

Tough Love: Kwame Alexander Remembers Tupac

September 11, 2016 6:34 AM ET
Heard on [Weekend Edition Sunday](#)
KWAME ALEXANDER

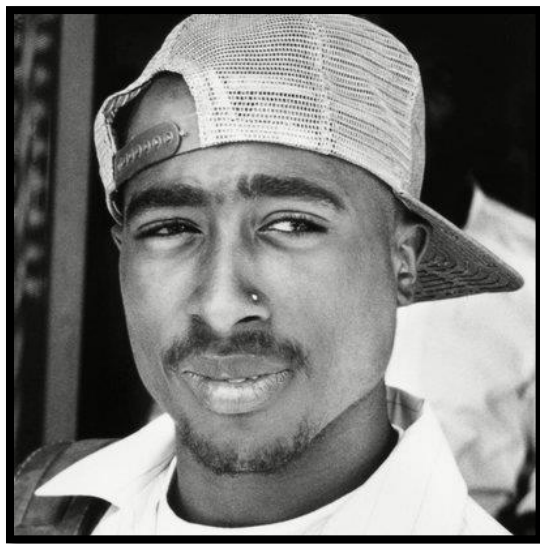


Tupac Shakur attends a New York club in 1994. The rapper died two years later, in September 1996.

Steve Eichner/Getty Images

Tupac Shakur was shot four times in a drive-by shooting in Las Vegas on Sept. 7, 1996, and died six days later. He was 25. To mark the 20th anniversary of the rapper's death, poet and author Kwame Alexander has this original commentary. Hear Alexander read the piece at the audio link above.

Tupac Shakur was an enigma — a puzzle many of us could never piece together, but enjoyed trying, a confusing amalgam of profound art and troubled reality. But he was ours. He presented himself like a gift offering: no ribbons, no bows, no paper. He came in a plain box and he came opened — *Me Against The World*. And I think we embraced him for that, much in the same way we embraced James Dean and [Nina Simone](#) and [Miles Davis](#), wild and free and honest — cultural icons with startling contradictions who not only narrated the wonders and the woes of our world; they literally changed it.



THE RECORD

[20 Years Ago, Tupac Broke Through](#)

We were both born at the inception of rap music, amidst the rampant racism and police brutality of 1970s New York City. Hip-hop was young people's resistance. It gave us words and beats to better understand the world, ourselves; to turn pain into joy, chaos into community. These were the times that birthed Tupac. And by the early '90s, when rap music was exploding, he was primed to become its most charismatic and contradictory spokesperson.

His was a short life, with a long, complex legacy left behind. But leaving doesn't always mean you're gone. I visit schools every week, and when I ask students to name their favorite rapper, some say [Kendrick Lamar](#), a few say [Eminem](#) — but many say Tupac. They quote lyrics from "Letter 2 My Unborn" and "California Love." They've seen *Juice and Poetic Justice*, his breakout movies, where he seemed to own the camera so brilliantly that it became hard to know where the characters ended and Tupac began. "The unwillingness to let go of Tupac Shakur," says Kierna Mayo, former editor-in-chief of *Ebony* magazine, "rests not so much in the tragedy of his sudden death, but in the very significance of his tumultuous life."

Michael Datcher, a writer in Los Angeles, and I edited an anthology about the life of Tupac. We called it *Tough Love*, because we were passionate about his brilliance, but clear-eyed in our understanding of where he fell short. "He was in part playing out the cards dealt to him, extending and experimenting with the script he was handed at birth," writes Michael Eric Dyson. "Some of his most brilliant raps are about those cards and that script — poverty, ghetto life, the narrow choices for black men, the malevolent neglect of a racist society."



BOOKS

[Kwame Alexander: How To Get Kids Hooked On Books? 'Use Poetry'](#)

Writing about his problematic relationships with women (Shakur served nine months in prison for sexual assault). Tupac walked a tightrope — between rampage and reflection, between bane and beauty. He was the seventh son, living what W.E.B. DuBois called a double consciousness: one day, nihilistic rampage, the next, compassionate reflection.

Tupac Shakur captivated me, us: his voice, his rebelliousness, his confidence, his poetry. I spent a weekend with him, in 1992 — Charleston, S.C. I fashioned myself a concert promoter; Pac was my first booking. On the way to the venue, my teenage, wannabe-rapper brother, Ade, played his demo tape for Tupac. Way past cool and hyped for the big show, Tupac patiently listened and then extolled the virtues of education over the music business. *Stay in school, little brother*, he said, with that infectious smile. *Be a black genius*.

