

☆ “Dear Mama”

Performed by 2Pac. *Pac’s Life* Remix performed by 2Pac and Anthony Hamilton.

Produced by Tony Pizarro. Co-produced by DF Master Tee and Moses. *Pac’s Life* Remix produced by Frank “Nitty” Pimental.

Recorded at Encore Studios in Burbank, California.

Album / Compilation appearances:

- Track 9 of *Me Against the World*;
- Track 10, Disc 2, of *Greatest Hits*;
- Track 14 (Remix) of *Pac’s Life* (United Kingdom and Japan editions);
- Track 14 (Alternate Mix), Disc 2 (“The Soul”), of *The 10th Anniversary Collection: The Sex, The Soul & The Street*;
- Track 10 (*Pac’s Life* Remix) of *The Best of 2pac, Part 1: Thug*; and
- Track 16 (Alternate Mix), Disc 1, of *Death Row Greatest Hits*.

Released as a single on February 21, 1995.

Single certified platinum (1,000,000 copies sold) by the Recording Industry Association of America.

Released as an album track on March 14, 1995.

Featured during Act One and Act Two of the *Holler If Ya Hear Me* Broadway Musical.

Running times: 4 minutes and 40 seconds; 5 minutes and 41 seconds (*Pac’s Life* Remix); 4 minutes and 55 seconds (*Death Row Greatest Hits* Alternate Mix).

“Dear Mama” is arguably the most important song that Tupac Shakur ever recorded and is unquestionably one of the most beautiful in Hip Hop’s forty-plus year history.¹ It captures the essence of Tupac’s greatness – it is honest and emotional, commercial but not compromised, personal and yet universal. Over the course of three verses, Tupac brilliantly weaves the story of his relationship with his mother, Afeni: their struggles in poverty, the wounds they inflicted on each other over the years, her addiction to crack cocaine, and, most of all, the overwhelming feelings of love, gratitude, and admiration that Tupac had for his mother, who raised him and his sister, Sekyiwa, despite incredible odds.² “Even as a crack fiend, mama / You always was a black queen, mama,” remains one of the most powerful dedications in popular music.

¹ “Dear Mama” was selected as the “Most Important Rap Song” of 1995 by writer Shea Serrano in his popular 2015 book, [The Rap Year Book: The Most Important Rap Song from Every Year Since 1979, Discussed, Debated, and Deconstructed](#).

² In his 2001 book, [Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur](#), academic Michael Eric Dyson described “Dear Mama” as Tupac’s “public peace with his mother’s painful past.”

The origins of “Dear Mama” are less lofty than what Tupac would ultimately achieve. Tupac had a habit of writing songs spontaneously throughout the course of his day. He used pens, pencils, notepads, napkins – whatever instruments were available to him at the moment because he could be inspired at any time and in any place. “Dear Mama” is a good example of his writing process. In a December 1995 television interview with MTV’s Bill Bellamy, Tupac revealed that he actually penned this song while seated on a toilet. The humble setting did not affect how he felt about it. He knew it was important. “It was plain, to the point, because I wanted people to feel it,” he explained to Bellamy. Feel it they would. He called Afeni after getting out of the bathroom and rapped “Dear Mama” to her with the same power he later recorded it with. Afeni, who had tears in her eyes, told him that she knew the song would be a hit. Tupac also called longtime friend Jada Pinkett after scribbling down his verses, saying, “I wrote this song about our mothers and I want you to hear it.”³

Details about the recording of “Dear Mama” were revealed at the exhibit dedicated to Tupac’s music, poetry, and life at The Grammy Museum in Los Angeles in 2015. A master tape box on display there indicated that this song was recorded at Unique Recording Studios in New York City on October 26, 1993. That initial, still unreleased, recording was produced by DF Master Tee, a fact reflected by Tupac’s pitched-down introduction – “Yo, Master Tee. Drop

