

☆ *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory*

Released by The New and “Untouchable” Death Row Records / Interscope Records on November 5, 1996.

Recorded at Can-Am Studios in Tarzana, California.

Guest appearances: 6 Feet Deep, Aaron Hall, Bad Azz, Danny Boy, Darryl “Big D” Harper, E.D.I. Mean, K-Ci & JoJo, Kastro, Prince Ital Joe, Tyrone “Hurt-M-Badd” Wrice, Val “Lady V” Young, Virginia Slim, Yaki Kadafi, and Young Noble.

Producers: 2Pac, Demetrius Shipp, Darryl “Big D” Harper, Hurt-M-Badd, QDIII, and Reggie Moore.

Executive Producer: Simon.<sup>1</sup>

Singles: “Toss It Up,” “To Live & Die in L.A.,” and “Hail Mary.”

Certified 4x Platinum (sale of 4,000,000 copies) by the Recording Industry Association of America.

Running Time: 59 minutes and 13 seconds.

Tracklist:

1. Intro / Bomb First (My Second Reply)
2. Hail Mary
3. Toss It Up
4. To Live & Die in L.A.
5. Blasphemy
6. Life of an Outlaw
7. Just Like Daddy
8. Krazy
9. White Man’z World
10. Me and My Girlfriend
11. Hold Ya Head
12. Against All Odds

*The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory* is Tupac Shakur’s most mysterious album for reasons that are immediately apparent and obscure. Its title is long yet cryptic, “2Pac” is not written anywhere on its cover, and, apart from a painting of Tupac by Ronald “Riskie” Brent on the front, its artwork is literally a sheet of cardboard stained by the inky fingers of Death Row Records publicist George “Papa G” Pryce. *Killuminati* is the visual antithesis of Tupac’s

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<sup>1</sup> Simon, *i.e.*, “Simon Says,” is a nickname of Death Row Records C.E.O. Marion “Suge” Knight.

previous album, *All Eyez On Me*. Unlike *Killuminati*'s cover, the cover of *All Eyez On Me* is dominated by the “2Pac” logo and a photograph of Tupac, who is wearing a black leather Jean-Paul Gaultier vest, throwing up the “W,” and holding up his Death Row pendant. The differences between Tupac’s Death Row masterpieces are not limited to those details. They go beyond the visual, from the conceptual to the aural.

Tupac did not want to become predictable. Even as he reveled in *All Eyez On Me*'s success,<sup>2</sup> he was already thinking about how he would surprise his growing legion of fans with future projects. In June 1996, he started work on *One Nation*, an album he devised to clarify that he loved the East Coast despite problems he had with specific New York artists. Tupac was also prolific. A month later, he shifted his focus toward *Killuminati*, the last album he recorded and compiled.<sup>3</sup>

As conceived by Tupac, *Killuminati*'s uniqueness is evident on the most basic levels. Tupac recorded this album under his Outlaw alias, Makaveli, a nod to Florentine political philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli, the author of *The Prince*, a treatise on the exercise of power that Tupac first read as a teenager and studied while incarcerated in 1995.<sup>4</sup> For that reason, *Killuminati* is sometimes placed in the “M” section of music stores rather than with the rest of his catalogue. The name change was a risky move – how many prominent musicians have

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<sup>2</sup> *All Eyez On Me* was certified quintuple platinum on April 5, 1996, a sales mark it has since doubled in the United States.

<sup>3</sup> According to *Killuminati* engineer Tommy “Tommy D” Daugherty, Suge Knight wanted Tupac’s *All Eyez On Me* follow-up to be a quickly recorded and released album of diss records directed at East Coast rap artists. Daugherty has recalled that the project evolved into a more socio-political and introspective album during the recording sessions.

<sup>4</sup> Tupac’s use of the name Makaveli for *Killuminati* is one of the reasons this album is so important to the conspiracy theories that arose after Tupac was murdered. For more information, please read “The 7 Day Theory (Conspiracy Theory)” article in the numerical (#) entries chapter at the beginning of this guide.

released an album under a different name at or near the peak of their popularity? Prince and Garth Brooks come to mind, but few others.

