



The Notorious
B.I.G., a.k.a. Biggie
Smalls, a.k.a.
Christopher Wallace rolls
a cigar outside his
mother's house
in Brooklyn, 1995.

THE NOTORIOUS B.I.G.

HE LOOMS LARGE OVER HIP-HOP,
STANDING AS THE DEFINITIVE PARADIGM FOR THE
POWER OF RAW RHYMING SKILLS.

By ALAN LIGHT

Hip-hop moves fast. Remarkably, after four decades on the pop charts, the genre's styles, tastes, and sounds continue to evolve at lightning speed. Which makes it even more impressive that more than twenty years after his death, whenever debates break out regarding the Greatest Rapper of All Time – which, inevitably, they do, since hip-hop was born with a spirit of competition – the Notorious B.I.G. remains at or near the very top.

In 2019 a BBC poll of music journalists, critics, artists, and industry experts named “Juicy,” the first single released from Biggie’s classic 1994 debut album, *Ready to Die*, the greatest hip-hop song of all time. “There’s one song in hip-hop that embodies the culture perfectly,” wrote Sowmya Krishnamurthy on the network’s website. “It’s an homage to the past with hope for the future. Steeped in the harsh reality of the

streets while being markedly optimistic, it’s the rags-to-riches tale of the hustle – and that’s why it rises to the top of the rap canon.” (A few years earlier, *Rolling Stone* put the song in its own all-time Top Ten, describing it as a performance by “the greatest rapper who ever lived, at his absolute peak: hilarious, incisive, insanely inventive.”)

Billboard named B.I.G. the best to ever rock a mic in its own 2015 list. “Death at a young age can often elevate a rapper from modern-day star to bona fide legend,” the magazine wrote, “But Notorious B.I.G. already attained the latter status early on in his career,” adding that “Biggie never dropped a single bad song, or a single errant bar.”

The Notorious B.I.G. released only one album during his brief lifetime. Yet his oversized shadow still looms large over hip-hop, standing as the definitive paradigm for the power of raw rhyming skills

Biggie performs at
the Meadowlands,
New Jersey, 1995.





even as he broke all existing rules about what a pop star – a sex symbol, even – should look and act like. He embodied his place and time, and he transcended his circumstances. Twenty-six years after its debut, Biggie's music has proved it belongs to the ages.

"Biggie died just as hip-hop lost its remaining underdog innocence," wrote *Spin* magazine's Sia Michel. "He never designed a sneaker, or rolled with Martha Stewart, or danced in a Sprite commercial, or lost his belly fat on a VH1 reality show. More than anything, he's remembered – quaintly, exhilaratingly – for something as old-fashioned as words."

He was born Christopher Wallace on May 21, 1972, in Bedford-Stuyvesant, a borderline Brooklyn neighborhood – striving and working-class on one side, urban wasteland on the other. He was raised by his Jamaican-born mother, Voletta; his father, Selwyn George Latore, left the family when he was two years old. By the time he was 10, he was writing rhymes and little rap routines, practicing while he packed bags at the local Met Foods supermarket. At 13, he and some friends formed a group called the Techniques.

He was already embodying his own contradictions: He was a straight-A student and a drug dealer, a romantic and a player, a jokester who was often depressed. He counseled kids to stay in school, then dropped out himself. He listened to country music and tore apart stages with his freestyles. As he became the Notorious B.I.G., he began to channel all of these complexities into rhymes of unparalleled depth and emotion.

In his teens, his interests broadened beyond music and school. He saw other neighborhood kids starting to reap the riches of crack slinging, and took to the streets himself, though a childhood friend said that Wallace "just dealt drugs for entertainment; he never was really a drug dealer." But in 1989, Wallace was arrested on weapons charges in Brooklyn and sentenced to five years' probation. In 1990, he was arrested on a violation of his probation; a year later he was arrested in North Carolina for dealing crack. He spent nine months in jail before making bail.

All this time, Christopher never lost sight of the music. Wallace was now calling himself Biggie Smalls, named for a character in the 1975 film *Let's Do It Again*, though he was forced to change the name when the actor who played the role threatened to sue. A chance connection to Mister Cee, Big Daddy Kane's DJ, turned out to be the break that would jump-start his career. Mister Cee helped the young artist re-record one of his tracks and submitted it to *The Source* magazine for its "Unsigned Hype" contest.

One of the magazine's editors tipped off Sean Combs, a young executive at Uptown Records who was calling himself Puff Daddy, about the new kid. "He was so charismatic," said Combs. "This big guy who looked like a security guard or a football player, you wanted to know what was behind these lyrics he was writing."

Biggie contributed the song "Party and Bullshit," which became a club hit, to the soundtrack for the 1993 movie *Who's the Man?* But then Puff was fired from Uptown, and plans for his developing artists came to a screeching halt. He kept B.I.G. busy with one-off performances and guest verses on remixes, building up the rapper's reputation.

"I became a fan the first time I heard his voice," said Mary J. Blige, who featured Biggie on several of

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SEAN COMBS

her singles. "The things he said, just in his pocket ... I lost my mind like the rest of the world." Eventually, Puffy's Bad Boy label secured a distribution deal with Clive Davis and Arista Records, and the *Ready to Die* album was finalized for release. It was preceded by "Juicy," which made it to Number Three on the rap charts and climbed to the Top Thirty on the pop side.

"Birthdays was the worst days / Now we drink champagne when we thirsty," Biggie rapped. The message of perseverance has staying power; it would be honored by the BBC in 2019 as "the quintessential rap Cinderella tale" and even made it to the floor of the United States Senate, when Congressman Hakeem Jeffries quoted the line "If you don't know, now you know" in the 2020 impeachment hearings.

