

TITLE: Keep Ya Head Up

SINGER: Tupac Shakur

SONGWRITER: Tupac Shakur, Daryl Anderson, Roger Troutman, Stan Vincent

GENRE: Hip hop, R&B

LANGUAGE: African American English

URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XW--IGAfeas&ab_channel=TheLoveboy

ENTEXTUALIZATION

TRANSCRIBED BY: Catharine Mason

DATE: December 24, 2017 - May 2025

No. LINES: 146

LONGEST LINE: I wonder why we take from our women, why we rape o^wur women, do we hate o^wur

SHORTEST LINE: But (l. 142); Please (l. 143)

No. VERSES: 3 stanzas of 5-5-4 verses consecutive + a refrain mixed at the end of stanzas I and II (2X)

CODES: VOVA Song Studies Code

VOICES: Lead singer - Tupac Shakur; AJB - Alohe Jean Burke (Five Stairsteps); DH - Dave Hollister

PURPOSE: Development of VOVA song studies method; development of English language course materials

ENTEXTUALIZATION BY: C Mason

LYRIC FORMAT: Segment Markers, Vocal techniques, Time codes

LYRIC-IN-PERFORMANCE:

Intro Li'l something for my godson Elijah and a little girl named Corin.

Prelude 'M say the blacker the berry,(0:09)
 The sweeter the juice,[^] I say the darker the finNsh the^unjn
 The deeper the roots. [I give a holler to my sistəs on]^a wel_fare:
 DH: [Uh uh uNd]^a
 Tup_ac cares,
 If don't nobody eNbe care.(0:18)

St. I.A 'N now,
 I know they like to beat ya doNwN a loNt
 When you come around the bloNdk
 Brothas cloNwN a loNt. (10)
 But please
 Don' _cry; dry your eyes; neNwer let _up.
 Forgive^ but don't forget, ginjrl! Keep ya heNad ənjp!
 DH: HeaNd ənjp

St. I.B 'N when he tells yə you ain't nothing don't belie··ve.
 'N if he can't learn to love yə, you should lea··ve,
 'Cause sista you doŋn't _neeNd 'imNJ
 'N I ain' tryin to gas yə up,
 I just _call 'm [how I see 'm.]^a
 DH: [You don't neeNd 'injm]^a (20)

St. I.C You know it makes me unhap[py?]^b
 DH: [What's that?]^b
 When brothas make babies,
 'N leave a young mother də be a pap'.
 DH: [O yea yea yea]^d

St. I.D.1 'N since we all came from a woman, got our name from a woman 'n our game from a
 DH: [yə yea]^c
 [Woman]^c,
 I wonder why we take from our women, why we rape o^wur women, do we hate o^wur
 DH: [Ah wah wah wah wah wa] h]^d
 [Women?
 [I think it's time to kill for]^d our women, (30)

Time to heal o^wur women,
Be real to o^wur women.

St. I.D.1 And if we don't we'll have a race of babies,
That will hate the ladies,
DH: [Ah yean]^c
That make the babies.

St. I.E And since a man can't make onje,
He has no right to tell a woman when 'n where to create onje.
So will the real_men get uNp?
I know you're fed_uNp, ladienjs,

But keep ya head_uNp.

(40)

longer pause

(1:22)

Chorus DH: Keep ya heaud uNp
AJB: Oo-oo chi·ld,
AJB: Things are gonna get easie·Nd
DH: Keep ya head up
AJB: Oo-oo child,
AJB: Things are gonna get bri·ghter

(1:23)

(1:24)

DH:Oh-oh
DH: Keep ya head up
AJB: Oo-oo chi·ld,
AJB: Things are gonna get easie·r
AJB: Keep ya head up
AJB: Oo-oo child
AJB: Things'll get bri·ghter

(50)

- St. II.A Hey y'all, (1:43)
I remember Ma·rvin Gay,
Used to sing to me.
He had me feeling like black was the thing to be. (60)
And suddenly the ghetto didn't seem so tough;
And though we had it rough,
We always had enough.
- St. II.B I huffed 'n puffed about my cur_few
And broke the rules,
Ran with the local crew,
And had a smoke or two.
I reNalize Momma really paid the price
She nearly gave her life,
To raise me right. (70)
And all I had to give her was my pipe_dream
Of how I'd rock the mic,
And make it to the bright screen.
- St. II.C I'm trying to make a dollar out of fif_teen ceNdt;
It's hard to be legit
And still pay your rent.
And in the end it seems I'm headin' for the pen
I try to find my friends,
But they're blowing in the wind.
- St. II.D Last_niNght, (80)
My buddy lost his whole_fam-ily

It's gonna take the man in me
To conquer this insanity.
It seems the rain'll never let_up
I try to keep my head_up,
And still_keep from getting wet_up.

