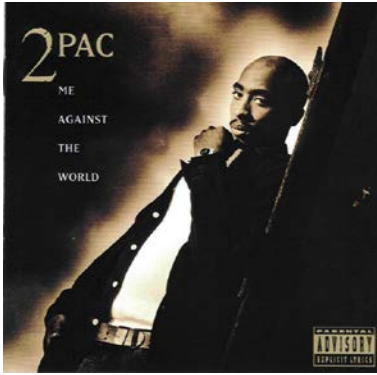


“Dear Mama”—Tupac Shakur (1995)

Added to the National Registry: 2009

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Original album



Original label



Tupac Shakur

“Me Against the World” was rap artist Tupac (sometimes spelled “2Pac”) Shakur’s third studio album and his first to go double platinum. Among the album’s 15 tracks was a song destined to become his best known: “Dear Mama.”

In some ways the song is very straight-forward: a long, rhyming ode to his mother and all mothers who have struggled to raise their children against the backdrop of hardship, racism and inner city violence. Yet few would call it a sentimental work.

Shakur (1971-1996) certainly came from no ordinary or sentimentalized surroundings, and certainly from no ordinary mother. His mother is Afeni Shakur (born Alice Faye Williams), a “courageous, creative woman” according to her friend, the novelist Toni Morrison. A politicized individual, Mrs. Shakur was a member of the Black Panthers and gave birth to her son one month and three days after being released from prison. She had been jailed in New York regarding “conspiracy against the United States government,” charges for which she was ultimately acquitted.

As would be noted years later, her son, Tupac, was practically “born into the movement.”

Though his mother sometimes worked as a school teacher or legal assistant, poverty was a constant. Based in New York City, the family was nevertheless forced to shuttle often between Harlem and the Bronx due to money troubles. Also not helping the family’s situation was Afeni’s ongoing drug problems.

Regardless, from an early age, Tupac showed a performance bent. In 1984, at age 13, he co-starred in a production of “Raisin in the Sun” at an Apollo Theater fundraiser. Not long after, the family moved to Baltimore and young Tupac was fortunate enough to get to enroll in the Baltimore School for the Arts. He discovered rap during his Baltimore years and began to spit at gigs around the city under the stage name MC New York. In his junior year at school, the family moved once again, this time to California.

Settling in Marin City, not far from Oakland, Tupac returned to school while his mother, unfortunately, returned to drugs. Shakur continued to rap making up with a microphone what he didn’t display in the classroom. He and his rhymes eventually came to the attention of Leila Steinberg, a white music promoter and teacher. Steinberg in turn introduced Shakur to Atron Gregory, manager of the group Digital Underground, famous for their hit “The Humpty Dance.”

Shakur would make his vinyl debut on Underground's 1991 album "This is an EP Release." That same year, Shakur would put out his debut album "2Pacalypse Now."

"2Pacalypse" would eventually go gold (half a million copies sold) and rise to #13 on the R&B chart. In 1993, Shakur released his follow-up album "Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z." His "Thug Life: Vol. 1" LP came out in 1994. "Me Against the World," the album that contains "Dear Mama," emerged in 1995.

As Tayannah Lee McQuillar and Fred L. Johnson III note in their book "Tupac Shakur: The Life and Times of an American Icon," the mood emanating from "Me Against the World" is a somber one. It reflected the Shakur's state of mind at the time. It was recorded just after Shakur was shot five times by masked men outside his New York City studio in an ambush that was said to be the work of professional rivals. It was also set down just after Shakur himself was sentenced to prison on charges of sexual assault; he began serving his sentence on February 14, 1995.

The songs on the LP include such titles as "F--- the World," "So Many Tears" and "If I Die 2Nite" as well as the title tune which concerns friends being shot and carted off to the cemetery. Within this context, the emotions and pathos of "Dear Mama" seemed to fit right in.

