, Biggie saw no divinity to his genesis. He was the product of his environment: just another kid in Bed-Stuy born to an assiduous, successful immigrant, raised in full-view of New York's luxurious patina, and determined, absolutely determined, to hustle his way to the top.

His debut single "Juicy" provides the foundation for Biggie's self-mythologizing. Worthy of all its plaudits and perpetual ranking as one of the '90's definitive, seminal, and simply best songs, what's compelling in terms of childhood is how different the Biggie of the song's childhood was from Christopher Wallace's. As Voletta Wallace detailed in her extensive interview with Choe Hodari Coker for Unbelievable: The Life, Death and Afterlife of The Notorious B.I.G. (2003, Three Rivers Press), young Christopher's life was far from "sardines for dinner." The doted-upon only child raised on the solidly working-class street of St. James Place in Clinton Hill had, according to Voletta, stereos, a color television, and all three video game systems: Atari, Intellevision and Colecovision. Though far from cushy, his life resembled that of many other only children of New York immigrants: over-protected, perpetually monitored, and aware of each material improvement in the family's status.
He had candy. His mother let him stay inside and watch television all day. As Voletta has testified, she took Christopher back to Jamaica each summer, providing him with something that many of his second-generation immigrant peers lacked: a vivid connection to his ancestral land. He digested Jamaica's sights, stories, rhythms, foods, and ineffable aura. And back home in Brooklyn, he was an '80s baby; he did not have to work in a factory or in a mine. Which makes the spiritual-truths and material-fictions of "Juicy" all the more resonant.

Though far from cushy, [B.I.G's] life resembled that of many other only children of New York immigrants: over-protected, perpetually monitored, and aware of each material improvement in the family's status. He had candy.

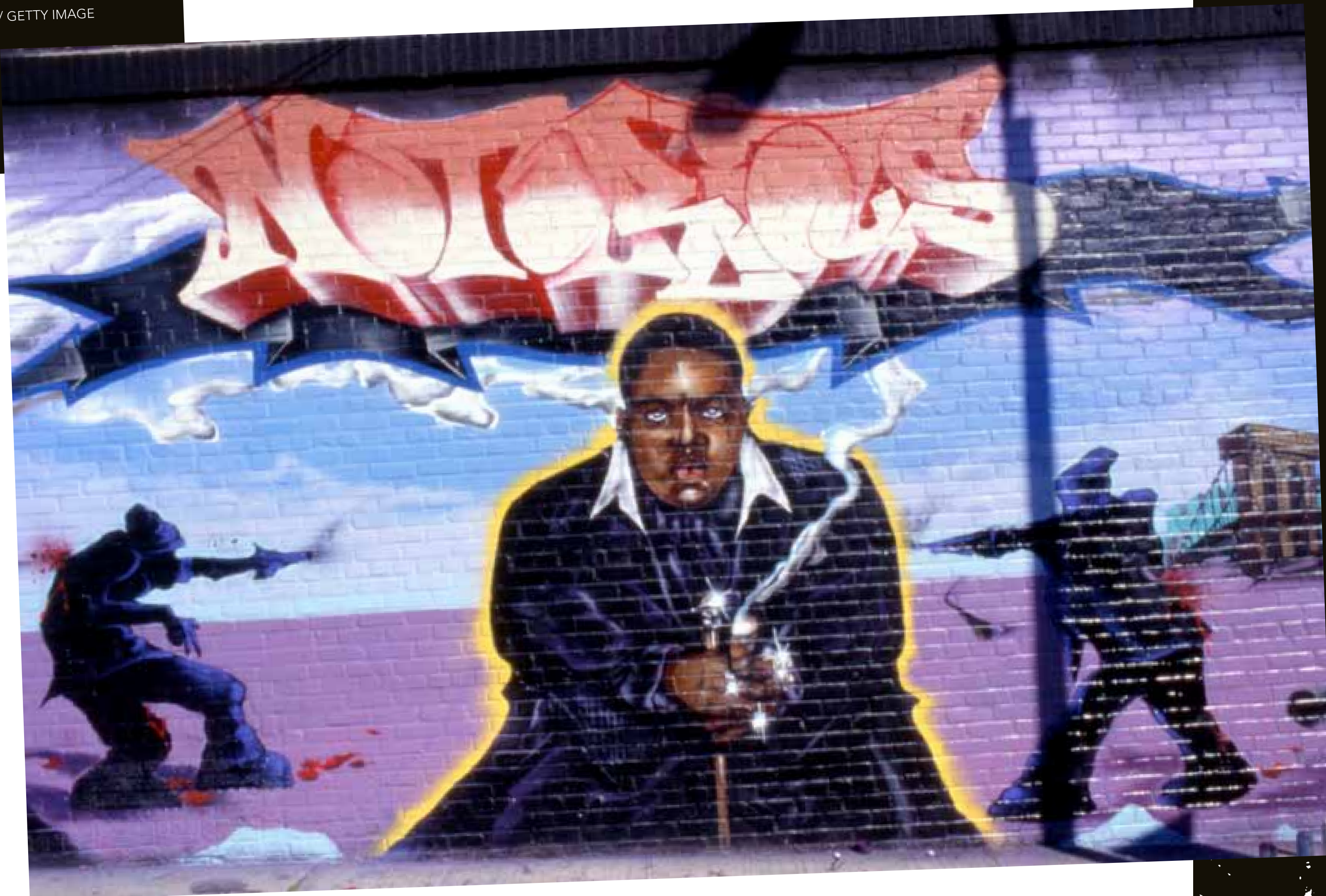
The Notorious B.I.G. with Sean Combs, hours before Biggie's murder, 1997. GETTY IMAGES

