



# MOURN YOU 'TIL I JOIN YOU

The troubled life and tragic death of 2Pac's favorite producer, *Johnny "J"*

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In June 2008, the producer Johnny Lee Jackson Jr., referred to by many as Johnny "J," attended a late dinner at the Roosevelt Hotel on Hollywood Boulevard with his wife, Capucine, and another couple. The table ordered a bottle of wine, and the conversation flowed. "He was in a good mood that night," says Earnie Hooks, an independent film producer. Hooks says Jackson drank a glass and a half of wine. "We didn't even finish the whole bottle," he says. Before departing, Jackson filled two glasses of wine and left them on the table in memory of his friend Tupac Shakur. He then drove off in his Range Rover.

Later that night, Jackson was arrested for drunk driving. (California's legal drinking limit is 0.08, one of the nation's lowest.) It was his third DUI. He pleaded no contest to the felony charge and was sent to prison. On October 3, 2008, Jackson died from injuries sustained after he fell at least 14 feet at the Twin Towers Correctional Facility. The state



coroner's report listed the official cause of death as "multiple blunt head and chest trauma" and ruled it a suicide. Jackson's release from prison was only two months away. He left behind three children.

Jackson was a pioneer of the West Coast rap sound, 2Pac's favorite producer and the primary architect of his magnum opus, the four-million-selling 1996 double album *All Eyez on Me*. But his death went little noticed in the public sphere—and remains, for some, a source of mystery. His wife has said that he killed himself and that he called her to tell her he was going to do it moments before he did. That isn't sufficient for some of his oldest friends. "I'm still convinced that it wasn't a suicide," says the DJ and rapper LaMont "King Scratch" Burnett, a friend from high school. "It's almost a Tupac and Biggie type thing. No one knows."

**Johnny "J" grew up** on 103rd and Budlong in South Central, Los Angeles, the oldest of three children. His father, John Sr., was a mechanic by trade who worked for the naval shipyards and now works for the U.S. Defense Department. His mother, Lidia, was a bilingual school teacher. He was spoiled as a kid. His parents bought him a souped-up yellow Camaro and a drum machine and made a break-dancing floor out of tile for him, and his aunt and uncle helped him build a makeshift studio.

Johnny's interest in hip-hop escalated while he was at Washington Preparatory High School. He played on the drum line and hit it off with the aspiring rapper Candell "Candyman" Manson; future artists such as Yo-Yo, WC and Sir Jinx, of Da Lench Mob, also attended Washington Prep around that time, in the mid-1980s. Soon after high school, Johnny got his big break, producing "Knockin' Boots" for Candyman. The song went platinum and reached No. 9 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 in summer 1990, pushing Candyman's debut album, *Ain't No Shame in My Game*, into gold status.

Such success proved tough to match. "After the success of Candyman, there were time periods where the music business was a roller-coaster ride," Johnny said in a 2006 interview with Fatal Hussein on the hip-hop website *pjbutta.com*. "I kinda survived through it and stayed true to the streets and kept doing demos... That kept me alive, kept me going." In February 1994, he released a solo album, *I Gotta Be Me*, that tanked.

Things, however, would soon get better. A few months earlier, he'd met the man who would change his life.

In late 1993, Big Syke, a member of 2Pac's group Thug Life introduced Johnny to Pac. They quickly gelled, recording "Pour Out a Little Liquor," for the *Above the Rim* soundtrack, and "Death Around the Corner," which would appear on *Me Against the World*. The partnership was derailed, though, when Tupac was sent to prison in February 1995. After his release that October, the pair reunited at Can-Am Studios in L.A. "We were doing seven or eight tracks a day," says the producer Ronnie King, who played keyboards at those fabled sessions. "Tupac felt very secure with him in the studio."

2Pac and Johnny J recorded more than a hundred songs together—11 of them, including "How Do U Want It" and "All About U," ended up on *All Eyez on Me*; the rest composed the bulk of 2Pac's posthumous work. Tupac's stepbrother, Mopreme Shakur, says the two bonded partly because both were workaholics. "Pac had a lot of energy, and so did Johnny," he says. "Pac loved it. Whatever Pac requested, Johnny could do. If Pac said, 'I want a slow, sad beat with strings, bass and guitar strings,' Johnny could hook something up. It was a perfect fit."

Not everything was so perfect, though. Just as Johnny was becoming one of the most successful producers in the music industry, his personal life was crumbling.

Around 1994, Johnny grew estranged from many of his close friends and family. Some blame his wife, Capucine Jackson, for creating the rift. "I think she didn't want us around. Why? I didn't know," says King Scratch. "He had all his numbers changed. All of his real homeboys and family, he kicked them to the curb."

XXL spoke with Capucine Jackson during the summer of 2009. After a 30-minute conversation during which she asked most of the questions, she declined an interview. "I can't violate my contract," she said. At the time, Jackson was rumored to be working on a book and documentary. Neither has materialized. "I'm still grieving," she said. "I don't want to relive it over and over." Capucine recently launched a gospel singing career. She goes by Coppe Cantrell. She did not respond to recent queries.

