

AuthorJournalist Cathy Scott Remembers Rap Icon Tupac 2Pac

Written by Cathy Scott ID3515
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Ten years after his murder, Tupac Shakur's popularity has only grown. - BY CATHY SCOTT

As the 10-year anniversary approaches of Tupac Shakur's (2Pac) fatal shooting near the Las Vegas Strip, his former manager is spending it by talking about the rap artist's legacy and his impact on the music world.

To many, Shakur was not just another ghetto kid who made it big in the rap industry. He continues to be an inspiration, not only because of his music, but also for his ability to reach youth, who look up to him as a role model. Some called him the Malcolm X of his generation, a voice for young black America.

While Shakur had developed a bad-boy thug image as his career developed, he also was an avid reader of literature with an insatiable appetite for learning. Whatever Shakur was, it's indisputable that in both life and death, he took the rap industry by storm.

"I just got back from putting on a program about Pac in Suffolk, England," said Leila Steinberg, who was the first to land Tupac an onstage gig back when he was with his first group, Strictly Dope. "There's so much to talk about. I spend time addressing his relevance and his social awareness."

Asked if she'd sensed Shakur's potential when she first met him, Steinberg said, "In life you meet certain people and you have an instant connection. I was the vehicle that got Pac his first real recordings, but it was Tupac who really facilitated me to learn about the business and the music industry. He's the one who helped me."

Steinberg, who has a nonprofit business, Hearteducation.org, that promotes educating youth through music and art, met Shakur at the Bay Area's Rohnert Park when Shakur, a teenager at the time, was living with his mother and half-sister in a low-income housing project in Marin County dubbed "The Jungle."

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"He is one of the most significant voices today," Steinberg said. "He had an amazing genius. This 17-year-old bought every book possible to study not just his art but the [entertainment] business. You don't become a phenomenal artist and actor without studying."

Shakur, who before his death released several CDs and was in at least three movies, was gunned down in a drive-by shooting on Flamingo Road off the Las Vegas strip on Sept. 7, 1996. He died six days later, on Sept. 13. His killer has never been caught.

Besides his high-profile shooting, Shakur left his mark in music. He's listed in the Guinness Book of World Records as the best-selling rap and hip-hop artist ever, selling more than 73 million albums worldwide. Most of Shakur's songs are about growing up around violence and hardship, ghetto life, racism and his public feuds with fellow rappers, including The Notorious B.I.G, who was murdered six months after Shakur in a similar drive-by shooting.

As a teenager, Shakur read Shakespeare and Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Many of the lyrics on his album "All Eyez on Me," which was released the year before his death, reference classic works.

"Now rule two is a hard one, watch for phonies," Shakur wrote. "Keep yo" enemies close ... Watch yo" homies."

For rapper Raggedy Wood, or Woody, with the West Coast Renegades, Tupac stands for rising up in the face of adversity.

"The thing about Tupac that separated him from every other artist is he was able to speak on any subject," Woody said in a telephone interview. "Whether you wanted to love your mama or kill your mama, he rapped about it. His mama was a freedom fighter. He always spoke big of freedom fighters."

And young people today relate to that, Woody said, because "his music was real" and "straight from the streets." At first, Woody said he didn't get Tupac's music. "The way he formatted rap," he said, "I didn't understand it. I grew to like him."

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Had Shakur lived another 10 years, he could have been a force to be reckoned with, said Los Angeles music producer Darryl Ross. "He had this generation's attention," said Ross, who landed Digital Underground -- a band Tupac eventually hooked up with -- its first record deal. "By now he would have been seasoned and he would have had a platform, unlike Biggie [Smalls], who was probably my favorite rapper from a talent standpoint, but he really wasn't saying anything that hadn't already been said. The social consciousness that Tupac had and the contrast of that with his thug street credibility was powerful. Tupac's persona was anti-system. That set him apart."

David Wallace, a manager, consultant and record producer who lives in Las Vegas, agreed that Shakur's rap can be an acquired taste. And his style of rap had an impact on the music world as a whole, not just on hip-hop.