The song's first verse gives us a picture of Biggie as fan, as listener: "I used to read *Word Up Magazine*: / Salt 'n' Peppa; Heavy D up in the limousine. / Hanging pictures on my wall, / every Saturday: Rap attack Mr. Magic, Marley Marl. / I let my tape rock till my tape popped…" While the bulk of the song covers Biggie's young adulthood, the time when he was indeed a broke young drug dealer, these opening lines, some of the most evocative childhood lyrics in hip-hop, capture not the birth of the young artist, but the adoration of the listener, the might-be artist gazing at his idols. It's the debut of the listener, not of the rapper. He's quite literally just like us. Again separating himself from 2pac, he sees himself as a boy developing into fan into hustler into man, not as a prophet to be received by the world. Unlike 2pac, who rarely mentioned the names of rappers before him, the first verse explicitly names influences. Like a poet, he evokes not just the muse, but also the names of the old masters who inspired his pursuit of craft. Read those lyrics again. Biggie constructs the routine of the disciple: layering up posters, naming the idols, popping his tapes like a Catholic thumbs a rosary or a Muslim kneels on a kilim. That sense of apprenticeship flashes in other Biggie songs. But they are just flashes. As a lyricist, Biggie often collapsed entire stretches of time into a deft turn of phrase while expanding a single moment into an entire verse, all in the same song. Biggie renders childhood itself—a generalized set of imagined experiences—rather than the actual circumstances of Christopher Wallace. The actual young man becomes Biggie the stick-up wizard, Biggie the hustler, Biggie the lyrical artisan.

Biggie's early life was determined by a shift from the academy—where young Christopher always excelled—to the streets. Like Tupac, Wallace came from a family that deeply valued education. Voletta had a master's degree from Brooklyn College and worked

