

“Ready to Die”—Notorious B.I.G. (1994)

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Essay by Justin Tinsley (guest post)*

the notorious **B I G**



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“Ready to Die” album cover

In a 1994 interview, The Notorious B.I.G., aka Biggie Smalls, provided context to the graphic title of his debut album “Ready To Die.” It wasn’t about *wanting* to meet an early death, he said. Instead, it was about an obsession with securing a better life. In the pursuit of success, B.I.G. reasoned, death was a sacrifice he and so many others valued as worth the risk.

“I’m not trying to commit no suicide ... I’m just saying, a n— come out here everyday hustling -- risking his life,” the rapper born Christopher Wallace said, leaning on a pay phone. “Risking his life from the police, the stick-up man. Anything can happen to a n— in the streets. So when I say a n— ready to die, I mean a n— ready to go all out for his. Ready to die for that money. Ready to die for his respect.”

Unbeknownst to anyone at the time, including Wallace himself, the Brooklyn-born MC had already lived nearly 90 percent of his life. But by 1994, Biggie’s world had already changed so much in just a short time. A half-decade earlier, the once-promising student dropped out of high school to sell drugs full-time. The decision crushed his mother, Voletta Wallace, a dedicated school teacher who worked tirelessly to keep her son away from the same trappings he ran towards. Three years earlier, he was splitting time between New York and Raleigh, North Carolina, moving weight. But also around that same period, he’d meet two men named DJ 50 Grand and DJ Mister Cee. The former B.I.G. was introduced to by his best friend, Damion “D-Roc” Butler. The latter, Cee, was close friends with 50 Grand and was also Big Daddy Kane’s DJ. 50 Grand’s original demo tape of Biggie was polished up by Cee, who eventually got the tape to Matteo “Matty C” Capoluongo at “The Source,” whose legendary “Unsigned Hype” column caught the eye of a young executive at Uptown Records named Sean “Puffy” Combs. He eventually offered B.I.G. a record deal.

The end result of this hip-hop butterfly effect was “Ready To Die.” In its true essence, the album is a response to American capitalism and just how deadly the pursuit of money could be and was for so many--in particular, young Black folks in America. “Ready To Die” is a response to so many moments in American history before it: the economic crisis that nearly crippled New York in the 1970s, the crack explosion of the ‘80s (and the unfathomable violence and destruction it brought) and Reaganomics/” Stop-And-Frisk”-era policies that crippled Black communities.

So it makes sense the album was released on September 13, 1994--the same day the historically controversial “Crime Bill” was signed into law. Biggie’s debut was a rebuttal to the legislation that was so responsible for the stereotypes around Black people, crime and violence. With records like “Things Done Changed,” “Gimme The Loot,” “Ready To Die,” “Everyday Struggle,” and “Suicidal Thoughts,” B.I.G. didn’t deny any of this was happening in the streets.

However, the music represented what it felt like to survive the same conditions Capitol Hill failed to humanize.

But they don't know about your stress-filled day / Baby on the way, mad bills to pay, he rapped on "Everyday Struggle." That's why you drink Tanqueray, so you can reminisce / And wish you wasn't livin' so devilish, s—.

The album, of course, is defined by its lead single--and one B.I.G. was initially hesitant to record --"Juicy." In 2019, the BBC named it the greatest hip-hop song ever. For anyone who didn't know Biggie Smalls before this record, "Juicy" remains rap's quintessential icebreaker. In less than five minutes, B.I.G. paid homage to hip-hop, explored the themes of capitalism and socioeconomic advancement and did so with an unparalleled sense of soul, swagger and storytelling. References to Super Nintendo, Robin Leach's "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" and "Word Up!" magazine timestamp the record. But it's the innate desire to find a life that didn't require him to look over his shoulder every moment of every day that makes the album eternally palpable.

"Ready To Die" was an instant success, spawning another hit single in "Big Poppa" and eventually the colossal, more commercially acceptable remix to "One More Chance," which peaked as the No. 2 song in the country. The album gave immeasurable credibility to Bad Boy Records and officially stamped Biggie as a force in the music industry. "Rolling Stone" dubbed the album "the precise moment when hip-hop's golden age transitioned into its modern age, the height of New York hip-hop and the sound of the greatest rapper of all time at the absolute top of his power."

The "greatest ever" debate in rap will rage until the end of time (or hip-hop, whichever ends first). But "Ready To Die" did watermark a significant moment in its history--one when underground hype translated into undeniable acclaim and near-universal approval regardless of region. Yet, here's the most tragic part of the album that eventually went several times platinum and turned The Notorious B.I.G. into a cultural *tour de force* the likes of which have rarely been seen.

He never got to truly enjoy the fruits of his labor.

Less than two months after "Ready To Die" burned through shelves nationwide, B.I.G.'s close friend Tupac Shakur was shot five times in the lobby of Quad Studios in Manhattan on November 30, 1994. That one moment would evermore alter American pop culture, and Black history. By the fall of 1995, a perceived bicoastal war between Bad Boy Records and Suge Knight's Death Row Records (which signed Shakur) erupted. Diss records, interviews, and run-ins at the awards shows only intensified the friction, mainly on the surface, spearheaded by Shakur and Death Row. In September 1996, Shakur's tragic murder at age 25 in Las Vegas was only the start of unfathomable heartbreak. Six months later, less than three weeks before the release of his sophomore album "Life After Death," Biggie was murdered in Los Angeles on March 9, 1997. He was 24 years old. Both murders remain officially unsolved, leaving perhaps the two darkest days in rap's half century of existence as two wounds that will never completely scab.

Hindsight is a gift if you're lucky to embrace it. So, looking back, saying "Ready To Die" represented a "peaceful" time in Biggie's life sounds odd. Stress was omnipresent. Biggie always found himself in some sort of drama--whether it be through his own doing or larger forces at play. And there was always a goal in mind. With "Ready To Die," Biggie saw an opportunity to create a legacy that he could be proud of and those he loved the most could, too. The sprawling LP is graphic, grotesque and gaudy. More than anything, it's a memento of a young Black man attempting to figure life out, with the thought of his life ending as the first thing he thought about

in the morning and last thing at night. It's a marathon of paranoia being run at a full sprint in baggy jeans and Timbaland boots.

Damn, what happened to the summertime cookouts? Every time I turn around, a n— getting took out! he lamented on “Things Done Changed.” *S—, my mama got cancer in her breast / Don't ask me why I'm mother—n' stressed / Things done changed.*

His story is a poignant American tale. One that involves so many complex and nuanced talking points from immigration, society's aggression towards Black families, human rights, racism, the War on Drugs, one-sided legislative policies, the music industry and the most influential musical genre of the last half-century. All that makes the late Christopher Wallace one of history's greatest orators--and *Ready To Die* a ghetto proclamation that'll always remind the world how far America has come and how much further it has to go.

Justin Tinsley is a senior reporter, columnist and TV personality for ESPN's “Andscape” (formerly “The Undeclared”). During his time there, he has become one of the foremost voices on the history and intersections of race, sports and Black popular culture. In 2022, Tinsley published the critically-acclaimed biography “It Was All a Dream: Biggie and the World That Made Him.”

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.