

NEVER SEEN BEFORE BIGGIE PHOTOS

THE SOURCE

THE BIBLE OF HIP-HOP MUSIC,
CULTURE & POLITICS

#207 FEBRUARY 2007

10 Years Later

COLLECTORS ISSUE



**"SMILES EVERY TIME MY FACE
IS UP IN THE SOURCE..."**



MASTER PLAN

THE SOURCE

ISSUE #207

THE BIBLE OF HIP-HOP

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#207 FEBRUARY 2007 Hip-Hop Music, Culture & Politics



Under The Influence

It's been 10 years since the untimely death of Christopher Wallace a.k.a. the Notorious B.I.G., who is still considered by many to be "the Greatest Rapper of All-Time." The Source deciphers B.I.G.'s musical accomplishments to understand how and why a decade later, he is still a leader to follow.

Somewhere inside the city's largest club a crime is about to take place. Everyone's cleared security, wristbands are tight and glowing. Drinks are spilling and in every corner party people are getting hugs from the honeys, pounds from the roughnecks. But after rocking the class of 2020, the DJ digs in her digital crates and this voice echoes in surround sound, "As I sit back relax, puff a blunt, sip a Beck's..." Instantly you can hear the hiss from the smoke machine. Patrons give each other confused looks like Rosie O'Donnell was hosting on *106th and Park*. The dance floor has become a wax museum. Ignorant, but not dumb, the listeners are holdin' up the wall cuz they missin' the point...

WORDS_JERRY L. BARROW PICS_BARRON CLAIBORNE



"As the years pass by, there is a younger generation that is going to start not knowing who the Notorious B.I.G. is," says Hot 97.1 (NYC) radio personality DJ Mr. Cee, who was a friend and mentor to the late Christopher Wallace a.k.a. "Biggie Smalls." "And it may sound funny that I'm saying this, but I DJ in these clubs all the time and its getting to the point where I can play 'One More Chance' for an 18 year old audience, and they almost don't know the record. The importance of who he is and still being the greatest rapper of all time is still evident...but in 2007 we should be much smarter in our education of the Hip-Hop generation."

Unlike his oft-compared friend/rival/peer, Tupac Shakur, there has been no legend built around the death of the Notorious B.I.G. No comparisons to Elvis, no sightings in Cuba. In the case of Christopher Wallace, who was gunned down on March 9th, 1997 outside of the Peterson Automotive Museum in Los Angeles, there was no easy fable to spin. After proclaiming that he was "ready to die," the Black Frank White became, unintentionally of course, a man of his word. Other than the title of his last album, *Life After Death*, there was nothing for the conspiracy theorists to cling to. But his impact is worthy of discussion.

Was he Hip-Hop's Barry White, a rotund ex-gang member and petty thief who went on to make an indelible mark on modern music? Considering Mr. White was still with us in 1997, no one was thinking that way. Maybe Otis Redding, the soul singer whose life was ended all too soon in a plane crash at the age of 27 and had his biggest hit, "Sittin' On The Dock of The Bay" after he died? Or maybe we have to turn to the world of literature. Was Biggie Hip-Hop's Donald Goines, a street's disciple raised in a good home who'd document his misdeeds in compelling stories for the world to absorb before being gunned down as well? It's all of these and then some. Biggie Smalls was quite simply the American dream. As rappers today bounce, bling and ball their way through

"borrowed" by fellow rappers. In short, if the Notorious B.I.G. was indeed the illest, he infected everyone within earshot on pandemic proportions.

"As an MC, lyricist and as a writer, the thing that stood out about him was tone of voice, cadence or what we call flow," begins Easy Moe Bee, who laid the soundbeds for B.I.G.'s "Machine Gun Funk," and "Warning" to name a few. "As tone of voice goes, a lot of people don't know [that] by the second album, he had matured vocally into a really secure MC. He was so sure of himself that you heard it in his voice. In the beginning, "Party and Bullshit," "Gimme Da Loot," [he had] that loud, hard screaming voice. You can tell the vocals that 50 Cent took were from that period. We heard the voice calm down a little on "Warning," but I really noticed it on "Big Poppa." I was like yo, is this new Biggie? I liked it because it was confident. All of those people looking to be the next MC of tomorrow need to take notes to what he was doing."

