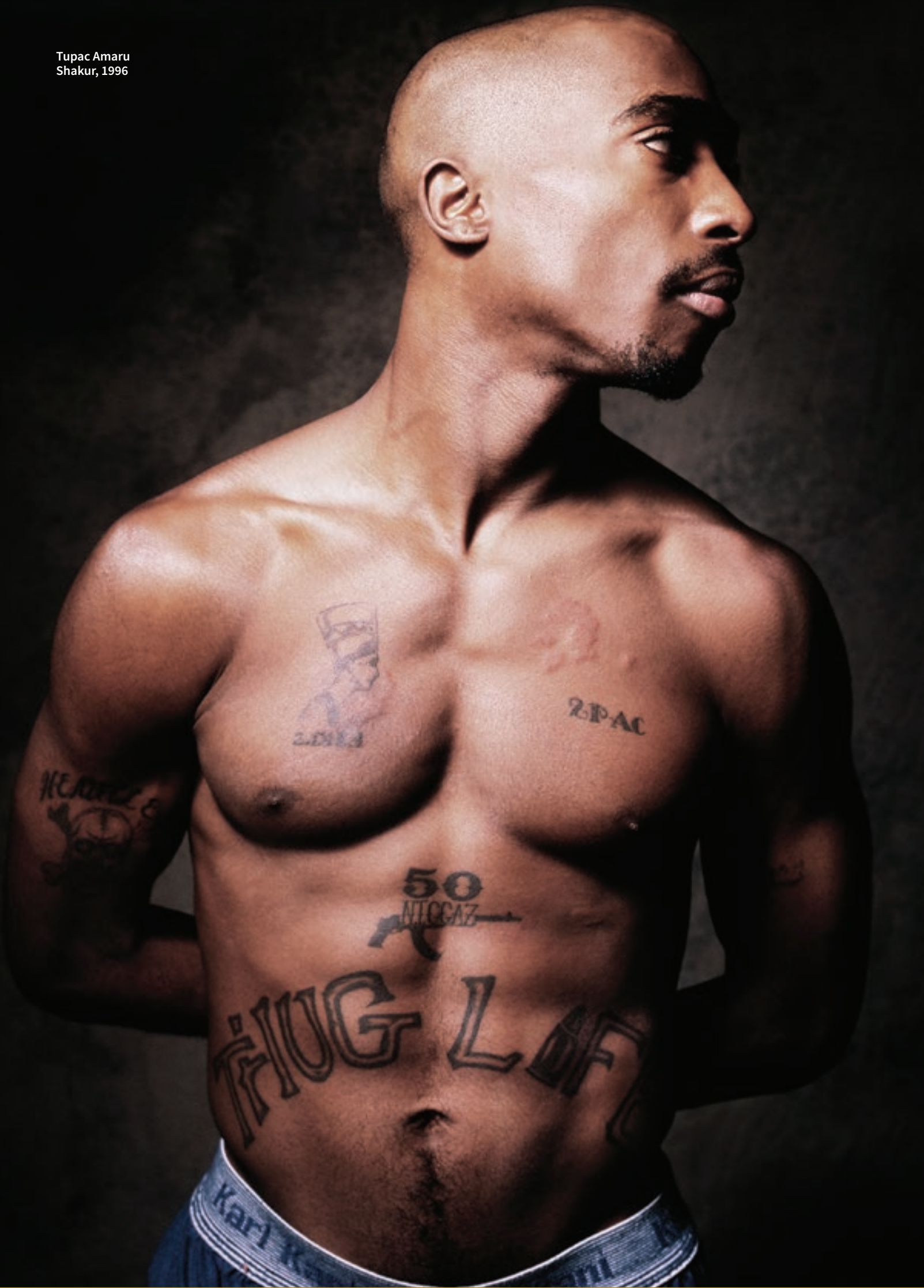


Tupac Amaru
Shakur, 1996



Tupac Shakur

**RAPPER. ACTOR. ACTIVIST.
THUG. POET. REBEL. VISIONARY.**

BY ALAN LIGHT

Tupac was a lightning rod, a screen onto which millions of people projected their feelings about rap, about race, and about the young black man in America. He may be a legend, but he's hardly a hero. Many young listeners looked up to him, but he himself often seemed to be searching for a leader. ¶ Though his recording career lasted just five years, Tupac Amaru Shakur (1971–1996) is one of the most popular artists in history, with over seventy-five million records sold worldwide. More than half of his eleven studio albums sold over three million copies in the United States. Both *All Eyez on Me* (1996) and *Greatest Hits* have been certified diamond, surpassing the ten million mark and placing them among the top-selling albums of all time. Tonight, his enormous impact on global culture is being recognized as he becomes the first solo rapper ever inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