in early childhood education in New York. Her supremely diligent parenting and the strong parochial options in Brooklyn offered Christopher Wallace his first game to master: school. The oral histories in Coker's *Unbelievable* tell the story of a young prodigy: a sweet, spoiled young boy who could talk a classmate out of his lunch at Quincy-Lexington Open Door Day Care, race through the alphabet and dash off basic arithmetic at the Catholic St. Peter Claver Elementary, and charge his friends a quarter each to use the videogames at his house. Voletta, like countless immigrant mothers before her, feverishly guarded her son against the specter of dangerous neighborhood influences. Like the speaker in "Juicy" watching his rap heroes live a life he could only imagine, Wallace spent his childhood watching the young bucks only a few years older than him dipping into the dark side of adolescence in do-or-die Bed-Stuy. Childhood trains us perhaps most powerfully when we are unaware of its lessons. For a rapper who wielded an eye that peerlessly balanced minute detail and cinematic scope, Brooklyn afternoons, when the fading light glinted off cars, sneakers, windows, puddles, and faces, supplied a trove of images for the ambitious young man trapped watching it all from his mother's stoop. Observant children become artists. They learn from youth that details compose the world. The lonely, insular life of

Mural in the Bronx, 1997. PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID CORIO / REDFERNS / GETTY IMAGE



the only child creates craving for the image and the system. Soon enough the system of childhood, the school, would give way to the system of adolescence—the street.

The soft yellows and stately blues of his parochial school uniforms would soon became old relics. Biggie had attended the private middle school Queen of All Saints School and the famed Bishop Loughlin Memorial High School (Rudy Giuliani's alma mater). For Voletta, who worked two jobs to keep them in the comfortable spot on St. James and keep Christopher in private school, this was the track, the itinerary of education, achievement, and success for which so many New York immigrants thirsted. Her son saw things differently. The street life of Brooklyn and its hypnotic material features—fresh clothes, street hustles, hints of fast, unlimited wealth—spoke to her son like a new language. And he could not study that language in the docile, lawyer/teacher/CPA factory of Brooklyn's private schools. Biggie requested a transfer to Westinghouse High School (now the George Westinghouse Career & Technical Education High School), a nearby P.S. outpost. The little prince of St. James Place would get his wish to mix with the rabble of his generation and to live that much closer to street level. The school became a catalyst for long-simmering trends. His attitude shifted from fresh to defiant. He challenged teachers and coasted on his natural gift for rhetoric, rhyme and mathematics. His burning desire for stuff—money, clothes, and general material ease—supplanted his scholarly gifts. Voletta hoped he might become an artist one day; as a boy Christopher would replicate pictures he saw with a nearly perfect freehand sketch. The prestigious Pratt Institute was blocks away from the family home. But Biggie picked up his true calling through the osmosis of the streets. Now a young adolescent coming of age in the throws of the Reagan era, Biggie saw that there was one way, and one way only, that the young men around him were getting the Polo, Adidas, Lacoste and gold fronts. New York, like L.A., Chicago, Miami and D.C., belonged to crack cocaine. The gates of childhood swung shut behind Biggie. The crack game would bring Christopher Wallace the stripes of adulthood and of authenticity he so craved. His mother's immigrant wishes for the success of her child were to be subverted. The canvas on which Biggie would first work would be the street, and the tight Brooklyn childhood that his mother worked so hard to give him would rupture into the world at large.

Perhaps the fullest record of this moment appears during "Sky's The Limit" from his tragically posthumous, magisterial Life After Death double album. Here, unlike on "Juicy," Biggie supplies images of a childhood that more accurately matches his own experience. He portrays himself as a young man fueled by material desire, going so far as to forge his own faux luxury-brand polo shirts, "sewing tigers on my shirt, and alligators. / You wanna see the inside? I see ya later." The song opens with an imagined convocation from his "mother," before the mother's prologue turns into the voice of the artist as a master of ceremonies introducing himself. The psychological imagery is rich. As Biggie closes the first verse, itself a elegy for young adolescent idealism and pratfalls (people do, in fact, realize that the speaker's shirts are fakes), he turns from the simple, stable childhood pleasure of friends sharing snacks to the tenuous relationships that exist around a young drug dealer: "I mean loyalty: niggas bought me milks at lunch. / Them milks was chocolate; the cookies, butter crunch… / In here, eyes crossed from blue and white dust / Pass the blunt." Childhood was over. All was but prologue.