St. II.E You know it's funny,
When it rains it pours
They got money for wars, but can't feed the poor.
Say there ain't no hoNpē for the youNth, when the truNth injs,
It ain't no hoNpē for the future.
And then they wonder why we crazyN
I blame my mother,
For turning my brother into a crack_ba-by.
We ain't meant to survive, cause it's a set_up
And even though you're fed_up,
Huh!
Ya got to keep your head up!

(90) (2:41)

pause

Chorus AJB: Keep ya head up!
AJB: Oo-oo child
AJB: Things are gonna get easier
AJB: Keep ya head up!
AJB: Oo-oo child
AJB: Things'll get brighter
DH: Oh oh!
DH: Keep ya head up!
AJB: Oo-oo child

(100)

AJB: Things are gonna get easier

AJB: Keep ya head up!

AJB: Oo-oo child

(110)

AJB: Things'll get brighte-r

III.A And now,

(3:23)

Tell all the ladies having babies on they own,

I know it's kinda rough

And you're feeling all alone.

Daddy's long gone

And he left you by ya lonesome.

ThaNdk the LoNdd

For my kids,

Even if nobody else want 'em.

(120)

III.B 'Cause I think we can make it, in fact, I'm suNde.

(3:37)

And if you fall,

Stand tall and come back for moNde.

'Cause ain't nothing worse than when your son wants to knNdw

Why Dad-dy don't love him no mo'.

III.C You can't complain you was dealt this:

(3:47)

Hell of a hand, without a man, feeling help less;

Because there's too many things

For you to deal with,

Dying inside, but outside you're looking fearless.

(130)

While tea·rs is ro·l-ling down your cheeks

Ya steady hoping things don't all fall this week;

'Cause if it did, you couldn't take it.
And don't blame mNo!
I was given this world;
I didn't make it.

III.D And now my son's getting older and older and cold
From having the world on his shoulders
While the rich kids is driving Benz.
I'm still trying to hold on
To my surviving friends.
And it's crazy,
It seems it'll never let uNo,
But

4:09

(140)

Please,
Ya got to keep your head unjp!

pause

ESSAY:

Tupac Shakur's performance of "Keep Ya Head Up", track 3 of his 1993 album, *Strictly 4 My Niggas*, is commonly interpreted as a unique expression of male solidarity with women, honoring the Black single mother of the American ghetto as she confronts hardships and harassment on various fronts while striving to raise her children. The artist has constructed a narrative voice speaking in camaraderie with poor African American mothers ("I give a holler to my to my sister on welfare", l. 3). He also speaks as the son of a single Black woman, whose troublesome choices are experienced by her as a burden (St. II.B, in which we hear, "I realize Momma nearly paid the price, l. 68)". In what follows, we will look more carefully at the

narrative point of view of this song as well as specific sound patterns that heighten its impact.

The narrator crisscrosses various viewpoints relating the condition of the single “welfare” mother as both a systemic and local context of misogyny. As we have seen, the singer indicates the precarious welfare status of single mothers in the US in l. 3. He punctuates its unavoidable reckoning with a syllabificated “wel_fare”. This syllabification is echoed in that of “Tu_pac”, highlighting the contrast between the artist's empathetic understanding and purpose and that of the system in the distinct percussive consonance of the singer’s name /t/ - /p/ - /k/ from that of the /w/ - /l/ - /f/ - /r/ (approximants and fricatives). The systemic oppression of state-subsidized mothers is detailed later in St. III, contrasting insider and outsider views with shifting pronouns. Note how the voices of the consoling narrator and the protagonist merge in St. III.A - “Thank the Lord/ For my kids,/ Even if nobody else want em” (ll. 118-20). The ambiguous “my” expresses both the standpoint of a universal parent, echoing the deep concern of the narrator, and the single mother of the Black ghetto.

St. III.B specifies the effects of systemic oppression with use of the passive voice in “You was dealt this” (l. 6), and “I was given this world” (l. 135). The latter line intertwines the literary voice of author Lorraine Hansberry in Tupac’s intertextual borrowing from her 1959 Broadway play, *A Raisin in the Sun*. In the song line, the mother’s voice overrides the narrator’s voice in a shifting “I”. In this way, the artist gives voice to the Black woman in a world that neglects her worth and abuses her vulnerability as a woman and as a mother.