A smile and a salute, 1993



Tupac's legacy has only deepened since his death. His embrace of contradiction, and the intensely personal story told in some of his rhymes, were clear inspirations for MCs such as Eminem, J. Cole, and 50 Cent, who said that "every rapper who grew up in the nineties owes something to Tupac." His image as both political revolutionary and uncompromising badass has elevated him to a symbolic stature rivaling Bob Marley or Marvin Gaye – to the point that if you go around the world and ask people to name a rapper, the most common name you'll hear is his.

"Tupac keeps you searching, even now, for the line between him and the him he put out there for you to see," wrote journalist Danyel Smith soon after his murder, "for the line between being and acting, between how one rolls through life and how one rocks the microphone."

As influential as his music was, Tupac was also respected for his work in film. His performances in *Juice*, *Poetic Justice*, *Above the Rim*, and other movies captured his raw charisma and revealed a powerful screen presence. His posthumously published book of poetry, *The Rose That Grew From Concrete*, has sold hundreds of thousands of copies, and illustrates Tupac's blossoming literary talent and ambition.

Tupac Shakur was born into a world of street politics and economic struggle. His mother, Afeni, was a leader in the Black Panthers, a member of the Panther 21 group arrested in 1969. While pregnant, she acted as her own attorney in the trial. She was eventually acquitted of all charges, and Tupac was born just weeks after her release.

Growing up in Harlem and the Bronx, Tupac read constantly, wrote poetry, and dreamed of becoming an

actor. At age 13, he played Travis in *A Raisin in the Sun* at the Apollo Theater during a fundraiser performance for Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign. Soon after, he and his family moved to Baltimore, where he lived in two different worlds. During the day, he studied theater, ballet, and music at the prestigious Baltimore School for the Arts. But each night, he returned home to a neighborhood ravaged by crime and poverty.

Intent on escaping Baltimore's violence, his family relocated to Marin City, California, when Tupac was 17. He hooked up with the popular Bay Area rap crew Digital Underground, starting as a roadie and backup dancer, and eventually worked his way up to contributing a verse to the 1991 hit "Same Song," his recorded debut. It was a frothy first taste – "Now I clown around when I hang around with the Underground" – but it was also a step into a spotlight he would never leave.

The very first rapper to sign with Interscope Records, Tupac saw his first solo album, *2Pacalypse Now*, arrive in late 1991 and generate both acclaim and controversy. Though the single "Brenda's Got a Baby" demonstrated his empathy and conscience, the album's unsparing examinations of street violence and police harassment led to a public condemnation by Vice President Dan Quayle. He secured his larger-than-life outlaw status when he shot two off-duty policemen during an altercation in Atlanta and walked away without being prosecuted.

This tension would continue to play out over the next five years, as Tupac's popularity escalated and his life grew increasingly tumultuous. In 1993, *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.*, including the hits "Keep Ya Head Up" and "I Get Around," became his first platinum release. Two years later, following *Thug Life: Volume 1* (recorded with Thug Life, his group of five MC's),