*Killuminati*'s title is unusual as well. Before examining it more closely, however, listeners should know that this album was improperly named by Death Row following Tupac's death. Per Tupac's handwritten notes, "The Don" should have been attached to the artist name, if anywhere – *i.e.*, "Makaveli the Don" – and not to *Killuminati*. The title Tupac intended was *Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory*, a fact confirmed in 2014 by E.D.I. Mean of the Outlawz on Money-B's *The Goin Way Back* [Radio] Show.

The meaning of "Killuminati" has been misinterpreted over the past twenty years, too. Contrary to the top definition at *UrbanDictionary.com*,<sup>5</sup> "Killuminati" is actually anti-conspiracy theory, not evidence that Tupac was out to demolish secret societies. Fortunately for rap music historians, Tupac explained the term's meaning in one of his last interviews: "That's why I put the 'K' to [illuminati]. Niggas was telling me about this illuminati shit while I was in jail . . . That's another way to keep your self-esteem down . . . I'm putting the 'K' 'cause I'm killing that illuminati shit. If these motherfuckers wanted to kill you, why the fuck they gonna tell Farrakhan? . . . Why they gonna tell this nigga in jail about the plan? How did he know? How'd it leak to him? Who told him? The Pope? . . . Get the fuck out of here!"<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *UrbanDictionary.com*'s "top definition" of "Killuminati" is as follows: "Pac was talking about killing illuminati. Illuminati is the elite ruling circle, the 34th degree of the Freemason click, which is a century old brotherhood of anglo-saxon protestants. He was tellin you to kill that shit. They're the cats that maintain all the inequality and oppression, supposedly. He came out with this whole theory after his prison stint, and after reading Machiavelli's 'The Prince.' Now it's on us."

<sup>6</sup> A song titled "Killuminati" was recorded and considered for this project but was ultimately discarded. Its lyrics are unrelated to Tupac's anti-conspiracy theory beliefs. "Killuminati" was remixed for *Still I Rise*, which was released posthumously on December 21, 1999.

*The 7 Day Theory* half of this album's title has been the subject of speculation as well. A *Killuminati* tracklist drafted by Tupac on July 22, 1996 reveals that its initial subtitle was "In 3 Dayz," not *The 7 Day Theory*.<sup>7</sup> Many people who were involved in this album's creation have explained that those "3 Dayz" referred to the amount of time Tupac and the Outlawz spent recording the album, a figure later amended to reflect additional studio sessions. It seems plausible that there could be another dimension to *Killuminati*'s title, however. Given that the recording dates of *Killuminati*'s tracks were spread throughout July and August 1996, and not over the course of a single week, perhaps there was a more religious meaning. The album's cover, which depicts Tupac crucified with a bandana of thorns atop his head, and songs recorded for the album, like "Blasphemy" and "Black Jezuz," suggest that there may have been. Perhaps Tupac intended the "3 Dayz" to refer to the number of days spanning Christ's death on Good Friday and his resurrection on Easter Sunday. Supporting that hypothesis are not only Tupac's lyrics from this period, but also the inscription in this album's liner notes – "Exit – 2Pac. Enter – Makaveli." – that refers to Tupac's rebirth. Considering the importance of the seventh day, the day of rest following God's creation of the universe, in Judeo-Christian religions, *Killuminati*'s "7 Day Theory" subtitle also implies religious significance. Tupac's morbid premonitions and belief in an afterlife arguably support this interpretation of *Killuminati*'s subtitle.

*Killuminati*'s often odd and occasionally overtly religious nature can be heard as well as read. Tupac was restless. He wanted to go in a new artistic direction on this project and *Killuminati*'s production is a reflection of that desire. *All Eyez On Me*, Tupac's previous work, had pristine beats crafted by some of Hip Hop's hottest producers. Those beats were often based on samples or interpolations of well-known songs, making them more accessible to casual

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<sup>7</sup> Listeners can hear Tupac refer to his "3 Day Theory" on "Krazy," track eight of *Killuminati*.

listeners. *Killuminati*, on the other hand, is rough around its edges and mostly bereft of samples. It is also a more cohesive listen than *All Eyez On Me*, in part because of the smaller circle of producers working on it.

