

What if Malcolm X Died at the Age of 25?

BY EWUARE OSAYANDE

As I have traveled from city to city in promotion of my latest book, *Gangsta Rap is Dead: Ciphers, Poems and Prophecies on the WAR for Black Youth and Hip Hop*, one of the most disturbing things I have heard has been grown Black folks standing up and placing blame on the backs of the rappers for the troubles they often find themselves in. They believe that these young brothers should be held solely responsible for the social conditions they say were created by rap music. What these and other people who indiscriminately condemn rap music as a pariah on the populous fail to acknowledge is that the conditions that these rappers rhyme about were here long before they were born. Yeah, I'm all for holding artists accountable for their art, but when are we going to hold the makers and shakers of this society accountable for the social reality they have created? And beyond that, what about us?

What about those of us who just sit back and watch our youth perish in the streets? What about those of us who throw our hands up in the air and sigh, "oh my, I can't do anything?" When I asked those that argued with me on this question, what have they done specifically to address the crises facing our youth, they had no response. This is what is most saddening and maddening.

To those of you who place blame solely at the feet of the youth, I ask that you consider the life of Malcolm X. What if Malcolm X died at the age of 25 like Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls? Malcolm lived the lifestyle that many of these rappers personify in their lyrics, videos, and some cases in real life. What if Malcolm was shot down in the streets by a rival hustler looking to take his place in the "dog-eat-dog" underworld of the inner city? He would not be remembered as Malcolm X, the fiery champion of Black power and self-determination; instead he would be remembered, if at all, as Detroit Red, the hustler, numbers runner, drug dealer and thief. What if Malcolm died in Charlestown State Prison, where he was imprisoned for seven years at the age of twenty-one? He would only be forgotten as just

another Black man behind bars.

But he didn't. He survived and recreated his reality. And that is what makes Malcolm's life so inspiring and exemplary, especially as it relates to the lives of many of our youth who listen to and are influenced by the often-contradictory messages of rap music. Simply put, Malcolm changed, transformed himself from Detroit Red the drug dealer to Malcolm X the prophet of Black power. But he did not do it alone. He had help, assistance, guidance. And it is a direct result of that guidance that Malcolm became the historic figure that he is today. If it were not for the intervention of his brother, Reginald, who introduced him to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam during that time, Malcolm would probably have died a tragic death not unlike Tupac or Biggie. This is what we need to recognize. The only difference between Malcolm and Tupac or Biggie is that someone reached out to Malcolm and gave him constant encouragement to change. Not condemnation but encouragement.

We don't know what Tupac and Biggie would have evolved to become. They did not live long enough for us to find out. According to some of Tupac's closest family and friends, he was trying to turn the corner, change his public image. Just like Dr. Dre before him, he was looking to leave Death Row Records behind. He saw the company as too confining. He began to put into place an organization that would be community-based, responsive to the needs of the poor and politically active. Three weeks before his death, he even fired his attorney, Dave Kenner, the real CEO of Death Row Records. Yeah, that's right, Suge Knight, now serving nine years, was just a front man. So there is more to this than meets the eye. Our youth are more conscious than we give them credit for.

This is why Malcolm resonates with this generation. They can relate to him and his legacy. They want to change, but they don't know how. They lack the necessary guidance to turn the corner of their lives and head in the direction that will lead them to their rightful destiny. Too often those that seek only to exploit their energy and expend their creativity end up getting to them before we do (because we are too busy ridiculing them instead of reaching out to them). This has got to stop. It is not enough to condemn the music. We must develop resources and structures that will change their conditions, giving these young people competitive alternatives to the violent and unmerciful streets. I'm not talking about some nickel-and-dime programs put together with scotch tape that do nothing more than further frustrate youth initiative. I'm talking about fully-funded institutionalized organizations that are

staffed with competent committed individuals who have the best interests of the community's youth at heart; who, themselves, live in the same community as the youth they intend to serve. Our youth need these dynamic, charismatic individuals interacting with them on a daily basis, encouraging them, challenging them to take charge of their lives.

Our communities must take a stand on this issue. Even as we attempt to hold our youth accountable, we must organize ourselves to insure that our youth can realize a future filled with promise and potential. Our future leaders are locked inside bodies that have been demonized and victimized by a society sick with white supremacy. There are a number of potential Malcolms; they just need to be reached before it's too late. Until there is a redistribution of U.S. wealth, and until people start placing responsibility not on the backs of Black and Latino youth but at the feet of those who have trampled on their dreams, aspirations, rights and freedom, then the Malcolms of the future will never have the opportunity to become the leaders we need them to be. Let us receive instruction from the words of Mumia Abu-Jamal, Black activist journalist and political prisoner currently on death row in Pennsylvania.

"How many Malcolms sit unripened in today's classrooms throughout urban America... their natural Intelligence dulled by a process that fails to educate them?"

"How many Malcolms cum 'Satans' sit stewing in pits of state-designed hatred, imprisoned in soul and in mind?"

"How many Malcolms submerged in deadly street life, use their quick minds to compute poisonous profits from crack, instead of contributing their wills and skills to the collective good? In short, where are today's Malcolms?"

In schools, potential untapped.

In prisons, potential entrapped.

In streets, potential sapped."

Malcolm in his many lives, touched so many because he lived so many lives. His is a tale of Overcoming.

Let us commit ourselves to do everything in our power to insure that our youth get to live as many lives so they, too, can Overcome.

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