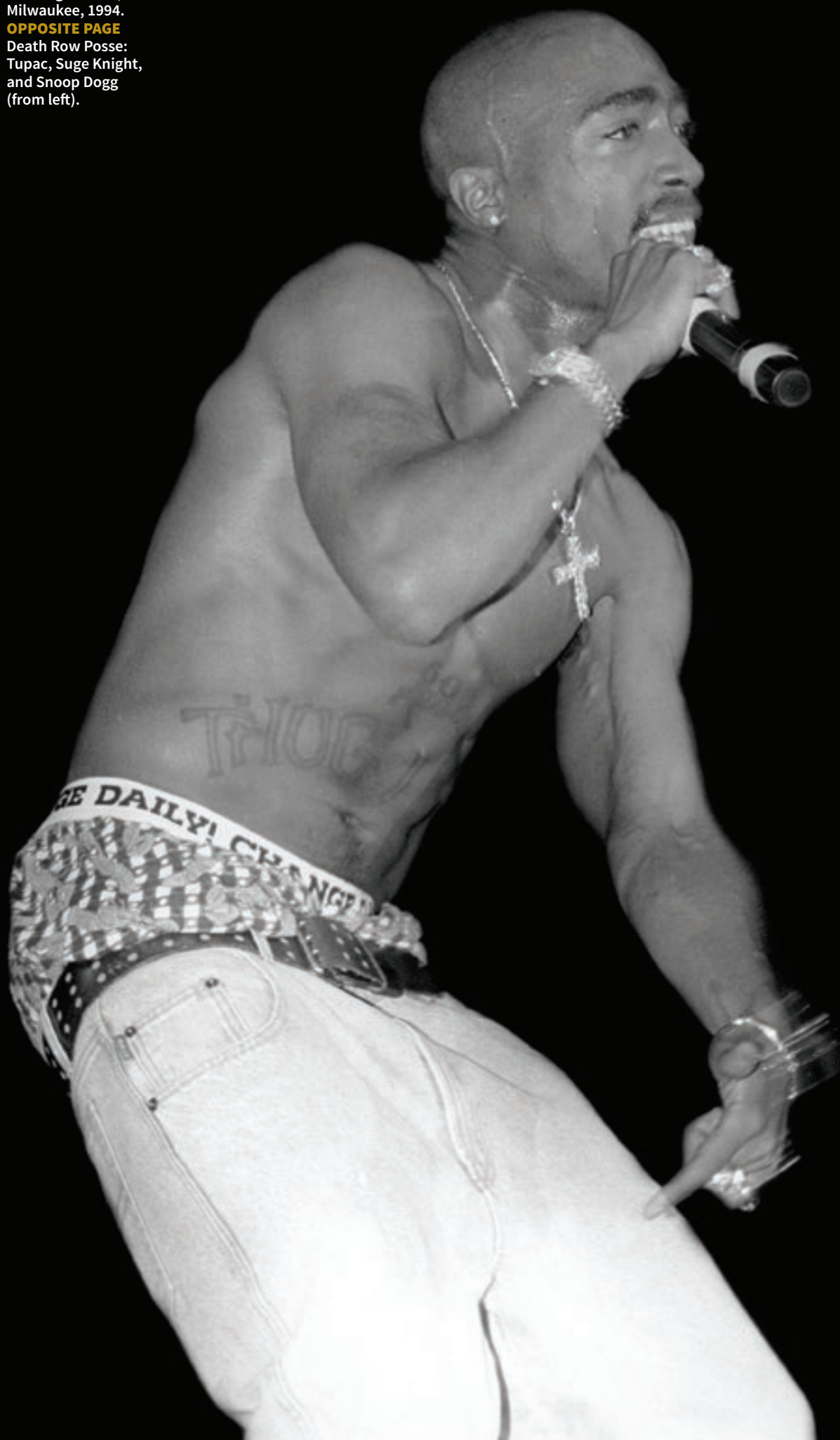
Onstage with Digital Underground, Chicago, 1991

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Working the mic,
Milwaukee, 1994.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Death Row Posse:
Tupac, Suge Knight,
and Snoop Dogg
(from left).