If only Tupac Shakur had lived long enough for us to see more of his.

TRANSCRIPT

RACHEL MARTIN, HOST:

This Tuesday marks 20 years since Tupac Shakur was killed after a drive-by shooting in Las Vegas. He was a musician, a poet, a record producer and an actor who has sold more than 75 million albums worldwide. Today, Tupac Shakur's life and artistry continue to resonate with fans. Among them, author Kwame Alexander.

KWAME ALEXANDER: Tupac Shakur was an enigma, a puzzle many of us could never piece together but enjoyed trying, a confusing amalgam of profound art and troubled reality. But he was ours. He presented himself like a gift offering - no ribbons, no bows, no paper. He came in a plain box and he came opened - "Me Against The World." And I think we embraced him for that much in the same way we embraced James Dean and Nina Simone and Miles Davis, wild and free and honest - cultural icons with startling contradictions who not only narrated the wonders and the woes of our world. They literally changed it.

2PAC: (Rapping) Come on, come on. 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 being poor and even worse, I'm black. My stomach hurts, so I'm looking for a purse to snatch. Cops give...

ALEXANDER: We were both born at the inception of rap music amidst the rampant racism and police brutality of 1970s New York City. Hip-hop was young people's resistance. It gave us words and beats to better understand the world, ourselves, to turn pain into joy, chaos into community. These were the times that birthed Tupac. And by the early '90s, when rap music was exploding, he was primed to become its most charismatic and contradictory spokesperson.

His was a short life with a long, complex legacy left behind. But leaving doesn't always mean you're gone. I visit schools every week. And when I ask students to name their favorite rapper some say Kendrick Lamar, a few say Eminem, but many say Tupac. They quote lyrics from "Letter 2 My Unborn" and "California Love." They've seen "Juice" and "Poetic Justice," his breakout movies where he seemed to own the camera so brilliantly that it became hard to know where the characters ended and Tupac began.

The unwillingness to let go of Tupac Shakur, says Kierna Mayo, former editor-in-chief of Ebony magazine, rests not so much in the tragedy of his sudden death but in the very significance of his tumultuous life.

2PAC: (Singing) California knows how to party. California knows how to party. In the city of LA, in the city of good old Watts.

ALEXANDER: Michael Datcher, a writer in Los Angeles, and I edited an anthology about the life of Tupac. We called it "Tough Love" because we were passionate about his brilliance but clear-eyed in our understanding of where he fell short. (Reading) He was in part playing out the cards dealt to him, extending and experimenting with the script he was handed at birth. Some of his most brilliant raps are about those cards and that script - poverty, ghetto life, the narrowed choices for black men, the malevolent neglect of a racist society - Michael Eric Dyson. Shakur served nine months in prison for sexual assault. Tupac walked a tightrope between rampage and reflection, between bane and beauty.

2PAC: (Rapping) And now my son's getting older and older and cold from having the world on his shoulders. While the rich kids is driving Benz, I'm still trying to hold on to surviving friends. And it's crazy, it seems it'll never let up, but please you've got to keep your head up.

ALEXANDER: Tupac Shakur captivated me, us - his voice, his rebelliousness, his confidence, his poetry. I spent a weekend with him in 1992, Charleston, S.C. I fashioned myself a concert promoter. 'Pac was my first booking. On the way to the venue, my teenage wannabe brother, Ade, played his demo tape for Tupac. Way past cool and hyped for the big show, he patiently listened, then extolled the virtues of education over the music business. Stay in school, little brother, Tupac said with that infectious smile. Be a black genius. If only Tupac Shakur had lived long enough for us to see more of his.

MARTIN: Author Kwame Alexander. His most recent young adult novel is called "Booked."

2PAC: (Rapping) I should've seen you was trouble right from the start. Taught me so many lessons, how not to mess with broken hearts. So many questions. When this began, we was the perfect match. Perhaps we had some problems but we working at it. And now the arguments are getting loud. I want to stay, but I can't help from walking out just a little way. Just take my hand and understand. If you could see I never planned to be a man, it just wasn't me. But now I'm searching for commitment in other arms. I want to shelter you from harm. Don't be alarmed.

MARTIN: Our theme music was written by BJ Leiderman.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "CHANGES")

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "CALIFORNIA LOVE")

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "KEEP YA HEAD UP")

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "DO FOR LOVE")

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