CLONE WARS

In fact they have. The attack of the clones began in 1998 when DJ Clark Kent overheard Jamal "Shyne" Barrow rhyming in a barbershop and brought him to the attention of Sean Combs. While possessing a modicum of skill on the mic, most of the attention around Shyne was centered on his similarity to Biggie in voice.

"In the beginning, I think Shyne sounded like Biggie, but I think he has his own thing now," says Nashiem Myrick, one of the producers from the Hitmen collective responsible for Biggie's classic, "Who Shot Ya?" "I don't see it as disrespect. To base your whole career on someone else, that's ultimate respect. B.I.G. is living vicariously through a bunch of people."

Another Brooklyn rapper, B.B. Jay earned some screw faces with the baritone inflections on his debut single "Pentecostal Poppa." But even with the

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—DJ MISTER CEE, HOT 97 (NYC)

music videos and awards shows, they are engaging in the end zone dance of the have-nots that the Notorious B.I.G. brought to the mainstream. From the late 70s to the early 90s, Hip-Hop was primarily about the struggle. In '94 Biggie told us it was OK to exhale. "Momma I made it..."

"In terms of Big, his vision was to take your mind away from the hood and paint a picture that you can visually see," says friend and business partner Lance "Un" Rivera, with whom Biggie started Undeas Records together—the former label home of Lil Kim and Junior M.A.F.I.A. "Make people strive for something more than what they had in a way that they can understand it. He wasn't speaking rhetoric. He was saying stuff that made sense to people. He had this thing about [being] nasty, ashy and classy. He told people, 'Yo, you can change. All you have to do is put some moisturizer on your elbow.'"

While Hip-Hop didn't create an aura of immortality around Biggie, there is no question that we've tried to keep him alive in a variety of other ways. Two years after he passed, a posthumous collection of old verses and new beats, *Born Again* was released to mixed results.

"It should have stopped after *Life After Death*," says DJ Premier, who produced the classics "Unbelievable," "Kick In The Door" and "Ten Crack Commandments" for B.I.G. "You don't want to ruin what was left behind. They did it to Jimi Hendrix, Tupac and Big. I hope they're done with that."

Born Again was followed by singers (Ashanti), rappers (50 Cent) and even Pop icons like Michael Jackson taking old Biggie verses and putting them on their songs. Eminem scored a hit record with "Runnin" (Dying to Live) a mash up of Biggie and Tupac, and in 2006 *Biggie Duets: The Final Chapter* was the last attempt to turn back the clock and allow today's artists and producers to work with the late, great one. This of course doesn't include the countless number of Biggie rhymes that have been

Puff-esque production, the gospel-flavored lyrics of his CD, *Universal Concussion*, could never be mistaken for Biggie's.

The last Big Poppa sound alike hailed from the Golden State. Compton's Guerilla Black debuted in 2004 with the CD, *Guerilla City*. Standing over 6 ft with a dark complexion and throaty vocals, the comparisons to Biggie came fast and furious. Memphis-born producer Carlos Broady, another one of the Hitmen who produced B.I.G.'s "My Downfall" and "Niggas Bleed," actually lent his talents to the Guerilla Black project.

"I thought it was flattering," he says of the likeness to Biggie. "To me, the cat sounded just like him. When I heard him on the phone it was scary, but I didn't think there was nothing negative about it. I caught some flack, and some producers didn't want to work with him, but dude can't help how he sounds. I think cats would have accepted Guerilla Black more if he had been from New York. I think he was a capable MC, but people didn't give him a chance. It's funny how biased people are. 'Cause everybody can mimic Pac..."

While often imitated, there was no duplicating Biggie. It took more than a deep voice to capture what made Big special. One of the most enduring practices of B.I.G. the artist, was his ability to create songs without writing anything down. Though he never claimed to pioneer the style, it was after collaborating with Jay-Z that it became public knowledge that they both got their West Indian Archie on (look it up kids) in the booth. Since this revelation, many MCs including Memphis Bleek, Kanye West, Styles P and the aforementioned Guerilla Black insist that pad and pen, once a benchmark of the MC, are no longer necessary.