In order to break away from *All Eyez On Me*'s glossy sheen, Tupac enlisted Darryl "Big D" Harper and Tyrone "Hurt-M-Badd" Wrice, a duo of unproven producers previously shunned by Death Row artists and relegated to a makeshift studio derisively referred to as the "wack room." Many have wondered why Tupac would take such a risk, entrusting the bulk of his follow-up to his most popular album to a pair of unknowns when beatmakers like DJ Quik and Daz Dillinger were apparently at his disposal. Although Tupac never lived to answer that question publically, there are a number of reasons why he might have chosen to work so closely with Harper, Hurt, and Kurt "Kobane" Couthan, who, according to Death Row engineer Rick Clifford, was the producer with the most influence on *Killuminati*'s sound despite being uncredited in the album's liner notes. As discussed above, such reasons include Tupac's desire to veer away from *All Eyez On Me*'s sonic signature for purely artistic reasons.

Financial considerations may have been important as well. Tupac had seen little of the money *All Eyez On Me* was generating for Death Row and Interscope in the summer of 1996. A double album with top producers and guest stars was a costly endeavor – *All Eyez On Me*'s pie had to be divided a lot of ways. *Killuminati* was to be the first project for Tupac's new label, Makaveli Records. Its spare, relatively sample-free, production by unknown musicians and its paucity of guest-stars, apart from the Outlawz, made it a less expensive album to produce and potentially more profitable for Tupac.<sup>8</sup> Evidencing this possible explanation is "When Thugz

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<sup>8</sup> A portion of the profits realized by *The Don Killuminati* would ultimately enrich the Shakur Estate, not Tupac himself. He was murdered two months before its release.

Cry,” a song produced by *All Eyez On Me* collaborator Johnny J that originally sampled Sting’s “The Fragile.”<sup>9</sup> “When Thugz Cry” appeared on early drafts of *Killuminati* but did not make its final tracklist for reasons never explained by Tupac.

Further suggesting the cost factor in Tupac’s decisions is *Killuminati*’s original promotion plan. *Killuminati* was initially going to receive a low-key, street-focused, push geared more toward swap meets and mom and pop stores than major retail chains. That plan helps explain why Tupac told “Big D” Harper in the summer of 1996 that he expected *Killuminati* to sell at least a million copies, a decidedly modest projection for an artist whose previous album had been certified quintuple platinum after just two months in stores.<sup>10</sup>

Another reason why Tupac may have relied upon “Big D” and Hurt is the increased control their involvement afforded him. Tupac had a rapid method of recording music. In contrast to Dr. Dre’s snail-paced method, *Killuminati*’s beatmakers were eager to pump out productions at a fast clip, one after another, for Tupac to rhyme over. Tupac was a demanding artist in the studio. He could get whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted it, from the “wack room,” an access to labor he might not have enjoyed had he been working with someone like DJ

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<sup>9</sup> Johnny J’s remix of “When Thugz Cry,” released on *Until the End of Time* in March 2001, suggests that sampling costs continued to weigh heavily in decisions made regarding Tupac’s music after his death. The “Fragile” sample was removed entirely. “When Thugz Cry” was not the only song reminiscent of a pop music hit that was culled from *Killuminati*. The QDIII-produced “Niggaz Nature,” which reinterprets Q’s father’s production of Michael Jackson’s “Human Nature,” was also considered before being cut.

<sup>10</sup> At some point, likely before Tupac died, the decision to expand *Killuminati*’s promotion to more traditional media outlets and stores was made. Three music videos were filmed for *Killuminati* songs during Tupac’s lifetime: two for “Toss It Up,” one of which never received a proper release, and one for “To Live & Die in L.A.” A video for “Hail Mary” was filmed after Tupac’s death. According to an MTV News brief that aired shortly after Tupac’s death, the promotional plan was not the only thing about *Killuminati* that was changed. Contrary to the *Killuminati* tracklists that Tupac drafted before he died, as well as statements by people who worked on the album, MTV’s Tabatha Soren reported that *Killuminati* was originally intended to be a 6 track EP but was expanded because interest in Tupac’s music “was at an all-time high.”

