

A lot of it seemed to defy logic. Puffy and Biggie were nowhere near 2Pac when things went down in Vegas last September, yet there were many who insisted that they were somehow responsible for his death. "2Pac died because 'Piggy' ordered a hit on him," was what some people were saying. Others claimed that "Piggy" set up Pac two years ago when he got shot 5 times in New York. The die was cast. Sooner or later Biggie would get his.

For far too many people this East/West Coast thing was way too real. The whole romantic notion of emcees settling their differences on the mic was unfortunately a naive thought that was held by hip hop aficionados. There just wasn't going to be a day when 2Pac and Biggie would get on the mic for some sort of pay per view concert and squash their beefs. 2Pac earnestly believed that he was set up in New York, and as he once said in an interview, "Sitting down and talking with Biggie and Puffy would be like Scarface sitting down and talking with the drug kingpins he overthrew." It simply wasn't going to happen. And as long as 2Pac felt that way so would his over zealous fans, friends and followers. I just recall the grief and I recall the anger that so many were feeling when 2Pac passed. Right or wrong, logical or illogical, Biggie and Bad Boy were to blame. As Ice-T once laid down on wax, "Dis me on record, then prepare to fight."

There's an old saying that time heals all wounds. And as time since 2Pac's demise stretched from days to weeks to months, life for most continued on and it appeared that this whole East/West Coast saga within hip hop would evaporate and just become a painful chapter in its overall evolution. Rappers from both coasts seemed to be getting on with the business of making good music. 2Pac's fleeting memory was kept alive by persistent rumors of his actually faking his death and by the release of the Makaveli album. Fans who had grown weary of the whole drama found the lyrics of some of his songs to be uninspiring, venomous barbs. Later his memory was again resurrected with the release of the movie "Gridlock."

When Biggie returned to the hip hop scene—without unofficially released bootleg copies of songs from his then-unreleased album—the hip hop world began to clamor with excitement. The Big Man was back and there was a whole lot of anticipation. Hip Hop fans were being left high and dry as artist after artist dropped disappointing lps like the anti-climatic Snoop Dogg lp and Dr. Dre's *Aftermath*.

When Biggie's current single, "Hypnotize," started being leaked to fans back in late January/early February it had many feeling that hip hop would be reborn. On a conference call in February, Biggie explained that he had been hard at work in the lab for over 9 months putting together his lp *Life After Death*. He noted, "I'm ready to take the hip hop world by storm." Biggie and members of the Bad Boy click began to visit the West Coast more and more. A once silent Puffy Combs appeared live on the *Sway & King Tech Wake Up Show* in Los Angeles and spoke frankly about the whole Death Row/Bad Boy conflict. A few weeks later Biggie came to LA and laid out his perspective on things. In both cases there was no drama. After all this whole East/West Coast thing was dead. Biggie had in fact reached out and did a song with West Coast artists Too \$hort and Richie Rich. He was scheduled to do a song with 2Pac's close friend E-40. As you may recall, E-40 and Biggie had once had con-

flict, but that had been squashed. Their collaboration on a song was to symbolize unity. Further signs of unity came when Snoop Dog appeared on the *Steve Harvey Show* with Sean 'Puffy' Combs and officially buried the hatchet. From the other side of town, Ice Cube and his Westside Connection click toured the East Coast. They even went into the belly of the beast, New York City, and spoke frankly on Hot 97. Even with their inflammatory lyrics directed at the East, their lp was well received and the group experienced no drama. In fact Cube and his rival B-Real of Cypress Hill came to terms and settled their differences. All the signs indicated that the hip hop nation was at long last coming together. A healing was taking place.



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The death of Christopher Wallace, aka Notorious B.I.G. caught everyone off guard. Four days before his death he appeared on KMLB's morning show *The Breakfast Club* in San Francisco. He was upbeat and almost playful. Biggie spoke very passionately about the importance of putting God in your life, "A lot of people are surprised to hear someone like me say that, they think it makes you soft," he explained, "But if God is with you, no one can be against you, no one is stronger than God." He mentioned that it was his good friend and the man who managed him, Sean "Puffy" Combs, who introduced this drug dealer turned rapper to God. It was a Biggie Smalls most have rarely seen or heard. It was an introspective Biggie who seemed to have weathered some storms and matured.

The Biggie I recall, in what would be his last radio interview, was a Biggie who spoke emphatically about the hell he had been through with the whole East/West Coast civil war within hip hop. He spoke frankly and earnestly about what it was like being in the middle of the whole drama. He told our audience that most people didn't really understand the relationship between him and 2Pac. He spoke on the fact he and 'Pac were nothing more than rappers and that a lot of things were blown out of proportion by the media.

As good as this interview was, there was one glitch. There was one comment that was a bit disturbing which in retrospect indicated that everything wasn't "all good." When asked directly as to whether or not he had a hand in the killing of his arch rival 2Pac Shakur, Biggie responded in a coy

type of way that he "wasn't that powerful yet." When asked again he responded the same way. This was the same response he gave when he was interviewed on the *Wake Up Show* in Los Angeles two weeks before. He didn't put forth that unequivocal, undeniable answer—"No." It was almost as if Biggie wanted to maintain some mystery about him. It was as if he wanted people to somehow think that he was somehow capable of carrying out such a heinous crime. Was Biggie inadvertently igniting a fuse? It's hard to say. Was he unknowingly reopening some wounds? Personally, I believe that it wasn't a very constructive thing to do, especially since 2Pac has many friends and family here in the Bay. To make matters worse, Biggie had been practically living in LA for the past month and had gotten very comfortable with being visible. After those remarks one was left to wonder, "Why he would go there? Why not permanently put all those rumors to rest?"

The shooting of Notorious B. I. G. took place in full view of a ton of music industry folks at the *Vibe Magazine* after party. Witnesses say that Foxy Brown was in a car near the Biggie's Suburban and her windshield got smashed from ricocheting bullets. There were also reports that Biggie was seen earlier arguing with DJ Quik and some of his boys. Biggie was on his way to 92.3 The Beat to do an interview.

Biggie's death has put hip hop at a very strange crossroads. The word around town is that his death was a result of the whole East/West Coast thing. Most people on both coasts have been sickened and saddened by his death. The overwhelming majority seem to be frustrated. Nevertheless there are rumors circulating about a supposed retaliation from the East. Biggie was not only admired much the way 2Pac was, he was also the bread and butter for more than a few people who aren't gonna let his death go by without saying something.

With all this in mind one has to look at the climate that surrounds hip hop. Many say this music and culture are reflections of the world around us. You hear it all the time when kids rhyme about shooting gats and life in the pen. "Yo, man, all I'm doing is talking about reality" or "I'm just being real and letting folks know what the game is all about." Those are simply weak excuses. They are coming from the mouths of people who are afraid to step up to the plate and be true to hip hop. Being true to hip hop has and continues to mean challenging yourself. It means leading the way.

Now with Biggie and 2Pac gone and the hip hop nation on the brink of traveling down a path of self destruction, the challenge we face is how to flip the script and turn things around. Can some good come out of Biggie's death? Will we continue to point fingers and dis each other's rap styles and coastal and cultural differences or will we commit ourselves to redefining hip hop? Or better yet will those of us who have good ideas set the tone and move hip hop in a better direction? Right now it's more than just the music but the entire lifestyle.

It's ironic that Biggie entitled his lp *Life After Death*—perhaps with God's will and a commitment from all of us—perhaps there will be new life within hip hop after his death. Let's hope so. Better yet, make sure that happens, because one thing is for certain, the death of Notorious BIG has forever changed the landscape of hip hop. =