Regardless of whether he wrote it down or used smoke signals, Biggie's lyricism could strike the listener dumb with both shock and awe. For better or for worse, B.I.G. gave the criminal life lyrical flair—using shockingly descriptive







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— EASY MO BEE, PRODUCER

content delivered in high definition that made the unthinkable palatable to the ear. 2 Live Crews’ descriptions of sex offended on the surface and left nothing to the imagination. N.W.A.’s crime tales were powerfully entertaining for their truth, not their style. But Biggie dared you to chant along to his grisly criminology. “*When I rock her and drop her/I’m takin’ her door knockers/And if she’s resistant ‘baka! baka! baka!’*”

“His voice was an instrument,” says Premier. “Biggie was like Maceo Parker playing with James Brown.”

That unmistakable voice coupled, with a gut busting wit has made Biggie as sample-able as any break. Lil Kim lead the charge nicely on the “Notorious K.I.M.’s” flip of “Going Back To Cali”—“it’s the N-O-T-O-R-I-O-U-S-you just, lay down slow...” More recently, Smitty’s “Diamonds on My Neck” hook is propped up by lines from “Dangerous MCs.” The “untouchable, uncrushable” line on Bossman’s “Untouchable,” is taken from Big’s appearance on an obscure Pudgee Tha Phat Bastard record, “Think Big.” Even the other late Christopher (Rios), a.k.a. Big Pun, dropped in the “lyrically, I’m supposed to represent” line from “One More Chance” on his ode to mic ripping, “Super Lyrical.” Not to mention the times Biggie sampled himself on “Kick In The Door,” “Warning” and “Big Poppa.” These phrases didn’t just magically fit into tracks. Biggie had a mastery of the sound bite that made him the ultimate pitchman for the young and the restless. “*Birthdays was the worst daaaays/Now we sip champagne when we’re thirstaaay...*”

“The way he paced his breathing for rappin’ was unreal,” says Moe Bee. “You would think a lot of that stuff was punches, but it wasn’t. Singers will tell you they sing from the stomach...and I think he was rappin like he was singing.”

CARRY ON TRADITION

Why has Biggie endured for this long? Was it simply that he died? No, if that was the case there would be more clones of other fallen soldiers in Hip-Hop. But the fact is that Christopher Wallace was a template that most rappers today, even subconsciously, are following. The gangster/drug dealer, pimp and playboy cut outs were already established in the likes of Eazy-E, Too Short and Big Daddy Kane to name a few. Even big men had their smooth operator ambassador in Heavy D. But Biggie was unique in that he embodied *all* of these characteristics into one, lyrically adept persona. Just as anyone who dares to claim “thug” owes Tupac a royalty check, every ex-drug dealer on the mic today should pour out a little something for the Notorious one. Whether you claim a corner or a trap, Biggie made that lifestyle digestible to the mainstream.

“When I hear cats like T.I. and them flip their lyrics, I can kind of hear [Biggie],” says Broady. “I hear it in Lil Wayne as well. I’m from the south, so to see Hip-Hop doing what its doing makes me glad. I can definitely hear B.I.G. in Lil Wayne...[its] the flyness.”

Like most New York rappers in 90s, Biggie kicked in the door wearing Timberland boots, Karl Kani hoodies and the like. But with the influence of Bad Boy Entertainment CEO, Sean “Diddy” Combs, B.I.G. ushered in the Versace era of high-end name brands. It caught on like wild fire, earning the ire of many purists, but even Biggie grew weary of the senseless name-dropping after a while. On a June 1996 episode of *Yo! MTV Raps* he ranted: “If I hear one more rapper talk about Versace, Dolce and Gabbana...leave it alone. I started it and I’m ending it, it’s over!”

Besides, talking fly is easy. What separated B.I.G. from his peers and his followers is that he kept one foot rooted squarely in the street at all times. Maybe it’s because he didn’t live long enough to lounge in that beach chair, but while he was here, the Brooklyn stoop was as welcome as the private jet. It helped that he kept his friends, i.e. Junior M.A.F.I.A., within arms reach.