As Combs explained, the song "put *Ready to Die* into perspective ... people could understand that we were struggling for a dream. I wanted to let people know he was more than just a gangsta rapper. He showed his pain, but in the end he wanted to make people feel good."

Ready to Die was an accessible introduction in 1994, but it hardly reflected Biggie's full mood. By the time he had completed the album, his mother had breast cancer. "I really was ready to die," he said. "My mom was sick and I was not giving a fuck about anything anymore. I felt that if I were to die, not too many people would miss me."

"Suicide was the album's metaphor for the widespread depression, despair, and hopelessness facing the kamikaze capitalists that New Yorkers simply dubbed hustlers," wrote the journalist and filmmaker dream hampton in *The Vibe History of Hip-Hop*. She added that "Big's form was a storytelling style replete with co-stars, characters created from his own alter ego."

This is what fans think of first when they think of the Notorious B.I.G.'s writing – the details, the turns of phrase, the ability to convey nuanced emotions in just a few words. "Back in the days our parents used to take care of us / Look at 'em now, they even fucking scared of us," he rhymed on "Things Done Changed."

From outrageous sex and brutality to doubt and introspection, *Ready to Die* captured the complexities and contradictions of the struggling, street-level drug trade with miraculously vivid specificity. And B.I.G. did all of this without writing anything down, listening to tracks over and over and composing his rhymes in his head. "It was like watching something supernatural," said Blige.

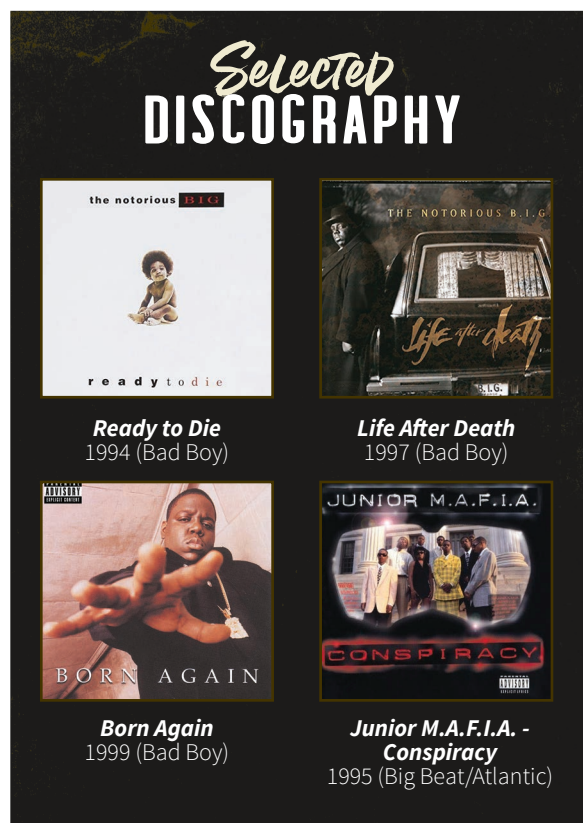
Ready to Die went six times platinum. When he assembled his protégé group, Junior M.A.F.I.A., Biggie's chart dominance blasted to hyperspeed. Col-

laborations with R&B groups 112 (on "Only You") and Total (on "Can't You See") both reached the Top Twenty of the Hot 100. By the end of 1995, Wallace was the top-selling male solo artist and rapper on the U.S. pop and R&B charts. Between 1995 and 1997, when he was featured on multiple tracks on Puff Daddy's debut album, *No Way Out*, he released nine Number One singles on the rap charts.

Biggie's life changed; he bought cars and a condo in New Jersey, where he moved his friends – it was too much for him to stay in the BK, so he brought the BK to him. And the topics he was writing about changed, too. The songs on the double album *Life After Death* moved hip-hop into the glamorous excesses of the kingpin era.

Spin's Michel asked him if the record still tackled the issues of his earlier work. "Not really, 'cause I'm not on the streets anymore," he said. "It would look stupid. I'm a different person, I'm grown up. This record is about me and my position."

Technically, *Life After Death* was a powerhouse, a dizzying range of rhyme styles and strategies, from





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: At the Soul Train Music Awards with Puff Daddy two days before his death; from a *Life After Death* photo shoot, 1997; live in 1995; in 1994.





the velocity of “Notorious Thugs” (a collaboration with Bone Thugz-N-Harmony) to the elaborate narrative of “I Got a Story to Tell.” The lead single was the springy groove of “Hypnotize,” which became his first pop Number One. *Rolling Stone* also listed this track as one of the 50 Greatest Hip-Hop Songs of All Time, calling it “his supreme pop-rap moment ... a testament to Biggie’s inimitable flow, matchless wordplay, and knack for leavening gangsta sex and violence with punch lines even a toddler could cuddle up to.”

But Biggie had also become entangled in a senseless beef with his one-time friend Tupac Shakur, which confused and frustrated him. “The fucked-up shit is that instead of my music, the shit I accomplished, I’m gonna be remembered for this dumb shit,” he said.

And on March 9, 1997, he was shot and killed in Los Angeles. He was 24. The crime remains unsolved.

Sixteen days later, *Life After Death* was released. It became one of the biggest-selling records in hip-hop history. The final track was titled “You’re Nobody (Til Somebody Kills You).” The irony is painful and obvious, of course, but it’s not that surprising, since death never seemed far from Biggie’s mind. But neither were his dreams. As he expressed in “Sky’s the Limit,” he hoped his life and his work could lead to something better.

*If the game shakes me or breaks me
I hope it makes me a better man
Put money in my mom’s hand
Get my daughter this college plan
so she don’t need no man
Stay far from timid, only make moves
when your heart’s in it
And live the phrase “Sky’s the limit.”*





Back in
Brooklyn
with Junior
M.A.F.I.A., 1995