Though the song is a tribute to his mother and all (mainly single, lower-income) mothers who struggle, Shakur does not sugar-coat his feelings or his memories. Within his tight A-B-A-B rhyme scheme, Shakur lays it all on the line:

Huggin' on my mama from a jail cell
And who'd think in elementary?
Heeey! I see the penitentiary

And later:

And even as a crack fiend, mama
You always was a black queen, mama

Within this celebration of the universal mother (the song's most repeated reframe is "You are appreciated"), Shakur also takes a hard look at himself, his past and some ugly urban realities:

I was lookin' for a father he was gone
I hung around the Thugs, even though they sold drugs
They showed a young brother love

And:

I ain't guilty cause even though I sell rocks
It feels good puttin' money in your mailbox

Though "Dear Mama" bears many of the hallmarks of rap music, with its focus on street life and survival, Shakur's willing to be so personal and even confessional is an important departure for a genre that often falls back on boasting and brashness. Shakur's "Dear Mama" helped paved the way for Eminem's later mining of his own difficult past.

The esteemed poet and avowed Tupac Shakur fan, Nikki Giovanni, has spoken and written often of her love for both the man and his art. In regard to "Dear Mama" specifically, she states:

What makes this a great poem, in my mind, is not the structure but the content. One of the reasons Tupac was/is beloved is that he spoke for his generation. The poem is love.

It is about love but it is love. He has to understand, the author, what his mother is going through and why. He has to reach out to a father who maybe would want to be there but can't. He has to find the mother and father in himself to be nurturing and strong. "Dear Mama" is a step in the direction of forgiveness. Which is both political and racial. But also about all of us...black, white, brown, yellow. No matter our religion nor our beliefs. That old judgment is not working here. It is one of his most important poems because he speaks to and for, without preaching or trying to reach anyone but the subject of the poem, a generation of youngsters who recognize that their world is crumbling but the pieces that are falling will be put in place again. I love "The River" for the same reason. We will, Tupac asserts, cross this "River" together. What a mountain top message.

In terms of music, "Dear Mama" could be categorized as a "slow jam." Though rhythmic, the song has none of the pounding, percussive beat typical of so much Tupac music and rap in general. And the anger that tends to fuel rap here has been replaced with love and a contemplative, even defeated, concern. In this way, "Dear Mama" hearkens back to Shakur's first important hit "Brenda's Got a Baby" from 1991.

In "Dear Mama," Shakur secures the groove and melody of the song with the use of two carefully chosen samples that set the mellow vibe: "Sadie" by the Spinners and "In All My Wildest Dreams" by Joe Sample. The disparate elements were merged into a seamless whole thanks to the superb work of producer Tony Pizarro.

It is a testament to the song's power, importance and universality that it managed to scale the rap, urban and pop charts upon its release though Shakur was not able to do any promotion for it; he was incarcerated at the time. In fact, in order to create a video for the song, its producers had to turn to still family photos and a Shakur lookalike.

Shakur's "Me Against the World" (which ended up selling over two million copies) would be Shakur's next to last album released during his lifetime. His next album, "All Eyez on Me," came out in 1996; it went nine times platinum. Under a newly coined moniker "Makaveli," Shakur had just finished the album "The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory" when he was shot to death in a Las Vegas drive-by shooting on September 7, 1996. The gunman was never caught and the case remains unsolved as well as the subject of great speculation.

A prolific reader and writer and recording artist, Shakur left behind a staggering amount of unpublished and unreleased songs. Since his death, seven albums of largely "new" material have been posthumously released. The emergence of some songs have been slowed due to legal wrangling between record companies and the Shakur estate. Therefore it stands to reason that there are still other stunning works awaiting discovery. Of course, even then, "Dear Mama" will no doubt remain one of his most important and resonating creations.

Cary O'Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books "June Cleaver Was a Feminist!" (2014) and "Women Pioneers in Television" (1997). He also served as assistant editor of "The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2009) and "The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2010).