Quik, who was busy working with the R&B group Tony! Toni! Toné! and other artists that summer.

Finally, Tupac's unwavering self-confidence explains why *Killuminati*'s production contrasts so sharply with *All Eyez On Me*'s. As related by "Big D" Harper, Tupac wanted *Killuminati* to demonstrate that he could pluck two of Death Row's most marginal producers from the depths of the "wack room" and use them to craft an album that would outsell his competition, within Death Row and without, despite limited promotion. *Killuminati*'s stellar sales upon its release in November 1996 proved that Tupac's appeal was only enhanced by the death he prophesized and proved that his last album's atypical creation was not the product of hubris.<sup>11</sup>

Whatever the reason behind its sound, *Killuminati* is not filled with "nothing but tired G-funk beats," as it was described by Stephen Thomas Erlewine of *Allmusic.com*. On the contrary, *Killuminati* has one of the most unique soundscapes of any mainstream Hip Hop album. The funereal bells of "Hail Mary," Spanish guitar of "Me and My Girlfriend," and placement of distorted religious television program excerpts during the opening of "Blasphemy" are just a few of *Killuminati*'s more memorable production flourishes. Out of tune instruments and recording "mistakes" that Tupac insisted on retaining give *Killuminati* a spontaneous, deliberately unfinished, sound. *Killuminati* also flows from one song to the next without interruption, the only album in Tupac's catalogue that does so.

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<sup>11</sup> *Killuminati* outperformed Snoop Dogg's *Tha Doggfather* (479,000 copies sold in the U.S. its first week and ultimately certified double platinum), the highly-anticipated *Doggystyle* follow-up that was originally scheduled for release on the same day as *Killuminati* but was pushed back a week by Death Row.

The writing and performances by Tupac and his guest-stars on *Killuminati* are not quite as unusual as the album's production but they do stand out from those on prior Tupac albums. Tupac's vocals, already legendary in Hip Hop, explode like an atomic bomb and his lyrics are as varied as ever. Tupac's songwriting talents arguably reached their peak on *Killuminati*, which showcases every facet of his musical personality. He is by turns enraged ("Bomb First" and "Against All Odds"), sexual ("Just Like Daddy" and "Toss It Up"), introspective ("Krazy" and "Hold Ya Head"), sentimental ("To Live & Die in L.A."), political ("White Man's World"), poetic ("Me and My Girlfriend"), and provocative ("Blasphemy"). *Killuminati* may be the most detailed and uncensored self-portrait Tupac ever put down on wax and he knew that *Killuminati* was something special. Listeners and critics who have derided *Killuminati* as the vicious last gasp of a once thoughtful artist might be surprised to know that Tupac proudly compared it to his politically-charged debut, *2Pacalypse Now*. During a brief radio interview with DJ Jelly of Atlanta's Hot 97.5 the summer it was recorded, Tupac said that *Killuminati* was "like my first album. It goes so deep. I go so, so deep." *Killuminati*'s personal nature is enhanced by the ubiquitous presence of the Outlawz and the relative absence of artists outside Tupac's innermost circle.<sup>12</sup> The intimate, late night, recording sessions likewise fostered Tupac's bunker mentality on *Killuminati*. This album has a claustrophobic feel that *All Eyez On Me* does not and Tupac often gives the impression of being surrounded by enemies on all sides.

Tupac's comparison aside, *Killuminati* and *2Pacalypse Now* are very different animals. Like all of Tupac's albums, *Killuminati* was influenced by what was going on in his life during

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<sup>12</sup> One of the Outlawz, Hussein Fatal, was in New Jersey, and therefore absent from most of the *Killuminati* recording sessions. Snoop Dogg, Death Row's other megastar at the time, and Tha Dogg Pound are noticeably missing as well. Bad Azz, of the L.B.C. Crew, is the only member of Snoop's camp who appears on *Killuminati*.



the recording process. The summer of 1996 was one of the most tumultuous periods in his 25 years. Out on bail pending the appeal of his 1994 sex abuse conviction, Tupac believed that his continued freedom was uncertain. The prospect of returning to the “living hell” of incarceration weighed heavily on him. Tupac was also in the midst of a by-then violent conflict with East Coast music figures like The Notorious B.I.G. and Sean “Puff Daddy” Combs.<sup>13</sup> His macabre visions of imminent doom felt as real as they ever had during the *Killuminati* recording sessions.<sup>14</sup>

