

The Music Never Dies

Written by Robert ID541

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Despite lingering rumors to the contrary, it's safe to say that Tupac Shakur is dead.

So why does he keep putting out records?

The rapper's latest posthumous release, "Loyal to the Game," shows up in stores next week in time for the holidays. It's the seventh 2Pac record (not including greatest-hits and remix collections) to emerge since he was shot down in Las Vegas eight years ago.

The punch line about Shakur's output in death can be explained by his prolificacy in life. The man who helped canonize the West Coast gangsta sound committed loads of unreleased material to tape before his unsolved murder. The demand for those songs is understandable. When Shakur was gunned down - at the age of 25 - he was one of America's most famous musicians.

But by dying young and famous, he joined a much more exclusive club. Like Elvis, Marilyn, Jimi and John, Shakur became one of those celebrities whose career continues to flourish and even diversify in death.

In 2002, Shakur entered Forbes' list of top-earning deceased celebrities at No. 10. His rank dwindled slightly on the latest list, published in October, but he still came in with a respectable \$5 million in 2004, edging out Frank Sinatra at No. 20.

People have bought more than 30 million of his records since he died in 1996 - several times more than he sold as a living artist. And that tally will grow with this latest release, thanks in part to the participation of Eminem, who produced the album and also raps on it, along with 50 Cent and other word-slingers who weren't even a twinkle in Tupac's eye.

Could it be possible that the dead rapper owes part of this posthumous glory to Elvis Presley?

When the King died in 1977, there wasn't much room on the market for late icons. Death was still a career killer. Within a few years, however, the Elvis estate (directed by his ex-wife, Priscilla) began to strategically cash in on his legacy. By promoting and licensing Elvis' image and work - while fiercely defending it from infringement - Elvis Presley Enterprises (as the business entity is known today) can still haul in \$40 million a year.

Needless to say, Elvis consistently tops the Forbes chart.

One of the people who helped gild the King's retirement from life was Mark Roesler. In 1981, he became the licensing agent for the Elvis Presley Estate and went on to shape the industry with his own company. As head of CMG Worldwide, he manages the market presence of some of

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the biggest stars in the business - many of whom happen to be deceased, including Princess Diana, Malcolm X, Babe Ruth and Buddy Holly.

"In the early '80s, if you were dead and gone, you were kind of forgotten. There wasn't the real interest in nostalgia that you see today," Roesler says.

He helped the heirs of such celebrities to lay claim in court to their famous legacies, which Roesler handles as product and person.

"The reality of it is that these personalities have become brands. A James Dean, a Marilyn, an Elvis, they've become brands today in a way that's not much different than a Ralph Lauren," Roesler says.

By jealously guarding and burnishing such brands, Roesler and his staff have brokered deals to license Marilyn's image to a winemaker and even a high-end diamond collection. Humphrey Bogart can be seen in magazines and on billboards endorsing a line of furniture.

So why not Johnny Cash cologne? Or Lana Turner lingerie?

"I think there's only a handful [of dead celebrities] that have really a significant amount of power to generate sales," said Charles Riotto, president of the International Licensing Industry Merchandisers' Association. "But having said that, not everyone has to be Elvis to have a decent revenue stream."

It may seem like a macabre business equation, but the stars that exit this world prematurely leave the most robust brands.

"Death can increase the currency [of the brand] because things are frozen in time. There's one image of James Dean frozen in time," Roesler says.

But the recently deceased Marlon Brando, for example, could pose a challenge for his posthumous handlers because the actor lived such a varied life.

"As future generations come to know Brando, they'll come to know many stages of his life, and not all of them attractive," Roesler says, slipping in a pitch for another of his clients: "Marilyn Monroe? Forever beautiful."

A violent death stemming from the thug life he endorsed took Tupac Shakur out at the top of his game, but his icon status is sealed by his music, which hardcore fans interpret as scripture. What's also important - and puts the rapper in league with his contemporary, Kurt Cobain - is the timing of his rise and fall.

"Tupac was American royalty at a time when hip-hop was making that transition from underground culture to mainstream pop culture. Even though before him and possibly after him there were better artists, he continues to benefit from that in a way that other artists don't," says Bakari Kitwana, a former editor of The Source magazine and author of the upcoming book "Why

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White Kids Love Hip Hop."

"I think the younger fans look at Tupac as the heyday compared to what they're seeing now," Kitwana says. "They look back at that as a more real era of hip hop when artists were more true to life and not all about making money. ... I don't know if they're accurate about that."

It was the emergence of an industry that protected iconic brands, one might say, that allowed Shakur to carry on a coherent career from beyond the grave.

Successful lawsuits and a deal with the record label that puts out Shakur's music gave his mother, Afeni Shakur, a former Black Panther, control over his unreleased work and the lucrative merchandising of his image. She is a co-producer of the new album, and her savvy business moves have led the estate into other ventures, including fashion.

"She approves every single design," says Rick Edwards, vice president of Makaveli Branded, an urban clothing line launched last year. It was named after the 16th-century writer Niccolo Machiavelli, whose work Shakur admired.

"It's not just a clothing line. It's a movement that supports the movement Tupac started," Edwards says.

But not everybody is happy with the way the "movement" is unfolding.

"I think they're just taking the legacy in the wrong direction," says R.B, who writes for rap news sites on the Web under the name Robert. He also runs a site dedicated to Shakur called [Thug LifeArmy.com](#), and like some fans who came of age with the rapper's music, he resents that it's been entrusted to Eminem.

Robert complains about the intrusion of today's hot rappers in the mix, but he's especially upset about the way Eminem has manipulated the words Shakur recorded in a different decade.

"They're twisting it to sound like Tupac is saying things that he wasn't saying, and that's wrong," Robert says.

"It's good to hear "Pac again," he adds, "but deep down, you know it could be better."

Perhaps the next record could be produced by a psychic channeling the dead rapper directly. ([Source](#))