"He's affected every culture, from the bandanas he wore to his music to, unfortunately, even his attitude," Wallace said. "Tupac lives. He's more popular now than he was when he was alive."

Wallace, who manages artists under his gospel label 4DL Records, once met both Shakur and his record producer, Suge Knight, at an event called "Death Row Night." Shakur's music was released under the Death Row label, now called Tha Row.

It was New Year's Eve 1991. Wallace and his band at the time, The Bomb, were flown out to a party -- held in a hangar at the Los Angeles airport -- by an assistant of Knight. Wallace's group was scheduled to perform.

"I wanted Tupac to introduce The Bomb," Wallace said. "Tupac was like, 'Hey, it's cool, but I don't know them.' He said he couldn't do it." A fight broke out and the band ended up not playing.

Wallace believes Tupac "was more than just a rapper off the streets."

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"He was a poet," he said. "His rhymes made sense, the way he talked about real life and the metaphors he used."

Even today, "Tupac challenges rappers," Wallace said. "He brought it to a higher level. To me he is the most prolific rapper. When he uses profanity, he uses it more as an expression instead of rappers today who use it to fill in a blank space. I believe in artists' freedom of expression. You have to give Tupac credit for his contribution to the industry and the fact that he took his rap seriously. He really had something special."

The only thing negative about his music, especially with his later lyrics, Wallace said, was when he rapped about violence and guns. That, he said, was done simply to sell the music and did not send a positive message to youth.

Those lyrics caused controversy throughout Shakur's career. He was heavily criticized by politicians, including then-Vice President Dan Quayle, who targeted the lyrics from "2Pacalypse Now," which included the tracks "I Don't Give a Fuck" and "Brenda's Got A Baby."

In a documentary interview after Quayle publicly denounced him, Tupac defended his lyrics. "I didn't create the thug life," he said. "I diagnosed it."

"They're trying to stop me," he continued. "I felt like I was a target, you know? I'm not going to say I'm going to change the world, but I guarantee you I am going to start the spark of grain that will change the world."

Steinberg explained that Shakur, even at a young age, because of his upbringing, recognized the ills of society. "He was able to be a diagnosis for society, for black pain, for oppression, for poverty," she said. "He was one of the greatest voices. I could not have been on the road and worked with Tupac if I didn't believe in him and have something that connected me to him."

Before Tupac died in a Las Vegas hospital, he was in a coma for six days. The Rev. Jesse Jackson, who met Tupac at a school when he was 12, went to his bedside, then on to a West Las Vegas Baptist church where the civil rights leader spoke to the congregation about Shakur,

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who has often been called a "gangster rapper."

"Before you condemn Tupac for calling women bitches and ho's in his music," Jackson told parishioners, "you need to understand and know about the background of this man and where he came from."

Tupac Shakur, born Lesane Parish Crooks in June 1971, was raised by Afeni Shakur, a radical Black Panther who represented herself in a murder case in the late 1960s and won. His mother renamed him Tupac Shakur after Tupac Amaru II, an Incan revolutionary.

Shakur, in the song "Dear Mama," wrote about his mother and the struggles she went through raising two children. "A poor single mother on welfare, tell me how ya did it," he wrote. "There's no way I can pay you back. But the plan is to show you that I understand. You are appreciated."

"My moms," Shakur once told a TV reporter, "was a Black Panther, so all my roots for the struggle are real deep."

Indeed, his background shaped him into the performer and political activist he became with the lyrics and poetry he wrote, Steinberg pointed out.

"In his brilliance, he diagnosed us as a people," said Steinberg, who lives in the Los Angeles area. "Pac manifested everything he thought and spoke."

And that, Wallace, said, is the essence of his message. Shakur made people think, he said, about more than themselves with his political statements.

Today, Tupac's poetry is being studied by college students. Classes on the rapper have been offered at Harvard and the University of California at Berkeley.

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And Frank Alexander, Tupac's personal bodyguard who was with Tupac the night he was shot, is about to release a second video about the rapper and his music. Alexander's first documentary, *Before I Wake*, was released in 2001.

