

Welcome to Sierra's Rap Renaissance, where we discuss integral parts of rap and hip-hop while educating Colin and the rest of our *probably* white audience on the importance of the genre.

So let's go back to 1971. Let's meet Alice Faye Williams. Alice ended up changing her name to Afeni Shakur after meeting Lumumba Shakur, who she married in 1968. They were active members of the Black Panther party in New York in the late 1960's and early 1970's. She became a section leader of the Harlem chapter of the Black Panthers and a mentor to new members. So absolutely go off queen.

So Afeni and 20 other Black Panthers were arrested and charged with several counts of conspiracy to bomb police stations and other public places in New York. With bail set at \$100,000 each for the 21 suspects, the Black Panthers decided to raise bail money. Charges brought against her and the other members of the Black Panther Party were attempted murder, conspiracy to commit murder, conspiracy to bomb buildings and just good old-fashioned conspiracy. Sounds pretty racist if you ask me.

Afeni actually represented herself in the trial, and she and the others were acquitted in May of 1971 after an 8

month trial. She was acquitted of over 150 charges. Altogether, Afeni spent two years in jail before that. She also became pregnant while out on bail.

After Afeni was acquitted, she did not return to the Black Panther Party. On June 16 of 1971, she gave birth to her son, Lesane Parish Crooks, who was later renamed Tupac Amaru Shakur. Afeni's marriage fell apart when it was discovered that Lumumba was not the biological father of her son. His biological father is Billy Garland, who Afeni had worked with in the Black Panther Party. Tupac would not see his father from the age of 5 to 23. "I thought my father was dead all my life, I felt I needed a daddy to show me the ropes and I didn't have one."

So Tupac was named after Tupac Amaru II, the descendant of the last Incan ruler, who was executed in Peru in 1781 after his failed revolt against Spanish rule. Afeni explained "I wanted him to have the name of revolutionary, indigenous people in the world. I wanted him to know he was part of a world culture and not just from a neighborhood."

So, in the 1980's, Tupac's mother found it difficult to find work and she struggled really bad with drug addiction. In 1984, his family moved from New York

City to Baltimore, Maryland. He transferred to the Baltimore School for the Arts in the tenth grade, where he studied acting, poetry, jazz and ballet. He performed in Shakespeare's plays and as the Mouse King in the Nutcracker ballet.

While at the Baltimore School for the Arts, he met now actress Jada Pinkett-Smith, who I will not speak one word about because I'm not trying to get smacked by William Smithsonian. Jada would eventually become the subjects of some of his poems.

Tupac became very close with his theater teacher, and was very passionate about poetry and writing. This translated into hip hop and rap very easily for him, and with his friend Dana Smith as beatbox, he won competitions as reputedly the school's best rapper.

Then, Tupac connects with the Baltimore Young Communist League USA. He dated the daughter of the director of the local chapter of the Communist Party USA.

In 1988, Shakur moved to Marin City, CA, which is a super slimy community in the Bay Area. In nearby Mill Valley, he attended Tamalpais High School, where he performed in several theater productions. Shakur did

not graduate from high school, but later earned his GED. Marin City is where Afeni succumbed to a crack addiction - a drug that her song would sell on the same streets where she would buy her supply.

Tupac's love for hip hop would steer him away from a life of crime, for a while at least. At 17, in the spring of 1989, he met an older white woman, Leila Steinberg, in a park. They struck up a conversation, and Steinberg would later recall 'a young man with fan-like eyelashes, overflowing charisma, and the most infectious laugh.' By the time they met, Tupac was obsessively writing poetry and convinced Steinberg, who had no music-industry experience, to become his manager.

Steinberg was eventually able to get Tupac in front of a music manager, Atron Gregory, who secured a gig for him in 1990 as a roadie and dancer for the hip hop group Digital Underground.

He soon stepped up to the mic, making his recording debut in 1991. After Digital Underground's manager took over managing Tupac, he landed a deal with Interscope records. 2Pacalypse Now, Tupac's debut album as a solo artist was dropped.

So let's talk about how Tupac feels about all of this. He often complained that he was misunderstood.

'Everything in life is not all beautiful. There is lots of killing and drugs. To me a perfect album talks about the hard stuff and the fun and caring stuff... The thing that bothers me is that it seems like a lot of the sensitive stuff I write just goes unnoticed.' The singles in 2Pacalypse Now, "Trapped" and "Brenda's Got a Baby" poetically depict individual struggles under socioeconomic disadvantage. US Vice President Dan Quayle partially reacted, 'There's no reason for a record like this to be released. It has no place in society.' Thank you for your opinion, white man.