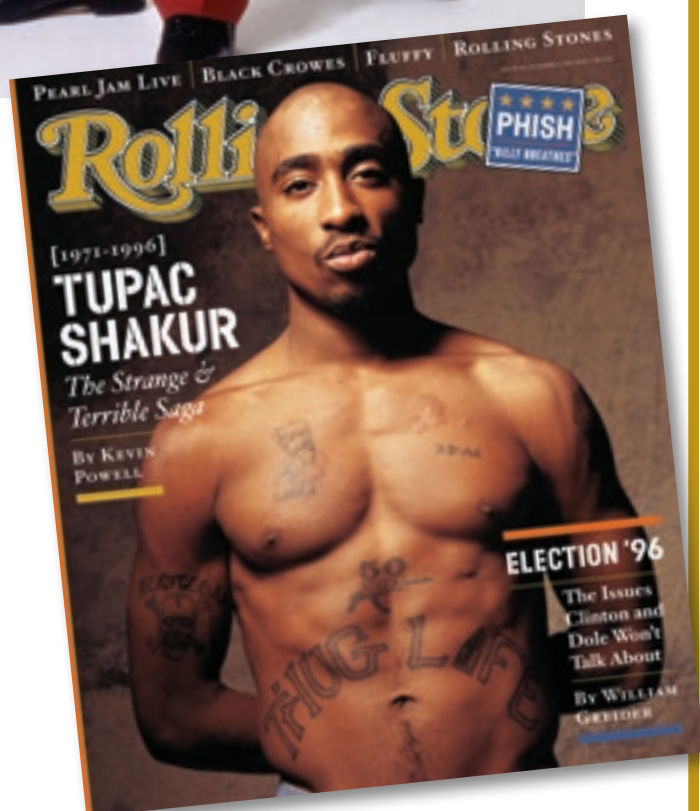


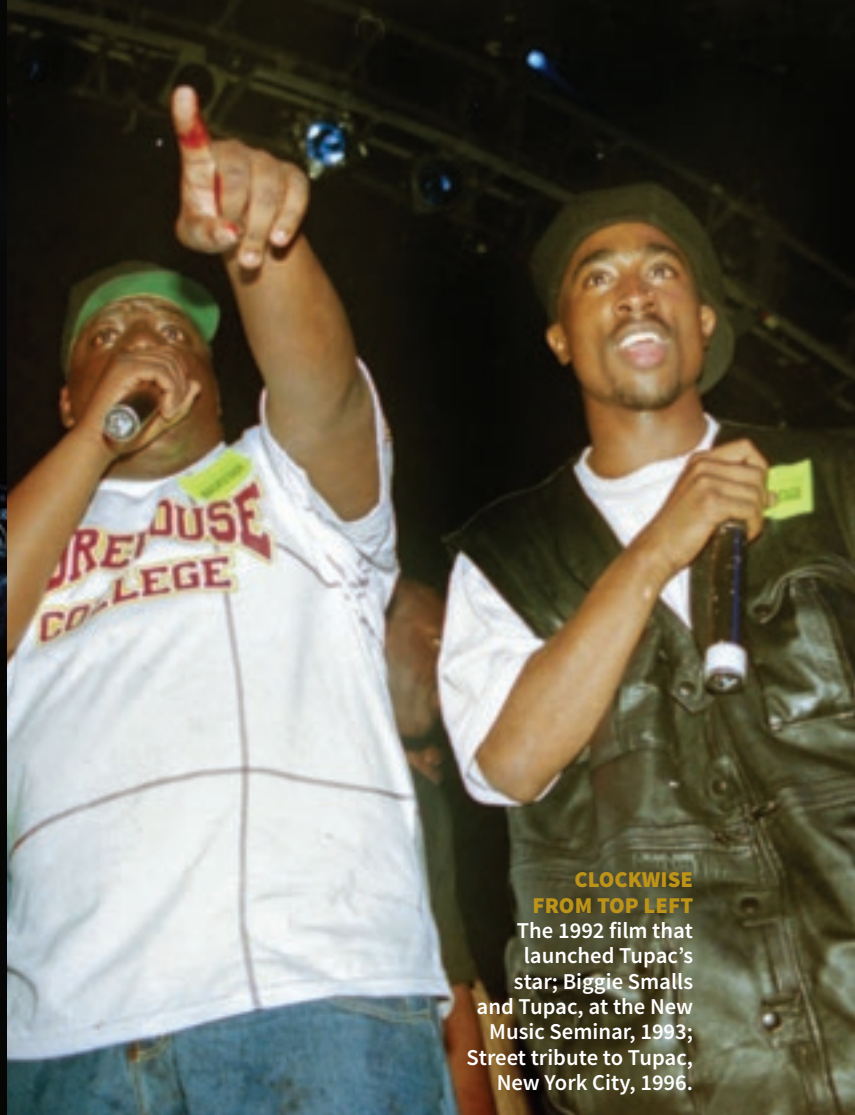


the more somber and reflective *Me Against the World* reached Number One on the album charts and was nominated for two Grammys. The dual sides of Tupac – his life and his art – were becoming almost unbearably tangled: “Dear Mama,” about his troubled but loving relationship with his mother, was a hit at the same time that he was arrested yet again (acquitted of sodomy and weapons charges, but found guilty of sexual abuse) and incarcerated.

