

Notorious BIG Remembered

Written by Ashante Infantry ID819
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In 1997 Cheo Hodari Coker was a 24-year-old Los Angeles Times music reporter, frustrated at not being able to get his editors' go-ahead for a big feature on the upcoming sophomore record from Brooklyn rapper Christopher Wallace, known as the Notorious B.I.G.

So when Vibe magazine called, he jumped at its offer to write a cover story about the artist, despite the strict Times policy against freelancing for competing publications.

"I knew that Life After Death was going to be the biggest rap record of the year," said Coker. "So, I accepted the assignment feeling like it was a risk I was ready to take and figuring the worst the Times could do was fire me."

The two-hour interview took place Mar. 7 in B.I.G.'s Santa Monica hotel room. The 24-year-old rapper watched the Soul Train Music Awards, cracked jokes and munched pizza and chatted with Coker about his two children, music and future.

The writer was asleep in his North Hollywood apartment when he got a call 36 hours later telling him that B.I.G. had been killed in a drive-by shooting. He phoned his Times editors at home to tell them that he had a front-page scoop — and that he'd been moonlighting.

"They were just happy that I had the interview, B.I.G.'s last interview. And because Vibe was on a monthly deadline, they were fine with me using some of those quotes first for the L.A. Times."

Today, Coker writes for Vibe and Premiere magazines, is a budding screenwriter and author of the comprehensive book *Unbelievable: The Life, Death and Afterlife of the Notorious B.I.G.*

He'll be speaking at a tribute to the slain rapper at Harbourfront's Kuumba Festival on Sunday.

"I realize now how big a deal it was to have gotten to know somebody like him," said Coker in a

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phone interview from his Chicago home, "and I think that years from now when I'm talking to my kids about him, it will be like somebody who went to a Jimi Hendricks concert or ever had a chance to talk to Miles Davis.

"He is the best pure MC ever. His voice, his diction, his delivery, the intricacies of his rhymes are just impeccable. His legacy is to the freestyle what Charlie Parker meant to alto saxophone. Tupac was an incredible composer whose real genius was his ability to communicate emotion, but the only person that ever rivalled Biggie as an MC was Jay-Z.

"And Biggie was just getting started. I think now he'd probably be trying to make the same transition that Jay-Z is making as president of Def Jam, based on some of the things he said to me in our last conversations. He didn't want to be rapping at 30; he wanted to be a CEO ... he wanted to be doing the things that he saw Puffy doing."

Although B.I.G.'s death remains unsolved, Coker thinks a wrongful-death suit filed by his mother, widow and heirs against the city of Los Angeles and former and current Los Angeles Police Department police chiefs and scheduled to proceed this spring may bring a resolution.

"What's important is not that they win a bunch of money, but that people who haven't talked before will now be compelled to testify."

The success of rappers such as B.I.G., Snoop Dogg and Tupac Shakur lead to the mainstreaming of hardcore rap, said Coker, who penned this month's Vibe cover on The Game, the former Compton gangbanger turned top-selling rapper.

"It was kind of like being around Snoop back in the day, and in some ways kind of like being around B.I.G.," said Coker, who considers The Game's No.1 debut The Documentary "the hip hop record to beat in terms of sales and quality in 2005."

"He has the same kind of cocky arrogance; not a mean arrogance, but a lust for life; and that fascination with a few years ago living illegally and now everyone wanting to know who you are."

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And it's difficult for former street hustlers like B.I.G. to leave that life behind, said Coker.

"None of them ever want to be so separated from who they are and where they're from. I think that fear is why they always need to keep certain people around and why they're always going back to the neighbourhood.

"I remember the first time I interviewed B.I.G. in Brooklyn in Sept. 1994 ... Being real was important to him and at the time in hip hop that was the catch phrase — keep it real.

"I find that when it comes to gangsters, you can basically write anything you want as long as you don't imply that he's a homosexual or a snitch, because everything else kind of helps their aura."

[Source](#)