The people surrounding Tupac and the Outlawz during Tupac’s stormy final months impacted *Killuminati* as well. At the time, Tupac was closely associated with Death Row C.E.O. Suge Knight and his crew of alleged M.O.B. Piru Bloods.<sup>15</sup> *Killuminati*’s combative tone and violent lyrical content are, in part, a reflection of the company Tupac kept near the end of his life. It is therefore no surprise that *Killuminati* does not make for easy listening. Shock G, one of Tupac’s closest early collaborators and a major contributor to *2Pacalypse Now*, has said that he does not recognize the Tupac he hears on *Killuminati*, echoing the sentiment expressed by listeners who prefer to remember the Tupac of “Keep Ya Head Up” and “Brenda’s Got a Baby.”

*Killuminati*’s release was scheduled for Election Day, November 5, 1996, prior to Tupac’s death on September 13, 1996. Despite Tupac’s absence and an on-going struggle

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<sup>13</sup> The original back cover of *Killuminati*, which was conceived by Tupac and approved by him on the night before he was fatally wounded in Las Vegas, featured artwork of The Notorious B.I.G. as a pig, Sean “Puff Daddy” Combs in a tutu, and Dr. Dre in a sexually compromising position with a man. That back cover, painted by Ronald “Riskie” Brent and Henry “Hen Dogg” Smith, was discarded after Tupac’s death but a print of it hung in Death Row’s office for years.

<sup>14</sup> On July 13, 1996, Tupac reconnected with Bay Area rap legend E-40 at the “Rapper’s Ball” music video shoot in Calabasas. That afternoon, Tupac played *Killuminati*’s “Hail Mary” for 40 and told him about all of the albums he had recorded in case he was murdered. Tupac died exactly two months later.

<sup>15</sup> Tupac pays tribute to a number of alleged M.O.B. Piru members during the outro of the *Killuminati* single, “To Live & Die in L.A.”

between his mother, Afeni Shakur, and Death Row / Interscope over ownership of his unreleased music, *Killuminati* arrived in stores as planned. It was a smashing success that had fans lining up outside of stores around the country for a special midnight release. Premiering atop *Billboard's* pop album chart with 664,000 copies sold, *Killuminati* made Tupac the first Hip Hop artist with two chart-topping albums in a single year.<sup>16</sup> By 1999, *Killuminati* had been certified quadruple platinum, representing the sale of over four million copies in the United States alone. As popular as *Killuminati* is, it never reached the heights that *All Eyez On Me* conquered.<sup>17</sup> *All Eyez On Me* is an album for the masses. *Killuminati* is for Tupac's most devoted followers and requires repeated listening sessions to fully grasp.

*Killuminati's* more idiosyncratic qualities – its coarse production, schizophrenic lyrics, and comparative disregard for radio-friendly records – made it difficult for critics to recognize its finer attributes. Many reviewers were unfamiliar with the album's history and Tupac's hands-on involvement in its creation. Tupac approved the album's final tracklist, artwork, and release date before he died. Despite that fact, a number of critics characterized *Killuminati* as an unfinished product that was rushed to stores to capitalize on Tupac's death. David Brown of *Entertainment Weekly* said that “the music feels unfinished,” called the packaging “low-rent,” and described the album as a “work in progress,” a “shameful cash-in,” and a “disgraceful exploitation” that was “cobbled together” by Death Row without Tupac's guidance. He graded the album a “D,” in a review that ignored the introspection and socio-political commentary on the album. He was not alone. J.D. Considine of the *Baltimore Sun* criticized Tupac's “lack of tenderness” and focused

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<sup>16</sup> DMX repeated the feat two years later with *It's Dark and Hell is Hot* and *Flesh of My Flesh, Blood of My Blood*.