³ A little-known story relevant to the origin of “Dear Mama” involves Kill Kill, a rap artist from Watts, California. Prior to Tupac’s imprisonment, Kill Kill allegedly gave a copy of his tape, *Comin’ From Watts!*, to Tupac while he was at 92.3 The Beat, a Los Angeles Hip Hop radio station. On that tape was “Moma Dear,” a song that bears little resemblance to “Dear Mama” apart from its title and general concept. When Kill Kill heard “Dear Mama” on the radio in early 1995, he felt that Tupac had ripped off “Moma Dear” and he recorded a diss track about the alleged theft called “Here We Go One Time.” Shortly after Tupac’s release in October 1995, Kill Kill met with Tupac at a hotel in Beverly Hills. With mutual friends from Watts mediating, they squashed the beef. After Tupac’s murder less than one year later, Kill Kill recorded a tribute to him, “This One’s for You.”

somehin' for my mama." That early version, which was publicized following Afeni's death in May 2016, is not very different from the recording most listeners are familiar with. The sample of Joe Sample's "In My Wildest Dreams" rings familiar and Tupac's lyrics are identical. The mix itself is rougher, however, and vocal samples, like Yo-Yo's "It wouldn't be a damn thing without a woman's touch," are in the place of the Spinners-interpolated hook that helped make the released version so touching.⁴

Tupac, who often revisited previously recorded songs, completed the final version of "Dear Mama" with producer Tony Pizarro months later. The song was reworked on July 16, 1994 at Encore Studios, about a mile and a half from the Walt Disney Studios in Burbank, California. The mix that came out of that session is cleaner than the original. That does not mean the impact of its lyrics was blunted by the revisions, however. The song's sentiment is deepened by the more saccharine sound.

Interscope Records was not blind to the extraordinary nature of "Dear Mama." Label brass agreed with Tupac that it should be the lead single of his third solo album, *Me Against the World*, and sent it out to radio stations a month in advance of *World's* release. "Dear Mama" was one of the most popular songs on Hip Hop radio stations during the spring of 1995. It reached number nine on *Billboard's* Hot 100 singles chart before being certified platinum later that year. You can still hear it over the airwaves on occasion to this day.

⁴ The sample of Yo-Yo's voice on the first version of "Dear Mama" is from Ice Cube's 1990 song, "It's a Man's World." Yo-Yo, a Los Angeles rap artist who was mentored by Cube, is one of a handful of women who had long-term romantic relationships with Tupac. The interpolated hook that replaced the sample of her voice on the final version of "Dear Mama" was inspired by The Spinners' 1974 single, "Sadie" – "Oh, Sadie, don't you know we love you / Sweet Sadie, place no one above you."

A moving music video directed by Lionel C. Martin was filmed to promote “Dear Mama.” As with later singles from *Me Against the World*,⁵ Tupac could not make an appearance for the video, although clips of him from the “I Get Around” video and other sources are sprinkled throughout. The reason for Tupac’s absence is no mystery – he was locked in a cell at the Clinton Correctional Facility on a sex abuse conviction at the time, a fact that highlights the contradictory natures of his persona. Without Tupac, the video’s power comes primarily from Afeni, who narrates and thumbs through albums of photos from Tupac’s life as the song plays. Tupac wanted the video, one of his best, to be dedicated not just to his own mother, but to all mothers who have lost their children to violence. Per his handwritten treatment for the video: “This video should be dedicated to Ocita Teal⁶ and all of the mothers who have lost children to the violence of our streets. My genuine heartfelt condolences go out to you. – Tupac Shakur.”

Once out of prison, Tupac emphasized the expansiveness of his message on the afternoon of Mother’s Day, May 12, 1996, when he told a crowd of single mothers, including Afeni, at a Death Row Records banquet at The Beverly Hilton in Beverly Hills:

I want to talk about the people that don’t have they mama no more ‘cause we all sometimes forget to appreciate our mothers. But like my little homeboy, Mutah [Napoleon of the Outlawz], he don’t got no mother today. While we’re all shedding smiles and being happy, they can’t be happy ‘cause they don’t got no mama . . . We gotta get back to that old school shit where we all care for everybody and all of us raise all these kids ‘cause we all out of hand.