Tupac, still feeling misunderstood, explained; 'I just wanted to rap about things that affected young Black males. When I said that, I didn't know that I was gonna tie myself down to just take all the blunts and hits for all the young Black males, to be the media's kicking post for young black males.' In any case, 2Pacalypse Now was certified gold, half a million copies sold.

2Pac's unapologetic lyrics were relevant, important, and reflective of the hard lives led by many. His music earned attention and respect through a poetic style

that embraced street vocabulary while being innovative.

SAMPLES!!!

Tupac sampled a range of artists on his records, such as Herbie Hancock, Pink Floyd, Parliament, Joe Cocker, Public Enemy and Stevie Wonder.

Trapped, one of the hit singles from his first record, samples James Brown's *The Spank*.

It wasn't just a case of choosing a sample because it sounded good; artists and producers would often incorporate people and songs that meant something to them.

Bruce Hornsby and the Range's *The Way It Is* as the original, or from Tupac's posthumous hit *Changes*. Hornsby's 1986 track addressed issues of poverty, classism, and racial segregation, all things that Tupac experienced firsthand growing up.

The upbeat sound of the chorus is at odds with Hornsby's somewhat defeatist lyrics, claiming "that's just the way it is, things'll never be the same".

But with Tupac's verses calling out racism, war, violence, drugs and police brutality thrust in between, Hornsby's words, re-sung by Talent, start to sound more authentic.

STACKS, LAYERS AND HUSK:

Another technique Tupac was known for was stacking or layering his vocals, which added another dimension of warmth and rawness to his voice.

This technique is often used by rappers to emphasize certain rhythms, words and phrases. Tupac does it on the track Dear Mama, from his 1995 album Me Against the World.

Stacking vocal lines is very difficult to pull off, if not done well it can disrupt the flow of intricate patterns and phrases can be hard to make out.

Let's talk about some legal drama. And jail.

In August 1992, Tupac was signing autographs and taking photos outside of a show in Marin City when a conflict broke out among the crowd. He drew his pistol, but dropped it in the fist fight. Someone picked it up, the gun was fired, and a 6-year old bystander who was 100 yards away was killed. While Tupac was not charged for the death of the kid, he was reportedly inconsolable. (Food for thought here: in 1995, the child's family brought a civil case against Tupac, but settled out of court after an unnamed record company - thought to have been Death Row - offered compensation of between \$300,000 to \$500,00.) Just

remember that I brought up Death Row, it's important later.

Let's talk about Tupac's next album: Strictly 4 My N-word with a Z.

This album debut at No. 24 on the pop albums chart, the Billboard 200. An overall more hardcore album, it emphasizes Tupac's sociopolitical views, and has a metallic production quality. It features Ice Cube, the famed primary creator of N.W.A's '*Fuck tha Police*', who, in his own solo albums, had gone militantly political, along with L.A.'s original gangsta rapper, Ice T. This album carried the optimistic compassion of the hit "*Keep Ya Head Up*", an anthem for women's empowerment (one of my favorite 2Pac songs).

Thug Life: a group

In late 1993, after recording two albums – the muddled 2Pacalypse Now and the slightly improved Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z. – Shakur unveiled his crew T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E., an acronym for The Hate U Gave Little Infants Fucks Everybody. At the time, it seemed like an unnecessary variation on the "gangster" trope that dominated West Coast rap at the time. However, his reimagining of a word that the Oxford Dictionary defines as "a violent person, especially a criminal" into a positive attribute resonated. 2Pac's vision redefined

the word “thug” into a man who triumphs over systemic and societal obstacles. By the end of 1994, Cleveland quintet B.O.N.E. Enterprises had renamed themselves Bone Thugs-N-Harmony; the word has since been adopted by Young Thug, Slim Thug and too many others to mention.

Because of this life surrounded by crime and drugs and other shit, Tupac started keeping a gun on him more often. There are a few different accounts of this story. In Atlanta, October 1993, Tupac was out with his friends and came upon two dudes beating the fuck out of black man. Tupac did what most people would never do, and got out of the car and shot the two white dudes, one in the abdomen and one in the buttocks.