<sup>17</sup> *All Eyez On Me* is one of two Tupac projects that has been certified diamond (10x platinum) in the United States. *Greatest Hits*, released in November 1998, is the other.

on *Killuminati*'s violence to the exclusion of practically everything else. Songs like “Krazy,” “Just Like Daddy,” “Blasphemy,” “White Man’z World,” and “Hold Ya Head” were not even mentioned in Considine’s negative assessment. At least *Entertainment Weekly* and the *Baltimore Sun* deemed *Killuminati* worthy of note, however. As with *All Eyez On Me*, *The Source* failed to review *Killuminati*, a puzzling slight given that magazine’s status as Hip Hop’s most influential publication at the time.

Like many other challenging works of art, *Killuminati* has been vindicated over the past twenty years. In 2002, *The Source* finally got around to evaluating *Killuminati*, awarding it five mics, the highest rating it can bestow. In a thorough appraisal for *Complex* in 2011, Rob Marriott, who interviewed Tupac at the very end of his life, declared that *Killuminati* is “like a blues record very much in the tradition of Robert Johnson” and artistically superior to “the more successful, commercial pop record” that is *All Eyez On Me*. *Vibe* magazine, a publication that controversially chronicled Tupac’s war with The Notorious B.I.G., named it one of the 50 best albums released between 1993 and 2013. In 2014, BET called it one of the 25 best posthumous albums, a distinction shared by a number of other Tupac records. Critics are not the only ones who have become *Killuminati* converts. Hip Hop artists love it, too. Kendrick Lamar named it one of his 25 favorite albums and 50 Cent, who paid tribute to “Hail Mary” on a Ja Rule diss record, has called it his favorite Tupac album. J. Cole, whose song “Villuminati” was released in 2013, went a step further. In 2010, he said that *Killuminati* was his number one album of all-time.

*The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory* is not an album for Tupac beginners. *All Eyez On Me* and even *Me Against the World* are more accessible works. That is not a criticism. *Killuminati* is one of the most complicated, haunting, dissonant, and yet ultimately entertaining

Hip Hop albums ever recorded. It is a fitting last will and testament that is required listening for anyone interested in the music and life of Tupac Shakur.

*See also* 1 John 4:9; 2PAC; *2Pacalypse Now*; The 3 Day Theory; The 7 Day Theory (Conspiracy Theory); 50 CENT; “Against All Odds”; *All Eyez On Me*; **Arrogance**; BAD AZZ; “Black Jezuz”; “Blasphemy”; Bloods and Crips; “Brenda’s Got a Baby”; BRENT, RONALD “RISKIE”; Can-Am Studios; COMBS, SEAN “PUFF DADDY”; COUTHAN, KURT “KOBANE”; DAZ DILLINGER; **Death**; Death Row Records; Diss Records; DJ QUIK; DR. DRE; E.D.I. MEAN; **East Coast – West Coast Beef**; **Education**; **Family**; Gangsta Rap / G-Funk; “Hail Mary”; HARPER, DARRYL “BIG D”; “Hold Ya Head”; HURT-M-BADD; HUSSEIN FATAL; **Hypocrisy**; Interscope Records; **Introspection**; JA RULE; JOHNNY J; “Just Like Daddy”; “Keep Ya Head Up”; “Killuminati”; KNIGHT, MARION “SUGE”; “Krazy”; LAMAR, KENDRICK; Las Vegas Shooting (September 7, 1996); L.B.C. CREW; Litigation of Tupac; MAKAVELI; Makaveli Records; *Me Against the World*; “Me and My Girlfriend”; **Mental Illness**; MONEY-B; New York Sexual Assault (November 18, 1993); New York Shooting (November 30, 1994); “Niggaz Nature”; THE NOTORIOUS B.I.G.; *One Nation*; OUTLAWZ; **Paranoia**; Posthumous Releases of Tupac’s Music; **Prison**; QDIII; **Racism**; **Realness**; Recording Style of Tupac; **Religion**; Sampling in Tupac’s Music; **Sexuality**; SHAKUR, AFENI; SHOCK G; SNOOP DOGG; *Still I Rise*; “To Live & Die in L.A.”; “Toss It Up”; *Until the End of Time*; **Violence**; “When Thugz Cry”; “White Man’s World”; Work Ethic of Tupac; and Writing Style of Tupac.