The longest line of this performance highlights the local oppression and exploitation of the Black woman: “I wonder why we take from our women, why we rape o^wur women, do we hate o^wur” (l. 28). The insertion of the /w/ sound to create 2 syllables in “our” expands the /w/ alliteration formed with wonder, why, we (3X), women (2X), as well as to punctuate the use of first-person plural and bring the focus to the local context of Black culture and internal misogyny. A heavy pause is placed between the soloist's performance of this line separating

the transitive verb “hate (o^wur)” and “Women” in the following line. Anticipation of the object of “hate” is aroused in the ear of the listener by its anaphoric use, serving to implicate “my Niggas” interpellated in the title of the album.

As we have seen, the interplay of narrative voices in Tupac Shakur’s “Keep Ya Head Up” guides the listener through various perspectives of the song’s topic. Shifting viewpoints move the listener between external perspectives of the condition of the ghetto mother, and internal, sometimes intimate, spheres that reveal emotional states and personal struggles. Speaking from the viewpoint of an artist who cares, a brother, a son, and the welfare mother, herself, the lyric mixes ethnographic and artistic presentations of cultural and systemic oppression of Black women. Every line contains elaborate sound patterns that highlight oppositions and sentimental landscapes that bring to life the human experience of economic, racial, and gender struggles.

MUSICAL STRUCTURE and EXPRESSION

Tupac Shakur’s “Keep Ya Head Up”

GENRE

1990s rap

KEY and TONE

“Keep Ya Head Up” follows a musical loop formed by alternating a major flat VI chord and a minor V chord.

RHYTHM

The beat is a dotted 8th note to a 16th note, creating a skipping effect on the bass and hi-hat. (syncopation?)

SAMPLE

A sample from the refrain of “Oh-Oh-Child” by The Five Steps is mixed into the chorus.

VOCAL and VERBAL FEATURES in Tupac Shakur’s “Keep Ya Head Up”

OCCURRENCES of VOCAL SYLLABIFICATION

The separation of syllables in a word. In vocal expression, this technique involves the equalizing of consecutive syllable values in volume and length (equal stress).

Line 3: wel_fare
Line 5: Tu_pac
Line 12: Don'_cry ... let_up
Line 19: just_call
Line 41: real_men_get
Line 71: fif_teen_cent
Line 77: whole_fa(-məly)

Line 80: let_up
 Line 81: head_up
 Line 82: still_keep ... wet_up
 Line 87: ain'_no
 Line 90: crack_ba(-by)
 Line 91: set_up
 Line 92: fed_up
 Line 111: long_gone
 Line 120: Why_Dad(-dy)
 Line 122: help_less
 Line 126: ro:l-ling_down
 Line 128: take_it
 Line 131: make_it

OE OBSERVATIONS:

21 occurrences of syllabification distributed fairly evenly throughout the song;

3 occurrences of syllabification in which the second syllable is part of a 2 or 3 syllable word - in each of these cases, the final word relates to family (family, baby, daddy);

4 occurrences in which the two syllables make up a particle verb (let up, wet up, set up, fed up) - in the case of a particle verb, the syllabification may be considered a natural form of accentuation;

3 occurrences constitute an adverb + verb pattern (don't cry, just call, still keep), also a natural accentuation pattern.

A single occurrence in which the first syllable is the final syllable of a word (rolling down); this occurrence stands out also with the vowel prolongation of the initial syllable (rol-) of the word containing the first syllable of the syllabification. This syllable is also stressed, which gives it a syllabified effect that is muffled by the vowel prolongation.

VERBAL RHYTHM PATTERNS:

A. *Expressive stress, intonation*

Line 13: for geNɪ, ginjɪ! ... heNɪd ɔnjɪ!

exp. stress/ rising intonation + exp. stress/ falling intonation

exp. stress/ rising intonation + \hat{S} exp. stress/ falling intonation

CE The dropping of the stress creates an intimate tone. This formula is repeated in the final occurrence of "keep ya head unjɪ". The /g/ alliteration of get/ girl heightens the imperative and explicit interpellation of the narrator's "sista" with "Girl"

B.1 *Syllabification (equal stress value in consecutive syllables)*

Line 3: **wel_fare**

Line 5: **Tu_pac**

CE The vocal equalizing (syllabification) of the syllable pattern in two words, each falling at the end of a line, creates a sound parallelism that heightens the contrasting levels of authenticity in the type of help provided. The state subsidization (welfare) of single mothers represents a form of oppression and dehumanization, maintaining their status of poverty and social isolation. The artist's "holler" as a form of interpellation is intended as a form of empowerment, or recognition, and (later) of giving voice and hence liberation.

