Foreword: 2Pac’s Legacy From the Hip-Hop Platform

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There will never be another Tupac. That is Tupac, in one fatal swoop and one rhetorical gesture, he both acknowledges the centrality of his mother’s beauty while also saying that she was flawed. Even as a crack fiend mama. Ya always was a black Queen mama. Who da think in Elementary. Hey, I’d see the penitentiary one day. So, Tupac was able … something about that voice registered beautifully that intimately spoke to you. Like the Marvin Gaye of hip-hop, you could feel the painful stuff and the channeling of that desire. You could feel his hurt and anguish. It was not about making money; even though he was rich, he knew he was doing it for the love of the “Yeoman,” to tell the truth and to register his beliefs in America. He wanted to leave his imprint. He wanted to leave some kind of recognition of those BROTHAs who would never be acknowledged by anybody. He said, “Tupac cares, if don’t nobody else care.”

So, the beauty of Tupac is that he represents the expressions and the ultimate symbol of Black masculinity and Black culture in general arguing against the odds. Yes, he was self-destructive. Yes, he shredded the line between representation and reality. Yes, he could have grown up. He was only 25 when he died. What were you doing at 25? He had written over 400 songs and made six films when he died at 25 years old. The man was working out his soul salvation in full public view.

What I love about Tupac was his obsession with God. Tupac saw that people worshiped their narrow notions of who God is. God is too big for your theological categories. Tupac said, “Somebody that hurt like we hurt, drink like we drink, and smoke like we smoke. A saint we can pray to in the Ghetto.”

If Heaven’s got a G, proclaiming Heaven a Designs of a G, who da think in Elementary. Hey, I’d see the penitentiary one day. So, Tupac was able … something about that voice registered beautifully that intimately spoke to you. Like the Marvin Gaye of hip-hop, you could feel the painful stuff and the channeling of that desire. You could feel his hurt and anguish. It was not about making money; even though he was rich, he knew he was doing it for the love of the “Yeoman,” to tell the truth and to register his beliefs in America. He wanted to leave his imprint. He wanted to leave some kind of recognition of those BROTHAs who would never be acknowledged by anybody. He said, “Tupac cares, if don’t nobody else care.”

So, for me, Tupac represents all this beautiful, contradictory, utterly self-destructive, edifying, hopeless, and hopeful—which is why he is the most complete symbol of a generation still evolving.

Author Biography

Michael Eric Dyson is Professor of Sociology at Georgetown University, a New York Times contributing opinion writing, and a contributing editor of The New Republic and of ESPN’s The Undefeated website. He is the author and editor of more than two dozen books, including Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X (Oxford University Press, 1995), Reflecting Black: African American Cultural Criticism (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), JAY-Z: Made in America (St. Martin’s Press, 2019), The Black Presidency: Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), and Holler if you Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur (Basic, 2002).

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