Alexander is no longer a bodyguard. He works in the mortgage business in Southern California and produces videos on the side. He also wrote the book *Got Your Back*. "I stopped body-guarding after Tupac died," he said. "I don't want to take someone else's life in my hands."

As for Shakur's murder case, Alexander said he and others who were with Shakur that night "wanted to see the shooter brought to justice." That never happened.

Ten years later, police are no closer to solving the murder than they were when it happened. On a busy Saturday night in the Las Vegas Valley, the shooter got away with murder.

On that night Shakur was in town with his record producer, Suge Knight, for the evening's championship boxing match between heavyweights Mike Tyson and Bruce Seldon. The town was packed with fight fans, including celebrities. Shakur and Knight were planning to meet up later with Tyson at a party at Club 662, a private nightclub run by Knight. Shakur was gunned down on the way to the party. A gunman in a white Cadillac pulled up next to the BMW Shakur and Knight were driving in and opened fire. Shakur was shot five times. He, along with Knight, who was grazed in the back of his head, was rushed to University Medical Center's trauma unit.

"All I saw was the position of the shooter," Alexander said in an earlier interview. "[The gunman] was in the back seat. I saw the arm of the shooter come out. I saw a silhouette of him which was a black person wearing a skull cap, a beanie cap."

Still, Las Vegas police never questioned Alexander and members of Tupac's entourage again after that night -- not until Alexander several years later complained to a reporter. Then Las Vegas detectives met Alexander at a restaurant in Orange County and showed him some photographs.

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"It wasn't that we weren't interviewed by police," Alexander said. "It was that there was never any follow-up, no lineup. We wanted to see the shooter brought to justice."

The eventual lineup of photos didn't do any good.

"I couldn't identify anyone from those photos," Alexander said. "I saw people who I knew, a couple of faces I recognized, but there was no one involved in the shooting."

Shakur's death was one of the most publicized killings in Las Vegas. Privately, investigators at the time said they didn't believe the shooter would ever be caught. The handling of the investigation has been criticized from start to finish by participants and observers alike who contend the police didn't do everything they could or should have, including preserving the crime scene. Bicycle officers at the intersection of the shooting, at Flamingo and Koval Lane, left the scene and ended up a mile away on the Strip after they followed Shakur's car and not the shooter's.

For their part, investigators say it hasn't been for a lack of effort, but, rather, for lack of cooperation from just about everyone involved: witnesses, Tupac's friends and associates, and even police from other departments and jurisdictions. The witness statements were pretty much the same. Metro Police Lt. Wayne Petersen, who headed the homicide unit, mimicked witnesses at the time: "I didn't see nothin". I didn't know nobody. I wasn't even there."

Shakur's slaying was one of 207 homicides within the Las Vegas valley and one of 168 in 1996 within the jurisdiction of the Las Vegas police that year.

For Steinberg and Shakur's mother, the police case hasn't gone unnoticed. "We both -- Afeni and me -- know the truth of what's important to think about," Steinberg said, "but we also have to think about his death."

But at the tenth anniversary, they're only thinking about Tupac Shakur and who he was.

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"I hope [Afeni's] taking time for herself -- for the whole family -- to heal," Steinberg said.

While his murder investigation continues to go unsolved, Shakur's ability to touch people with his music continues, producer Wallace said.

"I appreciate his music, especially "Dear Mama,"" he said. "That is the epitome of what a record is all about. It's real. Everyone can relate to it, from the kid who's had a mother like that, to the mother who's raising a young son. It's an encouraging song of hope. It's an anthem. It says, "Even though things didn't come out the way we thought, I still love you." He was a real poet. He didn't just wake up with a microphone in his hand.

"He was an artist. You can't just sing to somebody. You have to sing through them. Man, when Tupac sang, he was real about it."

Cathy Scott, an author and freelance journalist based in Las Vegas, wrote the book *The Killing of Tupac Shakur*.

Visit the site of Cathy Scott at <http://www.cathyscott.com>