But much of Johnny's anger, at least toward his family, was rooted in the discovery that he was adopted. Throughout his life, rumors had swirled because of his skin complexion: He didn't look like either of his adoptive parents, who are African-American and Mexican, respectively. When Johnny finally learned the truth, from a male cousin, he was irate. Johnny was in his mid-20s. The Jacksons had never planned on telling him.

"No one knew," says his sister, Nickie Jackson. "It was mainly because of the situation with his [adoptive] parents, and [my father] didn't want Johnny to be hurt."

Johnny was born in Juárez, Mexico, and was adopted by the Jackson family when he was one week old. He once told his former publicist Phyllis Pollack that he was sold for \$40. But there were even more difficult circumstances surrounding his adoption. "This came from out of Johnny's [adoptive] mother's mouth," says his old friend Al "Fila Al" Davis. "His sister, brother, father, they were like, 'Let me tell you what the real deal is.' They said, 'Johnny's mother and father, they were brother and sister over in Mexico.' So the Jacksons cared enough to take him from that situation." In 2009, XXL independently confirmed this with a family member. But in June 2011, Nickie denied it. "I don't think so," she said after a short pause. "I heard that too. When Johnny passed, that question was asked, and my mom said, 'No, they were not brother and sister.'"

Nickie said she would double-check with their mother, Lidia. She called back the next day. "I spoke to my mom, and she said that they were not brother and sister," she said. "His father was also his uncle. It was [his birth mother's] sister's husband. It was a brother-in-law."

After the revelation, Johnny's relationship with his adoptive family worsened. He occasionally dropped by the house, but sometimes he left curse-filled messages on their voice mail. At other times, he just ignored them. "I saw him once and was like, 'Hey, Johnny,'" says his cousin Kimberly Davidson. "He was like, 'Who are you? Do I know you?' I was like, 'What the fuck?' He totally erased us out of his mind."

He was also concerned about his career. Obviously, Tupac's death, in 1996, was a terrible blow. And in the years following, the rap legend's aura cast a long shadow over Johnny's work—in terms of both individuation and expectations. "It felt like I was standing next to 'Pac when I was in the room with Johnny," says Inglewood rapper Shade Sheist. "When I was in there with him, I felt like I was 2Pac and that it would be a smash hit just because it was Johnny 'J' on production."

Johnny founded his own label, Klock Work Entertainment, in 1997.

But by the end of the decade, the West Coast's influence had faded and Jackson's sample-heavy, post-G-funk sound was out of style. "We were trying to bridge a little of the West Coast production with the down-South style, but it didn't take off," says Ronnie King. "I think Johnny had a sound that he loved. He wanted to keep the integrity of that sound alive. I think he did it a lot for 'Pac."

Johnny did production work for Tatyana Ali and Lil' Eazy E, but both of their albums were eventually shelved. In early 2007, he formed Streetlife/Klock Work Records with Pablito Vasquez and former N.W.A manager Jerry Heller. That imploded too, and Johnny grew withdrawn. "He felt like a lot of people took advantage of his generosity and coolness," says his longtime engineer Ian Boxill. "He didn't know who to trust."

In prison, Johnny was housed in the Trustee Dorm with approximately 80 other inmates and worked in the laundry room. There were certain codes he had to follow, such as not using the upstairs toilet, because it was for Mexican-mafia-affiliated gang members. The notorious racial tension in Los Angeles between Mexican-Americans and African-Americans is exacerbated in prison. "Dee," a man who claims to have been in the Trustee Dorm, says that, while Johnny avoided problems with gangs, he was depressed. "He would lay in bed and zone out," Dee says. "I was like, 'Let's play cards, let's hang out, eat something.' But he was stressing."

According to the coroner's report, Johnny was the only inmate working on the second tier on the afternoon of October 3, 2008. He asked a supervisor for permission to make a phone call from a prisoner personnel office. This is reportedly when Johnny called Capucine and told her he was going to kill himself. She called the prison to warn someone, she says. After Johnny hung up, two custody assistants witnessed him leave the office, walk to the balcony, climb the metal rails and jump.

The coroner's report stated that there was no indication of foul play. Still, speculation ran rampant. The most popular theory was that he was murdered by Mexican gang members. "My opinion is that he was murdered because he was Mexican and was around Blacks all his life," says an old friend, Scotty D. "In county jail, you have to choose. You can't just roll with the brothers if you are Mexican."

Dee, from Trustee Dorm, says Johnny wasn't murdered. "Hell, no," he says. "He committed suicide." But further complicating matters, the Jackson family was initially told that Johnny hung himself.

Johnny's funeral was another ordeal. A shouting match ensued between the Jackson family and Capucine Jackson's family after a member of her family called Jackson an orphan. The feud even carried

over into the comments section of a Johnny "J" post made on the hip-hop blog Cocaine Blunts.

Johnny's family has yet to recover. Nickie cries when she talks about him. "It's just so hard," Nickie says. "People that weren't in our family didn't know him the way we knew him. We shared a bedroom together—me, him and my little brother. I never had anyone close to me die. It's so hard to get over it. It's been almost three years, and I still can't get over it. It never stopped my parents' love for him. I had to be the one who called my parents and tell them that Johnny was dead. We didn't care that he was adopted. It hurts so much to know that he's not here." ♦

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—MOPREME SHAKUR