Tupac also explained the personal significance of his rendition of “Dear Mama” that day, reminding his audience, “So last year about this time, I was sitting in a maximum security

⁵ *Me Against the World*’s subsequent singles were “So Many Tears,” “Temptations,” and the title track. No video for “Me Against the World” was ever shot, however.

⁶ Ocita Teal is the mother of Qa’id Walker-Teal, a six year old boy who was killed by stray gunfire on August 22, 1992 at an event that was attended by Tupac in Marin City, California.

penitentiary. I couldn't sing this song for my mama but I'mma do it today for all y'all and y'all mama," before giving what might be his last public performance of this classic song.

The impact of "Dear Mama" on rap music was immediate and has been long-lasting. The vulnerable honesty Tupac presents on this song goes further than the transparency of his previous singles from this mold – "Brenda's Got a Baby" and "Keep Ya Head Up" are not quite as intimate as "Dear Mama" is. At the time, such raw emotion was rarely expressed by Hip Hop artists who had reputations as hardcore as Tupac's. His brave candor opened the door for other artists, like Ghostface Killah (1996's "All That I Got Is You"), E-40 (2011's "I Love My Mama"), Jay-Z (2017's "Smile"), YG (2014's "Sorry Momma"), Rick Ross (2015's "Smile Mama, Smile"),⁷ Kanye West (2005's "Hey Mama"), Lupe Fiasco (2017's "More Than My Heart"), and countless others, to dedicate songs to their mothers. As great as those songs are, they cannot equal "Dear Mama," the "ne-plus ultra of hip-hop odes to Mom" in the words of *Rolling Stone* magazine, which named it the eighteenth best Hip Hop song ever recorded in a special 2015 issue.

The luster of "Dear Mama" has not dimmed despite the passage of over twenty years. Both Tupac's contemporaries, like Chuck D and Common, and progeny, like Eminem and Kendrick Lamar, have praised its power and worldwide influence.⁸ The praise has not just come from listeners and performers within the Hip Hop community either. One of the greatest honors that Tupac's music has ever received was bestowed by the United States government during the administration of the country's first black President, Barack Obama. In 2010, "Dear Mama"

⁷ Rick Ross explicitly references "Dear Mama" on "Smile Mama, Smile": "You always was a black queen, mama / You showed me all the best things, mama."

⁸ A contestant on the Eastern European television series, *Lithuania's Got Talent*, covered "Dear Mama" during one of that show's episodes, evidencing the impact that the song has had outside the United States.

became just the third Hip Hop song selected for preservation by the Library of Congress.⁹ As part of its induction, the song was described as a “moving and eloquent homage to both the murdered rapper’s own mother and all mothers struggling to maintain a family in the face of addiction, poverty and societal indifference.” Afeni, who was touched by the honor, remarked in a prepared statement, “It is a song that spoke not just to me, but every mother that has been in that situation, and there have been millions of us. Tupac recognized our struggle, and he is still our hero.”

See also 92.3 The Beat; “Brenda’s Got a Baby”; Crack Cocaine; Death Row Records; DF MASTER TEE; Diss Records; E-40; EMINEM; **Family**; **Hypocrisy**; ICE CUBE; “I Get Around”; Interscope Records; **Introspection**; JAY-Z; “Keep Ya Head Up”; LAMAR, KENDRICK; **Leadership**; Litigation of Tupac; **Love**; *Me Against The World*; “Me Against the World”; MOSES; **Mothers**; NAPOLEON; OUTLAWZ; PINKETT-SMITH, JADA; PIZARRO, TONY; **Politics**; **Poverty**; **Prison**; **Realness**; Recording Style of Tupac; Sampling and Tupac’s Music; SHAKUR, AFENI; SHAKUR, SEKYIWA; “So Many Tears”; “Temptations”; **Violence**; **Women**; and Writing Style of Tupac.

⁹ The first Hip Hop song inducted into the Library of Congress was Grandmaster Flash & The Furious 5’s “The Message”; the second was Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power.”