B.2 *Syllabification*

Line 77: **whole_fa-məly**
Line 80: **let_up**
Line 81: **head_up**
Line 82: **still_keep ... wet_up**

CE "let up", "head up" and "wet up" all fall at the end of consecutive lines, creating a sound parallel that connects the loss of someone's "whole family" in l. 77 with the strategizing of survival as a struggle to "conquer the insanity". The rain symbolizes the threat of destruction that is persistent ("will never let up"), necessitating the constant attention ("head up") of the oppressed to avoid violent murder (wet up). All of these stages are linked to the concrete experience of a friend losing all of the members of his family.

B.3 Syllabification

Line 90: **crack_ba-by**
Line 91: **set_up**
Line 92: **fed_up**

CE While "crack_ba-" establishes a parallel with whole_fa-məly" in l. 77, "set_up" and "fed_up" establish an echo of the participle verbs found in ll. 80-82 above. This stanza points to the contradictions of economic values that rig the system against families with single mothers. The narrator expresses the inseparability of his mother's responsibility in her drug use that is part of a systemic design in which the odds are against the family's survival.

SOUND PATTERNS (REPETITIONS)

A. Compound Rhymes (or near rhymes)

Line 5: race of babies
Line 6: hate the ladies
Line 7: make the babies

CE In these lines, we find a rich assonance of the /eɪ/ vowel sound (6 occurrences) for an /eɪ/-/eɪ/-/i:z/ pattern falling at the end of these consecutive lines. The first /eɪ/ sounds of each line fall in 3 distinct words with no other similar phoneme: r-c, h-t, m-k. The final words establish a pattern that will be repeated in ll. 8-10 in which the words of the first and third lines are identical.

Line 8: down a lot
Line 9: around the block
Line 10 clown a lot

CE These three phrases are found at the endings of 3 consecutive lines. In addition to the compound rhyming words using the vowel sounds /aʊ/ and /ɒ/. The final consonant in lines 8 and 10 are identical while that in line 9 deviates. This t-k-t combination allows for a slight dissonance which qualifies the context of sexual harassment described in the lyric.

B. Assonance (repetition of a vowel sound in nearby words)

Line 29: Take (from our women); Rape (our women); Hate (our women)

CE Several contours of the phrases in this line echo ll. 5-7. First, the /eɪ/ sound followed by three distinct consonants in these one-syllable words (take, rape, hate) recall the sounds of race, hate, and make. The repetition of "hate" carries semantic value as a component of the song's theme, misogyny, or the hatred of women. We find in both instances the /eɪ/ +

consonant pattern followed by a noun, either as an indirect object, direct object, or the object of a preposition. This grammatical variation increases the richness of the verbal form, and points to the social complexity of context described and critiqued in the lyric.

Line 130: **D**ying inside, but outside - 3X /aɪ/

CE This alliteration draws attention to the opposition of inner and outer expressing a dialectic an inner struggle for vitality and a social strategy for survival by hiding that struggle. The naturally prolonged diphthong /aɪ/ serves to create anticipation, slowing down the narrative for a few seconds (each /aɪ/ syllable also receiving a stress) for the unexpected 'fearlessness' that masks and, thereby, challenges inner death. This inner/ outer process provides a psychic equivalent of the song-title and main line of the refrain, "Keep ya head up" as a more physical manifestation of fearless survivalism.

Line 137: **o**lder and **o**lder and **c**old - 3x /əʊ/

CE The /əʊ/ assonance in line 137 is enhanced by the liquid /l/ and percussive /d/. The /ə-/ /l-/ /d/ cluster is echoed in 'world' /wɜːld/ and 'shoulders' /ʃəʊldəz/ in the following line (138). The vowel sounds /ɪ/, /aɪ/, and /e/ in l. 139 contrast with the assonance and the liquidity /ə(v)rl/ in ll. 137-8, putting weight on the class difference of the two realities for boys. Economic class opposition is further stressed by the alliteration of /z/, tying these lines together in 'shoulders' as weight-bearing, hindering movement, and 'Benz' as a privilege of movement and symbolic status.