“Tupac made people uncomfortable,” wrote Smith. “At his best, he called blacks and whites alike out on their complicity in a despicable system. He made thuggery-as-resistance appealing, urged us to be loud and wild and reckless. He was not trying to ‘rise above’ the way things are. He was not trying to ‘be better.’ No one ever said what would happen if folks got tired of aspiring to dignity; Tupac showed one way it already is. ‘I love it when they fear me,’ he said. But more truly, he loved not fearing them. He was free when he didn’t give a fuck about anything, including continuing his own life, when he felt like the world – for a change – was his.”

Things got even bigger and more out of control after Suge Knight bailed Tupac out of jail, and Death Row





CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP LEFT
The 1992 film that
launched Tupac's
star; Biggie Smalls
and Tupac, at the New
Music Seminar, 1993;
Street tribute to Tupac,
New York City, 1996.



“Every time I speak, I want the truth to come out.”

Selected Discography



2PACALYPSE NOW
Interscope 1991



**STRICTLY 4 MY
N.I.G.G.A.Z.**
Interscope 1993



**ME AGAINST THE
WORLD**
Interscope 1995



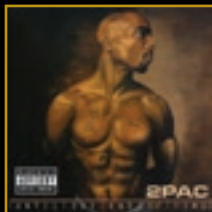
ALL EYEZ ON ME
Death Row/Interscope
1996



**THE DON
KILLUMINATI: THE 7
DAY THEORY**
Death Row/Makaveli
1996



**R U STILL DOWN?
(REMEMBER ME)**
Amaru/Jive 1997



UNTIL THE END OF TIME
Amaru/Death Row/
Interscope 2001



BETTER DAYZ
Amaru/Death Row/
Interscope 2002



LOYAL TO THE GAME
Amaru/Interscope 2004



PAC'S LIFE
Amaru/Interscope 2006

Records took over his recording contract. The East Coast-born Tupac became the most vocal loyalist in the beef between Death Row and Bad Boy Records (most notably and distastefully on the brutal disc track “Hit ‘Em Up,” which opened with him telling the Notorious B.I.G., “I fucked your bitch, you fat motherfucker”), and tainted his final days with the specter of a nasty coastal rivalry. It cranked up the drama, though, and in 1996, *All Eyez on Me* became Tupac’s best-selling album, spawning five singles, including two Number One hits, “California Love” and “How Do U Want It.”

Then, on September 13, 1996, at the height of his phenomenal success, Tupac’s life was cut short in a drive-by shooting in Las Vegas. He was 25. The shooting remains unsolved.

Despite the tragedy – or, in some awful ways, because of it – Tupac’s music catalog continued to grow, thanks to a significant cache of unreleased songs. His final recordings, a set of dark, paranoid tracks banged out in under a week, were released less than two months after his death, with the title *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory* (which planted the seeds for numerous rumors and whispers that he was actually still alive and hiding out somewhere). But whether out of creative obsession or label pressure, he had always recorded at a relentless pace, eventually amassing enough music for an additional seven studio albums, including the multiplatinum releases *R U Still Down? (Remember Me)*, *Until the End of Time*, and the double-disc *Better Dayz*.

Two decades after his death, appreciation has only deepened for the lasting impact of Tupac’s music. In 2003, his story was told in the Academy Award-nominated documentary *Tupac: Resurrection*, and his songs were the basis for the Broadway musical *Holler If Ya Hear Me*. The Library of Congress added “Dear Mama” to the National Recording Registry in 2010, and even the Vatican featured “Changes” on its official playlist. A selection of his lyrics is featured in the Smithsonian’s new Museum of African-American History. His legacy also endures through the work being done by the Tupac Amaru Shakur Foundation, a philanthropic organization established by his mother that provides arts education to children in local communities.

Tupac’s music continues to be heard in a variety of new projects, from his groundbreaking 2012 performance – via hologram – at Coachella, to a forthcoming biopic; from a popular exhibit telling his story at the Grammy Museum, to the inclusion of his thoughts (via an archived interview) on Kendrick Lamar’s chart-topping album *To Pimp a Butterfly*. “The people that you touched on that small intersection changed lives forever,” Lamar wrote in 2015, recalling his own feelings at age 8, when he saw Tupac for the first time at the “California Love” video shoot. “I told myself I wanted to be a voice for man one day. Whoever knew I was speaking out loud for u to listen.”

“Every time I speak, I want the truth to come out,” Tupac once said. “I’m not saying I’m gonna change the world, but I guarantee you that I will spark the brain that will change the world.”