The two men were police officers and brothers, and said that Tupac got involved when he and his friends drove by while the off-duty officers were arguing with a motorist that had almost hit them and their wives. However, there are conflicting accounts that the brothers were harassing a black motorist and uttered racial slurs as Tupac and his friends were driving by. One of the brothers, officer Scott Whitwell, admitted to possessing a gun he had taken from a Henry County police evidence room.

The charges were eventually dropped on both sides.

The beginning of the most influential hip hop beef of all time:

Biggie Smalls. The Notorious B.I.G.

In 1993, while visiting Los Angeles, The Notorious B.I.G. asked a local drug dealer to introduce him to Shakur and they instantly became friends. The pair would socialize when traveling to the opposite coasts. During this period, at his own live shows, Tupac would call Biggie onto stage to rap with him. Together, they recorded the songs '*Runnin' from Tha Police*' and '*House of Pain.*' Biggie often turned to Tupac for advice in the business, but Tupac didn't like to mix business with friendship.

Allegedly, Biggie asked Tupac to manage him, and Tupac advised him that Puffy would make him a star. Puffy is P-Diddy, or Sean Combs, who is important in Biggie's timeline, not so much Tupacs. The two then had a giant falling out in 1994.

Sierra, what happened in 1994???? Lemme tell ya.

On November 30th, 1994, while in New York recording verses for a mixtape, Tupac was repeatedly distracted

by his beeper. Music manager James “Jimmy Henchman” Rosemond reportedly offered Tupac \$7,000 to stop by Quad Studios in Times Square that night to record a verse for his client. Tupac wasn’t super sure, but agreed to the session as he needed the cash to offset legal costs. He arrived with a few people, and as they entered the lobby, three men robbed and beat him up at gunpoint. Tupac was shot, and speculated that the shooting had been a set-up. Against his doctors advice, he checked out of Metropolitan Hospital Center a few hours after surgery and secretly went to the house of the actress Jasmine Guy to recuperate. The next day, Tupac arrived at a Manhattan courthouse bandaged in a wheelchair to receive the jury’s verdict for a sexual abuse case that took place earlier in the year. Shakur posted a \$25,000 bond and spent the next few weeks being cared for by his mother and a private doctor at Guy’s home. The Fruit of Islam and former members of the Black Panther Party stood guard to protect him.

In a 1995 interview with Vibe magazine, Shakur accused Sean Combs (Puffy, Biggie’s manager), Jimmy Henchman, and Biggie, among others, of setting up or being privy to the robbery and shooting. These accusations were significant to the East-West Coast rivalry in hip-hop. Why? Months later, Combs and

Biggie released the song “*Who Shot Ya?*” where Tupac mistakenly took it as a mockery of his shooting and thought they could be responsible. So what did Tupac do? Release a direct diss-track called ‘*Hit ‘Em Up*’ where he targeted Biggie, Puffy, their record label, and Biggie’s group Junior M.A.F.I.A.

That’s what I would do too. (There was never proof that Biggie or Combs knew about the incident, even though the two were upstairs at Quad Studios when the mugging happened.)

So let’s talk about Tupac's connection with Death Row Records. First we have to talk about something not so fun, so trigger warning for sexual assault. Sorry friends, but it’s important.

In February of 1995, Tupac was sentenced to between one and a half to four and a half years of jail time for sexually abusing a female fan. Tupac maintained that he had not raped the girl, although he confessed to Vibe magazine journalist Kevin Powell that he could have prevented others who were present in the suite at the time from doing so.

While Tupac was in prison on those charges, he was visited by Suge Knight, the notorious label boss of Death Row records. Knight offered to post the \$1.3M

bail Tupac needed to be released pending his appeal. One condition though; Tupac had to sign on to Death Row Records, which was not something he wanted to do. Tupac signed. He was released from a high-security facility in New York in October 1995.

He dived into a world of gangster rap, formed a new group called Outlawz Immortalz after signing with Death Row.

In terms of his approach to production, he wasn't focused on the musicality of the songs. Instead he had a real urgency to make music.

You can hear this intensity and urgency in Tupac's delivery on tracks like *Hail Mary*, from his posthumous album *7 Day Theory*.

The song took around 30 minutes to make, and was recorded in a few takes.

Tupac didn't feel the need to be spending time in the studio choosing the right beat or the right kick.

"We don't have time ... we don't have the luxury to spend all of this time doing one song," he would say to his crew.