“Junior Mafia actually helped his career grow because while Puff was concentrating on the crossover element, Junior Mafia kept his street credibility,”

explains Rivera. “Puff was putting out ‘Juicy,’ and we were putting out ‘Players Anthem.’ Puff was putting out ‘Big Poppa,’ we were putting out ‘Get Money.’ It was the way for him to still do the records he wanted to do for the streets, while Puff was chasing the mainstream.”

Biggie’s internal pendulum swung between celebratory bragging and almost self-deprecating morose. “*Heart throb never, Black and ugly as ever, however...*” he jabbed on the “One More Chance” remix and fearlessly poked fun at his lazy eye on “My Downfall.” But rather than leaving him vulnerable in the eyes of fans, it just made him seem more real.

“The thing I always knew about Hip-Hop is [that] any record that got successful, is when you take a risk to tell your truth,” says Diddy, the mogul behind much of Biggie’s success. “Whenever you just tell the truth and do what’s true to you—if you just got out of doing jail time or you got shot 9 times, or sold crack in BK like Biggie, or you was a Crip in L.A., like Snoop or a Blood like Game—whatever your truth is that’s the thing that resonates in Hip-Hop.”

Biggie’s mastery of telling his own truth anchored both Bad Boy Entertainment and New York Hip-Hop. His gift was translating his success story for a national audience, effortlessly adopting regional styles, yet maintaining its own distinct presence. If you can judge a person’s impact by their absence, Notorious B.I.G. left some huge size 13’s to fill. While Diddy soldiers on, Bad Boy hasn’t been the same in the ten years since his death. Junior M.A.F.I.A. has disbanded amidst insurmountable internal strife. As for New York, the shiny Apple is bruised but sweet, and those that choose to eat prefer the taste of beef.

“Big was necessary,” says Myrick. “He put the quality level up so high and MCs coming up now have a standard to live by. Things he said were so in your face. Look at the influence he had on Jay-Z. Listen to the younger MCs and how they structure their rhymes. They borrow his flow and his wordplay. Take ‘Dreams’ [and] look at all the songs done off of that concept. Jay-Z’s ‘Girls,’ 50 Cent’s ‘How to Rob’...that was Biggie.”

Unfortunately, even with all of the sampled verses, borrowed rhymes and remixed albums, time is not forgiving to the MC, even one as large and influential as The Notorious B.I.G. As artists battle about whether Hip-Hop is dead, the irony is that many of them are living for the moment, trying to escape their own musical mortality. Biggie’s own mother, Voletta Wallace, is still at war with the LAPD over his murder. She maintains that rogue police officers were involved in her son’s murder. In August of 2006, the case was re-opened after it ended in mistrial in July of 2005. A judge ordered a retrial and forced the city to pay \$1.1 million in legal fees to Ms. Wallace. All parties should be back in court this year.

Until justice is found for the Notorious B.I.G. the onus will be on his family, friends and fans to campaign for his legacy. When you think “B.I.G.,” you have to acknowledge the ferocious battle MC with a vocal timber that could intimidate or seduce, and an ear for beats that could both pack a dance floor and keep radio spinning. A vivid storyteller that could make you break out laughing—or in a cold sweat. A trendsetter that could change the way his audience dressed and how his peers performed with a simple turn of phrase. Of course, there are great MCs that can claim some of this praise, but none of them can share in all of it.

With each year that passes, the Notorious B.I.G. will continue to find his way into our lives. Maybe a video game soundtrack, or in your favorite movie. It won’t be long before it’ll be half time at the Superbowl or the NBA Finals, and the manipulated score to *Rocky* will cut in. After a few seconds, the dramatic horns from “Victory” are pushing along a sporty new roadster called the Mach 1 Hurricane. Then that unmistakable voice drops in repeatedly...“M to the IZ H, phenomenal”...the grinning driver grips the wheel nodding his head...“escape in the coup, break bread...two seatas with two mirras...”the chrome wheels spin off into the urban night with one last shot of the twin exhaust...“excellence is my presence”...fade to black with the final pitch... “Be Notorious.” **S**

